

How should heritage decisions be made?

Increasing participation from where you are

Heritage is about what we value: places, buildings, objects, memories, cultures, skills or ways of life. So why can it be so hard to get actively involved in heritage decision-making?

Heritage becomes defined when decisions are made: what to preserve, what to show, what to think of as worth celebrating and sharing. In our research project we explored how such decisions could be opened up to greater participation.

‘Participation’?

The word ‘participation’ is everywhere in museums and heritage. Shifts in legislation, such as the Localism Act (2011), are just formal articulations of longer trends towards seeing individual people and groups – once imagined as an undifferentiated ‘the public’ – as active players in shaping their culture and places.

While the word ‘participation’ may often be evoked, there are number of specific challenges we’ve sought to engage through our research:

What participation is: The meaning of ‘participation’ is often opaque and is often used far too loosely to describe attendance at events, volunteering or consultation – we wanted to tie participation to the sharper and more specific idea of ‘decision-making’.

Where participation happens: Participation is too often limited to a range of established practices (such as small display interventions) and to silos (for example, museum learning teams) – we wanted to think about participation systemically within whole organisations and places.

How participation feels: ‘Participation’ is often seen as hard, painful and characterized by conflict, owing to the inequalities and exclusions it seeks to breach – we wanted to draw out the human and social ways in which we can all feel more able to influence things that matter to us.

The politics of participation: Although celebrated in some quarters, ‘participation’ remains politically contested. Questions often asked are: Can direct public engagement, with decision-making, deal with complex information? Can participation be scaled to involve more than the ‘usual suspects’? – we have sought to address criticisms of participation through articulating more fully our practices and through modelling alternatives.

Political questions, practical pathways

Four really simple ideas emerged from our research project which we think really help break down some of these 'sticking points'. We found that participation in heritage decision-making can be increased from wherever you work or live and whatever your position – professional, researcher or someone who cares about your own culture and place – if you animate your work with the following principles:

Act: Make change from where you are

Don't wait for someone else to take responsibility, do-heritage-yourself.

Connect: Cross boundaries and collaborate

Find people who share your passions and interests – and create networks of decision makers, professionals, activists and communities.

Reflect: See your work through other people's eyes

Talk to other people about what you're doing – they'll help you decide what to do next.

Situate: Understand your work in context

If you narrow your focus too much it's hard to see how change can happen. Seeing how people, ideas and resources connect and where disconnections happen can help you take action.

May 2015

The 'How should decisions about heritage be made?' project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Connected Communities programme. Full details of the Heritage Decisions research team and for more information on the project see:

www.heritagedecisions.leeds.ac.uk

