OLD TOWNS IN "SMART CITIES" BETWEEN CONSERVATION AND METAMORPHOSIS. PENDING EUROPEAN UNION GUIDELINES

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Abstract. *In reflecting upon the role of environmental capital as represented by old towns in smart cities, the author reveals the consequences of re-plastering the facade of ancient buildings while emphasizing the resulting risk of globalization of historic districts. This is followed by a critical consideration concerning the active protection of old towns and their cultural typicality and geographical context, prerequisites for the development of specific guide-lines for the European Union. Explanation is also provided about how the restoration dynamics of the old towns are irreversibly changing the urban landscape in European cities. Strict regulations regarding the preservation of European old towns will become increasingly essential to preserve local cultures and material authenticity.*
Keywords: *old town, smart city, globalization, preservation, restoration.*

The role of social and environmental capital within the urban performance of "smart cities" has been widely discussed. Undoubtedly, cultural heritage is a matrix of identity as well as a development tool for contemporary cities and metropolises[1]. The often-elusive concept of smart city has recently been introduced as a strategic device to encompass modern urban production factors that enhance the competitive profile of a city[2]. What role do old towns and historic districts play in the geography of smart cities in the European Union? The performance of smart cities will be increasingly influenced by specific attention focused on the urban environment and landscape, evaluated in terms of the degree of conservation of urban morphology and buildings in old towns. In the future, the concept of smart city will mostly emphasize the role of human capital/education, social and relational capital and environmental interest as important drivers of urban growth. Intelligent management of old towns will require real citizen participation in the maintenance and use/re-use of buildings and sites. This implies a new kind of governance, based on tangible citizen involvement in public policy[3].

Under these conditions, is a city smart that does not defend its historical identity? Can the typological and philological approaches still be considered as strategic methods to preserve the landscape of historic quarters in cities? And what

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[1] Carta, M. (2009). *L'armatura culturale del territorio: il patrimonio culturale come matrice di identità e strumento di sviluppo,* Milano; Scavone, V. (2009). *Città, identità storica e perdita dei confini*, Roma.
[2] Caragliu, A.; & Del Bo, C.; & Nijkamp, P. (2009), *Smart Cities in Europe*, Amsterdam, 45-59.
[3] Seisdedos, G. (2012), *Qué es una Smart City?*, in "Monogràfico. El camino hacia las smart cities", Madrid, 35-37; Kincaid, D. (2002), *Adapting buildings for changing uses*, London, New York, 13-20.

moderate globalization measures are undertaken by the European Union within its strategy for creating a competitive environment?

The campaigns for the restoration of old towns and maintenance of facades carried out in many European cities have often led to profound alterations in the historical landscape of the old districts. The surface of historic buildings plays a crucial role in the perception of ancient contexts and the tendency to replace or paint the plaster has changed the character of many historical sites. The material surfaces of ancient buildings should be considered the non-replicable resources that define the habitat and historic landscape. Surfaces convey the image of the historic districts and therefore their urban landscape; they contribute to defining that peculiar atmosphere that permeates the old towns of European cities. But, even today, the most widespread opinion (even among conservation "experts") is that the restoration of monuments and sites should pursue the illusory goal of "a return to their former splendour". This concept is manipulated and distorted in order to obtain quick and easy profits at the expense of architectural heritage, which belongs to the community and should be preserved with the highest respect for the value of authenticity. This trend leads more and more to a destructive metamorphosis of historical buildings and European districts[4].

A strange idea of "preservation" arose in Italy in the 1970s and the meaning of the terms "restoration", "conservation" and "maintenance" has been distorted and directed toward economic interests[5]. In truth, they are complex cultural actions based on a rigorous methodological approach but, in recent times, have become a simple evaluation of taste to be performed "with a brush". They are just common interventions to replace the plaster or change the colours of the facades, which are generally considered evanescent "wings", conveying a false message of decorum. At many historical sites, entire blocks were demolished to make way for new reinforced concrete buildings. Unfortunately, the replacement of buildings and the renovation of facades are also prevalent in the historic districts of many European cities owing to misunderstandings about the means and aims of conservation and restoration. Because of the poor examples offered by public institutions, many think that the renewal of surfaces is a normal restoration operation. In point of fact, many old plasters are in good condition and could be consolidated and cleaned to preserve them with modest expenditures[6] (*figs. 1-3*).

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[4] Tomaselli, F.; & Ventimiglia, G.M. (2013). *Superfici materiche nella percezione della scena urbana*, in Trapani, V.; & Vesco, I., *Madonie, Madonie. Divagazioni sull'habitat contemporaneo*, Palermo, 36-43.

[5] Carbonara, G. (2009). *Orientamenti teorici e di metodo nel restauro*, in Fiorani, D., *Restauro e tecnologie in Architettura*, Roma, pp. 15-41.

[6] Ventimiglia, G.M. (2010). *Piano col colore! Mezzo secolo di contraffazioni nei centri storici*, in "Ananke", Firenze, 59, 124-143; Ventimiglia, G.M. (2013). *Finte Pietre. Architettura dell'apparire e conservazione dei valori culturali*, Roma.

The specific relationships between places, identity and culture can be analysed in historical districts with interesting results: the alterations of the sites and their significance in the process of globalization are key themes of the contemporary debate. Each inhabited place cannot be considered merely as a container because people create emotional bonds and have a sense of belonging. Every person is not only localized but also defined with reference to a personal sense of place[7]. An old district is a unique combination of features characterized by a specific landscape, a context of actions and a stage for social events, a space that is emotionally experienced. Hence, each site is a spatial context, something physically or mentally determined; a place that gives meaning to space, form and materials[8]. Local communities created places and gave them names and functions, establishing multiple relationships of belonging; then they gave a character to the places in terms of culture, defining their meaning. Over time, every place realized its visual identity and space, perceived as a place, which encouraged the development of relationships. In fact, the place is not just a small space (a settlement or a house); on the contrary, every place is a small world that can be as big as a planet[9].

This complex and unique balance in European old towns is being threatened by the heavy process of globalization: the same plasters and building materials produced by multinational corporations are rapidly spreading through the historical districts of Turin, Barcelona, Prague, Naples, London, Portofino, Palermo, Vienna and of many other cities (*figs. 4-9*). Globalization implicates the metamorphosis of places of memory, but will it be possible in the future to recognize the historic districts or the ancient buildings situated outside the urban area? One of the most disqualifying planning tools for the old town is the so-called "colour plan", designed in Italy and promulgated in 1978 for the city of Turin, and then enacted in many other Italian cities[10].

The need to maintain historic districts is now widely recognized and internationally debated. According to John Stubbs, distractions while monitoring interventions may have effects on the sense of belonging to the place and to such an extent that even operations orchestrated to be carried out at the local level can give the impression that sites are owned by outsiders. To avoid serious consequences, any kind of intervention on architectural heritage should carefully consider its social, cultural and economic implications, and from the very beginning of the

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[7] Crang, M. (1998). *Cultural geography*, Routledge, Londra, 102; Massey, D.; & Jess, P. (2001). *Luoghi, culture, globalizzazione*, Torino, (1995 I ed.), VII-XIV, 97-100, 159-161, 187-214.

[8] Page, M.; & Mason, R. (2004). *Giving preservation an history*, London, New York; Tyler, N.; & Ligibel, T.J.; & Tyler, I.R. (2009). *Historic preservation*, London, New York.

[9] Yi-Fu, Tuan (1977). *Space and place: humanistic perspectives,* in "Progress in Geography", 6, 233-246.

[10] Aveta, A.; & Amore, R.; & Megna, C. (1993). *Il colore delle città. Note per il restauro delle cortine edilizie napoletane*, Napoli, 7-16; Ventimiglia, G.M. (2013). *Città, intonaci, colore*, Roma.

planning activities[11]. Globalization is transforming historic neighbourhoods into an undefined global village, without character and cultural incentives for residents and visitors alike. As noted by Giddens in 1990, globalization, intended as the most visible consequence of modernity, deeply modifies the relationship between place and time, resulting in a system of production and exchange where "local" is meaningless, and a growing number of people is influenced by globalized social relations, increasingly affecting the most important aspects of daily life[12].

The re-plastering and painting of historic buildings are becoming a popular trend in Europe, but such a phenomenon must be contained and regulated in order to protect historical landscapes and the local features of the material culture. Interest in the urban fabric of historic buildings is at the heart of the Italian concept of restoration. Minor buildings should be considered the product of human labour that, although devoid of artistic intentionality, tends to express an art of living and handcraftsmanship mostly linked to the phenomena of spontaneous growth. As a result, smaller buildings claim to be protected owing to their historic testimony and, even more so, because they are part of a structure. Each molecule of the human universe deserves to be conserved in its relationship with the others and, together, constitute an organism. This molecular chain, once broken, is damaged in its entirety. It is therefore necessary to know and study these organisms, and to identify the values and suggest appropriate methods of intervention in order to support and provide guidelines for both public and private sector-specific professions.[13]

Currently, the focus of conservation rarely has gone beyond the visual aspects, even believing that a "colour plan" or some attention to urban furniture design can be exhaustive for conservation purposes[14]. Even today, anachronistically, many restoration activities are based on the method applied by Gianfranco Caniggia to the town of Como in the 1970s. Despite that, the protection of minor architecture became an important topic during those years; no value was given before to the urban scene and small buildings were only a sort of frame for monumental architectures[15]. Indeed, the preservation of ancient architectural facades is part of a more general question within the restoration discipline: many mistakes are made if facades are considered an independent part of the architectural organism. The buildings of the past represent the culture of their time and

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[11] Stubbs, J. (2009). *Time honored. A global view of Architecture conservation*, Wiley, New Jersey, 9.

[12] Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*, Cambridge, 79.

[13] Dalla Negra, R. (2009). *Questioni di metodo nello studio degli aggregati urbani. Riflessi per la disciplina del restauro*, in Varagnoli, C., *Muri parlanti. Prospettive per l'analisi e la conservazione dell'edilizia storica*, Firenze, 191-196.

[14] *Ibidem.*

[15] Della Torre, S. (1995). *La speranza di un divenire organico del nostro mondo. Gianfranco Caniggia e la città di Como*, in Ananke, 9, 14-39.

are historical entities capable of providing information about the world that produced them. As a result, the buildings in old towns should be regarded as a permanent historical value to be preserved in their state of authenticity[16]. Any work to be done in European historic districts must be based on a critical attitude that separates the past from the present, placing the evidence of the past in its real historical dimension[17].

Cesare Brandi pointed out that the question of colour in old buildings is as important as the patina or the varnish in the restoration of paintings, and that there is no difference from a theoretical point of view. Architecture, however, is related to urbanism, which is not only a discipline but also a way to represent the city as a set of buildings in its historic identity. The urban surrounding plays an essential role for understanding each historic building and this texture will inevitably acquire the same importance as the building itself[18]. Brandi condemned stylistic restoration for the detrimental results it caused; in his vision, the chromatic treatments are also philologically unfounded because it is impossible to identify the original colour without misinterpretation[19].

It is important to recall that modern historiography has redeemed the value of architectural documents: they are authentic sources of information and have unlimited documentary potential when they become the subjects of research. As a consequence, stratifications should be maintained in the architecture through a methodological conservative process. The professional activities related to architectural heritage should be directed towards new professional ethics in order to protect a community's landscapes and monuments. An essential element disappears with every reproduction: the *hic et nunc* of the authentic work[20]. Many restorers often misinterpret the meaning of "conservation" and believe that restoring the forms of the past or suggesting forms that refer to the original idea is equivalent to preserving, but the historical authenticity is lost.

Form exists through a material medium. Surfaces are, therefore, the most external part of the material's texture, the skin and the building's contour, all modi-

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[16] Grassi, L., *Restauro*, 33-34, 40; Grimoldi, A. (1981). *Contro il ripristino tipologico*, in Di Biase, C., *Riuso e riqualificazione edilizia negli anni '80*, Milano, 388-395; Carbonara, G. (1997). *Avvicinamento al restauro*, Napoli, 536.

[17] Bonelli, R. (1959). *Architettura e restauro*, Venezia, 13; Sette, M.P. (2001). *Il restauro in architettura*, Torino, 33, 203; Panofsky, E. (1955). *Il significato nelle arti visive (Meaning in the visual arts. Papers in and on art history)*, 31-57.

[18] Brandi, C., *Intonaci, colori e coloriture*, in *Bollettino d'Arte*, 35-36, I, 6-8; Brandi, C. (2005). *Il restauro, teoria e pratica*, Roma, 54-60; Brandi, C. (1963). *Teoria del Restauro*, 9; Brandi, C. (1950). *Il ristabilimento dell'unità potenziale dell'opera d'arte*, Bollettino dell'Istituto Centrale del Restauro, 2, Roma, 3-9.

[19] Fiorani, D. (2005). *Il colore dell'edilizia storica*, Roma; Miarelli Mariani, G., *Coloriture urbane: omologazioni fra uniformità e dissonanze*, in Ananke, 10, 10-23; Ventimiglia, G. M. (2012). *Città, intonaci, colore*, Roma.

[20] Benjamin, W. (1955). *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica. Arte e società di massa*, 17-56 (I ed., Paris, 1936).

fied by time, light and atmosphere; in other words, the primary agents of the urban landscape[21]. Form, therefore, is always made of materials, and the "real presences" in the European territory will be irretrievably lost if the surfaces of buildings at historic sites are destroyed or re-painted[22]. Equivalence between physical objects and documents is established by Jacques Le Goff and he emphasizes that collective memory and its scientific form, i.e., history, apply to two types of materials: documents and monuments. Moreover, today, historical reflection applies also to the absence of documents[23]. For these reasons, a typological or philological restoration, or one that merely involves the facades may never achieve the objective of respecting the memory of or preserving the structure, or even of safeguarding the environment, something that an act of falsification does quite often by annulling memory and the passage of time[24].

The pandemic painting of old buildings in Europe is a phenomenon that distorts the meaning of preservation which, from a cultural gesture, has become more and more a frivolous exercise in urban decor. If ancient buildings reveal the signs of time, may they be considered indecorous or without dignity? In many cases, the "aesthetics instance" is nothing more than a distorted response to the request for urban decor[25]. The distinction between centre and periphery is often absent, and generalized re-plastering is destroying a significant collection of local materials. Stylistic restoration has arisen again, despite the fact that the modern culture of restoration focuses more on rigorous conservation[26].

The European Union should ask each country to draw up and adopt specific regulations to protect monuments and sites, and limit the effects of globalization on local cultures. A specific commission could play an important role in the development of a coherent policy strategy to preserve the system of old towns and historic districts in order to face the challenges of globalization. The commission could attentively analyse the local urban plans and control the main trends to guarantee sustainable social growth, while preserving architectural identity and the local urban morphology.

The consequences of globalization may also have a negative impact on tourist flows if the same plasters and building materials are applied everywhere. The Union should develop a greater conservative instinct and certify appropriate cultural training of restorers, architects and engineers within the university system. Respect for authenticity, minimal interventions and obligatory scheduled maintenance are the main elements of the future guidelines for the preservation of old

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[21] Focillon, H. (1943). *Vita delle forme*, 11-12, 51-67 (*Vie des formes*, Paris, 1934).

[22] Steiner, G. (1991). *Vere presenze*, (I ed., 1986), 17-57.

[23] Le Goff, J. (1982). *Storia e memoria*, Torino, 93, 443.

[24] On the subject of authenticity, consult Marino, B.G. (2006). *Restauro e autenticità. Nodi e questioni critiche*, Napoli; Bellini, A. (1986). *Tecniche della conservazione*, Milano, 17.

[25] Doglioni, F. (2008). *Nel restauro. Progetti per le architetture del passato*, 168-171.

[26] Feiffer, C. (1989). *Il progetto di conservazione*, Milano, 437; Feiffer, C. (1997). *La conservazione delle superfici intonacate*, Milano, 437.

towns. The characteristic variety of architectural heritage and European cultural landscapes requires flexible rules, detailed criteria for each building and preservation techniques instead of painting palettes or homologating standards. Can a city really be "smart" and "creative" if its historical identity becomes increasingly fragile and globalized? We are currently going through a global economic crisis, but this crisis, more than just economical, is basically cultural by nature[27]. The methods of traditional urbanism are no longer suited to regulate the historical microcosms and their relationship with the urban organism in its entirety; they can't regulate actions on such an intricate typology of structures and materials[28]. The obsolete definition of standards and the schematic nature of the interventions are the main limitations, and they seriously affect the outcomes of urban planning in old towns[29].

Globalization could have negative consequences on many European landscapes and places. The risk is particularly high today and everyone can perceive the effects of the changes taking place in old towns as well. In any event, the hope that the European Union can guarantee the protection of local cultures and historical scenery remains a fervent one. In conclusion, the preservation of historic identity prompts the formulation of a new strategic agenda for smart cities in Europe in order to achieve sustainable urban development and to improve the urban landscape.

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[27] Carta, M. (2007). *Creative city. Dynamics, innovations, actions*, Palermo, 11-24; Carta, M. (2014). *Reimagining urbanism*, Palermo, 101-113.

[28] A clear vision in Carta, M., *Reimagining urbanism*, cit., 149-153.

[29] Cannarozzo, T. (1999). *Temi e problemi della città meridionale*, in Cannarozzo, T., *Dal recupero del patrimonio edilizio alla riqualificazione dei centri storici*, Palermo, 27; Baldi, M.E. (2007). *Per una cultura del paesaggio*, Palermo, 171-188.
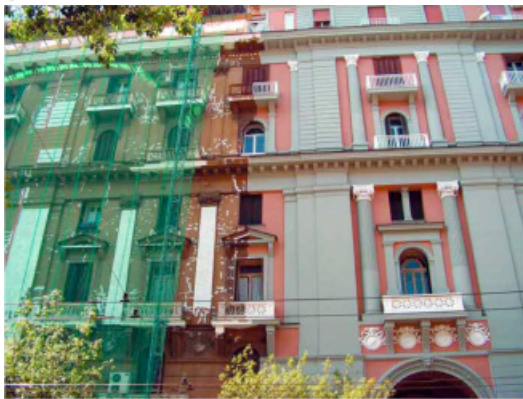
1-3. Palermo, St Cecilia Theatre, plaster integration, consolidation and cleaning with water sprays (Tomaselli, 1997); 4. Prague; 5. London; 6. Naples; 7. Palermo; 8. Portofino; 9. Turin