SAJ Volume 14 Issue 1 (2022): Call for Papers
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The Modern Cult of the Metaverse: Virtual Values and the Inevitable Decay of Heritage

> 'Permanent preservation is not possible because natural forces are ultimately more powerful than all the wit of man, and man himself is destined to inevitable decay.' – A. Riegl

In his essay 'The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin' (1903), Alois Riegl unpacks the notion of heritage (why something has significance for us). Accordingly, physical artefacts and built heritage have a tangible and empathetic significance for us – we touch and are touched by their presence – and like us they too exhibit 'symptoms of decay' that affords us a sense of unity in our shared mortality.

This work had a direct influence on both the Athens Charter (1931) and the Venice Charter (1964) employed by The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) as setting a fundamental framework for a global approach to build heritage as our cultural legacy. These heritage values are predicated on a combination of qualitative and quantitative characteristics such age, narrative history, and authenticity.

But Riegl also recognised that 'in the near future' the 'development of modern techniques of reproduction' would have significant consequences for how we perceive and experience both the original and the artificial artefact.

Writing over a century ago that near future has quickly become a recent past, and today we live in a time when smartphones are equipped with Lidar scanners, when AR/VR/XR is no longer the stuff of science-fiction, and virtual environments can be created in the morning and inhabited in the afternoon. The time has come to re-evaluate the meaning of heritage in a digital world, and whether it can hold the same value for us as its physical counterpart.

Indeed, can there even be such a thing as heritage if our digital environments do not show symptoms of decay, if there is no provenience or authenticity to speak of? Can we ever really be touched, moved, or affected by a digital environment if we are never truly embodying that space? What gets lost in the translation from the tangible material world to an intangible immaterial one?

This thematic issue of the SAJ focuses on broad implications of the concept of built heritage within virtual environments (digital archaeology, gaming industry, film industry, etc.): simply put, does it exist and if so in what form? These concerns have recently been brought to the fore by the threat of the global pandemic and subsequent social distancing which has prompted the increase of video conferencing and social media as many of us sought new means and media to interact with each other and escape the confines of our physical boundaries. Coupled with the increase of more affordable VR technologies and the sizable investment from Meta (formally Facebook Inc.) in their acquisition of Oculus, VR could soon become not only a reality but our reality. This raises further questions: Does the past still have a future in these environments? What is the cultural significance of architecture in a virtual world? Can you ever truly have a digital heritage or is this an oxymoron?

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