



Invited Opening Article

Urban Conservation Should Be Considered In the Framework of the Post-Modern Metropolis

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Many changes are affecting our environment and the same should happen within our disciplinary (and intellectual) frames. This is not always so, but if we go beyond the boundaries of individual expertise we might find new and valuable suggestions. This is true for what urban conservation is concerned, developing the word "urban" into its full meaning. Urban conservation has a long history: from Ruskin to Giovannoni to the present widening of scope and space, the debate has been developing in a number of directions. However, there are still inadequacies in the way urban conservation is linked to general urban policies, as witnessed by the conflicts arising between citizens and administrators on local decisions.

Among the general context of globalization, from which it is impossible to withdraw, and the thousands local contexts there is an infinite variety of urban situations. To cope with it we must adhere to some principles that help in putting on the same track the many facets of urban reflection. Here are some. In the recent decades we were forced to abandon the idea that the city is an organism: in the post-modern metropolis there is no internal consistency, rather there's juxtaposition, coexistence, diversity. The urban conservation issue fits in such frame, namely in the coexistence and juxtaposition.

We understand that this approach seems to deny the plan and the reasons for his claim to act as a control and reorganization of space as a function of an ethical, social and economic justice. Under attack is primarily zoning, accused of imposing monotony and rigidity to a city,

which is in fact increasingly fragmented and mixed. Such statement has its origins in a critique of the modernity: against the inadequacies of rationality we discover the myth, against the elusive reality we are content with its interpretation. Modern architecture, in an attempt to create a space (and a society) of equals, eliminated that symbolic apparatus that has so much part in the traditional city. With great (and interested) lucidity we had the temples of consumption and financial power substituting those of the civic (and religious) institutions. In doing so we built a hostile space, negation of that pact of coexistence among citizens of what the city has always been an allegory. By now we know that the city is not only its material structure, but also much more: a system of relations, a system of values, a system of desires.

Here comes the issue of planning for the conservation of historic centres. The most common approach intends to put together physical rehabilitation and economic revival on the ground that conservation policies cannot be afforded out of some form of economic return. However, one might observe that, while the two lines were developed in a parallel way (but the economic one was by far the most cherished), conservation aims were often overlooked.

Although the debate on conservation still goes on, one should admit that in many parts of the world some success has been achieved in preserving the historic building stock. However, its terms seem questionable: tourist floods, commercial monoculture, petty urban furniture are homogenising Europe's (or World's?) historic centres. Administrators appear satisfied with it, experts and academics are busy pushing forward protective legal measures wherever they can, people find increasingly difficult to accept such reductive policies. A basic lack of communication (ending in poor identification of goals and methods) among the actors is producing an artificial environment that is far away from what we would like to protect. My main assumption is that such values can be saved only through a process of social recognition and interpretation. Taking into consideration people's attitudes towards their own past, instead of teaching them how to think, could help in designing more effective policies.

Let us consider what happened to those European historic centres that were best taken care of, in terms of planning and development control. Fronts were more or less accurately renovated, as were the signs; building typologies thoroughly "renewed", were usually turned into flats for well off singles or into professionals' offices; streets and squares, liberated

from car traffic, were invaded by benches, flower pots and lamps more or less elegant but always at a "human scale". In these spaces, usually overcrowded, walk visitors, lunch time employees and, most of all, shoppers. Ground floors are mainly turned into shops, restaurants and fast foods, or even into large department stores, connecting astutely a number of different buildings: the final setting is totally organised in order to create that kind of joyful atmosphere that seems necessary to buy, consume and pay any type of product.

It is clear the role that the historical environment plays in the tourist business and the chances open for historic cities to develop relevant economic activities in the field. Cultural tourism and local economies should be there to meet in a happy marriage, where both parties have something to earn. It is only partly so. The wedding takes place, but this happens at a very high cost. Tourists crowding art cities change its aesthetic pattern, affecting the possibility to enjoy of its features. This is true both for the inhabitants and for the tourists themselves. Moreover, it is quite clear that tourist trade, even if it leads growing masses to visit art cities, puts its main efforts in the number of visitors, not in their quality. Cities try to conform to the image that was adopted by the societies originating tourists. Such images are extremely grossières and tend to overcome even the simplest distinctions: listening to Neapolitan songs in a Venetian gondola is not a learning attitude, nor is watching employees wearing old Quaker dresses during working hours in Ironbridge Valley. In this way cities become sheer peripheries of the spaces originating the tourist flow; they incorporate and favour even their consume patterns, if we just consider the sprawl of pizza and kebab joints all over the tourist universe. This type of transformation changes radically the original relationship between the site and the traveller: it is indeed the opposite of what travel is meant to be.

If all this is true, we must realise that one of the greatest possible dangers is considering the relationship between tourism and cities as having the same character everywhere. This would bring about a set of criteria to be applied uniformly in programming and planning in different contexts. Should these strategies show partially successful in a short term economic prospect, we would get as a main result an increased homogenisation in the character of our cities. This is not what we are looking for. We must instead stress the very basis of old centres fascination, that is diversity, both among themselves and in front of the contemporary city: his-

toric cities exist in the space and the mind of citizens and visitors as well. It is such structures and images that must be discovered.

This suggests a very individualistic approach that is describing, analysing and understanding the peculiarities of each city, before designing projects and policies most suitable to favour a correct kind of development. It would be very interesting to check what kind of urban policies a number of European art cities have adopted (if any). Most of them have a plan, but how effective such plan proved to be or how it was actually affected by tourism, these are still very mysterious matters. It is indeed a problem of policies, not just of plans. One could also suspect that planners (and public administrators) get satisfied with official documents while missing to acknowledge what goes around: investigating and ameliorating urban tourist policies could help raising the quality of life of the citizens.

Yet even this different approach may suggest new and perhaps more effective directions. If we take the plan as a project of government rather than a drawing of a preconceived model, we must necessarily activate a dialogue among the actors, and the plan will work as a platform for such dialogue. On the other hand, the recognition of a plurality of actors also involves that of a plurality of objectives: we must also be aware that the identification of targets comes through the unveiling-of the various languages that often obscure, in our culture, desires and passions. Opening paths for better communication is the challenge.

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