

Report

Kick-off Workshop “Diversify / Decolonize Heritage!”

19th July 2020

Participants: 40 members from a wide range of 15 NCs and ISCs

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INTRODUCTION

At present, monuments of colonialists, oppressors and racists are being toppled around the world. For many, these monuments embody racist ideals and therefore have been vandalized or destroyed; removed in a performative way; or adapted to showcase the symbols and values of the current Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Responses towards these statues have differed depending on their contexts and the communities engaged. However, a common theme within these responses is a demand for change in how we memorialize and represent history and how officially designated heritage specifically addresses racism, colonialism, enslavement and oppression.

Many organizations that deal with architecture or cultural heritage have already actively engaged in the ongoing debate (e.g. [SAH](#), [Historic England](#), [The Architectural League](#), [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#)). As a globally active organization, ICOMOS has an obligation to deal with this matter apart from individual statements from some National Committees and Working Groups (i.e. US/ICOMOS [statement](#), ICOMOS-UK EP [statement](#)). This context prompted the kick-off workshop hosted by [EPWG](#) and [AG2020](#) on 19 July 2020 with participation of 40 members from a broad range of NCs and ISCs.

“We have to ask ourselves, is the matter too complicated? Or is there too little interest or awareness regarding this topic in ICOMOS?” was a question posed during the opening.

The ongoing BLM protests also turn our attention to injustice and the continued structural racism found within organizations. In this regard, ICOMOS, needs to take a critical look at itself and the issue of underrepresentation of Black, Indigenous and People of Color in our organization.

The history of global heritage conservation practice – as we know – has been heavily Eurocentric. We must acknowledge that colonialism has shaped international conservation practice as we understand it today and that heritage conservation is to some extent a colonial enterprise. Still today, neither the background of international experts on heritage conservation nor the distribution of World Heritage sites is representative of the true diversity of the heritage of humanity. “We have known this for long, but has there been enough meaningful dialogue and tangible action to change this?”

As a global organization that is concerned with developing guidance for conservation and interpretation of cultural heritage around the world, we as ICOMOS members are responsible for building a diverse and inclusive organization. This means not only recognizing the structural racism that is embedded within the organization, but also ensuring our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color members are seen and heard and feel safe within our structures.

FORMAT OF THE DISCUSSION

The structure of this workshop began with a brief introduction of the current climate surrounding BLM, racial justice, and the toppling of monuments. The floor to speak was then given to all participants to contribute to an open dialogue that had been organized within three discussion sections:

I. Representation, Ongoing Initiatives & Suggestions

- a. Why are Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) underrepresented in ICOMOS?
- b. How should ICOMOS position itself in the current debate?
- c. How have other organizations and heritage communities addressed the on-going debate?

II. Reflection of the group and its mandate

- a. What do you think are potential measures in the short and long term to achieve an anti-racist heritage practice?
- b. How can we identify best practices for achieving inclusiveness in cultural heritage conservation?
- c. What are potential topics to be addressed by future workshops?

III. Next Steps

- a. Based on what you heard, what should be the immediate follow up of this workshop?

- b. Do you think your National Committee, International Scientific Committee or Working Group will discuss this further? How?
- c. Who would like to get involved in organizing future workshops?

KEY THEMES

With antiracism work, it is important to recognize that it is complex and requires nuance. The discussions from the workshop ranged from examples of racism seen within interpretation to self-reflection of National Committees to wider conversations surrounding diversity, equity and inclusion within ICOMOS. Below are key takeaways from the two-hour discussion arranged within themes seen repeated throughout the conversation. A brief summary of each theme is outlined followed by direct quotes from the audio and chat box. While we wish to showcase the main issues discussed, we also find it important that individual reflections and reactions to the conversation of decolonization, diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism also be noted.

Diversity & Representation

The anger and calls for change seen within the BLM protests have shed light on how whiteness is pervasive in how organizations have structured themselves, but also as the dominant voice that is seen and heard within them. Participants of the workshop discussed the lack of diversity within leadership roles through the different levels of ICOMOS and in general membership, but also how calls for diversity alone do not simply fix the problems of institutional racism.

Thoughts from the discussion:

“It has been a wake-up call, particularly looking at the composition of our (national) board of trustees.”

“We have identified that the old standard methods of dealing with inclusion have not worked. Particularly in terms of representation in relation to population ... Achieving diversity targets does not change peoples’ thinking.”

“Actions going forward should not focus on diversity targets, but on changing peoples’ minds.”

“I hope the future will be better than now as EPs are addressing the topic. It is not about [diversity] percentage, but about **the quality of work that Black people can bring to the discussion.**”

“In Africa, we have an issue with experts from other continents. There is no expert from Africa who can work on African heritage, however, we at least speak the languages of the communities.

How can external experts speak with the communities? They will never know what the communities know ... The people that actually work on the sites are not ICOMOS members, but

they actually know better. ICOMOS is more than us (academic experts). We can learn from them.”

“We must ensure if we are striving for diversity in our leadership, that there is also significant effort made to make marginalized voices/opinions/knowledge systems not only heard, but given the same amount of power. And that their grievances are given serious consideration. **We can’t use diversity as free labor to fix institutional problems.**”

“**How can we build an ICOMOS community that is reflecting the diversity of society?** In the 80s and 90s we had First Nation people on the ICOMOS Canada board, who were involved in conservation projects. Somehow we have an issue with attracting and paying people from this minority ... **We have to develop an inclusive agenda.**”

“We are an international organization. The issue of inclusion is something we have to address. **Gender is also an issue that needs to be addressed.**”

Self-Reflection of ICOMOS

The conversations of the session often drifted back to the international institution of ICOMOS itself. There was a noted tension of using the structures within an organization built upon Eurocentric and white ideals to tackle the issues surrounding racism within the heritage field. The dialogue explored how to use the current systems and structures of ICOMOS or whether a larger call for change was needed. Several times participants stated that it was important to work towards something, even if it was not perfect. One participant reflected that this event suggests a need to reexamine what ICOMOS is about.

Thoughts from the discussion:

“**In the past, ICOMOS has been a closed club** whereas in the future **we should work together and provide opportunities for people from different social groups** and think about ways of generating and sharing economic benefit for groups that have so far not benefitted.”

“What can we provide from this discussion to give our colleagues in the field guidelines, so that they can work in their own contexts? We have to be careful not to cross the line that defines us. **We should not end up with something vague, but something that can be used by colleagues in the field, even if it is imperfect.**”

“We should strive to incorporate the values-based perspective explicitly in all heritage decisions”

“**Decolonisation is an ongoing process and requires self-critique and listening.**”

“Take the focus off re-examining sites and focus on ICOMOS reflecting on itself. **Perhaps an outcome of this meeting is a call to National Committees to create opportunities to open up a**

dialogue with communities and asking communities if they know what ICOMOS is and what it does and what might it do to assist.”

“I understand the issues around the bureaucracy of ICOMOS, but equally, to go back to the point made before, **the structure of ICOMOS itself / its policies / its practices are probably problematic, so if we stay within these boundaries, what will really change?**”

“ICOMOS needs to have more meetings in Africa than about Africa.”

“I got quite disappointed by my national committee and disengaged from ICOMOS, so maybe this a way to change”

Narrative Building - Contention in Heritage

Part of the discussion heavily focused on what stories continue to be told within the context of heritage: white and European. This framing has repressed Indigenous, Black and People of Color’s narratives, but also removed them from the positions of power which make interpretation decisions. By its very nature, heritage is contentious. It is seen, felt, and understood by a variety of actors. What is celebrated by some can be mourned by others. This friction has elevated certain identities (overwhelmingly white, European) as the recognized version of heritage while delegitimizing those already marginalized.

Thoughts from the discussion:

“Heritage is always political. We are selecting, putting things forward and at the same time deleting stories. Heritage is colonizing the future in a way. We are now deciding what people in the future should know and think about us. **Heritage in itself is a colonizing project.** In that respect, it is always contested, that has multiple sides. We only chose two or three, but it is always a selection.”

“What structural inequalities are we reproducing through it AND its organizations. Who is it for, what stories are told, which are (conveniently) forgotten, how is it used an abused as a tool. **We need to go far beyond ‘adding’ stuff to the current lists/sites, but reexamine, engage with, and address the problematic nature of many sites.**”

“Single sided representation and narratives and the need to expose them has come up as a topic ... **In regard to World Heritage, ICOMOS endorses these narratives, it therefore has to take responsibility for ensuring the sites are diverse in terms of their narratives.** Could this be part of the mandate of the reflection group?”

“It is related to the structure of the organization. UNESCO is nation-state based, you’ll get the story of the nation state, which is often racist. The structure of UNESCO and ICOMOS, too, needs to be re-thought. **The reason for why the sites are narrated in that way go deep.**”

“It is useful to tie narratives to the idea of ‘who owns the past’ - and who’s been left out.”

“How can we reexamine sites in an ‘anti-racist’ fashion and complicate the narrative if we are still debating how to become more anti-racist? ... heritage is by its nature contentious, but **we need to be careful about moving forward using the same systems** of the past which have been created in racist/sexist/etc systems.”

“**Heritage specialists underestimate the public.** In my experience as a practitioner, members of the public enjoy debating history and understand that history is complex.”

Next Steps – Making a Statement

This preliminary workshop was developed because ICOMOS needs to deal more directly with what was transpiring in the world surrounding BLM and the emotional and immediate responses happening towards racist and colonial monuments. ICOMOS states that its mission is to [preserve and protect monuments and sites](#) and that it values [cultural and social diversity](#). Monuments throughout the globe have been toppled as societies no longer wish to have racist figures within their communities, yet ICOMOS has remained silent. What does it mean to be an organization dedicated to protecting monuments and sites, when these spaces have racist and colonial histories that continue to perpetuate racism and are sites of pain and trauma to different communities?

From the discussion, in the process of moving forward there was a call for a more immediate response (i.e. a statement) but also for ongoing progress (“Big Picture”) to work to make ICOMOS more inclusive and antiracist in its practices and within its organization.

Thoughts from the discussion:

“I’d argue one of the first questions to ask is **who is this going to benefit?**”

“The ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites (ICIP) has drafted a statement on structural racism and interpretation, including on actions that need to be taken by our organization. **ICIP is also looking for contributions from all ICOMOS members on how to address the issue** ... but it needs to be widely disseminated within ICOMOS.”

“**ICOMOS should or rather has to release a statement. The organization has made a statement on Hagia Sophia already. Why were we so quickly in doing that? But why is it taking so long to say something about the Black Lives Matter movement?** The statement should be self-critical

and not so self-righteous. Yes, heritage can be a tool to foster mutual understanding as has been said, but often it is not. So we need to be open and critical in addressing this. We need a new process of really becoming anti-racist.”

“**Silence in itself is a statement.**” (not in a good way)

“US ICOMOS has provided a statement. Do we maybe want to **encourage discussion on national levels** as a first step in reaching a consensus?”

“What can we do in short/long-term and how to identify best practices? Is a statement a quick thing we should do? Or is it more longer term? “

“**We also have to ask, who is the statement going to help? Is it going to help our organization look better? Or will it actually help the communities concerned?**”

“How can we draft a statement without assessing our current practice? But then we also need to commit to starting to change by communicating this. **We need to encourage communities that have brought the issue to our attention.**”

“We need to involve the board if we want to have a statement. It does not have to be perfect.”

“Can the statement include something on reflecting on **structural racism within ICOMOS as an organization?**”

Other Next Steps

As previously mentioned, there was a call when moving forward to immediately recognize the political and cultural climate of the moment, but also to have a deeper reflection of ICOMOS as an organization. A few of the long-term suggestions included:

- Forming a decolonization working group or ad-hoc working group
- Listing and coordinating initiatives
- Organizing workshop(s) on monuments (case studies, contentious histories, etc.)
- Inviting and paying BIPOC speakers & workshop coordinators
- Promoting the discussion within NCs, ISCs and Working Groups

Thoughts from the discussion:

“In our working group, we earlier discussed the possibility of **establishing a list of sites, including WH sites that have to be revisited in terms of their narratives.**”

“We should as a first **step map the initiatives that exist and try to coordinate between them.**”

“We need an **ad-hoc working group** that will accompany the process.”

“Let’s use ICOMOS mechanisms and have an ad hoc group that follows up”

“This ad-hoc working group will add on lots of expertise to ISCs. It is a hybrid of bottom-up and top-down approach. **We need a new approach to address this topic.**”

“The outcome of a reflection group or of this process should be to **include aspects of diversity, ant-racism, anti-discrimination etc. in the work of all working groups, committees and boards** instead of concentrating it in the work of a specific working group.”

“ICOMOS could develop a work program involving a mix of members, NC and ISC and start something. **A work program is not another committee with statutes and procedures but a way to act around objectives and learn to work together.**”

“We just discussed that **our structure itself is problematic**, so should we really discuss this in existing working groups and not create a new format to demonstrate we want change, and something radically new.”

“**If we invite BIPOC people to provide webinars and workshops, we must pay them.**”

“I think ad-hoc can get away with things sometimes that established working groups and ISCs cannot.”

Conclusions

This workshop served as a starting point. It was a promising show of interest from ICOMOS members who want to challenge the lack of recognition from the organization over BLM and adjacent calls to action worldwide. The conversations held will hopefully inspire members to have similar conversations within their own National Committees, Working Groups, and International Scientific Committees. The important question is: what’s next? How can we continue to advocate for antiracism work both within and by ICOMOS? At the end of the workshop, there was a call of interest to those who wanted to continue this work. At this point in time, an ad hoc working group appears to be the best means of continuing the work through ICOMOS systems, while also hoping to disrupt and change them. There is still the more immediate goal of creating a statement as well as exploring and implementing long term antiracist initiatives.

First, ICOMOS members and its initiatives have to come forward and express interest in organizing follow-up activities. One such example is the “our Common Dignity Initiative (OCDI) who is interested in being a party to a future webinar series on contested monuments. Those interested in being a part of the process should contact antiracism@icomos.org.

Inspiration from other organizations & ICOMOS

- [World Archaeological Congress \(WAC\)](#) - focus on having Indigenous representation within its board.
- Brussels [call for working group](#) to specifically address colonial symbols within public spaces.
- [The Stockholm Declaration \(ICOMOS\)](#)
- Decolonise British Archaeology [Facebook group](#)
- [Open Letter](#) to Getty Board of Trustees
- Evidence + Narrative in Architectural History [Project](#)
- U.S. Civil Rights Movement Sites and the World Heritage List (US ICOMOS - held 30 July 2020).
- [ICOMOS Brazil: COVID 19 and Traditional Communities](#)
- [Awakening the taniwha: Unleashing community potential from the rubble of Covid-19](#)
- [The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience](#) is the only global network of historic sites, museums and memory initiatives that connects past struggles to today's movements for human rights.
- Toppling Mission Mythologies [Conference](#)
- [Indigenous 'tokenism' in environment laws](#) - "Traditional knowledge is not valued"
- "Biculturalism at New Zealand's National Museum: An Ethnography of Te Papa" by Tanja Schubert-McArthur (2019)
- [Statement](#) of the SAH regarding toppling of statues
- [Statement and Reading List](#) of the Architectural League:
- Historic England about ["contested heritage"](#)
- German [initiative](#) about de-colonizing urban space
- National Trust for Historic Preservation on [Juneteenth 2020](#)