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PRESERVING TRANSCULTURAL HERITAGE:

YOUR WAY OR MY WAY?

Questions on Authenticity, Identity and Patrimonial Proceedings in the Safeguarding of Architectural Heritage Created in the Meeting of Cultures

WHY THE PRESERVATION OF TRANSCULTURAL HERITAGE?

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In an era of generalized globalization, which leads to increased hybridity in practically all levels of our existence, cultural barriers also tend to shade off substantially. This has motivated a growing feeling of protection regarding several singular cultural heritage elements that are considered to be unique identity components of the societies and communities that created them, and of irreplaceable value. However, this globalization that began centuries ago through commercial, technological, cultural, political and war-related exchanges between different peoples, which have been gradually increasing in intensity to the present day, turned out to be itself the originator of a heritage that has been created precisely in the context of contacts between different cultures. This new transcultural heritage (or, in some way, hybrid heritage) presents a whole set of different complexities that, to a greater or lesser extent, hinders its safeguard and preservation for future generations.

In a pleasant talk with Jukka Jokilehto and Mehr Azar Soheil, in Lisbon, about the theme of this congress – the safeguarding of transcultural heritage –, at some point the question came up: what is transcultural heritage? And why "transcultural", rather than "intercultural", "multicultural", "shared cultural" or any other name? Apparently, this issue of the terminology could be just a mere detail, but in fact, it contains distinct perceptions that need to be defined, allowing, therefore, for the flow of patrimonial speech. While all those expressions might be synonymous, they actually describe entirely different things.

The expression "shared" raises some issues: on a political level, the use of this expression still causes some friction. In some former colonies, for instance, the expression "shared heritage" is not always seen in a good way, since people used to consider it as theirs, refusing to "share" it with the former colonial power. Multiculturalism, pluriculturalism or polyculturalism can be understood as a multitude of cultures coexisting together, but each cultural group does not necessarily have engaging interactions with each other. Interculturalism (and even the cross-culturalism) is concerned with the relations between distinct cultures, which might promote the adoption of some cultural influences from one in the other. But it does not mean the existence of a "subculture" directly created in the meeting of the influencing cultures. Transculturalism, however, although very similar to interculturalism (in the way of the relations between different cultures), presupposes some kind of realignment of the cultural borders, due to the creation of a new hybrid subculture.

To facilitate the understanding of all these expressions, one can look to some examples. Multiculturalism can be seen in neighbourhoods where social groups of different origins co-exist and interact, but it does not necessarily mean any mixture. Interculturalism is visible, for instance, in the European *chinoiserie*, which includes, in its ornamental repertoire, elements inspired in Far-Eastern cultures; but it does not mean, in fact, a fusion of cultures, rather the mere adoption of some foreign cultural elements by the European culture. However, Indo-Portuguese culture can be considered a paradigmatic example of transculturalism, in a way that the fusion of distinct cultures (from Portugal and India) have originated over time a new subculture with specific characteristics in its cuisine, folklore, art, music, language, architecture, traditions, etc. Therefore, one can stick to the simpler definition of what is transcultural heritage: it is the heritage created in the meeting of different cultures, generated from both influences and eventually resulting in a subculture with coherent characteristics.

Among the vast cultural heritage that results from interactions and re-appropriations between distinct cultures, the built heritage stands out as one of the most visible and tangible physical signs of any culture. This includes cities, temples, fortifications, public buildings or

simple private dwellings, among many other edified structures. In many cases throughout history, this "mestizo heritage" has been the object of neglect or deliberate destruction because of the negative symbolisms associated with it, but it has also been obliterated or corrupted for functional or ideological reasons or simply as a result of ignorance on the part of those who mean to protect it. Regardless of the cause, the fact is that transcultural built heritage, born from the assimilation of cultures, continues to be under threat and the issues related to its safeguard are now more relevant than ever because of this globalization that challenges us with new constraints and contexts that we imperatively need to address and live with.

We shall focus very briefly on the issues of authenticity as a prime example of the complexities associated with heritage safeguard in various cultures. It is a common perception that Western civilisation has a deep love for the original materials of the monuments, where the signs of the passage of time (the patina and wear due to time and usage) are proof of this much-loved antiquity and originality.

What could then be said, for example, about the Temple Ise Jingu-Honden in Naiku (Japan), a wooden temple that is torn down and rebuilt anew every twenty years in an ancestral ritual that faithfully replicates each part of the ancient temple, a practice that has existed for centuries? Will a Japanese person who is asked how old the temple is say that it is five, ten or fifteen years old? No! For most Japanese people the temple has existed for centuries!!! They do not care that the materials the temple is made of are less than twenty years old, what matters to them is that the form and the appearance that were given to the monument centuries ago by their ancestors remain intact. And the same Japanese person would probably tell a Westerner that the signs of the passage of time in monuments are a lack of respect for the ancestors who handed down these monuments to the following generations, because these signs mean that the buildings are not being duly cared for or maintained exactly as the ancestors left them, that is, always looking new. It is not important that the materials used are the same as the original ones, or new ones, or even better materials; what matters is that the original form and appearance are maintained just as they were conceived by the ancestors. This is one of the main concepts of heritage authenticity.

And what about the magnificent modernist buildings that are being destroyed in Angola and Mozambique, such as the Quinaxixe Market in Luanda? Why are they not considered as heritage? Some African voices will say that the reason is because they are not old enough! Is it then antiquity that determines the heritage value of a building? Maybe, for some cultures...

We can also mention the Church of Saint Francis of Assisi, in Belo Horizonte (Brazil), a building designed by Óscar Niemeyer that was classified as a national monument while it was still under construction. How is it possible that a building that was not even finished was considered as heritage? The decision appears to have been based on its artistry, that is, its artistic value, which, in this extreme case, was still potential artistic value as the work of art was still incomplete! In a recent culture of the New World, outside the sphere of the pre-Columbian cultures where the oldest erected structures are usually not even 500-years old, it is normal for many of its citizens not to view age as a fundamental value, unlike the millenary cultures of other regions around the World. Different cultures have different concepts of heritage authenticity. But even this difference does not explain everything...

Taperoa is a small town in the interior of the Northeast Region of Brazil, one of those little towns that we are used to see in Brazilian soap operas, with a modest but relatively intact historical centre (not always well preserved). This town was chosen to be the set of the movie

"*A Pedra do Reino*" and several of its buildings were used in the filming; other buildings were covered by temporary sets and were decorated to evoke the historical period of the movie. Many residents of Taperoa lived for months in sets and had to first get through the doors of the sets just to be able to get into their own homes. When filming was over and the sets were starting to be dismantled, part of the local population stood up and took action to halt the dismantlement, as if they saw these film sets as a heritage that had to be preserved, and demanded that they remained in place. This happened despite the fact that their houses, without the decorated sets, probably had some heritage value themselves!!!

Even in the so-called European "Western culture", not all is as clear as it usually appears to be. For example, in inland villages – and sometimes even in large cities – one sees people touching up old paintings, covering century-old altarpieces with glitter, throwing away antique pieces of furniture because they are old, demolishing or obliterating old houses to build new ones that are deemed to have better conditions and, therefore, more value. What the Occidentals are shocked to see happening in other cultures also occurs in their communities. One cannot be a hypocrite, what is designated as "Western culture" is, in truth, the "culture of Occidental elites". And there is no such thing as a single occidental culture but rather various occidental cultures, in the same way that there are, for instance, various Oriental, African, and American cultures, all with their specific concepts of heritage authenticity, which are not better or worse than our own, only different and also worth respecting.

Nowadays, due to the intensive debate about issues on the authenticity of architectural heritage, the theoretical flexibility is bigger. Additionally to the sense that different cultures would have different meanings of authenticity, new evaluating concepts, associated with architecture, start to rise, becoming a delicate balance that will hardly generate absolute consensus. Besides the architecture's material authenticity, other authenticity values can also be found: for example, the functional, spatial, historical, symbolical and other evaluating concepts of authenticity. In addition, the duality of architecture as historical document and work of art, which used to restrain preservation actions on it, was overrun by the recognition of the architecture specificity: architectural structures hold several other tangible and intangible dimensions, besides the artistic or material dimensions. Heritage perspectives, which used to be based on European cultural perspectives, start to be reconsidered, embracing now other cultural perspectives that reflect necessarily the way in which those different cultures perform their actions on built heritage.

The recognition of diversified cultural specificities enhanced the relativity of the heritage evaluations, as well as the authenticity concepts. All the heritage actions have a relative value associated to the culture in which they are performed; therefore, the axiological reproach of those proceedings may result in a speculative performance, but nevertheless, the debate on this issue should be stimulated. On the other hand, the globalization increment can be seen in the rise of the exchange of influences between cultures, because of the interchange of heritage experiences, the emigration processes and due to tourism. Inclusively some restoration forms from the Past, which were later condemned, became again debated and, in a few cases, were applied again in heritage actions.

Paulo Varela Gomes mentioned an obvious aporia inherent in the concept of heritage in contemporary society (and particularly in the Western society): a monument is more heritage the more "authentic" it is (older and simultaneously less modified), but it is less heritage as less recognizable in relation to its presumable pristine shape created in the Past. This antinomy lies in the perception that restoration actions are capable of value and, at the same

time, to devalue monuments, providing and removing authenticity to them simultaneously. It is almost as an analogy with Heisenberg's *Uncertainty Principle*, but applied to architectural restoration: the higher the precision in relation to one of the evaluating dimensions, the lower is the precision over the other(s) dimension(s).

It is easy to understand that the current patrimonial debate does not allow the existence of a unitary method of heritage intervention capable of global consensus, since the interveners' different personal perspectives are always present. Every heritage intervention pattern has positive and negative principles, whatever the perspective. The (partial or complete) reconstruction of architectural monuments sometimes bring complaints about the obliteration of history, the creative distortion of the old buildings, the substitution of the original materials, the "disneyfication" syndromes; but at the same time, it can rescue valuable spaces and shapes, recover useful functions for the community, provide landscape framings or stimulate experimental studies. The strict conservation might freeze artificially the monuments in time, repress rehabilitation ambitions by communities, and prevent the life extension of the building; but it also preserves material and shaping historical characteristics, restraining abusive actions in monuments. Many more arguments can be invoked against or in favour of each pattern of heritage intervention.

History lessons allows to conclude that no one is the owner of knowledge about future expectations, nor can it be assumed that what is now considered correct will also be correct in the Future. It is not plausible to impose unilateral solutions merely based on the justification that it is for future generations, because it is not possible to prophesy unquestionably the future route of heritage values, since they are changeable. Things valued today can be criticized tomorrow and vice-versa; buildings preserved nowadays by their intrinsic values can be demolished tomorrow, because those values might not be recognized then; and things assertively restored in our days can be regretted as errors in the future. Returning to the analogy with Heisenberg's principle, if it is not possible to determine with precision the correct action to employ on the architectural monument, as well as what will be the heritage values in the Future, then the heritage actions should be based on expectations that are constantly determined and updated. That is why the debate and development of heritage documents is so important.

More than trying to follow pre-established intervention principles that supposedly intend to satisfy future generations, these actions in the architectural heritage should follow pragmatic principles to fulfill contemporary demands and its sustainability. These actions must be based in the weighting of the contemporary society's wills, admitting the impossibility of a perfect solution, but rather the existence of distinct solutions, matching better or worse the requirements. Consequently, accepting that all the heritage intervention principles may be considered valid, and that evaluating and authenticity concepts are variable among different cultures, times and circumstances, the critical focus concerning the heritage actions should not emphasiz predominantly the moralist evaluations on the intervention methodologies or philosophies.

Recalling the Chinese saying that Camillo Boito used to mention – "a shame to mislead contemporaries, an even greater shame to mislead posterity" –, one of the main subjects of heritage interventions should be about ethical issues, preventing to mislead intentionally or unconsciously society. Assuming that the contemporary heritage actions intend to pragmatically accomplish the society desires through varied solutions going from the simple conservation to the total reconstruction, the main concern should be not to deceive anyone. Actions in the architectural heritage must be **ethical**, adopting without biases their purposes, documenting the operations and showing the chosen options to the (present and future) society.

In that way, there is an ambition to encourage the dialogue about this matter, which has assumed particular relevance for the world heritage panorama. It aims to stimulate the knowledge of paradigmatic cases, the interchange of experiences, the exposure of problems and solutions, and the increase of potential collaborations that can be helpful instruments for the safeguarding of unique transcultural heritages, often ignobly vandalised, unwisely neglected, and irreversibly adulterated or harmfully over-exploited.