A Place for Heritage

A conference paper by Matthew Taylor and Clare Devaney, RSA

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A Place for Heritage

Contents

A Place for Heritage

Since Sir Michael Lyons made the phrase central to his 2007 review of local government 'place shaping' has been often used to define the role of the modern council. Indeed, a combination of factors including public spending cuts, some degree of central Government devolution and a greater emphasis on economic growth has reinforced Lyons' thought that local authorities should go beyond service delivery and statutory obligations, but see their core responsibility as, in his words, 'the creative use of powers and influence to promote the general well-being of a community and its citizens'.

Local leaders are increasingly recognising that if their place does not succeed as a place (economically and socially) they have an ever-diminishing capacity to prop it up through public spending.

It is surely significant that the first item on the list of components that Lyons said comprised place shaping is 'building and shaping local identity'. This begs the big questions which the RSA's modest research inquiry sought to address: 'what role could heritage play in successful place shaping, what role does it currently play and how could we close the gap between potential and reality'.

As well as a literature review and conversation with national experts in heritage and local government, the project explored these issues through a short but deep dive into three places; Manchester, Stoke on Trent and Plymouth. An early, perhaps unsurprising, finding was significant differences between the places. More surprising was how those idiosyncratic differences are manifest in attitudes and approaches to heritage, with each place displaying a fairly consistent and arguably characteristic focus on one particular strand of the heritage spectrum – be that on historic buildings, on storytelling and folklore, or on passed-down skills and traditions – often to the exclusion or detriment of other strands, and resulting in a sense of imbalance or 'something missing'.

This led to the idea, which requires further work before it is even testable, of some kind of typology mapping the local approach to heritage. Such a typology might reflect on the scale of material assets (building, parks, museums etc.), on the less tangible – but potentially measurable – degree to which places regard and realise heritage as an asset, the coherence of local heritage organisations as a sector, and the role that those heritage organisations play in local strategic decision making.

A Place for Heritage

Whilst to some degree we might expect these things all to go together it is clear that discontinuities exist between, for example, the sense that heritage is an asset and the degree to which that is embedded in practice by the bodies who shape places (council executives, LEPs), how it is reflected in the issues they consider and utilised to tackle the challenges they face.

These discontinuities pointed us to the first of our three major findings; simply, that despite the importance tacitly and even explicitly attached to it by civic leaders (place shapers) heritage qua heritage is not consistently treated as a strategic resource. There tends to be lack of clarity about the oversight of heritage assets and policy, about what those assets comprise (both the tangible and intangible) and about how best to engage with the heritage sector (comprising public, private and voluntary sector).

As a result, heritage is more often than not subsumed into the more visible – and visual - arts and culture portfolio. By extension, heritage becomes part of a tourism offer and an outward-facing brand, ever-more removed from its local roots.

If locality leaders don't assess and audit heritage assets, find it hard to describe what they exactly they are and don't know who best to talk to about them it is not surprising that their heart-felt enthusiasm for the history and identity of their places is often not manifest in a convincing local heritage strategy.

This finding may sound like the predictable complaint of any sector– 'no one understands us or takes us seriously'. In these hard times such complaints are futile unless heritage can convincingly argue that what it is holding out is not a begging bowl but an untapped asset.

As we have said, each place emerged as markedly different, but there was a consistent inconsistency in how far notions of identity held by local people were considered as critical to place shaping strategy. Emotional, spiritual and even familial connections to the past are sometimes championed, sometimes tolerated and sometimes simply dismissed as nostalgia. Strategy is something orchestrated at distance then communicated to communities through consultation. A number of places may well have strategies, but it is questionable how many of those strategies have place.

A Place for Heritage

As a result, whilst the accounts of place that civic leaders give are often redolent of local pride and distinctiveness, the economic, cultural and social strategies that are seen to comprise place-shaping often lack such distinctiveness, are based on a superficial 'famous dates and people' idea of place identity, or even disregard local heritage entirely. It would appear that every city – perhaps with the exception of Manchester – has a Beatles story.

Which takes us to our second finding: Despite the richness of the concept, our sense is that the very idea of place-shaping is incompletely developed. As Michael Lyons argued the critical issue here is identity, what does a place mean to its population and in what way can that meaning be articulated, shaped and manifested? In the act of place-shaping, who or what is doing the shaping? Who should be?

Seven years on from Lyon's review and the fundamental challenge for local authorities has arguably become less about 'the creative use of powers and influence' in place-shaping, and more about the creative use of 'the community and its citizens'.

Fortunately, the answer to the second problem potentially lies in the answer to the first. If heritage (as assets, ideas and people) were to be given a greater and more serious standing in local strategic conversations then the identity gap we have found at the heart of place-shaping might start to be filled.

Which brings us to our third – and pivotal – finding; that the more explicit the link with heritage is in a particular place, the greater the connectivity between that place and its place-shaping strategy.

This is obviously a call to civic leaders to more fully appreciate the full scope of heritage as an asset in place shaping. But for us it is just as obviously an imperative to local and national champions of heritage.

For the former the challenge is to raise our sights from protecting and preserving history - which, although it is vital, can tether heritage to the past – and open up instead to the possibility of heritage being at the heart of the conversation about a place's future.

Heritage in contemporary, inclusive usage has come to mean anything created in the past that helps us, collectively or individually, to understand the present, and create a (better) future. It is a fluid and living concept, and always in the process of being created.

A Place for Heritage

Effective stewardship of heritage in these dynamic and ubiquitous terms requires a sector which is up to the job, which understands the wider place challenges, that is willing to engage in hard choices about which aspects of heritage are the greatest asset in terms of local identity today and tomorrow, and which is able to work together to create a credible voice for heritage which is greater than the sum of its parts. Nationally, it means developing a body of expertise including domestic and international case studies of the role that heritage can play in successful place0shaping.

Only then – in a new era of common understanding, mutual value and shared ambition - might it realistically be possible to explore opportunities for more systemic approaches to place-making, positioning heritage as both a catalyst and nucleus in bringing community identity and aspiration together with public investment, co-commissioning and pooling resources toward the greater good.

Our sense is that both local heritage and civic leaders are open to these ideas but they need clearer idea of what success could look like, a toolkit of ways to bring heritage into place-shaping and support from national bodies to encourage local heritage leaders to raise their sights.

It is often the case that an idea exists for some time before it becomes something which changes the debate and drives action. Place-shaping may have been part of the local government discourse since 2007 but perhaps now – with new leadership, new imperatives and new ambitions in local government – place-shaping's time has come. If so, despite all the pressures the sector is under, this is a time of opportunity for heritage.

Matthew Taylor - Chief Executive, RSA

A Place for Heritage

Manchester is its heritage. It's in its bricks, its streets, its urban form, its pavements and cobbles, the movement and language of its people, their accents and stories, the Mancunian swagger. That's its heritage. Its attitude. And it transcends institutions or institutionalising. I'd say it's self-defeating and entirely un-Mancunian to even try and define it further. Why would you want to?

Some people interpret the story of 'The Mayflower' as 'the leaving of Plymouth'. We want to turn it around to 'From Plymouth, you can do anything'.

Stoke is stuffed to the gills with history and heritage, it just doesn't know what to do with it.

In very purposely creating the American business city we didn't have, we have accidentally destroyed the history they desperately wish they had.

It's not a binary choice between heritage and growth – the past and the future. It's all about moving forward and growing upward and outward now; it feels like a growth juggernaut. We need to recognise that our industrial heritage and social, academic and scientific history all add to our uniqueness and competiveness. Not a lot of places have got what we have.

It would be good to turn our old buildings into commercial assets by turning them into space for creative businesses. Funky cultural quarters have worked elsewhere, why not here?

Heritage is the Cinderella of culture here. Art and tourism have stolen the glass slippers

Plymouth's brand has gone from 'Spirit of Discovery' – pioneering, outward facing, unique and original – to 'Britain's Ocean City'. It has swapped its history for its geography.

Prince Charles came here and stood on those steps, and stared across at that beautiful building – it was like he'd never seen anything like it before in his whole life.

Heritage is something I occasionally do at the weekends, or in the school holidays.

About the Research

Nationally and globally, seismic social and economic pressures have severely weakened established structures and systems, creating the pressing need to question accepted approaches and to radically rethink the status-quo.

Austerity continues to underline the brutal economic geography of the UK, with the majority of our towns and cities facing extreme challenges in a politically sensitive and rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. Arguably, in terms of infrastructure, this has been most keenly felt in public services and shouldered by local government, where high levels of poverty, exclusion and social tension, low levels of employment, skills and social mobility and an ageing population are plotted against the rapidly widening gap between demand for services and availability of resources.

Together with a growing interest in sustainability and systemic change, and a recognition of communities as collectives of strengths rather than need, this has created the powerful imperative for a new approach which explodes the traditional paradigm of 'service deliverers and service users', and moves instead toward a model of individual and collective contribution, of co-design and co-production, and of empowered, productive and resilient local communities.

This potent context provided the backdrop for this short and focussed research piece, developed in partnership between the RSA and the Heritage Lottery Fund for Heritage Exchange 2014. Our two organisations share a mutual interest in wanting to more fully explore heritage as a strategic asset than has been attempted before. The focus of our research has therefore been to assess how heritage currently contributes to achieving local social and economic priorities and to scope potential for a more dynamic role for heritage in the future, considering within that both how heritage organisations can support local authorities and civic structures as they determine and navigate the terms of the new social narrative, but also how heritage itself is – and might be better - valued, supported and prioritised within civic structures and strategies.

An initial assessment of heritage assets, investments and governance structures, informed by literature review and conversations with heritage and local government experts, enabled us to plot towns and cities on a broadly linear scale. Manchester, at the centre of the schema, was selected as the pilot area for our research, with Plymouth and Stoke-on-Trent selected as comparators.

The methodology for our field-research has been simply to engage a number of civic and heritage leaders from each of the selected areas in a series of semi-structured conversations designed to examine reciprocal relationships, to interrogate how those

relationships work in theory and in practice and identify how they might be improved. Conversations looked not just at the role and relevance of heritage, but incorporated broader notions of culture, identity and place, and explored connections to wider agendas such as environmental and green issues, education and skills, and health and wellbeing.

This paper sets out key themes, challenges and opportunities emerging from that research.

Heritage. What is it good for?

'Heritage is the stuff from the past which allows people to make sense of the present and gift to the future. It is an 'inheritance' - something that is bequeathed to us, and which we in turn bequeath'.

'Heritage is anything that defines localness – the way in which a town is set out, where it's come from, its industry, geography, history. Here in Stoke, it's our stories, our accent, our oatcakes, our countryside, our blue bricks, Alton Towers, Robbie Williams – mix all that together and throw it in a pot kiln, and you might be halfway to it'.

'Heritage is the preserve of the local newspaper and its double-page picture spreads of things that are no longer there'.

Interviews have begun with the fundamental question: 'What is heritage?'

It is unlikely to be news for colleagues in the heritage sector that little actually emerged from this question in terms of clarity. Beyond taxonomic classification and verbatim quotes from organisational constitutions, heritage, for the most part, evades definition. Of more interest was firstly the nature of response, with what might outwardly seem a fairly innocuous question prompting confusion, self-doubt and self-correction, and secondly the diversity of responses, between interviewees, between places and with a number of individuals actually offering markedly different understandings from personal and professional perspectives.

Almost universally, responses began with reference to the past and to history. Whilst this was frequently applied to how the past relates to the present, and appended with a consideration of the ubiquitous nature of what heritage might constitute, only rarely – and exclusively from within heritage sector – was heritage referred to in relation to the future. Whilst preservation is unarguably important, the danger here is that cities and towns focussed on progress, growth and development might regard heritage as

'belonging to the past' and as something from which to distance themselves, rather than embrace.

The enigmatic nature of heritage as a concept is also a blessing and a curse. Whilst the sector appears fairly comfortable with a fluid and all-encompassing definition, and indeed whilst this allows and supports its broad-scope relevance, by the same token, there is a danger in that that lack of clarity results in people simply not understanding what heritage is.

Without the ability to clearly express what heritage comprises, it follows that there might be some degree of difficulty in defining its assets, in cohering those assets as a unified 'sector', and thus in articulating a clear vision or strategic voice for that sector. These are perilous times in which to be muted.

Whose heritage is it anyway?

'Are you asking me who should own heritage, or who does? It used to be owned by industry, now it's owned by the council, but you know – obviously – it should be owned by the people'.

With definition comes responsibility, and in applying a definition to heritage, even as a light-touch mechanism through which to manage and mediate, there is both a perceived and real tendency for civic structures and/or heritage organisations to become 'custodians apparent' of that heritage, in howsoever it is manifest. As a result, individuals and communities can be found in the situation of either having to apply to civic bodies for permission to engage with heritage (as demonstrated by

innumerate 'save' campaigns) or in being engaged in 'heritage' at distance, as audiences, and in effect the users/consumers of a heritage service.

There are many examples of good and excellent practice in more democratised approaches to heritage, and it is arguably the sector leading the charge in engaging and empowering communities. Indeed, it is thanks to its ubiquity and sense of communal ownership that is often the chosen route, for example through interpretation and storytelling, through which citizens are engaged, consulted and encouraged to participate in other aspects of citizenship. Still those critical paradoxes remain – If something is ubiquitous, how can it be managed? If something belongs to everyone, whose responsibility is it? And if it 'belongs' to certain organisations, how can it belong to everyone?

In response, heritage is subsumed into something more easily defined, either by focussing on one of its many facets, such as historic buildings – and pointing to that facet as 'heritage' – or by rolling heritage into a wider offer, often arts and culture, and by extension, giving it a purpose and economic value through application to tourism and place-marketing. Consideration of heritage in these limited terms arguably distances a place's heritage from its identity, and can also lead to support for heritage seeming superficial or piecemeal, primarily manifest in large-scale (tourism-focussed) buildings, projects and festivals.

That is not to say that the link between heritage, cultural identity and branding is by any means tenuous, and in fact a greater coherence between the three might be encouraged, but their delicate inter-relationship sits at the crux of how heritage is approached in civic strategy, and how successfully it is negotiated impacts directly on how far heritage correlates to place. Less sophisticated approaches can result in place-strategies which start at the clearest and most tangible point of understanding – either with tourism and branding, or with commercialising historic buildings – and effectively 'fit' heritage in retrospect.

The momentum created by public service reform presents a timely opportunity to 're-democratise' heritage, renegotiating the terms of its relationship with places and recruiting 'the people' as a powerful voice and advocate. Its future depends on it.

Only Connect

'Of course if you just have buildings, you are really missing something, a major part of retelling the story, but at the other end if you just have the people and the poetry, it feels superficial and lightweight, like an 'And finally' item on News at 10. You have to put the two together and give people something they can see and touch, then breathe life into it with human stories, so that it becomes real'.

Our field-research brought forward a number of ideas relating to heritage, its definition, role, relevance, opportunities and challenges. When these are considered in relation to the broader economic and social parameters relevant to this project, specifically top down and bottom up fiscal pressures and a move toward co-designed models of service delivery, and when this is then overlaid with notions of place, bringing together culture, education, health, business and all aspects of local life, this creates a triple helix, a unique DNA, an identity, a place. Our assertion is that the point at which all of these contributing factors connect *is place, is identity and is heritage.*

A Place for Heritage

Within this model, it is impossible to extricate a place from its heritage. Heritage is the critical connector in the helix, bringing together past and future, urban and rural, built and intangible. Without heritage as that connector, it creates an unassailable and fairly obvious hiatus. *Mind the gap*.

In testing emerging findings, interviewees from each city were also asked to respond to a short quantitative survey, grading a number of factors on a scale of one to ten, including the extent to which heritage assets are understood, the cohesiveness of a 'heritage sector', the strength of relationship between that sector and civic leadership, the strength of a 'sense of place', and how far heritage is integrated in civic strategy. Responses were analysed overall, but were also grouped as 'Civic', 'Heritage' or 'Other' (including representatives from industry, education, the health sector and voluntary organisations). Whilst there was a marked disparity in all three cities between average ratings from each group – with responses from the 'Civic' group being consistently higher across the board - the smaller the disparity between the three groups in a city, the higher that city scored for both strategic integration and sense of place.

Place: The Final Frontier

'Heritage is well supported here, but not celebrated. Yes, we need better advocacy and a voice at the table, but equally we need to challenge ourselves as to why we aren't already making that case'.

All three cities in our research are in the process of demonstrating a commitment to place, place-shaping and/or place-based strategies – despite varying definitions of what that might mean in practice. Whilst a reinvigorated focus on place is undoubtedly linked to a national groundswell of interest in devolution and localism, successful place-making and place-shaping cannot be simply expressed by its 'otherness' in terms of its relationship to the centre, but instead requires a deeper, organic, multi-faceted and multi-connected definition, firmly rooted in and driven by that particular place.

If, as our research to date indicates, heritage sits at the very epicentre of the debate, this represents a unique and timely opportunity for the heritage sector to lead the charge in shaping and defining place-making. This pivotal role requires a sector with confident in its definition, conviction and practice, that is connected to social and economic agendas, and open to new ways of working.

For HLF and other national heritage organisations, there is a leadership role around promotion and agency, re-positioning heritage as a critically important asset in, of

and for the future, as a potent tool in progress, social cohesion and connectivity, and as a key driver in the successful creation of place.

For civic leaders, there is a need to understand heritage, to encourage its inclusion in strategic development and to acknowledge its pivotal role in place-shaping and sustainable growth.

All must be able to give a coherent account of heritage in a particular place, to understand the health of heritage, identify where it can be better supported and respond to those requirements. Equally, all must be open to radical approaches to funding, commissioning and co-investment, to new business models, procurement, application and reporting processes, and to emerging models of community-led practice, shared custody and stewardship.

The more heritage is valued and expressed in all of its forms, and the greater the connectivity between civic and heritage leaders and the wider social and economic landscape, the stronger the relationship between a place and its strategy.

Place-shaping therefore represents a significant opportunity for heritage. But heritage must set its own place at the table.