

In Search of the Postmodern Culture of Conservation

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An accompanying visual presentation can be found here: <http://prezi.com/015-8eq6p0um/in-search-of-the-postmodern-culture-of-conservation/>

Paradigm Shift

There's talk of a new Heritage Paradigm. I'm going to talk from the Gen Y paradigm.

Kuhn argued that scientific theory grew through a series of shifts, where new ideas, previously dismissed, were suddenly considered valid. Paradigms—the very notion of truth—were not established by data, but by community consensus. Competing ideas were integral to the birth of new paradigms.

Is there a Canadian culture of conservation? Playing devil's advocate, or hopeless optimistic, I argue this culture exists, but doesn't necessarily revolve around architecture.

What is post-modern time?

Modernity can be seen as a rejection of the past. Postmodernity is harder to define: is it a reaction against modernity? An extension of modern thinking? We can all agree that things are different now than they were fifty or even fifteen years ago, with the emergence of the Information Revolution.

Modern time is seen as a **line of cause and effect**, progressing to a certain point. Understanding is formed through **dichotomies**: between arts and science, nature and culture, and so on. The world is understood in **overarching metanarratives, or a Universal Truth**, while our relationships have been constructed **horizontally, fraternally**, a result of newspapers and other technologies.

Modernity tore the fabric between the past and the present, breaking apart pre-modern milieu de memoire into disparate lieux de memoire. To conserve these sites is to mend that gap.

So why do we conserve? Is it an age-old storytelling practice to pass on values, traditions, knowledge? Is it about bridging that perceived gap between past and present, as we look to make sense of the world and our place in it? Or is it something else?

Postmodern time is like pre-modern time. It saw the end of the metanarrative and the rise of relativistic history (think the difference between integrity and authenticity). **Hierarchies continue to flatten**, but **time is becoming less linear**. With the internet, we are experiencing pre-modern **time** once more. The lines between past and present are blurring. We can be in different places at once.

Who is Generation Y?

So who is Gen Y? We were born between the early 80s and early 2000s. I won't tell you my age because I hear it depresses some people.

We've inherited a dying, alienating world. We have **deep-seated guilt and anxiety, but also a deep sense of purpose.** We think globally and act locally. Our prosperous and secure lifestyles have created suffering, death, and insecurity for others. **There is much wealth, and yet such disparity. Climate change is a given and time is running out.**

We've been raised in a **homogenizing, corporate culture.** Anything 'real' or authentic is rapidly commodified. We've had to accept planned obsolescence, not craftsmanship, as a general operating principle.

Our generation carries these concerns, not with optimism, but with harsh, bitter pragmatism. **We constantly fight apathy.** Every day is an affirmation. Many days we are depressed. Occupy Wall St. shows that we do care about making things better, **and if we aren't given the opportunity to do so, we'll do so anyway.**

We are accessing and engaging with heritage in different ways, even if we don't use the term. Foodies, extreme knitting, vintage clothing and retro music: **We are conserving heritage by enacting it.** The focus is on the sharing of stories, values, and traditions. Buildings are only one way to tell these stories.

What this means for Conservation

What does this mean for the postmodern culture of conservation?

Like other modern systems, conservation-by-designation isn't responding to change. The system prevents a holistic approach with its dichotomies between heritage and non-heritage, natural and cultural heritage, and different types of knowledge. But everything is heritage, and everything is connected. Because **conservation is about the process: it's about a way of seeing, not just the things we see.** Future systems need to be resilient and adapt to changing paradigms.

Conservation is like democracy: it can't be outsourced. A broad culture of conservation needs to be embodied individually and collectively: **We need to enable participation and encourage stewardship and ownership. We need to seek a post-designation system rooted in community-based conservation and values-based management.**

To do so, we must be more critical about ourselves: **this field needs to be not simply relevant, but representative.** Who's represented here: are there engineers, sociologists, folklorists? Where are the First Nations, Inuit, Métis and ethnic minorities? Who couldn't **afford** to be at this conference?

There are many cultures of conservation. Arguably the dominant Canadian **culture of conservation is linked to nationalism, even if perhaps we don't recognize it.** We contend with the idea that “nothing special ever happened” here, that our buildings are ‘young’, that our history is boring.

Yet many can name their favourite Heritage Minute (and Drunk History episode too for that matter). We're standing on the brink of revival: the War of 1812 is one of many upcoming anniversaries. The wave of popular conservation will crest again and we need to be ready for it.

Conclusion

The field is at a crossroads. We must embrace the postmodern culture of conservation: it can't continue to be a siloized activity struggling with the usual, self-inflicted problems. The field can learn to work with the New Paradigm, or watch as the next generation builds alternatives around it. We can't shy away from rigorous debate or contemplation. Our systems need to be resilient. We need heritage and the conservation process more than ever.

Nancy Oakley recently obtained her M.A. in Canadian Studies, specializing in heritage conservation, at Carleton University. Nancy's graduate research examined the cultural resource management practices of Algonquin Provincial Park. In addition to her studies and work as a heritage consultant, Nancy is an active volunteer, serving as a Board member and Heritage Keeper Program Coordinator with Heritage Ottawa.