

Boxes in the Basement of a Mid-century Builder: a Reflective Analysis of Heritage Conservation

For this assignment, I picked the article “Heritage Conservation” by Gordon Fulton from The Canadian Encyclopedia. I chose this because my area of focus is Heritage and Social History—at least this is what I think at this point, based on my project idea.

Even though, to be honest, I find heritage a little boring. Neither of the reading options for this area of focus made me feel excited (and I ended up choosing this article because it was the only remaining option). But I am interested in old things and storytelling, which have an element of heritage to them. As I discussed in my intro, my project idea (and the whole reason I chose interdisciplinary studies) is to do something with the generations of family archives in my basement. Without a doubt, I can benefit from some basic understanding of heritage conservation.

As the article sets out to explain, heritage conservation “addresses certain desires, notably for tangible connections to our historical roots and a ‘sense of place’.” It’s the process of identifying, protecting and promoting things that are important in culture and history.

Fulton’s article notes that heritage conservation can take several forms, including built or natural environments or as “an artifact of moveable cultural property.” The article then goes on to note that within Canada, heritage conservation usually refers to elements of built environments.

However, I think that my project idea falls under the latter form. There are many artifacts of moveable cultural property in my basement—photos, journals, letters, artwork. They may not be important within the larger culture and history, but they have significant weight in my family culture and I take seriously my responsibility to steward these gifts from my ancestors.

My task is to go through it all and attempt to tell the story, to find new homes for the artifacts or dispose of them with the love and intention they deserve. I don’t yet know what the story will be. But it will be, in part, a story of a working class settler family (my great aunt Kay, on the maternal side of my family and her husband, Gordon) in Esquimalt, BC, living in the mid-20th century, on land that was and still is Lekwungen territory.

My project idea also involves a building, although it’s not really old enough to be considered heritage. The house where I now live and which houses the family archives was built in 1949, which is still pretty old. My great aunt and uncle built this house, and Kay died in the living room in 2017. As a mid-century builder style home, it’s one of the “unpretentious ‘vernacular’ buildings” Fulton describes. This inclusion in the article tells us that these ordinary buildings, homes to the common people, are worthy of conservation. They’re worthy of study and documentation.

On my first reading of Fulton's article, heritage conservation appeared to be a self-contained discipline with its own set of criteria, yet I can see how it could intersect with other disciplines especially within a community or grassroots setting.

I see the interdisciplinary potential in what Fulton explains as the interplay of contextual values that guide heritage conservation: "efforts are made to recover any significant design values that have been lost..., to extend the life of historically important materials and to ensure that there is a fit within the community..."

Despite my initial boredom with the idea of heritage conservation, after a couple of readings the article left me feeling curious and eager to explore more. I see how it can be applied to my own life context, and the process of conservation gives me a framework that I can apply to my project idea. I need to start with identifying what is within my collection of artifacts (unpacking boxes, laying out photos, instilling some kind of order to the journals and letters); then protecting what's there (I interpret this as finding the historical context for the artifacts); and finally, promoting awareness of the material by crafting some sort of narrative around it.

At the very least, I'm driven by the same desire at the root of heritage conservation—a longing for a tangible connection to my past and a yearning for a sense of place.