Conservation Approaches to the Historic Urban Landscape in the Era of Globalization: In the Same Bed but with Different Dreams?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss how historic urban landscape is currently defined, interpreted and represented by historic communities around the world, and how its transformation over time reflects the impact of cultural tourism. As traditional concepts of historic preservation have evolved, the scope and concept of preservation itself has been extended into more broadly based thinking about historic/cultural landscapes that focuses on monumental heritage, as well as non-monumental aspects of culture. By the mid 20th century, however, cultural globalization and economic modernization had accelerated the changes to the traditional urban environments, including in some cases its disappearance, critically interrupting the continuity of the historic built environment in terms of what may be called ‘cultural consistency’. In response, one of the long lasting but unsolved cultural dilemmas around the world is how to maintain a cultural balance between the authenticity and visual integrity of historic cities. This paper will review and analyze contemporary cultural trends within the concepts and practices of historic urban landscapes focusing on four socio-cultural phenomena commonly recognized by communities around the world.

Introduction

The identification, designation, and protection of architectural resources ensure that communities retain their special sense of ‘time’ and ‘place’ (Tuan 1977). In a sense, understanding the history of urban landscapes offers citizens and public officials a basis for making political and aesthetic choices about the future. It also offers a context for greater social responsibility to practitioners in the design fields (Hayden 1997: 133). The decades after World War II brought rapid change to the practice of heritage conservation and in consequence the historic landscape. Influenced by post-war reconstruction and accelerated by the high speed of cultural modernization and socio-economic dimensions of globalization, these changes were also a response to the massive devastation of urban environments caused by bombings during the war and “revitalization” efforts afterward. From the 1964 Venice Charter onwards, the practices, philosophies, theories, concepts and terminology that evolved in the post-war period, have shaped the contemporary field of heritage conservation, the look of our cities, and even how we assemble our memories of them (Lim & Lambin 2009).

Traditional and/or historic built environments in modern cities have been affected more severely by socio-cultural changes (or human developments) than those in rural and suburban areas. Too much emphasis on the physical interpretation of urban heritage has often misled on issues of the significance and value of urban traditional housing. This yields a very narrow cultural perspective stressing the socio-cultural dichotomy between ‘preservation’ and ‘demolition’ of historic built environment. This is captured by Anthony Tung (2001: 3) who argued that ‘in Western civilization to “preserve” a historic structure has most often meant to retain as much as possible of the original fabric, or material, of old buildings’. In Asia, however, where verisimilitude is important, to “preserve” often means to retain the original aesthetic of a great building. Ever more complex cultural variants are, however, appearing to change accepted concepts of the historic built heritage in urban areas around the world. Still, European conservation policies that focus on the architectural heritage and its urban surroundings have continuously influenced preservation professionals to interpret cultural heritage in many other countries. After the UNESCO’s convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1972, national and international efforts were accelerated to preserve the historic built environments within each country’s historic cities. Stepping into the 21st century, preservation of the historic urban landscape has been one of the most challenging cultural issues around the world.

Tradition: How to interpret historical attitudes towards contemporary urbanism?

‘Historical time, however, is intermittent and variable. Every action is more intermittent than it is continuous, and the intervals between actions are infinitely variable in duration and contents…Biological time contains the unbroken events called lives; it also contains social organizations by species and groups of species, but in biology the intervals of time between events are disregarded, while in historical time the web of happening that laces throughout the intervals between existences attracts our interest.’ (Kubler 1962: 13)

Heritage in historic urban areas is currently facing very complicated challenges associated with social, economic, and political issues, which accelerated during the 20th century resulting in ‘globalizing’ processes affecting the urban landscapes. Globalization is not a single set of activities or a single ‘one world’ movement but a number of partially interlocking global networks which have been historically, geographically, politically, and culturally constructed (King
The core issue of contemporary historic urban landscape generally is how to interpret the meaning of “tradition” in the “globalizing” era of the 21st century. During the last century, the concept of “tradition” often represented something at a standstill and in sharp contrast to the concept of modern. ‘Tradition’ is usually conceptualized in academic research, as Ronald Knapp (2002: 4) has said, ‘with ambiguities of agelessness, monotony, and permanence’, which renders the concept easily misinterpreted and misused. In general, tradition has come to mean an ideology, custom or a way of doing something which has been formed, accumulated, and handed down historically from a group or community. In a sense, the concept of “tradition” has something to do with “historical authenticity” and “cultural continuity”. By the public, it was considered as passive rather than active, past oriented rather than contemporary-future oriented, and memory rather than materiality.

Where the concept of tradition has been transmitted, structured, and understood in the form of tangible and intangible expressions in contemporary societies, it is often related to as “cultural heritage”. More specifically, the ambiguous but general term historic urban landscape (HUL) has often been used to refer to a cultural heritage consisting of certain physical features contributing to contemporary urbanism. The Vienna Memorandum (UNESCO 2005: 2) clearly defines the concept as ‘ensembles of any group of buildings, structures and open spaces, in their natural and ecological context’ that ‘shaped modern society and has great value for our understanding of how we live today’. Based on etymological approaches, preservation of historic urban landscapes may be studied as a cultural process aiming to interpret the meaning of tradition in the contemporary built environment. When analyzing current cultural trends to understand tradition in the broad interpretive sense of “cultural tradition”, this should be different from the rigid concept of “culture in a traditional society”. If we simply consider the meaning of ‘tradition’ as something completed in the past as it was, its ‘modern’ representation may be considered just as cultural “copy” or “imitation” created “just now”. However, if we focused on the meaning of tradition as a ‘relevant remote past’ which can be culturally “measured” in the contemporary society providing reinterpretation and being recreated by the next generation, a modern representation of tradition may be considered as something to be continued and making connection between the past and the present (Lim 2008). Therefore, it is important to recognize current cultural trends when interpreting the term and applying it to the contemporary urban landscape.

Assimilation: International norm to preserve historic urban landscape?

From charters, to ordinances, to laws, to design guidelines, we have an abundance of materials to legally and philosophically guide our decision making process in a very rational way (Lim & Lambi 2009). The increase in international collaborative research and conservation activities in the urban heritage and landscape has contributed both positively and negatively. On one hand, many international charters, recommendations, and guidelines successfully direct international communities’ attention to the significance of cultural heritage and its effective management systems which are commonly and easily adopted and, in most cases, directly applied. In particular, most developing countries have accepted these without any critical review process, using them as a “cultural bible” to protect their cultural heritage against modern development. On the other hand, these codified international documents have resulted in common cultural trends, including the tendency to interpret the concept of “tradition” as a very simplified and generalized process, particularly in historic cities around the world. To make matters worse, many countries have been confronted by predictable philosophical and practical dilemmas due to the different ways international “guidelines” set out by international organizations such as UNESCO, ICCROM and ICOMOS are understood and interpreted.

Many government-led conservation projects in historic urban areas have commonly shown “generalization” or ‘simplification’ processes when visualizing the concept of ‘tradition’ or ‘history’. This particularly happens when a government designates a historic urban district (or area). In the process, they typically prefer to select buildings which potentially strengthen the historical originality within a historic district, preferably corresponding with guidelines and recommendations based on international perspectives. Another good example is the trend of installing a ‘buffer zone’ around world heritage sites, particularly in the historic district, as strongly recommended by UNESCO. On one hand, this is a good strategy not only for the prevention of unnecessary development inside the designated area, but also for maintaining the physical stability against potential changes that would threaten its authenticity. On the other hand, however, this regulation is always in the middle of critical
debates on a variety of pragmatic contemporary issues. International strategies, as pertaining to UNESCO’s recommendation of a “buffer zone” do not take into account local variability. Nor does it take into account local economic or political divisions or ideals. In addition, various levels of government intervention often cause ‘freezing’ or segregation of historic urban landscapes that result in the loss of the visual integrity of historic communities. To secure the protection of ‘past’ heritage within a buffer zone, ‘contemporary’ non-monumental and/or modern built environments often tend to be sacrificed.

Figure 2 Contrasting urban landscapes between Royal Tomb of Joseon dynasty, one of Korea’s World Heritage sites and surrounding modern office buildings. (photo taken by author, Seolleung, Gangnam-gu, Seoul, South Korea in 2007)

Politicization: Mapping urban landscape with historic monumental images

To see a landscape as ideology is to think about how it was created, but there is another approach which, while reflective and philosophic, is much more detailed and concrete to see (Meinig 1979: 43). It is ironic that modern preservation efforts regarding historic urban landscapes result in critical cultural dissonance over the contemporary urban built environment by characterizing historic urban images as part of a particular time era but ignoring cultural changes inside historic communities. This results in a tendency to reproduce existing historic communities with visual upgrades, so called “museumification” by adding a cosmetic interpretation of history through restoration, rehabilitation, and/or adaptive reuse. Mona Serageldin (2000: 52) raised this issue when arguing that elite attitudes toward the cultural heritage were coloured by the outsider’s view of the indigenous. Valuation of worth and benefits was unrelated to the perceptions and experiences of the communities interacting daily with this heritage. Values give some things significance over others and thereby transform some objects and places into “heritage”. The ultimate aim of conservation is not to conserve material for its own sake but, rather, to maintain (and shape) the values embodied by the heritage - physical intervention or treatment being one of many means toward that end (Avrami et al.2000: 7). With regard to cultural value, in general, two contradicting views exist, “aesthetic view” versus “Neo-classic economic view”. The first focuses on quality of life and understanding of the social and psychological values of cultural capital, and the second on measuring economic output and monetary value of culture to the economy, such as in tourism and related areas (Geurksen & Rentshler 2002: 2). In other words, this is really a matter of the questions “why should we preserve?” and “how can we preserve?” If the former concerns a social way of interpreting in relation to cultural heritage, the latter is concerned with physical intervention.

Attitudes toward the cultural heritage embody a complex mix of emotional and pragmatic needs. With reference to the architectural and urban heritage, a clear distinction is made between landmarks and non-monumental buildings that form the historic fabric and provide the setting for monuments (Serageldin 2000: 53). From the late 20th century, the meaning of sustainability, originally invented in the economic studies, has been adopted and expanded as a global objective associated with futuristic approaches to historic preservation. The move has largely involved two aspects: 1) establishing national identity by maintaining cultural tradition within the globalizing society, and 2) securing international competitive power by revitalizing local and national economies through cultural (or heritage) tourism. As discussed earlier, the former is a traditional approach responding to the question “why preserve” and focusing on the aesthetic view, whereas the latter focuses on the monetary value of cultural heritage including tourism, responding to the question “how to preserve”. Due to the politicized interpretation of the meaning of heritage value and sustainability, the cultural attitude to the conservation of historic urban landscape has gradually changed from seeing the latter as a cultural asset representing national identity to an economic tool producing economic benefits, the so called “heritage machine” being constructed in cities and towns, large and small (Barthel 1996: 121).

Figure 3 Historic houses at Prague’s Old Town Square. Many Gothic buildings are currently used as tourist’s venues, commercial shopping malls, and house museums after restoration and renovation. (photo taken by author, Prague, Czech Republic in 2007)

Commodification: Tourism impacts on the historic urban landscape

Nobody can doubt cultural tourism is currently one of the most influential yet problematic issues related to heritage conservation, and particularly historic urban landscapes. Tourism is an international growth industry that attracts
visitors to historic cities. In general, there is a clear effort to interpret the meanings/impacts of the tourism industry in different parts of the world. For example, in Europe and North America, it is a means of protecting the identity of a place; in other countries, particularly in South East Asia, it is a means through which local people can secure the basic necessities of life. Basically, cultural tourism is good in the sense that it provides us with more opportunities to experience and enrich our sense of tradition and history. In addition, it is hard to deny the fact that cultural tourism is one of the effective short-term economic strategies to revitalize historic urban communities at a local level and increase economic competitive power at national level as well. More positively, tourism can be “quick-fix” to maintain the minimum level of historic urban fabric. Looking at the other side of tourism industry, however, we have also noticed its side-effects, particularly related to historic urban communities.

Rapid transformation in this technological age often has a dramatic effect on the dual forces of continuity and change, exacerbating political tensions among stakeholders (Avrami et al. 2000). When discussing the concept of cultural tourism in historic cities, various struggles are frequently noticed around the world between insiders and outsiders, government control and the everyday life of historic communities, and mostly due to different perspectives and interpretations of the meaning of manageable “levels” of tradition and authenticity. This is happening in most historic cities, as they are facing a cultural conundrum between the promotion of cultural tourism, as a way of economic sources to revitalize historic communities, and the maintenance of their place-ness. For example, many Asian historic cities have gradually recognized that tourism-oriented preservation that focuses only on physical and cosmetic interpretations will bring about cultural dismantling of long-lasting traditions. Historically breached European historic cities led the cultural and geographical segregation of historic centres with the development of modern commercial districts. In the United States, tourism-oriented developments of historic districts (or main streets) keep evoking a serious social issue – so called ‘gentrification’. The main concern linked to cultural tourism with regard to the preservation of historic urban landscape is a loss of cultural identity and originality of the historic urban landscape as urban heritage is driven by economic concepts resulting in cultural “fake” or “looking old” urban scenes. It is important to keep in mind that the pursuit of money creates the resources to make landmarks, and to save landmarks, but it is also the justification for destroying them, as Tung (2001: 5) pointed out.

**Concluding Remarks: Looking for a new paradigm of heritage in 21st century urbanism**

“Our memory of the city is especially scenic and theatrical: we travel back in time through images that recall bits and pieces of an earlier city, we project these earlier representations forward into recomposed and unified stagings.” (Boyer 2001: 32).

Historic Urban Landscapes are a fundamental and integral part of the environment of communities who live within them or who have association with them; neither the designation of historic urban landscapes nor academic research into Historic Urban Landscapes should be to the detriment of local communities. Some countries are currently experiencing all the issues mentioned above, others only some of them, and still others none. How can we represent the meaning of “tradition” in manners that are culturally appropriate for the 21st century and which go beyond the “codified” international documents that have resulted in undesirable and monotonous interpretations of historic urban landscapes? How can we make a cultural balance among the past, the present and the future to maintain historic urban landscape without any “politiced” and “commodified” cultural selections – sacrificing the authentic value of historic cities to pursue economic benefits through tourism industry? These days, the concept of “vernacular” is being actively discussed as one of the alternatives to bridge the conceptual gap between the past and contemporary preservation ideology focusing on how the concept of “tradition” and “historical continuity” can work in the
A vernacular culture would imply a way of life ruled by tradition and custom, entirely remote from the larger world of politics and law; a way of life where identity is derived not from permanent possession of land but from membership in a group or super-family (Jackson 1984: 149). At the beginning of the vernacular research, most scholars approached to vernacular studies tended to assume that “vernacular architecture” is just a subcategory of “untouchable tradition” noted by Vellinga (2006: 84). In contrast with the concept of “tradition”, however, the cultural meaning of ‘vernacular’ has unique cultural potential and possibilities for interpreting contemporary historic urban landscape as a physical representation of cultural evolution over time, specifically urban historic communities.

Much of the existing urban built heritage is a result of long time and the collective memory of the public. At the same time, it is a living place still serving as part of the urban fabric. Therefore, the continuity and sustainability of the historic urban landscape can be achieved if its cultural meaning and needs in the present and near future are clearly identified. Also, it is important to recognize how historic communities in urban areas, as connected with the living social tradition, have been defined, conceptualized and valued during the modernization and/or urbanization process in the 21st century. As argued at the beginning of this chapter, our understanding of “tradition” in historic urban landscapes should keep pace with a more futuristic perspective to try to identify the continuity of “cultural tradition”, not “culture in a traditional society”. For preservation professionals, various issues and dilemmas related to the topic discussed above are still unsolved. How to achieve the modern representation of tradition in the present is the very basic mission, but it is not easy to carry out without being influenced by biased cultural attitudes and interpretations of our urban heritage and its surrounding built environment. This may be a new challenge to modern preservationists dealing with the cultural issue of the historic urban landscape in the 21st century.

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