
Designing an emotional narrative that integrates the architectural richness and the oral patrimony of Historic Centres for activating the tissues of these sites with their inhabitants

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ABSTRACT. Among the extended number of UNESCO's Historic Centres there is a privileged group in Europe which has achieved a steady preservation compared with other worldwide realities, nevertheless their safeguarding/valorisation is still leaving aside intangible resources that also have had a meaningful role in their creation and development. The Oral Patrimony of these places is a complete compilation of stories of their intangible and tangible richness, which could complement the visual narrative present in the architecture; in fact Historic Centres are silent witnesses of the daily life of their own communities and throughout Design it can be possible the creation of a narrative, which gives a voice to these places for making of them storytellers of the infinite happenings that occur in their cores, with the purpose of generating a deeper connection between the architectural scenario and their inhabitants or story protagonists.

KEYWORDS. Historic Centres, Oral Patrimony, narrative, emotions, safeguarding and valorisation.

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1. Introduction

Historic Centres are seen as the cores of the cities not only because the most relevant architecture is found in them but also because they are scenarios of different traditional practices that the inhabitants spontaneously perform day after day. This connection between tangible (architecture) and intangible (cultural practices) is a tissue created by the community, which gives a sense to these places.

Among the extended number of these sites proclaimed by the UNESCO there is a privileged European group, which has already achieved to develop strategies for a steady preservation and rehabilitation of their tangible richness (compared with other worldwide realities); anyway after overcoming this stage, that most of the time is urgent, there are more challenges ahead that should not be considered secondary, because Historic Centres are not just a group of architectural elements. In fact nowadays it is important to recognize that many intangible practices have had an important role in the creation, preservation and transformation of these places (UNESCO, 2003).

Throughout the exposure of this intangible presences, processes of conservation and valorisation could be enriched because the different tangible elements of a site recapture their core, which could help citizens to understand deeper their surroundings and discover new aspects that might change their perception of the urban space that they daily live (ITO, 2003). As *Ito Nobuo* member of the Executive Committee of ICOMOS, has stated: *"the study of intangible cultural heritage is essential to pursue our common interest and the objective of ICOMOS. The achievement of the study will be utilized not only to deepen the significance of monuments and sites, but also to offer the basis for authentic conservation work to be carried out"*.

On the other hand despite the positive attention that these places are receiving there are also some cases where the UNESCO's nomination has left negative consequences, which inevitably affect the locals' quality of life, causing the abandonment of these sites and therefore one of their main functions: *"to be a place for citizens to live, work and socialise"* (SCHEFFLER and CALVANUS, 2012). Consequently there is also a disconnection of the inhabitants to the Cultural Heritage inside these places that directly affects the cultural identity of these historic sites and their communities.

This analysis showed the need of creating new connections between Historic Centres and their local residents, with the goal of encouraging people to use their historic sites for keeping them as *living places* and therefore *active elements of the cultural heritage*.

2. The Narrative of Historic Centres

Currently the cities have a narrative that is completely visual leaving aside important perceptive elements, which could help citizens and visitors to deepen in the meaning of their architectural context. Historic Centres are not the exception and thanks to their exceptional aesthetic features, that make them masterpieces of the human creativity, this visual narrative is even richer and stimulating. Nevertheless there are intangible cultural elements behind each building and space

that need to be included for structuring a broader narrative that reveals how “culture is organized and inherently tied to space and place” (LARSON, 2003), because aspects like religion, culinary traditions, daily habits and gender roles, among others of an extensive list, are cultural values that have had a significant role in the creation and transformation of historic sites.

An interesting case can be seen in the urban design of many Latin-American colonial towns where “la plaza”, which is the focal growing point of these places, is also a space where the Catholic Church is mightily positioned, reflecting the importance of the religion for the community and tying this cultural facet to the physical constitution of the town. Furthermore “la plaza” has remained throughout the time as a central gathering point where the inhabitants meet after the mass, in the weekly market, in public celebrations and daily activities of leisure. Nevertheless this space has changed in many Latino-American towns, for example in Colombia at the beginning of the last century most of them just had benches for adults and wide spaces for the market and for welcoming children games, currently it is common to find football and basketball courts for answering the requirements of new generations, without compromising the long-established uses, which are essential in the community life of these places.

From a broader view each place of a city not only hosts its people but also is a scenery that silently witnesses the daily life of its inhabitants, which is plenty of inherited cultural values that throughout the time get transformed (stimulated by the global context), encouraging the renovation of the city for generating an adequate space able to answer simultaneously to the ingrained traditions and new expectations.

Unfortunately the records of this evolution, that show how the intangible practices of a community build the character of different city's areas, are completely disseminated, most of them are few family pictures that are complemented with stories of elderly plenty of emotional aspects, which create a complete portrait of these places and their transformations.

However there are few projects that have made outstanding efforts for gathering these memories, and throughout interactive technologies have created spaces for exploring cities throughout the stories of their inhabitants. Some remarkable examples are “City of Memory” developed in New York City by the design firm *Local Projects*, “Sensitive City” created by *Studio Azzurro* for the Italian Pavilion of the Expo 2010 in Shanghai and the Italian *Database AESS “Archivio Etnografia e Storia Sociale della Regione Lombardia”* (Archive Ethnography and Social History of the Lombardy Region).

Thanks to these projects citizens and visitors can perceive how the stories of the locals are also the stories of the city and in a balanced way merge the different aspects of the oral patrimony (which is plenty of intangible cultural knowledge and experiences about food, music, beliefs, etc.) with the tangible scenario.

One of the urgent needs of UNESCO's Historic Centres is the safeguarding of the intangible and tangible richness in a connected way for keeping alive the weave that structures these sites. Throughout the integration of Oral Patrimony and the scenarios of Historic Centres people could have a deeper approach to the architectural surroundings, learning how different aspects of the intangible culture have helped to shape the physical characteristics of these special places.

3. The role of Oral Patrimony in the reinforcement of Historic Centres narrative

The Oral Patrimony of a community contains a wide approach to all the expressions that make part of its Intangible Cultural Heritage, because as the UNESCO has stated: *"Language is considered the vehicle of all the traditions and cultural expressions, even the language itself"*. In fact Oral Patrimony archives permit to have an initial understanding of the stories told from one generation to other for passing knowledge about social practices as rituals, festive events and simple daily routines, performing arts, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe and different traditional craftsmanship as cooking, construction, trades, etc.

This definition shows the intrinsic narrative character of the Oral Patrimony, which has all the potential for reinforcing the visual narrative commonly used in Historic Centres. Throughout this integration some challenges regarding cultural strengthening could be confronted, using the emotional stimuli found in the stories and supported by the architectural scenery.

3.1. Storytellers and the stimuli of their voice

The importance of storytellers in the transmission of traditional knowledge is undeniable; as the Malian writer Amadou Hampaté Bâ said: "In Africa, when an old person dies a library burns down". Many non-western cultures share this perspective about elderly with huge respect, because they are considered preservers and transmitters of innumerable cultural aspects (CONDOMINAS, 2004).

For western cultures this image of storytellers is also found and despite not being quite recognized is present and alive. Cases where grandmothers teach recipes to their grandchildren or talk about past experiences that show the beliefs of the society years ago, are just some examples of how western storytellers spontaneously act in their daily life.

Although the performances of western and non-western storytellers are different, both are charged of emotional stimuli that give sense to the stories, and one of the most important tools for achieving this goal is the voice. This narrative tool is a powerful resource because possesses a unique flexibility able to play with intonations and expressions, among others, for emphasizing meanings and emotions; and even if printing archives have an important role giving stability to this cultural patrimony when printed tales are read miss significant contents, which just the storyteller can transmit throughout its voice (ROSENBERG, 1987).

On the other hand, this process of storytelling and cultural transmission depends on the fragile nature of the memory and currently it is well known the "urgency of its protection" like in the case of any resource that belongs to the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Since the *UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2003, it was internationally recognized that this kind of heritage needs special approaches for its safeguarding, which additionally to the usual inventories and analysis, involve a special support to the bearers (BOUCHENAKI, 2004) for avoiding situations where the death of a bearer means the end of his knowledge.

This supporting is also for encouraging bearers to continue performing their practices, which is a natural way of involving them in the protection, preservation and reinforcement of their own cultural heritage. In the area of storytelling few

cases have been developed, challenging museums to incorporate the voice of the storytellers-cultural bearers into the exhibitions.

Exhibitions like *"Singapore Voices"* (by Nanyang Technological University) and *"Museo della Resistenza"* (by Studio Azzurro) have showed how storytellers' voices can connect people with cultural aspects, that have identified a territory or have helped to build the character of a community. In fact, all the emotional charge of the stories touches deeply the visitors reminding them personal experiences, which are strongly tied with the cultural background exhibited.

Storytellers emerge from their voices, and throughout a skilful use of this narrative tool contextualize the public into fictional-real scenarios encouraging people to get appropriate of the reality told in the stories.

Historic Centres are adequate scenarios for this kind of storytelling, because this fusion not only contextualizes the stories but also completes the meaning of the architectural landscape. This proposal is an integration of the intangible and tangible resources of the cultural patrimony and the goal is to listen to the stories in the surroundings (buildings and spaces) that have witnessed them, without forgetting how the architectural details and the emotional stimuli of the stories are features that enrich this whole narrative.

4. Historic Centres and their inhabitants

Although UNESCO's Historic Centres have become an international priority, and this nomination strictly demands the implementation of strategies that take a special care of the *"outstanding universal values"* of each place, these historic sites are facing new threats and challenges. One of them is related to the deterioration of the tissues between the inhabitants and their historic surroundings. Unfortunately these nominations have called the attention of a large number of tourists and despite the economic benefits brought by this international prestige, the unstoppable entrance of tourists has deeply affected the social tissues of the population with their Historic Centres (LEE, 2010 and BEECH, 2012).

Cities like Venice (Italy), Hoi An (Vietnam), Zamosc (Poland), Luang Prabang (Laos) and Zacatecas (Mexico) are just some of the few examples where the priorities of the citizens and the city have been left aside for the demands of the tourist industry. Currently this situation has evolved in a progressive detachment of the locals to these sites, which consequently brings a detachment to the Cultural Heritage that these places represent, and a loss of sense of place and belonging that are major points in the construction of the cultural identity of a community (LYNCH, 1972 and SERAGELDIN and SHULGER, 2000).

Historic Centres need to reactivate these connections in these times where many global phenomena, like tourism, are penetrating our societies and jeopardizing many cultural resources and their tissues with the people who bear them. For this reason it is crucial to develop projects for the local residents (SERAGELDIN, 2000) that strengthen their connection with the intangible-tangible resources of their territory.

In fact, one of the significant aspects of Historic Centres is that they are places where life continues (WILLIAMS, 2000), plenty of cultural features that only the inhabitants can ingrain and maintain active. Then even if they become dynamic tourist destinations, the abandonment by the local residents could lead to the death of these sites as active elements of the worldwide culture.

4.1. Strengthening the tissues between inhabitants and Historic Centres

The narrative proposed in this research is part of a broader strategy that intends to strengthen the cultural tissues between inhabitants and their Historic Centres for a future reinforcement of the cultural patrimony (tangible and intangible) of these historic sites and the cultural identity of their inhabitants.

For this reason, the general strategy has been structured for stimulating the following stages: reinforcement of the narrative, creation of new connection between inhabitants and their cultural heritage, reinforcement of the cultural identity of the community, cohesion of social tissues among the inhabitants themselves and with the Historic Centres, encouragement of performing cultural practices in Historic Centres, sustainability and development of cultural patrimony and finally the reinforcement of the cultural patrimony (tangible and intangible) of these places.

As it was mentioned before, all the stories that make part of the cultural heritage help citizens and visitors to deepen into the meaning of the architectural and historic surroundings. Then, during the initial stage *"reinforcement of the narrative"* it is important to emphasize the role of the emotional stimuli present in the voice of the storytellers, which help in the *"creation of new and deeper connections"* (second stage) among inhabitants, the different scenarios of Historic Centres and the cultural practices performed in these spaces and told in the stories.

Certainly, this is a starting point, which helps in the *"reinforcement of the cultural identity"* of the inhabitants and in their *"cohesion as a community"* that shares a sense of place and a cultural background.

After touching an inner side of the inhabitants, the narrative proposed also could motivate people to continue performing some of the cultural practices described by the storytellers or retake others that have been left in the past. In this process the community, influenced by the global context, will have a crucial role in the re-creation of these practices and the creation of new ones. This stage of *"encouragement"* has also a tight relation with a sustainable view, which intends to motivate inhabitants to be part of a process that sustains their own cultural practices and therefore *"reinforce the cultural patrimony of these places"*.

On the other hand it is important to keep in mind that the scenario of this process is the Historic Centre, which throughout the narrative proposed could be activated and become a space lived and enjoyed not only by tourists but also by its own inhabitants. The goal is to create new attachments among the locals and the whole structure behind these places (tangible and intangible) that help to overcome a possible rejection and abandonment.

The inhabitants are a meaningful element of Historic Centres, because they are the engines that keep these sites apart of mummification throughout the performance of their daily activities (some of them part of their Intangible Cultural Heritage). They weave significant connections between the past and present, and the tangible and intangible, therefore it is crucial to strengthen the tissues between inhabitants and Historic Centres.

5. Strategies and technologies of Design for the implementation of the proposed narrative

Even though this stage of the project is still under development, the initial analysis of the characteristics and connections of the human, intangible and tangible resources of Historic Centres have exposed an affinity with some Design strategies, which could help to reinforce this intricate structure. Emotional, Collaborative, Sustainable and Interactive Design are providing interesting tools to the proposed narrative, which also could help to maintain the balance inside the Historic Centres' structures without forgetting the influences of the global context.

In this process has been important to recognize the inhabitants as consumers and the Cultural Patrimony as the product that has to be adjusted according to the expectations of these special consumers, which nowadays are *"becoming more discerning and pro-active. And what unites them is that increasingly their hearts rule their heads"* as Anne Lise Kjaer, director of the international trend forecasting agency Kjaer Global, has stated.

5.1. Exploiting emotional stimuli stirred by the Oral and Tangible Patrimony

Nowadays the relation between consumers-users and products has evolved involving more perceptive aspects for a deeper connection that goes further than a practical use (NORMAN, 2005); thus sensorial stimulation acquires an important attention for complementing the traditional use of the objects.

Throughout the vision of Emotional Design, the emotions arisen by the Historic Centres' scenarios and the storytellers' voices could be managed for making citizens to have a deeper relation with these historic spaces. The goal is to motivate in an emotive way consumers-inhabitants to *remind, revalue, retake, re-create and reinforce* different elements of their intangible and tangible Cultural Patrimony, inside a contemporary context that also demands the evolution of these resources.

5.2. Collaborative Design as a tool for encouraging inhabitants to be pro-active creators and consumers of their cultural context

Currently people have got a pro-active role in the design of the products that are part of their environments, and even though there is a design team guiding this process the expectations of the consumers are valuable elements in contemporary Design.

In terms of the narrative proposed in this research, the participation of the inhabitants is essential not only because they are the storytellers with a valuable archive of stories in their memories, but also because throughout these stories they can help to re-structure the connections of the intangible and tangible elements present in the Historic Centres.

The idea is to make the community an active participant in the development of their own surroundings because *"the environment works better if the people affected by its changes are actively involved in its recreation, management, etc. instead of being treated as passive consumers"*, (SANOFF, 2000).

5.3. Sustainable Design for the creation and re-creation of cultural resources

Increasingly, the connection between cultural heritage and sustainable development is better understood, and now it is clear that these domains need to be fully integrated, because the concept of sustainability is tightly related to the social, cultural and environmental realms and not only to the idea of economic floatability (RODWELL, 2007). In fact many indigenous groups are vivid examples where the cultural knowledge is the instrument for a complete sustainable development (SERAGELDIN, 1995).

On the other hand many cultural resources are endangered, reflecting the need of new strategies that promote sustainable cycles for giving the Cultural Patrimony continuity through the time without denying an evolution and transformation (KURIN, 2004).

For this reason the narrative proposed aims to motivate the community to participate in the creation of a sustainable cycle that keeps alive the Oral Patrimony and the Historic Centres. This participation can be as storytellers that want to share their experiences and memories in these sites, or as performers that after listening the stories could be motivated to re-activate different cultural practices in these historic scenarios.

In a long term this reactivation of the cultural practices and Historic Centres will be an incubator of experiences useful for new stories that can enrich the Oral Patrimony and the meaning of these urban scenarios, which means the sustainability of the Cultural Patrimony (intangible and tangible) of Historic Centres.

5.4. Giving a voice to Historic Centres throughout new technologies

Currently there are a wide amount of technologies that have been used in design for connecting people with their environment in a positive way. In this proposal these technologies can give an emotive voice to the Historic Centres, showing their role as active spaces that witness the happenings of their inhabitants everyday.

A synergy between emotional design and these technologies can show the Historic Centres potential not only as living spaces but also as intimate places where the most treasured experiences of a community have happened and can continue happening.

6. Conclusion

Although this research is a work in progress and at this point is still structuring the Design strategies, there is an initial possibility to develop a pilot project in Mantua city (Italy), which has been a close partner of the PhD in Design and Technologies Exploitation for the Cultural Heritage at the Politecnico di Milano.

The idea is to take advantage of this relationship for implementing this research, which could help to establish some conclusions and experiences that nourish the proposal itself.

The pilot project intends to be part of a broader frame of projects developed by the PhD and the Mantua municipality with the idea of helping to reinforce some of the actions related to the intangible culture of this UNESCO's site.

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