

CITIES AND AREAS : THE ISSUES SURROUNDING CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Innovative practices introduced in France and cooperative activities abroad are making us aware of the international dimension of the new issues surrounding the cultural heritage, with regard to upgrading and improving cities and areas.

At the start of the 21st century we find ourselves at a time when the social, environmental and cultural context of cities and areas is changing rapidly.

The urban transformations of the last thirty years have been accompanied by a profound change in the concept of heritage and the relationship which residents and visitors have with it. The experience which France has gained in the last two centuries is an undeniable asset for better understanding the change and comparing it with other practices and other countries. What therefore are the new issues, particularly in relation to urban development, and how can we take the measure of them and find the most appropriate level of intervention ?

Changing points of view

« Tradition and heritage does not mean to preserve the ashes but to keep the flame alight » this Indian proverb on its own sums up the issues and goals of today. « We must give new life to tradition and not merely protect it, otherwise it will inevitably die and disappear » stated the Chinese architect Wang Shu, one of five persons nominated for the 2207 global award during a speech he made in September 2008 at the Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine (Paris). In the last fifteen to twenty years, the conflict between town-planning and heritage protection is tending to diminish and new policies are starting to take shape. What goal was the Mayor of Brest (whose conurbation has 215,000 inhabitants) pursuing when, like his counterpart in Le Havre, (whose city centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site)² he set up an architectural urban and landscape heritage protection zone (ZPPAUP) in the parts of the centre that were built after the second world war and the old suburbs ? What motivated the Mayor of Saint-Benoît-du-Sault (a canton with a population of 5,432 with 776 inhabitants in the commune) when asked for a protected area in the village and a ZPPAUP for the surrounding landscape, suggesting that neighbouring mayors include part of the area they administer. Were these mayors trying to protect their commune from urbanization ? This is obviously absurd, in particular as they have been responsible for town-planning since the decentralization legislation of the early 1980s.

¹ With the participation of Françoise Ged, director of the Observatory of Architecture in Contemporary China (CAPA).

² Act of 07/07/83 concerning the division of responsibilities between central and local government gives municipalities the right to set up a ZPPAUP. This is based on a detailed knowledge of the site and asserts that heritage promotion measures have been negotiated between the municipality and central government. It includes an urban management plan and regulations and advice is given on both.

New tools

The major goal is no longer to protect areas «against» new construction or new developments but to ensure they fit in with the characteristics of the existing environment and the associated constraints. The ZPPAUP is used in a subtle way. On the one hand, it highlights that something is very much in the general interest that justifies the taking of occasionally authoritarian decisions in collaboration with local representatives of central government ; on the other hand, it introduces a method that is based on a details knowledge of the places in question which provides a basis for the enhancement of the built heritage. The documents that are produced, which have precedence over the commune's town-planning documents, play a moderating, or even a delaying, role with a view to achieving sustainable urban development.

By introducing a reference to history and the past changes in the area, this extremely important process gives meaning to development and makes it easier for residents to understand it. The innovation projects which have been carried out in France broaden the scope of thought about the capital role that the cultural heritage can play with regard to the sustainable development of cities and areas.

But these issues are not universally recognized. Such recognition involves publicizing experiments and attempting to find new practices for larger areas with heritage value, such as the Loire Valley³, which currently lack coherent management. These advances highlight the benefit of linking the heritage and cultural approach with the economic, environmental and social issues associated with sustainable development, in the context of a cross-cutting multi-disciplinary approach.⁴

Shared heritage and urban policies

The concept of shared heritage, whose scope has considerably broadened, has thus led to new approaches and innovative practices in France. Interesting experiments in small towns and large conurbations now have reference status and are providing a number of countries with a more comprehensive framework for thought. Cooperative actions undertaken in particular in China and India are increasing in number. They are even analyzed or debated under the aegis of multinational bodies such as UNESCO and UN-Habitat.⁵

These cooperative actions are making us aware of the international dimension of the new issues raised by the cultural heritage, with regard to upgrading and improving cities and areas. The questions raised are the same in the different countries, while the geographical levels do not necessarily seem to be comparable. They are posed in a shared context, that of the globalization of markets and production which, in particular, makes it necessary to find a new management balance between public and private actors. The experience acquired by France and the countries with which it has worked highlights these issues at an international level and helps us put shared goals into perspective.

3 The « cultural landscape » of the Loire Valley is 280 km long and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It involves two regions, 4 Départements and 160 municipalities.

4 See the paper « Développement urbain et aménagement durable » in the journal *La pierre d'angle* No 47.

5 For example in the framework of the project « Historic districts for all : a social and human approach for sustainable revitalization », that was run in 2007 and 2008 by the Division of Social Sciences, Research and Policy at UNESCO which will be the subject of a paper, a workshop and a presentation of publications on the topic at the next World Urban Forum in Nankin (11/2008).