

# Everyday Heritage and Place-Making

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In this paper, I combine sources from environmental psychology with insights from the everyday aesthetics literature to explore the concept of ‘everyday heritage’, formerly introduced by Saruhan Mosler (2019). Highlighting the potential of heritage in its everyday context shows that symbolic, aesthetic, and broadly conceived affective factors may be as important as architectural, historical, and artistic issues when it comes to conceiving of heritage value. Indeed, there seems to be more to a heritage site than its official inscription on the UNESCO register. A place is included as part of our heritage primarily because it matters to us. People live in, form relationships with, and derive existential and affective meanings from it. Above and beyond its official significance, a heritage site is thus a living dimension that plays a vital role in the everyday life and social practices of people, who transform it into a place of human significance. | Keywords: *Everyday Heritage, Place-Making, Familiarity, Everyday Aesthetics*

## 1. Introduction

At its core, the notion of cultural heritage is typically taken to mean something special, unique, and outstanding: ruins of a glorious and distant past, sublime landscapes, buildings of immeasurable beauty and artistic appeal. Cultural heritage refers to the most valuable things our ancestors have bestowed upon us, the gifts that past generations have offered to their present and future descendants. Not by chance, in many European languages the English term ‘heritage’ is translated with the Latin ‘patrimonium’ a noun originally indicating the estates or assets that were transmitted from father to son (see for example *patrimonio culturale* in Italian or *patrimoine culturel* in French). Heritage is regarded as our family treasure, a treasure that can be disputed by different family members (see e.g. Young, 2007), but whose exceptional significance is hardly put into question.

Consider now the concept of *everydayness*, to which this Symposium is dedicated. At first glance, there seems to be no notion as remote from and unrelated to the exceptionality of cultural heritage as that of the everyday. The Oxford English Dictionary defines everydayness as what is “commonplace and

ordinary”. Everyday are all objects, practices or activities that lack particular significance or have lost it over time because of daily abuse and redundancy. Repetition is indeed the generative law of everydayness (see: Lefebvre, 1991; Lefebvre and Levich, 1987). Like a word that loses its meaning by being uttered too many times, everyday life is reiterated again and again, and as a result of this over-exposure, it is rendered empty, boring, and trivial. This relates to the second key notion in this Symposium, namely, *banality*. Much of our daily life is banal in the sense that it is based on habitual and humdrum routines that are deprived of “new or interesting qualities” by their constant recurrence.

What, then, does cultural heritage have to do with everyday life, given that the former identifies all that is most special, significant, and non-banal in our culture, while the second captures only mundane, trivial, and trifling things in its scope? Isn’t the very combination of heritage and everydayness intrinsically paradoxical? My intuition is that there are in fact some compelling reasons to keep these two seemingly contradictory concepts together. This paper aims to unveil these reasons and show how profoundly they affect the way cultural heritage is actually experienced and perceived.

## 2. Top-down and Bottom-up Processes of Heritage Creation

To substantiate my argument, it seems important to clarify first of all the procedures that underpin the creation of ‘official’ cultural heritage (Harrison, 2013, p. 23). Notice that by ‘official heritage’, I will refer here uniquely to those sites that are recognized by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites. There is however a distinction between UNESCO and other non-official national or regional heritage (Matthes, 2018). Although not or not yet being classified as world heritage, these sites can actually play an influential role in cultivating a sense of national or local identity (Ireland and Schofield, 2007, p. 2). Nevertheless, for reasons of space, I will leave discussion on this point to future work.

How does a site come to be officially included on the UNESCO World Heritage List? From a technical point of view, the selection process is managed by a body that represents the sovereign state of the territory in which the site exists, and is submitted to a committee (the UNESCO World Heritage Committee) in charge of evaluating the nominations. To be considered, sites must be of “outstanding universal value” (for discussion, see: Cleere, 1996) and satisfy at least one out of ten selection criteria, some of which purely aesthetic. These include for example “representing a masterpiece of human creative genius”; bearing “a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared”; containing “superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance”, and so on<sup>1</sup>. Once a certain place is recognized as successful in this sense, it is inserted on the official heritage register and starts to be subject to a series of provisions on how it should be treated differently from other places. In particular, it is expected that the site

<sup>1</sup> The complete list is available here: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>.

be accurately managed and maintained, and funds are allocated for this to occur both by local and international institutions.

What I have just described is the standard procedure by which a site receives recognition and is placed on the UNESCO heritage register. It is a *top-down process* (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2009; 2013), in which values and meanings are formally attributed to a place through an institutional act of acknowledgement.

There is, however, an important sense in which heritage sites are more than mere items on a catalogue. As I argued at the beginning, for a place to count as cultural heritage in a substantial sense it must be *perceived or experienced* as a site of human value – it must matter to individuals and communities, and possibly to the entire humanity. In this sense, the notion of heritage only makes sense in relation to some individuals or groups of individuals who perceive it as significant (Smith, 2006, pp. 46-48).

A relevant question in this regard is how this perceived heritage significance has to be understood. One way to do this, I contend, is to imagine that there is an intangible “web of meanings” (Muñoz-Viñas, 2009, p.160) ‘wrapping’ around the tangible objects – buildings, places, constructions. Each heritage site is indeed surrounded by a series of immaterial aspects (the language we use to describe it, its cultural significance, the role it plays in mundane routines, etc.) which are crucial to determine how the site is perceived or experienced (Giombini, 2020a). In particular, a site’s perceived significance seems to reside on its being a *reference point* by which certain social groups understand themselves in relation to the environment around them. Heritage sites function in this sense as landmarks for people, and contribute to shaping their ways of knowing, making sense, and valuing their everyday experience.

While I shall return to the issue momentarily, let me put special emphasis here on the ‘everyday’ character of this experience. It is indeed through everyday practices that heritage significance is generated at the local level. Following Harrison (2009, p. 8), we can refer to this process as the *bottom-up process* of heritage creation, whereby the notion of ‘bottom-upness’ stands for the grassroots mechanism through which some environments are invested with significance by the people who inhabit them.

#### 4. Making Places

In recent years, the analysis of the grassroots relationships that link people to their living places and the function these places fulfil in their lives has been the subject of numerous researches in the field of environmental psychologists. Their empirical studies have shown that places strongly influence how people self-represent themselves and their relations with a territory. This sentimental bond is known as “place attachment” (see, among the many: Fried, 1963; Gerson, et al., 1977; Low and Altman, 1992; Hidalgo and Hernández, 2001).

In broad terms, place attachment can be defined as the affective rapport, link or involvement between people and specific locations of their everyday life

(Low and Altman, 1992), which develops over time and often without awareness. According to many authors, place attachment is an integral part of identity-creation processes, both for individuals and members of cultures and communities (Raymond, et al, 2010). How we inhabit an environment, and the practices we perform in our daily life, express and shape who we are. Place appears in this sense as a psychological more than a physical dimension, permeated by the “variety of meanings associated with that location by individuals or groups.” (Devine-Wright, 2009, p. 427)

Importantly, everyday practices play a key role in the place-making process. A locale becomes a befitting part of a person’s individuality and starts to serve as a *symbol* of the self (Proshansky, 1978) through daily intercourse. When settings are imbued with the personal meanings of quotidian life, they are transformed into a symbolic extension of our mind, landscapes become ‘mindscape’, and spaces become ‘places’. The role of quotidian experience in the process of place-making has been highlighted by psychologist Graham Rowles (1983; 1984) in his analysis of the notion of “place insideness” (Relph, 1976). According to Rowles, to be ‘inside’ a place is to belong to it and to identify with it so that the more ‘inside’ a person is with respect to a place the stronger she will identify with it. Importantly, this sense of insideness is both physical and social as it is autobiographical; it is the awareness of living within a familiar setting with its associated routines; within a context of community life and social exchange; and within a landscape of personal memories. In combination, these three aspects strengthen our emotional attachment with a place, which leads us to the feeling that we “wear the setting like a glove.” (Rowles, 1983, p. 114)

As of today, there still is no agreement among scholars over what kind of places people mainly develop attachment to, or what physical, social, and temporal variables influence attachment. What is perhaps more interesting to our purposes, however, is that it has been demonstrated that heritage sites represent strong purveyors of attachment feelings (Avrami et al., 2000; Byrne 2001; Smith et al., 2003). Indeed, these sites seem to be deeply embroiled in the construction of personal and group sentiment. As I have argued elsewhere (Giombini, 2020b) ‘heritage’ in itself may be seen as a mechanism of place-making. The very transformation of a place into heritage is a process whereby collectivity is shaped, and feelings of belonging are created and reinforced in the interaction with an environment. Importantly, these feelings are not wholly dependent on the official values of the site itself but are rather generated collectively through the everyday interaction between people and the environment.

## 5. Everyday Heritage

As discussions on place-making testify, while considering the perceived heritage value of a site it is therefore crucial to ponder the meaning it embodies for a certain community, its everyday ‘uses’ as well as how it is perceived as a resource for the local people to meet their own economic, social, personal, and emotional needs. This brings me to the core of my argument.

Construed as a place in this complex sense, a heritage site can be seen as a sort of ‘catalyst of everydayness’ for people, a ‘unifying hub’ that creates and organizes everyday spatiality for community life, and comes to be evaluated by residents through its functionality and uses more than through its historic or official value. This social and lived-in dimension of heritage is what I refer to as ‘everyday heritage’, borrowing the term from Mosler (2019). Rather than identifying a particular kind of heritage places or items, the everyday heritage concept stands for the complex sum of practices, activities, and meanings by which communities quotidianly use all types of local heritage to strengthen their connection to particular places and each other. Heritage everyday dimension is all the stronger, however, when the site is a public space, as it happens for example in the case of many urban heritage complexes. What makes these sites especially relevant is the fact that they are always present in people’s everyday routine. Unlike other types of heritage, we do not have to go anywhere to see them (e.g., to a museum), for they are already there, shaping our quotidian experience. For this reason, throughout history, urban heritage structures, organically embedded into the city fabric, have been adapted to a variety of social, physical, and cultural uses and have contributed to model the urban social and spatial morphology.

Some examples may be helpful to illustrate my idea. One of the contexts in which everyday heritage is more clearly instanced is the case of historical villas or urban gardens. Consider for instance the *Pincian gardens*, in Rome (Italy), located between Piazza del Popolo, Villa Medici, and the so-called Muro Torto. Laid out in 1809-14 by Giuseppe Valadier, the official heritage status of the garden resides in its numerous monumental furnishings, including fountains, small temples, and a famous belvedere. The site’s everyday heritage significance, however, lies in the set of practices surrounding its use by a wide range of people, including many children, who gather there to meet, stroll, and perform their daily activities. It is important to notice that these two aspects of the site are not in contrast with each other, but rather interact and contribute together to shape the users’ experience, reinforcing the sense of place identity and belonging. So, for example, the ‘official heritage’ elements in the Pincian landscape (statues, architectures, fountains) guide and direct people’s everyday movements in the park and facilitate navigation of the space, while providing a sense of time and a distinctive character to the site as a historic space.

Another example of everyday heritage, formerly proposed by Mosler (2019, p. 7), is related to the old fortifications surrounding many cities throughout Europe [Figure 2]. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these often-ruinous constructions were regarded as an annoying legacy of the past, hindering traffic roads from being widened and preventing the development of modern cities (Hirst, 1997). After their recognition and conservation as urban heritage, however, city walls started to play an important role in the life of the cities not just as important tourist attractions, but also as part of the everyday commute for the local inhabitants (Erkan and Ceccarelli, 2017). Today, historic walls are often open to the public as elevated walkways, allowing users to experience the city landscape from above and creating connectivity among

different urban districts. As uninterrupted pedestrian routes for walkers, they produce a sense of “spatial order and continuity” through the act of moving through a linear space (Wunderlich, 2008). Moreover, green public spaces are often enclosed between the intramural and extramural areas, offering people an everyday destination for their leisurely stays. This is for example the case of Dubrovnik City Walls (Croatia) [Figure 1] where the garden designed on the site in the nineteenth century is now a pleasant outdoor environment for local people and visitors (Mosler, 2019, p. 8).

Other significant examples of everyday heritage include ancient railway stations, which are often endowed with architectural as well as practical value (e.g., Porto’s train station, In Portugal), ancient cafes and restaurant (e.g., the *Café Procope* in Paris, France) and old marketplaces that are still in use today (e.g., the *Grand Bazar* in Istanbul, Turkey). Although I won’t analyse these examples in-depth, what is important to me is that these and other similar everyday uses of heritage highlight the vital interplay that obtains between place, heritage, and people and demonstrate the ways through which historical sites can shape and reshape urban everyday life.

## 6. Aesthetics of the Familiar

An interesting aspect in this regard is that there seems to be a close relationship between the emergence of heritage everyday significance and the site’s perceived aesthetic features. Aesthetic considerations appear to play a central role in the process of heritage place-making, reinforcing attachment, and strengthening feelings of belonging in the local population (Jaśkiewicz, 2015). Clearly, by mentioning aesthetics, I am not simply talking about the supposed “outstanding aesthetic value” (either artistic or natural) required from a site for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage register. Instead, I am interested in the enlarged construal of aesthetic quality that has been developed in recent work in the area of everyday and environmental aesthetics, and that considers quotidian intercourse, relationship, and interaction central for the ascription of aesthetic values to objects and places.

One major achievement of contemporary investigations in these newly established fields, I think, has been to highlight that our personal relationship with and our stake in a certain object, rather than being irrelevant or pernicious, are in fact crucial for the ascription of aesthetic character to it (Berleant, 1992; Saito, 2007, 2017; Brady, 2003, 2008; Leddy, 2005). There is indeed an extent to which the aesthetic dimension of objects only emerges when we are involved in, engage, and interact with them in our daily experience. Rather than a disinterested judgment, the attribution of aesthetic value can be thus seen as an experience of pleasure and meaning that results when a special bond is established between a subject and an object. This idea lies at the basis of the *engaged* aesthetic approach that everyday aestheticians defend (for discussion on the notion of aesthetic engagement, see especially: Berleant, 1992).



Many compelling arguments have been offered by contemporary aestheticians to support the claim that our aesthetic appreciation cannot be dissociated from the personal, as well as cultural and societal interest we have in objects. Particularly regarding the natural and built environment, their analyses have demonstrated that our appreciation of its aesthetic character cannot be detached from the personal rapport we have with it (Berleant, 1992; Brady, 2003, 2014;). Perception of aesthetic value in the environmental context has been proven inseparably linked to how we feel in a given place and to the meaning we give to it, which indicates the existence of a significant *affective component* in our appraisal of places (Brady, 2003). In this sense, whether we are native to a particular locale, having lived and worked there our whole life, or just tourists passing by, deeply changes how we perceive its aesthetic character and what kind of aesthetic experiences we undergo (Benenti and Giombini, forthcoming).

Because of space constraints, I cannot focus here on any of these arguments, but I want nonetheless to spend some words to illustrate a proposal that seems particularly relevant for the account I am trying to defend. I am notably referring to Finnish philosopher Arto Haapala's account (2005; 2018) of place appreciation in the everyday context. According to Haapala, in everyday life there are two basic modalities through which we can relate to a place, what he calls 'strangeness' and 'familiarity'. Strangeness is the basic experience we undergo when we find ourselves in a new environment, for example when we visit a foreign city for the first time, and we feel lost in a maze of extraneous buildings and streets (Haapala, 2005, p. 43). Familiarity, on the contrary, is the quality possessed by our everyday living environments – our home, our district or our living area – with their distinctive features and identifiable aspects. When we have settled down into a locale, Haapala claims, not only do we recognize the buildings and spaces, but we also establish an intimate bond with them, which brings us a feeling of "comforting stability" (Haapala, 2005, p. 50). Familiar elements in the landscape and known architectural spaces have indeed the role of "stabilizing factors" (Haapala, 2018, p. 171) in the unfolding of our daily routines. Importantly, this role, according to Haapala, also has a significant aesthetic component to it, not in the sense that some qualities in these landscapes or spaces surprise us or take us "somewhere else from our everyday" (*ibid.*), but exactly because these familiar places are able to secure that our everyday life rhythm flows smoothly and unproblematically.

Haapala's reference is Heidegger's famous examination of everyday tools and pieces of equipment in his *Being and Time* (1962, p. 98). As Heidegger explains, while these items are always present in our daily existence and make our quotidian activities possible – the computer I am using right now, the chair on which I lean, the room in which I sit –we hardly pay attention to them: they are "phenomenologically transparent" to us (Wheeler, 2019). What is interesting, however, is that these objects, in Haapala's account, not only have practical importance for our way of inhabiting the environment but are also endowed with a special kind of "silent beauty" (Haapala, 2018, p. 181). This beauty, in turn, is capable of engendering a distinct form of aesthetic pleasure, which

relies on such objects being always “ready to our hand” and continuously fulfilling the function they are created for. To use Heidegger’s standard example, we are talking here about the kind of aesthetic pleasure that the carpenter, while engaged in trouble-free hammering, may take in the hammer, nails, and work-bench she is using, exactly because such items allow her to be a carpenter and therefore act out her peculiar mode of being-in-the-world. To the same extent, if we go back now to the environment case, familiar places, according to Haapala (2005, p. 50), give us aesthetic delight inasmuch as they are ‘there’ for us, accompany our mundane routines, and enable us to be ourselves. Of course, this delight is as much aesthetic as it is existential because it depends on a certain state of wellness that is linked to the realization of our existential structure (Light, 2005, p. xi).

## 7. Heritage Values

Haapala’s consideration of the interactions between aesthetic and existential aspects in the process of place appreciation provides further support to the heritage picture I have canvassed so far. Particularly when it comes to culturally significant settings like heritage sites, the importance of the interplay between affective, aesthetic, and existential elements should not be ignored. All these factors contribute to a similar extent to make a site appreciated and valued at the local level. So, whereas the specific architectural, artistic, and structural features of a place are key for the attribution of UNESCO status to it, the happenings of the everyday are key for the formation of feelings that are responsible for, and constitutive of, the place’s everyday significance.

This is not to say that the two sets of values can be thought of as wholly independent from each other, or even less as mutually incompatible. On the contrary, I think that if heritage has relevance for humanity it is exactly because of its ability to bring these two different dimensions together. On the one hand, heritage sites are culturally and aesthetically significant in themselves; they represent the best and most special achievements of human culture and, thus, inevitably stand out from the flow of the everyday. On other hand, as we have seen, these sites also shape our daily life, provide spatial stability and social order, create a sense of temporal continuity for individuals and communities, and give people aesthetic pleasure through comfort and familiarity. The value of heritage, therefore, lies both in its everydayness, in its capacity to form and give substance to the routines of our days, and in the power it has to draw us out of the daily humdrum. Although one may be tempted to regard the latter type of value as more important than the former, I hope to have shown that there is in fact a role for both of them as well as no convincing reason to dismiss either of them.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, let me briefly come back to the main topic of this Symposium for some more personal considerations. As I pointed out at the beginning of this



paper, everything *can* and *does* become banal by way of continual repetition. Even the greatest of buildings and the most spectacular architectures eventually lose their attractiveness when we see them every single day. For me driving past it almost every morning to go to work, the Colosseum is but a big, mundane thing; an obstacle that I have to turn around to go where I have to go. But that doesn't mean that I care less about it, on the contrary! The Colosseum has become so to say a part of the furniture of my inner self; its reiterated presence one of the few certainties I have in my life. To a similar extent, I am sure that even the beautiful Helen may have eventually appeared ordinary to Paris, once he had to wake up next to her every single morning in the well-walled city of Troy. And yet, as history teaches us, isn't it for the sake of these everyday, familiar, and even banal things that people have been most ready to fight, wars have been waged, and empires have been made and unmade?

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[Figure 1. Bratislava City Walls. Photo by the author. November 2018]



[Figure 2. Dubrovnik City Walls. Photo by the author. August 2012]