Local Heritage Sites: Their Identity and Their Essence

How many heritage sites are there in Israel? Who decides what qualifies as a heritage site and what doesn’t? Can any person, institution or municipality declare the establishment of a heritage site? Are there elements that all heritage sites in Israel have in common?

In light of the many questions surrounding this topic, I’ll begin my lecture by saying that the term “heritage” is among other things, and perhaps mainly, a marketing label for the many sites in Israel that are seeking recognition. In the absence of clear local criteria, and despite financial subsidies provided by the government, the term “heritage” is not always clearly defined.

One might think that there is no need to hold an entire convention like this one, to explain what heritage is and what purpose it serves. When it comes to World Heritage Sites, the criteria for what makes such a site are perfectly clear and we should by all means be able to recognize and define what it is that the site preserves and passes on to future generations. There are a number of such sites in Israel, which have received global recognition and for which we can say that their heritage value is self-evident. But what about the rest of the sites?

As far back as the early fifties, the State of Israel, with the help of various committees and sub-committees, began defining and identifying various sites worthy of preservation as exhibits of culture and history, for the benefit of its citizens. However, the great boom in state-recognized Israeli heritage sites began following the establishment of the Council for Conservation of Sites (today the Council for Conservation of Heritage Sites) in the early 1980s. At first the Council fought to prevent the demolition of buildings and other facilities, but soon enough their activities began to include putting on exhibitions and educational displays at the various sites. Thus the process, catalysed by societal, economic and cultural shifts, saw many new heritage sites being established all over the country.

We won’t have time now to talk about all of the 200-plus sites in Israel that are recognized, identify themselves and market themselves as heritage sites. That is a rather large number relative to the size of the country and its population, and so it would be rather difficult to methodically compare all of their characteristics. However I did wish to present some comprehensive information about the heritage sites in Israel, and so my solution was to go have a look their credits plaques, meaning the plaques containing information about the people who contributed to the site’s creation.

A site’s credits plaque is in many ways like their ID card. It provides information about how the site was established and what its content is. I assume that most of you have had the occasion in the past to take a look at a credits plaque – perhaps you were looking for a colleague’s name, or rather the name of the person to whom you can address your complaints. I also assume that you must have noticed the key roles presented on these plaques – curator, academic advisor and designer. You might have even seen much more crowded plaques featuring a lot more names and functions. In my eyes, these plaques can tell us about not only how the site’s content was created but how heritage is actually determined in practical terms! If it is indeed determined.

I agree with the statement that sites, museums, monuments, etc. are means for shaping local, regional and national heritage. These sites shape our collective memory; they signal to members of the community what content is valuable and what history is worth remembering. But have we ever asked ourselves how these sites are designed to do so? That is to say, not why they are important, but what content they present and what do they do, in practical terms, to construct this thing called heritage?

In light of this declaration of intentions, we must further examine the credits plaques and ask ourselves – who’s missing? I would claim that there are two key roles glaringly missing from the plaques, and it is overwhelmingly the case, at least in Israel. These roles are – educational advisor and heritage advisor. Let’s look at education first. On most credits plaques and at most of the heritage sites in Israel, I found no mention of any education specialists involved in creating the displays or developing their contents. Those who are in charge of interfacing with the public and actually instilling the heritage, are not participants in the creative process of the place and are not there to present their professional stance. Assuming that heritage consists of those things from the past which we wish to pass down to the next generations, I find it somewhat strange that the people actually coming into contact with these generations are not involved in creating the content they are transmitting. I could expand on this subject, but for now, let’s move on to discuss the other missing key role.

I did not see credit given to a heritage designer or consultant on any of the credits plaques. Is this a role you might have encountered in other places around the world? I of course saw curators, and academic or content advisors at most of the sites. But are these the people who decide what heritage the site contains? If so, we must ask what formal education have they had on the subject? What training are they required to have? How can we certify them to be shapers of heritage?

Determining cultural and historical heritage is a hefty responsibility and the international discourse of World Heritage Sites has taught us that there is politics involved, as well as other criteria. Local attempts to establish heritage standards in Israel have all been done either within the existing legal framework (The Parks and Nature Authority Law) or, to a lesser extent, by way of decisions made by local councils of the Environmental Protection Agency. However, in practice, there are no formal criteria. In the course of the past decade, the government has undertaken many actions in order to promote heritage, mainly by giving government subsidies to projects dealing with heritage. However, as my colleagues have already pointed out, this activity raises a lot of questions, the most important among which is – what criteria are used for the allotment of funding? What entitles a site or a museum to state-sponsored financial support? Have the institutions in question presented any kind of clear and detailed document specifying their heritage credentials? Is the heritage they represent local or global? In the absence of clear criteria, we see national, and sometimes nationalistic, interests trumping neutral-global interests when the question of heritage is concerned.

Many credits plaques give the curator a place of honor, and there is no denying that the curator has a central role to play in the process of creating the heritage site. However, in Israel, certified curators consist mainly of art curators, and it is only recently that we have begun to certify curators specialized in the field of historical and cultural sites. Without the proper relevant certification, the curators employed at heritage site come from all manner of scholarly fields and don’t always have a full grasp of the responsibility they have as shapers of heritage.

As we said earlier, Israel has a great number of heritage sites. They have been deemed as such because over the past decade we’ve been on a heritage “kick”, but in reality, many of these sites have not been properly examined in terms of what heritage it contains, what is unique about the site and how it contributes to local and global discourse. As for what these sites actually do – they try to teach history, in an engaging way; they try to influence visitors’ viewpoints (in other words – they disseminate propaganda); and very few among them encourage visitors to enquire what lessons they can learn from the place and its history and how they might apply those to the future. In general, it is rare to find sites that raise unanswered questions.

In conclusion, part of the reasons why in Israel today we are obsessed with heritage, an obsession that has manifested itself in an ever-growing number of heritage sites, stem from the nationalistic, neo-liberal views of our current government. In addition, the term “heritage site”, as I stated before, is more familiar and convincing than “museum” or “visitors’ center”. Under such circumstances, it is no wonder that so many sites in Israel today present themselves as “heritage sites”. I have no doubt that it is possible to define the heritage for every such site, but I’m not so sure that every site goes to the length of finding out what its heritage actually is!