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EDITORIAL

Heritage, urban regeneration and place-making

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The focus of this special issue is upon how urban heritage is used as a mechanism to achieve urban regeneration, very broadly conceived. Because heritage can serve many purposes, it is often called upon to do so. The process of shaping heritage is undertaken consciously or unconsciously by many different agencies, including urban planners, managers and political decision makers. Heritage, as the contemporary use of imagined pasts, is thus mobilized for a wide variety of present purposes and public policy goals (Pendlebury 2014). One of the most frequent overt mobilizations of heritage that has developed over recent decades is its use as a catalyst in urban regeneration. The term ‘regeneration’ is often used as a near synonym for economic development. This is an easy trap to fall into in a world where capital accumulation overrides most processes in most places but, as will be returned to below, ignores those circumstances where there are different motivations and stimulations for changing place through a process of regeneration.

The link between heritage as a consumable experience and urban regeneration as an economic development activity is potentially attractive, widely exploited, can be assumed to be self-evidently symbiotic but conceals the different motivations and aspirations of different stakeholders (Pendlebury 2002). The instrumental use of heritage in regeneration is a global phenomenon, often linked into both strategies seeking to develop so-called cultural industries and a process of ‘place-making’, a term variously used by urban designers in establishing attractive physical locales as part of the backdrop of successful social space and, more critically, to be synonymous with place-branding (Porfyriou and Sepe 2017). Thus some policy of conservation is near-world-wide and indeed the utilization of heritage in processes of regeneration is near-world-wide. However, the specific dynamics and articulations of these processes vary widely according to national and local institutional frameworks and how effective these frameworks are in regulating and otherwise influencing practice. Furthermore, such policies are developed within very different economic and political contexts. For example, Europe and China are, broadly speaking, polar examples of the rate of urban change. In Europe the pace of urban change, in part due to heritage designation, is often very slow. In China, by contrast, rapid economic and demographic growth has made urban change an astonishingly rapid process, with the risk of heritage erasure. Ashworth (1997) describes the evolution of uses of the past in urban planning starting with a preservation paradigm (sustaining historic monuments), through conservation (managing urban...
change) to a heritage paradigm (a further shift from object to process, outcome and utility). In Europe this represents a century and a half of evolution, whereas the tempo of change in China seems likely to shorten this process to less than a generation. Linked to this, the use of heritage for economic development and wealth creation is particularly strong in China, often in relation to tourism, as part of a wider strategy of seeking culture as a key economic commodity. The local state is usually a key actor in development processes and has a major impact on the nature of the project executed. Outcomes vary enormously from sensitive conservation following international benchmarks of good practice to removal and reconstruction.

This special issue encompasses papers from China, the US, Europe and Turkey. Further to the broad focus upon regeneration, three of the papers also touch upon colonial heritage and its importance in culture or market led regeneration projects, most directly in the papers on Ireland and Wuhan, China, and more fleetingly in the paper on Malta. The Irish case presents a more overt colonial story than is common in much of Europe, whereas the Hankow concession area of European development in Wuhan represents a particular type of settlement found in a number of Chinese ports, of colonial European concession areas developed in the middle of the nineteenth century. The most well-known example is Shanghai and specifically the area of the Bund (Taylor 2002). These treaty port areas were established in China after the First Opium War, shaped with remarkable semi-colonial characteristics and imprinted with controversial connotations. How to reinterpret and promulgate the cultural significance of the Bund, and by extension of all treaty ports heritage sites, remains a sensitive topic in contemporary redevelopments. The rebirth of the Shanghai Bund shows that the Chinese attitude towards semi-colonial heritage had changed from masking it to making use of it by turning it into an object of consumption to bolster the city image (Yu 2017).

In Hankow, Wuhan, on the River Yangtze in central China, concessions were developed by the British, French, Russian, German and Japanese and these areas remained fashionable into the mid-part of the twentieth century. Cheng, Yu and Li describe the history of the area before bringing the story forward to the 1980s when rapid economic growth and redevelopment pressures grew alongside the beginnings of a comprehensive approach to identify historic value, with related conservation-planning initiatives. Overall, Cheng et al. are less than positive in their conclusions in the planning of the area, both in terms of sustaining historic value and in terms of achieving regeneration objectives. The German and Japanese areas were weakly protected and have been drastically transformed and the concession areas are now largely encircled by high-rise apartment blocks, with a drastic impact on their urban context. Within the remaining concession areas large-scale demolition has been avoided, but residents have been displaced wholesale in some places and regeneration plans have often not been successful and have been delayed.

In the next paper, Xie and Heath consider the case of Pingjiang Street in the historic city of Suzhou, approximately 100 km west of Shanghai. After considering the development of conservation practice in China they consider the historical development of the Pingjiang Street area. Following a series of plans, the area has undergone a process of conservation and regeneration over the last 20 or so years. Efforts have been made to adaptively reuse the historic buildings, maintaining the area’s morphology, whilst fulfilling improvements for modern living. The regeneration of the area has received many accolades, which often highlight the tourist potential of the area. On balance, Xie and Heath consider the revitalization
of the area broadly a success and stress the participation of residents, with many staying in the area.

The link between heritage structures and their adaptive reuse for creative industry activity is raised in Kapp’s paper. This confronts two issues that are very important in China but here are considered in the context of the US. The first is the role of government. Can governments at various levels create these desirable situations of the reuse of old industrial buildings and regeneration of industrial areas, for 'creative activities'? As he describes, many of the well-known cases in the US and around the world occurred without government intervention and sometimes in spite of governments. The whole essence of the creative societies discussed here depends upon a certain perceived individual freedom from regulation and thus government. Yet governments in some instances have taken initiatives to encourage or, on occasion, suppress such developments. There is a central paradox or at least a dilemma here that can be resolved only at the level of local circumstance. Second, is there a conflict between the preservation of structures and their redevelopment for these new creative enterprises?

The paper by Ashworth and Tunbridge discusses the regeneration of the area of the historic gate into Valetta, Malta, a World Heritage Site. The area was damaged by bombing in World War II and has remained only partly redeveloped until very recently, reflecting some of the complexities and sensitivities of this part of the city. They describe a complex regeneration process that includes elements of conservation, reconstruction, removal and new creation. Equally complex is the question of who the beneficiaries of this regeneration might be. In part there is the to be expected economic development motivations linked to tourist development or, in the case of Malta, a desire to shift to some degree from beach-based tourism to more of a cultural offer. Equally, however, potential beneficiaries include residents and, more broadly, a process of nation-building.

In Ireland, as elsewhere, the economic utility of heritage is often foregrounded. However, the political role of heritage is more complex than in many other Western European countries, where Ireland’s history as a British colony creates a post-colonial discourse. Parkinson, Scott and Redmond’s paper explores these issues in relation to three small towns in Ireland and how attitudes towards colonial legacies influence the role of heritage in place-making processes. They describe a situation where heritage associated with the British evokes ambivalent and shifting responses, albeit the general direction of travel has been one of increasing acceptance of the positive value of colonial architectural legacies. Heritage professionals might be in the vanguard of this shift but local collected memories are of equal importance.

This reinforces the point that whilst there is a strong correlation between conservation, regeneration, place-making and economic development, other motivations might be in play. Akkar Ercan’s paper takes a long view over the creation and subsequent evolution of a park in Ankara, Turkey, and shows how regeneration interventions maybe deeply political. She focuses on four historical moments, from foundation as a symbol of modernity in the new Turkish secular state, through a focus on amusement and entertainment to a more recent regeneration aimed at a conservative, less secular and lower-income demographic.

Each intervention has been top down and taken a very particular and partial view of heritage value and place-identity. The regeneration of heritage has been used in a non-inclusive way to manipulate the park’s identity.
This special issue was initiated by the current editors but also by Greg Ashworth, who very sadly passed away in 2016. Greg made comment on drafts of a number of the papers and some of the words in this introduction are his. We worked with Greg on this and other things in recent years and always found him to be a stimulating colleague and always ready to shake us up! Greg was one of the key figures in the founding of something called ‘heritage studies’ and we encourage readers to seek out the full tribute paid to him by John Tunbridge (2017) as well, of course, to read his works. We would like to dedicate this issue to his memory.

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**References**


