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## **The role of interpretation at the borderline between heritage declarations and reality**

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### **Abstract**

Heritage is unquestionably recognised as a treasure of society. It is the mark of history, nature and human beings. Its importance and social value is emphasised in conventions that have undeniable political implications. But, are these conventions really alive? Where is the crossover between heritage declarations and reality and what limitations do European citizens face? What lies behind the conscious process of using heritage and what role should heritage interpretation play in all of this? Let us investigate some of these borderlines and see what we can do.

### **Key words**

interpretation, heritage, history, convention, motivation

**“Everything should be taught through its causes.”**

J. A. Komenský (2004:69)

Our world is full of stories. Stories we can touch, we can feel, we can believe or not, fairy tales, detective stories or comedies etc. These stories are making our life, our personal and global history. History of nature and human beings, history we can learn from, history which can teach us if we are able and willing to hear and understand. If not, these (hi)STORIES change only to forgotten history. We can say that knowledge is the key word in this process. TO KNOW is recognised as one of the biggest values of human society today, even though sometimes it is replaced by the term information. But if I have some information, do I really know? And if I know, am I willing to deal with this knowledge? Am I willing or able to strike an attitude to what I know? Do I feel its importance and value or is it just another word for me? How does this knowledge influence my life? And is it possible for me to influence this knowledge back? Or to change it? Because the information or knowledge only works if I feel about it in this active way. This fact is extremely important in the field of cultural and natural heritage interpretation. Usually, this is the deciding moment, the moment when people decide to protect, share and care about a heritage site or not. So simple, so difficult.

71 years ago, UNESCO was established as a reaction to human and cultural disasters which happened through WWII (Constitution of the UNESCO 2014:6). Among the main ideas concerning the field of world heritage, declared more than twenty years later in the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* 1972, was not only to

protect heritage sites from other war damages in the future, but also to build “*an effective system of collective protection of the cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value, organised on a permanent basis and in accordance with modern scientific methods*” (Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage 1972:1). This decision goes hand in hand with public education about the value of cultural and natural heritage, making this heritage “hands-on”, as well as with making local communities interested in preserving and keeping these sites alive as a part of their history and of their everyday life again.

It seems to be a general tendency in Europe now that heritage sites are understood and preserved as a treasure, as an integral part of local communities used in a tourist industry with obvious economic value. But there was really hard work leading to this feeling of heritage as a common part of our lives. To give it its social value and appropriate importance, it was essential to define the basic terms and to formulate the most important rules of protection and care about cultural and natural heritage, to be clear what we are speaking about. The aim was to incite international discussion to make heritage protection a question of prestige of each participating state as a first step for political negotiations leading to understanding of well-protected heritage as an important sign of advanced state, leading to international systematic cooperation on preserving the heritage treasures.

To help this process, UNESCO - with other organisations and movements - develop basic and many additional strategic documents and conventions. We all know or should know or have heard about these conventions, but do we really know what is written there? Do we really feel it as our story? Do we need them as a part of our interpretation work? Are they still useful and alive? Where is the borderline between the state where we feel these conventions just as written words, and the point where we recognise them as a living functional system for helping people to know the story of heritage sites? Working with heritage in Europe, we usually feel these conventions as a shadow behind our work, as something which is “naturally” there and we do not need to care about, something what is not directly necessary for our daily work now, when we, as European society, recognise heritage sites as places preserved and used “self-evidently”. It would be a pity not to feel the power of words, intention and support of these documents and let it disappear in the common care of the heritage site. Let us try to cross our own borderlines between formality and internal use of these conventions. Let us try to exemplify it by the conventions or documents accepted quite recently.

For this brief analysis, I have chosen three different types of documents to search if and where are they matching interpretative practice. These conventions are: *The Kyoto Vision* accepted on the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the World Heritage Convention in 2012, the final report of *Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe* published in 2015, a project funded by the EU Culture Programme recognising benefits of cultural heritage and presenting policy recommendations for tapping into heritage’s full potential, and the newest one adopted in spring 2017, the legal basis for the 2018 - *European Year of Cultural Heritage* as a concrete possibility of arrangement of how to bring heritage to the common life of European citizens. All these documents have arisen at different occasions, are focused on slightly different details of heritage protection and popularisation, but were adopted with the same intention: to point out the importance of heritage in our lives.

The point of view of each of these conventions is defined by the purpose and expected use of them. *The Kyoto Vision* refers to the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage 1972* as the very first step to protection and popularisation of heritage; it refers to the values set up by the convention and declares the continuity of these values (*The Kyoto Vision 2012:1*). *Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe* is a very detailed report on the European heritage situation and the possibilities of its sensitive and effective use as well as protection. Its goal was to collect and analyse existing and accessible evidence-based research and case studies regarding the economic, social, cultural, and environmental impacts of cultural heritage, in order to assess the value of cultural heritage as well as to provide conclusive, both

qualitative and quantitative evidence of the heritage (CHCfE 2015:9). The “hottest” document, adopted just last week, is *2018 - European Year of Cultural Heritage*. It gives concrete tools to the European heritage practice, following concepts and strategies of previous conventions to lay stress on cooperation involving all stakeholders, including public authorities, the cultural heritage sector, private entities and civil society organisations, such as NGOs and organisations in the voluntary sector, to pursue an effective way of raising public awareness, disseminating information on good practices, promoting political debate, research and innovation and improving the collection and analysis of qualitative evidence and quantitative data, including statistics, on the social and economic impact of cultural heritage. All this at Union, national, regional and local levels to achieve greater synergy and a better use of resources (EYCH2018 2017:12).

By analysing these three documents it is possible to recognise four basic areas important to a successful process of interpretation. All of them should be present in this process, both naturally and consciously. As naturally as the care and knowledge of the heritage are usually present in European life. These four areas defining the successful and effective process of mediation and interpretation of cultural and natural heritage are:

- A. Perception of the importance of heritage care and protection;
- B. Setting up a functional system of heritage protection;
- C. Approach to the process of interpretation and the related educational activities;
- D. Internalisation of heritage values as a part of lifestyle.

These areas are clearly connected to the process of understanding as it is perceived by the modern pedagogy from Comenius to the constructivist theory. It is not possible to do anything without feeling its importance, recognising it as a part of a system that surrounds us. The possibility of getting to know the core and understanding of the thing then defines the acceptance of the matter in our lives. So, let us try to investigate where these documents meet the process of interpretation, where they stand in the conscious process of using heritage for both parties of the process – the public and heritage professionals. Each of these documents deals with these issues from a different perspective and with a different intensity. *The Kyoto Vision* shows these areas from the point of view of a general holistic approach. *Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe* report reflects these four areas by drawing a detailed picture of the present state of European heritage and arguments for possible concrete steps leading to improvement of European heritage protection, care and use. The *European Year of Cultural Heritage* gives a legal basis of particular interpretative tools and steps based on the premise that “*The ideals, principles and values embedded in Europe's cultural heritage constitute a shared source of remembrance, understanding, identity, dialogue, cohesion and creativity for Europe*” (EYCH2018 2017:4).

### **Perception of the importance of heritage care and protection**

Perception of the importance of heritage care and protection is the first step reflected in the process of interpretation. It is the *conditio sine qua non*. Intentional work with awareness of the importance of heritage not only helps to set up priorities in heritage care and protection but also has important educational meaning. Socially preferred values have obvious didactical meaning. Everything that our society recognises as common or important, the new generation rather feels as a natural part of life. This point of view is addressed in *The Kyoto Vision*: “*For forty years, the World Heritage Convention has embodied the global ideals and ethics of conservation. While continuing to emphasise the importance of protecting a selection of outstanding sites important for all of humankind, a holistic approach is necessary to include wider dimensions arising from new emerging challenges that threaten the foundation of our societies. The question is not only to save exceptional sites from destruction or neglect, but to demonstrate, through appropriate conservation and management, strategies and a development model based on the values of continuity*” (The Kyoto Vision 2012:4). The *Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe* project reflects this issue by saying that increasing recognition of the importance of cultural heritage is a prerequisite for evidenced-based policy making with regard to cultural heritage and affirms the

importance of cultural heritage as a strategic resource for a sustainable and peaceful Europe. European institutions should develop and implement an integrated policy approach to cultural investments over the coming years based on collected quantitative and qualitative data on the impact of cultural heritage on economy, society, culture, and environment as a sound basis for any future EU strategy, policy and action related to cultural heritage. Heritage is recognised here as a key component and contributor to the attractiveness of Europe's regions, cities, towns and rural areas (CHCfE 2015:10-19). The *European Year of Cultural Heritage* could be a great opportunity to start with making all these proclamations real, using heritage as a shared resource, to raise awareness of common history and values, and to reinforce a sense of belonging to a common European space (EYCH2018 2017:16). Concrete activities connected to this project can show real contribution of Europe's heritage to society and economy, through its direct and indirect economic potential, enhance social cohesion and generate long-term employment etc. (EYCH2018 2017:17-18). In the conscious interpretative/ educational work with visitors of heritage sites it is necessary to show and effectively use didactic arguments for this approach of perception of the importance of heritage care and protection and benefits for society as well as individuals to demonstrate why it is necessary for people to participate. Definition of terms, public debate about meaning and value of the heritage are also good tools for interpreters. They arouse interest and curiosity in people, so that it is easier to set heritage sites into social context and, therefore, also to protect these sites more easily.

### **Setting up a functional system of heritage protection**

Recognising the value of cultural and natural heritage is only the first step and the base of another logical step of setting up a functional system of heritage protection which determines its use for other purposes. *The Kyoto Vision* points to the fact that with 190 State Parties, the World Heritage Convention, adopted in 1972, is one of the most powerful tools for heritage conservation as a shared vision of the protection of cultural and natural heritage as an outstanding universal value, even though there is still lack of technical capacity and financial resources to implement the Convention. It is crucial to share experience, good practice and knowledge related to communities in support of world heritage and sustainable development, including capacity building at all levels as well as discussions on development of the agenda by engaging the international community - within all relevant regional and global forums, for an inclusive approach, considering environmental, cultural and socio-economic needs (The Kyoto Vision 2012:2). Careful collection of data for the build-up of this holistic approach to collecting, managing and interpreting both quantitative and qualitative data, which can demonstrate the impact of heritage on Europe's economy, society, culture, and environment, is addressed in the *Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe* project trying to identify, define and categorise heritage impact indicators (CHCfE 2015:32). Heritage is perceived there through research at three levels of analysis: macro, meso, and micro level. Macro level covers a review of theoretical literature on heritage impact as well as on both qualitative and quantitative indicators to measure this impact. The meso level entails an analysis of the research that has been done across the European Union demonstrating the wide-ranging impacts of cultural heritage at local, regional, national, and European levels. The micro level deals with case studies which provide real-life evidence that heritage has an impact in one or more of the four domains mentioned above: economic, social, cultural, and environmental. Such a holistic approach to impact assessment is intended to be essential to support the delivery of an integrated policy approach to heritage in the European Union and guarantee that the multiple benefits of cultural heritage are realised in practice (CHCfE 2015:13-14).

The *European Year of Cultural Heritage* promotes a wide range of activities based on innovative models of participatory governance and management of cultural heritage, involving all stakeholders, including public authorities, the cultural heritage sector, private entities and civil society organisations supported by EU. These activities should be built on debate, research and the exchange of good practices, on the quality of conservation, safeguarding, innovative reuse

and enhancement of heritage involving a people-centred, inclusive, forward-looking, more integrated, sustainable and cross-sector approach (EYCH2018 2017:18). The project counts on support of the development of specialised skills and improvement of knowledge management and knowledge transfer to strengthen the interaction between the heritage sector and other cultural and creative sectors (EYCH2018 2017:19). The building of open professional community as well as permanent discussion about rules and optimal care of heritage is not only reflected in heritage interpretation as a standard of perception of heritage sites by the public, but teaches the public to understand the needs of the heritage, teaches effectively how to help, or at least not to damage. It is another part of the conscious interpretative work with the public. Knowledge of the system can help interpreters to integrate methods of care and preservation in the process of interpretation. The system of heritage protection itself is here for interpreters to use cross-European connection, information, knowledge and human exchange as well as creation of partnership and mutual interdisciplinary projects helping the interpretation process to be more focused and more effective.

### **Approach to the process of interpretation and the related educational activities**

The connection between interpretation and direct educational work is elementary and obvious. When separated, they lose their meaning. Educational activities are a common part of the popularisation of heritage - activities making heritage understandable for the public - and they are expected by the public.

*The Kyoto Vision* acknowledges the significant contribution of the Convention to social cohesion, dialogue, tolerance, cultural diversity and peace and declares “*that a people-centred conservation of the world’s cultural and natural heritage is an opportunity to provide critical learning models for the pursuit of sustainable development and for ensuring a harmonious relationship between communities and their environment. The concept of heritage is fundamental to the logic of sustainable development as heritage results from the dynamic and continuous interaction between communities and their environment*” (The Kyoto Vision 2012:2). Education is also mentioned to be essential in connection with heritage in the *Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe* report speaking about education and lifelong learning as a tool for better understanding of history, feelings of civic pride and belonging, as well as cooperation and personal development (CHCfE 2015:30).

It is obvious that knowledge and understanding of heritage builds not only skills in the field of heritage itself and cognitive knowledge from history, art etc., but broadens horizons and helps to cultivate many other skills, including emotional growth, creativity or perceiving of the space. *Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe* tries to set up some measuring impact of heritage sites and possible interpretative and educational activities, which could serve as a base for other research usable not only to map the present state of educational activities but also to integrate it in the conception, measurement and actual practice of development policies and programmes of the EU. Interpretation process and educational activities should consciously reflect the expected effect on individuals or society, should work with expected social, cultural, environmental impacts or identity creation, as well as work with other values naturally present in cultural and natural heritage as historical value, commemorative value, aesthetic value, symbolic value, educational value, sense of place and identity, branding, social participation in reference to the role in cultural life etc. (CHCfE 2015:32-198).

Educational activities also are among the main aims of *2018 - European Year of Cultural Heritage*. These aims should be fulfilled through putting stress on the importance of Europe's cultural heritage by focusing on children, young and elderly people, local communities and hard-to-reach groups. A dialogue and cooperation in matters of cultural heritage as well as an intercultural dialogue, post-conflict reconciliation and conflict prevention should be present and used by all stakeholders, in particular public authorities and the private sector, and facilitate the

dissemination of research results to a broader audience in terms of significant events that have a symbolic importance for Europe's history and cultural heritage connected to year 2018 (such as the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I and of the independence of several Member States as well as the 400th anniversary of the start of the Thirty Years' War).

Among the activities under financial and coordination support of the EU realised at Union, national, regional or local level proposed in this document are:

- a) initiatives and events to promote debate and raise awareness of the importance and value of cultural heritage and to facilitate engagement with citizens and stakeholders;
- b) information, exhibitions, education and awareness-raising campaigns to convey values, such as diversity and intercultural dialogue, using evidence from Europe's rich cultural heritage and to stimulate the general public's contribution to cultural heritage protection and management;
- c) the sharing of experience and good practices of national, regional and local administrations and other organisations, and the dissemination of information about cultural heritage;
- d) the undertaking of studies and research and innovation activities and the dissemination of their results on a European or national scale;
- e) the promotion of projects and networks connected to the European Year, including via the media and social networks (EYCH2018 2017:21-22).

By a wide-range offer of points of view on heritage sites, chosen tools of interpretation gathering in activities consciously focused on educational substance of heritage sites it is possible to effectively form perception, recognition and knowledge of the heritage. Ways of interpretation connected to enjoyment and experience leading to critical thinking, personal engagement and participatory ways of sharing are the best tools to gain public interest.

### **Internalisation of heritage values as a part of lifestyle**

The internalisation of heritage values as a part of lifestyle is the condition of the whole interpretative and preserving process, including all aspects mentioned above. Heritage professionals often work with passion and personal interest. Of course, this passion and interest are based on deep professional education and experience but, as attitudes to work, they are priceless for the often low budget of heritage sites. *The Kyoto Vision* recognises that only through strengthened relationships between people and heritage, based on respect for cultural and biological diversity as a whole, grounded in a multi-disciplinary and participatory approach to heritage conservation, which would integrate the consideration of social, economic and environmental dimensions, will the optimal attitude become attainable. Emphasising the relationship between world heritage and local communities in terms not only to attract community to the heritage site, but also to make the heritage site a constant and common part of the life of the community, and so involve communities in conservation and management efforts (*The Kyoto Vision* 2012:3). Also, *Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe* research findings show that engagement with cultural heritage (at local and national levels) can lead to a greater national awareness, social cohesion, sense of a place and identity and contributes to the quality of life, providing character and ambience to neighbourhoods, towns and regions across Europe and making them popular places to live, work in and visit, attractive to residents, tourists and the representatives of creative class alike (CHCfE 2015:28). The locality is defined so, with a unique identity that creates compelling city narratives providing the basis for effective marketing strategies aimed at developing cultural tourism and attracting investment (CHCfE 2015:20).

Heritage, for that reason is, or could be, a significant creator of jobs across Europe, covering a wide range of types of job and skill levels: from conservation-related construction, repair and maintenance, through cultural tourism, to small and medium-sized enterprises and start-ups, often in the creative industries (CHCfE 2015:21). The *European Year of Cultural Heritage* joins this point of view not only by saying that "*The purpose of the European Year shall be to*

*encourage the sharing and appreciation of Europe's cultural heritage as a shared resource, to raise awareness of common history and values, and to reinforce a sense of belonging to a common European space.*" (EYCH2018 2017:16). Working with special financial potential negotiated in the proclamation makes realisation of these ideas much easier. Efficiency, as well as internalisation of the whole process, is based on implementation into local policies and, above all, on cooperation of coordinators at all levels from EU Commission to local participants (EYCH2018 2017:22-24). It could look like that direct financial support is too materialistic and has nothing in common with internalisation of the relationship to cultural or natural heritage, but the opposite is true. Financial support of realisation activities dealing with heritage in terms of care and protection as well as in terms of educational activities and community engagement gives hope and a real possibility to work on and with heritage sites, making preserving and educational activities possible. The feeling of "things are possible" is a great deal of motivation and an important part of internalisation of the value of heritage by both heritage professionals and the public.

No matter from which point of view we choose to see the conventions dealing with cultural and natural heritage, these conventions are tools helping society to define the area of interest, to agree on required rules related to heritage issues, to include it in the social context, to make it visible and to make it as effective as possible, thanks to international cooperation and knowledge sharing. It is a base which makes our work possible, which makes heritage interpretation legitimate and imperative. In our daily work dealing with heritage, these conventions sometimes seem to be far away from our real daily life, sometimes may also be a common part of European society of the last century. Sometimes, due to common problems about financial support and restoration, it is difficult to feel the connection with this base which allows European society to stand where it is now in relation to its heritage.

Simultaneously, the need for modernisation and extension of these documents proves that there is still a lot of work to be done, that there is still space for this process to move and that it is still necessary to rethink and make heritage care, preservation, understanding and use of heritage more effective, more functional to sustainable society and a conscious personal responsibility. Seeing the four areas mentioned above, the conventions are here to help the public to wise-up to the value and potential of heritage. Through care and preservation rules, to wise-up to sustainability of these values and through suitable interpretation and educational activities to wise-up to the awareness of the heart of heritage and its importance to knowledge of not only collective but also personal hiSTORY.

Nothing would work without internalisation of the values declared in these documents and its integration into our personal life. Conscious use of these principles also helps heritage professionals in their interpretative work. So where are you standing? Where do your activities meet the values and principles declared in these conventions? With which of them do you agree, identify with internally? How does awareness of them influence your own attitude, your own activities? How could it help you to find better professional focus? How do your professional activities help to perceive and realise these documents and interpret their values to the public? It is not always easy in the reality of daily life, but when we look back, we can see what a long way we, here in Europe, have come, how the borders of heritage work have shifted. Interpretative process is about telling the stories of our world, of people who lived and still live in this world, and of our personal attitude to these hiSTORIES. The conventions we have analysed can be seen as a tool, as a base progressing from the basic framework in *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* adopted in 1972 to very concrete steps and financial tools for their realisation in *2018 - European Year of Cultural Heritage* adopted in 2017. Then, what is coming can be seen as challenges we can look for. The field of heritage, more than anywhere else, holds good that butterfly effect – even the smallest flap of one's wings can bring large effect, if not immediately in material work on heritage, so in souls and in the way of human thinking. And this is what counts.

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