

Value and fluidity in collaborative heritage research planning: Perspectives from the memory, meaning-making and collections project.

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## Value and Fluidity in Collaborative Heritage Research Planning: Perspectives from the Memory, Meaning-Making and Collections Project

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Value and Fluidity in Collaborative Heritage**

# Research Planning

## Perspectives from the Memory, Meaning-Making and Collections Project

*Michael J. E. O'Rourke (bio)*

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Notions of value and significance have long been employed, both consciously and unintentionally, as a means of guiding a broad range of heritage initiatives. The degree to which public modes of valuation are effectively applied in such frameworks has been heartily critiqued, however, particularly with respect to the application of descendant community notions of heritage significance. This article addresses the topic of value in heritage research planning, drawing from experiences shared during the planning and implementation of the Memory, Meaning-Making and Collections project, a partnership between First Story Toronto and members of the University of Toronto and Michigan State University research communities. The Memory, Meaning-Making and Collections project was originally developed to mobilize a unique collection of objects under the care of First Story Toronto (FST), formerly known as the Toronto Native Community History Project, and to investigate the impact of museum collections on memory and a range of community-based heritage initiatives. Conducting the project in a fluid, responsive fashion facilitated the attribution of a continually evolving suite of values to the First Story Toronto collection and thereby promoted a varied range of community heritage-related activities. As a method, fluidity in heritage research planning has the potential of increasing community collaboration and thereby improving the relevance of results to community members. In this article I discuss the importance of value and fluidity in heritage research planning and outline how such tenets led to substantial changes to the overall trajectory of the Memory, Meaning-Making and Collections project. **[End Page 58]**

## Value and Significance in Material Heritage Research

The material remains of the past, those objects which have survived into

the modern day either through acts of careful curation or by chance of preservation, commonly come to be regarded as precious or in some way important to people in the present (Lipe 1984; Nicholas 2005; Samuels 2008). While the age of an object alone may be considered in conceptualizing value overall, it is seldom the sole reason that an object is considered to be significant. As Lohmann (2010: 294) has noted with regard to the Asabano of Papua New Guinea, objects with a history of use tend to be viewed as more valuable than a new or pristine version of the same object. This valuation of older objects among the Asabano is less a function of the age of the material than a reflection of the “sentimental attachment” to the object and its association with the people who used it in the past. Thus, while time depth may be implicated in the value ascribed to material remains of the past, there are often more evocative attributes related to age that might provide better nuanced and socially relevant assessments of how these objects come to be valued by people in the present.

Individuals and groups who identify with material heritage are said to impart actively different kinds of value upon these tangible links with the past. Indeed, many have noted that when it comes to material heritage, value is best conceived of as an active process rather than as an inherent quality of the object (Carver 1996: 49; Darvill 2010: 391–92; Graeber 2001: 254; Tainter and Lucas 1983: 714). As Kathryn Samuels (2008: 91) notes with regard to the management of archaeological remains, “value is action-oriented (a verb, not a noun), and therefore embedded in practice. Specifically, value is produced through actions that engage with temporal relationships via material heritage.”

The particular nature of values ascribed to heritage materials is largely dependent on the individual (or collective) contexts in which these objects are experienced (Appadurai 1986; Darvill 2010; Labadi 2007; Lipe 1984; Samuels 2008). Such contextualized values can play an important role in the effective design and implementation of a range of heritage initiatives, as demonstrated in the orchestration of museum exhibits such as the Alaska: Looking Both Ways exhibition (Clifford 2004), as well as

in the management of cultural landscapes seen in the Kitigaaryuit  
Archaeological Inventory and Mapping Project (Hart and Cockney 1998).

**[End Page 59]**

The degree to which...

# Value and Fluidity in Collaborative Heritage Research Planning

*Perspectives from the Memory, Meaning-Making and Collections Project*

MICHAEL J. E. O'ROURKE, *University of Toronto*

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