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EDITORIAL

CONSERVATION OF URBAN HERITAGE: REFLECTIONS ON ITS APPRECIATION AND MANAGEMENT IN URBAN CONTEXT

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Marked by globalization processes, current perspectives on cities continue linked with the latest contradictory urban dynamics. Induced by globalization and climate change, negative impacts on cities generate urban densification, gentrification, uncontrolled development of economic and productive activities, mobility, mass tourism, among others. The effects of such transformations also influence historic projects and give rise to commercial exploitation of urban heritage, consequently affecting cultural values and impairing people's quality of life and identities.

Consequently, as deep alterations in the urban tissue take place, services boost, and traditional sites become elitist, Latin American and Caribbean cities witness transformations in their historical areas and completely or partially lose central zones (RIGOL & ROJAS, 2012). Sites are often disabled or its inhabitants are forced to emigrate to make room for artists, professional and entrepreneurs to whom it might be fashionable to restore a house in an old neighborhood (LEAL, 2014). As a response, institutions, international governmental and non-governmental organizations who put the conservation of urban heritage in the center of theoretical, normative and public policy's reflection, have taken many actions. In the last decade, international guidelines, principles and recommendations impose the need to insert heritage in sustainable development, pointing to integrated models of management and multidisciplinary studies in historic centers and other urban zones.

In May 2011, in the Intergovernmental Specialists Meeting on historic urban landscape held in United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), urban heritage, both material and immaterial, was considered a capital resource to improve the habitability of urban zones and foster economic development and social cohesion in a context of global change. In this sense, active protection of urban heritage and its sustainable management is an indispensable condition for development (CONSEJO INTERNACIONAL DE MONUMENTOS Y SITIOS, 2011b). Similarly, in January 2016, UN's General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, containing an action plan in favor of people, the planet and prosperity, which also aims to promote world peace and access to justice. This Agenda proposes 17 sustainable

development goals, with 169 targets of integrated and indivisible character encompassing economic, social and environmental spheres. In goal 11, it declares a compromise with inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and human settlements, and considers doubling efforts to protect and ensure the world's cultural and natural heritage.

Even as recent studies reflect an enhanced conscience, comprehension and appreciation of built heritage and of guidelines for its conservation and protection, urban scale was relegated or lacked attention, except for historic centers, in which the patrimonial signification of sectors, environments and urban projects often circulates unrelatedly to processes of management and preservation. The Washington Charter (CONSEJO INTERNACIONAL DE MONUMENTOS Y SITIOS, 1987) reflected progress in this sense by opening the spectrum and stressing the value of the urban form as defined by the fabric and division of lots, the relation among different urban spaces, buildings, green and outdoor spaces, besides the relations between the population or urban areas and their surroundings (CONSEJO INTERNACIONAL DE MONUMENTOS Y SITIOS, 1987). Other guidelines, such as Xi'an Declaration (CONSEJO INTERNACIONAL DE MONUMENTOS Y SITIOS, 2005) and the Valletta Principles (CONSEJO INTERNACIONAL DE MONUMENTOS Y SITIOS, 2011a) evidence the diffusion of tools for valuing, managing and planning directed by a more responsible and sustainable practice for recovering heritage areas.

In recent years, emphasis on preventive conservation of cultural heritage constitutes a new challenge. UNESCO has identified opportunities for this tendency based on a monitoring and maintenance perspective, as it constitutes a more sustainable way of preserving authenticity of built heritage, avoiding damages and reducing intervention. For the same reasons, this perspective is considered rentable and promoting social participation, allowing people to get involved with the preservation of heritage (VAN BALEN, 2011). Given that preventive conservation appears as a new paradigm for processes of conservation and management of built heritage and that historic urban projects need monitoring instruments, specialists seek information to develop legal boundaries, policies, fields of application, and new tools and techniques to improve their implementation (VAN BALEN, 2011).

In this sense, ONU¹ Chair PRECOM3OS, placed in the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium, diffuses and promotes this approach and defends the growing need for potentializing and developing procedures and technologies that might contribute to optimizing the spatial analysis and monitoring heritage sites (VAN BALEN & VANDESANDE, 2013). Practical experiences such as *Monumentenwacht* in Flanders, Belgium, and in the Netherlands, as well as *Proyecto vlrCPM* for Cuenca, in Ecuador, evidence potentials of concretizing strategies for preventive conservation, not only in European developed countries, but also in Latin America. In the latter, however, the diffusion of monitoring goals for promoting the maintenance and contributing to adequate handling of heritage sites does not reach the intended extension, as its effects are limited to punctual practices.

In parallel, the increasingly versatile reality, sustained in a scenario of transformations with the emergence of different conflicts, imposes new challenges that force the search for innovations to adequately model, in management processes, the incorporation of themes related to economic growth, social inclusion, environmental balance and culture, which together conform the pillars of sustainable development.

Cuba is not unrelated to this context. Focused on a process of sustainable protection of its heritage richness, the country exhibits different practices as a result of its diversity. The most pioneering and singular experience is the recovering of Old Havana by means of a model of integral management distinguished for counting on a “fundamental condition for the development of any strategy of heritage rescue: political will in the highest level and clear conscience of those responsible for exerting it to propel innovating processes from the creation of Historian Workshops in Havana” (RODRÍGUEZ, 2009, p.iii). Such institution has enabled strategies by supporting Council of State’s Decree Law 143, which has, since 1993, awarded it new faculties to self-organize its own economic support and perform conservation works. The result was “*una experiencia útil, socialmente válida, económicamente viable y a su vez generadora de nuevos puestos de trabajo que ha fortalecido el papel de la comunidad*” (LEAL, 2014, p.90), as it improved under the lens of sustainability and new conditionings of the 21st Century.

Even as conservation works extended to other historical areas, such as Santiago de Cuba, Trinidad, Camagüey and Cienfuegos, where Conservator’s or Historian’s Workshops were created, appreciation and new practices of conservation implemented extrapolated the city centers and usual temporal marks, including exponents of recent urbanism. Since the 90s, one can testify greater opening and deepening in this sense, as modern zones were considered national heritage and protected areas, such as *Unidad Vecinal # 1 Camilo Cienfuegos* in *La Habana del Este*, *Quinta Avenida* and its surroundings, in *Miramar La Habana*, besides the neighborhood *El Vedado*, marked as zones of cultural and historical value². Still, the reduced list reveals the valuing and protection of urban heritage is only halfway, especially when compared to other sites in the country with no similar distinction. However, one cannot leave unrecognized the growing tendency of declarations and valuations of sets, environment and urban landscapes to succeed. In this sense, the Oriental Zone and its four provinces deserve special attention, gathering rich and diverse heritage, recognized in different UNESCO pronouncements.

Cuba is privileged with nine heritage-declared properties, the Caribbean country with the most recognized sites in universal heritage³. Out of 9 declarations, 4 are in the oriental part of the country, a rich region with one distinguished building, 2 natural sites and one cultural landscape — *Castillo San Pedro de la Roca* in Santiago de Cuba (1997), *Parque Nacional Desembarco del Granma* in the province with the same name (1999),

the Archeological Landscape of the first coffee plantations in Southeastern Cuba in provinces Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo (2000) and the *Parque Alejandro de Humboldt* in provinces Holguín and Guantánamo (2001). Also, in the exact same year the UNESCO Convention for the protection of immaterial heritage was launched, the *Tumba Francesa La Caridad de Oriente*, in Santiago de Cuba, was declared Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2003).

This region's cultural collection, and particularly Santiago de Cuba's one, attests an architectural urban group of meaningful heritage value, in which singular national and local exponents can be appreciated, constituting the historical memory of over 500 years of urban development. Even as conservation and management works carried by the city's Conservator's Workshop propelled handling actions with an integrative vision, its reach went only up to the historical center and a few monumental areas linked to this zone (LÓPEZ, 2016). Meanwhile, other historical spaces and groups were alienated, as heritage value conservation is limited or almost non-existent. This reality is complexified by the several problems affecting Santiago's edified patrimony, marked by an accumulated deterioration that advances due to the lack of sustained maintenance, poorly planned transformations and interventions, that consequently impact on its historical landscape because of inadequate control and monitoring.

In light of those problems, whilst strategies for managing the existent patrimony do not guarantee its integral conservation in a sustainable fashion, a continuous search for new means and tools to provide innovating solutions is taken by specialists and researchers involved in saving the past and projecting a more prosperous and sustainable future.

Following these guidelines, a meaningful experience is being developed in the University of Santiago de Cuba (*Universidad de Oriente*), within a program of international cooperation among universities and the Council of Flemish Universities in Northern Belgium — VLIR-IUC-UO — for the strengthening of sustainable development in the oriental part of Cuba. *Proyecto VLIR # 4* is an important part, as it drives its efforts to protecting cultural heritage with an interdisciplinary work that contributes to local development and the elevation of life quality in the oriental region.

Subprojeto #2 drives its line of work to the conservation and handling of architectural urban heritage, focusing on preventive conservation, a theoretical premise that involves current international tendencies in the theme and assumes the criteria of economic rentability and social sustainability that currently dictate management of heritage sites. One of its researches inquires the appliance of digital techniques, which might generate useful tools for such practices and the use of geographic information systems, optimizing the ability to handle information on heritage. The handling of information takes on a vital role in management processes, producing a direct relation that permits accessing the necessary data from its storage, continuously using it and updating it for future analyses in decision-making (BELLO *et al.*, 2016).

The international collaboration with the Catholic University in Leuven, the Raymond Lemaire International Center for Conservation, and the ONU Chair PRECOM3OS, leaders in the subject, was also profitable. The impact of such contribution has allowed a new collaboration project, the *VLIR Norte Sur Sur*, which, in synergy with Project *VllirCPM* of the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism in the University of Cuenca, has developed a Latin-American ax for research and experience in the area. Such collaboration intended to integrate knowledge and joint efforts to improve the design of monitoring systems for heritage, taking into consideration the diversity of the local context, besides strengthening research and obtaining a better vision of heritage sets in the region.

Comprehension and promotion of preventive conservation will contribute to improving the strategies of management for historic heritage and local development in a scenario of imminent transformations. Cuba is now in a changing context: the potentiation of small private companies from 2011, a new law for foreign investment in 2014, and the establishment of relations with the United States in the same year have initiated greater speculation on the future of the island. This has direct impacts in cultural heritage, inviting reflection on the predictability of changes and their impacts on urban dynamics. In the academy, a search for a new transformative view of conservation in urban heritage as a strategic resource for sustainable development is in course.

NOTES

1. Chair PRECOM3OS, which stands for *Preventive Conservation, Monitoring and Maintenance of Monuments and Sites*, is under UNESCO and was created in 2008 in the Raymond Lemaire International Centre for Conservation (RLICC), Catholic University in Leuven, Belgium. Professor Dr. Koenraad Van Balen is the director of RLICC and its professor.
2. According to Resolutions No.134, 155 and 154, approved by the *Comisión Nacional de Monumentos de Cuba* in 1996 and 1999.
3. Check a characterization of sites and buildings declared by Worldly and National Patrimony in the Book *Monumentos Nacionales de la República de Cuba, Consejo Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural* (ACOSTA, 2015).

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