The Politics of Attraction. About Competing Heritage Experiences

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The politics of attraction
About competing heritage experiences in the city of Athens

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The small church of Ayia Dynamis, built in Athens in the 16th century, is a perfect example of how heritage and history are intertwined and disconnected at the same time. The church is standing where it has stood for ages, on the corner of Mitropoleos Street and Pentellis Street. These streets, however, date from the 19th century and the church is bridged over by an enormous concrete building that only reluctantly seems to tolerate the ancient remains of a time long ago, but which nevertheless still compete for their own square meters in the center of Athens (Figure 1). The preservation of the church, despite the building of the Ministry of Education and Religion that overshadows it, is a fine example of choices being made in the modern era, to not eradicate traces of the past. However, the context of the old church has radically changed and this spatial disconnection of history brings us to a paradox that is inevitably linked to heritage: the paradox that we are always dealing with history and contemporary experience at the same time.

A city is first and foremost an object of application and consumption, a ‘tool’ for living and working, for education, contemplation and leisure. To look back on the past and derive an identity from it, the relics of this past will need to be integrated – hopefully in a meaningful way – in our present environment. It means also that these relics will be used and exploited. This exploitation is the core theme of this issue of Pharos. ‘Exploiting significant heritage assets,’ as Nikolakakis writes, leads to the creation and promotion of ‘a specific historic identity and image.’ This specific identity can be made to serve politics, in order to propagate nationalistic ideas as during the Metaxas regime, or made to serve the attraction of visitors and tourists, as happens in our time (Figure 2). In one way or the other, the choices that are made are never value-free. Which value, which past prevails? Nowadays, the Greek State places emphasis on Classical Heritage, in the same way that Amsterdam places emphasis on the 17th century. As a result, history is being framed with a selective past. Managing ‘alternative stereotypes’ and ‘re-branding’ (Touloupa & Poulios) can shift the identity of a
Figure 1. The 16th century church of Ayia Dynamis, corner of Mitropoleos Street and Pentelis Street (photo by the author)
Figure 2. Tourists on the Acropolis (photo by the author)
place, a city or a nation, but the outcome will always be a modern construction, with different ramifications, not least for heritage itself.

Nowadays, heritage management – i.e. the policies concerned with heritage – is mainly focused on multiplying profits. Generic managing models that are not linked to the place itself define the policies of attraction. Cities are competing to attract tourists. ‘You in Athens’, ‘Iamsterdam’, ‘Sei Berlin’. Governments are paying money to marketing bureaus in the hope of improving their position on the tourist market, by coming up with slogans that could as well apply to other cities (‘IAthens’, ‘YouinAmsterdam’). The customers targeted, the potential visitors, should be seduced to visit (Poulios & Senteri). This kind of branding and investment is clearly not aimed at the preservation of vulnerable historic fabric. On the contrary, these seem to be two separate worlds. Tourist masses bring money in, but affect the preservation of historic fabric in a negative way. Historic buildings are transformed into hotels. Steel plates have to be used to prevent the millions of footsteps per year from wearing out the floor of the Anne Frank House. Air conditioners, the installation of which in a building often has a massive impact on the historic fabric, are needed to prevent historic buildings and interiors from being degraded by the humidity levels caused by the visiting masses. Questions of crowd control lead to interventions in infrastructure and routing. Furthermore, when too many visitors come to one place, the ‘authentic experience’ is seriously endangered. Stonehenge can only be seen from a distance. As a visitor, you are not allowed to touch the stones anymore, the same goes for the Acropolis as well (Figure 3). The overcrowded Dome of Brunelleschi is essentially a popular staircase to a magnificent view over Florence; the greatness of 14th century engineering skills and the solemnity of the mighty spherical vault and its decorations can hardly be enjoyed, due to the millions of other people who also want to take a look.

Tourism leads to questions on how to reconcile religious functions with (professionally assessed) heritage significance and crowd control (Daniil & Poulios). This shows that there are many reasons to visit a certain place: a religious function of a building attracts people who want to attend a mass or find a place for prayer. But such a place attracts also visitors who are not interested in the use or function of the building at all, but in its age and architecture. On a larger scale, there are different reasons to visit Amsterdam or Athens, Holland or Greece, and motivations are shifting in the course of time. History and heritage may play a role, but sea, sun, sand and sex and the fact that the neighbours were already there are also part of these motivations. Travelling is not merely a matter of getting to know places of cultural-historical interest. In terms of consumerism, cultural history and heritage are good excuses to go abroad. Of course, the Rijksmuseum is a great reason to visit Amsterdam, as is the canal belt or the small Our Lord in the Attic
Museum. But for a major part of the visitors, these assets are only a bonus, not a motivation. The Acropolis Museum has turned out to be a visitor magnet since its opening in 2009, but the expected effects on the visitor numbers of the Acropolis itself failed to follow. More than that, the success of the Acropolis Museum leads to a small-scale Bilbao Effect in Athens itself. People come to the Acropolis Museum as it was not there ten years ago. But other places and museums are disregarded. As Karachalis writes in his contribution, the museums of the city of Athens are underperforming. The great Archaeological Museum suffers from being disconnected from other museums and from its distant location. When visiting the Schliemann House (Numismatic Museum) you will meet few other visitors. The Areopagus and the Agora cannot compete in terms of visitor numbers either, not even when compared to the Acropolis. However, this green zone with its ancient remains, literally in the shadow of the Acropolis, offers a much more satisfying experience than the overpopulated Acropolis itself, where a visit becomes cultural consumption.

Changes in (cultural) infrastructure lead inevitably to changes in dynamics, and in the patterns of siting of shops, restaurants etc., that are almost impossible to predict⁷ and what can be considered as authentic and real at one time, may seem constructed or outdated later: effects that were never foreseen. Strolling through

⁷ Brand 1994, 17.
the remains of the Middle Stoa, admiring the baffling Hephaesteion, one might get the feeling of an ‘authentic experience’ (Figure 4). The Agora leaves the impression of a place that is not being ‘managed’ and above all, of a place that is not overcrowded with tourists, which makes it a place that can make the visitor feel that it is fairly untouched. But of course, this place is a construct too. The Agora shows remnants of many centuries at one time and is in fact the result of the demolition of many later buildings, of archaeological excavations in different campaigns and of the reconstruction of the Stoa of Attalos in 1956 (Figure 5).² With this reconstruction, the story does not end. The ‘tourism narratives’ of Athens are shifting constantly, at present, by creating pedestrian pathways in the Archaeological Unification Project and cultural infrastructure (Karachalis). This should lead to an educational presentation of historic assets, which is more appropriate for present-day visitors, than the presentations used to be in the past. But will we really get a better impression, experience and understanding due to these new activities?

The past should be the starting point for present decisions and interferences. Our knowledge and value assessments must lie at the basis of managing policies and not the other way round. The tourism industry plays an important economic role and heritage is a key element in promoting cities, regions and countries.³ The more this industry contributes to the Gross National Product – see the stunning numbers for Greece in the contribution of Touloupa & Poulios – the more heritage sites will be an instrument in promotional tactics and policies. The danger of this mechanism is that heritage is only legitimised in a one-sided way, namely as a booster for the tourism industry. When that effect occurs, the city with its heritage becomes detached from its own characteristics and history. It becomes a product that fulfils a consumptive need, in a generic process of world-wide tourist standardisation.

How then to proceed, to bridge the distance between heritage conservation and business management? Heritage is being approached as a customer ‘experience’, with ‘authenticity’ at the centre of the ‘experience model’. As Poulios, Nastou & Kourgiannidis show, this model can help heritage organisations in enhancing their position in relation to the entertainment and tourism industry. This is a political choice and a reality. However, the experience model had better not have been copied from the business sector, as the authors warn. Instead, it is wiser to ‘adjust it to the values and the authenticity of heritage places in question. […] The process of the introduction of the model to heritage organisations should be undertaken by experts from the heritage sector rather than from the

² Christopoulou 2011.
³ Glendinning 2013, 420.
Figure 4. The Hephaesteion (photo by the author)

Figure 5. The Stoa of Attalos, reconstructed in 1956 (photo by the author)
business sector, and emphasis should be on the educational rather than the entertainment aspect of the experience.’ I think these are wise words. If we fail in considering heritage as a unique asset, inextricably bound up with the place where it originates, there is a considerable risk that it is especially that which is exploited, that is exploitable, and not that which is characteristic and meaningful in a historical sense.

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