

## FRH conference Vicenza

### A short report and review by Dr Linda Monckton

Amidst a warm welcome by local people Over 30 papers were heard by the attendees of the FRH conference for 2016. All papers related closely to the conference theme of 'Tourists, Travellers and Pilgrims' and the mixture of mini presentations and longer speeches provided a good balance of pace and an opportunity to hear about a large range of members' activities.

The conference started with an excellent keynote address by Alessandro Scafi which set the scene discussing the power of place. But, as religious sites attract pilgrims and non-devout visitors they interact with material and intangible heritage: the fact that the place is made holy by devotional *practice* and the demands of visitors for 'authenticity'. Historical experience is a construction however and this is based on the fact that it depends on our own perceptions and way so seeing. This, he posited leads to a relationship between the concepts of 'landscape' and 'mindscape' and he saw 'cultural heritage as the new faith of modernity' leading to a challenge of both accommodating large numbers of visitors at, for example, world heritage sites and other 'hotspots' and presenting sites with destroying their characteristics.

A myriad of polarities faces the theorist and the practitioner with regard presenting religious sites. Even deciding to respect a site is a construction, as to respect a site one must understand what requires respect, made harder by the fact, taking Scafi's point above, the fact that all visitors may experience the site in different ways, influenced by cultural specificity and expectations. Central to this debate is the clear fact that intangible heritage is no less powerful than material forms. Pilgrimage is of course a form of intangible heritage in and of itself. Preserving (or protecting in some way) is a complex, sensitive and challenging. The usual approach of heritage bodies – static signs based on articulated significance tends to site uncomfortably with the dissonant and dynamic nature of intangible heritage.

The potential for such sites with regard inter-cultural dialogue has been explored by some including trans national networks of routes, described by Luisella Pavan-Woolfe (Council of Europe). These remind us how the landscape of faith in Europe through the ages is essentially a common one and how the countries of Europe have interacted through the lens of faith across, often shifting boundaries, for thousands of years. The creation of new routes (re-evaluated every three years) that reflect this general trend, rather than supporting extant or historical pilgrimage routes, aims to strengthen understanding of shared universal values which are considered important, especially by national and international bodies. The focus is on cultural identities and a shared European history. In practice the routes include a range of faith groups and their buildings. Presumably the selection of the sites however shows a clear acceptance of the diversity within Europe, then as now. But the language

remains concerned with *universal* values, *promoting* inter-cultural exchange. Not everyone does hold everything equal in value of course and maybe the direction of travel will be towards discussions of revealing multiple identities and values at the same time in the future.

No decision within the presentation of religious sites is passive and the social and cultural complexity of intangible values presents a challenge equal to that of repurposing a church. Specific examples were shown, for example the cultural landscapes and buildings of community focus in the Netherlands. Linking places together was also shown through thematic relationships between places – particularly discussed in the series of mini presentations – and these included constructions of new links, repurposing of old links and presentation of linked and shared information on the web. Of course whichever approach one takes, all site-based presentations require research and understanding of the sites themselves, and all referred to at the conference, even if not always discussed in these terms, are actually related (surely) to the concept of welcome: that is, inviting participation and encouraging people to make links themselves. All, however different in the end presentational product, require story-telling in some form. This was a theme picked up in the additional conference sessions on the Friday afternoon: where welcome was discussed in terms of sharing. There was a plea in this session about aligning national research agendas in this area, and the need to link this material with human rights meaning and value as well as material evidence. The issue of religious literacy was touched upon, as it is often in debates in England, and the general level of social networks and daily experience of faith is now very different from even 50 years ago, as the Netherlandish context clearly showed. As religious literacy drops it has an impact on the nature and approach to presentation, but also is an issue prevalent in heritage policy and decision making more generally. So that, although for some ‘pilgrimage’ might be seen as separate from the practical realities of day-to-day heritage management, this shows that at its core the issues of understanding, multiple values, recognising conflicting perspectives, respecting diversity and protecting the intangible and tangible are fundamental to both theory and practice.

Also changes attempted to ‘improve’ welcome have a direct impact on buildings, policy and decision making. Creating new cultural associations and new ‘communities’ of association with a place is one way forward that was presented in the Church Conservation Trust’s *Church Keys* project. The dichotomy this project in part tries to address, but is a common issue, is the imbalance between sites which are too busy and those which without new appeal (a driver for visitors) will not support their own survival.

Although the issue of sustainability was only directly or explicitly dealt with in the Friday additional sessions – it still underpins all the debates held at the conference. Moving sustainability models away from economically-led agendas was a central theme of Professor Frans Lenglet’s paper. He spoke of the social values of sustainability and suggested a withdrawal of economic values from the centre stage of the sustainability model to a role within a broader environmentally and socially led agenda. Identifying tourism or pilgrimage as an ‘ecological’ site therefore is not necessarily the same as ensuring the process of conservation management is itself sustainable. Although the concept of ‘process’ is often not considered popular as such, if we accepted the idea that it is as much (or more) the process of heritage as much as the outcome that creates success and sustainable futures we might realise the value of debating process and method more. The Friday afternoon sessions provoked an interesting and welcome debate on this issue. Process, that is the act of maintaining heritage sites, need not be wholly divorced from the objectives of a finished ‘product’. Luca Baraldi’s own point on

the importance of sensorial experience shows how intangible values and experiences are crucial to all stages of the process towards heritage protection.

Given that it is impossible in a short space to cover all the topics and papers given at the conference I thought I would conclude by identifying the four themes that emerged most strongly for me, and no doubt others would have different perspectives

1. Uniting religious places
2. A living cultural heritage
3. Intersection of tangible and intangible heritage
4. Religious sites and multiple identities

It will be hard to beat a conference with 3 world heritage site visits and (if Friday is included) nearly 40 papers: it was not a conference for the faint-hearted. But the fantastic support, welcome and endorsement from Italian authorities, the press coverage, and presence of the mayor of Verona and Walter Zampieri - Head of Unit 'Culture Policy and Intercultural Dialogue', DG Education and Culture, European Commission ( to name but 2) go some way to encourage us that this issue does have a broader resonance with officials and media than is sometimes supposed. All those involved in the conference deserves thanks but a Luca Baraldi deserves the most special thanks for leading on and developing, and contributing to, a full, creative and thought-provoking conference. The FRH are lucky to have such dedicated volunteers to take things forward at a local level.