

Understanding perceptions of heritage in living places: the case of Greek traditional settlements

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The reconsideration of heritage from a given 'object' with pre-defined meanings and values, to a process constructed, enacted and performed by individuals, based on their current values and needs has been receiving an increased interest (Ashworth 1994; 2012; Lowenthal 1985; Smith 2006; Schofield 2014). Indeed there is a wide consensus on the idea of heritage, in the context of urban places, as the result of deliberate selection rather than as an ontological reality of intrinsic and uncontested worth. Within this frame, examining people's perceptions of heritage is of seminal importance in understanding what heritage is about and for what reasons (Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge 2000; Stubbs 2004).

However, it is often authorised views in identifying and qualifying something as heritage that still dominate. Authorised views of heritage, as expressed via conservation policies, have been questioned about their capacity to respond to local needs and to represent locals' meanings and values. Schofield (2014) argues that since heritage relies on personal perceptions and interpretations everyone may be an expert, in a sense that everyone may have his/her own insights regarding the 'object' and 'value' of heritage. In this respect, examining the way that heritage is perceived not only by experts but also by lay people may contribute significantly to understanding what heritage, within a context of place, is about and why.

This research examines the way in which people perceive heritage in living heritage places focusing on Greek traditional settlements. Despite the increased interest in examining the ways by which people perceive heritage (Smith 2006; Paillard 2012; Ashworth 1994), knowledge on lay-people perspectives of heritage in conjunction with these of experts within an area is still limited (Larkham 2000; Pendlebury 2009; Borer 2006). In this respect the study contributes to first hand

research, which is in its early stages (see Smith 2006; Schofield 2014). Indeed a number of studies remain at theoretical and abstract level reflected in generalising theories rather than grounded examples (Borer 2006; Hubbard 1993). It is however these examples that could reveal how individuals and groups think, 'construct' and make sense of heritage, thus contributing to the democratisation of heritage (Smith 2006).

The conceptual framework uses a qualitative perception-based approach in which the different aspects of perception are examined. It is found that this may contribute to the way in which perceptions of heritage may be examined in future research. Responding to inquiries about the 'what' and 'why' of heritage, 'for whom' and 'whose heritage we are talking about' (Howard 2003; Smith 2006) the study explores the factors that affect the identification and appreciation of heritage and the role of conservation policies in these aspects. The research focuses on Greek traditional (pre-industrial¹) settlements, which flourished during the period of Turkish occupation in 18th century. The reasons for selecting this specific context are numerous. Greece is a country rich of heritage places, providing the advantage of selection among a number of places. However heritage has hardly been subjected to a systematic theoretical account (Loukaki 2008, p.6), while perceptions of heritage within the Greek context remain an unexplored field. The few studies on Greek heritage focus on ancient sites (see for example Loukaki 2008) rather than on more recent heritage places, such as traditional settlements which indeed abound in the country.

The methodology employed for this study is a qualitative approach to perceptions of heritage and conservation through a case study of Greek traditional settlements. The main fieldwork took place in six traditional settlements in Mount Pelion in central Greece. In depth interviews were the main method of data collection in this study. Two were the main target groups, residents in traditional settlements on the one hand and experts, on the other. In total 80 in depth interviews were carried out, 72 with residents and 8 with experts at central and regional level of administration. In addition, 3 focus groups with local residents were conducted.

¹ the industrial era in Greece does not match the industrial era in the rest of Europe and US, as it basically starts in 1920's

Drawing on both similarities and differences across perceptions of experts and residents, rather than focusing on differences as in the case of relevant studies (see Schofield 2014), the thesis explores factors that may shape perceptions of heritage and the way that conservation policy may further affect these perceptions. It reveals that these are not three different aspects which can be explained through single independent factors alone, but they are interrelated forming people's perceptions of heritage. The research indicates that the way in which people perceive heritage depends on a dynamic relationship across the identification, evaluation and conservation of heritage and on a multiplicity of influential factors behind these processes. Examining both experts' and residents' perceptions in six traditional settlements, the study indicates that heritage may be collectively and individually perceived, as evident through the similarities and differences among participants. Expanding the idea that heritage exists as a collective and individual construct (Lowenthal 1979, p.550) the study shows how heritage may be a collective construct influenced by individual perspectives. The examination of both experts and residents' perceptions adds to our incomplete knowledge about the extent to which these two groups understand the concept of heritage likewise. This suggests that their distinction as often presented by other studies may be inadequate in explaining the way in which heritage is perceived. Overall, the research contributes rich empirical evidence to the conceptualisation of heritage as a social construct.

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