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New Skills in a Changing World: Strategic Alliances at World Heritage Sites

Cadar, S. *

Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg (Germany)

ABSTRACT

The presentation aims to examine the new type of skills that heritage professionals may need to acquire in response to the changing socio-economic context of the contemporary world. It will also look into possible strategic alliances between higher education, communities and the tourism sector that could link conservation and sustainable development (especially youth employment) at World Heritage Sites. Particular attention will be given to the social threats induced by tourism at heritage sites, such as the dramatic decrease of young population, rural exodus, or the deterioration of the local social fabric, and the critical need for revitalization strategies in this regard.

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* E-mail address: Simona.Cadar@tu-cottbus.de

I have been often confronted with the difficulty of finding a comprehensive definition for heritage sites. After all sorts of attempts, I realized that the best way to describe them is as living organisms: they are very similar to all other forms of life on this earth and, to a certain extent, they are very much like us, human beings.

Heritage sites are complex structures, a mix of visible and invisible layers, where each element plays a very important part in the good functioning of the overall structure/mechanism.

Some of them are younger (e.g. Berlin Modernism Houses/Germany, White City of Tel Aviv/Israel); others seem to be defying the test of time (e.g. The Pyramid Fields of Giza/Egypt), their extraordinary power of survival makes them the superheroes of our legacy and makes us somehow forget that life and death, natural growth and decay are the regulating forces of all forms of life, including heritage.

Some of them boast with their cultural or natural beauty, in a traditional aesthetic approach (e.g. Taj Mahal/India, Churches of Moldavia/Romania), others carry unpleasant scars with them, which are not always pleasant to look at (e.g. Auschwitz, Birkenau/Poland - German Concentration Camp 1940-45, Island of Gorée/Senegal).

Some are rich and glamorous (e.g. St. Petersburg/Russian Federation, Esfahan/Iran), others simple and unpretentious, but equally valuable (e.g. Historic Village of Shirakawa-go/Japan, Ngorongoro Conservation Area/Tanzania). Regardless of their physical appearance, they all have a story to tell, a story that has been perpetuated through the ages of time.

Similar to the whole spectrum of human relationships, heritage sites are subject to emotions: they are being loved and cared for (e.g. Apu ceremony in the Andes), hated and destroyed (e.g. the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan/Afghanistan), or simply forgotten.

They have a life of their own and an individual path to follow, are dynamic and evolving, but at the same time are part of a larger system, in which complex forces are at work.

Similar to human beings, they cannot be prisoners of the past, but must be part of the present realities, and add new values to the legacy that will make them be remembered in the future. And similar to us, they cannot live without money. They must serve a purpose in the contemporary society, which in many cases in connected with economic development.

Similar to human beings, heritage sites need constant nourishment in order to survive: both physically (the same as our human body) and emotionally (the same as our spiritual life).

Similar to us, they can only find meaning through other human beings, they need to constantly reinforce their function and relevance to the people.

The main role of education is to develop and disseminate these new ways of understanding and seeing heritage. Because understanding the nature and physiology of heritage sites is of capital importance for the development of adequate conservation and management strategies. How heritage is understood and managed is, of course, very much determined by the socio-cultural characteristics of a particular time. The way we understand heritage nowadays is very much different than how it was perceived 40 years ago, when the World Heritage Convention came into being. Sites are no longer perceived as static and isolated, but as dynamic, integrated in larger territorial development plans. They are no longer valued only as objects, but as landscapes and expressions of living cultures. The built fabric is no longer the basis of conservation and management processes, but rather the broader context, and places are perceived as outcomes of complex and intertwining natural, cultural and socio-economic forces. Culture and Nature are no longer understood as opposing concepts, but are inseparable in conservation and management planning. Because of these aspects, the general heritage discourse focuses no longer exclusively on conservation and protection, but rather on economic, social and cultural development, and the management of heritage sites can no longer be conducted by conservation experts, but requires a new kind of multidisciplinary knowledge, the participation of local communities and the establishment of partnerships.

This is very much related to the unique context of the world we live in, defined by a global knowledge society in which international mobility and information and communication technologies play a very important role. According to recent reports on global trends (European Union/Institute for Security Studies. 2012. *Global Trends 2030 – Citizens in an Interconnected and Polycentric World*; US National Intelligence Council. 2012. *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*), mobility, connectedness and access to information are and will continue to play a central part in all aspects of human activity, with a rapid democratization of everything: commerce, politics, societies… and heritage!

It is a world of information, in which immense amounts of facts are produced and transmitted through an overwhelming number of channels.

It is a world of communication, revolutionised by the information and communication technologies (ICT), social media, cloud computing, and the necessity to stay connected at all times.

It is a world of networks and private actors, where power has been gradually diffused from state to civic society, private actors, non-governmental networks and local authorities, and where networks of expertise will provide essential knowledge to build public awareness.

It is a world of cities. According to current statistics, 50% of the world population is living in urban areas and it is estimated that by 2030, this will increase to 60% (4,9 billion people). Megacities are likely to concentrate more economic wealth than many states.

It is a world of many centers, in which it is expected that power will not depend so much on GDP and population size, but on the diverse networks that will influence state and global actions, as well as on the ability to operate in networks and coalitions in a multipolar world.

It is a world in which mobility defines all aspects of life and where physical space no longer poses a challenge that cannot be overcome.

It is a world of empowered individuals (the Millennials/the Me, Me, Me generation), who nevertheless share the awareness that they belong to a global community.

With the middle class expected to expend dramatically (it is estimated that by 2030, 4.9 billion out of a total population of 8.3 billion, so more than 50% of world population, will reach this level), citizens will be connected by diverse personal and professional networks, and will be more influential in deciding their future. Widespread education and new technologies that are portable and affordable (it is estimated that by 2030 more than half of the world's population will have internet access) will considerably increase and facilitate access to information. A certain global consciousness and a "global citizens' agenda" is likely to appear; through strengthened communication and shared information and values, citizens will realize that they belong to a single human community in a highly interconnected world.

So how does heritage education respond to these trends? What kind of knowledge and skills are required nowadays from heritage professionals, in order to respond to the new context of the contemporary world and to the current needs of heritage sites?

Besides the specific knowledge of certain academic and professional fields, heritage experts will need, above all, the ability to understand and manage heritage sites as processes, not objects, to see the 'big picture' and apply an integrated landscape approach, to accept change and manage it in a sustainable way. For this purpose, certain knowledge and skills will be of utmost importance:

- cross-sectorial knowledge with focus on managerial skills, in order to respond to the greater complexity characterizing heritage sites;
- the ability to build networks and alliances (part of an "international knowledge network"), to facilitate partnerships between stakeholders and to mediate between various interests;
- the ability to communicate (use ICT), above all with the communities that are directly and continuously in contact with the heritage sites, introducing people back in the picture;
- the ability to articulate the relevance that heritage sites have for communities and to develop sustainable models for income generation (part of which could be re-invested in heritage conservation and rehabilitation).

These ideas are in line with the latest UNESCO report on *Trends in Global Higher Education* (2009). According to this, Higher Education today is characterized by the so-called phenomenon of massification: more access to Higher Education than ever; more affluent societies; more than 1.5 billion people are between the ages of 10 and 25,

representing the largest-ever generation of adolescents (UN Population Fund, 2007). The internationalisation of educational institutions and the increased student mobility are the natural adaptations that occurred in the past decade in response to the demands of global knowledge society.

Recent developments in the higher education sector indicate several important trends.

New focus: Traditionally, the modern university is structured on three pillars: research, teaching and public service. Whereas research will remain an important action field for universities, teaching is now perceived as the major public purpose and activity of universities.

New skills: There is a general need to develop more versatile, all rounded graduates, experts who are skilled communicators, effective critical thinkers, and productive team members in diverse environments. They should have local knowledge, but at the same time be global citizens with global competencies. The knowledge economy requires generalists with leadership skills, who are adaptable, creative, and can give broad consideration for socio-economic advances (Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000). Because of that, the value of liberal education has been re-evaluated: broad interdisciplinary curriculum focused on creativity, critical thinking, cultural awareness, problem solving and communication skills.

New methods: Educational programmes gradually changed focus from "declarative" knowledge (books and lectures) to "functional" knowledge (knowing how to apply theory to practical situations), while learning goals moved from knowledge-centered to student-centered.

New interests: The Higher Education sector has experienced a so-called "vocationalisation". Professionally oriented programs and more practical areas of study (business administration) are preferred by students, while relevance to professional interests and objectives, particularly to employability has become a key consideration. The need for real world applications has determined a more practical orientation for higher education programmes.

However, fundamental flaws appear to exist in keeping up with these changes, and higher education institutions often fail to demonstrate adaptability and quick responsiveness to this new type of requirements on the labour market. A report recently issued by the McKinsey Centre for Government (2013) confirms the systemic errors in the education-to-employment pathway. Recognizing the shortage of jobs and the shortage of critical job skills as the two current crises in the world employment market, the report's findings indicate that this often occurs because employers, education providers and youth most often live in parallel universes and have very different understandings on the skills and knowledge that are needed. The fundamental error lies in a failure to communicate and to engage all these three stakeholders in the process of curricular planning. Two common characteristics of all successful educational programmes were recognized: in all of them consultation between education provides and employers occurred (in the development of curricula

and teaching); they were all based on intense and continuous work with students from the beginning of their studies, the employers committing to hire them after graduation.

Translated in the context of heritage education or heritage tourism, an ideal model would require more dialogue and engagement with public and private organizations directly involved in the management of heritage sites or heritage tourism, respectively. At the level of curriculum development, this implies the need for study programmes that are tailored to develop very specific skills needed in the field and expected from potential employers. It is important not only to promote a new understanding of heritage, but also to realistically identify, in consultation with heritage/tourism practitioners and potential employers, the critical skills that students need and how these could be delivered (the trend: practical, hands-on learning is considered the most effective approach; however, only a very low percentage of graduates declare that this is the learning approach they experienced).

Youth unemployment: a critical issue

Another critical issue that confronts all societies around the world is youth unemployment. In Greece, Spain and South Africa, more than half of young people are unemployed. The Middle East and Northern Africa have one of the highest unemployment rates in the world: 25 %. The International Labour Organisation estimates that 75 million young people are unemployed, 4 million more are unemployed today than in 2007, and more than 6 million have given up looking for a job. And, according to the most recent global employment trends, the pressure added in the future by the present adolescent generation will continue to increase.

Creating employment opportunities in the heritage field relies very much on collaboration with the public sector which is, in many cases, in charge of the site management. The tourism sector, and the heritage tourism sector in particular, opens, on the other hand, a wide range of possible partnerships with the private sector. In this sense, universities should respond not only with study programmes relevant for the practical field and future employers, but also perhaps with more initiatives to integrate entrepreneurship and innovation into heritage curricula: leadership, how to turn ideas into action. In a report on the Entrepreneurship Education Workstream (2011), the World Economic Forum recognizes the crucial role that education has for economic development and societal change, and emphasizes the need of the education systems to change and start focusing on 21st century skills and to encourage entrepreneurship. At the university level, entrepreneurship should be more experiential, hands-on and action-oriented.

New Skills for New Jobs: Action Now (A Report by the Expert Group on New Skills for New Jobs prepared for the European Commission, February 2010) also recognises the importance of bringing the world of education, training and work closer together. Universities need to be more open to interactions with the world of business and work, and ensure that graduates have the right set of skills, enabling a better match between

supply and demand on the labour market.

Young people are the key element in many problems (and solutions!) related to World Heritage Sites. Significant social threats that increasingly affect heritage sites (especially cultural landscapes) are related to the youth.

- Rural exodus: Due to a wide range of reasons, but mostly because of the lack of job opportunities and public services, the young generation responds to the attractiveness of the cities and is leaving the rural areas at alarming rates. As a result, the communities in these areas are growing older, and are growing fewer. With no young population left, these landscapes are gradually disappearing. Soon enough, they will vanish completely. Not only the physical fabric is threatened with decay, but in the absence of an intergenerational transmission of knowledge, valuable traditions and knowledge will die. In Timbuktu, for example, the local communities traditionally worked together to refresh the surfaces of the buildings, but now the young generation has no interest to learn and do the traditional craftsmanship anymore. The disappearance of this social binding tradition, in which the young used to play an important part, has left many buildings in neglect and abandonment.
- Dramatic demographic changes affect even for more popular sites: historic cities are no longer an attractive living space for the youth (rent prices, uniformity of employment offer, social fabric: increasingly old population, occasional inhabitants, tourists). Each day, more than 60,000 people visit Venice - more than the entire population of the city. Venice's population has been declining for years, from 174,000 in 1951 to a mere of 59,992 inhabitants now. A quarter of those residents are over 64 and the city's registry office has warned that Venice could be devoid of full-time, native-born inhabitants by the year 2030. "People leave because life is becoming impossible. All the normal shops are turning into stores selling souvenirs like Venetian masks and Murano glass. It's no good for the locals - you can't eat glass."

Conclusion

Tourism represents the link between heritage sites and economic development. If sustainably managed, it could open many avenues for development and could stimulate the social regeneration of threatened sites. Such an example of regeneration through tourism is the Vega Archipelago, Norway. Located in a very remote and inhospitable area, this cultural landscapes is defined by the relationship between people, the environment and the eider ducks (people build small houses to accommodate the semi-domesticated ducks; after the birds have left the nests with their chicks, people gather the eider down that is left behind, process it using traditional methods and produce duvets. The site was almost entirely deserted and threatened with disappearance, but the World Heritage nomination and its development as a sustainable tourism destination have brought back the population,

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18

including the youth.

Young people will undoubtedly continue to play a central role in all scenarios for development, both positive and negative. Education (through the relevant skills and knowledge it provides) and tourism (through its potential to promote and valorise heritage assets) will be crucial partners in designing successful development models for heritage sites, which would indirectly contribute to their perpetuation. It would be of utmost importance to identify the indicators that could attract young people back to World Heritage Sites and to examine how they could be reached through strategic alliances between higher education and the tourism sector, with the support of other public and private actors. Such alliances would not only ensure the engagement of young people, but would also give them the right skills, the opportunity and the confidence to valorise heritage assets.