

Strengthening good governance of heritage cities

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Like most old countries, France can boast a very rich and world-famous cultural heritage. Based on the concept of “common heritage of the nation” emerging from French revolution time (1789), different systems of protection and enhancement have been developed, from the middle of XIXth century, to be able to pass it on to the future generations. How French experts have focused on heritage and its preservation and how our means of protecting it have evolved over the past two centuries ?

The tools which have been gradually put in place have worked out very well to save the major landmarks in France. Public awareness on the value of cultural heritage has raised steadily, especially during the past 25 years. No public or private owner today would want to destroy an identified heritage building. During the 20th century everything has been done to open a wide scope: starting from the building itself to its surroundings, then moving to the historic city as a whole and tackling landscape issues. French experts have been working on the preservation of the building as an object to the organisation of urban and rural contexts.

The issue today is not so much preserving and restoring but rather considering how we want to manage cities and their heritage value. It is not a question of transforming our historical cities into museums.

«Tradition and heritage do not mean to preserve the ashes but to keep the flame alight» (proverb)

A city is a living body; it is much more than the addition of the values of individual architectures. It grows and is constantly transforming itself. It is very important to understand what makes the value of a historic living town or territory. It is also the way the town is organised for the community of inhabitants, the specific pattern of the streets and public squares, the way the houses are laid out, the history and the culture linked with the different spaces, etc... This must be carefully studied through the history of the town and its actual plan to understand what builds up the integrity, particularity and the quality of that site. Cultural heritage is not only what we get, what we own but it is also who we are and the place where we are from.

During the second part on the XXth century tools have been designed to analyse, preserve, manage and enhance the wealth and complexity of historical sites. Thus, protected areas like the “Safeguarded sectors” (in French: les “Secteurs sauvegardés”) were created in 1962 and the “Architectural, urban and landscape heritage protection zones” were created in 1983, they became the “Areas for architecture and heritage enhancement” in 2010 (in French: les “Zones de protection du patrimoine architectural urbain et paysager” devenues en 2010 les “Aires de mise en valeur de l’architecture et du patrimoine”). They were replaced or improved upon strategies and documents designed for town planning. They are used by officials to call as much attention to emblematic sites and districts as to ordinary places.

“Transforming, reusing or modifying may well be as useful as making new buildings. Taking into account the existent as well as the intent seems to me the fundamental principle”. (Président François Hollande for “Architecture d’Aujourd’hui” (AA) in February 2012)

The strategies undertaken to adapt and actualize these tools represent a great opportunity to experiment a better governance of historical places (districts, cities landscapes, territories...).

These strategies are based on:

- The choice by authorities of an interdisciplinary team in charge of planning. It involves architects, towns and landscape-planners but it may also include archaeologists, economists and even sociologists, historians and ethnologists... The manager (usually an architect) coordinates the various approaches to a project.
- Before planning, this team has to study the history of the places and their evolution from the origins to nowadays. This research is based on the analysis of buildings and landscapes; a work that is frequently undertaken district by district or even specific place by specific place and always in link with the inhabitants.
- A group is created to have authority on the project management team during their mission. It is composed of representatives of the contracting owner (the State and local authorities) and of local associations. These private associations constitute a specific authority that could be called “maîtrise d’usage” (“using management”). It is important to highlight the growing involvement of these associations of inhabitants from the districts or local places.
- In order to ease communication between the actors of the projects (professionals, elected representatives and inhabitants) it is important to agree on a common language. The name of the local place inhabitants use (the usual name of the district, the local area, the street, the square ...) replaces the professional terms of town-planning (zone or sector). The meaning of the development of the area being therefore deeply modified;
- Once the plan is approved, it must be applied carefully. Local authorities need help from public architects and urban planners who are trained specifically to carry out a relevant supervision and give them advice on all public and private construction projects.

These strategies are far from being taken into account for each urban plan involving a site of historical interest, but they constitute interesting perspectives. Indeed, they reveal that heritage has become more than a mere object to protect but that it fulfils a cultural role in the field of town-planning and sustainable development with significant economic and social impacts.

“Culture will gradually take its place as the fourth pillar for sustainable development” (From the declaration of President Jacques Chirac at the Johannesburg Summit in 2002)

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