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Walk slowly, listen carefully, tread softly: enhancing participation in architectural conservation practice

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ABSTRACT

Participation is long-established within heritage and assists practitioners achieving the aims of critical heritage studies. Yet there is limited study into the utility of participation within architectural conservation practice. Through qualitative insight this article foregrounds views and experiences of twelve UK accredited conservation architects on the definition, meaning, and expectations of participation from within their role. Findings reveal conservation architects value participation with local communities at early project stages where it can positively impact significance and design development. Barriers towards participation were centred around client concerns, economic constraints, and limitations of their skillset, compelling practitioners to promote the benefits of participation and learn new skills to transcend traditional methodologies. A six-step process emerges to enhance participation in architectural conservation practice: 1) employ holistic project mediation; 2) identify place-based users with embodied experience of projects; 3) utilise project sites for participatory knowledge transfer; 4) apply knowledge to project briefs and significance statements; 5) capture heritage narratives within physical conservation; and 6) celebrate conserved buildings as symbols of partnership with participants. A mantra of 'walk slowly, listen carefully, tread softly' is offered as a concluding phrase and moral anchor for conservation architects to consider when contemplating a participatory evolution of their practice.

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Introduction: participation and conservation practice

Participation is fundamentally about taking part in something (Jenkins 2010, 13). Within the field of heritage studies it has become 'the new norm' over the past twenty years (Chitty 2017, 1) despite its origins tracing back to the 1960s (Clark 2019, 272; Hertz 2015, 53). Public involvement in heritage decision-making thus remains a contemporary focus for researchers (Yuan et al. 2021, 12). As will be explored in this contribution, participation can mean many things, resulting in its utility for resolving a range of issues. It can be employed by built heritage practitioners to resolve conflict (Myers, Smith, and Ostergren 2009); promote inclusivity and equity in conservation (Avrami 2020); improve value assessment in conservation planning (Mason 2008, 111); or empower marginalised communities (Alivizatou 2022, 28). Participation is therefore closely linked with intangible heritage and essential for its safeguarding (Alivizatou 2022, 29). In the broader heritage field participation is understood as 'the active involvement of stakeholders in various processes and projects' (Neal 2015, 346). However, its exact meaning and utility is influenced by the professional heritage context within which it is

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employed. The related term 'community' also attracts different meanings. Some see defining communities as a political act (Deacon and Smeets 2013, 132), or representing collective action (Berger, Dicks, and Fontaine 2020, 337); whilst others more critically highlight how it defines 'homogenous collectives' (Waterton and Smith 2010, 5) and produces free labour (Fredheim 2018, 626). Dragouni, Fouseki, and Georgantzis (2018, 759) more broadly describe communities as 'stakeholders who deserve to participate' and UNESCO offer a comparably flexible definition:

> A [g]roup of people sharing common characteristics or interests. A community can be either a geographically based group of persons or a group with shared interests or common demographic composition irrespective of their physical location within a country (UNESCO 2023)

Again, professional context plays a role in its conceptualisation, along with the country within which the term is defined (Berger, Dicks, and Fontaine 2020).

Whilst many professions and skillsets come together to conserve architectural heritage (Orbaşli 2008, 6), this article focuses specifically on the architectural conservationist – a dual-regulated profession (architecture and conservation accreditations) with a wide-ranging scope that often involves coordinating the work of others (Feilden 2003, 12; Orbaşli 2008, 7). It is speculated that this position may afford the conservation architect greater insight into the utility and applicability of participatory practices when working with built heritage. Whilst it is well-known that scholarly work on participation in heritage studies is now abundant, there are limited studies that specifically address participation from the perspective of contemporary UK architectural conservation practice. Moreover, there is inadequate qualitative representation of conservation architects' perspectives and experiences of participation as a distinct component of conserving (safeguarding) intangible qualities of heritage buildings. This is problematic, with decisions on the curation of architectural heritage and the spaces they create being a decisive factor in determining whose cultural narratives take precedence (Avrami 2020, 9). This article addresses these gaps through a series of twelve semi-structured interviews with UK accredited conservation architects, focusing exclusively on evaluating participation within contemporary practice. Participants were given full autonomy to discuss participation in whatever way felt authentic to them, providing it was related to their professional experiences on an architectural conservation project in the UK (defined as a building or site that requires conservation and/or adaptation of its physical fabric). One of the primary aims of this contribution has been to facilitate conservation architects self-defining what participation *is* and *means* to them, which contributes towards identifying a series of steps that the profession can take to enhance participation within their role. A series of research questions emerge to assist with this aim: what does participation mean for those professionally tasked with conserving and adapting built heritage in the twenty-first century? How might participation influence approaches towards the conservation of historic fabric? Addressing these questions should consequently elucidate the relationship *between* participation and the *process* of modifying heritage fabric.

The study begins by outlining key historical developments and participatory models in related fields, before examining how architectural conservation's historical emphasis on autocracy, expertise and scientific materialism has adversely impacted the integration of participatory practices. This then leads into the methodological and empirical sections of the study. It has been the explicit intention of the author to make ample space in the results section for the voices of the sample, foregrounding the collective expression of the contemporary conservation architect's world (Yin 2011, 135).

The participatory paradigm

Shifts towards socio-cultural forms of heritage practice in the West trace back to the mid-twentieth century when the concept of 'community' was developed into an academic topic (Davis 2008, 397; Gentry and Smith 2019, 1149; Waterton and Smith 2010, 6). The 1960s Public History movement challenged traditional notions of history ownership by shifting focus from

objective interpretations of community towards everyday narratives and alternative histories (Alivizatou 2022, 67; Berger, Dicks, and Fontaine 2020, 340; Robertson 2008, 146). Momentum was maintained across the latter half of that century, with grass-roots resistance to redevelopment gaining traction through a renewed popularity of conservation in the 1970s (Pendlebury and Townshend 1999, 72); the rise of postmodernism enhancing cultural diversity of heritage assets in the 1980s (Glendinning 2013, 424); and emphasis on 'place' in the 1990s and 2000s promoting a more holistic relationship between people and their historic environment (Clark 2019, 272; Smith 2006, 76).

Working in tandem with these societal shifts was the development of participatory models, with Arnstein's (1969) famous 'Ladder of Citizen Participation' being the most commonly cited tool for clarifying the degree of community participation employed within an urban process (ranging from 'nonparticipation' to 'citizen power'). More recent models have sought to build upon or respond to Arnstein's Ladder. For example, Wilcox (1994, 8) reduced Arnstein's eight steps (manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, citizen control) down to five (information, consultation, deciding together, acting together, supporting independent community interests) asserting that no level of participation is necessarily preferable, with different situations requiring different levels of action. Similarly within planning, Davidson (1998) promoted 'The Wheel of Participation', again noting Arnstein's emphasis on citizen control potentially leading to inappropriate methods. Instead, the Wheel was said to promote a more responsive approach that prioritised method selection (Davidson 1998, 14). Further discipline-specific models seeking citizen empowerment include Turner's (Fichter and Turner 1972) concept of 'Dweller Control' within the housing sector, which promoted citizen control over house building decisions (Broome 2005, 74–75); Healey's 'collaborative planning' which focused heavily on the *quality* of participatory interactions (Healey 1997); and Sanoff's (2000) expansion of participatory methods in architecture and environmental design. Others note how conservation and planning would benefit from holistic models that place community alongside economy, psyche, place, and nature (see Yuan et al. 2021, 6–7) – reflecting the conceptualisation of participation as a 'disciplinary border' (Yaprak, Schelings, and Elsen 2022, 711). Within built heritage, digital methods have been studied in relation to Arnstein's Ladder and their capacity to enhance relationships between physical fabric and community (Laing 2020), although a study by Aigner (2016) suggests digital tools – whilst increasing participation – ultimately reinforce dominant heritage narratives. Sanoff also specifically advocated for participation within architectural conservation by involving youths in the development of conservation strategies (see Aygen 2013, 238).

Despite co-production, co-creation, and the elucidation of social values gaining traction in heritage management (Grcheva and Oktay Vehbi 2021; Robson 2023), alongside numerous international heritage conventions advocating community involvement (e.g. Council of Europe (2005) on the right to participate; ICOMOS (2008) on the importance of local communities; and UNESCO (2003) on community involvement in heritage safeguarding) – there are still no established heritage participatory models for practitioners to employ on cultural built heritage projects. Moreover, there are no participatory typologies established specifically for architectural conservation practice, despite evidence of a concern for communities being traceable to The Athens meetings of 1931 (see Jokilehto 2018, 398). Participation within architectural conservation was originally related to Conservation Areas (Townshend and Pendlebury 1999, 313), and whilst initially used for engaging prominent stakeholders, it is now more commonly associated with 'widening participation' (Aygen 2013, 227). Since the late 1990s community concerns gradually permeated through to architectural conservation and the listing system (Townshend and Pendlebury 1999, 313). Around that time, documents like Historic England's 'Power of Place' (then English Heritage) (English Heritage 2000) validated holistic and people-focussed interpretations of heritage in England. The ongoing trend in policy and guidance towards the needs of the public has already been covered in detail elsewhere (for example, see Chitty and Smith 2019, 283; Clark 2019, 273; Djabarouti 2020, 393). However, some remark how policy-makers still do not adequately reflect the importance of involving local

communities (Aygen 2013, 223), and how the prevailing value-typology approach sustains expert control over participation parameters and the integration of public feedback (Chen and Li 2021, 9).

Material matters

Townshend and Pendlebury (1999) noted long ago how conservation professionals need to confront the public's lack of knowledge on conservation alongside the profession's apathy for participatory typologies. Recent empirical research on the understanding of intangible heritage within the built heritage paradigm by the author similarly highlights how practitioners feel their role is hard enough before attempting to grapple with intangible communal aspects (Djabarouti 2021, 1105). Yet these perspectives overlook the rewarding nature of participation and its ability to enhance cultural sector resilience (Fouseki 2022, 65, 166). Correspondingly, with the value and perception of built heritage considered a fundamental component of conservation processes (Sektani et al. 2023, 55) there are many reasons why architectural conservation would benefit from enhancing participatory practice in conservation procedures. Participation is one of the primary tools that professionals can employ to uncover the multiplicity of values at heritage sites, making the perception of heritage by communities a critical component of conservation strategies (Chen and Li 2021, 3; Sektani et al. 2023, 55). Additionally, as architectural heritage has a positive impact on subjective wellbeing (Sektani et al. 2023), employing participation can support personal growth, socialisation, and anxiety reduction (Sektani et al. 2023, 56). Hence why, in echoing ICCROM's (2015) Guidance Note, many refer to it as the 'people-centred' approach to heritage conservation (Chen and Li 2021, 6; Wells and Stiefel 2019, 15; Yuan et al. 2021, 13).

A people- or human-centred approach requires practitioners of architectural conservation to subscribe to two challenging assertions within their professional context. First, that materials and architectural form are a minor part of what makes a place and impacts a community (Avrami, Nicole Leo, and Sanchez Sanchez 2018, 103); and second, that heritage is principally a qualitative and socially responsive development process (Alivizatou 2022, 13; Fredheim 2018, 619; Wells and Stiefel 2019, 15). The rise of critical heritage studies has contributed significantly towards illuminating these viewpoints (Jokilehto 2018, 2), with literature focusing on evaluating the shortcomings of conventional practice (Djabarouti 2024; Wells and Stiefel 2019, 15; Witcomb and Buckley 2013, 570); the political structures that validate professional expertise (Fredheim 2018, 619); and the value of qualitative methods (such as ethnography) for illuminating the social practices that sustain heritage across a range of stakeholders (Jones and Yarrow 2022). Consequently, demands are mounting for architectural conservation to evidence: broader paradigmatic shifts (Orbaşli 2017); stronger ethical groundings (Muñoz Viñas 2005, 214); re-evaluations of historic building authenticity (Djabarouti 2023; Jones 2010); up-skilling to handle multiple narratives (Avrami 2020); and revised conservation methodologies (Djabarouti 2022; Otero-Pailos, Langdalen, and Arrhenius 2016).

Methodology: a conservation architecture perspective

The purpose of this article is to elevate conservation architects' views on the meaning and role of participation within their contemporary practice. By extension, this includes views on related concepts such as community and intangible heritage. As the scope of study is limited to participation within the context of UK architectural conservation practice, a flexible interpretation of participation and community was posed during the recruitment and interview processes, reflecting the conservation architect's position at the *intersection* of various stakeholders and groups (Feilden 2003, 3; Orbaşli 2008, 7). As for intangible heritage, it has already been theorised elsewhere by the author that built heritage practitioners conceptualise this as a storytelling activity (see Djabarouti 2020).

Table 1. Outline of ICOMOS competencies for working on architectural conservation projects. Author original image (after ICOMOS (1993)).

Ref	ICOMOS Competency
a	Identify site's emotional, cultural, and functional significance
b	Understand site's history and technology for conservation planning
c	Comprehend site's context and relation to other structures and landscapes
d	Access and utilise all relevant information sources for the site
e	Analyse heritage sites as complex systems
f	Diagnose causes of decay to determine action
g	Produce clear visual reports for the public
h	Apply UNESCO, ICOMOS, and other heritage guidelines
i	Make ethical judgments for long-term heritage welfare
j	Know when to seek specialised advice
k	Advise on maintenance, management, and environmental protection
l	Document works and provide access to them
m	Collaborate in multi-disciplinary teams
n	Collaborate with locals and officials for tailored conservation strategies

Twelve one-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted with conservation architects. Recruitment involved contacting gatekeepers of architectural conservation practices requesting interviewees to discuss participation in architectural conservation. A 'snowball sampling' method (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019) was employed across a nineteen-month period to obtain interviewees that met the following sample selection criteria:

- Accredited conservation architect with either Architects Accredited in Building Conservation (AABC) or Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA)
- Minimum four years' professional experience working on UK architectural conservation projects
- Adequate experience of participation in architectural conservation practice (self-declared)

A UK conservation architect must first be registered with the Architects Registration Board (ARB) to use the title 'architect', requiring approximately seven years study and work. Conservation-specific accreditation with either the RIBA or AABC typically requires an additional four years' experience. Accreditation is underpinned by ICOMOS Guidelines for Education and Training for the Conservation of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS 1993) (Table 1).

The interpretation of ICOMOS criteria within conservation accreditation procedures demonstrates how conservation architects are expected to possess diverse skills – integrating historical and technological knowledge to discern significance, diagnose material decay, and create publicly accessible documents, whilst collaborating with multidisciplinary teams to achieve ethical solutions. This breadth of experience reflects the expectation that conservation architects should be able to make 'balanced judgements' and 'informed decisions' at various stages of projects (Orbaşli 2008, 6,91). Across the sample, six held RIBA 'Senior Conservation Architect' (SCA) status, three held RIBA 'Conservation Architect' (CA) status, and six held AABC accreditation (see Table 2). The sample can therefore be described as highly skilled in the formal practice of architectural conservation.

Interviews covered meanings and definitions of participation; expectations/constraints; benefits/disadvantages; and its implementation within their professional remit (see Table 3).

For logistical reasons all interviews were conducted online, and whilst an interview guide was used to prompt interviewees, freedom of expression was prioritised which influenced the order of questions asked (Bryman 2012, 471). Discussions covered various project typologies, activities, and work stages, although all projects referred to by the sample were either publicly accessible (e.g. a public hall) or had publicly accessible stages within the construction project (e.g. open days). Predictably, not all responses were project-related, with participants encouraged to offer general feelings on participation. Transcripts were

Table 2. List of interviewee accreditations and interview dates.

Interviewee Count	Conservation Accreditations	Interview Date
1	RIBA, SCA	Jul-21
2	RIBA, CA	Jul-21
3	RIBA, AABC	Jul-21
4	RIBA, CA	Jul-21
5	RIBA, SCA, AABC	Aug-21
6	RIBA, SCA, AABC	Aug-21
7	RIBA, SCA	Sep-21
8	AABC	Nov-21
9	AABC	Jan-22
10	RIBA, SCA	Nov-22
11	AABC	Feb-23
12	RIBA, CA	Feb-23

Table 3. Interview guide covering research themes.

A – General Demographic Information

A1 Describe your role within the built heritage sector
- A1–1 – What is your educational background and qualifications?
- A1–2 – What professional accredited bodies are you a member of?
- A1–3 – How many years professional experience do you have in conservation?

B – Meaning, definition and consideration of participation

B1 Within the context of an architectural conservation project, what do the phrases *participation* and *engagement* mean to you?

B2 If you were given the opportunity to define the meaning of the term *participation* on an architectural conservation project, how would you define it and why?

B3 How common is participation considered on an architectural conservation project?
- B3–1 – If common: can you give examples and explain why?
- B3–2 – If not common: why don't you think it is considered?

C – Expectations and constraints surrounding participation

C1 Is it realistic to encourage participation on architectural conservation projects?
- C1–1 – If yes: why do you believe it is a realistic goal?
- C1–2 – If no: why not, what prevents it from being a realistic aspiration?
- C1–3 – What changes would need to be made to make it more realistic/achievable?

C2 If the heritage sector were to increase the awareness and importance of participation when working with heritage buildings, how might this impact:
- C2–1 – Your role?
- C2–2 – The architectural design process?
- C2–3 – The heritage sector in general?
- C2–4 – The conservation of heritage buildings?

D – Benefits of participation

D1 What are the benefits of participation from your professional standpoint?
- D1–1 – What experiences make you feel that way?

D2 What are the benefits of participation for practitioners and public?

D3 How do you think participation would benefit the architectural design process from the perspective of physical and spatial readings, reconfigurations, and alterations?

E – Disadvantages of participation

E1 What are the disadvantages of participation from your professional standpoint?
- E1–1 – What experiences make you feel that way?

E2 What are the disadvantages of participation for practitioners and public?

E3 Could participation negatively impact the design process?

F – Closing

F1 Is there anything else you would like to say that you haven't been given the chance to?

coded into sub-themes using thematic analysis software and visually analysed by creating a coding 'map' of sub-themes, which enhanced the interpretation of data connections and relationships between codes (Greg, MacQueen, and Namey 2014, 6).

Results: participation in architectural conservation

Results are split into three overarching analytical themes: 1) impact on significance and design; 2) participatory problems; and 3) evolving role and resolutions.

Impact on significance and design

Participation was chiefly understood as an instrument to help conservation architects engage multiple stakeholders on conservation projects – including clients, contractors, and communities. Within this understanding, emphasis was placed on *local* community engagement, with participation seen as a mechanism to foster inclusivity by allowing local knowledge to inform built heritage significance:

> . . . different types of significance need to be thought about and defined. And one of those types is local interest. So how do you know what that local interest is unless you ask people . . . That local interest cannot be defined by the likes of you or me, unless we actually go out and ask people. And that significance can be quite surprising, when you actually ask people what they like about their home, what they like about the place that they call home. You get some surprising answers – not necessarily the ones that you'd expect. (Interviewee 7039)

> . . . oral history so often disappears because it's not recorded. And buildings that – you're talking about changes to significance which relate to I suppose everyday memory. If that everyday memory isn't recorded in some form, it's no longer everyday memory and then it's not significant and could be ignored in future. (Interviewee 3545)

Emphasis on inclusivity was related to a practical concern for gaining project proposal support, with engagement processes seen as opportunities to capture stakeholder needs within preliminary conservation and design proposals:

> Early-stage stuff tends to be about having conversations and finding different ways of doing it. It's helpful for us as architects to help define the brief, you understand who the users are going to be. It's also useful for the funders as well, and it's essential when we're writing the funding applications to demonstrate that we've done participation. (Interviewee 4801)

> . . . we're looking at that critical participation stage, for long-term solutions that stick. If you can identify people who have needs, aspirations, memories, or something which they can see a kind of continuity and will stick by it, then there's a good chance it will be a success. (Interviewee 7039)

> . . . the initial design and so on, sketched designs, are informed by notions of place, of memory, of the history of the building and understanding that history and presenting it to the client as common ground to work on and talk about. (Interviewee 1948)

Participation was noted as especially beneficial to employ in earlier project stages to: 1) help refine project briefs by contributing local living memories to the formation of significance; and 2) support the development of initial design proposals by enriching professional decision-making. On the latter, the notion of *reciprocal access* (both intellectual and physical) featured prominently across the sample concerning enhancing overarching conservation and design decisions. Intellectual access was seen as beneficial for conservation architects to understand local user experiences of buildings, while for communities it was framed as an opportunity for practitioners to share guidance on material conservation best practice:

> . . . as a professional I want to stop people doing horrible things, you know, drilling holes in all the wrong places and hacking off medieval plaster. Clearly we need a system that prevents horrible things like that happening, but it shouldn't be at the price of separating the people from the building . . . So it's a correcting mechanism. Clearly they shouldn't be determining everything on their own . . . They need that expertise. (Interviewee 6667)

> . . . we were trying to say things like stone-pointing, how to do this, without going into mortar mixes, trying to explain what cement mortar does to stone. How you should clean terracotta, things like that, in very simple ways. (Interviewee 1948)

Physical access was seen as an opportunity for practitioners to quantify intangible qualities through attaching local knowledge (memories and stories) to tangible elements (physical and material), by creating opportunities for communities to access project sites. For example, walking with local people was frequently offered as a simple participatory practice that can support these forms of access:

> Tours go down really well because the local community like to have a poke around and see what's going on. A lot of people will be interested in going listening to a talk and looking at pictures, but actually more people are interested in having a poke around. (Interviewee 2723)

> . . . take them out on a tour and encourage them to write on a plan and collect those afterwards so that we could start to map it, because if you can map it, record it, or get people to give you information that you can physically document, then it starts to – you won't get an intangible result out of it – it needs to change from being something intangible in their memories to being something you can quantify a little bit. (Interviewee 6702)

> . . . there might have been fifteen people walking with us on a rainy Saturday lunchtime, just walking along the place. That then gets transferred into drawn material and we use our own observations mixed in with that – interpretations, things we noticed, patterns we see in the environment – and we make 3D models, plans, print them out big, and then presented them, who weren't necessarily the same group of people. You know, it's always a varying group of people. (Interviewee 1948)

Participation was accordingly portrayed as a reciprocal tool, with conservation architects able to share their own professional knowledge whilst also accruing new knowledge(s) from multiple and potentially transient stakeholders.

Participatory problems

Several obstacles were highlighted that impact the integration of participation within their role. These were related to added economic risk and uncertainty:

(1) Clients are wary of participation's impact on finances and timeline
(2) Participation invites uncertainties regarding project brief and reputation
(3) Speed and complexity of heritage projects doesn't accommodate participation
(4) Not all architectural conservation projects engender participation

Clients were frequently noted as a barrier due to their cautiousness and concerns across the following aspects of participation:

(1) No professional guidance to regulate what participation entails
(2) Reveals conflicting meanings and opinions (multivocality)
(3) Creates more professional responsibility
(4) Time consuming and unpredictable
(5) Could change expected project outcomes

> We don't do much public consultation as architects. And the clients don't seem to want to do it or suggest doing it either, or presumably don't want to pay for it. (Interviewee 3545)

> . . . participation will impact on our appointment, and that puts the onus on the client to pay more for conservation architect's time. (Interviewee 4265)

> You're usually working so fast – we've got a grant … there's a certain sense of urgency, shall we say, that doesn't suit participatory involvement. (Interviewee 1948)

> … in the private sector they're worried the community are going to want everything and they don't have any money… (Interviewee 2112)

As clients themselves constitute a 'stakeholder' from the perspective of the sample, these participatory concerns paradoxically become part of the mediation process across multiple stakeholders, reflecting the sample's dual obligation to their client and broader project stakeholders:

> … you're always a mediator, certainly in conservation, because you've got the needs of a client, you've got the needs of a building, you've got other needs as well, it's certainly a balancing of factors to get a conclusion. I don't think participation is pulling you away from what you ought to be doing, but it's adding another consideration. (Interviewee 3545)

Alongside client concerns, professional engagement with communities was described as another obstacle. Many interviewees noted friction between their expertise and local laypersons, underpinned by exclusionary mechanisms such as: formal language and communicative barriers; upholding conventional hierarchies and values; conflict of professional obligations; and tokenistic uses of participation by clients for marketing purposes:

> … this is the problem; people have got that knowledge, but they can't communicate it because they don't have the vocal or communicative skills. (Interviewee 7039)

> … there's a language barrier. And you're dealing with a very hierarchical system as well … and it's very difficult to communicate with them. It's difficult to communicate with the higher-level parts of the hierarchy never mind the actual community itself. (Interviewee 1948)

> … there will be limitations to participation for ethnic minorities if they don't feel the story of a site relates to them at all. (Interviewee 2112)

> … they felt such a sense of custodianship to that site, but they'd made quite a lot of decisions that from a heritage point of view weren't well informed … Obviously they didn't have the academic expertise to do it, but they had the energy and were really committed to the place, so what's right and wrong in that situation? (Interviewee 4801)

> … they [developers] probably see it as a bit of a PR thing. You know, turn up at this site, you'll get a scaffold tour to see what's going on. They're quite keen. But it does cost ultimately, whether it's time of the contract, raw materials, or whatever. (Interviewee 2723)

Evolving role and resolutions

Participants were clear how obstacles towards participation on projects could be resolved. These resolutions were reflexive and explored how they might address client-related barriers towards participation alongside how their own role might evolve to accommodate participatory practices. On client-related matters, it was felt conservation architects should proactively promote the benefits of participation to clients and actively involve it in work stages:

> … we need to encourage clients to embrace an understanding of … building up a picture of what that end use will be and encourage participation to formulate that because it'll help the project develop. And even sometimes that needs to be done before the brief is developed. (Interviewee 3341)

> I think there's definitely hoops you need to jump through, but you can approach those hoops positively or negatively, and how the client views it, it doesn't matter, because you still have to jump through those hoops. It's just how hard you have to convince them to approach participation positively. (Interviewee 6702)

> … it is up to the architect to choreograph how these stages work, and if you know enough about those stages, you know that it is really up to the architect to decide whether they are going to be the leader or the follower. (Interviewee 9864)

Four tactics were shared to promote participation to clients on architectural conservation projects:

(1) Clarify the difference between participation and consultation
(2) Recommend outsourcing participation to specialists when necessary
(3) Communicate the value of translating participatory outputs into conservation strategies
(4) Promote project advantages of interpreting local heritage narratives

However, preceding this it was felt the most viable solution to encourage more participation began with the skills and knowledge of conservation architects. The friction between their standard skillset and needs of participatory practice was emphasised as challenging, with participation perceived as requiring specific skills that are not part of a conservation architect's education or training. Emphasis was placed on learning new skills to transcend traditional approaches and integrate participation within projects:

> . . . conservation architects are trained to come into a vacuum and interject and impose their ideas; and sometimes your ideas don't represent the feelings and needs of local people. So, what's very important is that architects are trained to listen and learn from this process and that's not something that we're taught at schools of architecture. We're not taught to respond to other people's ideas, we're taught to develop our own to the exclusion of other people. (Interviewee 7039)

> . . . it takes a certain type of person to do participation really well and have the correct skillset and tools to be able to work with laypersons who might not necessarily be able to read plans, or technical drawings. I don't think conservation architects are necessarily always the right people to lead on these things, but they certainly will act as great contributors. (Interviewee 4265)

Resultingly, participation was portrayed as a panacea for addressing a perceived outmoded approach towards architectural conservation. The sample described its ability to help transcend autocratic habits instilled across their professional training, such as enforcing individual creativity, dominating design ownership, and imposing expertise. They were also explicit how the integration of participation within their role would encourage their profession to develop the skill of listening:

> . . . that does need to be backed up by an ability to listen – that's the skill that architects I feel often most need and most lack . . . that responsiveness you get from being able to listen well to people adds a huge amount to the process and helps in a positive sense to sort of demystify – it changes the way in which you hold your expertise. (Interviewee 6667)

> . . . it's all about listening and learning. And then the very last thing you do is bring your design knowledge into that equation. (Interviewee 7039)

> . . . I think that's something that, as architects, we are not taught to do very well, is to listen to people. (Interviewee 9864)

> Before you go and do any public consultation anywhere, go get your hair cut at the local hairdressers and just listen to all the local gossip of what's going on. Get the train there, get a taxi to the site, chat to the taxi driver and find out what's going on, because you know, we're preserving a community, we have to look at the culture. (Interviewee 4265)

Discussion: 'finding the happy place'

> I've used this term before – *finding the happy place* – on all projects, not just ones that involve communities. It's about taking all the different project requirements and finding where the push and pull is . . . It's about trying to find those compromises. And cost comes into it as well. But it's useful to have participation . . . because if it's going to make the space more useable now, its potentially going to give it more flexibility and a better viable life for the future. And it might be things as an architect that you don't always think about, so you need that involvement from the local community and end users. (Interviewee 4801)

Despite conventional assumptions implying architectural conservation helps sustain authorised discourses (Avrami 2020; Djabarouti 2022; Orbaşli 2017), the results illuminate how views and experiences of contemporary conservation architects are mostly in line with the critical trajectory of heritage, although it is apparent (and unsurprising) that conservation architects conceptualise the value of participation in ways that prioritise positive change to built heritage. A clear process can be interpreted from the results for enhancing participation in architectural conservation practice, which can be codified into the following six steps:

(1) **Employ** holistic project mediation – *the role of the conservation architect involves the responsibility of holistic project mediation*
(2) **Identify** place-based users with embodied experience of a place – *'community' for conservation architects can be defined as a group of place-based users who geographically share the embodied experience of a place in common*
(3) **Utilise** physical environment for reciprocal knowledge transfer – *participatory methods on architectural conservation projects reimagine historic environments as safe spaces for reciprocal knowledge transfer*
(4) **Apply** knowledge to enhance significance, brief, and local support – *participation outcomes are pivotal for enhancing significance, shaping project briefs, and cultivating local community support for projects*
(5) **Capture** heritage narratives through physical heritage conservation – *participation helps conservation architects transform buildings into repositories of communal memory by coordinating local living memory with physical fabric*
(6) **Celebrate** buildings as symbols of partnership and collective action – *the building or site is conceptualised as a symbol of partnership and collective action with local communities*

This discussion section is structured in accordance with these steps (note emphases in bold) which has emerged from the results as a process that informs how participation can be successfully employed, identified, utilised, applied, captured, and celebrated on architectural conservation projects (Figure 1).

During one interview, the concept of 'finding the happy place' (see above) was explained as a holistic strategy to employ when mediating across project requirements, stakeholders, and heritage qualities (tangible and intangible). It was described as a form of negotiated interplay across those elements. The essence of this reflects how the sample perceived participation in relation to what the role of the contemporary conservation architect *could* be: one who can coordinate tangible and intangible representations of heritage; who can resolve conflict between client and public demands; who can negotiate across building and community repair needs; who can achieve a sense of partnership across multiple stakeholders; and who can facilitate translation between living memories of the past and physical alterations to heritage fabric. Accordingly, **the role of the conservation architect involves the responsibility of holistic project mediation**, which relates directly to facilitating inclusion and equity (Avrami 2020), along with reframing heritage as a socially responsive development process (Alivizatou 2022, 13; Fredheim 2018, 619; Wells and Stiefel 2019, 15).

The emphasis that the sample placed on *local* communities and knowledges reflects their professional focus on a specific building/site and their desire for *contextualised* knowledge. The term 'community' was therefore heavily weighted towards a geographical representation – those who have direct experience of a place. The sample's focus on elucidating stories and fostering reciprocal 'access' (intellectual and physical) extended the scope of this interest to transient people and groups – that is, those who once *were* local. Thus, a **'community' for conservation architects can be defined as a group of place-based users who geographically share the embodied experience of a place in common**. This is far from a conceptual (Berger, Dicks, and Fontaine 2020, 337; Deacon and Smeets 2013, 132), generic (Waterton and Smith

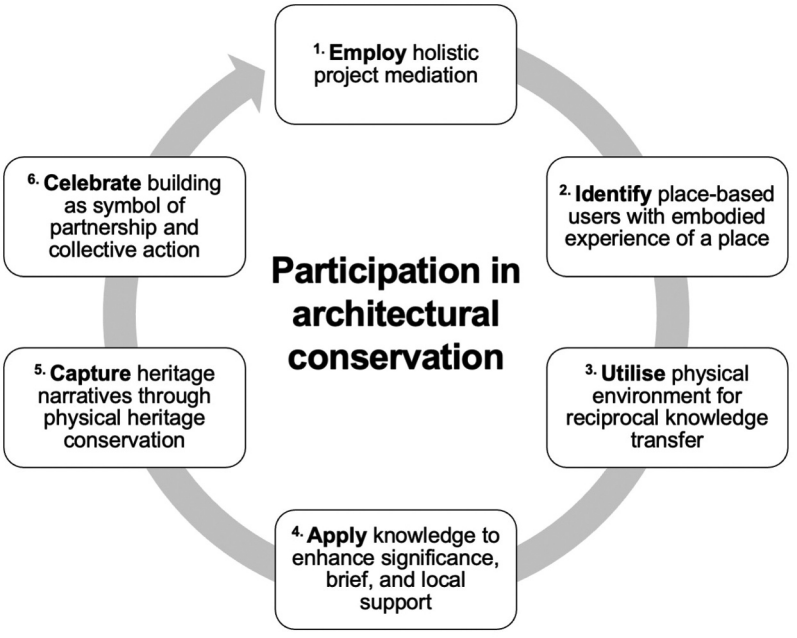

Figure 1. Six step process to enhance participation in architectural conservation practice. Author original image.

2010, 5) or exploitative (Fredheim 2018, 626) definition; rather, it is a strategically refined definition that achieves a discipline-specific outcome, which large organisations such as UNESCO (2023) cannot attain. The sample further clarified how site-based conversations and engagement activities with place-based communities enhances professional and local community knowledge about a place, resulting in longer-term changes to design drawings that are informed by those contextualised intersubjective experiences. It can therefore be posited that **participatory methods on architectural conservation projects reimagine historic environments as safe spaces for reciprocal knowledge transfer**. The degree of participation that was collectively described didn't subscribe to Arnstein's (1969) or Turner's (1972) quests for 'citizen control'. Instead, notions of reciprocity, mutual respect, and 'partnership' were pursued (see both Arnstein 1969; Davidson 1998), whereby conservation problems are solved *with* communities but there is no delegated power (nor expectation) for communities to make their own decisions (Davidson 1998, 15).

By providing access to local memories and experiences, participation was depicted as able to enrich understandings of user interactions with buildings by unifying tangible (sites) with intangible (stories) (Avrami 2020, 9). It was highlighted how **participation outcomes are pivotal for enhancing significance, shaping project briefs, and cultivating local community support for projects**. This predictably positions participatory insight at earlier work stages, valuing the potential for intangible contributions of engaged stakeholders to influence resulting material conservation decisions. Part of the value of this was related to capturing oral histories within formal processes, ensuring local memories are recorded for posterity. Thus, **participation helps conservation architects transform buildings into repositories of communal memory by coordinating local living memory with physical fabric** (also Walter 2017, 61). It is noteworthy how this was not portrayed as methodologically challenging, with the embodied experience of walking frequently given as a simple example of how to connect conservation architects, communities, and built heritage – leading to solutions that resonate with local knowledge, memories, and site-specific experiences. This relates back to the idea of the conservation architect as mediator, but specifically across tangible and intangible qualities of

places. As conservation architects feed local knowledge back into their design proposals, the building becomes a formalised manifestation of their partnership with those communities. Consequently, when they actively engage in a participatory process, **the building or site is conceptualised as a symbol of partnership and collective action with local communities** (Berger, Dicks, and Fontaine 2020, 337).

Conclusion: walk slowly, listen carefully, tread softly

> . . . what I can't do is bring local knowledge and significance to the process. They've got memories which are unique to them, which aren't necessarily of worth or note nationally, but they are personal, and it is those personal feelings that are vital when getting involved in redevelopment. As Yeats said, tread softly for you tread on my dreams. That is essential when you are involved in historic building work, because you can destroy people's past – their memories. (Interviewee 7039)

> Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.
>
> —W. B. Yeats, Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven, 1899.

Participation has been a substantial academic topic for over sixty years, and we are now in the third decade of sustained participatory research within the field of heritage studies. Contextualised against the postmodern heritage paradigm and rise of critical heritage theory, participation has emerged as a significant research topic that can address complex contemporary issues in heritage, such as inclusivity, equity, community engagement methods, and intangible heritage. Despite these developments there has been comparably less study into participation specifically from the perspective of architectural conservation practice. Whilst literature conventionally frames the conservation architect as a traditionalist, material-focused, and contributor to authorised heritage discourses, this study has revealed what participation is and means to the contemporary conservation architect and how it can influence change to historic fabric.

Across a codified process of six steps, conservation architects can achieve appropriate participation by: employing holistic project mediation; identifying place-based users with embodied experience of their project; utilising project sites for reciprocal participatory knowledge transfer with those users; applying that knowledge to the project brief and statement of significance; capturing those heritage narratives through physical heritage conservation; and celebrating the resulting changes as a symbol of partnership with those who participated. These steps demonstrate how a more nuanced practitioner-specific focus can help influence the practical application of participation in terms of how guidance might be informed by these perspectives – for example, how Historic England's (2008) guidance could enhance the notion of significance through championing practitioners as holistic project mediators, or how the RIBA (2020) Plan of Work could acknowledge place-based user participation as an essential component of early design stages. Reflecting the study scope, the proposed codification of best practice theorised from this research is limited to UK conservation practice, as well as being based on a sample size that inherently has limited generalisability. Further research should seek to improve the utility of these results by expanding their applicability to varied cultural contexts.

Whilst the steps offer a long-term direction of travel for a participatory architectural conservation practice, the study highlights three immediate changes that conservation architects can personally make to their own practice to support this process: taking time to walk with communities of interest at project sites; listening to the living memories related to their projects; and being more attentive to how the conservation of physical heritage can have an irreversible impact on those intangible qualities. A mantra of *walk slowly, listen carefully, tread softly* may therefore have utility as a moral anchor for conservation architects when contemplating a participatory evolution of their practice.

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