Aftermath: the consequences of the result of the 2016 EU referendum for heritage conservation in the United Kingdom

Sykes, Olivier; Ludwig, Carol

Postprint / Postprint
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Mitglied der
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

gesis
Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Olivier Sykes and Carol Ludwig

Viewpoint

Aftermath - the consequences of the result of the 2016 EU referendum for heritage in the United Kingdom

In June 2016 a referendum was held in the UK on membership of the European Union. Two of the territories of the UK, England and Wales voted to leave the EU whilst two, Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain. The overall result was a narrow UK vote to leave the EU. Perhaps the one thing that all sides in a now deeply divided state can agree on is that the decision to leave the EU is a momentous one. Internally the position of Scotland and Northern Ireland within the UK is a key issue. In England the status and role of London and other major cities (which also mostly voted to remain in the EU) in relation to other regions, is also a matter of debate (BBC News, 2016). Less attention has been given to the many and varied relationships that local authorities have developed with the EU since the UK joined the then EEC in the 1970s. The withdrawal will impact diverse areas of their work – for example, experts predict it will lead to a hollowing out of environmental protection (Travers, 2016). How it will affect the heritage sector however, has received scant attention in the referendum campaign and since the result. This Viewpoint provides some reflections on this issue.

Resources

The EU has been a key mechanism for the redistribution of funds to regeneration areas (Sykes and Schulze-Bäing, 2016). In effect by virtue of being allocated through the thematically organised EU Structural and Investment Fund regime, funds from the UK other 'net contributor' states were directed to areas of need. In addition given that the EU budget works on a seven yearly cycle, EU funds provided a secure source of matching funding for projects in contrast with the more fickle and centralised funding models which have traditionally operated in the UK. In 2014-2020 European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in England was due to be worth around £3bn. There is thus some uncertainty at present about what will happen to such funding streams in the medium term. But beyond the actual amounts which were redistributed, the availability of a dedicated stream of funding for certain areas, has proved important in supporting project partnerships and bids. As Travers (2016, 19) underlines "Seemingly, when local government cannot get what it wants from national government it looks elsewhere, and

the EU has been a very convenient source of allies in other cities and the Commission" adding that "this is even more important with the impact on local government of austerity". This ability to combine funds has been a key feature of how project finance has worked over recent decades. The argument that 'someone else' (e.g. Structural Fund programmes, the private sector etc.) is putting resources into a project provided a powerful argument for those making a case for support to their own organisation, or other funding bodies[1].

It is for the reasons above that many heritage restoration or valorisation projects in the UK have sought funding from the EU amongst other funding sources. 'Cultural Heritage' has also recently been recognized as a growing EU priority, eligible for more significant and wide-ranging EU funding including "for conservation, digitization, infrastructure, research and skills". There are several other EU programmes as well as the European Structural and Investment Funds, such as Horizon 2020, Creative Europe, Erasmus+, and Europe for Citizens[2] that reflect a direction of travel symbolized by the EU's explicit and increasing desire to recognize, preserve and promote Europe's 'rich and diverse' heritage. Whether the UK can access such a growing pot of funding as a non-EU member is unknown and clearly subject to negotiation post official withdrawal from the European Union under article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. It is to be hoped however that established initiatives and networks[3] and Heritage Open Days will continue. Though, perhaps rather tellingly, in the UK the European roots of the latter initiative have largely been forgotten with only Northern Ireland still billing the event as European Heritage Open Days.[4]

It is hard therefore hard to predict with certainty the impact that the EU referendum result will have on the resourcing of action around heritage and conservation. The UK, one presumes, will remain a wealthy state with resources to devote to heritage and conservation in whatever proportions it chooses. Statutory conservation work has suffered from funding cuts over recent years (Ludwig and Ludwig, 2014) but it is in relation to the funding of specific heritage projects that the impacts of leaving the EU are more likely to be felt. For local areas and heritage bodies opportunity structures to act in the interests of heritage and conservation will be even more defined by patterns of resource and power distribution within central government and the evolving shape of central-local relations between Whitehall and local areas. The ability to use territorially defined and dedicated funding streams from the EU as a local lever and bargaining chip in the assemblage of partnerships to undertake heritage-led regeneration schemes will almost certainly be much reduced.

---

[1] Though largely unreported there has already been a recentralisation of how EU funding is organised in England in the 2014-2020 period with English local authorities now being required to bid via central government for such funds.

[2] http://ec.europa.eu/culture/policy/culture-policies/cultural-heritage_en.htm

[3] E.g. http://www.erih.net/welcome.html ; http://cmsen.eghn.org/home

[4] http://www.discovernorthernireland.com/NIEA/EHOD.aspx

Policy Effects

It is unlikely that leaving the EU will have any immediate effects on the statutory planning policies which apply to heritage and conservation issues. Culture is an area where the EU has only played an accompanying and supporting role unlike in the field of environmental policy where the member states have pooled legislative competences in the common interest. Policy in this area is therefore primarily the responsibility of individual member states and local authorities. Article 3.3 of the Lisbon Treaty, however, formalised the EU's supportive role noting that "The Union shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, and [...] ensure that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced"[5]. In reality, while this commitment currently has little direct heritage policy implication[6], EU policies in other areas are nevertheless taking increasing account of heritage - for example, environmental impact assessment. Looking forward, any stronger commitment to proactively protect and enhance heritage at the European Union level will not affect, or benefit, UK heritage conservation and management. Sitting outside this framework, the main direct issue for the UK therefore is again likely to be the loss of access to funding from certain programmes, notably the Creative Europe programme which addresses culture and media issues. This incorporates initiatives like the European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture, or the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage[7] whose value in monetary terms is small but have a symbolic value.

The definition of heritage and its protection in practice

Though leaving the EU is unlikely to modify the statutory framework for conservation and heritage protection, there could nevertheless be consequences for how heritage is defined, how policy is operationalised, and the terms and discursive frames within which debate around heritage issues takes place.

The referendum campaign was highly divisive and characterised in parts by blatant manipulation of historical fact and strongly nationalist and exclusionary discourses. In its wake one issue is whether there is a risk of an insularisation and narrowing of our definitions of what constitutes heritage and culture and how space for the recognition of

---

[5]Full text of the Treaty of Lisbon http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C:2007:306:FULL&from=EN

[6] Although there have been calls for a more integrated and strategic approach to heritage management across the EU and for EU policies to preserve and enhance European heritage - see European Commission Press Release http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-854_en.htm and report 'Towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe' http://ec.europa.eu/culture/policy/culture-policies/cultural-heritage_en.htm.

[7] UK prize winners and laureates include: The Grainger Town Project, Newcastle Upon Tyne; The Edward Chambré Hardman Photographic Collection, Liverpool; St Davids Bishop's Palace, St Davids; Abbotsford: The Home of Sir Walter Scott, Melrose, and in 2016 Wimpole Hall's Gothic Tower, Wimpole, Cambridgeshire.

alternative and subaltern views of heritage beyond the Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) (Smith, 2006) might be kept open. Broader international trends in heritage discourse encourage a more inclusive understanding of heritage (Sykes and Ludwig, 2015) and the Council of Europe (CoE) has played a key role in the promotion of a more human-centred approach to heritage across Europe, drawing on notions of identity, belonging, diversity and human rights (CoE, 2000, 2009, 2011). Such wider notions of heritage already struggle to find a place within the AHD and there is a risk that this more inclusive approach will be further diluted once the UK leaves the EU.

Similarly, UNESCO views of heritage draw on notions such as "outstanding universal value", which is a key criterion for example in the designation of World Heritage Sites. Sites such as Canterbury Cathedral, for example, are more than a beautiful assemblage of stones in South East England with clear significance as an emblematic site in English history, but also preserve more universal legacies by standing testament to the wider emergence of the Gothic style in Europe, and the work of the 12th. Century French architect William of Sens. Britain's heritage is comprised of multiple transnational layers and linkages and as a result of this has a significance which stretches beyond the confines of her island shores. Yet narrations of history and definitions of heritage of course remain mutable. The EU referendum serves to remind us how contingent definitions of value and ideas of identity and belonging can be. As Winston Churchill noted "Europe is a spiritual conception. But if men cease to hold that conception in their minds, cease to feel its worth in their hearts, it will die" (Churchill, 1947). Equally, for tangible and intangible heritage to be deemed to be of significance it needs to be borne in mind and its worth recognised and valued. Like the natural environment, heritage is something that societies may choose, or choose not, to protect.

The new context may also have a bearing on the ways in which notions of heritage and protection are operationalised in practice. In particular there are some striking parallels which can be observed between the 'politics' of the EU referendum and those which often accompany heritage debates. When controversial heritage issues are raised by certain developments, those who are arguing for the protection of heritage are frequently cast as 'out of touch' representatives of a shadowy 'heritage lobby', aloof 'experts', or part of a 'cultural/heritage elite' and often as standing against the interests and views of a majority of local people. The case of the controversial Welsh Streets redevelopment proposals in Liverpool, provides such an example, where those arguing against demolition either as local residents, or representing groups like the London-based SAVE Britain's Heritage were frequently criticised in print, in person, on social media, and in public fora as variously being outsiders (not living in the area); being in a minority position; selfish; or, placing heritage concerns before people (Sheenan, 2014). As one pro-demolition resident remarked 'It makes me so angry when the heritage people talk about keeping the houses. They should come and live here for a week and let us live in their houses. They haven't got a clue' (cited in Sheenan, 2014, no page). The presentation of 'facts' about key issues such as the conditions of the housing, the cost of refurbishment v. demolition, and the balance of local public opinion were also subject to vastly varying interpretations. The

claim that there is a gulf between the wisdom and interests of society at large and that of 'experts' which was such a hallmark of the EU referendum campaign - epitomised by the Leave campaigner Michael Gove's statement that "people in this country have had enough of experts"[8], thus finds an echo in controversial episodes of heritage planning. Yet such a binary view which such postulates a 'them and us' relationship between lay persons and knowledge, and 'out of touch' experts and their knowledge, makes no sense in this field. Expertise on heritage may be held by a wide range of people and stakeholders and is not the sole preserve of the professionals and bodies charged with its official oversight. But even an 'amateur- expert' can find themselves painted as the enemy of 'common sense' and the common interest where their knowledge and attribution of value to some aspect of the built environment contradicts what is presented as a more widely held view.

Preserving built heritage in the new context

The availability of funding for heritage projects is an issue over which many of those with a concern for heritage can exert little direct influence. Nor can those who value and wish to preserve built heritage change the general atmosphere in which debate on matters of public interest apparently now takes place. The resort to simple majoritarianism and the claim that those with different views should be silent (especially if they are 'outsiders'), disparaging of expert opinion, and manipulation of fact, have been key features of some of the heritage debates of the recent past mirroring on a micro-level defining features of the EU referendum campaign.   The gradual and accelerating erosion of a public sphere in which reasoned argument and evidence are valued in the processes through which our society reaches decisions on distributional and value-based issues seems at this historical juncture irreversible. But it is possible to react to this context in reflecting on where the scarce resources of heritage enthusiasts and professionals can be put to work. Perhaps the lesson is to direct these into more high profile publically visible activities such as getting stories into the press and organising events. The essential work of experts, be they amateurs or professionals, in following and responding to conservation issues will need to continue. But, in a world where, to use the terms of Jürgen Habermas, communication is 'distorted', and the 'force of the better argument' may struggle to carry the day, communication and trying to influence public discourse will be crucial in building coalitions to support the protection and enhancement of our built heritage. Finding a strong voice will be vital to try and secure progressive heritage and conservation action in the face of arguments that it is a narrow or elite concern, not relevant to ordinary people's everyday lives, or obstructs and diverts resources away from other necessary economic or social objectives.

---

[8] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/10/michael-goves-guide-to-britains-greatest-enemy-the-experts/

Finally, the post-EU era in the UK poses a new heritage conundrum! What is to become of the tangible and intangible legacies of the UK's period as a member of the EEC/EU! There is already some febrile discussion on social media about removing any physical artefacts and symbols which will preserve the memory of the UK's period in the EU. For example, the EU flag from car number plates, or, more relevant to our concerns here, the blue plaques placed on EU-supported projects, which are such a common sight, notably across the 'regeneration regions' of the UK. Perhaps a renaming ceremony for a street like 'Europa Boulevard' in Birkenhead could be a key event at a future celebration of the 23 June UK Independence Day mooted by some who voted to leave the EU? Or will tangible artefacts be allowed to remain in the built environment as witnesses to a period when enlightened patriotism, and a sense of solidarity with others, overcame insularity and solipsistic nationalism, and Britain was not in denial about her European history, heritage and destiny?

Sources

BBC NEWS (2016) Petition for London independence signed by thousands after Brexit vote **http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36620401**

CHURCHILL, W. (1947)

CoE (2000) *European Landscape Convention*, CoE Publishing, Strasbourg.

CoE (2009) *Heritage and Beyond*, CoE Publishing, Strasbourg.

CoE (2011) *Action for a Changing Society, Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*, CoE Publishing, Strasbourg.

HUNT, T., LAVERY, S., VITTERY. W. and BERRY, C. (2016) *SPERI British Political Economy Brief No. 24 UK regions and European structural and investment funds*. Sheffield Political Economy research Institute, Sheffield.

http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Brief24-UK-regions-and-European-structural-and-investment-funds.pdf

LUDWIG, C. and LUDWIG, G. (2014) "Empty Gestures? A Review of the Discourses of 'Localism' from the Practitioner's Perspective." *Local Economy* 29 (3): 192-203.

SHEENAN, P. (2014), Battle of the Welsh Streets: 'We need everyone to take a breath and put the residents first', Liverpool Echo, 16 June 2014,

http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/battle-welsh-streets-we-need-7273068

SMITH, L. (2006) *Uses of Heritage*, Routledge, London.

SPRINGFORD, J., MCCANN, P., LOS, B. and THISSEN, M. (2016) Brexiting yourself in the foot: Why Britain's eurosceptic regions have most to lose from EU withdrawal

http://www.cer.org.uk/insights/brexiting-yourself-foot-why-britains-eurosceptic-regions-have-most-lose-eu-withdrawal

SYKES, O. and LUDWIG, C. (2015) "Defining and Managing the Historic Urban Landscape: Reflections on the English Experience and Some Stories from Liverpool." *European Spatial Research and Policy* 22 (2): 9-35.

http://esrap.geo.uni.lodz.pl/uploads/publications/articles/v22n2/Olivier%20SYKES,%20Carol%20LUDWIG.pdf

TRAVERS, T. (2016) *Implications of a Brexit for UK National Governance and Local Government - Report of the hearing held on 13th April, 2016*, LSE European Institute, London.
http://www.lse.ac.uk/europeanInstitute/LSE-Commission/Hearing-9---Implications-of-a-Brexit-for-UK-National-Governance-Local-Government-REPORT.pdf

WYN JONES, R. (2016) Brexit Reflections - Why did Wales shoot itself in the foot in this referendum?

http://centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/blog/brexit-reflections-why-did-wales-shoot-itself-foot-referendum