



Community involvement in heritage

Koen Van Balen & Aziliz Vandesande (eds.)

Reflections on Cultural Heritage Theories and Practices
A series by the Raymond Lemaire International Centre for Conservation, KU Leuven

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Shaping Tools for Built Heritage Conservation: from Architectural Design to Program and Management

Learning from 'Distretti culturali'

Stefano Della Torre

Abstract

The paper deals with lessons learned through more than ten years of experiences in Italy. Starting from theoretical assumptions about the need of new tools for a new idea of conservation, we tried to design and test new procedures in order to improve the efficacy of a process in which the same rules and tools were used to design the conservation of existing buildings and for the construction of new ones.

In the beginning we tested the introduction of maintenance plans, post-intervention reports, purpose-designed software and so on. It was easy to detect a common misunderstanding as many colleagues seemed and still seem to think that the needed step should not be from restoration to conservation as an advanced and complex process including different activities, but to maintenance only. Therefore our research turned to complex projects, working in the phase of the program, when process management conditions should be set up. The target was to work out conditions capable to put the long-run vision into practice.

The huge match-granting project 'distretti culturali' gave the opportunity to test the conditions for negotiating grants given under the condition of innovating methods and skills in preservation practices. The paper therefore provides some reflections on the observed behaviours of politicians, technicians and end-users when facing the opportunity of restoring a monument.

The starting point of this contribution is the shift of paradigm from usual restoration/event to conservation meant as a process which has to include investigation, prevention, maintenance, and restoration as well. This shift is relevant also to the involvement of people: it is not difficult to argue that traditional restoration involves the public as spectators, while in the conservation process as a whole there are many steps which require a new form of awareness and responsibility also for users, visitors and citizens at large. As the forms are so many and so different, the focus has to be put on the policies which can make possible and effective the involvement of people in a process which is definitely complex. In other words, many steps can be shaped in a more comprehensive way to foster a wider participation, but the observed behaviours show also a lot of criticalities and risks, as the players try not to change their minds and habits. The point, therefore, is not only the inclusion of the general public as a community, but the analysis of the involvement of the different players, as each of them, as an individual, takes some part in the process, and should develop awareness and interest in it.

The paper will therefore:

- recall some features about Planned Conservation in Italy and its development after 2000;
- the relevance of Management as the core activity to fuel the whole process;
- the intangible benefits of conservation on the public. i.e. the local system
- the roles of different players as observed in action: politicians, experts, public officers, ...

Conservation as a Process

Theoretical and practical research on Architectural Conservation in 1980's Italy arrived at the definition of a set of criteria and targets which went beyond Venice Charter and Brandi's theory. Besides the references

to Ruskin's legacy, or the discovery of Riegl's *Denkmalkultus*, the bulk of the Italian reflection is to be found in the discussion about selection criteria, that is the theoretical weakness of a methodology based on historical or aesthetical judgement (Bellini 2000). Material authenticity became (at least it was said to be) the main purpose of restoration works, trying to avoid any remaking of lost or damaged parts. Scientific research was therefore addressed to the renovation of tools: e.g. survey and diagnostics techniques had a strong enhancement, as well as treatments aimed at stopping decay and strengthening surface materials.

In some years the toolkit of conservation architects and conserver-restorers has been updated and definitely renovated.

Nonetheless, the efficacy of this 'revolution' is still far from being satisfactory. My diagnosis of this failure is that we have changed the toolkit of one phase of the process, but we did not take care of the process as a whole, and of the behaviours of the diverse stakeholders involved. Therefore many times we are not able to use our mighty tools, as we put our hands on the building when it is too late, or we lack information, or you don't get money enough, or nobody cares about maintenance after the works are carried out. That's why some years ago I tried a step forward, calling to the challenge of the paradigm shift from Being to Becoming (Della Torre 1999). Restoration was dealing with objects meant as steady, and the task was to return them in their prime: now, if Conservation has to deal with a becoming world, the matter is how to manage a long-term, lifelong relationship with objects. Under this theoretical point of view, 'architectural restoration' (that is an architectural project which through the transformation of an existing building tries to comply with new needs while preserving and exploiting the values which made the old building worthwhile for preservation) should no longer be the only way to treat historic buildings and more importance should be given to maintenance, prevention and management.

After the turn of the century a new attention began to be paid to the problem of implementing more maintenance activities and preventive care in heritage sector. Cesare Brandi's 'restauro preventivo' (Brandi 2005: 79-83) was recalled, mainly through the revival of Giovanni Urbani (1925-1994), who in 1975 launched the concept of 'conservazione programmata' (Basile 2004; Minosi 2004; Basile 2010).

Looking at these fifteen years, I could complain that in Italy the shift from restoration/event to conservation/process happened more on paper than in practice, the epistemological foundations have not been thoroughly discussed as I proposed, the cases of implementation, although growing, tended to be reduced to maintenance, as if this were enough. On the other hand, it is really inspiring to see that in contexts where maintenance is really implemented the reflections tend to enlarge the picture, working on the premises and the impacts of a regular maintenance strategy with respect to economy, society and environment (Van Balen, Vandesande 2013).

'Preventive and planned conservation' is a strategy based on long term vision, careful planning of uses and quality, information management, regular maintenance and control of environmental factors. Understood in this broad way, Preventive and Planned Conservation is correctly deemed to be the alternative to 'after damage' restoration. But I want to underscore that it is much more than scheduled maintenance or daily care. The shift should not be from working on one single phase of the process to working just on another one, but from thinking the single phase to rethinking the whole process.

Management of Conservation Activities

If we try to describe the process, as I tried some times, we can put on a chart different activities that we are able to identify and describe. We can imagine a chart of functions (Della Torre 2008), or the flowchart of phases along the timeline (often with an arrow back to the beginning).

Among these activities, we can underline the Management function which becomes more and more strategic if we want to be able to control and to enhance the interactions between functions and stakeholders. Transposed in the flowchart this means that the phase which should be targeted by research is Program, as it is the phase when decisions are taken. In other words, program is the phase when Management is carried out.

Program is the phase when:

- Identifying needs
- Identifying the state of conservation of buildings
- Evaluating compatibility among the function and the building
- Fine-tuning use or designing changes in use and layout
- Identifying stakeholders, with their different views
- Building alliances among different stakeholders also in order to build a feasible business plan
- Building strategies for valorisation and funding
- Deciding about the quality of design, works and maintenance plan

In the matter of fact, when an architectural intervention is foreseen, before designing the works it is possible to program quality, costs, players, and so on. Without such a program, it will be difficult to set up innovative practices, like scheduled maintenance or a tight control of the uses face the carrying capacity of the property.

The Benefits of Conservation Activities

Because of the many issues which can be dealt with, it is possible to pursue the aim of an empowerment of the local system, that is an increase of 'territorial capital' (Camagni 2007), which could be one of the outcomes of the investment in preservation. Money is spent to restore a building not only for the sake of conservation, but because this is a good exercise to train community participation and to foster the empowerment and commitment of administrative system as a whole. The *tangible* benefit (physical restoration) is a device to get an *intangible* benefit (*getting people involved*) useful in many other fields besides preservation.

Subsidiarity and devolution become the policy core: a preventive conservation strategy cannot exist without the involvement of local players. Next step becomes the recognition of values: many studies posed questions about potential conflicts in decision-making when heritage values are dealt with. Recognition itself of heritage values is said to be a top-down process, as listing sites or financing restorations would not be a matter for citizens but for professionals often speaking a language of their own.

These problems are typical of environmental policies. Conflicts on landscape are very interesting as they arise just where environment and culture come to overlap. This is a first point for our agenda: planned conservation practices should introduce a systemic approach to decision making and values appraisal, giving the utmost importance to involvement of people and to opportunities for education and capacity-building. Heritage values are produced both because heritage buildings are used and visited, and because the activities related to their conservation produce externalities which can be organized and turned into values of a new kind which can be appreciated in the frame of the models of Knowledge Economy and Creativity, as they concern

professional skills (human capital, intellectual capital) and relational attitudes (social capital).

As in order to set up a policy impacting on these values it is easier to work on a regional basis, we focused our research on 'comprehensive wide area projects'. In the last years these projects became a laboratory for an action-research performed on a real task.

These kind of projects give both grants and rules to applicants. In this framework the restoration of buildings useful for cultural activities or acknowledged as landmarks (what people want) are carefully planned taking into account quality, planned conservation after works, management system, exploitation of networking as a tool to enhance relational and intellectual capital.

Planned Conservation in the Context of 'Distretti Culturali'

The *Distretti culturali* call issued by Fondazione Cariplo is a huge matching-grant program aimed at producing new attitudes toward culture as a factor for local development (Barbetta, Cammelli, Della Torre 2013). More than 60,000,000 Euros have been invested in the six financed projects (selected out of 37 proposals). Each project includes several actions, some related to tangible heritage, some on intangibles, some targeted to governance and communication. Quite obviously in a granting program which matches the investments of the public sector, actions related to Built Cultural Heritage have a major part of the budgets, up to 75%.

'Distretti Culturali' program aimed at going beyond the common thought that for Heritage sector the problem is just to collect money to pay conservation costs, and that Heritage makes money directly through valorization and tourism. In the matter of fact this project made a lot of people work and enhance their skills. The challenge for

everybody has been to improve skills but also to change mind about the link between Economy and Culture, with a special reference to the Economy of Heritage. Here the call for a long-term vision made almost mandatory the implementation of concepts coming from the idea of preventive and planned conservation, but the more interesting actions are to be found in three projects. A short description of them may highlight some features which are strictly related to innovation in the approach to conservation issues.

Monza and Brianza project started as a Distretto Culturale Evoluto (progressive cultural district) under the supervision by Pier Luigi Sacco, and was carried out mainly thanks to the involvement of smart professionals well rooted in the territory. A dialogue with stakeholders has been carried out from the beginning, aiming at involving them in the matching-grant process: four buildings located in small villages (Castello Da Corte, Bellusco; Ca' dei Bossi, Biassono; Palazzo Borromeo Arese, Cesano Maderno; ex-Filanda, Sulbiate) have been selected to finance their restoration and reuse for purposes involving a number of stakeholders coming from different sectors. The aim is to empower the network as the necessary condition to start innovation processes, to set up a sustainable management system for local heritage (Moioli 2013), as well as to disseminate awareness about the relevance of heritage values for the local system. The strengths of this project are to be found in the capacity building activities in the construction sector (Canziani, Moioli 2010; Della Torre, Moioli 2012) and the links created between heritage sites and creativity: e.g. production of performing events inspired by the sites, or the conversion of the abandoned Sulbiate mill in a fab-lab for makers.

The Mantua Project provided grants for a set of interventions decided not through a dialogue but mostly by a top-down process. This project is a bit more traditional, and has been studied in the first phase by the firm Mecenate 90, then by a team from Politecnico di Milano. In this strategy, Heritage from Gonzaga dynasty plays as a brand but also as

an opportunity through tourism industry. Gonzaga buildings in Mantua and Sabbioneta have just been inscribed in Unesco WHL. The projects identifies a triple helix strategy, investing on university campus as a factor to enhance the cooperation between the administrative system and the productive chains. The establishment of a proficiency centre on Preventive and Planned Conservation in the Mantua Pole of Politecnico di Milano has been financed (Moioli 2011), supporting the new Unesco Chair in *Architectural and Preservation Planning in World Heritage Cities*. In the start-up phase a post graduate course has been organized with a satisfactory outcome.

Valtellina Project finances the inspections of dozens of monuments restored some years ago without any idea of subsequent use and maintenance. Nevertheless the process produced an increase of the skills of a group of professionals (Della Torre 2010), who are now ready to put their competences at work for new challenges. This has been proved by the successful application for an Interreg grant with the project 'Planned Conservation in common Rhetic Space' (La Conservazione programmata nello spazio comune retico') in which the common interest of Swiss and Italian professional for innovation in conservation activities was the first step towards transnational cooperation.

It is worthwhile to underscore also that the development of the three projects was constantly related to the academic environment where the Italian way to Planned Preventive Conservation was born. So a kind of learning community came into existence, strengthened by exchanges at different levels.

Rather diverse but all interesting and partly complementary, the three above mentioned projects show different ways to develop the idea of Planned Preventive Conservation while working in the phase of program for interventions. Starting from an analysis of needs and wishes, the search for sustainability on the long run ended in interesting experiments which have a common feature as people involvement and capacity

building have been taken as the decisive factors for innovation through heritage sector.

Learning from 'Distretti Culturali'

From all the financed and carried on projects we got the opportunity to learn lessons about the way Heritage sector can empower regional economy and society. The six selected projects show the diversity of the region, thus making the test even more interesting. These project play less with communities than with the factors conditional to the gap that stands among heritage and people. Put otherwise, the purpose is to work on heritage game and its context in order to exploit heritage and culture as levers to foster relations, network, alliances between persons. Here it is possible to highlight some lessons learned in the first steps of the program. The keywords are: leadership; continuity; the role of experts; the enrolment of subjects outside heritage field. All these issues have to be meant not in itself, but as related to the aim of building community through heritage.

Leadership and Community

It was not surprising to detect how much regional development processes could be conditioned by the quality and the continuity of the leadership which promotes and supports them. In literature sometimes a distinction is proposed between the political guidance and the technical one, sometimes the emphasis is posed upon an effective involvement of local players who risk to be excluded because politicians tend to capture the process. The diversity of territories engaged in the six 'Distretti culturali' projects ended in a fan of different cases. It has been definitely proved that this kind of local development processes can be provoked but not enforced: to provoke means to help the making of the territories, fuelling potentialities not yet expressed because of weaknesses which probably

could be solved working on relational and cognitive factors. These actions cannot be totally top-down, as they should be chosen and followed up by the local actors freely and with awareness, not just for the sake of taking an opportunity.

Therefore the question is how to put at work existing energies while maintaining an equilibrium: it is possible to propose best practices and an inspiring benchmark but, at any level, the expert should not substitute the local community representatives who, through their own learning process, have to prepare themselves to give continuity to the development process started up by granted strategic actions. The path is always amidst the risk of an external leadership and the opposite risk that the local administrative system capture the project and reduces it into a series of expenditures which, instead of promoting community building and innovation, strengthen just that existing authority system and that cognitive map which, in the matter of fact, brakes the making of the territory (Schürch 2006). This risk belongs to a system which selects its politicians and tends to confirm those who are more able to harvest funds in order to build consensus. Actions related to Cultural Heritage are often involved in similar processes, which tend to privilege the conformist choices, surely the least productive for innovation and definitely far from an understanding of culture as an infrastructure of Economy. The political leadership of a territory is therefore a conditional factor to the development of such a process: who takes the role of decision maker, mediator and representative of a territory should bear a vision which links the growth with the openness to learning and change.

Continuity

Also the issue of continuity has been observed as a determinant one. The building of a 'distretto culturale', in the sense of the innovative program launched by Fondazione Cariplo, is a long process whose time

span goes largely over the terms of administrative offices. It is obvious that during the process elections take place which entail an evaluation of programs by the electorate and the risk of a change of the political leadership. The problem could be very serious but, for the 'Distretti culturali' program, these conditions were precious tests. In the logic of pure efficiency the best timing (duration, deadlines, decisions...) should be the one which allows candidates to take the grants before the elections. This way the process could be more rapid, the works could be completed before, and the success could be a good subject for the electoral campaign. No doubt this opportunity could be a mighty incentive for politicians and their staffs. But it is evident that by this way becomes greater and greater the risk that the contents of the project would be curved to the interest of one political party and its structure of territorial consensus. By its own nature a development model cannot be neutral, but the reality of a given territory is a given one and its technical understanding should have an objective bulk. It has been detected that the projects endowed of a more solid and autonomous technical infrastructure have been able to overcome the test of heavy changes of the political guidance, while projects more conditioned by the interests of local politics have been unable to stand the shock. They became weaker or were totally rewritten, showing the contingent character of choices based on opportunism and not on a technical decision making. Therefore the independence between the timetables of the projects and the polls ended into a very productive 'inefficiency': in the matter of fact the target was to finance and to spend, but to start learning projects rooted in the reality of territories so deeply as to be resistant to the political changes. The sample of the six 'distretti' encompasses cases where the arrival of a new majority spoiled very interesting projects just for lack of understanding or for other, even worse, reasons. It is possible then to propose the hypothesis that harming an ongoing process could be easier if the process itself is not founded on broad, understood and diversified agreements: it is not difficult to close a museum or a cultural activity

which involves only few persons, but pacts signed by a large partnership, one started on the basis of a good participation, would be more solid.

Local cooperation suffers both for ancestral parochialism as well as for natural uncertainty of interpersonal relationships: that's why the formalisation of agreements is mandatory, although it can be felt or described as mere bureaucracy (it is worthwhile to note that bureaucracy is necessary, an sometimes blessed when accountability matters, as for public funding). One of the aims of the project is to lead many subjects to acknowledge their own advantage in cooperation, even if cooperation entails giving up some small part of autonomy, e.g. committing into agreements which link the grant for some work to aims which go beyond the boundaries of the municipality. This game can last very long, as parochialism may emerge again after the review of the actions and the signature of the agreements, both during works and when setting up management. E.g. somebody could try to lower the required quality level in order to employ a local firm, or to avoid new management solutions in order to keep a control which has also a symbolic value in the local play of recognizing authority and the roles. These processes have been investigated under several methodological viewpoints, and models have been proposed useful to understand the dynamics between networks and the single players (Latour 2005; Arnaboldi and Spiller 2011).

Experts versus Local Community

Besides political leadership, the start-up of a wide area project requires the technical contribution of some experts, that is another kind of leadership, and these two factors have to find a balance in their cooperation. The political leader may be distracted or intrusive, or simply incompetent and in the mercy of the consultants. In all these cases the precondition is missing for the success, that is the start-up of a process of learning and knowledge transfer. In 'Distretti

culturali' program the investment on a consulting team including high and diverse skills was required. But in some case happened that the consulting teams understood their task only in terms of producing on-desk reports instead than making local actors to participate. The risk is to get huge dossiers little or nothing shared with officers of involved Public Bodies: a result definitely unsatisfactory because such dossiers include unreliable proposals destined to be soon contradicted and abandoned by the real shareholder as soon as the consultant goes by. Anyway, the purpose should be the transfer of skills and knowledge from the experts to the local professionals. This happens when the target is clearly defined, the process is under control, the benefits are shared and communicated.

Involving the Outsiders

The main challenge of 'Distretti Culturali' has been to involve subjects which did not use to deal with Heritage valorisation. The hypothesis is the role of Culture as a factor able to empower Economy (Lazzeretti 2012). The different level of cooperation obtained in the six projects seems to depend not only on the opportunities offered by the contexts, but on the vision which had been at the basis of the projects as they were born. In some cases, although the potentialities of the territory were self-evident, the approach to cultural themes has been so narrow and traditional that the distance between the operators in the different fields did not change at all in spite of the explicit requirement to work together. Even when the lead partners were wide-area administrative bodies, endowed of competences and of skilled officers, forms of reductionism were often detected, as the cognitive map of officers does not go beyond their everyday tasks, and a cooperation between different functions is perceived as difficult to manage. In presence of such particular interests or cognitive blocks, it is definitely unlike that innovative processes take place more sustainable than the traditional ones. Although

this point had been clearly described from the beginning in the 'Distretti culturali' call, the understanding by territories has been often inadequate or at least reductive as it was limited to the easiest links with the short chain of touristic valorization and marketing. Perhaps the proposal was too new and the message had not enough redundancy to be understood. The point is not to ignore these issues, but the sustainability of the processes requires a deeper understanding of the structure of places in order to tie cultural activities with those supply chains which need to develop innovation by strengthening the links with the territory and their own identity. One of the lessons learned during this work is that more penetrating messages are needed to reach private players, that is citizens and communities. Because of statutory constraints, the grants of 'Distretti culturali' call are reserved to public subjects who have their own advantage in becoming the filter between the incentives and the public, avoiding that new bottom-up proposals emerge and come into a conflict with established priorities. The theme is not to subsidize for-profit or private subjects, but to involve them in a possible exchange of advantages and externalities, and/or in agreements about their no-core activities (promotion, location, education, ...).

Last but not least, the third sector should be involved more than it happened in the projects carried out: experts proposed many hints to fundraising opportunities, without concrete analyses and operative schemes.

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