

ARCHAEOLOGY IN RISK SOCIETY



Chris Witmore and I have a paper in “Unquiet Pasts” – the new book from Ashgate edited by Stephanie Koerner and Ian Russell – [\[Link\]](#)

It is my latest presentation of the argument for a living past, a transitive past, tied now to a call for attention to matters of common and pressing human concern. In Stanford Strategy Studio we have been modeling foresight thinking and planning rooted in the Humanities – a long term historical (and necessarily archaeological) perspective. Key components of this have come through my recent posts on human-centered design [\[Link\]](#).

Here is an extract:

... Great voids in the antiquity of humankind came in the eighteenth century with the challenges to senses of history based upon religious teaching, biblical chronologies and Graeco-Roman historiography.

Archaeology has worked so successfully over two centuries to populate the past with sites and artifacts in a global time-space systematics of timelines and distribution maps rooted in universally applicable systems of classification and categorization. While this inventory of archaeological remains has become the foundation and instrument of the management of the past in ministries of culture and planning departments the world over, it has nevertheless, indeed necessarily come with a growing awareness of threats both to the remains of the past and to the possibility of creating any kind of meaningful knowledge of what happened in history, if access to sources is overly restricted, if contextual information is lost or never acquired.

Here we experience a new kind of threat or risk to the past itself as well as to the potentiality and richness of pasts in the future, based upon new modern dynamics of presence (of the remains of the past) and absence (of past lives themselves as well as future memories and histories). The past is conspicuously not a datum, but subject to contemporary interests and concerns, infused now with the interests of knowledge and also with erosive threatening interests. Just as the natural

environment is now seen as a thoroughly socialized and institutionalized habitat, a hybrid that includes threats, culpability, and responsibility on the part of humanity to care and curate, so too the past is a matter of concern, a matter of foresight, another risk environment affecting whole populations' needs and desires for history, heritage, memory. The paradox or contradiction is that the control that knowledge affords, for example, in managing the impact of development or of the trade in illicit antiquities on the possibility of a past in the future, comes at the cost of a sense of security. It is not just that the past is threatened; senses of personal and community identity are threatened. ...



Folk singers at the Durham Miners' Gala UK 2010 – celebrating industrial and regional heritage [Link]