Narrating the Urban Fabric of our Historical Towns

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Based on a research project that involved 'ordinary' objects of minor villages and towns from the Valencia Region, this article will explore informal expressions of cultural heritage in historical towns, and analyse new forms of appraisal in historical urban settlements. Furthermore, it will challenge idealistically constructed scenarios of the past, and provide space for new interpretations on the cultural diversity of informal construction. In doing so, it will also examine how historical values can better incorporate past and present anthropological 'informalities' by discussing how assessment of these artefacts can improve a person's experience of their own town.

Everyday Objects as Cultural Expression

Reflecting on how we recognize cultural expressions may help in understanding how people integrate, appropriate and provide meaning to places. In historical cities, all types of objects are subject to scrutiny, such as masonry, carpentry, tools and machinery. Most of these objects were designed for interaction between individuals and places, and details of their construction speak of a continuous dialogue between time and place. Mate-

rials can be attractive or informative, but in both cases they communicate memories and events, and appeal to psychological wellbeing because they help satisfy intellectual and emotional appreciations – and appropriations – of space. This investigation of informal, everyday objects and habits in heritage practices addresses what has been called the 'heritage conservation paradox'.[1]

The conservation paradox draws attention to how the preservation of historical values often fails to incorporate past and present human-made 'informalities'. Following scholars in this milieu, such as Pereira and Bandarin,[2] one can see the difficulty in confronting preservation with informal historical and contemporary values, and more specifically with emergent cultural expressions, objects and structures that transform the spaces in question. In line with this research, international organizations call for more careful conservation processes through planning and management that pays attention to the everyday lives of local communities. Today, more and more heritage conservation entails reflecting upon previous inconsistencies, integrating contemporary values and perceptions, and developing approaches that are more inclusive and forward-looking in scope.[3] This more permeable form of conservation has been previously analysed by Gibson and Pendlebury, referring to the need for autocentricity and questioning established principles of heritage management.[4]

With this new way of thinking, 'traditional' communities have approached and adapted their respective cultures. They have done so by allowing varied interpretations of 'tradition', assimilating in various ways, absent of polarizing heritage discourses or ideological drives.[5] The historical site concept emerged in the 1970s with UNESCO charters on the 'colonial' appropriation of cultural spaces, emphasizing the importance of sites' historical value.[6] At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this discourse began changing through critical heritage studies, which instead favoured anthropological interpretations that help scrutinize how behaviour confers character to a

place where hosts, guests and intruders coinhabit and coproduce informal or 'unauthorized' spaces.[7] This perspective encourages understanding and integrating social values of traditional communities in contemporary heritage-making. It does so precisely because it comes with particular interpretations, ideas, behaviours, expressions and adaptations that result in characteristic experimentations that favour critical – and perhaps parallel – forms of conservation.[8]

Integration and the Historical City

As a heritage practitioner and researcher, I am interested in the minutiae of the 'urban fabric' and in questioning how people perceive and experience the physical elements that compose their historically built environments, as well as how to integrate them as part of their everyday culture. By interrogating fundamental principles of heritage management practices, fresh questions about other values and perceptions arise, such as: What kind of integration do we desire, if it proves to be political, economic, social and cultural as well? What integration do we permit or accommodate? What sort of integration do we live in? Do we seek integration in conservation?'

I consider integration a behavioural quality of the environment, which implies accepting, adapting and transforming the place. This includes others' ideas and alternative forms of expression.[9] Contextualizing integration in the world of the arts can help clarify the discourse. Artistic integration might be better understood as something that seeks to open up the perspective of a particular expression, fostering greater understanding and appreciation under a cohesive, broader aesthetic sense. In the realm of cultural heritage, critical appraisals consider alternative values that integrate a plurality of meaning, expression, utility and transformation – creating space for more democratic selection processes.[10]

Heritage practitioners and academics alike now consider the necessity of preserving tangible traces of history in tandem with intangible manifesta-

tions of emotions, power imbalances and desires for justice.[11] While in theory these open approaches are meant to stimulate integration, it is still challenging to achieve integration in fieldwork. Likewise, contemporary discourses, practices and uses of historical cities all question how to coexist with previous conservation paradigms, which revolve around contemporary adaptations of historical settlements.[12] Urban legacies and the role they play today still intersect, and clash, with communal wellbeing, knowledge, culture and creativity within what scholars regard in theory as potential spaces for reinterpretation/evidence of ways of coinhabitation.[13] In practice, however, heritage sites are still characterized by processes that segregate them temporally or physically from the previously mentioned expressions (Fig. 1).

Thus, contemporary culture-making in heritage sites is in the precarious position of subjugation when trying to overcome dominant policies and 'mainstream' cultural powers. This balance determines the extent to which integration, appropriation and 'meaning' can be effective forms in selecting and assimilating alternative 'legacy' in ethical construction. The now more open general discourse accepts that the spontaneous, the humble and the flamboyant in the urban fabric may be understood as social expressions,[14] and encourages certain forms of cultural coexistence and cohabitation. It revolves around the relevance and inclusion of lesser-known forms of heritage, which were completely excluded until now. Theoretical discourse now accepts the importance of these alternative values, the values that individuals and communities have always had when adapting and inhabiting a space.[15] Nonetheless, in practice, these lesser-known forms are not yet considered relevant, and still defy the established canon, as well as the prevailing methods, discourses, concepts and practices of heritage studies.

A Method for Integrative Appraisal of Built Heritage

To discuss how a more open, inclusive and forward-looking approach to heritage could work, the following paragraphs include some findings of the

Fig. 1. Functional integration. Adopted several decades ago, metal shutters are part of a consolidated landscape. While their owners cannot do without them, for others, these are controversial because they disfigure the historical environment's integrity. Image: Juan A. García-Esparza, 2019. Chair of Historical Centres and Cultural Routes, Spain

research project *Writing Historical Centres. Dynamics of Contemporary Construction in Spanish World Heritage Cities.* A team of researchers in Spain is currently conducting this study on the assessment of cultural preservation in heritage sites. The evaluation of the urban fabric focuses on the tangible and intangible characteristics of minor towns such as Ávila, Cuenca, Salamanca, Segovia and Toledo to help scrutinize past and contemporary practices that do not follow 'authorized' discourses in a World Heritage context.[16] The project is still ongoing and will last two more years. Our study aligns with Rodney Harrison, who developed a dialogical model focused on examining the relationship between heritage and other social and environmental issues.[17] This model intends to include fields of inquiry at all levels.

In the context of this study, which looks into the objects as a form of cultural expression, 'integration' means that objects are created, used, damaged, transformed, appreciated, abandoned, analysed and eventually preserved. This definition conforms to stories of recognition and fascination for these objects, and their perpetual or transitory inclusion in the built environment. In short, objects have a biography that changes according to time and interaction. The everyday life of communities exposes objects that compose urban scenery to all the eventualities of recognition, fascination, oblivion and re-enactment. Furthermore, all these objects within the world of architecture are connected with spontaneous exchange of expressions, accounting for the behavioural patterns of communities in urban spaces.

Thus, accounting for these sorts of informal biographies is a matter of researching the plurality within society. 'Plurality' here refers to the multiple biographies of objects that satisfy the different perspectives of different inhabitants. Understanding the significance of places also means understanding how visually recognizing objects contributes to psychological wellbeing, linking the scenery to past and present. Accordingly, following the research, our fieldwork entailed studying objects in relation to their practical purpose, investigating past and present forms of inhabitation. We attuned

ourselves to ethnographic methods, in order to better understand activities and objects through which we experience life and place.[18] Consequently, the project merged aspects of sociology, cultural studies and anthropology, and science and technology.[19]

Most of the methods employed, such as observation, interviews, planning and training, offered a more comprehensive understanding of the place's character. In each town under analysis over three years, we conducted annual informative meetings, photo-gathering workshops and heritage days. These activities served to investigate, through cataloguing and mapping, how everyday social practices informed the transformation of objects – and vice versa. Public participation allowed researchers to generate maps that might better reflect the knowledge, quality and intensity of values of heritage. The research method used to include these cultural and social complexities had the following phases: first, involvement with local participants; second, co-definition of architectural and social values with communities; third, cohesion and integration of perspectives; and fourth, creative and sustainable conservation. These four phases resulted in evaluations that enhanced senses of openness and community, and emphasized collective and popular dimensions of heritage (Fig. 2).

The researchers investigated the urban fabric to identify the factors that affect its present form. During workshops, stakeholders discussed their interpretations and ideas associated with defining values. Once defined, other groups related these values to the urban landscape by observing and cataloguing the physical elements that provided meaning for them. Participation of local inhabitants in the conceptualization looked to ensure an inclusive appraisal that better focused divergences towards mutual recognition of values. Harald Fredheim and Manal Khalaf point out that 'value types' differ between stakeholders, resulting in difficulty in obtaining a wholesale interpretation.[20] However, in our case, the researchers wanted stakeholders' analysis to help better understand the specific values of the local character.

Fig. 2. Forms of adaptation and appropriation of space, which to some may seem in a disorderly or chaotic manner. Nonetheless, it represents a true sense and meaning of place. Image: Juan A. García-Esparza, 2019. Chair of Historical Centres and Cultural Routes, Spain

The researchers initially asked hundred stakeholders to determine how they perceived the built environment, but based on that preliminary research, they soon increased the number of participants to four hundred. Photo-gathering workshops and questionnaires allowed the researchers to assess what those elements meant to the stakeholders and how to define the associated values. From the outcome, it became clear that historical and ethnographic values were prioritized. Nonetheless, the evidence demonstrated that the association of intangibilities (such as craftsmanship and trades) to the more tangible elements of the fabric needed thorough explanation, due to a lack of awareness. According to the results, these forms of appraisal need to begin with explicit co-definitions, and to later integrate views and interests.

Philosophically and ethically speaking, co-definition and integration innovates because it goes a step further from previous appraisals that focus on values' cocreation.[21] Other than these earlier forms, this study does not predefine values, but rather co-defines appraisals according to earlier spatial practices – as opposed to those spontaneously created by local practitioners, and later reappraised by themselves in an act of recognition. Thus, collaboration with local inhabitants in co-defining pluralities of meaning (phase 2) helped researchers to make sense of local everyday life, and to integrate informal transformations into later recognitions of values through multiple perspectives when evaluating a specific site, street or building that has been transformed over time.

It is interesting how these processes could suggest unpredictable new ways of working alongside, and perhaps clashing with, established preservation doctrines. It has not been until recently that conservation related to how values ingrained by 'non-professionals' can inform conservation studies, and bring alternative practices and objects to the forefront of the discussion. Thus, one could state that co-defining values with local communities is essential to the complex and broad-ranging urban fabric today.

The ‘four phases’ method can catalyse the preservation of the urban fabric that has understood and respected a plurality of culture. This method’s implementation can also provide understanding to how local character can incorporate past and contemporary significance in heritage practices. However, in order for it to work, it also requires proximity, sensitivity and care.

Conclusion

This study aimed to recognize the realities of particular paradigms by understanding them from an open and external perspective. The project hoped to ascertain how transformations of spaces occurred over time – and how neighbours perceived those transformations as valuable objects – recognizing them as informal expressions of historical and contemporary uses of space. New forms of appropriation and integration of cultural heritage conservation efforts serve as a framework for social and architectural contextualization. The final aim was to value historical and architectural heritage, and people’s practices and connections in each context.

The research findings demonstrate that this approach to social values of heritage confronts what conservators have not previously acknowledged as valuable: the unspoken emotional value of architectural heritage. Academic visual analyses, understood as aesthetic judgements, often lacked the methods to engage with the iterations of plurality; concepts closer to the popular appropriation of space. Today, it is recognized that these two forms of valuing space can coexist. There is an increasing understanding that objects in the historical city are complex and multidimensional. Today’s objects not only impress us by their age, but also by their ingenuity, spontaneity and beauty. Their meaning can be plural, and open to (re)interpretation. Integrating ‘informal’ cultural processes into urban conservation thus allows reflection upon the importance of cultural transmigrations in creating lasting structures for cultural capital evolution and values. This study thus appeals to habitats in which such aspects as traditional communities, indigenous peoples and the ethnicities of historical environments challenge the conventions put forward in traditional conservation criteria.

Fig. 3. Other forms of integration in a new urban scene created by World Heritage nomination in Ávila. Image: Juan A. García-Esparza, 2020. Chair of Historical Centres and Cultural Routes, Spain

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