



Easter 2020

Covid 19 is a cultural issue...

... as much as a health issue because the control of it depends, not on the hospitals and health resources but on the behaviour of people – how well we engage in social distancing. Recovery from the economic collapse in 2008 was engineered at great social cost; the interests of our banking systems superseded those of society and an economic model based on the paradigm of growth and indeed exploitation of natural resources was not checked. This virus, however, poses a much more existential threat as it threatens our lives and the lives of our loved ones and possibly the political fabric of our societies. Survival now depends on our sense of solidarity and community in banding together to act in the public good over and above any self-interest or economic prevarication. Resilience to isolation is being found in cultural activities as priorities and perspectives simultaneously shift to a people centred value system in this time of crises. For those of us working in the cultural sector, who have had to increasingly argue for cultural value in terms of economic yardsticks and statistical data (useful within certain parameters), the measures that have been taken are accounted for by an entirely different metric this time. Kick starting the economy, as is vital, will require us to insist upon our collective cultural behaviours, as these sustain and contribute to our wellbeing, being better integrated, reflected and resourced by government policies. The quality of our lives relates to our human knowledge of how to be in the world and the bottom line is not simply the management of economic return measured in units of productivity, commodities and consumption. There is much more at stake. As economic realities reassert themselves there are choices to be made; values that speak to culture and heritage can teach us how to move forward; from the cities and landscapes that we engage, design and live in to ensuring access, respect and care for our heritages and the creative activities these engender. We recognise with great clarity at the moment that these activities are core to human experience. They are the drivers of our social and economic discourse and therefore our future recovery.

Certainly, these are issues conservator-restorers will have to face in the coming days post-covid. The care of our material culture during this pandemic may not be considered a priority in light of the threat to human health but, the sector will have to make sense of spending money on the conservation-restoration of heritage in the face of an economic downturn that we are all facing into. We will have to know how to argue that the 'paradigm' has shifted, and that heritage is needed now more than ever because of the very nature of society. Those singing on their balconies get it and the creativity unleashed across all media is demanding to be preserved. We will have to use the resources of the European Commission and require that the work to develop an integrated approach to cultural heritage is urgently applied.

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