Preface by the editors

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The 2024 annual conference of the Association for Theory and Higher Education of Heritage Conservation (AKTLD) took place from the 3rd to the 6th of October in Coventry. Invited by the Department of the Built Environment at Coventry University, the conference explored the relationship between Heritage and Democracy.

This publication brings together a collection of the different contributions to the topic by analysing heritage under the categories of the public good, civil society, politics and polity. The conference examined heritage processes which operate in conjunction with the notion of democracy and how cultural heritage is shaped, interpreted, and managed in democracies and also within non-democratic societies. The emphasis was on public participation, contested narratives, and the influence of political structures. One of the key questions posed by the conference was: who defines and controls heritage, especially in times of rising populism and shifting state ideologies?

Coventry was an interesting place to hold this conference. The city shares a heritage with Germany which is mostly associated with the destruction of the city by German bombers of the Nazi Regime. The publications in this volume are framed by papers which examine the loss, memory and actions after that turning point as well as a perspective on wider developments in Coventry since the early 20th century. The role of Coventry as a city of peace and reconciliation, which has taken on since the Second World War was also the subject of various discussions during the conference. This role is further outlined in the introduction.

Early on in the planning of the conference, we decided to conduct it in English. Although the Arbeitskreis has held multi-lingual conferences before, we believe this to be the first time that we predominantly conferred in English as a lingua franca. This was as a courtesy to the British host city and host university and moreover enabled us to promote inclusivity towards a wider non-German-speaking audience.

St Mary's Guildhall in the very centre of Coventry, adjacent to the cathedral, provided a stimulating and convenient venue for the event. Largely built in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, it is one of the most interesting – and one of the lesser known – examples of medieval guildhalls in England. It was the headquarters of the powerful merchant guild of St Mary. Delegates had the opportunity, among other benefits, to see and hear more about the remarkable tapestry in the Great Hall, woven in Flanders in the early 16th century and assumed to be the oldest tapestry in Britain still hanging in the place for which it was created. After the dissolution of the monasteries and the guilds in the 1530s and 1540s, the city purchased St Mary's which then became the administrative home of the city council until 1920. For several centuries it was therefore the seat of local government, which was characterised by increasingly democratic decision making since the middle of the 19th century.

In addition to the presentations and discussions in St Mary's Guildhall, the city of Coventry acted as the wider conference venue. A varied series of fringe events offered delegates the opportunity to explore the city under different aspects and meet people who are active in the Heritage sector, either as professionals or in a voluntary capacity. Such events included tours of the post-war urban development and the attempts of integration of surviving medieval buildings since then. Highlights were visits to Coventry Cathedral and to the recently reopened Charterhouse. The programme concluded with a tour of the London Cemetery Arboretum, one of the earliest Victorian garden cemeteries in the country, designed from 1845 onwards by Joseph Paxton. In addition, formal receptions were held in the new Coventry Cathedral building and in the undercroft of St Mary's Guildhall.

All this was enabled by close collaboration of many participants, to all of whom we extend our heartfelt gratitude.

For the preparation of the academic content, we would like to thank the members of the scientific conference committee of the AKTLD, joined by Johanna Blokker, Sigrid Brandt, Christiane Fülscher, Claudia Marx, Ulrike Plate and Thomas Will. The collaboration during this planning phase was an intensive and enjoyable collegial process, which reinforced the aim of the conference to act as a positive voice for Heritage and Democracy.

A big thank you must be extended to the local organising team in the Coventry University Department of the Built Environment, specifically Amela Bogdanović, Adelina Skirth und Danny McGough for their creative and tireless commitment during the planning and implementation of the conference.

Special thanks also go to Peter Walters and Paul Maddocks from the Coventry Society and Michael Grass from the Thüringisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege for the lively tours of the city; to M. Lorenz, the architect who guided us through all the historic stages and contemporary challenges of the Cathedral complex and to The Very Revd John Witcombe, Dean of Coventry Cathedral. John Whitcombe not only generously enabled us to hold a memorable reception in the iconic post-war part of the Cathedral but also reiterated the long-standing reconciliation process between Coventry and Germany, which has been generated to a significant extent through the offices of Coventry Cathedral. In addition, we would like to extend our gratitude to Mark Webb for his deliberations about the tapestry at St Mary's Guildhall, to Stephen Oliver and James Hinde from Oliver Architects for their insights into the latest restorations and interventions of St Mary's Guildhall as well as to David Mahony from PCPT Architects for his tour of the recently restored and re-opened Charterhouse, one of the few remaining medieval monasteries in Coventry. Last but not least a big thank you goes to Jamie Magraw for his entertaining tour through Joseph Paxton's Arboretum and for his general commitment to the conference together with Ian Harrabin and Geoff Willcocks, who, together with Mark Webb are all trustees of the Historic Coventry Trust, which looks after several conservation objects in the city.

In addition, we are grateful for the support of Coventry University for their sponsorship of the conference. We are thanking the publishing house Jörg Mitzkat and their staff for the smooth implementation of these conference proceedings, as well as the scientific editing services of Dave Morris.

Following our call for papers we received a large expression of interest and we were in the fortunate, but also difficult, position of having to choose from a large number of proposals. We selected what we deemed to be the most relevant responses to the topic and the questions we raised, whilst at the same time seeking a balance of themes and speakers from different countries and backgrounds. There were many other interesting proposals which could fill an entire second conference and publication. Our heartfelt gratitude goes to all those who actively participated in the conference and the publication, and we would like to extend these thanks to all who submitted their ideas.

Ultimately, we feel we can say that the conference was a great success, enabled by the professional collaboration of many enthusiastic and committed colleagues: something the Arbeitskreis has been doing well for so many years.

We hope that this publication will deepen the memory of those who joined us in Coventry, and moreover, that it will reach a wider audience, inspiring new perspectives and initiatives for future debates on heritage in relation to democratic structures, organisations and practices.