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Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana
Casa abierta al tiempo Azcapotzalco

CyAD Ciencias y Artes para el Diseño

Procesos y Técnicas de Realización

Administración y Tecnología para el Diseño
Investigación

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Contenido

Preserving authenticity: an opinion on the intangible details of design and the public realm

Iván Osorio Avila
BA InDes, M Plan

Resumen

La conservación del patrimonio cultural en el espacio público depende en gran parte del inventario inmobiliario y cómo se preserva y evoluciona a la par de otros aspectos y necesidades sociales, demográficas y económicas.

Este texto de opinión explora cómo los objetos y espacios diseñados aunque tangibles, alcanzan a tener un valor cultural y social intangible, el cual merece y requiere de un delicado balance entre la remodelación y redesarrollo de edificios y espacios públicos y la gestión y conservación del patrimonio cultural.

El argumento presentado explica la relación entre estas variables y como la disciplina del diseño industrial tiene el potencial de ser un catalizador para entender y navegar estos detalles desde el lente del diseño para alcanzar el balance requerido para la evolución sostenible del espacio público.

Palabras clave

Diseño urbano, urbanismo, espacio público, preservación, patrimonio cultural, cultura, sociedad.

Abstract

Heritage conservation within the public realm depends greatly on the physical building inventory, how it is preserved and how it evolves alongside other social, demographic and economic needs and issues.

This opinion piece explores how designed objects and spaces, although tangible, acquire an intangible social and cultural value, which deserves and requires a delicate balance between renewal and redevelopment of the built form and the conservation and management of cultural heritage.

The argument made explains the relationship between these variables and how the practice of industrial design has the potential to be a catalyst to understand and navigate these details from a design lens in order to reach the required balance for a sustainable evolution of the public realm.

Keywords

Urban design, urbanism, public space, preservation, cultural heritage, culture, society.

Preserving Authenticity: The intangible details of design in the public realm

The design of objects, structures and places preserved through time have intrinsically shaped the cultural identity of our communities. Their relevant, strategic preservation must be transformed into part of the design practice, allowing for a constant update of functionality while retaining the intrinsic cultural value they have come to both retain and foster. The fact that many of these buildings still stand and are in use, represents the continuous habits we create as social and industrious beings. The feedback cycle between users, objects, structures and spaces gives continuance to the value of said tangible assets to the community and its story. Preserving the intangible essence and cultural value of a structure is a challenging endeavour, highly influenced by the physical and historical context in its past, present and future.

The value imprinted on an individual object can be transported along with the object (museums, collections, galleries). A building however, retains its value only while the building stands and is in use. At the same time, a building that offers a service and performs a duty towards the community will most likely be surrounded by others that do the same. An example of this is a school next to a park, or an at-grade retail area near a civic centre. These examples can be seen in urban models ranging from mediaeval markets as the central node of settlements and villages (1), all the way to global south colonial cities that followed the model of a town square flanked by a church, government building and retail arcade or strip.

The clustering of these buildings and their function for society anchor them as staples of the community, and through time they all create a collective value not only within their walls but also slowly becoming a piece of a greater fabric within the public realm. With time, these clusters of buildings, spaces, structures and objects have usually been complimented with newer, remodelled or altered elements. These new additions to the inventory can improve, evolve or erode

an area's character depending on its causes and execution.

Given how urban planning and growth trends have developed over the past centuries, it is likely that clusters of buildings that make up the core of a node or town centre will have a similar scale and massing and will have been built with similar if not identical materials, as they probably respond to the spatial needs of the same era. They would also be addressing the specific needs of the residents, citizens, visitors and overall users of the area and the built environment of the community. Again, we can exemplify this by thinking of the role played by a market in a neighbourhood, and how it can be the incubator for local businesses, a place of social and economic interaction and an impromptu meeting or gathering place. It is a landmark for both the community and external stakeholders. When a place, in this case made up of structures, buildings and objects, becomes a cultural benchmark beyond its primal use (in the case of the market, a place for trade and acquisition of goods and resources), it transcends from a tangible utility to an intangible value for the community.

This means that when we cluster enough of these tangible items (buildings, parks, plazas, urban fixtures and objects) together, and they each exceed their tangible utility into an intangible value, they provide the base for the creation of the character of a place, or the *genius loci*. *Genius Loci*, or the 'spirit of place' is the notion that a place has qualities based on the perception of its users and visitors, beyond its physical attributes (2). This can be interpreted as an intangible value that stems from the foundation and history of the place (understanding place as the aforementioned cluster of structures, buildings and objects making up the built environment within a given perimeter, such as a neighbourhood or district) rather than a crafted plan or strategy that assigns or embeds a value and character to a new or existing place, which is commonly known as 'placemaking'.

MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning defines placemaking as "The deliberate shaping of an environment to facilitate social interaction and improve a community's quality of life"(3). Placemaking can be a powerful tool to bring wellbeing to places that are lacking in elements such as comfort, safety, ergonomy or accessibility. Examples of this are the revisioning and remodelling of underutilized warehouse districts such as D.U.M.B.O in Brooklyn, New York, a renovation of the Plaza del Mariachi in central Mexico City to better cater to tourists and local guests through improved lighting and safety elements or the redevelopment of the East Village in Calgary, Canada, by redeveloping a forgotten area of the inner city through a para-state corporation that can have agency in both public policy and real estate development.

Each of these examples can be dissected into articles and deep research topics of their own, however, they are common examples of projects that aim to capitalize on the *genius loci* of a given place in order to promote different social or economic goals.

Preserving heritage buildings or other built form assets and their tangible and intangible qualities is one of these goals. There is a vast array of reasons to foster and encourage the conservation of buildings, parks, monuments and objects that define the cultural identity of a specific place. Two main drivers are the social and the economical.

The social rationale is that by strengthening the sense of place of these or other locations the government, community or leading organisations (whether for profit or not) can preserve, amplify and showcase the history, attractiveness and liveability of these places. This, in turn, will attract more people to visit, emigrate to, or at the very least acknowledge the existence and value of the locales presented to them.

Economic incentives behind these initiatives can be a bit more obvious. Given the fact that the physical, tangible assets that make up the sense of place are structures, surfaces and objects, and that they respond to a sense of property, the value of these assets can fluctuate. This fluctuation can be impacted by a wide number of external factors, including international market trends, geopolitical changes and local demographic trends. Additionally, they can be influenced by the intangible value of the asset itself. An example can be a building or structure that has outlived its intended functionality and could be considered 'worthless' through an economical lens, but can have a great amount of value as cultural currency through its sense of place.

When there are enough vacant, non-market-worthy places, there is a valid need from the community, its government and the real estate industry to transform it into something valuable, whether new or not. This is the pivotal point where the intangible value of a place comes into play. Will it be demolished? Will it be renovated? Will it be rescued? This is where placemaking and place-preserving come into play.

Placemaking is -by definition- crafted and inorganic, it seeks to create a sense of place where there was none or where it has dwindled. As such a practice, there is a balance to be struck between the flexibility and adaptability of renewal and preservation to reach a key element in the sense of place: authenticity.

Buildings, the public realm, their objects and physical elements need to keep offering a tangible service and utility to its users, as well as continuing to add value to the intangible currency as part of the cultural identity of its context and surroundings. All this must occur while respecting the organic traditions and social behaviours -all intangible cultural assets- that make up the essence of the place.

Placemaking can signify the redefining of an area, that can imply change in social equity. Demolishing an outdated apartment building in a modern metropolis to replace it for a newer, more aesthetically-pleasing,energy-efficient, ergonomic, and comfortable condominium, can signify displacing current tenants or home-owners, creating social divide and inequity, as well as fracturing the social and urban fabric of the neighbourhood.

These are the types of cases where placemaking can become place-marketing (4) and can negatively impact a community and the physical location they inhabit by putting the market value and economic incentive above the social equity and cultural preservation priorities.

Furthermore, these types of developments tend to capitalise on the original *genius loci* of the area and its built environment, but counterproductively erode it and can all but eliminate it if there the balance of preservation versus renewal is not reached.
This balance is a complex equation of physical assets (how many new buildings can a main street sustain amongst century-old structures before the new outnumber the old?), economic targets (how many housing units and at what price point must they be marketed for the investment to pay off and be profitable?), and social behaviours (how will these new built elements affect the character, history and authenticity of the place, how will they respect long-time residents and users?).

Examples of this can be found in gentrifying neighbourhoods of New York City, San Francisco, Mexico City and many other urban areas around the world. The same way a virgin beach becomes a selfie destination and loses its 'hidden gem charm', our local corner store can become a corporate-chain-owned convenience store devoid of character. Building-by-building and block-by-block, communities can either evolve and keep transforming while retaining their character and intangible currency, or they can devolve, become deserted and perhaps eventually become a brand-new neighbourhood, with no trace of a continuous history, authenticity or permanence for the built environment or the people that inhabited it.

Design, architecture and the built form are intrinsically connected in the spaces we inhabit and navigate through. Whether we are defining new places, renovating structures or roaming through century-old streets, we are part of the feedback loop of design and culture.

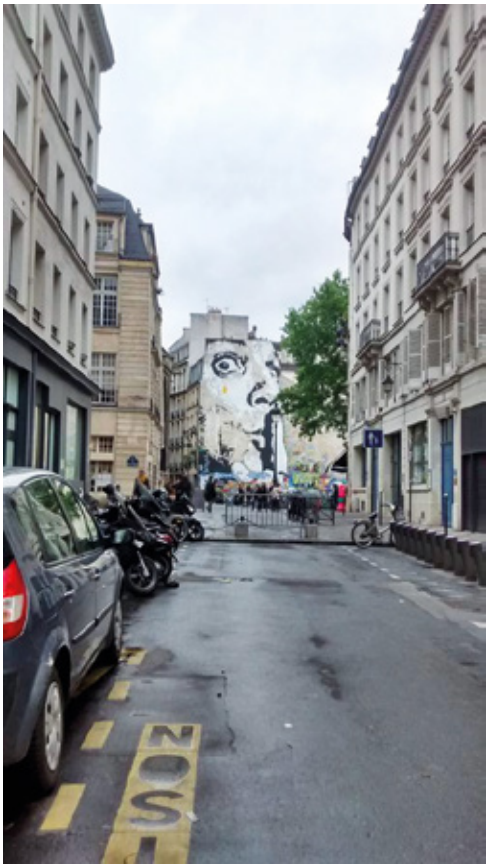
The discipline of designing and building new places has evolved into a multi-faceted industry involving designers, architects, engineers, urbanists and other professionally-trained humans. This industry however, has also evolved into a key driver in modern economics and social trends. Spaces, structures, buildings and other key infrastructure to allow our society and species to thrive is centred around fulfilling our individual and collective basic needs.

The built form and the objects within it are essential pieces that make an intangible cultural and historical value tangible, tactile and visual. A neighbourhood's historical 'charm' or 'quaintness' is hard to define objectively and quantitatively, but it is through the materiality and volume of certain built form elements that the qualitative elements can be defined.

As industrial designers, we are key in supporting the balance needed to retain the *genius loci* of our communities and cities. We tend to think in a scale of objects, or even smaller, a scale of parts of an object. We think in terms of individual artefacts and devices, which we forget make up the inside and outside of our buildings, streets and parks. Our impact extends much farther than that.

We are users of our own designs, and that of others, we must learn to build the skill of scalability into our practice. Designers are not only ideators, but translators. We can interpret and understand a range of adjacent disciplines in our industry: Visual art, architecture, urban planning, digital media. We have the potential to become catalysts in our industry and others, stewarding the preservation of our cultural heritage while allowing for evolution and renewal in an equitable way.

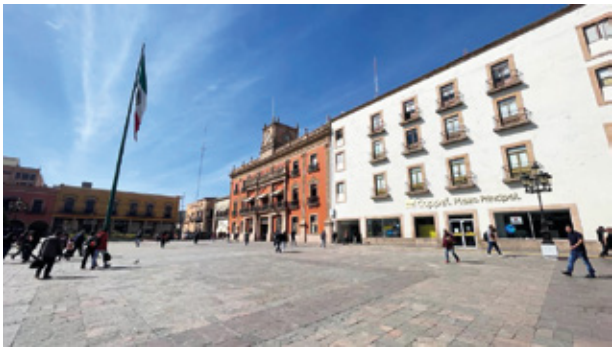
Charles Eames coined the phrase "The details are not the details. They make the design." That is equally true for our cultural heritage and the intangible value of the places we inhabit, so why not treat them as we would any other endeavour in our design practice?



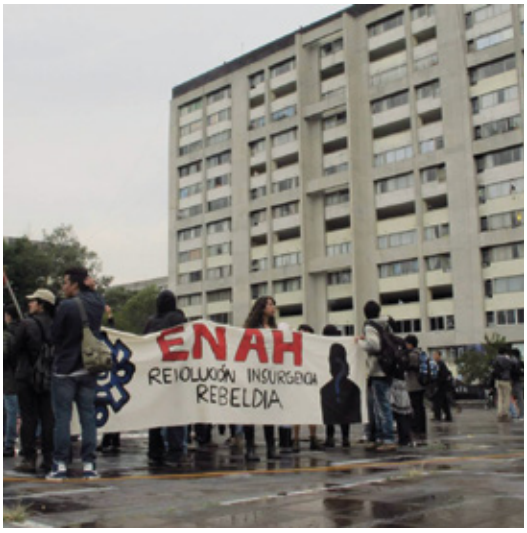
A contemporary mural uses an older building's blank wall as a canvas in Paris. An example of contrasting aesthetics in time that foster an evolution of the public realm without sacrificing the original sense of place. Image by author, 2015.

Images

A multi-century-old building retains its functional and cultural value in Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay. Image by author, 2013.



Zocalo (main city square) in Leon, Guanajuato, Mexico. The colonial urban layout of social gathering space, civic centre and business node still stand centuries later, now housing contemporary retail stores and current government offices. Image by David Hernandez Quijada, 2022.



Students gather to protest for civil rights and security issues at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas square in the Tlatelolco housing projects. This and many other social movements have used this space as a meeting ground, including the 1968 student massacre. A prime example of intangible social and cultural heritage now embedded in the senseof place of the square. Image by author, 2014.

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Born in Mexico and having lived in New York and Canada, Ivan holds a Bachelor's in Industrial Design from Mexico City's UAM, partial studies in Product and Furniture Design at the Centre for Design, Television and Film in Mexico and a Master's in Planning from the University of Calgary.

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