

GCHD Heritage and Environment

Humans have shaped buildings, cities, and landscapes in complex interrelations with each other and agents which are usually – for sake of convenience – labelled as positioned within the “natural environment”. Mobilizing the concept of “environment” in a fluid way, the H&E Working Group engages with the question how we can understand and use the notion that what we encounter today in landscapes and structures – and in their associated narratives and stories – embodies the remains of societal discourse in different pasts. Contemporary landscapes are a palimpsest of past networks and narratives, with outcomes from those pasts still visible or being narrated today. Historic buildings, such as churches or castles, warehouses and ports, windmills and refineries, but also polders and canals, are the embodiment of changing collective political, social, cultural as well as economic values. The narratives, networks and functions of these cultural environments have changed over time, others have been adapted or destroyed. As such, what is considered heritage today is more than “passive heritage”, but serves as reminders of social, cultural, economic and environmental continuity and change. At the same time, landscape heritage’s spatial appearances affect – and occasionally suggest path dependencies – future decision-making on what to do with heritage and with the landscape.

The H&E WG wants to be relevant for a regional, national and international audience, which is why its focus on networks of water and energy and their evolving complex relationships with man-made structures stands as example for the group. In the Netherlands, eight out of ten world heritage sites are related to water. Changing systems of transportation via water, rail or road, or air have shaped heritage landscapes over time, and stand as reminders of regional, national and international historical relations – including colonial networks. Around the three LDE institutions as much as elsewhere in the world, water shapes narratives in cities and landscapes, from coastal water defenses and ports to cities and waterfronts, from drainage and irrigation systems to utilities and drinking water. Shifting energy sources from water mills to oil have shaped urban development and heritage structures extensively.

In the face of diverse environmental changes such as global warming, migration or sea level rise, we will have to find new approaches towards the definition, conservation, transformation and adaptive reuse of heritage structures. The Research Group Heritage and Environment investigates these complex narratives of landscape change in the past, present and future. As a group of scholars with diverse backgrounds and experiences (including anthropologists, archaeologists, architects, engineers, heritage researchers and historians), we seek to address landscape heritage narratives, combining concepts and methodologies from these various fields of expertise. Instead of preserving individual iconic buildings from the past as emblems of our shared culture and history and finding ad-hoc solutions for each case, we argue that a comprehensive approach to (urban) heritage landscapes is needed – both to permit a scaling up of approaches towards heritage and understand how iconic properties of landscapes are created.

Exploring heritage in the context of the environment requires novel theoretical, methodological and conceptual approaches as well as instruments that acknowledge the inseparability of natural and cultural heritage, the interconnection of spatial and conceptual aspects of heritage, and the importance of landscape-related heritage for the future. By studying the interrelations between human intervention and diverse environmental factors that have shaped historic landscapes, we aim to create awareness of the interconnection between heritage structures and environmental factors past, present and future. Diverse methodologies – such as landscape biographies, landscape change models (including Geographical Information Systems and other modelling tools), design,

diverse qualitative approaches and more – are employed, to study, understand and apply historic exploration in relation to design for current and future challenges.