

Everyday Heritage and Aesthetics: A Reply to Giombini

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In this short paper, I examine the notion of everyday heritage as developed by Lisa Giombini in her article *Everyday Heritage and Place-Making*. While I argue that the article's main contribution is to combine the literature on place-making with current debates in everyday aesthetics, I also highlight some of the issues that I think should be addressed to further refine the notion of 'everyday heritage' and make it more resistant to criticism. | Keywords: *Cultural Heritage, Everyday Heritage, Everyday Aesthetics*

Cultural heritage is one of the most complex topics to be addressed in the field of humanities, aesthetics included. This is partly due to the fact that heritage is of interest to a striking number of scholars from several different scientific perspectives, and partly to the fact that so much has already been written on the issue. Finding an original way to approach the notion may seem in this sense a rather challenging undertaking. Difficulties notwithstanding, Lisa Giombini has recently been dedicating much effort in her works to examining some of the complexities of the notion of heritage (Giombini, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). The paper she presented for the current Symposium adds a small piece to the picture she draws in these previous writings.

But is this picture really successful in enlarging the scope of the discussion?

As I will argue in the remainder of this commentary, I think Giombini's attempt is successful at least in bringing some fresh air to contemporary discussions. What Giombini does in her paper - combining different sources to defend what she calls a "bottom-up heritage approach" - seems to me a very sensible thing to do. In particular, I think that using sources from the current literature in everyday aesthetic may actually add a whole new layer to our consideration of cultural heritage. As renown, a vital stream of debates and discussion takes place today under the heading of everyday aesthetics, and a remarkably large number of phenomena have already been analysed by philosophers working in the field. Investigating cultural heritage through the

lenses of everyday aesthetics can thus be promising and can even lead to a better understanding of what lies at the core of the “intangible web of meanings” (Giombini, 2020d, p. 52) that I think surrounds all objects, and not just heritage sites.

Furthermore, I concur with Giombini’s intention of proving that even from the notions of banality and everydayness – that we generally construe as radically detached from our heritage concept – we can nevertheless draw some well-grounded position on the topic.

As Giombini states at the end of her paper, heritage sites work in two ways. On the one hand, these sites stand out from the flow of our everydayness, and this is why they are inscribed on local, national or UNESCO registers as exceptional outcomes of human culture. But heritage sites also ground our feeling of being home, reinforce our cultural attachment, and stimulate the arousal of feelings that are, as Giombini claims, “responsible for, and constitutive of, the place’s everyday significance.” (Giombini, 2020d, p. 57) While heritage’s former aspects have been extensively discussed in the literature, also with an eye to the obvious aesthetic potential, the major contribution of Giombini’s paper is, I think, to put emphasis on the latter kind of ‘everyday’ aspects, that are responsible to ground the ‘bottom-up’ approach. In order to do this, Giombini offers several arguments and examples that attest our daily care for cultural sites. In this regard, she argues that heritage sites are reference points for individuals or social groups who perceive them as significant; and that once such attributions are made these sites engender a process of “place attachment” or “place-making”, which is strengthened by different kinds of everyday practices (for example in the context of public gardens, city walls etc.). Heritage sites, she claims, make us feel accustomed to a locale and fit to a place (and vice versa) and contribute to our hominess feeling, broadly conceived. And although scholars still do not agree on how to conceive of this process, we know for sure that heritage sites “represent strong purveyors of attachment feelings” (Giombini, 2020d, p. 53).

Although I am sympathetic to the general picture, I have some doubts about the strength of these feelings when it comes to particular situations, like for instance in the case of the Colosseum example mentioned at the end of the paper. In these cases, this type of feelings is weakened by the site’s quotidian presence in our life. So perhaps the emotional significance of attachment should be reconsidered. For instance, emotional involvement may be strong in the case of tourists who discover a place for the first time and take special intellectual or sensual pleasure in its beauty, but local people’s emotional reaction may be attenuated by repeated frequentation with the site.

Without entering into details of this discussion, what is more interesting is that while drawing evidence of these processes from the environmental psychology literature and from everyday heritage findings, Giombini also combines them - in a fruitful way, I think - with theories from the everyday aesthetics field. Importantly, all these theories originate somehow from Berleant’s “aesthetics of engagement” (Berleant, 1991), an account in which Kant’s notion of disinterestedness is challenged and replaced by a notion of

subjects' involvement when experiencing everyday life objects (I shall return to this issue soon). Emily Brady's idea of a "significant affective component" (Brady, 2003) in aesthetic experience and Arto Haapala's notion of "comforting stability" (Haapala, 2005) both contribute, in Giombini's reconstruction, to give ground to an alternative understanding of cultural heritage, opposed to the official top-down one. In this sense, as Giombini writes, heritage sites, like commonplace objects: "give us aesthetic pleasure inasmuch as they are 'there' for us, accompany our mundane routines, and enable us to be ourselves." (Giombini, 2020d, p. 57)

While I strongly agree with this idea and see especially Haapala's position as really compelling to the argument Giombini is trying to defend, what seems misguided to me is the reference to Berleant's unfair critique of Kant's notion of disinterestedness, a critique that has been taken for granted by most everyday aestheticians and that Giombini too adopted as an argumentative claim in this paper. As I've tried to show in my own work (Kvokačka, 2018, 2020), Kant's aesthetic theory in the Third Critique may prove in fact to be quite able to embrace everyday aesthetics within its scope once we abandon the usual reading of the concept of disinterestedness. This is not the right place to illustrate in detail how consistent and even beneficial Kant's aesthetic theory may be for investigations into everyday aesthetics, but, to support my claim, let me quote how Thomas Leddy, the well-known everyday aesthetician, answers to a question he himself raises in one of his recent papers: "How can disinterestedness play a role in appreciation of nature or everyday aesthetic phenomena?" (Leddy, 2017). He writes:

"Metaphorical seeing or seeing charged by the imagination plays a role both in interested and in disinterested attention and [that] the main role that disinterestedness plays is simply as a method for highlighting certain sensuous and formal features and freeing up the imagination from the dominance of historical features, allowing for actualizations of the aesthetic object in new ways." (Leddy, 2017, p. 77)

As Leddy seems to imply here, a reconception of Kant's aesthetic notions may represent a crucial breakthrough for discussions in everyday aesthetics.

In conclusion, and going back to Giombini's paper, I have a few broad observations that I think could add some perspective to the picture Giombini is trying to draw. In the first place, I wonder whether the bottom-up approach of heritage creation, which is somehow opposite to what we can call 'tourist way' of experiencing heritage, may not be interpreted as a way to give further relevance to local or national heritage lists that are often underestimated compared to the UNESCO one. Giombini mentions this issue at the beginning of her paper, but she does not deal with it. I am sure that this could represent a fruitful starting point for some further investigations. Moreover if, as I think, this bottom-up approach is not merely a theoretical account, but one that is grounded in the practice, then it may be worth exploring its implications for the way we preserve, conserve or otherwise manage our cultural heritage.

Another important issue concerns the relations between everyday heritage and cultural heritage. What I observe is that Giombini assumes that the two

notions should be thought of as present in each instance of a heritage site. It seems possible, however, to think about some examples of sites in which these two values do not meet with each other and actually remain unrelated. What shall we think of heritage items that do not allow everyday uses, like archaeological sites or sites that are otherwise protected, closed or inaccessible to the public? Of course, they can still work as 'landmarks' but shouldn't we also acknowledge the fact that to 'live close' to a site is different than to walk inside its 'walls'?

These questions are not to be understood as a criticism but rather as some suggestions to develop a position that, as I said, seems to me potentially fertile to help us rethink the problem of heritage in a different light and from a broader philosophical perspective.

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