

Conservation² = Preserving Collections X Our Environment
25th Annual Preservation Conference of the National Archives and Records Administration

Facing Change: basing heritage conservation on broader stewardship principles

Jerry Podany

Senior Conservator of Antiquities, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
President, IIC

Abstract

What influences the heritage conservation choices we make is no longer a simple matter of “preserving all forever at any cost”. The sustainability of our effort, and indeed of our mission and our profession, must take into account the impact our activities have on other finite resources and the broad understanding of our purpose by others. The profession of heritage conservation is undergoing changes and many of the tenets it has come to hold as unassailable are increasingly being challenged. Rather than resisting this change it may be time to see this new situation as an opportunity to verify what we hold true and to expose assumptions that, in the light of contemporary understanding and values, no longer make sense.

Change is not a word that most heritage conservation/preservation professionals like. After all, it has been their traditional role to prevent change. That is to say, it has been our job to cheat time.

But times and attitudes...and definitions... change.

There is a growing acceptance that what conservation professionals really do in the long term, and sometimes even in the short term, is to manage change. It's a sensible and healthy redefinition, but also one that is difficult to adjust to and may be uncomfortable for some. Difficult because it's far more challenging than the old dogma and uncomfortable because it can, perhaps at first glance, seem as if it is a capitulation to the difficulties of preservation. But it's not “giving up.” It's a dose of reality and a response to the concerns of our time, concerns about the sustainability of our planet, ourselves and our purpose, which can be defined as “the sustainable prolongation of usefulness.”

But there is a necessary caution to be considered. While we should internalize the meaning and implications of the word “sustainable,” it has come to be quite overused of late. So much so in fact that it threatens to trivialize anything it is linked to. But it is, none the less, a concept we must become familiar with and one we need to incorporate into our future planning. It does not only mean that we assure a balance between what resources we use in order to conserve others, it can also guide us to consider our own “lastingness” and the continuation of our purpose. Our sustainability.

I realize that my topic was supposed to focus on the interrelationship of environmental and cultural heritage management and to reflect on “the,” or at least “a,” way forward toward improved collections

management. I will do my best to make some connections that might be useful to this meeting. But first I want to establish some general context for my comments and maybe for this discussion.

One could be excused for wondering if the past, if history, is sustainable. Like the assumed permanence of language, which often gives the false impression of being immutable and unassailable, the permanence of the past is an illusion born of short term memory. Over the long term all languages (in their "pure form") change, mutate and indeed often disappear. Much the same can be said of the past, or at least our accurate memories of it, as well as the artefacts of the past which form and sustain those memories. I say this knowing that there has been a recent dramatic change in the relationship between these artefacts and our memory. Documentation, used here in the broadest sense, has far surpassed our more flexible and interpretive human capacity of memory. Captured evidence increasingly provides a more accurate, though still only partial, glimpse into the past...a platform of sorts for future scrutiny and interpretation of "what was." This evidence is essential to support or question our links to, and understanding of, events, creations and thoughts that influence the present moment and then, soon after, the new past. But of course I am still speaking about the short term, which itself raises ample reason to be concerned about the durability and stability of this growing mound of recorded past.

You can now purchase "archival" DVDs that are guaranteed to last 100 years! It's an impressive claim until you open a 700-year-old book or try to retrieve information from a large format floppy disc. Or until you try to plug something into your new computer that you once were able to plug into your old computer.

Protecting the evidence of the past, these links, and prolonging their useful lives, is not a task we should consider lightly or abandon. Nor should we blindly change our well-tested approaches and attitudes. Unless, of course, they are found to be not so well tested or we find them outdated and lacking, even misguided, in the context of the present. But how will we know if there is good reason to change?

Scrutiny and review, self examination and questioning are marks of maturity and acts that should always be welcomed. I think that this is exactly where the profession is today, moving toward maturity, delivered there by the projected immediacy of climate change, the more recent global economic downturn, and questions of the sustainability of our actions.

Let's start with a given. It is important that the creations and the evidence from the past remain available, as long as we can keep them available, for the use of future investigators who will not only make new connections but realize new interpretations regarding their importance and meaning. It is in fact not only important but essential to a healthy world. All those who have access will experience these things anew....new joys, new inspirations and new uses for the past and its products. I hold this equally true of historic documents, scientific specimens, the results of creative expression and the many material products of different places, time periods and cultures. All these link us to the past in some form or another, at some moment or another, and in ways we have yet to discover. These are primary documents of the past and they form a body of essential resources that enrich our lives and the quality of it.

What makes the preservation of this great cornucopia such a unique challenge is that these resources can apparently be defined as both finite (limited) and as endlessly replenishable. Why? Because while the products of history are unique, the products of dynamic culture are continually being created. We struggle therefore to “keep” an ever growing amount of stuff. And we do this with no apparent end in sight for either quantity or duration because this stuff has been identified (or re-identified) as “important.” Or we do it because we are prone to a “just-in-case-it-becomes-important” sensibility. Who is to say, after all, that at least one prime example of a Bakelite-clad toaster is not important enough to assure its survival by some other means than chance?

And of course what we keep and want to pass on is simultaneously tied to, and confused by, our need for authenticity, a need that reflects our mistrust of descriptive records and our love affair with the reliquaries of the past. When the day comes that a historic, or even ancient, artefact, can once be fully and accurately reformed, based perhaps on a complete set of analytical measurements and a redefinition of authenticity, we may resolve this dilemma. Until then we are faced with preserving the material aspects of culture as they come to us since, even if we include the intangible heritage, some form of material “thing or activity” remains necessary to communicate value. Some form of material presence like artefact, landscape, talisman or even story teller must be present to resurrect memory and carry it forward.

As if all of this isn't complicated enough, we are now being faced with the question of whether this surely unachievable task of saving everything indefinitely is in fact realistic, sustainable and indeed if it isn't indirectly contributing to our environmental woes.

It is because of this ever growing accumulation, forced upon us by the continuum of history, that we must ask ourselves whether “we” are sustainable, and whether we are doing as much as we can to keep our “consumption impact” (that is to say how much we consume of limited natural resources to preserve equally limited cultural ones) as low as possible.

Much has already been recently done, including within the projects you will read about in this conference. A partial list includes:

- LEEDS initiative, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design from the US Green Building Council
- ASHRAE American Society of Heating, Refrigeration and Air-Conditioning Engineers chapter of museums and libraries.
- The 2008 IIC London Congress, focusing on access, and then the roundtable on Climate Change and Collections (<http://www.iiconservation.org>)
- The Institute for Museums and Library Services (IMLS) funded Salzburg Global Seminar 2009 “Connecting the World’s Collections” session on sustainability and stewardship

- The Getty Conservation Institute and the Natural Resource Defense Council panel in 2008
- In the UK, the Arts and Humanities Council's new project EGOR, Environmental Guidelines Opportunities and Risks
- The National Endowment for the Humanities' (NEH) grants line emphasizing the achievement of sustainability.

This impressive but certainly incomplete list shows that energy efficiency has been a strong focus since it is both an ecological issue and a financial one. Cost is a primary concern in the discussion of sustainability. Energy is, after all, a form of payment we make to undertake the efforts of heritage preservation. We want to get as much as possible for the smallest payment possible. This is particularly true if the currency is the consumption of other limited resources.

How do we use less? There has, in the last decade or so, been a dramatic reconsideration of our "environmental standards" for collections care, whether for archive or museum collections. This has come about for the most part because of rising energy costs, but it has also been tied to our potential contribution to the global climate changes we are facing and will face for some time to come. Those who demand the maintenance of narrow and stringent climate control are now not only seen as proponents of a program that is "too costly to support" but also as agents of waste and contributors to the decline of our planet's health or, at best, as a group of people who are not so confident of their "facts." What does this mean to a group whose very profession incorporates the word "conservation"?

I think it means opportunity and maturity. But this will be true only if we meet the challenge with a coordinated, thorough, and rational effort. And rationality requires us to be aware of the trade-offs and the costs associated with heritage preservation while also maintaining the importance of the preservation effort as an essential part of a healthy world. It will not be easy. We live in a world where the past doesn't linger very long before it moves from our sight. It's not that we are necessarily living more "in the now," but more a matter that the past is now so quickly relegated to the status of irrelevant. It's all about pace, and rapid pace has a way of shrinking the opportunities for reflection, the transfer of experience and the formation of continuity. The internet for example, so pervasive in our lives today, is about simultaneity not continuity.

It is possible, even likely, that the coming generations will have a very different relationship than we have now with the past, and hence with all efforts to preserve it.

With that in mind we should ask if we have sufficiently engaged with young people. Have we explained our purpose and their potential place in this effort? Do they have any idea of how we, heritage professionals, keepers and caretakers of the past, fit into the emerging dialogue and into their lives? Or are we waiting, as we have done so often in the past, for them to come to us?

I had also been asked to bring a more international perspective to this discussion. And I will admit from the very beginning that all of what I say is, by necessity, my opinion and so subject to debate, which I

hope will happen since I would prefer to be dissuaded from such a dire overview. But it seems to me that the countries who are being the most repentant about their effects on the environment and active in reducing consumption are those who have been (and perhaps still are) the most wasteful. In general repentance is a good thing, but it's not always transferable. I hear on a regular basis from heritage professionals working in less advantaged countries that they wish to emulate a model for environmental control found in, or espoused by, the collections and archives of more advantaged countries. But the model they seek is now quite outdated. Indeed it is one of the great ironies in our community. These less advantaged countries aspire to strict standards of control which, at least in the United States, the majority of major institutions have admitted they do not regularly achieve.

I am of course painting with a very broad brush. And I do not, in any way, want to give the impression that I think we should abandon guidelines or make no effort to stem deterioration and decay by controlling light, humidity and temperature levels and the dramatic fluctuations of each. The challenges being heard to our long held ways of achieving the degree of environmental control we have called for are all good opportunities, if taken for the right reason, to evaluate where we are, why we are where we are, and where we should responsibly be going.

And that includes an evaluation of our very purpose, since it may not only be how we are doing things that is changing, it may also be why we are undertaking the effort, since both are intrinsically linked.

In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*,¹ Svetlana Boym notes that nostalgia, as a prevalent response to the Enlightenment, was a romantic notion that insisted on the "otherness" of the object of nostalgia, which itself existed "out of time," locked away in a museum, to be pondered from afar and forever....and at any cost. I have added this last statement, "at any cost," because I think it is evident that heritage conservation has, by and large, taken this approach to their goals. And this approach may well have now come to an end.

Ever since the Renaissance it has been predominately the western view that objects in collections can prolong memory and that, by preserving them in a container (the archive, library, or museum), we assure that prolongation. Knowledge, in the modernist sense, has become defined by organized material evidence, like museum, library or archive collections. But change is upon us. Just ten years ago Eileen Hooper-Greenhill wrote that museums will no longer focus on collecting but on use.² Of course one wonders what will happen when everything in the collections is used up.. In 2005 Nick Merriman made a convincing case for the role of disposal in a sustainable approach to museum collections.³ He made a case that museums no longer function as repositories for objects that form an assumed objective record of the past, but rather they form partial and historically-contingent assemblages that reflect both the tastes and the interests of the time and people who made the objects as well as the time and the people who made and maintain the collections. I can only assume that archives fall into these same categories, or at least face many of the same issues of change. In the end I suppose it is all about the value of memory, and how much we want to spend, in whatever form of payment we want to use, to keep our memories or the mnemonics that bring those memories accurately to the surface, intact. And recently the costs are being questioned.

In facing these challenges as an inevitable reality we must also be cautious to guard against the pendulum swinging to the other extreme. We cannot simply step out of the way and relinquish our responsibility of preservation. We cannot allow the evidence of the past to be consumed at an irresponsible pace. We must find a responsible balance, a middle path. Like our friends working on the conservation of natural resources, the most sustainable path open to us is one of managed consumption and compromise. The most productive approach is a rational, well reasoned one. But there are many barriers to rational thought, which itself is not always the best guide. None the less it remains a primary tool and an efficient filter to pass our more subjective decisions through. We all know stories of dramatic discoveries in cellars, attics, or long-forgotten libraries, suggesting that neglect can be a primary tool in preservation. But unfortunately in those situations where neglect has made preservation possible, it is coupled with chance. Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that whatever the object needed to survive...the object got. It is unfortunate then that it is so rare that we fully and forensically study the conditions of this neglect and what it has to teach us.

So what is the balance? I am not sure we can individually determine this. I am not even sure we can collectively determine this. We are not very good at evaluating long term global costs. Perhaps we will improve. In the meantime however we should care no less for the collections. We should try with no less commitment to prolong their useful lives in all the various permutations of the term "useful." And these efforts and decisions should be based on solid research and experience (present and past) and not on abstract dogma. We must put considerable effort into knowing what the particular object, collection, situation, and use require to reasonably survive, to be sustainable. We cannot move forward unless we do so. Evaluating objects in the abstract can be useful, but it is not the full answer. It will be complicated of course, since one person's "good condition" is another person's "dramatic instability." And change, as well as damage, has a myriad of causes. Nothing is going to be simple and almost everything is going to resist standardization.

Much has already been done and we have heard about a great deal of it in this conference.

Perhaps the formation of international working groups on environmental control and, more importantly, on the environmental needs of specific categories of objects, is in order. The Canadian Conservation Institute has led the way.⁴ But specifics need to be developed further. In the United States and the United Kingdom steps have already been taken to survey what conditions are actually achieved as compared to what has been required, and then to compare that to the "health" of the related collections. The findings have, I hope, set a new tone in the ongoing discussions.

There is much that can be done by bringing new technologies and research tools to this problem.⁵ Materials can surely be more fully characterised and their responses to a range of conditions and dynamic changes can be more accurately predicted. This will of course require significantly greater support, and time, to both design and implement. But we can also gather information about what we know, what we think we know, and what we have observed. The gathering of empirical observations has, I believe, several significant benefits. First we will clarify which observations can be verified and which have become de-facto truths. We will separate fact from myth, while valuing both. If we were to gather all of this messy data, and it will be messy, we may well see patterns emerging that lead to

unexpected conclusions. I believe that research based on these observations is likely to produce far more useful information and in a more timely manner, than our present approach. It is a call to develop real tools for rational evaluation.

The historian David Lowenthal has written that it is not a sign of resignation but of maturity for a discipline to realize that heritage stewardship is temporary and partial. From it, he says, we gain “self confidence and public credence.”⁶ I would only add, in reference to this discussion, that by putting heritage preservation in the context of preserving our total sum of finite resources we signal an even greater maturity and present our specific efforts as an example of sustainable continuity. We can lead the way in shifting the world’s focus from an ever insatiable search for the new, at any cost, to a paradigm of maintenance and renewal not at “any cost,” but at an agreed upon and balanced payment.

References:

1. S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
2. E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001).
3. N. Merriman, “Museum collecting and sustainability,” *Museum Management & Curatorship* 17/1 (2008): 3-21.
4. D. Grattan and S. Michalski , “Environmental Guidelines for Museums - Temperature and Relative Humidity (RH), “ Canadian Conservation Institute, <http://www.cci-icc.gc.ca/crc/articles/enviro/index-eng.aspx>.
5. C. Sabbioni, P. Brimblecombe and M. Cassar (eds.), *The Atlas of Climate Change Impact on European Cultural Heritage* (London: Anthem Press, 2010).
6. D. Lowenthal , “Stewarding the Past in a Perplexing Present,” in *Values and Heritage Conservation*, Research Report of the Getty Conservation Institute, eds. E. Avarami, R. Mason, and M. de la Torre (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2000), 20.