

CULTURAL VALUES: INTANGIBLE FORMS AND PLACES **Giancarlo NUTI*, Italie / Italy**

PRINCIPLES AND CONDITIONS

What spurred me to take part in this scientific meeting organised by I.C.O.M.O.S in Zimbabwe was the importance of the subject, aimed at discovering the intangible values existing in Africa or elsewhere in homes or places that have not yet been explored by the culture of seeming progress. This brief reflection of mine, which I offer as a contribution to the debate, is the fruit of a European experience that has not been supported by any direct evidence and involves in a critical approach an embryonic concept that is more widely applicable to monuments and sites of great cultural value. It is often thought that the recovery of the past, as a guide to a living culture, should be left to the material evidence of memory, which should be preserved more than others since they represent a particular way of life and because they can, therefore, still give expression to our heritage. In this respect, great importance is instead given to the different conditions of tangible, if not physical, presence, as specified by this agenda.

The concept of the intangible, materialised into a “thing to be preserved” (R.Pettman), and therefore to be interactively developed as an “exceptional universal value”, should therefore be significant. The symbols handed down through memory can then become an extraordinary model for mankind, as potential values to study, understand and interpret the future.

The philosophical, critical and creative approach to the study of the cultural fate of “knowing how to live” raises the need for a new, non-conventional guide. Generally, monuments and sites to be protected have been recognised as significant texts for history and art in relation to the progress of civilisation. The idea of ‘protective restriction’, which used to consist of notices on individual units, was then extended to the surroundings, and we are now aware that it is essential for the character of houses, streets and squares and therefore for the layout of the entire town.

In this expression of pervasive centrality, increasingly open to the image of cultural discovery, space has taken new decisive dimensions for the future, whilst time has remained a chronological note, which has dated the symbols of ‘the built’, without determinedly partaking of people’s experience in the re-composition of a town, one generation after another.

Through different stages, historical periods have transformed themselves in their people’s attitudes, migrations and employment, in the organisation of their units, first as tribes, then households, and in the dynamics of their habits and customs, which as a whole gave shape to their existence. These flows of expressions, knowledge and behaviours, insofar as they are significant, constitute the culture of “intangible heritage”, which has a history and a value to preserve.

On the other hand, civilisation, which, in the words of philosophers, relies on culture and morals, and which has manifested itself in spatial configurations and cities, has forgotten and often disrupted the periods of ethical education, which has been left to the “intangible world heritage”. While the age of Nature has its absolute laws, the age of Man has different rhythms, all about circumstances and generations, but not necessarily unimportant, since they educate Nature. I speak of traditions, customs, talents, fantasies of images, rituals, beliefs, habits, songs and dances, all actually inherent in lifestyle and patent in the general processes that coincide with the habitat.

The land of Africa opens up to this studies and gives prominence to a comprehensive, untouched human heritage of cultural values, hidden in the intangible but able to convey symbols of morality and social relationships on a universal scale. Today, on one side, we see cities that are so well developed in terms of their functions but so deficient in their services, and in many cases depleted of the healthy values of democracy, safety, hospitality and spirituality, On the other, we see traditional native societies in a state of underdevelopment and subservience, but still acting as the repositories of atavistic forms of communal life, beliefs, humanity and creativity. While the “shadow economy”, which seeks to control the environment for Man, is now seen as inappropriate for the Earth’s balance, and the “drap economy”, considered free of any pragmatic rule laid down by the contingent ecosystem, is gaining ground, one should think that civilisation, based on the culture of ‘being able to live among others’, should give pride of place to such values to improve quality of life throughout the world. ‘Becoming’ through so many centuries and so many places has created the basic roots for the bio-economies of diversity, including human development, which is the most genuine expression of intangible value.

INTANGIBLE VALUES AND SYMBOLS

The search for and the identification of the intangible aim at discovering natural processes of expression in relation to the condition of people and places. For developed civilisations, the sequence of so many centuries has resulted in layered and/or evolutionary ways of living and therefore in findings of ancient vestiges, complex structures and remote routes, all attributable to ways and symbols of human life.

Under different circumstances, native populations, within large regions and far from influences and exchanges, have remained isolated and have taken root in permanent dwellings, even after military and colonial conquests.

Even when local resources were poor, direct economies, supported by grasslands on plateaux and farm work, have preserved these settlements, engendering the slow progress of tribal settlement models in vast development areas. This is the origin of the traditions handed down by generations of Northern cultures in lands and reefs swept by harsh climates, Mediterranean, along the rivers and seas in temperate areas, Oriental, of extremely ancient origins in vast regions, African, secluded in desert inland areas, and European, differing by language and as a result of invasions. These are most of the main geopolitical orders generated by the civilised development of mankind.

The intangible heritage mirrored in these places is therefore at the source of an extremely important intellectual and spiritual education, which can guide mankind towards the common destiny of coexisting and using, one for all and all for one, local resources and individual creativity for a civilised, shared behaviour. The exceptional findings of objects that exist in the spirit, with no tangible expression to back them up, conceived and used for progress, are therefore to be regarded as decisive, since they remain intact in terms of their historical value, and through tribal traditions they overcome the recurring regression of time and reveal the direct language of 'mutual understanding', creative art and spiritual gifts.

The protection of such sources of human spirit for people and societies, which are not portrayed in a tangible form, now takes on a new value as the ethical ground for the pursuance of a new culture, more aware of social aspects leading towards human and global progress. After all, at this period in history called "transitional", the protection of the historical and artistic value of monuments and sites, without guaranteeing, with the renovation of towns, the educational setting for spiritual order and civilised communal life, seems to be sustainable.

This is why the all-invading rationalism and indifferent imported technology, which have actually destroyed latent intangible values that people are now trying to reveal in schools only as things of the past, no longer 'alive' in the present, and obsolete, have prevailed over time within urban settlements, at odds with the environment.

Admittedly, then, a different reality will have to be applied to rebuild a town, no longer using a schematic approach, since plans produce poor base results as they are limited to variable contingencies, but rather with a principle-oriented approach, by recovering the tendency to restore an ethical and social order consistent with citizens' rights-duties, as defined in the Declaration of Human Rights, recognised and endorsed by all countries in 1948, in New York.

In this day and age, the human era of 'being able to be' has been ousted by that of 'having'. The current production of countless objects, many of which are useless, makes the standard of living variable, as an alternative, and results in relentless losses of interest in acquiring experience and creativity through the ethics of behaviour. Thus, the past will have to become more and more a basic foundation for the intangible heritage of the present, which ventures into the future with a scientific and technological progress oriented towards the real welfare of mankind.

In this respect, it will be useful to reconsider as more pressing and decisive the commitment to protect, which can be viewed as broadly stretching out towards "cultural areas" of memory, antithetic to the all-invading flows of consumer tourism, the desecration of heterogeneous products, the trafficking of speculative trends and the transplanting of devastating building plans.

This "Heritage of Mankind" would be bound to become, therefore, a real inalterable reserve, but still a real one, for everyone's future, as a medium of expression for the perception of the senses, as resource of memories of the intangible, in order to search for values and images of places that are intact in their traditions and consistent with Nature for improved social conditions.

SIGNIFICANT EXPERIENCES

Values coinciding with intangible heritage still exist in many sites that in proto-historic times were human settlements and which, with the passing of time, have not been greatly altered by the progress imported by conquests. For this reason, we have to look back at different geopolitical boundaries and topographical areas, defined by the development of different beliefs and races. I am enclosing a few references for a preliminary study of the diversity and worldviews that have been left as evidence in important sites now shattered by the contact with the future.

AFRICA

Following are some reflections of mine on the theory of ethnologist William Fagg. The distribution of palaeo-African cultures begins with the appearance of sites with rock paintings, but it spread across vast highland slopes when so allowed by the nature of the soil, the presence of water in the subsoil, pasture for herds and patriarchal settlements. These sites witnessed the erection of villages and architectures that have been worked into assemblages of objects and manifested in rites and actions, which constitute a veritable intangible art 'of living'. Within such text and context, original signs are decisive since they adumbrate in symbols spaces in which to live together, while unveiling the meaning of life in ordinary things. This real and virtual world is attributed to tribal art because it is traditional and natural, "conceived by Africans for Africans and discernible in its aesthetic, intellectual, moral and social values".

A close analysis of such process explains its superior endurance in bio-climatic terms, due to the use of local materials, the secret meaning of rites and dances, the artistic design of plastic expressions, strong human ties and the survival, throughout so many centuries, of races, traditions and languages.

These African values should persevere in their integrity for the future of mankind. Hassan Fathy, Gourná's town planner, did not think, when designing, of town plans *per se*, but started from the idea of building a habitat while trying to portray people's actions and dreams. From a global perspective, the plan and dwellings of the village had to be laid out in an anthropometric fashion in order to bring the tribes' immaterial values closer to man's movements and pauses.

The distribution of villages, scattered across the desert, must have later been the same as that of people, who measure distances between places by using trees and set structural principles to move on towards the future in a silent message, consistent with African traditions and architectures.

"I must make the new plans look as if they had been brought to life by the landscape, just like the trees. Its people must live as naturally as they don their clothes....I must shape their homes to the rhythm of their songs, weave a village from its activities; there must be no false traditions, no artificial modernism, but an architecture that will be the permanent and visible expression of the new community. But, isn't this something different from a completely new architecture?"

Therefore, the architecture of 'becoming' should find in Africa another composition, able to shape walled, seamless tracks as in the past, to cast shadows and to respect the privacy of views in free spaces inside homes. This concept can be a lesson in architecture even for Europe, due to its ability to have an effect on the entire built environment. A. Revéreau acknowledged that this characteristic of African sites is quite different *vis-à-vis* the "much wider proliferation of our means and our needs". But today the confusion of so many relationships raises in Europe the pressing need to recover a compositional order for living space and time. In particular, there is the need to follow a more human approach, steering clear of any assumption of "character, ostentation and defence of civil rights, as well as mannerism and formalism". On the other hand, since many techniques can be regarded as "equivalent" if one wants to be able to live, then it is important to give, once again, pride of place to traditional economies and experiences, which are still applicable to African architecture today. (1 and 2)

GUATEMALA

I have a recollection of the great forests of Guatemala, Nature's universal resources, given in concession to the first colonisers and entrusted to the "Fincaeros" for profit by way of compensation for installation costs, and now submitted to reconquests and fires, which are deemed necessary to obtain "living" soil for the natives. Thus, even if Nature's values should be regarded, from a global perspective, as the intangible and inalterable gifts of God to mankind, farm work is now considered a utilitarian but legitimate activity necessary for survival.

JAPAN

This is my crucial commentary on intangible values, considered by tradition as the basic foundation of a living system. In Japan, the centrality of the aesthetic approach, which is typical of Eastern cultures, is far different from the compositional dictates of the city in terms of perspective, which spread from Italy across Europe. This idea, inherent to that culture, corresponds to a harmony in life, which must remain immanent in people's symbols, traditions and actions, consistently with the places, as a successful model of expression between Nature and Man.

Living under all the conditions imposed as necessary by progress can revolve around but must not shatter tradition, which has been always viewed as an intangible value of great spirituality for the ethics of behaviour.

In Japan, a unique relationship between shape and space affects creativity, which is renewed within tradition through manifestations of substance and amount between Nature and Man. Therefore, in places as of yet untouched by man the landscape reveals steep rocks and tall pine trees shaped by the wind and bowed towards the sea, almost like the typical image of the secluded house with drooping roof eaves and wooden elements similar to and outstretched like the leafy branches of those trees. (3 and 4)

MALAYSIA

Construction works for the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and now for the erection of the Capital, a new city in the void left by an ancient tin mine, are the rebutting evidence of the extremely serious damage that can be caused by high-tech, attracted to this country by large funding for market development purposes, like colonisation had once done elsewhere through the exploitation of resources.

Even if in Malaysia the goals might seem, with these powerful symbols of modernity, to atone for centuries of destitution and suffering, in fact the intangible values of traditions and behaviours have been shattered by comparison, favouring instead human oppression and social segregation.

ABSTRACT

Cultural values are to be preserved for life to have a meaning in human terms. Becoming, over many centuries and places, has established the founding roots of biodiversity for human cultures as well, which are the most genuine embodiment of intangible values. The impact of ethnic groups, beliefs and imported lifestyles and cultures has developed into colonial and utilitarian geopolitical set-ups, destructive for pre-eminent inherited values (in African and South-American countries). The recent history of the European civilization has unfolded at varying rates, since the transmission of intangible values has been distorted by all-invading rationalism and insensitive technology. The human time of "knowing how to be" has been ostracized by that of having plenty of more and a greater choice. Now, the past must be read in the continuity of the present, even if, for the progress of science, it is imbued with the future. Humanity is waiting for new cultural developments, steered towards the sources of life through the perception of the senses (expressions), the memory of the intangible (values) and the images of places (symbols). To preserve this understanding, experiences and situations drawn from places with innate intangible values are presented – through the nature of sites and the structure of monuments in Guatemala, Japan, Malaysia and Africa.

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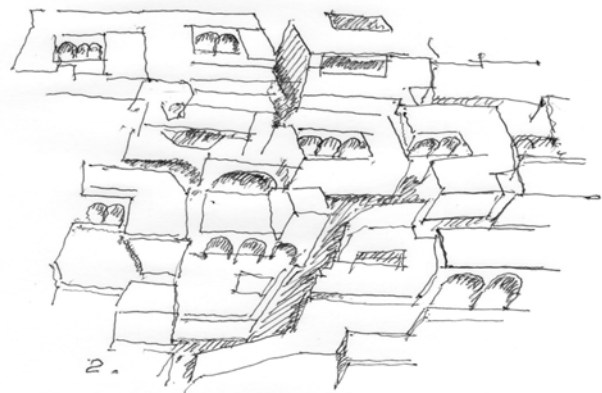
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AFRICA

Memories and signs in Africa's land

Les occasions de vivre diminuent en raison de l'augmentation de ce que l'on appelle les moyens. H.D. Thoreau



1. Lower and upper floor of a M'Zab house in the palms
2. Zsar terraces facing South with patio and porches for air circulation during the daytime, and for relaxation and rest during the night-time.

JAPAN

Memories and symbols of traditional places
and houses in Japan

*Tout notre dignité consiste en la pensée.
Travaillons à penser bien. Voilà le principe de la
morale.*

Pascal



3. Natural landscape

4. Traditional house