Cultural heritage and tourism: possibilities of a sustainable relationship.

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1. Cultural heritage and tourism

Conservators are generally trained to work on the tangible components of cultural heritage (mainly historic buildings and sites) as a means of preserving their values and meanings and to transmit them to future generations. The Venice Charter establishes, in Article 5, that *"the conservation of monuments is always facilitated by making use of them for some socially useful purpose. Such use is therefore desirable but it must not change the lay-out or decoration of the building"*. Tourism plays a prominent role in relation to uses given to cultural heritage; historic monuments and sites are one of the most valuable resources for the development of tourism since they express the identity and cultural traditions of a country, region or town. The Venice Charter does not mention tourism explicitly but two years later, in 1967, the Norms of Quito, a document issued by the Organization of American States, introduced a specific chapter on the use of monumental heritage by tourism. One of the important concepts introduced by this document is that "*archaeological, historic and artistic monuments are economic resources in the same sense as the natural wealth of the country"*. With regard to tourism, the Norms of Quito expressed that *"intrinsic cultural values are neither weakened nor compromised by association with tourist interests; on the contrary, the increased attraction of the cultural properties and the growing number of outside admirers confirm awareness of their importance and national significance"*. The document includes a set of recommendations related to the balance between tourism use of monumental heritage and adequate conservation. Almost fifty years after the Norms of Quito, the situation has changed in all directions: new social, economic and cultural frameworks oblige us to permanently revise conceptual and operational principles; in this framework, the purpose of this paper is presenting some aspects related to the relationship between cultural tourism and heritage conservation.

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNTWO), tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to

countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. Cultural heritage, especially historic monuments and centres, have always been a primary attraction for tourism. According to Françoise Choay, the concept of "historic monument" was constructed by the Renaissance artists and writers to make reference to tangible relicts of the Roman period and this interest in revisiting classical architecture and art motivated travels to Rome and other sites of the Italian peninsula which are the basis of the so-called *Grand Tour*. On this basis, it is possible to state that the practices of preserving historic monuments and of cultural travels were closely linked. The *Grand Tour* is recognised as the starting point of tourism in the modern era; it consisted of travels to Italy and France by noble and wealthy people from Great Britain and other European countries to take personal contact with historic monuments and museums. The expansion of railways over the second half of the 19th Century facilitated transportation and gave the possibility to less wealthy people to reach the cultural destinations. In current terminology, the *Grand Tour* was a cultural tourism practice by social and economic elites.

Over the 20th Century, the situation of cultural heritage and of tourism drastically changed if compared with previous periods. In the field of heritage, the most important change is the expansion of the very concept of heritage; in 1964, the Venice Charter consecrated the idea that historic monuments include not only great works of art but also more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time. Over the last decades of the 20th Century new heritage categories and types came into consideration, such as vernacular architecture, industrial settlements, cultural landscapes and routes and intangible cultural heritage. This means that currently, when speaking about heritage, we refer to a system of natural and cultural, tangible and intangible components that are closely interrelated.

At the same time, the scope of stakeholders involved in the process of heritage identification, protection and conservation has also expanded. Today, heritage is not a concern only of experts, but of a wide range of social actors, with different roles, among them local communities as a primary stakeholder. In this framework, values attributed to heritage assets are not only established by experts and scholars and based on historic or artistic aspects, but also social, economic and communitarian significance are considered.

In the field of tourism, significant social, economic and political changes that occurred over the 20th Century implied that new social classes had the opportunity to access to travel. Mass tourism has usually been related to holydays and sun and beach, but, over the last decades, together with new tourism modalities, such as ecotourism, gastronomic or adventure tourism, cultural tourism became also a target of mass tourism. There are more and more people who visit archaeological sites, historic monuments and centres, museums and other expressions of cultural heritage. This implies new challenges for both heritage conservators and tourism entrepreneurs.

In our capacity of conservators, we have usually worked to preserve the tangible substance of heritage as a means to preserve values. But when the values may differ according to different stakeholders or interested public, among them tourists, we face new challenges related in some case to the proper use of heritage or to the proper interpretation of those values by local communities and visitors. In this framework, the purpose of this paper is presenting some reflections on the relationship of cultural heritage and tourism; in other words, to reflect on the role and the impact of cultural tourism on heritage conservation.

2. What is cultural tourism?

One of the first aspects to discuss is what exactly cultural tourism is. So as the concept of heritage has been expanded over the last decades, something similar appears with the conceptualization of cultural tourism. In 1976, the first ICOMOS Charter on cultural tourism defined it as *"that form of tourism whose object is, among other aims, the discovery of monuments and sites".* We could agree that this definition is closely related to a rather limited and monumental conception of heritage.

The World Tourism Organization proposed two definitions in 1985, the so-called "narrow definition", derived from a technical product-based approach, and the "wide definition", derived from the conceptual process-based approach. The former makes reference to the moving of persons for essentially cultural motivations such as study tours, performing arts and cultural tours, travel to festivals and other cultural events, visit to sites and monuments, travel to study nature, folklore or art and pilgrimage, while the latter refers to all movements of persons because they satisfy the human need for diversity, tending to

raise the cultural level of the individual and giving rise to new knowledge, experience and encounters.

These two approaches were retaken by the Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research (ATLAS), in 1991, which proposed a technical definition, "movements of persons to specific cultural attractions such as heritage sites, artistic and cultural manifestations, arts and drama outside their normal place of residence", and a conceptual definition, "movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experience to satisfy their cultural needs".

ICOMOS adopted a new version of the International Cultural Tourism Charter in 1999, in which it is stated that the natural and cultural heritage, diversities and living cultures are major tourism attractions. Excessive or poorly-managed tourism and tourism related development can threaten their physical nature, integrity and significant characteristics. The ecological setting, culture and lifestyles of host communities may also be degraded, along with the visitor's experience of the place.

Regarding cultural tourists, several texts of the 1990s highlighted that they are usually educated people, who seek and appreciate authenticity of the sites and of craftsmanship and that are ready to pay more than the average to visit some places; in general, they are supposed to seek new knowledge or to enjoy high cultural experiences. In current theoretical approach to tourism, experience becomes a key concept; tourists are looking for new motivating experiences. This can take to some questions when it comes to define cultural tourism: should we define cultural tourism by the products consumed (historic monuments, museums, concerts, etc.) or should we do it on the basis of the visitors' motivations? Are people visiting heritage places really motivated to visit them? What kind of experiences are tourists expecting? These questions become important when trying to define what visitors are expecting from cultural heritage and what we are supposed to do, as conservators, in the process of including cultural heritage in the tourism offer.

3. **Cultural heritage and tourism: opportunities and threats**

The relationship between cultural heritage and tourism derives in a series of benefits and opportunities, but could also become a threat to heritage integrity and values if not properly planned. With regard to new uses for heritage buildings and sites, there is a dialectic relationship since tourism has contributed to define new uses for heritage buildings and having heritage assets has allowed several regions and towns to develop tourism or diversify the existing offer. Beyond the dedication of historic buildings to cultural purposes (museums or cultural centres), historic buildings and ensembles, with diverse types and degrees of values, are currently used for accommodation: hotels, hostels, boutique hotels, etc. Ancient monastic complex or obsolete industrial facilities have become conferences and conventions centres (Fig. 1). In this regard there is a variety of possibilities, which depend in part on the characteristics of the assets of each region and the policies and incentives in place for tourism development.

Beyond the positive effects of tourism and a possible harmonious relationship between heritage conservation and tourism development, in the absence of proper planning, there may also be negative effects, making tourism a threat. Among them, the excess in the carrying capacity appears as one of the main factors of risk for adequate conservation. The concept of carrying capacity refers, in principle, to the use or exploitation that an ecosystem can support without suffering harming alterations. This concept applied to tourism use of heritage assets (buildings, ensembles, urban or rural areas) refers mainly to the number of people that these sites can support, simultaneously, without changes that may impact on their conditions or their values. In the context we are discussing the basic concept that if there is an excess of simultaneous visitors, this becomes a threat to the site's integrity, to its values and its proper conservation.

With regard to the alteration or distortion of values and heritage message, we must recall that heritage is a system of properties to which society assigns values linked to history, art or science. In this regard, the heritage conveys meanings and values, through the conservation of material substance, from one generation to another. Adequate understanding and interpretation of these values is therefore essential to understand the true meaning of the assets, to ensure their appropriate use and to keep its authenticity, understood not only as the preservation of the material components but also of intangible ones, as functions, vocations, associated traditions, etc. In this sense, a conflict that appeared with the spread of mass tourism is that heritage sometimes becomes a

spectacle and an object for consumption. It may happen that while a heritage site is well preserved and its ability to receive visitors remains at appropriate degrees, dedication to tourism involves risks to its authenticity. This is a situation observed often in historic centres or urban areas. When we refer to threats to authenticity, we do not mean only the damage it can cause to the material components of the heritage assets, but also the risk of intangible aspects: many historic centres or old quarters of cities are well preserved; both buildings and public spaces have good and proper maintenance, but excessive dedication to tourism means that entire neighbourhoods are dedicated to visitors, commerce is intended for tourists, former residences are now hotels or restaurants, etc. The problem is that while the material substance can be, as mentioned, properly preserved, that sector of the city has lost its meaning and its original functions and its authenticity is frankly at risk. This aspect tends to be one of the most complicated issues when dealing with some heritage types, such as historic centres (Fig. 2).

The phenomenon of gentrification is often related to the above mentioned situation and can be observed in historic centres worldwide, although with greater recurrence in economically disadvantaged countries where traditional inhabitants prefer migrate to other neighbourhoods and sell their properties. The problem of this process is that buildings are acquired by people who usually use them as second residence and occupy them over short periods throughout the year. This implies that the neighbourhood gradually loses its population, which means, as we discussed above, to put at risk some aspects of its authenticity. In this case, although material building components can be in good condition, even improved in relation to its previous situation, a loss of authenticity of functions and vocations appears (Fig. 3).

Another type of problems is related to the relationship between visitors and local communities, especially in the cases where there are social and economic differences between them. In developing countries, it is possible to notice how local population is often aliened in visitors' expectations and desires, which becomes, in the end, another cause to threaten authenticity.

These are a few situations that can jeopardize cultural heritage values and authenticity, even in the case that the heritage components are properly conserved. The answer is the idea of sustainable cultural tourism, based on economic, social and environmental

aspects. Sustainable cultural tourism depends on appropriate policies that should include education, not only of local communities but also of visitors.

Some studies of tourism demand have demonstrated that tourists are not usually especially interested in heritage or motivated for expanding their knowledge or contacting a different culture but their main motivation is living pleasant experiences that can include heritage among other resources (Fig. 4). In this framework, it becomes difficult to define who really cultural tourists are and how to foster heritage interpretation. In any case, the work of heritage conservators needs to be complemented by the participation of other professionals to guarantee sustainable tourism.

4. Some conclusions

It is clear that built heritage constitutes a main tourist attraction. It is perceived by visitors as a testimony of the identity and attractiveness of the place and by stakeholders and residents as a source for revenue and for developing the tourism system.

It is evident that tourism has become a source of revenues and an opportunity for local economy but it is not evident how these revenues are distributed among local population. Improvement and enhancement of public spaces are enjoyed by both locals and visitors but some commercial, cultural or entertainment facilities are practically inaccessible for local population. Public investment is mainly oriented to areas or sectors especially destined for visitors rather than for locals, while private investment is focused on projects that ensure revenues.

There is not a necessary relationship between interventions of restoration or enhancement of built heritage, especially historic buildings, and preservation of the authenticity of the sites. The process of gentrification is a sign of loss of authenticity regarding intangible attributes such as traditional functions or social practices. Nevertheless, this situation does not seem to be a problem for visitors, because they feel attracted mainly by the tangible attributes of historic centres rather than for the real life of local populations.

Sustainability based on economic aspects seems to be evident in many cases; the good state of conservation of public spaces and historic buildings allows referring to

environmental sustainability as well. What seems to be at stake is social sustainability, on account of the situations explained above, i.e. gentrification, difficulties for local population to access to the facilities especially thought for visitors or acceptance by residents of the changes of use of urban land in favour of tourism uses. These situations take to rethink how the tourism use of built heritage should be planned and implemented in order to ensure sustainability. Llorenç Prats challenges the idea that heritage plus tourism necessarily implies development; he proposes that the answer to the question should be "it depends". Prats proposes three alternatives: a strict preservation and a non-expensive presentation of heritage; considering human resources as a significant heritage component (good technicians and low budget) and, finally, considering heritage as an integral instrument for local planning, not a simple instrument but the axis for local planning. This integration among heritage goods, human resources and proper planning could be the clue for a successful relationship between built heritage and sustainable tourism.

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Definitions of tourism and cultural tourism mentioned in the text can be found in the following websites:

Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research (ATLAS), http://www.atlas-euro.org/

World Tourism Organization (UNTWO), http://www2.unwto.org/

Photos: Alfredo Conti

Captions for photos:

Fig. 1: Monterrey, Mexico. Ancient foundry converted in convention centre.

Fig. 2: Historic centre dedicated mainly to tourism.

Fig. 3: The impact of tourism and gentrification on historic neighborhoods.

Fig. 4: Heritage as main tourism attraction.