

Cultural Heritage and Active Citizenship

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Why is it that the cultural heritage sector always seems unhappy with governments?

- Is it because we always demand more money to repair our buildings – and don't get it?
- Is it because we are always demanding more protection for those buildings, contents and cultural landscapes?
- Or because we want governments to stop saying 'yes' to every development on the basis economics alone?

Why do governments never seem to have time for the heritage sector?

- Is it because the heritage sector is seen as backward looking?
- Because it is seen as elitist?
- Or because the heritage sector is part of the tourism industry, which is made up of small businesses doing OK?

The two sides seem either to be at loggerheads or, at the very least, to have little enthusiasm for the other.

The European Union 'Working Group on EU Directives and Cultural Heritage' reports:

"Legislation drawn up by the EU has – unwittingly – had the reverse effect on the safeguarding of Europe's cultural heritage."

Why are things so much better for the environmental sector?

- As long ago as 1979, following the Bern Convention on European Habitats and Species, the EC Birds Directive came into force
- This was followed in 1992 by the EC Habitat Directive and in 2000 by the EU water framework directive
- Even CAP reform acknowledges the importance of managing land in a sustainable manner

But the legislation covering the built environment is nowhere near as strong. Why is this?

Perhaps, in part, because if, for example, you make a butterfly extinct, as happened in UK in 1979 with the Large Blue, that's it. You can't bring it back, or least it's very difficult to re-introduce it?

Whereas if you pull down rows of town houses, you can always build new modern tower blocks which will do just as well; in fact, being modern, they will be much better, more convenient.

But the cultural heritage movement has been waking up to the fact that the loss of the built fabric of our society is as permanent as the loss of a natural habitat. We can, of course, tear down the tower block and re-build the terraced house we destroyed 40 years before, but the sense of community and identity which has been lost takes many years to re-establish itself. Sweeping away buildings kills our social fabric as surely as destroying the habitat of animals or birds. It destroys the habitat of humans.

Study a map of any 19th century European city and you will find described the lives of its inhabitants: the rows of houses, the school nearby, the church, the factory where people earned their wages and the shops on the corner.

All this is probably self-evident to everyone in this room. But the world of cultural heritage has only recently woken up to this fact. But we have moved on. There is little point in berating governments or simply looking for short-term fixes through demands for more funding. We need to demonstrate the value people put on the places they live and the historic assets that surround them.

We have learnt from the natural environment: There is a universal appeal to saving the panda, but there is also a local appeal to saving our bluebell woods.

In the heritage world, we have succeeded in preserving our great national treasures, our World Heritage Sites, but, if we are to nurture the social fabric of our communities, we must also look at the local. This means that what we preserve needs to be relevant to people - not just to the art and architecture historians, but to a wider constituency.

The National Trust, which has existed for 110 years, has saved around 250 country houses, the great aristocratic estates of the past. But in the last fifteen years we have saved:

- Mr Straw's House (The semi-detached or terraced house represented the most common form of housing in UK for over 200 years.)
- A 19th-century Workhouse (Several million of the poorest members of our society spent time in workhouses in 19th-century. That means that the majority of the population will have a relative for whom this preserved building has relevance.)
- The Beatles, John Lennon and Paul McCartney's childhood homes in Liverpool. (These cosy 1950s interiors are important in themselves, but it was the importance of these heroes of popular culture that prompted the National Trust to take on both homes)

But we can go further.

The experience of visiting these places is largely passive. But we have learnt that preservation can play a part in re-building or preserving the social fabric of cities, towns and villages.

Situated on an apparently unpromising street corner in the centre of the city of Birmingham, the National Trust has restored these Back-to-Back houses.

The Back-to-Backs now offer an inspiring experience for tens of thousands of people, many of whom are not traditional 'National Trust visitors', but whose interest in heritage has been sparked by something that feels relevant and close to their lives.

But it has done more:

- It has generated **a sense of pride** among former back to back residents and the citizens of Birmingham that their history is being recognized
- It has been **a catalyst for regeneration** - unlocking the development potential of the adjoining sites which has resulted in a £50m investment.
- It created opportunities **specialist training** in traditional building skills as well as training for heritage professionals and volunteers.

But the lessons learnt here can be applied more widely, in fact, to the sort of building more associated with the National Trust, the country house:

At Tyntesfield, the extraordinary Victorian Gothic estate we acquired three years ago, we are building our whole approach on participative access and learning.

From the outset we have been committed to looking after Tyntesfield in a new way: giving people access and involvement, right from the start, not – as we have done in the past – closing the house up for years until the restoration is completed. We are dependent on the support of our 150 volunteers and work with numerous groups to provide a potentially pivotal experience which is changing lives as well as perceptions of heritage.

We are working with trainee craftsmen learning new skills on the job.

We are also working with disadvantaged youngsters and, by giving them a safe and encouraging working environment, we hope to help them move forward in their lives and become contributing members of society.

At Tyntesfield, we are seeking to retain valuable skills, create jobs, involve the local community and increase public involvement in and awareness of cultural heritage.

The National Trust has a large following – over 3.3 million members – but perhaps more importantly, we are supported by 43,000 volunteers, involved as guides, as countryside workers, as building surveyors – you name it, they do it. For all these people involvement in the cultural heritage adds to the quality of their lives and promotes the values of active citizenship at a local level.

With the expansion of the Europe Union into Eastern and Central Europe, there is a danger that Structural Funds will be used for economic development alone, and if this is done without respect for heritage, it will bring with it – is already bringing with it – a homogenised western or globalised culture. The facades of buildings in towns and cities will be kept – keeping the tourists happy - but behind the windows and doors, the physical structures will go. And with it the social structure, the basis of good citizenship. We must learn from our own past mistakes.

That local communities are the key to the future of the European country house was a key motivating factor behind the **ECHo Project – The European Country House in the 21st Century**.

The National Trust was the lead partner in this project, enabled with the support of the Culture 2000 programme. The other partners were Sychrov Castle in the Czech Republic, the Hungarian National Office of Cultural Heritage, An Taisce (the Irish National Trust), the Gelderland Trust, the National Trust of Slovakia and English Heritage.

The aim of the ECHo Project was to find sustainable social and economic roles for Europe's country houses in the 21st Century which encourage the support of society as a whole and of local communities in particular.

Through research and a series of workshops involving young professionals from each country, the project explored the socio-economic values of the built environment and offered country house owners and managers across Europe a methodology for involving diverse parts of the community in the management, use and decision-making process of country houses.

In Hungary, the workshop at Tata acted as the catalyst that brought together key stakeholders in the future of the Esterházy House and created a network, which if maintained, will play a vital part in finding a holistic solution for the future use of the site.

The workshop at Rusovce in Slovakia has been – and I quote – ‘the start of real co-operation with the local community which could eventually lead to the future successful reuse of Rusovce Manor house’.

More information about the ECHO Project is available on the ENNHO website (www.ennho.org) or in this leaflet.

A particular strength of the National Trust is that it works from experience. We speak from the experience of doing things on the ground. What we learned at the Back-to-Backs, at Tyntesfield and in the ECHO project can be applied widely. One of the key lessons is that we cannot – and should not – resist all change. We must establish what is important for people – not just the experts – about a place – its significance – and then find creative solutions that preserve that significance while finding new uses.

Perhaps the nearest thing to this on a large scale is to be found in the United States, where the National Trust for Historic Preservation runs its Main Street Programme. Established in 1980, the **National Trust Main Street Center**® helps communities of all sizes revitalize their traditional historic commercial districts. Celebrating its **25th anniversary** this year, the Main Street Center has been the leader of the preservation-based community revitalization movement and has proved that historic preservation and community-driven economic development can work together. Active in more than 1,800 city centres and business districts, the Main Street program has generated more than \$18 billion in new investment, created 240,000 new jobs, 60,000 new businesses, and, in the process, restored more than 96,200 buildings.

I hope I have demonstrated this morning that cultural heritage must play an important role in developing active citizenship, but only if governments and business work in partnership with heritage organisations and local communities. And for that partnership to work:

- We – the heritage professionals – must stop simply demanding more money and more protection (a message which, if given without creative solutions, will always come over as negative),
- and governments must stop seeing us as elite or backward looking.

We must work together, listening to our citizens, not simply dictating to them. If we are ever to enjoy the same level of legislative and financial support as that enjoyed by the environmental sector, we must engage with people at a local level. Though, of course, there is much to achieve through policy and campaigns, heritage, at its best, is a grass roots movement. This must surely be the surest road to protecting our cultural heritage to the benefit of society.