

DISCUSSION ARTICLE

Transience and the objects of heritage: a matter of time

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Introduction

Let me start by briefly recapitulating Sigmund Freud's short but seminal essay from 1915 on 'transience' (Freud 1957b). In this essay, Freud relates a conversation with two friends as they are strolling in a beautiful countryside setting. Freud describes how one of his companions – a poet – admires the beauty of the scenery, but how he cannot feel any real joy in the beauty of the landscape, because he knows that the beauty will vanish some day and be doomed by the transience of all things material. For the poet, the transience – or *Vergänglichkeit* – of whatever is beautiful means that it loses its worth. In the essay, Freud advocates an entirely opposite attitude. He argues that the temporal limitations of an object do not devalue the object, and that transience may indeed increase the importance of the object. Seeing things perish may of course be difficult – as in all cases of true mourning – but if we are not capable of letting go, Freud argues, then we end up in the pathological state of melancholia (Freud 1957a).

Freud's position on mourning and melancholia has been challenged by more recent research on bereavement and grief (Klass *et al.* 1996, Howarth 2007, see also Bjerregaard *et al.* in prep.), yet I believe that it is worthwhile – if not necessary – to return to Freud's praise of transience in light of the widespread paranoia of losing material culture characterising much contemporary heritage management and heritage politics. In the present issue of *Danish Journal of Archaeology*, Jes Wienberg offers a very stimulating and for some readers probably also provocative perspective on the dismantling of heritage objects. Wienberg makes the interesting suggestion that certain heritage sites – in his case architecture – can be 'creatively dismantled'; a managerial practice located somewhere between 'preservation' and 'destruction'. I believe that Wienberg's discussion of four churches and a lighthouse on the coast of north-western Denmark needs to be set in a greater conceptual discussion, relieving the architecture of the limited geographical and thematic confines within which Wienberg has chosen to delimit the

scope of his article. I would argue that two aspects of Wienberg's argument in particular hold the potential for further elaboration and critique: first the notion of 'creative dismantling' and second the notion of threat. In the following, I explore these issues through a critique and an example.

Dismantling destruction

The notion of 'creative dismantling' of course already forms a key concept in Wienberg's discussion, but Wienberg fails, in my opinion, to do full justice to the concept by not developing it conceptually and by not reflecting more substantially on the origins of the term. As Wienberg points out, the idea of 'creative dismantling' is a paraphrase of economist Joseph Schumpeter's notion of 'creative destruction'; yet, I find it worthwhile to clarify that 'creative destruction' was introduced by Schumpeter as a description of the disruptive mechanisms of economic growth and capitalism. In an ever-intensifying market economy, Schumpeter argues, the cycle of innovation, expansion and downsizing will lead to a constant reconfiguration of the socio-economic order and, hence, result in a process that is both creative and destructive at the same time:

The opening up of new markets, foreign or domestic, and the organizational development from the craft shop and factory (...) illustrate the same process of industrial mutation – if I may use that biological term – that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism (Schumpeter 2003, p. 83).

Wienberg's notion of a creative reconfiguration may at an elementary and rather under-theorised level share certain characteristics with Schumpeter's critique of capitalism. However, Wienberg's choice of changing the vocabulary from 'destruction' to 'dismantling' in fact disarms the most compelling and radical potential in

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translating Schumpeter's concept into the field of heritage management, namely the destructive element itself.

For Wienberg, 'dismantling' is preferred to 'destruction', because it may assume a position between preservation and destruction, whereas destruction is about changes 'perceived as negative', such as perishability, oblivion and erasure. So, while creative *destruction* is associated with the negative and chaotic demolition of a building, creative *dismantling* is synonymous with a controlled, supervised and seemingly more gentle deconstruction of the architectural unit, where as much as possible of the building material is damaged as little as possible. 'Dismantling' furthermore implies the potential for knowledge production and future reconstruction, whereas destruction results in the erasure and loss of the architectural unit. The implication seems to be that a dismantled architectural unit is never *really* lost, because it may be reconstructed in a different location and context.

In this distinction between destruction and dismantling, I believe that a crucial quality of Schumpeter's original point is lost, as he argued that the destruction of one object or condition would lead to the creation of something new, which is, in fact, at sacrificial logic (cf. Hubert and Mauss 1964, see also Willerslev 2009). Wienberg does indeed observe that 'all archaeology is both destructive and constructive', recognising the very sacrificial principle of common archaeological research methods, such as field excavation or laboratory analyses, where cultural layers or samples are destroyed in order to achieve knowledge. However, Wienberg does not fully extend the consequences of this observation to the five buildings on the coast of Jutland. Instead of embracing the archaeological sacrificial logic wholeheartedly, he seeks to preserve the dismantled building for potential future reconstruction. This means that he does not even consider the possibility that Mårup church could be allowed to vanish (yet this possibility has been aired in an older article, see Wienberg 1999, p. 199).

Disappearance as a cultural artefact

Let us consider for a moment what might be gained if Mårup church had been left on the verge of the Jutland, accompanying the graves that are for some reason allowed to remain in place, and gradually tumble down the cliff as the erosion progresses. Had Mårup been left in place to gradually be consumed by geological erosion, we would need to face, and potentially accept, the very *process* of destruction and disappearance as a cultural artefact in its own right, allowing us to rethink more critically the relationship between nature and culture, time and change, perishability and history. This form of disappearance through the forces of geological erosion would indeed have had disruptive material and culture-historical effects, but it would also contain the potential for an increased

awareness of the temporality of heritage and the constant changeability of the material world, redirecting the narrow, parochial focus on Mårup in favour of a deeper consideration of materiality, duration, pastness and futurity.

My point is not simply to roll back to a Romantic attitude to ruins and decay (not that I see anything inherently wrong in that attitude), but rather to voice a critique of conservation and protection as the unquestionable norm and ideal for whatever phenomenon is designated as 'heritage'. When objects, places or buildings are canonised (formally or informally) as 'heritage' they currently seem to be circumscribed, automatically, by a popular and institutional paranoia of disappearance and decay, and any recognition of perishable qualities in the object is entirely lost. However, I would argue – following Freud – that it is only by observing and appreciating the transience of things that we can truly begin to cherish objects and human life with objects, whether extant or vanished.

I thus advocate decay and demolition in certain cases, not because the past or history is a burden that can be relieved by disappearance and forgetting (cf. Wienberg 1999, p. 184), nor because decay is 'the story on [sic] inevitable impermanence' created by the conjunctures of Western capitalism (Wienberg, this issue), but because the very process of decay and disappearance – including acts of demolition and destruction – is to be considered as an object of heritage in its own right, allowing us to reflect on materiality, time and being (see also DeSilvey 2012, DeSilvey and Edensor 2013).

Threatening heritage

This brings me to the second issue in Wienberg's article that I see as particularly worth pursuing as a potential critique of current heritage agendas. Wienberg argues that threat is a dominating principle in the production of heritage, and he contends that threats are about changes perceived as negative. A threatened heritage object is thus an object in danger of disappearing, because, following Wienberg, disappearance is perceived as negative. For me, however, threat is not so much about negative effects, but rather about perceived vulnerability, emergency and precarious futurities (cf. Anderson 2010, Massumi 2010, Adey and Anderson 2012, McCarthy 2012), and I would like to explore threat and heritage from this perspective.

If Wienberg had scaled the cliffs and strolled the shores further south in Western Jutland in the summer and autumn of 2013, he might have added yet another dimension to the discussion of threats, protection, conservation and destruction. During the German Occupation, thousands of military fortifications were built in Denmark, the majority along the west coast of Jutland as part of the Atlantic Wall. A total of approximately 600 concrete bunkers are registered in the coastal landscape (Andersen and

Rolf 2006), yet others have already disappeared into the sandy beaches or the ocean since the Occupation. Some bunkers have been conserved and turned into formal culture-historical museums, for instance at Hirtshals and Hanstholm, while other concrete remains of the Occupation heritage are scattered along the coast in various states of deterioration.

In the spring of 2013, the Nature Agency and The Coastal Authority (under the Danish Ministry of the Environment) decided in collaboration with the Ministry of Transport and five municipalities in Western Jutland that around 120 bunkers should be demolished as they pose a threat to visitors and tourists, strolling the beaches and swimming in the water. After 70 years of exposure to the environment, the concrete is deteriorating in many places, and its iron reinforcement becomes exposed. The problem is that concrete fragments and iron bars are partially or entirely hidden under the water, which has resulted in a number of accidents, when swimmers have made close contact with the architectonic heritage of the Second World War. The removal of the undesired bunkers has proven very popular, and when the first bunker was demolished in July of 2013, the Minister of the Environment made her appearance in front of media and popular attention, celebrating the initiative to demolish the bunkers (Gade 2013, Lundsgaard 2013), which in effect eradicates a part of the national and international cultural heritage. This case brings out an unresolved tension between the protection of cultural heritage against people and the protection of people against cultural heritage, produced by ambiguous notions of 'threat'.

Taken at face value from the most pedestrian perspective, the bunker fragments on the shore are a threat because they can hurt people physically, but I believe that there is more to the definition of threat and damage than meets the eye in this case. I would argue that the bunker fragments are managed as dangerous waste and not as heritage, not so much because they are hazardous, damaged or, for some, ugly. Rather, they are defined as waste because of what they *do*: they possess a particular material and temporal capacity for emergence or to be emergent in uncontrollable ways, suddenly, unavoidably and with undeniable immediacy.

The emergence of the bunker fragment and its iron reinforcements is rapid and unforeseen, surfacing suddenly and violently, exposing the vulnerability of the human body and corrupting the possibility for reflecting calmly on heritage that is definitively 'past' (González-Ruibal 2006). While other bunkers, such as those organised as museums, are cherished as formal heritage sites, the decaying and corroding bunkers in the water do not obey the laws of tangible heritage by refusing to remain passive and inert media for retrospective historical contemplation as they continue to exert an agency and thus remain unfinished (Hetherington 2004).

So, somehow it seems that tangible heritage must remain conserved, unchanging, inert and passive, not confusing the borders of past and future, nature and culture (Edensor 2005, DeSilvey 2006, Harrison 2012), which is constantly what the bunker fragments on the beaches are doing: they are seamlessly interwoven in the rhythms of rolling waves and tidal change, and they merge into the gradual movements of gravel and sand grinding the concrete down, thus exposing and sharpening the iron reinforcements. In this perspective, the canonised cultural heritage object reveals itself as a truly modernist construction, setting up a wide range of strict dichotomies between nature and society, humans and non-humans, agents and patients (Sørensen 2013, but see also Simmel 1959).

Instead, the decaying bunkers force themselves onto us in their own time and at their own bidding, regardless of whether we want their presence or not. I would argue that this is the reason why the corroding and disintegrating bunkers cannot maintain their default status as heritage, because 'ordinary' or 'proper' heritage – at least in Denmark – needs to be controlled and controllable, domesticated, and brought under the regulation of the cultural system (see also Smith 2006). *Cultural* heritage, it seems, needs to be at our disposal, at our convenience, and it needs to be safe in order to deserve safeguarding.

Letting go

And the Danish ideal of a complacent and receptive heritage is presumably also the reason why Mårup church had to be taken down and why the lighthouse at Rubjerg Knude will also be removed in 2020, so that visitors to the sites or the shore will not be threatened by the tumbling debris of collapsed heritage. Just like the graves emerge in the profile of the cliff, exposing the vulnerability of human existence, so would a collapsing historical architecture give us reason to rethink the uncompromising conservationist agenda that produces an impotent and immobile heritage. It would, in my opinion, be more poetic and more intellectually challenging to allow the ruins to disintegrate and collapse to the rhythms of coastal erosion, celebrating the more brutal aesthetics of the relentless metamorphosis of all material phenomena.

Interestingly, unlike the local opposition to the dismantling of Mårup church, bunker destruction has been widely welcomed by municipal politicians, local stakeholders, residents and tourists, and only a few voices have questioned the removal of the 120 'dangerous' bunkers (Maressa 2013, Pedersen 2013). This also testifies to Wienberg's observation, constituting the fundamental subtext in his argument; that the choice whether to conserve or destroy is a matter of the narratives that are told about objects from the past (echoing Waterton and Smith 2009). I agree with Wienberg that the critical issue is not so much *if* the four churches and the lighthouse should be

conserved or removed, but *how* either action should materialise. I am, however, not convinced that ‘creative dismantling’ really achieves anything different than conventional heritage management, and I believe that there are compelling reasons to explore the possibility for a more radical creativity that allows for an exposure of the decaying process, leading to the ultimate disappearance of the material traces of the churches and the lighthouse (see also Holtorf 2006, Sørensen 2007, Harrison 2013).

In the light of the political initiative to remove bunkers on the West coast of Jutland, the question furthermore arises if the process of decay (or for that matter deconstruction and dismantlement) could be turned into truly creative components of heritage management. Might it be possible to establish a temporary and contemporary space for exploration, reflection and intervention on heritage, temporality and pastness (Varvantakis 2009) by allowing people to participate in the demolition of architecture and the creation of narratives, by actively inviting processes of departure with things as cultural events?

As Freud observes, departure and separation is often difficult, but nevertheless indispensable. So the question is, in terms of heritage, not necessarily what is lost when things vanish, but maybe, rather, what is lost when we fail to let things go in favour of a compulsion to conserve. Would it be possible not always having to conserve things as physical objects, but instead to sustain them as memories and narratives, and maybe then to cope with departure and disappearance, and remind ourselves that tears will, eventually, let up? In conclusion, we may recall a few lines from a song that was probably well known to the occupants of the bunkers on the West coast of Jutland 70 years ago (performed by Lale Andersen, music by Fred Raymond, lyric by Max Wallner and Kurt Feltz, 1942):

Es geht alles vorüber, es geht alles vorbei
Darum fällt der Abschied doppelt schwer, doch sie sagt:
‘Jetzt wein ich nicht mehr!’

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