INTERPRETING URBAN HERITAGE: MUSEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Considerations for the acquisition of the concept of urban heritage

Throughout the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century, many studies and practical initiatives contributed to the delineation of concepts and criteria on the preservation of urban-built heritage. In addition to the theoretical acquisitions that have outlined the general concept of heritage, preservation and intervention methods from different interpretive sources were also discussed. These discussions opened way for the valorization of urban-built environment specificities. Initially, the term ‘historic environment’ encompassed the area immediately built around the most important monuments, that is, its surroundings, the ‘frame’, a space that should be valued as an element that grants the exceptional monuments its characteristics of scale, contrast and composition. This approach was present in the studies of thinkers such as Italian Carlo Cattaneo (1957) and Belgian Charles Buls (1893), who vehemently condemned the demolition of structures adjacent to monuments and the consequent destruction of secular ambiences (Rocchi 1974; Smets 1999; Giambruno 2001).

The different forms of looking at urban space and interpreting the concept of monument, however, gradually led to a broader understanding of the values related to old urban settings, freeing and guiding them to a major monument. Among the various contributions in this direction, the nineteenth-century study of John Ruskin and William Morris must be highlighted. Both authors evidenced the social dynamics of urban space in old cities and the relevancy of the defense of their qualities and characteristics. Despite their undeniable contribution, these approaches are primarily related to the defense of a traditional dwelling. However, while criticizing the impending transformation of urban space, its own historicity is diluted (Rufinoni 2009).

From the contributions of Camillo Boito (1893), and especially Alois Riegl (1903), we have found an opening towards the extension of property considered as heritage. When evidencing the cultural character of the values attributable to artifacts – subjective and changeable character of our judgments of value each depending on time and place – it was possible to attribute historicity, ‘artisticity’ and expressivity to various artifacts hitherto regarded as ‘minor’. For these approaches, then, the old urban fabric began to be seen as a culturally representative artifact, considered as a set endowed with its own aesthetic and historical specificities. Conceptual

---

1 This research and participation in the Congress was supported by Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES-Brazil) and Fundação de Apoio à Universidade Federal de São Paulo (FapUNIFESP-Brazil).
elaboration also aided through studies of urban aesthetics, especially Camillo Sitte (1889), and by several contributions from the urbanistic studies in search for salubrity and modernity to the ancient cities. It is noteworthy, however, that this conceptual expansion was gradually performed. It would take several decades to assimilate the concept of urban heritage beyond the idea of individual monuments’ immediate surroundings. Indeed, despite important contributions that already indicated this path during the first decades of the twentieth century – with emphasis to studies of Italian Gustavo Giovannoni (1931) – the understanding of urban heritage specificities will be consolidated just after the Second World War.

The relationship between ‘old-new’ in urban fabric

In the first decades of the twentieth century, there was a gradual deepening regarding the investigation both on the qualities of the built environment and the ways of interfering in this reality. Besides the idea of the surrounding area of monumental works, the built environment was then perceived as a set of conditions that define an urban reality that is not only physical, but also social and memorial. This process was accompanied by several contributions – mostly resulting from studies of urban aesthetics and theoretical deepening of the second post-war period – and allowed for the disclosure of a series of questions that currently remain highlighted: the relations between old and new, the insertion of new iconic architectures in old urban tissues, the urban dimension of preservation and restoration and the search for interdisciplinary professional contributions in these processes. These matters, fed by an increasingly mature understanding about the values that define property, paved the way for the expansion of this very concept. Expansion that would appear soon in various international documents on the preservation of cultural properties, especially from the 1960s.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, one could highlight the theoretical contribution of the so-called ‘critical restoration’ – especially the study of Italians Roberto Pane and Renato Bonelli – and the theories developed by Cesare Brandi (1963). In the wake of Alois Riegl’s conceptual advances, who would overcome the positivistic vision tied to the conservation field, by referring it to the modern aesthetic concepts, the Italian scholars went beyond by allowing for the consolidation of concepts and criteria in the artistic and architectural restoration field. Furthermore, the latter ones stimulated the recognition of specific heritage qualities (historical, artistic, memorial) associated with the urban fabric (Carbonara 1997; Kühl 2007).

The recognition of urban settings’ cultural values and the theoretical principles that should govern upon them has been adequately addressed by international charters on preservation of cultural property. Venice Charter (1964) – the main theoretical framework of UNESCO-ICOMOS on this theme so far – addresses the issue of the concept of urban cultural heritage expansion to modest sites and buildings which have acquired cultural significance over time. The Charter also addresses the principles widely discussed and agreed upon at international level regarding the general criteria for intervention in cultural property. Similarly, considering operations in urban sites, Amsterdam Declaration (1975) and Washington Charter (1987) provide us with secure conceptual bases. An aspect of great importance for the treatment of urban areas with cultural interest is the discussion about the necessary integration between preservation studies and the initiatives from urban and territorial planning, the so-called integrated conservation method. A theme addressed in the Amsterdam document, the integrated conservation proposes an interdisciplinary action in all phases of the intervention process: the study of urban preexistences to be preserved, the
elaboration of urban planning proposals and the executive processes. The objective is to seek
for the simultaneous development of projects which include the requirements of heritage
preservation and those of urban and territorial development.

This expansion of the concept of cultural heritage represents a major theme in the contemporary
debate on preservation, restoration and interpretation of cultural property. As all transformative
action in cultural property requires the recognition of its specificities as a premise to support any
proposal, the ever more complex valorization of artifacts – such as the urban sites – puts the
architectural production across from the great operational and interpretative challenges. When
proposing a new architecture inside an urban cultural site, one necessarily creates a new dialogue
between the built constructions, such as a museological project that interprets, gives life and
attributes meanings to different artifacts; the new architectural production equally interferes
and suggests new ways of seeing and feeling the urban reality in which it is inserted.

Museological perspectives: dialogues between preexistence and new urban icons

Similar challenges have been presented to the disciplinary field of Museology. From the 1970s,
due to the extension of the heritage concept and the consequent transformations in the role
of museums, Museology moves away from the idea of study primarily focused on practices
developed inside these institutions, and acquires the sense of a social science that perceives
the museological object as a source of knowledge. At that moment, with emphasis on the
contribution from the discussions at the Round Table of Santiago de Chile\(^2\), two strands began to
emerge in this field: the traditional treatment of subject and the so-called New Museology. The
first strand would remain developing the traditional methods of museological interpretation,
typically focused on reading a particular collection inside the building that contains it. The second
strand seeks to relate the artifact to the context that produces and transforms it. The
museological interpretation would go beyond the walls of the building-museum in search
for community participation, allowing for the assignment of multiple meanings to considered
artifacts. This new approach would allow for the emergence of new types of museums and
new interpretations for the musealized objects and / or contexts (Cerávolo 2004; Barbuy 1995).

In this approach, considering urban heritage as cognitive artifact – according to assumptions of
the New Museology –, the presence of the museum in an urban cultural site can hold complex
and curious (or dangerous) functions. In the form of icon-buildings, a trend that has been seen in
the architecture of many contemporary museums, these new constructions take on a dual role:
on the one hand, they propose symbol images for the city and configure themselves, in this sense,
as ‘museum of itself’ buildings; on the other hand, they insert themselves in an urban fabric that
is also an artifact to be understood, respected and preserved by new constructive interventions.
Contemporary museums, architectural icons are therefore faced with the possibility of
interpreting the urban heritage and of dialoguing with secular structures, knowledge bearers, or
rather, risk nullifying the reading of the material and immaterial specificities that it composes, a
concept which has demanded decades of theoretical maturity, as was seen, to be recognized and
understood. The museological perspectives arising from a coherent and instigating interpretation

\(^2\) *Round Table Santiago do Chile*. ICOM, The International Council of Museums, 1972.
of urban heritage are configured, in contemporary architectural production, as a new face of the old dilemma about the dialogue between old and new in the historical sites.

Urban interventions and architectural icons: interpretation and renewal

The question of the relationship between the old and new in historic urban fabric has been discussed for several decades. In the variety of their propositions, supporter thinkers of the impossibility of harmony between the old and new and scholars’ advocates of dialogue among constructions from different periods, appear in this debate. One point, however, remains constant among different interpretations: a careful understanding of the values of urban heritage and concern for its protection. It is worth mentioning that this conceptual acquisition has received the unambiguous contribution of theoretical reworking of recent decades in the field of urbanism, such as the gradual deconstruction of the technical issue priority in the city transformation and of the idea of ‘place’ valorization, that is, the communities’ desires to recover and reinterpret their ties of belonging to a particular space, history and culture. In this assertion, urbanism considers urban heritage in different ways: the secular urban-structure interpretation as examples of organizations that transcend the technical evolution and keep unexpected actuality; and the unveiling of the symbolic values searched by man in face of an alleged globalization of culture that threatens individuality (Barthélemy 1995).

This watchful eye on the traditional urban environment as cognitive tool has strengthened a sense of confidence in the references provided by certain secular experiences, at the expense of merely theoretical schemes, difficult to verify in practice, proposed by planners until mid 1970s. The study of old urban fabrics as reference to current practice – not as a fortuitous copy but as a source of a renewed understanding of the processes of urban formation, as it was desired by Sitte – can then be a way to meet most of the desired responses. Thus, in the correct understanding of the pre-existence, we have found a new direction for the “creative imagination”, in the words of French scholar Jean Barthélemy (1995).

In the international documents mentioned, therefore, albeit the theoretical basis stemming from the disciplinary field of monuments’ preservation, it resounds as conceptual reworking on urban planning that began to emerge in the 1960s. In a revision context of certain assumptions of modern urbanism, varied reinterpretations of urban aesthetics appear, turning attention to the existing city and the perceptual reality generated by it\(^3\). From varied interpretations, these studies sought to prioritize a new set of needs related to a new understanding of the role of the city, instead of the focus on the known priorities of modern urbanism primarily based on the demands of traffic and the definition of using zones. In this new understanding, the urban settings assume roles of another order: beyond the idea of function associated with the use or the services offered, urban settings are seen as both spaces with symbolic power of attraction and places of cultural and social manifestation. This does not mean the abandonment of any elements of functionalistic character, but its revision from this broader view of the specificities of urban areas. The project of the ‘new’, therefore, would act in line with the development of the contemporary city and with the unequivocal preservation of urban heritage that daily configures and consolidates the city.

\(^3\) For example, the contributions of Kevin Lynch (1960), Jane Jacobs (1961) and Christopher Alexander (1966) among others.
However, contemporary practice does not always follow this direction. In many cases, new projects inserted in historical urban tissues, proposed as ‘revitalizing’ alternatives and witnesses of our time against the ‘mummification’ of the town, ignore the particularities of urban heritage and configure themselves, in the end, as different manifestations of the old speculative trend where the true objective is the economic interest (Cervellati 1981). Interventions of this nature have mainly occurred in urban sites of recent cultural valorization such as obsolete industrial zones, old harbor areas or traditional districts. In this process, many interventions so-called as ‘urban restoration’ are, in fact, actions contrary to the precepts of integrated conservation. On the one hand, these interventions ignore the existing heritage and propose formal and spatial constructive ineffective models; on the other hand, they dramatically interfere with the original social and functional composition, by inserting new uses that are not always compatible and expel the traditional inhabitants.

The insertion of contemporary architectural production alongside the pre-existing urban history is essentially a project-design problem; a response which should be searched in true works of art and architecture. These works should seek to engage in dialogue with history and restoration, not from fragile interdisciplinary ties, but from the real understanding of the interdependence of knowledge in the design conception. This approach should be sought from the very process of architectural education, attempt to ethical principles that should guide learning, as Bonelli (1957) pointed out, and stimulate a renewed discussion on the role of the professional architect in the intervention, production and interpretation of the existing city.

The search for the dissonance between the new and the pre-existence has undoubtedly generated several urban and architectural projects of high quality. This tool, however, depends on an accurate and conscientious project. This is why here we warn against the fragile recurrence “to the language of ‘stars’ of architecture” in the insertion of new architectures in historical context. The development of such project, to be inserted in an urban context of cultural interest, should be studied “away from illustrated magazines, reading the structures directly from the historical territory and environment, revealing them carefully, knowing them and playing them with your fingers”, in the words of Italian scholar Ranellucci (2003). This means to design new projects seeking for detailed investigations through basing the interpretive ways adopted.

In some ways, the issues involved in the preservation of urban heritage lead us to discuss the design process of the very city. More than building on open spaces, the reality of contemporary city throws us to the discussion on the recognition of the pre-existing values and the relevance to conduct the ongoing transformations of urban space from reasoned historical-critical interpretation.

In the continuous interpretation of these specificities, to design on the existing city is also to promote the museological reading of urban artifacts. Would this not be one of the goals of the Museum in the consolidated city? In this assertion, would the true icon of contemporary city not be the own reading of this revealed and continually transformed historicity?

The deepening of the issues involved in the preservation and interpretation of urban heritage confronts us with complex questions, as the discussion on our ways of seeing, understanding and

---

4 This theme is traceable in the works of architects as Frank Gehry, Richard Meier, Peter Zumthor, Zaha Hadid, David Libeskind among others. Montaner 1995 and 2008; Futagawa 2001 and 2008.
designing architecture and the city in contemporary times. Questioning our ways of seeing the city is also a way of rethinking the roles of the Museum-building inside and outside its walls.

Bibliographic References


