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Modern Society and the Role of Heritage

ABSTRACT: The purpose of the paper is to highlight the characteristics of postmodern society and its needs in order to better understand the role of heritage in the lives of individuals and communities. The article discusses the causes and consequences of the radical changes that took place in the 1960s. It describes the effects of rapid economic and environmental changes, which greatly threaten heritage in its original environment and lead to the loss of traditional knowledge, the erasure of identity, and the emergence of alienation. The characteristics of modernism and postmodernism are briefly presented; we also show the changes in public attitudes brought about by the use of modern communication technology. The phenomenon of individualisation and the influence of consumerism on the instrumentalisation of modern man are highlighted.

From the perspective of philosophical anthropology, the influence of the social crisis on interpersonal relationships and the role of the individual, as well as the loss of meaning, are discussed. The importance of the active role of the public in the protection and preservation of heritage, which has become a value of society in the 21st century, is explained. Changes in heritage approaches and concepts of heritage preservation are presented through a review of international charts and documents. The concept of the ecomuseum is presented and the key role of the heritage community is outlined. The importance of societal and personal values is highlighted from a psychological perspective, and taking this into account, opportunities and responses to societal needs that heritage can offer are identified. The importance of active public involvement in heritage preservation as a value of the living environment is explained. The role of ethics and the humanistic nature of heritage processes is briefly outlined.

Keywords: Heritage; Museums; Values, Public; Inclusion; Ethics

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1 Introduction

During the international heritology summer school at Alma Mater Europaea University, held in Ljubljana in July 2024, the author gave two separate lectures on the role of heritage in contemporary society and the importance of heritage interpretation. In recent years, several articles on interpretation have been published in Slovenian, but there are few publications on contemporary society and its needs from the perspective of heritage. This prompted the decision to write a paper on the characteristics of contemporary society and their impact on heritage.

The turning points of the 1960s brought rapid economic, environmental, and social changes, which on the one hand endangered heritage like never before, but on the other hand, brought new challenges and opportunities. The causes of the destruction and loss of heritage in its original environment are manifold, with industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation being among the most recognisable. Strong migration flows and radical changes in the way of life have led to the loss of traditional knowledge, the erasure of identities and rootlessness. However, the increase in general interest in heritage can also be recognized as a reflection of the specific needs of the modern environment. Consumerist thinking has permeated the way of thinking, and the instrumentalization of reason has also affected interpersonal relationships. Specific needs often stem from the personal distress of people who feel alienated in an atomized society. Modern man is marked by a tragic loss of meaning in life (Frankl 1989).

In order to understand the changes in the social role of heritage and the transformation of concepts, it is necessary to understand the specific characteristics of the modernity and postmodernity. These eras are marked by numerous antagonisms that at the same time also connect them deeply. The use of communication technology has brought about major changes in the habits and needs of the public and has offered unimaginable possibilities for the interpretation and communication of heritage. However, this same society, the society of the spectacle, poses major challenges for heritage institutions and points the way to a new humanism (Debord 1983).

The key developments of the 21st century in the heritage field are the result of decades of conceptual changes, which are well reflected in interna-

tional documents and charters. Changes in concepts and new approaches to heritage protection and public involvement can be observed throughout international heritage documents. In the 21st century, a holistic concept prevails, with heritage recognized as a social value that we protect and preserve for future generations. The heritage community becomes a key factor in contemporary heritage discourse (Council of Europe 2005). An involved and active community is capable of protecting and preserving heritage, which, despite its legal protection, often cannot be saved from destruction. An aware and empowered community is instrumental in making heritage a cornerstone of identity, education, cultural policy, religion, and economic development. Interpretation, which focuses on heritage as a holistic phenomenon, is of key importance in the social processes of heritage preservation. Inclusive interpretation is a bridge to understanding communicated cultural messages and accepting heritage as part of our personal values. In the confusing society of postmodern contradictions, ethics has also taken centre stage in the heritage field.

The paper is based on the premise that heritage is crucial for the preservation of humanity in society. The second premise is that inclusive interpretation is key to engaging the public, which is a prerequisite for preserving heritage as a unique and irreplaceable quality of life (International Council on Monuments and Sites 2014). The methods used are analysis, literature review, comparison, and synthesis. The research follows an interdisciplinary approach, based on heritology, and includes hermeneutics, philosophical anthropology, psychology, and cultural history.

The purpose of the paper is to offer a framework for consideration of the social role of heritage in the modern and postmodern era. Another purpose is to explain the nature of heritage processes from the perspective of philosophical anthropology and hermeneutics, which place heritage within the context of humanism. The goal of this paper was to offer broader humanistic perspectives on heritage preservation, based on the insights from philosophical anthropology, ethics, and psychology. The review of selected sources and literature is designed to assist in the study and protection of heritage.

2 Heritage and Modern Society[2]

Every day, three to five books on heritage and museums are published worldwide. This can be understood as a reflection of the needs of modern society and a kind of response to the rapid disappearance of the remnants of the past. Heritage has never been as endangered as it is in the age of consumerism.

There are various reasons for this. Rapid urbanization and industrialization with the construction of extensive infrastructure are just some of them. Global interventions in the environment are changing the cultural landscape and the world. Traditional social ties have been loosened or broken. Globalization has largely erased regional and local characteristics. There is no need to mention the terrible destruction caused by wars. It is enough to remember the destruction of landscapes by chemical weapons during the First World War (Košir, Črešnar and Mlekuž 2019), the systematic bombing of cities during the Second World War (Love 2012), and the destruction of Sarajevo in the Serbian-Bosnian conflicts. Those who have not experienced pre-war Syria, Ukraine as depicted by Svetlana Alexievich, and Odessa as portrayed by Isaac Babel, are forever deprived of the images and values of yesterday's world (Applebaum 1995; Alexievich 2016; Babel 2019). However, it is neglect and oblivion that threaten heritage most of all, not war, as one might infer from daily media reports. When memories fade, things fall out of use, and monuments or buildings lose their significance for the surrounding area, it is, despite legal protection, very difficult to preserve them. Some items find their way into museums; others end up in attics. Most of them disappear into landfills, waiting to be discovered in fragments and badly damaged, through expensive and time-consuming archaeological methods.

With this, we have already touched upon the characteristics of modern society, albeit only superficially. Modern society is recognized by its highly diverse, even contradictory and conflicting views on almost all

2 I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr Jelka Pirkovič, Dr Janez Weiss, Barbara Kalan, Anja Poštrak, Aleksandra Nestorović, Lucija Perko and Jana Puhar for their comprehensive advice and assistance in creating this paper. Without their help, the text would have been much more clappy. A big thank to my former student Timotej Pavlin for the improvements in the translation! *Amicus verus avis rara*!

fundamental issues of life. As a social value, heritage is inherently polysemous and inevitably conflicting. This dichotomy is reflected in the relationship between society and individuals. On the one hand, there is enthusiasm for the establishment of new museums, growing interest in cultural tourism, and mass visits to UNESCO monuments and famous museums. On the other hand, there is indifference and destruction. It probably goes without saying how much of a threat mass tourism poses to heritage (Perko 2016). Enthusiasm for heritage is often a reflection of fashionable nostalgia for the past, which is not entirely harmless and, unfortunately, all too often leads to new forms of intolerance and conflict (Bauman 2018, 49). Perhaps the most damaging thing for heritage is indifference. It often happens unnoticed and only comes to light when the damage has already been done, when it is usually too late to take action (Perko 2018). Neglect and oblivion have multiple causes, just as the concept of heritage is multifaceted and diverse, as the concept of the public is also polysemous. Let's try to shed some light on this through the characteristics of modern society!

3 Postmodernity, Post-postmodernity, or Simply Fluid Modernity?

The contemporary era is described in various ways: some call it postmodernity, others post-structuralism, others fluid modernity, etc. All these terms are quite elusive, as they are understood differently in different contexts (Lyotard 2002; Bauman 2018; Latour 2021). In recent decades, some new terms have also come into use, such as post-postmodernity and trans-modernity, etc. Postmodernity dates to the 1960s, a time of rapid post-war reconstruction of heavily devastated Europe and rapid industrialization and urbanization. This was followed by the quick disappearance of old city centres and the transformation of traditional rural landscapes. Large-scale agricultural interventions, the construction of transport links, and dams changed entire landscapes. Strong immigration flows led to the emergence of satellite settlements. These 'Towers of Babel' were largely populated by lonely, rootless, and identityless people. Western society was marked by consumerism, which brought about individualism and antisocial self-sufficiency (Bauman 2018, 90). 'The dark

side of individualism is self-centeredness, which flattens and narrows our lives, impoverishes them in meaning, and makes us less concerned about others or society,' wrote Ch. Taylor a quarter of a century ago (Taylor 2000, 10)[3]. The same author also recognized another fundamental characteristic of contemporary consumer society. He called it the 'primacy of the instrumental mind'. With this term, he referred to 'the kind of rationality we use when calculating the most economical use of resources for a given goal' (ibid.).

The criterion of instrumental reason has become a general social guideline that determines fundamental values and consequently transforms them into measurable and tangible assets[4]. Consequently, considering measurability and tangibility, people's attitudes toward the environment and their fellow human beings are also changing, which leads to alienation and isolation (Buber 1999, 118)[5]. Communication technology has further accelerated the atomization of a fragmented society. Identity crises and the disappearance of traditional values have been accompanied by an epidemic of loss of meaning in life. The COVID-19 pandemic has spread a general anxiety among people, which, with the loss of meaning, has become a fundamental characteristic of the so-called post-postmodern era (Frankl 1981; Desmet 2022, 125)[6].

The predominance of instrumental reason did not only lead to the ruthless exploitation of labour and natural resources. It has also led to the belief in the sole redeeming significance of technological development and the superiority of empirical, technological knowledge (Patočka 2021, 135–164). However, as early as the 1960s, major environmental disasters

3 Originally published as *The Malaise of Modernity* (House of Anansi Press, 1991); republished as *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1991).

4 The ambiguity of the English term value (in Slovenian *vrednost* and *vrednota*), is often used in Slovenian to economize heritage and reduce the meaning of the word to a purely material level. The authors of the proposal for the new Act on the Protection of Cultural Heritage-2 of the Republic of Slovenia consistently omit the term 'vrednota' and, in the spirit of neoliberalism, use the term 'vrednost' (in English both value) exclusively. Time will tell what benefits the law will bring to Slovenian society (Pirkovič et al. 2025).

5 First published as *Das Problem des Menschen* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1948).

6 The title of Viktor Frankl's anonymous publication in 1946 *Ein Psycholog erlebt das KZ*, later translated to English reads *A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp*. This was the original title of *Man's Search for Meaning*.

revealed the catastrophic nature of technically overestimated and irresponsible interventions in nature. Doubts were sown about the supremacy of the technological mind, and boundless trust in science and development was undermined (Schiele 2020, 47)[7]. Environmental disasters, the arms race, and uncertain political conditions led to student, worker, and environmental protests. The first civil society movements emerged. Over time, civil societies gained significant influence in various advocacy, education, monitoring, and service provision processes at the national and local levels. The growing political power of civil societies, which represent the interests of citizens and challenge political and business interests, has brought about the change in many areas of official and legal affairs. The public, demanding the right to democratic decision-making and active participation in social processes, finally gained a voice. We can say that the active role of the public marked the end of modernity and accelerated the transition to postmodernity.

The use of the terms modernity, modernism, postmodernity and postmodernism requires some clarification. In a historical sense, modernity refers to the modern era and is a relatively long period of world history. It began with the end of the Middle Ages and lasted for about half a millennium, from the Renaissance to the mid-20th century. On the other hand, the term modernism refers only to a short cultural period, which is most evident in the arts. Russian-American philologist and philosopher Mikhail Epstein explains that modernism emerged at the end of the 19th century, and in some places only after the First World War. It lasted until the 1950s and 1960s, depending on the version we follow (Epstein, Genis and Vladiv-Glover 1998; Èpštejn 2012, 89)[8]. The term modernism thus refers to the final phase of the modern era, which is most evident in the arts. This is also where all the contradictions of the era come to the fore. Mihail Epstein observes that 'the

7 The accident in Vajont, known as *Il disastro del Vajont*, occurred on 9 October 1963 as a result of a newly built hydroelectric power plant on the Alpine River Vajont, near Pordenone. An avalanche from Monte Toc slipped into an artificial lake, a wave of several meters washed away villages at the bottom of the valley, including Longarone. 1917 people died, including 487 children. (Disastro del Vajont 2025)

8 Summarized from the author's short essay available online http://www.focusing.org/apm_papers/epstein.html (17 July 2025).

gap between European individualism at its extreme limit of self-reflection and particularisation and the alienating, impersonal tendencies in culture and society is widening'. He adds: The modernist era is characterised by the development of mass culture, the rise of totalitarian governments, the development of atomic and electronic technology, the theoretical discovery of the unconscious, etc. The explosion of contradictions, which modernism further emphasised, led humanity from the modern era into the postmodern era in the second half of the 1960s and early 1970s (Epstein, Genis and Vladiv-Glover 1998). We might also add that the 20th century has earned itself the infamous nickname of the century of wars, and that there is no sign that armed conflicts are a characteristic feature of the modern era alone.

The term postmodernity was first used in 1979 by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in a polemic with the German philosopher, political scientist and sociologist Jürgen Habermas. Their dispute focused on the ideological, sociological and cultural consequences of a (new) concept that heralds the end of the modern era and marks the beginning of a new period (Lyotard 2002).

Postmodernity has established itself as a central concept in philosophical, sociological and cultural-historical debates on the developmental trends characteristic of Europe and North America in the 20th century. Slovenian literary historian Janko Kos describes postmodernity as a broader concept that is 'more comprehensive and superior, encompassing the social, cultural and spiritual existence of the world'[9]. He uses the term postmodernism to refer to the artistic trends of the late 20th century in literary history, theory, interpretation and criticism. Therefore, we can conclude that the terms modernity and postmodernity are more appropriate for the purposes of heritology. However, due to the interdisciplinary nature of heritology, which also extends to the fields of philosophical phenomenology and hermeneutics, the use of both terms, modernism and postmodernism, is acceptable.

9 Kos, Janko. Postmodernizem. Access: https://studentski.net/gradivo/ulj_fif_sl1_svk_sno_postmodernizem_01 (11. July 2025).

Postmodernity as a term for the period from the 1970s onwards does not have a completely uniform meaning. In French circles, the term poststructuralism is also used interchangeably for the same period. Zygmunt Bauman, who first used the term postmodernity, later proposed the term 'liquid modernity' on the grounds that it is still a modern era that is constantly and 'liquidly' changing (Bauman 2002, 38)[10]. Postmodernity can therefore be described as a series of critical, strategic, educational-rhetorical and propaganda practices that oppose modernist concepts of identity, historical progress, trust in science and the unambiguousness of meanings and values (Aylesworth 2015). Their effect on the existing, traditional structures of Western society is devastating, and in return they offer nothing but empty ideologies (Delsol 2019, 115)[11].

In agreement with Z. Bauman, we can easily conclude that essentially the same ideas and concepts are still present, albeit in a modified and greatly accelerated form. Jean-François Lyotard (2002) used the term postmodernity to highlight the differences compared to the modern era, which arose from Enlightenment thought at the end of the 17th and 18th centuries. The Enlightenment emphasised the power of reason and faith in progress, which stimulated awareness of the importance of education and the struggle for social equality. The Enlightenment reached its political peak with the French Revolution, and its social peak with the development of empirical science and philosophical rationalism. It paved the way for industrialisation and technological progress in all areas of human activity. The modern era also represents a radical shift in attitudes towards faith and God, who has been 'expelled' from the concept of man, the world and life by the dominance

10 In his 1993 book *Postmodern Ethics*, the author still uses the term postmodernity. (I would like to thank Jelka Pirkovič for the comment.)

11 The French philosopher Ch. Delsol reveals an obvious confrontation with authority, which is one of the pillars and fundamental concepts of Western society, linked to a series of imaginary (God), formal (judge, policeman, teacher) and informal (father) structures. The family is no longer the basic building block of society, but an obstacle to the euphoria spread by new gender theories. The second disturbing concept is responsibility; there are only rights. Basically, it is the demolition of the building blocks of Western civilization, which has catastrophic consequences on a social and personal level (Delsol 2019).

of empirical science (Delsol 2019, 141)[12]. A process of secularisation began in the Church, culminating in the Second Vatican Council between 1962 and 1965[13]. This brought a new era and changed the values in the daily life of Western societies, which until then had been strongly committed to Christianity (Delsol 2019, 155)[14].

We also associate modernity to the concept of liberalism at all levels, which brought stability and continuity to Western society through rapid economic development. It strengthens faith in science and technology and has a strong impact on the way of life. Until the 1960s, traditional social structures prevailed in the West. The family provided the framework for the classic social roles of men and women and the associated personal and social values (Delsol 2019, 115). From a philosophical point of view, this was also a time when the ultimate Truth prevailed. Mikhail Epstein says that the concepts of the modern era are 'truth', 'objectivity', 'soul', 'subjectivity', 'utopia', 'ideality', 'primary source' and 'originality' as well as "sincerity" and 'sentimentality' (Epstein 2016, 547).

Postmodernity refers to a specific economic or cultural state of Western society in the 1980s and 1990s. Z. Bauman identifies this era as a period of pronounced liberalism, which allowed a handful to accumulate wealth, and a disproportionate increase in poverty for the masses, especially in the Global South, which can be characterized by the words 'back to in-

12 J. J. Rousseau, who regarded the atheist philosopher of his time as a modernist, seems to have been the first to use the word to that effect ('Correspondance à MD', 15 January 1769). Littré (Dictionnaire), quoting a passage, explains: 'A modernist, someone who values modern times over antiquity'. (Vermeersch 2025)

13 The initiator of the Council and the changes was Pope John XXIII, who wanted to encourage the spiritual renewal of the Church and achieve Christian unity. A radical renewal of religious life followed, Latin ceased to be the liturgical language, theology changed, and the role of the Church in the world and the relationship with other religions was reconceptualized. (Britannica Editors 2025).

14 Emmanuel Todd, in the book *La défaite de l'Occident*, 2024, argues that there was a considerable boom in active religion in the 19th century, which lasted well into the first decades of the 20th century. The time of the substantive emptying of faith occurs after World War II, from the 60s onwards, when the ritual turns into a hollow formal custom with no deeper meaning. God is finally exiled in the postmodern age of radical nihilism and the devaluation of values. The state of mind is best reflected through the mass culture of violence (film, video, but no less the shallow, only negative reporting media of public information). (I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr Janez Weiss for the information.)

equality' (Bauman 2018, 79)[15]. Postmodernity can therefore be described as an initially silent, but later very vocal, resistance to progressivism, as an opposition to the supremacy of reason, science and technology, followed by the destruction of values and resistance to established, authoritarian social structures (Èpštejn 2012, 28).

The first phase of postmodernity is characterised by broad cultural activity, which is also strongly reflected in the fields of philosophy and sociology. The second phase is marked by digitalisation and the development of communication and information systems. The digital hyperproduction of information leads to the manipulation of almost all aspects of the media environment, which on a personal level has led to a state of constant identity crisis. According to Z. Bauman, constant change is the only constant of the modern age: 'Modernisation is omnipresent and ineradicable, an unfulfilled desire for destruction' (Bauman 2002, 38). This is the reason for his opposition to the assessment that the modern era is over, as he notes that many fundamental characteristics of modernity continue, even if they often lose their original content and structure. 'The society entering the 21st century is no less "modern" than the society that entered the 20th century; we can only say that modernity is modern on a different way'[16].

In the mid-1990s, the French Marxist theorist, philosopher and film-maker Guy Debord (1983) diagnosed contemporary society as a society of spectacle, characterised by a permanent state of delirium. He described his contemporaries as people who were numb to the perception of reality and are confused in terms of time, space, culture and identity. People are trapped in a false image of an endless present, desperately lonely, alienated from other people and nature. They are emotionally unresponsive and at the same time overwhelmed with information. Debord uses the term 'spectacle' to describe a general social phenomenon in which direct experience is replaced by representative; false images created for the public.

15 Among the main proponents of these ideas in the 80s was Margaret Thatcher, one need only remember her words '*there is no such thing as society*'. (I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr Janez Weiss for the comment.)

16 An obvious example of the dichotomy of modern society's attitude towards the empirical and technological sciences is the use of modern technology, without any concern or doubt being observed. (Thanks to Dr Janez Weiss for the comment).

He says that with the help of modern technology, life has become a separate, artificially created spectacular world that serves artificially created needs of ostentation, solely for viewing. The world of the contemporary is created by the constant rearrangement of fragmentary images taken from all aspects of life and glued together into a never-connected whole of absurdity. It is comparable to a glued-together mirror broken into tiny pieces, reflecting thousands of separate images and never again able to reflect the whole.

The 21st century is characterised by the penetration of communication technology and artificial intelligence into every facet of social and private life. The consequence of a generally accepted way of life that transforms every aspect of privacy into something public and publicly observed is the 'struggle to have' and the resulting universalism. According to Z. Bauman (2018, 89), living conditions 'do not create solidarity, but rather, with the help of a new managerial philosophy and a new strategy of domination, produce mutual suspicion, conflicts of interest, rivalry and disputes'.

The emergence of relativism is particularly evident in the area of traditional personal and social values, which is growing into new forms of social movements with the character of hidden, manipulative ideological struggles. American cultural critic Thomas Chatterton Williams[17] warns of the pitfalls of the information age, which prioritises speed over expertise and contributes primarily to a culture of superficiality in which 'even the elite will openly disparage the best that has been invented and declare it meaningless[18].' Simply speaking, the information environment, which creates and offers extraordinary amounts of information, also creates a dangerous, hermetically sealed environment due to its fragmentation. The German physicist and philosopher Harry Lehman recognised the processes of ideologization in the systems of education, science and art. They take the form of an ideological struggle to enforce a particular language policy through specific means of power. Lehman concludes that 'power is used to

17 Thomas Chatterton Williams is an American cultural critic and writer, professor of humanities and senior fellow at the Hannah Arendt Center at Bard College, and a Guggenheim Fellow. (Bard 2025)

18 Chatterton Williams, Thomas. 2023. The People Who Don't Read Books. Access: https://www.aei.org/op-eds/the-people-who-dont-read-books/ (11. July 2025).

achieve the desired behaviour on the part of people, including the use of the desired mode of linguistic expression' (Lehman 2024, 20). Institutions in modern democratic countries are losing their ability to recognise political communication; instead of research, knowledge and art, they produce ideology. They are turning into ideological machines (ibid., 41).

Mathias Desmet, referring to Hannah Arendt, states: 'The main characteristic of the crowd is not brutality and backwardness, but isolation and a lack of normal social relations' (Desmet 2022, 102). Without an understanding of the Whole and contact with themselves, modern humans are not only unhappy, but also dangerous, as they fail to grasp the explosiveness of depersonalised and uprooted masses that easily identify with totalitarian systems.

The growing, unrecognisable anxiety, resulting from alienation from one's own essence, leads to individualism and ultimately to collectivism (Desmet 2022, 101)[19]. This phenomenon seems new to us, but in reality, it is not. As early as the 1940s, the German Jewish philosopher Martin Buber discussed the general social phenomenon of individualism and collectivism in his work *Das Problem des Menschen*[20]. Based on various philosophical views of man, he developed philosophical anthropology. He explained man as an entity that can only build its identity in contact with another person, who cannot be replaced by a thing or an object. Man in his deepest being is defined by genuine relationships (Buber 1999, 119)[21]. Martin Buber explains that the 'great', i.e. essential relationship exists only between real persons […] and builds a bridge across the abyss of worldly anxiety from self-existence to self-existence (ibid., 86). He goes on to say that man is defined by a triad of relationships: his relationship to the world and things, his relationship to people, both individuals and crowds, and his relationship to the transcendent mystery of being, to the Absolute (ibid., 90).

19 The French historian, anthropologist, and sociologist Emmanuel Todd explains that the (sickly) individualism of Western society is the result of its technological development and mental decay. In it, he recognizes the dominant, economically and politically supported phenomenon of Western society. (Thanks to Dr Janez Weiss for the comment).

20 The book was published in Tel Aviv in Hebrew in 1943 and was published in 1982, after the author's death, in an updated edition in Heidelberg.

21 See also Buber (1958).

Due to the retreat into the 'castle of the mind', as M. Buber wittily calls modern man's refuge in rationality and exclusion of the metaphysical, especially Christianity, the alienation from nature and one's own essence is intensifying (ibid., 90). This reaches its peak with new communication technology and the Covid epidemic, which offers a range of virtual contacts but in reality, destroys genuine, personal relationships.

Western society responds with numerous care programmes ranging from anthropological and social to health and psychological services and programmes. However, as Martin Buber's anthropological philosophy has shown, care, however well-intentioned and modern, cannot replace genuine human relationships. Only the I–Thou relationship, which breaks through the barriers of the self, gives meaning to life and opens it up to the transcendent, can truly fulfil the individual and society (Buber 1999, 81; Frankl 1981).

Due to its detachment from humanity, postmodernity has earned itself another attribute: the era of posthumanism. This is the era of morally indifferent individuals, and a society driven by desires. Posthumanist society expresses the rejection of ethics in general, especially Western ethics, which is based on the uniqueness of the individual. The French philosopher Chantal Delsol (2019, 157) brilliantly explains the importance of ethics for the existence of humanity: 'My future is not my immortality, it is my neighbour'.

A brief overview of the characteristics of contemporary society, regardless of whether we call it postmodernity or fluid modernity, reveals signs of a profound crisis[22]. Despite broader aspects, we recognise as primary the crisis of a human being who has lost touch with his own existence, with his own being (Buber 1999, 85). We can conclude that, despite some key social changes, modern and postmodern humans face similar existential problems. On a personal level, we are talking about confusion about identity, loss of genuine contact with nature and with oneself, anxiety and loss of meaning (Desmet 2022, 102). On a social level, perhaps the most

22 Emmanuel Todd gave the crisis a meaningful name with the title of his work *La Défaite de l'Occident*, in English *The Decline of the West* (Todd 2024).

noticeable issues are atomisation and a lack of sense of belonging to a community, disorientation in terms of values, and rootlessness. From this perspective, we will be interested in what heritage and its preservation can offer in the most challenging areas of contemporary society.

4 Heritage, Value and Quality of Living Space

As we have already pointed out, the postmodern era often contradicts views of modernity, promoting scepticism, subjectivism, and relativism. It undermines confidence in the role of reason and opposes the validity of a single truth, which undermines the authority of tradition and fundamental values. These views are also strongly reflected in the field of heritage, which has led to new concepts of heritage and the emergence of new approaches to heritage preservation (Howard, 2003; Waterton, Watson 2015 and cited sources). The active involvement of the public dilutes the authoritative role of experts and institutions, giving rise to the concept of the heritage community.

The era of modernity has been characterised by a view of the past from the perspective of a single, generalising 'grand narrative' sometimes also referred to as a meta-narrative[23]. Postmodernism criticises it for its 'totalising nature' and the form of 'universal truth', which is why it is being replaced by personal stories and testimonies. The grand, scientifically (and thus also politically) supported historical 'truth' is replaced by the 'small', 'relative' truths of personal narratives. Active public participation and a constructivist approach to presenting the past are directed towards an empathetic and critical experience of heritage, which opens up reflection on oneself. Heritage is becoming a community matter, uniting it in its diversity and empowering it to protect heritage as a value of the living environment (Šola 2003, 125; Van Mensch 2015; Pirkovič 2015; Pirkovič et al. 2025).

Heritage in the 21st century can best be defined as what we have inherited from the past in order to value and enjoy it in the present, and to preserve and pass on to future generations (Waterton and Watson 2015[24];

23 Jean-François Lyotard used the term to refer to the totalizing narratives or metadiscourses of modernity that provided ideologies with a legitimate philosophy of history (Chandler and Munday 2011, 178).
24 And cited sources.

Pirkovič 2022)[25]. However, the recognition of heritage as a social value and the acknowledgement of the primacy of its intangible aspect are relatively new. These conceptual changes reflect the socio-economic and political shifts of the postmodern era that have transformed the way we live. More free time, higher incomes and more accessible education have encouraged the public to demand a more active role in public life. However, the identity crisis, loss of meaning and fragmentation of contemporary communities have also stimulated, among other things, a nostalgic interest in the past and a search for a 'golden age' that never was (Bauman 2018; Lowental 1998, 179).

Civil society movements and protests by indigenous peoples in North America and elsewhere, demanding the right to decide on their own heritage, have contributed significantly to changes in heritage theory and practice. The 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and the European Year of Architectural Heritage[26], proclaimed by the Council of Europe in 1975, were particularly important for bringing about these changes. The concept of heritage has expanded to include the intangible, content-related aspects of material remains, and a holistic concept of heritage has emerged, which presupposes the entirety of the social and natural environment (Watson and Waterton 2016; Harrison 2020).

4.1 Heritage in Museums

Since ancient times, efforts to preserve traces of the past have focused on materiality and form (Hudson 1988, 18–38). The heritage of the modern era was primarily represented by purposefully built monuments, memorials to events or famous people, and collections and objects of historical and artis-

25 The Heritage Council (2025), County Kilkenny, Ireland, has a brief definition on its website: 'Our heritage is what we have inherited from the past, to value and enjoy in the present, and to preserve and pass on to future generations.'

26 Convention for the Safeguarding of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage – 1972 Each Party recognizing this Convention shall ensure the identification, protection and protection, presentation and transmission to future generations of the cultural and natural heritage referred to in Articles 1 and 2 throughout the territory within which it belongs. All this must be done as comprehensively as possible, as far as possible and, where necessary, with international assistance and cooperation in individual cases, as well as in financial, artistic, scientific and technical interventions. (I thank Dr Jelka Pirkovič for her comments.)

tic value. Themes related to European civilisation with Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian roots were given priority. In the 19th century, during the emergence of nation states, material culture served as a basis for recognising and proving ethnic affiliation and national identity (Arnold 2002; Perko 2014, 61–62). Objects of archaeological, historical and/or artistic value often served the purpose of educating people about their nation's past, which was later often exploited for political propaganda (Schama 1995, 75–134). And even though ancient *mouseions* were designed as temples of inspiration for the muses (Perko 2014, 28-33), spaces of memory and contemplation, museums of the new age, from the era of cabinets of curiosities onwards, have focused primarily on the material aspect of heritage and the care of collections (Hudson 1988, 18–38; MacGregor and Impey 1985; Díaz-Andreu 2007). In the 19th century, many museums also took on the character of scientific institutions, which gave them special social prestige and an 'aura of academicism' (Perko 2022). However, an excessive focus on the scientific aspect also became an obstacle when, from the 1960s onwards, the perception of heritage shifted towards its intangible nature, social significance and values (Pearce 1992). The relative unresponsiveness of traditional museums prompted the emergence of socially engaged museums, with changes based on the theoretical insights of the new museology (Vergo 1989; Maroević 1998, 162; Šola 2003; Brulon Soares 2019, 77; Popadić 2017, 2020).

4.2 Heritage in Its Space of Origin

At the beginning of the 20th century, Austrian theorist Alois Riegel recognised the importance of heritage values and based his typology of monuments on them (Riegel 1903; Perko and Pirkovič 2025). The principles of value were also taken into account in the drafting of the famous Athens Charter on the Preservation and Restoration of Historic Monuments in 1931 (The Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments 1931). The devastating consequences of the Second World War revealed the vulnerability and transience of the material aspect of heritage. The need to rebuild what had been destroyed at least partly accelerated the changes. In the 1970s, ecomuseums emerged, which opened up heritage spaces to the public, who now had a voice in decision-making. The concept of ecomuseum accelerated conceptual changes in museology, conservation and

the doctrine of monument protection (Davis 1999, 2008). The term 'cultural heritage' was also used for the first time, replacing the outdated term 'historical monument'. This term paved the way for the understanding of heritage as a holistic social phenomenon. This happened thanks to the aforementioned 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. The changes were also strongly influenced by the fact that non-European countries began to appear on UNESCO's World Heritage Lists, where the intangible aspect often prevails in the perception of heritage. A new perspective on the perception of the intangible values of tangible heritage emerged, perhaps most significantly contributed to by the efforts of Asian countries, especially Japan as the host of an important international conference in Nara in 1994. (The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) 2019).

4.3 Heritage in International Charters[27]

International charters that set standards for the preservation, renovation or management of heritage offer a unique insight into conceptual changes. The Venice Charter of 1964 emphasises the importance of spiritual values, authenticity and symbolism of heritage (International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites 1964). Another important innovation, the active role of the public, appears in international charters of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The Burra Charter of 1979, revised in 1999, first mentions the community, its needs and expectations (Australia ICOMOS 2013). In 2005, the Council of Europe defined the heritage community as 'a group of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage and wish to pass them on to future generations' (ibid.).

The Nara Document on Authenticity, published in 1994, attempts to bridge the Western and Eastern understanding of the meaning of heritage and its values. The document is a response to the expansion of the World Heritage List to include only entries from the Western cultural environment and to the growing complexity of the meaning of heritage in the global contemporary world. Gradually, a new concept of heritage has

27 The comments and advices of Dr Jelka Pirkovič have significantly contributed to the improvement and clarity of the text of Chapter, for which I sincerely thank her.

emerged, moving away from the outdated, modernist, Eurocentric perspective. The document established a new way of perceiving the cultural diversity of heritage as a key feature of cultural diversity.

A decisive turning point came with the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which established a holistic approach to heritage as a whole, both tangible and intangible. The community was recognised as a central and driving force behind heritage, tradition and creativity (UNESCO 2024; Council of Europe 2005)[28].

The Council of Europe framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, also known as the Faro Convention after the Portuguese city where the document was drafted in 2005, is of groundbreaking importance for heritage rights and public participation. The treaty commits signatory states to protect cultural heritage and the rights of citizens to access this heritage and participate in heritage rights. In the spirit of Article 27 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights to 'freely participate in the cultural life of the community,' it defines rights and responsibilities towards cultural heritage. These rights are inextricably linked to the right to participate in cultural life.

4.4 Heritage from the Top Down and from the Bottom Up

With the public taking a more prominent role in museums and in the heritage protection processes, particularly through the fostering of heritage communities, the democratic principle of 'bottom-up' has become established, enabling a more equitable approach to heritage.

This is reflected in the principles of protecting cultural diversity, social values and collective and cultural memory as relevant indicators of the democratisation of contemporary society (Assmann 2011). The principal places professional institutions in a new position, with the previous authoritarian decision-making of experts being replaced by dialogue with the community and inclusive engagement.

The social needs and demands of the postmodern era have also led to radical conceptual changes. This has opened the door to a range of new herit-

28 For the Slovenian translation of the Faro Convention, see Zakon o ratifikaciji okvirne konvencije Sveta Evrope o vrednosti kulturne dediščine za družbo (MOKVKDD).

age studies. Public archaeology has emerged and the new museology movement, put into practice by the ecomuseum, has been born (Vergo 1989; Šola 2003, 101–120; Davies 2008; Babić 2018). In the West, this was the time of the emergence of critical heritage studies, and in the East, of the Brno and Zagreb schools of museology (Brulon Soares 2019). Under the umbrella of information science, which underpins the communicative nature of the contemporary museum, the museum joins the media (Maroević 1998). Following the penetrating, futuristic, holistically conceived heritage philosophy of Tomislav Šola, a new heritage science, heritology, was born (Šola 2003).

The implementation of the new museological theory, which emphasises the museality of objects or the social significance of museum objects, can best be observed in the practices of the ecomuseum[29]. The ecomuseum is designed to be holistic, dynamic and practical; it brings together the population, cultural and natural heritage, and takes into account the socio-economic and political needs of the environment. Experts act in an advisory role, and representatives of authorities, associations and religious communities are also involved. The ecomuseum can best be defined as the interpretation of space as a form of heritage philosophy and a process that is initiated by the community (Šola 2003; Babić 2018). The aim is to connect cultural, educational and research institutions with the goal of preserving the environmental heritage, which is implemented by the community through its way of life (Šola 2003; Davies 2008). The ecomuseum is based on the concept of heritage as the values of the living environment (Šola 2003, 101–120).

The new paradigm has also shed light on the temporal aspect of heritage. While fundamental sciences such as archaeology and history deal with the past, heritage is rooted in the past, present and future.

Reforms have brought about a new, active role for the public. The emergence of the ecomuseum is perhaps most important because of its social impact and the indirect pressure it exerts on traditional museums, which are not sufficiently socially engaged, and on overly authoritative monument services. Visitors, who play a passive role in traditional museums, become active collaborators, co-interpreters, and ultimately co-deci-

29 Due to a misunderstanding, an ecomuseum is also called a cybermuseum (Šola 2003, 101–120).

sion-makers and co-creators of collective memory in reformed museums (Simon 2011; Van Mensch 2015, 49).

4.5 Heritage, the Value of the Living Environment

Heritage can best be defined as a continuous process of identifying tangible and intangible remains and phenomena, evaluating them, enjoying them and simultaneously negotiating what society will recognise and accept as its values and preserve for future generations (Waterton and Watson 2016, 33)[30]. With the new concept of heritage as a social value, an epistemological shift has also taken place[31]. From the field of natural sciences and social sciences, which until recently dominated heritage research, research has expanded to include philosophical hermeneutics and phenomenology. With interdisciplinarity, their focus has shifted to the field of humanities. Ethics plays a central role. The global ethos is based on four values: the sanctity of life, the consecration of the dead, human dignity and the golden rule of ethics. The golden rule, 'do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you', is the guiding principle of contemporary Emmanuel Levinas ethics. It enables us to understand the depths of human dignity as a fundamental requirement of museum and broader heritage professional ethics (Klun 2002; Perko 2023).

4.6 Heritage as a Value

When the concept of heritage began to focus on values, a wide range of highly subjective personal values and values of individual groups emerged. In a postmodernist manner, a hidden danger emerged that these values, often even in the name of democracy, would override the

30 And sources cited therein.

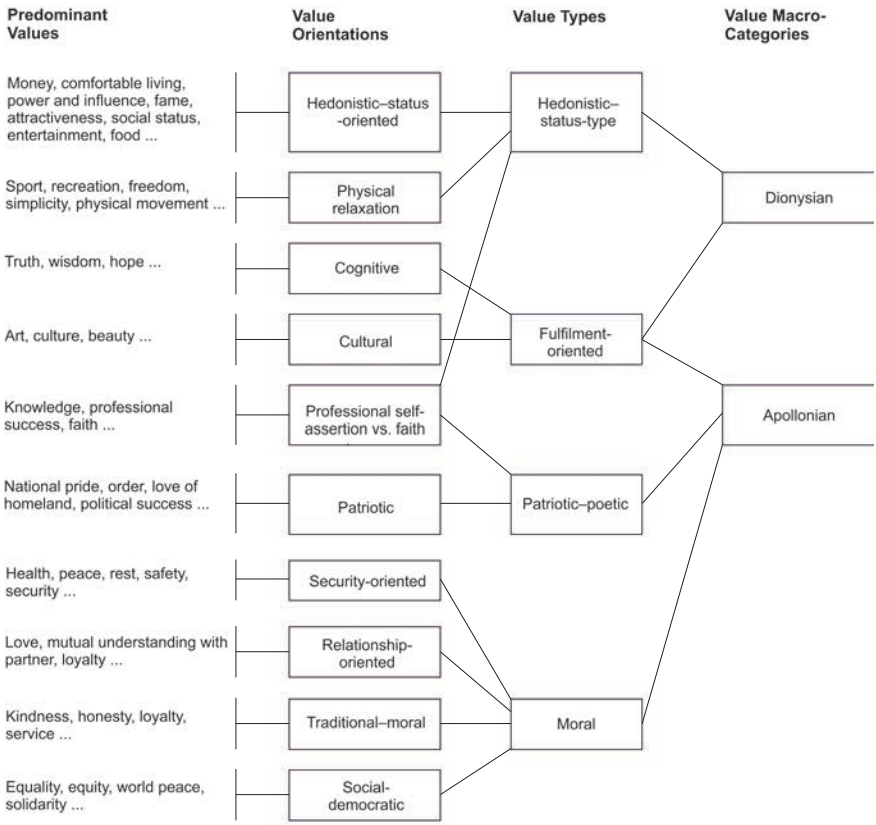
31 In the Textbook for the Management of Archaeological Heritage, Jelka Pirkovič refers to the ZVKD-1 (Act on the Protection of Cultural Heritage-1 of the Republic of Slovenia), which also includes among the definitions the social significance of heritage as 'the value that heritage has for the community and individuals due to its cultural, educational, developmental, religious, symbolic and identification potential, or for the study of disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology, architecture, ethnology, art history and history' (Pirkovič 2022, 51). ZVKD-1 (Act on the Protection of Cultural Heritage) uses the term 'vrednost' rather than 'vrednota' (in English both value) because it is a (mathematical) sum of individual values. The more of these individual values, the greater their social significance, which should also be an incentive for heritage professions to be interdisciplinary. (I would like to thank Dr Jelka Pirkovič for the explanation.)

values of the community or even harm the welfare of those who were (deliberately) politically overlooked. Jelka Pirkovič points out that humanity has long been aware of the importance of shared values, which form the basis for the formation and existence of communities and provide a safe environment for individuals. Only shared values enable creative cooperation, communication and joint planning for the future. Personal values are also formed in the family, school and wider social environment and most often coincide with the values of the social context, where they are historically and ideologically conditioned and inevitably politically coloured (Pirkovič 2023, 62, 72; 2024; Pirkovič and Perko forthcoming). Let us take a closer look at personal values, focusing on their connection with heritage.

Slovenian psychologist Janek Musek (2000) developed four levels of personal values. He equates the first level, which comprises self-improvement values, with spiritual growth and calls it the self-actualisation level. The first level is based on identity and education, and its key foundation is the heritage of a particular environment. Values that are closely linked to tradition and heritage are also the moral values of the second level. The third level includes potential values, which include successes and achievements, as well as patriotism and national pride, which are first recognised as values in the broader historical and cultural environment. The fourth level refers to hedonistic or sensual values. These are strongly linked to the enjoyment of cultural and natural resources, and therefore also to heritage.

J. Musek divides all values into Dionysian and Apollonian (Figure 1). The former represents emotional surrender, while the latter define the field of morality and fulfilment. Both types of values are rooted in tradition and education and are closely linked to the experience and enjoyment of the cultural environment. This applies primarily to works of art, which fill humanity with beauty and lead to the recognition of a broader truth. Similarly, heritage values also have a direct effect on individuals on a sensory and emotional level and can thus be described, at least in part, as Dionysian. However, their deeper meaning certainly affects the Apollonian level, because they enable individuals to perfect their moral sense. At the same time, we can conclude that culture and heritage are the fundamental basis of Apollonian values in particular.

Figure 1: Implicit value space according to J. Musek. Source: Lešnik 1996, 150.



On the other hand, research shows that traditional family and partner values are still at the top of the value hierarchy, while some potential values are the least valued (Lešnik 1996). It is easy to see that postmodernist tendencies in the field of heritage also give priority to personal and experiential values, which often imperceptibly pursue capitalistic goals. The postmodern era poses a difficult task for heritage institutions in deciding which values to choose and which to prioritize.

4.7 Heritage and (Professional) Ethics

Ethics enable us to recognise the balance and moderation between the personal and the communal, or the Dionysian and the Apollonian, in the preservation and interpretation of heritage and the provision of social wel-

fare. And, last but not least, the balance between politically correct democracy and justice. By taking into account the principle of achieving morality, which must be based at least on the golden rule, it becomes clear how an individual should act in specific circumstances in order to realize their human ethical dimension. It is crucial to realize that the needs of the postmodern era of chaos are pushing heritage institutions toward humanistic goals. Priorities become learning, socializing, connecting, critical reflection and, above all, insight into one's own human inner self (Marstine 2011, 3–25).

When we define heritage as a social and personal value, we are confronted with the full extent of postmodern society's dichotomy towards values. As already mentioned, on the one hand there is the destructive power of opposition to all traditional values, while on the other hand there is a great need for fundamental values that enable people to find meaning and restore their dignity (Buber 1999; Frankl 1981; Petkovšek 2021). From this perspective, it is easier to understand that the concept of heritage, defined as a social value, is historically and spatially conditioned and strongly dependent on the subjective experience of the individual and a particular community. It is therefore not surprising that David Lowental wrote as early as the 1990s that heritage is inevitably conflictual. Just over a decade later, L. Smith (2006, 296) added: 'The heritage process is inherently dissonant … it becomes important within certain struggles. These struggles may occur at family, local, community, national and international levels, but central to them will be conflict over whose experiences and perspectives are valid and whose are not'.

Due to the governmental processes of modern society, heritage is also highly political (ibid.). Two very good examples of conflictual and politically charged heritage are the Slovenian city of Nova Gorica, built after the Second World War, and Italian city of Gorizia. With the strongly politically supported European Capital of Culture project, it was suddenly pointed out that the fascist leader Benito Mussolini was still an honorary citizen of Gorizia. On the slopes of Sabotin, a hill above Nova Gorica, a large honorary inscription with Tito's name shines. Both, one on the side of the defeated, the other on the side of the victors, left behind a tragic legacy of totalitarianism. Despite the European Parliament's resolution on European consciousness and totalitarianism, neither of the parties in-

volved is willing to renounce it. Both sides insist on their own values and political traditions, neglecting collective memory and, above all, justice. Adherence to the ethical golden rule would certainly greatly facilitate the path to a solution that is acceptable to both sides involved and, above all, respectful of the victims of both regimes.

Once again, we can agree with David Lowenthal, who argues that 'heritage' is susceptible to market demands and is also profitable. This is also the case with both cities, Slovenian Nova Gorica and Italian Gorizia. At the same time, he also notes that the heritage industry jeopardizes historicity and can casually profit from tragic events while neglecting the suffering of those involved. The same author warns that 'heritage', tailored to market demand can turn locals into fools and boors. Traditions torn from their cultural context can easily turn the local community into circus bears, entertaining tourists for a handful of change. In this case, too, ethics points to the rule of balance and moderation between the personal and the communal. In other words, between the Dionysian, which serves pleasure, and the Apollonian, which demands moral reflection and responsibility for one's actions.

4.8 Heritage, an Opportunity for a Better Future

The remains inherited from our ancestors are not valuable in themselves, even though they may be of great importance to science. What is crucial is interpretation, which uses scientific and other data to shape cultural messages and convey them to the general public (Maroević 1998, 167, 215). Interpretation belongs to philosophical hermeneutics, which is the art of understanding and explaining. Leading American expert Sam Ham says that interpretation is explanation with meaning (Ham 2013, 69). It is essential for content that is distant in time and culture, where understanding enables broader insight and knowledge (Buber 1999, 79).

Interpretation appeals on a personal level, because a person's historical reflection can only develop from their own life. It arises 'on the basis of life experience and as its own execution in context: in the internal relationship between perceptions, remembered representations, judgments, and knowledge,' says Slovenian philosopher Dean Komel (2002, 427; Dilthey 2002, 41). Sensory and emotional experience is central to heritage interpretation, which also facilitates learning processes and deepens memo-

ry. The inclusion of the public, which chooses interpretive themes and co-creates the interpretive narrative, is crucial. Small, personal stories encourage critical thinking and personal reflection (Perko 2021a, 2021b, 2022). However, the relativism brought about by the power of personal stories has its negative sides.

Inclusive interpretation promotes experiential, object-based learning that takes place within the community (Pearce 2003). The knowledge of the community enriches the repositories of knowledge of heritage institutions. Collective memory is increasing, which is crucial for the preservation of the community and the foundation of a more just society. Reciprocal learning paths reduce the authoritative heritage discourse that gives institutions and experts a privileged role in heritage decisions (Smith 2006; Waterton and Watson 2015, 29).

5 Conclusion

Heritage has become one of the major themes of the postmodern era. On the one hand, this is due to threats and destruction, and on the other hand, to the growing interest in museums, cultural and natural landmarks as a reflection of the needs and habits of postmodern society. The beginnings of postmodern society date back to the 1960s and 1970s, marked by protests, environmental movements, demonstrations, etc. Postmodernity is an era of civil society and a time of rebellion against authority, questioning of science and the validity of a single truth, and opposition to the values of the modern era. Despite radical changes, the characteristics of modernity continue, such as liberalism, the arms race, and wars. Imperialism and neocolonialism also continue, spreading through culture and education to every corner of the world with the help of modern communication technologies. To quote the Trieste writer Claudio Magris, the postmodern man is lonely, alienated, and disappointed because of the chaotic world, and his life is worse. He suffers from a loss of meaning and simply no longer understands the world.

So, what can heritage offer postmodern human? How can it respond to the needs of contemporary society, which manifest themselves in the search for personal and community identity, the need for sustainable learning, socializing, and connecting, and the search for meaning in life?

Heritage is not a panacea, but it is nevertheless of inestimable importance to humanity. Amidst the many radical changes of postmodernity, including the destruction of values and resistance to established, authoritarian social structures, it has become a social value. The phrase 'heritage is people' highlights the essence: heritage is a key document and source of humanity. Participatory and inclusive heritage management brings numerous benefits to communities. It connects them and accelerates processes of social inclusion. New knowledge about one's own past increases pride and feelings of belonging (Batič et al. 2005).

Heritage responds to the social and individual needs of modern man mainly indirectly, through interpretation, which allows for new insights and stimulates creative processes. It opens the way to lifelong learning. It cultivates an instrumental understanding of consumer society with the dimensions of convivial and hermeneutic knowledge. Through collective memory, it increases the level of democracy in society. Through experiential learning about nature and getting to know fellow humans, it heals the wounds of impersonal relativism. Through connection and active socializing, it overcomes individualism. On a personal level, it connects modern, alienated people with the essence of life and restores their dignity. Heritage opens people up to transcendence and pushes them into the primary field of ethics, which 'answers the questions of how people should realize their humanity' (Petkovšek 2021, 991).

Let us conclude with the words of Martin Buber: 'The essence of man cannot be found in isolated individuals, for the connection of the human person with his generation and with his society is essential; we must therefore recognize the essence of this connection if we want to recognize the essence of man' (Buber 1999, 66). Heritage testifies to and proves the connection between the individual and society throughout the entire history of humanity (Perko 2023). Therefore, we can say that it embodies human existence and the essence of humanization. It is a unique source of humanity, realized through the personal adoption of historical experiences from the cultural treasure of humanity. At this point, we can argue that heritage transgresses the postmodern era of posthumanism and opens it up to a new humanism.

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