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Retaining character: heritage conservation and the logic of continuity

In anthropology and beyond, discussions of character have more often focused on this as a quality of human subjects rather than of the material world. How is character figured as a quality of historic buildings, monuments and places? I situate this question through an ethnographic focus on conservation professionals in Scotland, tracing the practices through which 'character' is recognised, understood and conserved. My account explores the practices and dispositions through which practitioners attune themselves to this quality, and highlights the role character plays in resolving a central dilemma for conservation: how things can remain as they are, even while changing. This ethnographic focus questions some of the materially essentialist analytic frameworks that have prevailed in literatures on both conservation and character, while highlighting forms of practice that are elided more than illuminated by countervailing deconstructive approaches to these topics: actions, ideas and commitments that stem from heritage professionals' own sense of character as 'in-built'.

Key words character, heritage, conservation, time, materiality

Introduction

Discussions of character, in anthropology and beyond, have primarily focused on its attribution to human subjects (but see Candea this issue). How is the concept extended, elaborated and transformed, as a quality of non-human artefacts? This paper explores this question, focusing on understandings of buildings and other elements of the historic environment as characterful. Ideas of human character connote an individual 'self', underlying exterior appearances and specific manifestations (Reed and Bialecki 2018). What commitments lead to the imagination of historic artefacts in these quasi-human terms, and what actions do these understandings set in train? How are notions of interiority and exteriority extended and reconfigured as qualities of historic environments?

An article by the director of the Scottish Centre for Conservation Studies highlights the central concept of 'character' to the work of historic conservation:

> Character is what we are trying to save – and it is inbuilt, not applied … However the complexity of the concept starts when we begin to consider which character we are seeking to conserve on any particular building, or area. Is it its original character – in which case are we right to demolish later additions or alterations? Or is it all the complex accretions of a building over time? And what of the repairs necessary to arrest decay and maintain the character of the original? Do we disguise some of these to maintain the character of the building we care for?

Or are we content to let 'time and tide' take its inexorable toll on the building and weather new elements back to the old? (Holder 2001: np)

How are these questions asked and answered in practice? Inspired by recent anthropological work (see particularly Faubion 2018; Keane 2016; Reed and Bialecki 2018; Strathern 2018), this paper seeks to understand how character is implicated in the adjudications and assessments that heritage professionals make, in their efforts to value and protect the historic environment. Drawing on ethnographic research with conservation professionals working for Historic Scotland, the national heritage agency, I highlight how the concept is central to the deceptively simple work of maintaining continuity (compare Pedersen 2018).

Questioning materially essentialist understandings of 'character', implicit in a range of applied and theoretical conservation literatures, I take particular inspiration from Webb Keane who highlights the inter-subjective negotiations through which the 'exo-skeleton' (2016: 97) of character is shaped and insists we see this as an ongoing process. Character, as Keane sees it, is not given but assigned through imputation (2016: 107). Rather than emanate from 'within', it is imputed as a co-constructed object of multiple interactions. Yet 'journeying with the concept' (Reed pers. comm.) to understandings of 'character' central to heritage practitioners' assessments of buildings requires extension of this conceptual framing. On the one hand, Keane's approach retains what seems an unhelpful essentialism: conceptualising this as a subjective quality of a rather singular kind forecloses attention to the multiple versions at play in heritage professionals' highly sophisticated understandings of what character can be, specifically as a quality of non-human artefacts (cf. Faubion 2018) and built structures. On the other, the anti-essentialist logic of social construction elides the animating role of essentialism in the thought and practice germane to these negotiations. While highlighting the multiple ways in which heritage professionals elaborate these ideas, I wish to foreground their own sense of character as a way of specifying the integral qualities of the buildings and monuments they seek to protect.[1] Rather than critically deconstruct the essentialist orientations of heritage practitioners, I explore what is at stake in ideas about character, as an essential, albeit complex and sometimes contested quality of everyday heritage practice.

Moral character

Concepts of character began to be applied to buildings during the 18th-century European Enlightenment, emerging in tandem with understandings of human character. Architectural theorist Adrian Forty argues that, even in the face of significant historical shifts and ideological differences, the concept has remained central 'to efforts to demonstrate a relationship between built works of architecture and ulterior meaning'

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1 The account builds on collaborative ethnography undertaken in conjunction with Sian Jones, focusing on Historic Scotland, the national heritage conservation agency. The organisation has since changed its name to Historic Environment Scotland but here I retain the original name as consistent with the ethnographic present of our fieldwork. From 2009 to 2013 we undertook ethnographic research aiming to trace the nexus of professionals involved in the work of conservation, including through participant observation with stone masons, heritage scientists, archaeologists, architects and other civil servants.

(2004: 120). In this European tradition of thinking, ideas of character instantiate a relationship between building and human presence in three linked senses: first, as elaborated perhaps most influentially by Heidegger, character refers to the sense in which built space has qualities only as experienced by a specific human subject; second, in the German romantic tradition, as developed by John Ruskin and others in 19th-century Britain, ideas of 'expressive character' connote an understanding of buildings as outcomes and artefacts of the characters of those who make them, having value as the outward expression of this inner force; and third in the degree to which the qualities of buildings can be understood, analogously to people, as residing in an individualised essence of a quasi-personified kind.

Why is it important to preserve historic character? In line with broader international conservation principles, inscribed in a series of charters, the Scottish Historic Environment Policy (SHEP), the key national policy document,[2] sets out the rationale for historic conservation, along with guidance on the over-arching principles that specify how this is to be done: 'The historic character of our environment is important to our quality of life and sense of identity. Many of its elements are precious, some are not well understood; if it is lost or damaged, it cannot be replaced' (Historic Scotland 2009: 16). Implicit in this opening line is a moral appeal that works at two levels. Echoing broader international discourses, protection of the historic environment is rendered as a form of patrimony, whose value as a material embodiment of the past is intrinsic and unchanging. Overlaying this emphasis on intrinsic significance, SHEP engenders the logic of the more recent 'values based' (Pendlebury 2009, Chapter 11) approach, justifying conservation of character via social and economic contributions, including through regeneration, tourism and collective identity.

Concepts of character figure centrally in the moral rationale that is given, in policy and legislation, and in the everyday negotiations through which this is enacted. Justification for formal designation of buildings, for example, is that, 'Listing ensures that a building's special character and interest are taken into account where changes are proposed' (Historic Scotland 2009: 23). As one of a complex of interlinked concepts, including 'authenticity', 'integrity' and 'honesty', the term is distinguished, in part, through the imputation of a personified material essence. Writing as a practising heritage professional, Holder describes how ideas of historic 'character' have an in-built moral appeal that can be of instrumental utility but that also leave professionals open to charges of subjectivity and lack of rigour:

> Not only is it hard to define but it shares with related concepts such as integrity and honesty, a family resemblance by employing what Ruskin termed 'the pathetic fallacy'. That is to say we apply concepts properly belonging to human beings to inanimate objects. […] To accept the concept ensures that all the participants are already treating buildings as people, as living breathing beings, whose fate we care about, and not simply as bricks and lime mortar. (Holder 2001: np)

2   SHEP was superseded by the Historic Environment Scotland Policy statement in 2016, following the merger of Historic Scotland with the Royal Commission and the integration of the two as Historic Environment Scotland. I refer here to SHEP as the key guidance document during the period our research was undertaken, noting that the underlying concerns with character remain fundamentally similar.

Holder recognises the utility of the term as 'a direct, and frequently effective appeal to the emotions of those who make decisions in planning committees up and down the land', along with its shortcomings, including through appeals which 'fail to impress the hard headed and leaves conservation looking distinctly amateur' (2001: np). Rights-based discourses are extended on this logic, more and less explicitly, as a commitment to the personified essence of a historic building or monument.

Rothsea Academy: recognising character

We are on our way to Rothsea Academy, a derelict modernist school. Currently listed, the local authority have applied to have it de-listed in order to enable demolition and redevelopment. According to Michael,[3] the point of the visit is not to interpret the significance of the building – all that comes later – but to give the best, most accurate description of its 'character'. Prior to the visit, Michael was on holiday and has had little time to do 'the provisional', the background research that is sometimes undertaken before visits. He sees this as an advantage, allowing a 'pure experience' of the space, unencumbered by the kinds of contextual information that can cloud understanding and judgement.

Michael holds strong views on architecture and planning. As we drive, he narrates these as a commentary on the towns and buildings we pass: the tower blocks of Glasgow followed by a series of smaller towns on the south of the River Clyde. A self-professed 'lover of old buildings' but 'not a traditionalist', he is critical of the creeping 'pastiche', and of the combination of narrow self-interest and short-sightedness that has led to the diminishing quality of our built environment. These are what he terms 'dinner party' opinions and though he holds them strongly, he is at pains to point out that such 'personal' views have nothing to do with the listings processes he is employed to undertake: 'Whatever you might personally think about a building – whether you like it or not – is irrelevant.' This means being 'detached', 'cold' and 'clinical' in the way that judgement is exercised. Personal opinion is irrelevant to the judgements that are made: 'there is no room for egos'.

On arrival at the building, it becomes apparent how these ideals are enmeshed in various practices of attunement and recognition. The building has been derelict for over five years. The place is permeated by the smell of damp, with obvious evidence of low-level vandalism: tables and chairs strewn around, panelling punched through and the crunch of broken glass underfoot. Some of the rooms are left more or less as they would have been – posters and student work on walls, pictures of staff and students depict haircuts and clothes already looking dated. Michael remarks on the eerie atmosphere but is clear to distinguish this as extrinsic to the character we are here to assess.

The visit is carefully structured but the process is not mechanical. Michael works his way around the building with logical and deliberate movements. He uses a camera to document what he sees. Rooms are approached as a series of vistas, the requirements of documentary convention eliciting a structured way of moving through space. Shots are taken of the four main aspects of each room, before detailed close-ups of important details. When he looks, his vision is guided by a wider set of expectations about the kinds of detail that can constitute important elements of a building's character. The

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3 Pseudonyms are used throughout the text.

images will act as an *aide-mémoire* when he comes to narrate the case for consideration by others in the weekly listings meeting. He explains that the site visit adds 'immediacy of experience' that the images don't convey, along with the 'narrative' of the building: 'That's something you can only understand by being in the building; seeing it close-up and first hand … in the flesh.' He works his way through the rooms, narrating what he sees: 'So this must have been a later addition?' he wonders aloud, as he tries to resolve the temporal sequence posed by a strange configuration of rooms by the entrance. The descriptive language and documentary methods are primarily visual, but character takes various forms, whose understanding is aided by other senses: materials are touched to work out what they are; walls tapped in efforts to understand what is structural. In the process of recognising character, the subjectivity of the assessor is rendered as a form of objectivity (cf. Shapin 2012: 170–1). Assessments must be stripped of personal judgement and framed by the shared criteria and expectations of others in the team: acting through these principles, listing team members recognise character as a response that is objective, even as it is registered, felt and experienced as the embodied response of specific individuals.

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How is historic character defined and recognised in practice? Efforts to conserve the historic environment are framed by various forms of legislation. In Scotland, as in the UK more generally, historic monuments are protected by 'scheduling', a historic designation associated with a distinct typology of character. Tim works in the scheduling department, surveying archaeological monuments, and explains:

> It's incredibly difficult because it's rather subjective. And that's why we tend to use criteria to assess what we call, the intrinsic, the contextual and the associative character of monuments. The intrinsic character is the observations and records of sites that we make, when we visit. How well does it survive? How visible it is? How fragile it is? We then research a lot more about the sites before we write it up and that provides us with context and association. And by context, I mean understanding how the story of that site fits into the story of Scotland. It also includes a rather more ephemeral set of issues about landscape and position, how it sits with other monuments, whether it forms part of a wider complex and it's not just in isolation, as a standing remain, but it's part of a bigger palimpsest, through time. Finally, associative character are any significant associations that these monuments have. People, events, situations that help us understand what the associations were and are with the monument, in the past and the present. It's only when we've understood those three elements of the monument's character that we then collectively discuss and agree what we think is the overall assessment.

By contrast to monuments, historic buildings, defined as structures that are roofed and in use, are protected through the legislative instrument of 'listing'. Listing is likewise centrally concerned with the identification and protection of 'character', and similarly distinguishes between its intrinsic, contextual and associative elements. However (as further elaborated below), a more elastic interpretation of 'character' is partly informed by the pragmatic recognition that more change must be accommodated in these circumstances.

While the concept of 'character' is central to these legislative definitions, its recognition is far from straightforward. A heritage manager responsible for adjudicating on

changes to listed buildings describes it as 'a word that's always there' but 'difficult to pin down'. Another heritage manager likewise describes it as 'nebulous' and 'hard to define'. During an interview, a local authority conservation officer refers to it as a 'weasel word', acknowledging she cannot explain what it means but only how she uses it. Concepts of 'character' are used regularly but are rarely reflected on. Heritage professionals direct attention to the question of how to interpret and recognise this quality in relation to specific monuments and buildings, but the quality itself is rarely questioned. Ideas of character sediment as ways of thinking, acting and seeing that are relatively unscrutinised.

The difficulty of definition is partly one of over-familiarity, partly one of complexity. The head of the team responsible for 'listing' buildings describes character as the 'unique blend of how the different elements that make it important come together'. Accordingly, heritage professionals emphasise how character is a contextual relation of elements that must be inductively recognised. A district architect who oversees the conservation of buildings for which Historic Scotland have direct responsibility of care explains:

> You wouldn't blindly apply the idea of we mustn't affect this part of the building's character. You would break it down: Sometimes buildings are raised on steps, so that could be an important part of the character or it could be just the fact it's built at a different level and you needed to get steps. I think most of us would always be asking ourselves these questions and you wouldn't just uniformly apply this principle.

While heritage professionals stress the systematic nature of their efforts, they are resistant to the idea this is formulaic. Legislative guidance provides the parameters by which character can be understood and acknowledged but requires interpretative capacities, 'skilled visions' (Grasseni 2007) that are trained through education and then instilled through professional practice.

Dunoon Pier: distinguishing character

Heritage professionals seek to understand what character *is* as a way of identifying what it is not. Much of what they do makes instrumental use of these understandings in order to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable intervention. The SHEP describes the government's approach as follows:

> The challenge for sustainable management of the historic environment and how it contributes to the vitality of modern life, is to identify its key characteristics and to establish the boundaries within which change can continue so that it enhances rather than diminishes historic character. (Historic Scotland 2009: 6)

The point of conservation is not to prevent change, but to ensure this 'respects' existing character:

> To retain historic character and future performance of older buildings it will be important to use appropriate and compatible materials and construction techniques … It is important that new developments are sensitive to historic

character and attain high standards in design and construction, while recognising
the portfolio of original building materials. (Historic Scotland 2009: 13)

These over-arching commitments emerge in practice as a range of specific assessments.
Kenneth, a heritage manager trained as an architect, is responsible for consenting
work relating to Dunoon Pier. Originally built in 1835, it was substantially extended
and modified in the late 19th century, and fell out of use in the late 20th century
following construction of a larger, modern quay where the car ferry now docks. We
are here for a meeting with various representatives of the local authority and with
the project architect for an early consultation on their proposals for a regeneration
scheme. Though much of the conversation focuses on specific details, Kenneth is
at pains to highlight the provisional and informal nature of his thoughts, which are
aimed at conveying general principles.

Kenneth starts the meeting by outlining the key elements of the pier's character
and the planning implications that arise from this: 'It's a very simple structure, so any-
thing you do needs to respect that. Most of the character is expressed externally.' He
goes on to outline the range of aesthetic, material and structural elements that comprise
this: 'The whole thing about the pier is its lightness and the importance of being able
to see through it. Below deck you get nice views of the sea and the sense of the struc-
ture above almost floating. It's nice and light and airy. It's all about connection.' Also
important is the function for which it was built: 'as a pier or dock so even if this is taken
away this should remain a readable part of the structure'.

In addition to this issue of 'readability', some further general implications derive
from this: as a working pier that has adapted over time, 'Part of that pier's charac-
ter has been [that] it's constantly been bolted on, bits have happened, and other little
blancmange structures have come onto it for a while then they've got swept away later
on.' The pier retains its character not despite but because it has constantly changed.
Character is here understood as the material embodiment of a specific logic of change.
This general assessment frames a series of more specific judgements.

Standing on the deck, Kenneth enthuses about the possibility of a new pontoon that
would allow access to the sea and would be 'consistent with the character of connec-
tion', albeit as a new structure and for the new use of serving leisure boats: 'It would be
nice to give access back and to feel like the pier is still working.' Likewise he responds
positively to the local authority representative's tentative suggestion that the wood-clad
buildings could be re-used to house restaurants, to attract people from the town and
from the sea: 'we need to find uses that make these connections'. Beyond the desire for
a financially viable plan to ensure the long-term preservation of the structure, character
here emerges as an idea of continuity of function and use underpinned by the logic of
connectivity.

In later interactions the implications of these ideas of character are drawn out as
a series of distinctions between elements of the building of relatively more or less sig-
nificance: the roof is rotting. Kenneth recommends cutting and splicing new timber,
to retain the original where possible, so that the new wood reads 'as a distinct but
sensitive insertion'. Inside one of the main Victorian structures, white weatherboards
with peeling paint, the internal lining is seen as 'integral to its character' and therefore
'to be kept if at all possible'. In the second of the main buildings, we pause to eval-
uate the windows, which have bevelled original glass – 'I think you'd be struggling
to change these – they're really quite significant'. The local authority representative

wonders about new windows, which would be lower maintenance and more energy efficient, but Kenneth is insistent 'it's about the character. We wouldn't want to see the glazing bars lost.' In this instance 'character' is specified a structural and material quality that places significant limits to acceptable change. Elsewhere, a set of windows with replaced modern glass elicit a different response: deemed less intrinsic to the character on account of their 'already compromised' nature, double glazing is likely to be permissible to improve thermal performance.

While considerations of 'originality', understood as 'faithfulness' to the existing structure, are here an element of character, the two concepts do not always coincide. Kenneth and the architect stop to discuss some ornate detailing over two of the internal doors. 'Is it original?' the architect wonders. Unsure how old it is, Kenneth taps and prods. He arrives at no definitive conclusion but sees the issue of originality as ultimately unimportant in this context: 'I think they're great, really nice and blousy – that's what the seaside is all about!' Then later, 'they're here, they're part of the building's history, so let's keep them, it's seaside architecture – fun and a bit overblown'.

Back on the pier, we congregate in a blustery corner, words shouted into the wind. Peering down through the deck, waves can be glimpsed through large cracks, framed by bitumen-encrusted timber decking. The timbers have a character of their own, and contribute to the valued qualities of openness and connection. How to reconcile these with the need to allow access, consistent with health and safety legislation? The tension is not straightforwardly between the retention of character and concerns of a pragmatic and legislative kind, but between contradictory ideas of character of piers: aesthetically of lightness and airiness; and functionally as places on which people walk and circulate: 'connection', as Kenneth puts it. Current legislation makes it difficult to reconcile the two. Discussion aims at 'compromise', arriving at the suggestion of a boarded runway down the middle with the sides left open. Connection 'enhances' character, even as some character is diminished by loss of visibility.

At the ticket-office building, the issue of the relationship between these distinct versions of character emerges in a different form. Now an unremarkable squat, pebble-dashed building, Kenneth is concerned that it has lost 'its character of being light and open' and that 'the character of connection is diminished'. He underscores the point, narrating a history of ticket offices, controlling entrance and exit to the pier, for passengers and for people out for a stroll. In the face of public-sector funding cuts, Kenneth recognises the project budget is limited, but even so recommends 'some cosmetic additions would go a long way to making it feel more part of the pier'. In part because of the 'severely compromised' nature of the structure, this historical and functional interpretation of character in this instance outweighs concerns to retain originality. Kenneth suggests, 'perhaps something quite contemporary, quite bold'.

Tardos (2005: 9) highlights how legal professionals deploy the concept of character, as a way of assigning qualities to people and abstracting actions that do not belong. Likewise, ideas about character define what is 'essential' about a building, and therefore enable distinctions to be made between elements that can be changed or removed and those that need preserving. Character can be negatively affected through interventions that are spoken of as 'insensitive', 'unsympathetic' or 'jarring'. As an overarching imperative, conservation aims to retain the character, through the prevention of changes that compromise this. Understood as a kind of essence, the question of how to interpret and define it is complex because multiple factors are simultaneously at

play in indeterminate relation. Agreement about the need to conserve character frames interpretation, discussion and debate through which a series of contextual distinctions are made: between intrinsic elements in need of protection, and extrinsic elements that can legitimately be lost. It is on this logic that a building or monument can be understood to undergo change, even of a radical kind, while becoming more essentially what it already is. Even as character is invoked as a way of disaggregating decisions, with respect to specific structural elements, each of these is specified in relation to overall impact on the building as an individuated whole: a pattern or logic to which these various elements should ultimately defer.

Temporalities of character

The conservation movement emerged alongside a concept of linear historicity, often traced to post-enlightenment Europe (Jokilehto 1999, Chapter 7; Lowenthal 1985: 389–91), where time is irreversible, each period is unique. As expressions of actions in the past, monuments and buildings acquire a value as the materialisation of time. The imperative to conserve, evinced particularly strongly in the 19th-century writings of Ruskin and Morris, relates to ideas of the historic environment as a finite resource: once destroyed it could not be recreated. Arguing in opposition to Viollet-le-Duc and more generally the restorative impulse of the 19th century, the anti-scrape movement opposed restoration on the logic that what is once lost can never be regained. A paradox of authenticity arises, recognised, at times acutely, by conservation professionals at Historic Scotland, and exemplified in a joke with common currency: there are two ways to destroy the historic environment – by not conserving it, or by conserving it (see Lowenthal 1985: 126). In the former, destruction is through the loss of originality through material degradation through the passage of time; in the latter it is through conservation's own 'artificial' intervention. Ideas of character are implicated in this material-cum-temporal paradox and provide the means of contingent reconciliation. Character is temporalised in distinct ways, reflecting acknowledged differences in the qualities of the buildings or monuments they seek to conserve and in epistemic orientations of the experts involved.

Temporally speaking, it is common to talk of character through an association with a specific historic period. The head of the listings team describes it as 'the thing that makes [a building] special and of its time'. She relates this to an idea of 'integrity', another commonly invoked term in this context: 'How true something is to what it was constructed as.' Character, from this perspective, relates to the notion of 'originality', understood as an 'authentic' tie between material and time: some element of the historic environment and a moment or period of origin. Ideas of character are thus related to those of originality but, as seen in the example of the pier, the two are not synonymous. The character of a building or monument can relate to an 'original' phase of construction, but can also be acquired over time. As I watch one of the heritage managers leafing through a pile of applications for modifications to listed buildings, he explains the decision to approve a substantial addition to a whisky distillery: 'if they have constantly evolved then part of that character is that they should be capable of evolving and changing again and having new, quite significant elements put onto them maybe makes them look quite different from how we are used to seeing them now, but that's always been part of their character'.

Attributions of character enfold considerations of materials, aesthetics, structure and use with those of time. On the one hand, this temporal understanding enables discrimination between elements on the basis of association with more or less signifi-cant historical associations, periods or events and so of *what* can change. On the other it enables assessment of the degree and kind of change inherent in specific objects of conservation: in other words of a specific logic of continuity, or *how* this change can legitimately occur. In both senses, character is understood as an intrinsic quality. Even so, heritage professionals recognise how these temporal qualities are elaborated in dif-ferent ways: by heritage experts trained to see and know in different ways, in relation to distinct legislative instruments.

With a PhD in archaeology, James is now a heritage manager, responsible for the conservation of scheduled ancient monuments. He describes how differences in pro-fessional training relate to more fundamental differences in the ways that character is conceived:

> The main focus of the listings process is on the architectural heritage and most of the people employed [in those roles] all came through architectural history so there was that architectural approach, what was important was what somebody understood the architectural merit of the building to be and what the [original] architects had envisaged. So later re-workings which an archaeologist might find interesting tend not to be thought about as being of any relevance … On the ancient monument side it would be a lot more focussed on protecting the fab-ric and seeing the fabric as part of what you'd like to preserve, whereas on the building side, they tend to be more or less trying to retain the overall impression and some of the finer details rather than the solid fabric. Both sides are trying to strike a balance, but it's where the balance can be struck.

He describes a recent case, a tower house on the borders, where these perspectives come together in conversations and sometimes disagreements about how to proceed. Originally protected as a scheduled monument, the decision was recently made to de-schedule it and designate it as listed:

> Because it was occupied until fairly recently, it's very well preserved, its original features have all been maintained, so you can restore it without losing its overall character. There will be a debate at some point about harling [a traditional exter-nal render]. We saw some earlier phases, you're going to lose some of that [ability to see the earlier phases] if it's harled, but then it'll be returned back to its original appearance, so there's a little debate to be had there.

Broader tensions in conservation philosophy are refracted through specific forms of expert knowledge, associated with distinct understandings of character: archaeo-logical emphasis on materials sometimes conflicts with an architectural emphasis on form, even to the extent that both acknowledge the inter-dependence of these elements (Yarrow 2017; Yarrow and Jones 2014). Assessments of character involve consider-ation of the contributions that are made by a range of potential elements, including aesthetics, function, material authenticity and physical structure. While these are not reducible to temporality, each are taken as evidence of the past and are given value (or not) as a function of their association with the people who constructed and have used them. With respect to character, questions of 'what' a building is are also, indissolubly,

questions of 'when'. Character is always a relation of continuity of past and present, even to the extent the basis of that continuity is change. This, in turn, becomes a way of specifying the future as an elaboration of an already existing logic.

Scales of character

So far I have focused on the elaboration of character as a quality of buildings and monuments. As applied to the historic environment, the concept individuates at a range of further levels (see Williamson nd). Gordon explains: 'It can work at different scales, relating to the building, to the setting, and to the interrelationships of structures – the spaces between buildings.'

   With respect to Saxon villages in Romania, Williamson describes how ideas of character entail 'unity encompassing heterogeneity' (nd: 5). A building or monument has a character, recognised, as a sum of various constituent parts. 'Character features', for instance doors, windows, architrave or particular roof detailing, contribute to the overall character, and are given character, in part, through this encompassing context. We have already seen how a general assessment of the character of a building enables a reading of some features as more integral and so more valuable.

   Just as understandings of specific historic buildings affect assessments about those elements deemed 'in' and 'out' of character, so regional and national understandings of character are drawn into decisions about the significance of particular buildings. Intended to protect the historic qualities of specific areas or streetscapes, Conservation Areas protect 'character', in part defined as a function of the visual, spatial and material relationships between buildings. The SHEP explains:

> The demolition of even a single building and the construction of a new building or buildings in its place could result in harm to the character or appearance of a conservation area, or part of it. In deciding whether conservation area con-sent should be granted, planning authorities should therefore take account of the importance of the building to the character or appearance of any part of the conservation area, and of proposals for the future of the cleared site. (Historic Scotland 2009: 40)

At a still broader geographical scale, the historic environment has a 'national character' that defines what is significant and hence worthy of protection.

> Scotland's distinctive character has been shaped by some 10,000 years of human activity. Past generations have left their mark in the form of monuments, build-ings and sites, in our towns and cities and in the countryside around us, even in the patterns of our streets and fields. (Historic Scotland 2009: 8)

At various levels of abstraction, the concept of character operates through a recur-sive logic of individuation and aggregation. On the one hand, entities are ascribed a value through their emplacement within a broader field of relations, such that understandings of 'character' allow for the identification of elements of features, buildings or regions that are more or less 'characteristic': those qualities they have in common. In this sense, attributions of character are forms of classification. On the other hand, as that which is individually specific, character defines what is valuable

because it is unique. In this way, character individuates, as a frame that encompasses without surpassing the individual qualities of the elements thereby agglomerated (cf. Faubion 2018; Williamson nd). In her discussion of Euro-American sociality, Strathern (particularly 1995) describes the logic by which individuals are imagined to have a scale of their own, as corporeally bounded units, distinct from the social relations in which they engage. It is on this understanding that those abstracted relations can be imagined to scale at different levels, for example community or nation. As a quality of buildings, artefacts and monuments, by contrast, 'character' appears as a form of individualism that emerges across contexts without a self-evident scale of its own.

Conclusion: character as continuity

My aim, primarily ethnographic, has been to demonstrate how character is central to the conceptually and practically complex work of keeping something 'as it is'. Tracing character ethnographically inevitably has a relativising effect. Faubion highlights 'the plain enough truth that both the ascription and the inscription of character are not in fact written in stone. Both are subject to revision, self-revision included' (2018: 173). As a central concept in heritage conservation, character specifies what is essential, understood as a specific relationship of elements that cannot be aggregated. It is partly these qualities that make the term difficult to define, other than in relation to the contexts through which it is recognised. As an ethnographic account of its practical uses, I have demonstrated how the term is elaborated, variously as material, functional and aesthetic qualities. This focus makes apparent a series of negotiations that have largely been elided from the perspective of heritage literatures bifurcated between the opposed analytic positions: of assuming these qualities to be intrinsic (and so foreclosing the negotiations integral to these acts of recognition) or of imagining the historic environment as an 'empty signifier' (Brumann 2014) onto which contemporary meanings are retrospectively projected (for a more extended discussion see Yarrow 2017; Yarrow and Jones 2014). Indeed the practical appeal of the term is partly its ability to relate and reconcile without ultimately resolving what practitioners and scholars have often taken to be axiomatically distinct: heritage in its 'tangible' and 'intangible' forms; the material manifestations of the past and the meanings associated with them.

Anthropological accounts of character have primarily focused on the concept as applied to human subjects. Extending this focus to buildings, monuments and other elements of the historic environment, I have sought to demonstrate how these formulations of character echo and explicitly reference, but also complicate, ideas of character as a quality of people. As heritage practitioners see it, the historic environment expresses the character of people, and is a repository of the qualities of those who have made or used it. While in this sense indexical, it embodies these actions, ideas and intentions as an individuated essence, sometimes attributed quasi-personified qualities, for instance of 'life' or 'personality'. The expertise of heritage professionals inheres in the ability to detect and discern this, with the ultimate aim of conserving it. To this end they employ sophisticated forms of decipherment, elaborating general orientations to materials, aesthetics and time in relation to particular cases and contexts. In the exercise of these judgements they recognise character as a quality that is registered and understood experientially, and so by human subjects, while seeking to make judgements that

do not reflect their 'personal' views or opinions. Bureaucratic procedures and professional skills are ways of understanding character as a kind of objectified subjectivity: the character of elements of the historic environment is brought into view through separating their own character from the assessments they make. More generally, they are concerned to protect the character intrinsic to these artefacts from the potentially destructive actions of people in the present. As in understandings of human character, the concept foregrounds relations between extrinsic appearance and intrinsic qualities. However, notwithstanding the attribution of qualities of 'personality' or 'life', heritage practitioners' concern is not to discern an underlying subjectivity in the form of a 'self'. Rather, exterior qualities, for instance the structure, material make-up or visual appearance of a building, point to interiority imagined as the embodiment of time: character points to the interior make-up and composition of an artefact, the embodied history of the various people and events through which it was composed. Inside things heritage professionals find the past from which their ultimate meaning and value derives, although different practitioners might detect and elaborate that past through distinct expert and disciplinary sensibilities.

Inspired by recent work (particularly Faubion, 2018; Keane 2016), I have sought to describe character as a form of inscription and ascription. However, my account questions and qualifies these approaches, moving beyond the anti-essentialist orientation of critical deconstruction to highlight the ethnographic logic on which these are made: social practices that are after the fact of and so in response to qualities that are understood, in the words with which my paper opens, as 'inbuilt not applied'. As a broader argument, the account highlights how character animates through appeals to essentialism that have multiple effects and ways of mattering (Yarrow 2018).

In *After nature*, Marilyn Strathern touches insightfully on the logic by which Euro-Americans figure the relation between continuity and change:

> one might wonder how the twin ideas of continuity and change coexist. How come that the one (change) seems as much in place as the other (continuity)? (Strathern 1992: 1)

Change, she suggests,

> can be visualised as a sequence of events that 'happens' to something that otherwise retains its identity, such as the English themselves, or the countryside: continuity makes change evident. (1992: 1)

If change and continuity are mutually implicated, depending on each other to demonstrate their effect, then to magnify one is to magnify both. Extended to the ethnographic contexts introduced through this paper, her point well captures the conservationist logic by which concerns with character amplify and elaborate continuity against a context of change.

Materially and aesthetically, heritage practitioners' commitments to character involve working from the qualities of things 'as they are'; temporally, this entails an effort to extend these qualities forwards in time. If conservation is not so much the prevention of change as a commitment to figuring the present and future with respect to the past, character is crucial to the work of understanding how. Thus it refracts a common commitment to continuity as a series of decisions about the intrinsic qualities

of things, and of how best to retain them. Aptly described in DeSilvey's idea of 'positive passivity' (2017: 115), maintaining continuity involves a paradoxical kind of work made invisible to the extent it is effective. The paradox stems from the asymmetrical terms in which continuity and change are inflected as passive and active, respectively. Character allows for the possibility that even as things change, essential qualities are not transformed. Conservation professionals' work to maintain character involves skill, interpretation and difficult dilemmas, but must constantly erase its own action, figuring this as an incidental or secondary elaboration of things as they are. DeSilvey recently argued that heritage should be seen as 'a verb, a continual achievement rather than a fixed object' (2017: 9). Turning this around, I have tried to show the actions that historic objects are understood to animate as material embodiments of 'character'.

Acknowledgements

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Préservation du caractère : la conservation du patrimoine et la logique de la continuité

En anthropologie et dans d'autres disciplines, les discussions au sujet du caractère considèrent très souvent celui-ci comme une qualité attribuée aux sujets humains, plutôt qu'au monde matériel. Comment le caractère est-il figuré en tant que qualité de bâtiments historiques, de monuments et d'autres lieux ? Mon analyse situe cette question par le biais d'une approche ethnographique focalisée sur les professionnels de la conservation en Écosse et mettant en lumière leurs pratiques d'identification, de compréhension et de conservation du caractère. Il s'agit d'examiner les pratiques et les dispositions par lesquelles les acteurs se sensibilisent à cette qualité, et de souligner le rôle que le caractère joue en ce qui concerne une interrogation centrale pour la conservation : les choses peuvent-elles rester identiques tout en changeant ? Cette approche ethnographique remet en cause certains cadres analytiques essentialistes qui prédominent dans la littérature sur la conservation et sur le caractère, tout en mettant en évidence des formes de pratiques davantage négligées qu'éclairées par les approches déconstructivistes largement répandues aujourd'hui, à savoir les actions, les idées et les engagements des professionnels du patrimoine découlant de leur conception du caractère comme « faisant partie intégrante » du patrimoine.

Mots-clés   caractère, patrimoine, conservation, temps, matérialité