# Authenticity in Cultural Heritage Management and Tourism

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Heritage conservation and heritage tourism are frequently characterised as oppositional practices. This polarisation not only suggests that tourism practices run counter to conservation aspirations, but it allows heritage professionals to imagine tourism as morally separate and even inferior to conservation. However, tourism is increasingly regarded as an important source of financial revenue to achieve the aims of heritage conservation.[1] Thus tourism is regarded as something of a 'necessary evil' – necessary because it can provide resources for cultural heritage management and conservation, but 'evil' because it simultaneously undermines conservation efforts.

The way in which tourism undermines conservation is twofold. First tourism has a range of negative physical impacts on heritage properties. Second, and sometimes less obviously, tourism can impact on social aspects of cultural heritage. The commodification of cultural heritage as a result of tourism is perceived to be one of the key negative impacts. It is central to the tension inherent in heritage tourism because the commodification of heritage is thought to lead to a loss of authenticity. Thus tourism is seen to corrupt one of the central tenets of cultural heritage conservation, which is to preserve the authenticity of heritage sites. This paper suggests that tourism and conservation are not directly opposed in these matters. Rather than directly attributing the commodification and loss of authenticity to tourism, it suggests that these are also a product of the principles and practices of cultural heritage conservation.

## Cultural heritage: a commodity for consumption

In the process of commodification, things and activities become goods and services.[2] Central to this transformation is the role of a market that determines the value of such things and activities. When objects and practices become valued only for their exchange value within that market, they become commodities.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that tourism has played a significant role in the commodification of cultural practices around the world. These effects are felt in both cultural activities and in the products of those practices. Tourists are predominantly from affluent, industrialised countries, and in travelling to other parts of the world they inevitably transform local cultural practices into commodities. Through economic exchange between tourists and locals, local activities and practices become goods and services in the form of souvenirs, recreational spectacle, performances, and so on. In this way many of the practices and things originally produced for local use and trade become (re)produced as items to exchange with tourists. Consequently, both practices and associated material cultures are susceptible to commodification as a result of touristic influences.

The commodification of cultural heritage is similarly thought to occur through the production of heritage properties as tourist destinations. Tourism is seen to commodify heritage in a range of circumstances including the focus on historic cities and archaeological sites as tourist attractions rather than local places, and in the looting of artefacts for tourist souvenirs.[3] What is less readily recognised is the commodification process instigated by heritage practices. Heritage professionals do not regard heritage as a commodity and argue that the economic value of heritage is difficult to define or determine. It would even be fair to say that managers resist attempts to place monetary value[4] on heritage, regarding the importance of these properties as invaluable. To this extent, heritage professionals regard their decisions as independent of economic factors, and assume that they are disconnected from processes of commodification. It is only when such properties become part of a commercial tourism operation that heritage managers recognise that commodification has occurred.

The conviction that heritage decisions are independent of economic consideration is, of course, not wholly correct. Conservation and maintenance of heritage properties demands considerable monetary resources. At the most basic level heritage properties that are selected for conservation are, in effect, those the market determines are worthy of particular expenditure in time and money. Underpinning these decisions, however, are the much more opaque processes of heritage assessment which operate to commodify heritage.

According to Appadurai, commodities can exist in a number of contexts and are not only restricted to capitalist and developed societies.[5] His framework also allows us to recognise how it is the capacity for exchange that defines a commodity rather than the nature of things themselves. This is a useful model in understanding how something like heritage can become a commodity. The very term heritage invokes an inheritance from the past as well as an intended recipient of that inheritance, which itself suggests a mode of exchange.[6] Furthermore, heritage practitioners who maintain that they operate outside a monetary market, nevertheless routinely make judgements about heritage 'values'. The term value itself implies exchange according to a market. In the case of heritage, values are determined by heritage professionals as the basis of making conservation decisions. Put another way, the heritage market determines the relative value of heritage which in turn determines how it can be used and who can access it. In this sense the heritage profession operates an exchange system in which different types of heritage properties, historical eras, cultures, time and space are all exchanged with one another. Thus they may choose one heritage site over another, in deciding whether it is representative or unique, or has other particular significance. In this way heritage managers decide which heritage places will be conserved, which will be ignored, and even those which can be destroyed. Hence, decisions about significance and conservation and management that are regarded as independent of direct monetary markets, are nevertheless focused around practices of exchange.

Another important aspect of Appadurai's argument is the

recognition that some things are commodities for only particular periods or under particular conditions.[7] In the case of heritage, assessments and management decisions provide the context through which heritage or history is brought into a commodity phase. In Appadurai's terms, heritage practices provide the commodity context to link the commodity candidacy of heritage to its commodity phase. It can thus be seen that conservation has consequences for the commodification of heritage sites because it often determines (and alters) the function and purpose of such properties.[8] Hence, heritage can be transformed into a commodity, not only through tourist demand and consumption, but also through the exchange market established by heritage assessments and management.

## The nature of heritage commodities

Conservation and tourism share further similarities in relation to the commodification of heritage, in that both are focused on particular kinds of attributes. History is fluent and fragmentary and can only ever be understood in fleeting moments of recognition,[9] but the focus of cultural heritage conservation demands a more concrete view of the past. Heritage assessments necessarily capture and fix a single episode or series of episodes relating to particular eras, activities, or historical themes. Standard processes in identifying and assessing heritage give consideration to a range of values and associations, but the process necessarily essentialises particular aspects of a property or region. As such it becomes cemented as a particular interpretation of the past judged to be significant in the present. This process introduces new, or changes existing, products for exchange. Thus culture and history as continuing and fluent become fixed into heritage commodities. This essentialised product becomes the basis of many forms of consumption, including heritage conservation, political gains and tourism.

Thus the creation of a fixed commodity commonly precedes the development of any tourism enterprise at a particular heritage property. In other words an essentialised and fixed commodity created by heritage assessment becomes the basis through which heritage can be consumed by tourists. This is further supported by data that suggests heritage sites included in the World Heritage List receive more visitors and tourists than comparable heritage sites.[10] The conviction that listing leads to increased tourism is frequently a reason why nominations for World Heritage Listing in Australia have been surrounded by controversy, triggered by local objections to such listing. Similarly, a survey by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council found that Aboriginal sites listed in the Australian Register of the National Estate had been more degraded by visitors than any others sites in the state.[11] Thus the very act of listing or assessing a heritage site may cause it to become a tourist destination.

Significantly, the heritage commodity through which an imagined or reconstructed past is represented, promoted and interpreted takes particular physical manifestations. Heritage assessments have traditionally given greatest consideration to conservation of fabric rather than the 'intangible' associations.[12] By its very nature heritage management cuts across continuing practices, fluidity and change, and at best can only map or trace that which has already gone.[13]

These approaches are challenged by living traditions, particularly those that are of 'other' cultures and there is increasing concern about how communities of interest other than those of elite groups represented by professionals, may attribute value to a heritage site.[14] In Australia this is sometimes referred to as social value or social significance and is increasingly regarded as an important aspect of heritage assessments.[15] In spite of these developments, heritage conservation continues to be biased towards the assessment and management of physical manifestations of the past. This is particularly apparent in relation to the built environment which is most commonly evaluated according to aesthetics criteria. These criteria and their implementation are strongly linked to the visual qualities of fabric. This stems from an understanding of aesthetics within art and architecture where visual qualities, such as scale, form, colour and proportion are paramount. It is therefore arguable that in the context of European heritage the particular definition and interpretation of aesthetics is, to some extent, justified because heritage conservation and notions of visual aesthetics share similar Western origins.[16] However, in contrast with professional assessments, local knowledge of place is developed through embodied experiences of space.[17] Even architecture comprises more than visual quality, with human movement and building function comprising important elements of its significance.[18] However, heritage assessments seldom, if ever, consider such experiences.[19]

The dominance of fabric in heritage assessments, and its particular focus on visual qualities is strongly aligned with consumption in tourism. Urry has suggested that the 'tourist gaze' establishes the tourist condition.[20] And like conservation management this gaze has origins in nineteenth-century Europe. It is through the act of gazing on something or somewhere that is different to the everyday, that the status of tourist is achieved. Although the gaze falls on something different to the everyday, it is not an unexpected difference. Rather the subject of the visual gaze is (re)constructed according to pre-existing notions of difference which are contained and non-threatening.[21] Heritage buildings are particularly important visual symbols of the tourist experience because they can act as synecdoches of a particular region or 'place'.[22] For example, heritage buildings such as the Sydney Opera House, Eiffel Tower, Statue of Liberty and Big Ben, can all be used as visual symbols of the broader cities, and even countries, in which they are found.

The focus on visual qualities severs tourists and others from local knowledge of place which originates in a much more embodied experience of space.[23] Augé has argued that modern infrastructure further removed tourists from such local experience and knowledge. Whereas travellers may once have travelled through towns and stolen glimpses into local everyday lives, highways now bypass these experiences and are replaced with signs.[24] This has taken an extraordinary and rather literal turn in Tasmania where road exit signs along the renamed Heritage Highway employ photographic images of historic features to indicate the towns through which tourists might once have travelled.[25] While these road signs are a product for tourists, the emphasis of heritage conservation on visual aspects of fabric has provided the framework for this visual consumption.

It can therefore be seen that both heritage tourism and heritage conservation have an interest in the commodification of visual aspects of heritage fabric. This has particular relevance to the question of authenticity and the relationship between commodification and authenticity is considered in the following section.

## Commodification and authenticity

The process of commodification is thought to impact on authenticity when a cultural practice or product is altered as a result of exchange with outsiders, or when outsiders become an influential part of exchange. The concept of authenticity originally developed in relation to European museum collections and the acquisition of exotic objects from 'other' cultures.[26] More specifically, authenticity related to objects created within non-industrialised societies and in the absence of outside influence. This is most clearly envisaged in its original context – that is, in encounters between 'tribal' or 'primitive' cultures and Western outsiders. However, it is also recognised that within the 'West', such inequitable exchanges occur between industrialised peoples and ethnic or folk minorities.

Authenticity is thus defined as a relative term in which there is a binary of the authentic (the local most often represented as 'other') and inauthentic (represented by outsiders or 'self'). The concept relies on a division between the authentic/original/pure and the inauthentic/copy/impure, implicit in which is a value judgement that gives preference to authenticity over its counterpoint.[27] Authenticity is thus compromised when there is contact between these two ends of the spectrum. This is seen to occur when particular objects or practices become commodities in relation to external exchange, or when commodification is a direct consequence of outsider contact.

While authenticity is an attribute central to many charters and guidelines for cultural heritage management, including World Heritage listing, it is also a central concern for tourists and tourism operators. MacCannell's work, *The Tourist*, first published in 1976 has been particularly influential in tourism studies.[28] He identified authenticity as a central motivator for tourism, but argued that in seeking authenticity tourists necessarily diminish or destroy it. The very presence of tourists (outsiders) contaminates or changes the local (insider) experience. Thus commodification that occurs as a result of tourism is criticised because it leads to the loss and even permanent destruction of original associations and meanings. While a commodity state for an object or practice can be a temporary phase brought about by a particular context,[29] commodification that results from outside influences is often thought to be irreversible. In some instances, commodities lose all association with their original meaning and context and are only (re)produced for their role in tourism exchanges. Examples include artefacts manufactured solely for the tourist souvenir market and dance performed only as tourist spectacle.[30]

It is relatively easy to identify this effect, and the power relations of such interactions, when the dualism between insiders and outsiders is dependent on the rather blunt and obvious construction of 'otherness'. It is more difficult to recognise when the influence of an outside perspective is portrayed as a rightful one, or where it assumes a hegemonic position of authority, as is the case with heritage conservation. As outlined above, heritage identification, assessment and management are seldom recognised as processes of commodification. Similarly, the explicit aim of heritage conservation to respect and uphold authenticity, does not allow heritage management to be readily recognised as a factor in the loss of authenticity. In contrast tourism, with its clear dichotomy of locals (insiders) and visitors (outsiders), is much easier to identify as an agent of commodification and as a contaminant of authenticity. Consequently authenticity is constructed as the realm of cultural heritage managers' judgement, and tourism is made synonymous with inauthenticity or at least a loss of authenticity. However, as heritage management provides a commodity context to create heritage as a commodity, heritage management is also problematic for authenticity.

As with tourism, heritage management can lead to the commodification of the past in a way that limits any continuing practices and associations. Heritage management is not established and maintained through local everyday practice, but rather is imposed on such practices by a heritage profession.[31] Several authors have argued that as products of a European tradition, cultural heritage frameworks privilege the position of the expert, and struggle to accommodate other cultural perspectives.[32] However, heritage managers seldom recognise themselves as outsiders. This is perhaps more the case when the heritage in question is apparently 'ours' rather than 'theirs'. It is no coincidence that those who have identified the problem of hegemony in cultural heritage frameworks, like Sullivan and Byrne, have largely worked in Aboriginal heritage management in Australia and worked with diverse cultural groups in the developing world. When the focus is on 'European' heritage, or non-Indigenous heritage, it is more difficult for heritage managers to recognise themselves as outsiders.

Authenticity as a key element in cultural heritage conservation has strong parallels with the concept as it developed in relation to museum collections. In particular it shares the construction of authenticity as a binary of pure and impure states. This idea that authenticity exists as an absolute state is fundamental to understanding how it is diminished through commodification and the influence of outsiders. The state of authenticity for cultural heritage is imagined to exist at a particular time in the past. The authenticity of a property is therefore measured by the extent to which the fabric remains consistent with (or unchanged from) that particular historical period. Absolute authenticity is therefore an imagined point at which there is no contamination between insiders and outsiders, or between past and present. Furthermore, there is an assumption that change is only brought about through the influence of unequal exchange partners, classically between the West and non-Western cultures. It does not consider change as part of social life. This point of stasis is equivalent to an imaginary point zero that environmentalists imagine 'before the influence of any people', or 'before industrial influence', or how anthropologists, historians and archaeologists, imagine an Australian Aboriginal past stretching back without change for thousands of years, or how research into tourism might imagine societies before contact with outsiders. While there are undoubtedly instances of dramatic and negative change as a consequence of contact between different societies, there is considerable research that contests the idea of a point zero for the environment, Aboriginal history and tourism.[33] Such equilibrium is contested because it essentialises particular aspects of history, the environment and culture. Similarly, such an imagined point of beginning for history can only perceived with the privilege of hindsight – or a distant temporal perspective. By its very nature, the past is separated from the present so that in selecting an historic period from which to measure authenticity, heritage management cuts across continuing practices. This positions the heritage management as an outsider, a perspective consolidated by the intention to remain objective and impartial. Heritage management is therefore removed from local, direct or personal knowledge of place and even in relation to what might be regarded as their own heritage, practitioners inevitably operate as outsiders.

Heritage practitioners operate as outsiders, but their status as experts grants them considerable power. Their decisions about the significance of properties, determined according to their own views of the past, in turn become the basis of management decisions. Consequently heritage managers enjoy considerable privileges in deciding access, use and interpretation. While tourists are widely acknowledged and acknowledge themselves as outsiders, the hegemonic position of heritage practice does not facilitate a similar awareness. Instead this power allows heritage practitioners to operate as though their knowledge and understanding is inimitable. In this way the context for exchange of heritage values, which is provided by heritage management and which gives rise to commodification, is controlled as an exclusive domain.[34] This inevitably alters the way in which locals access, use and perceive heritage properties. Thus the privileged position of expert is an outside influence that significantly changes local practice. As such, heritage management diverts culture and history from its flexible path and creates a fixed commodity of diminished authenticity.

Both heritage management and tourism can thus be recognised as having a role to play in the commodification of culture and history. And both have a role in a loss of authenticity. However, authenticity is itself a problematic term especially for the notion of sustainability, and its continued role in heritage conservation and tourism is open for discussion.

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper suggests that tourism is not solely responsible for the commodification of heritage, but that heritage practices themselves lead to the commodification of culture and history. It is also suggested that both tourism and heritage conservation share a bias towards the visual qualities of heritage fabric and that this impacts on notions of authenticity.

Both heritage and tourism have been confronted with the problematic of the binary in authenticity. MacCannell initially identified the authentic in relation to objects, other times and places, but more recently others have suggested that authenticity is much more relative and polyglot.[35] Furthermore, tourists acknowledge themselves to be problematic for authenticity and there is a desire to create more meaningful experiences for tourists. It is now important to understand not only authentic goods, but authentic experiences, and it is recognised that authenticity can be object-related or experiential.[36]

Similarly, an awareness of the imperialist nature of cultural heritage practice and the adoption of heritage management by non-Western and marginalised groups has seen the emergence of a less rigid notion of authenticity as suggested by the Nara Document on Authenticity,[37] and interest in qualities such as 'social value'. However, heritage management by its very nature reinforces the dualism contained within the notion of authenticity. While conservation management strives for sustainability through the maintenance of authenticity, this focus inevitably leads to the commodification of the past. This is similar to the way in which even the most unwitting tourist changes those places and experiences which they most desire.

Heritage management with its strong focus on materiality misconstrues authenticity as an inherent quality of the objects, times and places of interest rather than recognising it as an idea in Western thought. By recognising it as a process and acknowledging that authenticity is created in the present it is possible to transcend the binary to recognise that authenticity is a concept influenced by authority and power.[38]

Many problems and issues that confront sustainable use of historic heritage in tourism are not the sole domain of either tourism or conservation, but rather are issues confronting tourists, managers and operators alike. Rather than taking an adversarial approach which typifies tourism as 'evil' and heritage conservation as 'good', heritage tourism and heritage conservation should envisage a more complete experience of culture and history. Rather than seeking to establish authenticity as a point of absolute equilibrium, we should seek to understand flow, change and invention as well as continuity in both local and tourist experiences.

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**Endnotes**

1    The financial costs of conserving heritage properties, and the number of properties that require financial support, far exceed existing Government and private funding. Furthermore, governments increasingly look to models of user-pays. These issues have been raised in various contexts including at an Australian Heritage Commission Conference on heritage economics (see Australian Heritage Commission; Butler 2001; Cotterill 2001; McArthur 2001; Robins 2001; Throsby 2001; Young 2001). More recently this has seen cultural heritage become the subject of a recent Productivity Commission Inquiry (see Australian Council of National Trusts 2005; Productivity Commission 2005).

2    Appadurai 1986; Cohen 1988

3    Ashworth and Tunbridge 1990; Baram and Rowan 2004; Stark and Griffin 2004

4    Terms such as 'cultural capital' are more accepted for discussing heritage economics. Throsby 2001

5    Appadurai 1986

6    Ashworth and Tunbridge 1990: 24-5

7    See also Geary 1986

8    Ashworth and Tunbridge 1990: 1-2

9    Taussig 1993: 38-40

10    A study of the contribution of World Heritage listing to tourism branding suggests that listed sites attract a larger number of visitors than unlisted sites (Buckley 2002). While the data for visitor numbers are only tentative, the report also suggests that increases in visitor numbers coincide with environmental controversy more than World Heritage listing (Buckley 2002: 21). It should, however, be noted that environmental controversy is itself often a trigger for heritage listing and many heritage sites remain relatively unknown in the absence of threat.

11    Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council Corporation 1994. However, Lehman 1993 acknowledges that listing in the Register of the National Estate does afford some degree of protection. As noted above, it is often threats to heritage that result in sites being listed. This may account for the pattern that suggests that listed sites are more damaged than those that are not. However, visitor pressure to listed sites is known to be greater than to unlisted sites, and visitor impacts on fragile heritage sites are well established. While threats to heritage sites can act as a trigger for listing, site integrity is held to be a key aspect of heritage assessment so it can be assumed that at the time of listing the site has a reasonable degree of integrity.

12    This is partly a reflection of the fact that managers are most concerned with physical impacts and spaces or sites that may be affected. However, the bias towards fabric often suggests that it is valued for its own sake rather than for any associated values.

13    Pocock 2003

14    Byrne 1991; Sullivan 1993; Byrne, et al. 2001

15    See Johnston 1992; Byrne, et al. 2001; Pocock 2002a

16    Pocock 2002b

17    Pocock 2004

18    Carlson 2001

19    Casey 1996; Feld 1996; Feld and Basso 1996; Pocock 2002b

20    Urry 1990, 1992, 1995

21  cf. Ryan 1996; Pocock 2003
22  The popularity of heritage tourism can partly be explained by ever increasing
    demands for diversity in tourist experiences. See Apostolakis 2003: 796.
23  Casey 1996; Feld 1996; Feld and Basso 1996; Pocock 2002b, 2003
24  Augé 1995
25  The exceptions are the few towns which the highway continues to pass through,
    and these are marked by signs with drawings of historic features rather than
    photographs.
26  Cohen 1988
27  Olsen 2002
28  MacCannell 1976; 1999
29  Appadurai 1986; Geary 1986
30  See MacCannell 1999: 91-107 for a discussion of staged authenticity
31  Pocock 2003
32  See, for example, Cleere 1984; Byrne 1991; Sullivan 1993
33  McGrath 1991; Martin 1993; Langton 1996; Rose 1997; Lowenthal 2000; Olsen
    2002
34  Cf. Geary 1986
35  Apostolakis 2003
36  Olsen 2002; Apostolakis 2003