

What is sustainable conservation of urban heritage sites?

The ‘sustainable conservation’ of urban heritage sites depends on the maintenance of their present and past ‘significances’. To achieve sustainable conservation, managers of urban sites, and other stakeholders, act on the ‘attributes’ of the ‘heritage’ that convey ‘values’. The attributes can be of a material (tangible) or a non-material (intangible) nature. The actors may keep, change, restore, reshape or substitute the attributes or even the objects. The actions of managers and other stakeholders should be guided in such a way that the ‘values’, ‘integrity’ and ‘authenticity’ of the attributes of objects are maintained.

Objects, processes, material and non-material attributes

The conservation of urban sites, unlike the conservation of archeological sites or works of art, deals with ‘objects’ (and their ‘attributes’), and ‘processes’. This is because urban sites are living sites in which the presence of humans is essential for their existence (Zancheti and Jokilehto, 1997). So the heritage of urban sites comprises objects and processes that have value for people. The attributes of an object are defined as “any and all features of objects and processes recognized as having heritage value, whether material or non-material”. The processes are the elements that generate the dynamics of urban sites, that is, make them alive and subject to continuous change due to human action.

To society, important heritage values are those attributed by ‘collective processes’, through intersubjective selection and evaluation procedures performed over long periods of time.

For the purpose of this paper, the city is seen as configured objects, structures, natural and built, and human/symbolic relations and processes. They are represented as significant entities that embrace material and non-material attributes related to a mode of specific construction, living and being and are recognizable as being an essential part of an intelligible whole.

Values and significance

Urban sites are conserved because they have values and these are always defined in relation to other values. It is very challenging to determine whether values are intrinsic to objects (the objective approach) or whether they are defined by the subjects, i.e. people (the relativistic approach). It was Frondizi (1971) who best defined values without falling into the traps of these two approaches. He understood that the subject interacts with the object in certain contexts and the values are determined by this relationship. The object is not passive, yet neither is the subject absolute in projecting values on the object. There is a reciprocal determination that depends on the context in which the interaction happens.

However, heritage values are significant for society when they are the product of many subject-object interactions, that is, they are the