Heritage Studies: unfolding complexities and knowledge practices

Tim Winter, Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney

This paper discusses the current state of heritage studies and conservation as both fields of academic research and professional practice.

At present, in both teaching and research, ‘heritage studies’ is fragmented across a number of academic disciplines. Each approach heritage with vastly different methodologies, concepts and knowledge practices, meaning that anthropology, architecture, archaeology, ethnomusicology, history, materials conservation, and so on each claim heritage as their own. Although this fragmentation facilitates a pluralist definition of heritage, it does, however, mean that discussions are subdivided into a number of specialist, sector specific disciplines. Not surprisingly, there is often very little attempt to consolidate or reach across boundaries. By way of a parallel, as the professional sector of conservation of cultural heritage has evolved and expanded, so too have the social and political complexities that envelope the field.

This presentation argues that over the coming decades the greatest challenges and threats to cultural heritage will be social in nature, and that the conceptualization and practice of heritage conservation, in its current form, is inadequately equipped to address and respond to such a future. To address such themes, the paper explores a number of questions, including: What is the relationship between ‘heritage’ and ‘conservation’ studies? How should higher education courses in these areas inform professional practice? What knowledge practices can most effectively overcome the culture/nature binary, which continues to define heritage conservation? What is the role of interpretative, critical theory in fields of conservation rooted in positivist and/or scientistic traditions? Given the ever-present legacy of Euro-centric frameworks and models in international conservation policy, how can these be most appropriately challenged or addressed? And how might we best attempt a de-fragmentation of heritage knowledge in the face of highly challenging futures?

Tim Winter is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney. He recently edited the Routledge Handbook of Heritage in Asia (2012). His other books include Post-conflict Heritage, Postcolonial Tourism; Culture, Politics and Development at Angkor, Asia on Tour: exploring the rise of Asian Tourism and Expressions of Cambodia: the Politics of Tradition, Identity and Change. Tim has consulted for the World Bank and World Monuments Fund and held Visiting Scholar positions at Cambridge University and Getty Conservation Institute.