

Brittle Memories: the most known but unexpected and forgotten Heritage

by
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The fires that destroyed thousands of square kilometres of forest and urban areas last summer, in Portugal, made also evident that the relation between the public Heritage authorities and the memories dispersed in the territories is a very fragile one.

I'm talking about old wells, abandoned mills, Palaeolithic small camps, but also about specific trees, that only differ from the surrounding ones because they carry a given story, I'm talking about XXth century toys and about cheese recipes now forbidden by health community's laws.

I'm talking about grand-parents photographs and about family tales. I'm talking about memories dispersed throughout the territory, that make each one of us, simultaneously, part of humankind and unique. I'm talking about our collective and individual identities.

The problem, of course, is not that public structures have ceased to be efficient in accomplishing their role. They simply were never organised for such a task. In fact, it is our understanding of the Heritage that changed. From an antiquarian view (that gave us the Museums), we evolved into an aesthetic-architectural one (namely leading to the creation of the World's Heritage list, by UNESCO) and to incorporate minor sites, like archaeological ones (leading to integrate Heritage into the environmental impacts assessments). But, in the last few years, we finally realized that Heritage is memory, and therefore it starts with single memories to incorporate all the landscape shaped by humankind in the past.

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How to preserve it, then? And how to select what must be preserved, since this new concept also implies a daily destruction of past memories for the simple fact of us being alive and active in this, now memorial, landscape?

I believe we must go to the roots of this contemporary perspective. It starts with identity, since it was in the context of modern Nations consolidation that Heritage became a social concern. It has to do with the Renaissance, of course, but beyond that to the need to legitimate one's existence in a no longer purely spiritual authority. Heritage concerns were driven by modern scholars curiosity, and the endless quest for our human origins. The later theoretical evolution, after the crisis of modern National-based states, together with a series of violent situations allegedly legitimated by different cultural origins, made it clear that the link between ethnicity and Heritage was a very arguable one, and Ethnography, so important in the dawn of the 20th century, faded away.

Yet, this “politically correct” response, understandable in the context of tragedies since the turn of the Century, would generate a growing distance between Heritage and population. A curious phenomenon, since Heritage was never as protected as during the last century, even if less and less people really cared for it. A contradiction generated by a growing, but increasingly more detached from society, elite.

This evolution contributed to the loss of bonds between members of given cultural groups, thus favouring cultural globalisation and the crisis of old values (family, religion, etc.) without their replacement by other.

Identity, in fact, is based in equilibrium between conservation and innovation, governed by social interactions that take into consideration material and immaterial memories, which operate as a sort of ethnic auto-biography. Heritage came to play, in contemporaneous society, the role once belonging to the founding myths, formerly boosting national rivalries (a vision dominated by the aesthetic perspective) and now stressing diversity and tolerance concerns (a vision incorporating all memories, all landscapes).

This is a new and unsuspected memory, which is twice brittle: for its instantaneous dimension, since it is re-elaborated and reviewed constantly, and for its minor consideration by the public authorities, still concerned, mainly, with the former, ethnic driven, approach.

We face, now, the task of managing a new and endless Heritage that was first born out of Europe, as an anti-colonial perspective, but pervaded all societies, raising new challenges. First because the Ethnography crisis in the most developed societies disrupted previous efforts for a systematic inventory of that Heritage. Then because public authorities don't have enough financial resources for such a task. Finally because we lack qualified human resources: Universities are still training skills for the monumental approach to sites, even if the landscape approach is emerging; and, more important, the producers of many of these memories are becoming old without their knowledge being recorded and transmitted to new generations.

We need a new approach, then.

I would say that the first step is to build new structures for the survey and protection of these memories. We need diffused structures, web structures, to cope with a diffused Heritage. We need to reduce the role of the State to regulation and control, and to involve the whole of society in the process, the only way to face so basic challenges as the inventory of this Heritage that could not be expected by the public authorities. We need to introduce the dimension of total quality into the process, preventing public spending in non assessed and badly managed sites, and bridging the gap between cultural heritage and land management policies. We need to open the discussion on the grading of Heritage remains relevance for endless preservation, since otherwise any contexts may easily be destroyed.

We need many changes. This is a new Heritage, requiring new policies. One first major step is this very simple, and brilliant, idea of engaging users in the assessment of Heritage, and incorporating market mechanisms into Heritage protection, that Dr. Maurizio Quagliuolo had and Herity developed. We will need further steps, but to consolidate this one is our main task now.