



A policy for the preservation of historic centers

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Any hypothesis for a methodology for the protection of historic centers must consider the fact—proven by scientific research and practical experience—that no historic center, no urban settlement dating from the preindustrial era can be adapted to modern traffic and functional requirements, not to such problems of the future. All the attempts that have been made in this direction have not had enough success to compensate for the serious sacrifices they have imposed: demolition of ancient road patterns, destruction of entire quarters, loss of architecture improperly defined as minor or current, dismantling of monuments and their reconstruction on other sites. These adaptations, contrary to any elementary principle of conservation and restoration, have brought no appreciable practical results. As soon as they were carried out, they proved inadequate and often damaging, as they provoked an intensification of traffic and an always lessening adaptability of the urban center. Because it is easy to foresee a continuous increase of motorized traffic, it is also easy to see that within a short time the successive adaptations will have practically destroyed the historic centers without having solved a single problem. The Corso del Rinascimento and the Via della Conciliazione in Rome are examples of the worst aesthetic results and minimal practical utility of such adaptations.

The urbanistic solution

The first condition necessary for the preservation of historic centers is, therefore, an urbanistic condition, which implies precise choices and commitments on economic and political levels. The urbanistic solution must have as a fundamental principle the moving of business areas outside the perimeters of historic centers, which are to be reserved, primarily through restoration intervention, to "tranquil" activity. This seems to be the only solution for several reasons: (1) the confirmed inadaptability of historic centers, (2) the indiscriminate damage that heavy and intense traffic causes to the foundations of ancient buildings and (3) the damages that traffic does to the image and visibility of a historic city, reducing and eliminating the principal motive for conservation. The image of a historic city should not be preserved as a document in an archive but as a cultural valuable retaining reason and function.

The urbanistic solution does not exclude utilization but does exclude indiscriminate exploitation of historic areas. These must, therefore, be removed from the speculative market if they are to be conserved. Two obstacles are present, however: (1) the high land prices in urban centers and (2) the reluctance to sever the center from active life, from what is considered even today the spiritual life of the city.

The first obstacle is, in fact, a vicious circle; the high cost of land in historic centers is determined by the fact that "rich" activities, i.e., the administrative organs of businesses whose sole presence endangers the preservation of the urban image, have the tendency of penetrating the centers. When business activities are excluded, the land values will diminish considerably.

The second obstacle arises from the belief that the historic centers are the spiritual centers of the cities and that they must contain the industrial and commercial functions that claim to be the most qualified. In fact, it is of no importance whether historic centers are considered spiritual centers; they should be considered cultural property to be preserved with the same scientific criteria applied to works of art. It is therefore logical that the headquarters of social and cultural organizations be located there. It is also important that housing not be excluded, since before being an instrument of protection and consumption a city is the residence of a community.

Naturally, in order to pose the problem on an urbanistic level, it is necessary to redeem the historic centers from their current functions as business areas. This implies a need for heavy financial intervention on the part of such public enterprises as the nation or the municipality. Without such intervention, the problem of the historic center has no possibility of a positive solution.

The historic center concept

The concept of a historic center is difficult to define. The area cannot be limited to certain monuments and their immediate surroundings, nor to some ancient areas that have luckily survived, nor to some buildings of predetermined period or style. It cannot be separated from social content nor from traditional functions, at least when these still have justification in the urban economy.

Because radical change in scale, structures, functions and social composition of the city took place with industrialization, it is evident that what is meant by *historic center* is the urban entity that existed prior to the industrial age. However, it must certainly be admitted that the restrictions, the intensity and the method of intervention vary in relation to the scales of historical and aesthetic interest in the specific area under consideration.

Inhabitants

It is a fact that forms are not easily conserved when their contents change. Among the poor and middle classes who reside in the historic centers, there is a tendency to move to modern, popular areas on the periphery. Within certain limits the trend is spontaneous, but there is also strong pressure on these classes to move from the historic centers, and the populations that traditionally live there become the objects of speculation. The spontaneous trend is partly determined by the wish to find better and healthier living conditions, although such conditions are possible in the historic center with proper rehabilitation. Further, it must be considered that the transfer of the population from the center to the outskirts does not improve but may lower living standards and that access to jobs for the working class becomes more difficult.

The replacement of the poor classes in the historic centers with the more affluent lovers of the "picturesque" is an artificial and partial solution. In practice, it serves only to conserve facades while eliminating all the tertiary infrastructure, social activities, crafts and small businesses. Such a solution also substantially increases automotive traffic in the ancient streets and, inevitably, finally transforms the exterior aspects of the buildings through increased height, additions, etc.

Open space

Every design and plan for rehabilitation and conservation of a historic center must consider both the image of housing and streets and also the individual structures and articulation of space. The open space in historic centers, as seen today, bears no more than a vague similarity to what it was originally, when almost all houses "breathed" from back gardens and courtyards. All these open spaces which were essential to the well-being of the neighborhood were filled in one after another with buildings and storage facilities. In-depth improvement of historic centers should eliminate all suprastructures and open all closed spaces. The problem has a demographic aspect, because it would reduce the excessive density of the population. It has an economic aspect, as it would considerably reduce the revenue of the areas. It has a functional aspect, because the liberation of these spaces should permit automobile parking which now occupies the streets and reduces the traffic lanes. It has a hygienic and aesthetic aspect, because it would markedly increase the percentage of green space per inhabitant. It is obvious that this process would require financial intervention on the part of public enterprises. However, the assumption of definite commitments and responsibilities is the main condition necessary for the conservation and restoration of a historic center.

Analysis of the historic center

What emerges from this discussion is an understanding that the problem cannot be limited to a few buildings or quarters but requires analysis of the entire historic center and the selection of clear methodological lines. Such methodology includes a series of operations: preparing measured drawings of the building in their current states, programing, designing and determining intervention operations.

Measured drawings of certain sections or of entire historic centers have been completed in a number of Italian cities by individual municipalities or faculties of architecture. Studies of Turin, Bologna, Ferrara, Genoa and Taranto are available and there must be others which, not having been published, are unknown to the author. In every case, the work was carried out by an interdisciplinary team. It can therefore be affirmed that a methodology has finally been defined and that the material gathered constituted an extremely useful base and guide for the study of any building intervention, even of modest proportions.

In each case, analysis was carried out house by house, extending to the interiors and singling out the additions to be conserved or demolished. The street was always considered a single architectonic entity and every aspect was recorded and studied, including the slopes and the pavement texture. (The latter is an important element, which only recently has received deserved attention: The disfigurement of streets in historic centers results largely from new pavement. The harm is even more serious in medieval towns, in Tuscany and Umbria, for example, where the original baked clay pavement is modeled into various paths, often with stairs, for the passage of people, animals, vehicles, running water, etc.). Measured drawings, besides establishing current conditions, bring to light all remains of ancient walls and permit the determination of recurrent typology and morphology (doors, windows, roofs, etc.) that constitute the vernacular of local building. This knowledge is invaluable to each building intervention.

No less important for design and restoration operations is the systematic gathering of sample materials (stones, bricks, tiles, wood, iron, etc.) to provide guidance when it is necessary to mend tissue that is torn or worn down.

An essential criterion for the design of single restoration projects is the consideration of elements fundamental to the unity of the urban image, e.g., dominant colors, walls, roofing textures, etc.

National conservation agencies

Technically, the restoration of a modest building is no different from the restoration of a building of major significance, just as the restoration of a minor canvas is not technically different from that of a masterpiece. The major current difficulty in restoration rests above all in the control of operations to prevent the use of workmen and techniques that do not guarantee strictness of execution. The problem is also essentially economic.

There will not be a satisfactory solution to this problem until every country has an agency for the preservation of historic centers. The agency must have not only binding and protective duties but documentary, programing, planning and executive powers. There should be international coordination among these agencies so that their activities might be guided by the same methodological criteria, even if practice in each country must necessarily correspond to individual requirements. The agency should be autonomous, that is, separate from national, regional or municipal agencies concerned with urban planning from the technical agencies responsible for the restoration of monuments. Each agency should have substantial funds for disbursement or should have public funds to enable it to gradually purchase land in historic centers to remove it from the destructive action of speculation; to assume large projects and subvent rehabilitation that owners undertake within the design of the agency, following precise criteria for conservation; to conduct documentation; to carry out general planning and design for restoration and intervention; and to execute through proper technical machinery part of the work.

The establishment of specialized agencies is necessary because the concept of the historic center is new and not yet well defined. The notion implies a vast listing and requires procedural and operative techniques for each case. It is clear that in a historic center there exist sections of varying historical and artistic importance –areas still socially vital, where intervention must be of a conservative nature, and dead areas that are beyond repair, where new building cannot be prevented but where limits of density, elevation and volume must be respected. A fundamental principle of the agencies should be active collaboration with the local population. They should also solicit within limits economic participation. Essentially, the residents of historic centers must be persuaded that their condition is one of privilege, not of inferiority.

The structure of a public agency for the protection of historic centers in Italy could be as follows:

- (1) *A governing group* with the duty to: (a) maintain contact with political and administrative groups interested in planning (i.e., public works) and in monuments and the arts (i.e., public education); (b) prepare special legislation for the protection of historic centers; (c) administer the funds allocated for the rescue of the historic center from speculation, for the execution of subvention of projects, for documentation, etc.; and (d) plan protection and direct intervention at the national level.
- (2) *A documentation center* to promote and coordinate the systematic recording of historic centers.
- (3) *A design group* to study the technical plan of intervention.
- (4) *An operative group* to direct restoration work and eventually carry it out.
- (5) *An inspection group* to maintain continuous control of the condition of historic centers.

Scarcity of skilled labor

A particularly serious difficulty on the operative level is the scarcity of skilled labor capable of carrying out improvement and restoration operations using techniques that have long been abandoned for common use and today are rarely practiced. The development of large industries, including the building industry, has practically eliminated traditional crafts necessary to the work of building re-integration. The difficulty is insurmountable unless the agencies maintain their own specialized technical machinery and personnel.

Today, the restoration of monuments, like that of works of art, is justly considered a scientific discipline to be applied to the highest levels of the artistic heritage. There are still qualitatively inferior, but quantitatively more extensive, levels where restoration is reduced to mechanical operations.

In Italy it is not impossible to train specialized labor in traditional techniques. There are many professional schools that offer students what is generically a crafts education and that constitute an almost unproductive burden to the national budget. These could easily be converted into specialized schools of traditional techniques for conservation, training worker-restorers, masons, carpenters, plasterers, etc. These students would certainly not be destined to unemployment. Many buildings and works of ancient crafts are being destroyed today because there are no craftsmen capable of restoring them, and, for the same reason, restoration is very costly. If there were schools to train specialized labor and national agencies that hired craftsmen for work on buildings in historic centers, there would be no risk of unemployment. In fact, programmed and organized activity of rehabilitation and conservation of historic centers could continue for all the foreseeable future.

Photographs

The pivotal or focal buildings within a historic environment generally are public structures, such as the cathedral in Florence, Italy.



DUOMO. FLORENCE. *Image: Valerie Magar.*

It is frequently the pivotal buildings of an area that are the last to disappear. The U.S. Customs House, a New York City landmark, now stands in a new environment of 20th-century skyscrapers, while the Blessed Virgin of Pompeii Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, today is surrounded by parking lots and has its nearest neighbor a thermostat factory.



UNITED STATES CUSTOM HOUSE. New York. *Image: Public domain.*



BLESSED VIRGIN OF POMPEII CHURCH. Milwaukee. *Image: Public domain.*

Few districts continue to exist in complete homogeneity. The intrusions can be extreme, as in this area of Chicago, Illinois, or more in keeping with their surroundings, as in Georgetown, Washington, D.C.



CHICAGO. *Image: Public domain.*



GEORGETOWN. Washington *Image: Public domain.*

The sense of place in a historic district can arise from geographic features, such as the sea and mountains between which Bergen, Norway, is built.



BERGEN. *Image: Public domain.*

One mark of a historic district is a sense of time and place, here seen in the quiet streets of Nantucket, Massachusetts.



NANTUCKET. *Image: Public domain.*