

Why Civil Society and Heritage need each other

At the recent biennial conference of the new European heritage network [Future Religious Heritage](#) (FRH), 100 people from 30 different countries listened to a range of speakers on the challenges and solutions for heritage in the 21st century. But one speaker – the keynote – was there at my invitation to talk more about civil society than he was about heritage. Stephen Bubb @stephenbubb- , Secretary-General of [Euclid Network](#) and CEO of [ACEVO](#) spoke with passion of how protecting our heritage also protects civil society and vice versa. He reminded us that a strong community stands up for its historic buildings whilst well-cared for, public, historic buildings make for a strong community.

Civil society refers to the part of society that exists between government, citizens and the world of business. This includes the non-governmental, not-for-profit and voluntary sectors, encompassing anything from small voluntary and community organisation to charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutual organisations. Civil society plays an increasingly important role in all our lives as the role of the major institutions shifts and responsibility for (but not always power over) many of the things those institutions used to deal with, is devolved.

Those of us concerned with heritage realise that we must engage the wider community if we are to succeed. Key to this is engagement with and support for civil society and genuine devolution to those at the front line. Heritage organisations need to become civil society movements, embracing grassroots passion for quality public places and shared history in order to create the vision, direction and ultimately the resources to achieve our aims.

Organisations and networks like FRH increasingly provide the best example of how this is to be done. Because religious buildings were always there for the common good – built by the community and forever used by and for the community – they make the best case for saving heritage even in an increasingly secular world. The mainstream case for protecting our heritage is clearest with historic churches, chapels, synagogues and mosques which welcome not only public worship but cultural, community and even entrepreneurial activity. They are so often where civil society resides and from where it has come.

Without community buildings we are all alone in our sitting rooms and cars. Historic religious buildings - particularly in rural areas - are amongst the last and the finest community buildings left. Whether in their original use or not, they must remain in the hands of the community if civil society is to flourish - and we need civil society to ensure that happens.

Posted 7th November by [Crispin Truman](#)