Typology of Heritage Utopia:
Some essentials on the good heritage experience

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As conductors of heritage mediation, we are often enrolled in a tale about the increasing need for making heritage experiences popular and relevant. As solutions, this discourse usually brings forward newest technologies, active participation in 'living history' and critical constructivist learning approaches. What seems missed, is that 'traditional' monumental heritage experiences still are the most visited heritage attractions, and that there is a large heritage consuming segment seeking passive and meditative experiences (as passive consumers of heritage exhibitions and through recent movements such as 'slow tourism', 'digital detox' and 'micro-adventure') (Hansen 2016: 24, 80). The simple 'being' in a heritage environment has great value for many. In relation, we need to recognize how heritage affects our very basic tactile senses: the experience of drinking a beer is different (better) in for example the square of a medieval town than a 70s concrete building in a capital suburb.

The background for this paper is my PhD thesis on medieval heritage experiences in Northern Europe. The project had the purpose of developing heritage industry in the Danish region of West Zealand: a region with remarkable medieval heritage and good conditions in tourism and infrastructure, but with very little budget set for attraction development (Hansen 2016). Thus, the project aimed to develop methods to detect experience attributes carried mainly by the heritage itself. In the project more than forty heritage attractions were studied. The most popular and engaging attractions had a wide extent of idiosyncratic physiognomy to it, which carries experience potentials far beyond just attracting many visitors, and much stronger than what technology and learning strategies can bring (Hansen 2016: 132ff.).

Instead of approaching these matters via the theories that have become traditional in heritage studies – the so called 'critical' or 'new' (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill 2013; Smith 2015) – I turned the theoretical attention towards thinkers on the ways 'historical space' is created emotionally and physically. In particular I found great use of Jörn Rüsen and his 'five dimensions of historical culture' (Rüsen 2013) and Gernot Böhme's atmosphere theory (Böhme 1995).

The theories and attraction data led to the idea that the essentials of good heritage experiences is the Utopia of heritage: heritage (at a certain preservation state) is too good to be true – it has survived the most apocalyptic force of all, time. Moreover, it is the closest we get to communicating with the world beyond. These two factors make heritage divine and Utopian and are what heritage experience attributes are created from (Hansen 2016: 56-58, 73-80). However, the features reflecting Utopia, differ in the various types of heritage. Hence, the typology below is an attempt to describe the different features.

The Artifact

The artifacts with the highest degree of Utopia-effect need to carry an exotic expression to the degree where layman can recognize that the artifact is from a 'world beyond'. Moreover, the patina needs to be at a stage where it contributes to 'the world beyond' experience. At the same time, it must reflect a naturalistic expression to the degree where it becomes recognizable, as well as the level of preservation should be complete at a degree where the artifact is experienced as having 'survived' time. In addition, the materiality of the artifacts, or its craftsmanship or exhibiting institution should also give some exclusive impression. All of these criteria are for example met in 'the Sky Plate from Nebra'.

The Ruin

The Utopia-effect of a ruin is met when the degree of decay symbolizes the struggle against time, but the preservation is at a degree where the ruin is experienced as having 'won the battle'. The big question is where the limit goes. One explanation could be at a size where grandness of the architecture and the dimensions can be discovered and the visitor can 'go into' the monument. Moreover, an iconic shape seems to feed the Utopia-effect. One the best examples is Hammershus Castle on Bornholm, Denmark.

The Isolated Monument (the UFO)

Another Utopia-effect can be achieved when a monument is isolated and remote to a degree where a full overview is easily accessible. Thus, it will be experienced as a fully preserved vessel from 'another world' just 'landed'. Grand open landscapes and recreational settings seem to increase this experience. Ales Stenar in southern Sweden is a brilliant example of a 'heritage UFO'.

The Heritage Room

Understood as heritage preserved to the stage where one can enter it, be inside it fully covered by roof and walls, where this space of being can be overviewed and thus the dimensions and aesthetics are grasped. Moreover, one of the important features of the experience here is the distinct border to the contemporary world outside the heritage room. The Utopia-effect is obtained when the aesthetical reflection of time is obvious (style and patina), but the spatial borders are fully preserved. The most obvious example of the heritage room is a historic church of an age and style (e.g. gothic) of which 'the other world' is obvious.

Things that dissolve Utopia

In certain cases, the awareness of heritage being 'lost' can lead to a Utopia-effect of its function or the process of its reconstruction. Mostly, reconstructions and replicas tend to lose their Utopia-effect. However, if the experience contains an illustration of the object being lost to time, a Utopia-effect can be achieved by an experience of the skills that created the object in the first place or the demonstration function of the 'lost' object. An example could be the Viking ship museum in Roskilde: an exhibition shows the 'poor' state of a series

of Viking ship wrecks. In addition, the museum contains a fleet of Viking ships reconstructed from the archaeological knowledge of the wrecks – some of these have set for long and epic voyages under great public attentions. These are all experiences of a materialization of skills and functions that have survived beyond their tangible sources.

The Heritage Universe

The heritage universe refers to heritage environments beyond a single building. Here, both buildings, artifacts and nature are in combination the heritage experience. The heritage universe is on the one hand a very limited world on which escapism is stimulated as well as the experience of something endless. The good experience of the heritage universe stimulates all senses and are extensively tactile. In this experience, a paradox of 'chrono-syndrome' (disorder of ages) appears: the consumer will typically search for a 'time travel experience' but at the same time search for authenticity through the impressions of time (patina, smell, humidity, assimilation with nature etc.). These impressions would not be present if it was a 'real' time travel back to the environments 'original' use and creation. The chrono-syndrome paradox is the reason why fully reconstructed or replicated environments (e.g. Viking markets) often don't have Utopia-effect. An example of the heritage universe is the traditional Scandinavian open-air museums, where original buildings have been resurrected for more than a century. Around these buildings is staged an environment which not only has had century to develop its expression, but – in some cases – is an 'original' environment preserved at the open-air museum, while modern cities grew around it.

I sincerely hope this typology as well as the thoughts and theories behind it will inspire future strategic decisions on what to brand and display as heritage experiences and how to stage it.

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