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Dossier: Heritage explorations across Europe

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CHEurope: critical heritage studies for Europe

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Critical heritage studies is a newly emerging interdisciplinary field which is concerned with exploring the ways in which the past is used in the present, covering research into what we choose (or not) to conserve and why we choose to do so; relations of power and the politics of the past in the present; processes of heritage designation, conservation and management; and the relationship between commemorative acts and public and private memory. The CHEurope project focuses on developing a new theoretical and methodological framework for critical cultural heritage studies and their application for training in heritage management and the development of the cultural industries in Europe. Our program explores the processes by which heritage is 'assembled' to inform more conventional aspects of cultural heritage designation, care and management. In so doing, research will have a more direct impact on future heritage policies and will be linked explicitly to new modes of training with a view to enable future practitioners to be aware of and to facilitate a more democratic and informed dialogue between and across various heritage industries and their audiences in the twenty first century.

The new integrated approach to cultural heritage that we develop in CHEurope takes much of its inspiration from this new emerging field of critical heritage studies. The vitality of critical heritage studies was witnessed in the first international conference on the subject held in Gothenburg in 2012 when approximately 500 delegates attended. Considering the fact that the domain of cultural heritage emerged initially outside academia through the applied field of heritage management, this conference was the first recognition of the fusion of the academic and the practical. The risk remains, however, that the two dimensions maintain their separate existence. In this respect, the CHEurope project developed a training program aiming at strengthening their closer interaction.

Critical studies of heritage and CHEurope thus have much to contribute to understanding and developing creative solutions to social, economic and ecological problems, which arise as a result of conflicts between different systems of value and their associated friction in contemporary societies. The fact that heritage is such an all-pervasive, global phenomenon, which has had a fundamental influence on how we have shaped and reshaped our built and natural environments, coupled with its powerful cultural influence in contemporary global societies, suggests that developing an oversight and a sense of its common concerns and the ways in which heritage is implicated in current and emerging 'critical' issues that face the world today is both urgent and long overdue. The CHEurope program reflects these emerging new fields of critical debate, dealing with 1. Heritage futures in Europe, 2. Curating the city, 3. Heritage in the digital making, 4. Heritage and well-being, and 5. Heritage management and public engagement. These themes will be described in more detail below.

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