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Author

Morgan, Coleen L

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ZEITGEIST: Burcu Tung

Only Time Will Tell: Some musings on archaeology, heritage and preservation

Dr Burcu Tung, University of California, Merced

Recently a good archaeologist friend of mine asked me for some references on heritage for her work. She wanted more grounding in how archaeologists consider heritage as a field of study as she considered the connections of her palaeobotanical work to food heritage. We discussed our colleagues who have recently turned to heritage studies (including myself) and wondered if it was a means to an end or an end in itself.

Is *heritage* the emerging zeitgeist of 21st Century Archaeology?

In practice, legislation surrounding cultural heritage, in the United States and other developed countries from the 70s onward, provided a solid foundation for the application of specialist knowledge, thereby creating the greatest number of jobs in our field. In the academe, an increasing number of archaeologists draw on heritage issues and opportunities to justify the relevance of their research to assure funding. And archaeologists now make up much of the faculty within heritage programs across the world.

Recently Cornelius Holtorf and Anders Högberg (2013) criticized the lack of futuristic insight within heritage studies at large, despite the common mantra of “preserving the past for the future” used both by practitioners and institutions alike. They note heritage may be more relevant for the future if we actually begin assessing the effects of our policies and practice over different increments of time. How will future generations cope with the nuclear waste they have inherited from us in the next thousands of years, they ask? They wonder about rogue radio waves that have been transmitted in the last century and those that continue to be transmitted today. How might they affect possibilities of extraterrestrial communication thousands of years later?

To me, these discussions evoke a sense of heritage as being nestled out of time. In discussion of what heritage is, Holtorf and Högberg connect it to the human pursuits of self-enrichment, altruism and ever sought after immortality (2013, 741). While they raise important concerns surrounding superficial decisions on preservation, little acknowledgment is given to the socio-political realities of these decisions, or heritage in time.



1. Hubble Space Telescope image of galaxy clusters and colliding galaxies some 8 billion light-years away, giving some perspective to our own delicate existence.

Identity, interpretation, tourism, access, use and copyrights are important issues within heritage practices and sites. All of these issues are highlighted at the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük

where I direct the excavations within the North Shelter. Just like my colleagues and the students that work there, I have had to learn to be oblivious to the gaze of tourists that have exponentially increased since the site was inscribed to the World Heritage List. The creation of this World Heritage Site has started to spark the local economy and at the same time continues to provide local politicians and archaeologists a stage for their professional development.



2. Tourists visiting the North Shelter at Çatalhöyük. Photo, Jason Quinlan.

Admittedly an oft-cited case, Çatalhöyük exemplifies how archaeological practice is embedded in global networks, and how in time, sites take on meanings and realities often not anticipated. While a 9,000 year old Neolithic site might be considered out of context in the construction of Turkish national identity, it is clearly part of some consciousness: in the introduction of the new constitution of the country, which is still under debate, Çatalhöyük is referred to as a site 'inherited' by the nation.

Decisions on the use of such sites to meet certain political ends or economic needs can't simply be monitored and controlled. Forty years after our discipline's "loss of innocence", there should be no question of our work's malleability. Perhaps our incessant desire to preserve is due to this malleability, since as the saying goes, time will tell.



3. The Church Trap, created by Rebekah Waites with Scott Froschauer, Jena Priebe, and Tom Pine in 2013. Photo, Scott London

But will each instance tell us something different? And what if our preservationist obsession is obstructing other forms of development? The communities and networks surrounding Black Rock City, a permanent city formed for an annual event called Burning Man, have only grown larger with the burning down of more than a dozen temples and hundreds of art installations. The ephemerality of the moment expressed by destruction has produced some of the most impressive collaborative modern art works of

our times. In the production of this active heritage, thousands of individuals take part in an experiment of expression.

What are some of the insights such an experiment can provide to our 'conservation ethos'? How can we resolve some preservationist dilemmas, particularly with our position in an unfettered capitalist expansion causing the destruction of cultural resources and yet opening new avenues of cultural production? Finally, in the spirit of heritage, as we accept the malleability of our field, and the uses to which it is put, can we ever just do archaeology? Only time will tell.

References Cited:

Holtorf, Cornelius, and Anders Högberg 2013 Heritage futures and the future of heritage. In Counterpoint: Essays in Archaeology and Heritage Studies in Honour of Professor Kristian Kristiansen. S. Bergerbrant and S. Sabatini, eds. Pp. 739-746. Oxford: Bar International Series 2508.

