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A cura di Mario Bisson

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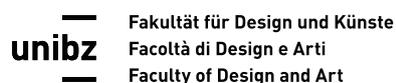
# 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on Environmental Design

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# The user's perspective in architectural heritage

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## KEYWORDS:

| Accessibility  
| Adaptive Reuse  
| Architectural Heritage  
| Environmental Design  
| User's Perspective.

## Abstract

*Currently, the awareness has been widely acquired that appropriate use is an important condition for saving architectural heritage: as well as many others requisites (manageability, maintainability, and security) similarly accessibility has become common to any settlement, including the built heritage.*

*Keeping in mind this general framework, the paper will outline the link between architectural heritage and the user's perspective, intended as the paramount basis both of technological design and health science.*

*The intertwined relationships between socio-cultural and economical aspects clarify the features of the use of this specific form of built environment, proposed as a thought provoking application field to be focused on within the Environmental Design.*

## Introduction: the use of architectural heritage

The very idea of architectural heritage includes its dynamic essence, because it consists of its subjective or collective significances, much more than of its objective nature. The comparison between the meanings given to the built heritage during different epochs could easily prove this.

The First Industrial Revolution has expanded the original concept of monument: something not only devoted to perpetuating a memory, but also, above all, a testimony of an increasingly distant and alien Past. The awareness of the distance from contemporaneity (evident in technological, typological, and morphological buildings' and cities' features) was the main factor in the appearance of the idea of architectural heritage; at the same time, the primary imperative of its conservation has arisen as a consequence of the substantial differences between the inherited built heritage and the contemporary buildings and settlements.

Following the development of the restoration's theories, the issue of using has increasingly supplemented the conservation's needs, becoming the main distinguishing feature of architectural heritage, compared to the wider cultural heritage, starting with the knowing and understanding processes (Germanà 2015). In fact, it has always been clear that the functional features (original use and successive changes through time) contribute to the whole identity of architectural heritage and that they are always a reference of its manifold meanings and values (Riegl 1982). The well-known distinction between the dead monuments (ruined and further from contemporaneity, like the archaeological buildings) and the alive monuments, in the Thirties of the last century introduced the opportunity of using architectural heritage; however at that time the conviction prevailed that one had to choose only uses not very different from the original ones, in order to avoid excessive alterations<sup>1</sup>.

During the second half of the 20th century many experiences, studies, and shared documents have fed the continuous evolution of the issue of using architectural herit-

age. The Amsterdam Declaration in 1975 marked a milestone of this evolution, summarising some novelties in approaching this theme:

- the inclusion of the urban and landscape scale in the heritage meanings, that has contributed to a wider vision, embracing the human and social dimensions;
- the consequent awareness of the complex weaving of functional, social, and cultural features of architectural heritage, both in its original identity and as a premise of its contemporary existence;
- the opportunity for historic buildings and areas to have new functions, consistent with the demands of contemporary life, has become a prerequisite for their conservation (CoE 1975).

These novelties, in sum, have paved the path towards the current paradigm of the adaptive reuse: using the built heritage has nowadays become an apparently obvious choice. But its sense is completely different from the physiological activity frequent in the preindustrial tradition and it poses both theoretical and design challenges, due to the conflicting requirements of using and conserving<sup>2</sup>. In comparison to the above-mentioned imperative of the conservation, the use of architectural heritage is not longer considered a “necessary evil” (Della Torre 2012), but rather a precondition for survival, provided that this theme is considered in all phases of the knowing, conservation and enhancement processes, starting from the programming phase.

## Ways and meanings of the use of architectural heritage

In coherence with the holistic approach currently invoked for architectural heritage, the requirement of usability – as well as other requisites, like manageability, maintainability, and security – acquires specific dimensions and meanings, despite having the same importance than in the ordinary built environment. Generally, one can find the theme of the use in the architectural Vitruvian Triad (Firmitas, Utilitas, Venustas) and subsequently even after, until the contemporary quality standards of buildings (obtained when the requirements posed by the needs, deriving exactly from the specific use, are fulfilled). The comparison between two statements, written with a chronological distance of five hundred and twenty years, helps to confirm that the use has continuously played a central role in the architecture:

- 1) Leon Battista Alberti defined the Architect as following: «Chiamiamo architetto colui che ha appreso ... a divisare e anche nei fatti a eseguire tutte quelle cose che ... meglio si possono adattare all’uso degli uomini; e per poter far ciò, bisogna ch’ei conosca e padroneggi cose ottime ed eccellenti»<sup>3</sup>.
- 2) According to the European Directive on the recognition of professional qualification, one of the required skills of the Architect is even today «understanding of the relationship between people and buildings, and between buildings and their environment, and of the need to relate buildings and the spaces between them to human needs and scale» (CoE 2005).

Following this general consideration, the need for thought arises on how the use changes, in case of the built environment acquires a certain meaning of heritage.

Firstly, the use of architectural heritage occurs in two possible ways: directly or indirectly. The direct user is a person (resident or visitor) that is in physical contact with the built heritage, as individual or as part of a community (Fig. 1). The physical contact could be intentional or unintentional, sporadic or continuous, individual or collective (Fig. 2); it always generates consequences on the material essence of the built heritage, both positive (using is a premise for caring), and negative (using could produce overusing and, consequently, many damages).

### 01

*The daily path within the archaeological site of Dougga (Tunisia) of an inhabitant of a near village (credits: M. L. Germanà, 2014).*





02

Visitors and tourist operators in a mixed crowd, in an ordinary morning in front of the Pantheon in Rome (credits: M. L. Germanà, 2017).

access it. The level of users' understanding and awareness influences the qualitative aspects of the use, greatly impacting on the management.

Finally, all the ways of using architectural heritage, both direct and indirect, are currently undergoing the changes of the digitalisation (Fig. 3), whose disruptive theoretical and operational effects allow new kinds of memory and extraordinary experiential forms, expressing huge potentialities and controversial risks (Germanà 2018 and 2019).



03

03

Digital devices are increasingly a habitual medium between the visitors and the cultural sites: for instance, none of Bernini's or Caravaggio's admirers do without a smartphone (credits: M. L. Germanà, 2017)

### User's perspective in architectural design and in architectural heritage

The user's point of view is the main perspective and the basis of every quality oriented intervention and, for this reason, it has acquired paramount importance in the technological disciplines. In fact, current architectural design culture is nowadays completely aware of the user's perspective, in coherence with the advances of the health science and within a holistic framework of the perceptual/sensory experience. The influence of the quality standards has pushed the production of goods and services towards an increasing interest on the user/customer. The Fourth Industrial Revolution has confirmed this global trend; for instance, the User-Centered Design (UCD) and the User experience (UX) are key topics in the web design and digital communications issues (US Dept. of Health and Human Services 2006).

Architectural design has been oriented towards the human being for a long time before and the interest towards the user's perspective is certainly not new. All its scales focus on the human being, as the famous words by Ernesto Natham Rogers "from the spoon to the city" well summarise. The user's perspective has offered the conceptual basis to the Performance Building Design (PBD), developed and codified as a fundamental of ACE (Architecture, Construction and Engineering) sector in the

second half of the last century, a period during which huge quantitative and qualitative transformations have globally taken form. The PBD has given a formal order to a traditionally rooted approach and, despite the lack of novelty of the focus on human beings, it has been quite revolutionary, moving the attention from the means to the ends<sup>4</sup> and providing the basis for an objective assessment of the quality. The performance approach has been linked to the origins of the Environmental Design, as still today is intended: a interdisciplinary field of studies, oriented towards a “scientific conception” of architecture, aiming to obtain “the well being of the people in their living environments” and that only lately “has suffered a progressive flattening on issues regarding energy savings, environmental sustainability and governance” (Lauria 2017).

The user’s perspective takes on specific significances if it refers to architectural heritage, due to the above-mentioned peculiar ways, dimensions, and meanings of use. The human centred approach could offer a general framework to understand the last theoretical and operative developments even in this field, considering both architectural heritage in itself, and the interventions on it.

On the one hand, it should be noted that the same idea of heritage would not exist without a direct or indirect user, who recognizes a particular interest in it. Therefore architectural heritage has a relative meaning, which depends on the cultural context and that changes continuously in the intergenerational passages. The determining role in forming the identity of the individual and the communities is also linked to the user’s perspective, if one considers the immaterial sphere of the use of architectural heritage. In fact, health research in the geographical and environmental field has proved the positive benefits on people involved in heritage conservation in their habitat, in terms of well being (“personal enrichment, social learning, satisfaction from sharing the heritage products with others, and less anxiety about the present”) (Power & Smith 2016).

On the other hand, considering the interventions on built heritage, the user centred approach considerably improves the outputs of all kinds of activities, increasing their sustainability, especially if they are a part of a wider process-based approach<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, in architectural heritage field, the user’s perspective moves the focus on the purposes of the activities and emphasizes their qualitative aspects, avoiding the risk of considering them an end in themselves. Some positive consequences of the user’ perspective applied to the activities on built heritage are summarized as follows:

1) The knowing of the built heritage goes beyond the boundaries of the erudition and produces, on a case-by-case basis, flexible outputs and extensible contents, depending on the beneficiary (technician operators; management responsible persons; managers; individuals or community; residents or visitors; children or young people; people with a different level of education or different abilities). Keeping account of the user’ needs, the premises for facing the critical double obsolescence of the knowledge (referred both to the contents – for which periodical updating is necessary – and to the devices for archiving the information) are stronger.

2) The conservation of the built heritage goes beyond the mere aim of the transmission from Past to Future, and the Present takes its revenge: individuals and, above all, local communities are the key players of the conservative processes, thanks to their engagement and inclusion within participatory strategies. This allows more lasting conservative effects, because it encourages the users, in their various capacities, to take care of the built heritage.

3) The user’s perspective is even more crucial in the enhancement of architectural heritage: in fact, due to the impossibility of developing meanings, values, or physical consistency, the object of the enhancement is precisely the use of architectural heritage (Germanà 2015). Enhancing the use means increasing it in all its forms. Considering the indirect kind of use, the users’ perspective guides towards various stakeholders and encourage diversified communications strategies, also by adopting new technologies and referring to the contextual (natural and anthropic) conditions. Considering the direct use, the user’s perspective guides the research for improving accessibility, that includes requisites like those aimed to optimising the using conditions for every person (in opposition to the limitations possibly deriving from age, gender, health, and from the physical or intellectual capacities).

Even though the built heritage is in most cases inaccessible or accessible only in few portions, these requisites should be considered and fulfilled, as much it is possible without compromising the original meanings of built heritage (Ruggieri 2011). With reference to the tangible aspects, it is well known that an accessible heritage encourages the tourism, keeping in account the increasing percentage of disabled persons due to the demographic changes<sup>6</sup>.

Considering architectural heritage as a part of a wider built environment, the need clearly arises for defining uniform strategies to face the issue of accessibility, applying a multi-scalar methodology (Germanà 2013), in which the user's perspective should play a relevant pivot role.

## Conclusions

The user's perspective represents much more than a mere technical issue: it puts into play the entire culture of design, synthetizing a paradigm shift that is necessary in order to face the challenges of contemporaneity. From a theoretical point of view, the human centred design is almost interpretable as the expression of a refreshed Humanism. The potential of this theme is undeniable in various and wide application fields, which suggest interdisciplinary research and methodology.

Architectural heritage is a multifaceted kind of built environment in which the individuals or the communities recognise a peculiar interest and that is, in the same time, a driver of cultural identity and a key factor with positive effects on all aspects of well being.

The paper has outlined that the ways, the dimensions, and the meanings of the use of architectural heritage prove the specific importance of the users' perspective also in this stimulating field of the Environmental Design.

The digital revolution, currently entering a mature phase, is putting in crisis two pillars of the traditional vision of built heritage: Time and Place (Castell 1996). But meanwhile, the digitalization attributes a renewed centrality to the users, emphasizing their responsibilities and potential in the sustainable architectural heritage management and conservation.

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## Notes

1. «Nei monumenti che possono dirsi viventi siano ammesse solo quelle utilizzazioni non troppo lontane dalle destinazioni primitive, tali da non recare negli adattamenti necessari alterazioni essenziali all'edificio» [Uses not too far from the original destinations are allowed in the monuments that can be considered living, in order to avoid in the building essential alterations necessary for the adaptations [transl. by the A.] (CSABA 1932).
2. Many researchers have faced this problem, highlighting the issue of the appropriateness of the new utilizations (see for instance: De Medici & Pinto, 2012; Di Battista et al., 1995; Fiorani et al., 2011; Sposito & Germanà, 2002).
3. One says that an architect is who has learned ... to imagine and even in deeds to perform all those things that ... can best adapt to the use of men; and in order to do so, the architect must know and handle considerable matters [transl. by the A.]. Alberti, L. *De re aedificatoria*, 1485, IX.
4. «The performance approach is, first and foremost, the practice of thinking and working in terms of ends rather than means .... It is concerned with what a building or building product is required to do, and not with prescribing how it is to be constructed» (Gibson 1982).

5. In order to prevent knowledge, conservation and enhancement from remaining mere good intentions, lacking concreteness, it is essential to use a process-based view. If the activities necessary for achieving these three aims are articulated in an organized sequence of process steps, it is easier to identify the skills, operational tools, procedures and resources necessary for carrying them out. The integration between knowledge, conservation and enhancement processes demands centralized control, with a systemic framework of interdisciplinary contributions, and a common base for interoperability during the various phases, in order to untie critical knots that also represent factors of inefficiency in the construction process of new buildings [transl. by the A.] (Germanà 2014).
6. «Essentially, Accessible Tourism is not meant to be a new kind of tourism, offering segregated travel only for people with disabilities. Accessibility must be integrated in every kind of tourism experience, allowing all people to take part in cultural, rural, gastronomy, adventure tourism, or whatever other experience may be on offer. Disabled travel expert and educator, Dr. Scott Rains, has also noted: "American adults with disabilities or reduced mobility currently spend an average of 13.6 billion dollars a year on travel. Creating accessible cruise ships, accessible ship terminals, accessible ground transportation, and accessible tourist destinations is not charity - it is just good business"» (Ambrose 2011)

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