Loved but ignored: New research reveals how the UK is failing to get the most out of its heritage

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The UK's heritage assets remain largely untapped by local authorities and could play a much greater role in helping their area thrive and succeed as a place, according to the new report launched today by the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA).

Commissioned to inform the debate at Heritage Exchange, a new thought leadership event organised in partnership between the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and the RSA, the report warns that many local leaders disregard the potential offered by local heritage when developing their local area's economic, cultural or social strategies.

Despite some heart-felt enthusiasm for the history and the identity of their places being expressed by local leaders, this is rarely made manifest in a robust local heritage strategy, the report found.

The RSA concluded that rather than base local strategies on superficial famous dates and people approaches, heritage organisations should play a more central role in place shaping and developing a strong local identity that promotes the general well-being of a community.

Currently, heritage is not treated as a strategic resource, with civic leaders failing to grasp the real worth of heritage assets, and lacking clarity about how to best implement local policy or best engage the heritage sector (comprising the public, private and voluntary sectors).

If heritage, including assets, ideas and people, were to be given a greater and more serious standing in local strategic conversations then the 'identity gap' we have found at the heart of place-shaping might start to be filled, the report said.

Commenting on the pamphlet, Chief Executive of the RSA, Matthew Taylor said: "The UK's heritage is much-loved but its immense value is being ignored. If leaders don't assess heritage assets, find it hard to describe what they are and don't know who best to talk to about them, it's hardly surprising that their heart-felt enthusiasm for the history and identity of their places is not manifest in a convincing local heritage strategy. The challenge for local authorities is to raise their sights from protecting history (although this is vital) to the possibility of heritage being at the heart of the conversation about a place's future. The heritage sector too should develop an understanding of wider place challenges, and be willing to engage in hard choices about which aspects of heritage are the strongest in terms of local identity today and tomorrow. The sector must also begin to convincingly argue that what it is holding out is not a begging bowl but an untapped asset."

The RSA and HLF will bring together for the first time a range of high profile heritage leaders and thinkers on the 14 and 15 July to debate the challenges and opportunities facing the sector. Heritage Exchange will draw on both UK and international perspectives to think creatively about how to better shape decision-making, how to stimulate new mind-sets and create fresh business models.

Commenting on the event, Dame Jenny Abramsky, Chair of HLF, said: "This is a pivotal moment for the heritage sector. We continue to live through turbulent times. We urgently need to look to the future, consider heritage's role in society and explore new ways of working to ensure its resilience.

“HLF has now been in business for twenty years and in that time we’ve helped – thanks to National Lottery players - some 36,000 projects across the UK with £6billion worth of investment. We’ve invigorated places and communities and succeeded in getting people involved in the heritage they care so passionately about. But we cannot be complacent. Heritage Exchange is an important opportunity for us to strive for the relevance, growth and enjoyment of heritage now and in the future.”

Published to coincide with the event, the RSA’s pamphlet sets out to explore the basis for what was termed 'place based commissioning’, the idea being that heritage organisations and assets could be seen (and funded) to play a more central and strategic role in place strategy. For the heritage sector, place shaping - the building and shaping of local identity - begs certain vital questions; what role could heritage play in successful place shaping? What role does it currently play? And how could we close the gap between potential and reality?

The report concluded that despite the richness of the concept, the very idea of place-shaping is incompletely developed. The critical issue here is identity, the report said. What does a place mean to its population and in what way can that meaning be articulated, shaped and manifested in ways which ‘promote the general well-being of a community and its citizens’?

In the context of place shaping heritage is as much about the future as the past, the report found that conversation, about heritage in the future, is one which must engage with identity as it is understand and sued by local people. A significant, albeit tentative, finding from our case studies was that the greater the degree to which communities are involved in place shaping the more central issues of identity and heritage become, the RSA said.

Notes to editors

The event will launch some new research presented by Dan Corry, CEO, of New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) and Matthew Taylor, CEO of the RSA.

The event is invite-only and oversubscribed but those not able to attend can access the event through live-streaming at the official website. Please join in the conversation on twitter #HeritageExchange.

Further information

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