CONSERVING PLACES OF MEMORIES: ON SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE AND JUSTICE

Hélia Marçal

Departamento de Conservação e Restauro, Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Ed. Departamental, piso 1 - Gab. 1.22, Campus da Caparica, 2829-516 Caparica, Portugal / Instituto de História da Arte, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Avenida de Berna, 26-C, 1069-061 Lisboa, Portugal, email: hp.marcal@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
This paper addresses the preservation of places of memory by reflecting upon two issues: (1) the importance of successfully assessing the social significance of a given conservation object, without disregarding its multiplicity, and (2) the relevance of communities for that process. An effective collaboration with communities, and the systematic documentation about the process is presented as a step towards a more complete and fair preservation of the intangible features, including the memories, of the object. In this context, examples from two buildings will be provided.

Keywords: Community / Social significance / Justice / Places of memory / Built heritage

1 INTRODUCTION

A lieu de mémoire [site of memory] is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community. (Nora, 1996: XVII)

Portugal, April 25th 1974. After forty-one years of dictatorship, Portuguese people occupy the streets of Lisbon demanding a political change. This movement, also known as The Carnation Revolution, although planned by the left-wing military, is characterized by its great popular participation, and by being one of the few pacifist military-coups that happened in the 20th century. This dictatorship period (1933-1974), called Estado Novo, is characterized by great military oppression, with intense censorship, and prosecution of regime opponents, which were often imprisoned and tortured by PIDE, the International and State Defense Police (in Portuguese: Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado), the regime’s police, which became known as DGS after 1969. PIDE’s (and DGS’s) headquarters, located at António Maria Cardoso Street in Lisbon, was the stage of many episodes of torture and even painful death (Fig. 1). For many people that lived in that period, this address, this building, its front, and its interiors, are a symbol of repression and revolution. For this reason, this is a place (or a site) of memories.

The number 22 of António Maria Cardoso Street, in Lisbon is now a luxury condo (Fig.1). For the generation that was born after the revolution (and after the turbulent revolutionary process that lasted until the 1980s), this is just one more building in a busy street at the heart of Portugal’s main city. This erasure of the building’s history
and of the memories of the community became even more drastic after the removal of
the commemorative sign (Fig. 2), which referred to the events of April 25th 1974, in
2010 (due to the rehabilitation of the building) and in 2014 (after a robbery). After the
second removal, Lisbon’s municipality interfered, and added a new sign, aiming at
encouraging the preservation of memories of the building (Boaventura, 2014). The
sign, however, lists the names of the people that were killed during the Carnation
Revolution and does not mention the previous function of this heritage.

Figure 1: Building at António Maria Cardoso Street, 22, Lisbon. Former headquarter of
PIDE/DGS (until 1974 – photograph available at
https://desenvolturasedesacatos.blogspot.pt/2011/05/excertos-historicos-tenebrosa-
pide.html). After being sold, this building is now a luxury private condo (photo from 2014).

Figure 2: Commemorative sign present on the walls of António Maria Cardoso Street, 22,
Lisbon until 2010 (photograph available at https://desenvolturasedesacatos.blogspot.pt/2011/05/excertos-historicos-tenebrosa-pide.html). Translation to English, by the author:
“Here, in the afternoon of April 25th 1974, PIDE opened fire on Lisbon’s people and killed:
Fernando C. Gesteira, José J. Barneto, Fernando Barreiros dos Reis, José Guilherme R.
Arruda. An reverence from a group of citizens 25-4-1980”.

Within a 15-min walk in the direction of Lisbon’s Castle (Castelo de São Jorge), it is
possible to find Aljube’s prison (Fig. 3), which was used by the PIDE until 1965, when it
was closed after multiple complains, including from the International Amnesty (Oliveira,
In this prison, political prisoners were held and tortured for months, frequently living in small cells where they had to be permanently seated. Among its prisoners, it is possible to account for Miguel Torga, Álvaro Cunhal, and Portugal’s former Prime Minister Mário Soares. Aljube is also one of Lisbon’s oldest buildings, as it is one of the few structures that resisted to 1775’s earthquake. For both reasons, this is a place of memories.

Since 2015, this building is the home of Aljube’s Museum (photograph available at http://ocorvo.pt/2015/07/14/aljube-de-prisao-a-museu-da-memoria/).

Nowadays, Aljube’s prison is Aljube’s Museum (in Portuguese Museu do Aljube – Liberdade e Resistência). Within its new role, there is a path towards the memorialization of the dictatorship, the resistance, the revolution, and of the multiple voices that are still unheard, the multiple stories that are yet invisible (Museu do Aljube – Resistência e Liberdade, 2015). This intention can be seen in the discourses of the exhibition space, as this museum without physical collection serves a vehicle of testimonies and as a receptacle of memories, as well as in the other spaces that are part of this Museum, which includes a documentation centre.

Comparing PIDE’s headquarters with Aljube’s prison it is possible to see two building rehabilitations: but while in the first case the memories of the place have been erased, in the second these memories are being praised, transmitted, and continually constructed. While these are extreme cases of erasure and memorialization, they can be used as operative tools in the examination of more nuanced issues that might occur in the conservation of cultural heritage. Where does the “original intention of the artist” ends, and the “social significance” of the artwork starts? When does conservation stop to be a process aiming at recovering the past, and starts replacing memories? Whose memories are being preserved, and where is the social in the object’s meanings?

The aim of this paper is to reflect upon the conservation of the intangible features of tangible heritage. To achieve this goal, the notions of conservation, and of, within this context, social significance and justice, will be discussed.
2 TOWARDS AN EXPANDED NOTION OF CONSERVATION

Conservation theory has travelled a turbulent path throughout the years. While more classical theories suggested an overlapping between originality and authenticity concepts, being the physical, aesthetic and historical integrity of a given object, conservation's primary scope, contemporary theories of conservation provide other frameworks to think about conservation practice.

The notions of physical, aesthetic and historical integrity have been developed in Brandi’s Teoria del Restauro. This approach suggests that an object's identity intrinsically related to its materiality. In fact, according to Cesare Brandi (1963), an artwork is an artistic expression - a combination of different materials and techniques chosen by the artist; for that reason the final object maintains its authenticity with the permanence of those materials (“[the] object’s true nature” – Brandi, 1963: 90).

In 2005, Salvador Muñoz Viñas explored this issue in his book Contemporary Theory of Conservation, suggesting that the search for the object's true nature usually regards its materiality, and does not count on its emotional or aesthetic response (Muñoz Viñas, 2005). This author then suggests a shift from a material-based conservation to an approach that focuses on subjects instead of objects (Muñoz Viñas, 2005: 147), making very clear that objects are contextual and contingent. Indeed, as referred by Erica Avrami at al., in the report Values and Heritage Conservation, published by the Getty Conservation Institute in 2000 (pg. 6), “we have come to recognize that conservation cannot unify or advance with any real innovation or vision if we continue to concentrate the bulk of conservation discourse on issues of physical condition”.

While in theory conservation is considered an integrated process that encompasses many dimensions within a social frame (Avrami et al, 2000; Clavir, 2009), in practice the social dimension of objects has been overlooked in most conservation endeavours. That happens either by (1) successively disregarding communities as an interested stakeholder in the decision-making process (Henderson, 2016; Sloggett, 2009), or by (2) intervening into a given object to the point its history or context are lost (Muñoz Viñas, 2004). One good example of the latter is explored by Salvador Muñoz Viñas. As explain by the author, throughout history four artists painted the panel of Saint Lucy of the Williams College Museum of Art but after a restoration in 1983, the traces of three of those artists were irreversibly erased. According to the author, in this case, conservation “has changed the meaning of the object: it has made one of all the possible meanings prevail, at the expense of the other possible ones” (Muñoz Viñas, 2005: 170).

While principles such as minimum intervention could be a good starting point to avoid this issue, as suggested by this author, they are relative and thus their application is based on subjective accounts of what minimum means (Muñoz Viñas, 2009). Muñoz Viñas then suggests another principle - balanced meaning loss (Muñoz Viñas, 2009: 50). Instead of minimum intervention, this concept replies a notion of economics science, which determines that the best decision is the one that guarantees the least loss at the biggest gain. There is, however, some difficulty in the definition of what “least loss” and “biggest gain” really means. The question is: least loss and biggest gain for whom? That, again, looks forward to the issue of community representation in the conservation of Cultural Heritage. If conservation’s scope goes beyond the artwork’s materiality, and communities are bearers of Cultural Heritage intangibilities, is it possible an active participation of communities in the decision-making process could be a way to access and protect the object’s multiplicity of meanings? In other words,
could communities’ recognition be the answer to protect object’s social significance? And if communities are the vehicles to understanding the social significance of the object, the vehicles of its memories, could their active participation in the decision-making process be a way to make conservation a more effective process?

3 RESTORING THE OBJECT - RECOVERING ITS MEMORIES

Communities, together with owners, artists, and conservators, among others, are usually part of the stakeholders identified during conservation’s decision-making process. While several cases in literature refer to community consultation, the majority does not specify what they mean by community, or the methodology used to make that consultation (interview, focus groups, etc.). First of all, the concept of “community” is very heterogeneous, and if some the social groups and communities involved may easily be identified due to the development of formal or informal associations, in some instances the stakeholders are impossible to identify and, therefore, to reach in an effective manner (Waterton and Smith, 2010). Second, consultation is a term very broadly used, but rarely defined. What consultation really means?

Jane Henderson, in a study performed about collaboration showed consultation with dominant stakeholders such as the owner, “experts”, and, sometimes, artists, has a clear prevalence over consultation with communities. Henderson concludes that where “consultation strays into the aspects of conservation practice and decisions that impinge on the physical manifestation of the object there is less ease with the community” (Henderson, 2016: 77). And when there is, in fact, interaction with communities, this detail remains absent of the conservation documentation that follows the object into future times (Henderson, 2016: 75, referring to a 2009 essay written by R. Sloggett). Although Henderson also explains that “there seems to be an effective communication regarding the values of cultural heritage” (Henderson, 2016: 77, emphasis added), it is important to reflect upon these values are being conveyed, and how social significance is being determined.

The social significance of a given object can be considered as its importance in a given social setting. M. J. Revez, for example, suggests that “institutions today evoke a multitude of values when assessing the importance of a heritage object – or, better said, its significance” (2016: 9). These values, however, are not uniformly understood nor applied. As explained by M. J. Revez (2016: 13), in a systematic search for value-system references, although there are many values ascribed to Cultural Heritage, aesthetic, scientific and symbolic values “make up for almost half of the found (...) references”. And local communities are not usually questioned about the aesthetic or scientific values of a given object, or, actually of any value directly. The relative importance of values is usually assessed through indirect surveying. But how are communities being consulted? What kind of approach is being made, and by whom? What kind of questions are being asked?

It is known that context will influence the answer to a given question. At the same time depending “on the wording, framing and social context of the choice, which may include subjective meaning as well as perceived social norms” (Marçal et al. 2014, 2), conservator’s cognitive biases might influence the decision-making process. For this reason, if the consultation process is successively forgotten in the developed documentation, how can we know how the object’s social significance was determined? How can future generations evaluate the consultation process and how that influenced the conservator and the decision-making process? And how can the
multitude of values that are ascribed to a given object be part of the decision-making process, if conservation fails to reflect upon the ways they were determined?

About this issue, E. Avrami et al (2000: 10) states:

[T]he conservation field needs to know a great deal more about the nature of the role of conservation in society — how it is changing, who participates, and so on. At a more empirical level, we need to know how the values of individuals and communities are constructed with regard to cultural heritage, how these values are represented through an assessment of cultural significance, and how the concept of cultural significance can play out more effectively in conservation policy and practice, through better-negotiated decision making.

In the case of PIDE's headquarters, for example, the State did not consult communities about the purchase of the building by a private buyer. Nor they were consulted about the rehabilitation or about the removal of the commemorative sign. Indeed, the latter provoked a series of protests by the Movement “Não Apaguem a Memória” (direct translation by the author: Do not erase the memory) that ultimately led the city hall to put the sign back on the wall (Boaventura, 2014). More than being a problem for the conservation of cultural heritage objects, which becomes worse in the preservation of cultural heritage involving social artistic practices, ethnographic objects, public art, participatory or performance art, this is a problem of social justice.

By being successively absent from the conservation decision-making process and from the documentation that is produced as an act of remembrance for present and future generations, communities surrounding the object are being forgotten by systems of power that tend to enhance some voices instead of others (Waterton and Smith, 2010). In the case of PIDE’s headquarters, for example, the voices being forgotten are ultimately the same voices that allowed the revolution to happen. The destruction of the “memorial character” of this building is therefore a symptom of a process of erasure of the history of the building and of the memories of the revolution.

Acknowledging that cultural heritage is something that belongs to all – an more so in the case of places with such a presence in the collective memory, such as the PIDE headquarters, and the Aljube's prison - it is possible to consider it from a public realm, or public sphere, a realm in which democracy occurs (Mitchell, 1995: 117). In this context, it is important to consider Nancy Fraser’s ideas about the “actually existing democracy” (Fraser, 1990: 56). According to this author, justice, which “requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers”, or parity of participation (Fraser, 2003: 36), is absent from most areas of society. The main challenges to this utopic ideal are, according to the author, maldistribution, misrecognition, and injustices of representation (Fraser, 2003). Waterton and Smith (2010) explain that misrecognition is the main challenge associated with heritage studies. While Waterton and Smith’s account is focused on what is considered cultural heritage or not, this notion of misrecognition can also be applied to the decision-making in conservation.

Misrecognition is a problem that “denies some individuals and groups the possibility of participating on a par with others in social interaction” (Fraser, 2001: 27). According to this perspective, it becomes clear that communities have been misrecognized in conservation’s decision-making process. Either by failing, or not even attempting, to identify possible spokespersons within communities, or by making their accounts about the work invisible, or even by transforming communities in mere consultants – without
really explain how that worked, how questions were asked, and who was asked to intervene in the process – conservation is withdrawing power from this stakeholder. Fraser’s notion of justice suggests that, as users of cultural heritage, communities should also be responsible for its preservation – moreover, in the case of places of memory, they are also the reason why this heritage is protected. But the absence of communities in decision-making circles is not accidental. As explained by Waterton and Smith (2010: 13), “communities of expertise have been placed in a position that regulates and assesses the relative worth of other communities of interest, both in terms of their aspirations and their identities”. For this reason, and in this case, it is possible to consider this heterogeneous group as a set of people who share an interest on the object and on its conservation.

As stated elsewhere (Marçal and Macedo, 2017), this notion of community, perhaps somehow more inclusive, leaves conservation decision-making in a conundrum: being inclusive means becoming unmanageable. Indeed, although it would be possible for conservators to promote a participative action, by creating multiple open, physical and virtual, fora where individuals of different communities could directly engage into the conservation process of a given artwork, that would inevitably raise some problems by: (1) creating an issue with community representativity as probably, different communities would not be equally represented in the process; (2) making conservation processes more time consuming; (3) increasing the costs of conservation actions due to the employment of more (and more specialized) human resources in order to analyse the data; and (4) transforming conservation into an openly political action, as many voices (the ones that would argue for the objects destruction, for example) would probably not be considered. Albeit these problems, communities still need to be involved in order to promote a more just decision-making process, making the preservation of these places of memory, truly an action of recovering memories of the object itself. It is not a path solely towards the preservation of the immateriality of the object, but is also a way to make more informed decisions. In the case of Cultural Heritage with a very relevant social history, as in the case of PIDE’s building or of Aljube’s prison, this engagement needs to happen as a way to transmit their memory to future generations. It is of utmost importance for the preservation of this heritage as a place of memory; otherwise, fifty-years from now, there are no reasons left to preserve PIDE’s building, as communities will then have forgotten about the meaning of that place, and perhaps, ultimately, about the meaning of the Carnation Revolution. After all, why conserving cultural heritage for future generations if present generations are not called to decide in the process?

4 CONCLUSIONS

This paper argues that conservation is a process of recovering memories, or, in a way, of making those memories visible, allowing them to be (re-) constructed by future generations. It also explored some dangers of current conservation practices, which tend to make those memories less visible, either materially – by erasing traces of the object’s history, which is, fortunately, rare, or immaterially – by not allowing communities to truly intervene in the assessment of the object’s social significance, or by not fully explaining in the related documentation how that assessment occurred. These practices not only endanger the object, but they are also a symptom of successive acts of injustice that are perpetuated by stakeholders with (symbolic and real) power. While it is obvious that not all the places of memory from the dictatorship or revolutionary period can become places of remembrance (such as the Aljube’s
Museum), it is possible to reach a middle ground, where small traces of that past existence of the object can be recorded, and transmitted. On the other hand, an active cooperation with communities is of utmost importance, however, it can easily become unmanageable. Conservation documentation can nonetheless explain how the consultation occurred, resorting, when necessary, to anthropologists in order to assess the social significance of the object. Conservators can also be equipped with training in the application qualitative methods (interview, focus groups, etc.) in order to make consultation and interaction with communities more successful.

5 REFERENCES


