



Contexts for Conservation

2013 National Conference - Adelaide 23- 25 October

The accidental futurist: Using Causal Layered Analysis to understand conservation across time

MaryJo Lelyveld

Abstract

Conservation is best understood in intergenerational time frames. As conservators we no doubt have one foot in the past, seeking to understand past states and past intent that have shaped the artefacts upon which we work. However we also have one foot firmly in the future – a future that we design through a process of managing the physical, environmental, social and cultural aspects of the artefacts upon which we work.

Interestingly, as a profession we have and continue to populate the future with the artefacts that we are preserving in the present but we are yet to develop an effective language around ideas of the future. What is a future state? For many it is inconceivable territory akin to looking into a snow storm with headlights. For others it is simply a projection of the present. Where the alternative futures of our cultural heritage and conservation can be imagined, they are commonly defined by new technologies and material innovation or else mediated broader social and cultural themes.

The aim of the paper is to present a model for conservators to understand how they engage with time using the futures technique of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). This methodology assumes four levels of knowing or conceiving of conservation practice: litany, system, worldview and myth. By identifying the levels at which conservation practice is enacted and how these levels are active across different temporal scales (short, medium and long-term timescales) we are better equipped to frame and explain the work we do with a narrative that is rich with depth and complexity and a long-term forward focus.

Keywords: role of conservation, futures methodology, worldviews, discipline, change over time

Introduction

Conservation is a complex physical and cultural thing. We not only deal with the tangible and intangible but also enact our efforts across a range of time frames. We uncover the past through analysis and investigation, modify the present through treatments and proactively influence future states through, amongst other things, acts of preventive conservation. Yet all

too often conservation is reduced to one-dimensional framing of conservator as applied-scientist, conservator as craftsman, conservator as art medic or technician, often by the conservators themselves. Within some contexts this is no doubt a preferable thing - a reductionist approach offers an efficient and effective introduction or a short-hand means of explanation. The danger arises when we allow the cursory to define the whole.

The following paper aims to provide a framework that helps to describe and develop a capacity for a more insightful understanding of the role of conservation as a human endeavour. This research itself is a tentative exploration in the area of determining the role of conservation as a socio-cultural act across human-existence. It is an exercise in trying to define what it is that conservators do and in articulating what it is we hope to achieve or to what end do we employ our means? The aim of the paper is to see whether the use of Causal Layered Analysis as a tool that can help frame and enrich our understanding of conservation practice and whether foresight tools are useful in helping describe the conservators' agenda.

1. Conservation as 'flatland'

Futurists are concerned with understanding alternative images of the future, most notably the social, economic, environmental and political forces that shape them. They are concerned with understanding the implications and consequences of these images of the future and how this knowledge should be translated into action. In building an understanding of the future, or how things change over time, futurists hope that we move from a position of reaction to action. Instead of reacting to the future as it unfolds we take a proactive position in which we aim to influence, design or create a preferred future state.

In conservation, a latent futures or foresight orientation, is visible in the development of preventive conservation to influence future chemical and physical states, re-treatability as a criterion to influence the ease of future treatments, and materials and deterioration testing to ultimately allow for continued engagement with the object or artwork. Less obviously it includes research, advocacy and education that develop the collective knowledge base around concepts such as stewardship and significance. Although undefined, the idea of 'futures' is central to conservation practice and embedded in the aims of our professional practice 'to preserve cultural heritage for future generations' (AICCM 2013). It must be understood, therefore, that conservation works within an expanded temporal scale, an idea to which we will return to later.

Conservation is also a very rich practical and intellectual field. It has been described in terms of inter- and trans-disciplinary aims and activities (Avrami et al. 2000) and whilst this widens the scope of our practice laterally, it is only by developing a more critical understanding of conservation practice, whereby we examine the more ill-defined and expansive role that is has to play in the act of social and cultural creation, that we create depth in practice. As indicated by a number of publications, recognition of the complexity of conservation practice is not always acknowledged or understood outside the profession (Pye 200; Jones 2002; Humphrey et. al. 2011). More telling, is Cane's observation that '...there is a default setting to which conservators seem to want to return in which the 'conservation professional' is defined by a

narrow, technical definition of skills and knowledge... This, I believe, reveals an underlying reluctance to engage in the broader, challenging debates around the vulnerability, care and use of the finite resource that forms the cultural heritage' (2009:174).

This parallels one of the problems faced by the foresight profession - the compression of futures into a shallow image of the future. In foresight, these are presented as techno-utopias ('pop' futures) or economic or environmental collapse (dystopic futures). These images of the future, that accept as a given or reinforce current ideological frameworks such as economic growth, nature as a resource and the current cultural hegemony have been termed 'flatland' (Slaughter 1998). What makes flatland problematic is that this compression of vision results in a reduced sense of creativity and agency in influencing or designing alternate future states. The aim of this paper is to determine whether tools developed within foresight to expand 'flatland' futures may be useful in expanding our notions of practice and inform a more sophisticated view of conservation futures.

2. Causal Layered Analysis

One of the aims of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) is to mitigate a reductionism of practice and make uncritical acceptance of the future problematic. Sohail Inayatullah, the practitioner behind CLA notes of the methodology, "(it) takes as its starting point the assumption that there are different levels of reality and ways of knowing. Individuals, organizations and civilizations see the world from different vantage points." (Inayatullah 2003:5) ... (it) is less concerned with disinterest, as in the empirical, or with creating mutual understanding, as in the interpretive, but with creating distance from current categories. This distance allows us to see current social practices as fragile, as particular, and not as universal categories of thought - they are seen as discourse, a term similar to paradigm but inclusive of epistemological assumptions." (Inayatullah 1998:2).

As a tool Causal Layered Analysis calls for an examination of what Inayatullah refers to as horizontal and vertical elements. The horizontal denotes the plurality of discourse, cultures and worldviews whilst the vertical refers to the structures or levels that define our social or cultural existence. These vertical levels are referred to as: Litany, System or social issues, Worldview and Myth or metaphor (Figure 1). In simplistic terms the vertical transitions form the most visible and superficial readings of the problem or area of examination to the lower level unconscious and hidden deeper meanings.

2.1. Litany

Litany is the official or widely disseminated description of the issue. As Figure 1. Indicates it is defined by what is observed and easily described, presenting a simplistic reading of the situation that allows for broad public consumption. At this level, little analysis or reflection is carried out and trends and data are accepted as fact (Inayatullah, 2005: 5).

When applied to conservation, this is reflected in the public perception of conservator as 'art doctor'. Within the broader heritage and museums profession this alludes to the perception of conservator as inflexible risk-averse conservative or service technicians and as described

earlier by Cane, is the self-imposed superficial representation by conservators themselves through their narrow focus on technical outputs as a means of validating practice.

2.2. System and Social Issues

This layer is characterised by quantitative trends and data like economic, political and historical factors and models built on a strong academic foundation. Unlike the litany level, knowledge in the form of trends and data is used to derive a deeper understanding through interpretation.

It is at the system level that conservation is concerned with the development of the profession as a discipline through the development of organisational structures and policies, and its horizontal relationships disciplinary practice. We also begin see conservation in the context of wider social, environmental, political and technological landscape. For example, the development of conservation science in response to the problem of pollution in newly industrialising nations (Clavir 2002:7) or the growth of conservation as a profession and the number of professions in association with the wider political support for the development of museums and heritage in the mid- to late 20th century.

2.3. Worldview

The third layer of CLA looks inward to examine the worldview and episteme, or system of understanding, that underpin the trends and problems outlined in the preceding layers. These are observed across the horizontal as the range of deep structures of belief and assumptions across societies and cultures. At this level we see how the different discourses not only support the trends but also legitimise them through ‘framings’ such as language and definitions of the knowledge bases themselves (e.g. conservator/artists-restorer/conservation scientist/conservation professional or ethnographic versus Indigenous)

At this level we see conservation being mediated by the intellectual culture with which we identify. For example, a number of conservators are working to deconstruct and make problematic the empirical framing of western conservation through their work with Indigenous and First Nations cultures (Clavir 2002; Sloggett 2009;) and the conservation of post-modern new media art forms (Laurenson 2006; Kemp 2009; Jadzinska 2011).

2.4. Myth or metaphor

The myth or metaphor level refers to the hidden dimensions that form and inform our structures of interpretation and mental models. Myth in this instance refers to its symbolic meaning rather than the idea of falsehood and carries with it the unconscious and emotional. It draws upon ideas of the broader human enterprise and “is the grand narrative, the wisdom and story of the universe, while history is simply the most recent superficial headline in the nine o’clock news.” (Ramos 2003:44).

In conservation it seeks to find a deeper meaning beyond the worldviews themselves to explore the liminal space that resists language. At the myth level we observe how alternate worldviews defy and contest traditional conservation notions of significance, value,

permanence, intangible and virtual. It also frames conservation in terms of grander human concerns such as stewardship, memory, equity, identity and the relationship between self and other.

3. The role of time

Before describing how CLA may be applied to conservation futures, let us first look briefly at the relationship between CLA and the scale of time and how this may be used to inform futures thinking. It might now be apparent that each of these layers unfolds across their own unique temporal timescales (Figure 1). As we transition from the upper to the lower levels, we require larger timeframes to discern or enact change.

At the litany level we see the churn of information as it is influenced by the whims of public and political perception. It is defined by events, sensationalist headline news (e.g. ‘Fuzzy Jesus’) and media ‘grabs’ to garner interest in conservation. Its effect is measured in days and years.

The level of social causes focuses on practical near term challenges through policy analysis and quantitative research. Its temporal scale also includes recent history as a means of determining causation and correlation. At the levels of worldview and myth, scales shift from centuries to millennia and are marked as intergenerational. It is at these levels that we encounter the search for large patterns in the past, present and future of humanity, described by Inayatullah (2002) as ‘macrohistory’ and it is in the worldview and myth context that “macrohistory provides us with models, stages, concepts for coming to grips with the long view. Properly understood, it also frees us of intellectual and cultural parochialism, meaning that we can begin more consciously to situate our efforts in a wider frame and in a conscious appreciation of some of the larger dynamics of history.” (Slaughter 1999:151).

Conservation futures: Applying CLA to the problem of continued collecting

When considering the future of conservation, Causal Layered Analysis provides a framework upon which we are able develop a richer analysis of the problem or subject. Rather than taking as its starting point an ideological stance or given solution, CLA provides a scaffold to explore, examine, and synthesise different discourses, worldviews and ways of knowing. Initially this makes explicit commitments to privileged knowledge bases and at the deepest level may require us to problematise or redefine the idea of conservation itself.

“The future holds a number of developments that cannot easily be reconciled with the aims of conservation... repatriation, continued collecting, scientific developments, changing function of museums...” (Caple 2009:30)

Caple’s statement above alerts us to a range of perceived future challenges for the profession. One of these ‘continued collecting’ is explored in Table 1 using the CLA method.

Table 1. Causal Layered Analysis of the problem of continued collecting

LEVEL	ISSUE	ASSOCIATED SOLUTIONS	ASSOCIATED PROBLEM SOLVER
Litany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • storage is full • we don't know what we have! • artefacts are not being given proper care • increased pressure on collections management staff • more resources needed • public cannot access their collections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • build new storage • employ more collections management staff • increase funding (public and private) to facilitate greater public access • institutional collections audits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • institutional level e.g. Tate and Guggenheim 'franchise'
Social Causes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • desire for next big thing • division by function e.g. science museum, art museum etc. • broadened 'client' base stimulating new collecting areas and changing role of the museum • 'less than 5% of the collection is on display at any one time' • Industry benchmarking and global competitiveness in heritage tourism • collections management expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • question accessioning and de-accession policies • audit, rationalise and consolidate collections • review stakeholders in collection management • localised versus globalised collections? • moratorium on collecting for a period (of the institution or the artworks themselves) • 'closing' collections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional level • Government level e.g. Delta Project; CCI audit • International NGO/industry - best practice
Worldview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • responsibility to collect • value lies in the physical artefact (empiricism) • museums as cultural stores/keepers of the cultural heritage • universal value • encyclopaedic knowledge and expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • responsibility to collect lies with others • alternative collecting systems e.g. traditional storylines, technologically immersive worlds • alternative repositories of culture including private and co-operative ownership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intellectual discourse • social movements e.g. Maker Movements

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • re-discovering public responsibility for stewardship 	
Myth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • humans are defined by their tools • inheritance as a cultural universal • material culture represents memory and identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memory and identity as a virtual history (oral or digital) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • professional re-definition?

Though the above table is cursory, it starts to map alternative futures around the issues of growing collections. Moving down the layers we see for example how it is that the solution of building more storage in the short term continues to reinforce and support the underlying layers that define the museum as the repository for cultural knowledge and presupposes an ongoing commitment to encyclopaedic collections. But, by reassessing deeper commitments at the worldview and myth level we encounter alternative futures possibilities that consider alternative means of conserving heritage namely through alternate structures (e.g. revitalising private ownership) or distribution of collections across organisations (e.g. consolidation of overlapping collections).

As Inayatullah notes, “The movement up and down is critical otherwise a causal layered analysis will remain only concerned with better categories and not wiser policies. By moving back up to the litany level from the deeper layers of discourse and metaphor, more holistic policies should ideally result.” (2003:3). At each level, the opportunity arises to question the assumptions that underpin our response. This is the lateral movement and is best explored across the stakeholder group. As novel ideas or alternate perspectives arise at individual levels, we can move back along the vertical to follow through their implications, ascertain their assumptions and possible manifestations at the different levels.

For example, if we examine the assumed role of museums as repositories for collective knowledge how might an alternative to this play out at the social level or litany level? Alternatively, how might consolidating ‘like’ collections be to the conservators advantage (and disadvantage)? Loci of power are made explicit and likely points of future tension and dissent can be anticipated. For example, if we choose to pursue alternative collecting methods, say by emphasising the meta-data rather than the material itself, who would be the greatest opponents to such action? What structures or social systems might be agents of support or dissent? In response to the problems outlined at the start of this section, Caple himself wonders “As the ideals of the Age of Enlightenment are lost and social values are increasingly focused on mass entertainment, increasing personal wealth and fundamental religious principles, society will redefine why it keeps the objects of the past. Will conservation need to re-define its aims, or if society wishes to ‘maintain and enhance’ its objects in a way that no longer reveals, investigates and preserves them, does what we do cease to be conservation?” (2009:30).

It must be highlighted that the solutions presented in Table 1 are in no way meant to be comprehensive nor representative of a preferred future state. Nor do they offer any ready simple solutions or clear courses of action to what is indeed a highly problematic situation that faces collecting institutions. Rather, by traversing the depth of CLA levels and expanding these across the horizontal we develop a richer understanding the future. It becomes readily apparent that there is no singular, destined future, but rather, a range of futures to be explored, advocated for or may prove problematic for our own preferred future.

Inayatullah explains, of the foresight field “real futures... are perhaps those that cause cognitive dissonance, that do not make sense to the immediate - not because they are nonsensical but because we do not have the epistemological frames to comprehend them” (Slaughter 1999:5). In other words, the complexity itself is not a problem but rather the absence of a way of acknowledging and articulating that complexity with its variant worldviews, epistemes, systems and headline news, in order to engage and ultimately work at addressing the issue. It is my assumption that in part, “the reluctance to engage in the broader, challenging debates around the vulnerability, care and use of the finite resource that forms the cultural heritage” described by Cane (2009:174) can be alleviated by finding useful mental models that help to frame and challenge our knowledge base.

Conclusion

The aim of CLA is not to get the ‘right’ answers but to provide a tool that prompts users to expand their assumptions and challenge superficial readings of a problem. In this way, conservators can broadly situate their knowledge base and its relationship with other ways of knowing be they across cultures, social systems, disciplines or epistemes. When considering certain problems, conservators should be encouraged to imagine a range of futures that might prove problematic or preferable to their own professional aims or agenda and accordingly take action that advances the approach or re-designs an alternative.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of my colleagues Holly McGowan-Jackson and Toby Miller for their thoughtful comments and editing and lecturers Peter Hayward and Jose Ramos for their thoughtful and supportive teaching.

Biography

MaryJo Lelyveld is a Conservator, Frames and Furniture at the National Gallery of Victoria. She received her B.App.Sc. - Conservation of Cultural Materials (Paintings) at the University of Canberra in 2002 and recently completed her M.Management (Strategic Foresight) at Swinburne University in 2012. She is interested in the understanding the role of conservation within a macrohistorical context.

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Figure 1. Causal Layered Analysis (Conway 2013)

