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## **From bricks and mortar to social heritage: planning space for diversities in the AHD**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article investigates the authorised heritage discourse (AHD) through the lens of conservation planning practice. The AHD is characterised as an exclusionary discourse that privileges the physical nature of 'heritage', defined scientifically by 'experts'. Set within the context of wider international trends towards more inclusive heritage practices, the article advances understanding of the contemporary AHD. Using local heritage designation as an investigatory platform, a thesis is developed to explain professional representations of heritage operating in this setting. In doing so, a pervasive, yet nuanced AHD is exposed. At the same time, a complex variety of contextual factors that constrain radical readjustment of the AHD are also uncovered. These include struggles over the subjectivity and operationalisation of social and cultural heritage values in rational planning environments. The conclusions drawn from this research challenge and subtly refine the AHD, and crucially, propose that wider trends in the heritage discourse cannot be adequately implemented within the current legal apparatus and mind-set of traditional rational planning. The article suggests that further research is required to understand how the multiple and diverse layers of heritage meanings can be emplaced and legitimised within planning settings.

### **KEYWORDS**

Authorised heritage discourse; AHD; conservation planning; local heritage; positivism

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is twofold; first it provides a means through which understanding of the authorised heritage discourse (AHD) can be further refined. Second, it provides evidence to suggest that the challenges that nations are confronted with in implementing wider international trends in heritage conservation cannot be tackled adequately within the current legal apparatus and mind-set of traditional rational planning. The article reports on a three year doctoral research project that used case study research in four English local planning authorities to unpack the following research questions: first, how is heritage understood by conservation planning professionals and how is this understanding applied during the local heritage designation process (planning, marketing, consultation and decision-making)? Second, is the discursive space provided for inclusively negotiating alternative conceptualisations of heritage? Third, why do some conceptualisations of heritage receive legitimisation in this process whereas others do not?

In investigating these questions, the research advances a prominent debate within heritage studies. This debate centres on the AHD, as characterised by Smith (2006), and the need to make visible plural and more subjective contemporary representations of heritage. Specifically, this entails finding

a formal place for intangible heritage and its 'affective registers' within the allegedly elitist, expert-led AHD (Waterton and Watson 2013). This is deemed particularly important given the different ways in which places, as well as people, are dependent on pasts, memories and histories for legitimising and mobilising current identities (Massey 1995). Moreover, no matter how different pasts are produced, accessed or consumed, connecting with them is always an activity that is rooted in the present. The AHD thus provides a useful theoretical entry point for investigation, which has also been taken up by others as a heuristic device for international analysis (Waterton 2010; Högberg 2012; Mydland and Grahn 2012; Harvey 2015). The idea of the AHD, however, has in itself, ignited some degree of scholarly criticism and contestation, particularly Pendlebury (2013) who argues that it has/is changing, becoming more flexible since initially characterised by Smith (2006), discussed in more detail below. The contribution provided by this article is thus the production of new evidence to advance understanding of the contemporary AHD and provide a perspective on this debate. In drawing on the above, and interweaving this with strands of planning theory, what I believe to be a more nuanced explanation of the AHD is offered. While there are numerous mechanisms through which the discourse operates, few studies have offered investigation into the current realities of the AHD from the local conservation planning perspective. This article fills this gap. First, it argues that there has indeed been some creep in the discourse but as yet this is not sufficiently demonstrated in practice. Second, it argues that the English planning system unequivocally prevents a more inclusive and less materialist AHD in conservation planning.

### **Scale of focus – local heritage designation in England**

The focus of this article is thus the practice of conservation applied through the English planning system (conservation planning). Specifically, local heritage designation is used as a lens through which to critically examine the AHD in operation. Unlike statutory listing, which is conducted at the national scale (controlled by central government), local designation is conducted at a local scale by local planning authorities. The historical link between the national statutory list and local heritage designation is important and has a number of consequences. Emerging as a response to wartime bomb damage following the Second World War and the anticipation of comprehensive redevelopment, the national statutory list was a tool developed to protect the most important buildings of special architectural and historic interest. The statutory listing system operates using a hierarchy of 'listing' at Grade I (buildings of exceptional importance), Grade II\* (particularly important buildings of more than special interest) or Grade II (buildings of special interest) (*Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act, 1990*). When the statutory list was first initiated, there was, however, a less well-known further grade of ranking, Grade III. Grade III buildings were those deemed by the UK Government's then Department of the Environment to be of some value, but not important enough to be of statutory quality. Local authorities were thus advised that Grade III buildings should be protected through the normal planning process and those Grade III buildings unable to be elevated to grade II status were therefore classified as being of 'local interest' (Boland 1998). In 1970, however, the government decided to abolish the Grade III category altogether. The removal of Grade III was thus the initial impetus for what is now referred to as local heritage designation, also known as local listing. In contrast to the statutory list, the local list is prepared by local government planning authorities. It is not underpinned by statute and it is not compulsory for local authorities to prepare such a list (approximately 50–60% have one at present). Heritage 'assets' designated on the local list become a material consideration in planning decisions (CLG 2012, para. 169), meaning that local heritage designation is a means of helping to protect locally valued buildings, structures, places and landscapes from unwanted alteration or demolition. Moreover, local listing, according to Historic England<sup>1</sup> is also a tool that can bring communities together and celebrate local distinctiveness. Historic England advocate that local lists should be prepared jointly with communities using an open call for nominations (English Heritage 2012b). Local selection criteria for assessing these nominations should be mutually agreed and an

independent decision-making panel led by the local authority should determine which nominations will be designated in accordance with the agreed criteria (English Heritage 2012b). The members of the panel, usually conservation experts, planning officers, civic/amenity societies and local representatives (elected members), thus become the key gatekeepers, making final judgements, effectively forming and authorising the AHD at this scale.

The reason for 'downscaling' the focus of my investigation to the local level is outlined in some detail below, in relation to a seemingly shifting political landscape in England, yet this decision also draws theoretically on Harvey's (2015) consideration of the heritage-scale relationship (drawing on Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge (2000) and expanding on the work of Massey (1996, 2005) for example). Through considering scalar boundaries, Harvey (2015, 579) argues that 'more sophisticated theorisation' of heritage processes at different scales can provide useful insights to enhance understanding. Local heritage designation (undertaken locally and primarily on the basis of public nomination) thus offers a powerful, yet discrete lens through which to intricately analyse the struggles over the articulation of heritage. The article takes up an England-orientated focus; however, reflecting on the long tradition of rationality in spatial planning systems across Western Europe, the insights offered by this research are likely to be of much wider applicability.

## **Setting the context**

### ***International trends***

Heritage is now increasingly being drawn into and framed in the context of a much deeper realm pertaining to humanitarian concerns, human development and the exercising of basic human rights (Bonnici 2009; Meyer-Bisch 2009). For instance, identity and diversity reflected in living landscapes (CoE 2000) and the importance of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2003) have moved on to the international agenda. Moreover, the Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (the 'Faro Convention' (2005), which came into force in 2011) has a particular emphasis on local participation in decision-making processes related to heritage. Rather than focusing purely on physical fabric, conserved, buried or upstanding monuments, objects or landscapes; cultural heritage is defined in the Framework as, 'a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and an expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions' (CoE 2011; Article 2, a). More specifically, the Faro Convention promotes cultural heritage as both an element of identity common to all, and a factor of differentiation (article 7). Of particular note are the founding principles of the Convention, on the basis of the respect for human rights and democracy (article 4). These rights include *inter alia*, the right to participate in the identification, selection, classification, interpretation and management of cultural heritage. However, only 17 member states have ratified the convention and the UK is among those countries that have not signed up to it. Such international trends have subtly influenced English policy/guidance to an extent (Sykes and Ludwig 2015), as discussed below, but their impact on local conservation planning practice is negligible, as this article shall demonstrate. To begin to unpack these insights, however, first requires a brief discussion of the heritage-planning nexus in England.

### ***The AHD debate and the heritage-planning nexus***

While it is now widely acknowledged that heritage means different things, to different people, at different times, and in different contexts (Ludwig 2013), there is limited empirical evidence to explain to what extent this apparent understanding is modifying the normative heritage discourse in conservation planning offices. Is it even possible to alter practice beyond the rhetorical subtleties observed by Waterton (2010) for example? This is of particular interest in the context of the English conservation-planning nexus where it has been argued that the multifaceted nature of heritage appears not yet

to be adequately acknowledged or problematised (Waterton 2005; Smith 2006; Waterton and Smith 2008). Instead, the practice of conservation, applied through the English planning system, is accused of being guided by a rather uncritical, naturalised, and deeply embedded 'way of seeing', centred on the physical nature of heritage defined by 'experts' (Smith 2006). This AHD (with its origins in the nineteenth century birth of the conservation ethic, see Smith (2006)), is argued to exclude 'all dissonant, conflicted or non-core accounts of heritage' (Smith 2006, 11). It is therefore highly exclusionary and works to reinforce ideological representations of heritage that focus on elite/consensus history, nationalism, tangibility, age and aesthetics. Moreover, it is described as a 'self-referential' discourse that, 'privileges monumentality and grand scale, innate artefact/site significance tied to time depth, scientific/aesthetic expert judgement, social consensus and nation building' (Smith 2006, 11). The AHD is therefore underpinned by a powerful set of ideas about what heritage is and these ideas act as orientation points for expert decision-making and any adaptation. Such an exclusionary discourse is clearly problematic. Indeed, the privileging of the architectural merit and historic significance of the physical fabric provides limited space for alternative understandings of heritage that relate to ascribed social meanings/associations and focus on emotional content. As such, this one-dimensional understanding of heritage value has the potential to marginalise and/or discredit a plethora of unorthodox heritage that sit firmly outside of the grand and/or sanitised mainstream taxonomy of conservation planning 'typologies' (Smith 2006; Waterton 2010). Moreover, this exclusionary discourse is wholly misaligned with international trends in heritage definitions. So, are the parameters for decision-making about heritage really so inflexible and rigid? Are the underpinning ideas about heritage that uphold the AHD still so pervasive in local conservation planning practice?

In response to such questions, Pendlebury (2013) illustrates that the AHD in the context of English conservation planning has indeed displayed some degree of flexibility and is often required to adapt in order to compete 'for control over the built environment with other elite interests' (Pendlebury 2013, 717). An example would be adjustments due to external pressures to recognise vernacular and post-war heritage (Hobson 2004; Pendlebury 2009). Smith (2006) also acknowledges that the AHD is changeable across time and space, however she crucially points out how the AHD's ability to adapt to such external pressures is fundamentally determined by the degree to which these pressures align with the orientating points, or underlying principles of the AHD. Subsequently, any values which sit outside of this authorised framework are firmly resisted. While Hobson (2004) refers to the ability of the heritage discourse to adjust as a rather smooth, 'rolling consensus', it must be questioned to whose consensus he is referring? Can or is the heritage discourse changing to include interests other than those of the elites? Has the inherent emphasis on 'physical things' in local conservation planning adjusted to capture a more inclusive heritage? Examples of well-reported adjustments are clearly driven by experts, including the promotion of heritage as an enabler of change and synonymous with regeneration (English Heritage 1998, 2007, 2008b), a driver of economic growth (English Heritage 2002); the source of social and economic instrumental benefits (English Heritage, 2008a) and complimentary to sustainability, renewable energy, energy efficiency, and broader climate change agendas (English Heritage 2006, 2008c). Indeed, urban heritage has recently been referred to as a key component of the overall 'territorial capital of places' (Sykes and Ludwig 2015, 9). Pendlebury (2013, 709) suggests that this interlacing of discourses results in a series of 'sub-AHDs', which he argues, 'can be organised ... around the short-hand labels of Conservation Principles, The Heritage Dividend and Constructive Conservation'. Such sub-AHDs, he explains, deploy, 'a challengingly flexible interpretation of what constitutes acceptable and desirable conservation practice, often far removed from the traditional emphasis on the authenticity of material fabric' (Pendlebury 2013, 722).

Moreover, while Smith (2006) highlights the elitism and exclusiveness inherent in the AHD, Pendlebury, Townshend, and Gilroy (2004, 11) argue that the heritage sector is in fact, 'seemingly anxious to demonstrate its non-elitist, progressive nature' and that at all spatial scales there is a wider liberal agenda 'seeking to create a more widely defined and inclusive process of conservation' (Pendlebury 2009, 208). He does, however, caution that it is questionable 'whether the sector is really prepared to

relinquish a measure of their control or whether the rhetoric of pluralism is used merely as lip-service to sustain control in the face of a broader political agenda' (Pendlebury 2009, 186). The question therefore is whether the AHD is changing in local conservation planning to include interests other than those of the elites or whether there remains a self-regulating AHD that simply has the ability to morph to let other elite interests in. To further this debate it is helpful to look towards recent changes in contemporary policy and guidance in England.

### ***Repositioning of English conservation policy and guidance***

To somewhat substantiate the sector's apparent will to appear non-elitist/progressive it is possible to identify several policy documents that have emerged since the turn of the century under the umbrella of the Heritage Protection Review. Such policy documents not only promote wider participation in heritage planning (for instance 'Power of Place' (English Heritage 2000) and the Heritage White Paper (DCMS 2007)), but also seek a more self-conscious understanding of 'significance', which relates to social and communal values (for instance 'Conservation Principles' (English Heritage 2008a)). While suggestive of a desire to democratise 'heritage' processes, this celebratory narrative, however, is criticised for shying away from problematizing the very essence of 'heritage' and instead being more about 'procedural change only' (Waterton and Smith 2008, 201).

Notwithstanding this, the publication in 2010 of Planning Policy Statement 5 – *Planning for the Historic Environment* (PPS5), which set out planning approaches to heritage conservation, made some ideological adjustments. PPS5<sup>2</sup> gave significantly more weight to *local* non-designated heritage assets in the planning decision-making process than ever before and in doing so took a more holistic view of the built and natural environment. The support for local heritage designation is not particularly diminished by the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (published by CLG in 2012) and is further supported within Historic England's National Heritage Protection Plan (NHPP) (2012). The NHPP (2012a, 7), for instance, sets out that there should be a, 'continuing shift to more local heritage management' (English Heritage 2012a, 13). It also explicitly sets a target that encourages the production of local lists (2012a, 22, 5A4).

The above publications paved the way for the first ever Good Practice Guide for Local Heritage Listing, published in 2012. The guide clearly states that non-statutory local heritage designation should be a community-led process and criteria for assessment should include alternative conceptualisations of heritage such as 'intangible aspects' (English Heritage 2012b, 16). The guide refers to these 'aspects' as 'social and communal values' and explains these as follows:

Relating to places perceived as a source of local identity, distinctiveness, social interaction and coherence; often residing in intangible aspects of heritage contributing to the 'collective memory' of a place (English Heritage 2012b, 16).

While arguably somewhat cryptic and ambiguous, the guide nevertheless clearly indicates a growing interest in local designation as a heritage management tool, as well as the intention, or at least the *stated* desire that the local list process will serve to actively embrace and execute a local, more inclusive approach to heritage management (CLG 2010; English Heritage 2010, 2012a, 2012b). The guide, however, like the list itself, has no statutory underpinning and could therefore be accused of lacking any real teeth. Moreover, being produced centrally by Historic England raises critical questions about a potential paradox created by a central agency seeking to circumscribe a local grassroots process. Indeed, it could even be argued that in prescribing the process, Historic England is seeking to assert a measure of control as part of the AHD.

### ***Localism and heritage***

Such *local* policy emphases, however, appear to align neatly with the recent political rhetoric of the 'Big Society', and the spirit of 'Localism' in England (an internationally occurring trend (O'Riordon 2001)).

Localism symbolically highlights a political commitment to devolution and community empowerment. Discursively, it represents a national strategy to transfer decision-making powers away from Central Government, to communities.<sup>3</sup> Whilst on the surface this would appear to sit comfortably with the ostensible shift of conservation philosophy, there are indications that these stated desires are not translating into implementation on the ground. For instance, in his speech in Central London on 12 August 2010, the UK's Prime Minister David Cameron openly criticised the previous Labour Government's undermining of the 'Tory' sense of heritage (old country houses and other majestic buildings that symbolise wealth and privilege (see Dunt (2010) for further discussion)). Moreover, there are also signs that other issues (such as the recent economic downturn) have surpassed localism as a Government priority; and that localism has instead become merely a smokescreen for public sector cuts (Ludwig and Ludwig 2014). Consequently, this research is presented at what is a timely and politically visible point of conflict: international trends towards a more inclusive heritage, a relatively new social discourse of localism (emerging during times of political austerity), infused with a rigid conservation orthodoxy that traditionally has prioritised a particular set of expert-led heritage assumptions and a particular social group. It is this nexus that has shaped the scope and design of the research.

### **Scope and design of the research**

The findings are based on data collected from four case studies using three methods: 30 semi-structured interviews undertaken between 2011 and 2013 with senior conservation planning professionals<sup>4</sup>; analysis of 23 documents associated with local heritage designation (including leaflets, posters, web material, public notices and the local list document itself); and direct observation of decision-making panels and heritage community consultation events in four geographically dispersed local authorities. The four case studies were selected based on a thorough sequential process. The primary factor affecting selection, however, was timing; the local authority had to be currently preparing/reviewing their local list and there had to be an opportunity to attend a community consultation event as part of the process. The case studies included South Tyneside Council in North East England (CS1), Oxford City Council (CS2), York City Council (CS3) and The London Borough of Harrow (CS4).<sup>5</sup> Data were supplemented by personal field notes recording discussions during the decision-making panel meetings and a preliminary stage of national-level interviews undertaken with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS),<sup>6</sup> Historic England, Civic Trust,<sup>7</sup> Heritage Lottery Fund<sup>8</sup> and Black Environment Network (BEN).<sup>9</sup> These interviews provided a national context in which to embed the subsequent local case studies, providing a richer data set. As the data collected exposed strikingly parallel insights, it was considered more meaningful to present the results together by theme. The case study data extracts are coded to show which case they came from (e.g. CS2 means Case Study 2). The findings are unpacked below, commencing with the observed legitimization of less grand, everyday forms of heritage such as post-war, industrial, and vernacular heritage, which have now become firmly established as part of the AHD in local conservation planning.

### **Research findings**

#### ***AHD nuances: tangible adaptations***

Primarily, data from all sources suggested that the AHD in local conservation planning has developed from a discourse which prioritised grandeur and elitist, 'highbrow' heritage, to one which normalises more everyday examples, including those with arguably no 'sense of aesthetic grandness' (Choay 2001), such as industrial and post-war heritage. Such examples were recorded through analysis of the local list designations/nominations, as well as the interview data in all four cases, with senior conservation officers stating that they now recognise and accept, 'vernacular materials and construction techniques' (CS1), 'local landmarks' (CS4), 'industrial heritage' (CS1), 'twentieth century architecture' (CS4),

'heritage landscapes' (CS2) and, as one senior officer at Oxford City Council summed up, 'heritage is now accepted to be what's all around us', including 'the non-designated'. The similarities across the four cases indicate that such wider versions of heritage appear to have become embedded in planning practice and a naturalised component of contemporary heritage discourse. Further evidence of this is provided in the documentary evidence and interview data set out below:

- (1) The list includes a variety of heritage assets that use traditional vernacular materials and construction techniques, are local landmarks, [and] are good examples of buildings or structures by local architects (SPD21 Locally Significant Heritage Assets document, CS1).
- (2) The ones [criteria] that are most common ... are the statutory criteria adapted to local needs ... things like industrial, or twentieth century architecture (CS4).
- (3) People are thinking more about the wider landscape than individual sites with limits, they want to see how things connect to each other, how whole areas work (CS2).
- (4) I think if you look back ... 20 years or so I think there is a sense in which people thought of heritage as the particular kind of special things ... special in terms of ... the highly designated things. I think there has been much more of ... a shift towards heritage being what's all around us ... the non-designated as well ... you know the very fact that everything all around us has interest and value and significance (CS2).

Indeed, the decision-making panels assessing nominations for inclusion in the local list all considered industrial, vernacular and post-war buildings/structures to be legitimate examples of heritage. Designations such as those in Figures 1 and 2 were deemed to be of undisputed local heritage value and thus appear in South Tyneside Council's adopted local list. The ubiquity of these examples across the four local authorities confirms that such notions of heritage have become normalised in conservation planning offices, confirming both Howard (2004) and Pendlebury's (2009) claims that less-glorified forms of heritage are now also an established conservation cause. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that the AHD in local conservation planning is progressing into more unconventional areas as discussed below.



**Figure 1.** Former industrial buildings. Source: South Tyneside Council (2011).





**Figure 2.** Former industrial buildings. Source: South Tyneside Council (2011).

### ***AHD nuances: intangible heritage?***

In addition to the above tangible nuances, data expose an evolving discursive broadening of professional conceptualisations of local heritage, with interviewees from all case studies, as well as national bodies, referring to heritage as having a 'broad meaning' (DCMS), representing 'the connection between the tangible and the intangible' (Historic England), being 'to do with culture' (CS1), and as one interviewee expressed, 'It's everything, it's now a much wider concept, intangibles, movable things, social, spiritual values, as well as the tangible things' (CS2).

Discursively, such professional conceptualisations of heritage therefore appear to have extended far beyond special architectural and historic significance, rarity, age and monumentality (Smith 2006), as well as beyond the tangible adaptations observed above. The interviewee's definitions appear to portray heritage as a more complex, multi-sensual experience (Waterton 2007, 2010) rather than something simplistically tied up in the physical fabric of buildings (Hobson 2004; Smith 2006; Byrne 2008). This creep in the discourse, however, is not sufficiently demonstrated in practical decision-making, as argued below. Indeed, analysis of the actual local heritage designations in the four case study locations shows negligible shift in the AHD, however there is some evidence of adjustment, which warrants acknowledgement. Such examples of this include the White Horse 'rock-art' on the cliff face by Marsden Craggs/Quarry Lane and the Al-Azhar Mosque at Laygate, South Shields.

### ***The White Horse***

The White Horse (Figures 3 and 4) is of local heritage value because it represents a locally renowned social-historic intergenerational legend. It is a painting/marketing of a White Horse on a cliff face, reportedly created by Whitburn nobleman Sir Hedworth William following the unexplained disappearance of his wife while riding her White Horse along the Cleadon Hills (see 'description' printed in the South Tyneside adopted Local List technical Appendices in Figure 3).<sup>10</sup>This story is about a nobleman and his wife, yet it is a story that is now firmly associated with Cleadon Hills' place identity and it is passed on to children in the local area as if it were a shared memory. This oral narrative is obviously attached to a material object (the image of the horse on the cliffs) and while this is useful for making the story tangible, it is not in and of itself 'heritage'. The narrative would still be a locally valued intergenerational legend to be passed on even if the image did not exist. It is, however, something local people value and

27. Whitburn nobleman Sir Hedworth Williams and his wife would go riding along the beach at Marsden and picnic at a spot near Darding Lake. But one day Sir Hedworth had to leave on business so Lady Williams went out on her white mare alone. She was seen galloping towards Marsden Rock, which was then attached to the mainland and was last spotted riding into an opening in the rock. Search parties found no trace of her but Sir Hedworth carried on looking for two years until he accepted that the tide must have carried out both the bodies of his wife and her horse out to sea. Heartbroken, he lost all interest in his estate and gave all his horses to an ostler, Wareham, and his money to his gamekeeper, Peter Allen, who later became tenant of the Marsden Grotto. The Williamson family gradually faded out of the scene, but while Peter Allen made money at the Grotto out of visitor's curiosity about Lady Williamson's disappearance, Wareham thought of a more fitting tribute. As a memento to his former master's kindness, he scratched out a white horse with tar and limewash on Cleadon Hills for all to remember (Local List Technical Appendices).

**Figure 3.** White Horse description in local list technical appendices. Source: South Tyneside Council (2011).



**Figure 4.** Image of the White Horse. Photo credited by Author (2016).

would like to see protected because of the associated historical legend. This idea of heritage, as an 'act of passing on and receiving memories and knowledge' or 'as an act of communication and meaning making' is a form of heritage which often fails to find 'synergy with the professional or expert view of heritage' (Smith 2006, 2), yet the White Horse is designated in South Tyneside Council's Local List.

In preparing the accompanying 'justification' statement, however, conservation planners considered the White Horse should be 'justified' for inclusion on the list due to its visual amenity and aesthetic/townscape value only, and thus it was deemed to meet South Tyneside Council's local criterion G (relating to townscape merit and visual amenity) – see STC (2011) for more information on selection criteria. 'Townscape' is defined by Historic England and the Design Council as, 'the relation between the settlements and their landscape context' and townscape analysis includes identifying 'landmarks and vistas, as well as ... the layout, scale and form of buildings and space, materials, colours and texture' (English Heritage and CABE 2008, 12). In other words, such a criterion is concerned only with an area's settlement pattern and/or physical appearance, rather than any narratives of shared value (the true source of the art-work's significance). The use of such a criterion to make tenable this

designation appears to diminish the importance of its explicit intangible historic/social significance, which was not referred to at all in the justification statement. This intangible heritage (narrative) was treated as supplementary information; something that ‘adds something’ to the more tangible effect of the art-work. While the inclusion of the narrative in the designation’s description exposes a degree of flexibility in the AHD operating in this setting (because the previous local lists in the case studies examined did not even mention such legends), this acknowledgement nevertheless appears to remain somewhat constrained in terms of its power to *justify* the designation.

This observation was replicated at other local planning authorities. Indeed, the most commonly applied criteria used to determine local heritage designations in all four local designation processes were variations of the following:

- Architectural and design merit – showing qualities of age and style.
- Townscape merit – visual amenity and landmarks.
- Historic interest – relating to social, cultural, religious, political or economic history.

Whilst thematically, these frequently used criteria correlate quite closely with English national statutory listing criteria and the characteristics of the AHD (namely physical-led, material values related to architectural quality and historic significance), the notion of historic interest is rather ambiguous. While it makes clear that ‘history’ is a crucial factor in decision-making, planning officers still remain more comfortable with tangible manifestations of heritage, as further argued below. Moreover, while the historical narrative is captured in the listing description of the White Horse, it must be highlighted that this narrative refers to a nobleman and his wife. Despite representing an alternative form of heritage, it nevertheless does not provide evidence of non-elite interests being absorbed into the AHD. A further example of the listing of intangible heritage is exposed in relation to the Al-Azhar Mosque designation, discussed below.

### ***The Al-Azhar mosque***

Indeed, the Al-Azhar Mosque at Laygate, South Shields is a further example of the capturing of social history, which, at the time of writing, however, was the only non-British/minority heritage to be designated (thus revealing in itself). The Al-Azhar Mosque was purpose-built in 1971 to satisfy the religious needs of South Shields’ established Yemeni community (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Image of the Al-Azhar Mosque. Photo credited by Author (2016).

Whilst the local list text describes the architecture of the mosque as 'somewhat underwhelming' (STC 2011), the social history of the mosque is what the conservation planners state makes the mosque acceptable for designation. The accompanying description explains that in 1977 the former boxer Mohammad Ali visited Al-Azhar to worship and to have his marriage blessed by the local Imam. Consequently, it has become a cherished landmark of South Shields, especially to the Yemeni community. The conservation planners, however, highlight how unusual it is for them to designate such a building with no aesthetic or historic merit:

- (5) The mosque architecturally is incredibly dull ... it has no merit, but the social history attached to that building is amazing and it needs to be recognised for that and recognising it makes it heritage because it is significant to our community. I mean, it's all interlinked isn't it? ... There's difference of opinions as to whether you think it's architecturally interesting and it certainly isn't old, per se ... it's that cultural heritage, it's that in those architecturally contentious buildings (CS1).
- (6) Yeah, it's a God awful building to look at, but you look at the social history behind it and they really are significant and really do deserve to be on the list ... We are doing something different here (CS1).

Whilst these examples provide evidence of a fusion of values, drawing together materiality and social significance, this synthesis is conveyed as an exception to the norms. The statement, 'we are doing something different here' (extract 6) implies that such decision-making is deemed quite uncommon in heritage designation. Nevertheless, despite their rarity, both the White Horse and the Al-Azhar mosque are noteworthy examples to illustrate some degree of movement in the local heritage designation process. Indeed, officers emphasised how the previous local list included absolutely no reference to any intangible heritage and was dominated purely by historic and/or architecturally important buildings, valued because of their material fabric:

- (7) You just need to look back at what was the local list ... prior to this review the local list was about ... special architecture and old buildings and you look at what we've got in this review and you can see that there's elements of social history there. So this list is significantly different to the list that went before (CS1).

When considering the previous local list (see extract 7 above), one could argue that this is therefore evidence of a shifting AHD in local conservation planning practice, but a shift that is carefully controlled. For instance, as only one example from four case studies, the listing of the Al-Azhar mosque seems largely tokenistic. Indeed, the mosque is designated on terms understandable by the majority (and by non-Muslims) – Mohammad Ali was a famous historic figure that is relatable to by a large number of people, rather than representative of a listing done for values that represent the Yemeni community. While such a listing does help to illustrate a shift in expert conceptualisations of heritage working on South Tyneside Council's local list, thus requiring acknowledgement, it is important to emphasise that such adjustments to the discourse are clearly not translating into *radical* change in decision-making, or to the AHD. Indeed, in discussing this (and other similar examples) with senior conservation officers in all four local authorities, the resounding message was that such examples were negligible because they represented 'planning risk'. As a senior conservation officer at South Tyneside Council explained, 'if such a building faced demolition, such stories and associations might not be enough to save it' (CS1). Similarly, a senior conservation officer at York City Council stated, 'examples like these do exist but they are the *least* secure form of justification when facing the threat of unwanted change or demolition' (CS3).

### ***A dominant (yet nuanced) normative heritage discourse***

Having shown evidence of some repositioning in the wider *discursive* constructions of heritage, the local heritage designation process, however, remains dominated by materiality. Only a negligible

proportion (4%) of total (and proposed) local heritage designations in all case study locations related to intangible heritage. Despite a discursive emphasis on ascribed social/cultural meanings, a consensus emerged through all interview data that built environment professionals are predominantly 'interested in bricks and mortar' (Historic England) and, 'they're less comfortable with designating something that doesn't have some kind of physical presence and physical value' (Civic Trust). The limited number of social heritage designations confirms that there remains a dominant 'controlling centre' that is yet to be dismantled (Bakhtin 1985, 1986). While the social content of heritage appears to have found some semblance of a place within the AHD, its embedding is clearly constrained. Indeed, deeper probing during the 30 interviews revealed that the initial evolving rhetoric (or 'lip-service' to borrow from Pendlebury (2009)) struggles to find an instrumental use in conservation planning practice, as unpacked below.

### **Barriers to change**

Indeed, national level data revealed that the English conservation planning response to wider international trends in heritage discourse 'is quite slow' (Historic England) and that the environment in which local heritage designation sits is held back by 'strong ideology and organisational culture' (DCMS). Local authorities are described as having, 'feet of clay' (CS2), established 'mind-sets' which are difficult to 'break through' and as such an environment where it is, 'really hard to step back and think about things in that more philosophical sense' (BEN).

The local case study interview data pointed to some particularly constraining characteristics of this: the need for heritage claims to be, 'clearly justifiable' (CS1), 'properly evidenced' (CS2), 'rigorous' (CS2), 'careful' (CS3), 'robust' (CS3), 'defensible in planning' (CS1,2&3), underpinned by a 'robust evidence base' (CS1,2&4), and 'clear-cut and valued by many' (CS1). Such professional parameters of heritage legitimisation, the extracts below indicate, are borne out of an increasing fear of planning appeal and/or legal challenge and the basic need to defend decisions in the wider planning arena. Constrained by this setting, the lead conservation officer preparing South Tyneside's local list explained 'it is always difficult to justify the intangible'.

Indeed, there appears to be a heightened contemporary struggle with the more subjective, emotional forms of reasoning in current planning practice (Waterton 2010), which appears to be intensified by the ephemeral UK political agenda that has recently shifted towards an emphasis on growth and delivery. As such, at the expense of localism, interviewees describe a, 'more pressing growth strategy' (CS2) and a consequent perceived need to be, 'conscious of potentially more appeals' (CS1). Such a changing working context has created a volatile planning environment, characterised by instability, uncertainty and fear of challenge:

- (8) It's a difficult time right now for conservation officers. It's hard to do more when we're thin on the ground. It's also tough to expect us to expand conservation values when there is a more pressing growth strategy that needs to be thought about. We can't be seen to be being unduly prescriptive or else we'll probably face an appeal situation (CS2).
- (9) Certainly because of the emphasis on growth and delivery, we're conscious of potentially more appeals ... so we need to prioritise heritage assets which are defensible, clear-cut and valued by many. Conservation officers don't want to raise their heads above the parapet right now in this period of diminished resources (CS1).
- (10) ... There is that proviso that it would be the council's money that would be on the line in terms of appeal and the council officer who would have to defend the document (CS4).

As a consequence of the above, there is a natural assumption that any defence at appeal can only be made using technical, objective reasoning, belonging to the realms of specialist expertise. A direct implication of this defensive working environment seems to be the need for technical evidence and a privileging of positivism, characterised by the search for rationality and scientific/technical fact.

This struggle to emplace subjective reasoning in planning is reinforced by a senior professional in Historic England, who, speaking about local conservation planning, stated:

(11) No, in practice, social value is not considered to be relevant ... it is deemed to be a subjective emotional attachment, and therefore not relevant (Historic England).

Such assumptions confine notions of 'social value' to the realms of, 'subjective emotional attachment' (Smith and Waterton 2009) and thus, 'not relevant' (extract 11). Drawing on Lowenthal's (2015) consideration of the distaste for the 'unreliable' emotion, it appears that in conservation planning environments it is *mandatory* to prevent such subjectivity 'clouding' the more comfortable, manageable versions of the 'past'. Moreover, because a scientific, analytical process underpinned by rational, objective evidence is *required* to be successful at planning appeal, the retention of technical, 'expert' status presents itself as not necessarily an elitist, power-hungry professional desire (as cautioned by Pendlebury (2009, 186)), but instead, a practical necessity. Such parameters of validity/integrity in planning, thus serve to justify, naturalise and sustain the deep-rooted, yet subtly nuanced, AHD.

## Discussion

The above findings identify an interesting paradox. The openness of the conservation planning *discourse* and the shift towards more local community-led listing is tightly bounded by the operational requirements of the planning system. Such bounded horizons represent a worldview that is perceived necessary *to do the job*. This emerges as a tightening-up of decision-making, which philosophically can be understood as a largely involuntary adoption of an epistemological position forced towards the positivist (epistemological realist) pole of the epistemological spectrum. What is more, there appears to be a current (re)intensification of positivist decision-making in planning practice; decisions which are more cautious, guarded and constrained by notions of objective evidence and absolute truth in order to defend designations.

Constrained by the observed deep-set ideologies, strong organisational culture, established norms/working practices and other systemic weaknesses conservation planners are therefore unable to adapt appropriately to wider societal transformations and needs. Planners currently do not have the structural tools or legal apparatus to accommodate heritage diversity. On a more superficial level, this is constrained by diminishing resources. On a deeper, more fundamental level, this is a consequence of the above deeply engrained sector-wide challenges and organisational culture of a rational planning environment (Ludwig and Ludwig 2014).

The idiosyncrasies prevalent in the planning discipline help to explain such lines of thinking. Indeed, wider arguments in planning theory have since the 1960s encouraged a move away from positivist approaches to planning, and instead promote the acceptance of more subjective forms of reasoning in planning decision-making. This is clearly struggling to translate adequately into practice. Moreover, planning theory encourages striving to reach an ultimate goal of consensus and/or collective agreement in democratic decision-making fora (Healey [1997] 2006). While Patsy Healey sees consensus as an agreement to be found during inclusive deliberation, to strive for it in *conservation planning* may in fact have undesired consequences 'for community groups seeking to assert an alternative understanding of heritage', which others do not share and should not be forced to (Smith and Waterton 2009, 77). Indeed, there are an increasing number of local communities that now have an acknowledged and explicit 'unconsensual' view about what heritage is, how and when it is created and to whom it belongs (Sykes and Ludwig 2015). This natural dissonance found between and within communities is amplified when contextualised by the fact that according to the UN (2012, 3), 'human mobility is at its highest levels in recorded history'. This intensification of migration is not necessarily leading to greater fluidity and openness in heritage conservation planning. Given that several commentators have highlighted the complex links between 'heritage', 'identity' and 'belonging' (Massey 1995; Dicks 2000; Harrison 2010) and that the identification, recognition and conservation of 'heritage' is an important human need (Bonnici 2009), concentrating efforts on consensus or agreement in respect to heritage,

thus underplays the importance of 'difference'; a matter of increasing importance in contemporary society (Foresight 2013).

Inclusive heritage protection and management, however, is not about preserving everything. Rather than an undesirable, too 'plural-centric' approach to listing, my argument is that at present wider trends in the international heritage discourse cannot be adequately implemented within the current legal apparatus and mind-set of traditional rational planning. While a line needs to be drawn to clarify which conceptualisations of heritage receive legitimisation in this process (e.g. using local designation criteria), the planning system at present has no wholly satisfactory (justifiable/defensible) means of safeguarding a building, structure, landscape (or any other aspect of the built and natural environment) unless it has some visible, physical quality (tangible heritage) and aligns with material-focussed expert interpretations of heritage. This is a key barrier that needs further research to understand how the diverse layers of heritage can be emplaced and fully legitimised in planning settings. It could, however, be argued that local lists are conceptually different from other planning protection systems because they are not embodied in legislation, and therefore their role could be to simply record/celebrate intangible heritage, or indeed that there may be a different way (outside of the planning system) to capture such heritage values. If local heritage designation is to be inclusive, however, the planning system *needs* to find a means of managing/operationalising alternative forms of heritage that lack traditional tangible values, yet hold significance. As the quotations from conservation officers show (see above), in conservation planning, 'stories and associations might not be enough' (CS1) and the conservation of such types of heritage is therefore at risk.

The mounting liberal rhetoric operating in conservation planning thus falls short of radically transforming the AHD in its practical context. Instead it presents itself as a fragile sub-AHD (to borrow from Pendlebury 2013), subject to instant regression because of its inability to align with, and 'sink down deeply' into the conservation orthodoxy and the culture and norms of the conservation planning profession (Albrechts 2010). Thus, whilst emerging as a trajectory of change, the extent of this developing discourse has clear limitations.

## Conclusion

This paper has provided a means through which understanding of the AHD can be further refined. It has shown how the AHD has been subtly recast in the context of local conservation planning practice: indeed, in addition to the special architectural and historic significance, rarity, age and monumentality upheld by the AHD, contemporary conceptualisations of heritage have extended to legitimise and naturalise less grand examples such as post-war, industrial, and vernacular heritage. Such examples, however, I have shown continue to fetishize materiality, objects and sites (Smith 2006). While the material subjects of the AHD have therefore evolved further than might have initially been implied by Smith's original formulation, the AHD clearly remains problematic, rigidly controlled by expert/elite interests.

Second, I have shown that there has been some creep in the discourse but as yet this falls short of transformative change in practice. Indeed, transformative change 'rarely occurs in instant revolutions' and instead 'is change that actually evolves in many small ways' (Albrechts 2010, 1118). The struggles observed in the English planning system justify extant concerns about the exclusionary power of the AHD (Smith 2006; Waterton 2010) and raise genuine questions about integration of wider international trends in heritage discourse at domestic scales. If such concerns are to be brought onto the planning agenda, planning professionals 'need to take part in a very proactive way to substantiate the transformative practices that are needed' (Albrechts 2010, 1125). The planning inspectorate, for instance, may have an influential role to play in the establishment of case law<sup>11</sup> to facilitate real shifts in conservation planning. The findings of this research thus offer a thesis that can be more widely probed to unite the heritage and planning literature, advancing understanding of this blockage to accelerate positive change. Formally recognising alternative heritage values in conservation planning is to be inclusive and foster resilience of diversity in the face of growing nationalism. To make such

diversities visible is to make space for them; to emplace them. It is hoped that the arguments presented in this paper will encourage further international research to investigate how intangible heritage can be legitimised and emplaced in rational planning environments.

## Notes

1. Historic England (formally English Heritage) is a public body which advises the UK Government. It is an arm's length body of the Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) providing expert advice on protecting the historic environment.
2. PPS5 was superseded by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) two years later.
3. Practical examples of this include the introduction of Neighbourhood Planning and Community Asset Transfer (part of The Localism Act 2011 – see Part 6 'Planning', Chapter 3 'Neighbourhood Planning' and Part 5 'Community Empowerment', Chapter 3: 'Assets of Community Value').
4. Interviewees are anonymised to uphold confidentiality; they included director-level and senior-level professionals from the national bodies listed, and interviews with three senior-level conservation planning officers and an elected member in each local authority.
5. At the point of data completion, only South Tyneside Council had finalised and adopted their local list. Oxford City Council and York City Council had progressed far through the process and had proposed designations. The Borough of Harrow were progressing very slowly with collecting public nominations.
6. National Government Department responsible for protecting and promoting cultural and artistic heritage, in addition to supporting innovation in businesses and communities to grow the economy.
7. A national charity for the civic movement in England.
8. Most significant funder of heritage in the UK since 1994.
9. A network to represent ethnic issues through influencing policy and fuelling debate (this organisation played a strategic role in the preparation of Historic England's publication 'Power of Place' in 2000).
10. All designations on local lists require both a 'description' (as in Figure 3) and a 'justification statement', which explains which local designation criterion has been met.
11. Case law is a set of decisions of adjudicatory tribunals that can be cited as precedent.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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