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HERITAGE AS A MATTER OF CARE, AND CONSERVATION AS CARING FOR THE MATTER

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Introduction

In this chapter we explore how care and care ethics, conceptually, can help create new perspectives on our relations with the historic environment and practices of adaptive reuse of built heritage. We argue that using ‘care’ instead of ‘protection’ as a frame for how we approach and deal with heritage can change how we conceptualize conservation. We explore what happens to our understanding of the historic environment when we define conservation as a care arrangement between human and other-than-human actors. Traditionally, heritage management tends to focus on the protection of heritage from harm. Here instead, we propose to think of conservation not as a practice of ‘protecting from,’ but as a way to ‘care for’ the historic environment. We show that conceptualizing conservation as care highlights the way the historic environment reproduces spatial conditions and injustices in a way traditional conceptualizations of conservation do not. As such, our assumption is that framing conservation as care changes how we theorize the intent of the action of conservation. It also puts the focus on the ongoing care relation between people (through heritage), and between people and heritage. Traditional ideas of conservation with their focus on expert knowledge, materiality, and protection generally do not focus on this relationality. Subsequently, they do not reckon with the ethics of those relations, nor think how we (re)produce inequality and injustice through our (lack of) care for certain stories, histories, and structures within the historic environment. Using care as an analytical framing provides a way of understanding and addressing relations, and relationality, with and in place, foregrounding the importance of the ethics involved (Till 2012).

We first theorize care as a concept in the conservation context, and we then explore this conceptualization illustrated by two case studies: *170/5 High Street West*, Sunderland (United Kingdom), three vacant buildings in a highly deprived area in the North East of England, and *Hof Prädikow*, a manorial complex in Brandenburg, near Berlin (Germany).¹

Heritage as a Matter of Care

One could argue that ‘taking care of old buildings’ is an informal definition for conservation. In heritage studies this has been critiqued, not so much for the act of ‘taking care’ in itself,

but for its focus on old buildings. As critiqued by many, the processes around identifying and conserving built heritage are often too much about a very limited set of objects and narratives, focused on material assets that represent a part of history in a particular way, and forming a particular perspective (Dicks 2000; Meskell 2015). To acknowledge this process, heritage is now commonly conceptualized as a process and practice of selecting, interpreting, and presenting the past. As such, we can ask who is selecting, interpreting, and presenting, and thus which layers of material, whose values, and which versions of these histories are being foregrounded and preserved for posterity. Through this process, heritage conservation is then also defining the future. Heritage is a means to an end, it is made to ‘do’ things in (re) enacting, (re)producing, and mobilizing some past(s) in the present.

The act of ‘taking care’ (in ‘taking care of old buildings’), and the ways in which care is being given, received, or withheld, has not been subject to much questioning. Feminist scholars define care as an ethical practice and attitude that implies relationality, between actors and their environment (Fisher and Tronto 1990). Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto (*ibid.*: 40) suggest that this includes “our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.” Most care literature focuses on human-to-human relations, the ways we care (e.g., care for, about, with), and what the related moral principles are (Midgley 2018). Some work engages more explicitly with the care relations between people and their environments (Barnes 2012; Mattern 2018; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Till 2012). We want to explore how an ethics of care perspective can help to rethink the ways we deal with our built heritage. We do this by conceptually (re)framing heritage as a ‘matter-of-care,’ after the work on ‘matters of care’ by María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017). Subsequently, we re-frame conservation practices as the ways we care about, for, or through heritage.

When it comes to built heritage, and protection of the historic environment, there is a substantial body of literature and normative texts on how best to protect (see Veldpaus and Pereira Roders 2014). While protection is a form of care, limiting care to protection is obviously reductive (Tronto 2013). While legal frameworks around built heritage tend to focus on protective measures, conservation practices are much more varied and nuanced. People care for, about, and through heritage and take care of it in many different and co-existing ways: For example, through work, volunteering, demolishing, visiting, dwelling, cleaning, dismantling, listening, enjoying, or creating space—potentially all expressions of care. A lot of this takes place outside of any formal conservation work, in the everyday use, maintenance, and repair of materials and meanings, through the actions of people who want to share their history, identity, and culture, by reaching out to peers in past, present, and future.

Care for, with, about, or through the material world, and conceptualizing conservation as a practice of care, is about reinterpreting, questioning, and rethinking the work that is and could be done in a conservation context, by anyone involved. It is about discussing what the implications of this work are, who is doing it, and what, and thus who, is cared for, and who is not, and by doing so we reflect on current practices, as well as find new ways forward, for example through new forms of (re)commoning and (re)collectivizing heritage as a public good.

Conservation Through the Lens of Care

We introduce two projects to illustrate how care takes shape in the everyday practices of adaptive reuse. The buildings in these projects were cared for long before they became formally listed as

heritage, and when they were in use they were, in their own way, focal points within their communities. This focus moving elsewhere resulted in a lack of attention and active care for the sites. Those in power, however, the heritage authority, cared enough about them to use protection as a mechanism to make demolition difficult. This did not protect the buildings from falling into disrepair, but it does mean they have not been demolished. The care lens introduces a distinction that ‘conservation’ does not make: It was apparently acceptable to care ‘about’ the buildings without caring ‘for’ them, or ‘through’ them for the neighborhood. So, we can wonder why, and by whom this care was being withheld. Our aim here is to show how the care perspective raises these questions in the first place. A group of people are caring for these buildings once again though. Their time and energy are focused on developing collaborations and building community as well as on restoration. This care, however, seems to have little or nothing to do with the protected status of the buildings or their formal ‘heritage significance.’

Hof Prädikow and 170/5 High Street West

The former manorial complex of Hof Prädikow is located in the state of Brandenburg, in the countryside, and is about 50 kilometers northeast of Berlin (see Figure 19.1). The surrounding area is dominated by farmland and woods and the natural preserve area Märkische Schweiz is just a few kilometers away. It is a majestic estate, with a stream of run-down buildings, which are gradually being turned into a co-housing and co-working space, as part of a housing cooperative (Darr and Novy-Huy 2020). This housing cooperative brings together a group of Berliners, who have been working since 2015 on establishing co-housing and co-working spaces and creating a community center in Hof Prädikow. After centuries



FIGURE 19.1 OpenHeritage visit to Hof Prädikow. Source: Loes Veldpaus, 2019.

of aristocratic ownership, the 9.5 hectare-sized estate was nationalized following the Second World War. It was used for agricultural purposes and a distillery during the existence of the post-war German Democratic Republic. German reunification in 1990 led to the dissolution of these activities, followed by vacancy and deterioration. Since 2015, 46 adults and 26 children have gotten involved in the new reuse project, which aims to create a model for rural regeneration, offering an escape from the overheated housing market in Berlin, while keeping ties to its economic and labor markets.

Quite different is the case in Sunderland, as it is located on a high street, in an urban area, and involves three Grade II Listed Buildings (Historic England 1978). These three dilapidated buildings played an important role in the urban history of Sunderland, a post-industrial city in the northeast of England (see Figure 19.2). The changes in commerce and city structure have meant a loss of function and use for the buildings, which led to vacancy and deterioration (TWBPT et al. 2020). The current gradual renovation is led by a building preservation trust, undertaken in collaboration with various other local stakeholders, to develop new uses, create mutual benefit in doing the buildings up, and provide accessible space for a variety of users. The Sunderland buildings were built as merchant houses in the late 1700s and were part of the first wave of post-medieval development, showing the (industrial) merchants' wealth. Only a few years after they were built, the houses were turned into shops and offices as the street they are on became the 'high street' and the commercial heart of the town. One of the buildings is linked to what later became Barclays Bank, while another is the original location for Binns, a department store that became a national chain. After being left vacant and in disrepair for at least the past two decades, the buildings were finally obtained by Sunderland City Council and gifted to the Tyne and Wear Building Preservation Trust (TWBPT) in 2018. TWBPT is a trust set up in the 1970s to restore heritage assets in the Tyne and Wear region, mainly by bringing them back into use.



FIGURE 19.2 The first three buildings 170/5 High Street West Sunderland. Source: Loes Veldpaus, 2019.

Care and Protection

Legal protection is absolutely relevant in both cases. It creates a focus and opens up funding possibilities, and importantly it provided the legislative and regulatory framework that saved the buildings: It meant the buildings could not simply be demolished. This did not prevent them from falling in major disrepair. Both cases saw decades of vacancy, under-use, and deterioration. Formal heritage protection meant the buildings were protected from demolition, thus cared ‘about,’ but not cared ‘for.’ The protection agencies have been supportive partners in the current adaptive reuse processes. Other public sector organizations were important as well, including the local authorities, which in both cases have been part of the support network.

More importantly, however, heritage protection created the opportunity for various people to come together and develop a network of relations with and around those buildings, making the current reuse processes possible. This attention is not because all of a sudden these buildings became financially attractive investments. Quite the contrary: There is a vested interest beyond the commercial, in caring for the wider area, the neighborhood, a particular group of people. That is made possible through investing energy, time, and resources in these buildings, as we will discuss further below.

Finally, both cases benefit from a more general shift in heritage policy and funding priorities, moving away from just protection and material restoration, toward also facilitating the use of the buildings, and supporting the people using it. For example, the Hof Prädikow team receives support specifically aimed at facilitating their interaction with the villagers, with the clear view that the manor should at least partially fulfill its former functions as the center of the village. The Sunderland project received funding from the Architectural Heritage Fund to match its crowdfunding initiative with a pound for a pound. The campaign ‘Buy a brick’ (on *Crowdfunder*) was set up to support the building’s reconstruction as well as community use, while also using the crowdfunding initiative to build a wider online community of interest.

Tending to the material in itself is a care relation, as the involved practices of repair and maintenance make the ‘valuable’ matter and meanings endure (Yarrow 2019). This does not just lead to the question of what should be kept, and why, but also who it is valuable for, and why. When we use the lens of care, questions like “Who is (not) being cared for, through caring for this matter?” and “What and who is (not) being cared for, through making some material last?” are not commonly asked. Can we really separate our dealings with the material world from our dealings with people? These questions show how care can offer different perspectives, and raise different questions, for the work of conservation.

Care, Collaboration, and Community

In the case of Sunderland the adaptive reuse process is being led by the TWBPT, a trust specializing in ‘difficult’ restoration projects. The aim is developing a viable future for buildings through restoration. This means tending to the material, but also stimulating, facilitating, and weaving a self-sustaining network of care to secure future maintenance and use. The work therefore involves obtaining funding and planning permission and overseeing construction and restoration works, as much as it does collaborating with (future) tenant(s) and users, local organizations, small businesses, artists, neighborhood organizations, students and staff from

the local college and universities, local government, and creating links with other buildings, spaces, and projects in the area. The connections are being developed in a multiplicity of ways by, and through, all the partners in the network, with the buildings at the center, as a place to meet, to use, to organize around and through. Events and activities organized vary from heritage informed events such as lectures and exhibitions on the history of the buildings and the area, to a community mural (see Figure 19.3) and pop-up coffee shop, an exhibition and workshop on ‘Rebel Women of Sunderland,’ and various music performances, podcast recordings, and arts and crafts workshops organized by a coffee and record shop, and the future tenants of 172-5 High Street West, *Pop Recs* (see Hellowell 2019; Pop Recs 2020; Sunderland Culture et al. 2019; TWBPT 2019). One of the authors was involved in organizing some of these events as a form of action-research. This started the process of reflecting on what and who is cared for and by whom, as well as what types of care are wanted and needed. All the network-building and collaborative work is entangled with the restoration of these buildings, which clearly has to be much more than restoring materiality.

This is particularly important in a neighborhood ranked among the 10% most deprived neighborhoods in England (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2019). In many ways, it can seem like there are more urgent needs in this area than restoring a few buildings. However, as Marian Barnes (2012) and Shannon Mattern (2018) suggest, there is importance in being able to care for one’s environment, and in feeling cared for by how the environment is designed and maintained. Then maybe the opposite is also true, not feeling cared for by an environment that is not maintained and looks dilapidated.



FIGURE 19.3 Inside 174 High Street West: Community mural by Kathryn Robertson with Heritage Open Days 2019 visitors. Art by krillustrates (<https://krillustrates.bigcartel.com>). Source: Loes Veldpau, 2019.

In Sunderland, we saw that some people care mostly for the buildings, whether that is its layers of history, the aesthetics, the construction, the type of bricks, or the shopfronts. Others care more for the space it creates, an accessible space, a safe space, an event space, a place to meet, a place to get a coffee and a chat. Traditionally, conservation is only 'for' the former group. We would argue this separation is unproductive. The stories told by and in the building are part of how accessible and safe it is. How does it feel, for example, for those not acknowledged in those stories? We have to keep asking ourselves who is not being cared for in the approach taken. We neither can or should care for everyone in the same way. Some people will, and others will not need or want to be cared for by the buildings, their stories, or their users, or care for these buildings. But it is important to reflect on that, because as heritage is used to create belonging and community, it also defines who does not belong (Anderson 1983; Hall 1999; Said 1994). What is the role of heritage in creating this need or want to be cared for, or not? And can changing stories and approaches to the materiality change this? Heritage easily reproduces structural inequalities. This happens in the everyday, in the practices of maintaining and repairing some worlds and not others, in the careless reproduction of harmful histories, and the exclusion of narratives and voices. Awareness of this is key. One of the stories that could easily go untold, for example, is about the Binns family, who owned and ran No. 172/3, the Binns drapery and department store. They were Quakers, and as it turns out, quite a radical family. In the late 1830s they set up a mechanics institute in Sunderland, got arrested for sedition, and were active in the anti-slavery movement and advertised their refusal to sell "any goods manufactured from cotton not warranted to be free labour grown" (Moss 2004). A story like this will surely speak to the residents in the neighborhood and to the future tenants differently than one of rich industrialists and merchant houses.

At Hof Prädikow, collaboration and community have been crucial too, albeit in a different way. The village Hof Prädikow only has 250 people. It is a very small village, which forms part of a larger municipality. Many of its buildings already stand vacant, among others its former school complex. They face depopulation and a loss of opportunities in this area, and it seemed hard to turn around this trend despite the availability of extra government funding for rural redevelopment. The site was rediscovered by a group of people who had developed ideas about starting a co-housing project. The Hof Prädikow group is trying to integrate caring for their own (housing) needs with a care for the wider village they have become part of by refurbishing this formerly derelict historical site. The cooperatives' activism and activities are of course also inseparable from the trend of finding alternative housing solutions outside of the Berlin housing market.

Some members from the Hof Prädikow cooperative have been living in the nearby village for years, slowly building up a community interested in co-housing, as well as becoming part of the established village community. By creating a physical space where they can meet, they are reconnecting the new community in the manorial complex to the current life in the village. The Village Barn is seen as the connection between the village and the housing community. It is a place to meet and discuss and organize events and it also provides a forum to address possible rumors and handle conflicts. The needs and expectations of various actors are different though: While some villagers would like to see craftspeople moving in, the current residents of the co-housing are freelancers who tend to work long-distance and are tied to the Berlin labor market. Many villagers, however, are glad someone again cares for this complex and want to contribute their knowledge about the site and its former uses. One way or another, the long-term sustainability of this conservation project will depend strongly both on

collaboration within the housing cooperative, but also with the village. It will remain important to develop and reflect on the relations built and sustained through this building complex, by listening to each other's critiques and needs; and in the way they are developing and maintaining the barn as an inclusive space for encounter, both in its material and immaterial form.

Another way community and collaboration has been important for Hof Prädikow is their capacity for linking into wider networks. This is a group of people with cultural and financial capital, and they have been able to mobilize their connections and knowledge to make sure they could take on the care for this complex of buildings. They collaborated with the German foundation *Stiftung trias* (Darr and Novy-Huy 2020), who helped them develop a financial structure to acquire the site in the framework of a lease agreement. The group also moves in a network of similar co-housing initiatives in Brandenburg (Kreativorte Brandenburg 2020) and is part of the cooperative *Mietergenossenschaft SelbstBau e. G.* These networks provide them with access to legal and practical knowledge related to co-housing, as well as better access, knowledge, and connections for funding and other resources. In the competition for funding, access to the relevant networks and resources is crucial. It means being able to position an organization or heritage asset in such a way it can be cared for. It also means, however, due to the element of competition, many other assets will not receive this attention, as they do not have a community with the capital to make this happen. This is an important aspect to reflect on as well when looking at conservation as care.

Reflections on Conservation as Care

As argued by Barnes (2012: 123) and Sara Ahmed (2017: 266), the practice of care is not inherently good, and neither, we would add, is conservation. We have to be aware of the cultural, social, and political functions both perform. Both cases illustrate how looking at conservation as care allows us to see that conservation is not about the buildings only: It has to be about the relations between people, and between people and buildings. Using care as an analytical framing provides a way of addressing relations, and relationality, with and in place, but it also has to be a way of reckoning with its workings, and the histories and structures the work of care and conservation sustain. Care is being 'done' in the relation between people, and between people and place. As such we need to reflect and act on the ethics, and thus how the work of care sustains or ignores certain structures, institutes, groups, and histories, on who gains from it, and who loses out, and who stands to lose if care is withdrawn. (Re)establishing collaborative networks, through mutually supportive communities and spaces, is not easy especially after long periods of neglect. Neglecting physical space likely also indicates that the connected communities have not been cared for very actively. How to bring together, listen to, and involve people, and understand the various needs, and thus care for one another, within, through, and beyond these sites, is actually crucial for conservation in both cases. These are not radical statements, but the care perspective makes them visible, and makes them part of the same process. Caring for people is not separate from caring for place. By not paying attention to this, conservation often remains a practice of re-inscribing patterns of (un)belonging rather than one of challenging and changing these patterns.

With a focus on place regeneration and civic engagement, the long-term conservation of both sites is as dependent on the buildings as well as how they facilitate processes of collaboration and care. In this chapter we have aimed to illustrate how the lens of care changes the perspective as well as the questions asked when it comes to conservation. We argue that

conceptualizing conservation as care can highlight how activities undertaken in conservation are more complex than material protection. Rather than looking at what it entails to protect and restore a complex of buildings, we shift the perspective to questions such as how and why do we (not) care for place? And what are the ethics involved in this process? How do we care for each other through place? This involves processes of repair and restoration, as much as it does engagement and collaboration. It involves networks and relationships, but also policies and funding. Proposing this different lens helps to make visible the work conservation performs, how it includes and excludes, and how this work is being done through the way we tend to the material and immaterial matter. As such, we do not argue that care should replace conservation, rather that we broaden our view, and shift our perspective. This can enrich the way we look at conservation as a practice of care for one another and our environment, and the ethics of caring and being cared for. This creates a perspective in which conservation becomes part of a much larger societal picture and more embedded in everyday life, as it highlights the socio-ethical and political nature of conservation.

By focusing on actions that maintain, continue, and repair a world that explicitly includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, Fisher and Tronto (1990) do include our surroundings in their definition of care. Through this, we can build a complex, life-sustaining web of care including people and environment. We can care about, or care for our environment, but we can also feel cared for through our environment. Conservation and restoration are ways to care about and for the built environment. With framing conservation as practice of care, new questions are raised about how to handle risk, responsibility, and accountability, and how we think about the ethics of care. All these questions we feel are relevant, and move the idea of conservation forward, by pushing the boundaries of what we do, and what world we bring about, when we practice conservation.

Note

- 1 This is an explorative paper and the case studies are 'living labs' in the project *OpenHeritage* (see www.openheritage.eu). *OpenHeritage* has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement no. 776766. The main aim of the project is to create a sustainable and inclusive governance model for adaptive heritage reuse that is applicable under diverse circumstances, including marginalized areas. In doing so it identifies, evaluates, and tests innovative practices of adaptive heritage reuse in Europe, with a focus on the social innovation, community engagement and empowerment, cooperative governance, and innovative financial tools.

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