

Heritage conservation today: Consensus or collision?

**Report of the meeting held on 18th September 2007, Worcester College, Oxford
convened by the ‘Consensus or collision?’ research cluster**

Background

The ‘Consensus or collision?’ research cluster, funded as part of the Preserving our Past initiative by EPSRC/ AHRC/ ESRC and English Heritage, involved twenty three core participants drawn from a wide range of disciplines and areas of expertise. Our overall aim was to provide an effective, tangible and imaginative way of bringing together experts with a wide range of methodological experience relevant to the study and management of the historic environment in order to create new awareness and facilitate development of co-ordinated future research collaborations. To achieve this we held a developmental series of meetings over a one year period, culminating in an open meeting on 18th September 2007 at which we presented our findings to a wide invited audience of fellow researchers, policy-makers, end users and representatives from research funding bodies.

Meeting format

The meeting was informed by three keynote addresses as listed below, which set the scene and summarised some issues of inter-disciplinary collaboration in studies of the historic environment.

- ‘The AHRC/EPSRC Science and Heritage Research Programme’ by Professor May Cassar (Director, EPSRC/AHRC Research Programme in Science and Heritage)
- ‘Burslem: conservation and regeneration issues’ by Janet Miller (Atkins)
- ‘Interdisciplinary research collaboration for the historic environment: A scientist’s perspective’ by Professor Peter Brimblecombe (University of East Anglia)

The core of the meeting was devoted to four group presentations, focusing on outline inter-disciplinary research proposals developed by research cluster members during and after one of our previous meetings in Burslem. These presentations aimed both to summarise the research proposal and also to reflect upon the group members’ perceptions of the experience of inter-disciplinary research project design. The talks were on the following topics:

- ‘Memory and materiality’
- ‘What is the nitty gritty? Public engagement with dust.’
- ‘People, pots and place’
- ‘The ground is a library’

Areas of discussion

Five main themes arose during the meeting, and in previous meetings, as outlined below which deserve more attention in the future.

a) The exercise itself

Several participants in the research cluster and, particularly, in the group exercises to devise outline inter-disciplinary research grant applications, noted that the exercise was very artificial for several reasons. Firstly, there was a limited range of disciplines involved in the exercise, and others (for example e-science, nanotechnology) would have brought exciting new dimensions to some of the proposals. Also, individuals were assigned to groups and then each group left to devise its own proposal, based on the expertise, passions and perceived areas of commonality amongst the group. In reality, it would be more usual for one person to have an idea for a research project and then involve others. Furthermore, the basic idea for a project would come out of an individual's expertise not from a short site visit (in our case, to Burslem). However, the exercise was perceived to be valuable in that it gave opportunities to study the process of inter-disciplinary project development and also to deepen our understanding of different research cultures. Interestingly, despite the difficulties involved in the process (for example, one group had to start again from scratch after one proposal failed to develop to everyone's satisfaction and as group members came and went) four really creative and interesting proposals emerged at the end of the exercise. The four proposals each illustrated a different mode of coming together of the group participants, and a different balance between academic, industrial and end-user partners.

b) Barriers to inter-disciplinary collaboration

During the course of the research cluster meetings series, several issues were identified which make collaboration between people from very different research traditions difficult. For example, several cluster participants noted that social scientists/ humanities-based researchers seem much more aware of the advantages of engaging with scientists than the other way round. Perhaps this reveals an underlying lack of comprehension and/or respect for social science and humanities-based research on the part of scientists. Alternatively, it may reflect the greater amount of money available for science rather than arts and social science research. Another keenly felt issue was the fact that it is not only methods that vary between research traditions, but also the underlying research questions asked. This creates more of a barrier to integrating methodologies, as researchers are forced to engage with deeper issues of research philosophy. Linked to, and perhaps clearly exposed by this issue, is that of the different language used by researchers from different traditions. It was clear from a very early stage of the research cluster activities, that we were not always using the same words to mean the same things, and that furthermore each discipline or subject area had its own (often exclusionary) lexicon. Thus, the social scientists were happy talking about epistemology and ontology, whilst the scientists preferred expressions such as calibration, quantification and hypothesis-testing. A final issue which became very clear during the course of the research cluster activities was the time-

consuming nature of all the different research types. It is often seductively easy to think that it is only your own type of research that needs real depth, time and is difficult, whereas the research of very different (and often quite alien) disciplines, must be quick and simple. To take a slightly caricatured example, scientists often perceive social science work of a qualitative nature involving participant observation to be ‘quick and easy’ because it doesn’t involve any quantification or the use of high tech equipment. The lack of understanding by many scientists of what such qualitative work really involves means that they cannot see how it could take a long time. Similarly, social scientists often assume that hard science involving high tech equipment is quick and easy (a sort of ‘plug and play’ approach), because they have never experienced the frustration of calibration, development and maintenance of such techniques.

c) Approaches to inter-disciplinary project design

The ‘Burslem exercise’ revealed several different strategies for the development of inter-disciplinary project ideas. Some groups were swayed by a dynamic and passionate group member, who provided a focus for the group based on their own expertise and interests. Other groups spent time trying to establish a consensus by discussing potential topics and seeing whether each member could contribute anything to them. A further approach involved groups searching for some overarching idea or concept which could then be explored by the group working both individually and together. These different strategies were reflected in three alternative models of inter-disciplinary projects, as illustrated diagrammatically in figure 1. The first involves one research question or direction to which other specialities may contribute. The second consist of several parallel lines of investigation on a single topic or theme, and the third is characterised by the exploration of one core idea or concept with strands of research bifurcating away from, and reconvening on this central idea.

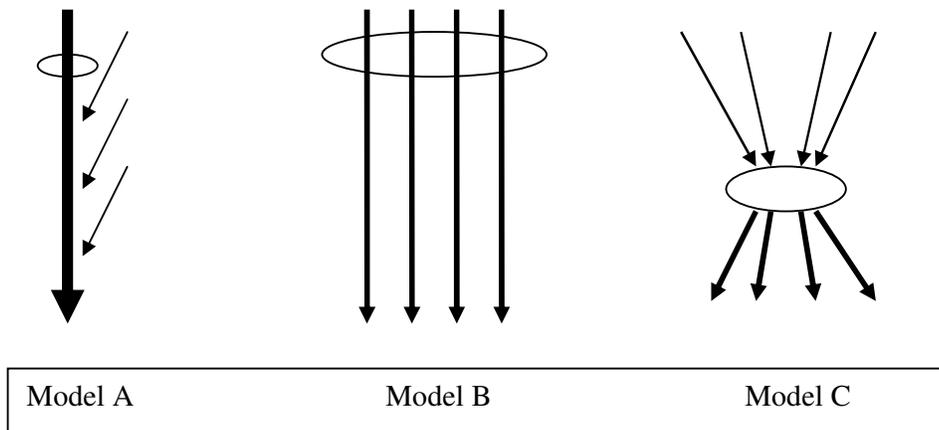


Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of different strategies for inter-disciplinary research projects. Research proceeds from the top of each diagram following the arrows which represent individual disciplines or methods. The thickness of the arrows reflects the ‘importance’ of their contribution. The ovals represent the underpinning concept/ idea or focus of the project and their location reflects when and how these are chosen.

These different approaches result in very different levels and types of integrations between the various strands of the research, which will have ramifications for practical issues of project management and staff involvement. Issues of leadership are also influenced by these different types of project design, with the different templates requiring different management approaches and strategies. The type of project design also influences the degree of innovation in different aspects of the project. For example in model A, where a number of different methods are essentially ‘hand maidens’ of the central route of the project, not all methods would be equally innovative, as some are essentially simply being asked to supply small parts of a larger ‘jigsaw’.

d) Project management

The production of the outline inter-disciplinary research proposals also illustrated some key practical issues. Firstly, how would such large and complex projects be managed effectively? Experience from other inter-disciplinary projects suggests that fully engaging all the disparate elements and members of the project in the entire thing is a key to success – perhaps through work-shadowing (where project members can become involved in very different elements of the research), regular meetings at which early results are presented and discussed, and frequent updating of a central ‘bank’ of results and information. Secondly, several participants noted the potential challenges facing any PDRAs employed on such projects – how would young researchers, often employed to provide a very specialised skill-set, contribute to and engage with a complex and broad project with some quite alien components? A further and important aspect of keeping everyone involved in such a project engaged and committed relates to the outputs expected. For academics, publication is essential – but there are very different publishing traditions within the sciences and other disciplines. How might publications in high quality, international, refereed science journals be facilitated from a highly inter-disciplinary project? Conversely, how would ‘end user’ and industrial partners and local people involved in such projects craft outputs of relevance to them?

e) The way forward?

Several discussions held over the course of the research cluster activities pointed towards some general lessons and issues for the future, which we summarise here.

- Truly inter-disciplinary projects are expensive, because of the need for well-balanced representation of a number of different methods, and complex management requirements
- Inter-disciplinary project proposals require careful refereeing by people with experience of, and sympathy towards, the rather different nature of many inter-disciplinary projects. Such refereeing needs to take into account that not all aspects of inter-disciplinary project methodology will be equally innovative.
- In order to encourage inter-disciplinary research activity in the field of heritage science and the historic environment we propose that a series of more focused workshops would be of great value. Such workshops would concentrate on particular topics (eg urban heritage, buried heritage, ceramics) and proceed in a similar way to our research cluster, ie encouraging

presentations of different methods followed by group exercises to develop project proposals.

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