Heritage and Climate Justice:

Regeneration as an Alternative Discourse

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In a transdisciplinary assessment of why we have failed to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions over the last three decades, Stoddard et al (2021) uncovered that the neo-liberal economic order colludes with politics to maintain a hegemonic world view that has infected our ability to realize a new way of existing. Culture, the authors conclude, is one of the most effective levers to upend the current paradigm and actualize low-carbon and just ways of living.

From this, one can extrapolate that the Global North must configure and embrace alternative discourses and alternative paradigms that disrupt the “epistemological monoculture” (Stoddard, 2021) that has brought our planet to its knees. Being that heritage is used as a legitimizing force and is an act of culture creation, heritage could be an effective conspirator towards the creation of societies that take seriously a mandate for climate justice. Yet heritage management authorities and practitioners associated with the Authorized Heritage Discourse (Smith, 2006) remain mostly concerned with self-preservation, focused on how climate change affects heritage assets, or engaging in educational offerings that have done little to disrupt the status quo. Wu and Hou (2015, p 48) write that “we need research that changes the ways in which heritage is talked about and, in so doing, changes the historical consciousness, cultural logic and political aspiration embedded therein." Locating alternative heritage discourses could uncover ways that heritage might become more effective agents for climate justice.

One such discourse that is worth examining is the emerging regenerative paradigm, which is an alternative discourse to neo-liberalism and extractivism. Practitioners in fields as diverse as agriculture, tourism, and architecture are increasingly adopting regenerative ideation and methodologies to foster the potential of thriving living systems. This new conception of regeneration is distinct from the use of the term within the United Kingdom and Europe over the last decades, which indicates redevelopment for economic growth. Within this emerging conception of regeneration, value is not profit driven; value is seen in relationships. It is an integrative and holistic discourse that deploys an ecological worldview and polyvocal knowledge traditions to nourish all beings—human and otherwise—within an interconnected, nested, place-based living system. Regeneration insists on co-creative, participatory methods purposefully deployed for system-wide care and evolution. This ecological worldview decenters humans while also insisting that humans generate cross-species and cross-system health. These principles appear within various intellectual and spiritual traditions, including Indigenous and Eastern philosophies and practices, ecology, and living systems theories. This diverse etymology serves as a cross-cultural, trans-disciplinary triangulation that indicates we inhabit an interconnected earth that evolves in life supporting ways. This diverse etymology also indicates its wide-based appeal.

Developing the concept of regenerative heritage practice could be a valuable contribution to ongoing debates about uses of heritage towards climate justice. I posit that a regenerative approach could serve as an evaluative framework for the heritage sector as it works with those inside and outside the sector to root a new kind of heritage, one that generates an ecologically

just future. However, possibilities for this are limited unless the field of heritage sets aside its inherited discourses (the AHD) and deploys its current capacity for care and stewardship towards supporting healthy, interconnected living systems.

Select Sources

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