

The Significance of the Historic Fabric: Why the Fine Grain Needs Conservation Policies

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ABSTRACT: Authenticity of the built heritage is the sum of all the characteristics that allows for particular built fabric to present and represent its context and period (space and time). The materiality of the actual heritage is only valuable because it transports authenticity. We are currently dealing with this issue from different perspectives and it is a very positive sign to see this issue getting a real public debate. It demonstrates social emancipation from all stakeholders by the end of the public debate.

We should not prioritize the enrichment of all property owners, namely in the historic centre. This isn't sustainable, and it is very incompatible with the assumed compromise with UNESCO to become a world heritage site. If we don't create a systematic methodology of avoiding this kind of continuous pressure on the entire historical centre, we are going to keep on seeing a lot of things go. The facades of the old city are the framework of our collective identification of the city and its public spaces: they belong to the collectivity as much as to the property owner.

It is unquestionable that the planning and architecture of our days has to operate using the layers of the historical city, relate to it and continue to produce value with equivalent collective human proportion and significance. When we don't evaluate the conservation of the historic fabric or demand of ourselves as designers the inclusion and understanding of the historical context, we risk substituting a highly qualified architectural code, loaded with authenticity and a social dimension, with un-signified generic plot ratio increase.

KEYWORDS: Heritage; Cultural policy; Historic Centre; Urban planning; Architecture

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Rua da Felicidade. The authenticity of the built heritage is the sum of all the characteristics that allows that particular built fabric to materialize and represent its context and period (space and time). The materiality of the actual heritage is only valuable because it transports authenticity. It doesn't need to have value beyond its authenticity. Image: Carlotta Bruni

The Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) recently gave me an interesting challenge: looking at the old city to understand how heritage policy is, or isn't producing an effect on the real city, which I have accepted, after having walked through town trying to track the types of phenomenon that are under way and impacting the historical centre.

The IC has led an incredible process of implementing a heritage law and reviewing the practice and policy for the redevelopment in the old city - which in Macao is very difficult and challenging. I am confident that Macao Society has gained confidence and insight on the complexity of debating authenticity. In the past years, we have seen a number of young stakeholders coming of age in the field of heritage consciousness. The lighthouse grassroots movement was very important for Macao to realize that there

are many people, committed to heritage and just how important that is in the search for our collective identity as a world heritage city.

Let's start by reflecting on the notion of authenticity. Authenticity of the built heritage is the sum of all the characteristics that allows for particular built fabric to present and represent its context and period (space and time). The materiality of the actual heritage is only valuable because it transports authenticity. It doesn't need to have value beyond its authenticity.

The Nara charter on Authenticity considers authenticity as the essential qualifying factor concerning values. The understanding of authenticity plays a fundamental role in all scientific studies of the cultural heritage, in conservation and restoration planning, as well as within the inscription procedures used for the

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This shift of scale is unsustainable as a systemic conversion of the historical centre. On the left, an example of how styled good intentions are worse than no intention. Authenticity is loosing ground in Macao. Image: Carlotta Bruni

World Heritage Convention and other cultural heritage inventories.

This notion became obvious if we look at *Rua da Felicidade*. Done in 1999, this operation which saw the restoration of all the *Rua da Felicidade*, was very vigorous in keeping the fenestration in all the typology of these houses in the old red light district. Even though we don't use these windows and these doors any more for that purpose, I thought that made the street very meaningful because it allowed us to have an authentic experience through the minimal interpretation of this well-conserved environment. This operation was important in Macao because it represented a change of use, and yet preserved the original fabric to a very high degree even though the function was not there anymore.

We are currently dealing with this issue from different perspectives, namely in the case of the *Hotel*

Estoril in Tap Seac, where there's a proposed change of use and a lot of issues came up not only in terms of value, but mainly in terms of authenticity. It is a very positive sign, to see this issue getting a real public debate. It demonstrates social emancipation from all stakeholders by the end of the public debate.

There is a growing trend in the process of rebuilding the historic urban fabric that is allowing a high level of compromise, both in terms of volumetric allowance as on how the architectural style has to be followed.

The fact is that the old low rise buildings of the inner harbor which only had two or three levels are being substituted by six or seven floor buildings which mimic the architectural rendering of the old buildings is something that de-qualifies the entire street and kills the whole logic of these old streets in the historical centre. So, in terms of authenticity, I think that it is preferable

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The change of scale will eventually erase any trace of the historical centre, leaving some monuments floating in a built limbo. Image: Carlotta Bruni

to have the not-so-nice green building that we see on the right of the image above which doesn't compromise the value and authenticity of the small old buildings: the old is still rendered recognizable because the new does not assume its condition of time and place, of here and now.

The main threat to the integrity of the historical centre is the change of scale that is being continuously operated stretching the section of the streetscape from three to seven levels and the permissive allowance to the systematic demolition of the old façades of scale which stretches the street section from 3 floors to 7 floors.

It's not necessarily acceptable to allow this doubling or tripling of gross floor area in all areas. I don't think that the Macao SAR Government should be constrained to prioritize the enrichment of all property owners, namely in the historic centre, so government departments shouldn't feel pressured to fulfill this

systemic mantra that property exists to enrich its owners. This isn't sustainable, and it is very incompatible with the assumed compromise with UNESCO to become a world heritage site. This is the biggest challenge and difficulty that we are facing in Macao, and if we don't create a systematic methodology of avoiding this kind of continuous pressure on the entire historical centre, I think we are going to keep on seeing a lot of things go. I think that, we have to establish rules at a different scale - more at a neighborhood scale probably - but that allow for everybody in that area to have a same rule, so that we find some level of reasonability to permit that this old neighborhoods renovate themselves without having to systematically be involved in a process of speculation, a process of densification and de-characterization.

Another reason why we urgently need planning instruments in dealing with the historical centre at a different scale is the setback. The setback that was



The traditional types of construction made an almost constant offset of the ground surface. This fact makes the city built over the hills reproduce the shape of the actual hill with a constant tile and roof materiality the historic neighborhoods built over the hills should have specific guidelines to preserve these distinctive qualitative urban landscapes. Image: Carlotta Bruni

established in the San Ma Lou plan, which was done by Architects Fernando Távora and António Madureira, is very wise because they allow a setback of two floors, going back the depth of the porticos of the ground floor. And because of the cross section of the avenue, that setback becomes unnoticeable. So it really works. Now, when we see that this 3-metre setback is applied systematically in different areas it doesn't necessarily work. It proves that we cannot have a positive attitude towards urban strategy on heritage sites. The scale of construction of the fine grain is critical in Macau because our morphology is of a city built on hills and surrounded by water. The city is an enchanted artifact because the same type of 3-storey buildings covered both the flat areas and the hill sides creating a very sensible off-set of the hills and also revealing the natural morphology. This topography allows us to gaze at the built hills from another hill and perceive the sensuous result of the urbanized geography.

The city is creating opportunities for you to gaze

at it from within itself, and in a traditional city all of this was much respected. This should be central in the planning focus when we're trying to regulate or define how to develop, how to redevelop. And probably, that is a sufficient rule to say 'here it's not sensible to grow vertically, so here you cannot increase volume'.

Another black hole on policy effect that I find traumatic at the moment is the architectural clusters and their unrecognized value. The city was developed through small scale development initiatives that created lane or patio communities. The architecture of these lanes was defined not by the single building, but by a repetition of the unit. Now, because some of them get destroyed during time, we see that there are these leftovers, which look very lost, and maybe even not very interesting to some eyes.

But the fact is that, if you look at the picture, which is this type of city production that I refer to, you see how this was such an intentional way to built up the image of the city. And even in areas that were not

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Architectural clusters: there were many urban blocks and whole streets that were built as comprehensible architectural ensembles. Image: Private Collection.

necessarily rich like the inner harbor, this way to design the unit - not for the sake of itself, but for the sake of the repetition - and to make a block built up the streetscape had this presence of a palace, giving the city this richness. Until the middle of the 20th century, Macao was a city that reflected a very rich public scenario. This reflects a very big collective vision and capacity of producing beauty with the Urban Development Process. It also means that all stakeholders involved with Urban Development shared an agreed system that was structurally aesthetic, and naturally ethic, which is something that unfortunately cannot be said about the current universe of stakeholders (contractors, engineers, architects, Government and investors).

Making all these remarks, looks like I'm pointing the finger at IC, but really I'm doing the opposite. I think that IC really needs to have more partners who allow for better policy to be implemented, because it's something that takes time, but it's also becoming very urgent. In the next image, near the *Rua da Felicidade*, we can see a block that is totally unrecognizable on the main street, due to over imposition of all sorts of stuff over the facades of these shops.

Many clusters are still in a good state of conservation but are rendered unrecognizable due to the unregulated use of publicity and abusive overlays on the facade. And this is what the success of the *Senado Square* and of the *Rua da Felicidade*, is about.

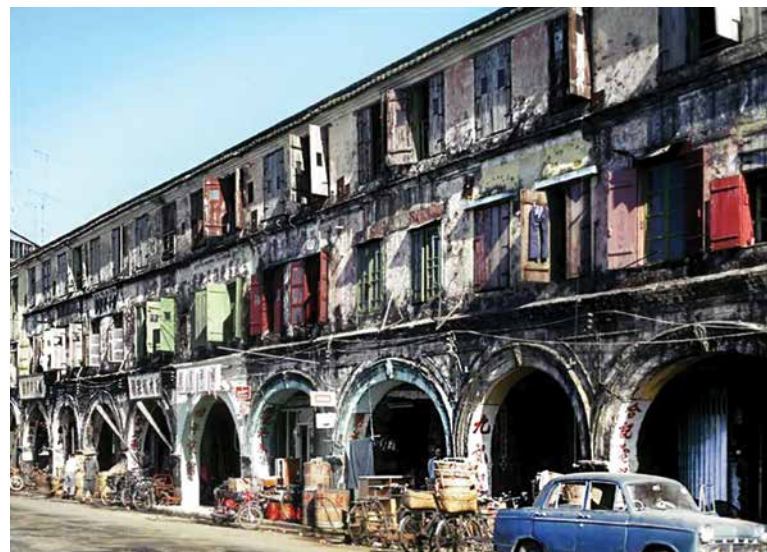
When they were implemented, I suppose, 15 years ago, also St. Joseph Church, nobody could guess that this clean up, this upgrade of the public space, and

that the buildings could be so successful in the way of re-visualizing the historical centre. Sometimes in the past, though, there were things that were allowed by-passing any technical consideration, like the disgraceful Tai Fung Bank tower in Avenida Almeida Ribeiro, opposite the extraordinary and unique Central Hotel.

The sensible thing to do now that we have more legal and administrative ground in the field of heritage conservation would be to demolish the Tai Fung Bank Tower and classify the Central Hotel. Why? Because the former is the result of pure speculative opportunism, whereas the latter is a significant and seminal example of how Macao's entrepreneurial and experimental culture has dealt with innovative programs, and the tower reveals the beginning of the process of evolution that the gaming industry saw in Macao. Through a spirit of entrepreneurship and pragmatism of our business community, improvising solutions and coming up with ways to make things happen in a very nice and happy way.

The place where the Tai Fung tower now stands used to be a small cinema, the *Cinematographia Vitória*, which was a preciously designed little building, cutting the corner to create a public space bordering the Avenue. That space was where the *San Ma Lou* met the

Architectural clusters: many heritage clusters have been dilapidated by decades of inexistent protection policy, making its original value and urban intention almost untraceable. Image: Private Collection



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Rua dos Mercadores, which are two historic main roads, so this small public space extending across San Ma Lou had a critical location. The fact that sometimes we lose these critical spaces in the city terribly compromises the urban text of the city, and the city ceases to be understandable from then on. Bad intentions may prove to be worse than no intention.

Many examples of tentative historical integration reflect incapacity towards interpretation and the understanding of context.

The preservation of the historical facades, in many cases would allow for an equivalent site development as in these cases.

The facades of the old city are the framework of

our collective identification of the city and its public spaces: they belong to the collectivity as much as to the property owner.

The historical centre is really about residents and citizens rediscovering or reconstructing our quality of life and finding ways to revive and re-occupy it collectively. That's why I started with the Nara Declaration, because probably, in a place like Macao the Nara Declaration should be something that we teach in our high schools so that it gets critically discussed and digested, socially, because it is a central notion for all to know and share so that this World Heritage somehow is apprehensible by the public at large.

We have seen how the architecture of the

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(right) Many clusters are still in a good state of conservation, but are rendered unrecognizable due to the unregulated use of publicity and abusive overlays on the facade. Heavy traffic also cuts away from the eyesight the lower portion of the architecture. Image: Carlotta Bruni

(upper left) We need to distinguish the exceptional significant (both architectural and historical) from the disastrous absence of historical understanding of the city, sometimes side by side. Image: Carlotta Bruni

(lower left) The preservation of the historical facades, in many cases would allow for an equivalent site development as in this cases. The facades of the old city are the framework of our collective identification of the city and its public spaces: they belong to the collectivity as much as to the property owner. Image: Carlotta Bruni

traditional city made use of very wise and efficient strategies to create collective large scale compositions that produced beauty of measureless dimension. It is unquestionable that the planning and architecture of our days has to operate using the layers of the historical city, relate to it and continue to produce value with equivalent collective human proportion and significance, this means, in most cases that when we don't evaluate the conservation of the historic fabric or demand of ourselves as designers the inclusion and understanding of the historical context, we risk to substitute a highly qualified architectural code, loaded with authenticity and a social dimension, with un-signified generic plot ratio increase.

The preservation of the common small grain heritage, like the Chinese patios and the shop-houses are fundamental to maintain the historic dimensions of the public spaces. The monuments and exceptional buildings don't have the ability to secure the historical spaces of the city as they are only one piece of the space where they are inserted onto. This simple notion has to be passed to and understood by all of our community, while there are still shop-houses and patios to protect.**RC**