

## CHANGING PERSPECTIVES IN PLANNING FOR HISTORIC CENTRES

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### Origins

Policies for the preservation of historic remains are at least two centuries old, but for many years only a few buildings were protected as artworks, because of a special value attached to some specific manufactured goods. Only at the end of the 19th century the idea came of historic urban fabrics deserving conservation as such, even without any monumental characters. This concept yet did not come largely into effect until after world war II, when the idea of the city as an artefact was embodied in such different cases as the reconstruction of Warsaw or the protection of Venice, where the conservationist thesis was applied to its extreme consequences. During the so called cold war, different regimes, in the east and in the west, meant different threats to the integrity of historic cores, while planners and architects seemed to be using the same professional approach everywhere. In the east-European countries planners were backed by local authorities in protecting cities' historic core, but their effort was weakened by poor economic conditions affecting the whole urban environment. In the west, historic cores were threatened by land speculators, often politically strong, trying to turn central areas into more rentable business districts: economic success of cities proved sometimes dangerous to historic sites. The coincidence of the city centre with the historic core in the European city proved to be simultaneously a resource and a danger. In times of economic growth land value tends to overcome the value of existing buildings; here comes a strong trend toward substitution of old fabric with more up to date building types, which can more easily afford the land costs. This is a main threat to the spatial and architectural aspects: physical conservation becomes than a major worry, while the enemies are land speculators and building developers. Combination of weak planning and strong market forces posed great problems to western cities; scholars and planners had a lot to think and through mistakes and unexpected events a few steps in better understanding and policy designing were eventually made.

### Standardisation

Starting in the late '60s, new policies for historic centres were developed in most economically advanced countries. Different policies were experimented to reach the

conservation objectives, but all proved to be incorporating some kind of danger. So it was with gentrification, that is substituting old dwellers with higher income social groups, which brought unrequested segregation, turning the old complex city into a ghetto for the wealthy. So it was with extended commercialization, which turned many historic cities of continental Europe into a single mass shopping centres, where the signs of the past have no other role than advertising that everything is for sale. The same was for tourism, which is turning our most cherished art centres into toy cities for unprepared and disinterested masses of people, bringing often more nuisances and problems to the community than money to the private. The increase of prices of goods and properties caused by tourism falls actually over the local people, whose greatest majority is not involved in the business. Under terms like revitalization or regeneration, through fiscal and planning measures intended to attract new investors in the central areas, strong tertiarization and commercialization processes were put into effect, with the ultimate object to justify the costs of restoration and maintenance of the physical environment. This process resulted in a radical substitution of local residents and functions. Historic centres became the places where only the most profitable business could survive -be it de luxe shops or mass department stores- or high income residents, mainly bachelors and free lance professionals. Living or having one's activity in the historic centre had become a status symbol. Despite an apparent conservation of old urban patterns (although with many exceptions) such centres are not but the image of what they were: the complexity of the city, with its fascinating mix of people and uses, had disappeared, and the historic core is by now an other mono-functional section of the contemporary segregated city. This is even more so where tourism has taken a relevant role in the city's economy: here the past itself, instead of being an obstacle, becomes the instrument for economic advancement, while the city turns into one shopping centre.

However, it is true that in many parts of the world some success has been achieved in preserving the historic building stock. Destruction such as that occurred during the years of post-II world war "reconstruction" is today unthinkable in most European countries. Nobody (almost) would threaten an historic building in Venice or Rome, because of its economic value, and nobody could propose to destroy a medieval village in order to build a highway, because of

legal protection. However, the terms of such success seem questionable: tourist floods, commercial monoculture, petty urban furniture are actually homogenising Europe's (or world's?) historic centres. The same recipe is being used everywhere: pedestrianisation, commercialisation, gentrification.

On planning for the conservation of historic centres a little has been done and much more has been said. 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 could think that the two lines were not developed in a similar way: the economic one was by far the most cherished, and in stressing it, the conservation aims were often overlooked. Let us consider what happened to those west-European historic centres that were best taken care of, in terms of planning and development control. Facades 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, pizza and fast foods, and 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. This is also what is happening in the historic cities of the once socialist countries, and possibly so with a unhappy side: the fair of goods that is being put on is intended mainly for foreign visitors, who can only afford those prices. Was this the result we were looking for, raising the issue of conservation of the historic city? 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 one would like to protect.

### **Extension**

New planning principles have been developed during the recent past, as far the conservation of historic sites is concerned. They basically regard the extension of the concept of history and historic to domains up to now left aside. We are also aware that all the physical environment incorporates some degree of historic significance: this is true

for the peripheries and the countryside, the mountains, the rivers and the shores. Everywhere in our densely inhabited world there are signs of the past that have influenced later spatial arrangements: our task is to read and preserve such signs to recover that sense of identity and belonging that is lacking so widely today. A few decades ago it would have been unthinkable to call "historic" what was built in the XIX and XX centuries in Europe; today so called industrial archeology or modern architecture of the '20 and the '30 are being given protection in many places. Besides, the historic core is preserving its role as the collective image of the urban identity, and these elements lead us to understand that its main value is not an aesthetic one, but one of necessary testimony.

Such an extension is not a mere intellectual exercise, but it reflects a social process of recognition of the value of the past within our way of living. Much of this appreciation derives from the shortcomings of the contemporary city; even new equipment like tourist villages or commercial plazas often reflect, in their fake revival style, a nostalgia for a different urban past. Then we realized that the destiny of historic centres is linked to general urban dynamics; now we know that the main problem of Europe, where urban growth has come to an end, is the rehabilitation of the whole existing city, together with its core. Economic forces alone have largely demonstrated themselves unable to solve urban problems, but, at the same time, they cannot be ignored. The role of the public administration is in this field essential, as the main possible planning body: it is up to it to assess socially acceptable goals. It is up to the public administration also to show the correct strategies toward the various actors involved and to design the policies necessary to carry out them. Interacting with market forces, public policies and planning instruments, when carefully designed and managed, should be able to bring about results like a lively and well maintained historic core within a city of equal environmental quality throughout. Yet, even if such an outcome remains largely unattained, there can be no doubt that with no public intervention there would be no reasonable chance reach such goals; this is particularly true for the historic core, since we are dealing with a non renewable resource, whose protection must be granted for the future of our society. All these policies however may have a role, but they must be carefully applied, and restrained when necessary: it is indeed a problem of planning

It is also true that contemporary planning is indeed rejecting sharp land uses segregation in favour of a richer overlapping of different uses and users as well: strangely enough, this is not true for too many historic centres, remaining confined to their instrumental fate. There are

obvious reasons for such choice. One is tourism, that seems unable to grow without a strong shopping side: development of tourism goes together with increased shopping expenditure, as they reinforce each other. The other one is the failure of the modern city in providing attractive open spaces: the success of the historic centres is not but the mirror of such poor performance. The contemporary city seems losing the competition with the historic centre, at least in terms of attractiveness. But isn't this also linked to modern land use practice?

## **People**

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We must recognise that if people grant the "success" of an area, it is both fair and reasonable to take into account people behaviour in using urban spaces. This leads us to consider how many actors are playing on the stage, and suggests that, in order to devise strategies to overcome the problems, we must identify different goals put forward by different groups. It is also a matter of rights, since participation in planning can be more than a simple word, as it implies identifying who participate and when. If we give a close look we see that a number of different groups, each of them with specific goals, can be considered as having a vested interest in historic centres.

First come the natives who, like most of us, are struggling to ameliorate their living conditions, in terms of housing, transport and job opportunities. The residents form a second group overlapping but not necessarily identifying with the first one, since they have chosen to be there: they might love the slower path of life induced by the absence of modern facilities and nuisances as well. As a third group come the users, people who take a direct advantage of the historic centre, like trendy shopkeepers or professionals. Then come the tourists: they even pay to visit the historic centre and, quite often, pilgrims come, since religious tourism in historic places is a relevant share of overall tourism. Experts and art lovers are the final group, although possibly the most visible of all in many circles.

These groups are often in conflict, but they all share some right to have a say: in many circumstances, but particularly under conditions of social change, group objectives can be very different. Conservation vs. development is the mother of all conflicts, but one can identify many others, like elite vs. mass tourism, modernism vs. traditionalism in functional choices, etc. All these groups develop their own strategies, and use their power, be it electoral (the residents) or economic (the shopkeepers and all those involved in the tourist trade). Alliances among different groups are possible but rare. The most obvious can develop between tourists and art lovers, although not all tourists can be considered art

lovers since they are rather used to build mass tourism: visiting Venice isn't but a journey within a "week on the seaside" package.

## **Planners**

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What do the experts (usually academics or public officials) do? They have no power in quantitative or economic terms, yet they enjoy a large audience, due to social prestige. They insist that their main weapon is scientific research: knowing the past in depth and protecting it even when it is little known (as for many underground remains) is often turned into indisputable evidence of experts' primacy in the decision process. Moreover, experts, for their social role, have easy access to public policies, and tend to impose their view through law enforcement. Such approach proves actually ineffective in many cases. In isolated cities there might be insufficient awareness of its heritage, particularly when it lacks major monuments and is constituted only by the old urban fabric; in great, dynamic centres enthusiasm for economic exploitation can obscure the boundaries of admissible change, and everywhere, more simply. Particular greed can overcome public interest. In many circumstances law is ignored, bypassed or misinterpreted, and police enforcement arrives when it is too late, nor it is possible to use it on a large scale.

Experts claim that more research is needed, in order to identify and evaluate all possible heritage (and to impress recalcitrant people): on the ground that social attitude can change thanks to cultural arguments. But is it really so? Historic environments are really better protected when they are covered by extensive research? One can certainly find, as we said at the beginning, places where a conservative approach was adopted successfully, where life flows gracefully (as we like to think it was in the past, before the machine age) and old buildings are carefully maintained and restored. However, it is hard to think of all this as an output of scientific research instead of wise real estate policies. The fact is that market came in supporting conservative policies when the customers started to appreciate its value: where this does not happen, and those policies are supported only by norms and laws, the result is much less commendable.

Social success of conservation ideals are reflected (and indeed granted) by the market: if there is very little push towards renewal in the historic centre of Rome or Venice, it is because real estate values are among the highest in the world. This is not the case of Krakow or Lvov, where modern buildings would enjoy a much larger demand. Market values can hamper or support conservation policies: they certainly are not neutral, leaving to scholars or experts

to implement one or the other program. They respond in fact to a social demand, not to the intellectual élite: to modify those values implies coming to an understanding with the society. How are historic values being perceived by the citizen?. My assumption is that such values can be saved only through a process of social recognition and interpretation. Social interaction is crucial to the process of building shared values: it is dialogue, and eventually alliance with other groups that will help winning the battle for conservation. Taking into consideration people attitudes towards their own past, instead of teaching them how to think, could help in designing more effective policies (but this could also have the disturbing effect of showing the amount of useless research produced by some academics in search of power).

There is something new in the planning field. Since few decades, planners seem having adopted an advisory role, rather than a more official (and enforcing) one. They emphasise cognitive and political limits of planning, the changing configuration of the general interest through the time, and planning as a learning process. They insist on offering small solutions today to great permanent problems, linking advice to specific local conditions, choosing different “planning styles” for different problems. Terms such as incrementalism, local rationality, dialogue have become key words of the planning debate today.

Case studies are summing up to demonstrate that it is possible to use common knowledge as a tremendous planning tool. Not only it helps enlarging experts’ knowledge of what is not documented in the archives or what comes from oral history, but helps also spreading awareness of the issue, changing the very terms of the problem. This requires an attitude from the planner that is at the same time humble and curious, in order to gain support or to adapt his early objectives. In the field of conservation, this support was gained through a long process, but now in many cases the market helps. Understanding and using the reasons of the market (that reflects people attitude) is possibly the best way to build effective policies also in our field. In other words, most efforts are spent in order to create a social attitude favourable to conservation ideals, drawing on local knowledge and publicising the environmental gains obtainable through good use of the heritage. But this cannot be separated from correct urban policies at large: recent research supports the thesis that a good use of the historic centre offers actually the evidence of a good living.

## Abstract

How are historic values being perceived by the citizen?. My assumption is that such values can be saved only through a process of social recognition and interpretation. Social interaction is crucial to the process of building shared values: it is dialogue that will help winning the battle for conservation. Taking into consideration people attitudes towards their own past, instead of teaching them how to think, could help in designing more effective policies

Unfortunately, in most countries recently opened to market economy the main trend appears to privilege renewal vs. conservation: the appeal of modernistic icons is still much too strong. But is it the traditional experts’ approach the correct one? The whole process is based on the assumption that the knowledge of the experts wins over any other, and that the main problem is to explain and articulate that same knowledge. It can be demonstrated that things do not work this way whenever the preferences of other social groups, biased toward different goals, are not taken into account.

However, since a few decades, planners seem having adopted an advisory role, rather than a more official (and enforcing) one. They insist on offering small solutions today to great permanent problems, linking advice to specific local conditions, choosing different “planning styles” for different problems. This requires an attitude from the planner that is at the same time humble and curious, in order to gain support or to adapt his early objectives.

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