The marriage of risk assessment and significance assessment: can it really work?

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Abstract

The results of risk assessments and significance assessments can help collecting organisations set work priorities. However, the complementary nature of the two methods, deriving from different professional traditions, means that recommended priorities are likely to differ.

The desire of cultural heritage risk analysts to include significance determinations in their workings is both logical and brave. In the more comprehensive risk analysis systems, this inclusion depends on the quantification of changes in significance due to changes in states of objects or collections, which can be difficult to deliver. Significance assessment purists reject the reduction of complex, shifting meanings to numerical values because of the apparent rigidity and certainty this implies.

The purpose of this presentation is to provoke discussion. Should risk assessment or significance assessment come first when decision-making for collections? Who has the power of veto if opinions differ? Do concepts of ‘value’, as opposed to significance, assist? Will professional demarcations doom the marriage of these two hopefuls?