

How conservation matters: Ethnographic explorations of historic building renovation

Journal of Material Culture
2019, Vol. 24(1) 3–21
© The Author(s) 2018



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1359183518769111
journals.sagepub.com/home/mcu



Thomas Yarrow

Durham University, UK

Abstract

This article focuses on ideas of historic conservation, examining the multiple ways in which these are made to matter through practices of renovation. Bypassing normatively inflected literatures on heritage, the author adopts a more ‘agnostic’ ethnographic approach, highlighting how conservation involves an imperative of continuity that is elaborated in a multiplicity of ways by conservation and construction professionals, and inhabitants of old buildings. This focus brings to light a series of dynamics that have received limited attention, demonstrating how conservation is practically substantiated in a range of ways including materially, bodily, emotionally, ethically and conceptually.

Keywords

buildings, conservation, energy, environment, heritage, knowledge, time

Introduction

Why do old buildings matter? In other words, why do they take the material form they do? And why is this important or valuable?

In line with broader approaches to heritage and conservation, answers to these questions have tended to take one of two basic forms. On the one hand, understanding buildings as material embodiments of specific pasts, their value is inherent. If time is linear and unrepeatable, as it came to be seen from the enlightenment onwards, old buildings and artefacts are valuable as embodiments of these specific and unrepeatable pasts: as unique materializations of time (Lowenthal, 1985). While applied and academic literatures might disagree on the specific ways in which that value should be acknowledged

Corresponding author:

Thomas Yarrow, Social Anthropology, Durham University, Dawson Building, South Road, Durham DH1 3LY, UK.

Email: t.g.yarrow@durham.ac.uk

and protected, they have shared a basic understanding of conservation as a way of protecting these inherent or authentic qualities, and of the broad value of doing so (Jokilehto, 1999; Pendlebury, 2009). Debates in the 19th and 20th centuries were framed by these basic assumptions, which continue to orient a range of scholarly and professional discourses.

By contrast, from about the 1980s onwards, the critical deconstruction of many of these ideas emerged through a range of literatures, loosely referred to as critical heritage studies, associated with a rather different answer to the question of how and why the past matters. From this perspective, conservation is not simply a way of recognizing qualities that already exist. Rather, it is a social and discursive process of constructing those qualities and of choosing to value them in specific ways (for instance, see Herzfeld, 1991; Lowenthal, 1985; Smith, 2006). Correspondingly, critical heritage scholars have highlighted the political dimensions to these constructions: how conservation objectifies the past in ways that reproduce specific interests and values, notably of neoliberalism (e.g. Franquesa, 2013), the state (e.g. Herzfeld, 1991), and more generally social elites (Smith, 2006), and marginalize other perspectives.

This article builds on these broad insights, highlighting the negotiations and tensions that are central to historic conservation, but develops these in a rather different direction. Focusing on the nexus of home owners, building professionals and conservation experts involved in renovation practices in the UK, I seek to highlight how conservation *matters* in ways that existing accounts have tended to overlook. Bypassing normatively inflected interdisciplinary debates between ‘heritage enthusiasts’ and ‘heritage detractors’, I adopt a more ‘agnostic’ (Brumann, 2014; Clavir, 2009), classically ethnographic (Yarrow, 2017; Yarrow and Jones, 2014) approach, which highlights how ‘the good’ of conservation is specified and challenged in multiple ways. As has recently been noted (Brumann, 2012; Jones and Yarrow, 2013; Macdonald, 2009; Pendlebury, 2009), deconstructive critiques shed light on the discursive construction of conservation in general terms that frequently elide understanding of the specific everyday practices through which these are located. Building on broader ‘post-human’ approaches to materials (particularly Henare et al., 2007; Ingold, 2007), the article highlights the multiple ways in which conservation is practically *made to matter*, in the linked but distinct senses: of being important or valuable, and of taking material form.

This conceptual framing is developed in two directions. Firstly, by exploring the everyday interactions of those involved in renovation, I highlight how concerns with conservation make buildings matter as specific objects of knowledge and intervention. Conservation, from this perspective, is not a straightforwardly procedural response to a building’s inherent historic and material qualities. Rather it is a way of assigning, negotiating and practically realizing those qualities through the interactions of various actors. These acts of substantiation are multiple (cf. Mol, 2002), since different professional and domestic practices train attention to buildings in distinctive ways. Thus the account traces how ‘conservation’ objectifies buildings as specific objects of attention, interest and value.

This point relates to a second focus on the ways in which conservation is itself made to matter as ideals are extended through their application to specific contexts. I approach conservation, not as a self-evident principle determining practice in a singular way but as a concept whose meaning must be located and interpreted (see Jones and Yarrow, 2013;

Pendlebury, 2009): by specific professionals and clients, in relation to particular buildings, documents, regulatory frameworks and tools of various kinds. Conservation principles are 'deflected' (Yaneva, 2008) by the practices and concerns of other actors, as well as through the quotidian challenges posed by specific material and spatial agencies. The question of whether and how conservation gains traction is political, insofar as some people's interests are privileged at the expense of others. Yet, inspired by recent work in anthropology (Laidlaw, 2014; Lambek, 2015), I also want to highlight how this involves the everyday negotiation of ethics: different visions of 'the good' are at stake in a range of dilemmas about what should be kept and why.

I start from a position of analytic 'symmetry' (Latour, 1993), developing insights from actor-network theory to understand conservation as a way of thinking, seeing and acting that is practically 'performed' (Mol, 2002): through actions that assemble people, places, buildings, documents, representational technologies and materials, in various configurations. Even so, I highlight how a classically ethnographic approach to these issues situates the account in specific, less symmetrical, ways that privilege actors' understandings of the entities and agencies involved. In what follows, I focus primarily on the explanations of those involved: of what they do and why, and the practical circumstances in which these commitments arise.

Situating conservation

My understanding of these dynamics is based on a 4-month period of ethnographic fieldwork, undertaken in 2014, exploring the nexus of building professionals, planners and home owners, involved in practices of renovation. Based in a small architectural practice, I observed how renovation emerged through their daily interactions with one another, clients, planners, conservation officers, builders and others. Additionally, I undertook detailed semi-structured interviews with those taking part in these projects and analysed key planning policies and professional publications. My focus on domestic renovations encompassed a range of building types and ages, with various degrees and kinds of heritage protection. Located in the Cotswolds, an area I know well, amongst a predominantly middle-class cohort of British professionals and domestic inhabitants, I encountered epistemic and methodological issues common to other forms of anthropology 'at home' (Jackson, 1987): while unfamiliar professional practices took time to understand, the more profound challenge was to critically interrogate those assumptions, in Riles's (2001: 18) terms, 'too well known to be described'.

In a seminal account of the rise of the 'heritage industry', Patrick Wright (2009[1985]: xvii) observes: 'Delight in continuity and cumulation is integral to English appreciation of genius loci; the enduring idiosyncrasies that lend places their precious identity.' In the UK, these enduring idiosyncrasies are valued and protected as part of what Pendlebury (2009: 1) describes as a 'conservation consensus': ideas legislatively inscribed in the Town and Country Planning Acts after the Second World War, allied to interlinked social and institutional changes that render conservation 'an increasingly accepted, even inevitable value'. Since the 1940s, buildings have been legislatively protected through 'listings' applied to individual properties and 'conservation areas', intended to conserve the historic character of townscape, particularly in relation to external appearance. From the

1940s, the underlying rationale for these historic designations has remained as a commitment to the retention of ‘cultural values’ relating to ‘architectural significance’, even as interpretation of those values and that significance has shifted broadly, away from 1960s concerns with beauty and aesthetics towards the extrinsic ‘values’ these buildings have, whether interpreted in social or economic terms. The ‘traditional’ vernacular stone buildings of the Cotswolds are central to regional and national identity, and are strongly protected through legislation. Conservation legislation exists in relation to a broader conservation nexus, a set of ideas that circulate through public discourses and media representations of various kinds, including prime-time television programmes on the renovation and conservation of old buildings, and a range of popular lifestyle magazines.

In the contemporary context, these broadly articulated ideas about the need for historic conservation are refracted through specific forms of expert and domestic practice, associated with distinct assessments of what a building ‘is’ and how to conserve this. By no means universally shared, ideas of conservation are ‘plurally ubiquitous’ (Samuel, 1994: 281), framing a range of issues with which home owners and building professionals grapple, including: Is the character of a building best conserved through historic accuracy or is its very nature to change? Is ‘originality’ a matter of a specific period or building style, or of a full and ‘honest’ expression of the entirety of its historical development? Does the character of a building reside only as an embodiment of past people and events, or can it be enhanced as it is modified in response to the lives of contemporary inhabitants?

While the ethnographic focus is regionally and temporally specific to this context, many of these tensions have broader resonance. The conservation consensus of the UK reflects and refracts a wider ‘global inflation’ (Franquesa, 2013: 358) of interest in heritage, specifically in the form of international charters and treaties through which shared principles have been consolidated and disseminated. The practices of home-owners and non-professionals are less directly framed by these principles but even so resonate with accounts from other geographical contexts, in orientations to valuing the past configured against an understanding of the destructive possibilities of modernity (Brumann, 2012, 2014).

In the following sections, I explore these tensions and negotiations through specific narratives and vignettes that are illustrative of this multiplicity, rather than generally representative.

Refractions of conservation

I meet Clare, a Local Authority conservation officer in the District Council offices, a converted mill beside a river. ‘A nice place to work’, she comments, pointing to the exposed ashlar walls: ‘look at those stones. You’ve got all the various different people who did the masons’ mark and you can almost see their different characters. Every day I have a look at these stones and think “good grief, who are they?”’ She tells me how her interest in conservation developed from ‘a passion for old buildings’:

I think they are a testament to the past, and I like the bits that are gone as much as I like the bits that are still here. It is the people more than anything, it’s a kind of respect for them. I like a

survivor. And I think people [today] don't associate historic buildings with the people that built them or the reasons that they were made or the social changes, and so that's what fascinates me. It's from a historic context as well as obviously [they are] an aesthetic, beautiful thing. Mostly I can't look at them without seeing what caused them to be built; I like the bits that are missing as well, I like the poignant bits that are gone, or the scars, all of those things.

She is explicit about the romantic sensibility that informs her perspective, which she connects to the 19th-century conservation movement, and particularly the work of John Ruskin and William Morris.

Respect for the crafts, respect for changes over time, and just a basic respect for the people that built it, and not to be so presumptuous as to take things away. Because it is a presumption, you wouldn't do it in front of the person if the person was standing there, you wouldn't go 'ah, knock it down', it would hurt their feelings!

She expresses these ideals, aware they are in some ways at odds with the current circumstances in which she practises: the former role of conservation officer as detached 'patrician elite' (Pendlebury, 2009: 220) has been undermined by local authority cuts to funding since the 2008 financial crises and, more generally, by policy changes that emphasize conservation as an 'enabler' of development. Even as she accepts the inevitability of these changes, there is a wistful nostalgia for the apparent certainties of this earlier professional context and the more straightforward historical 'truths' to which they are related. Her personal and professional commitments to 'the building' have their counterpart in trained ways of seeing, in her own words, 'from the building's point of view'. The past of a building comes into focus through a 'skilled vision' (Grasseni, 2007b), a professional way of seeing inculcated through training and decades of professional practice. Drawing on her formal and practical professional experience, historic contexts are unfolded from the evidence she has available. When Clare makes her assessments she starts from the perspective of the building and its setting. Some of this is known to her from previous visits and applications. Estate agents' pictures and plans are accumulated and archived from online sites to help to understand the internal layout. Another key tool is GIS. Different filters are switched between to build up a sense of the building and its context: the delineation of conservation areas, aerial photographs. Historic maps are 'ridiculously useful', showing the development of settlements and the 'broader historic context'. What Clare sees in these buildings relates to *how* and *with what* she sees them (cf. Grasseni, 2007a; Strebel, 2011).

Through these practices, time is related to the material circumstances of old buildings. As 'evidence', it is unfolded as understandings about people, events and activities through which their form and structure were made and remade. This temporal understanding, sequential and progressive, is then folded back into those structures and materials as assessments of 'historic significance', 'character' and 'authenticity', key terms by which buildings are formally assessed, and in relation to which decisions are made (Jokilehto, 1999; Jones and Yarrow, 2013). As embodiments of specific histories, old buildings have a value as a finite and fragile resource, relating to a particular understanding of time as linear and unrepeating that emerged in 18th-century Europe (Lowenthal, 1985). The approach underscores a personal sense of ethical commitment. Commenting on planning proposals

relating to listed buildings or those in conservation areas, her role, as she puts it, is 'to do what's right for the building', even to the extent this may conflict with the interests and ideas of those who now live there: 'my job is to deal with the buildings not the owners'. An instance of a wider professional commitment to 'monumental time' (Herzfeld, 1991) conservation, from her perspective, is a way of objectifying the building as a function of its past. Notwithstanding recent shifts to a 'values based approach', her commitments to these buildings take precedence over contemporary people and interests.

For conservation officers, seeing buildings 'from the past', orients a particular way of understanding their present and future. Application of these ideals is not straightforward. Clare explains:

It's a matter of going back to what makes this building significant in the first place. If, for example, it's as a small, unaltered, vernacular cottage, if you're going to extend that ... then that takes that inherent significance away from it, so an extension wouldn't be appropriate. If, on the other hand, you've got a massive great sprawling house with wings all over the place then it might be perfectly acceptable to put quite a large extension on because that is part of its character, that it's got these massive evolutions and bits and bobs scattered all over the place It's just a question of coming back to what makes this building special.

Ideas about 'character' inform attributions of 'historic significance' as ways of locating elements of central importance, distinct from those elements that can be modified or changed:

Even though they're not pickled, they are supposed to be examples of a building type, building style, or a particularly significant point in time, as it were, and so to take that away is then to sort of remove the point of it. But it does depend entirely why the building is of interest, and the presumption is in favour of preservation ultimately.

Conservation, from this perspective, is a way of managing change so that the present and future of a building emerge with 'respect' to valued elements of its past. This general orientation is broadly articulated by conservation professionals, framing (without entirely determining) a multiplicity of practices through which character is attributed and constructed (Jones and Yarrow, 2013): through the drafting of documents that designate and define these qualities; the interpretation of national policy as local planning guidance; and myriad daily judgments consenting or blocking proposed developments.

Different forms of expert practice are associated with different orientations to the past of old buildings. Sociologist Dawn Lyon (2012: 7) argues that:

Builders monopolise the physical manipulation of the building as process and object ... The physicality and tactility of building work produces men ... with their hands in the 'guts' of the building which they know through habit, in an embodied or tacit way.

She contrasts this way of knowing with that of engineers and architects, who, in the context of her ethnography amongst British building professionals, 'knew the building as a conceptualised space, through drawings and measurements, reports and schedules' (p. 7). What might this imply as an orientation to historic conservation?

In the UK domestic house, renovations are usually undertaken by small-scale builders, who often work directly for the client, particularly in cases where formal planning consent is unnecessary. In the Cotswolds, the predominance of traditionally constructed buildings means that most general builders will routinely encounter these in the course of their work. A small proportion of these specialize in conservation work, through training in traditional construction techniques and conservation principles; some pick these up ‘on the job’ and through interactions with conservation officers. Most of those I encountered professed a general enthusiasm for working with old buildings, even in the absence of specific conservation skills. This was not necessarily incompatible with complaints about this kind of work, specifically insofar as traditionally constructed buildings have structural characteristics that can be difficult to reconcile with contractual ways of working.

Originally trained as a carpenter, Mark runs a small construction company, mostly renovating Georgian and Victorian houses. I meet him in his own Georgian house that he has been renovating over the past five years. ‘Still a way to go!’ he jokes, gesturing around to exposed plasterwork and wiring. The house appealed because of its past. He sees the work he is doing as a way of carrying that forward to the future:

In this house, like in a lot of houses I’m sure there’s a whole gamut from joy to dreariness, but yes there is a sense of lives, the whole cycle, births and deaths, joys and sorrows. And I suppose I’m contributing to that as well. If the house still stands in 100 years’ time, people will look at the things that I’ve done, I’m sure there will be some vestiges of what I’ve done to the house and they might not be conscious of me, they almost certainly won’t be, but it will affect their lives in a hopefully positive way.

As a builder, there is a specific kind of connection:

It’s a very physical thing, the relationship that I have with the building. Sometimes I want to hit it. I take pleasure in knocking out a wall or being quite brutal to a building, so it is a physical relationship with the building, and that’s something that I enjoy.

Watching him at work, on a domestic renovation, I see how the past is experienced corporeally and viscerally through the materials encountered through building work. On one occasion, he picks up a 19th-century brick from a pile created by the demolition of an internal wall, running his hand over the surface, as he explains how it came to have its distinctive mottled pattern: ‘All the others are flat – you see it was raining on that day.’ Elsewhere, he shows me the back of a cupboard where the plasterwork is noticeably less well finished: ‘That’s where the apprentice would have practised.’ He knows roughly when the building was constructed, but the past disclosed through these encounters is less of a chronologically sequenced ‘history’ than of the more intimate, if more fleeting, sense of connection to those who built it.

Mark has no formal training in building conservation but describes how the physical intimacy of working in these buildings engenders a specific way of understanding and caring for their past: ‘There is a big sense of responsibility; you’re making big decisions that have irreversible consequences for the house.’ Working with them intimately, normally only on one at a time, brings a specific kind of responsibility:

The work that I do, the timescale, it's not as though I work on 100 different places, it's not like an architect who might work on lots and lots of places and each one is kind of an experiment and each one they're learning from. I am doing that but I'm there more intimately.

Mark acknowledges and bemoans the structural constraints and pragmatic considerations that can, in practice, make it difficult to be as 'respectful' of this history as he would like.

There's a satisfaction in seeing good craftsmanship from the past and feeling that what you're doing is at least as good, often better. The frustration is usually about time and money, that you know what would be more sympathetic ... but a lot of people don't know and don't care because they just want their house finished.

He echoes others in the construction industry, highlighting how the development of standardized building materials and approaches is associated with diminished skill that militates against sensitivity to existing structures, a tension that is likewise noted by Brumann (2012) in the context of Japan. If a conservationist impulse is sometimes curtailed by factors beyond his control, Mark is also explicit in highlighting how his own interests in old buildings differ from a more purely conservationist approach: 'Often it is applied too literally. In the past they were not concerned with conservation in the way we are now. In the past, they were less self-conscious, they just did what they thought was right.' As a builder, he recognizes good craftsmanship in the buildings he works on, but claims these were often badly constructed, for people who lived differently from how they do today. Preservation of 'original' features is less important than upholding the traditions of 'good craftsmanship' (Yarrow and Jones, 2014). Implicit in what he says is a more widely articulated understanding of the authenticity of trade practice, linked to concern about the inauthenticity of conservation itself: in his terms, an 'artificial' effort to arrest time.

Architects sometimes articulate similar frustrations. Like builders, they must work with a range of practical, financial and legislative constraints, although their own professional practices are oriented by distinct considerations of creativity and design. Rob, an architect at Millar Howard Workshop, a small practice of architects working in the Cotswolds, describes how design possibilities are opened up and closed down, as a response to the place in which they work:

Not just materially but spatially and geometrically as well ... For someone like me, who really enjoys that layering of history, or the layering of time and fabric and problems and ideas, and responding to something that's already existing is usually more interesting than having a completely blank canvas.

Design, as he sees it, is a way of unfolding the past – towards the present and into the future. The role of the architect is to understand the 'stories' that buildings materially disclose and then to re-narrate them. Rob explains:

You have to make a judgment on how valuable the existing fabric is, and what stories or what narratives it contains, be it old stone walls, which were there for hundreds of years, or whether it's a bit of timber that's been burnt in some old fire.

Less important than historic ‘significance’ and ‘truth’, as conservation professionals might understand those terms, is narrative interest:

Architectural history can be represented in that but there’s also the personal things that I’ve come across, in terms of the wear on a stone step or something like that, that you might really try and go out of your way to retain in the new building.

He, like others in the practice, is often compelled, interested and inspired by these artefacts of unknown and intimate pasts. Connections are made in different ways through design practice: from the literal retention of an existing structure, to the understanding of a more generic sense of what is materially and visually ‘appropriate’: ‘materials and place and stuff’, as Rob puts it. Even so, the nature of their work involves a necessary disconnection from that past. Building histories are interpreted in the context of a wider brief. Paid by clients to adapt them to their needs, the starting point is always in some sense a ‘problem’ that needs to be overcome. Architects are professionally predisposed to reconcile buildings to the needs of their clients more than vice-versa. Una, another architect at Millar Howard Workshop, explains: ‘using what is there as an inspiration for dealing with the problem’, a building’s history is one element to consider amongst many:

Changing that or manipulating that and making it better ... I really imagine, ‘okay, that family is going to live there, how are they going to live there’, and then try and work out the design based on that and what we think would be best for them.

The virtues of historic conservation have a complex relationship with professional architectural norms that valorize creativity, novelty and innovation. Brumann (2012: 149) highlights a similar tension in the context of Kyoto, Japan, where ‘vernacular architecture that traditionally aimed inconspicuously to blend in with the surroundings ... [does] not always sit comfortably with the wish to leave one’s personal mark.’ As a creative endeavour, architectural design is oriented from actuality to possibility (Murphy, 2004). The past is an ‘influence’ and ‘inspiration’ for something new and different. David, another architect in the practice, explains how architectural training engenders the capacity to see beyond what already exists: ‘Physical form is so persuasive, we live in it, that part of training to be an architect is to sort of disengage from it, and somehow be able to escape the seduction of it in order to manipulate it.’ This way of seeing is enabled by a range of practical orientations: site visits provide ‘inspiration’ in the form of ‘direct experience’ of existing material circumstances. Creative possibilities are subsequently cultivated through representational technologies that move them beyond this: sketching and computer modelling materialize shifts in scale and are central to the move architects aim to make from the actual to the possible.

Clients engage architects for these skills and capacities, but while home owners also routinely espouse the virtues of old buildings, domestic occupation attunes these concerns in specific ways. Conceived as ‘property’, renovation is often considered ‘an investment’ and modifications are undertaken with an explicit awareness of ‘adding value’ (Franquesa, 2013; Lawrence-Zuniga, 2016), concerns that are particularly pronounced in the Cotswolds, an area in close proximity to London with high property values. Retaining or enhancing ‘character’ can be consistent with this understanding of a

house as property, to the extent that ‘character’ attracts a financial premium. Nevertheless, the value of buildings as commodities sometimes conflicts with the meanings a building acquires as the locus of domestic and family life (Brand, 1994; Miller, 2001): as a ‘home’, houses are extended and altered to reflect the lives and needs of their occupants, and are often seen as profound expressions of personal identity (Miller, 2001). Both these orientations can prompt changes to buildings, through forms of renovation intended as adaptations to family life. Tom, the owner of an unlisted 19th-century woollen weavers’ cottage, reflects: ‘Our house, I suppose, reflects us. And who we are has been shaped by what that house is able to do.’ His comments have broader resonance, exemplifying how the construction of an ‘authentic’ self, emerges through the negotiation of the authenticity of material contexts (Jones, 2010). Occupants describe how their own lives are affected by the buildings they live in: ‘feel’, ‘atmosphere’, ‘character’ and ‘personality’ are sensed and experienced through practices of daily domestic life and are linked to myriad ways of registering the past, including as expressions of personal and family identity, through eliciting emotional response, and as acts of memory and imagination that connect people back to their own and others’ lives.

These home owners are far from unique in understanding buildings as quasi persons, entities that have metaphorically human capacities and which are seen to act on inhabitants: producing actions, emotions and identities (Brumann, 2012; Franquesa, 2013; Istasse, 2016; Miller, 2001). It might be hypothesized that such animistic thinking responds to what Miller sees as a broad discrepancy between the longevity of homes and the transience of the lives of occupants. He suggests that ideas about ‘haunting’, spiritually or metaphorically, are responses to these prior, unknown and uncontrollable agencies; of a negative sense of ‘alienation’ which inhabitants variously seek to overcome – for instance, through renovation practices or the use of material culture that reconstruct the house as inalienable home: as a place that reflects the lives of its inhabitants.

Amongst my informants, predominantly middle-class owner–occupiers, similar dynamics can be observed, but exist alongside a more positive orientation to a materially embodied past that remains *productively* irreconcilable with present interests and identities. To the extent that the logic of conservation is privileged, this involves a commitment to a building that remains ‘itself’, retains its own ‘personality’ and ‘character’, other than as a straightforward reflection of the lives of contemporary occupants. Inhabitants relate in positive terms how old buildings elicit positive emotions and feelings (cf. Istasse, 2016) and moreover acquire specific capacities through their inhabitation of these spaces.

For many inhabitants of old buildings, acknowledgement of their past relates to a commitment to their future. As Lawrence-Zuniga (2016) has recently observed in the US context, ideas of ‘character’ are often linked to those of ‘custodianship’, entailing a responsibility to the building as a moral agent in its own right. Even where renovations are undertaken for other reasons, this ethical imperative can lead to a sense of personal tension and ‘guilt’. Jess lives with her husband, a fund manager, and their three young children in a large Victorian terraced house. She describes how renovation work involved a balance between these sometimes conflicting imperatives:

That’s the thing with old buildings, I feel like I’m a custodian of it, rather than an owner who can just bend it to my will and to hell with the consequences. We weren’t thinking that we’d

stay here forever, so we wanted what we did to it to feel like it would be good for other people, practically, so we could sell it, but also for the benefit of the house.

Attributions of ‘personality’ and ‘character’ create an ethical imperative that orients a series of decisions regarding the nature and scope of ‘appropriate’ modification. The conservationist imperative to ‘retain’ is constructed through these encounters as differently articulated versions of what a building ‘is’. By the same token, it literally constructs the essence it pre-supposes (cf. Samuel, 1994): ideas are materially ‘enacted’ (Mol, 2002:177) in specific decisions of what to keep, remove or enhance.

Even as those involved in the renovation, regulation and inhabitation of old buildings express common sentiments about their importance, the past is located, elaborated and understood in specific ways. Different practices and subject positions orient, and are oriented by, different understandings of history, which in turn frame different orientations to the question of whether and how to conserve this. Conservation involves multiple efforts to specify the relationship between the time, space, form and material composition of buildings. My account of these practices highlights how conservation matters, both as an imperative to intervention and non-intervention. At the same time, it makes clear how those involved figure these activities as elaborations that are after the fact of buildings as pre-existing agents. Conservation, as a commitment to the past, is a way of asking what a building ‘is’ in order to specify what it can legitimately become. The following section traces how the answer to this question arises in more or less sharply contrasting answers, as differences that are related, negotiated and aligned in a range of ways.

Coordinating conservation

David, an architect, describes how his concerns with adaptation sometimes conflict with a more purely conservationist interpretation:

My first encounter with the conservation officer was quite confrontational, and I went away rather shocked. I said, ‘oh, we’re thinking of taking this bit down’, and she said, ‘what!’ And it became apparent that, in being an advocate for the building, they regarded the building as a historic document. Not just in its 16th-century sense, but all the way through to the present.

Having lived in the area most of his adult life, he is enthusiastic about the local building traditions but critical of reified understandings of ‘tradition’: ‘we allow history to sort of stunt our imaginations sometimes. And yes, it’s a wonderful history. Not to do it down at all. It ends up being almost an obstacle.’ Tom is enthusiastic about ‘the rich architectural heritage of the area’, but echoes other architects in highlighting reservations about the application of heritage legislation in planning: ‘at no other point in time have people wanted to stop time in that way.’ He highlights the paradox that a conservationist antipathy to change is itself peculiarly modern. Conservation as an imperative of continuity can be elaborated in different, potentially conflicting, forms, as continuity of process or as continuity of fabric and form (Brumann, 2012, ch. 4; Jones, 2010; Yarrow and Jones, 2014).

These narratives of difference do not imply fragmentation (Mol, 2002, ch. 3). In various ways, different constructions of conservation are related, coordinated and made to cohere. At a Grade Two listed former mill in the heart of the Cotswolds there is a meeting to discuss plans for major renovation work. Architects, clients, electrical engineers and a quantity surveyor discuss different options, with significant implications for the future of the building. The conservation officer is not in attendance, but her views, known from a previous informal consultation are a significant element of the discussion that develops. Cathy and her husband, both accountants, still live in London but plan to retire here. She, in particular, stresses the appeal of the 'character' of the building, deploying a term with wide currency amongst middle-class home owners in the UK (Shove et al., 2007; Yarrow, 2016) and other Euro-American contexts (e.g. Lawrence-Zuniga, 2016). Often connected to the personification of buildings as entities with 'personality' and 'life', the concept connotes the sense of a valued and specific essence that is more than the sum of its parts and frames a shared commitment to conservation. Cathy observes: 'It's about working together with the conservation officer. We're saying we want to preserve all of the history.' In practice, this attachment to history is part of a complex negotiation, involving interactions between clients and building professionals.

More and less explicitly, ideas about the positive qualities of the building's 'character' inform situated assessments about what is 'appropriate' and 'in keeping', and by the same token what is 'out of character' and therefore subject to modification. Concerns with conservation and continuity attune attention to the building in specific ways, through interactions that pose and resolve a series of questions about the nature and consequence of a building's past. Downstairs, we congregate around one of the stone mullioned windows. Views of the other side of the valley are distantly visible through the leaded fenestration and irregular crown glass. In this instance, the assessment of client and architect align easily with the assumed view of the conservation officer: 'Great aren't they!?' the architect pronounces, to assenting smiles and nods. Shared understandings of authenticity are implicit in aesthetic judgments about their value. A decision is made and noted by the architect as an action arising: the windows will stay.

Even within a single meeting, the imperative to conserve is elaborated in multiple ways (cf. Yaneva 2008). The client's brief has various elements. To make the building more suitable for the life of their family, they are keen to make the building 'lighter' and 'more comfortable'. They like to cook and spend time in the kitchen, which they plan to enlarge. During the meeting, discussion focuses on a wall, highlighted by the conservation officer as having original 18th-century plaster that should be retained. It produces a 'design anomaly', Tomas, the architect, remarks, bringing it into focus through pointing hands gesticulating between the plan and the wall which is now the focus of a loosely congregated semi-circle: 'that's a bit weird', Cathy assents, remarking on the strangely shaped room that results from keeping it: 'It's too dark – it's *so* dark.' Tomas agrees: 'Let's negotiate with the conservation officer, I think she'll give in.' Later, in the attic room, intended as their master bedroom, there's also concern about the lack of light and views. Cathy is keen to push for the addition of a dormer window. Tomas cautions against this, knowing that without evidence of historic precedence it will almost certainly be rejected: 'We need to choose our battles.' Through these interactions, various

forms of expertise are negotiated, in relation to one another, to the material circumstances of the building and to broader regulatory frameworks.

Issues of *how* to apply a broadly conservationist logic of continuity intersect with issues of *how much* importance this should be given in relation to other moral, pragmatic and ethical concerns. At times, the historic conservation is an explicit focus of attention, in other moments these concerns are the background context to other issues. As we tour the house, the meeting shifts to focus on questions relating to the mechanical and electrical infrastructure entailed in the renovation and extension work. For the mechanical and electrical engineer, the building is one of heating, lighting, electricity, energy. He understands the building as a series of circuits and flows, materialized through the diagrams he draws and consults, and expressed through the pointing hands that direct attention to where the electrical infrastructure might go. For the quantity surveyor, it is a building of costs and budgets, a way of seeing enabled and expressed through the mundane technology of calculator and balance sheet. He has to understand the design, the heating, the lighting, structural issues – in fact everything – but only in relation to this very narrow concern: ‘How much will it all add up to?’

Renovation brings together various forms of knowledge and perspectives that are expressed and resolved as specific articulations between people, building, material and place. The technology of meeting (Yarrow, 2017) is premised on and creates the perspectival articulation of these differences as multiple views on ‘the same’ building: An agenda, pointing hands (Gibson, 1979), tacit conventions of discursive turn-taking and expectations of resolution are ways of staging, focusing, coordinating and aligning these differences. Multiplicity takes a form that anticipates its resolution as ‘actions’ of a singular kind (Brown et al., 2017). Many versions of the building co-exist but not all of these have equal weight in determining the relationship between ‘what is’ and ‘what will be’. The everyday politics of conservation is a matter of the situational negotiations through which some ways of knowing gain traction at the expense of others. These involve a subtle interplay that is not well captured through broad-brush deconstructions of Authorized Heritage Discourse as the dissembling of elite interest (pace Smith, 2006).

Reconstructing conservation

Among the many interests enjoined through renovation, considerations of energy performance have become increasingly central, driven by pragmatic concerns to reduce costs as energy prices rise, as well as by environmental concerns linked to climate change (see Yarrow, 2016). These concerns are situated through contexts of renovation in a range of ways. How, then, are old buildings objectified in relation to these concerns? How do interests in energy and the environment make old buildings matter in new or different ways?

Concerns with energy efficiency and climate change are associated with various discourses that render old buildings as embodiments of ‘inefficiency’ and environmental unsustainability (Cassar, 2005). Judith, a semi-retired artist, lives in a detached Victorian house in the affluent market town of Chipping Norton. Now in her mid-60s, she moved there almost 40 years ago when her four children were living at home. She traces the

genesis of her own environmental concerns and relates the difficulty of reconciling these ideals with the fact of living in a large Victorian house:

I am really aware of the impact that the way that we live has on the earth and climate change and the effects that's going to have, and the awareness as individuals that we need to try and do what we can. That does make a difference, if everybody does it. The population is so vast that it's hard to imagine what you do in your house can have any effect, but I do believe that and I always have done. Way back in the early '70s, when we were living in a commune, we were thinking those things then. The climate change issue hadn't really established itself strongly then but we were very aware, I suppose, of materialism and the effect it was having on the planet. So I have always been aware of that and I suppose I feel sad that I haven't really ... I haven't followed that through. I wish that my life had more integrity.

Concerns with climate change attune attention to her domestic space in new ways that render this as 'leaky', 'drafty', 'unsustainable' and hence as ethically problematic. Aware and committed to environmental conservation as much as she is to the conservation of the built environment, she sees no easy reconciliation: 'You live with conflict and contradiction.'

Just as environmental concerns can make old buildings seem newly problematic, energy efficiency measures are associated with a range of interventions, including double-glazing, micro-renewables and solid wall insulation, not always easily reconciled with constructions of old buildings as embodiments of history (Cassar, 2005; Fouseki and Cassar, 2015). Energy retrofit represents a threat to historic buildings that can lead to a novel explicitness about the value of what may be lost. Una reflects:

I look at a wall and I think, okay, that's a stone wall, and suddenly I've started looking at walls that look like a stone wall saying that's probably not a stone wall. I'm suddenly thinking is that a stone wall or actually is that a hyper-insulated wall with stone cladding?

The past becomes more important *because* it is seen to be threatened (Lowenthal, 1985). Energy-related modifications alter and de-stabilize old buildings as objects of historic significance, questioning and re-configuring understandings of what is 'real' and 'authentic' in a range of ways. In Gable and Handler's (2003) terms, authenticity remains a goal, even as it becomes elusive and profoundly questionable.

Environmental conservation and historic conservation emerged in the 19th century as related movements, specifically through the thinking of William Morris and John Ruskin. Concerns to protect the natural and built environment were articulated as a response to the threat of industrial modernity. As the above examples illustrate, recent concerns with energy and climate change are often associated with elaborations of these overarching commitments, leading to distinct, even incompatible, understandings of what should be conserved.

Heritage conservation professionals have increasingly sought reconciliation through ideas of 'sustainable heritage'. The Stroud Industrial Heritage Conservation Design Guide, for example, makes the case as follows:

Development which, for whatever reason, fails to function well and suit its context, produces a burden for the future – someone, sometime will have to re-think, re-develop and dispose of the

physical and social consequences of poor development. At a very basic level, poor development is unsustainable ... Building conservation is part of a sustainable approach to development – conserving and, where necessary, adapting old buildings for new uses is recycling on a grand scale

Echoing broader heritage discourses, the sustainability of historic buildings is stressed in a narrative that renders energy conservation and heritage conservation as complementary endeavours (Cassar, 2005; Fouseki and Cassar, 2015). Interests are narratively aligned in a way that allows for the incorporation of both as a singular object, buildings or houses become instances of ‘sustainable heritage’.

Rob, an architect in his early 30s, has no specific training in building conservation but even so is sympathetic to the approach. He also sees himself as ‘environmentally aware’ and professes to be unconvinced by the environmental claims of many of the new building technologies: ‘I think I’m in danger of being very sceptical about environmental arguments because the life cycle [energy] cost of whatever environment plug-on isn’t really factored in.’ He echoes other building professionals and home owners in seeing buildings and their material components as instances of ‘embodied energy’:

A UPVC window, for example, yes it’s going to save you energy year on year, maybe replacing a single glazed window with a double glazed UPVC, but actually the old wooden window has been there for ages and its energy, its carbon footprint, has been spent.

Critiques of eco-modernization have their counterpart in narratives that stress the environmental credentials of old buildings. Rob explains, as he highlights the problems of mass-construction techniques: ‘There are a lot of lessons that could be learned from history, from older buildings, just in terms of orientation and solar gains and that kind of thing.’

Discourses of heritage conservation and climate change intersect in a range of ways in the context of specific interventions. Interests in energy, environment and heritage are associated with specific practical orientations that ‘perform’ (Mol, 2002) buildings as different kinds of object. Phil, an architect with no specific conservation training, explains how concerns with energy and environment are routine elements of the design process:

We’re all constrained by the building regs that are bringing in all these new [energy] standards now, but I think we should all be aiming to design as environmentally friendly and as sustainably as possible. And that’s what those elements are working towards, whether it’s making buildings more thermally efficient, more airtight ... I think it’s better building.

A barn conversion he is working on demonstrates how the regulatory imperatives that frame concerns to improve energy efficiency intersect with those of historic conservation. Building regulations align with the client’s own desire – part environmental, part financial – to make the building more thermally efficient. As a listed building, the client’s concerns to ‘retain the character’ only partially coincide with the planning assessment of what is legally required. The planning permission statement stipulates the nature and kind of conservation in forensically precise detail, each with a specific rationale, for instance:

Alterations to external elevations made good using matching and wherever possible salvaged materials. Reason: to maintain character of the building and to ensure satisfactory visual relationship of the new development in accordance with Saved Policy EI of the Basingstoke and Deane Borough Local plan.

Poised between these legislative frameworks, architects encounter the relationship between energy and heritage conservation as a design problem that is neither straightforwardly procedural nor ultimately intractable. Issues are dealt with 'on a case by case basis', Phil explains: 'You have to go through each element and think: how does this sit with the existing building?' Sometimes they align easily; at other times compromise has to be found. The wooden frame will be demolished and re-built, with a timber stud-wall that allows for a greater depth of insulation; original fabric is lost, but the external appearance is retained by the reuse of original cladding.

Through these activities, ideas of 'conservation' are practically elaborated in a multiplicity of ways. Even as continuity is stressed, heritage conservation is made to matter in relation to the changes associated with 'energy' and 'climate change' as novel objects of interest and concern. Old buildings reconfigure these interests by locating them in specific ways and are literally and conceptually transformed as they are newly objectified through a range of practices associated with 'energy efficiency'.

Conclusion: Made to matter

My account highlights how conservation is made to matter through practices of renovation, in the linked but distinct senses of having value and importance, and of taking material form. As a general imperative to continuity, it responds to a perceived divergence between these, where what is important is materially threatened and orients practices to bring these into alignment: to make what is valuable endure.

Framed by this overarching imperative to continuity, conservation is made to matter in many ways that are not well captured by dualistic framings opposing heritage expertise to the non-expert perspectives of others. Against the grain of much recent work, Harrison (2016: 171) has recently suggested that conservation is 'an heterogeneous and discontinuous series of domains of practice'. My account develops this insight ethnographically, revealing the myriad ways in which these logics are entangled in practice: how distinct versions of conservation overlap, intersect and diverge; how they are made to matter by specific people with specific understandings of what is 'real' and important about the past; how that importance relates to other kinds of commitments and values; and how these intersect in relation to particular buildings and material circumstances. These interactions establish conservation variously as a valuable or problematic ideal in relation to a range of other interests and values, more or less sharply distinguished or opposed. As others have stressed, these include a capitalist logic of commodification (e.g. Franquesa, 2013) and a nation state concerned to implicate the past as an index of the 'monumental' teleological time that upholds the interests of state bureaucrats (e.g. Herzfeld, 1991). Yet, if conservation is made to matter in relation to these other interests and values, ethnography helps remind us of the indeterminacies that arise as these intersect. Rather than read conservation discourses as instances of a systemic imperative, I have sought, extending recent work on ethics (e.g. Laidlaw, 2014), to highlight the

situated negotiations and everyday dilemmas that occur, and how people navigate between versions of conservation that are internally contradictory with one another and with other kinds of 'good'.

Moving beyond discursively focused deconstructive approaches to heritage and conservation, my aim has been to bring to light an understanding of conservation that is situated but substantial. I have sought to illustrate how the principles and philosophies of conservation are made to matter in a range of ways, including through acts of building, designing, living, owning and legislating. Elsewhere Sian Jones and I (Jones and Yarrow, 2013) highlight the epistemic dimensions to these negotiations in relation to professional conservationists. Here I extend that work to reveal how conservation comes to matter for a broader range of actors and as a diverse range of orientations, not only as a way of knowing but also, indissolubly, as ethical orientations, emotions, identities and ideologies of various kinds. Echoing recent work in critical heritage studies, Franquesa (2013: 347) describes heritage as an 'empty category', a term that captures the potential openness of these discursive forms and principles, but does not sufficiently account for the material and meaningful ways in which it is elaborated, in multiple specific ways (cf. Brumann, 2014). If the concept is abstractly empty, I have aimed to demonstrate how it is filled out through myriad practices that give it substance, form and meaning of specific and complex kinds.

Others have highlighted how the process of conservation creates the past as a specific kind of object (e.g. Franquesa, 2013; Smith, 2006) but have given less attention to the ways in which historic objects, in this instance buildings, are understood to create and prefigure contemporary processes. Temporally speaking, conservation is associated with a commitment to the past and an effort to act with this in mind. Rather than deconstruct this teleological orientation, I have aimed to show how it is elaborated through specific forms of practice: as ways of tracing out the present and future according to an existing logic or set of material circumstances.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the many home owners, architects, planners and builders who assisted my research, particularly MHW who generously and patiently tolerated my presence during an extended period of participant observation. Thanks to those who helped improve the article through comments on earlier drafts, particularly Sian Jones, David Yarrow and two perceptive anonymous reviewers. I am grateful for the assistance of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation, particularly Seán O'Reilly, and of Historic Environment Scotland.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by an AHRC grant, 'Building on the Past, Constructing the Future: Understanding Intersections between Energy and Authenticity in the Built Environment', Grant number: AH/L000032/. There is no conflict of interest.

References

- Brand S (1994) *How Buildings Learn: What Happens after They're Built*. New York: Penguin.
- Brown H, Reed A and Yarrow T (2017) Towards an ethnography of meeting. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 23(S1): 10–26.

- Brumann C (2012) *Tradition, Democracy and the Townscape of Kyoto: Claiming a Right to the Past*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Brumann C (2014) Heritage agnosticism: A third path for the study of cultural heritage. *Social Anthropology* 22: 173–188.
- Cassar M (2005) *Climate Change and the Historic Environment*. London: UCL Centre for Sustainable Heritage.
- Clavir M (2009) Conservation and cultural significance. In: Bracker A, Richmond A (eds) *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Fouseki K and Cassar M (2015) Editorial: Energy efficiency in heritage buildings: Future challenges and research needs. *The Historic Environment* 5: 95–100.
- Franquesa J (2013) On keeping and selling: The political economy of heritage making in contemporary Spain. *Current Anthropology* 54: 346–369.
- Gable E and Handler R (2003) After authenticity at an American heritage site. In: Low SM, Lawrence-Zuniga D (eds) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*. Bodmin, Cornwall: Blackwell.
- Gibson J (1979) *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Grasseni C (2007a) Introduction: Skilled visions: Between apprenticeship and standards. In: Grasseni C (ed.) *Skilled Visions: Between Apprenticeship and Standards*. New York: Berghahn.
- Grasseni C (ed.) (2007b) *Skilled Visions: Between Apprenticeship and Standards*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Harrison R (2016) Archaeologies of emergent presents and futures. *Historical Archaeology* 50: 165–180.
- Henare A, Holbraad M and Wastell S (2007) *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*. London: Routledge.
- Herzfeld M (1991) *A Place in History: Social and Monumental Time in a Cretan Village*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ingold T (2007) Materials against materiality. *Archaeological Dialogues* 14: 1–16.
- Istasse M (2016) Affects and senses in a world heritage site: The sensual and emotional side of Fez medina. In: Brumann C, Berliner D (eds) *World Heritage on the Ground: Ethnographic Perspectives*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Jackson M (1987) *Anthropology at Home*. London: Tavistock.
- Jokilehto J (1999) *A History of Architectural Conservation*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Jones S (2010) Negotiating authentic objects and authentic selves. *Journal of Material Culture* 15: 181–203.
- Jones S and Yarrow T (2013) Crafting authenticity: An ethnography of heritage conservation. *Journal of Material Culture* 18: 3–26.
- Laidlaw J (2014) *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lambek M (2015) *The Ethical Condition: Essays on Action, Person and Value*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Latour B (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Lawrence-Zuniga D (2016) *Protecting Suburban America: Gentrification, Advocacy and the Historic Imaginary*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Lowenthal D (1985) *The Past Is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lyon D (2012) The labour of refurbishment: The building and the body in space and time. In: Pink S et al. (eds) *Ethnographic Research in the Construction Industry*. London: Taylor & Francis.

- Macdonald S (2009) *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*. London: Routledge.
- Miller D (2001) *Ghosts as Estate Agents. Home Possessions: Material Culture behind Closed Doors*. New York: Berg.
- Mol A (2002) *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Murphy K (2004) Imagination as joint activity: The case of architectural interaction. *Mind, Culture and Activity* 11: 267–278.
- Pendlebury J (2009) *Conservation in the Age of Consensus*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Riles A (2001) *The Network Inside Out*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Samuel R (1994) *Theatres of Memory*. London: Verso.
- Shove E et al. (2007) *The Design of Everyday Life*. Oxford: Berg.
- Smith L (2006) *The Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge.
- Strebel I (2011) The living building: Towards a geography of maintenance work. *Social and Cultural Geography* 12: 243–262.
- Wright P (2009[1985]) *On Living in an Old Country*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yaneva A (2008) How buildings ‘surprise’: The renovation of the Alte Aula in Vienna. *Science Studies* 21: 8–28.
- Yarrow T (2016) Negotiating heritage and energy: An ethnography of domestic renovation. *Historic Environment: Policy and Practice* 7(4): 340–351.
- Yarrow T (2017) Where knowledge meets: Heritage expertise at the intersection of people, perspective and place. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 23 (S1): 95–109.
- Yarrow T and Jones S (2014) ‘Stone is stone’: Engagement and detachment in the craft of conservation masonry. *JRAI* 20: 256–275.

Author biography

Thomas Yarrow a Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at Durham University. His research primarily focuses on expertise as a social practice. He has explored this through ethnographic research in a range of contexts including amongst international development practitioners, archaeologists, architects and heritage conservation professionals.