

## **VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE. IDENTIFICATION, PRESERVATION AND UPGRADING PRINCIPLES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Vernacular architecture is world-wide extremely vulnerable, for economic, social and political reasons. That's why it's related to urban decay and physical degradation, exposing to risk an essential historical, cultural, but also social and economic, resource. Moreover, due to its geographical as well as quantitative vastness it's rarely recorded or listed, and important parts have already been lost.

The objective of this paper is to analyse some possible strategies that could contribute in enhancing a widely accessible and long-range preservation and valorisation process of vernacular heritage, and in promoting sustainable development, in particular in the Mediterranean basin.

To preserve vernacular built heritage means to deal with living environments, not merely built-up sites, and to ensure that heritage policies directly benefit the people, improving the quality of their physical surroundings, both from the constructional and the socio-economic point of view. Sustainability of cultural heritage is about managing the balance between preservation and use, so that as much as possible of the significance of - for example - the built heritage is passed on to future generations.

Three are the examined strategies:

- A. promoting the study of traditional technologies and materials and enquiring on their potential nowadays application, enhancing them where needed, and on their environmental sustainability both in terms of energy consumption and of maintenance;
- B. identifying 'light' methodologies of investigation and survey;
- C. developing awareness-raising methods and participatory techniques to stimulate the appropriation by the inhabitants of their own environment of life.

It's necessary to think about actions integrating human development and conservation within a comprehensive strategy. It means to build capacity at the local level and among site management authorities to enhance conservation and preservation.

### **1. BACKGROUND**

Traditional heritage is world-wide - even in most European countries - extremely vulnerable. Important parts have already been lost and most of the building traditions are business for ethnographers or ethnologists and not always collected and documented.

In most countries, in Europe, Asia or Latin America, with a rich heritage, vernacular is neither protected nor considered worthy to be conserved and a negative meaning has been always attributed to "vernacular", as "primitive" and consequently without value.

The step forward towards recognition as historic monuments still seems to be very difficult.

The first factor to be considered is that vernacular heritage with all its traditions is subjected to a continuing transformation process, depending on social and environmental factors. In many areas vernacular settlements are related to urban decay and physical degradation. They are abandoned due to structural problems of economy, or house disadvantaged population and present endangered situations from the point of view of structures and services, but also for social security and economic conditions, with evident consequences on quality of life.

Laws on conservation of cultural heritage can't guarantee, alone, its safeguard. Also in consideration of its evolutive nature, its inhabitants ought to be made aware and empowered to adjust (in a compatible way) the vernacular heritage to satisfactory living standards and to take advantage of its qualities in order to give communities a new sense of belonging and create new employment opportunities.

In the long run, where appropriately supported by local

authorities, Community Development bodies might be established in such areas, to facilitate - among other things - a shared enjoyment of the technical tools for revitalisation.



Fig. 1. Tamnougalt, Drâa Valley, Morocco

Second, due to its geographical as well as quantitative vastness, this heritage is very rarely recorded or listed. Some attempts to initiate ambitious inventory campaigns of the vernacular buildings have been suspended after some first experiments. Sometimes this was also due to the choice of high specialisation requiring, expensive and quickly obsolescent software and tools instead of developing 'light'

methodologies of investigation and survey and consequently minimising expenditure of capitals and energies.

Last but not the least, vernacular architecture has not been considered for a long time by international organisations. Attention to the vernacular architecture responds to a sensibility for social values matured only in the second half of the 20th century, in coherence with the progressively growing movement towards heritage conservation. ICOMOS is the only international organisation that has dealt with the phenomenon, ratifying the charter of "Built vernacular heritage" (Mexico, 2000), which defines the priority of knowledge for conservation of the 'common' built heritage.

## 2. MAIN ISSUES

To preserve vernacular built heritage means to protect a sense of identity, although in a post global era defining 'identity' becomes increasingly complex; certainly to take care of the physical form and fabric of buildings, structures and spaces, always considering the ways in which they are used and understood, and the intangible associations which attach to them.

There is more. Vernacular architecture can be considered a fundamental resource for the economic development: if the objectives of preservation and valorisation are achieved, healthiness, safety and security will improve, with direct influences on physical and psychological well-being of the inhabitants. Heritage policies could turn to better and energy-saving living places, also contributing to reduce the consumption of land and contrasting excessive urbanisation processes; to sources of income for their inhabitants thanks to new small compatible economic activities, for example in the areas of services, crafts, and high-quality tourism; and to sources of historic and cultural knowledge (also in the sense of material culture) for visitors.



Fig.2. Settlement in the Drâa Valley, Morocco

Moreover, vernacular built heritage can be seen as 'the essence of sustainability', being constructed with local materials and the minimum waste of resources. Even with the awareness that materials and techniques once cheap and self-provided within the community may today be sometimes quite expensive and less efficient compared to industrialised ones, it's necessary to enquire on their possible present use.

In this scenario technology is conceived as a result of historic and contextual process of the society to which it belongs and, at an operative level, as made up of sets of methods and tools, scientific knowledge, technical and organizational skills, which are capable of producing goods and services relevant to satisfying human needs and wants.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

Three are the suggested fields of action. The first concerns the developing of a systematic research to tie innovation and tradition (as architect Alvaro Siza Vieira said, "*tradition is a challenge to innovation*"). It means promoting the study of traditional technologies and materials and enquiring on their potential nowadays application, on compatibility with the requirements of modern living, enhancing them where needed; and on their environmental sustainability both in terms of energy consumption and of maintenance.



Fig.3. Use of local materials and technologies (Morocco)

Two concepts are connected to this approach: technological hybridisation and appropriate and sustainable technology. With technology hybridisation we mean the combination of local and low cost materials and advanced technologies, which implies the contribution of methodological research, experimentation, calculation and testing in large quantities, and the use of relatively expensive imported materials in small quantities.

The concept of appropriate and sustainable technology permits local needs to be met more effectively, because local people are involved in identifying and working to address these needs, allowing the integration of local traditions and values. Besides, it allows a more economical operation by minimising the transport of goods in an era of expensive energy, allowing greater interaction of local industry and permitting greater use of local resources – both material and human, skills and knowledge. At last, it makes unnecessary many expensive or unavailable finance, transportation, education, advertising, management, and energy services; and avoids the loss of local control that use of such outside services implies.

The second research line pertains to the identification of 'light' methodologies of investigation and survey. Low-cost and easy-to-use computer technologies and software could be customised and arranged in new operating processes providing a basis for collecting, elaborating and confronting data on vernacular architectural heritage and its preservation. To understand how a building is constructed, how it works, it's a prerequisite to make the inhabitants, the decision-makers and the larger public appreciate its inherent qualities, to manage and transform it correctly, and to take benefit from its environmental and economic values.

The third thematic area regards the development of awareness-raising methods and participatory techniques with special attention to strategies that engage families, communities and local authorities in problem analysis and search for solutions.

Community participation is necessary to obtain appropriate

solutions. The agreement between project solutions and user's requirements may avoid wastes in resources with non asked performances. That is particularly important in situations with strong budget constraint.

Community participation leads to better results in project delivery because of a better chance of knowing beneficiary preference; it leads to easier acceptance of project results by beneficiaries and to better economy of projects because of participation directly reducing costs and enhanced willingness to pay.



Fig. 4. Casbah in the qsar of Tamnougalt

Only local communities – both as individual citizens and in groups and associations – can perform those everyday, minute and innumerable acts of maintenance which, taken as a whole, make vernacular heritage survive. Many of those acts are performed by women. They have a close relationship with the context in which they live so they can have a key role in actions of protection, maintenance and valorisation.

At the same time, awareness-building devices addressed to groups of professionals have been investigated, to promote knowledge and safeguard of vernacular heritage from decision-makers, civil servants, urban planners, architects, entrepreneurs, developers, etc.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Much has been done, at the European Community and national levels, and a significant part of the monumental heritage has been restored, renovated, and made accessible to the broader public. Not the same can be said about this 'minor' heritage, i.e., urban fabrics, vernacular buildings and settlements, not labelled as worthy of attention and special protection measures – nor socially considered as status-promoting in many European, and also Mediterranean, country. In many places, on the contrary, a 'tourist-oriented' fake vernacular has developed, often condemning to decay and abandonment existing vernacular buildings and settlements.

Now time has come to fully recognise also this part of our architectural heritage as a determining factor in the quality of life and as a vehicle of cultural identity, not opposed to modernisation and the rising of the living conditions.

To enhance conservation and preservation of this 'living'

heritage is necessary to think about actions integrating human development and conservation within a comprehensive strategy. It means to build capacity at the local level and among site management authorities.

Activities must meet and ensure conditions for local appropriation by involving the widest possible range of local interested parties more closely, to stimulate the appropriation by the inhabitants of their own environment of life, to promote self-reliance towards the interventions of architecture rehabilitation, to reinvigorate its perception as a fundamental vehicle of cultural identity and custodian of collective memory, to hint at its characteristics of economic sustainability and its potentialities as generator of employment and quality of life.



Fig. 5. Tamnougalt. The future?

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