

# **THE VALUE OF HERITAGE IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD**

## **A new perspective on the role of cultural heritage**

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### **CULTURAL HERITAGE IN A GLOBAL SOCIETY**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, “heritage” has come to signify far more than tourist attractions and impressive historical monuments. Alongside great architectural icons like Angkor Wat and Chartres Cathedral are places where the communal ethos and memories are embedded and transmitted from one generation to the next, such as the inspiring District Six Museum, a site of conscience in Cape Town, South Africa; place-specific rituals and events that periodically bring a community together, such as the Fallas in Valencia or New Year celebrations in Chinese communities throughout the world; and unique examples of “intangible heritage” such the masks, textiles, and embroidery of the participants in Bolivia’s Carnival of Oruro or the multicultural carnival celebrations in Rio.

This expanded understanding of what heritage is and the growing respect for culture as a human right of all, including minorities and migrants, have brought official recognition to the traditions and creative expressions of groups and communities, to the special places where important social interactions that sustain communal life and common values take place, and to the distinctive cultural landscapes of regional and national significance around the world.

By engaging all citizen-stakeholders in helping to determine what is important to them, what should be saved or safeguarded, and what stories are important to tell, “heritage” can encourage positive identity among individuals and foster mutual and universal respect and appreciation for the collective memory of all communities, whether living side by side or far from each other. When managed with sensitivity, heritage can be used to build bridges that facilitate social solidarity through community-based programs of heritage enhancement, inter-generational and inter-cultural dialogues, and civic life.

In today’s world, where radical demographic shifts are transforming society, the task of building cohesive communities is a critical task. Urban societies have grown increasingly multicultural as groups of different ethnicities, and with distinct cultures, languages and traditions come to live – sometimes uneasily – side by side. Many

people, often immigrants, find themselves in environments that are new or historically alien to them, to wit London's Asian populations, France's African communities, Germany's Turkish "guest workers", and Latinos in the United States. Similar situations occur throughout the developing world when rural inhabitants move to urban centers and face the challenges of the built environment, social interactions, living traditions and mores that are foreign to them. This is the case with rural migrants in the São Paulo *favelas* and all *bidonvilles* in Africa.

While the multiculturalization of societies is widely seen as a positive goal, the achievement of real coexistence and positive social interaction is often extremely elusive in spaces shared or contested by disparate groups whose mistrust of outsiders is driven by perceptions of real or imagined threats to their way of life; threats that acquire ominous dimensions by remaining unaddressed by the larger society. Territorial fragmentation and ethnic encapsulations (ghettos) are often the undesirable result of demographic change, together with social conflict and even violence.

During times of rapid change like those we are experiencing in our increasingly globalized world, people cling to the familiar – their heritage – as an anchor of identity and security. Heritage plays an important, yet vastly unrecognized role in promoting a shared society by fostering contacts among different groups and creating social cohesion based on new, shared identities. We all must go beyond mere respect for diversity and for other people's heritage and reposition heritage as a physical and symbolic tool that brings harmony in purpose and a common identity to all who share a society/common space.

This vision creates new, participatory processes of decision-making for heritage conservation and interpretation that enhance the universal appreciation of the whole range of places, traditions and history that are held dear by the communities within a certain society and promote social solidarity in even the most challenging of political and economic contexts.

## **THE MULTIPLE VALUES OF HERITAGE**

In order to do this it is necessary to move away from outdated concepts of heritage that divide groups and privilege some at the expense of others, and come to see it as a shared resource with a new social role. In general terms, cultural heritage consists of certain ideas and their manifestations inherited from the far past as well as from more recent eras, which we have come to value for specific reasons. The values attributed to these tangible and intangible heritage elements are many and can change over time.

To take one famous heritage site as an example of this multiplicity of values, the World Heritage City of Santiago de Compostela is described by UNESCO thus: "This famous pilgrimage site in north-west Spain became a symbol in the Spanish Christians' struggle against Islam. Destroyed by the Muslims at the end of the 10th century, it was completely rebuilt in the following century. With its Romanesque, Gothic and Baroque

buildings, the Old Town of Santiago is one of the world's most beautiful urban areas. The oldest monuments are grouped around the tomb of St James and the cathedral, which contains the remarkable Pórtico de la Gloria”.i

The local authorities (Concello de Santiago) describe its significance in slightly different terms: “Santiago de Compostela is a World Heritage City, pilgrimage destination, cultural capital and example of historical, urban and environmental regeneration, which attracts thousands of visitors due to its singularity. Santiago, the capital of Galicia, is also a centre of institutional services, with a privileged location on the Atlantic Axis. The city also has a deep-rooted university tradition, which supplies innovative business initiatives with technological and scientific resources”. In the published information they also chose to emphasize the quality of life and of the environment, cultural and educational activities, its importance in the diffusion of Galician language, culture, food and festivals, its commitment to equal opportunities for all inhabitants, and its economic value, based on several factors, including tourism. ii

A travel group points out that “Santiago is certainly one of Spain's most monumental towns with a particular architectural style all of its own. But it is as well a town which plenty of life, with one of the most famous Universities and a large number of students who guarantee youthful ambience in between the historical walls. Also the region's cuisine is of great reputation, and it is said that nowhere you can eat better sea-food than in Galicia”.iii

The published statements of three stakeholder groups identify a multiplicity of values: symbolic, religious, historic, architectonic and aesthetic, environmental, social, and economic. Other stakeholders in the community – social, religious and artistic groups, students, long time residents, immigrants, etc., will identify not only other values, but specific areas of the city that have particular significance for them.

The preservation and regional development agendas are both a reflection and an expression of the desires and aspirations of each self-defined stakeholder group, they recognize the special meanings attributed by them to certain aspects of the territory's geography, history and traditions, and use that information to promote understanding, create common social spaces, and bring about the best conditions for the well-being of all residents and visitors. Based on the recognition of and respect for a multiplicity of values in heritage elements, numerous intangible heritage activities can become an additional and important platform for the larger goals of the Shared Societies Program.

## **HERITAGE AND THE SHARED SOCIETIES PROGRAM**

When viewed as a vessel of a multiplicity of values, cultural heritage can be a strong component of several of the Shared Societies Program's central Commitments.

- The historic environment and objects that constitute cultural heritage are where multicultural communities live today. In addition to constituting a considerable monetary investment inherited from the past, the character and human scale of traditional built environments are conducive to interactive community living and to the use of public spaces for common purposes. (Commitment VI)
- The processes of identification, conservation and interpretation of cultural heritage provide a unique opportunity for consultation with and empowerment of all stakeholders in the community. Social sectors that previously lived in isolation are effectively brought into the social and political arena as full participants (Commitment II)
- The recognition of multiple values in cultural sites, together with a participatory process of identification and stewardship of these values, promotes respect and appreciation for the cultural heritage of others as well as one's own. In addition, it recognizes the contribution of past generations and looks out for the rights of future ones (Commitment IX)

New heritage approaches can offer direct and engaging platforms to help achieve some of the most important of them:

**Civil Society** – In the contemporary world of massive migration, rapid development, ethnic and religious tensions, and a regrettably wide gulf between the world's rich and poor populations, new approaches to heritage as a sustainable, shared source of pride and cultural resource can have an enormously positive social effect, with beneficial repercussion in many unrelated sectors of society. The problem of multiculturalism cannot be solved either by segregation into ethnic enclaves nor through unrealistic expectations of rapid assimilation into the "mainstream."

All human groups have values that must be respected as a necessary precondition to social cohesion and equality of opportunity. Each heritage stakeholder community, while retaining its own identity, is also a pixel that contributes to the overall image of a shared society. That larger, composite image needs to be made known and cherished by all who are part of it.

**Community Identity** – In both immigrant and indigenous communities, pride in one's culture identity is an earnestly sought, yet increasingly elusive goal. The sustainability of cultures, of communities transplanted from one place to another or from rural to urban areas is a central problem of intergenerational concern. New approaches to heritage can offer a vehicle for communities to preserve their traditions in a way that does not make them a retreat from wider civil life. Our experience shows that helping communities understand and prioritize their heritage often uncovers new paths that lead

away from the culture of poverty without sacrificing important elements of cherished communal traditions and cultural identities.

**Economic Development** - For too long the quantifiable economic dimension of heritage has been seen exclusively as “tourist attractions” that can bolster a local economy through ticket sales and the arrival of visitors with disposable cash. But economic development can be stimulated in more pervasive and at times unquantifiable ways for visitors and for the local population by preserving quality of life in the historic city; through community rejuvenation that does not require gentrification; with energy efficient rehabilitation and the inherently sustainable reuse of historic structures for new purposes; and fostering traditional economic activities through micro-loans.

**Open Government** – The tradition of heritage preservation and commemoration has always been from the top down. Professionals and planners have decided what is important and what is valuable without serious input from the general public. Yet, the creation of local heritage boards and stakeholder consultation frameworks empowers communities and individual citizens with civic responsibilities to discuss and participate in the decision-making processes that shape the places where they live, work and play. Engagement in such open fora allows all groups to decide how their heritage will be presented and shared with the outside world, and how they contribute to the creation of a shared society.

## **THE NEED FOR HERITAGE TOOLS IN THE SHARED SOCIETIES’ KIT**

New tools are needed that will identify and protect the heritage of multiple groups as the new composite heritage of modern multicultural societies (developed, developing, and underdeveloped); and that will generate new appreciation and meaning among resident communities for the heritage places of others where they currently live, but whose original stakeholders, while still valuing them, are no longer resident. These tools will promote an appreciation of heritage places as points of convergence (rather than conflict) by multiple groups, and that together hold shared meaning for all society. Our heritage – like democracy itself – must be shared for the benefit of all.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/347>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.santiagodecompostela.org/english.php>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.red2000.com/spain/santiago/>