

Reflections on Heritage

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ABSTRACT

The matter of heritage is approached not only from a general standpoint but also within the context of the Catholic Church, which possesses a significant share of Philippine heritage. The paper argues that stewardship, beyond ownership, of heritage ought to be the overriding principle of relating to heritage with a view not only to the past but also to the future. The notion of stewardship hinges on the responsibility to preserve heritage—an act that combines historical knowledge and methods of history, the science of conservation, and of the arts. Multidisciplinary collaboration, a sense of appropriateness, of time, and of likeness, and national and local partnerships are all necessary elements of preserving the nation's heritage.

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KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

Heritage can be viewed from different perspectives: from the standpoint of law and policy; from the more technical perspective of conservation science; as a broader, multidisciplinary field of learning, research, and practice; as a matter of cultural appreciation, and so on. Rather than address all these perspectives I will attempt to build a framework hinged on the following statements:

- Heritage is not just as an extension of the human community but is the soul of its very being. As such, heritage cuts across religious faith, political orientation, age, ethnicity, gender, and social class.
- Each generation has the right to create its own heritage. We value therefore not only structures and objects of the past but also future products of the present generation.
- There is a responsibility attached to heritage, whether from the legal or moral standpoint. The duty of the present generation is to preserve significant traces of the past, tangible and intangible, just as it will be the duty of future generations to preserve heritage created by the generation today. We are all, therefore, stewards of heritage with a view not only to the past but also to the future.
- The preservation of heritage requires a combination of historical knowledge and methods of history, the science of conservation, and of the arts.

LIVING HERITAGE

Let me start with a self-contradictory premise: heritage is a living thing of the past. This may of course seem a rather odd statement, the past being dead and long gone. But as we all know, communities leave residues of their individual and communal lives in many forms, and it is through these traces that we know what happened, how generations before us lived, and what mattered to them. Each time we preserve any part of our heritage, we keep it alive. It is in this sense that I regard heritage as a living thing: it becomes a part of us who live in the present. The irony is that we do not give these traces as much importance while their makers are alive; but once gone, their remnants take on increasingly greater value. What is it about the past that so entralls us?

For antique collectors the answer is plain to see. Objects of the past achieve a measure of rarity that confers value upon them, both material and psychic; hence purveyors of the past command their price and buyers pay for the sheer appreciation of a rare artifact. The antique industry, the smuggling of antiques, and their unlawful sale here and abroad all thrive on the rarity of objects of the past: the rarer the object, the higher its price. But why the interest in things of the past?

We look back at the past for many reasons: because we want to be inspired, or because some of us find it exotic or intriguing. We find this among those who yearn for a past they consider ideal or, at any rate, better than the present: the good old values that are fast disappearing, and the purity and relative peace of a once idyllic age. For these reasons there are those who prefer to be surrounded by things past, from furniture to paintings, textiles, and religious objects. Others want to find answers to today's problems or, at the very least, understand what is going

on and maybe, just maybe, obtain clues about what is to come. Every problem in the present has its own history, and no problem can properly be understood outside its historical context. Still there are those who look back simply to reminisce, to bask in the joy of memories that sustain us and add meaning to our lives. Ancestral homes, old family photographs, letters, diaries, and childhood drawings induce a flood of memories about our loved ones and prized experiences, bringing joy, pride and, sometimes, sadness—all emotions that strike at the heart of our humanity.

Whether from curiosity, or admiration, or a search for identity, or a need to anchor one's self, or from a sense of shared values, or the passion for learning, the past beckons us at one point or another in our lives. History and heritage are human products that have endured over time; their appeal is universal or near universal; and they hold meaning to their readers and viewers. Government values history and heritage as our national patrimony that must be protected and enriched, as a source of Filipino pride and identity, as the fabric that weaves us together as a people no matter the differences among us. This explains why history and heritage are prescribed subjects in various levels of education. For historians like myself, the past is a lifelong journey of discovery and learning, a deliberate and rigorous intellectual pursuit; they are aware of the limits of what the past can offer, yet challenged nonetheless by its seemingly infinite well of diverse human experiences.

HERITAGE AND HISTORY

Heritage rests on two important assumptions. The first is that the past is a legacy that must be preserved. Legacy is our historical and cultural anchor, which keeps us grounded as we move forward in time. The idea is not for legacy to hold us

back but to provide the solid foundation on which we face the present and the future. The second assumption is that the past is something we cherish because it answers the need for ritual devotion: in our private lives, such as the simple remembrances we keep at home, at work, in places of worship, and anniversaries we celebrate with family and friends; and in our lives as a people, such as public commemorations in honor of heroes and important persons, of events that shaped our history, and of places that symbolize who and what we are as Filipinos.

For these very reasons, however, as David Lowenthal cautions, heritage can also be abused: to embellish the past, for example, or to fabricate it even, so as to indulge in a personal whim or preference, or to solicit unwarranted public allegiance. Because heritage aims, among others, to exalt the past, it tends to portray the past as what it should be rather than what it actually was. In this respect heritage differs from the discipline of history, which talks about both the pleasant and the unpleasant in an effort to explain what actually happened. History is open to scrutiny and contestation, which historians themselves happily engage in within the profession. Heritage, in contrast, is a difficult area for contention because its framework and rhetoric—collective identity, social worth, and national pride—are unassailable. Lowenthal critically explains why.

Heritage is immune to criticism because it is not erudition but catechism—not checkable fact but credulous allegiance. Heritage is not a testable or even plausible version of our past; it is a declaration of faith in that past. Loyalty and bonding demand uncritical endorsement and preclude dissent.¹

History, on the other hand, is all about proving one's argument. Historians use facts as the basis of their interpretations

and conclusions, and they argue, sometimes incessantly, about their readings of the evidence. But history, too, can be abused, as in memoirs that portray only the good side of important persons, or in accounts dominated by bias in lieu of fact. Such history, however, is easy to dismiss as unscholarly because of established standards of historical method and analysis. Heritage that is abused, on the other hand, is more difficult to dismiss because those who abuse it either call upon such ideals as loyalty or a sense of belonging, or refer to outdated needs served by heritage structures.

OWNERSHIP OF HERITAGE

And here lies one of the difficult paradoxes of heritage: though a thing of the past that survives in the present, the heritage structure might no longer respond to new and contemporary needs. Hence the town plaza of old is fast disappearing. Claiming the need for a modern municipal building or a larger hall of justice, some town mayors have eliminated the few remaining public open spaces, replacing green space with concrete cement. The same could be said of church sites where once lovely courtyards are now built spaces that earn parking fees, or where green areas have been forsaken in favor of ceremonial halls for revenue-earning baptismal and wedding receptions. Not infrequently the owner justifies these changes on the sole ground of ownership—he can do with the structure as he pleases and as his taste dictates.

But does the ownership of heritage confer absolute power upon the owner? Of course not. You and I know that ownership carries responsibilities also to the community. This is why, for instance, homeowners in residential areas are not allowed to build factories in their houses even if they own the land, or why beerhouses cannot be put up

on private land within so many meters of a school, or why private land owners cannot construct tall buildings in the immediate vicinity of airports, or why heritage zones are surrounded by buffer areas. These limits are normally set by law, national and local, but they are also ideally the products of agreements and shared aspirations that in everyday life can sometimes be more compelling than the letter of the law. And it is this common aspiration I wish to speak to.

I maintain that even when the historic site or structure is privately owned, it belongs to all people, not in a material or legal sense as embodied in the title to the property but in the manner of the collective or communal mind and spirit enriched by heritage. In this sense, heritage knows no physical border or, to put it a little more accurately, heritage transcends boundaries of ownership and physical location.

The agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of the Philippines on the Cultural Heritage of the Catholic Church accepts this premise when it states “that the cultural heritage of the Catholic Church in the Philippines constitutes a very significant part of the cultural patrimony of the Nation,”² for which reason close cooperation is needed between both parties “for the protection of the cultural heritage of the Catholic Church,” its “conservation, appreciation and proper use.”³

STEWARDSHIP VS. OWNERSHIP

Hence instead of proprietorship, perhaps the more useful perspective would be that of stewardship. Heritage, after all, will outlive us all just as it will, generations to come. Stewardship

connotes not just a sense of continuity over time but also responsibility beyond the force of authority or control. Recently, an assistant parish priest from the Visayas questioned the role of the National Historical Commission of the Philippines (NHCP) as intrusive upon the authority of the parish; priests cannot even move flowerpots and benches without our consent, he alleged. It seemed to me, however, that he asked his question not out of a concern for his centuries-old church but, quite sadly, from the perspective of material power. To my mind there is a vast difference between stewardship and power.

Where the first is mindful of the larger and long-term well-being, the second is attuned to the immediate and limited needs of the present. Where one is focused on broader communal concerns, the other is directed at the self or a single parish. Where proprietorship rests on the letter of canon or secular law—the product of human and imperfect institutions and which can change over time—stewardship hinges upon a moral spirit that transcends human mortality. Proprietorship can cater to individual caprice; stewardship never does.

Rather than approach the question I posed from the legal perspective that centers on power and control, I prefer to do so from the standpoint of the stewardship of heritage as a living thing of the past, valuable not because of the revenue it can generate but because it caters to the highest realm of the human spirit. If we do not protect our heritage, we will lose a chunk of our past and, with it, ourselves. What would we gain by having all the material wealth in the world yet lose our collective soul?

I say this with full recognition that the Church as an institution has its own rules, which I respect, and as does government, whose laws, as NHCP chair, I am duty bound to uphold. As provided in the agreement between the Vatican and the Philippine government, the care of ecclesiastical heritage calls

for constant dialogue and cooperation, which I am happy to note is the case in the restoration of church heritage destroyed by natural disasters. I realize that certain parishes fear intervention by the state through agencies like NHCP in what they consider to be the sole turf of the Church. Not long ago, for example, a parish priest rejected the offer of the NHCP to install a marker at his church, and although the reason was never stated, I suspect it had something to do with a fear of future outside interference in what he perceived as a purely church matter. Although there was absolutely no basis for his fear, I respected his decision and did not place a marker, but the loser, I believe, was not the Commission but the church and especially its parishioners, who were deprived of the pride of knowing that their place of worship bears a mark of historical significance for present and future generations to behold.

SENSE OF APPROPRIATENESS

I suppose part of the apprehension stems from the nature of heritage preservation, which seeks to affirm and reinforce the historic and architectural integrity of a historic site or structure. In simpler language, I refer to this as a sense of appropriateness and consistency. Does, for instance, a McDonald's restaurant or, heaven forbid, a mall belong to church grounds? Must the town plaza have a basketball court?

If we examine the reasons for these constructions, we will find that the justifications are commonly materialistic, certainly not historical, and of doubtful artistic merit. It is imperative that proposed alterations of historic structures, even in the name of restoration, rest on solid ground. Allow me to give you an example close to home. Six years ago, the then National Historical Institute decided to repaint the external walls of the Rizal house in Calamba, green from its original dull

grayish white. The public was horrified!⁴ I recently reviewed the documents relating to this issue as the Commission was in the process of modernizing the Rizal museum, and learned that, first, the decision was not arbitrary but that of the Board, comprised mostly of historians; and second, the decision was historically grounded. Their reasons were as follows:⁵

- The present house is not the original house but was built by Juan Nakpil in the 1950s, who based the reconstruction on a faded photograph of the house and on what was left of its original foundation.
- Not all *bahay na bato* were white. During the earlier Spanish period they were painted blue, yellow, red, or green, and owing to the cholera outbreak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most *bahay na bato* were whitewashed with lime in the belief that this was a disinfectant.
- Following the 1849 decree of Gov. Gen. Narciso Clavería, the then Mercados chose “Risal” from the *Catálogo alfabético de apellidos*, which comes from the Spanish word *racial* that describes a green field ripe for harvest.
- In terms of historical resonance, the color green speaks to the agrarian roots of social unrest in our country, which the Rizal family directly experienced as tenants of the Dominican estate in Calamba.

SENSE OF TIME AND OF LIKENESS

Another aspect of appropriateness is age. We expect adults to dress in accordance with their age, which for many of us means foregoing certain fashions of today’s youth. A similar attitude applies to the restoration of heritage. Recently, Escuela Taller chairman Jaime Laya spoke about the seeming contradiction

between restoring heritage structures and retaining their familiar look. With reference to the Malate Church, he said: “There is a conflict here, because the public wants its churches to look old, even after restoration.”⁶ The public concern apparently arose after the Escuela applied new *paletada* (plaster) on the sidewalls, resulting in a smooth finish and a new rather than old appearance, especially when juxtaposed along the church façade.

Our position is that there need not be a conflict between restoration and the preservation of historical appearance. The public wants to retain the memory of the church and also, rightly, wants an assurance that the building will be structurally stable and architecturally preserved. Restoration, in fact, should prolong the life of a historic property by returning it to its original form as much as its structural foundation would allow. As a historian and a student of heritage, I believe we ought to retain the patina of time. Restoration should not make a structure that is several hundred years old appear newly built. To the extent possible, every layer or patina of the past must be meticulously reflected in the labor of restoration, and it is the method of conservation that makes this possible.

Finally, the sense of appropriateness also entails a degree of likeness to the past. Although an exact likeness might not always be possible, especially with regard to buildings that have been altered over time, the characteristic of likeliness remains important, not only because of the public’s emotional attachment to the past but also in keeping with the heritage property’s historicity.

THE RESEARCH SCAFFOLDING

This brings me to my next point, that all heritage work must proceed from historical research. After all, buildings and

other remnants of the past did not emerge overnight; they were created in particular historical contexts, using materials abundant during the period through methods we consider today to be traditional. As I noted earlier, they were also built for specific purposes, which might or might no longer be tenable or relevant to contemporary needs. While old churches in the Philippines have retained their function, for example, other historic structures could be adaptively reused, such as the *escuelas de niños y niñas* and *casa tribunal* in Loay, Bohol, which the Commission hopes to restore and convert into a museum of Boholano history (with the consent, of course, of the diocese of Tagbilaran).

Sound research balances the emotions that fuel the zeal for heritage. At a practical level, the fervor of heritage advocacy must be bolstered by historical evidence to be effective. Historical facts temper individual tastes with respect to color and style and institutional agenda of promoting various aims. Historical research also provides the foundation of heritage work. At the most basic level, it establishes the historical worth of old structures. Unfortunately, the present heritage law (Republic Act 10066) rather confuses the meaning of historical significance. On the one hand, it defines “important cultural property” as “cultural property having exceptional cultural, artistic and historical significance to the Philippines, as shall be determined by the National Museum and/or National Historical Institute,”⁷ while on the other, it presumes that all structures fifty years and older are important cultural property.⁸ For historians, age alone is not a sufficient indicator of historical importance for everyone ages, yet not everyone enters history books. The law I just cited is so broad that it could conceivably cover fifty-year-old public toilets!

Thus in determining whether or not to recognize old structures, the NHCP adopts the historian’s parameters of historical significance. What is worth remembering about the

past? The simple answer would be any event, person, group, or institution that occupies a meaningful place in the historical narrative. But we all know that meaning and importance depend on one's perspective and purpose and these vary over time and from group to group. Thus for historians, what is and is not important and why, are gauged according to the following measures:

- How long has the structure lasted? (*durability*)
- Of what larger story is it a piece? (*context*)
- How does it shed light on the past? How does it help us understand and appreciate the past? (*means to the past*)
- Did it result in change and how deeply were people affected by it? (*profundity*)
- How many people's lives were affected by it, in how many places, and in what areas of human life? (*quantity*)
- What meaning did it have to people in the past? In the present? What might it mean in the future? (*value, resonance, relevance*)

For these reasons, from a heritage standpoint we generally recognize structures that are rare and played a distinctive role in society or had a broad impact on society.

MULTIDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

While these determinants are historical, the approaches to restoration are not just so. And here lies the beauty and challenge of heritage work. It marries history to science and to art. Driven by a common purpose, the partners in this union must agree on approaches and methods. As in any marriage, each must respect the other's identity, be open about the limits of one's field, and all must learn to give and take. Coming from a social science background, my work at the NHCP has brought me into the

world of conservation science, whose method and rigor I have learned to appreciate and profoundly respect. Our scientists at the Commission study the nature and properties of various stones in order to determine compatible alternatives to limestone, for example (an endangered species). Heritage architects are guided by the findings of science when they decide how to restore walls and retain the intricate carvings on a façade. The Commission has just engaged the services of Carlos Villaraza and the Association of Structural Engineers of the Philippines to craft guidelines for historic structures (unreinforced masonry) which the Natural Structural Code of the Philippines does not address.

I must emphasize that we do not have all the answers yet in the field of conservation and I suspect more questions will surface as we conduct further investigations. With regard to the lime mix of plaster, for example, we all agree that traditional lime should be used for mortar but there are factors that should also be considered, such as the physical and mechanical properties of the materials comprising the mix, their moisture absorption, whether the resulting combination has limited application (to ruins, to superimposed parts such as for repointing) in order to withstand axial stress, and accessibility and drying time of materials. All these considerations affect the consolidation and stabilization of structures that are functional in nature. And they require tests.

The Commission is presently investigating the applicability of traditional lime mix using original type of masonry materials such as coral block powder, limestone powder, brick powder, sandstone powder, and volcanic tuff powder as additives to strengthen the structure in place of gypsum or white cement.

For their part, scientists also consider the historical context and origin of structures and artifacts and their social role and

impact. Aesthetics, too, are an important factor. Splashy colors, gaudy taste, features inconsistent with historical and architectural integrity, are appalling. In addition to the matter of taste, we must avoid at all costs any fabrication of history.

NATIONAL AND LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

Over the years, pressure on heritage has grown massively, not least because of natural disasters that have recently distinguished themselves in magnitude from all previous instances. Human pressure, primarily from urban growth and haphazard planning, has also placed heritage structures in jeopardy. Traditional open spaces are under threat, as are once beautiful architectural buildings now trapped in decay, ready to be replaced by homogeneous high-rise buildings. All these point to the necessity of collaboration not only across different fields of knowledge but also among cultural agencies, dioceses and parishes, local governments, and communities. We call them stakeholders precisely because they have inherited the past that has imbued meaning in their lives as individuals and as communities. No restoration can succeed without their active partnership and engagement.

This is the basic premise of our partnership with local governments and communities, and collaboration has been the strategy of the Commission in all its restoration projects. Our most challenging work at present lies in Cebu and Bohol, where we are working closely with parishes and local government. One of our goals is also to develop a pool of trained heritage workers for long-term sustainability of the restored structures. I am pleased to inform you that the rehabilitation of calamity-stricken structures in Bohol and Cebu, which the national government is funding through the Commission's budget, is also

accompanied by the training of community members. Although at the moment our training is focused on short-term, hands-on workshops, we also envision longer apprenticeships, formal senior high and post-secondary diplomas in conservation that entail supervised field or on-site restoration as well as training in the laboratory. In this manner, qualified heritage workers will not only undertake basic conservation as their livelihood but also serve as first responders wherever disaster strikes.

NHCP GUIDELINES

To organize our restoration program, the Commission has produced guidelines that help us identify and select the built and movable heritage structures and objects we will fund and restore. We will exert every effort to select heritage assets that are representative of different parts of the country, subject to certain criteria and conditions.⁹ Apart from the standard of historical significance that I discussed earlier, the site or structure must be publicly owned (by the national or local government), except for a heritage church or mosque for these provide an essential nonprofit, noncommercial community service. The degree of damage or deterioration, moreover, must be compelling (i.e., it threatens the historical integrity and/or physical stability of the structure). The restoration project will prioritize the use of indigenous or historic materials and the application of indigenous methods of construction to the extent possible. Modern methods, where necessary, may be introduced with prudence, guided by scientific data and the sole end of preserving the safety and integrity of the heritage asset. In all these, stakeholder dialogues will constitute an essential element of the restoration process. The project must also include a training component on basic conservation, maintenance, and the financial aspect of preservation.

Our guidelines aim to ensure that restoration benefits the local community through any number of ways: by contributing to social or community cohesion, enhancing public awareness and appreciation of history and heritage, developing local knowledge and skills in conservation, creating jobs, or promoting healthy heritage tourism.

LIMITATION AND MITIGATION

Our guidelines, however, have limitations; our budget and staff resources compel us to prioritize projects and needs. Much as we would like to cater to all requests, we cannot, and since we are not in the business of making promises we cannot possibly keep, we prefer to lay down the parameters and bases of our choices.

I am transparent about our limitations also out of awareness that the practice of heritage is now being challenged by the emerging field of critical heritage studies, which points out that

[d]ominant social agents, political and cultural elites, decide which legacies deserve special attention, while others—that may have fundamental values for other social groups—lie outside heritage recognition.¹⁰

In the Commission we try to remedy this weakness by encouraging local governments to recognize sites and structures important to their communities even if these are not acknowledged through national historical markers or heritage zones. Indeed, local communities are better placed than national agencies to identify traces of the past that are directly important to them, and it is our hope that they arrive at these decisions on solid ground and through consensus-building. By setting

guidelines the Commission has no intent to create a heritage orthodoxy that fits only certain types of heritage and disregards others. Even as we realize the need for a guide, we accept that meanings and values of heritage can and do differ across communities and stakeholders, even among cultural agencies and heritage societies. The approach to these differences is dialogue, painstaking dialogue, because the more we understand each other's differences, the better we are able to deal with them.

Increasingly the Commission finds itself in the (thankless) role of mediating between contesting parties. Sometimes the differences are between the heritage group and the local government; other times, between the parishioners and the parish priest. Wary of getting involved in local political squabbles, the Commission cannot shy away when called upon to act.

Our approach is to first ascertain the facts, which unfortunately also entails wading through layers of anger and mistrust. Then we review the plan in question. We invite concerned groups to discussions (sometimes heated) and elevate big issues to the Board of the Commission. And then we decide.

In the process we attempt, sometimes in vain, to reconcile differing views. We also receive flak from parties we fail to please, and little praise from those we satisfy. But we take all these in stride not because we are immune to unfounded criticism—we are not—but because of an overriding commitment to preserve our heritage. In the end this is what heritage work is all about: we look back at the past with an eye to the future, and that future is larger and more important than all of us combined.

NOTES

- * This paper was read as the keynote address at the 9th Biennial Convention of Church Cultural Heritage Practitioners, “Renewing the Heritage Church of the Poor,” Sorsogon City, Sorsogon, 1–4 June 2015.
- 1 David Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” *History & Memory* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 7–8.
- 2 Agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of the Philippines on the Cultural Heritage of the Catholic Church, signed by Fernando Filoni for the Holy See and Alberto G. Romulo for the Republic of the Philippines, Manila, 17 April 2007. Entered into full force on 29 May 2008, following the exchange of the instruments of ratification.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 See, for example, Maricar Cinco, “Rizal House Is Green but People See Red,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 19 June 2009.
- 5 As explained by then NHI chair Ambeth Ocampo, “Why Rizal’s House Turned Green,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 3 June 2009.
- 6 Quoted in Eric S. Caruncho, “Restoring Malate Church Without Losing Its Spirit,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 24 May 2015.
- 7 Art. II, Republic Act No. 10066, “An Act Providing for the Protection and Conservation of the National Cultural Heritage, Strengthening the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) and Its Affiliated Cultural Agencies, and for Other Purposes,” 26 March 2010.
- 8 Ibid., Art. III Sec. 5.

- ⁹ See National Historical Commission of the Philippines, “Second Five-Year Plan, 2016–2021,” May 2015.
- ¹⁰ Joshua Chan, Ian Dull, Giulia Di Pietro, Adèle Esposito, Sara Guagnini, Abby Hsian-huan Huang, Isaura van Den Berg, and Rita Wittek, “Heritage beyond the Boundaries: A Manifesto,” *The Newsletter*, no. 69 (Autumn 2014): 22

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