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The Architectural Practice of Regeneration

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Abstract: In form and in content, cities are the epitome of diversity. This state is the result of the accumulation of layers of history, of construction, of demolition and reconstruction cycles. These tensions are the catalyst for the emergence of new urban forms and participate in the construction of heritage. As such they should be encouraged. As important as the existing fabric of the city is, its evolution to accommodate the ever-changing needs and fashions of its inhabitants is paramount. For regeneration to be successful it must inscribe itself in this process and it must be driven by an understanding of the environment where it occurs. This paper explores, through the lens of an architectural practice, some design processes and architectural proposals that have been generated by working on the Valletta harbours. It also discusses the necessary dynamics required to accommodate stakeholder engagement and planning policy while ensuring design quality and the perpetuation of the creative process inherent to the city. Finally, the paper introduces, as a possible future, the experiments and studies of the practice on the wider Valletta, putting into perspective the benefits of theoretical research combined with formal and aesthetic explorations of the harbour region.

Keywords: regeneration; heritage; indicators; design; Malta

1. Introduction

The concept and process of regeneration have formed part, under different designations, of the history of cities and neighbourhoods for centuries. Both Vitruvius and Leon Battista Alberti characterised the ideal city and promoted the redesign of part of some cities to fit that ideal, and the Renaissance saw an increased interest in the urban organisation of Europe's major cities, in stark

contrast with the relative anarchy that prevailed in the development outside the moats and castles of the mediaeval era. Military interests and defensive goals were, during the 17th and 18th centuries, the catalysts of new forms of urbanism, such as the fortified cities of Vauban whose theories spread across all Europe. In the case of Paris, the *Plan Turgot* is probably the first real “regeneration” project, with the reorganisation of streets and districts and the careful planning of preferred viewpoints. This was, however, considerably altered by the work of Baron Haussmann in the mid-19th century, which created a series of wide avenues throughout the city, and initiated the construction of a large number of city blocks that are today characteristic of the Paris cityscape. The new urban form invented by Haussmann which spread across many of the European capitals nevertheless ensured the preservation and integration of the most representative ancient space and buildings [1]. The majority of these schemes were implemented in order to improve hygiene and communications as much as for the feeling of security for the inhabitants of these ever-growing cities. During the 20th century, the modernism of Le Corbusier claimed a more humanistic approach to, and vision of, the city. His unrealised *Plan Voisin* (1925) for Paris was a radical solution to the intricacy of the Marais quarter [2]. It is worth noting that Valletta was not left out of these planning changes, and several urban proposals were made from the late 19th century onwards.

The post-war reconstruction was complemented by the regeneration of several areas of Europe’s devastated cities. This was then followed by the aftermath of the post-industrial era in the mid-1970s, which in turn generated scores of regeneration projects. The regeneration schemes as we know them today, however, appeared only at the end of the 1980s and it was only during the 1990s that regeneration started to really encompass heritage buildings [3]. This rapid overview of regeneration as it took place throughout history highlights the important contribution that was made recently by heritage to what has always been considered essentially as a “natural” process of urban evolution.

English Heritage [4] defines regeneration as the “process of reversing economic, social and physical decay in areas where market forces alone will not lead to recovery”. Regeneration is here expressed as an initiated process which is not inscribed in time but which presupposes a state of decay. Perhaps more appropriate, and certainly more defined, is the approach offered by Roberts [5] who characterises urban regeneration as “a comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting change in the economic, physical, social and environmental condition of an area that has been subject to change”. If strongly anchored in the urban domain, this reading is nevertheless more sustainable in its understanding, encompassing the notions of “lasting change” and “integrated vision” together with the social, economic and environmental aspects.

None of the above definitions refer to heritage as an element of regeneration. This can be explained on two counts. One is that regeneration does not need to include heritage to be successful or even to take place [6]. It supposes a rather narrow perspective of heritage, reduced to its material constituents. Secondly, if and when heritage is considered as part of regeneration, it is “often as a strategy of last resort in specific problem areas that have proved largely immune to other policies” [7]. One can see in this quote a fairly bleak picture of the relation between heritage and regeneration. It is, in that respect, important to notice that heritage has for a long time been considered a hurdle to the regeneration process and development at large [8]. Only in recent years, new regeneration projects have emerged that put heritage on their priority list; the so-called heritage-led or conservation-led regeneration schemes. If claims have been made that heritage is being an instrument in the hands of regeneration

schemes [6], it could be argued that this might be the price to pay in order to ensure the sustainability of heritage conservation. On the other hand, there is an extremely fine line between careful regeneration and integration, and the creation of artificial neighbourhoods where heritage becomes “the logo on the glossy brochure”, devoid of meaning and of any relation with its surroundings.

The impacts for heritage and for new developments are real and the responsibility shared between the advocates of both fields. There is also the risk that, beyond the already damaging attitude that considers heritage as an embalmed museum artefact, it becomes equivalent only to a series of regeneration policies.

2. Method

This has been expressed by Rodwell [9] in his stand for a new role for architectural conservation to be taken on: “‘Character’ and ‘appearance’ have reduced much of the role of the conservation officer and urban designer to that of a theatrical set designer, concerned with morphology and architectural detail when viewed from certain public vantage points, skin-deep, and unrelated to the functions of buildings, to the intangible cultural heritage, and to the human traditions of any given place. This role favours a monochromatic view of what supports pastiche and timidity where replacement or new buildings occur. It places preservation of the dominant physical character of a place above past design evolution and above evolutionary enhancement in the future. It ignores continuity of human occupation, activities, and traditions”.

An important point underlined in Rodwell’s stance is the result of the values found in or attributed to heritage. Indeed, any impact on heritage assets or otherwise resulting from the presence of heritage assets is the corollary of the type of values that the heritage asset represents. Markeviciene [10] identifies three categories of urban heritage values, which he calls “socio-cultural goals”:

- (1) Monumental values—symbolic, representative, and memorial;
- (2) Philotopic values—traditional, ecotopic, and ecological;
- (3) Life quality values—aesthetic and cognitive.

These values are in turn the driver behind one’s decision (as a socio-cultural group rather than as an individual) to neglect or care for our heritage. This set of values also considers the constant and necessary integration of heritage within the community.

In terms of regeneration the impact of these values is reflected differently, depending on several parameters. However, there is a certain “pattern” that seems to characterise heritage-led regeneration schemes outside of the possible financial incentives offered to the developers. Monumental values have been instrumental in generating and guiding many regeneration projects, based on the idea of creating an icon, or a focal point for the *new* community. Heritage here becomes a vital element in a branding exercise for the whole development. In this case, however, only the physical integrity of the heritage concerned seems to matter; the monument is most often devoid of context in the regenerated environment. Moreover, although the impact on heritage is important, it is often the result of past “success stories” such as the Bankside Power Station turned Tate Modern, “from redundancy to urban stardom” [11], to the extent that every single derelict power station, at least in Europe, became overnight a potential contemporary art space.

The second set of values that comes to mind when speaking about regeneration is certainly life quality values. This is a theme recurrent in most regeneration schemes, and which, to some extent, is justified. Scores of marketing campaigns appeal to our idea of aesthetics, to the pursuit of the beautiful, and to our revealed interest in the historic environment, more often than not inspired simply by nostalgia. This has a direct physical impact on heritage goods, since it is where pastiche occurs and where aesthetic appearance leads conservation. It also has an impact on new development restraining the field of architectural language that can be used to misused and abused traditional and hackneyed elements. The result can be described as a bland and sanitised environment where everything is “peppered” with heritage flavour.

However, if perceived heritage values are a determinant factor in the quality of the process of regeneration, the anticipated outcomes of the regeneration are also important in the process. In a paper on good design, Macmillan [12] presents the results of three workshops held at Price Waterhouse Coopers, RICS (Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyor), and CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment), about the different outcomes as valued by the various stakeholders (see Table 1).

Table 1. Stakeholders and the outcomes they value [12].

Category	Stakeholders	Outcomes
Finance	Financiers, banks, PFI (Private Finance Initiative), consortia, developers, government	Return on capital, profitability, long-term value, ease of letting or selling, awards
Design and construction	Architects, engineers, surveyors, designers, contractors, subcontractors and suppliers	Profitability, repeat business, awards, prestige
Occupant organisation	Chief executive, project directors, communications and marketing managers, general workforce, human resources managers, facilities managers, security staff, cleaners	Organisational productivity and profitability, organisational vision, image and identity, corporate brand and reputation, corporate social responsibility, good working environment—staff health and well-being, recruitment and retention, absenteeism, energy and maintenance costs
Public realm	Local authority, local community, regional and national community	Regeneration and inward investment, impact on property value, pollution, local health, employment, civic pride, neighbourly behaviour, vandalism
Visitors to building	Hospital patients, hotel guests, retail customers, students, pupils, the general public	Hospital recovery rates, retail footfall, educational attainment levels

Though the workshops were not targeted towards heritage or regeneration, the results presented below illustrate clearly the differences, but also the common factors that may exist amongst the various stakeholders. Dealing with heritage only adds a level of complexity and involves more stakeholders.

The main issue in assessing the impacts of heritage-led regeneration projects is the lack of indicators. A certain number of indicators exist that concern regeneration in general, but most of them are focused around return on investment values, number of jobs created, square metres of floor space created, or number of dwelling units before and after [13]. If it is interesting in terms of the economic outcomes of regeneration, it is less informative when dealing with the success or failure of a project from the point of view of the pre-existing local community, or the on-site heritage assets. It is also a dangerous set of indicators that may push for the overdevelopment of the regenerated area to offset the costs of heritage rehabilitation.

In 1999, English Heritage and Urban Practitioners set out to evaluate the “social and economic impacts of English Heritage’s [regeneration] programmes” [4]. Subsequent editions were published in 2002 and 2003. In 2005, English Heritage published the Heritage Dividend Methodology. Besides the economic factors mentioned previously, the data collected include “social factors, environmental outputs, perception of heritage area/building”. Furthermore, data were collected prior to the project inception, and then later. The report, however, points out that the timescale of data collection should be extended “in order to assess long-term impact”. Even though this is based on a limited number of case studies, the approach is interesting and it may be beneficial to see a similar method applied to other projects, in order to better understand the impacts of heritage-related regeneration projects.

The last set of values that should be mentioned is the *philotopic* values. These are probably the most difficult to assess, but their impact on the success of the regeneration process is far from negligible. This is a part of heritage which is often overseen because of its intangible quality. It is partly the common memory of a community, its traditions and practices, its relation to the area they live in or nearby. It is what cannot be created on demand in a given (regenerated) environment. Nevertheless, when taken into consideration it can be the catalyst for a successful project. “The group value of collections of historic buildings also has an important role in creating a sense of place” [8]. The acknowledged regeneration projects of Grainger Town in Newcastle upon Tyne and of Santiago de Compostela certainly succeeded because of the respect and the involvement of the local community, be it a street, a quarter, or an entire town. Rather than creating a sense of place, these projects maintained and possibly further contributed to a living/lived-in heritage stock that broke free from historical restoration [1].

3. Case Studies

Perhaps one of the most emblematic regeneration projects in the Grand Harbour is the Valletta Waterfront (see Figure 1). It was initiated by central government in 1998 through a development plan for a Cruise Passenger Terminal. The semantic shift between the original and actual denomination of the project already highlights one of the successes of the waterfront. Beyond its functional mission as the point of entry for Malta’s cruise tourism, the Valletta Waterfront has become a destination for the local population and for tourists other than cruise liner passengers. However, besides statistics concerned with numbers of passengers, the full regenerative impact of the project has not been evaluated. From an architectural practice point of view, and referring to the indicators by Macmillan outlined in Table 1 above, the outcomes of this project for Architecture Project (AP) were positive. The project received several awards; it added prestige to the office portfolio and induced repeat business.

Figure 1. The Valletta Waterfront (Photo David Pisani/Metropolis).

However, the lack of really measurable indicators can lead to the misreading of a specific situation. In the case of the Valletta Waterfront, its success from a cruise industry point of view, most certainly helped by a global increase in cruise tourism over the past decade, has led to a local desire to multiply berthing facilities for cruise liners around the Valletta harbours. In 2007, a report issued by MIMCOL (Malta Investment Management Co. Ltd., Valletta, Malta) stated that the “harmonious blend between the past and present has made the Valletta Waterfront become one of the most sought-after destinations for locals, tourists and visiting cruise passengers and crews. The Grand Harbour report, issued recently, acknowledges this and even propounds the development of further cruise liner berths to complement and improve the existing facilities, more so if Malta intends to one day become a homeport in this line of business. [...] In this regard, no other location comes closer to this notion than Fort St. Elmo and its immediate surroundings”.

The impact of such proposals on cultural heritage or the environment, social fabric or quality of life for the residents, or their sustainability in the long run, had evidently not been asserted beforehand. From another point of view, in a paper presented at the *On the waterfront* conference, McCarthy [14] remarked that whilst the project included “elements of good practice” it does not cater for “residential uses [...] which are often desirable for such areas”. Needless to say that, with an increase of 89% in the numbers of permanently vacant dwellings in Malta between 1995 and 2005 [15], this argument could be challenged in the local context. This shows the limits in replicating models developed elsewhere, or the applicability of non-specific indicators.

The Valletta Waterfront also contributed to the regeneration of brownfield land further in Grand Harbour. The construction of the Malta Maritime Trade Centre in Marsa (see Figure 2) became necessary when the Malta Maritime Authority had to vacate their premises within the Pinto Stores as part of the Valletta Waterfront project. This new building is located in the more industrial part of the harbour. Consisting of 17,000 square metres of office space, it accommodates today several government

entities. Through its implantation in this area this building has contributed to the direct regeneration of a former brownfield land, but also to the conversion of an industrial area to an office environment generating employment growth in this part of the harbour and highlighting the regeneration potential of the Menqa area. This, in turn, has generated new proposals for this part of the harbour, further helped by the recent construction of the Malta-Sicily catamaran terminal. However, although improvements are palpable following these developments, no studies were carried out before or after to measure these impacts.

Figure 2. Malta Maritime Trade Centre (Photo T.A.B.B. Sciberras).



On the other side of the harbour, in Bormla, Malta's first dockyard is also the object of a regeneration project. Having won the original tender as part of a consortium, AP embarked on an extensive campaign of stakeholder consultation as part of the design and planning process. Residents, local councils, NGOs and businesses were met at early stages to present and discuss the options under study. One of the ambitions of this project was to increase communication between the Three Cities through an improved permeability around and across the dock area. The initial scheme included a mix of residential-, cultural-, commercial- and maritime-related activities spread across the heritage buildings and also new-built accommodation. Unfortunately, the project in its original design will not see the light, perhaps due to the difficulties in achieving a "regenerative mix", which would have been satisfactory both from a Government and an investors' point of view. Currently, only part of the dock is being rehabilitated through a landscaping project, whilst the Knights and British barracks for the time being have not been restored.

4. Explorations and Discussion

Throughout its practice around the harbours, and despite the lack of a proper set of indicators, AP has developed over the years an understanding of the context and dynamics, sometimes complex, in which local regeneration takes place. The practice has always been a firm believer in the necessity for a

trans-disciplinary approach to architecture, even more so when dealing in a heritage context. In this respect, the role of the office has been not only to provide architectural services but also to act as a catalyst between the various dynamics present in any given project. The result is a more iterative approach to design, attentive to the clients' requirements whilst also guiding them on the possible outcomes of the design solutions implemented. This approach is strengthened by extensive research in the historic and built environment. This is necessary for the formation of an understanding of the project's context.

This is also why AP has been active in experimenting and developing a conceptual model of the Valletta Harbours region. Called *Novelletta*, and initiated by Jens Bruenslow, Konrad Buhagiar, Edward Cuschieri and Simon Grech as a paper manifesto in 2006, it was developed into a physical exhibition for the 2010 edition of the London Festival of Architecture.

Through a shift in focus from the project base to a wider regional vision of the harbours, these theoretical explorations of a possible future of Valletta allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the aesthetic relationship between the community and the urban fabric. The model is conceived as a thought-provoking tool that pushes the boundaries of our comfort zone by effecting changes to a well-known physical environment. As it alters landmark settings and context in the process, it calls for the development of new design solutions. But more importantly it underlines the importance of a necessary shift in the spatial approach to local regeneration.

As presented through the case studies, although urban regeneration, and especially that of the Grand Harbour region, has been high on the Government's list of priorities for some time, the approach has been exclusively project-based rather than grounded on a wider, more encompassing vision. Currently sustainability objectives are typically set around economic performance, with the overall aim of achieving a perceivable level of improvements in the public realm. On the other hand, and almost as an opposing factor, heritage preservation is conditioned by a highly aestheticized and historicized vision which transforms buildings into objects of contemplation, increasing the difficulties in successfully developing regenerative schemes based on adaptive reuse.

From the practitioners' perspective there is a need to rethink the approach to regeneration from a broader perspective, focusing on the Harbours region rather than on a stretch of quay at a time. The multiplication project with similar requirements for mixed uses will create a saturation which cannot be absorbed by such a small territory. Furthermore, there is a strong tendency to keep manufacturing and production activities away from these developments, in favour of retail-, residential- (often high-end) and tourism-related activities. This is especially true of the Valletta Harbours where one can find, within a small territory, high demographic levels, a dense historical fabric and World Heritage components, together with the only cruise terminal in the country, as well as ship repair activities and an electricity production power station, and still some cargo-handling. There is a real risk of seeing this region transformed into a tourism hub, devoid of any other traditional activities that could actually keep the harbours alive. To this effect it is important to keep improving our understanding of the existing parameters.

From an architectural point of view, there is a need to promote better design in order to better fulfil existing briefs, but also to provide informed and suitable solutions or replacements for the historical surroundings. This is not a simple aesthetic quest, but must be grounded by the studying of existing contexts, physical and environmental but also social. In order to achieve this, it is intended to

conduct an in-depth review of existing indicators, which are readily available, and to subsequently formulate a methodology that can be used in a professional environment to complement and reinforce stakeholder consultations.

Nevertheless, this will prove futile if it is not supported by policymaking based on proper multidisciplinary value assessments. Similarly, stakeholder engagement must take place well before the masterplan stage in order to reflect the consultation. As has been established here, the variety of indicators can only be complemented by the formation of adequate trans-disciplinary groups, with the aim of researching the current situation in order to develop appropriate usable tools, rather than drawing up policies relying on outdated theoretical frameworks. In this respect, the use of scenario analysis and prediction maps is also recommended in order to test the sustainability of future regeneration projects.

5. Conclusions

“If conservation is about managing change” [16], then the role of heritage professionals is to communicate and facilitate this change with all the stakeholders involved. This should be done on a long-term scale, giving the time for communities to adapt to the change and to consider the benefits for future generations rather than for the present, or near future. “The resource value of our built heritage is [...] a very powerful argument in favour of its conservation—over and above its special architectural or historic interest” [9], and as such it should constitute the core of the regeneration process, and not just be a glorifying tool and, even less, a barrier. It means accepting that “heritage value and significance may be embodied in the uses, meanings and association of a place, in addition to the physical fabric of a place or structure” [17], shifting the focus from the micro-fabric, to the macro-context.

Urban regeneration calls for a multidisciplinary approach led by consensus and for thorough knowledge of the values in question, necessitating the involvement of the communities concerned from the inception of the project. Regeneration must be seen as a tool to preserve the diversity and interactions inherent to the city, while at the same time perpetuating its creative process. Cities have to reflect both our time and our history in order to continuously reflect the meanings and values of identity. “It will mean resisting the pressure to turn our public domains into simulated and pristine imaged environments free of chance encounters and risks that make their experience unique” [18].

Locally it also means developing a specific set of indicators, specific to the Maltese context, in order to properly evaluate the implications and benefits of regeneration. But possibly one of the most important indicators consists of a full understanding of our heritage stock: its constituents, its state, its extents, its values, and its potential. This can only be achieved by stepping back from the single project approach to consider a broader spatial area. Finally, it must also be emphasized that urban spaces are intrinsically dynamic environments that must be kept alive by allowing the coexistence of heritage and creative architecture. Specific indicators need to be developed that allow us not only to measure quantitatively the successes or failures of local regeneration projects, but that can also inform us qualitatively on the nature of the solutions proposed. The over-reliance on past performance of local or overseas project tends to mask the reality of the terrain. This is where practice can contribute

not only to a pool of case studies but also to the necessary learning curve to be followed to ensure successful regeneration.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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