

Assessing the social values of dynamic urban heritage

Elizabeth Robson, Siân Jones, Chiara Bonacchi

Anyone involved with urban archaeology will be familiar with the multi-layered deposits of historic features that make up our cities and the meanings, stories, and practices related to them. Policy and guidance frameworks increasingly recognise the importance of these tangible and intangible heritage assemblages in mediating people's dynamic relationships to place. For instance, echoing UNESCO's *Historic Urban Landscape Guidebook* (2016), Scotland's *National Planning Framework 4* describes the historic environment as "physical evidence for human activity that connects people with place, linked with the associations we can see, feel and understand" (2023: 150). Policy frameworks have also moved away from the idea of urban heritage as a victim of development and instead attempt to reposition it as part of the ongoing transformation of cities through values-based approaches and expectations of public benefit.

Questions remain, however, about how to capture the *social values* of diverse publics and incorporate them into planning processes, including development-led archaeology, so as to create more equitable and socially sustainable urban development and regeneration. In this short article, we introduce an innovative mixed-methods approach for assessing social values, which was developed as part of the 'Deep Cities' project (see Bonacchi et al. 2023; Jones et al. 2024). Social values arise from the meanings, stories, identities, memories, practices and attachments that together sustain people's complex and diverse relationships with place (see Robson 2025). Often associated with lived, everyday experiences, these communal values are not necessarily readily apparent to heritage and planning professionals, nor obvious in the tangible fabric of the city. People-centred methods are therefore critical in understanding social values.

Our methodology is framed by rapid ethnographic approaches, including methods such as structured and semi-structured interviews, site walks, and observation. These are accompanied by participatory interventions that facilitate co-production of knowledge, such as photo-elicitation to prompt discussion of stories and memories, and participatory mapping to identify places of significance. Importantly, these qualitative offline methods are combined with quantitative and qualitative online methods such as surveys, crowdsourcing, and analysis of material from social media platforms. Where platform policies and infrastructures allow, large bodies of social media data can be extracted and analysed in an automated way to identify themes and sentiments, followed by qualitative analysis of content relating to social values.

This suite of rapid methods was trialled at multiple urban sites (see Jones et al. 2024), including the area associated with the New Street Gasworks (1818-1906) and its remaining structures at 179a Canongate in Edinburgh. The site falls within the Old and New Towns of Edinburgh World Heritage Site, as well as the Old Town Conservation Area, but the Gasworks themselves are not designated. The New Waverley (formerly Caltongate) development was well advanced at the time of our study, with plans approved that would see most of the remaining Gasworks structures demolished, except for selective facades.

We found a rich tapestry of contemporary social values associated with the Gasworks and its surviving architectural fragments by multiple, at times overlapping, communities of residence, attachment, and interest. Both the offline and online methods highlighted the importance of personal/familial connections, everyday working lives, and leisure experiences in the values associated with the area. Many of these values were linked to specific historic features and their related functions, events, activities, and affective qualities.

However, social values are not necessarily *directly* related to tangible heritage and its historic and aesthetic significance. They often pertain to the more recent social lives of buildings and places or involve some kind of re-working of historic and aesthetic values with respect to present-day identities, attachments, and agendas. In the case of the Gasworks, subsequent use of various elements of the complex as a municipal bus station, a night club and a market all engendered rich social values.

Maintaining contemporary connections and social values therefore depends on understanding the past functions of urban places and attending to the constantly evolving socio-material relations of the city, rather than purely focusing on preservation of architectural facades and aesthetically pleasing fragments.

One of the strengths in combining a range of offline and online methods is that it facilitates engagement with a wide range of diverse constituencies. This was particularly relevant in the Canongate study, where community fragmentation, alienation and relocation due to previous developments meant that it was difficult to reach all the groups identified in the time available. Extending the research into online environments also facilitated access to those engaging with the site at a distance, such as people with personal or family connections who now live and/or work elsewhere.

Importantly, our research found that different values are expressed in distinct offline and online spaces. For instance, everyday interactions with tangible elements of the city produce different associations to the more fleeting but intense engagement of someone returning to a past family home. Furthermore, different digital platforms facilitate expression of different kinds of values. For example, on the public Facebook page 'Lost Edinburgh', users often express nostalgic emotional responses to the working-class heritage of the Gasworks, mediated by historic photographs, whereas interactions on Twitter tend to revolve around present-day use and the politics of urban development (Bonacchi et al. 2023).

The Deep Cities project demonstrates that a *combination* of rapid, people-centred methods, applied in both offline and online contexts, can effectively reveal the diverse social values associated with urban environments. However, we recognise that expertise, training, and organisational capacity are required for these methods to be adopted into planning and urban development processes. A practitioner toolbox has therefore been produced with guidance on their application. The toolbox also shows how archaeological assessment of the complex and fragmented fabric of the city can be used alongside the methods discussed here.

Failure to take social values into account in urban development can result in fragmentation and/or marginalisation of communities and their place attachments. It is our hope that this research (discussed more fully in Jones et al. 2024) can support those involved in planning, conservation, and regeneration to implement more inclusive approaches that recognise the diverse meanings, memories and senses of place associated with past and present uses of the city. This in turn could help to reduce conflicts around urban transformation and create more socially sustainable future outcomes.

Online Resources:

Deep Cities Toolbox: <https://www.deepcities-toolbox.unifi.it/>

Social Value Toolkit: <https://socialvalue.stir.ac.uk/>

Further Reading:

Bonacchi, C. et al. (2023) Researching heritage values in social media environments: understanding variabilities and (in)visibilities, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 29 (10):1021–1040. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2023.2231919>

Jones, S. et al. (2024) Assessing the dynamic social values of the 'deep city': An integrated methodology combining online and offline approaches, *Progress in Planning* 187. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.progress.2024.100852>

Robson, E. (2025). *Assessing the Social Values of Heritage: Methods in Theory and Practice*. Abingdon: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003497271>

Author Bios:

Elizabeth Robson is Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Heritage at the University of Stirling.
<https://www.stir.ac.uk/people/424107>

Siân Jones is Professor of Heritage and Director of the Centre for Environment, Heritage and Policy at the University of Stirling. <https://www.stir.ac.uk/people/257398>

Chiara Bonacchi is Senior Lecturer in Heritage and Director of the Heritage Minds Lab at the University of Edinburgh. <https://edwebprofiles.ed.ac.uk/profile/chiara-bonacchi>

Image captions:

Figure 1: Map showing the location of the New Street Gasworks, Edinburgh, and the wider urban context (© Elisa Broccoli).

Figure 2: North-east corner of building 179a Canongate on Old Tolbooth Wynd. These elevations are two of the few remaining upstanding structures of the Gasworks (© Elisa Broccoli).

Figure 3: Back wall of 179a Canongate, reflecting some of the many modifications to the structure (© Siân Jones).

Figure 4: Front entrance to 179a Canongate (standing vacant), previously used as offices and a gallery, most recently it was a market venue (© Elizabeth Robson).

Figure 5: Photo entitled 'Caltongate' taken during a UNESCO-ICOMOS reactive monitoring mission to examine development projects affecting the World Heritage site and shared on Flickr (CC BY-NC © Angus Mcdiarmid).

Figure 6: Redevelopment of part of the Gasworks area, viewed from Carlton Hill (© Elizabeth Robson).