Centre for Critical Heritage Studies current research themes

The centre is conducting joint research, initially under five main thematic areas:

1. Making global heritage futures
   This research cluster explores how heritage – as assemblages of objects, places or practices from the past, in the present – is used in future making practices which invoke ecological, political, economic, social and cultural processes that simultaneously address and transcend local, national and global scales.

   The work of the cluster considers how heritage is interpreted and practiced within the politics of memory production and identity politics; how heritage is appropriated and exploited in terms of rights, property and ownership; the ways heritage is used in connection to the commodification and consumption of the “past”, of “culture” and “nature”; and how heritage is being globalized as an assemblage of institutions, expert positions, knowledge and discourses. It explores articulations of both natural and cultural heritage and the relationship between them. The cluster coordinates and supports critical and interdisciplinary research activities and projects, with a cross-boundary character. Examples of work currently being conducted as part of this research theme at UCL include the AHRC funded Heritage Futures research programme and AHRC-GCRF funded Restricted Access Pilot Project.

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2. Embracing the archive - critical archival and digital humanities studies cluster
   The work of this cluster intersects with that of ICARUS (the International Centre for Archives and Records Research) and the UCL Centre for Digital Humanities, both based in the Department of Information Studies at UCL, but both operating on a cross-disciplinary basis.

   We take the Archival Multiverse and a participatory approach to knowledge production as a starting point. We are interested in collaborating with all those inside and outside the academy who are interested in critically exploring questions about the nature of the archive and digital cultural heritage including:

   • The many meanings and forms of the archive, inclusive of orality and performance, in the digital age
   • The role of the archive and digital cultural heritage in supporting and challenging significant historical narratives, and the extent to which these interventions reflect marginalised and intersecting presences with regard to gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and disability
   • The role of records and access to information in supporting individual and collective endeavours for social justice

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3. Curating the city – transdisciplinary approaches in urban settings
This cluster focuses on urban heritage, exploring the dilemmas faced by academics and practitioners, specialists and laypeople, policy makers and citizens alike when it comes to negotiating the relationship between the urban past, present and future.

We are interested in questioning the ways in which heritage can be used to generate particular, often exclusionary, narratives of urban identity, and to legitimise certain kinds of urban intervention, and our research activities aim to challenge established heritage practice to support the relevant and resilient development of historic cities in response to contemporary conditions.

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4. Heritage and wellbeing
The core agenda of this cluster is to critically explore the connectivities between heritage and wellbeing. We address from various perspectives the key question of: ‘what constitutes wellbeing’ and more specifically we ask; how heritage is called upon to make sense of what constitutes wellbeing and in turn how wellbeing is called upon to make sense of what constitutes heritage.

We are interested in pursuing the longstanding associations between heritage and wellbeing. From grand narrative articulations of heritage as a ‘redemptive formula’ and as ontological, spiritual, existential, magical expressions of cure and healing to grounded everyday quests for care and protection. We also see our challenge to critically respond to the recent emergence of ‘wellbeing’ as a new ‘buzzword’ and ‘heritage value’ that operates at the level of policy-making, professional training and critical-academic research.

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5. Heritage and science
Conservation science has been at the core of heritage studies since their very inception. What is meant by conservation in different cultural settings and the way science sustains a universal approach to heritage value has come under scrutiny. We intend to follow this further as well as recognise that during the last 5-10 years we have witnessed a science turn within humanities and social sciences.
The impact of studies of ancient DNA on understanding past and contemporary population change and migration, the increasing importance of Big Data, e.g. digital humanities, as well as other new science based analytical methodologies, such as network analysis will likely have a profound effect upon future directions of research, and therefore should also be the subject of critical analysis.

Two themes:
- Science in humanities and historical studies
- Science in conservation and heritage management

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Heritage Academy
Alongside the thematic research areas, the Heritage Academy aims to be a bridge between the academic world and the surrounding society, in line with UCL’s commitment to strengthening dialogue between research and practice.

Existing relations with museums and cultural institutions in London provide a strong base for exploring further positive developments between critical heritage research and partners outside UCL. We see positive outcomes in establishing stronger shared dialogues and research initiatives through creating a Heritage Academy. Our aim will be to create a London-wide network of support and dialogue to generate new research questions and educational opportunities.

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