

## HERITAGE OR THEME PARK? SOME REFLECTIONS FROM PORTUGUESE EXPERIENCES

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**Abstract.** This proposal will use Portuguese examples to reflect on the relation between heritage and tourism, namely on the threats and the opportunities that it faces, as well as on the strategies and tools available for its more desirable sustainable development.

### 1. Introduction

Over the last two centuries, we have witnessed not only a greater awareness of the importance of architectural heritage as a historical and material document, but also a popularization of old structures as the chosen portraits of national, aesthetic, religious and political meaning. In the twenty-first century, the era of globalization and information, heritage is being re-assessed as a document for promoting our identity and collective memory. 'Artificial memories', developed via electronic and digital means, contribute to a growing 'cult of monuments' and to their superficial appropriation, which may lead to the misinterpretation of a site's authenticity and significance. The complex, dynamic and multiple meanings developed for cultural heritage are often reduced to a self-referential cult of generic, even 'narcissistic', identity, playing the role of a large mirror in which we can contemplate our ideal and desired image (Choay, 1992).

Furthermore, the economic sustainability of heritage calls for restoration, tourism and marketing, all of which inevitably submit structures to an exhibition process that removes them from their original contexts. As a result, heritage develops into another 'site' for general public consumption and entertainment, just like shopping malls, stadia or theme parks. (Solla Morales, 1996).

Our contemporary society, based on mobility and globalization, not only promotes travel, recreation and tourism (the world's largest industry), but it also tends to 'trivialize' heritage. Heritage becomes a theme park, equipped with the hyper-realistic technologies of simulation, persuasion, spectacle and marketing. The kaleidoscope of images (on paper supports, screens, or three-dimensional) offered in multiple formats (guide books, internet, video) is reflected in the infinite number of visual perspectives available, which are often false or are manipulated by technology specially prepared for any kind of simulation (Solla Morales, 1996).

It is precisely when heritage is converted into 'image' that it becomes a fetish. Complexity, irreproducibility and individuality are all reduced to a formal invariant that is over-historical, emblematic, symbolic and demands (incessant) duplication-reproduction and merchandizing. Curiously, it is often the analogue image (or copy) that, because of its simulative and hyper-realistic potential, has the power to seduce the most unexpected masses of visitors and spectators (Dezzi Bardeschi, s.d.).

Therefore, cultural heritage, with its rhetorical and symbolic appeal to a nostalgic and golden past, is often a key representative of cult and consumption, revivalism and fetishistic pastiche. In such a scenario, is architectural heritage itself becoming a theme park, a nostalgic escape into the safety of the past, when faced with an uncertain future? Are we respecting the reliable meanings and authenticity of cultural heritage sites or are we just using them as narcissistic mirrors of our own identity (Choay 1992)?

Furthermore, it is important to reflect on how to resist the pressure exerted by the economics of the tourism industry and on how to minimize the negative impacts of tourist consumption. How can we find a balance between the day-to-day management of our monuments (tours, souvenirs, events, etc) and the provision of a historical and architectural experience? Is tourism the only solution for architectural heritage management? *Can the development of tourism be sustainable?*

### 2. Heritage and Tourism: threats and opportunities

#### 2.1. REVIVALIST RECREATIONS

Since the late 18th century, we have witnessed a greater ideological appropriation of our heritage, and even its mass consumption, namely in the form of stylistic restoration or revivalist recreations. In the 21st century, revivalist architectural production

has decreased; nevertheless, there are other curious revivalist phenomena, such as ‘medieval events’, which are to be found invading Portuguese monuments during the summer season. These are among the new trends in cultural tourism, such as ‘open-air museums’, the re-enactment of historical events, high-tech simulations and mega cultural events (such as the European Capital of Culture). Hence, there is a curious parallel between the tourist attractiveness of postmodern theme parks (deliberately fictional and simulative like Disneyland) and the popular appropriation of some monuments and sites, particularly those classified as World or National Heritage. In this way, heritage is transformed into a ‘museum’ or ‘park’ that transcends its original purpose (religious, defensive, symbolic) and is converted into an object of consumption.

Many of these events are largely commercial in their intention and have questionable historical backgrounds, so that they encourage superficial and fetishistic appropriation. We can therefore ask whether these recreational, commercial and popular events are able to convey to people the authenticity, characters and values of our architectural heritage.

## 2.2. FAÇADISM AND RUINISM

Since the 1970’s, stylistic restoration has decreased notably; However, in some of the historic centres of Portuguese towns, we can find the same lack of attention and respect for the authenticity of heritage as in revivalist recreations. A situation that is unfortunately accepted by politicians, public opinion makers and citizens alike, frequently with very little critical opposition. ‘Façadist’ interventions are still a common feature, induced by a peculiar form of populist and speculative strategies. Both the historical stratification and the complexity of architectural heritage (material, constructive, cultural, typological, etc.) are then reduced to meaninglessly cheerful and colourful scenery for tourist postcards, concealing behind their façades modern structures equipped with every facility (just as in theme parks). On the other hand, the alternative to this ‘heavy’ intervention is decay and ruin, as there is a general lack of maintenance or conservation practices.

The material and immaterial damage that is to be found in both cases (façadism and ruinism), causes a progressive disappearance of heritage values and, ironically, a consequent decrease in the quality and excellence of the ‘tourist product’, in a long-term perspective. Despite this threat, some positive efforts have been made to follow the UNESCO World Heritage Centre’s recommendations on management and monitoring (Pedersen, 2002), with special attention being paid to the tourism indicator (Câmara Municipal

do Porto et al., 2010).

## 2.3. THEMATIC ROUTES

Thematic routes have provided both an opportunity and a challenge for cultural tourism in Portugal, since they are more attractive for the tourism industry and investors, because of the benefits of the networks and the economies of scale that they create. Furthermore, this strategy goes beyond the traditional passive models for the management and safeguarding of heritage to become a proactive tool for generating economic synergies and stimulating the socio-cultural development of the territory. Some experiments have already been performed in Portugal: for instance the ‘Romanesque Routes’ created along river valleys (Minho, Sousa, Tâmega), ‘Castles on the Border’, ‘Historic Villages’, ‘Cathedrals Route’, among others. Nevertheless, some of these routes may be questionable when they have mainly commercial or touristic scopes, and they promote no long-term sustainable or local development. Furthermore, by drawing attention to certain objects (through the efforts of heritage protection institutes, the media, tour operators or funding), they risk to overlook and neglect a large number of minor or scattered heritage sites, which are nonetheless important to preserve.

## 3. GOOD PRACTICES

### 3.1. GUIMARÃES – UNESCO WORD HERITAGE

A positive example of this process is the safeguarding and conservation of the historic centre of Guimarães (UNESCO Word Heritage, Europa Nostra award) which has been advised by Fernando Távora, in collaboration with the municipality, through the creation of a multidisciplinary technical office (GTL), since the early 1980’s. Although the city centre had become socially and materially degraded, the local inhabitants, their identity and collective memory, were considered the main indicator of the sustainability of the project (Aguar 1998).

The plan is very interesting for the synchronism that it creates between different disciplines and scales, such as regulatory plans, fund management, infrastructure and the design of public space, and architectural conservation. Furthermore, it involves a wide range of different operations, always respecting the organic structure of the urban fabric, which is crucial for the volumetric, functional and typological equilibrium of the old city.

Hence, the plan adopted a conservative approach, involving minimum intervention, seeking to maximize continuity by making surgical replacement of only small parts of the building (bathroom, kitchen, chimneys,) and not entire buildings. Priorities are dictated by a

strategy of diagnosis and preventive conservation, designed to ensure medium to long-term durability and sustainability, which has been successfully pursued for 30 years. Therefore, Guimarães has served as a pioneering example in Portugal, where urban regeneration has often sought to achieve more immediate and ambitious results in large areas, with heavier interventions that tend to overlook heritage's authenticity, inhabitants and uses.

The same conservative approach has led to the recovery of traditional materials and the use of building technologies that are more economic, sustainable and compatible with old structures. There was specific professional education and qualification in this field, which promoted the repeatability and transmission of constructive skills, as well as the employment and empowerment of local artisans.

The plan is still being implemented by municipal technicians working on housing conservation, day-to-day maintenance and the renewal of an abandoned industrial area. Artists' studios will be inserted at the site, along with university laboratories, a kindergarten, a youth hostel and housing. By resisting the idea of a "theme park", the local council encourages the development of the infrastructure necessary for the housing of young families and sustainable activities.

### 3.2. ROMANESQUE ROUTE- SOUSA AND TAMEGA

The 'Rota do Românico' (Romanesque Route) in the north of Portugal is one of the few touristic structured itineraries in the country (the winner of both national and international awards) and an exemplary case of Development as Tourism, designed to strengthen the local economy through endogenous and integrated development.

Since 2003, with the support of European Union funds, as well as benefitting from the cooperation between the various stakeholders involved (including the 12 municipalities and heritage protection institutes, among others), this project has made it possible to safeguard 57 Romanesque monuments along the Sousa and Tamega river's valley (such as bridges, chapels, churches, towers and monasteries). The Route is being progressively enlarged and linked to other national and international tourism 'networks', such as Transromanica.

Attempts have been made to provide for local sustainability, not only through the enhancement of the region's cultural heritage, but also through the development of its endogenous activities (agriculture, industry, traditional arts and crafts), as well as through professional education and qualification.

The enhancement of the Route's cultural heritage has been taking place at two complementary levels:

promotion and participation, on the one hand, and the conservation and safeguarding of heritage on the other. In trying to reach the widest possible audience (not only for the purposes of tourist 'consumption'), there are specific investments being made in information (websites, guides, traffic signs, plaques, interpretation centres), but also in improved accessibility (facilities for the disabled and older people) and participatory practices (for the local population, children, older people, volunteers, tourists). Furthermore, effort is made in promoting intangible heritage (gastronomy, traditions, handicraft, festivities) and creating a recognizable brand (in restaurants, shops, hotels and cultural services).

Heritage preservation suggests the adoption of a conservative approach, using accurate preliminary analysis and diagnosis and aiming at the recovery of traditional building practices, as these are more sustainable and respectful of the collective identity. Some attention is also starting to be paid to preventive conservation and maintenance practices, combined with community involvement and participatory practices, including education in good practices for everyday users (Ferreira 2010).

### 4. Guidelines and open questions.

After the presentation of critical and positive Portuguese experiences, some guidelines are proposed for discussion at different levels. As far as information, disclosure and the promotion of cultural tourism are concerned, it is important to carry out more in-depth research into themes that genuinely represent the authenticity and character of the sites. Some of the tools available include the exploration of multiple sources, as well as surveys, interviews, analysis and diagnosis, giving special emphasis to direct observation in the field. Therefore, it could be useful to attempt to look at architectural heritage without any nostalgic fantasies, ideals or prejudices, trying to consider the 'material document' rather than its 'image', and accepting its stratification over time. Faced with the modern-day cult of the virtual, which is often manipulated and transformed into fetishism, it is also important to recall and recover tectonic values and material authenticity, as well as phenomenological spatial experiences.

As far as the management of the sites is concerned, systemic strategies that are operated through networks or integrative systems (using top-down and bottom-up approaches), are possible instruments for optimizing public investment in the safeguarding of heritage, as well as being more appealing for tourism, management and future self-sustainability (Putignano et al 2009). Other concerns may relate to compatible

and multifunctional uses, involving local stakeholders and communities (multicultural pluralism, participative and cognitive practices, professional and educational qualification), encouraging endogenous development and improving accessibility (for all, regardless of their physical and economic condition).

Finally, as far as preservation and conservation are concerned, it is important to respect material and cultural stratifications over time (thereby limiting stylistic reintegration and derestoration practices). Preventive conservation and ordinary maintenance (for instance, using the funds redirected from visitors' entrance fees) can be a useful instrument for preventing decay and material damage (thereby increasing preservation), as well as for improving local participation, education and employment by reactivating professional craftsmanship and constructive skills. The current decline in economic and natural resources calls for more rational and sustainable management; consequently, monitoring, preventive conservation and planned maintenance strategies (minimal, anonymous, ordinary and cost-controlled) can be an essential means for ensuring the future self-sustainability of heritage sites.

Tourism is the world's largest industry, and it is a prominent feature in Portugal, where it represents 6.5 % of GDP and employs 10% of the active population. Besides, it generates positive effects in the processes of local and regional development in particular, through the creation of new economic structures, environmental enhancement and cultural improvement (Turismo de Portugal, 2007). However it is also important to recall that the WTO (the World Tourism Organization) recognizes that the effects of tourism can be negative if there is a lack of responsible planning, management and monitoring. Following the recommendations of the 'Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism', three key elements are recommended (Turismo de Portugal, 2009): the planned use of available resources, the cooperation between stakeholders, and the monitoring of results (such as controlling visitor flows, protecting sensitive areas, minimizing impacts on biodiversity,

promoting an efficient management of resources and guaranteeing permanent professional training and the improvement of skills).

Hence, sustainable tourism is undeniably a great challenge, particularly when it takes the form of a balancing act between the business of tourism (which is better if it is designed to ensure long-term profitability), the conservation of our heritage (comprising the preservation of its authenticity and its values) and the increasing of intellectual capital, designed to improve communities involvement, sustainable use, education and training (Della Torre 2010).

The strong decrease of economical and ecological resources, combined with the effects of a globalization strongly determined by standardization and westernization, generates forms of instability in the human society. The new conditions point towards a change of paradigm in safeguard and conservation, defined by the presence of new values for heritage – such as economic, ecologic, social, political (Roders 2007) and, why not, touristic – which transcend those which had been defined in the beginning of the XXth century (Riegl, 1903). Unfortunately, in a time of economic crisis, heritage tends to be often and mostly considered for its economical value in a short-term perspective, overlooking authenticity and long term local development.

As a conclusion, and in answer to the questions asked in the introduction, we may say that the development of tourism can be sustainable under certain conditions, such as the respect for the authenticity of heritage and the empowerment of local system and communities (which can guarantee both preservation and day-to-day management) as a necessary means for the local development and for the effective sustainability of sites.

In this way, heritage can play a major role in the creation of tomorrow's society, particularly if it is connected with other networks on a global scale, increasing the quality of life by enhancing self-esteem, identity, and cultural and cognitive processes, as well as by promoting local and sustainable development for future generations.





Figure 1. Mosteiro de Pombeiro. Activity with local schools. ([www.rotadoromanico.com](http://www.rotadoromanico.com))

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