

Nasos Alexis & Laura Verdelli

THE COST OF URBAN HERITAGE: DISCUSSION WITH BERTRAND JOLIT¹

This article summarizes the thoughts that emerged during an interview with Mr. Bertrand Jolit on 8th February 2015) discussing the management of urban heritage as a form of private property and, by extension, the role it plays in the formation of a collective asset for the character of an area. As the abstract of an article by Einar Bowitz and Karin Ibenholt says: *“Investments in cultural heritage are often claimed to be beneficial for a local economy, not only in terms of cultural consumption, but also in the form of increased employment and income”*², the literature on this matter, even if the methods to calculate direct and indirect impacts are still very basic, is increasing. Heritage is considered as a socio-economic development factor, but the first sector that is addressed by heritage conservation projects is cultural tourism and visits, which often lead to a staged heritage.

But what about ordinary, everyday life in added-value heritage buildings?

How do ordinary people, owners of ‘old’ buildings, deal with costly restorations, constraining rules, and lack of skills (starting with their own, but going up to craftsmen)?

How does the action of ‘ordinary’ people (as well owners and professionals) contribute to the general and overall conservation of the built up heritage (made up of both tangible and intangible components)?

How does it keep heritage alive?

How does it avoid having ‘only’ protected monuments that are preserved?

If, following the more recent theories, we assume that there is no conservation without social conservation, what is the role individuals are playing in sustaining a complex, complete and general heritage environment?

How does heritage conservation contribute to the preservation of place and people identity?

How does the so-called sustainable development (mostly reduced to energy issues, which are

only part of the environmental pillar, and very rarely including the social one) interfere with contemporary built up heritage conservation?

We will try to answer some of these questions starting from the very operational perspective and the reflections of an architect confronted daily with the very basic choice: is it worth preserving 'old' buildings or is it easier, faster and cheaper to build new ones?

KEYWORDS

cultural heritage, urban heritage, sustainable urban development, thermal regulations (e.g. French RT2012), public good, resilience.

Urban heritage has nowadays become a very hot topic in the discussions on urban development, as it relates directly to the social aspect of sustainability. It is a component of the collective culture of a place and its people and it constitutes a public good. As such, it exists for the benefit and the delight of the public. Nevertheless, there are frequent occasions on which urban heritage attributes are found on private property or possessions. Inevitably, this creates different conditions and needs with regard to the management of heritage conveyors. As privatization is fiercely encouraged in a global context, the notion of private initiatives concerning the preservation, accentuation and management of urban heritage gains ground. This practice poses a threat to the very role of heritage regarding monuments, public space or other urban elements that fall within the realm of public culture. In the case of private property, it is, however, the only available means of management and as such should be promoted and, conditionally, supported by the state or the local authorities. At the same time, as a public good, it should be regulated, controlled and protected.

Where do we stand today in terms of urban heritage protection and restoration?

"Well nowadays the keyword is sustainable development", says Mr. Bertrand Jolit "What makes me smile today is the fact that we are going to build houses in the same way that our grandfathers used to build them, which means with very thick walls, no openings on the north, large openings towards the south. In terms of heating they are trying to recommend nearly woodstoves, we collect rainwater and all those various things that used to make people smile at about 10 years ago but nowadays everybody feels concerned about it."

There is a documented return to traditional methods and tools. The value of heritage is nowadays appreciated not just as a static item but also in the principles that re-introduce the knowledge of the past. By applying the practices that were used in the past, when technology didn't offer so many conveniences and people needed to resort to more natural means, perhaps we manage to advance sustainability in the best possible way.

But what obstacles are there when we try to mix traditional ways with the modern mentality and lifestyle?

"...As far as I am concerned, in my main activity when I organize the restoration of old houses, which means mansions or manors, the real problem is people that feel, or pretend to feel, concerned about architecture and decoration, they keep telling me they'd like to see exposed stones on the outside walls. And it's difficult for me to make them understand that the time has gone when we could do that. Because first of all it'd cost them a fortune if they didn't put insulation on the outside walls, to organize a proper heating of the house and secondly it doesn't really comply with this new recommendation that we have, which is called the RT2012 and encourages people to organize

better insulation. It means that I have to twist their arm more or less in order to encourage them to introduce this notion of insulation.”

Along with the methods and practices come the traditional materials. Industrialized materials have been used in construction for too long, especially since the need for larger quantities became imperative. Apart from the obvious convenience that the industry has offered, one must admit that the appearance of the buildings has changed dramatically. In addition and despite the abundance of different types and designs, it seems that only the traditional materials have the ability to draw out the real quality of the traditional building techniques.

How has our attitude towards traditional materials and techniques changed over the years?

“... About 30 or 40 years ago, when I started my activity, removing clay tiles and even creating openings in the walls meant that all that there was left after the opening was created or after we had removed all the clay tiles, was just emptied in a pond instead of being picked up and stored somewhere. Yesterday we didn't know what to do with it, today it costs a fortune if you want to buy a square metre of original clay tiles. We are up to €60 per square metre, when in the past we used to empty them in pits here and there. The same applies to the natural stone. There was a time, about 20 or 25 years ago, when people didn't feel too concerned about when they created openings in their old houses. They refused to put natural stones because they pretended it cost too much money. Today people want natural stone. Therefore, all those natural stones we had to throw away in pits, today we just collect them in wooden crates and they are for sale. So the local masons who deal with restored, old houses are very happy to have natural materials in order to use them. In the same way, these old

timbers, things like the old oak that about 25 years ago we used to cut into pieces in order to put them in our fireplaces, today we keep them and we re-use them. If today I need some natural oak beams in order to rebuild a new floor in an old house, it's a hell of a job to find some kind of an antique dealer who has gradually decided to specialize in selling old materials like old clay tiles, old stone dormers or stone fountains or just stones or clay tiles. In order to organize my sites, I spend more time with antique dealers who have specialized in that trade rather than with people selling some brand new materials in order to restore these houses.”

Do you find it difficult only to have the materials or also to have the people that are able to work with them?

“I feel it will be awfully difficult in about 10 - 20 years' time to have the people, the craftsmen who can do the job properly. We French build brand new houses today exactly the same way that the British used to build houses 40 years ago. 40 years ago you only needed to find some brick layers that could do the cavity wall and you organize some kind of a rectangular volume and the roofing was easy because you'd only have two slopes, the partitions were prefab, the electricity was also a system that was prefabricated, no local joiner could manufacture a proper door or a window, you had to buy everything directly from a factory, I repeat it was about 40 years ago and gradually today the joiners are disappearing one after the other and the new generation is going just to set into position windows and doors that will have been manufactured in factories. So just to answer your question about the ability of those craftsmen, I think in about 20 years of time they will be gone, it will be awfully difficult to find people who can just use the old materials the way they have always been used.”

Even if more and more people are speaking about how nice it was in the past?

“...the real problem is if you want to keep these craftsmen doing a proper job then pay them, give them a decent salary. Today these people that have been doing this fantastic job for years and years, for nearly 30 years of time, maybe they get 1300, 1400 euros per month. So nobody, who is a young lad, is prepared to work for such a low salary with that fantastic knowledge. I think it's a matter of salary. In the building trade if you want to attract a young generation to do the jobs as their ancestors used to do, pay them correctly. Just a matter of salary, I think.”

Mr. Bertrand Jolit addresses the topic of the cost of preservation of heritage at a private level; the restoration and preservation of privately owned buildings, not protected as Historical Monuments, mostly residential, that can fall under the regulations of the “*Fondation du Patrimoine*”³ and at the same time, have to comply with modern building requirements regarding environmental performance. By extension, the discussion is about the role of the architects and how “market rules” affect the conveyance of crafts and skills to the next generations, resulting in the survival of those traditional practices or condemning them to oblivion. The mention of “free” market rules is not accidental and doesn't lack semantics. A notion that is raised during the interview, albeit not advocated, is that heritage is something for the rich. The peril in this concept is that parts of the population can eventually be excluded from using the public good that is cultural heritage. What we need to remember, however, is that urban heritage, in the form that we perceive it today, comprises the vernacular architecture of each place but (especially when the discussion is about restoration of old residences) also that it is often the middle or low

income groups of a population that inhabited those buildings in the first place. By extension this means that the demographic groups that played the most essential role in creating a big part of urban heritage are nowadays threatened with exclusion from it. “It's about the cost per square metre”, Mr. Bertrand Jolit says. “Today, if you buy an old house and you want to have it restored in a nice way, in the way that it should be restored, which is nice and solid and strong and something that has real value the day you decide to sell, it costs about €1600 per sq. m. That's the cost of a brand new building, if you have a new house built. But it means then you have to buy an old house and you measure the inside, you multiply by €1600 and you know your budget. People just can't afford it today.”

Can this situation be avoided or reversed, where it is already established? Since the free market has largely failed to create any degree of equality, could state intervention in the form of financial measures be a viable alternative? It is important to highlight the notion of reciprocity. An old manor, however glorious an example of vernacular architecture it might be, would be nothing without the general context of the space surrounding it. Individual structures give character but also deduce identity from their context. It is the collective result of the evolution of space, the adaptation of human practices to climatic, social and economic factors that shape heritage as we perceive it today. In other words, it is the sustainability of the past that is present today and as such it is, by definition, public. It cannot become a privilege of the rich or depend on wealth for its survival. According to Mr. Bertrand Jolit “*The State is not helping a lot.*” It seems that there are very limited financial incentives offered at the moment. “*The other way the State is helping is, if you decide to introduce this notion of sustainable development, it's because they allow the contractors to*

charge VAT at 5.5%. Therefore if they decide to organize the outside [partition] with lining on an old building it's 5.5%. If you buy a boiler and the boiler complies with the French regulation then it's 5.5%. Everything that is linked with the insulation is 5.5%. Still it's even more vicious than that. Because if the contractor wants to practice this 5.5%, he has to go and take some kind of an exam, I think some energy performance diagnosis (e.g. French DPE), he needs to comply with this new system of regulation which will entitle him to practice this VAT at 5.5%. That's the only advantage there is in the system."

Even under these strict regulations, people still value and appreciate heritage and are interested in making it part of their everyday life, to the extent it is possible. But the opportunities remain essentially available only to the richer, as Mr. Bertrand Jolit points out.

"But then people do accept it, you know? I told you that I restored fairly recently a very large house. Someone spends all together about €1 million on an old house, and he wanted to have heated floors. I said OK, but if you want to have heated floors (and we had ceilings of nearly 4 meters high), it won't be sufficient to create the proper 20°C inside. Therefore not only shall we have to organize the heated floor but I will need to adapt some radiators on the outside. So he told me, oh no, if I put the heated floor it's just to get rid of the radiators. I said fair enough, but then we will have to organize the insulation. And the thing is, he had to pay an extra €20.000 just to have the proper insulation. And he said OK Mr Jolit you go ahead with the insulation. So in this 17th century house, he decided to have this proper insulation just in order to avoid this notion of putting radiators against the walls because he didn't want to see them. It just gives a modern approach to the restoration; if you have the heated floor, nobody sees the radiators, therefore it looks free of anything that wouldn't be appropriate with the 17th century style."

The outside insulation, if done properly, doesn't affect the exterior of the building and therefore the properties that are of heritage importance. Furthermore, according to Mr. Bertrand Jolit, the STAP⁴ does not intervene, unless a building is within a radius of 500 metres of a monument⁵. They can, however, impose extra rules and limitations, depending for instance on whether the owner of a building is applying for tax facilities. In such cases, the "Fondation du Patrimoine" also gets involved. Does the law discriminate between private and public?

Is this rule strictly applied both to small particulars and big institutions?

"Yes, it goes for everybody. It's quite clever. For instance, I worked for a young couple, they had a tiny little house that was 25 square metres. I added up on the side of it one little bedroom with one little bathroom and toilet, all together maybe I added 15 sq.m., which was a tiny project. Because this extension that was created was over 30% of the existing area, I had to comply with this new rule of the RT2012. Therefore I got some polyurethane sheet and made a space that was completely super-insulated and with a proportion of 1/6th of the area created with the windows opening outside and in the end it cost a lot of money to this couple. But as I told them, don't regret this money that you put today, because tomorrow it will cost you far less in terms of what you'll have to pay for heating the house.

The mind-set is quite correct. If it's only about restoring old houses and you are not adding any square footage, on top, you do what you want. As far as the law is concerned, I only have to comply with this new RT 2012 only if I create an extension which is more than 30% of the existing area. But if it is less or if it's just an old building, it's just a matter of economy. Which means that I have to tell my client that if you put some insulation on the lining of the outside walls you will spend far less money to warm it and to keep the steady temperature at 20°C rather

than if you don't put anything at all. So the client is quite sensitive to that. Then they understand."

The new regulations have altered the profession. First of all, they create a stricter framework in which the architect can move. But there is also the paperwork that needs to be done in order for a complete dossier to be filed in for the permit. In terms of engineering, additional load is required for the calculations of the proper insulation and type of heating that will be installed. By extension, this also affects the external appearance of the buildings with regard to the number or size of windows, dormers etc. Finally, the requirement for the buildings to produce 20% of the energy they consume has created the need for the installation of solar panels, which has also a very obvious effect on the external attributes. But how is the new regulation affecting the architect's creativity?

"...I'd say it's only if you are very old-minded that you say that it cuts your creativity. But for instance, what created that attractive approach on our little houses, architectural details like a dormer, in the future we will not have any more dormers, because on the side of the dormers we can't put proper insulation. Therefore we will probably have some roof window lines following the slope of the roof that could be vertical eventually, but simply in order not to have the heat running away through the sides of your dormer. So the style of architecture will change because of the regulation."

Traditionally, what defined the style of these buildings were the particular needs that they needed to address. Today the architecture is changing due to the regulations.

"...Our houses will have to be designed differently. In this country for instance the houses only have two slopes. They have always had two slopes. And when you walk around all the various estates you sometimes see that they have 4 slopes. This was done only to comply with the regulation but not with the acclimatisation,

not with the climate. It's only because there was a new law so we had to adapt ourselves. And I regret it, because it changed the appearance of the landscape. When you have a house with four slopes it has nothing to do in our area. To my mind, according to what I have always seen, it is completely artificial."

Therefore there is a great responsibility shared among those who set the new regulations. In particular, considering that traditional architecture is location-based and by extension very much diverse between places even within the same country, the rules cannot be universal, they also have to be flexible and adapted to the identity of each region.

So the aesthetics are more a question of answering constraints than having an idea of morphology.

"France is a country that more than 60 million people visit. It is not to see our modern architecture. It's to see or just to appreciate what was done in the past and I feel sorry that, what we do today doesn't correspond to what existed in the past. We are inventing some closed space which doesn't correspond to the architecture that existed in the past. I am not trying to remain stiff on what existed before, but I keep repeating that I regret that it is the applicable regulation and in order to comply with the rule we have to change completely the architecture. Which means that all around France fairly soon, the style of houses will be exactly the same."

But don't you think it's related to the fact that architecture for private use isn't a status symbol anymore? You have more and more iconic buildings made by big firms but then people just prefer cars or television or satellite things more than...

"I think it's a matter of money. I feel there are so many people who would like to keep houses with the soul they had in the origin, but certainly when

the roofer tells you, if you want to keep those two dormers, here, first of all the mason will have to do a little bit of work and this little bit of work will be about €2000 and if we re-roof them after organizing all the carpentry work and all the roofing work and it will be another €3000, those people are not prepared to spend €5000 because they don't have the money, therefore they knock them down and replace them by two roof window lines..."

But they probably use the €5000 to go skiing. It's just a question of priorities. The aesthetics of architecture is not any more a priority.

"Yes, yes. I have to agree to what you mentioned here. Yes, definitely. It's a matter of priority. They don't feel too much concerned about the quality of architecture. Only a few people, but you need to have wealth and quite often if you have wealth and you have the culture. Yes, I had not really thought about it in the way that you introduce it, but certainly people feel concerned about architecture because they have the culture to do it. And the culture quite often... this notion of culture... means that they have the wealth and they will do things properly. For sure the two, wealth and culture, are linked."

Something seems to be changing...

Despite the limitations and regulations, it appears that the number of people who are concerned about heritage preservation is increasing as is the number of buildings that are restored in a way that promotes the principles of sustainable development. So what is it that makes people so interested in and committed to urban heritage? Nostalgia? Mr. Bertrand Jolit certainly thinks so. Whatever the reason, this is undoubtedly positive progress, as due to the lack of maintenance or abandonment, a large number of traditional buildings in France have already been lost and more are threatened. But apparently, nowadays, we have come

to realize that apart from the market price, buildings can relay other intangible, conceptual values, related to their past. Mr. Bertrand Jolit compares traditional buildings to classic sport cars in order to give an example: "...if you find an old Peugeot 403 to be restored and an old Jaguar XK140, it costs about the same price to have them sprayed and repainted and have the body rebuilt completely but by the time they are both finished, they don't have the same value."

Questions that remain unanswered.

What is the balance between regulations and incentives? To what extent should private initiative be allowed when it comes to urban heritage? Who should bear the cost and how should the benefit diffuse in a city and among the society?

Financial aid of all sorts is a burden to the state budget and therefore should be prioritized, especially in times of crisis. Incentives aim to level the inequalities between poor and rich regarding the ease of access to public goods or services. They are also meant to ensure the fair redistribution of resources and, as was explained earlier, urban heritage can be considered to be a resource. Therefore it can be argued that a state policy which allows populations with specific attributes to utilize reduced costs or tax facilities for example is justified.

What is the role and responsibility of the architects and other professionals in the field, regarding the preservation and accentuation of urban heritage as a cultural asset? Is it static? Safeguarding traditional values is of course a legitimate stance but the dialogue today is focused on resilience. Apart from resilient cities, we should discuss about resilient properties or attributes that spaces have. Urban heritage, along with the components that relay it are such attributes. In order for it to be preserved and act as a merit that continues to add value, the way we stand towards it, rather than heritage itself, needs to be adaptive. An expression of

this adaptation is the case of old buildings to be restored and used for residential purposes, galleries, studios, recreational avenues etc. As long as the proposed use is in sync with the character of the building and the spatial context in which it is going to be introduced, the purpose of preservation is served, provided of course that the restoration process is done properly. And this is exactly where the role of the authorities is essential. Quoting Mr. Bertrand Jolit, “*too much law kills the law*”, this could be the case here. In fact, too much law can kill the very vision of preservation of heritage. Severe hindrances or unnecessary limitations may discourage people who were initially interested in acquiring and restoring a heritage asset. The same is the situation with the, often unbearable, cost of a restoration. State authorities should, of course, impose the laws and regulations that govern heritage preservation as a whole, but should always see to it that they do not set obstacles that force people to eventually consider heritage preservation as something that is none of their business or beyond their reach.

Equally important (if not more), is the role of the state in education. Cultural heritage, the past of which is urban heritage, is imprinted in the social, collective conscious through education and cultivation. The ability to acknowledge but also the ability to produce is something that needs to be passed on to the next generations. State-funded workshops and/or handcraft exhibitions that promote traditional methods of building could be an answer. Especially as this model of promotion is largely available to the public, it can also become a response to the argument that wealth and culture are directly linked.

Coming back to the question of the title, what is the real cost of heritage? Or what is the cost for the society in the case of a disconnection between the people and their culture? In the era of globalization, our cultural background might

be one of the very few things that allow us to maintain our sense of identity. It might be better to spread the cost of preservation based on income criteria and favour the underprivileged rather than accept the risk to deprive a large part of the population of their sense of cultural roots and connections with their past.

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1. Mr. Bertrand Jolit has been working as an architect in the French Indre-et-Loire department for over 30 years, mostly restoring, conserving and adapting non-protected (rural) heritage to the present-day way of life and to contemporary society as well as to contemporary standards and requirements
 2. Einar Bowitz and Karin Ibenholt, “Economic impacts of cultural heritage – Research and perspectives”, *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 10 (2009) 1-8
 3. Created by the French law of 2 July 1996 and recognized as public utility by a decree of 18 April 1997, the *Fondation du patrimoine* has been mandated to safeguard and enhance the built heritage of proximity often unprotected by the State as historical monument. Alongside the State and the major stakeholders, it helps public owners to finance their projects, allows private owners to reduce taxation on their works, and mobilizes corporate sponsorship. The *Fondation du patrimoine* is the only private organization authorized by the French Ministry of Economy and Finance to award a label to a restoration operation on an unprotected building, but with a real heritage interest. Under certain conditions, this label allows private owners to benefit from incentive tax deductions for external works done on buildings visible from the public road. <https://www.fondation-patrimoine.org>
 4. The Territorial Service of Architecture and Heritage (STAP) is a part of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication with offices in each department of the country. To know more about the STAP, please refer to another article of this book: Supportive guidelines as a tool for the conception of local urban plans, by Mélanie Riauté.
 5. The French law 43-92 of 25 February 1943 concerning Historical Monuments, institutes a buffer zone of 500 metres of radius around any protected building. Within this radius, all changes on (ordinary) buildings must be approved by the State services in charge of heritage protection (in particular the STAP), especially if they are visible at the same time or from the protected monument.