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SHOULD HERITAGE MANAGEMENT BE  
DEMOCRATIZED?  
THE *DENKMALPFLEGEDISKUSSION* IN GERMANY

CORNELIUS HOLTORF

Uppenbarligen följer det inte av att kulturen är ett egenvärde att staten har ett speciellt ansvar för den. Tvärtom kunde man hävda att om kulturen verkligen representerar egenvärden för medborgarna så kan man anta att de har starka motiv för att på egen hand hålla utbudet av dessa godsaker högt och varierat.<sup>1</sup>

On 30 March 2000, Dr. Antje Vollmer, Vice President of the German Parliament and spokesperson for cultural politics in the Green Party (part of the government coalition under Gerhard Schröder) organized a public hearing, which turned out to be a political bombshell for months to come. The subject of the hearing, held in the German Parliament, was an expert report commissioned by Vollmer from Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm.<sup>2</sup> Its topic was an assessment of the future of cultural heritage management in Germany. Its provocation was twofold. First, heritage management in Germany is nearly entirely devolved to the Bundesländer so that, essentially, the German Parliament has no business discussing it. As a matter of fact, this was the first time heritage management had ever been discussed by the national parliament. Second, the report suggested nothing less than an extensive withdrawal of state heritage management and a much stronger “democratization” of the way cultural heritage is managed in Germany. This was reflected in the provocative title of the report, which asked “Can heritage management be denationalized [entstatlicht]?”

Whereas the first provocation was essentially a legal matter, which does not need to concern me here very much, the second provocation constituted a fundamental attack against many of the taken-for-granted principles and practices of heritage management and raised important issues, which deserve discussion even outside the borders of Germany. This paper seeks to summarize some of the key issues of the German debate and begin a discussion of how it might relate to, for example, heritage management in Sweden.

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<sup>1</sup> Beckman, 1998, s. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Hoffmann-Axthelm, 2000a.

It was no coincidence that Vollmer turned to Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm in commissioning an expert report on heritage management. With a background in theology, philosophy and history, he works as an editor of two journals on architecture and urban planning and on aesthetics and communication. His long-standing association with the former alternative milieu of Kreuzberg in West Berlin may have been an important credential for being chosen as an expert working for the Green Party. Moreover, as early as 1980 he had published an essay entitled “Plea for abolishing the preservation of heritage”.<sup>3</sup> Yet Hoffmann-Axthelm is probably best known as the author of several books on the history of architecture and urban planning issues in Berlin and as an architectural critic, often questioning post-war architecture. Actually, in the fields of architecture, urban planning, and heritage management, he is an autodidact. Some have said that this shows in his work, which is usually polemic and accurate in historical detail, but lacking, for instance, in background knowledge of the history of the preservation of heritage.<sup>4</sup>

In his report, Hoffmann-Axthelm discusses two fundamental problems as regards the status quo of heritage management in Germany. I hasten to add that he deals exclusively with architectural and urban heritage – the archaeological heritage, which faces very different challenges, is not the subject of either his report or my article.<sup>5</sup> The first problem concerns the way heritage management at present relies on an authoritarian state model. According to Hoffmann-Axthelm, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the state advanced the preservation of heritage with the aim to prevent particularly significant old buildings in its own possession from decay and destruction. The current management of cultural heritage still rests on some of the same principles, even though the situation has changed completely. Now, the preservation of heritage predominantly concerns buildings in private possession and the kind of sites and buildings protected is growing constantly. The heritage authorities, Hoffmann-Axthelm argues, use the existing planning and building laws and regulations to impose strict conditions on ever more private clients. In that process they come across as authoritarian, self-righteous, and unable to take into account the view of the owners and users of heritage. Indeed, Hoffmann-Axthelm claims that the strict German planning and building laws and regulations contain many remnants from the absolutist age. In other words, the ideals for the preservation of collectively owned national treasures have been transferred to the preservation of privately owned buildings. The issue Hoffmann-Axthelm raises is thus to what extent it is justi-

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<sup>3</sup> Hoffmann-Axthelm, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Dolff-Bonekämper, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> See Lettmann, 2004.

fied for the state to assume a *collective* responsibility and use authoritarian means when regulating building work on *privately owned* sites.

The question which decisions can best be left to the citizens themselves – possibly with some guidance – and for what aspects the state and its authorities need to take active responsibility on account of the collective interest is relevant to any state ruled by law. It is particularly relevant in democracies that explicitly seek to implement the rule of the people. So why should the people not be allowed to decide for themselves how much of their own heritage they wish to preserve and in what way? Is the preservation of heritage a common good of such high priority that it can and must be imposed on citizens (like health and safety regulations or environmental laws), or should it be best left to the preferences and choices of the individuals who actually inhabit and own these buildings? Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm argues that citizens should be able to make these decisions for themselves.

The second problem Hoffmann-Axthelm raises concerns the criteria that are to be applied to heritage management decisions. As it stands, heritage management is not based on any clear-cut principles and values but is, according to the provocateur, highly subjective and politically negotiable. When their own financial interests are affected, the state and local councils as well as individuals with connections either to politicians or to the media, plus businesses who can plausibly argue that jobs may be at stake, find heritage authorities much more lenient than others. Hoffmann-Axthelm thus claims that the burden of the costs for the preservation of heritage is largely carried by all those ordinary individuals without much political leverage.

In addition, in specific cases civil servants appear to confuse their own personal convictions and academically motivated preferences with their role as disinterested assessors and judges of heritage on behalf of society. The fact that more and more buildings are listed as part of the heritage, and that they are of more and more recent age, can mean that individual civil servants use the preservation of heritage as a pretext for influencing contemporary architecture and urban planning on the basis of personal aesthetic preferences. Or they might use narrow academic criteria in order to determine which buildings are "historically representative" and therefore in need of conservation, even though the preserved structures may never be of interest to any but a few specialists. There may even be politically motivated strategies within some heritage authorities, e.g. in cases when GDR remains are being protected simply because they originated in the GDR. Such policies serve *Ostalgie* and specifically the PDS Party, i.e. the successor of the former Communist party in Eastern Germany.

Whether or not there is merit in any of these charges and suspicions, Hoffmann-Axthelm claims that weighing up specific values in individual

cases always involves a high degree of subjectivity. The reasons for a specific decision can be difficult to convey to the clients who have to pay for their consequences. Specific decisions and conditions imposed on clients' projects are not always easily comprehensible. They can appear to be arbitrary and solely dependent on the personal attitudes and preferences of individual civil servants. All of that, if true, is hardly appropriate in a democratic state in which the people are said to rule and civil servants are required to be directly accountable to the people and their elected representatives.

Taking these two problems as his starting-points, Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm develops a series of theses and suggestions for a new kind of heritage management in Germany:

- (a) The term heritage has been overstretched – too much is being preserved. This has led to reduced public credibility vis-à-vis the heritage authorities responsible, as almost anything might be taken to be a significant part of the heritage. The more items preserved, the less understanding of the reason why. This trend ought to be broken.
- (b) A lack of state protection for a given building does not mean that it can be demolished without further ado. What it means is that the building is not protected by the state. There may be others than the state, such as the owners of a building, local companies, citizens' initiatives, independent foundations like *Deutsche Stiftung Denkmalschutz*, and huge bodies like the National Trust in the UK, which accept their own responsibility for heritage and take it upon themselves to protect a building by seeking to convince other relevant parties to support them. The old link between heritage and its state administration needs re-thinking.<sup>6</sup> Even if we are losing some valuable buildings until a sufficient number of stake-holders are becoming fully aware of their responsibility, the benefits gained are still worth these unfortunate losses.
- (c) A state should not collect whatever is *representative* of past ages but preserve what its citizens appreciate as *worth preserving*. Towns should not be treated as archives or museums. The value of a protected building must be apparent to any visitor and must not depend on complex academic appraisals in writing. The most important criterion for preservation should thus be the aesthetic quality of the building's direct impact on onlookers, i.e. its "beauty". Put simply, buildings that people do not love do not deserve to be protected and preserved. Heritage authorities should thus protect only such structures "without which we would be poorer and the world would be cooler", saving those "whose demise would break one's heart". Such aesthetic judgments need to be made by the people concerned rather than by the state, i.e. they need to be de-

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<sup>6</sup> See also Beckman, 1998.

mocratized. (There are important exceptions to this principle, in particular regarding sites of special historical significance that are not of value as buildings, such as concentration camps, which must still be preserved by the state or others, in the collective interest.)

- (d) The criterion of beauty will invariably favour older buildings, such as medieval churches or castles, before more recent ones, such as factories and other functional buildings constructed from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. It is wrong, though, to preserve a large number of modern buildings which often led to the destruction of the old cities when they were built and which were anyway not designed to last longer than a few decades.

In sum, Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm argues that in principle it is not the task of the state to implement the aesthetic, academic, or political demands of heritage specialists, when these demands lack support among the local population.

Some elements of Hoffmann-Axthelm's polemic found their way into Antje Vollmer's "10 Theses on the preservation of heritage, the need for reforms and the possibilities of change" from May 2000. This fairly short document chiefly emphasises the need to have a comprehensive, open and taboo-free debate about the preservation of heritage. Vollmer also calls for a new "culture of dialogue" between heritage officials and citizens, where the former are more willing to account fully for their reasoning and are more open to reach compromises with the latter.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, Vollmer adopted far more of the suggestions by Hoffmann-Axthelm. Taking his argument one step further, she even proposed that the list of scheduled buildings should be reviewed every ten years. In that way, it would continuously be re-assessed precisely what is worth preserving and what is not, thus making decisions accountable to every new generation of citizens.<sup>8</sup>

In the hearing of the German Parliament on 30 March 2000 practically everybody spoke against the analysis and the specific proposals made in the expert report by Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm. The same is true for the following debate that took place in some of the largest national German newspapers (including *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*) as well as in some regional papers (e.g. *Der Tagesspiegel*, *Berliner*

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<sup>7</sup> Vollmer, 2000a.

<sup>8</sup> Vollmer, 2000b; see also Rüsche, 2000. A similar suggestion has been discussed again recently, see Donath, 2005.

*Zeitung*). Within a few months, more than 30 contributions were published.<sup>9</sup> Radio and TV also got involved. A subsequent webpage featuring a public forum<sup>10</sup>, a reader<sup>11</sup>, and additional workshops<sup>12</sup> and panel discussions<sup>13</sup> carried the debate further, albeit not on the same scale.

Most writers were fairly critical of Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm's report. The criticisms ranged from disputes of his historical judgments to claims that his arguments were misinformed (concerning the relations between citizens and state authorities), misconceived (neglecting how decisions are made in a representative democracy), or misplaced (ignoring the possible destructive consequences for many still existing heritage sites). Further points being raised include the risk for heritage authorities to become driven by "populist" demands and seemingly arbitrary popular aesthetics, which would defeat any academic accountability of heritage management. In Hoffmann-Axthelm's scenario, there would also be a potential threat of heritage being aesthetically valued only by well organized and vocal minorities.

Although only a few commentators or politicians spoke out in favour of the parliamentary report<sup>14</sup>, many were agreed that the preservation of heritage in Germany was in need of a critical analysis and that, in a general way, Hoffmann-Axthelm had a point.<sup>15</sup> As a contribution to the 2000 debate, Eckart Rüsche, a heritage manager in Hannover, summarised the most urgent problems in German heritage management arguing that

- there are too many scheduled monuments. Due to the lack of resources these monuments cannot all be properly managed. The existing scheduled monuments therefore need to be reviewed, with the purpose of de-scheduling some of them.
- there is a lack of theorizing concerning the preservation of heritage. Many regularly used terms and categories are confusing and inconsistent. There is no consensus about common values and best practices.
- there is confusion about existing responsibilities between the lower level of heritage authorities (towns, communities, districts), the

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<sup>9</sup> e.g. Dolff-Bonekämper 2000; Hoffmann-Axthelm, 2000b; Rauterberg, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> [www.denkmalpflegediskussion.de](http://www.denkmalpflegediskussion.de) (now defunct).

<sup>11</sup> Donath, 2000 (out of print).

<sup>12</sup> e.g. Petra Kelly Stiftung, 2002; Maaß, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Donath et al, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> e.g. Brülls, 2002; Donath in Donath et al 2004.

<sup>15</sup> e.g. Habich, 2000; Rüsche 2000; Greipl 2002; Maaß 2002.

higher level of heritage authorities (*Landesdenkmalämter*) and the highest levels of authority in the relevant state ministries (in each *Land*), as well as concerning the role of various independent advisory bodies. There are large differences between the various German states. All this leads to inefficiency and occasionally even to contradictory decisions.

- there are deficiencies in public outreach. Many events, such as Heritage Days satisfy only people's basic curiosity but are otherwise empty of content. Partly as a result of the lack of adequate theory, fundamental questions about the aims and functions of the preservation of (a specific example of) heritage and the kind of 'public interest' justifying state involvement in heritage management remain unaddressed.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that this enormous discussion took place at all demonstrated, too, that a sore point had been touched. Without much doubt, the heritage state authorities and the preservation of heritage as such have an image problem in Germany (and possibly, as we will see, elsewhere too). The authorities have not gained sufficient public trust in their abilities and their judgement. They have not been able to convey precisely what they are doing and why. Heritage smacks of non-sellers, sleeve protectors, and the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> The relevant state authorities are seen as the nasty heritage police bothering house owners and preventing industrial development. This image is beautifully expressed by the following graffiti:

Gott schütze uns vor Staub und Schmutz,  
vor Feuer, Krieg, und Denkmalschutz.<sup>18</sup>

Maybe the most significant outcome of the German debate was that it brought home the fact that the preservation of heritage is no longer something to be taken for granted in the public domain. It is rather something that is contested. Decisions concerning the preservation of heritage must be subject to the same rules of accountability that apply elsewhere in a democracy governed by the rule of law.

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<sup>16</sup> Rüsche, 2000. Brülls, 2002 raises many similar issues.

<sup>17</sup> Greipl, 2002, s. 18: "*Denkmalpflege ... klingt nach Ladenhüter, Ärmelschoner und neunzehntem Jahrhundert.*"

<sup>18</sup> Greipl, 2002, s. 20. Svante Beckman provided the following free translation for the Swedish situation: "Gud skydde huset, folk och få mot eld och krig och RAÄ".



To what extent is this debate relevant to states other than Germany? Obviously this depends on the degree to which the preservation of heritage by the state suffers from the same shortcomings. As we will see, there is some reason to believe that at least some of the specific problems discussed in Germany are also of concern in Sweden. But on another level, the debate has been addressing issues that are of a general nature and apply to all representative democracies. What is the adequate role of state authorities in representative democracies ruled by law, and how should the civil servants working for them act? To what extent should they follow governmental directions, to what extent should they be malleable by citizens' preferences, and to what extent should they be experts accountable only to higher principles of academic wisdom? Should state authorities generally be re-active, responding to what already goes on in society, or pro-active, persuading people to act in particular ways? If the latter, should these desired actions be of a particular, politically favoured kind or should people be encouraged to do anything *they like*, limited only by the requirements of the law? Clearly, these are complex matters relevant to very many states and of considerable interest to political scientists in all these countries.<sup>19</sup> It is evident that the German *Denkmalpflegediskussion* revolved in large parts around Hoffmann-Axthelm's position, which seeks to minimize the active role of the state (and government) in heritage matters, while maximizing the liberty of the citizens in relation to what is ultimately perceived as an aesthetic matter.

Just as in Germany, we could ask about the relations between heritage, citizens and the state in Sweden. What is the appropriate role and objective of the Swedish Riksantikvarieämbetet and the relevant County Museums and County Council Departments, in particular with respect to buildings not owned by the state? Which aspect of heritage in Sweden requires state authorities, and what do they seek to preserve, on which grounds? Are Riksantikvarieämbetet and the state heritage services in Sweden outdated relics of a past age of nationalism and collective values, when heritage first became a state interest, but which no longer exist in the same form?<sup>20</sup>

It is evident that at present there is very little sensitivity within the Swedish heritage sector to questions concerning the legitimacy of state heritage management. It is taken as self-evident that the relevant state authorities tell the citizens about the significance of heritage rather than vice versa. For example, in its vision and strategy document for 2004-2006, Riksantikvarieämbetet describes one of its priorities as being increased participation and broadened responsibility ("ökad delaktighet och breddat ansvar"). This objective is then further developed in the following way:

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<sup>19</sup> See for example Blomgren, 1998, s. 8-17, 25-35.

<sup>20</sup> See Beckman, 1998; Grundberg, 2004.

Det finns ett stort intresse för historia och kulturarv i samhället i dag. Genom att Riksantikvarieämbetet synliggör kulturarvsfrågorna och skapar förutsättningar för delaktighet i arbetet ökar möjligheten för medborgarna att utveckla ett eget förhållningssätt till kulturarvet. Det är i samtidsfrågorna som de flesta individer känner igen sig, vilket gör det viktigt att belysa på vilket sätt kulturarvet kan vara en tillgång i samhällsutvecklingen. Därför måste myndigheten vara lyhörd för vilka behov den enskilde individen har för att kunna ta ansvar för kulturmiljön och kulturarvet. Riksantikvarieämbetet skall ställa sin fackkunskap till förfogande och föra en dialog som tillgodoser det engagemang som finns och inspirerar till eget ansvar och debatt. Kulturarvsarbetet måste också på ett tydligare sätt väcka debatt och stå med på den politiska dagordningen.<sup>21</sup>

The quote reveals the extreme top-down attitude prevailing in this authority. Citizens are said to need opportunities for making the cultural heritage their own and Riksantikvarieämbetet sees its role as offering and increasing such opportunities. Moreover, Riksantikvarieämbetet considers one of its tasks to be revealing how heritage can be relevant to the development of society. It is fairly clear that the desired "dialogue" and "debate" about heritage as well as the idea of people assuming their "own responsibility" for heritage are welcomed especially when they follow the good advice given by the state.<sup>22</sup> Graciously, Riksantikvarieämbetet offers its expertise so that citizens can contribute more to what the state tries to achieve.

A similar way of thinking can even be found in the Agenda Kulturarv project. This project involved much of the Swedish heritage sector over several years (2001-2004). Its aim was to question the fundamental aims and approaches of the preservation of heritage in Sweden with the explicit objective to put people first. Indeed, the final policy statement raises one key issue that might as well have been formulated by a supporter of Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm:

in dialogue with the society at large, we must continually re-examine our selection criteria and the ways in which we evaluate the historic environment. [...] every time we make some kind of selection, we should ask ourselves questions such as: What do we want to accomplish? Who will be affected? Whose viewpoints and values are we reflecting?<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Riksantikvarieämbetet 2004, s. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Gustafsson and Karlsson 2004a, s. 9-13; 2004b, s. 25-29.

<sup>23</sup> Agenda Kulturarv 2004, s. 13.

Yet this concern did not extend very far in the end. The project never really moved from “asking ourselves” these questions to openly discussing them with the people directly affected. What do they want to accomplish with their heritage, and how does the state preservation of heritage affect them? This was the result of a systematic design flaw of the Agenda Kulturarv project. In limiting the project’s participants to representatives of the heritage sector, even excluding the universities, the role as such of state heritage management in Swedish society was never intended to be scrutinized thoroughly.<sup>24</sup> The same policy statement expresses a view that is precisely of the kind Hoffmann-Axthelm attacked so vehemently in Germany:

Society has assigned us the task of enabling and encouraging people to draw on the power of their history and heritage to shape their lives and surroundings.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, the Swedes are said to need the state heritage sector in order to appreciate and use their own heritage and history. This kind of patronizing attitude and lack of real dialogue is perhaps characteristic of state heritage management in Sweden at large. Only very recently have some commentators begun to ask questions about it. Anders Gustafsson and Håkan Karlsson, for example, asked a series of questions that touch on the very heart of the matter:

- Hur gestaltar sig det samtida samtalet och kommunikationen mellan kulturarvsförvaltningen och medborgarna? Existerar den levande dialog som kulturpropositionen uttryckligen efterlyser? Hur har samtal och kommunikation gestaltat sig tidigare?
- Föreligger det överhuvud taget någon dialog, eller har den kommunikativa relationen och praxisen mellan kulturarvsförvaltningen och medborgarna mer formen av en enkelriktad monolog? En monolog där antikvarisk expertkunskap – och specifika kunskapsperspektiv – överröstar medborgarnas rättmätiga krav på medinflytande och medskapande i frågor rörande det gemensamma kulturarvet och det gemensamma kollektiva minnet?
- Inrymmer den samtida kulturarvsförvaltningen den lyhördhet, de organisatoriska strukturer, och de strategier som krävs för att fånga upp, kanalisera och prioritera det medborgerliga intresset inom ramar för en öppen och levande dialog?

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<sup>24</sup> See also Agenda Kulturarv 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Agenda Kulturarv 2004, s. 7.

- Har kulturarvsförvaltningen kommit att bli en isolerad sfär inom det samhälle där den bedrivs, och för de medborgare den är satt att tjäna?<sup>26</sup>

These are indeed the same questions as asked earlier in Germany. The fact that they have been posed underlines the pertinence even in Sweden of the question whether heritage management ought to be thoroughly democratized. In 2000, the *Denkmalpflegediskussion* in Germany addressed precisely this issue. Throughout the German news media arguments were formulated both for and against the liberalization of heritage legislation and practice.

The Swedish heritage sector would be wise to find responses to the different challenges which their German counterparts were largely unprepared to deal with and thus stumbled through. For one day similar issues might suddenly burst into the open in Sweden too.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Gustafsson and Karlsson 2004, s. 10.

<sup>27</sup> I am grateful to Riksantikvarieämbetets FoU programme for supporting the research on which this paper is based, to Matthias Donath for several valuable suggestions, to Peter Aronsson for inviting me to the conference in Norrköping, and to Svante Beckman for the translation of the German graffiti into Swedish (see footnote 18). A more extensive report about the German *Denkmalpflegediskussion* will be published as a booklet by Riksantikvarieämbetet, probably in 2006.

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