

THE MATTER OF FUTURE HERITAGE

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Prof. Giovanni Leoni
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THE ASSETS OF
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Re-Maining Material Legacy, Re-Meaning Cultural Heritage: Preserving the Past to Design the Future

Material legacy; preservation; meanings; re-signification; cultural heritage;
Casa Littoria; Bolzano; street art; Forlì; Berlin; Kampung Pelangi; Indonesia

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Leading a reflection about the re-signification of existing heritage, this paper aims at highlighting that the matter of future heritage may represent the result of two fundamental operations which are capable of re-maining material legacy and re-meaning cultural heritage. Especially, the possibility of preserving the existing works, even if conferring new meanings to them, will be here addressed by the analysis of some promising practices carried out on various kinds of assets: monumental buildings, minor productions and forgotten places.

What is the matter of future heritage?

A reflection can be developed on the basis of two aspects: on the one hand, there is the city with its history, its heritage and the human beings living in the urban spaces; on the other hand, there is the essential relationship between these fundamental components.

With regard to the first issue, a relevant question may be highlighted. As pointed out by Antonio Pennacchi “the city is above all an anthropological fact: it is made up of the people in it, the relations among them, their culture and their shared heritage of histories, memories, myths and practices which make it a specific *communitas* [...] that is different from all the others”¹. In relation to the second issue, Marc Augé clarified a very relevant theme. As a matter of fact, he said that “the work describes its time, but it does not describe it exhaustively anymore. Those who contemplate it today [...] will never have the gaze of those who saw it the first time. [...] The perception of this gap is the same perception of time, of the sudden and frail reality of time”².

The above-mentioned topics make it possible to open a reflection. Particularly, the present paper aims to extend attention beyond the boundaries of the well-known sites and buildings, such as those mentioned in the UNESCO World Heritage List. The purpose is to refer to the cultural heritage as the identity set of tangible and intangible assets produced by different and specific cultures. Heritage with symbolic value contributes to forming the spirit of the place³: the different assets composing it are both the direct material expression of local communities and the bearers of the immaterial dimension of those

1 Antonio Pennacchi, *Fascio e martello. Viaggio per le città del Duce* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2008), 279, author's translation.

2 Marc Augé, *Rovine e macerie. Il senso del tempo* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2004), 25-26, author's translation.

3 See Donatella Fiorani, Loughlin Kealy and Stefano Francesco Musso (eds.), *Conservation-Adaptation: Keeping Alive the Spirit of the Place. Adaptive Reuse of Heritage with Symbolic Value* (Hasselt: EAAE, 2017).

communities. But if heritage is “a defining trait of ethnic and territorial groups”, then “global interdependence likewise makes heritage universal”⁴. As a consequence, heritage “embraces things and ideas that give us collective identity”⁵.

From this perspective, built heritage is the bearer of a material inheritance – which in turn is carrier of messages – that the past gave to the present and that the present should leave to the future. In this regard, there are at least three factors that can be identified and which connect people to heritage: the mutation of the observer’s gaze, the possible rereading of the existing buildings and the change of meanings with the change of time. Precisely in relation to this, the intent of the present reflection is to draw attention to a particular aspect, which is the fact that the matter of future heritage may represent the result of two fundamental operations which are capable of re-remaining material legacy, by preserving it, and of re-meaning cultural heritage, through the addition of new meanings.

In an effort to deepen the above-mentioned field of investigation, this paper aims to prove what has been asserted, by including in the reasoning the daily memory over time⁶. Especially, the reflection about the possibility of preserving the existing works, even if conferring new meanings to them, will be here addressed by the analysis of some promising practices carried out on various kinds of assets: monumental buildings, minor productions and forgotten places. Interventions vary according to the asset, but the basic assumption remains. In the first case, it is the installation superimposed to the Casa Littoria in Bolzano that shows how a punctual insertion may add new meanings to an architecture even if preserving its unique material substance.

4 David Lowenthal, “Identity, Heritage, and History,” in *Commemorations: the Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 43-44.

5 *Ibid.*, 43.

6 See Antonella Tarpino, *Geografie della memoria. Case, rovine, oggetti quotidiani* (Torino: Einaudi, 2008).

In the second case, it is the common buildings and urban walls that confirm the possibility of transmitting new messages through contemporary intervention. A few outstanding examples are that of Forlì where a street art festival has been configured as an opportunity for collective reflections about social themes, and that of Berlin where it was street performers that transformed political symbols of hate into works of art and love. Finally, in the third case, it is an intervention carried out in Kampung Pelangi in Indonesia that highlights how a simple operation may confer new meanings to places which were unknown yesterday, and that are enhanced and visited thanks to rereading processes today.

The monumental buildings and the addition of new meanings

The monumental buildings constitute the first kind of assets examined in this investigation. In particular, the focus is on a case study which is characterized by a complicated and difficult symbolic significance. As a matter of fact, attention is given to a mighty architecture dating back to the Fascist era. Highly experimental, the buildings realized in Italy in the period between the two World Wars show a continuous research for tradition, as well as for innovation. They bear proof of a balance between past and future which looks at modernity, although they demonstrate an “attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past”⁷ capable of strengthening the national identity and that of

7 Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

the local communities. In this way, Fascist regime reinforced an imaginative power⁸ by adopting a political abuse of nostalgia⁹.

In this scenario, the first experience here documented is the Casa Littoria in Bolzano: one of the many headquarters of the National Fascist Party. Designed by Guido Pellizzari, Francesco Rossi and Luis Plattner, this building was erected between 1939 and 1942. Geometrically defined and spatially calibrated, the Casa Littoria in Bolzano presents itself to the city through a massive façade with a large bas-relief. Realized by Hans Piffrader in the 1940s, this sculpted representation was meant to illustrate the history of Fascism through symbolic images. Therefore, a strong connection to the Fascist ideologies characterizes this work with Benito Mussolini on a horse lying at the heart of it.

In the case of this treatise, the aim isn't to focus on the historical significance and documentary evidence of this heritage, neither on the dual need for its conservation and contemporary use. Rather, the essential purpose of this paper is to underline a parallel and equally fundamental theme. As a matter of fact, this specific case represents an excellent example for highlighting the precious opportunity of adding new meanings to the built heritage. Moreover, if this operation is possible on a building with a strong ideological value, this is equally practicable on other architectures too.

But what happened in Bolzano exactly? The recent history of the local Casa Littoria is marked by an ideas competition announced in 2011 by the Provincial Council of Bolzano, whose aim was the transformation of the façade of this building which hosts the Palace of the Financial Offices nowadays. After winning the competition, Arnold Holzknecht and Michele Bernardi

8 See Stephanie Zeier Pilat, "La Parola al Piccone: Demonstrations of Fascism at the Imperial Fora and the Mausoleum of Augustus," in *Political Landscapes of Capital Cities*, ed. Jessica Joyce Christie, Jelena Bogdanović and Eulogio Guzmán (Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2016), 343.

9 See David Lowenthal, "Nostalgia tells it like it wasn't," in *The imagined past: history and nostalgia*, ed. Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 20.



Fig. 1
Casa Littoria,
Bolzano. Author's
photo.

from Ortisei carried out an operation of extreme relevance: they materialized their conception of a luminous writing that was located above the bas-relief in 2017. The insertion provides a contemporary response to the Fascist maxim “Believe, Obey, Fight”: it does not obliterate the past, but it does interpret the theme of memory according to an approach that favors stratification. As a matter of fact, the intervention operated by addition, superimposing an installation with a significant writing containing some simple but deep words by Hannah Arendt, a German philosopher of Jewish origin of the 20th century: the luminous installation exclaims and remembers that “no man has the right to obey”¹⁰ [Fig. 1].

For these reasons, the Casa Littoria in Bolzano constitutes an emblematic case study: it demonstrates that it is possible not only to make a transition from an unwanted memory to memorial spaces¹¹, but also to respect the existing heritage and, at the same time, to modernize it. Notably, it allows to show how a punctual insert can offer the possibility of adding new meanings to an architecture even if preserving it.

10 See <http://www.basrelief-bolzano.com/en.html>.

11 See Rob van der Laarse, “Fatal Attraction: Nazi Landscapes, Modernism, and Holocaust Memory,” in *Landscape Biographies*, ed. Jan Kolen, Johannes Renes and Rita Hermans (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 345-375.

The minor productions and the transmission of new messages

Urban fabric includes not only monumental buildings, but also significant architectures of recognized value, as well as common buildings. The ensemble of these constructions contributes to defining the tangible and intangible identity of a community which, without that specific set of buildings, would be 'another community'.

Focusing on minor productions, it is possible to confirm the great opportunity of preserving the existing assets and of transmitting new messages deriving from the contemporary epoch. Once again, it is the abandonment of a removal-friendly approach that makes it possible to preserve an architecture even if transforming it. In this process, interpretation becomes an essential planning tool.

Several experiences contribute to demonstrating the above-mentioned assumption, but here the attention is given to two exemplifying European case studies, located in Italy and Germany, respectively.

The Italian experience focuses on a city which is promoting urban practices characterized by a high social value and a strong participative involvement: Forlì is one of the cities of the region Emilia-Romagna that is paying attention to these aspects of great relevance.

On the occasion of this paper, the investigation is circumscribed to a specific city event: the Murali street art festival. Organized in 2018, the first edition of this project was developed under the art direction of Marco Miccoli and it provided an interweaving between communication and artistic expressions. Particularly, the choice of the initiative was to redevelop defined urban areas through interventions on the walls of buildings with a low value. In this way, these surfaces have been intended as paintings on which works of contemporary art could be realized.

The involvement of numerous artists — such as Eron, Camilla Falsini, Gola, Millo, Moneyless and Zed1 — made it possible to shape creations that are freely usable by people. The *fil rouge* of the operation was the Constitution of the Italian Republic: seventy years after its coming into force, the aim was to decline some of its articles in a moment of collective reflection about social themes. This confirms that “while there are plenty of wrong reasons for disliking a work of art, there is no such thing as a wrong reason for liking it”¹².

In Via Nullo, Zed1 has chosen to focus on article 1, according to which Italy is a democratic Republic founded on work. In Piazza del Carmine, the wall painting by Millo calls for a reflection about the important theme of equality; as a matter of fact, he interpreted article 3 of the Italian Constitution, whereby all citizens have equal social dignity [Fig. 2]. In Parco della Resistenza, Camilla Falsini reread article 9, in which Italy promotes the development both of culture and of scientific and technical research; moreover, it safeguards the landscape and the historic and artistic heritage of the nation. In Vicolo Casaglia, Gola referred to the same article. In Via San Domenico, Eron worked on the issue of family: the wall painting portrays some washing lines; furthermore, given that it is located in the city area where there was the Jewish ghetto of Forlì, it reinterprets the theme of the Holocaust with striped clothes. In Via Cobelli, Moneyless played with forms and colors. Nonetheless, within this framework, the project Barcaccia Underground promoted interventions of urban art on the walls of the parking garage underlying the Musei San Domenico, a renowned cultural place in the historic center of Forlì¹³.

Shifting attention towards Germany, another experience is worth mentioning. Here again, wall paintings both regenerated

12 Horst Woldemar Janson and Ernst Hans Gombrich, “The Story of Art,” *College Art Journal* 9, no. 4 (1950): 429.

13 See <http://www.muralifestival.it>.

Fig. 2

Wall paintings, Forlì and Berlin. Author's photo; "Berlino."



urban compartments and offered the pretext to invite reflection. Nevertheless, the initial situation highlights the main difference between the Forlì experience and that of Berlin. If in the first case wall paintings made it possible to add value to 'anonymous spaces' of the city, in the second one they acted on symbols with a strong ideological significance.

Specifically, the project that has been developed in Berlin has dealt with some urban walls of the German city which showed the presence of swastikas. A possible reply to this situation could have been the removal of these terrible symbols, but the will of the project was to identify a different path: once again, art suggested interesting solutions and provided important incitements.

The project germs occurred in 2015 when a man went to a local paint shop to erase a flag of the Third Reich that appeared on a wall of his building. Consequently, an idea came to mind to the owner of that shop, Ibo Omari, who started believing that a wider urban creative action could have turned hate conveyor elements into positive messages of peace. Thus, the so-called Paint Back campaign started and the writer Ibo Omari, together with *Die kulturellen Erben*, a group of street performers, intervened on the walls of the city which were marked by swastikas.

The initiative saw the participation of artists for new reinterpretations which managed to transform political symbols of hate into works of art and love¹⁴ [Fig. 2]. In this sense, the operation shows the possibility to use creativity for transforming things associated with dark periods of history into contemporary messages of hope and equality.

14 See "Berlino, così gli artisti di strada trasformano le svastiche in murali," *Corriere della Sera*, 10 January (2018); Letizia Tortello, "Il writer che trasforma le svastiche in opere d'arte," *La Stampa*, 22 March (2018).



Fig. 3 **The forgotten places and the enhancement of unknown spaces**

Kampung Pelangi,
Indonesia. Morosi,
"Kampung Pelangi."

The final category investigated in this paper concerns the forgotten places: whole villages, or even portions inside cities, may constitute little known, if not unknown, spaces. Nevertheless, promising practices demonstrate not only that a redemption is possible for these urban areas too, but also that from rejected spaces they may become known, appreciated and visited locations.

An outstanding example of this is the intervention carried out in Kampung Pelangi in Indonesia. This shanty town was an extremely degraded place composed of about two hundred houses. Very few people knew it and nobody wanted to visit the spaces of the village. This condition persisted until not long ago, when Slamet Widodo – the director of a local school – promoted an exemplary initiative. Indeed, he decided to paint the slum houses of Kampung Pelangi with the aim of creating a rainbow village. The challenge was accepted by the whole population and, thanks to this simple but powerful intervention, the village has changed but, at the same time, it has been preserved. Probably, no one would have imagined the real replay that such an

operation was able to obtain, but the truth is that Kampung Pelangi attracts visitors from all over the world nowadays¹⁵ [Fig. 3].

The intervention carried out in Indonesia appears noteworthy since it provides a message of possible regeneration through practices which are contrary to destruction. Furthermore, it shows how a simple operation is able to enhance little known, if not unknown, places and urban spaces. As a matter of fact, rereading processes may activate a virtuous circle composed of urban practices, interventions on existing buildings, creativity, art and people. Nevertheless, giving visibility to these communities is certainly one step but, other than that, there might be conflicting perspectives and cleavages to be addressed¹⁶. In this respect, it seems necessary for these operations to fit within wider regenerative paths. Identification of the needs of current and future users, together with participation and innovation, can thus become components of a system of mutual exchanges and fruitful relations.

The above-mentioned case study relates to a whole village; nonetheless, as has already been anticipated, the approach adopted in Kampung Pelangi may be confined to parts of cities which, in this way, can initiate broader enhancement paths.

Many other experiences show the existence of a creative cities network¹⁷. The interconnection between different cultural industries highlights the multiple possible declinations of creativity¹⁸ which, conceived as a strategic factor, can actualize the spiral reaction of cultural tourism¹⁹, within enhancement processes of local specificities and global heritage.

15 See Silvia Morosi, "Kampung Pelangi, la baraccopoli indonesiana trasformata in opera d'arte," *Corriere della Sera*, 17 May (2017).

16 See Peter Gathercole and David Lowenthal (eds.), *The Politics of the Past* (London: Routledge, 1994).

17 See <http://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/creative-cities-map>.

18 See Edouard Louis, Annie Ernaux, et al., *Pierre Bourdieu. L'insoumission en héritage* (Paris: Puf, 2013).

19 See UNESCO, *Protection of mankind's cultural heritage. Sites and monuments* (Paris: UNESCO, 1970), 61.

The link between past, present and future

The promising practices investigated allow to develop a broader reflection that contributes to highlighting the possibility of re-remaining existing works, even if re-meaning them. This generates a fusion between past time and present place²⁰, which in turn is projected into the future. With regard to the built heritage, a double need can be underlined: on the one hand, there is the necessity of preserving material legacy that constitutes the challenge to our cultural heritage²¹; on the other hand, there is the need to interpret existing assets in order to give them new meanings through processes which do not obliterate, but add messages from the contemporary epoch.

Heritage as memory carrier constitutes the expression of personal and collective legacies²². Therefore, its conservation makes it possible to protect documents of culture and, in so doing, to enable others to have the same opportunity of knowing these unique and unrepeatable proofs in the future. From this perspective, the preservation of cultural heritage – with its material and immaterial values and transformations – provides documentary evidence of traces and signs which give information on things, men and history²³.

For these reasons, the challenge of contemporary intervention is to support the narration of the existing heritage or, in the words of Lucien Febvre, to help “mute things speak”²⁴. Thus,

20 See David Lowenthal, “Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory,” *The Geographical Review* 65, no. 1 (1975): 1-36.

21 See Yudhishtir Raj Isar (ed.), *The Challenge to Our Cultural Heritage: Why Preserve the Past?* Proceedings of a Conference on Cultural Preservation, Washington, D.C., 8-10 April 1984 (Paris: UNESCO, 1986).

22 See David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Michael Frisch and David Lowenthal, “Possessed by the Past: the Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History,” *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 5 (1998): 1567-1568.

23 See Eugenio Vassallo, “Tempo e memoria,” in *Architetture nel tempo. Dialoghi della materia, nel restauro*, Maurizio De Vita (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2015), 204.

24 Lucien Febvre, *Problemi di metodo storico* (Torino: Einaudi, 1966), 177, author’s translation.

interpretation becomes an essential act. The assumption of the meanings of a work as a project element should imply the conservation of its messages and the guarantee that others may interpret them. Nevertheless, as this study attempted to demonstrate, it is possible to preserve existing assets and to enrich them through the attribution of new meanings. In this regard, Umberto Eco contributed to underlining the fundamental possibility of adding following meanings to a work²⁵.

Hence, the promising practices here analyzed help to develop a reflection that highlights a triple need. The first one is to maximize preservation of what the past has transmitted to the present; the second one is to maintain the multiple meanings of existing assets; finally, the third one is to add new meanings deriving from the contemporary epoch. In so doing, knowledge and creativity may become essential operations of interventions that can then take various declinations on the basis of the asset on which they are carried out. But if actions vary according to the asset, then the same assumptions can be followed in different cases.

Along these lines, the awareness of the possibility of re-remaining material legacy and re-meaning cultural heritage can lead to virtuous interventions that create a link between past, present and future. In this perspective, we ourselves are authors of the matter of future heritage because it is through the preservation of the past and the re-signification of the existing heritage that we can provide a contribute to design the future.

25 See Umberto Eco, *La struttura assente. Introduzione alla ricerca semiologica* (Milano: Bompiani, 1968), 201.

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