The aim of this thesis is to critique the intrinsic institutional division set between attributes classified under ‘tangible’ and ‘intangible’ cultural heritage, as inscribed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO]. Setting itself within the multi-faceted complexity of Indian cultural landscapes, the study will examine the authenticity and mutable nature that the term ‘heritage’ upholds, bracketed within a Western umbrella that demands for an interrogation of its critical dimension within the conservation framework of the built environment. Bridging an international agenda with western philosophy that predicates Charles Sanders Peirce’s theory of ‘Semiotics’, an empirical opportunity is found within the plural and meaningful pasts of the Indian subcontinent, arguing the establishment of a reductive representation of its holistic identity. Specifically inscribed Indian heritage forms the dossier in question to their
associated UNESCO conventions, unearthing an argument that cements a physical presence to the intangible and, en masse, a notably ethereal existence to the tangible, chartering a scrutiny over the existing divorced conditioning of the terms and finding value within their ideal unity.

Inaugurated through a methodological series of recreations of the ‘Mandala’, a spatial archetype of Hindu and Buddhist descent, the critique directs an argument against UNESCO’s institutional delineations, disputed through an analogy of the mandala’s symbolic foundation of the cosmos, enriched with meanings of a sacred totality and synthesis. And yet such is the diversity and rich pluralism of South Asia that its heritage reading is far from singular. India has a remarkable character, an elastic ability to self-organise, revive its own cultural traditions, and enact in parallel time and spirit, always bridging an intimacy with nature and landscape. Ascending from an embryonic interlace of heritage and identity, understanding the value in a sense of belonging becomes integral to such a contested context, often reduced to a selective past, a peerless projection on a global cultural and political screen. Challenging these semantics of human value interchange, how do we as designers identify its tangible nature, inset within India’s labyrinthine city fabric, and what is the potential impact on the management and control of its authentic representation under future preservation strategies to maintain an accurate interpretation of cultural identity?

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

My routes have always been a marvel of mine. Having experienced a humble upbringing in the divided capital of Cyprus, I have been accustomed to uncovering the beauty that lies between the political ruins of its ground. Through this appreciation, I have adopted the resilient nature of its people and learned to apply it towards my design approach: a meticulous yet adaptable outlook with a positive intention to challenge the unconventional.

I am currently a RIBA Part II Masters student at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, and grateful to have been rewarded the opportunity to visit India this year, enabling an exploration of a thesis that fuses my passion for the unbound domain of heritage with academic design-led research. With a growing interest in the fields of translating past, dilemmas of nostalgic yearning, controversies over memory and imprint, I was compelled to email in hope of beginning a dialogue or simply welcoming an exchange with AMPS over their didactic insight that can only serve to further my knowledge of the built environment.

Having studied under, Stirling-Prize winner, Amanda Levete (AL_A architects) last year, who recently completed the new porcelain-tiled entrance and underground exhibition hall at the V&A Museum, it has been an incredibly edifying journey that has truly inspired a refreshing, contemporary attitude towards heritage approach, coupled with a
parametric ethos that demonstrates to push the boundaries of innovation whilst maintaining a contextually authentic advance into design.