EDITORIAL:

This issue of furnace journal is the third in a series of four on the meanings and values of World Heritage inspired by the pioneering AHRC funded research project ‘Communicating World Heritage: Meanings, Values and Practices amongst Communities of Interest’ undertaken in the Ironbridge International Institute for Cultural Heritage at the University of Birmingham.

The first issue in the series considered Industrial World Heritage and the second looked at World Heritage Education. This issue is on the topic of Communities and World Heritage and will be followed by the final instalment in the series, which will address tourism. This volume showcases five papers relating to the relationship between World Heritage Sites, considered in the UNESCO discourse as sites of Outstanding Universal Value, and communities who live within or alongside this places. The papers present case studies from four continents and include examples of both cultural and natural World Heritage Sites.

The keynote paper by John H. Jameson introduces this volume by highlighting reoccurring themes in the individual papers. These relate to both the communities and their disconnection from site management as well as what he describes as ‘the participatory culture model’ where community engagement is not mere education or
outreach conducted by heritage specialists but meaningful cooperation. His arguments are illustrated by recent research conducted by various scholars on the critical assessment of the relationships local people have with their heritage. These vary from communities opposing scientific interpretation of a World Heritage Site or, such as in the case of indigenous peoples, where they create new interpretative narratives. Jameson characterises the exclusion of local communities as often caused by the elitism of officials and academics, and the politics of power. Despite numerous international charters developed by bodies such as ICOMOS, he argues that, in some cases, it is almost impossible to comply with such international standards due to political, social and economic situations where there is no respect for multiculturalism. Hence, he is advocating for collective research in the construction of more pluralistic narratives, where heritage professionals take up a role of mediators more than mitigators.

As will be seen as a theme across a number of these papers, the absence of meaningful consultation or involvement of local people in the identification of heritage and development of Management Plans, contributes to the disconnection of local people from the sites in which they live. This volume will show that this disconnection has been inspired by top-down governmental bureaucracy, which creates conflicts where not only communities suffer, but also the cultural heritage in its tangible and intangible forms. Two cultural heritage sites in Thailand form the focus of the paper by Bhadravana Bongaslip, which itself provides a unique insight into the operations of the Thai Government in its implementation of World Heritage processes. The author illustrates the complexity of the interrelated state departments, which form a structure of state bureaucracy where World Heritage is a matter of foreign policy and national importance. However, in this context, Bongaslip presents two contrasting case studies, the first representing the traditional top-down approach to World Heritage inscription used at the Historic City of Ayutthaya and the second, where a bottom-up approach empowering the local community has been utilised at Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, Nakhon Si Thammarat. In the case of the former the local community feels alienated from the ancient structures within their city and negotiate governmental interference in their lives and businesses. The result has been that people conceal and even destroy archaeological remains when they encounter them. In the latter case, in contrast, the nomination of the site has
been led by well-respected people within the local community and is seen as a source of local pride and identity.

George Richards considers the involvement of UNESCO in post-conflict restoration of cultural heritage sites, using the case studies of the Bridge of Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Timbuktu in Mali. In both instances monuments of international significance were restored and the paper addresses the effects on the local community. Similarly to Bongaslip’s paper both a bottom-up and a top-down approach are presented. The work on the Bridge of Mostar was undertaken by an international coalition including UNESCO itself, but despite becoming an international symbol of restoration the local community remains divided. In the contrasting case of the more recent work in Mali, perhaps resulting from the need to use local experts due to the adobe architecture in question, there was considerably more interaction with the local community. Although it is too soon to conclude on the effectiveness of the restoration of Timbuktu, time will tell if the involvement of the local community may prove its value.

Diana Farisah Rahman and Gregorius Afioma’s paper on the Komodo National Park in Indonesia reflects many similar issues raised in this volume. The authors reflect on a vast increase in the popularity of the National Park to tourists in the last two decades. As a result, in combination with conservation led initiatives to preserve the habitat of the Komodo dragons, there has been a serious impact on the lifestyles and traditions of the local community. The community have found their fishing waters and forestry practices curtailed by zoning restrictions, whilst seeing no economic benefits as all tourist infrastructure has been developed on a neighbouring island. This is in contravention of best practice ideals relating to sustainable development. The result is that, while the unique value of the Komodo dragon to humanity may be preserved, a whole dimension of also unique intangible heritage is at risk of being completely lost. Instead of prioritising the people of Komodo Island as a core community and respecting their traditions and cultural processes in the development of the Management Plans for the site, international tourism is being given precedence to the advantage of local interests.

Melinda Harlov’s paper presents a contrasting case study from a cultural World Heritage Site in Hungary. This is a particularly interesting example, deriving as it does from a site which has been the focus of conservation for over fifty years, with the
inscription on the World Heritage List only a part of a much longer running development of ideas about how the site should be managed. The Old Village of Hollókő is a Palócz settlement which continued to be occupied into the second part of the 20th century. Its nature as a ‘living’ example of Hungarian rural life is at the core of its Outstanding Universal Value. However, the restrictions resulting from being preserved as a ‘heritage site’ led to the local community shifting to a nearby area and returning to the old village to practice traditional practices as performances of folklore rather than as a part of modern life. Harlov’s paper leads us to consider if this is the inevitable future for places like Komodo Island and if this fundamentally undermines the very values for which these sites are inscribed on the World Heritage List.

All the papers in this issue have highlighted issues of imbalance between the needs of local communities and the way sites are operated, which is often through top down management procedures which are run at a high level and which rarely involve meaningful consultation or engagement of the people who actually live within these sites. In all cases, relating to sites inscribed as both cultural and natural sites, the lack of interaction with the community risks loss of heritage values, whether it be through the vanishing of intangible heritage held in traditional lifeways, or by the physical threats to fabric. The case of Hollókő, where the living culture that is supposed to survive has been reduced to a theatrical performance prompts a question, is this a natural progression for other internationally designated sites where communities feel disconnected from their heritage?

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