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City, Culture and Society

Mapping community identity: Safeguarding the memories of a city's downtown core

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Roberta Cauchi-Santoro

School of Languages and Literatures, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON, Canada

A B S T R A C T

The paper explores the crucial role communities' memories play in safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of a city's historic core through the narration of stories associated with landmark buildings in the downtown. The physical regeneration of a city centre or heritage neighbourhood can occur if its community desires to revive collective memories of the historic neighbourhood in its heyday. Reference will be made to the state of Canadian downtown cores, specifically to a case study of the downtown of London Ontario, where a community-related project that aims to map layers of the lived experience of the city's hub is currently underway. Getting people to revive their memories about the heyday of the downtown core is an activity indissolubly tied to an attempt to shine the spotlight back on this area and reignite the community's enthusiasm for it. The present research project, co-funded by the Culture Office (City of London [ON]), is not simply a nostalgic attempt to recover narratives about an architecture that, to a degree, simulated realism; rather, the older layers of lived experience of these heritage buildings need to be brought back to the fore in order to better value present cultural expression and more-judiciously plan the future cultural profile of the city – a profile that reflects both nostalgia for the missing truth and celebration of the possibilities it liberates.

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In 2011, the City of London (Ontario-Canada) started to compile a cultural resource database with a focus on mapping tangible cultural resources. This initiative reflected governance concerns in the last five years across Canadian municipalities, particularly Ontario municipal corporations, where the emphasis has been on cultural infrastructure provisions (Duxbury, 2008). The 2011 mapping process highlighted the concentration of London (ON)'s cultural assets in the downtown core. Consequently, municipal policy makers decided to dedicate more attention to the downtown, an area that had been largely neglected since the early 1980s. In 2012, the City of London (ON) sanctioned the downtown as a heritage conservation district and a year later the municipal Office for Cultural Policy (London, ON) co-funded, together with Mitacs Accelerate (Canada), the present project entitled "Mapping Intangible Culture in the Historic Core: A Case Study."

This project is an ethnographic study similar to the one advocated by Keith Basso (1996). It attempts to show how community members express their sense of place through "ordinary talk" as well as "agencies of … art, [and] architecture" (Basso, 1996, p.57). As

Michael Baker succinctly points out, "streetscapes in the city's oldest districts represent a cherished history of lived changes" and are "a record in brick of the city's growth" (Baker, 2000, p.24). The older layers of lived experience associated with downtown heritage buildings need to be brought back to the fore in order to better value present cultural expression and more judiciously plan the future cultural profile of the city.

The study thus aims to provide a rich account of the historical meanings associated with London (ON)'s oldest heritage buildings in the downtown district. Nonetheless, it is also meant to be of value to local citizens, enhancing their civic pride, contributing to a consolidation of their collective identity and, most importantly, drawing them into the relatively new process of urban preservation in London (ON)'s historic core. Attempts to preserve cultural heritage in this case provide excellent opportunities to democratize the process by which we give value to heritage by assigning a larger role to local people who have, oftentimes, been made to feel powerless in the face of their deteriorating downtowns and historic neighbourhoods. The physical regeneration of a city centre or heritage neighbourhood can thus occur if its community desires to revive collective memories of the neighbourhood, which provides a forum to put pressure on the municipal authorities, and to voice its

E-mail addresses: rcauchis@uoguelph.ca, rcauchis@uwaterloo.ca.

frustration at how the present (often dilapidated) state dampens communities' civic pride and falls short of their historic aspirations. These goals certainly resonate with a city like London (ON), where, as argued below, policy-makers and planners have for decades turned a deaf ear to pro-heritage civic activism and where generation after generation of the city's municipal politicians has sanctioned the demolition of several spectacular heritage buildings. The choice to embark on the present project indicates that municipal administrators are now recognizing that cultural aspirations encompass an ever-widening scope that entails the built heritage and its wider implications for the community.

As described in the Creative City Network of Canada's "Cultural Mapping Toolkit" (Stewart, 2007), cultural mapping is "a process of collecting, recording, analyzing and synthesizing information in order to describe the cultural resources, networks, links and patterns of usage of a given community or group" (p.8). It is a UNESCO-endorsed tool which involves communities in the identification and recording of local culture and historic assets. Broadly speaking, culturally-meaningful assets in a community can be described as tangible (physical spaces, heritage buildings, architecture) and intangible (community narratives, histories and memories, rituals, traditions and a shared sense of place).[1] In the present project the focus is on showing how tangible and intangible assets go hand in glove. As in UNESCO's view of cultural mapping, aspects of culture are increasingly recognized as being demonstrable through the intangible dimensions of cultural practices. Nancy Duxbury (inspired by Lia Ghilardi) succinctly expresses this intangible aspect as entailing the identification and articulation of the "uniqueness or 'cultural DNA' of a place" (p.9). The goal of this project is indeed to "transform the intangible and invisible into a medium that can be applied to heritage management, education and intercultural dialogue" (Crawhall, 2007, p.6).

Tangible and intangible cultural aspects are thus here construed as necessarily intertwined. The tangible/intangible distinction is, to a degree, justified in the present context because advocacy for preservation of heritage is at stake. Nonetheless, that same advocacy is bolstered by underlining the fluidity of such a distinction. As Pierre Bourdieu argues in relation to the study of culture, meaning is the outcome of an embodied subject's interaction with the physical world and, as a result, "fields of cultural production propose to those who are involved in them a *space of possibilities*" (Bourdieu, 1993, p.176). Taking this perspective into consideration, there is no sharp line demarcating the tangible and the intangible, and all forms of dualism are potentially misleading. Meaning making involves the subject and the object, the mind and the body, the intangible and tangible. A. Munjeri also states this interrelation with respect to community involvement in heritage preservation: "cultural heritage should speak through the values that people give it and not the other way round […] the tangible can only be understood and interpreted through the intangible" (13).[2] Within this context, cultural mapping becomes a means for making intangible heritage more visible and understandable, including information excluded by mainstream documents or unrecognized in official power structures.[3]

The centrality of mapping ancestral cultural heritage to community life, often defined as an exercise in counter-mapping, is indicative of an entire philosophy of life. Counter-mapping attempts to unearth forgotten knowledge and thus points toward alternative senses of space and place. This conception entails refocusing on local know-how and traditional knowledge and practices that ensure sustainable use of both natural and built resources (Leach, 1998; Warren, Slikkerveer, & Brokensha, 1995). A philosophy of life based on the local naturally spills over into the whole concept of 'an economy at zero kilometres,' a way of living that, once again, has become popular in the last decade, and that focuses primarily on using local produce and seeks to bring out local talents in order to preserve and showcase what is indigenous to a community, irrespective of whether these elements are highly valued outside that same locality. Moreover, as threats, such as global culture, continue to menace the local cultural milieu, the need for such safeguarding must be consciously and continuously revived. As Manuel Castells (1991) has observed,

> Local societies … must preserve their identities, and build upon their historical roots, regardless of their economic and functional dependence on the space of flows. The symbolic marking of places, the preservation of symbols of recognition, the expression of collective memory in actual practices of communication, are fundamental means by which places may continue to exist as such. (pp. 350–351)

Getting the community to revive its memories is thus an activity indissolubly tied to reigniting enthusiasm for its neighbourhood. With relation to the ability to capture and retain these various layers of shared knowledge and experience, it is crucial to watch out for the danger of fossilizing, and, in the process, trivializing this living culture. This project does not entail a revival of 'folklorized' practices by scholars and it is not simply a nostalgic attempt to recover and breathe life into an architecture that, to a degree, simulated realism. Rather, the project is motivated by an urge to create a dialectic relationship that interweaves such architectural expression with more recent and contemporary contrasting strands of architecture. Furthermore, on offering a neat set of data harmoniously catalogued, the mapping process can only attempt to propose, and then again to a very limited degree, some sort of useable purchase on a world of crumbling certainties. This project acknowledges, from the start, the considerable subjectivity, ephemerality, and, to an extent, the ineffability of what it is trying to capture.

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[1] It is important at the outset to contextualize the notions of both 'culture' in intangible cultural heritage and 'community.' For at least the last twenty-five years − the period that paved the way for the definition of 'culture' as expressed in the 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention; ICHC) − the concept of culture has shifted towards more anthropological definitions. The intangible cultural expressions that keep reflecting and moulding our identities as communities and nations are part of the new concept of the vastly under-theorized Heritage Studies. The 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention; ICHC) has marked a watershed in its attempt to acknowledge such oral histories. The 2003 Convention specifically explores the concept of 'intangible culture' and its implications in a broader, more critically engaged definition of 'heritage.' The adoption of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention is the culmination of a revision of an overtly Westernized way of thinking about the relationship between culture and development. A cultural rights dimension to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage has also been introduced and witnessed considerable attention since the 2003 *Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention* (ICHC). These anthropological views of culture have informed the development of cultural heritage law and are central to the notions of community as defined in the 2003 ICHC. The identification of any intangible cultural heritage is thus dependent on the recognition by communities, groups and individuals who are continuously interacting with such culture and who are willing to safeguard it because it provides a sense of belonging. The use of the word 'safeguarding' of intangible culture implies that the community in question has to contribute proactively to its continuing viability.

[2] In a survey carried out by Smith in 2006, visitors to heritage sites were asked to define 'heritage.' Largely, heritage was conceived as memory, oral histories and 'traditions'.

[3] As early as 1982, the intangible elements of cultural heritage were already being given a more important role and the notion of cultural heritage had already been expanded beyond monuments and sites to their socio-cultural and economic contexts (Aikawa, 2004; Garcia Canclini, 1998; Klamer, 2004).