

## **In Support of Stylistic Reconstructions: Some Thoughts on Authenticity and Justice**

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*It is the familiar connection, not all the old physical things themselves, that people want to retain.*

Kevin Lynch, 1972, *What Time is This Place?* p. 39

### **Introduction**

Human and natural catastrophes devastate historic environments worldwide. In and out of the field of preservation, scholars ponder what interventions – if any at all – can remediate the loss of heritage. As a participant in these debates, I argue that stylistic reconstructions can help to promote collective and individual healing processes. Reconstructions can be a means of recuperating the visual wholeness and spatial layout of lost urban fabrics. They thus provide individuals with a tangible canvas of memory and allow them to rebuild their everyday lives. Stylistic reconstructions serve as an incomplete palimpsest on which users inscribe a new sense of belonging through their quotidian practices. The rebuilt city, I suggest, both enables inhabitants to elaborate their loss and includes them as participants in the construction of a renewed urban condition.

My suggestion that stylistic reconstructions can replace destroyed urban fabric is subject to at least two established sets of critiques. The first revolves around the notion of authenticity as conceived in Western preservation theories. Such theories condemn the use of *fake* elements in historic preservation, arguing that the original stratification of heritage cannot be counterfeited. According to this view, stylistic reconstructions are to be avoided because they disrespect the artistic and historical value of the lost authentic artefacts (Brandi, 1963; Jokilehto, 1999, 2013). The second set of critiques pertains to the social needs associated with reconstruction processes. Landscapes fabricate and are fabricated by socio-political, economic, and physical contingencies. Since stylistic reconstructions impose a predetermined urban form, one might argue that they prevent individuals

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from taking part in the production of the space they use. This consideration leads those concerned with issues of justice to argue that stylistic reconstructions deny urban inhabitants and users the *right to the city* (Lefebvre, 1968).

These two sets of critiques, concerned with authenticity and justice, respectively, underlay most of the debates at the 2017 Icomos University Forum on Authenticity and Reconstructions. Some of the participants remained sceptical towards my proposal for stylistic reconstructions. A few built their critiques upon the foundational guidelines of restoration to express their concerns (Icomos, 1964, 1979, 1982, 1990; UNESCO, 1972). Reconstructions, they argued, do not do justice to the original stratification and values of the lost heritage. Other participants criticized my proposal for its exclusionary implications and strongly advocated for the need to involve local communities in the decisions regarding the future of their lost heritage. Their concern was that reconstructions neglect democratic processes and outcomes by impeding the participation of local stakeholders.

Responding to the feedback I received at the Icomos University Forum, I am constructing a case for stylistic reconstructions around two considerations. The first consideration is that heritage landscapes belong to the domain of architectural theming and thus *become* authentic through everyday uses and signification processes. I thus contend that the concerns for the authenticity of reconstructions are based on premises that are speculative in nature. The second and most important consideration is that stylistic reconstructions allow for the participation of local communities. By re-establishing the visual integrity of a destroyed heritage site, reconstructions favour the social production of space that lies at the core of *the right to the city* by providing a spatial layout that facilitates resignification processes.

## **Heritage is Theming**

For a long time, preservation experts concentrated on the materiality of historical artefacts. More recently, they have embraced a holistic approach, which understands heritage as a process of cultural production that re-signifies history, presenting the past through intentional registers of commemoration (Harvey, 2001; Harrison, 2013; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1995, 2004). Acknowledging that the scopes and meanings of heritage go far beyond the materiality of historical artefacts, I advance the case for stylistic reconstructions by considering historical landscapes as part

of the domain of architectural theming. As in the case of themed environments, historical settings *become* authentic through people's uses and interpretations. These circumstances, I suggest, should encourage preservation experts to abandon their preoccupation with the authenticity of reconstructions.

Themed experiences increasingly characterize our everyday lives. By definition, a themed environment is organized around an overarching narrative that conveys a sense of otherness, whether it is topical, chronological, or cultural. Especially since the success of Disneyland (opened in 1955 in Anaheim, California), the theme park typology developed into a systematized, reproducible, and standardized urban model. This model has proliferated worldwide, especially over the last three decades, and has become pivotal in the construction of new patterns of social distinction (Hannigan, 2010). Most scholars remain critical of theming. They tend to hold theming responsible for producing a *fake*, commodified, and exclusionary city (e.g. Huxtable, 1997; Sorokin, 1992; Zukin, 1991). Looking at how people use and signify themed settings, other researchers have illuminated two facts: not only do users consciously enjoy themed settings, but through their daily practices they cause themed settings to *become* authentic (Beardsworth & Bryman, 1999; Davis, 1996; Lukas, 2007; Ross, 1999).

Heritage sites represent one type of themed setting because they are staged in nature. Scholars increasingly associate the diffusion of staged historical environments with neoliberal patterns of production and consumption since the spectacularization of history serves to attract capital. Heritage sites convey a certain *pastness* by constructing an atmosphere evocative of the past. The degree to which users appreciate historical sites seldom depends on the material authenticity of those sites' tangible components (Holtorf, 2005; Judd & Fainstein, 1999; Zukin, 2010). On closer inspection, it becomes apparent that this phenomenon is not distinctive to our time: heritage sites have always been edited to privilege specific narratives that are necessarily selective. Moreover, much of what we understand as urban heritage in the Western world was built following rules that would hardly fit within our current ethical and aesthetic paradigms of authenticity (Choay, 1992; Lowenthal, 1985; Smith, 2006).

These circumstances make evident the association of heritage with theming. Both cultural phenomena arose with the advent of modernity, defining – and inventing – traditions. One as much as the other is embedded within the semiotics of space: they convey a specific privileged narrative by relying on intentional registers of representation. Both theming and heritagization strategies have

emerged from the nexus of politics and power, too often serving exclusionary and hegemonic dynamics of political control. In this context, the subtleties of authenticity are central to both phenomena. That is, the fakeness of heritage sites and themed environments constitutes at once the reason for their popular success and the primary concern of scholarly inquiry. On the one hand, staged heritage and themed settings deliver immersive atmospheres that please audiences and match their expectations. On the other hand, especially in the case of heritage sites, such immersive atmospheres potentially undermine more rigorous descriptions of which elements are historical and which ones are not.

The notion of authenticity, along with its subtleties and shifting values, underlies the controversies surrounding both themed settings and reconstructions. A decades-long discussion in the field of archaeology and heritage has led scholars to understand authenticity as a context-dependent relationship between places, artefacts, and people (Holtorf, 2013; Jones, 2010; Vannini, 2011; Wang, 1999). The values and meanings that users attribute to historical settings have little to do with the artefacts' material originality. They depend, rather, on the bodily practices and emotions at play in the experience of heritage (Bagnall, 2003; Knudsen & Waade, 2010; Smith & Campbell, 2015). Themed settings are equally appropriated and re-signified by their users. Negotiating and possibly contesting dominant definitions of "the authentic," the users of themed environments produce unique spaces through everyday practices and emotions (Piazzoni, 2018; Warren, 2005).

Reconstructed heritage can become just as "authentic" as historical artefacts and themed settings. The proof of my hypothesis lies in the success of many reconstructed sites around the world. Reconstruction is not only is an institutionalized preservation practice in the Asian contexts (Ito, 1995), but also rebuilt sites abound in Europe -where theories of preservations discourage stylistic reconstructions. The Kraków market square, the Dresden cathedral, and the Cassino Abbey are but a few famous cases. The people who visit these reconstructed sites enjoy their experience regardless of the fact that they are dealing with a "copy." A look at the comments that tourists leave on the Trip Advisor website explains my point. Trip Advisor is the largest consumer-generated recommender system for tourism worldwide. The website allows users to rank locations and attractions with one—"terrible"—to five stars—"excellent. Among the over eighteen thousand reviews of the Kraków market square, about seventy-six percent rate the square "excellent." Most commenters express their appreciation of the architecture, vitality, and overall "authentic"

atmosphere of the square. As of this writing, of the twenty-five people who have rated the square as “terrible,” no one takes issue with the fact that it is a complete reconstruction. The visitors of the Cassino Abbey in Italy show even more explicit enthusiasm for reconstructions. Most commenters on Trip Advisor refer to the fact that the abbey was completely destroyed to rubble and reconstructed after World War II. This fact, however, does not prevent visitors from calling Cassino “a mecca where religion and history intersect,” or a “unique location” of “stunning architecture and history.” Some tourists even point to the reconstruction process itself as one of Cassino’s most wonderful features: for example, one commenter argues that the abbey’s restoration is symbolic of “what man can do.”<sup>2</sup>

Heritage sites thus develop into authentic places because their users appropriate them symbolically and spatially. Following this logic, I contend that themed reconstructions can become as *authentic* as the lost heritage they imitate. As long as users are conscious of the *authentic fakeness* of the reconstructions, preservation theorists need not preoccupy themselves with the ethical implications of stylistic reconstructions. Once we concede that preservation experts should not concern themselves with the authenticity of reconstructions, a more pressing issue becomes evident: the question of social justice in the management of post-traumatic events. I turn to this matter over the next sections.

## **Reconstructions and Justice**

Building stylistic reconstructions presupposes that preservation experts direct the operations and that the appearance and layout of the built environment are predetermined. These two facts limit (albeit only partially) the agency of nonexperts in participating in the reconstruction process. Some attendees of the Icomos forum used this argument to criticize my defence of stylistic reconstructions. Their concerns echo a larger preoccupation that problematizes the role of expertise within the context of the UNESCO and Icomos frameworks. Particularly over the last two decades, scholars and professionals have emphasized the need to maintain a rights-based approach to the management of heritage. This approach redefines the role of the preservation expert as someone who serves the interests of local communities rather than imposing solutions on them (Logan et al.,

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<sup>2</sup> Quotes extracted from Trip Advisor on November, 21, 2017. [https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g194714-d274095-Reviews-Abbazia\\_di\\_Montecassino-Cassino\\_Province\\_of\\_Frosinone\\_Lazio.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g194714-d274095-Reviews-Abbazia_di_Montecassino-Cassino_Province_of_Frosinone_Lazio.html)

2015; Kuutma, 2012). Taking positions consistent with this view, most attendants at the Icomos University Forum invoked participatory procedures as the primary tool – if not the only one – to guarantee the correct management of heritage in the case of traumatic events.

And yet, participatory practices do not necessarily lead to just outcomes. Planners have long walked the participation path. Since the mid-1960s, they have involved groups that traditional planning procedures had excluded from the decision-making processes (Davidoff, 1965). With this spirit in mind, the supporters of the communicative action model made participation their primary goal during the 1980s. The planner, they argued, should facilitate the dialogue between the diverse groups that affect and are affected by urban transformations (Fisher & Forester, 1993; Haley, 1997; Innes, 1995, 1998). Recognizing the diverse subjectivities that coexist in human societies is but the first step toward rebalancing uneven power dynamics. It is indeed essential that marginalized groups take the lead in decision making (Amin, 2008; Fincher & Jacobs, 1998). Unfortunately, however, participatory practices do not automatically dismantle injustices. They might even reinforce them, as planners have long suggested (Fox, 1970).

A community – if we even indulge in using this ambiguous term – is composed of diverse individuals with very different interests, affects, and needs (DeFilippis, 2001; Portes, 1998). Within the planning field, scholars have promoted a participatory and therapeutic approach to resolve the conflicts associated with the contemporary urban condition. This process-based approach requires time, dialogue, and the willingness of diverse participants to make themselves vulnerable to one another (Sandercock, 2001, 2003). However, participatory processes can also reinforce rather than dismantle unbalanced dynamics within and between groups (Fainstein, 2000, 2010). When it comes to preservation, these risks are equally at stake (see, e.g., Dundes Renteln, 2004; Winter, 2015; Yung & Chan, 2011).

By arguing in favour of stylistic reconstructions, I do not intend to minimize the importance of participation. Involving those whose heritage sites were destroyed remains essential, especially when the emotions and dynamics at stake have to do with death, pain, and absolute loss. It is also crucial, however, to act promptly in the aftermath of traumatic events. At the concluding session of the Icomos University Forum, Erica Avrami referred to the urgency to act quickly following the destruction of heritage sites. Her words echoed a sentiment shared by all of us. In taking up the delicate task of advising policy makers in the case of post-traumatic events, we need to propose pragmatic responses. Engaging in theoretical speculations would do little, if anything, to help the

people who were suffering from unimaginable loss. In this spirit, I argue that stylistic reconstructions should provide communities with speedy solutions that have positive social implications. By re-establishing the visual appearance of the lost heritage, the rebuilt urban fabric can serve as a palimpsest that offers different publics the possibility to remember, grieve, ponder, and act. Over the next section, I turn to the notion of the right to the city to continue my elaboration.

### **The Right to the (Fake) City**

As described above, some attendants of the Icomos University Forum argued that rebuilding historic fabrics prevents communities from making the decisions concerning the form and character of their own cities. According to this view, stylistic reconstructions deny inhabitants and users what French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre defined as “the right to the city” (1968). I believe that this legitimate concern overlooks the crucial role that everyday activities and signification processes have in the production of space, and hence also in Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city.

Henri Lefebvre developed the idea of the right to the city as a means of resolving the injustices of the contemporary urban condition. At its core, the right establishes that all city inhabitants – especially the marginalized – are entitled to produce the space that they use. This means that decisions impacting the city must be subject to the control of all inhabitants, regardless of whether they possess formal citizenship. In Lefebvrian terms, the production of space goes beyond the arrangement of physical settings and encapsulates both the material and intangible aspects of urban societies (1974). Taking control over the production of space thus implies governing the social structures of city life. From this perspective, the right to the city does not simply allow people to use urban spaces, nor does it invoke the return to a preindustrial status – before the contradictions of modernity made the city an alienating product. Rather, the right calls for a totally renovated urban condition that entitles all inhabitants – the “citadins” – to “urban life, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses” (1968, p. 179).

The built environment serves the struggle for the right to the city. Lefebvre understands the urban as a complex oeuvre – as opposed to a product that is duplicated endlessly. The urban oeuvre results from the labour and everyday practices of its inhabitants. Content and form intertwine with one another in the built environment, which is the locus where social life unfolds and fabricates

itself. Carrying systems of meanings and values, the urban fabric can integrate or exclude its inhabitants. It can also, however, function as the battleground where the marginalized fight for justice. The right to the city, Lefebvre argues, legitimizes inhabitants to participate in the production of the urban oeuvre. This production occurs through the participation and appropriation of the city that people enact through their everyday spatial and social practices.

Scholars in urban studies have recently given a great deal of attention to the right to the city. They develop Lefebvre's framework along two intersecting paths. The first is rooted in the political economy tradition. Scholars of this group – with David Harvey as its leading figure (2008) – interpret global injustices in class terms and focus on how social movements can fight the oppression of the weak. More pertinent to this paper, the second line of conversation engages with the spatial implications of the right to the city. Scholars in this group elaborate on the premises that spatial patterns reflect and affect the marginalization of vulnerable subjects and that space is instrumental in reversing injustices. These scholars explore the ways in which the urban realm provides a social and physical system to both contrast asymmetric power relationships and redefine citizenship (Dikeç, 2001, 2002; Purcell, 2002). From this perspective, the quotidian participation and appropriation of space are the necessary conditions (albeit insufficient in and of themselves) to shape a more just urban society (Amin, 2008; Kohn, 2010; Mitchell, 2003).

Everyday practices are a crucial part of asserting the right to the city. Power actors exert social control by normalizing specific sets of behaviours. Imposing a common understanding of how people should act, they influence the way in which most people behave while also marginalizing those who do not conform to the dominant view of what is proper (Cresswell, 1996). Scholars have long established the importance of quotidian life in reproducing or resisting this form of hegemonic control. Through our daily actions, we fabricate, reify, and possibly subvert the local habitus, or the set of ingrained socialized norms that guide our behaviours (Bourdieu, 1979). Everyday space becomes the realm of creative resistance, in which individuals elaborate spatial tactics to appropriate and re-signify what surrounds them (Certeau, 1984). Each space contains multiple meanings that at times contradict one another. People negotiate, produce, and resist these meanings through their quotidian practices (Chase et al., 1999; Crawford, 2008). Acting in space, individuals explore the potential for new social arrangements and forms of imagination. In doing so, they claim the right to the city.



In my view, the users of stylistic reconstructions will be able to exert the right to the city. By occupying, using, and becoming visible in a wide range of different spaces, people around the world claim the right to the city. They enact alternative landscapes by materializing and legitimizing new forms of politics (Bayat, 2000; Hou, 2010; Iveson, 2013; Vasudevan, 2015). Participation and appropriation can occur in any built environment, regardless of the aesthetic appearance of the city or whether the space was designed through participatory processes. In line with this reasoning, I do not see how reconstructed historical settings would limit the agency of people to use, signify, and even subvert the social order that the stylistic reconstructions represent. In other words, stylistic reconstructions enable the participation and appropriation of space no less than any other piece of urban fabric. What is more, the re-established visual integrity of the historical landscape even facilitates the re-familiarization of the users with their lost city.

### **A Case for Stylistic Reconstructions**

As a participant in the debates on post-traumatic heritage management, I have theorized that stylistic reconstructions can replace destroyed historical urban fabrics. But I do not mean to suggest that this is the only plausible option. The participants of the 2017 Icomos University Forum on Authenticity and Reconstructions proposed various alternatives. For example, virtual renderings restore the visual integrity of the lost heritage while also respecting and narrating destruction processes. However, virtual reconstructions inevitably remain a memorializing enterprise. Lacking physical substance, they cannot bind together ordinary human experiences. This limits the scope of virtual reconstructions, especially when we consider the importance of ordinary experiences in allowing people to elaborate their loss and fabricate new meanings. Stylistic reconstructions re-establish the visual integrity of the lost heritage as their virtual counterparts. Moreover, they provide a locus where social life unfolds and fabricates itself.

My contention is that users will be able to appropriate stylistic reconstructions through their everyday activities and that the restored appearance of the urban fabric will both ease grief processes and enable re-signification. This argument theoretically builds upon the importance of images in the attribution of meanings, memories, and values. Cities are inevitably associated with visual culture. As Kevin Lynch argued long ago, the imageability of an urban setting determines the ability of a city to evoke a strong image in the observer's mind. The clearer the visual identity, the

stronger the sense of belonging that users feel towards a place (1960). Although all senses are key in affecting our experience of place, sight conserves a primary role.

Spatial images and collective memory intertwine with one another. The physical and visual firmness of the spaces we inhabit promote our spiritual well-being and the formation of collective memory. As Maurice Halbwachs has taught us, people rely on the comforting continuity of the world that surrounds them to understand themselves and their being in the world. The sudden loss of things and places shocks people's present, shuffles conceptions of the past, and conditions the future (1950). This is particularly evident when people experience the loss of heritage sites. The privileged relationship between sight and the experience of historical places is long established. As heritage sites remain open to the interpretations of plural publics, their images speak to diverse audiences and convey different meanings (Urry & Larsen, 1990; Urry, 1999).

Especially in the case of traumatic events, re-establishing the visual integrity and spatial consistency of destroyed historical sites enables multiple publics to re-fabricate their collective memories while also negotiating their belonging in the present. To be sure, by making the case for stylistic reconstructions I renounce an environmentally deterministic approach. I do not contend that themed urban fabrics automatically predispose users to a specific set of behaviours. In fact, the re-establishment of the city's visual character and physical layout is but the first step of a long process of symbolic and spatial appropriation – one that users will negotiate through their every day practices and signification systems.

No reconstruction can – or should – give back what is lost. Yet rebuilt heritage might alleviate collective and individual grief. Diverse publics will authenticate stylistic reconstructions through embodied, performative, and affective experiences. Moreover, reconstructions provide users with the first layer of an urban palimpsest by restoring the visual and spatial firmness of the lost heritage. This layer simultaneously recuperates the collective memory of the lost urban fabrics and opens up the possibilities of the space. Everyday spatial and social practices potentially allow the users of stylistic reconstructions to establish new meanings and fabricate a new sense of belonging.

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