The role of the UNESCO World Heritage List in the commemoration of World War II: Auschwitz Birkenau (German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp 1940-1945) and Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Genbaku Dome)

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Abstract:

Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, the Genbaku Dome, in Japan are two cultural heritage sites that “bear witness” to the atrocities of the Second World War. Rooted in emotion, the decisions to preserve Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Genbaku Dome were extremely controversial. The decisions to inscribe both sites onto the UNESCO World Heritage List on the basis of their “outstanding universal significance” required consideration of both the collective memories associated with the war sites and the needs of the local populations. This essay will examine the development of UNESCO as a direct response to the damage and looting of cultural heritage by the Nazis during the Second World War and how the World Heritage List was developed within the framework of UNESCO. Second, it will explore the specific preservation and conservation efforts employed to safeguard Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial for future generations. Last, it will compare the risk factors that challenge the retention of authenticity at both cultural heritage sites.
Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in Japan are two cultural sites that have been inscribed onto the UNESCO World Heritage List on the merit of their “outstanding universal value” as places that “bear witness” to the grave injustices of WWII. Both sites “have been absorbed into [our] collective memory,” symbols of the resilience of man in the face of war and intolerance.\(^1\) As the last survivors of the Holocaust and of the Hiroshima bombing die, and are no longer able to transmit their firsthand accounts directly to future generations, the preservation of both heritage sites is more important now than ever.

The concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau was established in Poland by the Nazis in 1940. It served as the base for Hitler’s Final Solution, intended to systematically exterminate the Jewish people.\(^2\) By the time Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated five years later, the Nazis had starved, tortured and murdered 1.5 million people in this camp alone.\(^3\) When the site was inscribed onto the World Heritage List in 1979, it was initially listed as “Auschwitz Concentration Camp”. In 2006, however, the World Heritage Committee approved Poland’s request to change its title to “Auschwitz Birkenau” with the subtitle “German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940-1945),” to emphasize Germany’s role in the site’s history.\(^4\)

The Hiroshima Peace Memorial, the Genbaku Dome, commemorates the dropping of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima, Japan, by the Americans on August 6\(^{th}\), 1945. That day, 80,000 civilians were killed instantly by the blast; by the end of the year the death toll had risen to

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\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Ibid.
140,000 due to residual radiation. The skeletonized Dome that stands today was once the Industrial Promotion Hall where local industrial products were displayed and sold. The Dome was the only structure that survived in the area near the bomb’s hypocentre; all the other buildings within two kilometers burned to the ground. Today, the Dome is situated within the Hiroshima Peace Park, along with the Peace Memorial Museum and the Cenotaph for the Atomic Bomb Victims. Collectively, these sites not only serve as memorials for the victims, but also as a call for the abolishment of nuclear warfare, and as a symbol of peace. The site is also tied to numerous commemorative practices, including the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Ceremony held annually on August 6.

Rooted in emotion, the decisions to preserve Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Dome were extremely controversial. These decisions required consideration of both the collective memories associated with the war sites and the needs of the local populations. In both cases, two conflicting viewpoints on preservation emerged. The first favoured abandoning the sites or converting them for alternate uses in order to dissociate the sites from their horrific histories. At Auschwitz, many ideas were proposed, including demolishing the site and planting a forest, building a cemetery or sculpture park, or converting the site into a training camp where young people, including the children of camp victims, could learn practical trades. The second viewpoint

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10 Mitsuo, A-bomb dome, 3.
11 UNESCO, Advisory Body, 115.
12 Wu et al., Destination (re)branding, 548.
favoured preserving the sites as memorials and, in the case of Auschwitz-Birkenau, as physical evidence of the Holocaust, an historical event which even today some deny ever occurred. In the end, those who argued for preservation were successful.

Prior to the inscription of the Camp and the Dome onto the World Heritage List, the Polish and Japanese governments implemented legal measures to protect their respective sites. In 1947, the Polish government passed a law “On the Commemoration of the Martyrdom of the Polish People and Other Peoples in Auschwitz,” which resulted in the establishment of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, still a feature of the site today. These protective measures were essential at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where locals were using the site for recreation and as a short cut. In Japan, the Dome was designated an historic site in 1966 under the Japanese 1950 Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties. This designation requires Hiroshima City to manage preservation efforts, and the national government to provide technical and financial support.

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention was ratified in 1972. This Convention led to the establishment of the World Heritage List in 1978, which codifies the protection of natural and cultural heritage of “outstanding universal value.” The World Heritage List must be understood within the framework of UNESCO, an organization that was established in 1945, the same year that WWII came to an end. UNESCO was, in fact, developed as a response to WWII, specifically with respect to the Nazis’ disregard for cultural heritage and the weakness of legal procedures for

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15 Holocaust deniers either completely deny that the Holocaust ever occurred, or minimize the atrocities that were committed (Schonfeld, Holocaust Denial, 108). In several European countries, including Germany, Austria, Belgium, Poland, Spain and France, Holocaust denial is a criminal offence, and in Canada, Holocaust denial can be prosecuted as a hate crime (CBC News, Ernst Zundel, 2007). In 2007, a German court convicted the German-born Ernst Zundel, who lived in Canada for four decades, of incitement of racial hatred and sentenced him to five years in prison for Holocaust denial.
16 Mensfelt, Original Camp Relics, web.
the protection of cultural property. In 1954, the UNESCO-organized Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict emphasized the idea of “special protection” for certain cultural properties, and included a Register of Special Protection, which formed the basis for the World Heritage List developed at the 1972 Convention.

Poland signed the World Heritage Convention in 1976 and, in 1979, Auschwitz-Birkenau was included on the list of protected sites. Auschwitz-Birkenau was one of three Polish inscribed onto the List within the first two years of the World Heritage List’s operation. This is logical considering the fact that the List was developed as part of the broader UNESCO framework to safeguard cultural property following the atrocities of WWII.

The Japanese, however, did not sign the Convention until 1992, twenty years after it was ratified. And when the Japanese did sign, their acceptance of the Convention was part of Japan’s broader plan to project itself as a peaceful nation in the post-war era. After joining the Convention, Japan was influential in changing UNESCO’s framework for the nomination of sites. In 1992, Japan hosted UNESCO’s Nara Conference, which broadened the terms of reference for defining heritage of “universal value.” The changes made at this Conference led to the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which identified criteria for the nomination of “intangible heritage,” which is particularly highly valued in non-Western countries.

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20 Toman, Event of Armed Conflict, 21.
21 Ibid., 97
22 Ibid., 110
24 Ibid., 132-3.
25 Ibid., 130.
Initially, Japan was reluctant to nominate a site representing the horror of war.\textsuperscript{26} When the national government refused to nominate the site, local citizens established “The Committee to Promote the A-bomb Dome as World Heritage”.\textsuperscript{27} This committee collected 1.65 million signatures nationwide, petitioning the government to revise the criteria for historic site designation and to advocate for the Dome’s nomination.\textsuperscript{28}

Despite the support of the national governments, neither site was inscribed onto the World Heritage List without contention. Auschwitz-Birkenau was nominated by the Polish government in 1978, however, its inscription was delayed a year because of debates concerning the use of criterion (vi). Criterion (vi) was established in 1977 as an autonomous criterion to nominate sites “associated with ideas or beliefs, with events or with persons, of outstanding historical importance or significance.”\textsuperscript{29} The nomination to inscribe Auschwitz-Birkenau on the merit of criterion (vi) was very controversial because the criterion was intended to reflect the “heights of human accomplishment”, rather than the horror of war.\textsuperscript{30} In an attempt to prevent future sites of horror from being inscribed onto the List, the World Heritage Committee recommended that the Camp should be the only site on the List to bear witness to horror, and that criterion (vi) should be used in conjunction with other criteria.\textsuperscript{31} In 1996, the Genbaku Dome was also inscribed on the basis of criterion (vi).\textsuperscript{32}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{26} Mitsuo, \textit{A-bomb dome}, 1.
\bibitem{27} Wu et al., \textit{Destination (re)branding}, 549.
\bibitem{28} Mitsuo, \textit{A-bomb dome}, 1.
\bibitem{30} Ibid., 95, 97.
\bibitem{31} Ibid., 97-8.
\bibitem{32} Ibid., 98.
\end{thebibliography}
In the case of the Dome, the nomination made by Japan was opposed by the U.S. and China at the World Heritage Committee meeting in Mexico in 1996. The Chinese delegation abstained from the consensus, claiming that inscribing the site would represent the Japanese as innocent victims of WWII and would legitimize Japan’s military aggression. The U.S. used more neutral terms by “dissociating itself” from the decision to inscribe the site, claiming that it was “concerned about the lack of historical perspective in the nomination of the Genbaku Dome”. It is likely that the U.S.’s decision to withdraw support from the nomination was an attempt to influence the world’s perception of America’s role in WWII.

When the Dome was finally inscribed onto the List, it included a 43 hectare buffer zone, in which the City of Hiroshima established regulatory guidelines to control construction. Conversely, the vast 191 hectare property of Auschwitz-Birkenau lacks a buffer zone. A central issue preventing the establishment of a buffer zone is the fact that Auschwitz and Birkenau are located 3 kilometers from one another in different municipalities that are managed under different jurisdictions. Today, the site contains only the 100m zone prohibiting development that was established in 1999 when the Polish Government signed “The Act for the Protection of the former Nazi Extermination Camps.” When this zone was first instituted, five hundred locals protested, claiming that it would discourage investors and job creation.

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36 Beazley and Deacon, *Intangible Heritage*, 100.  
37 Wu et al., *Destination (re)branding*, 550.  
The buffer zone has remained a point of conflict at Auschwitz-Birkenau. In 1983, a Carmelite Convent was established adjacent to the Camp, offending the international Jewish community. The Museum remained neutral throughout this conflict because the 1947 Act that established it only allowed it to act within its boundaries. The dispute was not resolved until 1993, when the Pope ordered a new convent to be built further down the road.

In 1995, another dispute arose when a local businessman made a proposal for the development of a parking lot and a supermarket across from the Camp. This plan was initially supported by the Museum because it would have removed the need to provide a place to buy food within the Museum. However, when the agreement was drawn up, the Polish word for “supermarket” was incorrectly translated as “shopping mall,” sparking outrage in the global media. Though its decision was resented by the local community, the Museum decided to dissociate itself from the initial plan and the development was halted. In 2000, the Polish courts ruled that the Polish government’s actions in stopping the development were illegal, and the development plan proceeded, generating over one hundred jobs.

In 1997, the Oświęcim Project was launched by the Polish government to fund the redevelopment of the road system leading to Auschwitz-Birkenau, with the goal of improving access for visitors and compensating for previous policies that inhibited the economic growth of the area surrounding the Camp. According to 2014/2015 ICOMOS reviews on the Heritage

42 Charlesworth et al. *Out of Place*, 155.
43 Ibid., 168.
44 Ibid., 155.
45 Ibid., 166.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 167.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 154.
Impact Assessment of the Project, the new roads do not pose a threat to the “outstanding universal value” of the site, and the project has been well-received by the State Museum.\textsuperscript{50}

A major goal in the preservation of both sites is the retention of authenticity. At Hiroshima, the park management office conducts a detailed survey of the monument’s condition once every three years, while the Conservation Committee at Auschwitz conducts a survey twice a year.\textsuperscript{51, 52} The Dome has undergone three conservation projects (in 1967, 1989-1990, and 2002-2003), which have all involved the use of epoxy resins as binding agents and steel reinforcement to prevent structural collapse, as well as minor rebuilding of the deteriorating masonry using the original bricks.\textsuperscript{53} The preservation of the structure of Auschwitz-Birkenau has proven to be more difficult because it was built as a temporary structure that was eventually supposed to be destroyed as part of the Nazis’ plan to bury evidence.\textsuperscript{54}

The Master Plan for Preservation (MPP), initiated by the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation, involves the work of the on-site conservation lab and an interdisciplinary team of specialists.\textsuperscript{55} This project oversees the preservation of 155 original camp blocks and barracks, 13 kilometres of fencing, roads, drainage ditches, railroad tracks, and two original sewage-treatment plants.\textsuperscript{56} One specific preservation project implemented at the site is the ecological management plan, which aims to recreate the “authentic” ecological landscape of 1943-4 through the accounts


\textsuperscript{51} UNESCO, \textit{Genbaku Dome}, web.


\textsuperscript{53} UNESCO, \textit{Advisory Body Evaluation}, 116.

\textsuperscript{54} Cloonan, \textit{Paradox of Preservation}, 138.


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
of former prisoners and through archival research. Specifically, the plan seeks to maintain the arrangement of trees that was used to camouflage the mass killing facilities.

The MPP also oversees the conservation of moveable objects from the Museum’s collections including 110,000 shoes, 3,800 suitcases, 12,000 pots and pans, 40 kilograms of eyeglasses, 470 prostheses, 570 items of camp clothing, 4,500 works of art, as well as the Museum’s archives. The conservation of certain items has been controversial, including the question of what to do with the collection of deteriorating human hair. Many religious Jews argue that the hair should be buried, while many Holocaust survivors have argued that the hair should be conserved to serve as physical evidence of the Holocaust.

At Auschwitz, photographic documentation has been vital to the success of the preservation process, in order to place elements in their exact original locations after they are disassembled, cleaned, reassembled, and reinforced. Photographic documentation has also been used to create 3D models of the site. The Bavarian State criminal office in Munich has created a 3D model of Auschwitz-Birkenau that can be viewed on a computer or with a virtual reality headset. In order to recreate buildings that have been destroyed, the developers referred to blueprints from the Camp’s archives. This 3D model was used by the prosecution in the trial of the former SS guard Reinhold Hanning, allowing the court to understand what Hanning would have been able to see from his post at the watch tower within the Camp’s premises.

57 Charlesworth et al. Out of Place, 240.
58 Panstwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Memorial and Museum, web.
59 Ibid.
60 Cloonan, Paradox of Preservation, 140.
61 Ibid.
62 Panstwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Memorial and Museum, web.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
One common potential risk to both sites is tourism; 1.5 million people visit the Dome annually, and 1.72 million people visited the Camp in 2015.\(^{67,68}\) At Hiroshima, there is no tourist management strategy to limit the number of tourists, whereas a tourist management strategy has been implemented at Auschwitz via an online pre-registration system, better managing both the flow of visitors and the preservation of the site itself.\(^{69,70}\)

At Auschwitz-Birkenau, ground movement caused by coal mining activity continues to be a major risk.\(^{71}\) A protective pillar has been created and no excavation is carried out beneath the Museum to mitigate the risk, however, ground movements still occur and continue to pose a risk to the site’s structural stability.\(^{72}\) Another risk at Auschwitz is flooding, due to its location near the Vistula and Sola rivers.\(^{73}\) In May 2010, the risk of flooding resulted in the temporary closure of the Museum and the movement of the collections within the Museum from the ground floors of the original camp buildings to upstairs levels.\(^{74}\) A recent 2016 project is intended to create pumping stations and to raise and strengthen existing dykes along the rivers.\(^{75}\)

Both Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial serve as sites that commemorate the atrocities of WWII. Their designations as World Heritage Sites help ensure that they will be protected on the basis of their “outstanding universal significance.” While both sites have contentious histories surrounding their inscriptions onto the World Heritage List and in

\(^{69}\) Wu et al., *Destination (re)branding*, 553.
\(^{71}\) UNESCO, *Section II*, 3.
\(^{72}\) Ibid.
\(^{73}\) Charlesworth et al. *Out of Place*, 238.
\(^{74}\) Panstwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, *Memorial and Museum*, web.
terms of managing their preservation, they continue to serve as constant reminders of the horror of war and as calls for peace.
Bibliography:


