Intangible Cultural Heritage/Living Heritage and Spatial Justice

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Some thoughts and provocations

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In this very brief presentation, I hope to contribute to the on-going discussions taking place within your forum around the place of living heritage/social values within the context of urban development in the city of Cape Town and beyond.

There are many pathways with which one could begin, proceed and end this intervention I propose within the twenty minutes allotted to me. I have chosen to frame and begin mine within the context of what living heritage is, how it can catalyse and reframe ways of conducting heritage related work so as to foster and deepen spatial justice within a city and a country that is deeply divided, still.

Defining Living Heritage and its consequential languaging

Living heritage is used here in the context of that part of our heritage which is intangible, not visibly seen but possibly manifested through material objects, relevant to sites and place. Living heritage contains at its heart, the notion of continuity of practice – that which crosses over and is transmitted over at least three generations. Dynamic in nature, it is responsive to social, natural, economic and political contexts and so inherent in its definition, is the notion of change. Its nature and value either together or independently change within these contexts.

" The intangible cultural heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills – as well as instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups, and in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage". UNESCO 2003 Convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.. Article2.1

The UNESCO Convention 2003 for the safeguarding of living heritage provides domains within which living heritage. These are; (a) oral traditions and expressions; including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage, (b) performing arts; (c)social practices, rituals and festive events;(d)knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe and (e) traditional craftsmanship. Article 2.2

These domains are used within the South African National Policy for heritage to describe living heritage. However, the convention makes clear that these domains are not in any way conclusive but open to the ways in which individual States Parties wish to describe their living heritage within their borders.

From the definition as well as the domains identified above, it is clear that while these elements are cultural in nature, they crossover into various aspects of life; governance (Spanish water tribunal, https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/irrigators-tribunals-of-the-spanish-mediterranean-coast-the-council-of-wise-men-of-the-plain-of-murcia-and-the-water-tribunal-of-the-plain-of-valencia-00171l), agriculture (traditional fishing methods in Mali,https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/sanke-mon-collective-fishing-rite-of-the-sanke-00289)building community and social cohesion (Ugandan naming ceremony, https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/empaako-tradition-of-the-batooro-banyoro-batuku-batagwenda-and-banyabindi-of-western-uganda-00904), medicinal practices (https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/traditions-and-practices-associated-with-the-kayas-in-the-sacred-forests-of-the-mijikenda-00313), infrastructure (bridge building in China https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/traditional-design-and-practices-for-building-chinese-wooden-arch-bridges-00303), and many more. Just these few examples of identified living heritage elements, challenges those of us who work in the cultural sector to think very carefully about the ways in which cultural practices rest at the heart of Life and explore nuanced and inclusive practices across disciplines and sectors. The safeguarding of living heritage cannot only exist within the ambit of the cultural sector. Hence, when the South African draft policy for living heritage was initiated, one of the first outputs was identifying all of the sectors which overlapped in its safeguarding. This mapping exercise continues to be used as an example of possible methodology for policy design in other countries. (In spite of South Africa not having ratified by the convention nor passed its policy for living heritage). Integral to the dynamic nature of living heritage is the notion that it cannot be 'managed' nor 'legislated', but driven by communities[1] of practice continued. The conventions of 'conservation' do not apply. Safeguarding is defined as that which creates an enabling environment within which practices may continue and thrive as decided by communities themselves.

"'Safeguarding' means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promoting, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of the heritage". Article 2.3

Understanding this notion challenges us as heritage professionals with respect to how we engage with living heritage and the communities of practice who are custodians and identify with them. It requires a turning on its head – the defined conventions of 'heritage managers', 'heritage experts' as located outside of communities of practice. This reorientation of role and place I will return to under the section called 'challenges'.

Defining Spatial Justice and its implications

There are just two aspects to spatial justice which I wish to ponder on. The first is the ways in which it has been defined by radical geographer, David Harvey (1973 onwards). He believes that one cannot speak of space without speaking of place and environment and that injustices which are riven within society manifests spatially. The second aspect which I wish to draw into this presentation is the iterative difference between 'belonging' and 'access'. Often they are used interchangeably when speaking of

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[1] Communities is not defined within the Convention. It is understood to be a group, collective of people who

creating spaces that are just. The first, of which much has been written about, with complexities of what it means, how it manifests within space by cultural geographers and across the social sciences. From Habib and Ward, 2019 to Ahmed, S 2012 to Calhoun, C 2015 it is argued that 'belonging' is a critical driver of place making, identity and democracy.

'Access' calls to mind the 'access card', that there are restrictions and limitations which require some navigation before being able to be/act/exist in a place. The radical nature of spatial justice lends itself to have us thinking very carefully about 'belonging' in our discourse when thinking about city making and place making.

Identifying/Reminding ourselves of the blindspots

- That we live in a city designed to exclude a shape shifting 'Other'…black body, poor, gender non-conforming, woman – dependent on political, social and cultural governance and mindset
- That the exclusion is not only through legislation and policies which determine them; the group areas act, eiselen line, coloured labour preferential system but through devices which serve to create a sense of (un)belonging (sharp edged stones under bridges, coffee for sale at ZAR35, heavy policing/presence of security companies, profiling and so on)
- That profit and development imperatives "at all cost" eliminates any imagining of alternative ways which bring development and just city - building together
- That there is a persistence of not being able to recognize and see that there are ways of being and seeing the world outside of the western paradigm and so imbuing spatial planning with these philosophies rather than reiterating what does not work
- The persistence of colonial/apartheid constructions of land/earth – extractive and individual ownership based; the rural/urban dichotomy

So how can using the lens of Living Heritage bring into view opportunities for spatial justice

- OR What are some of the concepts carried by living heritage and how could they serve spatial justice (thinking aloud)?
1. Driven by Community/ies of practice; participation of custodians and stakeholders is critical in the safeguarding of living heritage
   A practice to which more and more conservation policies and practices are turning to as well – having realized that arms - length management and poor community ownership is not constructive nor sustainable conservation practice. The tension between ownership of authorities

as opposed to 'users' or community custodians (Lynn Meskell, Webber Ndoro, George Abungu, etc. writings reflect on critically). Living heritage pushes the boundaries of what this means in terms of community driven and led initiatives and offers possibilities for understanding on a case by case, everyday practice level, ways of thinking or imagining a different heritage practice

2. There is generational transmission which takes place within communities – memories, knowledge systems and practices which have sustained, redefined, adapted living heritage over time
   Understanding transmission processes, systems of knowing and sharing, who is responsible and how this is decided within community offers up levels of understanding social structures, cultural organization patterns and power relations which again can speak to or open up avenues for spatial planning which is inclusive, consultative (beyond the ubiquitous consultation/stakeholder meetings)

3. That these living heritage elements have been adaptive and dynamic in response to specific local and global contexts including geographical shifts from place/location to space/site
   That the continuities and changes can shed light on the present and more importantly on the future possible uses and ways of using space/place, strengthening and enabling continuity of living heritage (teaching of gardening skills to young people in Columbia, in an area beleaguered by remnants of the long civil war becomes both skills upgrading and job creation opportunity, but also a transmission of indigenous knowledge of planting and agriculture, https://ich.unesco.org/en/BSP/safeguarding-strategy-of-traditional-crafts-for-peace-building-01480 *OR* https://ich.unesco.org/en/BSP/safeguarding-strategy-of-traditional-crafts-for-peace-building-01480

4. That the values which are associated with the living heritage elements can change over time – and that the ways in which the living heritage is practiced can change
   Values beyond aesthetic or period as in the case of buildings or sites

5. That living heritage is not confined to space or site, nor boundaries of place – that beyond an understanding of significance to space – there are values, knowledge systems which can traverse boundaries (the practice of boy to man initiation which still continues to a large extent in the Eastern Cape has landed and found a place within the Western Cape and imbued it with sacred meaning)
   Challenges the convention of boundary and defined – opens up possibilities for development of the city through Historic Urban Landscape approach

6. *Echoes the complexities of what constitutes 'community' or 'community of practice'*

7. Understanding the risks and threats to living heritage often leads to an understanding of what rests at the heart of conflicts/social risks and vulnerability and recognizing the interrelationship between culture and heritage and sustainable development

And what of the How?

- Beginning processes of community based inventorying that are not only tied to place or building, but rather using the site or building as a catalyst for understanding what constitutes a specific community for which there is meaning, and what the kinds of living heritage emerges
- Using the framework of the Historic Urban Landscape as an approach – placing culture and heritage at the heart of decision making
- Thinking about values as beyond place or boundaries

Challenges

There are too many to mention, but a few which come to mind as priority areas for discussion;

1. The need for scholarly disciplined research into the intersections between building just cities and living heritage
2. Related to the above, research into ways of making living heritage "legible" and defensible within a legal and policy regime which still cannot measure social impacts
3. Opening up forms of urban planning and design which experiment and work with case/context bound modalities
4. Finding ways of navigating political and economic imperatives
5. The rate of urban growth and demand is a very real challenge
6. Re-orienting the nature of heritage profession so that it can become more interdisciplinary, that scarce skills identified through "mistakes" made are integrated in in-service training and at tertiary levels

Useful readings/references

The Historic Urban Landscape: Managing Heritage in an urban century, Banderin and van Oers, 2012

Reshaping Urban Conservation – the Historic Urban Landscape, (ed.) Pereira Roders Ana, Banderin Francesco, 2019

https://shelterforce.org/2020/01/06/redevelopment-that-preserves-cultural-heritage/

https://www.accu.or.jp/ich/en/pdf/c2006Expert_DEACON_2.pdf

http://www.accu.or.jp/ich/en/pdf/c2006Expert_DEACON_1.pdf

The intangible dimension of urban heritage, Rohit Jigyasu, 2014 (in Reconnecting the City, ed. Banderin and van Oers, 2014)

https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245999

Culture Urban Future UNESCO report to UN Habitat Quito meeting, 2016

http://www.agenda21culture.net

https://ich.unesco.org

Heritage, gentrification: remaking urban landscapes in the name of culture and historic preservation, Lynn Meskell, International Journal of Heritage Studies, 2018

(A network which is useful to join up for further readings, conferences, training in ICH/urban issues);

https://www.criticalheritagestudies.org/intangible-heritage-network

https://www.criticalheritagestudies.org/heritage-and-urban-space-network

I thank You