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The potential role of citizen conservation in re-shaping approaches to murals in an urban context

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Abstract

Public visual spaces populated by a blend of community murals, unauthorised street art and historic painted mercantile signs, are often the mark of an urban environment that is both progressive and eclectic. Changes in the aesthetic and cultural value of these urban mural forms has led to an increase in the appreciation and, in some instances, promotion of their artistic merit and cultural significance as examples of public art. However, examining the significance of these works, with a view to implementing a conservation approach, is problematic. This is due to a number of practical and theoretical considerations that are primarily a result of the ephemeral existence of urban murals outside conventional exhibition spaces and issues associated with their often fragmented ownership and uncertain authorship. Consequently, larger thinking on the interpretation, conservation assessment, and advocacy for the conservation of urban murals are required. Key to defining and implementing such strategies is contextualising the public visual spaces that these murals occupy and, as part of this, the local and wider communities' perception of these murals as culturally significant objects as well as fostering awareness and understanding of appropriate measures aimed at their conservation.

This paper examines the role of citizen science, or crowdsourcing, of local community members in establishing a conservation dialogue and generating conservation relevant data on urban murals. It looks specifically at a project involving a collection of in situ historic painted mercantile signs — also known as ghost signs — in the City of Port Phillip, Melbourne, Australia. The project fostered the establishment of an informed and open dialogue between conservation specialists and participants from the local community on the significance of local ghost signs whilst transferring knowledge on conservation processes and assessment methods. Working directly with community members, a program was designed in which conservation and community knowledge, of these urban art forms, could be collected and exchanged across digital platforms. This enabled researchers to examine how citizen science can be utilised as a research tool as well as a means to advocate for the conservation of collections of urban murals. It created the opportunity to consider the role of non-specialists and shared authorities in the collection and collation of conservation relevant data and how information generated from what we call citizen conservation projects, can inform the way in which conservators evaluate and prioritize the conservation of urban cultural heritage. The data gathered and interpreted proved to be the most effective means of 'conserving' these often ephemeral forms of cultural material.

Keywords: Citizen conservation, urban murals, conservation, participation, shared authorities, digital platforms

Introduction

Citizen science projects, facilitated by the use of digital technologies, are an increasing popular way of inviting members of the general public to participate in tasks that contribute to research and enterprises. The crowd-sourcing of data with the assistance of digital platforms such as mobile phones, wikis, websites and blogs, is enabling volunteer participants to 'immediately' contribute large quantities of data across various locations and over long periods of time (Bonney *et al. ,* 2009; Smith, 2014). In addition, the use of customized, licensed and freely available software is widening the scope to collect, integrate and provide universal access to data generated from citizen science projects. These forms of software provide a cost effective means to collect vast amounts of data and ways for public participants to directly engage in research programs that promote the emergence of shared authority and 'community- centred profession' emerge (Scott, 2015; Cohn, 2008; Nov, 2011).

Enlisting members of the public to locate, document, photograph and generate data on-site specific cultural material, in urban environments, has gained momentum with many examples on the WikiProject Public Art. Projects utilise crowdsourcing for the documentation of urban cultural heritage such as the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art North America (INCCA-NA) project to document outdoor sculptures by the American artist Tony Smith (and the History of Advertising Trust (HAT) (2011) project to generate a ghost signs archive for the UK and Ireland. These are working examples of the use of citizen conservation to collect data on urban cultural heritage. The remaining question is whether the data generated from such projects can be used to inform conservation directed decision making and can citizen science projects provide a forum in which the conservation of urban murals can be advocated for?

A role for citizen conservation in the conservation of urban murals

Conservation, as viewed from a traditional set of competencies, is vested in expertise and evidence. Consequently, the acquisition of object based knowledge, including its physical condition, by a non-expert can be a point of tension. This is a concern that which has been acknowledged from within the conservation profession and in citizen science projects more broadly (Court *et al*., 2008; Brooks 2013; Purdam, 2014). Then again by utilising a citizen science model to acquire data and document site based objects, provides a mechanism for participatory engagement and a positive way 'to create social capital' and to inform participants about cultural heritage, conservation values and conservation processes (Williams, 2013; Purdam, 2014; Brooks, 2013). Likewise within a space of positive engagement and dialogue, mechanisms for joint data acquisition and processing can extract a more rigorous set of data. In maintaining a commitment to citizen conservation and evidence, the traditional sciences argue that clear frameworks for participation are more likely to secure s consistent datasets (Purdam, 2014). The main challenge then is to design a project that positively and ethically engages participants with clear research aims reflected in the tasks assigned (Dickinson *et al*., 2010).

The processes of recording, cataloguing and undertaking the condition assessment of items within cultural material collections are among the principal activities of a conservator. In the context of

citizen conservation projects, non- specialist community members have a clear role to play in these tasks by supporting such resource intensive and costly documentation activities (Sloggett, 2014). Beyond the conventional recording of objects it also provides information on the location, condition and the ongoing monitoring of immoveable cultural heritage *in situ*.
As site-specific, immoveable forms of cultural material, the significance as well as the condition of urban murals is intrinsically linked to the environments in which they are located. For many of these works, establishing authorship and ownership can be complicated, presenting challenges in defining cultural heritage values and utilising conventional conservation approaches. However, recent shifts in the significance of urban murals have prompted re-evaluation of pre-existing approaches to their conservation. An example of this is the renewed interest in ghost signs within the City of Port Philip. Driven in part by recent gentrification in the area and the promotion of heritage values and protection by the municipality, traction was provided for a community centred conservation project in which alternative strategies for the interpretation and conservation of these signs based on participation, 'positive social impacts' and shared authorities could emerge (Scott, 2015).
Dissemination of tasks across a broader space

Citizen science in conservation: a case study
The City of Port Phillip has a long and rich post-settlement history, extending from the mid-nineteenth century. Physical evidence of this history can be seen in the historical painted signage across residential and commercial buildings throughout the municipality that capturing mercantile and social aspects of the area's rich local history (Fig. 2). Unfortunately, despite providing immediate access points to the history of the area, many are at risk of deterioration and loss. Common factors contributing to their demise in this urban environment include: poor maintenance, protection and neglect of the historic buildings to which these signs have been applied; exposure to environmental conditions; deterioration of original materials and urban redevelopment (Fig. 1). Furthermore, in the absence of policies and legislation directed towards the preservation of these signs and established conservation approaches to their documentation and intervention, these manifestations of local, cultural, collective and personal memory are compromised.

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The 'Community conservation project: painted (ghost) signs in the City of Port Phillip was initiated to evaluate how a citizen science model could be successfully adapted in recording the location and condition of ghosts sign in the municipality. Conducted over two phases and based on a collaboration between local heritage specialists, local community members and staff and students from the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (Grimwade Centre), University of Melbourne (UoM), the project aimed to raise awareness and provide a conservation-based understanding of local painted ghost signs, as well as foster a sustainable conservation program in the wider community. The involvement of Grimwade Centre staff and students in the project design and implementation contributed to the UoM's education programs to revise and revaluate teaching models, while the assessment of digital tools for the purposes managing and disseminating project data, enabled researchers to evaluate a citizen science model in a working community conservation project.

Sixteen local community volunteers and seven conservation student volunteers were involved in the initial phase of the project (Fig. 3). During this phase, 18 painted schemes over 17 sites across three areas in the City of Port Phillip were photographed digitally and documented in hardcopy versions of

project specific pro formas. Volunteers were provided with an introductory set of conservation assessment skills for the documentation and condition recording of the signs through introductory sessions. In these sessions examples of local ghost signs were used to discuss painting stratigraphy, common symptoms and mechanisms of deterioration and the importance of the architectural support and the surrounding environment on their long-term preservation. To orientate and guide volunteers through a large on-site project, supporting documentation, including area maps and a visual glossary of condition categories, were provided. To co-ordinate the on-site collection of data and to provide support and direction for on-site investigations, area managers, with conservation experience, were assigned to actively support the on-site sessions involving the location, examination and recording of signs. Project data was collated, organized and digitally transferred to the Emerald Hill Heritage Centre within the City of Port Phillip in electronic form. Sub-sets of the data were made available to the wider community through the digital, user-generated archive Historypin.

Whilst the project that unfolded was initiated by community interest and driven by volunteerism, it focussed on ways of serving and working with the community to build conservation knowledge and awareness. By working with the community, conservators were able to draw upon a wider range of expertise and local sources of information; provide more immediate and responsive access to conservation expertise as well as improve the quality of information for a shared community/institutional authorship. The initial phase provided a wealth of images and data on the signs; a comparative overview of their condition as well as an appreciation by conservators of their personal and cultural significance. This fundamental approach formed the basis of the second phase of the project where improvements were made to the content of introductory sessions and the content collected.

Evaluating digital platforms for citizen science projects

From the onset, a key aim of the ghost signs project was to ensure that data was community generated and that this data was subsequently made available to the local and wider community in hardcopy and digital forms. The use of digital platforms to foster community participation and as tools for preservation required an understanding of how digital tools were used and accessed by project participants. It was acknowledged that in practice, conservation data generated during condition recording was too complex for continued use by the 'community users' and that the information made available and choice of platform should be image based and straightforward. In consultation with local heritage specialist and project participants, it was determined that aspects of the data would be made available through uploading onto a pre-existing Historypin account maintained by staff at the Emerald Hill, Heritage Centre, City of Port Phillip.

Historypin met the requirements of community access and generation of project data. However, in organising, prioritising and preparing data for a digital platform and audience, many limitations and issues were encountered. Firstly, conservation specific language and methodologies used during the project became misunderstood when adapting it for use in Historypin. For example Historypin includes a field for image titles but not accession numbers. For the professional conservator, consistent metadata and standards are important features of our work, and being restricted to one field compromises object identification. This was further complicated by the use of 'given or assigned titles' by the community members, making it difficult to link the data to the signs *in situ* and digitally. In addition, although it was possible to provide a summary of all the visible text as a

descriptor for individual signs as well as the orientation of the sign and its location, additional information on the condition of the work could not be included due the limitations of the fields provided by the in program. This meant that even in a condensed form specialist and evidence based conservation data could not be recorded using Historypin and a database that could support more in depth and expansive fields of information would be required for this purpose.

This assessment did not imply that either platform is exclusive to a particular audience, but that the integration and appropriate selection of digital tools is required in order to maximize the management and dissemination of project data (Pruulmann-Vengerfeld, and Aljas, 2014). In achieving these aims, multifaceted information could be structured around a 'community user' profile with Historypin and a 'conservation research' profile employing adifferent ICT platform. Preliminary work with OMEKA and eHive is providing such a pathway and the framework for this is ongoing in consultation with end users in the community and the conservation field. What is also apparent with the reliance on free ware platforms and their hosting, is the issue of program redundancy and the need to constantly back up the information with an archival copy (Ritchie, 2015).

Discussion

Under the guidance, and with the support of cultural heritage specialists, community volunteers from the City of Port Phillip were successfully involved in the collection of conservation relevant data on a series of ghost sign in the municipality. This experience provided volunteers with the opportunity to develop an awareness of the cultural heritage values of the signs as well as an understanding of the symptoms and mechanisms of deterioration. Evidence of the success of the transfer of specialist knowledge was observed in the, often robust, discussions on conservation and cultural significance that took place during and at the conclusion of each phase.

The information on the historical can local significance of the signs, provided by community volunteers, proved invaluable in guiding historical research in order to prioritise the conservation of specific signs. The involvement of the community added a crucial dimension to the project, as it is the local community that is most directly affected by conservation decisions, or otherwise, made on behalf of the ghost signs.

At the conclusion of the initial phase, volunteers were asked to evaluate the project with regards to its structure and outcomes as well as its success in developing an inclusive and collective appreciation of the signs and an awareness of their conservation issues that they present. In summary, most of the volunteers felt that the aims of the project were appropriate and were met and that the project was well structured and well managed. There was also a high degree of satisfaction in the level of exchange between community and conservation volunteers. As community and student volunteers expressed the desire to work with digital copies of the proformas, this was viewed as a willingness to work with digital tools in future projects. Improvements to the pro formas, and the inclusion of risk assessment matrices made in the second phase of the project, should enable data on the condition of the signs and assessment of their risk to be readily integrated.

Community members and others who have access to the project on Historypin, feel this software supports data in a way that provides a sufficient overview of the project. At present the project

exists as a hybrid of digital and conventional hard copies of recorded, archived and accessed data. Although not without its limitations, this approach has enabled the project to include a more diverse cross section of the community, it has also supported the assessment of available digital tools and their capacity to manage data in templates used in the initial phases of the project with a view to digital conversion. However, based on the overall evaluation of the project, particularly the success of knowledge transfer and goodwill between participants, engagement is unlikely to be purely digital and online. Face to face interactions are understood to be necessary and one that is facilitated and enhanced by digital tools.

This paper summarises the methods and impact of a pilot citizen conservation project aimed at establishing advocacy among members of the public for the conservation of ghost signs. In addressing the conservation issues posed by urban murals, we are currently seeking to adopt a similar citizen conservation based methodology for street art that is well known in the small lane ways of Melbourne. For these works the position of community members is likely to be more polarised, as some works may be viewed as a defacement of the public visual space and are less likely to possess the historical filter that frames the perception and appreciation of the ghost signs. Therefore, while the conservation process and the citizen conservation digital interface maybe similar, the response of community participants and advocates for the preservation of street art, will be harder to gauge. For street art, like contemporary public art, the works are often in the process of becoming part of the accepted public visual space; subject to change; yet to be owned by the community, they may be viewed as still belonging to the artist or a particular sub-culture (Van de vall 2011). A sound citizen conservation project that addresses these issues but maintains objectivity in obtaining conservation relevant data, the primary motivation should be to provide and generate information that promotes an evidence-based discourse on these emerging forms of cultural heritage.

Conclusion

With regards to the information generated during the project, although it has been possible to manage and guide the recording process, the outcomes are ultimately depended on the contribution of the volunteers and for this reason, the quality of data acquired from citizen conservation projects. In considering the potential limitations of non-experts in the recording of cultural materials, it was undeniable that the project was a success in providing a preliminary and comparative account of the presence and condition of a series of ghost signs. In the absence of the project, and of course the enthusiasm of volunteers, it is perhaps unlikely that the recording of these sign would have been possible and even in its current form, data can be used as inventories for decision-making and risk models. More importantly when dealing with cultural heritage that exists in a space of shared authority, it is important to trust users and community members in creating new cultural heritage knowledge and to support an environment for communication. Likewise with increased uptake of citizen cosnervation projects in cultural materials conservation, further opportunities and capacity will arise (Scott, 2015). As discussed a clear research framework is paramount to the success of a citizen conservation projects and its outcomes. With this in place the role of citizens conservation and paired digital technologies in cultural heritage conservation should aspire to multiple authorship where the community is permitted to intervene with image uploads or textural content and in doing so tangibly contribute and shape the strengthening of conservation dialogues.

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