

Heritage Conservation in Democracies

Riegl, Managing Change, and the Need to Organise Participation

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Artikel diskutiert Prozesse, Verfahren und Fälle im Hinblick auf ihr Potenzial Kulturerbe als demokratischen Prozess und Kulturerbe in solchen zu verstehen. Obwohl diese zweifachen Prozesse noch nicht etabliert sind, stehen wir schon vor der nächsten Herausforderung: Wie reagieren wir – als Fachleute und als Zivilgesellschaften – wenn nicht-demokratische Akteure das Erbe für ihre Interessen (miss)brauchen?

Die Argumentation geht von Überlegungen des Denkmalpflegers Alois Riegl aus und plädiert für eine Organisation der Akteure und Prozesse der Abwägung als ein Management of Change. Darüber hinaus stützt sich der Artikel auf die Argumentation von Karl Popper und Ralf Dahrendorf, die Demokratie vor dem Hintergrund der Erfahrung der deutschen nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit definieren. Kulturerbe in demokratischen Prozessen ermöglicht und fordert individuelle Verantwortung in den Denkmalinstitutionen und in der Zivilgesellschaft, sowie legitimierte Verfahren, die verschiedene Institutionen, Gruppen und Akteure miteinander verbinden. Dissonante Erbeobjekte und Formen des Protests zeigen den Bedarf an gemeinsamen Formen und Prozesse der Kritik, die offen sind für die unterschiedlichen Akteur:innen und auch die Argumente derjenigen berücksichtigen, die sich ins Unrecht versetzt fühlen. Daraus ergeben sich zwei grundlegende Argumente: Es braucht die gesellschaftliche Akzeptanz, dass Kritik sowohl einen rechtlichen Rahmen als auch vor- und nachbereitende Expertise benötigt; und das institutionelle Verständnis, dass Expertise ohne (institutionalisierte Formen der) Partizipation die Akzeptanz von Entscheidungen und letztlich die Demokratie insgesamt gefährdet.

ABSTRACT

Community involvement and participation activities are gaining increasing attention in heritage conservation; this article provides insights into processes, procedures, and cases that show the potential for understanding heritage as democratic process, and of heritage *within* democratic processes. However, although these processes are still to be established and elaborated, we face the next challenge: How do we – as professionals and as democratic civil societies – respond if non-democratic actors (mis)use heritage for their own interests? The argumentation is developed from considerations by the conservationist Riegl, and argues for an organisation of actors involving management of change. Furthermore, the article is informed by Karl Popper and Ralf Dahrendorf's argumentation, which defines democracy against the background of experiencing the Nazi past. Hence, heritage in democratic processes allows for – but also demands – individual responsiveness and responsibility in heritage institutions and in civil society, as well as legitimised procedures that link different institutions, groups, and actors. Conflicting phenomena, such as statues of anti-Semites and forms of protest, show crucially that criticism is needed, together with sufficient access to initiate and participate in associated debates while listening to all voices equally and considering the arguments of those who feel wronged by various historical and current sentiments represented in monuments. In consequence, two arguments follow: Society's acceptance that criticism needs both a legal framework and preparatory and follow-up expertise; and institutional understanding that expertise without (institutionalised forms of) participation jeopardises the acceptance of decisions and, ultimately, democracy as a whole.

The New Right

In November 2023, it was revealed that a far-right meeting in Potsdam discussed plans for so-called ‘remigration’. This would expel millions of people living in Germany, including both naturalised German citizens and asylum seekers. *Correctiv*, an investigative journalism network, reported that the same plan was launched concurrently by Martin Sellner, the Austrian leader of the far-right NGO *Identitäre*. *Identitäre* is part of the ‘Identitarian’ movement, and has both ideological and personal links to the far-right in Austria’s *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) and Germany’s *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD).¹ In response, large demonstrations in favour of human rights, freedom, and choice of diverse forms of living provided a symbolic rejection of the leaked plan; nevertheless, in federal state elections during September 2024, the AfD gained the largest share of votes in Thuringia² and the second-largest in Saxony,³ and has performed similarly in Brandenburg;⁴ the FPÖ, in turn, won the largest share of votes in Austria’s national election in autumn 2024.⁵ Consequently, far-right actors are/will be in a position to govern the cultural sector.

Other events: In summer 2024, it was reported that an AfD member of the Bavarian State Parliament (Franz Schmidt) had bid to purchase the listed Mattsies Castle in the Allgäu, which is in need of major conservation, to establish a “patriotic centre” there. In consequence, non-democratic actors are – as owners of built heritage – relevant partners in the management of heritage conservation. The professional heritage community (administration, authorities, and architects) and civil society (owners, users, or initiatives) must therefore deal with such actors in that context.

What do these worrying trends and tendencies in the political sphere have to do with heritage conservation? Heritage conservation is a political affair in giving meaning and interpretation to historic objects, environments, and places. The professional heritage communities in Germany and Austria value, select, and protect such assets in the public interest, in accordance with heritage conservation laws. Community involvement and participation activities are gaining increasing attention in heritage conservation, and this article provides insights into processes, procedures, and cases that show the potential for understanding heritage as democratic process, and heritage *within* democratic processes. However, although these processes are still to be established and

elaborated, we face the next challenge: What do we – as professionals and as democratic civil societies – do if non-democratic actors (mis)use heritage for their own – antidemocratic – interests?

Both Austria, Germany, and many other societies are democracies in the sense of the philosopher Karl Popper’s *Open Society*.⁶ The sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf positioned himself in following Popper;⁷ using these authors’ arguments to inspire and specify questions in our field of heritage conservation. Popper (1945) and Dahrendorf (1965) both developed their arguments from the case of Nazi Germany, of which Austria was a part, in mind. The Nazis misused heritage, and we see striking parallels among the “New Right” today.

In this context, the article considers the diverse perspectives of actors involved in the management of change processes, as well as rationalised processes of re-assessing heritage. The article does not consider memorial sites such as concentration camps, which require specific examination, but includes two examples of monuments located in Vienna that commemorate known anti-Semites, and Nazi architecture in Bozen/Bolzano. Instruments of heritage conservation in conservation practices, as well as the relationship between top-down and bottom-up approaches, are examined in more detail.

My core argument is that the professional heritage community strengthens democracy by establishing comprehensive communication and negotiation within a reliable framework of decision making on the one hand. On the other hand, institutionalised processes of criticism in heritage conservation must encompass personal and professional responsibility and rationalisation as well as responsiveness, and also give a voice to those who make arguments for democratic values. However, there is no clear answer yet, on how to limit the (potential) misuse of heritage by actors that Popper describes as enemies of the *Open Society*.

Heritage as Democratic Process

Alois Riegl and the Management of Change

The Austrian conservator Alois Riegl worked within a monarchy a good 120 years ago and, I argue, democratised the appreciation of historic objects, environments, and places. According to Riegl, the value of age, unlike historical value, is not specifically linked to expert knowledge, such as art history, but instead is directly perceptible by all using their own senses.⁸ The much-cited debate about how to

deal with the ancient Roman Diocletian's Palace in Spalato/Split around 1900 exemplifies how Riegl described the houses and uses that had grown and were established within the time.⁹ He pointed out traces of remodelling and decay that – while not of classical antiquity – had since generated age and atmospheric values. The conservator attached great importance to this sensual–emotional appreciation of the place and the process of *Werden und Vergehen* instead of advocating for the established position in conservation at that time, that solely prioritised the exposure of antiquities. This broad perception and assessment – of layers of time, heterogeneity, ambivalences, and polyvalence of this heritage – transcends the expertise of art and architectural history, and develops a social–political perspective that relates to all,¹⁰ and thus lays the figure of thought for foundational democratic processes and procedures in the field of heritage.

Since Riegl, discussion on the scope of values and processes of justification used in assessing and managing built heritage has developed further and has intensified in the past 20 years, e.g., through the *Assessing the Values of Cultural Heritage* report by the Getty Center.¹¹ The continuing discussion about *Authorised Heritage Discourse* (AHD) has fuelled questions of whose past, whose heritage, and whose legitimation to define.¹² One critical argument is that only authorised institutions and experts, such as heritage authorities, are involved in selecting and assessing objects in the present and defining them for us all as our given past. In contrast, John Pendlebury and other scholars highlight heritage as an assemblage of objects, regulations, and practices by both the professional heritage community and civil society. Recent concepts argue explicitly that diverse actors are part of heritage processes, as for example in community-driven adaptive heritage reuse (AHR),¹³ or in the management of change.¹⁴ The German conservator Hans-Rudolf Meier explains that a plurality of values enables conservation opportunities among larger networks of actors: “[...] the value of open, value-plural and value-reflective heritage conservation [lies] in recognising not only the diversity of conservation values, but also [in] the diversity of conservation motivations and ultimately conservation opportunities. This also opens up new perspectives for official heritage conservation [...] as part – and anchor – of heritage conservation as a diverse, open network that aims [...] to preserve cultural diversity.”¹⁵ In addition to these opportunities,

any plurality of values and actors is also accompanied by conflict and criticism, and hence a need for rational resolutions to such tensions, e.g., resolving conflicting perspectives on heritage.

Management of Change

Values and assessment follow differing priorities depending on the perspectives of various actors. They are group-specific, compete for priority, and reflect the struggle for the sovereignty of interpretation.¹⁶ However, we agree that values and the process of assessing are constitutive for heritage identification and management. Conflicts among actors thereby reflect conflicts of values.¹⁷ Management of change is one such rationalised form of negotiation: a guided process of balanced decision-making on interventions in built heritage. The core idea is to reflect comprehensibly and explicitly what we do when assessing and (in some cases) changing heritage objects.¹⁸

The Austrian conservator Bernd Euler-Rolle suggests a decision-making matrix that reflects the *Guidelines for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance – the Burra Charter* (1999).¹⁹ Both matrix and guidelines describe the interrelation of assessment and decision-making on heritage changes as a form of value-based management. The decision-making matrix offers a reliable framework for the integration of multiple actors, and allows an interactive process without losing sight of the assessments and statements of significance that define objects and places as heritage. The directed process highlights the interactive negotiation among different perspectives, subsequent options for change, and the potential impacts of resulting intervention. The impacts have to be weighed in regard to their effect in modifying the cultural significance of a monument: “The way the decision matrix works corresponds to a cycle of impacts between current heritage significance, changes, and new significance. What is essential here is the openness that changes to the artefacts can even strengthen certain heritage values.”²⁰ Reflecting heritage and democracy means that considered heritage values are contextualised by democratic ones. Systematisations for integrating different values, perspectives, and actors can help in rationalising these heritage conservation processes. The *Good Practice Wheel* (GPW)²¹ structures eight fields of action (conservation, (re-)use, community engagement, sustainable development and climate change, education, urban development, research,

and management) to demand explicit benefits of cooperative and collaborative action. Furthermore, the corresponding fields of expertise are brought into a “dialogue”.²² Here, value-conflicts are rationalised by seeking the potentials – rather than the risks²³ – through integrating plural perspectives in the management of change.

These instruments, of decision-matrix and *Good Practice Wheel*, help to institutionalise the management of change procedures. The idea to strengthen certain heritage values in these procedures should be in accordance with democratic principles and within the framework of greater institutionalised agreements such as constitutional laws and human rights if we understand heritage as a democratic process. One condition for successful management of change and of democracy is that the actors involved are qualified. This is no easy condition, as the instruments rest on statements concerning the significance of the heritage, which – especially in the European countries – is found in methods of art history. Otto Pächt and others (1977) highlight the inseparable connection of seeing, knowing, and perceiving;²⁴ however, not all actors are well educated in this field. Therefore, we have to think in two directions: First: The expertise of the professional heritage community lies in questions concerning the material, construction, appearance, etc. of objects: the *Dingfragen*. The task of professionals, including heritage authorities, is to explicitly and comprehensibly document and communicate such knowledge and values in procedures that assess heritage and manage its change. Second: The expertise of further actors can be structured and integrated along the GPW; e.g., first-hand expertise in using a heritage object (such as the inhabitants of a settlement) is likely to be important for the use and care, appropriate development, and research for understanding the place. Both need time, and this might be a further aspect to think about, since democracy in itself always needs time.

However, what do we do if actors such as the New Right attempt to misuse heritage procedures and objects for non-democratic values, programmes, and activities? Do professional heritage communities and civil society have the better argument for heritage corresponding to democratic principles? Values-based assessment and forms of management that are comprehensible, documented, and clearly communicated are central to framing and managing heritage as a democratic process.

Heritage in Democratic Processes

Popper’s Concept of The Open Society

Heritage and democracy lead us to the question of how to deal with the mandate for protecting difficult heritage and controversial monuments,²⁵ the original purpose (or some past function) of which violate people’s dignity or human rights more generally, as noted in the context of the *Black Lives Matter* movement and with monuments representing supporters of slavery. Thus, what to do when conflicts arise – as in the Vienna context, with monuments to anti-Semites – about altering, removing, or destroying such monuments?²⁶

Popper and Dahrendorf would both agree with heritage as organised democratic processes, but would also argue for heritage in democratic processes. Popper critically reflects, in his chapter *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, on the occidental society as rooted in Ancient Greece and Rome, which transitioned from a tribal to pluralistic mindset. In this context he neglects Plato’s utopian ideas of a state and elaborates links from utopia to oppression. In contrast to the Greek philosopher, Popper argues for a liberal society with individual freedom of choice and argument under a political regime of ongoing checks and balances and step-by-step responsiveness within social change, that are processes in which personal and professional responsibility has to be taken. Here, responsibility, criticism, and rational negotiation in the political-social sphere are central to limiting or avoiding aspects of totalitarian governance. Furthermore, Popper and Dahrendorf associate the Open Society with equality before the law and protection from oppression for each person.²⁷

What does this mean for conservation? Heritage in democratic processes allows for and demands *individual responsiveness*²⁸ and *responsibility*²⁹ in heritage institutions and in civil society, as well as *legitimised procedures*³⁰ that link different institutions, groups, and actors; *for criticism – and, if needed, rejection*³¹ – *of assessment and decision-making processes*, especially in science and academia; for sufficient access to initiate and participate in associated debates while *listening to all voices equally*; and finally, for considering the perspectives of those who feel wronged through statements or sentiments represented in monuments.

Important examples have been given of when individuals, initiatives, and communities have criticised controversial monuments and difficult heritage related to racism, as happened in the context of the



Fig. 1: Plaque of the Lueger monument, Vienna (2024).



Fig. 2: Art installation: Lueger temporär, Vienna (2023).

Black Lives Matter movement; or related to anti-Semitism, such as Vienna's statue of Karl Lueger (Fig. 2) (by Josef Müllner; designed 1913, erected 1926) on Doktor-Karl-Lueger-Platz or the bust of Josef Weinheber (by Josef Bock; designed 1940, erected 1975) on Schillerplatz (Fig. 3).

The monumentalisation of Karl Lueger, mayor of Vienna from 1897 to 1910, has been criticised since the 1970s for his proclaimed anti-Semitism. In 2009, a first competition was held to contextualise this heritage, with the winner proposing to tilt the statue slightly by 3.5 degrees. Reactions by the city's politicians followed the general positions of their respective parties. "The Greens were in favour of implementing the chosen proposal in the Vienna election campaign. Mayor Häupl (SPÖ) [Social Democratic Party of Austria] could not imagine a slanted position, but at least spoke out in favour of erecting an explanatory plaque at the memorial. The ÖVP [Austrian People's Party] emphasised the importance of historical contextualisation with regard to the anti-Semitism politically instrumentalised by Lueger, but at the same time expressly rejected a redesign or renaming. Not very surprisingly, the FPÖ demanded: 'The Lueger memorial must not be touched.'³² The Vienna heritage authorities expressed concerns regarding major impact on the appearance of the monument, which, due to their state mandate, has to be protected.

Following these proposals, nothing happened. In 2016 a plaque was installed by the city administration to memorise both Lueger's contributions and failures, yet making only very brief mention of his anti-Semitism and not mentioning that of Müllner at all (Fig. 1). Thus, criticism persisted, and in 2020 the monument was sprayed with graffiti saying 'Schande' (disgrace). Several civil society initiatives followed, such as the contextualising art project *Lueger temporär* from 2022 to 2023 (Fig. 2), conferences, petitions, and a performative guard of dishonour. In 2022–2023 a second competition was launched by the city, the same project won as in 2009, and the transformation of an upright statue into a slightly tilted one is underway. Nevertheless, loud criticism persists: that neither Lueger nor Müllner's anti-Semitism is explicitly addressed, and that the square and statue still memorialise Lueger.³³ Moreover, I ask what (if anything) would happen if the FPÖ was in power?

Josef Weinheber was an early member of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) since 1931 and a writer whose

lyrics honoured both the NS and Hitler himself; the artist Joseph Bock is known for portraying Hitler, and created a bust that was presented by the Wiener Tagblatt daily newspaper in April 1938, immediately after the ‘Anschluss’ (Germany’s annexation of Austria).³⁴ A bust of Weinheber, also created by Bock, was erected in Vienna’s Schillerplatz in 1975 by a private foundation. In 1991, the marble plinth was changed to granite and a new fundament was built to secure the monument. Since 2010, the *Plattform Geschichtspolitik*, a group of students and teachers of the *Academy of Arts*, has criticised this form of memorialisation of Weinheber. They exposed the fundament in 2013, metaphorically revealing the foundations of ongoing extreme right-wing positions in today’s society and raising awareness about the problematic and non-democratic background of both honoured persons (Fig. 3). Finally, in 2019 a plaque was installed through cooperation among the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* (Institute for Contemporary History), *Universität Wien*, and the city of Vienna, which at least acknowledges the difficult heritage represented by Weinheber (Fig. 4).³⁵

In Bozen/Bolzano we note another form of visual and intellectual criticism of fascist architecture (Fig. 5). Waltraud Kofler-Engl reflected this case in more detail during the 2012 AKTLD conference.³⁶ Illuminated lettering, *Kein Mensch hat das Recht zu gehorchen/Nessuno ha il diritto di obbedire* [No-one has a right to obey] now disrupts the front façade of the former fascist party headquarters – today used as a tax office – and overwrites the NS visual programme and fascist slogan of *credere, obbedire, combattere (glauben, gehorchen, kämpfen)* [believe, obey, fight]. The installation is combined with an information block in the square. Both critically reflect the fascist heritage as well as demanding democratic norms, correspondent to the argumentations of Popper and Dahrendorf. In contrast, the fascist building opposite has continuously housed the courthouse, making it complicit in imposing the laws and ideologies of that regime, which until today has passed without comment.

Heritage Assessment and Management in Democracies

As the call of this conference states, “*Democracy is a fragile creature*”; and further, the political system is related to participation and empowerment of people. Popper and Dahrendorf argue that critique is needed in democracies, allowing for institution-



Fig. 3: Weinheber bust, Vienna (2024).

al improvements for the benefit of freedom, choice, and empowerment of people. Democratic values for heritage conservation are defined together with personal responsiveness and responsibility in institutions and civil society, and protection of those who are wronged. The *Black Lives Matter* movement has shown that there is a social need to reassess monuments that violate democratic values. The illuminated lettering, together with the information, at the former fascist (s.o.) party headquarters in Bozen/Bolzano translate the theoretical argument of Popper and Dahrendorf into heritage conservation practice and product.

Both intellectuals argue for criticism as a central constituting value of democracies; as the basis of democracy for change and greater participation; and for limiting or avoiding (aspects of) totalitarian governance, as we note today in Hungary and obviously in Russia. Criticism allows for reflection and, if necessary, can demonstrate that particular hypotheses (or decisions) are false or no longer tenable. However, there is a framework needed for criticism in heritage conservation: the juridification (rule of law) and institutionalisation of negotiation processes, which due to Popper and Dahrendorf I have called rationalisation.

From this follow two arguments: Society's acceptance that criticism needs both a legal framework and preparatory and follow-up expertise; and institutional understanding that expertise without (institutionalised forms of) participation jeopardises the acceptance of decisions and, ultimately, democracy as a whole.

Riegl's value-based assessment, the *Burra Charter*, and scholars constitute these aspects in heritage conservation. Instruments such as the decision matrix, the *Good Practice Wheel*, and others open opportunities for professional heritage communities

to organise heritage as a democratic process and to link top-down processes with bottom-up ones. Hereby, the Lueger case in particular shows the need to clarify the role of heritage authorities. Do they understand themselves as mediators in balancing conflicts between various stakeholders, or do they take agency for protecting cultural heritage with rational arguments? What if they do both?

These reflections are even more urgent in the context of aforementioned right-wing extremism. What happens when the enemies of the *Open Society* – of our democracies – claim a right to define, evaluate, and manage heritage and sites? An even greater challenge occurs when not only sections of civil society and political parties in opposition but instead elected representatives argue for non-democratic positions. What happens if not just heritage is at risk, but democracies? My argument for criticism is not one for criticism's sake, but for managing change, and the need to organise participation in rationalised processes of negotiation, which include the ability to comment on, change, and dismantle monuments. Furthermore, I argue – and this is slightly contradictory – for strengthening the role of professional heritage communities in heritage conservation procedures in the sense that they must take the lead in considering critics and plural voices when assessing and managing heritage, as part – and anchor – of heritage conservation as a diverse, open network, as Meier said. Heritage professionals are key actors in comprehensibly communicating the cultural significance of heritage objects and sites, and in rationalising those impacts that strengthen democratic heritage processes. Furthermore, they play a role in recognising and rejecting value attributions and narratives that promote totalitarian aspects, but they cannot secure heritage and democracy alone.



Fig. 4: Plaque of the Weinheber bust, Vienna (2024).



Fig. 5: Former Casa del Fascio, Bozen (2024).

Figures

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Endnotes

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