



International workshop
Venice - March 11-12 1999
Concepts and Paradigms of Urban Management
in the Context of Developing Countries



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"World Heritage"

My contribution centres on research on the origin, meaning and applications of the concept or paradigm of "World Heritage" underlying the new orthodoxy of cultural globalization.

I will show how dependent and professional thinking has influenced conventional wisdom laid down by international institutions, such as UNESCO; I will also examine the role of researchers and practitioners. What results can there be on the World Heritage Convention, and especially on the protection of cultural property conservation and the highlighting of practice? What is the Convention's effectiveness regarding the World Heritage List? Other approaches involve a selective perception: doesn't the list integrate some editorial and mediatic approaches in assimilating just one "heritage" with its possible touristic attraction? The List has become a list of the world's wonders: What is the Convention's credibility in view of the influence of the media?

I have examined a possible common policy of conservation and putting into practice all of the World Heritage Towns (see Management Guide : the recommendations of World Heritage Towns Organization). The pragmatism of WHTO's Management Guide and the Convention's presentation considered World Heritage inside several cultural areas as a typology defined according to different parameters : function, civilization and artistic or historical epochs or styles. The elitist UNESCO attitude instituted a policy of assistance: there are those who know and those who don't know about safeguarding practices..., and this attitude is now widespread. The treatment of architectural forms or building materials have become generalised with the institution of one doctrine grouped together with some strategic and political points of view (in the World Heritage Committee, the States choose the international professionals). The safeguarding of the original town of Tunis can be taken as an example.

Tunis is an example of putting into practice ideas that were contrary to the those of the World Heritage Convention, with its humanist ideals and its political philosophy of redemption. Nevertheless, the experience of Tunis has been designated as a model: Tunis was the Cultural Capital-city in 1997 and it has received three Aga Khan Prizes for Architecture. In Hafsia (an urban district inside Tunis' madina, the original historic town), some buildings which could have been kept have been razed to the ground, or premises have been forcibly vacated of their inhabitants. But the new single-family neighbourhood which has been built respects the Arab-Muslim architecture and there is now a reconstituted "real" Arab district inside an "authentic" urban order. However, the architectural forms which weren't deemed fit to be part of that civilizations' and artistic history have been forgotten. This fonctionnal typology coincides with the media-inspired typology of the World's wonders. The rule of researchers and practitioners is primordial: the different categories of "heritage" such as towns (identified according to fonctionnal, historic and aesthetic criteria) have been claimed by the collective memory after their designation by the scientific community. The latter is the necessary intermediary because the local, national or international scholars have all the necessary knowledge on the situation. To this end, Tunis and its madina have benefited from a favourable media image: the safeguard professionals are acting in the context of an association (Association de Sauvegarde de la Médina : the A.S.M.) which acts as a black box for Tunis Municipality's actions in the madina.

In fact, the present "patrimonialization" of the old town of Tunis is linked to its spatial fonctionnalization: the

madina has become a new scene, a monumental space with a touristic vocation. The madina is in the centre of political debate and the results are the substitution of one population by another through gentrification and the substitution of artisanal activities by others through tertiarization. The reference model - which has been underlined as an example of protection in Tunis -- is the Parisian "Marais"; I have already identified some common characteristics: art galleries, luxury shops, literary pubs, cultural activities organized by associations, homosexual "archipelagoes". Economic activities, sponsored cultural activities and private investment have taken the place of public investment. The key to reading these patrimonialization activities could be the effective institutionnalization of the madina as collective heritage. However the sleeping partner is political: behind the patrimonialization of a particular space, there is the claim of one's national cultural identity. The architects are one of the institutional instruments used in order to magnify an urban order and to recuperate the larger gentrification movement using words aimed at giving a positive image in a touristic country.

The universal message of UNESCO has appealed to cultural diversity. The original melting-pot of Tunis' madina has been disturbed under the pretext of current urban performance standards. The limits to be given to a common urban standard are in the respect of the singularity of a place, and not in the magnification of one particular aspect through the theatralization of all the place and its definitive distortion.

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