

Heritage Engagements: Critical Applications

Research Programme of the Cultural Heritage research group

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By Hester Dibbits & Riemer Knoop

1. INTRODUCTION

“There is ample evidence all around us of the many changes the 21st century has brought to our lives. We live in a more competitive, yet more interdependent world. [...] Such an unpredictable context requires an increased capability of humans to engage with complex challenges and agility to adapt to new situations, along with a diverse set of individual competencies.”

This passage comes from a report on ‘21st Century Skills’ by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) from 2013, drawn up at the request of the Dutch advisory body on education *Platform Onderwijs 2032*. The Reinwardt Academy advocates heritage education practices and a heritage approach that benefit the society of the 21st century: a practice that takes a dynamic interpretation of heritage. In this approach, heritage is not considered as a given, but a dynamic subject. It is the provisional outcome of an ongoing negotiation process in which a number of (f)actors play a role. Heritage is not a thing – but a quality we attribute to something, depending on the moment, context and intentions. Heritage is not something neutral. The Reinwardt Academy’s research group examines how to arrive at a ‘heritage education practice’ (curriculum development and supply) and a ‘heritage approach’ in which this dynamic is the key focus.

In our ever-changing world, people select things from the past to cherish as heritage: works of art and commonplace consumer items are incorporated into museum collections; landscapes are cherished as heritage sites; old buildings are elevated to listed building status; and rituals and traditions are nominated for inclusion in intangible heritage inventories. Numerous projects and programmes are developed on the assumption that children and adults should learn to ‘respect’ this heritage. By devoting attention in education to the other’s and each other’s heritage, social cohesion is supposed to increase.

In an alternative form of heritage education, heritage is approached neither as an actual given nor as a source of knowledge about the past, but as a process and an object of critical research. Questions that would come up for discussion in such an approach include: what are the roots of our preoccupation with heritage, who or what determines whether something is designated as a listed building, is placed in a museum or on an intangible heritage inventory, and what are the implications of that? What does contemporary decollecting mean? Heritage sites, museums and archives are not seen then as a source of knowledge *about the past*, but as institutions *that produce the past in the present*, with knowledge, emotions, values, claims, hierarchy, dominance and displacement as by-products.

2. ASSIGNMENT AND QUESTION

The Reinwardt Academy research group starts from the latter approach. It advocates a practice in which heritage professionals operate critically and inquisitively in processes of heritagisation, musealisation and folklorisation. In this way, the research group wants to contribute to the positioning of the Reinwardt Academy as an educational institution for ‘applied and critical heritage engagements’. The Academy requests that the research group, together with lecturers and (future) professionals from the Netherlands and abroad, examines how such an approach can be made visible in education (higher professional education, secondary education, primary education etc.) and in practice. The key question is as follows:

What practices exist, in terms of heritage education and dealing with heritage, that operate from a dynamic and critical heritage perspective, which ones work best, and how can the Reinwardt Academy contribute to their further development?

We believe the designation ‘heritage’ is the outcome of continuous processes of negotiation, and that professional engagements with heritage demand a profound awareness of the dynamic character of this negotiation process and of the context-related nature (time, place, group) of the result. On the basis of this vision, the research group will examine how the Reinwardt Academy can contribute to the development of such heritage practices.

3. PROGRAMME

As part of its research into 'applied and critical heritage engagements', the research group is working on various projects. In some projects, the research group may be initiator and project leader, while in other cases the research group adopts a more supervisory role. In particular in the former, participation will be based on willingness to invest in the further elaboration of and examination of research questions as formulated above. The programme builds on and is inspired by a long tradition at the Reinwardt Academy of education and research related to the theory and practice of critical museology and dynamic views of heritage.

The basis of the programme started in 2016, with the participation of all lecturers. In a series of seminars, the curriculum is questioned with regard to its critical/dynamic view of heritage. During intervention study days, key texts will be discussed and all lecturers will be invited to participate in a writing assignment: where/when/how does the curriculum make clear that heritage is not a *thing*, but rather a *quality* attributed to something? Next to this, selections of texts, written by Reinwardt Academy's lecturers, will be published, describing the heritage approach taught at the academy.

In addition, the research group is active in a number of projects in which the focus is on the practice rather than the curriculum. The precise attachment to the curriculum may vary from involvement of lecturers and students within the framework of a module, elective or minor, to involvement of lecturers and students within the context of the graduation phase.

The first project worth mentioning here is the *Straatwaarden* (Street values), a multi-year project co-financed by ACIN. In this project, the Reinwardt Academy, together with the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and the Sustainism Lab (Michiel Schwarz), are researching the crossovers between space and heritage on the basis of concrete cases, such as the Knowledge Mile (Weesperstraat/Wibautstraat in Amsterdam) or the Cruquius development area (bottom-up design). What sort of signifying processes are taking place here? Who attributes which meanings to this urban space? Under which conditions do those processes lead to heritage formation? And conversely: which role does existing 'heritage' play in those signifying processes? Professor Riemer Knoop and lecturer Nancy van Asseldonk have a key role in this project.

A second project is *Stadsgevoel* (Urban feeling) of Imagine IC, heritage and society pioneer in *Amsterdam Zuidoost* (Amsterdam Southeast), which is co-financed by the DOEN foundation. The Reinwardt Academy is Imagine IC's steady partner in this project. The project researches the heritagisation of 'urbanity', with the line of approach being the negotiation process of various actors in a so-called emotion network. What does up-to-date, future-oriented heritage formation in the city look like, and how could heritage institutions capture that based on a dynamic view of heritage? How can we capture – as a multiform emotion network – 'the city' in collections of listed buildings and landscapes, archives and museums, stories, memories, practices and (conflicting) emotions? In this project, the exercise of the 'heritagisation' of the city itself interpreted as a *third* space – a place of negotiation between conflicting interests and emotions about the city. A reading group was formed within the context of this project, which meets at the Reinwardt Academy under the supervision of professor Hester Dibbits.

Both projects build on the output of the previous research group programme, while also involving bachelor's and master's students in addition to lecturers. They are invited to graduate on 'urban ensembles' and 'street values' (place-making), and to participate in the various knowledge events.

Besides being researchers IN the practice ('design research'), the professors and researchers involved in the research group will also be active as critical observers who look at the practice with a little more distance. For example, Marlous Willemsem, director of Imagine IC, has been working for the research group one and half days a week all through 2016. She designs research in the field of heritage and religion. There is little attention for religion, both in education and in the field of heritage, while it does play an important role in the social debate. This raises the questions what type of religious heritage is 'created' by institutions, how they do that, and which heritage they actually do not create. How is religious heritage institutionalised and shared in public archives, museums, libraries and immovable and intangible collections? How do institutions create support for 'their' religious items and how do they avoid or deal with controversies? And how about support for non-Christian heritage or intangible heritage as religious performances? Who supports this heritage and attaches emotions to it? Which emotion networks are connected with which religious heritage collections, and what do actors contribute to or want from those networks? Parallel to this research, work is carried out with lecturers on translating insights from the research to the Bachelor's and Master's curricula.



A second example of translating research to the practice is the attention that the research group demands for processes of heritage formation in relation to gender minorities, once again from the critical/dynamic heritage perspective. The Reinwardt Academy has devoted attention to Queering Collections since 2013. Initially, Master's students studied the mechanisms that might underlie the inclusion of so-called AIDS Quilts in museum collections, in collaboration with the Amsterdam Museum. That was discussed publicly during an *Erfgoedarena* (Heritage arena) in 2014. In early 2015, an international conference was devoted to that subject, which was organised together with the Amsterdam Museum, IHILIA and COMCOL. Several Bachelor's students graduated on this theme, while more are to follow. In 2017, we will be participating in a UvA Public History seminar on this topic. The aim is to gain insight into the importance of *social justice* in collection and presentation policy, in theory and practice (D. Flemming, Liverpool; R. Sandell, Leicester).

A third and final example is the broad theme *Vergeten* (Forgetting). Reflection on the dynamic side of collections is required to do justice to their growth, their connection with other fields, combinations and, ultimately, also their lapse into oblivion sometimes. Links to information are lost, institutions get closed down, sub-collections become dormant in repositories, change name or function, or are auctioned or disappear, at any time of the day or night. That raises questions. What is information without a connection to its creator, which heritage institutions have disappeared over the last century, which collections are no longer used and which paradigms have been forgotten? Why? What will happen to the 'forgotten' collections? By demanding attention for the 'forgotten', the research group wants to provide a counterbalance to the alarm over the poor visibility of collections. Such discomfort can be put into perspective by providing an insight into the development of collections and museums, against the backdrop of changing tastes, paradigms and epistemes, and the limitations of the much-praised transition towards the 'information age'. A more conscious approach to forgetting, as a contrast to preserving and remembering, will enrich the heritage practice. Experimental graduation project 2015-2016, continuation and extension in 2016-2017.

Yet another type of projects are those which arise from a concrete request from the field. The Reinwardt Academy is frequently being approached with invitations to participate, along with lecturers and students, in the development of exhibitions, mobile apps, recommendations for nominations to inventories and a number of other activities. Within this context, many products are developed for the wider field of heritage, under the guidance of lecturers, in collaboration with students. At the request of the Academy, the research group monitors these projects, in which the question is also posed once again about the role played herein by the dynamic/critical heritage approach. One example is the externally funded international project GOSTEP, in cooperation with IZI-travel (2016-2017) and the externally funded international project EMPHOS (2016-2017). Lecturers and students from the Reinwardt Academy are involved in both projects. The same principle – involvement of the research group at the request of the MT – applies to invitations for education abroad, in the form of modules, refresher or further training courses, or – occasionally – even completely new Bachelor's or Master's programmes. The research group can also play an advisory role in terms of content in that instance.

In 2018, a final project will commence, which will take stock of 2 years of research. The findings from the various projects will be gathered and analysed, and the extent to which it is possible to arrive at a methodology for critical/dynamic heritage education and practice will be examined. In this case, there will also be cooperation with various partners, including the LKCA and Erasmus University, where Hester Dibbits holds a chair. She conducts and supervises research into the role of the critical/dynamic heritage views in collaborative projects between primary and secondary education with various heritage partners: research that seamlessly ties in, therefore, with this research group programme in terms of the vision and research question.

4. RELEVANCE

The relevance for education can be found, among other things, in the contribution the programme can make to the increased visibility of the focus of the curriculum, the professionalisation of lecturers and a better alignment with the practice. As part of the programme, there is cooperation with a large number of actors from the world of education, museums, archives, libraries and other types of organisations (NGOs, etc.), as well as with the general public.

The research group aims to contribute to the updating of education with regard to content. The research relevance can be found in the programme's contribution to increasing insight into of the extent to which and manner in which theories from critical museology, European ethnology, social anthropology, critical archaeology, critical archival science, etc. are carried over into heritage practice. It would appear that there is little to be seen of the up-to-date (academic) views of heritage in practice. To what extent could this be explained by the lack of a proper education practice/consistent curriculum? A static view of

heritage is dominant in the public debate, where heritage is being seen as a given and instrumentalised. The research group advocates alternative approaches and examines how professional higher education (Reinwardt Academy) can play a role in its provision.

The choice for sharper profiling of the critical/dynamic heritage approach in education and practice is in line with the AHK's wish to remain up-to-date, while focusing specifically on diversity and on the international context within which education operates. The choice for an urban focus in the two projects in which the professors themselves play a central role matches the desire of the AHK – as an institution based in the metropolis of Amsterdam – to get a better understanding of, and possibly also a grip on, dynamics in the urban context. The choice to organise study days for the entire staff and to offer specific practical projects and research meetings, supervised by the research group, which are open to both lecturers and students, is in line with the pursuit of excellence also formulated by the AHK.

Finally, the research products include *cahiers (2017-2018)*, *knowledge events (2016-2019)*, *graduation theses (Bachelor and Master)*, *conference contributions* and *publications*. The research will contribute to an evermore consistent, challenging and up-to-date curriculum (BA and MA) based on a clear vision.

Needless to say: as the only permanent Reinwardt staff entirely focused on research, the professors may be expected to contribute to the growth and blossoming of an investigative climate in all forms of education.