4. Cultural heritage practices

Purpose
This tentative input to the cultural heritage field aims at catching up and giving room to discussions of cultural heritage as a field for social operative functions, based in a “cultural heritage sector” but geared towards working methods and needs that cross into other sectors and are in other ways comprehensive.

Problems/possibilities of heritage practices in the social context

What is the real function of the cultural heritage sector in a society where the more and more complex and diversified nature of cultural heritage cannot easily be handled according to traditional practice and where the assessment of cultural heritage is not exclusively a question for heritage professionals?

In today's social development – both locally and globally – the traditional view of cultural heritage as material historical testimony is being challenged. Earlier, the purpose can simply be said to have been to preserve a supposedly objective cultural heritage for posterity. Today, cultural heritage is instead understood as a living dynamic phenomenon and the “preservation procedure” often means change or development based on certain historical interpretations and points of view.

The instrumental qualities of heritage are increasingly used broadly outside the traditional cultural heritage profession, as in the exercise of power, local development, tourism and other trades, including individual meaning-making and local self-assertion.

One way of looking at the complexity and problems in relation to how organizations, institutions, authorities and others within the area of natural and cultural heritage manage to handle this field can be illustrated by the figure above. Principally, natural and cultural heritage practices related to “typical” cultural heritage objects can be understood in terms of different social systems or contexts, which are exemplified by the boxes in the figure. Each box has its strategies, regulations,
organization forms, occupational groups and so on which in many situations independently take decisions and measures within their own field which can have positive or negative effects in the other boxes. At the same time all these sub-systems depend on what attitude society as a whole takes toward preservation, for example, and how such concepts are formed and reformed through socio-cultural processes. The figure is, however, fragmentary in two dimensions and can be made more complete by adding a third with the inclusion of a scale shift from individual to global level in each box. Such a complex system measures the capability of the natural and cultural heritage field to identify, examine, preserve, make accessible and develop the natural and cultural heritage. This system is continually integrated in a wider perspective with co-operating and competitive systems, where the production results of the field become resources or obstacles to the practices of these systems.

The attitude toward culture-historical evaluation and how it is carried out are of central importance to the cultural heritage practitioner on a general level and have also been discussed continually since the mid 19th century. Alois Riegl, general conservator in Vienna at the turn of the century 1900, discussed various value categories, but also brought up the importance of a social, artistic/aesthetic, contemporary, normative understanding – a factor even today in identifying “cultural heritage.” Such understanding gives an idea of how the choice of artefacts is finally made, but also, and perhaps most importantly, how preservation, in the form of conservation, restoration, reconstruction and development, is really done.

| Is the concrete preservation practice a historically/scientifically safeguarded activity or a socially conditioned design question based on historical interpretation and intentional needs and possibilities? |

In conservation and restoration practice, knowledge and abilities are combined from several different subject areas: cultural and social science methods are used for insight into the history, context and significance of the artefact; natural scientific methods for analysing and solving problems related to material and degradation; artistic and culture-historical understanding is developed in order to avoid making aesthetic mistakes and historical misinterpretations; and finally included is the specific craftsmanship of the conservator/restorer in doing his/her work.

Gothenburg and western Sweden have several necessary requirements to develop Conservation Science to a profile of international significance, through co-operation between various departments at the University of Gothenburg and other actors in the vicinity. Initially, the work could be focused on certain groups of material, such as stone, textile and colour-pigment, and archaeological. The concept of reconstruction has a different meaning to different groups; to some it suggests pastiche, falsification or an unnecessary return to a bygone historical form; to others it can be a necessary method to reach historical understanding, or to create something of high quality. An emphasis on the concept of reconstruction can mean a necessary exploration of the past to get knowledge and ideas to further develop an occurrence, that is, to make us conscious of our cultural heritage (our own tradition) as a basis for our own creative capacity of expression.

**Inputs to the input**
Starting-points for discussions of these perspectives on the cultural heritage field can be, for example:
- Cultural environment as a palimpsest – is the view of cultural heritage, authenticity, reconstruction and renewal as inter-woven to a whole an impossible utopia for social planning, building and administration?
• How is future social significance influenced by politically-controlled instrumental needs, by increased historical usage outside the institutions, by a need for individual meaningmaking, and so on?
• Can a global perspective on an adjustment activity, where industries become industry memories which become visiting sites of the tourist industry, be seen as a fourth phase of industrialization? What significance do the following things have: the handicraft of industrial work, culture-historical value, authenticity, identity, local mobilization, frequented visiting sites, place branding and industrial establishments in the third world?
• Can a reconstruction of a given cultural heritage be seen as a phase of artistic presentation, as a historical-scientific method, as an upholding of the quality of material making and execution?
• Can natural scientific cutting-edge research be joined with cultural-scientific insight and artistic understanding in order to preserve artefacts? What does “preservation” mean in relation to selection, evaluation and interpretation?

But several more themes are possible! They can be formulated on May 20 – 21 at the kick-off conference, but also in the autumn at the workshops that will take place within the Cultural Heritage Seminar.