

HERITAGE — MAKING FUTURES



A critical-heritage complement to the Janus Maneuver —
[Link]

More notes on futures studies. A second component to the same conclusion: that working with the past is a way of making futures.

Convergence – the “Janus Maneuver” and heritage futures

In a recent post I made the case for “The Janus Maneuver” [Link] – that an archaeology of design supplies futures studies with a worked-out philosophy of time, materiality and knowledge. Janus, Roman god, performed hindsight and foresight at the threshold of pasts and futures – the Janus Maneuver; archaeologists work with remains in the actuality of now, with a care for what is to become of what was. Over the past two decades a strand of archaeology and heritage studies has been arriving, by a different road, at a closely related conclusion: that heritage management is not fundamentally about the past at all, but about the future. To care for what remains, to decide what to keep and what to let go, to conserve, restore, list, archive or rebuild, is always to act on behalf of some imagined future and some future public. Heritage, in a phrase that now organises a whole research field, is a *future-making practice*.

This is a strong complement. Where the design-foresight argument enters futures studies from the front door – through strategy, scenarios and prototypes – the critical-heritage argument arrives from within the management of the past by the back door, taking preservation to be a theory of the future. Two disciplinary fields, two directions, one itinerary.

There is a genealogical point worth making at the outset, regarding the way concepts and practices propagate in academic and professional fields (for archaeology, as explored in *Archaeology in the Making*, 2013) [Link]. The leading figure in the heritage-futures field, Cornelius Holtorf, now Professor of Archaeology and holder of the UNESCO Chair on Heritage Futures at Linnaeus University, took his doctorate at University of Wales Lampeter in 1998. We were both part of a great experiment – building a new kind of archaeology department centered on critical thinking about pasts-in-the-present, and I was Cornelius’s supervisor. His pioneering doctoral dissertation, *Monumental Past*, traced the long “life-histories” of megalithic monuments in north-east Germany – the ways prehistoric tombs were reused, reinterpreted and re-presented across millennia (Holtorf 1998). It was already an argument about the past as something continuously remade in successive presents; the step to future orientation was a short one.



haecceity — it happened here, and let me tell you something ...

Constructing senses of place. Hadrian's Wall, border of the Roman empire, 2nd Century CE, Northumberland UK. The whole landscape was purchased by local Town Clerk and landowner John Clayton in the nineteenth century and transformed into a heritage monument. Concern over this process of heritage place-making was the inspiration for my 2013 book (updated 2019) – *Heritage – Performance – Design: Let me tell you about Hadrian's Wall* [Link].

From the past as cultural property to heritage as process

The groundwork was laid by the critical turn in heritage studies, which displaced the commonsense view of heritage as a set of valuable old things to be protected – cultural property

David Harvey's "Heritage pasts and heritage presents" (2001) argued that heritage is not a thing but a *process*, present in every period and not the invention of the modern conservation movement, and called for a longer and more reflexive historical scope for heritage studies. Laurajane Smith's *Uses of Heritage* (2006) pressed the point into a now-canonical thesis: heritage is "not a thing" but a *cultural and social process* of meaning-making in the present, and the field had been captured by an "Authorised Heritage Discourse" that privileges the old, grand, monumental and expert-certified, naturalising particular narratives of nation, class and science. The Association of Critical Heritage Studies, founded at Gothenburg in 2012, turned this into a programme, its manifesto declaring that heritage studies needed to be "rebuilt from the ground up," democratised against the Authorised Heritage Discourse and opened to marginalised and non-Western practices (Association of

Critical Heritage Studies 2012).

If heritage is a process enacted in the present, the question of *for what, and for whom* follows immediately – and that question is about the future. Rodney Harrison's *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (2013) drew the consequence, proposing a “dialogical” model of heritage that connects it to pressing social, economic and environmental concerns and asking, in a chapter title that names the whole problem, for “a future for the past.” The pivot from object to process had quietly become a pivot from past to future.



Computation, archives and records, statistical summaries, management, business, governance. IBM punched-card machine. Computer History Museum, Mountain View, California. Contemporary heritage – double-sided origin of AI agents.

Heritage as future-making: the Heritage Futures program

The explicit move was made by the *Heritage Futures* research programme, a large, AHRC-funded, interdisciplinary collaboration whose findings appear in the open-access monograph *Heritage Futures: Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural*

Heritage Practices (Harrison et al. 2020). Its premise is that conservation and preservation practices, natural and cultural, are best understood as techniques for *assembling and resourcing futures*, and it compares them across four cross-cutting themes – **diversity, transformation, profusion, and uncertainty**. Heritage, on this account, is one of the principal ways modern societies attempt to build and provision the worlds to come; the museum store, the seed bank, the archive and the nuclear repository are all, in their different idioms, future-making machines. Sharon Macdonald’s parallel work on memory, identity and “difficult heritage” anchors much of the program’s account of how societies negotiate contested pasts on behalf of the future (Macdonald 2013).













Miners' Gala, Durham, UK. The annual "Big Meeting" of often 200000 people in memory of the coal mining industry that was dismantled in the wake of class conflict in the 1970s and 80s.

Two strands of the programme bear especially on our argument. Caitlin DeSilvey's *Curated Decay* (2017) confronts the preservation paradigm at its most basic by asking what happens when we stop trying to arrest change. Through cases of "curated ruination," she develops a notion of *palliative curation* in which decay and loss are not simply failure but can be productive of meaning – a heritage practice that works *with* transformation rather than against it. DeSilvey and Harrison (2020) generalise this into a rethinking of "endangerment": rather than treating loss as the thing heritage exists to prevent, they ask what social and cultural work is done by anticipating, managing and sometimes accepting it. Tellingly, those papers were first given at the Second International Conference on Anticipation in London

in 2017 – the heritage-futures researchers meeting the anticipation-studies community on shared ground, the very ground where Riel Miller’s futures literacy also stands (Miller 2018).

Holtorf, resilience and deep-time futures

Cornelius has made the future-orientation of heritage his central theme, and pressed it furthest. Against what he calls the loss-aversion built into conventional conservation – the reflex, in Kahneman’s behavioural-economics sense, to weight any loss far more heavily than an equivalent gain – Holtorf argues for *averting loss aversion*: appreciating heritage objects as things persistently transformed in ongoing processes of change, growth and creation rather than as fragile originals to be frozen (Holtorf 2015). In “Embracing change” (2018) he reframes heritage as a contributor to *cultural resilience*: its value lies less in the specific fabric preserved than in its capacity to help communities absorb disturbance and adapt – to change well – for the future. The edited volume *Cultural Heritage and the Future* (Holtorf and Högberg 2021) gathers the international case for this position, and the UNESCO Chair on Heritage Futures, established at Linnaeus University in 2017, institutionalises it – significantly, under the same UNESCO roof that houses Miller’s futures-literacy programme.

The most literal expression of heritage-as-future is Holtorf and Högberg’s work on the long-term communication of nuclear waste (Holtorf and Högberg 2014). Safe geological disposal requires transmitting knowledge, warning and memory across tens of thousands of years – time spans for which no record has ever demonstrably survived. Treating a repository as *living heritage* rather than a sealed message reframes the problem: not how to freeze a warning for the deep future, but how to keep meaning alive through continuous re-interpretation, the way heritage always has. Here the archaeology of the very ancient and the design of the very distant future meet – hindsight and foresight as a single operation, at the scale of the *longue durée*.

The convergence, and the complement

Set beside “The Janus Maneuver,” the heritage-futures literature does three things.

First, it corroborates. The central claim of the design-foresight argument – that working with the past is a way of making futures, and that the preservationist and

predictive paradigms (freeze the past; forecast the future) should give way to an active crafting of plural futures from what remains – turns out to be the independent conclusion of a substantial body of heritage scholarship. DeSilvey's transformation-over-stasis, Holtorf's change-over-loss-aversion, and Harrison's assembling-of-futures are, in heritage idiom, the same refusal of the freeze that the Janus argument makes in the idiom of foresight. The position is not idiosyncratic; a whole field has been building it.





Desks that belonged to William Armstrong, Lord Armstrong, in his house at Cragside, Northumberland UK. He remains celebrated as an innovator and philanthropist – tech and business “magician of the north”. On the desks – four slaves carrying a golden cage, letter-writing materials, an artillery piece, scientific instruments and specimen slides. Armstrong was the first global arms dealer who normalized the practice of selling weapons to all comers, was national leader of employer resistance to the labor movement throughout his life, and a beneficiary of imperial naval expansion who profited from every colonial war of the late nineteenth century. His support for tech innovation and philanthropy were real and funded by

activities whose human costs were borne by ordinary people – industrial workers, strikers, conscripts, colonial subjects.

Second, it extends the reach. The two literatures divide the labor helpfully. Heritage futures concentrates on institutions of conservation and memory and on the management of loss, decay and transformation – the care of what remains. The archaeology-of-design strand concentrates on strategy, innovation and organisational change – the design of what comes. Together they span the arc of the Janus Maneuver: looking back to care, looking forward to make, with the same gesture. Critical heritage supplies the missing institutional and ethical hinterland – questions of whose past, whose future, what may be let go – that a foresight practice needs and rarely has; design foresight supplies the generative, propositional, prototyping orientation that heritage practice, trained on protection, can lack.

Third, it sharpens a shared politics. Both literatures insist that futures are plural and contested – Smith’s critique of the Authorised Heritage Discourse and the critical-heritage demand to democratise the past run exactly parallel to the warning, in futures studies, against *colonising* the future on behalf of the few (Sardar 1993). To ask “whose heritage?” and to ask “whose future?” is to ask the same question.

Hindsight, foresight, and future worlding

Heritage is a future-making practice. That sentence, now a commonplace in critical heritage studies, is the same proposition the Janus Maneuver reaches from the side of design and foresight: that hindsight and foresight are one movement, and that the material remains of the past are the resource from which futures are crafted. The convergence is striking precisely because the two literatures set out from opposite ends – one from the management of loss, the other from the design of innovation – and meet in the middle. That a leading architect of the heritage-futures field served his apprenticeship in an archaeology that already refused to separate past from present only underlines the point. An archaeological sensibility, carried through to its conclusion, does not choose between the past and the future. It holds them together, and works the threshold between.





"Costumed engagers". Nineteenth-century domestic servitude and industrial drudgery celebrated at Beamish – the Living Museum of the North, Durham, UK.