Preventive Conservation: People, Objects, Place and Time in the Philippines

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Abstract Preventive conservation, with its origins grounded in the material fabric of cultural material, is in a period of transformation, with numerous practitioners, in and outside of the field of conservation, considering its broader and holistic objectives. The conventional tools for the assertion of preventive conservation principles, namely the assessment and management of risks to cultural material from the "ten agents of deterioration", have a central focus on the primacy of physical materials and degradation, with less clear relationships with *people, place*, and *time* in their modelling. With a case study focus on collections in the Philippines, this paper argues for a practice of preventive conservation that incorporates a balanced assessment and broader thinking around the contexts of *objects, people, place,* and *time*. The case studies of ecclesiastical Church collections, and museum environments in the Philippines, demonstrate how the interdependency of *objects, people, place* and *time* forms a holistic and conceptual preventive conservation framework. Through a cyclic renegotiation of these four parameters, this paper speculates on the gaps and opportunities for an inclusive view of preventive conservation that is current and more sustainable.

Keywords: Preventive Conservation, Knowledge acquisition, Decoloniality, Social inclusion, Authority, Philippines

Introduction

Preventive conservation has shifted from a "process to be controlled", to the use of predictive models based on risks assessments of the agents of deterioration (Waller and Michalski, 2005, p.733). More recent motivations to revisit these principles and actions, aim to embrace a 'people centred model' (Scott, 2015, p.6) of social inclusion, sustainability and the expanding notions of museums, collections, and conservation

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(Cassar 2009, Sloggett 2009, Saunders 2014). While 'decoloniality' (Mignolo 2007) and museum discourses, are acknowledging the dominance of universal heritage charters based on rationalist processes, and are advocating for the inclusion of source communities and the development of regional and diverse approaches in heritage conservation (Labrador, 2014; Luxen, 2004, SEAMEO SPAFA, 2014). As such, the title of this paper with reference to *people, objects, place* and *time*, takes its inspiration from Mignolo's "delinking" and "relinking" of knowledge acquisition (Mignolo, 2015). Accepted as a logical transformation for a field so closely linked to notions of human identity, these epistemic and methodological developments are yet to be routine, and consequently are largely invisible outside of the conservation field. Winter's critical scrutiny of conservation's 'epistemological bias towards scientistic materialism' is a case in point, as is his argument that 'approaches to heritage and conservation are inadequately equipped to deal with … poverty reduction, climate change, sustainability, human rights, democracy, the future of the state and of course the protection and preservation of cultural heritage itself' (Winter, 2013, p.533; p.542).

While such concerns remind us of the prevailing perception, and the troubling reality of the cultural materials conservation profession in the critical heritage space, this paper aims to highlight where transformation is occurring, the existing gaps, and why preventive conservation offers a platform to drive change through a more balanced recognition of the inter-related contexts of *objects, people, place* and *time*.

Case studies

Three case studies drawn from collections in different contexts within the Philippines – one community-based collection, and two that are managed under a national governance remit – are presented. Although diverse in their collection size and range, domains of control, resources, and human capacity, the case studies, show how Mignolo's concepts of 'de-linking' and 'relinking' allow a re-linking of *objects, people, place* and *time* in the preventive conservation space. This geopolitical re-positioning of preventive conservation is especially relevant as the Philippines undergoes 'economic and political re-emergence of [its] cultures and civilizations that have historically been undermined by global coloniality' (Mignolo, 2015, p.1).

Catholic Church Collections, Diocese of Tagbilaran, Bohol

Under the authority of the Diocese of Tagbilaran, and, more largely the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) Permanent Committee for Cultural Heritage of the Church, the island of Bohol includes 26 parishes with ecclesiastical collections. Ten parishes have been declared as National Cultural Treasures, and eight of these, along with their ecclesiastical collections, were seriously affected in the 15 October 2013 earthquake, subsequent Typhoon Haiyan on 8 November 2013, and ongoing annual floods. "The Bohol Heritage Task Force" comprising the National Commission of Culture and the Arts (NCCA), the National Historical Commission of the Philippines (NHCP), the National Museum of the Philippines (NMP), and the

Diocese of Tagbilaran and Parishes, has since been working to conserve the churches and their ecclesiastical contents.

National Museum of the Philippines

The National Museum of the Philippines comprises three campuses; namely the National Fine Arts Museum[1], the National Museum of Anthropology[2], and the recently opened National Museum of Natural History. Its brief also extends to 18 regional museums and 8 cultural property sites that have been given the status of "National Cultural Treasures" or "Important Cultural Properties".

JB Vargas Museum, the University of the Philippines

In 1978 the private collection of Jorge B Vargas was bequeathed to the University of the Philippines (UP) and in 1987 the university's Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Center (UPVM) was officially opened on the Diliman campus. Much of the collection was acquired directly from the artists working at the School of Fine Arts from its beginnings in 1939, and in addition to these, comprises Vargas's personal library and memorabilia from the 20th century (Tse, Sloggett and Roberts 2008). The reflections presented in this paper are based on a collaborative research project conducted from 2003 to 2006.[3]

Objects

In preventive conservation, risk assessment and management of the familiar "ten agents of deterioration" is standard practice (CCI, 2017). The ten agents and the approaches to their mitigation are driven by the material fabric of collections, where risks to object values (including research value) are mapped. Here we understand the baseline attributes of objects as a function of their original form, and current purpose and value within, what Day describes as 'a traditional museum framework' (Day, 2008,

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[1] Formerly known as the National Art Gallery from 2001, the National Museum of Fine Arts was renamed by the National Museum Trustees in a resolution in 2015 to uniformly identify the three flagship buildings in its Manila precinct.

[2] Renamed by the National Museum Trustees in 2016 from its former name from 1998 Museum of the Filipino People.

[3] 2003-2005 Australia Research Council Linkage Grant LP0211015 *The Behaviour of Western Materials in Tropical Environments* (partners the National Gallery of Victoria, the Heritage Conservation Centre in Singapore, Balai Seni Lukis Negara Malaysia, the National Gallery of Fine Arts Thailand, the JB Vargas Museum University of the Philippines, with R Sloggett and A Roberts as co-investigators [CORRECT?YES CORRECT], while N Tse undertook doctoral research).

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.9). This interdependency is illustrated in Figure 1, where the agents are located at the object-place interface. Based on the rationalist principles of object-place responses alone, the agency of people is less transparent, whether they were acquired from the regional and localised parameters under investigation and/or are inclusive of the varying perspectives of change and time on material culture. By delinking and re-questioning the disciplinary processes of how objects and their material behaviour are understood and classified, the limits of knowledge and asymmetries in preventive conservation can be relinked and made more transparent. This modelling recognises that ways of knowing objects are not fixed, and there are multiple perceptions and interpretations that depend on the experiences of the viewers and the sources that inform them (Eastop, 2006; Labrador, 2014; Wisse, Brokerhof and Scholte, 2005, p124). This extends to notions of originality and what things are 'supposed to look like,' where views differ across geographic place, people and hierarchical knowledge structures (Barns and Labrador, 2016; Vazquez, 2016). For example, using the conventional tools of risk assessment for a painting collection at the UPVM, diverse understandings of their materiality and probability of damage across team members became evident, as did the recognition that the imagery could be misinterpreted in differing cultural contexts, languages and by outsider researchers (Tse, Sloggett and Roberts, 2008; Sloggett, 2009). Knowledge that such varying perspectives were likely is apparent in the oral histories of artists' community and kin groups, but accounts had not been gathered, or corroborated. Hence, in understanding the collection, from 2003 to 2006 annual workshops with artists, curators, collection carers, technicians, Filipino and foreign conservators were conducted, along with oral history interviews. There were numerous re-iterations of the process and formats to cross verify and co-produce different ways of seeing. This collective approach to preventive conservation allowed a more representative risk assessment format to evolve, and the object's 'lore', oral history and story-telling value to be acknowledged (Labrador, 2010; Labrador, Balarbar and Esguera, 2011).

This brings us to a feature of object classifications in preventive conservation, and its positivist approach, a process that standardises knowledge within the given parameters. Here, knowledge largely resides in the domains of technicians and expert professionals, and is used to assert legitimacy of museum discourse and 'global coloniality' in the Philippines (SEAMEO SPAFA, 2014; Mignolo, 2015). Labrador (201, 2014) notes 'that the cultural heritage management and governance strategies-what works-in the Philippines are not always the same as those found in "developed" nations' (Labrador, 2014, p.258) and maintains that tradition in Southeast Asia is not from the past but continues to be practiced and observed in the present. While Luxen (2004) and Winter (2013) argue that the strong links between social and historical memories and current processes and actions in Asia, involves the constant re-evaluation of material culture, heritage and their meaning. In response, the National Museum of the Philippines aims to preserve object life cycles in the past and present simultaneously using the construction and reconstruction of Ifugaos huts and socialised engagement with living and expert source communities in preventive conservation textile projects.

Based on Ingold's (2000) idea of 'enskillment', co-produced and technical knowledge is created in a Filipino museum context., the approach also acknowledges Filipino concepts of duality and tri-partitioning that are found in their local practices and beliefs, to likewise allow multiple object meanings to emerge.

Beyond 'enskillment' and embodiment, the question then is how to capture multiple object meanings and their transitory phases, and who should record them in preventive conservation? This is not an easy task and not sufficiently addressed in this paper, but the use of social media is a possible approach. Social media uses the diverse formats of words, images, sounds and moving images to convey object meanings and includes wide participation from diverse sources and places. For example, the National Museum of the Philippines has an active Facebook account with 142K likes (as of October 2017 since it began in 2011), and although advocacy is a key driver, it is a complimentary form of documentation to build object based stories, to inform the risk assessment criteria of loss of value, probability of damage and magnitude of risk through co-learning and recognition of people. We suggest that sharing such stories and narratives through social media is one way to represent multiple object realities and understand risks rather than the use of fixed, text-based, classification systems commonly practiced by experts in preventive conservation (Sloggett 2009).

People

Given such varied and often contested histories of objects, and the increasing awareness in museums of the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they operate, conservators are actively engaging more fully with the public, communities, and with individuals and groups who can help understand and preserve collections. Examples of citizen science and community based programs are therefore becoming increasingly accepted as mainstream approaches (Kyi, Tse and Khazan, 2016). The lens of "People" as proposed, promotes participation from a diverse range of citizen experts in preventive conservation activities, and empowers and engages widespread and willing support for institutions and/or projects (UNESCO, 2015).

In Bohol, since the 2013 natural disasters, Governor Edgardo Chatto and Father Ted Milan Torralba now promote Bohol as a 'heritage conservation laboratory' having moved on from an earlier agenda to stimulate cultural tourism in Bohol as the centre of Church heritage' (Tse et al., 2017). This signals willing government support and a shift away from the economics and consumption of culture, to one that is people centred, socially inclusive and action based to "Build Back Bohol Better" (as a play on words from UNICEF's "Build Back Better"). The StarDust volunteers from the Maribojoc Parish are a case in point, as preventive conservation actions of recovery, risk assessment and object classification, simultaneously built a strong community of practice after the natural disasters (Tse et al., 2017). Figure 3a, for example, shows a collective planning diagram devised by the StarDust volunteers and Figure 3b illustrates the results of storing the effected and damaged church collections, as examples of collective 'people centred' outputs. These were also central concepts discussed at the 2017 5th APTCCARN forum on natural disasters and cultural heritage in the Philippines

(Figure 4), that examined co-produced preventive conservation actions across *objects, people* and *place* for the sustainability of Church collections.

This leads to notions of authority and role of technical expertise as raised by critical heritage discourses and Mignolo's 'decoloniality' (Mignolo, 2015; Winter, 2013). The questioning of universal discourses, standards of practice and 'centers of authority' (Labrador, 2014, p. 258), can simply be posed as what approaches work best, who should do the work, and what knowledge informs decision-making (Wisse, Brokerhof and Scholte, 2005). In many of its community-based preventive conservation projects the National Museum of the Philippines, for example, has found that it is best to act as cultural brokers and facilitate skills based sharing but not actually do the work. This model places value and trust in the process and experiences to generate new approaches rather than focussing only on outputs, which is often the aim in traditional forms of preventive conservation and risk assessments. The National Museum has found that, provided the necessary preventive conservation skills are well-communicated, roles are clear and regular contact is maintained, the benefits of community based preventive conservation outcomes can emerge in diverse ways.

While volunteerism in itself is not a new approach (Saunders, 2014; Scott, 2015), it is the unanticipated benefits of these kind of collective conservation activities that is of interest, such as the increased morale noted amongst the StarDust volunteers, and a sense of pride in the results of the work as demonstrated at the 5th APTCCARN Forum (Tse et al., 2017). Saunders further argues that maintaining professional privileges, which exclude others from preventive conservation processes, and from the associated pyscho-social benefits that can derive from such direct access to objects of value, may be unethical (2014), while Mignolo (2015) views this as 'emancipation'. These two case studies recognise the enduring contribution of volunteers, and locate these within a wider understanding of community-based preventive conservation as a central ethic and platform across the object-people-place interfaces shown in Figure 1.

Place

Discussions of the proposed parameter of *place*, recognise that it is geographically influenced by the political, economic and environmental contexts and the institutions where domains of control 'are defined, their interrelations legislated and authorized' (Mignolo, 2015, .5). In addition, the geo-specific realities of non-standard, extreme climates of cold, hot, humid or dry conditions and extreme weather events, along with the use of air conditioning, unclear climate guidelines for the long-term preservation of objects, is central to the argument, while the link between place, people and its context, shape heritage, its representation, and multiple values.

Like the global north, the National Museum of the Philippines and Southeast Asian museums more broadly, have contended with the universal environmental guidelines of 20ºC± 2ºC and 50%RH ±5% (Maekawa, Beltran and Henry, 2015; Tse, Sloggett and Roberts 2008). Introduced through international training workshops by authorised experts, these universal truths are environmentally, economically, and socially unsustainable in the institutional contexts of most collections throughout

Southeast Asia (Agrawal, 1975; Tan, Tse and Ho, 2015). For many conservators in the region, as recounted at APTCCARN Conferences since 2008, this has created professional ambiguity (APTCCARN 2018). In general, guidelines for Southeast Asian collection care and an understanding of their unique material degradation pathways in tropical environments have not been a major focus of conservation research, and therefore has implications for determining the probability of damage and magnitude of risks in preventive conservation (Tse, Sloggett and Roberts 2008). Figure 5 also shows the diversity of climates in the Philippines, Malaysia, Bangkok and Singapore, of historic outdoor conditions and representative climate data recorded from within the National Museum of the Philippines and the UP Vargas Museum. These values are very different from the global north where much preventive conservation research resides, and ways to determine "incorrect temperatures and relative humidities" in a Southeast Asian museum context are unclear. The same can be said for the concepts of "proofed fluctuations" and "acceptable loss" where local dialogues between people and place, have not wholly captured experiential knowledge of deterioration and how things are "supposed to look" for context based values to be attributed.

The last point as related to *place* is the effect of natural disasters and climate change, including increases in frequency and severity of extreme weather events. The Asia Pacific region is 'highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and national hazards' and the Asian Development Bank has stated that 'heat waves, droughts, floods, and tropical cyclones have been more intense and frequent, causing extensive damage to property, assets, and human life' (Parr, La Vina and Henry 2016, 2). This points to the new normal, where the acceptance of the unexpected, and the need for preventive conservation to embrace and develop flexible approaches in its actions is paramount (Tse et al 2017). The National Museum of the Philippines has deeply reflected and co-learnt from past and present events as part of "The Bohol Heritage Task Force". In adopting concepts of flexibility and planning, their Museum Emergency Program (MEP) is integral to museum work across their three national institutions in Manila, 26 regional museums and "National Cultural Treasures" or "Important Cultural Properties". They run collective workshops across expertise domains, and promote local groups to devise their own plans based on their networks, resources and systems and aim to include "more research on traditional forms of coping with emergency within the MEP framework" (Labrador, Balarbar and Esguera 2011). For example, since Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) damaged the 17th century church in Eastern Samar in Guiuan in 2013, the National Museum incorporates traditional knowledge and crafts in their conservation projects. This has included an interdisciplinary team of Anthropologists, Archaeologists, an Engineer, a Botanist, Zoologist, and the parish community working together to acquire ad share skills on wood carving, and to identify and source local materials such as seashells to inform the conservation efforts within the church.

Time

The cultural perceptions of 'originality' in materials are not fixed and neither are the notions of *time*, change, material decay and loss (Barns and Labrador 2016, 39).

While international charters have recognised this inter-subjectivity, and ideas of material loss and replacement, with the UNESCO Recommendation for the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections (2015) and 1994 Nara Document to name just two, there is still ambiguity around this issue in conservation and preventive conservation practices (Tay, Tse and Ho 2015).

"Loss of value", for example, is one of the risk assessment criterion which is highly dependent on *people, place* and *time*. Labrador (2010) argues that the natural cycles of decay and material replacement are a condition of life and part of local practices in Southeast Asia, and likewise material culture is part of the present and not simply from the past, which involves continual re-evaluation of its meaning and attributed value. While Agrawal (1975) notes that traditional conservation practice has been active in the region much longer than the introduced colonial museum practices These dynamics have implications for the way damage and object biographies are perceived, as well as their time scales. It also brings into question whether "loss of value" should be viewed in negative terms, but rather be framed as part of natural cycles of decay with which Southeast Asia is accustomed. These are important cultural understandings to be incorporated in preventive conservation practices, which it is argued, not customarily embraced.

What now?

Across *objects, people, place* and *time*, preventive conservation has many concepts and parameters to embrace. Through an examination of issues in the Philippines, we have provided examples of how a mindful community of practice is emerging that is engaged with people, diverse communities and the societies from where cultural assets originate and are valued. We have presented preventive conservation as a complex system of decision making, grounded by people-to-people linkages across a diverse range of skills, capabilities and experiences of cultural heritage. Grounding these discussions has been a 'de-colonial thinking' as Southeast Asian museums navigate their position in society and articulate what they do in reference to their own values and actions, as distinct from their colonial past (Labrador 2010).To achieve the aims of a people-centred model, notions of originality and multiple realities, centres of expertise, authorship, empowerment, resilience and healing, and decision-making have been raised for the purposes of sustainability and a reflective practice. The arguments presented are drawn from Filipino case studies, that represent national collecting institutions in de-colonial times and community held collections. These raise some conceptual issues for the practice of preventive conservation arguing that an object based focus has not equally valued *people, place* and *time* in its modelling. It is speculated that such discursive analysis responds to transformative approaches for preventive conservation and de-colonial contexts, and shows how practices may be considered, evolve and take place.

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Figures

Figure 1 Preventive conservation and decoloniality: delinking object knowledge and the fluid relinking of knowledge across objects, people, place and time.

Figure 2. (a) Planning diagram devised by the StarDust volunteers of the Maribojoc Parish. (b) the collection store after the 2013 natural disasters, recovery and re-organisation.

Figure 3. Sharing sessions during the 5th APTCCARN Forum *Natural disasters and cultural heritage in the Philippines: Knowledge sharing, decision making and conservation*.

Figure 4. (a) Historical and recorded climatic temperature and relative humidity readings: Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore. (b) Environmental readings recorded at the National Museum of the Philippines, 12 April to 19 November 2017 (T-TEC datalogger).