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From Materials to Meanings: an Evolution of Architectural Conservation Practice

By Johnathan Djabarouti

As we commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, it is essential to acknowledge the profound influence of intangible cultural heritage and critical heritage theory on architectural conservation. These evolving fields have expanded our understanding of heritage, which continues to (re)define the role of the built heritage professional in contemporary conservation practice.

Intangible cultural heritage represents the living traditions, knowledges, customs, and practices that are passed down from generation to generation, shaping the collective memory and identity of communities. Within the realm of architectural conservation, intangible heritage has emerged as a novel, if not slightly problematic component in the efforts to safeguard the spirit and essence of heritage places. It reminds us that buildings are not merely bricks and mortar but repositories of stories, traditions, and values that must be preserved alongside their physical fabric. Yet with the Modern Conservation Movement premised on objective matters relating to the preservation of physical assets, original materials, and decay prevention, a broader range of concerns and motivations must be embraced to ensure that conservation practices remain relevant and adaptable to evolving conceptualisations of heritage. In combination with critical heritage theory, a focus on intangible qualities of built heritage assets offers a fresh perspective. It challenges us to question the social, political, and cultural dimensions of heritage. It prompts us to examine the power dynamics that shape the understanding and physical representation of the past. In the realm of architectural conservation, critical heritage theory calls for a more inclusive approach that acknowledges diverse narratives and voices, encouraging those involved with built heritage to engage with communities, fostering dialogue and collaboration to ensure that all relevant identities are valued and included within conservation processes.

The conservation and revitalization program of the Ancient City of Ping Yao in China serves as a prime example of how the interplay between tangible and

intangible heritage influences and informs each other. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a comprehensive conservation programme undertaken at the site acknowledges the profound link between the intangible cultural practices within Ping Yao, across traditional crafts, festivals, and the physical fabric of the city itself. By placing emphasis on safeguarding and promoting its intangible elements, Ping Yao ensures the preservation of its rich cultural traditions, which in turn informs and guides the technical conservation efforts applied to its buildings and structures.



Image 1: Ping Yao. View from Market Tower. Severin.stalder (CC BY-SA 3.0). [Image Credit.](#)

This holistic approach establishes a framework where tangible and intangible heritage coexist and mutually reinforce one another. It creates a synergistic relationship where the tangible elements of the city's architectural heritage are enhanced and given deeper meaning through their connection to intangible cultural practices. This framework not only ensures the conservation of physical fabric, but that this fabric can more meaningfully contribute to the life of the city. By fostering a symbiotic relationship between tangible and intangible elements, the conservation program of Ping Yao focuses on generating a sustainable model for the city's future, rooted in tradition, re-created for present-day societies. This framework ensures that the historic city remains meaningful and

relevant, carrying forward its rich legacy for future generations to experience. It celebrates the unique cultural identity of Ping Yao and serves as a testament to the enduring value of both tangible and intangible heritage in shaping and preserving the city's cultural landscape.



Image 2: Folk performance in Ping Yao. Gino Zhang. (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0). [Image Source.](#)

The growing interest in intangible cultural heritage and critical heritage theory has also begun to transform the role and remit of built heritage professionals, who must now serve as facilitators of community engagement, advocates for inclusivity, and narrators of intangible heritage as well as custodians of physical heritage. Physical conservation work must now involve the creation of platforms for dialogue, fostering collaboration, and the appreciation of the intangible aspects of heritage. Recognising that the essence of architecture is in stories, traditions, and practices, professionals are in a privileged curatorial position which can bridge the gap between the tangible and intangible, accepting that heritage first and foremost is a dynamic and living entity shaped by people and their environment. This can more simplistically be described as a shift in focus from materials to meanings.

Integrating an 'intangible outlook' in professional practice fosters a more

inclusive and sustainable approach towards architectural conservation. By preserving the intangible practices that make sense of our heritage buildings and sites, we can ensure that future generations inherit a rich cultural heritage.

Author Biography

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