



Versión del texto
en INGLÉS

The future of the past

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Publicación original: Carlos Flores Marini (1976) "El futuro del pasado", *in*: Carlos Flores Marini, *Restauración de ciudades*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, pp. 50-57.

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With a vast history behind it and a monumental heritage that weighs more every day, international and national cultural institutions have made a special effort to tackle the problem. Legislation and regulations are not lacking, congresses and symposia are constantly convened, but the degradation of the historic centers continues.¹ Are the cultural authorities responsible for this continuing degradation?

The mystery, we think, has not delved into the heart of the problem. Moreover, this is not found in the consequence, but in the cause. The abandonment of the countryside for the city by small-town inhabitants, as well as the social, economic, and cultural degradation of the historical centers, have a permanent, constant element: the lack of real incentives for the inhabitant to once again generate means of well-being and improvement, which at the same time could allow him to live with his setting, his traditions and his environment. This cannot be achieved if monumental heritage programs are not closely linked to community improvement actions, focused both on infrastructure and its basic deficiencies. By recognizing the historical and artistic significance, the inhabitants of the place are usually left aside; as a general rule, they are usually not taken into account in the restoration and preservation programs. The cause is not difficult to discover: regardless of the cultural factor that forces such conservation, all other factors are external. The main one is tourism, and since it is thought that it only looks for beautiful scenarios without caring what exists behind them, that is, therefore, the limit of the concern.

¹ In order to have a clear image of this situation, it is fundamental to read a speech, already classic in the world of monumental preservation, delivered by architect Roberto Pane at the opening session of the II International Congress of Architects and Technicians in Historical Monuments, held in Venice on May 25, 1974. See: Pane, Roberto, "Teoría de la conservación y restauración de monumentos", *Boletín del Centro de Investigaciones Históricas y Estéticas*, Universidad de Caracas, Núm. 2, 1975, p. 9.

It is a big mistake to think that even the educated tourist, let alone the mass tourist, does not realize this. And even if this were the case, our obligation and commitment must be focused on the permanent factor and not the transitory one, and this will always be the inhabitant of the historic center rather than its visitors. We will not treat the inhabitant of the place as another piece on the board, ignoring it or moving it, as the case may be, and taking it into account only when there is a need for a great scenography created by the ego of some politicians; some of these have even thought, as in museum-cities in the United States of America, to have inhabitants dressed in period enactments, either as distinguished bourgeois, with ruffs, or as hardened soldiers defending some walled port. All this has been reflected upon, but it is not his living condition or the causes that have kept him in the historic center of a city.

The panorama is known, and for that reason, there are often attempts to ignore it. There is a social problem rather than a monumental one. The current inhabitants of a historic center may be massively displaced and replaced by others that are integrated into the tourism sector, but this does not prevent its mummification and stiffening. A city vibrates and is worthwhile when it is alive, and, for this to happen, it will have to count on its inhabitants, of all classes and social conditions, and not only with weekend moguls or those retired to leisure. One should not be scared, and less prevent that there may be a dry cleaner or a small shop next to a restaurant or an inn; the multiplication of uses and functions is what gives variety and life to the historic center, integrating it and keeping it alive within the contemporary world.

Along with this great premise, a series of considerations must be taken into account when giving life to a historic center, assuming that there is an interest in preserving its monumental value. These are the economic, legal and administrative aspects that any city handles and that acquire specific proportions and approaches in the particular case of the historic center.

The economic values managed for the benefit of the historic centers have to be closely linked to the housing policy promoted by official bodies to ensure that a high percentage of such funds towards existing housing in the historical complexes. This requires establishing a different financing mechanism, seen from a different angle than that currently being carried out in new constructions. In this regard, there could be two operational approaches; one intended exclusively for the owner and another in which the tenants also participate. In this case, the tenant acquires co-owner rights, being able in a given case to establish a multi-stakeholder fund that makes all tenants acquire the property they inhabit, establishing a percentage of participation in accordance with their resources and time of occupation. This operating mechanism has the greatest chance of success since it stops building speculation and rescues innumerable homes from the state of disrepair in which they are. To do this, there must be an official backing and a feasible financial mechanism that allows the tenant to become an owner, significantly improving essential infrastructure services. However, after this operational phase, there must also be an effective technical advisory service provided by those responsible for the preservation of cultural heritage so that the work to be carried out does not affect its monumental quality or destroy elements of historical and artistic value. This is especially important, when changes in water systems, electricity, drainage and telephone are not only subject to the natural deterioration of time and abandonment, but also imply fundamental changes in their distribution, as these buildings are occupied in a way that is different from that for which they were conceived. When speaking of a different form of occupation, it must be established that modifications to the original purpose for which the property was made are one thing, and its overcrowding is another. In other words, a building made for a single family can, at any given time, with substantial modifications, house several up to the saturation limit. Still, it is not recommended that they become "round rooms," with each family living in one room. The solution to this must necessarily be individual, after

Careful analysis on a case-by-case basis and as a result of inventories and anthropological-social surveys that demonstrate the real situation of each property and each family. Only in this way will our solutions be realistic and open up, no doubt, the field of operation also to the private sector, which is traditionally reluctant to anything involving a dwelling declared as a monument.

This inexplicable contradiction results from the policy that is permanently applied to monuments, with legislation that only establishes obligations of the owners and does not provide them any benefit, a fact that is aggravated in the case of Mexico by the “freezing” of rents, motivated by World War II; this persists in our country, and behind it, immoral maneuvers are hidden and practiced, both by owners and tenants, which do nothing to benefit and, on the contrary, cause countless damage to the monumental heritage.

It is clear that the approach must necessarily be comprehensive, involving both inhabitant and monument; otherwise, it will not be possible to continue moving away from the urban makeup that is traditionally applied in our monumental centers and where the work is only carried out on the façades, without exercising any action that benefits the inhabitants. And while it is true that working on the external façades, one sees the work undertaken, neglecting the occupational nucleus creates a pressure pocket and general discontent for the “tinsel works,” which in the long run add up to a large number of opinions against monumental conservation. This is also a consequence of the fact that in America, generally, only churches, palaces, or large colonial mansions are restored and only destined to become museums. One forgets that just as religious monuments maintain the continuity of their use, the city also has continuity. The works must meet all the building regulations, both the grand monument and the anonymous ensemble that complements and gives diversity to the historic center. Only in this way can we maintain a living human concentration that can preserve the area’s cultural value.

Any operating mechanism in monumental sectors must be backed by a legal apparatus of legislation, laws and regulations that guide and regulate financial operations and grant the necessary legal frame to any economic transaction.

The brake on financial and real estate speculation described as “public enemy number one” of the monumental complexes,² as well as a regulation that protects the operation and aesthetics, are two of the fundamental aspects that the laws must observe until they allow the establishment of cultural management of the territory.

Another essential aspect to address is an operating system that allows both the owner and the tenant to have advantages and legal facilities without great technical or bureaucratic complications; that also serves to regulate the allocation of public funds to the work to be carried out, prioritizing the needs to avoid the derangement of the areas under study, through a careful system of work priorities.

In the specific case of Mexico, the legal angle offers particular points of view since, as it was already mentioned, the “freezing” of rents predominantly affects the historical sector of the capital. In addition to this and the lack of an actual urban policy, the historic center of the metropolis abounds in vacant lots that, apart from their deplorable appearance, represent a thorny problem in which the legal basis is decisive. Today, all of them function as lots where cars are parked and, apart from the juicy business they represent for the owner or the dealer; they do not favor the deteriorated urban harmony of our historical center.

² Van den Abeele, André, “La salvaguarda de las pequeñas villas históricas. Aspectos legales, financieros y administrativos”, *Coloquio Internacional del ICOMOS*, 1975, p. 14.

Now, the approach to the problem presents different nuances and varied angles. What ultimately must be avoided is the construction of neo-Colonial buildings, as was requested for years in that part of the city. A Colonial building in the 20th century is clearly more aberrant than studying a contemporary solution that amalgamates volume and textures with the traditional physiognomy. In this, Le Corbusier's famous sentence is once again valid: "To slavishly copy the past is to condemn oneself to lies, it is to erect the falsification into a principle [...] By mixing the 'falsified' with the 'true,' far from achieving an overall impression and to give the sensation of the purity of style, one only arrives at the fictitious reconstruction that is capable of throwing discredit on the authentic testimonies that we most wanted to preserve"³ (1933). In this regard, we will be told that all the examples made have been an evident frustration, from the arranged villages around the metropolis to the modern façade of one of the interior courtyards of the National Palace. But one does not consider that there has been a poverty of imagination and a desire to just get out of the way since there are no regulations in this regard, and the solution is hardly aimed at completing one more effort. Hence the importance of an authentic operational policy that, with a legal basis, submits projects and solutions not only to the consideration of the officers involved but also to a technical council, whose opinion is heard and *taken into account* by the decision-making powers. This will provide an adequate legal framework, and above all, it will make the problem of historic centers comprehensive. However, there is an even more serious factor than the lack of adequate norms and regulations, and this is the lack of public awareness that deprives Latin America of its monumental heritage, a lack of awareness to which the apathy of training centers towards those examples of culture has contributed; this is the antithesis not only of their purpose but even of their functioning since many of the great universities of America teach their courses in ancient and valuable monuments. As reality has shown, it is not enough that only a few intellectuals have dedicated their entire lives to the sterile crusade for the protection of monuments. To those great names of De la Maza, Arbeldez, Velarde, Buschiazzo, etcetera, we should add citizen awareness, and a primary factor to achieve this: it is the awareness-raising work that is done with the youth, both in schools and universities. We know that this is not achieved overnight, but as long as the classrooms do not place particular emphasis on it, we will never be able to see other results than looting, predation, and destruction that today reign in our monumental complexes.

This promotional work with the youth and people, in general, has to be sponsored by the administrative bodies in charge of cultural policy in each country, backed by those responsible for the conservation of the monumental heritage. Unfortunately, in Latin America, they can do little if it is not to support this attitude and apply pressure so that, as requested by one of the statements of the *Norms of Quito*, the aspects of monumental preservation are taken into account in national development programs. Only in this way will these organizations have more effective means of action. This administrative policy must also observe the practical operation of the achievements, and this, without the responsible technicians, cannot be carried out either. For this reason, it is essential to improve the technical level of the Latin American professional who works in this field since experience has shown us that the goodwill and desire to work of the civil servant are not enough when there is not the most basic technical base to support it. In addition to this, the bureaucracy of the technical offices themselves creates one more obstacle to carrying out expeditious and effective work.

Faced with this bleak panorama, what future awaits the monumental past? In truth, the omens are dark, and you do not have to become a fortune teller to discover them. You have to fight, and fight very hard, to overcome these and more obstacles that appear along the way, but you

³ No reference has been provided by the author. Note from the translator.

have to take a safe path, and Latin American countries have seen it in tourism. No longer as a simple path but as a wide avenue that, regardless of providing the governments with juicy foreign exchange, is a path for the conservation and restoration of the monumental heritage.

Without being the panacea that some have wanted to see, tourism is not entirely negative if it is properly focused on taking advantage of it as a conjuncture for the preservation of historic centers. The obstacle that we now have is to stubbornly face reality represented by the fact that "In 1973, the total number of people who visited foreign countries rose to 215 million and their expenditures for world trade represented a sum of 27.6 billion dollars."⁴ With these figures, it is easy to understand why all the governments of Latin America now have agencies dedicated to promoting tourism.

But let us see what our first results have been just a little over 25 years after this new activity has really increased and how it has had an impact on Latin American cultural heritage, the basis, and essence of its personality. "Within the Latin American countries, Mexico and Brazil were the first to arouse the interest of tourists: the proximity of the first and the exoticism of the second allowed the beginning of this 'tourist demand'; however, in both cases, the two main tourist centers were not constituted by sites of great monumental importance. The warm waters of Acapulco and the carnival joy of Rio de Janeiro monopolized the mass tourist, who in a much smaller proportion diversified towards archaeological or monumental sites. The latter was reserved, almost exclusively, for European tourism and the occasional American specialist. This condition of lack of market diversification remained almost to this day, due more than anything to the political instability of many American countries, which made it difficult to establish a trend, due, among other causes, to the lack of security for the traveler, when not to a total lack of information. Today, the first thing we can say is that the lack of information has virtually disappeared, but it continues to be one of our most pronounced deficiencies."⁵

With this, Latin America is in an unbeatable position to promote tourism. Aboriginal groups, folklore and various natural beauties are added to the rich monumental heritage. For this reason, various governments have begun to draft specific tourism development programs in which the restoration and revitalization of its monumental heritage have been considered a priority. Panama, Colombia and Peru are actively working on these plans and the multinational projects of the "Mayan Route" with Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico, as well as that of the "Jesuit Missions" with Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina, are receiving broad support from their respective countries. This cannot be ignored by the technicians; by closing ourselves in our shells, we have encouraged tourism development plans to only focus on its basic infrastructure, such as transportation, accommodations, food and entertainment, forgetting a fundamental aspect for Latin America, cultural penetration, which the overwhelming mass of tourism is fostering day by day and which has trapped us totally unprotected to be able to resist it. Given this, we insist once again that the fundamental cause affects the approach that we have come to inhabit the monumental complexes. The greater their defenses, the less mystification with which they are presented to the visitor. That is where we believe the core of the problem lies. We need to create a solid base of Latin American personality without false positions or servility, and for this, it is necessary that the monumental restoration reach human regeneration. Let us leave aside the "typical" towns that have a gleaming and washed face; when inside, there has not even been auscultation of a medical visit. Let us advocate

⁴ Congreso de la Unión Internacional de Organismos Oficiales de Turismo, Madrid, 1975.

⁵ Flores Marini, C., "Revitalización urbana y desenvolvimiento turístico", *Boletín del Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas y Estéticas*, Núm. 16, Universidad de Caracas, 1973, p. 150.

that this serves those who, being a living part of that urban conglomerate, have suffered the indifference of living in the old part of the city. It is important to do tourism with personality, not on our knees, and for this, it is urgent to create a platform of citizen awareness that prevents thoughts of abandoning some of our cities to the sole tourist influence, stripping them of internal life and personality.



CANDELARIA, BOGOTÁ. *Image: Pedro Rojas, 1977.*



CATHEDRAL'S SQUARE, CUSCO. *Image: Pedro Rojas, 1960s.*

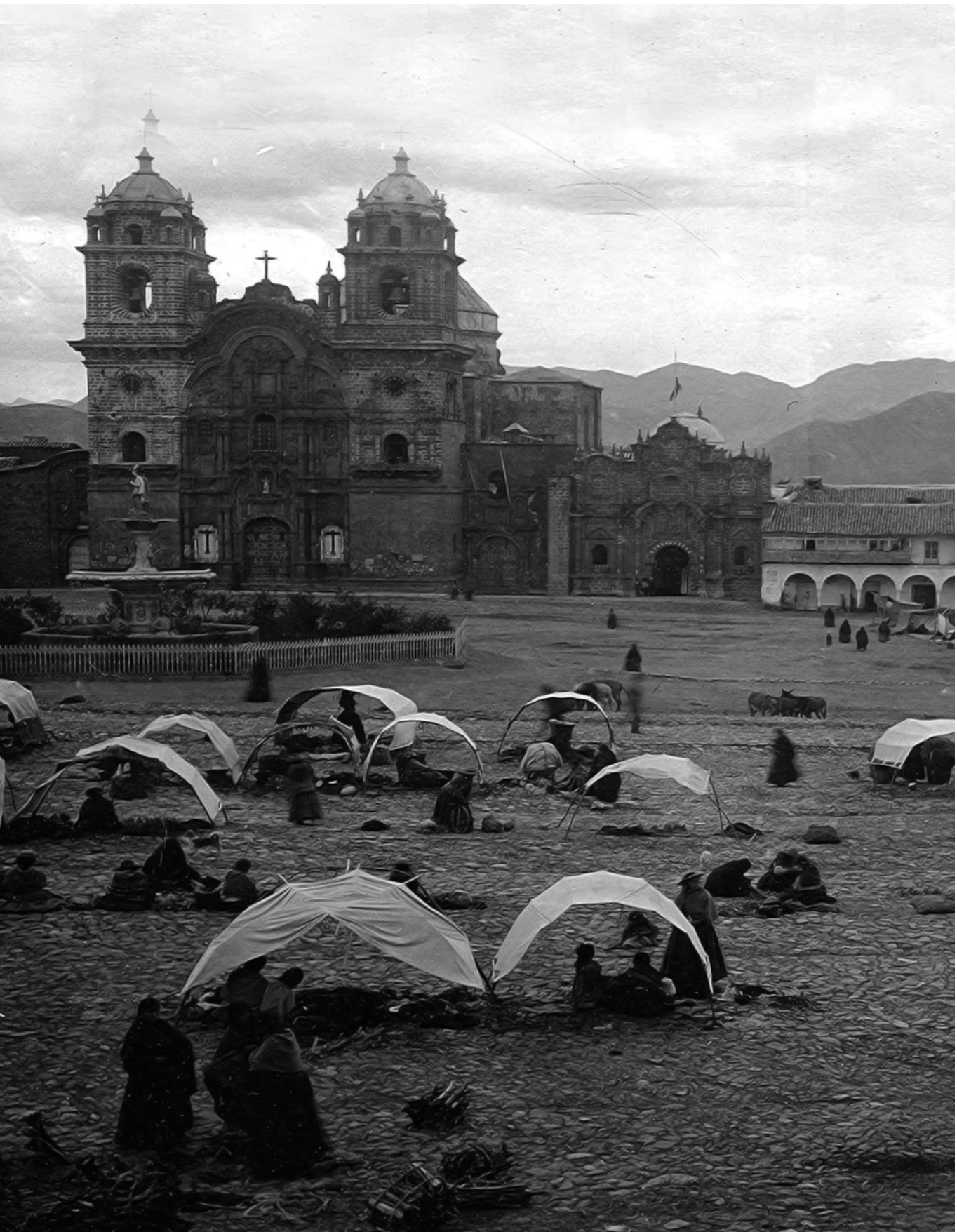
This, which would seem preposterous, has already been bitterly raised by several authors, among others the Italian Piero Sampaolesi, who, when referring to Venice, says that the city in certain months of the year no longer belongs to its inhabitants but to tourism.⁶ He affirms that the massive migrations of tourists make us hope, in the near future, that Rome, Paris, Athens or Florence will definitely become city-museums, by not resisting this imposing migration that, on the other hand, is advocated to increase. And this raises a serious dilemma: "to conserve its appearance and especially its character, while at the same time conserving its life. These are two contradictory things because life is continuous renewal and static conservation is not life."⁷ The last sentence exposes the core of the problem: our conservation does not have to be static but dynamic and new like the continent, since to propose only the possibility of abandoning all areas and forms of life to tourism is to close the way to other development possibilities, and America definitely has them. As a continent that produces raw materials, these help in the development of societies and of tourism, but we must ensure that the rural environment, and with it the small historic towns, receive an economic reimbursement for the benefits they bring. The creation of stock exchanges of internal aid will tend to level and improve the lives of these small towns, avoiding that we take them into account only as providers of services and labor. The careful application of this economic benefit will provide a gradual and constant improvement and will make them create their own social structure and remain stable, not uprooting their inhabitants from their environment. The excessive aid aimed at specific towns only creates greater external dependence, apart from producing an internal imbalance by creating artificial and onerous needs for the town itself. Just as it is necessary to promote aid to small towns, we believe that it can also be achieved in the historic centers of large cities. Currently faced with the burden of housing problems, governments have opted for the apparently easier path: creating new housing complexes while leaving the old parts aside when the bulldozer does not enter.



SANTA MARIA NOVELLA, FLORENCE. *Image: Pedro Rojas, 1967.*

⁶ Sampaolesi, Piero. *Discorso sulla metodologia generale del restauro dei monumenti*, Editrice Edam, Firenze, 1973, p. 287.

⁷ No reference has been provided by the author. Note from the translator.



CATHEDRAL SQUARE, CUSCO. *Image: Public domain.*

The outpouring of public funds should be programmed gradually and not massively, where urban revitalization programs are supported by comprehensive studies and where the tourist approach does not serve to cause uniformity and monotony of colors, but also without destroying the existing community ties in those areas. Let us not forget that under any floating population, there must be a stable layer of permanent population, and it is this that establishes the links and acquires responsibilities by being strongly linked to the existing communal life. And it is clear that the more varied the type of life, the greater the need for communal coexistence. This is where the strength of the historic centers lies, in their human aspect. These are perhaps the only places where friendship is encouraged and cultivated, urban intimacy still exists, and public coexistence reaches a framework of social life for all prayers since neighborhood harmony is only given by time.

The existing framework should not be destroyed, but improved without practicing the standard policy that, in search of urban revitalization, displaces the inhabitants as if they were a plague, destroying the community ties that existed for a long time. We advocate for diversity and prevent building speculation. Let us forget the superficial veneer of well-being that façades produce in favor of a true and conscious revitalization where the inhabitant of the place is reinstated with his dignity and decorum. Only in this way will we be able to count on lively and dynamic historical centers in the future.

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