Valuing the Intangible

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In a recent radio broadcast in the UK, a BBC correspondent recounted a poignant story concerning the trees of Prague. In a part of Prague outside of the historic city centre, trees several centuries old were being cut down to make way for shrubbery, benches, and other portable street furniture, as part of the redevelopment of the area for the construction of luxury residential property. The protests and petitions of local residents were in vain; the trees were duly felled, but one of the residents asked the developers if she might take away a section of one of the trees to keep. The developers granted this request, telling her that it was in any case of 'no value'. Showing the tree section to the man from the BBC, the woman traced with her finger the rings marking the age of the tree, observing, 'this ring marks the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; this is the Prague Uprising; this the Prague Spring'. How, she asked, could such a living and tangible link with the great events of the city's history be said to have no value, no future?

Notions of what constitutes 'heritage' have broadened with the widening recognition given to the concept of "intangible heritage". But the story of the trees in Prague highlights the very broad nature of intangible heritage, and its attendant difficulties, in terms of its identification and management, how it should be valued – and by whom. To begin with – do the trees constitute tangible, or intangible heritage? There are obvious areas of overlap between 'tangible' and 'intangible' forms of heritage – memory, stories, cultural knowledge and performances of all sorts are invariably anchored in concrete spaces and have tangible objects at their heart, around which webs of association, significance and cultural practice are spun. Equally, the construction and maintenance of tangible heritage derives from knowledge, techniques and skills which have been developed over time and passed on through traditional cultural institutions, such as apprenticeship, with their own intangible heritage value. As a number of writers have argued, the very concept of 'heritage' is embedded in culturally constructed meanings, practices, and hierarchies of value, and to this extent, ALL heritage can be said to be intangible.

On the other hand, it is questionable how far ideas and approaches developed in the curation and conservation of objects and buildings are transferable to the realm of knowledge, ideas and practices associated with intangible heritage. Standard conventions of authentication and inventory listing originate in the practices concerned with the classification and valuation of objects, and are closely linked to the commodification process, whose effects tend to diminish and stultify living cultural forms. To put it another way, those cultural expressions which are most likely to make it on to an inventory of intangible heritage are arguably those which best lend themselves to objectification, thus moving away from the more 'anthropological' approach to culture, which is said to inform ideas about intangible heritage. They also set down implicit criteria for what 'counts' as heritage – and what doesn't.

The cultural inventory, then, is a double-edged sword, identifying not only what should be safeguarded and preserved – but also, by its omission, what is expendable and lacking in value. The trees in the example from Prague are two-fold victims of the cultural inventory. Occupying an intermediary space between tangible and intangible forms of heritage, their peripheral location also places them in a space which is culturally and historically unmarked, by contrast with the culturally and historically saturated city centre. Indeed, such neighbourhoods are particularly likely to be candidates for urban development and renewal, as cultural sites are increasingly tied to urban branding strategies, and property prices are driven upwards by their proximity to heritage cores. For every case of a Jamaa'el-Fna Square – saved from the 'cleaning up' and modernisation plans of the municipal authorities by its designation as a cultural space, following international recognition of its intangible heritage value – there are innumerable examples throughout the cities of the Mediterranean of the failure to safeguard neighbourhood communities, bearers of vibrant urban traditions and social forms, which no longer fit into the authorised vision of the city's future, as the social and cultural spaces which sustained them are sanitised and 'upgraded'. A case in point is the controversy surrounding the plans of Fatih municipality in Istanbul to demolish the homes of the gypsy community of Sulukule in order to build a 'gated community of 620 up-market neo-Ottoman townhouses' in preparation for Istanbul's term as European Capital of Culture in 2010.[1] The gypsies and their supporters have argued that this will destroy, not only a living link with the city's Byzantine heritage, but also the viability of the community in the future, since they would no longer be able to earn their livelihood performing at weddings and places of entertainment in the city.

Heritage values are inseparable from the economic, cultural and social values in which they are embedded, and which they help to create. The trend for the historic cities of the Mediterranean, once centres of production, habitation, and trade, to reconfigure themselves as tourism and leisure consumption hubs, has transformed the meaning and value of heritage, and provided the economic means to care for it. At the same time, it carries with it the risk of polarizing 'historic' and 'non-historic'; 'culturally marked' and 'culturally unmarked' spaces; heritage with 'value', and heritage with 'no value', in ways which may be inimical to the types of intangible heritage which are the lifeblood of cities, and which animate the space between heritage sites. For these reasons, I should like to propose that, rather than seek to adapt tangible heritage practice to intangible heritage purposes, we should instead be injecting intangible heritage methods into the way we approach tangible heritage. In this context, the balance of tangible and intangible heritage projects in the Euromed Heritage 4 programme is to be warmly welcomed.

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[1] 'Postcard from Sulukule' http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1812905,00.html accessed 03/05/09