**The Re-purposing of Cultural Heritage Assets**

©Rhys Evans, 20.08.2014

Cultural Heritage assets are found across a wide range of social situations. They range from tradtional boats which were used by our ancestors to travel or to make a living, through the farmscapes and forestscapes which were the product of collective activity by earlier generations, to native breed animals, like horses, which were bred to be part of a ‘traditional’ way of life producing a particular place. It includes many human knowledge-based practices such as lace-making, singing and dancing, or, indeed, language. What all cultural heritage assets have in common is that they were once vitally important for a collectivity in a specific environment and that they have been superceded by new technological opportunities. Thus the farm horse was replaced by tractors, wooden boats by steel ones powered by internal combustion engines, etc.

In fact, we can say that there are three Phases a piece of cultural heritage goes through in its life. Phase One is the one where it is designed, used, refined and becomes core to a community’s way of life. In this Phase, cultural heritage assets are unique to a people and place, core in that they contribute to a fundamental way of life, and endlessly adapted by their users in order to optimize the positive impact they have on income or subsistence.

In Phase Two, the assets become superfluous to the productive process as they are replaced by new, often disruptive technologies which create a new paradigm of economic activity. Thus horses were replaced by tractors and trucks, and picturesque old barns in Norway are no longer suitable for modern agriculture. In this Phase, most examples of the asset disappear (horse population decline of over 90% in mid 20th Century; boats disappear from ex-fishing harbours, etc.). And, as young people move into new ways of making a living, so the knowledge in the minds of older practitioners becomes threatened with disappearance once they pass away. This Phase is the time of the museums and small communities of enthusiasts who step in to ‘save’ and ‘preserve’ the artefacts and sometimes the ways of knowledge out of a recognition of how important they have been in the making of contemporary society and place. It is also the time of ‘designation’ of cultural heritage assets such as that done by UNESCO with their designation regimes.

However, just as these artefacts and knowledges were the purview of all of society – even non-fishermen could see the importance of the boats and value the skills and perseverance which were invested in producing and using them – so too, these cultural heritage assets remain the property of the wider society. Thus there is a wider interest in them than just in the small communities of ‘preservers’, ‘enacters’ and educators. Whilst their presence in museums and other institutions preserves their fabric and, in some cases, the knowledges used to design, produce and use them, it also isolates them from the wider community and works to discursively break the ties between the assets and society. These assets become ‘not for us to use’, and to an extent they become alienated from contemporary society. It is their movement out of the museum and into the community which constitutes Phase Three of their existence.

Phase Three is characterised by active engagement between enthusiast communities and the wider communities they live within. The cultural heritage assets become used in new purposes, often around either leisure activities or education, and sometimes both. Thus, for example, old boatbuilding skills can be used to teach discipline and craft skills to unemployed young people. Or native breed horses can be used in equine assisted therapy. Or old wooden barns can be re-purposed as culture centres, etc. Although the assets are no longer at all appropriate as part of the economic activity they were originally meant for, they are now appropriate for a whole new set of exercises, some of which sit directly within some of the fastest growing parts of the developed economy. In particular, cultural heritage assets are unique things, special in their uniqueness, and thus can provide unique experiences to customers, potentially operating within the Experience Economy. Here, these ‘old’ and ‘devalued’ assets once again become highly valuable as they address fundamental consumer needs for individual experiences which linger in the memory.

Additionally, in the 3rd Phase of the life of cultural heritage assets, the use of the assets for educational or social work puposes offers many opportunities for the creation of community Social Enterprises. When these public assets are employed to deliver public goods such as health or learning, a Social Enterprise is often the ideal way to organise this. A key issue here is the ability to generate income from *trading* – whether delivering a product (i.e. a local, special food) or a service (therapy) – which can replace grant funding from central government sources. By employing the cultural heritage assets directly in the community, not only do they become more important to that community, but the activities which are generated generate what could be seen as sustainable income. And this transition to sustainabile income is a challenge faced by nearly all Social Enterprises, positioning assets such as Cultural Heritage resources as important parts of community entrepreneurship.

In summary, cultural heritage assets such as traditional boats, native breed horses, old barns or indeed, cultural landscapes like those of the Faroes Islands, represent an important part of rural community development, functioning as key assets around which can be delivered experiences or services which the general public is willing to pay for. As such, with no original purpose the millieu in which they were development, they become ‘re-purposed’ as community assets, addressing key needs of rural communities and forming the pivot around which much social, cultural and economic development can be built.