

Exposé – Call for Papers

AKTLD Annual Conference in Coventry

3rd – 5th October 2024

Submission deadline: **24th March 2024**

Heritage and Democracy

Democracy is a fragile creature. As a political system it is characterized by the participation of citizens in the decision-making processes of the government, either directly or through elected representatives. Democracy can take various forms, but the common thread is the emphasis on the empowerment of the people in shaping the policies and direction of the state.

Cultural heritage, its designation, interpretation and management are always affected by political circumstances. Whatever the approach taken towards heritage in democratic societies, it has to be subjected to the scrutiny of the public, and that includes a dialogue and discourse beyond heritage professionals. There is an assumption that cultural heritage in democratic societies and the proponents of its state-driven management are acting in the interest of the public good. It is an assumption underpinned by the notion of culture as embracing a social value. This can be challenged not only by different kinds of public, but also by different representatives of the state. But what happens when democratic governments start to influence investigative and diverse narratives, undermining values of heritage and culture which heritage professionals have been taking for granted? Where should the sovereignty of interpretation lie when populism is on the rise? Who defines, interprets, uses or instrumentalises heritage and for what purposes?

After the euphoria that greeted the fall of the Iron Curtain, a consensus developed that democracy is inevitable as a progressive trajectory of history. The following years were accompanied by a sense of optimism, endurance and superiority which was pervasive across Europe and the wider democratic world. Over the last decade or so, this consensus has been shaken as we have seen resurging authoritarian tendencies and an undermining of civil liberties. Such tendencies are often based on the most simplistic understanding of democracy, the so-called ‘will of the people’, neglecting its other qualifying characteristics. In the current climate, we are sharply reminded that democracy is not a static condition, but a constant process of negotiation, and that the ‘will of the people’ can go in different ways – as illustrated by the appearance of the same slogan in connection with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the rise of new authoritarian rule.

Democratic processes are more and more distinguished between top-down and bottom-up decision making. There are many perceptions, not to say prejudices, as to how this differs in various national contexts, specifically with regard to cultural heritage. In order to gain a more nuanced picture that includes national contexts beyond those most experts operate in; we aim to explore the reality behind these perceptions. We thereby recognise that the notion of civil society is also embedded in democracy; for example, in the UK civil society is embodied by the charitable and community sector, generally upheld as one of the great traditional pillars of British society.

This conference will look at heritage processes which operate in conjunction with the notion of democracy – this includes heritage *in* democratic processes and heritage *as* democratic process. It seeks to uncover the role of the Nation State both enforcing heritage protection as well as (potentially) defying it. The protection of heritage can happen despite the state or – under certain circumstances – against the state. However, to a large extent, heritage practices deal with the care for listed buildings, conservation areas and other (physical) entities, supporting those entities to survive and thrive. To this extent they are not bound to democratic

institutions, as has happened and continues to happen whether or not democratic structures are in place. What does this mean for heritage management processes within democratic structures?

We are approaching this discourse from a perspective of the canon of cultural heritage and its protection and conservation which has been developed over more than 200 years, originally in the context of the European Enlightenment and more recently of Globalisation. That perspective is generally represented by experts whose participation in decision-making processes is founded on a legal mandate. This is usually communicated on the basis of a shared understanding of values among those experts, and is justified as being in the interest of the public. Who this public is, and how it is constituted, needs to be further explored with regard to the various heritage processes.

This is an international conference organised in Coventry by the [AKTLD](#) Arbeitskreis für Theorie und Lehre der Denkmalpflege e.V. [*Working Group on Theory and Education in Heritage Conservation*]. It will explore questions of Heritage and Democracy in national comparison, including, but not restricted to Germany and the United Kingdom. Coventry provides the venue and the conceptual framework. As the city of peace and reconciliation it has promoted mutual understanding, human rights, peace and security as pillars of democracy ever since it was bombed in 1940. Its iconic treatment of how to deal with the destruction of its cathedral in terms of architecture and heritage is also testimony to these ideals.

Key questions:

1. Notwithstanding the assumed consensus on the superiority of democracy as the least objectionable of all state models, is there an indication that heritage discourses and protection practices serve democratic societies (more so than autocratic ones)?
2. How can discourses and practices of heritage uphold and develop democracy? And to what extent do they depend on it?
3. What are the different heritage management practices of top-down/ bottom-up decision making in national comparisons?
4. What roles do heritage processes play in contemporary societies – both *in support* of state narratives and as oppositional and alternative practices?

Potential Sections:

- Heritage and the public good
- Heritage interpretation as an instrument of nation building, of creating, stabilizing or questioning democratic (or other) societies
- The professional heritage community and civil society
- State heritage structures, the law and democratic processes

SUBMISSIONS

We are looking forward to receiving your proposals for a 20-25 min talk. Although we envision the conference to be predominantly conducted in English, we will also accept German proposals and talks.

Please send a substantial abstract of maximum 200 word together with a short CV by the **24th March 2024**.

Please indicate in which sections you wish to position you talk and send your submission to:

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