

## **INTANGIBILITY IN HISTORIC TOWNS** **Andras ROMAN\*, Hongrie / Hungary**

Human presence is not a necessary means of existence for all historic monuments. There are numerous historic monuments that have lost their original function and are no longer inhabited. Is there any doubt about Machu-Picchu having been a historic monument during the almost four hundred years it remained hidden from the eyes of mankind, even if it had not yet become a ruin covered with earth – simply because it no longer functioned as a human dwelling any more, thus falling prey to the jungle? Monument preservation differentiates between *living* and *dead* historic monuments, but no-one would even think of considering that a dead historic monument is not a historic monument.

However, there is no such thing as a dead *city*. Well, there is, but they are not cities in the real sense of the word. Machu-Picchu ceased to be a city when the Inca abandoned it in the mid XVI century, and even today it is not a city, despite the fact that its buildings still stand almost intact, having only perhaps lost their roofs. Likewise, Pompei is not a city and neither is Victoria, on the island of Gozo, belonging to Malta, a town destroyed by the Turks in the XVI century, and that has never been rebuilt – instead a new settlement was created next to it. Rather, these are archaeological sites or cities of ruins. If nouns could have past tense form, I would say these are cities in the past tense.

Yes, a city is a city only if it is inhabited, if its inhabitants are an organic, permanent part of it. A city is the only historic monument that consists not only of bricks, stones, adobe, timber and reed, that is not only a building or structure created by man and surroundings created by nature. Its third, but equally important component is man himself, with his permanent presence. And as people live in *society*, that is, in an organized community, this also means that a city is not inhabited by a mass of individuals, but by communities – starting from families, going through religious communities, crafts guilds and other groups. For example, this year in Hungary the football team of a small town won the championship and was celebrated by the entire population.

This presence of a real society, by the way, indicates another difference between the city as historic monument and other historic monuments. Day after day tens of thousands of people visit Pompei or Machu-Picchu, but all these people do not make up a community. There is hardly another Babel on Earth like the one on those famous fields of ruins, where one can hear people speaking all kinds of languages, from Japanese to Dutch, but actually the only thing that connects them is the fact that they belong to the same group of tourists.

They are alien to one another; the only thing they have in common may be the interest in, the admiration of, or the enthusiasm for the site, but beyond that they have no common identity. And this is where we arrive at the key point of the intangible value of cities. The city, in its material reality, expresses the *identity* of the people living there, and in this capacity it has, in a way, its own identity.

There is no doubt regarding the fact that cities have their own character. They have material characteristics: whether they are located on the water-side, or among hills and valleys, if the network of their streets is symmetrical, asymmetrical or perhaps circular, if houses are one-, two- or multi- storey ones, if the ridges of the houses are parallel to the alignment of the street, as in Italy and Hungary, or perpendicular to it, as in timber-framed areas, etc, etc.

However, material features are not in fact our main concern on this occasion, but rather the intangible characteristics of cities. Religion has for several thousands of years been a decisive factor in the life and identity of mankind. When a city becomes a religious centre this fact determines the characteristics of the city over a long period of time. In Hungary the character of Esztergom, Kalocsa and Eger had been for a long time determined by, and to a certain extent still is, their status as Episcopal sees or Archbishops.

Any loss has also an effect on the intangible character. Banska Stiavnica in Slovakia has the fair right to be proud of having had the first technical university in the world. For hundreds of years the town had been a bustling centre of education. However, when Hungary lost the town to Czechoslovakia after the World War and the university was removed from there, the town declined and became dusty, sleepy and unimportant. For decades it could not find its place, and began deteriorating in the physical sense as well. This process came to an end when, upon the suggestion of Slovakia, already independent by that time, the town was inscribed on the World Heritage List, and therefore all monument restoration works that had been previously begun were sped up. The case of Dessau is interesting in this respect. This town had only been the centre of the Bauhaus movement for a couple of years. Nevertheless its name was linked to this great educational institution. It is obvious as well that the fortunate survival of the Gropius buildings played an important role in this matter

On the other hand, thanks God, the majority of the best known and most relevant institutions of higher education and universities have existed in the same city for a long time, creating the character of the city itself. For example, we have Oxford, Cambridge or Heidelberg. We also know a university-town that was established exactly for this purpose, so no-one would even consider it as having other special characteristics. Such is the case of Louvain-la-neuve in Belgium. It is now fitting to highlight an important phenomenon: the determinant character of a city can assert itself only within certain size limitations. Though the importance of the Sorbonne is hardly less than that of Oxford University, it is evident that Paris is Paris not only on behalf of its university; what is more, it is not primarily a university town. Several characteristics mingle in metropolises, and hardly any one of them can achieve a privileged status.

However, people do not only pray and study, but are involved in all other kinds of activities that can determine the intangible values and traditions of a city. For example, people work. And in this respect allow me again to refer not to geographically relevant features, as in the case of mining towns or their closely related industrial centres, but rather to handicraft traditions that still exist or have existed, and had been or still are characteristic of a city. It is a great pity that these traditions – at least in Hungary – tend to disappear. In this context we also have to include not only production, but exchange, trading, as well. The importance of Gouda in the Netherlands – and all over the world – had been and still is determined by the cheese fairs that have been held there every week for several hundreds of years. And, also in terms of trade, one of the interesting features of Paris is the sale of books along the Seine.

Food and hospitality are not far from all of the above. Yes, they do indeed belong to the traditions of cities. In Pisa I bought a strange, saltless bread. "This is Tuscanian bread", the baker said. These are real, living traditions, much more real than the food that is "traditional" only in name, like 'Hamburger' or 'Parisian rib steak'. This idea is complemented by the traditions related to food and hospitality. On St Mark's Square in Venice one can find not only the Cathedral, Doge Palace or the Campanile, but also the Floriani Confectionary. The literary life of Paris was merged with the Deux Magots and the Flore *cafés*. Even night-clubs belong to this sphere. How could we imagine Paris without the Moulin Rouge? If I wanted to be frivolous, I would mention Pigalle as well.

The reference to these two literary *cafés* brings us back to culture. With this regard, the two most characteristic examples are Bayreuth and Salzburg. The yearly summer festivals are responsible for the cultural importance enjoyed by these two cities nowadays. Two geni represent the intellectual character of these cities: Wagner and Mozart. And in this respect it is irrelevant that in Salzburg not only the works of Mozart are played.

This example also illustrates the fact that the memory of a great artist or an important personality also contributes to the intangible value of a city. And if we place sports, as well, among culture, the most classical example for thousands of years has been Olympia.

Obviously, the person with whom we intellectually identify a city does not necessarily have to be an artist. Wittenberg is officially called Lutherstadt as well, and this presently remote, not-too-lively small German town has become completely inseparable from the memory of the great religious reformer. The examples of Bethlehem and Nazareth are even more compelling, a fact which, I think, needs no explaining. I also presume that the number of tourists visiting Ajaccio in our times would be much less if Napoleon had been born somewhere else. However, such a celebrity does not necessarily have to be a real one – it can also be a fictitious or literary one. For example, Shakespeare provided character and tradition to two cities by means of his characters: Hamlet to Helsingør in Denmark, and Romeo and Juliet to Verona in Italy.

Going back to large cities, instead of having one dominant feature, the latter is compensated by the peculiar character of a *part of them*, which can be a quarter, but may as well be a single road or a square. Of course, metropolises can have several such characteristic areas, in which case this greatly contributes both to the attractiveness of the city and to the expression of its identity. The booksellers along the Seine banks and Pigalle in Paris have already been mentioned, but Paris has a number of other quarters of which to be proud. Everyone has heard about the Quartier Latin or Montmartre. In New York, the cultural quarter, mostly famous for its entertaining character, is Broadway; in London the Soho is also famous for entertainment, and in Vienna the Grinzing is characterized by its pubs and taverns. The Plaka in Athens must also be mentioned. I do not know if the inhabitants of Amsterdam are proud of that famous quarter where the girls sit behind shop windows or if they are ashamed of it, but, in any case, without them Amsterdam would definitely lack flavour.

Therefore, we can say that a city's quarters may have their own characters, but this affects less frequently the identity of the people living there. As far as I am concerned, it was only in Italy, in the seats of the one-time city-states, that I found that local identity had not become completely extinct following the mediaeval administrative or parish division. In Siena, it is still the teams representing the centuries-old quarters (the *sestiere*) that compete at the horse-race -the Palio- around the main square. Of course, this may be so mostly for the sake of tourists.

Allow me to conclude with the following. I believe that the shaping or development of the intangible elements of cities should be better left to the city itself; that is to say, to its inhabitants. Plenty of experience proves that cities resist artificial, wilful interventions, whereas their spontaneous development usually goes in the right direction. We also know that for normal development to take place it is not only necessary to have peace, but time as well. Let us leave it to the city and its inhabitants to fashion and preserve their features – both tangible and intangible.

## **ABSTRACT**

Of all monuments, towns possess the greatest intangible value. The reason for this is that in the case of all other monuments human presence is not a must, whereas towns cannot exist without people; what is more: without human societies. The traditions of men and society have an impact on towns.

These are the traditional criteria that define the essence of a town, not less important than the natural environment, landscape, town structure or architecture. The difference is enormous between a university town and spa or industrial town, but it is equally distinctive whether it is an ecclesiastic or administrative centre.

Furthermore, dominant elements can be professions, commercial traditions (markets) and even typical local food. There are other local customs different from all of the above, e. g. if church bells toll at an unusual time. Monument protection must concern itself with these phenomena and in the same way it must deal with material values. Society is to be initiated in this field especially since these elements are part of their own life.

While briefly summarising these elements, this paper substantiates its argument with real-life examples drawn from several towns.

## **\*Andras ROMAN**

(András ROMÁN Ph. D., architect, former head of section of the Hungarian National Board for the Protection of Historic Monuments, honorary member of ICOMOS, founding president of the International Committee of Historic Towns and Villages of ICOMOS (CIVVIH), former vice-president of ICOMOS, former president of the Hungarian National Committee of ICOMOS, university professor, has been lecturer at all the scientific colloquia of the ICOMOS General Assemblies since the IVth one, was general rapporteur of the colloquium of the VIIth General Assembly.)