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The Evolution of Urban Heritage Concept in France, Between Conservation and Rehabilitation Programs

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Abstract

Since the 1852 Haussmann's decree in which, although linked to a modernization programme, the notion of *ensemble historique* born, France has constantly pursued its innovative vision of “urban heritage”, by enacting the 1962 Malraux law on the safeguarding and valorisation of historic centres (1962) and introducing the *zones de protection du patrimoine architectural et urbain* (1983). Following the guiding principles of the 2002 Solidarity and urban renewal law, the notion of heritage has been integrated into an overall urban vision, including it into town planning tools. This work intends to present this conceptual advancement and its applications in France.

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1. Introduction

The long evolution of cultural heritage till today's wide meaning is intimately linked to France, where this concept born in the 19th century, during the Revolution, the Empire and the Restoration.

It originates from its recognition as an expression of national identity and progresses through a sequence of legislative acts: initially linked to the preservation of individual monuments, later of the sites and protected areas, and then of the historic centres. This has been done by gradually increasing the reasons for such interest, initially founded on urban *décor* concerns and finally on the awareness that heritage would be a powerful contributor to social stability and sustainable economic development.

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If, in general, this improvement is not very dissimilar from that of other European countries, the “French exception” is here reconfirmed and expressed by vigorous debates and a special attention paid to urban areas to which correspond administrative bodies and specific legal instruments [1].

Since the Haussmann’s decree of 1852 in which, although linked to a radical need of modernization, the notion of *ensemble historique* came, for the first time, into sight, France has constantly pursued its innovative vision of *patrimoine urbain*, by enacting the Malraux law on the safeguarding and valorisation of historic centres (1962) and introducing the so-called *zones de protection du patrimoine architectural et urbain* (1983).

In more recent years, following the guiding principles of the 2002 Solidarity and urban renewal law (SRU), the notion of “heritage” has been integrated into an overall urban vision, striving to bring it into line with town planning traditional data.

Moreover, the process of patrimonialization - the various means by which cultural features (either material or immaterial) are turned into a people’s heritage - now also concerns many buildings of the 20th century, including the big social housing estates created during the Post-war economic boom. Privileged witnesses of the modernization of France (after 1945), the *grands ensembles* are arousing, today, some interest as rich in symbolic values and, for this reason, deserve to be preserved and maintained [2].

At a time when the future of its main cities has moved centre stage onto French policies, this paper intends to present the conceptual advancement in national urban heritage protection mechanisms and their applications.

It thus will retrace the heritage concept evolution: from the beginnings during the *July Monarchy* to the recent developments, through the implementation of large urban projects, the reconstruction carried out after the World War II, the urban renewal of the second half of the 20th century characterized by extensive demolitions.

The objective is twofold: while focusing on the destructions operated in France, it is equally possible to understand the progression of the conservative thoughts. This, because the idea of protection clearly appeared when town’s changes initiated to be considered a threat for its homogeneity and historical character [3] [4].

The ultimate purpose of this paper is to analyse the current situation and highlight the new tendencies in urban (regeneration and conservation) strategies.

2. At the roots of the heritage’s concept

The current concept of heritage is certainly to be considered as the outcome of numerous factors. It results both from the “physical reality” of the elements composing it, and from the aesthetic, documentary, descriptive and even sentimental values that the common knowledge gives them, as well as from the legislative apparatus that has been produced over time in order to know, study, protect and make it accessible to as many people as possible.

Its origins can be traced - according to an “*étrange paradoxe*” [5] - in the French Revolution: the period in which this notion mostly evolves, changing from “sacred well” to “collective public good” [6] [7] [8]. As the bearer of a tremendous memory’s value, heritage is considered as an element that can substantially contribute to the formation of national identity that it is reflected.

During the revolutionary period, in response to the many acts of devastation that accompanied the popular uprisings, France developed many legal and administrative instruments devoted to the understanding and protection of its historic and aesthetic heritage.

The safeguarding of monuments, of these *pierres durables* that far from being just ornamental elements were, however, part of the foundations of the nation was, beyond the important destruction made in the early years, an explicit goal of the revolutionaries. “The transmission to posterity will be henceforth the result of reasoned actions, specifically oriented in this direction” [9]: in this context, cultural goods were considered as a resource to reorganize not more to the benefit of the elites but of the entire national community.

A season marked by a genuine patrimonial vocation will be, therefore, that of the July Monarchy. A time during when - through the first census on “*l’état des monuments survécus à la Révolution*” (1810), the creation of figures/bodies specifically responsible for (the *Inspector général des monuments historiques* in 1830 and the *Commission des Monuments historiques* in 1837 with a specific budget for the restoration and conservation) and the establishment of specific protection modalities (the law of 3 May 1841 on expropriation for public utility) - the public engagement in the field of cultural heritage developed.

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