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Heritage in War and Peace 4 Years Later: An Ever-Growing Field

About the Heritage in War and Peace project and the book [Heritage in War and Peace: Legal and Political Perspectives for Future Protection](#), edited by Gianluigi Mastandrea Bonaviri and Mirosław M. Sadowski, published by Springer in 2024.

[Karima Bennoune](#), the former UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, famously remarked that “*cultural heritage is significant in the present, both as a message from the past and as a pathway to the future. Viewed from a human rights perspective, it is important not only in itself, but also in relation to its human dimension.*” Guided by these words, the *Heritage in War and Peace* project celebrated its fourth anniversary in December 2024.

1. How It All Started? New Beginnings

The beginnings of the *Heritage in War and Peace* project stem from the *Law and the City* conference, organised by the GLSA at the Faculty of Law, McGill University, in May 2021. Still grappling with the realities of the pandemic, the head of the conference committee, Mirosław M. Sadowski, was approached by two of the incoming participants of the cultural heritage panel, Gianluigi Mastandrea Bonaviri and Hani El Debuch, in March 2021. Without meeting one another in person, they found a common understanding of the words of [Renold and Chechi](#), who postulated that “*culture is understood, protected, and promoted not only for its physical manifestations but for the relationship of culture to people, individually or in groups, and the diversity of the relationships being protected and promoted.*” As such, they agreed to plan a conference dedicated solely to the questions of heritage, one that would bring the different perspectives—from the realm of peace and from the realm of war—together.

2. The First Seminar: Bridging the Gap

Planned for December 2021 at Sapienza University in Rome, the first conference had the uneasy task of bringing together heritage specialists from fields that have typically remained separate: those working with heritage in conflict and those working with heritage in peacetime. The

project received invaluable support from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which sponsored the [Virtual Museum](#) subproject, a 3D, alternative reality experience allowing for viewing selected Italian spaces. Presented for the first time in Rome in 2021, the Museum has since become a staple of all the project's conferences, with objects of Egyptian and Scottish heritage added to the virtual experience.

Despite a partially lost battle with the ever-changing pandemic mandates, the soon-turn hybrid conference succeeded in attracting over 50 speakers from around the world, mostly joining remotely. With the sessions divided into separate 'peace' and 'war' groups, a clear picture soon began to emerge: Given the particularities of heritage protection in the 21st century, which often involve small-scale community-based conflicts during peacetime, specialists from the two fields should be talking with one another.

3. The Second Conference: Building a Heritage Platform of Dialogue

This palpable need for dialogue between the peacetime- and war-time heritage experts made the project's organisers realise that one conference was not enough to bridge the gap between the two perspectives; rather, an ongoing conversation needed to take place, one centred around the conference.

The second edition of *Heritage in Law and Peace*, running in November 2022 at McGill University under the theme *Spaces of Conflict, Spaces of Justice: Between Natural Landscapes and Cityscapes*, allowed for exactly this. With a significant number of people involved in the project meeting in person for the very first time, the meeting resulted in over 70 people from all continents coming together in Montreal. As the conflict and peacetime perspectives were brought together for the first time in the same sessions, a number of vital realisations for the protection of our heritage emerged. Thus, the organisers realised that they needed to be more permanently preserved and share with the global public. In addition to continuing with the editions of the conference, two ideas appeared: that of a publication bringing together speakers from both editions of the conference and that of a more concrete platform of heritage discourse.

4. The Book: Opening the Project to the General Public

The first element of the plan to be realised was the book, which was published in early 2024 by Springer; it brings together over 50 authors in over 35 chapters. Divided into four parts, the first, "*Cultural Heritage Between Theory, the Past, and the Future*", comprises chapters related

to the different theoretical and historical approaches to the matters of heritage. The second part, “*Heritage Issues in Times of War and Conflict*”, collects papers concerning issues of heritage during wartime. The third, “*Heritage Issues in Times of Peace and Stability*”, focuses on the heritage question at peacetime. Ultimately, the fourth, “*Heritage as a Right: From the Fight for Preserving the Past to the Questions of Restitution*”, explores the relationships among heritage, human rights, and the questions of restitution.

Published in the *Law and Visual Jurisprudence* series headed by Anne Wagner and Sarah Marusek, the book is next to the virtual museum the first tangible outcome of the project, allowing the general public access to the thought-provoking conversations and ground-breaking discussions taking place at the project’s conferences. The project’s organisers, however, knew that the book itself was not enough to spread the message about the best practices of heritage protection available in the modern world.

5. The Third Conference: Heritage International Institute Arrives

Taking place at the University of Bologna in January 2024, the third conference was organised under the theme “*Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage through Past, Present and Future*”. Bringing together some 80 heritage scholars and professionals from around the world, it followed a format similar to the previous one; however, the caretakers-moderators of the specific panels were experts in their fields who were involved in the selection of papers for specific panels.

The main change, however, was the official establishment of [Heritage International Institute](#), a permanent body responsible for preserving and spreading valuable insights from successive conferences throughout the year. Permanently bringing together the network of experts from the various editions of the seminar, now divided into different departments according to their specialisation, the Institute organises various smaller events throughout the year, being able to respond quickly to global events, such as in the case of Syrian Cultural Heritage at the turn of 2024 and 2025, organising a [Syrian Heritage Week](#) in early 2025.

6. The Fourth Conference: Building the Legacy

The fourth seminar was organised under the theme of “*Heritage and Human Rights. Perspectives through Past, Present and Future*” at the University of Strathclyde in December 2024. Bringing together a record number of almost 100 heritage experts, it cemented the

conference as one of the global events related to the matters of heritage. This was further assured at this edition of the conference by running an exhibit of a resident artist, adding another thread to the project's ever-growing network that allows researchers from around the world to come together, ensuring that policy solutions are shared and known to those who are at the forefront of battle for the preservation of our past for humanity's future.

7. Conclusion: The Work Continues

Interdisciplinary—with experts from law and political science to archaeology and architecture to art—intergenerational—aims to bring together established scholars, practitioners, early career researchers and students—international—with speakers from all continents—and forward-looking—embracing technology—the project is well prepared to continue its work to overcome the shifting challenges that heritage faces in the present day. The next conference, planned for December 2025 at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, will be organised under the theme of “*Heritage and Technology*”. Furthermore, the University of Strathclyde and the University of Mississippi, together with the Heritage International Institute will organise a Summer School in June 2025 on the questions of heritage, human rights and space law. In the world of growing conflicts, it is only by coming and working together that we will be able to preserve our heritage for future generations.