

## Architectural Preservation or Social Preservation?

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### Abstract

Preservation has a complex meaning because the question of keeping something into existence involves its tangible and intangible aspects. On one side we have buildings and all other constructions but on the other side we have their links with the local community.

Where the first aspect is static to some extent, the second one is dynamic. In fact, the people involved change continuously which depend also on the natural change of generations.

Therefore, if we want to merge preservation and sustainable development, we have to plan a participation program and a soft-education campaign which have the purpose to recognize the local community's values and to make all people be part of the flow of development.

### A static vision of preservation

If we look at the meaning of the word preservation, Oxford Dictionary states: "to keep safe, unchanged, or in existence. Interest regarding as one person's domain" the definitions seem to be clear but these words can be read in every sense depending on where our focus of attention lies. The fact is that 'safe' and 'existence' are sometimes in opposition when we think of the taste and smell of life.

Despite the above mentioned discrepancy, architecturally speaking this definition seems to be clear, especially when we think of historical cities or ancient monuments. But it is not so clear if we think of the social aspects of these historical cities, of the relationship of these constructions with their context and with the local community. We cannot describe the Coliseum forgetting about

the Roman Empire and the lifestyle of the ancient inhabitants of Rome. The Coliseum represents the past and it lost the function it was built for, becoming an open monument only. Only few Roman constructions are still used by today's people, as for example the Arena of Verona. We do not normally separate Florence from the story of the Medici family, whereas the inhabitants of Florence presently do. Without a context our opinion of a painting of Giotto would be very different since its lack of perspective could make it seem elementary.

Going back to the definition of 'preservation' of Oxford Dictionary there are no specifications of what kind of actions we have to do to preserve something or to keep it in existence nor specifications on the meaning of 'existence' itself. In historical centers we have constructions and buildings together with a relationship with them and the question is how to concentrate our attention on both features.

Until a few years ago, in many countries such as Italy, the difference between architectural preservation and social preservation was misunderstood. Generally political programs and, as a consequence, norms and laws, were for preservation intended to make the present static not taking into considerations as such that constructions cannot be separated from their users (relationship). This way all the attention was concentrated on the architectural aspects only. Projects of preservation are designed by architects only and few people thought of a social strategy for preservation. For this reason many historical centres seem to be open museums and seem to be dead (not in existence) when there are no visitors. The fact that society evolves, the local community and its relationships with the constructions change, implies a dynamic vision of preservation and a change of perspective.

The supremacy of the static preservation is generally due to a high perception of risks associated with every dynamic behaviour. 'Static' was seen as known, maybe not the best but safe, without points of excellence but reassuring. Exactly as the first definition of Oxford Dictionary: safe.

## Social barriers to development

The fear of abandoning the static vision can become a real barrier to any change (even the best) if we do not contrast it. If a change is seen as a risk but risk is not associated with something positive, there will not be an evolution. In many Western countries we lost all interest in challenges, especially when there is a smell of risks, and so preservation is static and relegated to architecture. This way we will completely forget the relationship of the constructions with the actual local community. But who are these people, these stakeholders?

It is most interesting to understand the perception of risks from the ecological and environmental point of view. There are two authors who can be put at the opposite ends of a line: Naomi Klein (2001) with her *No Logo* and Lomborg (2003) with his *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. The success of these books demonstrates not only the confusion of readers but also the blurred borders of science. We have mentioned these books because they were best - sellers and many people have read them. These 'common' people are exactly the ones who have a relationship with constructions, the ones we want to involve in participation programs and who are the direct users of our communication campaigns. Complexity of ecological relationship takes us to an indefinable condition that certainly is not static.

Dealing with this uneasiness of knowledge of certainties associated with the unknown creates the perception of risks, and the evaluation of risk has become a profession (Bettiol and Campi, 2005). It is normal that every feeling has an appropriate mediator (Block, 1995) and fear too has experts who try to evaluate the degree of peril. At present economy is based on the fear of risks (and not only the fear of the unknown). I mean that the general level of fear is so high that every change is perceived in its broadest sense. Every change can be dangerous (Lupton, 2003). Dynamic versus Static.

This situation appears as natural if we look back at the great ecological disasters due to the indiscriminate pollution of the

70s and 80s, but it appears as unnatural if we look at the nowadays situation. The problem is that there is no development if we are in a static situation. Development runs with dynamic and evolution.

And more, society evolves naturally as people change continuously. New generations take the place of the old ones and they create new relationships with the place they live in and they feel the need to be identified by their own actions. This need corresponds to the preservation of social relationship. Even if we have passed from a society composed of the single person who needs a self-identity to a society composed of communities which need a common self-identity (Viano, 2002), it is evident that the necessity of a personal recognition remains a constant factor.

### **Sustainable development**

For all these reasons we had the necessity to define which kind of dynamic development is associated with the lowest level of fear. In this work we will not consider the other points of view of Bruntland's report (1987) definition of sustainability as we want to concentrate on the perception that people have of the dynamic process of development.

When we try to rationalize what a sustainable development is we refer to Bruntland's or to Nobel Prize Solow's definitions (1990). These conceptualizations are very deep even if they can be expressed in few words. In particular Bruntland said that a sustainable development can be reached when we are in the barycentre of an equilateral triangle whose vertexes are the environmental, the social and the economical aspects.

This way the dynamics of any realization depends on the interactions with the respect of environment, the financial revenue to do it and the perception people have of the kind of relationship with this project with them (the local communities, the press, the users and also any kind of stakeholders).

Environmentally speaking this point could not correspond to a totally ethic behaviour and so there will always be a percentage of risk associated with every change. By ethic behaviour we mean the total respect of every environmental

parameter that corresponds to a static situation in the end. We can understand it by analysing the slogans of many environmentalist movements and the values they mention. Normally different people have different values and a different dream about the meaning of ethic behaviour, therefore there will always be someone who does not agree with a change. Sometimes this situation can be considered to belong to a NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) Syndrome (Bobbio et al., 1999), but sometimes it is only a more general fear of an unknown and unpredictable future.

For example, a very strict member of a pure environmentalist association would consider the total respect of nature and its complexity as an ethic value. This wish of the total preservation of environment is the same as the one in architecture: this way the distance between ethics and fear is very short. If ethics correspond to values, in fact, we can feel safe because values can be considered as a postulate in the life of man. Values and postulates cannot be discussed (Benouski, Quintarelli, 2001). Maybe someone can change credence but not values. For this reason we feel fine when we meet someone who shares our same values and, at the same time, we do not want to waste time with people with different values. When we try to draw a point corresponding to a person's project (which reflects his or her ethic point) inside the triangle of development, we will put this position very close to the environmental vertex (Bettiol, 2005).

Following the previous definition of sustainability we can consider this point of totally ethic behaviour as a utopistic one not only because it is very far from any economical sustainability but also because it has no social sustainability either. Its only relationship are with the designer and with people who share the same values and not with the local community which is composed of several and different people.

### The paradox of static and ethic

If a static project is an utopia there is a paradox somewhere. The paradox is that the more we try to reach one of these totally ethic ways of behaving, the farther we are from the

barycentre of the triangle of sustainability – and so from a sustainable development. The more the architectural rules of preservation are fix and rigid, the more the old constructions are transformed in an open museum without relationship with the present.

It is the same kind of paradox of many social assistance programs where the cost of their management is higher than their benefits for the assisted people. Merton (1970) described it efficacy in his theory of the self-fulfilling prophecy. He said the phenomenon occurs when 'a false definition of the situation evokes a new behavior which makes the original false concept come true'. So if there is an expectation (to preserve something in a safety development process) we tend to act in ways that are consistent with that expectation and so we crystallize the present. Problems arise because of unrealistic expectations of development in a static situation. This is the case when people's image of society reflects more an interest in balance than in change. Static versus dynamic.

The paradoxes can be overcome following two different strategies: a very involving communication campaign to define the neurosemantic frame of the development (or the project of it) and a participation program to involve people in a dynamic flow. Both of them have to be based on the consciousness that people's values cannot be changed but we can make people change their points of view.

The question of the frame is very important as it represents the 'false definition' of the theory of Merton. If the question is asked in a wrong (or partially wrong) way there are few possibilities to create social development. The main aim is that if people do not change their ideas on what ethic behaviour is, they might take ethic points of others into consideration going from dream to reality.

As we are referring to the neurosemantic frame - that can be seen as the background of a sustainable development – we have to build this scene before the beginning of every transformation. This background is exactly the strategy of a development and it

represents the common relationship which links all the people involved. Only after a correct definition of the main border of a common frame we can pass to a participation program to define, if better and to smooth its frame.

In The past years we saw both the failure of several protection norms and of participation programs (Cardinali, 2002). The focal point is that we cannot consider preservation from the architectural point of view only. Most of the failures are due to an extreme attempt to rationalize and drive emotions, which are the basis of every relationship.

When a new project is presented, only few people will understand it and have emotions. Obviously people understand a static project but not a dynamic one. Therefore, the main aim of a participation program is to create several new shared symbols from the fragmentation and disaggregation of the project. When an architect does not comprehend this social dynamic, he or she will not provoke and be part of a 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003).

A city is not an open museum and citizens are not the guardians of this open museum. Or better, they can be guardians but they have to feel it as a new status and they have to create new relationships. They have to invent how to be a new kind of guardian, a modern one. Nowadays citizens of Rome are very different from the ones of the Roman Empire and many buildings could increase their efficiency if they "married" some retrofit technical maintenance. To fight pollution it is everyday more important to improve the energy performances and to reduce the consumption of energy of the buildings. This could be done by passive and active solutions which both imply interventions in the matter of old constructions. This case is very interesting as it represents the encounter of two different values: the static preservation of architecture and the respect of environment.

The distinction between credence and value is essential in every participation program. When someone has to take part in the definition of neurosemantic frame he or she has to understand which the real background is. This investigation can be helped by

some qualitative analysis as the one performed by the Focus Group (Zammuner, 2003). For this reason, an architect without social education cannot manage a participation program with hundreds of citizens and stakeholders, each with different points of view and probably different values.

### Communication campaigns and soft-educational programs

Even if a participation program involves many people, it cannot involve all the people or each member of the community. We cannot say that a participation program creates a foggy background and a communication campaign makes it shining because it connects all people. In trade matters this effect is called 'one to one marketing' (Pepper and Rogers , 2002) that means that a company have to draw personal link with each client.

The difference between trade matters and sustainable development is the same as the one between credence and values. You can make people change their credences but not their values without any wars. The essence of relational marketing related to a participation program is to make people be a part of a flow, a knot of a net, teaching them how to do it.

This is the sense of every communication campaign in architectural transformations. Maybe the exact name would be "soft-education campaign". Whatever the name we give to this communication program, the sense is that it has to be a bi-directional communication. In fact, on one side it has to inform stakeholders and citizens, and lower their level of fear and to move them, but on the other side it has to show the technicians which the social points of view are.

It is a transit from a static moment to a dynamic one and emotions are the only means that we have (Evans, 2001). The etymology of the word emotion clearly shows why. Its root belongs to ancient Latin 'e-moveo' and it means that it is 'something' that provokes a movement. And movements are dynamic. So we have arrived to the conclusion that architectural preservation without social preservation is an oxymoron as there is not preservation but death. And as the 'sense of living' is given by emotions we have to

make people feel them.

This situation has been described by many scholars of different disciplines as economists, philosophers and social scientists. Their studies are on the intelligence of emotions (Nussbaum, 2004) and how our decisions are taken following our emotions more than our rational thoughts and that we cannot ignore them. And now economists are investigating on the economy of happiness.

### Conclusion

The preservation of historical centre cannot be done from an architectural point of view only. This way we create a catatonic city, we take it into existence but in a coma. If we are interested in the vitalization we have to plan a social preservation program too. This way we pass from a static consideration to a dynamic one.

But dynamic means emotions as they are the only ones that move people to actions. Therefore we have to investigate in the kind of actual relationships which link the local community to the building and to investigate in their future development.

Obviously this work cannot be done by an architect alone but there will be a staff that works with people in a participation program. The aim of these shared project is to recognize the present values of people and to help them accept the others without personal contrapositions.

Following this strategy we will generate a flow that can multiply not only our strengths, but also the effects of the development, making it a sustainable one.

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