

Who Owns Heritage? The Fight for Historical Monuments (Brno, 6 Nov 25)

Masaryk University Brno, Czech Republic

Deadline: Apr 22, 2025

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+++ extended deadline: 22.04.2025 +++

Call for papers for the conference "Who Owns Heritage? Local Communities and the Fight for Historical Monuments in the 19th and 20th Centuries" at Masaryk University Brno, Czech Republic, November 6, 2025.

This conference is hosted by the Department of Art History of Masaryk University and it is part of the project "The First Histories of Architecture and the Creation of National Heritage in South-Eastern Europe (1860-1930). A Transnational Approach (GN22-19492I)" led by Dr. Cosmin Minea.

What happens when those living alongside historical monuments – churchgoers, farmers, workers, custodians, local officials, non-human entities – see these sites as theirs? Through what sources and scholarly approaches can we recover their voices and their role in the state-led activities of restoration and preservation of architectural monuments?

This conference explores the debates, conflicts and role of local communities in the heritage politics starting from the mid-19th century and focusing especially but not exclusively on Central and Eastern Europe. It also seeks to understand the role of non-human actors, such as plants, animals, natural formations, weather and the different, more-than-human perspectives, they bring to the process of heritage making. The conference is based on the premise that local communities played an unrecognized role in official heritage policies, through resistance, negotiations, adaptations, and the use of traditions and knowledge. Architects and commissions frequently relied on the knowledge and testimonies of these communities, acted in accordance with their desires and employed them on works of restoration or preservation. At the same time there was often a sense of struggle over the heritage. For example, communities opposed the modifications to their monuments while architects and state institutions had to also prevent transformations, replacements or demolition by the locals.

The institutions, actors and ideologies underpinning the process of heritage building have been thoroughly analysed in groundbreaking studies (Jukka Jokilehto, Miles Glendinning, Brenda Schildgen) as well as more recent works that focus on Central and Eastern Europe (Maria Couroucli and Tchavdar Marinov, Dragan Damjanović and Aleksander Łupienko, Maximilian Hartmuth and Ayse Dilsiz Hartmuth). They have revealed a wealth of case studies that explain how national ideologies shaped a specific vision of the past with the help of historical monuments. These are seen as

“living witnesses” of the past, as states the Venice International Charter of 1964, still a reference in the management of architectural heritage today.

However, in the processes of restoration and preservation, other types of “living witnesses” were silenced, namely the local communities and non-human entities. They have been legally and symbolically dispossessed of their monuments, which were placed in the custody of the state. Legitimized by national narratives, “heritage experts” emerged, holding the “authorized heritage discourse” as Laurajane Smith famously noted.

This conference seeks to balance the disproportionate attention that state actors and elites have received and analyse what has been the role as well as the influence on those for whom the monuments were part of their daily lives.

Proposals for 20-minute papers are invited on topics such as:

- Attitudes, reactions, reflections on the state-led restoration activities from the local communities as well as their influential role in the process
- Grassroots preservation practices. How local communities took care of their historical buildings?
- Local notions of “architectural heritage”. Beyond the dichotomy “bad taste” of locals and the “expertise” of professionals, how did the local population see historical architecture?
- How can we configure a more-than-human perspective on the heritage-making process? What was the role of non-human actors such as insects, rivers, snow, trees, etc.?
- Marginalised communities, minorities, alternative official voices, including responses to quasi-colonial attitudes of the elites of Central and Eastern Europe
- Discussion of sources. How can we study local voices and what kind of sources did they produce?
- Displaced and destroyed heritage. Responses to the disappearance of the heritage through decay, destruction or relocation to ethnographic museums or other sites
- Definitions and inquiries into notions of heritage, patrimony, possession, ownership, communities, etc.

Submission of proposals:

The deadline for submission of abstracts of up to 300 words including a short biography is 22 April. They should be sent to cosmin.minea@phil.muni.cz

Selected participants will be notified by 28 April.

Some travel and accommodation costs may be covered for participants without access to institutional funding.

Reference:

CFP: Who Owns Heritage? The Fight for Historical Monuments (Brno, 6 Nov 25). In: ArtHist.net, Feb 27, 2025 (accessed May 27, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/44066>>.