The Future of the Past: Cultural Heritage as Theater and the Heritage of a University Campus’ Park – Illusion or Reality?
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Cultural Heritage as Theater and the Heritage of a University Campus’ Park – Illusion or Reality?  
by Kenneth R. Olwig  

It is impossible to treat the subject of cultural heritage without taking into the consideration the meaning of culture, one of the most complex terms (next to nature) in the language. To avoid the necessity of a long discourse on the concept of culture, I will instead initially focus on theater as a generally accepted example of cultural heritage that can be applied, as well, to other forms of heritage. I will relate this subject to: 1) the issue of heritage as static conservation vs. heritage as dynamic resource for the future; 2) the question of heritage as illusion or reality; 3) the role of the built heritage in a living social landscape and its landscape park, as exemplified by the campus of a university which is typical of many such campuses many places in the world. In this case, as will be seen later in the text, the focus will be upon the Alnarp campus of the Swedish Life Sciences University – SLU-Alnarp, in Scania.

Shakespeare as Scandinavian Cultural Heritage?  
When treating of the theater as Western cultural heritage, the plays that perhaps come most readily to mind are those of William Shakespeare. The plays of Shakespeare, however, are hardly the first thing one might think of as Scandinavian cultural heritage. This very fact, however, brings out a number of issues that might otherwise be overlooked, not the least the point that cultural heritage is not necessarily national in origin, though it may become part of a national heritage. The plays likewise bring out another easily overlooked issue, namely that it is essential to comprehend the living practice of cultural heritage, if one is to understand the physical heritage of the built environment within which that practice takes place. Heritage is lived practice before it is material objects, like buildings. Finally, the plays bring out the significance of illusion as a core of heritage’s reality.

The first time I saw Shakespeare’s The Tempest it was clearly classified as heritage by the world heritage establishment. I saw it namely on an excursion to Stratford-on-Avon as part of the 1988 Second World Congress on Heritage Presentation and Interpretation, held in Warwick, England (Uzzell 1989). The establishment of Stratford-on-Avon as an official heritage pilgrimage site for Shakespeare might be seen as a good example of cultural heritage as static and conserving. But is the Shakespearian heritage static? The answer is “no,” quite the opposite. I did not, for example, on this first occasion see a company of male players in Renaissance costume playing in a thatched, half-timbered replica of the Globe Theater. No, I saw the play in a modern building with a mixed company in which the male actors were clad in modern business suits. I have subsequently seen it performed in Danish in period costume in Copenhagen and in Swedish in an avant-garde production in a Stockholm theater where there was no clear demarcation between stage and audience (Prospero actually walked right up and spoke to me at the beginning of what turned out to be the intermission). Finally, I have seen it as an avant-garde film called Prospero’s Books, by the English director, Peter Greenaway.
Static conservation vs. dynamic resource

Shakespeare's plays also turn up in various guises under the names of other authors, as in the case, for example, of the transmutation of *Romeo and Juliet* into *Westside Story*, a musical about Polish-Americans and Puerto Ricans in New York City. I last saw *Westside Story* performed in Norwegian by high school students in Trondheim - a good example of trans-national cultural heritage. But then, this is nothing new because Shakespeare, according to the custom of his time, apparently lifted much of the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* from the ancient story of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, which itself can be traced back through the Rome of Ovid to ancient Babylon. Shakespeare, himself, makes a point of the way his plays encompass older plays, as for example in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, where an amateur company of craftsmen performs Pyramus and Thisbe as a play within the play. *Midsummer Night's Dream* is set in Athens, but the Midsummer celebration, and fairies of the night (particularly Robin Goodfellow or Puck - *Puke* in Swedish dialect), are also very much a part of not just English Anglo-Saxon cultural heritage of custom, but also that of much of Northern Europe, not the least Scandinavia. The magic of midsummer has much to do with the drastic shifts in the length of the day in the northern latitudes, and hence the special character of nature and the light at midsummer. Midsummer was a pagan festival in the northern latitudes, long before anyone thought to call it St. John's Eve (*Skt. Hans*). I have seen a *Midsummer Night's Dream* performed in Danish in summer gardens and parks in Danish in Copenhagen and Korsør and in a combination of English and Norwegian in a rain wet garden in Trondheim (where the fairies spoke Norwegian). I have also seen it performed in New Norwegian in an old fortress on the island of Munkholmen in the Trondheim fjord and in the trendy modern Danish of Copenhagen youth in a theater in downtown Copenhagen. It thus appears that what makes Shakespeare such a vital heritage is that the plays have never been amenable to static conservation within narrow national bounds, just as the plays themselves were a living expression of a long cultural heritage crossing national and cultural bound-

aries ranging from Babylon, to Rome to the ancient England of the Anglo-Saxons and the Viking settlers.

What particularly makes a play, or a piece of music, resistant to death by conservation is the fact that each performance is necessarily an interpretation, and interpretations will change through time. This applies not just to the work of the actors, but also to the use of scenery and even the physical heritage of the theater in which it is performed. There is thus an interaction between the practice of culture, as when performing a play, and the constructed environment within which that practice takes place. Together, practice and environment establish a heritage, but it is a heritage that must evolve through time if it is to remain not just current, but avant-garde.

Illusion or reality?

Prospero's landscape

One can learn a great deal, I believe, about the relationship between illusion and reality in heritage preservation by examining the role of illusion and reality in the Shakespearian heritage. But before returning to this subject it is necessary to take a longer look at Shakespeare's approach to illusion and reality in relation to literary heritage.

The English poet and critic, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, famously stated that "poetic faith" (which is stronger than "historic faith") depended upon "the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment." He was thinking particularly of the "persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic" that were characteristic of such Shakespearean plays as *The Tempest*, which occupied much of his attention, and admiration as a critic (*Coleridge 1951* (orig. 1817), s. 527). The artistic experience of a play thus depends upon its ability to create the illusion that enables one to believe that that which is expressed on the stage is real. The key words here, however, are "willing" and "for the moment." If the belief induced by illusion is unwilling and unlimited in time, then we are not dealing with art, but with deception and delusion - as in sorcery or magic. The willing suspension of disbelief is accomplished in the theater by various devices, notably the physical structure of the theater itself. When one leaves the space of one's daily life, and
crosses the threshold into the enclosed arena of theater, one enters a place where one is predisposed to willingly suspend one’s disbelief. At the end of the play, on the other hand, one once again crosses the liminal threshold of the theater and returns to daily life. The Tempest itself appears to be about the very issue of entering and leaving the realm of illusion that is the heritage of the theater— as a literary form (theater), and as a construction (a theater).

Prince Prospero is a magician of sorts, but at the end of the play he merges with the persona of the playwright. At the end of his career Shakespeare wrote The Tempest, which because it was possibly his last independently written play, begs to be interpreted as his testament to the world concerning his role in the theater. After the conclusion of the play, in the Epilogue, Prospero, the benevolent magician-king of an enchanted island, appears before the audience in ordinary dress, without his wizard’s costume, to make a statement which it is tempting to interpret to be the words of Shakespeare himself, making a final bow:

Now my charms are all o’erthrown,
And what strength I have’s mine own,
Which is most faint: now ’tis true,
I must be here confin’d by you,

In this bare island by your spell;
But release me from my bands
With the help of your good hands [by clapping]:

Let your indulgence set me free. Exit.

(Shakespeare 1954: “Epilogue” 11-20, s. 133)

What does all this mean? On one level, Prospero is a magician who has thrown away his magic book and wand and begs to be forgiven for practicing magic by asking the audience to break the spell of the illusions he has created, and which continue to bind him to the realm of illusion. There is a long folkloristic tradition, part of the Faustian corpus, for such magician-king heroes to beg for, and receive, forgiveness for their sin. Prospero, however, is also an actor, who after the play is over appears as an ordinary person (rather than as a costumed figure illuding a magician-king), in order to beg for the audience’s applause. The clapping
sound (of the "good hands") traditionally was believed to be the means by which the enchanting spell of the theater was broken, thus allowing the players and the public to return to normal daily life. The better the spell, the louder the applause needed to break it.

In this examination of the transposition of illusion and reality in *The Tempest*, one can see that Shakespeare has captured the heritage of the theater as it develops from magic and folk ritual to an art form that points forth to the most avant-garde theater and film of our time. A possible lesson to learn from this, as far as heritage preservation is concerned, is that the management of heritage can function as a kind of art form that stimulates the imaginative understanding of the reality of the past. As with the plays of Shakespeare, this art form allows for considerable interpretive freedom and development, while creating an illusion that one is experiencing the past. Denmark's Kronborg Castle was not the site of the ancient Danish legend of Amled, but Shakespeare made it the site of his version of the story, Hamlet. Kronborg, furthermore, is no longer identical with the castle as it was in Shakespeare's day, but nevertheless, Hamlet has become an essential part of the experience of Kronborg Castle's heritage through Shakespeare's interpretation of Danish legend and geography. We never experience Shakespeare's plays directly, but only via an interpretation, and the same is true of any other form of cultural heritage. That interpretation only rings true through a willing suspension of disbelief that allows us to accept, as poetic faith, the illusion of a given historical interpretation, such as Shakespeare's interpretation of the heritage of Kronborg. This means that there must be ways of signaling to the visitor to a heritage site that he or she is entering a place where one is free to "willingly suspend disbelief," and thereby allow one's imagination run free and fill a place with the life of the past. But this should only be "for the moment," for otherwise they are being deceived. Kronborg is thus the perfect place to stage Hamlet, but once the performance is over, it is also appropriate to have an epilogue of sorts, such as that which ends *The Tempest*, where the
producer explains, with good historical faith, that it is all an illusion, that Hamlet belongs to legend, not to Kroneborg. If the point of heritage interpretation is to teach about history, there is no better illustration of this than the history of Amlæd as a figure of Jutland legend, with no connection to Zealand’s Kroneborg. The illusory story of Hamlet and Kroneborg as told by Shakespeare, however, is also true enough in its own way – Kroneborg’s heritage is no doubt forever wedded to that of Hamlet in the minds of most people. Poetic faith is stronger than historical faith.

Shakespeare, nature and the university campus

The heritage embodied in Shakespeare’s plays can help explain the role played by the park that provides the natural heritage of the setting for a university campus. Here again, to understand this point it is necessary to take a closer look at Shakespeare’s plays, this time in their relationship to nature.

The fourth act of *The Tempest* also includes a vignette of rural seasonal festival dance. This takes place as part of a masque, performed as a play within the play, that is acted by the spirits of the island under the direction of Prospero. The masque celebrates the fruitful marriage of heaven and earth as a blessing – relating sexual union with nature’s fruitfulness – upon the future marriage of his daughter with the prince of Naples. As the Canadian literary critic, Northrop Frye, puts it:

Shakespeare’s type of romantic comedy follows a tradition established by Peele and developed by Greene and Lyly, which has affinities with the medieval tradition of the seasonal ritual-play. We may call it the drama of the green world, its plot being assimilated to the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the wasteland /.../ Thus the action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world (Frye 1971, s. 182).

Such rituals appear still as part of a living Scandinavian heritage when, for example, people leave their private homes at Mid-summer in order to seek out some common place, a park or meadow – a green world, and celebrate St. John’s Eve (Skt. Hans) together with others in the local community by burning a bonfire, or dancing around a maypole, and singing summer songs. The green world, according to Frye: “.../ charges the comedies with the symbolism of the victory of summer over winter.” It is a world which:
This "real" world, as Frye writes elsewhere, "has none of the customary qualities of reality. It is the world symbolized by nature's power of renewal, it is the world we want" (Frye 1971, s. 116).

It was noted earlier that Shakespeare's plays are often performed in parks and gardens. The use of parks and gardens for theatrical performances was common at Shakespeare's time, just as it is now. Parks and gardens are a kind of "natural" theater, providing an enchanted green setting that facilitates the willing suspension of disbelief with regard to theatrical illusion. The heritage of the park-like settings of many university campuses, not the least in Shakespeare's England, create a groves of academy (in the tradition of Plato), that facilitates the imaginative creation of a privileged place that allows the scholar to disengage from the established rationality of the every day life beyond the campus, with its focus upon individual gain, and become able to imagine new ways of benefiting the larger community. The green world of the campus, thereby, helps turn illusion and reality on end, showing that what normally is accepted as reality, need not be the only reality. It does this by creating an illusion that facilitates the ability to imagine a better reality, which might be achieved in the future. In the case of Alnarp, an agricultural university concerned with the life sciences, this green world has particular significance because it is not just a setting for ivory towers; it is the very stuff with which Alnarp is concerned - the green world. Alnarp was purpose built as a school of agriculture in the mid-nineteenth century. It includes a castle like manor house for its main building, with garden and park, and the surrounding buildings of a tastefully designed working farm with its farmlands beyond. The setting is put in relief by its placement, on one side, adjacent to the dark waters of the sound that divides Denmark from Sweden, and to the other side, within the rapidly urbanizing environment that characterizes the Öresund region.

Prospero's magical island and Alnarp's campus

The island setting of Shakespeare's Tempest is particularly relevant to Alnarp's park, which provides the landscape setting for the buildings in Alnarp's campus. The landscape of Prospero's island is that of the pastoral commons, a park landscape, shared by the community, that provides the setting for the pastoral tradition, and the bucolic tradition more generally, in the arts. This environment, as the literary scholar, Leo Marx has explained, is the quintessential "middle landscape," mediating between the city, on the one hand, and the wilderness on the other - or, to put it another way, between culture and wild nature (Marx 1964). In Shakespeare's time there was no clear-cut distinction between science and magic, and many of the famous scientists of the time practiced both, and applied their knowledge to the theater. Prospero was thus a kind of scientist, using his knowledge to shape the nature of the island to create an ideal pastoral paradise by transforming wild nature into an ideal model, humanized, environment. As an island it forms a landscape whole, underlying its character as a unified gestalt. The island itself is a kind of utopia, or non-place, which the players must leave, but it provides an idealized model for how to shape the real world to which one returns.

When the 133 bus leaves Malmö station it wends its way along dreary motorways through seemingly endless miles of dockyards, rail yards and industrial wastelands, before crossing the windswept treeless industrial agricultural plains of Scania. But when it crosses of the threshold of the shady shelter of Alnarp park it is a lot like suddenly going ashore on Prospero's enchanted island. It is literally a "grove of academy," with grassy lawns and ancient trees, which probably can be traced back to a earlier Medieval farms of the nobility, and thus predate the establishment of the agricultural school in the mid 19th century. It is university commons, shared both by the scholars who inhabit it, and the surrounding community - it is a place, in fact, where mid-summer is celebrated, along with various academic rituals. It is also a model farm, with a faculty
concerned not just with the practical arts of agricultural production, but also with gardening and landscape architecture. The grounds therefore also contain an arboretum and intensively cultivated gardens with labeled beds of plants for educational use. There are also greenhouses, orchards and cultivated fields, as well as a "landscape laboratory" where new approaches to the planting of tress in the landscape are subject to experiment. This green world provides the setting for farm buildings, and its castle style main building, dating back to the foundation of the school, as well as a variety of buildings with facilities for lecturing, research and offices. It forms a unified landscape gestalt, clearly demarcated from the surrounding world, yet very much a part of it.

The Alnarp campus is a model of an agricultural middle landscape, that has inspired generations of Swedish agriculturalists and helped to create the landscape heritage of rural Sweden, and which now provides a potential model for the peri-urban landscape of modern southern Sweden. The campus has evolved through the years, and though parts of it are out of harmony with the original campus plan for the school, most of it strikes the visitor as fitting into a landscape whole which is both spatial and temporal, expressing a long cultural heritage. It thus illustrates the way the heritage of a landscape can be maintained, when that heritage evolves together with a particular cultural practice, in this case that of education and research. Even when the barns are no longer filled with animals, but instead with teachers and students, the barns still retain their form and their educational purpose. Yet, for all the attraction of the campus, I fear that the living heritage of Alnarp is threatened.

Conclusion

The threat to Alnarp lies in the widespread prevalence of an ideology that first succeeded in enclosing most of Europe's commons — though many still thrive in Scandinavia — and which is now seeking to enclose and privatize much of what remains of our heritage of common places. The result is that the living fabric of our towns with their shops and
markets is becoming encapsulated in private shopping centers, while the built environment of our public institutions, including university campuses, is turned into privatized real-estate whose value is reduced to the uniform philistine measure of the square meter. Under such a system it becomes impossible to measure the qualitative value of common areas that belong to an academic community and to the larger community beyond it, be they the landscape grounds of the campus, or the many historical buildings which belong to the heritage of the campus, but which are difficult to justify in terms of utilitarian measures of rent per square meter. In such a system there is no room for middle places that are qualitatively different from the profane space of profit maximization identified with the urban metropolis. All that is left is the metropolis's other—wild nature, which today is the object of great attention. Large amounts of money are available to preserve the biodiversity of wild environments, even though the biodiversity of the middle landscape may actually be more significant. There is no room for the middle landscape under such conditions.

One day, I fear, I will board the 133 bus in Malmö, but when I arrive at Alnarp the campus will be gone, and all that will be left is miles of windswept agribusiness wasteland, crisscrossed by noisy motorways and bordered by urban sprawl. It will be just as when Prospero breaks his magic wand, and declares:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind.


Kenneth R. Olwig, b. 1946, Professor, landscape planning and theory, Department of Landscape Planning, slu, Alnarp.

kenneth.olwig@lpal.slu.se

Endnotes

1. For a discussion of the complex meanings of nature and culture see: (Olwig 1993).
2. On the relationship between custom and heritage see: (Olwig 2002).
3. On liminality see: (Turner 1974).
4. On the relationship between magic, science and the theater in Shakespeare's day, in relation to the modern conceptions of landscape and nature, see: (Olwig 2002).
5. On common nature see: (Olwig 1993).
6. On the nature of this middle landscape see: (Olwig 1995).

Bibliography


— 1995, "Reinventing common nature: Yosemite and Mt. Rushmore – A meandering tale of a double nature." Uncom-