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ATRIUM: Heritage, Intercultural Dialogue and the European Cultural Routes

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ABSTRACT

One of the key priorities of the Cultural Routes programme of the Council of Europe is intercultural dialogue. The resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 67 (2013) indicated that an overriding strategic goal of the Council was to “promote dialogue and understanding between majority and minority, native and immigrant cultures.” It linked this general principle to two other documents regarding strategic policy for the Council of Europe: the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue entitled “Living Together As Equals in Dignity” (White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, 2008) and the Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, otherwise known as the “Faro Convention” (Council of Europe Framework Convention, 2005). These general principles were adopted by the Council of Europe Advisory Forum of the Cultural Routes in Baku in 2014, whose closing declaration included an exhortation that the cultural routes should act as “vectors of intercultural dialogue” (Baku Declaration (2014). This paper will look at the way the ATRIUM cultural route has attempted to interpret and implement this strategic goal.

Keywords: ATRIUM; Dissonance; Heritage; Dialogue; Routes

1. The ATRIUM Cultural Route

ATRIUM is a cultural itinerary, recognized by the Council of Europe in 2014 and recertified in 2018, dedicated to the theme of the Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes in Europe’s Urban Memory. It was set up as a result of a project which had its origins in

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the city of Forlì, in north-eastern Italy, originally funded by the South East Europe programme, one of the transnational regional development programmes of the European Union. One of the project's outputs was the submission of a dossier putting forward the candidature of ATRIUM as a European Cultural Route to the Council of Europe, and the constitution of the Association which still today manages the route (Leech, 2014). Today, the route has 18 partners in five different European countries and has brought together cities with notable examples of architecture or urban spaces strongly characterised by buildings dating back to a totalitarian regime of the twentieth century. These include examples in which the Fascist state left a strong mark in Emilia Romagna such as Forlì, Forlimpopoli, Cesenatico, Predappio, Castrocaro, Tresigallo¹ and Ferrara (Tramonti, 2005); other towns and or cities in Italy such as Merano, Tor Viscosa and Carbonia; cities shaped by the expansion of Italian Fascism in the 1930s such as Labin and Rasa on the Istrian peninsula, and Tirana in Albania (which saw important urban development both under Fascism and post-war regime); Iasi and Stei in Romania, characterised by development during the Ceaucescu regime; and, in Bulgaria, the capital Sofia and Dimitrovgrad, a city in the east of the country near the border with Turkey.²

The route focuses exclusively on a heritage which can be recognized as somewhat exceptional in the panorama of the cultural routes; a heritage which poses the visitor or cultural tourist a series of uncomfortable questions regarding history and identity, to the extent that this particular form of heritage has merited the label "dissonant" (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996; Battilani, Mariotti, and Bernini, 2018). We will explore this type of heritage and its implications for intercultural dialogue below. But first let us turn to the ways in which intercultural dialogue are elaborated in the two key documents of the Council of Europe to which the Baku Declaration refers.

2. The Council of Europe: Intercultural Dialogue and Heritage

The Council of Europe's policy on intercultural dialogue is formulated most clearly in its White Paper (2008). The document stresses dialogue in all its forms, but its starting point is that dialogue is to be conceived of as the "key to Europe's future" in that it provides a framework for managing "different identities constructively and democratically on the basis of shared universal values" (p. 4). The link between intercultural dialogue and the Faro Convention is perhaps a little more opaque. The Convention nowhere makes use of the term "intercultural". The text of the Convention does see "dialogue" as a key ingredient of the work of the promotion of European cultural values as they emerge in our relation to heritage, and, indeed, Article 7 is specifically dedicated to "Cultural Heritage and Dialogue". But the concept of dialogue is not developed robustly. Point (b) of Article 7 sees dialogue as having a role in encouraging "reflection", principally about the complexities of conflicts in which there are claims on the part of different communities to the same cultural heritage, with the implication that these conflicts can be handled by means of "processes of conciliation". Point (c) of the same Article is more cogent to our concerns here. The signatories undertake to "develop knowledge of cultural heritage as a resource to facilitate

peaceful co-existence by promoting trust and mutual understanding with a view to resolution and prevention of conflicts". The specific heritage which is the object of the ATRIUM cultural route is, we might say, strongly implicated in the struggle to prevent conflicts through a deep knowledge of the particular heritage of totalitarian regimes. The latter, it should go without saying, were heavily implicated in the conflicts of the twentieth century and thus an informed and thorough knowledge of the workings of these regimes, also as manifested in the built heritage that they left behind, falls squarely within this remit.

Given that the ATRIUM route is strongly tied to the notion of heritage, it is worth considering in more detail the way that heritage is formulated in the Faro Convention and the implications this may have for international dialogue. In Article 3, which deals with the "Common heritage of Europe", the first elaboration of the way that heritage is to be understood specifies that it constitutes "a shared source of remembering, understanding, identity, cohesion and creativity" whereas the second mentions instead the "ideals, principles and values, derived from the experience gained through progress and past conflicts", with a view to using this heritage "to foster the development of a peaceful and stable society, founded on respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law." Two elements are worth pointing out here. First, there is no delimitation of heritage to material heritage but rather, in both formulations, an emphasis on immaterial heritage. In other words, heritage is understood not to be the physical objects passed down to the present but the meaning systems that they represent. This leaves the door open to dialogue between the different interpretations that can be given to material heritage. Second, it is interesting that these definitions avoid any celebratory notion of heritage as the recognition of material or immaterial goods to be preserved and valorised in the present as a result of their inherent cultural value. The focus instead is on elements which can contribute to a shared understanding which can be functional to the promotion of a democratic and peaceful society, in line with the overall strategic mission of the Council of Europe. This element is particularly important, of course, when dealing with "dissonant" heritage as ATRIUM does, in which there can be no unthinking celebration of the meaning system of the heritage but only a critical and historical evaluation of it (Leech, 2018). The emphasis on an active process of understanding as the key to heritage, in other words, heritage as a relation between the present and the past and not as an object, helps us to understand the ways in which ATRIUM can interpret intercultural dialogue.

3. ATRIUM and Dissonant Heritage

Let us elaborate, here, on the nature of the heritage which is valorised by ATRIUM. It should be remembered from the start that the premise of ATRIUM is that the valorisation involved is not that of recuperating the forgotten legacies of totalitarian regimes in any revisionist sense but valorising the democratic gaze of contemporary democratic Europe precisely through a deeper understanding of the totalitarian regimes and the ways in which architecture and urban design were a structural part of these regimes.³ The route, as we have seen, works with a very particular heritage: the

uncomfortable one of the architecture and urban structures which were constructed during totalitarian regimes, either Fascist or Soviet-inspired, but which still characterize the built landscape of many European cities (see also Bodenshatz, Sassi, and Welch Guerra, 2015). Both regimes, although markedly different in historical origin and development, shared certain characteristics such as a commitment to state-led notions of urban development which resulted often in major architectural projects. We only need think of the label of Forlì as the “città del Duce” because of the imposing development to the east of the old city in this period (Prati and Tramonti, 1999; Mariotti, Battiliani, and Bernini 2015), of the foundation of the town of Dimitrovgrad in eastern Bulgaria in the Soviet period, or the dual heritage of Tirana, influenced by Italian fascism in the 1930s and the post-war Hoxha regime (Tramonti, 2017). All of these examples, moreover, as is the case with other towns and cities of the route, share the fact that these developments, architectural and urban, were strongly linked to the overall strategies of the regime, whether these were propagandist, industrial, educational or infrastructural. The strength of the link between these projects and the strategic objectives of the regimes enables us to understand more clearly the notion of a heritage which is “dissonant”, in which the term refers to the contrast and conflict between the original political and historical context of the construction of the object, and the democratic Europe of the present which emerged from these regimes after the end of the war and after the fall of the Berlin wall. Any exploration of this heritage, then, has to be fully aware of this dissonance and use heritage to promote a full understanding of the complex, violent and oppressive nature of the regimes. In other words, the route is at one and the same time involved in an appreciation and exploration of the nature of the material heritage and a historical and critical examination of a dark period of recent European history.

The Faro Convention, as we have seen, carefully stresses the emphasis on the function of heritage to support the rights-based consensus of contemporary Europe through a deeper understanding of the past. But this is not the only interpretation of the function of heritage. Another common one is that the task of heritage is to protect objects and buildings from neglect and thus to guarantee the transmission of material or immaterial elements of the past. It is, as a consequence, a perspective which is thus strongly tied to notions of continuity. The Council of Europe’s own charter on architectural heritage of 1975 (point 2)m, for example, puts forward the idea that if this transmission is interrupted, “part of man's awareness of his [sic] own continuity will be destroyed” (European Charter of the Architectural Heritage, 1975). This sense of continuity, however, is problematic in the case of ATRIUM in which heritage is “dissonant”, as we have seen. The overarching diachronic sense of a human community which can celebrate continuity is not a workable framework for a cultural route based on dissonance: there is no easy assumption of identity from which to regard the uncomfortable heritage left to us from twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. It is precisely this problematizing of identity, however, which opens the notion of heritage up to an intercultural perspective. The challenge of ATRIUM, in fact, is to construct a shared transnational perspective on this “dissonant” heritage; this leads ATRIUM to adhere to the intercultural approach of the Council of Europe not only to align itself with their strategic priorities but out of strict necessity. The dissonant nature of its heritage, in other words, pushes ATRIUM towards a specifically rights-

based, transnational interpretation of its heritage, as, indeed, is made explicit in the full title of the route: “Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes of the 20th century in Europe’s Urban Memory interpreted to promote human rights and democracy”. We may at this point give two concrete examples of this interpretation, one regarding the heritage object and one relating instead to a particular focus of the activity of the route.

4. ATRIUM and Intercultural dialogue

The first regards the particular heritage of three towns, two members of the ATRIUM cultural route, Dimitrovgrad in eastern Bulgaria and Tresigallo in the Po Valley near Ferrara, and one which has yet to join, Eisenhüttenstadt, a German town near the border with Poland. All three may be seen as concrete illustrations of what may perhaps be termed a “totalitarian road to modernity” (Gentile, 2008). Dimitrovgrad was constructed as a new model, socialist town built in just a few years from 1947 to the early 1950s thanks to the enthusiasm and hard labour of the socialist “brigades”. The function of the town was to provide housing and services for the new industrial workers in the new heavy industry which the Bulgarian socialist state had decided to build there. To offset the conditions and pollution of the heavy industrial plant, a key element of the urban design was the provision of large green spaces – 36% of the total surface of the town, according to the promotional brochure (*Dimitrovgrad. I am and I will be*, n.d). Tresigallo, a small town of around 4,000 inhabitants a few kilometres east of Ferrara, was similarly a new town which owed its expansion in the brief period 1936-39 to the activity of one of its eminent citizens, Enrico Rossoni, a Fascist *gerarca* originally a trade union leader, and from 1935 Minister for Agriculture. A new cellulose fibre plant was set up in the area and there was, as a consequence, a need to accompany this with an adequate urban structure which led to the construction of a new town with many examples of rationalist architecture. Eisenhüttenstadt, with which Dimitrovgrad is twinned, has a similar history. Built in provincial Germany, on the banks of the river Oder on the border with Poland, it was intended to house a large-scale industrial complex (in this case producing iron, as the name of the town makes clear), as well as the necessary administrative, residential and recreational structures to accompany it. Located across the river from the old mining town of Furstenberg, Eisenhüttenstadt was constructed in the early 1950s and originally given the name Stalinstadt after Stalin’s death in 1953 (Fulbrook, 2005). Like Dimitrovgrad, the architects of the early residential areas envisaged the construction of services and green areas to compensate for the difficult environmental conditions of the industrial workers.

The accelerated industrialisation of towns such as these points to their shared local experience as the concrete enactors of the regimes’ commitment to enhancing economic development through reliance on the state as the prime mover. The local responses to this heritage may also show some similarities. The ATRIUM activities in Dimitrograd and Tresigallo, for example, have focused on bringing to the surface citizens’ perceptions and memories of the construction of the towns and attempts to deal with these often positive memories within the shared framework of dissonant

heritage. The mayor of Dimitrovgrad, for example, Ivo Dimov, had this to say about the construction of the original town and its guarded celebration by the current inhabitants:

Today, Dimitrovgrad without nostalgia ... is trying to preserve the material evidence of the time “when the foundations were poured”, when here faith and hope gave meaning to the human urge for creativity. (*Dimitrovgrad. I am and I will be*, n.d.)

ATRIUM, in other words, has created a framework for comparison and dialogue around these issues, of central importance to the strategies of the Council of Europe. The second example relates instead to the intention of ATRIUM to follow another element of the Baku Declaration relating to intercultural dialogue, working with the younger generations. The Declaration emphasised the importance of promoting “the full participation of younger generations and consequently of cultural routes developing active education programmes and tourism products that specifically target young audiences – both of school age and young adults” (Baku Declaration, 2014). One example of this, a local one, has been the involvement of ATRIUM in a project financed by the Emilia Romagna Region entitled “Memories and Borders”. This involved a school trip of some Italian students to border areas of Italy which share a dissonant aspect of historical heritage in relation to the activities of the Italian Fascist state, namely to Trieste and Istria (including Labin and Rasa, other members of the ATRIUM route) (see <http://www.atriumroute.eu/projects-menu/european-projects/371-memorie-di-confine>). Another, more ambitious project financed by the Italy-Croatia Interreg programme called “Atrium Plus” had as its principal objective the construction of a cultural tourism product for schools, devised and projected by the schools themselves, and involved the ATRIUM partners Forlì, Labin and Ferrara. The project also aimed at enhancing the competences of tourist guides in the particular area of European dissonant heritage (see <http://www.atriumroute.eu/projects-menu/european-projects/atrium-plus>).

These are examples, then, of the two ways in which ATRIUM contributes to intercultural dialogue. The first relates to the characteristics of the route itself, concerned with bringing together difficult experiences of heritage relating to totalitarian regimes in twentieth-century Europe, and in so doing, create a dialogue between these different experiences within the shared framework of European political rights. The second relates instead to the dialogue between generations, specifically between one whose memories of the characteristics of totalitarian regimes, if not first hand, are in any case only one generation away, and young Europeans born over half a century after the fall of the Fascist regimes and several years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. They confirm the objective of the Council of Europe to find, in the Cultural Routes programme, a means of grounding principles of human rights and intercultural dialogue in concrete experiences of culture and tourism.

Acknowledgement

This article looks at the way in which the ATRIUM cultural route interprets and puts into practice intercultural dialogue. The article begins by looking at the ways in which the Council of Europe has interpreted intercultural dialogue and heritage, in particular in its White Paper “Living Together As Equals in Dignity” (2008) and in the Faro Convention (2005). These indications were adopted by the Council of Europe Advisory Forum of the Cultural Routes held in Baku 2014. The work of the ATRIUM cultural route focuses upon a very particular type of heritage, the “uncomfortable” or “dissonant” heritage related to the architectural and urban structures constructed by, and with a strong cultural and ideological link to, the totalitarian regimes which produced them. The article goes on to explore the particular nature of intercultural dialogue that work on dissonant heritage implies, in particular in relation to the overall mission of the Council of Europe to promote dialogue and human rights.

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¹ In 2019, the town of Tresigallo merged with the nearby Formignana to form a new administrative entity, "Tresignana", which is consequently the name of the member of the ATRIUM route. This article is concerned with the particular historical conditions of the (now defunct) town of Tresigallo.

² For further information on the members of the Association and the topics explored in their activity as part of the cultural route, see the ATRIUM web site: <http://www.atriumroute.eu/>

³ To avoid any misunderstanding, article 2 of the Association runs as follows: "The Association's activity is inspired by the principle of the promotion of the values of democracy and cooperation between peoples as the foundation for peaceful and civil co-existence. In no case and in no way does the Association accept expressions and forms of exculpation for totalitarian, dictatorial, authoritarian or non-democratic governments, neither the Association's actions intend to classify or compare aforementioned forms of government. In particular it identifies with the principles expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the democratic principles on which the Council of Europe is founded." (<http://www.atriumroute.eu>).