



Social housing and working class heritage

Winners and losers perspective: Rodney Harrison

**Rodney Harrison, lecturer in heritage studies
The Open University**

This idea of conserving working class heritage, and housing in particular, developed as part of a critique of heritage which was really about pointing out that what most of what has been conserved as heritage has been associated with elite classes in society, it's been the English country house associated with the land gentry and it hasn't really been about conserving the material legacy of working people, and in this sense ordinary people have been made invisible in the past. So these critiques were related to this movement, the history from below movement that was very popular in history in the seventies and the eighties and much of its effect in terms of heritage practice wasn't really felt until the 1990's.

What we see in the video is in part response to this idea that we should also consider working class heritage but what becomes clear in the course of the video is that this movement towards the conservation of working class heritage places, in terms of listing post-war housing, is really more about extending the architectural canon of modernism by experts than it is about adopting places which are valued by working class people, and this is something that I think we need to question the motives for. What we get in the video is a real sense in which these places are being conserved by the same group of experts who are just experts in modern architecture rather than experts in English country house architecture, and what we wanted to do with the video was really sort of question whether that's appropriate.

One of the reasons that we chose Carpenters Estate is that it's unlikely to be listed by English Heritage or any other conservation agency because of its architectural heritage values. It's not a well designed building, it's not part of what architects would see as the architectural canon, and yet what we see at Carpenters is this very kind of close attachment that members of the community, and residents and ex-residents have to it as a place, and what we were interested in exploring in the video was whether these social values have any meaning in terms of the listing process, and how these social values play themselves out in terms of conventional heritage practice. What the first film does really rather well, and which I was very pleased to see it do well, is to describe these three very different models of heritage, different ways of approaching heritage which derive from very different sets of values about the relationship between people and material objects from the past. The first of these is the idea of heritage as a sort of canon where heritage represents those things which professionals deem to be the best examples; it's what Sue Clifford in the video terms 'the special, the rare, the endangered and the spectacular', so ordinary people are not really seen to have any place in this model of heritage. It's the experts who have the knowledge and a sense of taste which allows them to assess which are the finest examples from the built environment, and this model of heritage comes through most clearly in the way in which it's articulated by Roger Bowdler from English Heritage.

The second argument is that heritage is as much about social value as it is about architectural value, and the sort of deep attachment, the social attachment of various members of the estate feel towards the place in which they live might justify its conservation purely in terms of this social value. And all of the kind of world and national heritage charters, and indeed English Heritage's latest conservation principles acknowledge the social values of heritage and the importance of conserving places which have social value to communities, but it's an issue which has largely been ignored by the State because it takes the power to control heritage out of the hands of experts that are themselves controlled by the State, and it gives it across to the community. So in the video it's Sue Clifford and Nick Bullock that most clearly articulate this argument for the social value of heritage, for seeing heritage in terms of its value to a community rather than in terms of its architectural value, and the values

themselves, the social values, are discussed by the residents and the ex-residents of the estate in the film.

The third argument in the video is that heritage should be broadly representative of the past and that it's a sort of material record of the successes and the failures of the past, and that in this sense we shouldn't just be conserving the best aspects of things, the best examples of built heritage, but we should think about conserving the most representative examples of built heritage. So in this case we wouldn't necessarily want to conserve the most architecturally significant examples of post-war housing, but the typical examples of post-war housing that exist, so the idea is that if we conserve a representative example of this form of housing we're not going to destroy them all before their value to historians or other members of the community are understood with hindsight, and we see this where Roger Bowdler mentions, for example, that in retrospect we probably wouldn't have wanted to have demolished Quarry Hill in Leeds, that that's now seen as a very architecturally significant example of public housing, but at the time that it was demolished in the 1970's architectural historians weren't interested in that sort of architecture.

And in the video Mick Aldridge's comments that come right at the end of the film are a very clear articulation of this argument for representative heritage that we can't fully understand or articulate at this very point in time, what with hindsight will be significant to people in the future, and so perhaps we should conserve examples of the typical and the everyday, as well as the best, the greatest and the most grand. Mick's position is complex in that he's giving us two different arguments. One is a kind of classic representative heritage argument, and one is about the sort of social value and, I mean I think people employ arguments to argue for a particular end, and the end that he's arguing for is the conservation of the estate, and obviously people will use whatever arguments there are, that are available to get that and I think that's another interesting aspect of heritage practice, you know, that we talk about official heritage practices as being most things are imposed by the State but ordinary people are able to employ those, and employ them in quite different ways to the way in which the State intends them to be employed, and one example might be the conservation of a place like this which the English Heritage designation system was never intended, was never set up to list.