Caring for creative possibility: Locality as heritage

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Abstract

This paper addresses the problem of how to articulate the notions of heritage and locality, while looking at accessible public space as the ground for the awareness of its possibilities. Acknowledging the importance of scattered creative and co-creative experiments – spatial and political practices which are seen as proposals with great cultural value – what is proposed is a challenge: to look at neighborhoods as players in a more densely connected urban narrative. The way heritage is reinterpreted appears then as a citizenly contribution for a more diverse urban sensescape, where values such as vicinity or provocation can become operative. A major conclusion is that an ethics of the curatorial – as implied in the concept by Irit Rogoff – is the basis for a pragmatics of the urban realm where heritage can have a *futurant* sense.

Keywords: Public Space, Culture, Curatorial, Heritage, Locality, Spatial Practice

So the everyday (as a theoretical and practical arena) has the potential ability of producing, not difference, but commonality. It might be that this is where its generative ability lies.

Ben Highmore (2012: 2)

This paper addresses the problem of how to articulate accessible public space with a wider awareness of its possibilities. But there is a difficulty: how shall the multidimensional experience of the urban everyday, of art in the city and of the subtle strategies of the curatorial (Rogoff, 2015) become a matter of heritage (management)? How can such distinct intangibilities be articulated and fuel consciousness in the urban stage and how might awareness rise out of the communication of concepts and the production of situations and encounters happening on the urban stage?

I speak from the perspective of Cultural Studies, arguing, as a principle and with Ben Highmore that "everyday life studies demands the kind of attention to form that is usually reserved for art." (Highmore, 2012: xiii) For Lefèbvre, "it is in everyday life and starting from everyday life that genuine creations are achieved, those creations which produce the Human and to which men produce as part of the process of becoming Human: works of creativity." (Johnstone, 2012: 31)

1. Contrasting localities

Community-based artworks, for instance, are indisputably co-creative models for concrete localized communities to co-enunciate both locality and a global meaning, sometimes in eloquent intercultural interaction. Street-based social awareness becomes visible in many other sorts of urban interventions in the fields of performance and the visual arts, some led by the State, others by invisible urban players.

It is within this emerging narrative of inclusive articulation that all sorts of grassroots cultural projects, in particular those implying the practice of everyday life spaces (de Certeau, 1984) can appropriate the local to turn it a part of a global conscience. Interdependent of the knowledge of how networks can be used to design a collective horizon, these spatial practices, despite their very diverse typologies, have become sometimes a part of more or less official (political) discourse.

So the attention shifts from the global to the local which is appearing must ground its reasoning in a better and better understanding of a globalized world and its multilayered narratives – both in their 'positive' and 'negative' practical consequences, be it within the perspectives of critical scepticism (Critical Theory) or in the sphere of motivational entrepreneurialism (Creative Industries). The city, also as an ecosystem of values and ethical positions, demands from citizens and the urban powers that be to recognize the many faces of pluralism (Nawratek, 2012).

There is then something intangible in common between projects like Fábrica Braço de Prata (a cultural factory mentored by a renowned philosopher) and Travessa da Ermida (a venue for culture and art owned by an esteemed ophthalmologist). The added value that these projects lend to the city, and in particular to its neighbourhoods, comes from their potentially intertwined perspectives, which materialize as free-access urban cultural concepts, but only as long as their contrasting identity is kept dynamically clear.

2. It's happening in the neighborhood

Lisbon has witnessed new movements such as municipal entities promoting street art (GAU) or fostering citizen participation in local partnerships (BIP ZIP programme). On the other hand, the recent popular upheaval against the demolition of an old building in Praça das Flores should not be understood independently of a distant fact: a group of cultural managers, architects and other members of the community activating a whole area of Ponta Delgada by means of the 'Quarteirão' – an expression where the vernacular fully overlaps the limits of the intervention (a city block), in expressive transparency.

That's why small organizations like Palácio Belmonte – run by a free-thinking economist and self-styled landscape collector – create their own very specific urban cultural intervention and communication strategies, completely 'separated' but also parasitically 'integrated' in the urban narrative (of Lisbon, and of Lisbon as touristic destination in particular), both questioning and challenging policies while fuelling their discursive potential by means of ambiguity or even controversy.

We know from human geography or urbanism that any dynamic city is a balance of density, diversity and complexity. But still, it is an ever-present philosophical challenge to know how to continually redefine complexity in a world where hegemonies such as those of commerce and industry disturb the transformative powers of locality. Here the concept of hegemony (Laclau, 1996) can become highly operative. This means inventing and more or less regularly communicating practices for dealing not only with the dimension of particularity, but also, and in particular, with the dimension of time in urban life, which of course implies introducing the idea of our critical understanding of heritage (heritage being a result and a legacy of the awareness of time, independently of its scope).

3. Sensing a future

Because urbanity is, amongst other things, about activating the senses, and aesthetic participation in the world is still a crucial endeavour toward a complex idea of citizenship, to interpret and then participate in urban reality is then a crucial aspect of creative citizenship (and not only to produce nice things to embellish the latest hostel or barber shop – even when these reach high levels of artistry or design proficiency). The problem is frequently one of an impossible translation, one that is frequently 'lost': the past into the future. Memory into engagement. The moment back to the historical. For Carlos Fortuna (1996), it is about choosing now, in the pure contingency of the present moment, what to share with future generations, in a time defined by the flux generated by the Internet.

The void, along with multifunctional takes on the materiality of the built environment – approaches that many planners and politicians seem to fear – is for instance as inspiring as the consolidated city when it comes to breathing life into the urban fabric. Now, what is crucial is to study the ways this emerges in terms of our sensorial life. Along with the emergence of critical endeavors such as vertical urbanism (Campos, 2011) what is at stake are the means of a redistribution of the urban sensible (to paraphrase Rancière, 2014), the idea of sensescape in Landry (2012) is here an absolutely precise, and at the same time highly captivating concept, because, in its straightforwardness, anyone can appropriate it.

4. Cultural developments

Each new project with urban cultural relevance must then point to a specific approach of certain urban elements — for instance endangered heritage, buildings or traditions whose value is not adequately acknowledged, or simply a funding opportunity that a set of partners could try to explore. It is about seizing the occasion by means of a reconceptualization of shared space, memory, identity, or, of course, the immaterial character of an atmosphere.

We could remind ourselves here of Charles Landry's (2012: 13) idea of "urban literacy" (understanding how places work). There is a whole jargon available here, which goes from the more active perspectives – Cirugeda's recetas urbanas, for example – to categorizations such as Mary Louise Pratt's concept of contact zones – where various identities are taken up, protected, discombobulated and played out (Green, 2003: 27).

So, there is thus a global community highly aware of the issues of locality and at the same time struggling for their own ways to cope with globalization. On the other hand, Krzysztof Nawratek (2012: 69) says that when considering the city as a biopolitical machine there are incorporeal (law) and material (urban fabric) factors that "shape human behaviour, sustain interpersonal relationships – and, in general, shape a certain type of human being as a citizen, or user of a city."

One might reflect then on how urban art influences this process and even takes part in its policies. For the inspiration and creation process of urban scape interventions it is highly important to investigate the local palimpsest of the city fabric – crossing its multilayered structures, in social, historical, and geographical senses. Take the example of the activity of Palácio Belmonte in the surrounding ruins at Pátio de D. Fradique.

In recent years, the production of large scale artworks (Disoriented Pavilion, by Camila Cañeque, in 2014; Things to Come, by Stefan Kornacki, in 2015) strikingly transformed the atmosphere of the place for months, by ephemeral installations which obviously both enriched the experience of traversing the place, no less than its publicity; such ephemeral aesthetic improvements were an added value the owner of the Palace managed to offer to the guests of his Alojamento Local (Local Accommodation). A highly specific spatial configuration (remains of the eighteenth century earthquake) thus becomes an infrastructure for ongoing symbolic renovation. The complexity of the results is enormous, when one considers the sheer amount of passersby of all sorts of nationalities, and the way that a private entrepreneur interacted with the narrative of the district and the neighbourhood – the iconic Castelo area.

A particularly rhetorical statement of this attitude was a 'sail' installed on the terrace (a work by Jana Matejkova-Middleton): in that privately owned area, a beautiful terrace, visible from afar, like a flagship, the installation turned the huge building symbolically into a vessel. Furthermore it should be noted that in this gesture Belmonte – internationally acknowledged for a skilled tradition-based renewal (heritage craft) – demonstrated how an intuitive curatorial and art production strategy within a long-term commitment to heritage and identity can be productively mixed with short-term provocations.

This is in line with a note by Carlos Fortuna:

> There is a futurant sense in heritage, sometimes unexpected, which can be passed to the next generations. The only condition is that it does not remain a prey of the action and the rhetoric of the nostalgic touristic market. (Fortuna, 2016: 7)

This leads me to praise the virtues and virtualities of the curatorial, when it manages to convey aspirations of diverse communities and partnerships in dialogue. You don't even need the works to be conversational (Kester, 2005) – in the sense of imposing a top-down dialogism – it is good enough to let diverse agents acknowledge a certain degree of (non-)participation (the idea, in Babo (2015) of the public as an activated entity). In some cases, the process can start following political decision" (Lorente, 2002: 94), which is of great interest in the realm of contemporary policies for sustainable cities.

One could argue that in this regard, if/how/when art is fuelling the vitality of the neighborhood, the mere fact that artistic interventions interrupt the local everyday, leads not only citizens, but also policy-makers, to react. It imposes an aesthetic challenge, an activation of opinion.

5. Conclusion(s)

> We need to flesh a notion of aesthetics as it might impact
> on the theorizing of everyday.
> Ben Highmore (2002: 19)

In many of the cases I have studied, artistic and urban culture projects somehow generate folds in the tiring or at least inconsequent narratives of tourism (or politics), while not completely losing their connection to valid grand narratives (from Community to Tradition or Myth).

One could argue that local inventions like the ones I have been mentioning are contributing to a certain competitiveness based on locality – and specifically local heritage – that ultimately could contribute to more diversity in public life. As Landry (2012: 29) states, "the public realm acts as the connective tissue within which the buildings forechords and streets a pattern of mosaic. The urban design knits the parts of the city together into a more seamless whole, so each element gains from its proximity to the next." This is where density appears related to complexity (richness of localities), while contributing to turn the public realm into a public experience of a potentiality democratic diversity. But this, of course, only if ultimately the authorities in charge manage the difficult mix of control and freedom to boost creativity while not killing its creative power.

After all, heritage is always envisaged by each epochs' driving forces and we are never sure about which are the most insightful). For Fortuna, the notion of heritage is intrinsically presentist (Fortuna, 2016: 7). So, it is up to the management of culture to create platforms for broad and comprehensive debates to deepen our knowledge of urban public spaces and broaden the possibilities for neighborhoods.

My perspective oscillates between critical positions and a pragmatic renewal perspective. I wonder how to reconcile these two valid perspectives, when deeper philosophical insights are difficult to translate into immediate planning actions; while immediate planning actions are too often fuelled by conventional ideas of the city and the needs of the people.

I just wonder where to stand, if one could ask me where to be. For in the urban scape we are challenged to face immediate and strategic issues, within broader or tighter senses of temporality. That is no less what an architect like Siza Vieira recently demonstrated in the Venice Architecture Biennale: a value as important for any street as neighbor-ness (vizinhança), appearing as a value the urban professional and no less any citizen needs to take into consideration. For Grande and Cremascoli (2016) the mechanisms to save material heritage do exist; but not to save the immaterial heritage of people and citizen relations, as progressively conquered along history (many times painfully). It has always been a history where vicinity, tolerance and multiculturalism were not given, but fought for. For Grande and Cremascoli (2016) as arguably for Steiner, that is even the basis for any idea of Europe.

Very interestingly, these issues are difficult to appear as individual building blocks of a larger panorama; in any case it is important to remind the reader of the defining aspects of this process of Siza in Venice. It tells a lot about how a multidisciplinary and collaborative take on the territory and all its potentiality can create situations which shed light on the present, the future and the past (as a creative way to acknowledge many dimensions of the challenges implied).

Nuno Grande, the curator, tells an important tale:
> Following an invitation by the Ministry of Culture of the Portuguese Government to curate the contents for the pavilion of Portugal in the 15th Architecture Biennale 2016, we decided to present a proposal which could interact directly with the physical and social fabric of that city, exposing, simultaneously, what is happening in other European 'vicinities.'
> (Grande & Cremascoli, 2016: 35)

Further, according to Grande:
> Facing the impossibility of realizing the Pavilion of Portugal in the heart of the Biennale – in the space of the Giardini or the Arsenale where the country doesn't have a fixed venue – we proposed to localize it in an expectant site in Venice, there where the Portuguese representation could contribute to interpolate the remaining Venetian neighbors. The chosen space was Campo di Marte, in the island of Giudecca, less exposed to the touristic and artistic pressures generated by the Biennale (Grande & Cremascoli, 2016: 35).

What is striking in this proposal is the fact that it originated from an unusual cooperation between local inhabitants, architects, authorities and the Italian Institute for Social Dwelling (ATER), provoking a change in the horizon: the need for the authorities to do something about the renewal of the area. What here is possibly just generating more artistic and architectural pressure in the area is always an issue, but no less important is the fact that a cohesive gesture generates a public sphere, since action provokes all sorts of reactions. Such manifestations of projectual wit may lead to the social and public acknowledgement that the city is a grammar that potentially any agent, individually or collectively, can try to deal with. In the very words of Grande, "the Portuguese participation went beyond a mere representation of architecture to appear in the public realm as a manifest on the idea of vicinity." (Grande & Cremascoli, 2016: 35)

Arguably, there is a lot of work to be done in order to translate the exceptionality of what one learns in Venice (or an alley in Lisbon such as Travessa da Ermida – where continuous cultural activity includes artistic projects (street art interventions, public sculptures) and, most strikingly, the innovative reinterpretation of mythical public space thorough narrative thinking (Caeiro, 2014: 191), or a lost secret gem of locality as the Palácio Belmonte) into the broader reality of cities. Maybe it is the communication potential of portals – places where past and future meet without touching (Morton, 13) – that ultimately fuels the contact between distant worlds.

The narratives behind being a city-user are today as vague as they are inoperative, when not adequately put into perspective by the agents involved. Seixas (2016) who was concerned with such somehow paralyzing heteronomy, ultimately for the benefit of short-sighted cultural businesses, reminds us that cities are noteworthy accumulators of human energy (Seixas, 2016: 57) and thus our responsibility, as managers of places and carers for their vitality, is to make sure the ecosystems of locality can overcome the most hegemonic globalization industries in order for a bottom-up industry of hegemonic locality to redeem our forgotten urbanity. The ethics of the curatorial, and its care for a long terms commitment to the aesthetic of urbanity, could be a response to a situation where many spaces in the city "fall prey to exogenous, sudden and violent transformations, where a rhetoric of connectivity between the individual, territory and urbanity is absent" (Seixas, 2016: 61).

That is what art – and all the civic arts in particular – has always taught us, to learn to be surprised by the everyday landscape. Moreover: art redistributes the city, even – or better said, particularly – when it is disguised as the most humble response to local needs, the creative origin of the art of the urban. I would say that the changes needed could be grounded on the basis of a specific practice: the translation of conceptual values into living models for citizen encounters and motivating narratives.

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