Sustainable heritage management … for whom?
A critique on contemporary economics of culture & the use of Information and Communication Technologies towards a symbiotic management strategy

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The ongoing processes of economic appropriation of the surrounding resources have reached, in the last few decades, the somehow ‘marginal’ field of cultural heritage, seeking to re-invent its social importance and locate its place in the developmental national schemata beyond the singular touristic exploitation. In the ‘sustainable development’ environment, especially, a number of relevant patterns have been compiled in order to define heritage in monetary terms and transform it into an ‘input’; thus, creating a number of inconsistencies, profoundly traced in the social and cultural compounds of cultural heritage. This paper critiques on these trends of culture economics seeking to establish a new pattern of dealing with heritage based on the use of Information and Communication Technologies.

Contemporary issues in economy and development

Being introduced in the aftermath of Enlightenment, modern development theories rise early in Europe, marking the gradual disassociation of economy from society, especially after World War II. The western economic paradigm, based on economic growth, extended to become the ‘imagined’ international norm through the introduction of GDP as the comparative scale of development, thus creating ‘developed’ and ‘under-developed’ countries in a context of western hegemony, crypto-colonialism, the threat of imminent bankruptcy to many European countries and anti-communism (Esteva 2009, 1-3).

These materially based patterns of development are organised around linear economic growth and converge with the neo-liberal views of free market, privatization, need for productivity and innovation, ability to buy and consume and other practices that define our lives nowadays, sustained by the important advents of technology.

Even though the above model resolved a number of social problems, it nurtured a number of deficiencies, widely recognized as the ‘environmental problem’ and the limited carrying capacity of earth to sustain these intensive human activities. Criticism and the need for alternative paths gave a twitch to the linear patterns of development by introducing the ‘sustainable development’ agenda, famously defined in the Brundtland Report as “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987, 43).

Political decisions that followed the UN World Summit in 2002 and 2005 marked the era of ‘viable, fiable, vivable’ development through a number of sustainable policies that operate under the mantra: ‘Economic development cannot happen unless in a context of social stability and ecological balance’.
In order to operate, this seemingly eco-logical- schema requires the translation of social, environmental and economic resources in a common pattern -i.e. economic value- to be inserted and balance the ‘sustainable platform’ of development. Even though not a critical factor economically wise, cultural heritage, already being exploited as a touristic product, has undergone a process of value re-interpretation in order to have its economic potential and contribution possibilities in this schema assessed.

**Economic readings of cultural heritage**

The first researches for the economic value of performing arts and culture appeared in the 1960’s (for example, *The Liberal Hour* (1960) by J. Galbraith and *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* (1966) by W. Baumol and W. Bowen). This attempt to capture, analyse and use the economic value of culture steadily enveloped cultural heritage and became a trend in the 1980's, in an effort to acknowledge its place in the developmental processes of the state and its cost-benefit pattern and to validate the state funding in relation to the public values/taxpayers’ needs, altogether responding to the context of the ‘New Public Management’ (Throsby 2002, 101). The first systematic research for the important role of the management of cultural heritage in relation to the wider economic circle and the provided added value was by R. Lemaire (1980).

Parallel to that, the dialectics of ‘cultural industry’ appeared, declaring the importance of culture and cultural heritage to the national income, replacing other decadent industries (Walsh 1992) and promoting, at the same time, the national identity through the touristic product. Heritage industry is considered, nowadays, one of the most fast-pacing industries in world economy, valued for 7% of the world GDP and estimated to increase 1% per year (UNCTAD 2004).

From another point of view, this trend of economic analysis of cultural heritage converges with the calls for more representative, co-operative and democratic management. In the aftermath of the post-colonial era and emancipation processes, cultural heritage was explicitly acknowledged as a public good to be enjoyed and managed by the majority of its stakeholders, instead of specific communities of experts (archaeologists, architects, conservators etc.). The latter entered the multiple fields of self-reflection, altering their management processes in order to cater for the ‘public’ and promoting a number of alternative practices: e.g. public archaeology, community archaeology, archaeology and the media and others (Lekakis 2008).

As a respond to the ever-growing market and the capitalistic ‘ways forward’ adopted in the economy, nowadays, cultural economics have been developed as a stand alone field of study, researching mainly the monetary value of heritage through the binary value system of ‘use’ and ‘non-use’ values, prominent in the private sector as well.

Various econometric methods, mostly revolving around ‘Contingent Valuation’ and 'Willingness to Pay' methodologies, have been employed in order to assess, valuate and valorise heritage resources and become the desired input to strategic and developmental plans. Prominent example is the research conducted by ‘Accenture’ for National Trust’s estates (Accenture 2006).
Cultural heritage is thus considered as a resource placed in the global market, after being transformed in the homogeneous aggregation of remnants (also known as ‘Cultural Capital’) that if managed appropriately and invested upon, could yield the desired, differentiated, ‘special product’. As an input, parallel to the natural resources, cultural heritage could enhance the tripartite system of economy, society and environment, in the sustainable platform of development. This pattern consolidated in international charters and conventions (e.g. 2005 UNESCO Convention on cultural diversity, 2005 Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society) appears nowadays through different forms of ‘sustainable management for cultural heritage’; among them the second-use of preserved architectural heritage, especially in urban regeneration schemes and ‘cultural tourism’ patterns seem to be the undeniable leaders to the sustainable/economic appropriation of heritage in the contemporary economic environment and the only ways of viable protection of this fragile resource.

Problems of managing culture in an economic base

Even though these schemata seem to provide a palpable answer to the problem of heritage sustainability, especially in the contemporary environment of economic downshift, they also seem to generate a number of inconsistencies in the management of cultural heritage. Cultural heritage as a ‘public good’ creates a ‘market failure’, since it does not exclude people from enjoying it at the same time, or cannot easily contain ‘free riding’ (consuming the product without paying for it) (Mourato & Mazzanti 2002, 53). If, on the other hand, cultural heritage is addressed as a mere input to the wider developmental plans, it restrains its social qualities, being detached from the social context, and seizes catering for the wider public or the ‘core’ of culture. What is more, a number of threats appear ranging from commercialisation of interpretation to be fed in the touristic market and the creation of visitors instead of participants to the physical damage of the remnants because of increased use.

The role of ICT in the compilation of a new ‘language’ in managing cultural heritage sites

Even though, the economic importance of cultural resources could not be denied, we believe that an alternative ‘language’ for the management of cultural heritage that perceives culture holistically along with its social parameters, should be employed, without placing monetary cost-benefit patterns on the top of the agenda. Among the tools needed to compile this language, are Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) that could lead us from the contemporary to a more viable state. This potential is explored in the remaining of this paper and illustrated through the case of mobile applications for heritage sites.

As we examined, cultural heritage sites’ sustainability being closely associated to the demands of heritage tourism strategies (Boniface and Fowler 1993) and affected by the rapid changes in global economy are confronted with the inherent problems of a market-based approach to cultural heritage, raising the demand for new directions aligned to the European digital agenda. The role of ICT -already successfully appropriated in heritage dissemination schemes- in the accessibility and the informed experience of the public, is becoming
increasingly apparent also in the formation of a participatory platform for managing and enjoying cultural heritage.

The uses of sophisticated new media provide audiences and visitors with more innovative and engaging interpretations of culturally significant sites or artefact collections in museums. Already, a plethora of experimental and commercial ICT applications have flourished in this field, a fact which is acknowledged by the ICOMOS Charters of London and Ename (Beacham et al. 2006, ICOMOS 2007) and illustrated by the European Commission reports and the research community (i.e. emergent themes in conferences such as Computing Applications in Archaeology (CAA) and VAST). Cultural Heritage constitutes an attractive, inspiring and profitable area for the industries of tourism and computing and from a heritage management point of view, ICT are recognised as suitable tools both for renewing content and hence, presenting new prospects in sustainable management of digital resources and enhanced modes of dissemination.

The stakeholders have shown a keen interest ‘in integrated approaches to visitor management, in relation to the sustainability of the sites and the enhancement of the visitors’ experience’ (Chrysanthi & Earl forthcoming). In the case of heritage sites, a significant number of collaborative projects are just starting to exploit the real potential of developing new methodologies to assist their research in interpretive archaeology (Monod & Klein 2005). Whether these technologies are used as interpretive or knowledge dissemination tools the main idea is to enhance the user’s perception of the physical environment with additional cultural heritage content in a meaningful way. Usually, such information involves the visualisation of past anthropogenic environments, buildings and artefacts as well as textual and audio storytelling.

However, innovative ICT systems developed for on-site interpretation, as products of research funded by European schemes, are rarely employed by heritage institutions due to their experimental character and financial and technological unsustainability. In Greece’s case, heritage sites have been used as a test bed for several innovative applications from audio guide tours and location based media to more advanced 3D interpretive technologies, such as mixed reality (e.g. the ARCHEOGUIDE project). In reality, the majority of heritage sites cannot sustain such technologies. The cost of employing these systems is recharged to the people who hesitate to pay additionally for digital content.

In an attempt to define a sustainable and cultural-social centric approach to heritage site management considering the input of ICTs, the focus is shifted to the European Commission’s current digital agenda for mobile technologies. According to a recent study by the European Interactive Advertising Association (EIAA), over 71 million Europeans use their mobile phones to access the internet. Furthermore, the European Commission has proposed extending broadband access by 2013 and providing all of Europe’s regions with access to speeds of at least 30Mbps by 2020.

Mobile handsets equipped with powerful media and combined with web 2.0 features prevail as the most promising medium for delivering cultural heritage content into our ever changing mobile lives, providing personalisation, interactivity and context-awareness. The ‘Digital Agenda for Europe’ includes
further digitisation of Europe's cultural heritage and low roaming tariffs a fact that will facilitate immensely cross-regional accessibility to heritage content via mobile phones. Parallel to this, an emerging democratisation process of mobile technologies spurs from the open source developing platforms, which are available to heritage specialist for creating interpretive applications. In essence, this means that rich media content can be delivered to the visitor through his personal device via a web-accessed or a standalone application available to download from the hosting institution (Kenteris et al. 2009).

The European Commission’s strategy articulates the message that Information and Communication technologies should be treated as goods - accessible and affordable for the common wealth of societies- above and beyond the notion of ‘profit’. This message accords with what in essence constitutes cultural heritage and justifies its existence as an academic and professional discourse; heritage management and development ought to be designed outside the laws of market but within the new frame, prospects and solutions that technological accomplishments provide the contemporary societies.

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