

Intangible heritage and design in historic contexts

AHRC Innovation Scholars Secondment (2023-2025)

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Executive Summary

Overview

This research explores how intangible cultural heritage (ICH) – including skills, memories, cultural practices, stories, and lived experience – shapes the significance, management, and future of historic places. It examines how these intangible dimensions relate to physical fabric and how they can be more clearly recognised within design, conservation, regeneration, and heritage decision-making across the built heritage sector.

The research was undertaken through an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Innovation Scholars secondment, with Dr Johnathan Djabarouti seconded from the Manchester School of Architecture, Manchester Metropolitan University, to Historic England, the UK Government's adviser on the historic environment. Whilst grounded in Historic England's remit and operating context, the findings have wider relevance for informing work with partner organisations across the UK, supporting approaches that recognise and sustain the cultural, social, and material dimensions of historic character.

This standalone executive summary accompanies the full Historic England Research Report and provides an accessible overview of the research purpose, approach, key findings, and implications.

Why this research was undertaken

Historic England has long recognised that heritage value extends beyond physical fabric. Intangible dimensions of heritage already inform work across wellbeing, skills, placemaking, regeneration, and community engagement. However, these dimensions are often addressed implicitly, without a shared framework or consistent vocabulary through which they can be confidently articulated.

At the same time, expectations placed on the historic environment have widened. Heritage is increasingly expected to:

- Contribute to health, wellbeing, and quality of life
- Support inclusive and locally distinctive place-making
- Sustain traditional skills and forms of care
- Demonstrate public value alongside statutory protection

These challenges are not unique to Historic England. Local planning authorities, conservation officers, consultants, regeneration teams, and private and third-sector heritage decision-makers across the UK face similar pressures when seeking to recognise lived experience, community knowledge, skills, and cultural practice alongside material conservation.

This research was undertaken to consolidate existing practice, clarify how intangible heritage operates in relation to historic places, and provide practical, transferable tools to support more confident and consistent engagement across the built heritage sector.

Research approach

Evidence was gathered through three complementary strands:

1. **Internal focus groups** with Historic England staff across a wide range of roles and specialisms, exploring how intangible heritage is currently understood and addressed within the organisation and the broader built heritage sector.
2. **Policy, documentary, and literature analysis** spanning heritage, design, conservation, and place-based practice.
3. **Three in-depth case studies**, selected to reflect different scales, geographies, and policy contexts:

- a. **Bootham Crescent, York:** a former football stadium redevelopment examining how community memory, identity, and place attachment inform decisions about adaptation and change.
- b. **Heritage Building Skills Programme:** a national skills and training initiative exploring how craft knowledge, skills transmission, and professional practice underpin long-term conservation outcomes.
- c. **Kirkham High Street Heritage Action Zone, Lancashire:** a place-based regeneration programme demonstrating how heritage, health, and wellbeing intersect through everyday use and local cultural practices.

Together, these strands reveal consistent patterns in how intangible heritage shapes historic places and how it is already negotiated within everyday professional work.

Key finding: working with a ‘third register’

A central finding of the research is that the relationship between intangible cultural heritage and the historic environment is not well served by treating them as separate “domains” or matters of concern. In practice, professionals do not encounter cultural value and material fabric independently. Instead, heritage significance is produced through the ways cultural practices, memories, skills, and experiences are embedded within, expressed through, and sustained by physical places, materials, and spatial arrangements within the historic environment.

Across the research, decisions about conservation, design, adaptation, and management were shaped by how places are used, remembered, worked, and experienced over time. Cultural life influences how historic places are understood, valued, and cared for, just as physical form enables or constrains cultural practice.

The research describes this combined condition as a ‘third register’. This is not a new heritage category, nor a replacement for existing distinctions between tangible and intangible heritage. Rather, it provides a way of recognising the practical conditions through which cultural meaning and material heritage operate together, and through which significance becomes visible in real-world heritage work.

Crucially, this binding between cultural life (intangible) and the historic environment (tangible) can be identified and described in consistent ways. These recurring patterns are articulated through a series of five **Cultural Mechanisms**.

Five cultural mechanisms

Across all strands of the research, five recurring Cultural Mechanisms were identified. These describe the main ways in which intangible cultural heritage is carried, supported, and sustained through the historic environment, and how cultural meaning and material fabric are bound together in practice:

1. **Materials** that carry cultural memory
2. **Spaces** that support cultural use
3. **Practices** that animate conservation
4. **Narratives** that shape significance
5. **Experiences** that connect people and place

Together, these provide a practical framework for recognising how cultural life and material heritage operate together, and for articulating this relationship within heritage decision-making, design, conservation, and management processes.

Principles and priorities for built heritage practice

The findings are translated into two aligned sets of guidance intended to support work across Historic England and the wider UK built heritage sector.

- **Designer principles** aimed at architects, conservation professionals, and those shaping physical change, focusing on:
 - Designing historic places as active cultural settings
 - Allowing managed change where it sustains living cultural practices
 - Recognising how materials, spaces, and layouts carry cultural meaning
- **Decision-maker priorities** aimed at policymakers, funders, asset owners, and senior leaders, focusing on:
 - Treating community knowledge and lived experience as authoritative evidence
 - Embedding co-creation early in heritage processes
 - Supporting skills, practices, and forms of care that underpin conservation
 - Aligning heritage decision-making with wider objectives around wellbeing, inclusion, and place quality

These findings represent a shift in orientation that supports more confident, transparent, and consistent engagement with intangible heritage within existing statutory and policy frameworks.

Implications

The research addresses a persistent challenge in built heritage practice: how to recognise and work with cultural value that is not fully captured by physical fabric, without undermining established conservation principles or decision-making processes.

By identifying how intangible and material heritage are bound together in practice, and by articulating this relationship through the Cultural Mechanisms, the research provides a clearer basis for evidencing cultural value, supporting decisions about change and use, and explaining why particular practices, skills, or forms of engagement matter to the long-term care of historic places.

For Historic England, the research supports ongoing work to respond to the growing emphasis on living, practice-based understandings of heritage, and to strengthen how cultural value, skills, and lived experience are considered alongside physical fabric within guidance, programmes, and decision-making.

More widely, the research provides a clearer basis for heritage professionals across the UK to articulate and evidence the role of intangible heritage in everyday practice, supporting more consistent and defensible decision-making where historic places are subject to change and ongoing use.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that intangible cultural heritage is not an additional layer to be considered after physical fabric, nor a parallel concern to be addressed separately. Cultural practices, memories, skills, and experiences are integral to how historic places acquire meaning and how decisions about their future are understood.

By clarifying how cultural and material dimensions of heritage operate together, the research provides built heritage professionals with a practical basis for engaging with intangible heritage in everyday work. Grounded in real-world practice through a secondment to Historic England, the findings are applicable across the UK built heritage sector and support more confident and consistent decision-making within the context of the historic environment.

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