Conflicting accounts

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Anna Irwin reflects on how reminders of a troubled past can be assimilated into our cultural heritage

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There is a tendency to think of heritage as buildings or monuments that act as a focus for national pride, demonstrate skill, achievement or ingenuity, enhancing our townscapes and reinforce our sense of identity. Once heritage is officially designated by listing or scheduling, for example, it is considered a valuable asset, as a result of its cultural significance. This conception presents and promotes heritage as a positive force.

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This dominant definition of heritage, which is referred to as the ?authorised heritage discourse?, directs our attention towards the aesthetically pleasing and the monumental and therefore lays a greater emphasis on the value of the physical fabric, its authenticity and its quality than it places on other, more intangible associations.

Recently, there has been much press coverage of the destruction of cultural heritage. The International Criminal Court?s first war crimes trial for the destruction of monuments is now in progress, concerning an individual accused of demolishing ancient mausoleums in Timbuktu.

This is not the first time heritage has been deliberately targeted: perpetrators wish to erase the identity of a people whom they do not consider to share their history, instead exerting their power to inflict psychological injury. Yet although the historic fabric may have been destroyed, the significance of these structures or places and the meanings that have been attached to them for generations have not been lost. Rather, a new significance is added as the communities reclaim their heritage. In such circumstances, there is a desire to restore lost heritage as a means of re-establishing normality.

But as well as damaging or destroying heritage, conflict can lead to the creation of a new heritage. This can hold difficult and painful memories, representing the most violent, destructive and perhaps shameful aspects of a nation?s history. These sites are referred to as ?dissonant heritage? or ?dark heritage?.

Peace walls

The issue has particular relevance today in Northern Ireland following almost 30 years of

violent conflict, known as the Troubles. The signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 essentially brought an end to the conflict. However, there has been little consensus or debate on how to deal with the remnants of the period.

Some of the most visible and defining structures associated with the Troubles are the Belfast peace walls. There are estimated to be more than 90 such barriers in the city centre, dating from 1969 to the present day. The first and possibly the most famous peace wall was built in 1969 between Cupar Way and Bombay Street, separating the predominantly loyalist Shankill Road area of Belfast from the mainly nationalist Falls Road.

For nearly 50 years, this wall has been an imposing and familiar feature of the urban landscape, controlling the movements of neighbouring residents, constraining and influencing by these physical barriers. For many living very close to this and other walls, they continue to provide security amid ongoing, low-level sectarian activity. Yet for others, the retention of these structures reinforces segregation, and they are therefore considered essential in protecting cultural identity.

While the walls remain in place, they signify to the international community that attempts at peace have not been completely successful, and can act as a deterrent to inward investment. Not only do the walls control potential violence but they also create the conditions through which violence is sustained and perpetuated. The peace walls have also reshaped land-use patterns in the economic core of the city ? prime development sites have been blighted for housing land and many adjacent buildings have suffered frequent damage, with some now lying abandoned.

The permanent removal of these structures would be seen by many as advantageous and there is a clear government agenda for their disposal. However, there has increasingly been discomfiture among others at the hasty removal of structures so intrinsically linked with the Troubles.

Renewal and remembrance

In a post-conflict society, there is a desire to move on and forget ? to return to some sense of normality. Part of that process can include the removal of the impositions from the conflict period as quickly as possible, leaving only the traces of a more pleasant and proud past. But to eradicate evidence of these structures would be to make an incomplete record of history, and without them the memory of events remains intangible and more open to different narratives.

A future heritage resource is in danger of being removed before its true historical value can be realised

The Cupar Way?Bombay Street peace wall was constructed as a temporary response to escalating violence, but evolved in response to the intensity and changing nature of the Troubles and the recent transition to peace, and has become one of Belfast?s most popular and distinctive tourist attractions. At 13.5m high and stretching more than 3km through the city, it is constructed from conventional materials and has had much of its fabric renewed, replaced, strengthened or extended over time. It is therefore seldom considered historically or aesthetically pleasing and does not fit with the ethos of minimal intervention or conservation. Despite this, the alterations and fabric are significant to our understanding of the intensity and nature of the conflict.

The wall has considerable social, cultural and economic significance, which can be expressed in both positive and negative terms:

- acting as a means of bringing people together but also keeping them apart;
- as a tourist resource but also a blight on the city?s economic core; and
- as a site that evidences strong cultural traditions and heritage, but that can be intimidating and provocative.

?Discord value?

In considering a potential heritage of conflict, there is a need to recognise a broader range of values, particularly negative ones, and to articulate these in order that dissonance can be expressed, rather than concealed or ignored.

Dubbed ?discord value? by the academic Gabriele Dolff-Bonek?mper, this arises where t e creation, or potential creation, of heritage promotes contestation, controversy or d scord. In effect, the discord value of an object or structure far exceeds its potential h storical value. With the passing of time, and as the fear and hatred associated with the s ructure fades, so too can such value, to be replaced with historical value in the eyes of m ny.

In the future the debate around its significance will itself become part of its history and add another layer of meaning. As time separates us from the events associated with a structure, our emotional engagement with it changes. Ultimately, while a structure can possess strong discord value, this concept is rarely identified or accommodated in heritage models, so a future heritage resource is in danger of being removed before its true historical value can be realised.

Conclusions

The Belfast peace walls highlight the vulnerabilities of dissonant heritage, particularly given the continued emphasis on the importance of the physical fabric, age and authenticity of heritage. Structures such as the Cupar Way?Bombay Street peace wall are ordinary structures that have developed distinctive associations. Any risk of demolition is thus contentious and discomforting in a post-conflict state.

This demonstrates the importance of viewing heritage as a social process, recognising the dynamic and changing nature of its values and meanings. This can present a significant challenge in that the values ascribed to a heritage resource can never really be fully recorded or defined. In the case of conflict heritage it is therefore necessary to draw together as wide a range of values as possible in order to expose as many narratives as possible, and prevent singular claims of heritage and disinheritance.

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Further information

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