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Title	What to Conserve? Heritage, Memory, and Management of Meanings
Type	Article
URL	<a href="https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/id/eprint/11743/">https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/id/eprint/11743/</a>
DOI	
Date	2015
Citation	Kamel Ahmed, Ehab (2015) What to Conserve? Heritage, Memory, and Management of Meanings. International Journal of Architectural Research, 9 (1). pp. 67-76.
Creators	Kamel Ahmed, Ehab

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## WHAT TO CONSERVE?

### Heritage, Memory, and Management of Meanings

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#### Abstract

*This Paper explores and criticizes different theories and perceptions concerning 'cultural heritage' to explore the definitions of 'heritage' throughout history, and questions how the conflicts in considering and identifying 'heritage' might have affected the approaches to its conservation. In such process, the paper investigates the relation between 'place' and 'memory' and how place has been always the medium through which history was written, resulting in two inseparable faces, tangible and the intangible, forming the two-faced coin of 'cultural heritage'. This research assists understanding the complex construct of heritage places; stressing the growing awareness of intangible heritage's importance, which represents a remarkable turn in heritage conservation realm in the twenty-first century, and emphasizing the notion of heritage as a coefficient of society, which is understood through experience, learnt through performance, and represented through 'activities' formed in the present maintaining and developing the identity of place and preserving its spirit, rather than a past oriented vision that tends to 'pickle' images from the past in a picturesque manner that is only tourism-oriented.*

**Keywords:** *Heritage; conservation; meaning-management; memory; tangible; intangible.*

## INTRODUCTION

"We act now, modifying our environment for the future. We recall now. We learn now, which is to say we modify ourselves to act more effectively in the future" (Lynch, 1972: 89).

Although Lynch argues that recalling the past should be through providing an environment that facilitates learning; by linking the living moment to a wider span of time, this is not how historic places have been conserved for ages!

Generally speaking, conservation has been related, and still is, to a great extent, to the understanding of heritage as the display of nations' past glories, represented in their remains. For example, in the nineteenth-century, historic buildings used to be restored to their original status, where any adaptations used to be completely removed; this stressed the tendency, at that time, to purify the image of the past in a picturesque manner. Later on, the French concept of 'patrimoine' dominated the field of heritage conservation for ages; emphasising the sense of 'aesthetic grandness', which promoted that present's duty towards the past is to receive and admire its passed on monuments, and to pass them "untouched" to future generations (Smith, 2006). Ruskin's (1865) ideas concerning historic buildings were certainly of a great influence on such heritage conservation practices; as he considered historic buildings as not belonging to present generation, which makes people, in Ruskin's words, 'have no right whatever to touch them'. This concept was the foundation to the conservation trend of 'conserve as found'.

There is no doubt that there has recently been a greater awareness of the importance of conserving 'intangible heritage', as an approach of maintaining local identities, growing day after day, especially after the pressure mostly made by Southern hemisphere developing countries states parties of UNESCO in 1997, who showed their upset from the non-geographic balance of World Heritage Sites due to the Selection Criteria that represent more the Western and Northern cultures, and are not suitable for the cultural heritage of Southern countries, which are still, of course, part of the World's heritage, and should be equally safeguarded and conserved (For

more details, see (Aikawa-Faure, 2009: 14-15)). Such awareness expresses that 'heritage conservation' should be concerning the identification of significances of each community/place on their local levels. On the other hand, it is realised that shared intangible heritage can form good bases for strong unity between different groups of people, which is hardly ever the case when dealing with just pure physical remains that sometimes can be a source of disputation between countries and nations regarding their ownership.

The main lesson we learn from looking back at the past is that life moves on, and 'change' is its only constant; as Tabraham (2006) claims, people work to provide a future for the past because they believe that the past has something important to offer the future. Accordingly, it can be claimed that 'heritage conservation' is a process that should consist of two main bases; first is the preservation of 'tangible' (physical) remains to be passed over to future generations, and second is to manage the change of the 'intangible heritage', which are basically the cultural activities taking place in present-time so that the main defining cultural values of each community are maintained and conserved throughout time. In the same sense, Tiesdell, Oc, and Heath (1996) describe preservation, or what they call 'pickling', as mainly concerned with limiting change, while conservation is more about the inevitability of change and the management of that change, where they describe regulating the change occurring to historic quarters as of a great importance, where the aggregate effect of a large number of relatively unregulated small changes are claimed to, over time, result in the erosion of place-character.

Hence, conservation of the physical appearance of any heritage place should be for the purpose of preserving the physical image that recalls a mental image of the past, in order to augment the preservation of intangible aspects of heritage represented in cultural activities, maintaining the cultural heritage of the place and the identity of its society. Also, it must be realized that without the physical image, that enhances both collective and spatial memory, the changes happening to the intangible cultural activities would probably be less controllable. It is expected that just as the twentieth century promoted the conservation of tangible heritage, the twenty-first century will foster the preservation of the intangible aspects of cultural heritage, and the re-join of the two faces of heritage (Kamel & Hale, 2010).

In this paper, the notion of heritage conservation as a dialogue between present and past, memory-management, and culture guidance is discussed, in a sense of engaging both the cultural contexts and its content in one whole for a better understanding, and thus conservation and maintenance of cultural heritage.

### THE PAST-PRESENT DIALOGUE: TANGIBLE OR INTANGIBLE?

Heritage is often assumed to be, as stated by Kenny (2009), the uncontested residue of static traditions, but it can be easily noticed that the term 'heritage' is commonly used by people to name their ancestors' remains that link them to their past, and offer them supporting memories and meanings that, normally, provide them with a source of pride and belonging; as throughout history, not only had people always been eager to learn from their ancestors' experiences for achieving, but they also treasured material remains of the past for constructing their own identities.

Referring to the literature concerning 'cultural heritage' it is realized that there are generally two different concepts of 'heritage', which might have produced two different approaches for dealing with heritage. The first concept, currently the most consumed as a heritage definition, understands heritage as the remains from the past, which usually celebrate the past glories; including different aspects of power and dominance of particular civilizations among, or compared to, their peers. This concept emerged in Europe, particularly Britain, France and Germany, during the nineteenth-century modernity era (Feilden & Jokilehto, 1993; Smith, 2006; and Smith & Akagawa, 2009), as a result of the then-newly developed dialogues on race, through colonial expansions, where ethnic and cultural identities, as mentioned by Smith (2006: 17) "*became*

*firmly linked with concepts of biology or 'blood'*". Of course, it should be remarked that the Darwinism had helped justifying the link between race and identity, and had claimed the advancement of the 'European' cultural and technical achievements. This heritage concept is claimed to represent, as Smith (2006) complains, the common sense assumption of 'heritage' as being, wrongly, identified as 'old', grand, monumental and/or aesthetically pleasing sites.

On the other hand, starting from the last two decades of the twentieth century, and remarkably noticed since the beginning of the twenty first century, there has been growing efforts spent on spreading the second concept of *heritage*; as a practice of meaning and an identity-making tool that uses memories from the past, and provides routes for new generations to discover fresh ideas about their inherited traditions and values through interacting with physical remains from the past. This concept defines 'heritage' as activities, or understanding, that is discursively constructed in the present, which might be different from the remains themselves, but very connected and linked to them at the same time. This notion of heritage is what Kenny (2009) demonstrates by defining heritage as "a process in the present allows for a more dynamic understanding of cultural production," but it should be also mentioned that the continuous process of 'heritage' construction is itself a product of the cultural process that the heritage practices seek to develop and maintain.

### The conflict of heritages

In fact, most of the physical remains that exist today are 'antiquities', which are categorized and valued according to their archaeological values; these antiquities have usually been preserved and protected 'from people' either partially, by keeping them in open and/or closed museums, or by completely banning them away from public; either ways, no interaction is allowed between people and historic remains, which, by time, created a gap between societies and their history, and thus their heritage practices. The problem of *heritage*, as being practices and activities, is that a link should be discovered and fostered between the physical remains and the understanding of their meanings, which requires the engagement of people in such process of understanding, as well as requiring the existence of proper landscapes that facilitates such process.

Although both the physical 'things' and the non-material values of human beings are so connected in a very complex and interactive way, it can be assumed that due to the two heritage concepts mentioned above, and because of current heritage conservation practices as well, a conflict has been brought to attention; that of cultural heritage being separated, and thus dealt with accordingly, into 'tangible' remains, of which clear conservation, protection, and safeguarding regulations have been set up; and 'intangible' meanings, values, memories, feelings, and activities that exist whether accompanying historic monuments or not. This separation has been so obvious to the extent that Laurajane Smith (2006) believes that there is a decided tendency, within the international classification of heritage, to define *heritage*, and then *intangible heritage*, as two separate and different things. This new understanding of heritage indicates that historic buildings are heritage only when they are well understood by people, in a way that makes their meanings a part of their societies' life, otherwise, historic buildings are just antiquities that are maintained and preserved as pieces of arts, which might make the place more beautiful, but not consequently meaningful.

Traditions, for example, represent an important form of intangible inheritance that creates repetitive life patterns and is claimed as structuring physical 'spaces' (Alexander 1979); realizing such patterns is essential before imposing any new element to an existing space, which is consequently supposed to introduce a new change to the existing patterns. These traditions are alleged, by Misztal (2003), as being re-employed and used as a tool for creating a sense of belonging and fostering group identities. Misztal defines tradition as "*an interpretive scheme transmitted from one generation to the next*". Meanwhile, "keying" is considered to be the process

through which the social identity is guided and developed within a certain place; as it is the bringing together of symbolic models from the past with the experience of the present, where Misztal strongly insists that “keying” can direct traditions towards making dramatic events comprehensible, particularly during national emergency periods, by making the intangible values tangible.

The debate over heritage ownership was also highlighted as part of the conflict; as some tangible heritage, which might seem belonging to their countries, go back to thousands years ago, which sure have belonged to different people from non-existing civilizations that happened to occupy the same lands of now-a-day's countries. So, this raises a question whether it is enough to own them? On the other hand, the problem of intangible heritage ownership seems much easier than that of the tangibles; this might simply have been the case because intangible heritage is transferred by people, individuals and groups through time and from one generation to another, and thus own by them, not by countries, and thus lacks the political influences that guide, to a great extent, the tangible heritage practices. Here, the intangible heritage is normally pointing to groups and communities or places in particular; for example, the *Kimono* will always be a Japanese heritage, no matter who wears it, and where ever it is worn. The same as the Egyptian *Pyramids*, as an example of a tangible historic monument, it will always remain an Ancient Egyptian symbol. Even so, some conflicts started to show up recently upon some intangible heritage ownership, such as the Palestinian scarf, which show the power that intangible heritage can symbolise.

### Functioning heritage

A belief that cultural heritage is the ‘achievements’ of human civilizations that need to be documented and safeguarded over time, has been dominating the ‘Euro-centric guard’ of heritage conservation practice throughout the twentieth-century. This lead to greater emphasize on evacuating many historic contexts from their cultural heritage content; for the sake of their physical preservation. Such approach put more challenges in front of heritage sites’ managers, as well as architects, urban designers, and landscape architects who work on developing heritage sites; as this requires a thorough understanding of how heritage functions, as well as deep understanding of how people experience their heritage. As community members usually share history, habits, language, traditions, knowledge, customs, ceremonies, cultural expressions, and other social and cultural practices, they also transfer their cultural characteristics from place to place, and mix it with others, to produce different/new cultures; as in the case of Chinatowns, started in America with the Chinese-American society practicing their Chinese cultural heritage, in spite of the legal exclusion, institutionalized discrimination, and the racialised stereotyping they have suffered for long (Schaefer, 2008: 285), but still definitely Chinatowns are not the same everywhere, as everyone is somehow influenced by its own local culture(s).

Hillier (1996) highlights the relation between the community and its urban spaces’ formation when he underpins that urban spaces are both spatially structured and functionally driven, and between the spatial structure and the space function there are degrees of intelligibility, through which the large-scale spatial system is understood and learnt without conscious effort. The three components: structure, function, and intelligibility, can be considered as the spatial elements of social engagement; they represent the three elements forming the ‘spirit’ of place (or *Genius Loci*): form, function, and meaning, through which people experiences their culture.

Experiencing the heritage is the way historic tangible and intangible inheritances are understood within their contemporary context, and through which contemporary generations interpret their meanings; simply, by getting engaged with it. Thus, the awareness of heritage is mainly through activities that are done in the present for experiencing the inherited values of the handed-over inheritance, either tangible or intangible, these activities wouldn't be recognized and



admired as heritage experience unless they are accompanied by the act of remembering. Also, such activities should be fostering the feelings of belonging and constructing a sort of identity for both the society and the place. Festivals, for example, can be one of the forms of transforming and enhancing the heritage experience of any society. This can be clear in Smith's (2006) description of the week-long Castleford Festival; how the community is engaged and how children learn about their traditional crafts and skills, and know the meanings behind these traditions and the materials used in their present life. Such ways of engagement are proven to enrich the sense of pride in the society and help their interaction with their past as part of their present life. Thus, if cultures are realized as routines of habitual memory that are unconsciously learnt and developed via numerous routes, this would clarify that cultural heritage is actually conserved through preserving the traditional social performances in the first place, not just as folkloric arts, but more as a part of the social life patterns.

### Heritage and the construct of identity

Although Charles Correa (1983) disclaimed that identity can be constructed, he stresses that it can be developed through tackling what the society conceives as its problems. Correa defines identity as a 'process', not as a result object, which might be linked to inherited cultural heritage from recent civilizations occurred, previously, in place; this process produces non self-conscious identities. Thus, identity can be considered as a function of both historical and cultural circumstances. Furthermore, Cote & Levine (2002) claim that all aspects of social reality are constructs of historic facts, and that they have serious influences on lives and behaviours of individuals in the society. It is also claimed that cultural heritage is often utilized for constructing shared identities for communities and societies (Hazucha & Kono, 2009).

If we consider identifying people by gathering individuals into groups of the same characteristics, there are very obvious categories that people are identified by since their birth; like gender and nationality, although it depends on factors like parents' nationalities and place of birth, which can be argued as meaningless and non-identifying in the sense of grouping alike people together, and this created generations suffering loss of identity; for example, in the most cases of second generations of immigrants to many European countries are seen as non-natives, by original citizens, and at the same time, are seen as non-citizens, by their parents' home-countries natives, especially when they are of different ethnic groups from those of the countries they live in.

Grouping people into categories, or 'labelling' them, is one of the concerns of 'social identity'. such groups can be initiated according to one, or more reasons in addition to those mentioned above, some of them are related to the physical characteristics of the human being, which cannot be changed, while others are related to believes or concepts that people adopt, which might change from time to time; for example, labelling groups of people based on their religion: Muslims, Christians, Jews, or even sub-religious grouping can take place, like Catholic, Orthodoxy, Sunni, Shiite, ...etc.; or based on their ideologies: Conservatives, Liberals, Socialists; or based on their ethnic groups, as we can find: White, Black, Gipsy; or based on their origins, in a much wider consideration than that of the nationality, where grouping might have several levels, starting from grouping people based on their continents, countries, regions, cities, to grouping after specific residential streets/districts, depending on the influential powers and importance of such origins: for example, people can be grouped as Europeans, British, English, Londoners, etc. Thus people, as individuals, might belong to more than one social identity; as it is a feeling of sharing others their look, fate, aims, dreams, goals, or history, while using such identities might depend on the situation they are used at. Cuno (2008) describes the complexity of having dual nationality and, moreover, dual cultures as: when people share and enjoy a non-static and non-separable identities that are made up of many components all mixed together to show their individuality.

Heritage, as a cultural process, has a great influence on the formation of both social and personal identities. Hence, heritage practices and the understanding of the history of place are claimed to be rooting people to their past, and fostering their sense of pride and belonging, especially that memory in particular has currently begun to be widely called upon for the purposes of legitimating identities; since it has been realised that the core meaning of any individual or group identity is actually seen as sustained by remembering (Misztal, 2003).

## HERITAGE AS A MEMORY-MANAGEMENT PROCESS

"From the heights of these pyramids, forty centuries look down on us" (Napoleon Bonaparte, July 1898).

Both history and place have a sort of invisible connection. When Napoleon Bonaparte reached the Egyptian Great Pyramids, he sensed the past glories of a great civilization that has been completely vanished, but still materialized and represented in a physical evidence; the pyramids. It was not the 'pyramids' that Bonaparte was stopped by, but it was the 'history' materialized in them.

Places are considered responsible for making memories cohere in complex ways, where Hayden (1996) underpins the notion that memory, in general, is naturally place-oriented. Furthermore, it is claimed that 'place' usually stimulates 'visual memory' that can be utilized as a source of a community-based 'public history' (The field of 'public history' embraces the different kinds of efforts to bring history to the public (Hayden, 1996: 48) that provides a sense of shared authority; an authority that gives power to communities to define their own collective past. People tend to document important events of their life, which they like to keep remembering in the future, by several ways; the most important of which is to link such events to certain places: places where they were born, streets where they grew up, schools where they learnt, etc. Similarly, it is a fact that every historic event is related or linked, somehow, either directly or indirectly, to particular place(s). Depending on the importance of the event throughout time, some places, consequently, develop to be memorials of particular historic eras. Thus, places have such power for guiding their communities, which might explain why invaders always superimposed public buildings forcing their own architectural styles into public places of occupied lands, in a way that confirms the supremacy of the 'new' regime, and documents the invaders' dominance over conquered nations.

For further clarification on the difference between memory and history approaches towards the past, Misztal states that 'memory' emphasises social groups' awareness of their identities and their extended roots through time from past to present, while on the other hand, 'history' accentuates the discontinuities, which makes it '*situated outside and above groups*' (Misztal, 2003: 102).

## Memory-marking

Also, Harvey (2005) stresses the notion that ancient monuments can be acknowledged as socially constructed phenomena that have, what he names as, 'life history' in them. This also emphasizes the important role that collective memory plays in both formation and then interpretation of cultural heritage. This vision matches Misztal's (2003) perspective of antiquities, as he believes that the latter are characterised by the predominance of oral memory that conveys a sense of the past, which mixes between the mythical and the historical. This relation between antiquities and memory goes back to the *ars memoria*, or the art of memory, which refers to the discoveries of the poet Simonides of Ceos (c.556-468 BC) emphasizing the importance of the sense of sight to the memory, confirming Aristotle's claim that every thought is linked to an image (Misztal, 2003; Yates, 1966). Hence, there is a mental image for every memory, and consequently, images are claimed responsible for constructing and recalling both individual and collective memories.

Hayden (1996) underlines the power of historic places on defining their public pasts; as he points out that places generate the memories of their locals, who already share a common past, and at the same time, he sees that places can represent the locals' shared past(s) to the non-locals. It is important here to highlight that 'memory' and 'history' are considered as two different 'routes to the past'; as Myszta connects memory's orientation towards the past to the 'ritualized actions' designed to create a sense of the past in the present, whereas, she considers the historical orientation as an exploration of past events, which aims to develop the understanding of these events' causes and consequences. Thus, memory itself is considered a tool for preserving the past that gives it added cultural meanings. That is why historic and heritage places are discussed here as memory-markers; where buildings, by themselves, do not have inherent stable meanings (see Jones, 2000), but they sure stand as witnesses of history, which act as memory markers, and work on calling back spatial memories from the past into the present. Such historic remains can be considered as remembering-initiators, while the understanding of the buildings' history, and the meanings behind that history, are the media through which such remembering develops into further heritage practices.

### Management of meanings

"Meanings, like the environments that communicate them, are culture specific and hence culturally variable" (Rapoport, 1982: 21).

As a main component of the 'spirit of place', meanings are very much related to cultures that meanings are interpreted through. Rapoport claims that meanings change according to the changes in cultures communicating them, and this explains why particular messages and symbols can be misunderstood if not interpreted with a complete understanding of their original cultures. The meanings of a place are found to be continuously constructed and reconstructed throughout time, as well as found to be carrying more than simply just one set of meanings.

Dovey (2010) relates meanings to the ideological construction of place, where he describes the 'ideology of place' as the construct of place experience and the process through which a framework of series of beliefs is set-up. Dovey also states that such 'ideology' is integrated with a 'web of meanings', of which it constructs a set of guides and spectacles that people can interpret a place by; otherwise a place would be meaningless. This 'web of meanings' is what, generally, form 'cultures. The built environment is found to be the primary medium for distinguishing several techniques of establishing, legitimizing and reproducing the ideology of place; as places are considered the 'warehouses of memory' (Dovey, 2010).

Now, understanding that meanings are produced by people, not solidly embedded in objects or things, however, still things do provoke meanings. The question is how they elicit or activate their meanings and guide them? And which things or objects "work" best? This raises an important question that forms a new challenge for heritage conservation practices in the twenty-first century: How meanings can be encoded in things in such a way that they can be decoded by the intended users?

As visions for the future are very much affected by past experiences, Lynch (1972) considers the power of creating a mental future lies in the ability to imagine the remote consequences of the present, which will connect present feelings and motives to these consequences. Towards suggesting a method for controlling present consequences in space, Christopher Alexander (1979) claims that knowing how the "structure" of a space supports the intangible activities, or what he calls patterns of events, enables to predict change that might be generated by any change of the space's structure, and thus, controlling such change can be possible; where he describes the structure of a place as consisting of a pattern of repeatable "relationships" that form the base fabric of space, even after its physical elements dissolve. In their book, *The Social Logic of Space*, Hillier & Hanson (1984) discuss and suggest an approach for analysing buildings; as transformation of space through objects, where volumes of space, surrounding buildings, are



created and organized into patterns. While Hayden (1996) adds the importance of collaborative work between architectural conservation, public history, and public art for defining a city's history; when they are complemented by a strong community process that establishes the context of the social memory.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Heritage is not just a *thing* or a place, but rather cultural processes of social activities that include remembering, memory-marking, as well as a continuous meaning-making and re-making through certain socio-cultural patterns that differ from one place to another. Such process gives every place its own significance and defines its identity, where intangible cultural heritage is the activities that highlight the cultural significances of different societies. Cultural activities might be related to language, performances, knowledge, food, clothes, traditions, habits, faiths, values...etc. (see *Figure 1* - visualising the interlocking construct of 'heritage conservation', as a process that combine both tangible and intangible complexities; as represented in this paper). The activities are, typically, created and developed in the past and transformed, probably developed, into the present through successive generations, as a tool for shaping their characteristics and identity. Hence, the identifying activities of any society are very much attached to the place in the first place, but at the same time can be transformed, by people, either individuals or groups, and now by media, from one place to another.

Although the concept of heritage as 'the remains of the past' is still dominating the public 'common sense', a growing understanding of the role of heritage in present life has started to rise on the academic level that considers 'cultural heritage', in particular, as the cultural activities taking place in the present time, affected by, and learning from, inherited values that are represented in both tangible and intangible forms. This perception encourages new approaches of heritage conservation and heritage sites' management processes to search for more innovative approaches, providing techniques of heritage investigation and analysis that allow the maintenance of both tangible and intangible heritage as two faces of 'one' coin that should not be dealt with separately.

It is very important to ensure that the communities do not passively absorb their environment's influences, but rather have a role in changing their surroundings by modifying and sometimes recreating their cultural traditions, which happens usually through aware/wise cross-cultural borrowing in-between engaging communities.

This paper emphasises heritage conservation as a process to manage the changes occurring in place, rather than just a technique of freezing the image of place at some time in the past in a picturesque emotional way. For achieving the equilibrium between the tangibles and intangibles of heritage sites, several aspects are realized as important to be studied and emphasised, which can be summarized as follows:

- Recognising the individuality of each place, to maintain its identity and spirit;
- Considering that every tangible remain has relevant intangible heritage that needs to be preserved just as well as its physical form;
- Considering local communities as important stake holders in the process of acknowledging and analysing any place heritage;
- Realising the relation between present activities and past traditions/patterns in place, with a thorough analysis of the existing life patterns;
- Defining, understanding and maintaining the stories of place, giving attention to 'memory' of place as much as its history, with a complete understanding of collective memory, the remembering and forgetting patterns, and the keying tools and techniques usually applied;

- Conserving cultural heritage for the benefit of both present and future generations, which requires the functioning of such heritage into their community's life (to be useful).

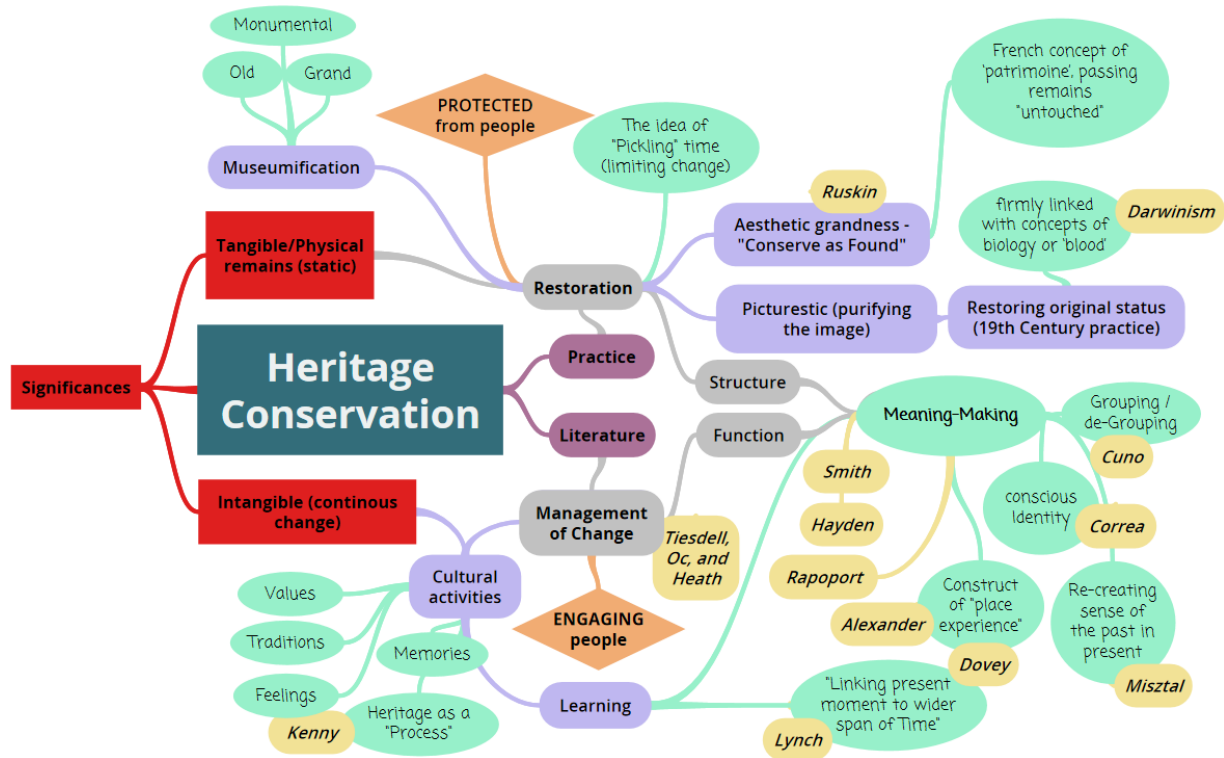


Figure 1. Complexities of Heritage Conservation (Source: Author).

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