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The Many Horizons of Cultural Heritage: Part II

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by Mario Duarte Duque*

Heritage continuity

As much as environmental criteria is also applicable to culture management, cultural environments are to be regarded differently from natural environments in the way that nature is to be evaluated in terms of equilibrium maintenance, while culture is also to be evaluated in terms of achievements.

Therefore, it can only be a mistake to regard culture heritage as the final stop of past achievements.

To discourage that understanding some prior acknowledgments may be useful:

The acknowledgment that today's cultural heritage is itself a manifestation of past contemporaneity; the acknowledgment that value in Heritage's resides in Heritage's past contemporaneity, rather than in Heritage's present antiquity, the acknowledgment that, memory, as a present day manifestation of past events, is not final; the acknowledgment that memory also conveys a sense of future otherwise there won't be any use in remembering; the acknowledgment that, if we don't do anything relevant in our own time regarding what we remember, we won't be able to project any heritage into the future, not even the heritage that we've been entrusted with and proclaim we are committed to preserve; the acknowledgment that today's achievements are tomorrow's Heritage; the acknowledgment that cultural industries, which are not contributing to any substantial contemporaneity, are only using the cultural resource without generating any relevant achievements for culture itself.

The future of heritage

Much of what we nowadays have in practice regarding heritage management may all fall in instrumental categories. This in the way we address public policies, techniques of intervention, opportunities, even the way we address the psychological frameworks of the momentum which sets favorable predispositions to embrace cultural heritage.

Instruments are tools that we may exchange any time for new ones that may prove to perform better or if the scenario changes.

Idealism on the other hand is rather strategic and structural. However some instruments have proven to be able to challenge the course of ideas. Biological cloning is quite a strong example.

For basilar issues of civilisational relevancy such as cultural preservation versus cultural innovation or mimetic reproduction versus interpretative continuation, we are still further from generating spontaneous common understandings.

Much as we may admit that only via interpretation humans can interact with heritage in terms that may generate discourse and, consequently, innovation and further accomplishment and achievement, material preservation versus conceptual preservation is still a sensitive discussion in cultural heritage. Whether what we value is the knowledge that generated a specific heritage or rather the material accomplishments that such knowledge generated.

On one side stands the acceptance that material accomplishments are subject to decay and to perish and only the knowledge that generated those accomplishments is what assures continuity, on the other side stands the singularity of the material substance as irreplaceable if accomplished or touched by a genius or by a holy person.

The first favours the idealistic heritage value associated to a specific knowledge or tradition, the other is rather the materialistic relic value for being irreplaceable.

Music that has been composed in the past is unquestionably heritage though not configured in any material substance.

Thus, only for the capacity to notate, which is no doubt a relevant instrumental accomplishment, music compositions are not to parish with their composers and performers.

But music notations that were written by the hand of a music genius already fall in the category of relics, worth millions, however its value is not of civilisational relevance as the music itself is.

Other forms of heritage of a perishable nature, such as gastronomy, also depend exclusively in the possibility of being notated in a way that allows reproduction.

Heritage configured exclusively in its material substance, or heritage that rather depends on its notation is what generally divides human cultural achievements in tangible or intangible categories, but also what distinguishes aspects regarding the way heritage is generated, transmitted, appreciated, participated and committed.

Heritage that depends on the preservation of its material substance, is distinguished from, Heritage whose existence depends entirely on the knowledgeable performance of participants.

Heritage configured in artifacts that can be owned, distinguished from, heritage that necessarily has to be learned and performed in order to be transmitted.

Heritage that generates knowledge directed to its conservation, not necessarily its evolution, distinguished from, heritage that generates knowledge directed to its performance, interpretation, critical discourse and evolution.

Heritage whose gratification triggers consume or acquisition, distinguished from, heritage whose gratification triggers experience or performance.

Heritage that entirely depends on its material existence and struggles against inevitable decay and perishability, distinguished from, heritage that endures in a similar way to life itself.

Even human biological life, during its cycle, is supported both by extensive natural renovation of its material substance (body cells) as well as by knowledge and research to support its maintenance but, in its limit, is also to face its perishing physical inevitability. However life also has the capacity to generate new life and to transmit all intellectual accomplishments that are to endure in humanity.

Even in architecture and urbanism all these manifestations coexist. Architecture is performance as well as existence in material substance. Architecture also accomplishes structural and functional bodies which end up in decay as much as we endeavour efforts so that construction components may resist weathering. Even many construction components in buildings are to be replaced so that the same valued architectural accomplishment may still endure. In the same way buildings in a city are subject to renovation so that the same valued urban fabric may endure.

As much as architecture is configured in the existence of architectural bodies there is much in architecture that is also intangible, just like music or gastronomy, in the way that architecture can be notated so that others can perform, even in another place or another time. For architecture it is also rather unlikely that conceptual knowledge and craftsmanship are to reunite in one same performer.

Architecture relies in craftsmanship as well as organized knowledge and is extensively based on standardization. It is also the result of a tradition as it appears configured in its own contemporaneity. It is rather a team work whose accomplishments are far more essential in the way it is accomplished than the material substance in which finally remains.

In this understanding, no doubt there has always been an Artic Architectural Heritage, which may melt every end of winter. Or even within Shinto communities in Japan, who safe guard the knowledge of temple construction, for the essential reason that in Shinto tradition, material decay may signify spiritual impurity and, by showing signs of decay, a temple is to be abandoned and a new one to be built by use of preserved and notated knowledge.

Chinese civilization is known to have generated architectural heritage that reach contemporaneity with little of its original material substance, for the fact that perishable components were used. An aspect often pointed by materialistic approaches for being essential that architecture heritage is to exist in its original substance.

For some followers of this line of thought only stone is able to generate heritage as only stone is enduring. Others even condescended to the temptation to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding and declared that architecture ought to exist in stone as only stone can generate beautiful ruins.

The same way we admit humans to be able to transcend biology, heritage preservation is yet to learn how to transcend the material substance in which is configured.

Very much in the way of the known speculation, whether the pyramids of Egypt should have been time capsules, rather burial monuments, to shelter wise men and transfer the civilisational knowledge, not its material substance, at the eminence of natural catastrophes, such as Great Floods, when little and few humans were going to survive.

An understanding that may still be of capital importance should humanity be prepared to face calamities, both natural or by human intervention, wars, diluvia, uncontrolled urbanization or other forms of erosion.

Uncontrolled or unqualified urbanisation may well fall in the category of misfortunate events as a result of human intervention. Hopefully, much of what has emerged from less qualified opportunities may one day inspire little interest and opportunity to retake discontinued heritage.

Taking the example of classical humanism in western culture, discontinuation lasted many centuries, still extensively recovered with renaissance. The same for the golden age of the hundred schools of thought of Chinese classicism, however extensively recovered by Han Dynasty.

Should european renaissance have been in the possession of more extensive notations on classical antiquity, or the legalist Qin chancellor Li Si did not promote the burning of the books, probably renaissance as well as Han and later dynasties would have produced more accurate interpretations of their discontinued heritages.

However knowledge is not to be continued with abdication of ethical and aesthetic responsibility. Therefore maintenance of intellectual instruments is essential. Only in that way can we be sure to be moved by a sense of civilization and not just by mood or by gratification.

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