

## **When the ruins are gone - the sensible dimension of the heritage reconstructions**

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### **Introduction**

In this paper, I discuss the entanglement between people and their ruins and reflect on the reconstruction of cultural heritage. Based on my experience and on various fruitful discussions in which I engaged during the ICOMOS workshop in Paris, my previous thoughts about the relationships between people and ruins are reaffirmed.

The majority of authors would agree that people live around ruins. However, I argue that *the ruins live in people* (Bezerra, 2009; 2012). Understanding the deep connections between people and the *ruiniforms landscapes* (Silveira & Rocha, 2013) of the present and past is, in my perspective, one of the main challenges of heritage reconstructions.

It is widely assumed that both the tangible and the intangible dimensions of heritage are affected by many types of disasters (either caused by human action or catastrophes), although a significant number of reconstruction projects have developed from a material-oriented approach. One main reason for this is the emphasis on the conservation of physical properties of heritage: An eternal preoccupation with loss and decay, and an “obsession with preservation that dominates the contemporary interests in the past (...)” (Holtorf, 2012:160) (for a discussion about “heritage obsession” see also Jeudy, 2008 and Gnecco, 2017).

Authors such as Byrne (1995), Huyssen (2006), Smith (2011), Harrison (2004, 2013), Holtorf (2012, 2016), and Herzfeld (2015) have made important and remarkable contributions to these debates on the destruction, conservation, and preservation of heritage. However, their notions are far from being widely accepted.

Holtorf (2012) has noted that the destruction of heritage is part of the process of preservation. Herzfeld (2015: 9) has also stated that “preservation itself can be

destructive.” Similarly, while reflecting on conservation, Jeudy (2008: 108) has asked, “Conserver n’est-ce pas déjà une manière d’achever ce qui est encore vivant?”

In the “heritage game” (Peacock & Rizzo, 2008), people who live near so-called patrimonial sites are ignored. Verdesio (2010: 346) has described this process as a “domestication of a space used in the past,” engendered by institutional and functional actions that contribute to the articulation of Western rationalities over heritage. According to Jeudy (2008: 95), the idea that there are standard practices and notions, which can be applied in any context, confirms “totalitarisme patrimonial.”

Indeed, an essential point discussed during the workshop concerns the process of decision-making in reconstruction projects. To address this concern, it is necessary to answer the following questions: Who decides the future of destroyed, or endangered, heritage? Why and for whom to reconstruct? How to balance local claims on one side, and global management goals on the other? What kind of reconstruction do people want, and what if people do not care about the *heritage for the future*? Then, which perspective will prevail - the community's or the specialists'?

As Harrison stated during the workshop, “we cannot blame someone for not being worried about the future.” Pyburn (2009) has further argued that we cannot make decisions for others, although we are responsible for discussing the consequences of each possible path others may choose. While extending these concerns to the focus of this paper – people and ruins— we should reflect on whether the reconstructions of the ruins are desirable to those directly affected by them.

### **My Experience with People and Their Things in Amazon**

For the past several years I have been studying the relationship between people and the objects of the past, more specifically the things that *resonate* with the past in Brazil. My main concern is understanding how people interact with archaeological sites and artifacts in their daily lives. Considering both sites and artifacts as mundane things, I have been able to comprehend the deep entanglement between people and the material repertoire called “heritage” (Bezerra, 2017).

As an outcome of my fieldwork, I have found that many people have personally owned archaeological objects (Bezerra, 2012, 2015, 2016). I have moreover discussed the affection that people, especially in the Amazon region, have for objects or places,

regardless of their historical and/or archaeological value. Indeed, the things from the past are part of the day-to-day present (see also Harrison, 2004 and Hamilakis, 2011). The *thing* itself is not what is important, but the hermeneutical process of “creation of senses” (Smith, 2011:44).

Nevertheless, a closer examination of these relationships has revealed that, in many cases, the [archaeological] materials themselves also play an important role in the relationships between people in the present and objects of the past (Bezerra, 2017). As Ingold (2007:3) has questioned, “(...) might we not learn more about the material composition of the inhabited world by engaging quite directly with the stuff we want to understand?” Aligned with this perspective, I began to observe how people relate to the ruins themselves.

In interviews, people who live near archaeological sites told me about the things they usually collect and keep at home. Their narratives indicate two main criteria for collecting artifacts. Firstly, they choose things for their aesthetic attributes, rather than a sense of belonging – as stated in heritage discourse. Secondly, they select things for their physical characteristics, i.e. things that are practical and useful in their daily lives.

For example, in Joanes, a fishing village in the northeastern region of Marajó Island in the Brazilian Amazon, Dona Vera, a retired local school teacher acts as a curator of her own “domestic collections,” which are formed by fragments of historical dishware. She selects the most colorful pieces and has composed an impressive range of design patterns. The things that form these collections are kept among her personal *stuff* (Miller 2010), such as family photographs, personal documents, and mementos from her children. Her memorabilia combine precolonial ceramic sherds, historical dishware and contemporary objects like a plastic button (Bezerra, 2012, 2017). She has claimed that all of these things are bound by one aspect: they were all found in her backyard, in the same place, at the same depth, during the long-term construction of her house. Here the “pastness” (Holtorf, 2016: 34) is at stake as a relational attribute that is transmitted from one thing to another (from the deposition layer to the ceramic sherds and from these to the plastic button). Similarly, the occurrence of the plastic button contributes to the deconstruction of the strangeness of the ceramics and the dishware, as well as to their incorporation into the familiar repertoire of things.

Yet, in another context – farmers’ villages along the Transamazônica highway in the western of Pará state – women collect polished stone axes and ceramic sherds that they

find while working. Several of these women collect these items because the form, the surface shine and the weight of the axes make them good door weights and paper weights, among other uses. Some of the women told me that once the polished surface has eroded, they throw the axes away. The ceramic sherds are also considered very useful for their physical properties, as they help keep the soil moist in their house plants. Whereas the women emphasized the practical purpose of the things they collected from nearby archaeological sites, they also referred to the “visage” – a native category for haunting narratives – that constitute these things. For example, the axes are known as “corisco” or “pedra de raio”<sup>1</sup>, as they have heard from her ancestors (see also Harrison, 2004 and Hamilakis, 2011, among others). Other specific examples have been presented in previous studies (Moraes & Bezerra, 2012).

Both cases mentioned above deal with the idea of *pastness*, that is:

“(…) a significant concept because it disassociates cultural heritage from age and links the historicity of cultural heritage with an experience in the present, thus making it easier to discuss the forms and functions of cultural heritage that operate in contemporary society” (Holtorf, 2016: 340).

In the first example, Dona Vera created a “genealogy of objects” (Gosden, 2005: 203) based on her observations of what she found and the context in which they were found. The antiquity of her collections is connected to the long construction process of the family home. The things collected by her hold meaning because they were found in her backyard; A landscape that is “pregnant with the past” (Ingold 1993: 152-153), the village past and her past, acts as a trigger for the construction of her memories. Simultaneously, beauty, art, and aesthetics are also important.

In the second example, the group of women linked the “visage” of the polished stone axes with their childhood and or/youth. It seems that a “flux of materials” (Ingold, 2007) generates these “coriscos”/axes: lightning, thunder, the earth (from where they emerge after seven years, as told by the narrators), trees (always near the place where the axes fall from the sky), and the sky.

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<sup>1</sup> In English “thunderstone” or “lightning stone”.

In these two cases, the decay of the materials plays an important role. Dona Vera, however, tries to avoid the destruction of the artifacts, taking care to clean, wash, restore, and store the items very carefully. She proudly shows off the pieces she has cleaned and restored. The group of women, contrarily, decided to keep or to throw away the axes based, not on the decay itself, but on a certain stage of decay. In both examples, the aesthetics of the artifact's surface defined the women's choice and destination, but the visual experience with these artifacts is also affected by their old and decayed appearance. The women's attachment and aesthetics experiences are connected to the discussions about the reconstruction of ruins presented here.

### **People and their ruins, or ruins and their people**

The aesthetic experience considered here is twofold: the experience of people who live near ruins and those of the specialists who seek to manage them. The archaeological artifacts discussed before also constitute the "ruiniform landscapes" (Silveira & Rocha, 2013). Although all archaeological sites are also ruins (see Verdesio, 2010), this section focuses on "mega-artefacts" (Harrison & Schofield, 2010: 156): ones that visually impose their presence above the surface.

Within this context, I add two cases from Brazil. In the first case, an extensive revitalization project was conducted at a World Heritage Site. The Historic Center of Salvador, in Bahia, northeast of Brazil was founded in the sixteenth century. Salvador was the first capital of Brazil, and it was the site of the first slave market in the New World. The Historic Center encompassed the Monumenta Program actions. The Monumenta Program is an initiative of the Brazilian government and the IADB (Inter American Development Bank) conceived in the late 1990s. The main purpose of the program is to recover and preserve urban historic sites (Diogo, 2009).

I conducted a heritage education program at the Historic Center of Salvador (Bezerra, 2009, 2010). During the fieldwork seasons, in advance of the heritage education actions development, I had the opportunity to acquaint myself with the people who experience those landscapes daily. At that time, I was close to these people, especially the elderly, who had grown up surrounded by the historical buildings and structures. Many of them lived in very vulnerable conditions, not only confronted by economic and social constraints, but also urban violence. Some of them had even lived in the ruined buildings.

Although a detailed examination of the actions of the heritage education project is beyond the scope of this paper, several reflections of mine that emerged from the narratives of those I interviewed are relevant. On several occasions – in addition to the formal interviews – I wandered through the streets with them and took note of “the remembering”; For Sarlo (2007: 10, transl. mine), the “smell appears, even when it is not evoked.” While we walked, many of them would talk about their past and the ancient landscapes. Some buildings had already been restored, but they were barely mentioned. Along the way, several old houses had already been reconstructed, but their *nostalgia* was connected to the *poetics* of their relationships with family, neighbors, friends, and a feeling of peace. As the elderly residents say, “The street was *pretty*, there was no agony.” In fact, the houses they discussed were the “oniric houses” (Bachelard 2008: 32) of their childhood.

These memories were triggered and inspired by the ruins as we passed by them. Gnecco (2017: n/p) argued that the value of the ruins is “(...) su liminaridad. Es de una materialidade indudable pero su importancia está en lo que evoca, en lo que dice haber sido.” Thus, according to Huyssen (2006), there appears to be a profound liaison between the biography of people and the biography of the debris of the buildings that had gone to ruins. People and ruins are part of the same genealogy (Gosden, 2005); they are coauthors and witnesses of their ageing process.

The ruins are these people’s “landscape biographies” (Harrison, 2004: 57), as their lives are entangled with the biography of the landscape constituted by the ruins. Violette Morin (1969: 132-133) has even proposed two categories of objects that live with us: “l’objet dit biocentrique ou biographique (...) [et] l’objet dit cosmocentré ou *protocolaire*.” The first encompasses things that witness our life (our *mementos*), while the other comprises the *modern* things that surround us, but which resent our affections. To the group of old residents of the Historic Center of Salvador, the reconstructed, restored and revitalized heritage appears to be part of a *protocolaire* landscape.

The second example, as discussed in previous works (Bezerra, 2012, 2014, 2017), considers the relationships between people and ruins in Marajó Island.

The ruins of Joanes comprise precolonial and colonial remains, including the debris of the church Nossa Senhora do Rosário, a remnant of a religious mission from the seventeenth century. The Indigenous people were integrated into the colonial society by

the missionaries and, as is well known, the relationships between Indigenous people and the Portuguese in the Amazon were extremely violent (Schaan, 2009; Harris, 2017).

In addition to the church ruins, there is an assemblage of ancient ruined fish traps (*camboas*) along the local beaches. The fish traps integrated the system connected to the Royal Fishery, which supplied the city of Belém with the fishing of Mullet (*Mugil sp*) during the colonial period (Lopes 1999; Silva, A. 2012).

When I began my work there in 2007, it seemed to me that the residents did not have strong connections to these ruins. However, throughout the years, I have come to realize that the residents' entanglement (Harrison, 2004; Hodder 2012, 2016) with these structures is anchored in their narratives about their lives and the past (Bezerra, 2011, 2012).

When asked, the children do not talk much about the ruins, although their school is just beside the site, but they play at the ruins, they search for coins there, they believe there to be ghosts that reside around the ruins (Silveira & Bezerra 2012). The ruins are also humanized: some people refer to the "mortal remains" of the church.

While some residents wonder about the preservation of the ruins, others are interested in their touristic value. Nevertheless, many of them also refer to the ruins as witnesses of their lives, as in the previous case. Dona Maria, for example, can see the ruins from her house: "Ever since I can remember, the ruins have always been there." Joelson, a fisherman, while explaining the functioning of a fish trap, has said that the fish traps have the shape of a half-moon, explaining further, "like this as if it was a heart." The affective memory of family members of the older fishermen is also activated by the fish traps (Bezerra, 2016). They remember walking at night to the fish traps, and that the walls "did not allow them to see what was inside" (Silva, A.C. 2012). The widow of a fisherman, nostalgically noted that there was a time in which "the *camboa* was happy" (Silva, A.C. 2012), in reference to the fishing abundance of the past. The fishermen also described children's games that were played with small boats on the waters dammed up by the fish traps. Joelson, Dona Maria's grandson, also said that the fish traps have always been there. He used his body as a reference to discuss the dimensions of the fish trap walls when he was a child, trying to "measure" the memories of the fish traps with his hands (Bezerra, 2017).

The ruins of the church were recently restored. At first, there was a mismatch between my own memories of the ruins and their restored version. Apparently, the residents of Joanes were not affected by the aesthetic transformation of the ruins as I was. Although the color of the surface, due to the plaster layer, had changed from brown to beige, the residents merely noted that the intervention prevented the tower of the church from falling. Interestingly, the artisans who had chosen the ruins (the “old ones”) as the visual identity of their association (Bezerra, 2014) continue to paint the ruins as they were in the past. To the people of Joanes, the restoration of the church tower was an act of healing the “mortal remains” of the church (as it prevented the ruins from falling) and did not change their image of the ruins or their relationship with them.

These two examples suggest that such interventions do not erase the “oniric ruins” from memory; those ruins “to where our dreams take us” (Bachelard 2008: 32). In both cases, the people and the ruins are *growing old together*. Thus, it is necessary to consider why and for whom ruins are restored and reconstructed.

### **Never Concluding....**

Simmel (1958) has argued that nature is the core element in the formation of ruins. According to him, in the “balance between the nature and the spirit” they “shift in favor of the nature” (op.cit.: 379). People let this ruining process persist, becoming “accomplice of the nature” through an attitude described by Simmel as a “man’s positive action and (...) his passivity”. They finally perceive human work as a “product of the nature”, and this is the seduction of the ruins (idem: 380).

Indeed, human work turns the ruins into a “place of memory” (Nora, 1984), in which time is entrapped, as if life in that space has been interrupted, or ceased altogether. Nature, despite its move towards decay, follows the flux of life. The ruins grow old, they create wrinkles, their veins become exposed, and they do not mock time. As one of the characters of Peixoto’s book says, “I had to come back here to get an idea of how time passed by” (Peixoto 1987: 164, transl. mine).

The “memory of place” (Silveira, pers.com., 2012) is established by the forces of nature, as the ruining process is in a constant state of becoming (*devir*), and is never a finished “human work.” The ruins are a reference to life and, as such, also decay and death. Their *ānima* comes, paradoxically, from their humanized nature with regard to decrepitude and



death. In this sense, people's lives are profoundly entangled in the ruins by these humanized forces of nature, just as in the two cases presented here. Indeed, their lives become *animated* by the ruins. The ruins, therefore, *live in them*.

Reconstruction is an act of "human work" in the *simmelian* sense that acts as "healers" of the material wounds, transforming them into wrinkle-less landscapes, without expressions. In this way, the landscapes are anesthetized. To preserve the memory of a place, another place is created, composing a hierarchy of landscapes anchored in power relations in favor of aesthetic harmony. Thus, a mismatch is created between the individual who grew old, and the ruins that "flourished" through reconstruction. In this way, the ruins are destroyed, their *ānima* is killed. Both Brazilian examples indicate that reconstruction is not always desired by those who live near the ruins. As Cornelius Holtorf suggested during the workshop, maybe we could "reconstruct ruins as ruins".

Nevertheless, it is necessary to recognize that reconstructions can make a difference in a post-trauma context. Many authors have discussed the role of heritage in a post-conflict context, as well as its contribution to the healing process after wars, disasters, and other traumatic events. In several cases around the world, people who live near "wounded" places (Schneider and Susser 2003), or "places of pain and shame" (Logan and Reeves 2009), have benefitted from the value of "heritage as therapy" (Meskel and Sheermeyer 2008), and hence the heritage's reconstruction.

In these cases, the reconstruction of cities, monuments, and buildings could have the opposite effect as that of the previous Brazilian examples. It is critical for us to understand that a "wounded" landscape (Schneider and Susser 2003) is also a constituent part of heritage. However, we can conceivably propose that the process of "erasing" the wounds through reconstruction only blurs the lines between the present and the past – between the memory of the peace and the traumatic contemporary reality. As Giblin (2013: 14) has argued:

"(...) it is impossible for individuals or societies to recreate an earlier state of being because the experience of the problem perceived, whether healed or not, will have contributed to the contemporary understanding, the memory, of that body"

Whether or not to reconstruct is a matter to be discussed, primarily, with the people whose lives are enmeshed in the threads that form the social, cultural and sensible fabric of heritage.

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