

Chapter 37

Young Professionals' Perspectives on World Heritage – Transformation from an Expert-Dominated Concept to a Project for the People it is Made for



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Abstract In this roundtable discussion, emerging heritage experts address their personal involvement with the World Heritage Convention, their assessment of achievements and failures of the 50 years of its history, and perspectives of future developments as seen by the younger generation. The discussion reveals a strong emphasis on more convincingly participatory procedures, community involvement, global equity and sustainable development. Heritage is what we take from the past to shape our future. From this conceptual stance, the emerging experts develop their claim of a far more substantial involvement of the younger not only in conceptual perspectivizations of heritage, but also in decision-making bodies. This would allow

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them to transform and shape the institutions they are working with to be sustainable, diverse, inclusive and future-oriented.

Keywords Heritage · Youth involvement · Governance · Sustainability

37.1 A Round Table with Young Heritage Experts Moderated by Roland Bernecker on June 22nd, 2021

Roland Bernecker After the conversations we had in preparing this meeting, I was impressed by your commitment, your projects and ideas, your energy. Let me come straight to the point and start with a simple question: Approaching the 50th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention, what is, for you personally, its most meaningful success, and in what respect do you feel frustration or criticism?

Juan Carlos Barrientos García I think the Convention, in itself, was one of the most important landmarks in the history of humanity, as it managed to bring together most nations to concur in the idea that cultural heritage and natural heritage do not belong to a single state or nation, but they are the shared heritage of humankind. I think this novel notion, which inspired and has remained the essence of the Convention, effectively erases the political borders between humans. It creates a sense of a global community where the Mayan pyramids in Honduras are also the heritage of the people in Nepal, or how the Great Barrier Reef in Australia is also my coral reef, not just a natural resource belonging to Australians. It belongs to all of us. It's a wonderful idea.

However, the Convention was designed to stand on the pillars of education, conservation and tourism. Tourism has become one of the main motivators nowadays, and, sadly, education is not playing the important role it should play. There is a competition to inscribe sites, and most of the efforts are put into these inscriptions. But once an inscription is achieved, instead of considering it as the beginning of the work, it is often where it ends. Education must be the main force driving the World Heritage project.

Elisabeth Korinth I think there are a lot of achievements that are worth celebrating, like building an international community around heritage protection, subscribing to a set of shared principles and values—and having over a thousand World Heritage sites protected. But what I think is maybe a more subtle achievement, for me as a heritage professional, is that the Convention itself has fostered a global discourse on heritage. It has also enabled us to build a network of heritage professionals for exchange. I think this is something that we are all part of, and that is something very valuable and very precious to keep.

At the same time, we can identify a range of failures with the Convention, such as the politicized decision-making machinery, an unbalanced World Heritage List, as well as the lack of sufficient funding. I think we should not forget that the Convention itself was originally based on a technocratic conservation agenda that promotes heritage as something static, material. In the past decades, there have been

numerous attempts to change this. The concept of heritage has developed. But at the core, the Convention itself remains focused on physical substance. I think this still causes problems that can harm heritage as well as communities.

Isabelle Rupp One of the greatest achievements of the World Heritage programme is the positive public image it has fostered for heritage protection. My own motivation for studying heritage at BTU was the focus on World Heritage. I was inspired by UNESCO's work and the purpose of the World Heritage programme. UNESCO's achievements with World Heritage contribute to reinforcing what I would consider the programme's most glaring weaknesses. The ideas it espouses and its modalities of operation have become somewhat reified and sealed to change. The way heritage is defined has become institutionalized to the point that dynamic reform is less discernible than it could, and probably should, be.

Giulia Tomasi The Convention itself is fantastic; it created a sense for the concept of a world community with a responsibility to take care of cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value. It really gives this sense of belonging by overcoming cultural, ethnic and geographical boundaries. It does, however, exclude the younger generations. We seem to be kept out of the active process of managing, of preserving heritage sites. In Italy, the complex national and local governmental structures behind heritage management tend to exclude young people. We protect heritage for the world and for future generations. But young people are not perceived as actors in contemporary processes of cultural and heritage site management. We want to be involved in the responsibilities expressed in the World Heritage Convention and contribute to the decisions that need to be taken for the future. World Heritage projects need to open up to the creativity and the ideas of the young.

Klaus-Christian Zehbe I also think one of the biggest achievements of the Convention is offering a political arena across nations, which allows the mediation of conflicts on a global scale. Having said that, the Convention adapted to current challenges, which is also a major achievement. It is still with us after 50 years and has not been taken away. However, it also carries the legacy of being conceived in the Global North, and maybe one of its biggest shortfalls is a very Eurocentric division of nature and culture, as well as its failure to give voice to Indigenous Communities and their ways of looking at the world. As the Convention has been with us for 50 years, the institutions dealing with it have developed their own lives. I think this process has contributed to political power games over which sites might be inscribed and which not, and what kind of trade-offs are being made. This is one major threat. In terms of youth involvement, we have to consider that the young generation has its own right to devise its future. Rarely, though, do we have an idea of what the future can be. Therefore, I think heritage is an important element for the young generation to understand what might be possible to achieve. There is no true measure of saying where humanity is going. Heritage is a very important touchstone for the young to define themselves in relation to the future. Where do the older generations stand, and where are we going?

Roland Bernecker I would like now to come to the question of youth involvement, a point you all have mentioned. Giulia, you have adopted a “youth manifesto” with the Italian Youth Forum in Parma in March this year. I have seen it, and I think it is an impressive document. Let me come back to what you said about your involvement as a younger heritage expert in cultural policies: Is your generation addressed? Is there an interest to capture the perspective of your generation, and what would be your main request in this regard?

Giulia Tomasi As a Youth Association for UNESCO, we really believe that education and spreading knowledge of UNESCO’s values is an essential aspect. So, for us, this is the real starting point and plan of action, especially for creating a new active citizenship. We have an educational program that reflects the importance of global agendas and topics but also provides a sense of empowerment. We asked students to create something for their peers, for their community. Through this programme, we aim to make sure that young people discover how their voices can be heard in a multi-stakeholder system, a complex system such as culture and World Heritage. We have over 300 members, and we are organized throughout Italy in regional teams. We create programmes and concepts developed across regions in Italy and try to reach as many students as possible. I firmly believe that education is the starting point. We actually go into schools and make young people acknowledge that they have the power and potential to contribute to important causes. By doing this, society can benefit as a whole. Education, therefore, is the major asset of the Italian Youth Association for UNESCO.

However, as previously said, the job market always seems a little behind. So, this year we started another approach, which is organizing technical roundtables composed of young experts, members of the association. Together we drafted strategic proposals to be submitted to the government. This year we worked specifically on four technical tables: school, culture, food and cities. We proposed some operative approaches for the upcoming post-pandemic recovery fund, which were well received by the Italian government. This is an example of how we have tried to achieve youth participation and community outreach, simply by empowering them. We focus on education and on giving space to young members of the association to reach out to the government through us, with plans of actions regarding culture, school and education, and other important topics. Obviously, there should be more national and international frameworks for official youth participation at decision-making tables. This should be a methodology to be applied generally.

Roland Bernecker Elisabeth, how serious is the commitment which is asked of young people? You are working on a concrete project with the Syrian community in Germany. This is a particular challenge in the current context. What are your experiences with the involvement of these exiled communities, and what can you do to help them maintain links to their own heritage?

Elisabeth Korinth I would like to tackle this question first from a conceptual point of view and then look at it again from the perspective of Blue Shield Germany, because if we want to find out how to improve community involvement, we need to better understand who our community actually is. The World Heritage system has increasingly addressed the importance of community involvement, but it has not given a clear definition of community, and it somehow assumes that there is a community that can be clearly defined and that it can be included in a management system. But if we really go into the technicalities of the question and ask, “who belongs to a community?” which necessarily also raises the questions of, “who doesn’t belong to a community, and who has the right to decide that?”, then we are faced with very difficult questions that confront us with the controversial and exclusive notion of community they can be entangled with. In order to improve participation, we need to look at criteria of inclusion and diversity, which we are, of course, doing in the Syrian Heritage Initiatives of the Museum for Islamic Art. We do not need to look at the people we are already including, but the ones we are excluding.

I would also like to shortly look at the notion of community as a fixed and harmonic geographical group, which is problematic and becomes apparent when you look at community involvement at World Heritage sites in conflict. Conflict is characterized by a division within a community or between communities. Long-term armed conflicts, in particular, are characterized by movement and by a very dramatic change of population as people are being displaced. There is a fluctuation of local communities, disrupting the social life that was there before the conflict. From a heritage perspective, we see a loss of expertise on the ground that needs to be responded to. So, if we want to improve community involvement at World Heritage sites in conflict zones, I think we need to ask ourselves: “who belongs to the community that is not directly at the site?”

I want to stress this issue of displaced communities here because it is no longer a temporary phenomenon. In 2020, UNHCR estimated the number of forcibly displaced people to be 82 million, among them many children and young adults. These people have the right to belong to a community, but they are usually not recognized by participatory programmes and community involvement. They are important carriers of knowledge and expertise needed to protect World Heritage sites. They are important advocates for their heritage worldwide, and they can play a vital role in safeguarding measures. In the case of Syria, we have seen numerous initiatives and grassroots community projects that have been initiated by Syrian heritage professionals from abroad, which have played a key role in documentation, in raising awareness about heritage under threat, and also in supporting local communities on the ground. If the World Heritage system can strengthen these ties and networks and can include these groups of people, especially youth, in a way that they are not competing but complement each other, we can move away from a safeguarding effort focused on the physical matter to a holistic and sustainable approach of community involvement, which includes and values the most vulnerable parts of the community that are, of course, scattered around the world.

Roland Bernecker Klaus, you have studied World Heritage at BTU and are now focusing on educational sciences. Is World Heritage a political framework for global citizenship education? What is the role of heritage in our modern concepts of education? Can it play a role in educating global citizens?

Klaus-Christian Zehbe Actually, it should. From an educational perspective, we have a double responsibility. Youth, in one respect, has the responsibility not to fall back behind what has been achieved by previous generations. The older generation, on the other hand, has the responsibility to give access to these stores of knowledge. Heritage can play an important part in opening that store of knowledge and providing a benchmark. There is maybe a third responsibility. It is sometimes framed as a responsibility towards future generations, which should have the right to enjoy living on this planet in the same way as the current younger and older generations. Heritage plays an important part in all of this because it intersects the younger and the older generation and can also provide valuable insights into the processes which have been relevant in the past and provide a perspective for how things might develop. World Heritage is crucial for these responsibilities, in terms of sustainability and reconciliation between groups but also reconciliation with the mistakes and errors of the past. This might not be present in all the sites, but because the sites have been preserved by the older generation they are important enough to provide some kind of touchstone—where the different generations can convene, transmit and discuss their different perspectives. As Giulia said, the young generation has to have the right to inscribe their own meanings and stories in this heritage because they are going to carry it into the future.

Roland Bernecker How do students at universities, how does academia contribute to making better use of heritage? Do you think that university gives you sufficient tools to understand these complex issues and to get involved?

Isabelle Rupp A lot of studying is theoretical; we don't get as many practical tools as we probably should. We should learn more through doing or having a job in the field. I think we're exposed to a lot of ideas, and so we can pick up on things that, further down the line, we will then have the tools to actually do something about or engage with in a way that makes sense professionally. But it is something that still needs to be improved.

Roland Bernecker Juan Carlos, you do not speak on behalf of *World Heritage Volunteers*, but you speak as a manager involved in the volunteer projects. What is your experience with the involvement of young people in these activities?

Juan Carlos Barrientos García This is a good follow-up question to what Isabelle said. It has become the role of organizations like the one I am working with to provide these opportunities for young heritage professionals to explore the field. The World Heritage Volunteers initiative, for example, is a worldwide campaign started by UNESCO. It seeks to foster youth commitment towards World Heritage and to

provide projects that include concrete awareness raising and hands-on activities at the sites and the opportunity to interact with people who come from the same background, to make practical experiences and nourish enthusiasm for heritage. The campaign is organized and implemented on the ground by different organizations. The campaign creates a link between them. I have been involved with the World Heritage Volunteers campaign for several years now through the organization European Heritage Volunteers. European Heritage Volunteers is the leading organization implementing educational heritage volunteering initiatives in Europe, uniting a wide network of international partners, local heritage activists, heritage institutions and community stakeholders at heritage sites; all coming together for organizing and implementing volunteer projects at World Heritage sites in Germany and around Europe. There is an entire network of partner organizations supporting European Heritage Volunteers with volunteering activities all over Europe, not just at World Heritage sites.

I was first a participant and then became a group coordinator for projects linked to the World Heritage Volunteers campaign, organized by European Heritage Volunteers. Today, I am a concept developer and coordinator for the projects of European Heritage Volunteers. European Heritage Volunteers' programme is focused on providing opportunities for hands-on activities, addressing young heritage professionals and heritage enthusiasts through volunteering projects and training courses. They create a space for real hands-on experiences in the field that is perhaps lacking in universities. The programme develops a well-structured educational experience and provides a platform to connect communities and local stakeholders with their own heritage through their collaboration in these volunteer projects, both at World Heritage sites as well as other heritage sites.

The volunteering projects we create are always centred on different themes and heritage topics, including the impact of climate change on heritage sites, reconstruction of elements, interpretation of heritage, traditional skills, documentation of heritage, site management, conservation work on neglected structures, and other themes. The participants get real immersion in the heritage field. They widen their perspectives of heritage through an encounter with heritage in a well-organized cultural and educational experience.

These seminars and training courses contribute to the dissemination of the values of heritage and the World Heritage Convention. I am very proud to be a part of this organization. Through the work of this organization, the ideas that inspire the World Heritage Convention are put into practice. To continue to support a wonderful initiative like the World Heritage Volunteer initiative and also to support dynamic regional organizations like European Heritage Volunteers is actually a practical way to involve young people and communities with World Heritage.

Roland Bernecker What you do is a very good example of the practical involvement of young people, with their passion and their interest in the real thing. The point that still intrigues me is the political dimension of involvement, which is very ambitious. What needs to be done to get a serious involvement of young people in the policy side of things, an involvement that goes beyond rhetoric declarations?

Giulia Tomasi It's a very complex issue. The political territory is intricate and complex to begin with. As previously said, having a framework—an international framework—would be a start, a framework in which young people are invited to technical tables, not because they organize them on their own and then present what is done to the government, but officially, as a side arm of the government itself. Officially recognizing this process when it comes to culture and sustainability is important. For the moment, young people should be provided with the tools to develop something on their own and present it. Make them understand that they can do this and have the power and the knowledge to do it and be part of creating something that is better for the future. For the moment, we need to start on our own and actively promote and network with each other, especially among youth associations, and then propose something until we will have a real space on the stage for decision-making.

Roland Bernecker There are a few questions from the audience. I'll address the first question to Klaus. It's more a comment: The Eurocentric silos (nature, culture; tangible, intangible) are not simply in conflict with Indigenous communities. They are constructs that do not fit well with most of the Global South and non-urban regions of the Global North. Would you like to comment?

Klaus-Christian Zehbe Unfortunately, it seems that these attempts to address the dichotomy between culture and nature, to value non-Western concepts, are again led by Western organizations which operationalize them. These silos were meant to address the problems. However, they seem to be aggravating them now because these institutions all work in different ways. The problem is, more or less, trying to find local ways of involving people and broadening horizons to include voices that are largely unheard. I think that might be a way of strengthening civil society and forming coalitions to develop political pressure in order to have an impact on state-level institutions, such as ministries and intergovernmental agencies.

Roland Bernecker A question to Juan Carlos: Today's level of tourism was not anticipated in the 1972 Convention. It did not exist at that time; it arrived later and commodification likewise. This is linked to your criticism of the focus on tourism and commodification.

Juan Carlos Barrientos García The Convention was not originally conceived to be focused on tourism. It was built with a focus on education and on awareness raising for the protection of World Heritage. This evolved on the side and has become one of the main motors right now of the World Heritage brand. In its essence, the Convention was conceived to promote education about protection and the necessity of protecting heritage. We should return to this focus. It is why and what World Heritage was created for.

Roland Bernecker The next comment is for Elisabeth. The notion of “homogenous” is top down, artificial and time dependent, fluid in both space and time. This is a remark to your intervention.

Elisabeth Korinth I cannot agree more. That is what I was trying to point out by emphasizing that it is a problematic notion. It is a concept; communities aren't a thing. Communities are complex. They are constantly changing, and they are deeply intertwined. Sometimes members of a community may not even like each other, so we need to better understand what we mean precisely when we speak of community involvement. I agree totally with the point made in the comment.

Roland Bernecker A last question to Isabelle and Giulia. How should young people be educated, when, where and by whom, to be capable of receiving and using the messages coming from various types of heritage?

Isabelle Rupp If there was a stronger emphasis on heritage interpretation, we would need less of a formal education process. People would be engaged. These places would matter to them, and they could be involved in the interpretation. If we do not look at it as fixing something, a deficit, but rather as if these places were theirs from the beginning, then the education process wouldn't necessarily be formal.

Giulia Tomasi There are a lot of associations like the Italian Youth Association. Juan Carlos was talking about how education has been prioritized by youth organizations or other independent organizations. I think there are exceptional initiatives at universities. So, a lot can be improved, but a lot is already being done. Specifically, there could be more attention to what civil society is. Culture in a broader sense and some aspects of the Convention could be studied in schools as part of creating a global community. This would be essential to learn to care for each other beyond geographical or ethnic boundaries. There is too much dispersion in channelling these competencies. When people specialize and learn about heritage, where can they apply it? This often is a waste of energy.

Roland Bernecker A 50th anniversary is an occasion to reflect on a perspective for the 50 years to come. What would be, very briefly, your main expectation, your hopes or requests for the future of the World Heritage Convention?

Klaus-Christian Zehbe To put it like the Lakota: We should not think of just 50 years, but for the coming seven generations. That would make some 200 years to live peacefully and sustainably on this planet.

Isabelle Rupp It is time to reconsider, or at least reconfigure, some of the core concepts that were introduced and defined in the Convention and through its implementation but have since become problematic or ineffective. The foundational concepts of the Convention need to be updated to reflect contemporary understandings of heritage and also the paradigm shifts happening in the broader heritage sector.

Juan Carlos Barrientos García The message I would like to leave people with is that there are organizations like European Heritage Volunteers, providing and trying to create platforms for youth to get educated and expand their views on heritage,

which should receive stronger support from UNESCO. More support is needed to help these organizations grow and continue to provide platforms for youth and young heritage professionals.

Elisabeth Korinth I think we all agree that there is a lot of opportunity for growth, and I hope we will find solutions for the many challenges that World Heritage is facing today, including climate change and rising conflicts. As Birgitta Ringbeck has pointed out earlier, the World Heritage Convention gives us a framework, and the system addresses all these issues. It's up to us as heritage professionals to create political awareness and also to create awareness among the youth about the importance of this valuable Convention. My hope and request for the next 50 years as a heritage professional would be, to bring it to a personal level, that we learn how we can be part of the solution. We should learn to enable communities to be involved so that not only my heritage is protected, but other peoples' heritage is protected, too. That we do our very best to transform and shape the institutions we are working in to be sustainable, to be diverse, to be future-oriented and inclusive.

Giulia Tomasi This has been a wonderful meeting. I hope we can find ways to collaborate further, which would be in the interest of everyone. My hope for the global scale is that the Convention will continue to promote this incredible sense of belonging and caring for World Heritage. On a more local scale, international protocols and methodologies need to be better enforced by promoting collaboration and alignment with the Convention. We need to shorten the distance between what is internationally perceived as World Heritage and what is actually happening on the local level and its effect on the people. Although we have a role in this, and we actively want to improve the world in which we live, we need support from the political level and from institutions like UNESCO to be able to work successfully in this sense.

Roland Bernecker Thank you, Giulia, Elisabeth, Juan Carlos, Isabelle and Klaus, for sharing your thoughts and also for the work you are doing in the organizations you are engaged with. And, finally, thanks for your dedication to the cause of World Heritage.

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