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Introducing Cultural Heritage in the Sustainable Development Agenda

Sustainable Preservation and Development of the Urban Heritage

A statement to the Congress by Eduardo Rojas

Context

Sustainable development needs sustainable cities: not only because the majority of the population lives there but also because they produce the majority of the goods and services that ensure good living conditions for the population. The challenge of this forum is to show that the city's heritage have a significant role in ensuring their social and economic development and their sustainability.

I discuss this challenge based on the significant progress made in the last decades on the understanding of the role of the heritage in society as a provider of meaning and identity, two pillars of social interaction and stability. The material heritage include more than monuments and archaeological sites encompassing a large array of cultural significant places including historic centres and towns, industrial areas and landscapes. The intangible heritage formally protected by UNESCO's 2003 Convention includes oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, knowledge, rituals and festive events.

Further, I frame my remarks on the arguments advanced by UNESCO in its 2011 "Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape" that advocates leaving aside the fragmented concern for the monumental aspects of the material heritage of cities as separated from the social benefits of the intangible heritage of the urban communities.

The historic urban landscape promotes an approach to the analysis and interventions into the urban heritage that consider its material expressions together with its associated intangible cultural practices, values and memorial dimensions.

I will argue that integrating this approach into the public and private decision-making processes that shape the development of cities brings a new perspective into the contribution of the urban heritage to sustainable development. The heritage provides material and intangible assets for development. I will argue that this can be done but with a new mechanisms—institutions, rules and procedures—for managing the urban heritage.

My remarks will cover three topics:

1. The role of the urban heritage in sustainable city development;
2. The challenges of adequately managing urban heritage; and
3. The need for new mechanisms for effectively integrating the urban heritage into the sustainable development of cities.

The Urban Heritage: a Commons that Supports the Sustainable Development of Cities

The material urban heritage is the stock of physical capital: streets, squares and other public spaces, monuments, public and private buildings and the cityscape that an urban community inherits from its past.

The intangible urban heritage includes individual attributes like knowledge, values, and skills that allow them to produce and live in society and societal assets like language, traditions, rules and other forms of social capital that enable individuals to live, work and cooperate in a city.

In essence they are assets that an urban community received as gifts from the previous generations and that are shared by most of its members. They are a commons.

Some or all members of the community value the material assets because they produce a flow of socio-cultural benefits. They are the places where historic events took place, or symbols with which the community identifies, or places of worship. They provide the community with a connection with its history, a sense of belonging or are aids to educating its members. The valuation by the community of the socio-cultural flows of benefits generated by the material and intangible heritage turn this heritage into cultural assets, the cultural heritage of cities.

But the urban heritage has economic use values also. Historic centres and other urban heritage areas provide space for productive and service activities as well as houses. Historic buildings frequently accommodate government offices or cultural institutions and the historic centres are the traditional location of the city's offices, shops and often craft production. In many historic towns they are the place where most people live and in larger cities the historic centre provides affordable housing to low income households. In large cities, the central location of the material urban heritage contributes to reduce the need for the population to travel far to get the goods and services they need.

The intangible heritage is valued also because it forms part of the community's culture allowing its members to communicate and cooperate in the management of their affairs. Knowledge, skills and values allow members of the urban communities to produce and get organized in the distribution of the goods and services they produce. They are the culture and institutions that define life in common in a city and are essential to its sustainable development.

The depletion of the urban cultural heritage can have significant negative impacts on the social and economic development of the cities. The loss of monuments would deprive communities of valued symbols or witnesses of their history. The loss of residential, office or commercial properties in urban heritage areas will deny the community of their aesthetic or historic values and their owners of their use values: that is their capacity to provide housing, workspace or commercial space. Also their loss will force the community to build space anew with the consequent consumption of resources.

Similarly, the loss of intangible heritage has social and economic consequences. The breaking of individual values like righteousness or industry, or the higher incidence of crime in a city due to the loss of social capital in the community reduce the city's capacity to produce and provide good living conditions for its population. A city with a fractured community and composed of an archipelago of individuals pulling in their own direction does not function and is not capable of creating and producing what it needs to sustain its development.

The appropriate management of the urban heritage—its preservation, development and good use—is then critical to sustain social and economic development of the city.

These considerations provide a strong rationale for including the urban heritage as a central component of a development agenda that promotes sustainable development and the reduction of inequalities. As discussed, the material urban heritage provides physical support for productive and non-productive activities and the intangible urban heritage the foundations of an integrated and inclusive society. They are significant assets for the sustainable social and economic development of the cities.

This is a goal that expands the developmental contribution of the urban heritage going beyond the traditional conception of the heritage as a provider of meaning and identity

to communities. Foremost, the urban heritage provides material and intangible means of production and for the improvement of the quality of life. This is a critical issue that is almost always left out of the social and economic development agenda of governments.

The Management of the Urban Cultural Heritage

Finding the urban heritage a place in the development agenda it is not sufficient. There is also the need to ensure that the material and intangible assets provided by the urban heritage are well managed, that is that they are put to work for their developmental purposes.

The good management of these assets should ensure that the material and intangible heritage of cities contributes to enhance the quality of life of the population: That the material heritage provides space to support new and expanded economic activities, good quality housing and urban amenities; That the intangible heritage continues enhancing the capacity of the members of the community to work and cooperate in the production and distribution of material and cultural goods.

The characteristics of the urban heritage pose significant challenges to achieving this goal. Although some buildings are privately owned and that access to some of the socio-cultural flows generated by the urban heritage are transacted in markets and have a price, the most important attributes of this cultural heritage—those that generate the bulk of the socio-cultural values—are available to all members of the urban society and to a great extent are held in common; they are a commons.

The management of commons has always being problematic for societies. The urban heritage is not an exception.

Markets do not manage well the commons: it does not have private owners and cannot be priced. Everybody owns the main square of a historic town and no one can be denied the enjoyment of the beauty of the buildings facing the square. You do not pay for the sense of belonging to the community that comes from participating in one of its public celebrations.

Unfortunately, governments also have limitations to properly manage the commons. Two major issues emerge in the case of the urban heritage. The preservation of the characteristics that makes the material heritage culturally valuable requires imposing special regulations to its use, limitations that are always regarded by private owners as barriers to development. The rules and regulations are mostly justified only on the preservation of a few socio-cultural values (historic, aesthetic, symbolic, spiritual) and it is done calling for the investment of public resources for achieving the preservation objective.

This approach leads to a situation in which the urban heritage is regarded as an urban planning and financial liability for development and it is opposed or—in the better circumstances—regarded with indifference by the champions of economic development.

More often than not, governments lack the human, institutional and financial resources to preserve and maintain the community's monuments. They rarely are capable of assisting private owners to preserve the attributes of their properties that confer them their heritage value, and even to regulate the use and upkeep the public spaces of daily use in the heritage areas of the cities.

The result is laxity in imposing regulations and absence of direct action that leads to the deterioration and often abandonment of the material heritage.

The absence of appropriate management for the material urban heritage is costly for the city. Just one example: the unregulated use of public spaces by street vendors a frequent occurrence in historic centres with tourism appeal leads to its decay. The over use of street by vendors not only impair other uses—like access to buildings and the flow of pedestrian and vehicles—but also deteriorate the pavements and the facades of the buildings. This outcome is strikingly similar to those presented by Garrett Harding in his essay on “The Tragedy of the Commons” that shows that the scarce resources of a common meadow open to all comers are finally depleted and left in ruin by the herders.

When neither the market nor the government in isolation can manage properly a commons like the urban heritage it is necessary to find institutional mechanisms to do so and ensure the continuity of the flow of socio-cultural and economic benefits that it provides to society.

Foundations for the Appropriate Management of the Urban Heritage

We try to take good care of what we value and are willing to devote time, talent and treasure to its up keeping. If lacking resources, we seek help. Similarly, members of the community that value a part of the urban heritage will strive to protect it; if necessary they will pressure for regulations and government spending and will engage the interest of philanthropists and other donors to provide resources. In qualified cases they would be prepared to borrow to finance the conservation and good management of the heritage.

The most common occurrence us for the cultural elite—that assigns great importance to the aesthetic or historic socio-cultural values of the material heritage—to mobilise donations for the preservation and maintenance of monuments having these attributes. They often pressure governments to help with public resources. On their part, organisations of the civil society that care for the spiritual values of sacred places do the

same. Likewise, enterprises that depend for their production on the special skills of craft persons in the community support the inter-generational transmission and enhancement of these skills through education and training.

However, the isolated concerns of a few actors lead only to isolated and often unsustainable interventions. There is an urgent need to expand the range of stakeholders willing to support and contribute to the preservation and development of the material and intangible heritage of cities.

The larger the variety of socio-cultural values of the material heritage—for instance, monuments holding historic, aesthetic and symbolic socio cultural values—the larger the variety of stakeholders interested and willing to contribute to their preservation and good management. The mix of socio-cultural and economic use values that combine in an urban historic landscape should attract the interest of a wide verity of stakeholders and mobilize their resources and skills towards its preservation and development resulting a more sustainable preservation and development of the urban heritage. Enlarging the base of stakeholders interested in and contributing to the appropriate management of the urban heritage is often a forgotten element of the urban development agenda.

If most of the social actors in a community can be mobilised to contribute to the sustainable preservation of the urban heritage, then the issue is to find the appropriate suitable governance mechanisms to channel their contributions. That is institutions, regulations, rules and procedures capable of effectively combining the interests and contributions of all the stakeholders towards the sustainable preservation and development of the material and intangible urban heritage.

Sustainable Mechanisms for the Preservation and Development of the Urban Heritage

The sustainable preservation and development of the urban heritage requires overcoming the shortfalls of the market and the government in the management of this commons. This can only be achieved by cooperation; by a social accord that combines the advantages of good public governance with those of efficient markets; by engaging the cooperation of all stakeholders; by turning the management of the urban heritage a task of all social actors.

Legitimising the Contributions of Heritage, the Starting Point

The most basic step in improving the management of the urban heritage is to provide a “voice” for its contributions to the socio-economic development of cities and for the challenges posed by its sustainable preservation and development. Cities need to engage in an ample debate about their heritage, promote the analysis of its multiple values, identify the threats to its preservation, and value its contributions to the sustainable development of the city.

The second step is to give “political legitimacy” to the social concern for the urban heritage. An ample and pondered debate about the heritage’s contribution to the sustainable development of the city will turn around the ill-based perceptions that regard its protection as a *planning and financial liability* and induce stakeholders concerned with the development agenda to view it as a *development asset* for the city.

Promoting Stakeholder Cooperation, the Necessary Condition

Urban communities need to revise the role and position of the institutions caring for their heritage. Their role should evolve from an over concern for the preservation of the monumental heritage to a focus on the sustainable use, preservation and development of the wide array of heritage assets that can be put at work towards the sustainable development of the city. Their position in the city government structure of the

institutions caring for the urban heritage should move to the core of the group of agencies promoting the social and economic development of the community.

The regulations affecting the use of the material heritage must progress from preventing *au tranche* changes to its attributes and uses, towards promoting the sensible adaptive rehabilitation of the material heritage—buildings and public space—to satisfy contemporary needs.

The procedures for managing the material urban heritage need to move away from transferring all the costs of preservation to the private owners of monuments and buildings towards mechanisms that coordinate the contributions of all interested stakeholders in preserving and developing the heritage assets, including the government, private philanthropy and the beneficiary communities. The corollary of this statement is that the preservation of the urban heritage should cease to be the sole responsibility of the government, local, state or federal.

Encouraging Developments

There are numerous examples of these ideas at work. The Municipality of Quito in Ecuador established a mix-capital corporation to work in conjunction with private owners and investors to preserve and develop the historic centre of the city, a World Heritage Site. In Edinburgh, Scotland, six community associations in the historic centre (also a World Heritage Site) cooperate with the Edinburgh World Heritage Trust (a private foundation) the City of Edinburgh Council (the local authority) and Historic Scotland (a national entity) in the design and implementation of interventions towards the preservation and development of the urban heritage area that is a major source of income to the city from tourism, service and commercial activities, and also traditional residential area.

These are but two examples of fruitful cooperation among varied stakeholders to protect the urban heritage and turn it into a significant contributor to the wealth of the city while maintaining its cultural values that are the commons of its citizens. What the examples have in common is that they managed to set up institutions, regulations and procedures that set up fruitful cooperation processes among a wide variety of stakeholders and channelled their contributions to the sustainable preservation and development of their heritage. By these achievements, the cities incorporated additional assets to their social and economic development with positive impacts for the sustained improvement of the quality of life of their populations.

All cities can achieve results like these if they put their best efforts to the task.

The Road Ahead

There is some urgency in getting city managers, local councils, community associations, private investors, households and consumers to appreciate the contribution that the urban heritage can make to the sustainable development of cities. Early action by cities means that less heritage is lost to decay and destruction so more material heritage assets are put to work for the sustainable development of cities. Active conservation of the intangible heritage or urban communities allows for more individual skills and social capital to contribute to the economic and social development of the cities.

The Sustainable Development Agenda is a suitable vehicle for disseminating the significant role that can be played by the urban heritage in the future development of the cities. The existence of success stories of well managed urban heritage contributing to the economy of cities and the quality of life of their populations is proof of the benefits that can be ripen from these efforts.

International cooperation can play a significant role in assisting cities to improve the management of their heritage for development. Cities will benefit from assistance in: identifying the socio-cultural and use values of their material heritage; evaluating the economic and social development potential stored in the intangible heritage of their communities; and establishing heritage management arrangements that take full advantage of this development potential.

The wise management of the commons represented by the heritage of cities is as a tool for social and economic development as also is the wise management of other commons like the environment and the efficient use of the productive capital of the enterprises and the wise investment of the saved and borrowed resources.

It is time that we put the urban heritage in its proper place as a development asset.