11 Palermo / Italy
A Dark Legacy. Surviving through Remembering

Il Titolo della Città è di Felice
The Title of the City is The Happy One
(*Francesco M. E. Gaetani, 1754*)[1]

Heritage Value – from Object to Process

Why do we talk about heritage values? At heart we are less concerned with discussing the conditions under which a historical artefact can be considered to possess "value", so that it can be listed and preserved as a monument, than with providing an ethical basis for the work we perform as conservationists (in a very broad sense) for society. In more general terms, we are concerned with establishing the current and future relevance of heritage conservation in a heterogeneous field of diverse heritage practices. At times, we may also be called to examine whether the concepts that we use, that have come down to us – concepts such as 'nation' and 'society' – can still carry the burden placed upon them by the members of what we might describe as increasingly diverse heritage communities. Can the discomfort that Wilfried Lipp identified around the debate over values in the field of heritage conservation[2] be brought into connection with this shift in the debate over values outlined here? The series of "thresholds" that Lipp hypothesizes is easy to read as a story of weakening and decline in which the monument – from its start as mythos charged with nationalist resonances – is tamed, to become mere historical evidence, then successively democratized and globalized, until it finally experiences complete dematerialization. Equally, however, one could conceive of the shifts analysed so perceptively by Lipp as a necessary precursor for the restoration of vitality and civic potency to a form of heritage conservation, considered as a specific heritage practice – a vitality and potency that it doubtlessly possessed through much of the 19th and 20th centuries.[3]

1 Gaetani, Della Sicilia Nobile, 1754–1775, I/1754: 30.
2 Lipp, Heritage Trends, 2014.
3 Vinken, From Monument to Heritage, 2018.

The challenges are huge for a new heritage conservation: one that that seeks to overcome the concept of the monument rooted in archaeology that was established in the 19th century – the idea of a monument that possesses "artistic and historical value" – and to confront the necessity of a concept of heritage that takes a social perspective, such as that of Critical Heritage Studies.[4] Awareness of the pitfalls of inclusive and hegemonic constructions of identity has grown, and the ideological production that was heritage conservation's twin and constant companion (when it acted, for instance, as the herald of national cultural heritage)[5] is now, thanks to postcolonial studies, subject to theoretical scrutiny; nevertheless, in practice, the danger that heritage politics are yoked to ideological ends has by no means disappeared, as the global growth in heritage-formations employing nationalist, racist, and other exclusive identitarian narratives shows. The ruling house of Saudi Arabia is currently seeking to cement its claim to represent all the people of that country by undertaking wholesale destruction of the holy sites of non-Sunni Muslims such as the Marabouts. Poland's right-wing nationalist government is propagating an interpretation of the Holocaust in which Polish national identity is exclusively associated with the victim role. China, India and many other states are trying to prevent the articulation of cultural or religious diversity – and this random selection of examples could continue indefinitely.

To analyse such processes, it is less important to discuss the quality and value of the cultural assets that are threatened by destruction, reinterpretation and suppression than it is to analyse existing power relations and the goals and rationales of relevant actors. Heritage politics can hardly be analysed in terms of the internationally established criteria of quality, integrity or authenticity. Although questions of materiality are also important, when layering, diversity and ruptures are more likely to signify socially negotiated heritage than are purity, reconstruction or simulation, the focus in the evaluation of heritage-figurations should be directed at the processes rather than the objects themselves.[6] The decisive question remains: "Who has the right to speak?" In other words: which groups are even able to articulate their conceptions of heritage? To what extent are processes of heritage making, implementation and canonization subject to mechanisms of hegemony, censorship and oppression? A reorientation of the value debate against this background seems imperative.

As a lengthy research visit to Palermo again made very apparent to me, heritage conservation can only be conceived of in connection with societal processes and negotiations over heritage, memory and identity. In the Sicilian capital, which so long appeared to be in a state of permanent bondage to the mafia, heritage conservation works as part of a diverse heritage movement that has literally become a lifeline for an urban population whose very existence is at stake.

4 On the shift from an archaeological and object-oriented notion of cultural heritage to one founded in the social sciences and focused on actors, cf. Smith, Cultural Heritage, 2007; Eriksen, From Antiquities to Heritage, 2014.

5 Glendinning, The Conservation Movement, 2013.

6 Ashworth/Graham/Tunbridge, Pluralising Pasts, 2007.

The Redemption of Palermo

In recent decades, the historical centre of Palermo has experienced a true resurrection.[7] The port city was destroyed twice in the 20th century. In the Second World War, allied bombers destroyed more of Palermo than of any other Italian city. Some 150,000 of the city's residents remained homeless for years, living in ruins or caves. The city was devastated for a second time during its post-1945 reconstruction (the "scempio" or Sack of Palermo, as it is still known in Sicily), which was orchestrated by a conspiratorial combination of local politics, the construction industry and organized crime that sought to bypass all applicable laws and planning regulations to siphon off aid money flowing from a range of sources. As a result, the historical centre remained in an abject state until the 1980s, with ruins standing cheek-by-jowl with crumbling *palazzi* and wasteland sites lined with oversized new buildings (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Death, destruction, decay. Albergheria quarter in Palermo (Photo: G. Vinken 2019)

After the war, the population of the historic districts fell from 200,000 (1946) to just 20,000 (1996).[8] The devastated districts were full of poverty and crime and lacked infrastructure; they had collapsed into a no-go area at the heart of the dynamic and dysfunctional sprawl that is this city of over a million souls.

The redemption of the historic centre of Palermo is inseparably tied up with the struggle against the mafia. The low point in terms of humiliation and powerlessness was

7 On the rehabilitation of the old town, cf. Di Benedetto, La città che cambia, 2000; Di Benedetto, Restoration and Re-Use, 2000; Prescia, Restauri a Palermo, 2012.

8 The historic low came in 2001, when only 21,500 residents remained; by 2008, the number of people making their home in the historic centre had risen again to 27,000, which included 5,500 foreigners. Cf. Söderström, Urban Cosmographies, 2009, 90.

the murder of General Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa in 1982, which inaugurated a period of energetic effort on the part of the state to combat organized crime and the ubiquitous corruption. An anti-mafia movement was formed in Palermo which would change the city forever. It was supported by broad sections of the population and took tangible form when local elections were won by non-corrupt politicians around reformist mayor Leoluca Orlando.[9] Today, the entire area – at 240 hectares, likely the largest historic town centre in Europe with 158 churches, 55 monasteries and convents, and over 400 aristocratic residences – is protected.[10] In order to break with established customs in the building trade and with old elites, Orlando consciously appointed renowned specialists from outside Palermo to oversee the rehabilitation: Pier Luigi Cervellati, the lead architect in the restoration of Bologna, as well as Leonardo Benevolo, Italo Insolera and others.[11] The *Piano Particolareggiato Esecutivo Centro Storico* (P.P.E. Centro Storico) that they developed took effect in 1993, following the return of the reformist mayor to office after a series of political intrigues had temporarily cost him his position, leading him to break with the established parties.[12] The ambitious goal was to restore the old city's population to at least 50,000 and to bring back the middle class, while avoiding the gentrification and commercialization that had, despite the best intentions, occurred in Bologna: there, those with low incomes had been driven out and the rehabilitated historic town centre – meanwhile cleaned-up and stylish – was now firmly controlled by the wealthy.[13]

The rehabilitation of the historic centre was generously supported with EU funds and matching money was provided by the city, the region and the Italian state.[14] With the founding of the Office for the Historic City Centre (*Ufficio Centro Storico*), Palermo now had, for the first time, an effective heritage conservation department and the ability to make use of modern restoration techniques.[15] After the restoration of several large prestige projects and public buildings, the focus was then placed on the most badly damaged buildings, which were purchased, restored and sold for residential use. In return for observing conservation regulations, new purchasers received financial support from the authorities. In 1999, work was being undertaken on 200 churches, monasteries/convents and palazzi; during this period, some 90 billion lire went to support over 360 individual projects.[16] Significant attention was paid to building up infrastructure. Paving and lighting were restored according to historical models (Fig. 2).[17]

9 For the general history of the anti-mafia movement in Palermo: Schneider/Schneider, Reversible Destiny, 2003.

10 Di Benedetto, Restoration and Re-Use, 2000, 13.

11 Schneider/Schneider, Reversible Destiny, 2003, 240–243.

12 Di Benedetto, Restoration and Re-Use, 2000, 25–26; Prescia, Restauri a Palermo, 2012, 10–138.

13 Schneider/Schneider, Reversible Destiny, 2003, 247.

14 Di Benedetto, Restoration and Re-Use, 2000, 27–28.

15 Prescia, Restauri a Palermo, 2012, 75; Di Benedetto, Restoration and Re-Use, 2000, 27–39.

16 Di Benedetto, Restoration and Re-Use, 2000, 28.

17 Di Benedetto, La città che cambia, 2000, II:689–696.

Figure 2: "Restauro in Corso". Fontana del Genio, Palermo (Photo: G. Vinken 2019)

Considerable progress has since been made. Quarters such as Kalsa have been successfully turned around. The middle class and the tourists are back, and with them, amenities such as restaurants and shops. The traces of gentrification, which are certainly present, may be considered here as normalization – in the sense of the heterogenization of formerly homogeneous slums. Other districts, such as Capo and Alberghia, continue to exhibit significant problems with both buildings and infrastructure: tenantlessness and dereliction can still be seen here, indeed ruins and wasteland may even be seen on main roads. The urban fabric of Palermo, which reflects hundreds of years of social polarisation (the frequently absentee major landowners from church and aristocracy on the one hand, an impoverished underclass on the other), has proven to be a very different obstacle than in Bologna.[18] A major problem remains the restoration of the 400 palazzi, some of which go back to Norman times and are among the city's most valuable buildings. Most of these are not inhabited by their owners, but fractionally subdivided and owned by multiple people; others have been abandoned and are in a state of ruin. One reason for the slow progress is the high barriers set up by the city authorities to deter speculation. These restrict subsidy applications to people who have lived in a property for at least ten years.[19] In practice, the widely divergent interests of owners are extremely hard to coordinate. [20] Critics have also complained about the generally reconstructionist approach taken in the so-called *Cervellati Plan*. This project is guided by an image of the "historic" city as it appeared in 1870. The plan aims at (partially) reconstructing badly damaged and lost buildings on the basis of historical plans

18 Schneider/Schneider, Reversible Destiny, 2003, 248–251.

19 Schneider/Schneider, Reversible Destiny, 2003, 248–249.

20 Cannarozzo, Riqualificazione, 1996, 40–41.

and pictures, and requiring the remaining structures to be replaced with new buildings that conform typologically, while "intrusive" modern buildings are to be torn down.[21] The strongest source of criticism of these specifications has been the faculty of architecture at the University of Palermo, which has recently been increasingly vocal in its support for the buildings of the 1950s.

Reappropriating the City

In any case, the balance between restoration and revitalization is highly impressive, especially when one looks beyond the technical discourse of heritage conservation. The architectural measures have been integrated in a process that has seen the city reappropriated by its citizens, with the support of a broad range of actors. The reformers around Mayor Orlando should be given credit for orchestrating a grassroots cultural and social politics, a heritage politics that aimed at providing an alternative based on cultural heritage and new opportunities for identification, to contrast with the apparently irrevocable stigmatization of Palermo as the capital of the mafia. The city's government itself initiated a broad package of measures, but focused above all on involving a broad cross-section of the population and providing the many groups of actors with scope to bring forward their own initiatives.

The variety of activities carried out can only be roughly outlined here. One aspect was the deliberate framing by the city authorities of the restoration of historic buildings as a symbol of a new politics. A particularly symbolic event was the reopening of the Teatro Massimo, celebrated on its hundredth anniversary in 1997. Formerly one of the largest opera houses in Europe, it had been closed for "temporary" renovation in 1974 and had stood rotting away ever since, a monument to corruption (Fig. 3).[22]

A similar effect was achieved by means of the uncovering and restoration of the ruins of Santa Maria dello Spasimo, a long-deconsecrated church that had been completely hidden from view (Fig. 4).[23] Typical of this project, as of so many others, was the high level of engagement on the part of numerous volunteers and the subsequent public use of the building as a multi-purpose cultural space. In many other cases, too, expensive restoration work that was funded by the state went hand in hand with the transfer of usage rights to private bodies in the culture sector. Prominent examples include the Chiesa di Montevergini, which has been used as a theatre since 2005, or more recently the anti-mafia memorial set up in a centrally located *palazzo* by the *Centro Siciliano di Documentazione "Giuseppe Impastato"* (CSD Giuseppe Impastato), the first formally incorporated anti-mafia initiative. By such means, numerous symbolically charged points of reference for civic initiatives and the development of the surrounding districts were created.

21 Schneider/Schneider, Reversible Destiny, 2003, 240–243.

22 Di Benedetto, La città che cambia, 2000, I:453–492.

23 Di Benedetto, La città che cambia, 2000, I:261–274.

Figure 3: Open again after decades of agony. Teatro Massimo, Palermo (Photo: G. Vinken 2019)

Figure 4: New centre of urban culture. Santa Maria dello Spasimo, Palermo (Photo: G. Vinken 2019)

One key precondition for this reappropriation of the city by its citizens was the rapidity with which the civic authorities recognized the significance of public spaces. A new department in the civic administration was established to deal only with public green spaces. It was overseen by Letizia Battaglia, who had gained fame as a result of her

photographic documentation of mafia crimes. Joint private-public initiatives cleaned up public squares, terraces were created for use by restaurants, and in 1995 Palermo's intersecting main axial roads, the Via Vittorio Emanuele und and the Via Maqueda (Fig. 5), were closed to motor traffic (if only temporarily at first).[24]

Figure 5: Now closed to motor traffic. Via Maqueda, Palermo (Photo: G. Vinken 2019)

These and other similar measures have been very well received, as not only have they improved the quality of life in the old town, but they also stand for a conscious effort to win back areas that had previously been abandoned to organized crime, and for the reclamation of public space by an autonomous civic society.

The most concise example of how heritage politics and urban planning can create new opportunities for identification is provided by the district around the Piazza Magione. According to plans made in the 1960s, an expressway (the *Asse Stazione-Porto*) was to be built from the harbour that would have sliced right through the old city and the botanic gardens. Fourteen city blocks had been demolished before the project was stopped at the *Convento della Sapienza*, which now stands isolated in middle of the Piazza Magione.[25] In 2000, the piazza was redesigned to expose the foundation walls of the destroyed houses and show the historical layout of this part of the city. A memorial plaque explains the historic structure and commemorates Judge Giovani Falcone ("to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude"), ~~a victim of mafia murder~~ who grew up in the area.

24 Examples are given in Di Benedetto, Restoration and Re-Use, 2000, 180–219.

25 Di Benedetto, La città che cambia, 2000, II:673–678, with reconstruction of the pre-war state.

Figure 6: Banner commemorating Paolo Borsellino and Giovanni Falcone in front of the school at the Piazza Magione in Palermo (Photo: G. Vinken 2019)

A banner that was affixed to a fence at the side of the piazza on the 25th anniversary of the assassination of Falcone and his comrades-in-arms states that the city authorities will hold a ceremony each year to commemorate the murder (23rd May 1992) (fig. 6).[26] The piazza was long a popular meeting place for the city's youth and remains a central site for the reaffirmation of the organized civic anti-mafia movement.

Heritage as a Survival Strategy

It is indeed impossible to understand Palermo's recent heritage formations without the anti-mafia struggle, which is a common point of reference for the various actors. The events known as the *Palermo Spring* were made possible thanks to broad civic engagement and the ability of the anti-mafia activists to overcome the divide that had split Italian society in the Cold War.[27] While there were numerous protest movements, campaigns and initiatives at the start, there was no coordinated remembrance or heritage politics. Following the murder of Dalla Chiesa in 1982, the first anti-mafia monument was erected, the *Monumento Ai Caduti Nella Lotta Contro La Mafia*, which expressly positioned itself in the tradition of monuments to the fallen.[28] Yet this martial monument was never really accepted by the people. Initiatives such as the renaming of streets in the

26 Website La Repubblica Palermo, slideshow.

27 For a long time, the struggle against the orthodox left and the "red scare" united Giulio Andreotti's middle class *Democrazia Cristiana* party and the church and allowed even cooperation with organized crime to be seen as the lesser evil. Cf. Schneider/Schneider, Reversible Destiny, 2003, 49–80.

28 On the events that lead up to this, cf. Schneider/Schneider, Reversible Destiny, 2003, 175, 195.

late 1980s by means of signs memorializing the victims of the mafia, which inscribed public space as part of the anti-mafia movement, were more popular.[29] Only with the murder of two prominent mafia hunters, Paolo Borsellino and Giovanni Falcone, in 1992 were the social conditions in place for a broad public culture of remembrance. This was then able to achieve its full potential with the institutional and civic engagement that followed the re-election of Leoluca Orlando as mayor in 1993. If Palermo used to be *the* city of the mafia, today it is impossible to overlook the symbols of the anti-mafia movement. When approaching the city from the harbour, one is greeted by a more than life-size mural of Borsellino und Falcone, who are honoured as martyrs. When leaving the city on the *autostrada* to the international airport – which is named after the two mafia hunters – one passes two monumental obelisks that mark the site of the assassination of Falcone, and, a short distance away, the hut from which the bomb that killed all five occupants of the car was detonated, and on which the painted slogan "NO MAFIA" can be seen from a considerable distance. And the last thing one might see when going through airport security is a poster of Borsellino and Falcone with the catchy slogan "*insieme per non dimenticare*": united so as not to forget.

The current phase is characterized by the close interlinking of heritage politics and other commemorative practices, which often seek the broad involvement of the population. Schools play a particularly important role. The project *Palermo apre le Porte*, which, based on a successful project in Naples, encourages school classes to "adopt" monuments, to ensure regular opening times and to act as guides at specific times. By 1999, 73 schools were already participating, and by 2007 over 70 percent of "adopted" monuments had been restored.[30] As in similar projects, there are multiple effects. Opening the long-neglected landmarks, which had often been forgotten about, is an important engine for the reappropriation of the city. The main goal is a form of re-education in which the children are taken off the streets and offered alternatives to a life of crime, but also to give them a sense of pride and ownership of a shared heritage.

The branding of urban space by means of murals (*murales*) of varying sizes is also part of the city's efforts to grant Palermo a new identity. Whether painted officially or unofficially, the murals include not only anti-mafia themes, but also religious and popular motifs.[31] The *murales* are extremely popular and are now not only promoted officially but also by word of mouth. This is a tangible attempt to oppose the branding of Palermo as the city of the mafia with a broad politics of commemoration that makes use of and reinterprets a variety of resources from history. The city's revered patron saint, Rosalia, who once saved Palermo from the plague, has been repurposed to provide divine protection from the mafia: first through reorganization of her feast day in July in accordance with historical models – in the 18th century it was a multi-day spectacle that attracted visitors from around the world, and today it is again the city's main festival – but also through the creation of a monumental mural depiction of her in the public space. To this image has been added the figure of an "African Saint", San Benedetto il

29 Schneider/Schneider, Reversible Destiny, 2003, 181.

30 Troisi, Schools adopt monuments, 1998.

31 There are many good sources available online; for a selection of the most spectacular, *Murales* cf. Rotolo, Cinque nuovi murals, 2018.

Moro (fig. 7), as an expression of a culture of welcoming; less well-known until now, he has acquired real popularity and significance at a moment when Italy's government is attempting aggressively to close the country's borders to migrants from the south – migrants who make up nearly 20 percent of the population in this part of Palermo.[32]

Figure 7: Mural of San Benedetto il Moro by Igor Scalisi Palminteri in Palermo (Photo: G. Vinken 2019)

These are only a few highlights of the diverse cultures of commemoration that Palermo's civic authorities are orchestrating and promoting. They are working to reconcile the city with its rich history and to popularize a range of alternative narratives. Classical formats of heritage politics and heritage conservation are being combined with intangible, experimental and ephemeral formats; the official and the institutional are combining with the voices of individual communities and actors. The frequently described transformation of cultural heritage from an area of antiquarian interest to one of immediate social concern may be experienced here in paradigmatic form. Heritage-formations thus take on a new force and relevance, in the face of which a heritage conservation field that has typically focused on its own professional concerns must attempt to assert itself anew. The field's contribution as an academically informed specialist discipline is indispensable in this connection, as Palermo again shows. The values conservation identifies and conveys must, however, hold their own in a multi-vocal process of appropriation and interpretation; more concerted efforts to involve citizens in its institutional processes – not just by transmitting information on heritage sites and objects, but by engaging the public in dialogue and exchange – would be constructive in both a pragmatic and a fundamental sense for the goal of greater sustainability.[33] The valuation of heritage can never be a matter only for experts: heritage is not, to adapt one of

32 On several occasions recently Orlando has expressed his vehement opposition to the Salvini government's treatment of foreigners. Cf. Affaticati, Widerstand gegen Salvini, 2019.

33 Selitz/Vinken, Kommunales Denkmalkonzept, 2017.

Alois Riegl's expressions, a mere "passion for art and history",[34] but rather, as Derrida puts it,[35] an activity that is deeply and intimately linked with individual existence and social processes of identity formation and negotiation.

34 Riegl, Neue Strömungen, 1905, 95.

35 Derrida, Specters of Marx, 1994 (1993), 67–68.