

Patrimony, urban memory and social link

Guy Saez

Director of Research, CNRS, CERAT-IEP, Grenoble

Ruptures due to globalization, the impacts of which are many, and radically modify references and ways of thinking and acting in the urban cultural domain, characterize the present-day situation in towns.

This globalization provokes a shaking up of urban space and the morphology of large cities (delocalisation, de-industrialisation, “peripherization”), and leads to extraordinary disorganisation. It is economic and financial, but also cultural, and places us in front of a new choice as far as world history is concerned. It creates such wide and extensive possibilities, such an excess of cultural capacities, that it creates cultural disorder. Its results in a heavy imbalance between those who are able to take advantage of the opportunities provided by cultural globalization and those who feel culturally insecure, because of the relativitization or the disappearance of their traditional references.

A “counter-tendency” desire to territorialize, patrimonialize and memorize certain elements of daily life can be discerned in this urban and cultural disorder (this term should be understood without moral presupposition). We are today undergoing tension between an explosion of forms, referents, spaces and cultural products and a desire to reappropriate space, cultural assets and self-confidence in this dimension.

Towns have to face up to this dilemma, and seek the political, social and cultural answers necessary for this transformation. It is important to develop this first point: we have talked a lot about cultural and artistic emergences and innovations, but what are the public actions emerging in reply to these innovations? To reply with ancient models cannot be viable even if cultural action machinery and cultural policies continue to do so. In reality, modifications and fragmentations are appearing which make null and void the modalities used up to now.

These social and cultural fragmentations can be declined in the following way: -

- We are witnessing a widening of the generation gap and a defamiliarization of cultural practices, which are no longer, structured by family but rather by peer groups (friends, age groups).
- There is no longer any regulation of cultural practices by a structured political universe. Previously, certain cultural practices arose from political ideologies (split between the left and the right).
- In the same way, there is no longer a strong link between cultural practices and the world of work. More precisely, work no longer serves to structure cultural practices.
- Lastly, we are witnessing a desynchronization of cultural practices (they no longer follow fixed annual or daily rhythms) and a deterritorialization (work mobility and time management means that people can go to shows, concerts, exhibitions, etc. in places a long way from their home).

This situation comes out of a “cultural society”. Certain sociologists (C.Geertz, F.Jamson) speak of the “cultural turning point” of Western societies and the fact that people are more and more orienteering their life towards artistic and cultural values. Self-expression is becoming a social, communal norm, even a referent, in social practices. The desire to express oneself (body tattoos, amateur practices in all cultural fields) is clearly visible and everything can be an element of expression. These evolutions (expansion of the cultural society and deregulation of cultural practices) challenge cultural action because they were not foreseen by institutions in terms of budget or management, as witness the overflowing of cultural demand, the extraordinary increase in the number of people who call themselves artists, initiatives, music groups, etc. We are observing a real bottleneck, in all sectors of expansion, in the demographic management of cultural actors/producers.

It is in this sense that the towns represented here today can inform us as to what sort of questions they come up against, and the solutions that they have been able to provide.

The second point important to make is that of the aspiration of collective action on memory. This patrimoniamization movement is recent, even if such policies have existed for a long time. Formerly, they only concerned particular buildings, remarkable for their architectural interest, but in no way integrated into town policies. For a long time towns in general were not seen as elements of patrimony. The best proof is the ideal of the local councillor in the years of the reconstruction of Europe, until the end of the seventies, that of the mayor builder and not the mayor curator. It was he (or she) who built, and in order to build, destroyed old groups of buildings for the construction of roads or expressways.

As an example, the mayor Lyon, Louis Pradel declared, “my passion is concrete”, to such a point that he wanted to build urban expressways in the old part of Lyon. It was thanks to the active mobilization of an association that succeeded in pushing back the mayor’s wishes and initiated a united movement, which was at the origin of the designation by UNESCO of old Lyon as world heritage site. It was a good example of a real and collective awareness of the potential damage linked to urban policies.

It was in the seventies that this awareness came into being, and it was at the end of the eighties that the phenomenon became general (example of Glasgow). This concern for conservation and restoration contains the social phenomenon of the affirmation of memory. But what memory? Memory of a place, a social group, rural or urban archaeology? In reality, it is a general movement of expression amongst people and the inhabitants of an urban framework. We are observing the conjunction of the demand for memory and the willingness to reappropriate urban space through signs, which are agreed upon by a consensus of inhabitants, and the problem of redefinition of old industrial spaces, re-qualified from a cultural point of view.

In view of these events, juggling of the re-deployment of industrial buildings, the manifestation of social memory, and forms of self-expression and artistic form, pose a question. To what point does this movement require a new concept of citizenship?

More precisely, non-institutional demands, even anti-institutional demands, voiced by actors of artistic innovation, sometimes presented in an accusing or protesting manner, ask the following flagrant question: how have we managed the institutionalism of these emergences? How can we use the past in

order to project the future? How can we ensure that memories are not backward looking but forward-looking?

