

# ICOA1581: HERITAGE AS THE DEMOCRACY OF THE DEAD, THE LIVING AND THE UNBORN: THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE WITH MONUMENTS IN INTEGRATING COMMONALITIES

## Subtheme 01: Integrating Heritage and Sustainable Urban Development by engaging diverse Communities for Heritage Management

**Session 2:** Management, Documentation

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**Abstract:** Heritage predates conditions and finally forms our cultural life, while we constantly reframe it in changing urban contexts. In this diachronic, dynamic cultural process of conservation and development, a diversity of stakeholders invests different sets of values, establish different cultural significances and envisage different futures for their heritage.

Yet, heritage is common to all in both; its spatial dimension, as it occupies the common public space of all stakeholders, and in its temporal/ historical dimension, as it equally pervades their shared history and memory. We could add to G.K. Chesterton's phrase

“Tradition is the democracy of the dead. It means giving a vote to our ancestors”, that heritage, as tradition, is also the democracy of giving a vote to our unborn descendants.

What is urgently needed in order to accommodate this growing diversity of involved stakeholders of heritage at any one time, but also at different times involving past, present and future generations of stakeholders is an active dialogue centred upon the monuments themselves and their emitted cultural significance.

This shift of the point of view from the dialogue between stakeholders to a dialogue of all of them with the monuments, could establish the latter as valid interlocutors in setting, according to their idiosyncrasies, the criteria of their compatibility, capacity and potential vis a vis urban development. Such a dialogue with monuments could then safeguard sustainability of both, heritage and development alike. Monuments as active agents can make a claim for a democratic dialogical process that alone could establish their common sense on a common ground and conflate conservation and sustainable development in one place.

Dialogue, the prime characteristic of democracy, should be the prime means towards unfolding this potential of monuments for spatial and temporal mediation in establishing a common ground of shared cultural significance in multi-cultural urban environments.

*Key words: heritage, development, commonalities, dialogue*

## **Overview**

Cultural heritage is that part and aspect of our living environment that predates, conditions and finally forms our cultural life, while we, in our lifetime, are re-shaping it. In this diachronically evolving cultural process a diversity of stakeholders, especially in urban conglomerates, invest different sets of values, establish different cultural significances and envisage different futures for their heritage. Yet, all these cultural outlooks and projections converge necessarily on the same corpus of cultural heritage in its spatial dimension, as it occupies the common public space of all stakeholders and in its temporal/historical terms by constituting their shared history and memory.

## **Problematic issues**

The proliferating diversity of heritage stakeholders at any one time necessitates social tolerance and political compromises as prerequisite strategies for the accommodation of different and opposing cultural values. These strategies do not necessarily employ an engaged dialogue and they don't necessarily aim at establishing commonality. On the contrary, more often than not, they represent one sided attitudes from a part of stakeholders towards the rest of them and, what is more important than that, they represent an one-sidedness view towards the monuments by projecting dominant views upon them. The professed ecumenism of heritage preservation practices and the equally opposite of professing cultural relativism may not be compatible and their opposition may endanger cultural heritage.

Urban environments, as extreme cases of cultural conglomerates are hosting a diversity of communities, social groups and individuals and accommodate respectively their diverse values of preservation and development values. They present the most acute and challenging ground for heritage of any kind and scale in that they present a seeming paradox. Monuments and cultural sites are, by definition, culturally specific and thus valued, preserved and managed in terms of this specificity. Yet, despite their specific relation to a cultural group of the past, or of the present, they necessarily partake and share the common urban space they co-habitate. Out of this co-habitation, contesting attitudes arise concerning decision making about heritage protection, enhancement and management.

Cultural tolerance and readiness to compromise are prerequisites but not enough as means to reach a common sense, to create a 'common ground' upon the shared public urban space. In order to enhance the diversity of stakeholders, what is needed is a democratic constitution where all specificities will find their place, metaphorically but also literally in the public space they share.

In striving for resolutions in heritage matters by exercising tolerance, compromising differences and imposing cultural diplomacy and manifesting power, should not be addressed as a problem, but as an opportunity of/ for heritage enrichment. The very diversity of beliefs, values and prospects should not be seen as a source of contestation and possible conflict, but rather as cultural enrichment, a manifestation of human values. Culture diversity is actually the proof that no matter how diverse, opposing and contesting different cultural systems and values happen to be, they nevertheless are the best expressions of human vitality and cultural creativity in their creating values to regulate their communal life. Monuments and cultural sites as both manifestations and tokens of cultural views should be preserved because of the achieved diversity they elicit and showcase, as parts of cultural life and socio-cultural development.

## **Cultural heritage as necessary commonality**

We could attempt at mitigating these conflicts by starting from the fact that cultural heritage, due to its permanence in place and endurance in time is there occupying the public space. This outlook could enable a shift of point of view towards an active dialogue centred upon the monuments themselves and their emitted cultural significance. This shift of the point of view from the dialogue between different stakeholders to a dialogue between each monument and each stakeholder, could establish monuments as valid interlocutors in setting, according to their idiosyncrasy the criteria of compatibility and carrying capacity in unfolding their potential *vis a vis* urban development.

Such a dialogue with monuments could then safeguard sustainability of both, heritage and development alike. It will then appear that monuments can make a claim, from their own point of view as active agents and not as subjects to projections upon them, a claim for a democratic dialogical process that could establish a common sense on a common ground of heritage. Cultural heritage as an active agent and a valid interlocutor could be considered as the best possible mediator and catalyst in bridging the past, the present and the future for different cultural groups in one place.

### **Democracy as the ground of accommodating the other**

To that end we should redefine for our current situation. Democracy as a socio-political system, by definition, accommodates the diversity of heritage stakeholders down to the scale of each citizen and their equally diverse cultural values they withhold, tangible and intangible which are embedded and projected on their shared urban space. Democracy guarantees their conviviality, respect for their cultural differences (otherness), solidarity and acknowledgement that diverse cultural groups can achieve the cultural enrichment of public life in cities by as common good. Furthermore, democracy does not denote a state of achieved balanced stability, but rather a continuous practice towards it. Democracy, meaning the power of 'demos' (in Greek, the assembly of the people) empowers the majority but at the same time respects the minority in all socio-political matters and employs dialogue as the means to all decision making. Democracy is about communal aims and communal means in communal places; where it is enacted constituting thus an evolving educative ground for citizens, while dialogue is the prerequisite means to achieve it. Negation to come in dialogue or pretentious dialogue are, by definition, non democratic.

But even if a democratic dialogue manages to be finally established, i.e. a proper dialogue, can only guarantee engagement and sharing of its value as a democratic means. It cannot guarantee a resolution at all times. Yet, even when a democratic dialogue fails, tolerance end up in respecting the interlocutor, as the other, as opposed to hypocritical or indifferent and distanced tolerance and compromise.

### **Dialogue as the means of Democracy**

Dialogue should be considered as conducted between concurrent diverse cultural beliefs, between generations and even between different, diverse and even opposing interests aiming at communication and mutual understanding instead of distanced tolerance and compromise. It aims at mutual understanding and sharing of values instead of mere acknowledgement of cultural differences. Dialogue facilitates a culture of sharing. More particularly, dialogue achieves:

- A common aim (telos), a common set end as the teleological aim regulating principle driving the dialogic process. It is on the on the ground of a preset end that dialogue could operate as the means towards that end.
- A common language of communication.

- Openness to the belief of the interlocutor as the other, which, according to philosophical hermeneutics forms the necessary prerequisite of understanding.<sup>1</sup>

- Acceptance that the dialogue binds and affects both parts in resulting to their modified views and an unforeseen final resolution that will be binding to both interlocutors.

A dialogue thus conceived, achieves a synthesis, a resolution that is creative because it was not there before, it could not have been achieved otherwise and has been particularly formed through that dialogue. It is a resolution created by the bilateral contribution that binds democratically both ends avoiding thus any unilateral compromise or imposition of view. A democratic dialogue thus established and activated as part of communal life could then be the best possible mediator for cultural heritage to be acknowledged as common good in both temporal and spatial terms.

In temporal terms, and for the diversity of the stakeholders, dialogue could mediate across concurrent diverse cultural views and beliefs that are projected on the common public space. Due to its spatial permanent standing and shared reference, cultural heritage could be the means to integrate commonalities based on cultural heritage as common public good, notwithstanding different projection and different cultural investments of meaning. Dialogue could connect and conflate the values of the past, their contemporary appreciation and their aspirations toward their development in the future.

Cultural heritage conceptualized as common denominator and acting as a mediator could be seen as establishing democracy not only for the living but also for the dead who created, culturally appreciated and shared this same cultural heritage. In an inspired essay, G. K. Chesterton pinpoint this issue arguing for the democracy of the dead in contemporary and future contexts where cultural heritage monuments and sites partake.

In his own phrasing:

«I have never been able to understand where people got the idea that democracy was in some way opposed to tradition. It is obvious that tradition is only democracy extended through time. It is trusting to a consensus of common human voices rather than to some isolated or arbitrary record (...) Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead»<sup>2</sup>.

We could extend Chesterton's observation to include as stakeholders of cultural heritage not only the dead who created and culturally appreciated this same cultural heritage before us but also the future stakeholders. Concerning our monuments, we could thus establish a democracy of the living, the dead and the unborn stakeholders.

Tradition, considered by some as an impediment to free democratic development, argues Chesterton, is part and parcel of democracy as it incorporates not only our values relating to the contemporary horizon, but also values of the past that constitute part and parcel of our current identity. So, through surviving and still valued monuments, the stakeholders of the past should also be parts of democracy as well as, also projected by us, future stakeholders.

This approach manifests eloquently the power and potential of cultural heritage to establish cultural bonds between different, diverse and opposing stakeholders as they all have to share what is in place, in their public ground, no matter the different cultural views.

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<sup>1</sup>Gadamer, 2004

<sup>2</sup>Chesterton, 1908.

Dialogue could be systematically conceptualized as a dialectic hermeneutical process engaging all stakeholders, contemporary voiced as well as past and future stakeholders, with what stands there in place and is being considered as relevant to an ongoing culture. This hermeneutical process not only best acknowledges but is particularly based on the otherness of each interlocutor as the ultimate ground for mutual understanding and accommodated dialogue as a creative process that engages and surpasses both interlocutors binding them to a creative resolution. Out of this dialogical process a resolution may not ensue but even so dialogue is all we've got.

### **Cultural heritage as integrating commonalities by mediating in place**

So, it's not democracy in the protection and managements of cultural heritage but rather democracy through the mediation of cultural heritage as common means and ends partaking to shared public space. Monuments were there in place before us and claim the continuity of their existence through their partaking to our public space and public cultural life.<sup>3</sup>

In spatial terms the dialogue is proposed not only between stakeholders about their shared monuments, but mainly as the dialogue between each one of them with monuments, ascribing thus to monuments an agency showcasing their distinct identity and their idiosyncratic carrying capacity, forms of compatibility and appropriateness in their conservation practices.

A monument thus considered is an autonomous ontological entity able to prescribe and assess any projected upon it and mediate between contested cultural projections envisioned by different cultural outlooks of the diversity of stakeholders.

In spatial terms, dialogue could establish common bonds between contesting cultural significances of monuments and sites in shared public urban space and cultural heritage could then be seen as a democratic ground acting paradigmatically in establishing commonalities.

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<sup>3</sup>Ganiatsas, 2015.