

URBAN HERITAGE AS CULTURAL RESOURCES: PARADIGMS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Jurate Markeviciene *

Cultural Change and Continuity in the Globalizing World

The concept of cultural heritage preservation has undergone a major metamorphosis during the Modern Era; however, recent changes may be defined as a transfiguration rather than a transformation. Volume, typology, and spectrum of cultural heritage, but first values and reasons for preservation of historic environment are subject to change. Our galloping world is seeking for change per se – for permanent ‘update’ and ‘upgrade’, with a highly rated value of ‘here-and-now’, and a priority given for ‘new’, ‘original’ and ‘unique’ features, including individual lifestyles. However, individualization (customization) is in fact strictly limited to leisure time activities, while work and other basic spheres of contemporary human life are under increasing pressure of uniformity and regulations, which are supposed to replace traditions and custom law, where social order is under request. However a structuring framework of traditions and cultural continuity is going weaker and weaker, thus culture started to be created ‘ad hoc’ – for specific needs of an organization or a social group – and therefore becoming a short-term phenomenon. On the other hand, the *inherited* culture constitutes the vast majority of any human culture; many sociologists in general identified culture as *heritage*.

Living in a such a world leads to a natural question: is there any chance that cultural identity and continuity (although declared as a top priority) will survive in a common life, or it will flourish exceptionally on specific occasions or in ‘reservations’? This question is extremely important, because human societies must accept rapid change in order to maintain or gain importance in a globalizing world, but on the other hand, they experience heavy uniforming pressure of globalization.

How do globalization affect specific characteristics of a local culture? A good illustration of such a ‘universalizing’ transformation of a distinct cultural context is given by a translation of *Pater Noster*, one of the main Christian prayers, into the ‘language of universal meanings’. The author Anna Wierzbicka, Professor of Linguistics at the Australian National University, who focused her work on the identification of the universal human concepts, created an original method – Natural Semantic Metalanguage – in order to make texts of a single

culture meaningful in any cultural context with the help of linguistic universals. However, these ‘simple and universal human concepts’, change the prayer in such a way, that any Christian culture could hardly identify it at once.

Modern English (1970) text of the Prayer:

*Our Father in Heaven, let your holy name be known, let your kingdom come, and your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today the bread that we need, and forgive us our wrongs, as we forgive those who have done wrong to us. Do not lead us into trial, but save us from evil. For yours the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen*¹.

Anna Wierzbicka’s transformation: *I am thinking of You: You are someone different from other people, people exist because You want them to, You know all the people, You want to do good to all the people, You can do good to all the people, if You would not do good to all the people, they should not be able to live. As well I am thinking of You: people cannot see You, because You are someone different from other people, people can know You, when they want to do good to other people, just as You want to do good to all the people. I know: all the other people can think of You the same way, all other people are the same as me, therefore, when I am thinking of You, I want to think of other people.*²

What conclusion can be drawn out of this comparison? Cultural homogenization excludes objects from their context. Although **meaning** is a universal human cognitive activity, it always occurs within a cultural context and vice versa. Globalization changes the world rapidly, and physical structures of different cultures – their cultural environments – are extremely vulnerable.

Historic Settlements – Honourable Antiquities or Cultural Recourses?

From the anthropological perspective culture often is identified not only with human activities, but also with an environment as well: ‘*Culture is man-made environment, continuum of things and events in a cause and effect relationship; the function of this external, man-made environment is to make life secure and enduring for the society of human beings living within the cultural system; thus culture may be seen as the most recent, the most highly developed means of promoting the security and continuity of life, in a series that began with the simple reflex*³. We may

see historic towns – urban environment – from two contrasting perspectives: as urban heritage and as cultural resources. Each a perspective leads us to different ends.

Historic Towns as Monuments of the Past

From this perspective urban heritage exposes itself mainly as a collection of monuments and landmarks: honorable relicts of the Past, symbolizing our history, giving meaning to our cultural identity and embellishing our lives. Monuments are *diachronic* creations – they developed, following a historic time-line. This *diachronic dimension* can be defined as *imaginary* dimension as well. Perception and contemplation of such a monument is an intellectual experience, available only based on preconceived knowledge. In this context an old artifact, having no known history – is *not* identified as a heritage, but rather perceived as an artifact of a contemporary world. In practice this *monumental* approach is tightly related to ‘selling the commodified past as a recreational product’⁴ – to heritage, assigned for leisure time activities. This motivation for preservation is well known, elaborated, and needs no further comments.

Such an approach is a **global** paradigm. However, at the same time, and in its favor, a **local** paradigm is neglected i.e. local population is alienated from its heritage, which factually does not belong to theirs common everyday life any more.

Historic Towns as Cultural Resources

Another and much further-reaching heritage dimension may be defined as a *substantial* dimension. It refers to heritage qualities that are outside ‘historic dramas’ of monument. However, these qualities influence individuals and social groups much deeper, and are extremely significant to identity and continuity of cultures. This perspective shows us historic towns as human settlements – media for everyday life.

In the latter case, cultural heritage must be considered as **cultural recourses**, feeding cultural development of a society or community. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *resources* as ‘a means of supplying some want or deficiency; a stock or reserve upon which one can draw when necessary; capability in adapting means to ends, or in meeting difficulties; possibility of aid or assistance; the collective means possessed by any country for its own support or defense’⁵.

Masterpieces are important to a few, resources to everybody. In the latter case, historic towns are perceived as *living environment*, where a larger variety of artifacts appears worth preserving, and a broader spectrum of motivations inevitably becomes involved in preservation of historic environment. In addition, it is possible to attract a much larger number of supporters, if compared with traditional urban heritage conservation ends.

As cultural resources, historic urban environment plays three important parts in contemporary human life:

1 Continuity of Culture

Historic urban environment sustains social structures of human societies and ensures their continuity to some extent. Every culture ensures its continuity through a mechanism of *tradition*. Tradition is a specific phenomenon – members of a society or a community commit to it without any specific discussion on its sense and values – they just take their ancestors path, hoping that their children will follow the same way. According to Pentti Routio, ‘the younger members of the community had access to an abundant source of experience: the tacit wisdom stored in the memories of their elders and accumulated in the models of design of all artifacts, which followed tradition. Tradition was often quite rigid, and people were reluctant to diverge from it when making new artifacts. A diversion could only be made if people felt strong enough need for it’⁶.

Tradition has been the exclusive and effective tool for self-protection, self-maintenance, and self-creation of a social group for millennia. If members of a community refused to follow its common law, they usually felt victims of the social exclusion from the community. After the Enlightenment era rejected tradition in favor of scientific knowledge and education, tradition had been gradually replaced with continuously expanding heritage preservation, which now started a race with rapidly changing modern societies. The subsequent change of the very definition of cultural heritage – starting from *monuments*, *antiquities*, and *relicts* to *cultural treasures*, then going to *cultural properties*, *cultural heritage*, and ending in *cultural resources* – which occurred in the 20th century, is the best evidence of this run.

Thought an impact of traditions is decreasing, societies, which could survive without traditions, just do not exist. Environment plays a significant role in socialization: from the very babyhood, individuals experience an impact of the native settings. Specific environmental characteristics – geomorphologic features, spatial structures, scale, rhythms, textures, light, colors and similar – are gradually imprinted in human mind, creating a sense of sympathy with the native environment, as well as preferences for specific spatial and other physical patterns. This way environment transfers culture of an ethnic, a nation, a class, or a similar social group from generation to generation. Sometimes ‘a silent language’⁷ of environment is more suggestive than words, because it is less intrusive and does not moralize, as it sometimes happens with verbal socialization.

Thus, historic urban environment plays a significant part in cultural development – it acts as a carrier, a sustainer, and a transferor of traditions. Factually, this is the main role of historic environment, and local people understand this perfectly well – intensifying grass-roots movements or spontaneous resistance of local population against a new development – are clear evidences of this phenomenon.

2 The Quality of Life

'All human interaction is *situated* – it occurs in a particular place and has a specific duration in time. Our actions over the course of the day tend to be 'zoned' in time as well as in space'.⁸ This time-space convergence is tightly related to a culture of a specific society, as well as to some biological aspects of human beings. This is too complex a topic to be considered in depth, but equally this dimension cannot be avoided, if we talk about historic environment as media of everyday life of a specific culture. Biological aspect of this impact is related to some natural traits of the *Homo sapiens* species and may be traced across subcultures, cultures, and even civilizations, such as senses, scale, capabilities of spatial motion, etc., as well as with biological and social needs for order and variety, privacy and proximity, communication and safety and similar. According to Edward T. Hall, 'being a prisoner of his own biological organism, like other members of the animal kingdom, man /.. / is an organism /... / distinguished from other animals by virtue of fact, that he has elaborated what I have termed *extensions* of his organism /... /, man has created a new dimension, the cultural dimension; the relationship between man and cultural dimension is one in which both *man and his environment participate in molding each other*'.⁹ If historic environment fulfills these requirements, it provides psychological and aesthophysiological comfort, improving the quality of life this way. On the other hand, environment may have not only socio-petal, but also socio-fugal impact.

3 The Sense of Beauty

Historic urban environment usually has been moulded according to priorities, which rather rarely urge masters of contemporary architecture. The old builders, both unconsciously (intuitively, traditionally) and consciously (on a rational, calculated basis) attempted to create beauty which was understood in the terms of harmony, integrity, equilibrium, and resonance with a greater – Universal – Order.

It is myths, ancient religions and Ancient Greek philosophy, where we first meet discourse on the Natural Order in the context of the Nature of the Universe, its structural Unity and of the Universal Law that governs everything, on the Principle of Absolute Law that governs the Universe and admits of no exceptions. Contemporary sciences found out that the phenomenon of self-organization is not limited to living matter but occurs also in certain chemical systems, it can be noticed even in astrophysical structures, and started to define these principles as some General Law that governs not only life but also the whole Universe. We see these evidences in development of human societies as well¹⁰. 'The development of tradition is normally incremental: it mainly consists of just small diversions from the original model. After a tentative change is made, the result will be scrutinized and judged either better or worse than the original. If it is not deemed satisfactory, new attempts are made until a good 'fit'

is found. The method is called iteration (lat. *iterum*, 'anew'). In theory, the process is eventually bound to reach the equilibrium of well-fitting forms'¹¹. Professional architecture, starting at least from Ancient Greece, was seeking the Ideal Beauty regarding it the Order resulted from three prerequisites: wholeness, harmony and clarity. In the Middle Ages, the research of beauty usually was classified as a branch of theology. The argument was that beauty is an attribute of God.

Art of modern societies show a little interest in this type of beauty. From the late 1700 ideals of order, balance and continuity were progressively replaced by the values of the *New* and the *Other*, and social continuity – with permanent revolution, inspired by genius. In the sphere of urban development the all this resulted in a chaotic urban environment – a collection of distinct 'enclaves' – sites or even single buildings, however lacking, any clear-cut integrating spatial structure.

These new environments lack many human-friendly qualities, which promote more communal living patterns and are typical to historic environments – they lack spatial divisions with readable hierarchy of space and clear borders, subtle gradations of *intimate, personal, social* and *public distance*¹², human scale, readability and potential for extrapolation), stability (as an opposition of a continually restructured space of modern¹³ urbanism), balance of harmony and stimulators together with visual richness and variety of a stimulating heterogeneous environment. Contemporary cities, according to Anthony Giddens, are 'worlds of strangers'¹⁴ – anonymous socio-fugal environment, which turned to maximize alienation, and hardening social contacts and socializations. 'Since the industrial revolution we have lost ownership of our towns and cities, allowing them to become spoiled by poor design, economic dispersal and social polarization' (quoted in Giddens 2001:583), the Urban Task Force (UK) noted in their final report in 1999.¹⁵

In an opposition to an anonymous city, there is an evidence of rising taste for environments with traditional characteristics i.e. 'urban villages' i.e. 'neighborhoods involving close kinship and personal ties often to be actively created by city life; they are not just remnants of a pre-existing way of life, which survive for a period in the city'.¹⁶ Increasing interest in urban conservations proves this tendency as well.

Preservation as Sustainable Development

On a conception level, by analogy with a *biotope*, we may define historic urban environments as *ecotopes* (homes).¹⁷ Then, by analogy with nature conservation, urban preservation may be defined as the process, through which a society or community is sustaining and continuing the cultural structure of its ecotope. When included into such a context, historic environment gains a huge potential for

multifaceted cultural and social development of social groups. For all these reasons, preservation of urban heritage is closely tied with cultural sustainability. However, until recently the mainstream sustainable development movement hardly took into account specific cultural needs, targeting mainly in issues of human survival. The basic concept of sustainable development (as defined, for instance, by UN) does not include issues of preservation historic environment, as key human needs yet. In such a context, urban conservation is factually (and in spite of declaring quite opposite ends) pushed aside as peripheral exclusive activity in the mainstream of sustainable urban planning. The Agenda for the World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002 included hardly two events, related to culture and sustainability: (1) Francophonie and Sustainable Development (organized by the Organization International de la Francophonie), (2) Roundtable on Biodiversity, Cultural Diversity and Ethics (organized by the UNEP, the Government of France and the UNESCO). On the other hand, Draft Political Declaration of WSSD 2002, perhaps for the first time in the global process of sustainable development, takes into account human cultural needs: 'We respect cultural diversity and various value systems. We recognize the importance of initiatives such as the Dialogue among Civilizations for promoting peaceful coexistence and better understanding of diverse cultures (5)'. This fact may be a sign for the future convergence.

If people are to survive, culture – human way of living – must be taken on account as well. If we define heritage as cultural resources, it becomes possible to adapt the popular formula on sustainable usage of natural resources for the needs of heritage preservation. Based on this formula, the *main principle of cultural sustainability* may be defined as follows:

'For the cultural system to sustain itself indefinitely: (1) *renewable* cultural (heritage) *resources* must not be used faster than the rate, at which they can be recreated or replaced with adequate new resources; (2) *non-renewable* cultural (heritage) *resources* must not be used faster than the rate at which they can be substituted for; and (3) *changes* must not be generated faster than the rate, at which the cultural system can absorb them'¹⁸.

If urban preservation is based on or even identified with the process cultural sustainability, some major problems of contemporary cities might be solved in a different, but sometimes a better way, and also win much more public and private interest and support. For example: *inner city decay* might be diminished, if taking into account not only heritage preservation needs, but wider aspects of a created human environment; *socio-petal, human-friendly, personalized historic environments* of may serve their traditional destination pretty well – sometimes it is easier to revive them for such a purpose than commodify for

commercial ends or let further decay, while making attempts in building new environments with the relevant qualities; and so on. However, *urban recycling* (the refurbishing or replacement of old buildings and new uses for previously developed land), which became fairly popular in large cities, only sounds good from environmental point of view as a sustainable motto (i.e. 'reduce, reuse and recycle'); it should be applied very carefully to historic areas, because it is one of the main agents of change, especially as regards living environment.

Conclusion:

- 1 From the anthropological and sociological point of view, culture is not an attractive, but non-essential 'arts and pleasures' of human beings, contrary, it means lifestyles of particular societies or communities, together with their physical environments; and environments are essential in giving such a social group its own structures and creating unique cultural identity;
- 2 The process of inheritance, preservation, maintenance, and transference to next generations is the very core of any culture;
- 3 Historic settlements should be considered as cultural resources (often irreplaceable), that are necessary for particular societies and communities in order to ensure their cultural and social continuity;
- 4 Urban conservationists should make attempts in order to turn conservation process in direction of sustainable cultural development, thus giving urban conservation a much broader and multifaceted social perspective, and urban heritage – a better chance for survival and rebirth.

Notes

- 1 Kevin Condon, tr. 1970: *The Alba House New Testament* (New York: Society of St. Paul)
- 2 Quoted by Maja Wolny 1998 in 'Język wspólnego Boga', *Polityka* (Poland), No 52 (2173) Dec. 26. P.60
- 3 'The Concepts and Components of Culture' 1991, *The New Encyclopedia Britannica. Macropædia* (London) Volume 16, p.874 – 8754 Gregory J. Ashworth 1996: 'Realisable potential but hidden problems: a heritage tale from five Central European cities'. In *The Historic Metropolis: a Hidden Potential* (Cracow: International Cultural Centre). P.46
- 5 *The Oxford English Dictionary* 1994 (Oxford University Press)
- 6 Pentti Routio 1996: *Arteology* [Online]. Available: <http://www.uiah.fi/projects/metodi>
- 7 A term coined by Edward T.Hall 1956, *The Silent Language*
- 8 Anthony Giddens 2001: *Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity). P.98
- 9 Edward T.Hall 1966: *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Doubleday), P. 3-4
- 10 Jurate Markeviciene 1999: 'Sustainability: Necessity, Ideal Morality or Natural Phenomenon?', In *Conservation and Urban Sustainable Development: a Theoretical Framework* (Recife: Centro DE Conservação Integrada Urbana e Territorial, Universidade Federal

de Pernambuco). P. 77-91

11 Pentti Routio 1996

12 See Hall 1966

13 in a sociological meaning of the term as referred to the modernity are (where postmodernism and late modernism are synonym definitions, see Giddens 2001)

14 Giddens 2001, P.576

15 Urban Task Force 1999: *Toward an Urban renaissance*, final report of the Urban Task Force, chaired by Lord Rogers of Riverside (London: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions)

16 Giddens 2001, P. 576

17 Jurate Markeviciene 1999: 'Human Values in Urban Development and Urban Conservation: Opposite? Shared? Common?', In *Vernacular Architecture* (Morelia: XII Assembly Icomos, World Congress on the Conservation of Monumental Heritage). P. 9-25

18 Jurate Markeviciene 1999 (2)

* **Jurate Markeviciene**

Jurate Markeviciene is working in academic fields of cultural anthropology, theory and history of architecture, urban heritage conservation, sustainable development, Vilnius urban history; teaches heritage conservation and cultural anthropology at the Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts and the Vilnius University, was a trainer at the ICCROM's ITUC courses; has over 50 academic publications; presented papers at many UNESCO, ICOMOS, ICCROM, OWHC conferences in Brazil, Czech, Finland, France, Mexico, Norway, Poland, Sweden, etc. As an expert, she is often contracted by the State and the Vilnius government. She is experienced in co-operation with UNESCO, ICOMOS, ICCROM, and the Nordic countries, representing Lithuania in the Nordic-Baltic project *Industrial Heritage Platform 2000-2002*, and in the NWHC programme *Sustainable Historic Cities: Nordic-Baltic Approach*. Jurate Markeviciene is a voting member of the ICOMOS CIAV. She is a trained art historian, MA.^o