



Museums in contemporary society

AHD and AD281

Rodney Harrison:

I'm Rodney Harrison. I'm course team chair of AD281, Understanding global heritage. This term Authorised Heritage Discourse, or AHD, is a term that really helps us to focus on issues of power and representation in heritage. So the idea is that there are this set of discourses or ideas about heritage which are embodied in the documents and practices around heritage, official documents and practices, and that these discourses authorise particular people as experts on heritage in the past, and in doing so they exclude other people, perhaps ordinary members of the public, in determining those things which are important, those things which are significant, and those things which the State chooses to represent its citizens. We need to think about whose heritage is being presented in this sort of vision of model citizenship that the State uses heritage to create, and conversely whose heritage is being neglected, and when we start to think about these issues we realise that heritage is often focused on objects and places that are either associated with elite social classes in society, or with majority in a way that excludes minority members of society, and we often find that minority groups and the working classes, for example, have been passed over in terms of official recognition within heritage.

So the term was developed by an archaeologist, Laurajane Smith, and she suggests that the official representation of heritage has a number of characteristics which exclude the general public from heritage, and which emphasise this idea that heritage can only really be engaged with passively by the general public. And so what Laura Jane is saying, and what we're asking people to think about, are those things that are forgotten, those things that are passed over by those experts and whether, indeed, we want to pass across to this limited set of experts the right to determine those things that are important in our communities, and I think increasingly people are saying that they don't want to do that, that they've got their own values and their own heritage places, and their own stories that they want to be celebrated and told, and that they want to a chance to be able to use to represent themselves at a local level, but also on a sort of global level. Heritage has this sense of timelessness to it. It purports to be the one single set of things that are always important, and world heritage as a concept really very much pushes this idea that there are a set of places that have universal values, that they're above and beyond any value that we can place on them at the local level, that there are a set of places that have values to all global societies, and I think we really need to kind of question whether there really ever could be one definitive list of heritage places that have a sort of universal value to human kind.