



# Into the Contact Zones of Heritage Diplomacy: Local Realities, Transnational Themes and International Expectations

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## Abstract

Heritage is increasingly promoted as a tool for economic and social development to help rebuild societies that have suffered conflict and deep social trauma. Heritage diplomacy is an emergent form of cultural relations that forms a ‘contact zone’ between different stakeholders and divergent expectations. This paper explores some aspects of this field of heritage diplomacy and develops a basic typology by contrasting the tension between the uses of ‘charismatic heritage diplomacy’ and more ‘careful heritage diplomacy’. It examines differences between local realities and international expectations of heritage by bringing together two case studies: one from a Creative Europe–funded project where civil society actors develop strategies for working with the difficult heritage that lies behind nationalist myths, and the other from a British Council–funded programme dealing with endangered heritage in the MENA region. Critical studies of heritage-making often pitch the local against the international, with grassroot activities contrasted with international rhetoric surrounding heritage places, objects and practices. However, this dichotomy can mask other actors and social dynamics, not least the subtleties of how the collective traumas of conflict play out in the cultural field. The idea of heritage diplomacy as a ‘contact zone’ (Clifford 1997) highlights that heritage-making in (post-)conflict cultural relations is an ontological encounter between international agents and the traumatised communities for whom the stakes are, inevitably, higher. Mediated through the transnational best practices of heritage professionals, and through the visible pragmatism of civil society heritage activists, the impacts of heritage-making nevertheless remain complicated and entangled.

**Keywords** Heritage diplomacy · Conflict heritage · Civil-society · European heritage

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## Introduction

“Syrians should not pay too much attention to what the wider world believes we ‘must’ do next. Whatever path the country chooses to take with our heritage it shouldn’t be for the sake of anybody else [...]. Instead, let’s for once sacrifice the temptation to do ‘too much too soon’, rather, let’s do it right.” [Marwa Al-Sabouni 2017]

The stakes are high for the heritage sector. The last few years have seen the systematic destruction of numerous heritage sites, places, practices and people. In the aftermath of humanitarian horrors, and amidst a familiar feeling of failure on the part of the international community, heritage is being strategically promoted as a tool of international cultural diplomacy. In part this is also due to the successful ascendance of heritage within cultural policy, increasingly becoming the focus of policy instruments and international conventions. And within Europe heritage is increasingly mobilised by the European Commission to aid Europe’s own internal cultural relations, during a marked turn to ethno-linguistic nationalism across the continent.

This paper discusses two kinds of heritage diplomacy: charismatic and careful. I borrow Nour Munawar’s (2017, p.14) description of ‘charismatic archaeology’, which identifies those sites—like Palmyra, the Al Nuri Mosque, the Stari Most bridge—that are recognised as highly symbolic, as icons of a past culture. Such sites are useful to international donors, they work well for key agents in the Bourdieusian ‘field’ of cultural relations: they ensure diplomatic largesse is visible, and emphasise that the donor is aligned with international values. On the other hand, ‘careful heritage diplomacy’ is less spectacular. Here, donors fund high-risk projects, often dealing with communities and intangible heritage that are—quite simply—hard to work with. In other words, charismatic heritage diplomacy tells a good story, often one of international assistance and rallying around ‘universal values’; instead, careful heritage diplomacy eschews clear narratives in favour of trying to open up the past and make it work for communities traumatised by conflict. To attempt to test the promises made of heritage as a factor in improving social cohesion, the paper describes what heritage diplomacy looks like on the ground, in the shared work of heritage practitioners and civil society activists.

I argue for the advantages of seeing heritage diplomacy—both charismatic and careful—less as cultural relations, and more as a ‘contact zone’, a space where divergent viewpoints are brought together. The contrasts between local realities and international expectations of heritage are further highlighted by bringing together two case-studies that attempt to work with the heritage of conflict: one from a Creative Europe-funded project where civil society actors develop strategies for working with difficult heritage, and the other from a British Council-funded programme dealing with endangered heritage. One deals with heritage-making around historic prejudices that continue to divide European society (Europe’s diverse nationalisms and their stereotyping of others), with civil society actors pitched against nationalist and xenophobic uses of the past; the other on how heritage conservation work in conflict-ridden contexts like Libya might contribute to rebuilding civil society itself. This comparison draws attention to the continual need for carefully engaging with the difficult past, even decades later: the future impacts of heritage diplomacy are unpredictable.

The paper draws on my own work as a researcher within the Heritage Contact Zone project, and a series of interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019 with Principal Investigators from eight funded CPF projects, as well as with grants managers and other British Council staff. Other material came from my own previous application for a CPF project in Afghanistan made with

a peacebuilding NGO, as well as involvement in the CReW Workshop ‘Reinforcing cooperation on cultural heritage in the EU neighbourhood south’ in 2018, hosted by the British Council in London.

The following section describes how heritage diplomacy has emerged in this era of exceptional violence towards cultural heritage, and resurgent nationalisms that prefer ethno-linguistic or ethno-religious revisionist histories to nuanced and multivocal pasts. The ‘[Careful Heritage Diplomacy](#)’ section then details aspects of one project funded under the British Council’s Cultural Protection Fund (CPF), and then compares this in the ‘[Civil Society as a Contact Zone Between Policy and Practice](#)’ section with some of the work of the Creative Europe–funded Heritage Contact Zone (HCZ) project. Some final reflections on what heritage diplomacy looks like on the ground highlight key differences between heritage activists working across Europe and ongoing conflict in North Africa. The underlying question is whether the ‘contact zones’ of heritage diplomacy are what they hope to be—spaces and processes of mutual exchange furthering greater social cohesion—or whether they are window-dressing for the international community’s history of failure to preserve human life and culture during the world’s recent conflicts.

### **Difficult Heritage and Charismatic Heritage Diplomacy**

How is ‘difficult heritage’ being used in cultural relations? Examining the long list of failures to conserve heritage and its communities (from Mostar to Mosul, Djenne to Sana’a), leads me to characterise the prevalent trend in international uses of heritage as ‘charismatic heritage diplomacy’. The idea that this diplomacy may itself be problematic is based on critical analyses of recent heritage-based interventions around ancient sites and museums destroyed by Daesh and others before them (e.g. Hamilakis 2009; Joy 2018; Isakhan and Meskell 2019; Munawar 2017); it also draws on studies that reveal the political game-playing around transborder and transnational ‘dark heritage’ sites like Seodaeman Prison in Korea (Huang and Lee 2019), and the Soča Valley in Slovenia (Clarke et al. 2017).

Whilst the literature specifically on ‘heritage diplomacy’ is not large, this is in part because heritage has long been used in cultural diplomacy (Kersel and Luke 2015, p.70), so ‘heritage diplomacy’ can be seen as essentially just another name for public diplomacy. Tim (2015) emphasises heritage’s role ‘as a form of governance’ and describes the different ways heritage works both *as* diplomacy, and *in* diplomacy. In demonstrating just how heritage operates as governance, both co-opted and co-opting, he highlights how heritage sites are often instrumentalised for other ends; those who have worked closely on the diplomatic subtleties of UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee substantiate this (Brumann 2018). Nevertheless, whilst some heritage diplomacy is charismatic, much is rooted in local communities and their concerns, and civil society heritage organisations and activists take a careful approach to managing the conflicting concerns of conservation, development, tourism and gentrification. An emerging interest amongst scholars is how to decolonise instrumentalised heritage diplomacy through pluralising forms of heritage practice and archiving (Clopot 2020), a tendency that the case studies covered in this paper represent.

To understand why heritage practice needs pluralising, we need to highlight the tensions between international expectations and local perspectives. For example, aspects of heritage diplomacy come close to other international activities that impact on local lives: this means they look like foreign-donor development, and indeed, in the CPF case, the programme is in

fact official development assistance (ODA), and its outcomes aligned with the OECD. Instead, for civil society activists we note how the EU's heritage diplomacy—as pursued in this case through a call specific to the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 (EYCH)—is sometimes naive in assuming heritage is an unproblematic social good, even as it supports the local agendas of civil society organisations and heritage professionals. Indeed, the kinds of dichotomies between local/global, community/professionals, even heritage/development (Basu and Modest 2014, p.3) are always simplifications of complex realities.

International collaboration, assistance and networking on heritage are multifaceted, with much attention given to the conservation needs of places, buildings and sites. Here though we focus on heritage *under threat* (archaeological sites and Sufi shrines in North Africa), and heritage *that threatens* social cohesion (European xenophobia and nationalism). If earlier heritage diplomacy was interested in heritage threatened by natural disasters and manmade development like the Aswan High Dam in the 1950s, after the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001 by the Taliban, heritage has come to be defined by its use in identity conflicts. In fact, interest in addressing such deliberate destruction through international instruments has increased over the last 30 years, with notable moments being the resolution adopted by the European Parliament in April 2015 on the destruction of heritage sites by Daesh/ISIS, with a further resolution in June of the same year (for Palmyra) and a July resolution, also in 2015, regarding Yemeni heritage sites at risk from the civil war (European Parliament 2018, p.5). As mentioned above, particularly significant was the UN Security Council's Resolution 2347.

Given that the vast majority of heritage at risk is threatened by development processes, general ignorance and poor management (a notable recent example being Rio Tinto's 'accidental destruction' of the 46,000-year-old Juukan Gorge Aboriginal site in May 2020), why have international donors and new initiatives gravitated to these spectacular horrors? The historic precedent was the concern with heritage destroyed during the Napoleonic Wars, something explicitly recognised in the 1814–1815 Congress of Vienna (Sørensen and Viejo-Rose 2015). The contemporary reason is that western donors continue to play straight into the 'clash of civilisations' narrative that drives deliberate destruction like the 'cultural atrocities' of Daesh in Syria and Iraq. A related answer is that much heritage diplomacy garners its support—political, mediatic, financial—from focusing on the visible, those viscerally *memorable* moments of destruction: Bamiyan, the Bel Temple and Triumphal Arch of Palmyra, the Stari Most bridge. Both France and Italy have played prominent roles here, from President Hollande's launch of the 2016 exhibition 'Eternal Sites: from Bamiyan to Palmyra' at the Louvre with Irina Bokova, the then Director-General of UNESCO, and in 2017 Italy's hosting of the first G7 Ministerial Meeting on Culture which featured the 3D reconstruction of Palmyra's Triumphal Arch. Worth noting is that each member-state's minister was allowed to bring one representative of their cultural sector to the discussions: the UK chose the Chief Executive of the British Council Sir Ciaran Devane.

Attacks on heritage have long drawn widespread international condemnation, but relatively little restructuring of international instruments to enforce substantial change. However, the attempt to save Timbuktu's manuscripts from Ansar al-Dine in 2012 did help to establish CPK at the core of peacekeeping missions. The key change came in 2016 when the International Criminal Court found Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi responsible for 'crimes against culture' for his destruction of the Sidi Yahia mosque and Sufi mausoleums (Joy 2018, p.15). His conviction was the first of its kind in the world, re-establishing the idea of international responsibility for cultural heritage.

Despite these changes, many of those who work on the ground remain deeply concerned that current efforts are totally inadequate: more performances of solidarity to allay guilt than programmes that actually help. After all, in principle the legal instruments have existed since the 1954 *Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* and its two Protocols. Moreover, Britain and France are the only two permanent members of the UN Security Council to have ratified them. For archaeologists like David Mattingly with more than 30 years experience of working across the region:

EU policy-makers and international organizations like UNESCO have been incredibly ineffective in dealing with the developing scale of the crisis. There have been many workshops in attractive places bringing together heritage experts from around the world and heritage professionals from MENA countries, but there has been remarkably little follow up action from those sorts of meetings. In many ways, I feel a bit like a climate scientist observing the signs of the environmental catastrophe in the field and reporting back to a still sceptical world that does not recognize climate change. (Mattingly 2018, p.2)

My argument here is not to question the intentions of international funders but to consider the likely outcomes of certain kinds of action versus others. What are the risks of such charismatic heritage diplomacy, and what does the focus on the visible and iconic tell us about the real values being promulgated? Because there is another side to heritage diplomacy too, less charismatic, and with less quantifiable impact. This careful side of soft power is driven less by the glories of resurrecting monuments, and more by what comes from the shared best practices of the professionals and civil society activists who actually work with heritage.

### Other Heritage Diplomacies

A variety of international heritage organisations run specific programmes dealing with heritage at risk. Some of these institutions bring with them immense cultural capital accumulated through their technical expertise (ICCRUM), others are technocratic and politically-constrained (UNESCO), some specialised and pragmatic (Prince Claus Fund). Others began with a fairly open strategy but have become increasingly politicised (US Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Protection), and others are too new to evaluate (ALIPH).

The heritage sector became particularly animated by the creation of the ALIPH Foundation in 2017 (The International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas, based in Geneva), essentially a cooperation between France and the United Arab Emirates, with significant involvement—and financing—from other countries and private donors. France remains the biggest donor with \$30 million, with Saudi Arabia promising \$10 million, UAE \$7.5, Kuwait \$5 and smaller amounts from Luxembourg, Morocco and China. Initially funding projects in Libya, Mali, Iraq and Afghanistan, ALIPH has since expanded to cover fifteen target countries. ALIPH's manifesto—"A response to barbarism. An alliance of the willing. [...] A unique guiding spirit: 'Action, Action, Action'" (ALIPH 2019)—places them as an actor focused on the charismatic side of heritage diplomacy. It is worth noting though, as do Isakhan and Meskell (2019), that some of the new heritage saviours funding the regeneration of Mosul also (indirectly) funded Daesh's destruction and looting.

Whilst the game of comparing funds is a blunt indicator, it is worth noting Qatar's commitment in 2014 to spending \$135 million on Sudanese heritage alone, an unprecedented amount for one single country. Nevertheless, in April 2019, the circa €1 billion donated in a

matter of days for the restoration of the fire-damaged Parisian cathedral of Notre Dame dwarfed it. To compare, the UNESCO-led project *Revive the Spirit of Mosul and Basra* is a multi-donor 3-year programme that funds restoration and develops livelihoods in the two Iraqi cities: in February 2019 the EU committed to donating €20 million in development cooperation as part of a total budget of €85 million (see [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/projects/reviving-spirit-mosul-and-basra\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/projects/reviving-spirit-mosul-and-basra_en)). The case of Notre Dame indicates that there remains a global hierarchy of heritage value: the ‘charisma’ of certain heritage sites is not inherent, rather it consolidates geopolitical and economic interests with cultural values.

In these other funds and programmes that work specifically with heritage at risk, there has also been expanded interest from European institutions. Increased collaboration over the trade in illicit antiquities and Horizon2020 projects that are supporting new networks like ILUCIDARE (International Network for Leveraging Successful Cultural Heritage Innovations and Diplomacy, Capacity Building and Awareness Raising) demonstrate that the potential of heritage diplomacy is increasingly recognised. However, if we take the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 (EYCH) as emblematic of how European institutions think about heritage, we are not taken far beyond traditional ideas of heritage. The slogan for the year ‘Where the past meets the future’ was vague, and the problematic aspects of cultural heritage—such as tackling how it is mobilised for ethno-nationalist and xenophobic identities—remained secondary to conservation values and a positivist idea of heritage as a social good. This positivist idea of heritage fits the geopolitically useful narrative of Europe and the West as responsible custodians of heritage, defenders of universal values through culture. The following two sections show why this matters, and that the methods of grantees of the UK’s Cultural Protection Fund and of some of the partners in the Heritage Contact Zone represent approaches where heritage is chosen, evaluated and mobilised differently within cultural relations. These approaches appear to take seriously Syrian architect Marwa Al-Sabouni’s challenge to the international community not to just rush in with ‘solutions’: ‘Action, action, action’ is perhaps not what civil society needs to rebuild itself.

## Careful Heritage Diplomacy

Are there significant differences between what the British Council’s CPF is doing, and what the civil society based HCZ practitioners hope to achieve? What kinds of impacts can internationally funded heritage-making projects have on networks of locally based heritage professionals and civil society institutions? This pilot project of the British Council is a particular kind of heritage diplomacy, still very much of this era of ‘cultural atrocities’, but characterised by pragmatism and an ethical orientation based in the work of practitioners. In the ‘[Civil Society as a Contact Zone Between Policy and Practice](#)’ section, we see how the HCZ represents a similar approach, one led by the interests and working knowledge of civil society actors.

## The Cultural Protection Fund: Origins and Priorities

Following events in Iraq and Syria, the British Council’s CPF was first announced in 2015, and then took form following a consultation process instigated by the UK’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) at the beginning of 2016. The consultation asked professionals from the sector for advice on the thematic and regional priority areas for a fund to assist with heritage at risk in twelve target countries (mostly in the MENA region). From the outset,

emphasis was placed on the official development assistance (ODA) goals that underlie all British ODA funding, and it was clear that the CPF was being set up to prioritise projects that fulfilled the following three outcomes: (1) cultural heritage protection, (2) training, (3) advocacy and education (DCMS 2016: 12).

The consultation revealed widespread support, followed by significant political mobilisation at this time, not just because of the ‘cultural atrocities’, but also incontrovertible evidence of the UK’s role in the illicit antiquities trade. Since its inception in 2016, the fund has received more than 1000 proposals, and by maintaining a high profile within government—including an exhibition in 2019 in the UK’s Houses of Parliament—another round of funding was secured in October 2019, with preparations underway for an enhanced Fund from 2021. Much remains uncertain, however: in June 2020, the pandemic put the BC on the brink of insolvency, and the merging of DFID with the Foreign Office by the Johnson government adds further confusion. Two reports—*Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth* (2018) and *Art for Peace* (2019)—show that the BC continues to expand its work using heritage for social goals and cultural relations, with some of this international heritage diplomacy funded through the UK’s Heritage Lottery Fund.

Unlike the HLF, the CPF sets its goals in line with some government policies but is strongly influenced by stakeholder consultations across the cultural sector. One such recent consultation resulted in the report ‘Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth’ (British Council 2018) and here too the possibilities of heritage for cultural diplomacy were noted. However, these are described as *secondary*, so that goals more resonant with ODA objectives remain a greater priority. ‘The secondary outcomes of this theory of change relate to UK cultural relations and soft power, to provide deeper relationships, stronger influence/attraction and long-term value to the UK’. (British Council 2018, p.23). Equally significant is the recent BC commissioned report *Culture and Development: towards an interdisciplinary methodology* (Singh 2019) whose findings reappear throughout BC policy strategies, and underpin the programme’s ethical stance. Indeed, the new funding round for 2020 to 2021 revised their required project outcomes for applicants under three ‘impact areas’ (heritage, society, economy), with there now being five ‘society’ outcomes (see: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/arts/culture-development/cultural-protection-fund/apply/eligibility>).

There is a deliberately sought heterogeneity in the projects that get funded and an underlying ethos—financial transparency and commitment to pro-social development goals—that makes the CPF unique: this is a particularly careful deployment of soft power. Though the development of the CPF was in part a response to the deliberate destruction that flourished during the Syrian War and the emergence of Daesh, it essentially reflects two broader paradigm shifts in British governance, one within ODA, the other within heritage policy.

The first were the major changes in how the UK structured its aid and its foreign policy during the Tony Blair government (1997 to 2007): the UK tried to detach ODA funding from business interests and established a new global governance norm of transparency (Haufler 2010). Despite recent political stasis UK policy remains internationally influential and the UK has only just moved down to second place in the rankings of global ‘soft power’ (<http://softpower30.com>).

The second shift in governance was catalysed by the UK’s National Lottery Heritage Fund established in 1994. With funding coming direct from citizens through the purchase of lottery tickets, the HLF funds projects citizens hold to be interesting, rather than follow central government policy (IN05). Consequently, HLF projects deal with multiple aspects of heritage:

far from the eurocentric ‘castles and cathedrals’ model of European heritage, the UK heritage sector celebrates diversity, from the life histories of prisoners to Jewish secular LGBT spiritualities. £7.1 billion for over 40,000 projects has gone a long way to taking heritage-making in the UK out of the conservative domain of conservation, and turning it into a laboratory for processes of social inclusion, fostering public engagement and expanding heritage (Maeer 2017). These two changes in UK development and heritage appear to have resulted in a particularly pragmatic approach, a ‘careful heritage diplomacy’ that grantees and others appreciate, and one rooted in fostering and expanding the role of civil society actors. In his assessment of working with the CPF, John Darlington, Director of the World Monuments Fund which has two CPF projects, one training Syrian stonemasons in traditional techniques, one restoring a national museum in Yemen, commented:

By its very nature, working in a conflict zone is not easy and requires flexibility by all involved. I’ve found the British Council grants teams to be the opposite of bureaucratic box-tickers – willing to listen, understanding of the situation, and flexing with us to get the best out of the project. (British Council 2019, p.18)

Whilst many international heritage actions involve high-visibility restorations, the CPF instead funds projects that tackle less quantifiable aspects: intangible heritage, community cohesion, religiously sensitive cultural practices. This echoes the development orientation of the CPF, the criteria used during CPF evaluations of potential projects is not typological but development-focused: are projects viable, do they deliver on the three ODA goals, and can they demonstrate local buy-in, legitimacy and relevance?

Many CPF projects eschew the spectacular, the charismatic, in favour of heritage that is little known, but of significant social value. These range from £484,110 for endangered language in Yemen’s Soqatra archipelago, £997,000 to develop community museums in western Sudan, £2,497,198 to revive lost craft traditions in Kabul’s Old City Murad Khani, £250,955 to protect Yazidi musical culture in northern Iraq, and £96,700 to record the intangible heritage of Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The partnerships behind each project are different, some involving heritage ‘giants’ like ICCROM-ATHAR and the British Museum, but many involving small NGOs and developing new nascent networks. Significantly, the British Council has long-favoured an idea of cultural relations that are person-to-person, institution-to-institution. The CPF uses the same idea, and indeed the projects themselves—for the most part—echo this ethos: a careful use of heritage in cultural diplomacy.

### Training in Action

Training in Action is a transnational CPF project, one using its £963,825 budget to train both Libyan and Tunisian heritage officials in documentation techniques; the BC is particularly interested in training as it directly addresses one of their ODA goals of alleviating poverty. Led by the University of Durham, it involves other UK academic institutions—King’s College London and UCL—and on the ground is partnered with the Institut National du Patrimoine de Tunisie, and the Department of Antiquities, Libya. The situation in Libya is complex, so there are in fact two directors of the Dept. of Antiquities, one for Western Libya, and another for Eastern Libya. The dire situation has developed into a proxy war, with even EU member states supporting different factions (e.g. France’s support for General Haftar). Though often depicted as a Western versus Eastern Libyan split, the conflict dynamics are more complicated



(Harchaoui and Lazib 2019), and at the time of writing remain a disaster for the country's inhabitants, and a foreign-policy conundrum for the Mediterranean neighbourhood. Despite years of conflict the two Directors of Antiquities have been able to work together, in part because most of the training has been run in Tunisia.

Training in Action has received little direct assistance on the ground from the British Council. In some ways, the project's director welcomes this hands-off approach, as it has facilitated the ways they can consolidate their relationships with local institutions. Indeed, for those that have experience of grants from other sources, the British Council's light touch is both appreciated and unique. Delivering these kinds of projects on the ground always involves compromise and change, and the help of local BC offices in providing information on the viability of projects creates realistic expectations for both funder and grantees. These kinds of offices have a unique kind of cultural capital, valued because of their long-running role as a provider of cultural programming, small grants and language tuition. Indeed, in the case of Tunisia and Libya, the British Council was instrumental in facilitating the growth of culture throughout the Arab Spring by supporting new cultural NGOs and civil society activists (British Council 2012).

In line with project design common to UK-funded development projects which aim to develop local 'buy-in', Training in Action not only provides training in site recording and database management, but uses some of its budget to open a competition for trainees to present their own mini-projects. These have been remarkably successful, enabling enterprising local heritage professionals to work in parts of Libya that have been off limits for years. Given a situation of constant flux in Libya, making these trainings and mini-projects a reality has required subtle manoeuvres: collaborations with the Institut Français in Tripoli, with the German archaeological mission in Tunisia and others. One interviewee described how not only is mutual tacit help given between a UK-led project and another European national embassy (IN13), but even materials like computers are shared between them (IN07). Often based on personal relationships these interactions constitute a level of heritage diplomacy that operates below the official visible one. This range of interactions constitutes a 'community of practice' between heritage professionals, international organisations and other civil society actors that creates its own kinds of diplomatic opportunities and mutual recognition, a kind of ad hoc 'contact zone' enabling meaningful heritage work to take place. This other level of heritage diplomacy is recognised by the CPF grants managers and individual project managers. Transacted by locally based heritage professionals rather than politicians or bureaucrats, this echoes the British Council's preferred form of cultural relations as being person-to-person, institution-to-institution. In post-conflict states the reputations of grant givers is on the ground, judged by what you are able to achieve and how engaged you are with local stakeholders. In many of these contexts the British Council appears more interested in their legitimacy being recognised at this level of civil society than they are of state-level largesse and posturing.

### **Civil Society as a Contact Zone Between Policy and Practice**

Whilst the CPF focuses on helping MENA-region states try to use heritage towards broader social and development goals, the European Commission is leveraging heritage towards similar ends within the European neighbourhood. And it does so with perhaps increasing awareness that Europe's internal identity conflicts continue to be a problem. So it was under the EYCH 2018 that the project discussed here, the HCZ, was funded, and the activities of civil-society NGOs promoted and supported at an international level. Like the British

Council's CPF, here too we have pragmatically inclined actors like Germany's Goethe Institut involved (evidenced in their co-published 2018 report *Culture in an age of uncertainty: the value of cultural relations in societies in transition*). In this way, the EYCH (perhaps unwittingly) funded projects that aim to make difficult heritage activism contribute towards 'a habitable multiculturalism' (Gilroy 2014, xii).

## The European Year of Cultural Heritage: Charismatic and Careful Heritage Diplomacy

The European Commission has long been interested in using the past to promote a narrative of unity in the European project; back in 1977 the Commission noted the lack of Europe and European integration in national museums and requested—in vain—for member states to ensure at least one room in each national museum covered the history of integration. The year 2018 became a watershed when the EYCH was presented as a unique opportunity to unite 15 European Directorates-General (DGs) to promote heritage and cooperation, and establish heritage's economic potential for cultural tourism. However, with a total budget for the Year of only €8 million there was concern about its impact; consider that in its bidbook for European Capital of Culture 2019, the Italian city of Matera earmarked €30.2 million on programming alone. For the EYCH 'difficult heritage' was not explicitly a priority area, the only mention found in the Year's Evaluation Report, specifically, two deliverables on the illicit trade in antiquities (European Commission 2019). Instead, the Year showcased a traditional idea of European heritage as a public good, stressing the well-worn Unity in Diversity motto. The Year itself finished with the forming of an Expert Group and the formulation of a European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage, identifying five key areas for action, covering inclusion, sustainability, safeguarding, innovation and knowledge exchange and 'stronger global partnerships: reinforcing international cooperation' (European Commission 2019, p.9).

The EU has created other tools to attempt to forge a European identity through heritage, most notably the European Heritage Label, similar to UNESCO's World Heritage List. In her analysis of six European 'peace' sites with the Label, Mäkinen (2019) describes how the idea of peace is used through these sites to consolidate a European 'authorised heritage discourse', one that brings different pasts into a unifying narrative: Europe's presentation of integration itself as a 'peace project'. Thus various attempts to create a European narrative have sought to use heritage selectively to tell a positive and inclusive story of Europe. Some of the internal tensions around this erupted in the attempts by member states to influence the content of the House of European History (HEH), most notably around how to represent the Holocaust, collaboration and colonialism.

As Kaiser (2017) argues in his analysis of the HEH project, and the querelles it fomented with Eastern European governments, when we look at the prevailing narratives displayed, we see in fact how the potential of the HEH was sacrificed by the 'core' European states who may have,

seen cultural policy and history politics as a weak field of little material significance – and in this sense as a suitable playground for Eastern European history politics activism that could help deflect criticism on the EU's periphery of its prevailing informal power relations. (Kaiser 2017)

This indicates how heritage can be instrumentalised in broader power relationships; we must be wary that culture in general remains a sideline of European power, perhaps one that may be

used to distract from broader inequities within the European project. In this respect then, we need to scrutinize whether the EYCH's value as a tool for charismatic heritage diplomacy may diminish its promise as an instrument of social change.

## The Heritage Contact Zone

The *Heritage Contact Zone* is one of a number of EU-funded projects that work with difficult and contested heritage, and the predominance of the EYCH's more traditional conservation-focused idea of heritage is offset somewhat by EU funding for such critical projects as TRACES (*Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritages with the Arts: from intervention to co-production*), ECHOES, and indeed EUROHERIT (*Legitimation of European cultural heritage and the dynamics of identity politics in the EU*).

As part of this push to question instrumental uses of heritage, the HCZ consortium, including the author, experiments with different methods for working with difficult pasts. Of the seven partners—H401 (Amsterdam); Culture Action Europe (Brussels); Etz Hayyim Synagogue (Hania); European University Institute (Fiesole); Goethe-Institut (Lyon-Marseille/Bucharest); Human Platform (Budapest); Timișoara European Capital of Culture Association (Timișoara)—five actively work with contested heritage. Each of these partners developed an exhibition around contested heritage objects, places or ideas, and commissioned an artist to create a participatory process that engaged broader publics. In doing so they follow the Council of Europe's idea of a heritage community as self-constituting, rather than ethnically or otherwise determined. Less interested in the conservation ethos that predominates in the EYCH model of heritage, the heritage activists, curators and artists involved have tried to bring together communities divided over deeply felt differences about the past. In the case of HCZ, this includes heritages rooted in colonialism, anti-semitism, sexual abuse, utopian and post-communist pasts.

The HCZ practitioners create 'contact zones' (Clifford 1997) to explore inequities, to develop multiple narratives and different ways of telling them. This is not an idealised 'tool', similar to a 'safe space'; instead, the contact zone is a space of productive *friction* (Karp and Kratz 2006). Each project design is predicated on dialogue, exposure to the viewpoints of others, and broad participation. Each partner developed their own method and contracted their own curator to create the kind of contact zone best suited to their context.

The project's design recognised that the past is frequently 'multidirectional' (Rothberg 2009), and so all of the projects have sought to expand their particular 'difficult heritage' beyond its local context. In particular, the lead partner H401's contribution to the HCZ project, the exhibition *Impossible Journeys Now and Then: The Netherlands, Russia, and Persia* (Amsterdam, May–June 2019), exemplifies how these international strands were brought together. Curated by Irina Leifer, the exhibition critically interrogated the travels, writings and representations of the seventeenth century Dutchman Jan Jansnoon Struys, by bringing together historical objects, new artworks and the public into a critical conversation. Leifer commissioned six artists from Russia and Iran to create new works that were then presented to the public through interactive workshops. Significantly, a mosaic of funding and support enabled the exhibition itself to travel beyond Amsterdam to Samara, to the Museum of Moscow, and to Isfahan. With core funding provided through the Shared Heritage Fund of DutchCulture, the Netherlands' organisation for international cooperation, Creative Europe, and with the support of the Dutch embassies in Russia and Iran, as well as others, H401's heritage contact zone created much more than a space for reflective dialogue about the past, it

built on and constituted a broader community of practice involving local activists and international funders. In some ways, this is like the ad hoc, pragmatic, below-the-radar heritage diplomacy described in Libya above. In the case of the HCZ project though, it is also built on long-term collaborative relationships such as that between H401 and the Goethe Institut, relationships that emerge from the shared ethics and networks of a strong community of practice.

The CPF and HCZ share a concern with how to foster inclusive processes of heritage-making. For Training in Action, this is about enabling Libyans and Tunisians to create national databases that will ensure conservation of this material culture; crucially, it also means working regionally together across national boundaries. For HCZ projects, the challenge is to encourage participation, but to find ways of keeping evidence-based historicity in the room, so that the contact zone is also one where citizens are encouraged to test their own certainties.

Such critical discussion is less charismatic, more careful, open to multiple perspectives, and unafraid of confronting national(ist) myths. The question is whether this kind of careful heritage diplomacy—often tacit, unstated even by funders like the EU—is compatible with the more charismatic kind. A related question is how can civil society organisations and heritage activists make charismatic heritage diplomacy work towards the kinds of goals that they are most interested in: opening up the multivocality of the past, rebuilding communities, and—quite frequently—contrasting the ethnonationalist historical myths that revise history and divide societies.

The issue perhaps lies with funders, especially national funders, who risk co-opting these kinds of careful heritage diplomacy, and through their own contradictions and inconsistencies (and frequently, failures) risk diminishing the careful work of civil society actors like the British Council, and indeed some of the EU's programmes.

## Conclusion

Using heritage for diplomacy or cultural relations carries risks, even more so when the heritage itself is contested. Trying to apprehend what heritage means to communities, in the mess and trauma left by conflict, or by the deep scars of living under totalitarianism, is hard to evaluate. Peacebuilders with decades of experience still struggle to predict how culture works in post conflict scenarios. Despite truth and reconciliation commissions, despite the digital mapping of Syria's archaeological sites, heritage's potential in rebuilding postconflict societies is still unproven: working in the contact zones of heritage remains an art rather than a science. And the contact zone into which careful practitioners and charismatic international programmes are brought together through heritage diplomacy, whether the CPF or the EYCH, reveals that despite some overlap, there is—at least in postconflict heritage—an ontological gap. When international actors leap to save or restore iconic heritage sites and buildings they do not do so as neutral operators, they are not simply perceived locally as guardians of universally shared values. There is a tension between the charismatic uses of heritage in diplomacy and the careful approaches represented by many heritage professionals and civil society activists. It is not a clear dichotomy, but it is one that generates unintended consequences.

So can heritage diplomacy meaningfully contribute to the work of local heritage institutions and communities in their own terms? We have seen how for many major international donors and institutions a certain kind of charismatic heritage-making is preferred: monumental, measurable and visible. By contrast the British Council's CPF is careful, a soft power

supporting varied kinds of heritage-making. It gains legitimacy from providing assistance to heritage practitioners in post-conflict countries with no explicit requirement for foreign expert involvement. Evidence so far suggests that for the CPF project goals are being met at the level of field officers, local curators, those on the frontlines of heritage safeguarding, the people who catalogue, record and safeguard it.

Similarly, despite the rather traditional view of heritage represented by the EYCH, it has funded projects that experiment with different methods of working with contested heritage, open up spaces of dialogue, and develop local legitimacy. And by linking practitioners and heritage activists transnationally, a new kind of public sphere for heritage is emerging. To this extent the EYCH represents an international programme that encompasses both charismatic and careful heritage diplomacy, the result of a kind of strategic ambiguity. A charismatic idea of heritage was needed to leverage various DGs onboard and to aid international cooperation, whilst the influence of heritage professionals working on the ground ensured an emphasis on broader community engagement that enabled civil society heritage actors to become involved in some of its funded projects. In question now is the legacy of the EYCH, and whether the new Expert Committee will shape the way heritage diplomacy is used within the European space: for example, will they prioritise support for civil society activists and guard against ethno-nationalist appropriations of the past?

The transnational solidarities of a cosmopolitan civil society—one that imagines its pasts as enmeshed in global history—make heritage a contact zone between nationalist narratives and cosmopolitan uses of the past. And examples like the recent reprisal of the battles over Confederate monuments in the USA and over colonialists and slavers in Europe, and indeed the tearing down of the slaver Edward Colston's statue in Bristol in June 2020, demonstrate that old wounds require constant care and attention. The memory wars of the former Yugoslavia illustrate how well-meaning charismatic heritage diplomacy of the kind that rebuilt the Stari Most bridge comes at a cost (Walasek 2015). More recent international efforts like parading the 3D reconstruction of Palmyra's Arch in global cities like Florence, London, and New York lead us to ask whether charismatic heritage diplomacy is little more than just monumental virtue-signalling.

Given the past history of western interventions in the governance of MENA states, there are good reasons to remain attentive to how these projects and funds might be co-opted. As one of Isakhan and Meskell's informants claims:

I think this whole project by UNESCO to 'Revive the Spirit of Mosul' is just a marketing campaign. I don't know how you revive a spirit. A spirit is dead and gone. Perhaps that's what they should do: leave the monuments destroyed like the spirits of our ancestors. But I think UNESCO wants to rebuild to use Mosul as a symbol to say 'we defeated Da'esh and we are for peace.' It's just going to be a nice photo at the end and a political celebration. But it won't bring real peace to Mosul. (Isakhan and Meskell 2019, p.13)

The nice photos and political celebrations of much charismatic heritage diplomacy may serve both geopolitical interests—as cultural diplomacy always has—but in this strategic reframing it also attempts to re-narrate emblematic moments of collective shame and failure. In Bamiyan, Mostar, Palmyra and Mosul, charismatic heritage diplomacy tries to rehabilitate an international order incapable of corralling its members to set aside their economic and geopolitical rivalries in favour of saving human lives, and indeed heritage. So, the key tension in the contact zone remains between charismatic re-narrations promoted by international donors and agencies, and the less visible careful work of heritage practitioners on the ground. The contact

zones of heritage diplomacy are then not just about governance, but also about how civil society works in practice, about the morality play of international donors, and more generally about how heritage remains an ambivalent public good.

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