GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON CRITICAL PRACTICE: ENVISIONING HERITAGE IN NEW LANDSCAPES

Simon M. Bussiere
College of Architecture and Planning, Department of Landscape Architecture, Ball State University, USA

Introduction

This paper discusses current design and communication techniques through three contemporary projects designed by the author - the first, a new conceptual hotel in Sardinia, Italy; the second, a conceptual urban park in Mumbai, India; and the third, a new housing community being built in La Prusia, Nicaragua. Starting with an overview that problematizes the current state of envisioning heritage, the paper first questions its common oversimplification as a strictly aesthetic or stylistic act. Building on their analysis and critiques, this paper explores this revisioning of heritage in built and speculative form by blending cultural and ecological heritages in urban landscapes. Next the paper explores the interplay between the design and communication methods in each of the three case study projects and situates each in a global context of critical practice. From there, the paper concludes with an expanded discussion of imaging as it relates to design thinking and communication through an examination of the techniques that were employed to graphically communicate each individual project.

Scholarship and practice concerned with envisioning heritage has primarily concentrated on the aesthetic understanding of heritage as historical preservation. This field of work has emphasized the visual perception of heritage – such as the stylistic elements of architectural beauty and image – rather than a systematic approach that centers how heritage operates within ecologies and complex social and cultural landscapes. Humanity is understandably interested in image as it relates to our visual and foundational past. Born of Western thinking dating back to the fifteenth century, historic preservation has provided a mirror for humanity. That image reflects our values, but should not be oversimplified. Francoise Choay asserts in her book *The Invention of the Historic Monument* (1992) that concepts of historic preservation were a responsive invention to humanity becoming visually blunted with buildings and objects to the point that they became a neutral background to our daily lives¹.

Sharon Zukin in *The Naked City* (2013) argues that stylistic architectural elements commonly celebrated in envisioning heritage are ultimately superfluous. As end users adapt architecture and physical environments through changing historical, social, and cultural contexts, styles are reinterpreted, floor plates reconfigured, all in an effort to make new what was latent. These ubiquitous forms of adaptive reuse find value in the search for authenticity. However, when we seek to romanticize through historical forms, we seek a utopian ideal that does not exist. Kevin Lynch in *The Image of the City* (1960) and Fran Tonkiss in *Cities by Design* (2013) argue that utopia is not found in a faraway place, but rather in what Lynch argues in a “recalibration of placelessness.” Furthermore, extending Alfred Crosby’s ecological analysis of trans-Atlantic imperialism in his seminal text *The Columbian Exchange* (1973), a holistic understanding of heritage requires an ecological framework.

Building on their analysis and critiques, this paper explores this revisioning of heritage in built and speculative form by blending cultural and ecological heritages in urban landscapes. This paper uses three case studies of global contemporary design to problematize the over-simplification of architectural traditions while elucidating diverse forms of envisioning heritage in urban and peri-urban areas to help provoke future discourse in the field.

**Case Studies**

**Sardinia**

The first case study, Hotel Santo Stefano in Sardinia, Italy, fuses archaeological ruins with eco-tourism and the slow food movement by investigating sites and connections between ancient structures and farmlands. The area in La Maddalena, a small archipelago on the northern coast of Sardinia in the Mediterranean Sea, remains home to countless fortifications created by armies stationed in the area over the course of its long history (Fig. 1). Defensible bunkers built into the hillside that have been rendered dormant, dating back to pre-history and as recently as World War II, in addition to the closure of the NATO naval base which terminated more than five thousand jobs, have left behind vestiges of robust historical impacts.

The agricultural significance of the archipelago aligns with a belief that new development can bring together disparate pieces of the area’s history into a productive cohesion of heritage, activity, and socio-economic advancement. With a law that allows for a 25% volumetric bonus for “hotel specific” developments within or directly connected to the historical sites, the project was able to propose...

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contemporary updates to the existing structures. A basic 35 m² unit was conceived as a building block for the hotel rooms themselves, and units were inserted in the landscape where appropriate to closely hug the hillside, capture the best views and remain somewhat hidden from the surrounding pristine view shed. Observed footprints of the existing structures was used to impose a scaffolding of desire lines that would frame the units on the landscape and in direct relation to the structures (Fig. 2) – ensuring a direct physical connection to the site’s heritage. While technical in nature, the images used to communicate the heritage of the islands is meant to serve more as a graphic overview – a map to be used by adventurers in their search to find new modalities in the old places being identified by the hotel program.

Once-fallow land has been adapted for reuse through the recent expansion of the slow food and eco-tourist movements that capitalize on the influx of foreign investment. The project, therefore, is framed by both the fortifications and a renewed restoration of an authentic food culture and ecology. Designed for America’s Cup, the world’s premiere sailing event, as well as the G8 summit of 2009, the “Hotel” capitalized on the site’s breath-taking views and beach vistas. The project metaphorically exploded a typical hotel’s program across the island rather than concentrating development into a single structure in order minimize visual impact from the water. Hotel Santo Stefano converted underground armory batteries that once held nuclear armaments into spas and hot springs. Old NATO docks and structures serve as the hotel lobby, while the fortifications themselves serve as restaurants, nightclubs, community spaces, and lodging which offered an ideal footprint for the hotel’s programs while showcasing the site’s unique ecological and architectural heritage (Fig. 3).
Fig. 2. Framework map of Santo Stefano. Vacant fortifications are highlighted in red with two zoom-in lenses illustrating design guidelines at typical site scales

*Source: Image by Alesandro Preda, Jennifer Myers and Simon Bussiere.*

Fig. 3. Conceptual collages of key design features

*Source: Images by Simon Bussiere.*
The intention is to re-activate and showcase the context for what it truly is. Santo Stefano: whose terrain and structures represent the broader context of the Maddalena archipelago, is the gateway to Maddalena National Park, and thus to an understanding of the history and ecology of the greater archipelago. This history and ecology should not however be viewed as something that’s captured in a post card, or fossilized in time, but rather, it must be engaged through active recreation and educational programs that espouse the greater mission of the region. The project was conceptual in nature, and the proposal was intended to offer a set of speculations about the landscape and possible futures.

**Mumbai**

The second case study, Bandra Park, in Mumbai, India unites disparate social classes through elevated urban green space in order to visually rethink colonial heritage, representing a model for a new means of population distribution and social interaction within the city. Mumbai is a former British colony where more than 19 million people currently inhabit a 4 x 14 kilometre island – a hub of one of the world’s greatest human densities to which rural migrants and rich entrepreneurs alike flock to seek fortunes. Remnants of colonial rule reinforce significant class disparities in which some of the richest and poorest live on the same street separated by artificial structural boundaries. Nearly all development exists in enclaves that extract local resources from the poor while continuing to marginalize lower castes – tower housing developments rise from the slums below further distancing two socioeconomic worlds. The project critiques that artificial caste separation as stemming from colonial heritage and embedded within the urban landscape. Combined with virtually no green space or respite from the sweltering density of the city, the project adds needed open space while bridging the poor and rich through the construction of an urban park that, instead of demolishing urban slums, uses air rights to build above key sections poorer neighbourhoods, generating a path to ownership, increased property values and equity in the poorer settlements below, by using the following strategies.

**Implementation and Design Strategies:**

1. Map public social infrastructure (hospitals, schools, rail stations, etc.)
2. Employ a Property Use Plan (PUP) to yield maximum benefit to the local community by incentivizing mergers of surface rights.
3. Invest in upgraded water channels and right of ways for utility, circulation, and transportation.
4. Create “Bundle of rights” agreements through early negotiations with constituencies regarding joint use and the extent of infrastructure.

Uniting an upper-class tower development on the west with an affordable housing development to the east, the green bridge with flowing epiphyte mesh roof results in a pronounced decrease in temperature while cleansing the air of harmful pollutants (Fig. 4).
Paid for with the funds earned from the towers development, Bandra Park provides a place for all social classes to come together by embracing the postcolonial heritage of a unified India (Fig. 5). At a higher level, the urban design framework encourages inevitable and increasing densification of the city to happen along key zones (which already exists as a composite of iterative micro-connections but lacks a higher cohesion) enhancing equity, growth capacity and upward mobility through Air Rights developments. (Fig. 6). To begin assessing air rights potential, site constraints were determined at the neighbourhood scale by existing social infrastructure, pedestrian circulation networks and microclimate. Income valuation was next considered to establish what was to be built in the air rights as well as what types of income would be derived from such improvements. With Bandra Park’s total new land parcel (8,000 m²) worth approximately 24 million USD, and nearly a half billion dollars from new commercial and residential space, the development is able to subsidize affordable housing and mitigate a long held heritage of socioeconomic disparity. The city benefits directly from development in increased property and sales taxes, new jobs, and global attention from the high profile projects that would follow.
Fig. 5. Illustrative Masterplan of Bandra Park  
Source: Image by Simon Bussiere.

Fig. 6. Analytical maps, sections and diagrams of existing conditions in Bandra  
Source: Images by Simon Bussiere.
Nicaragua

The third case study, Servicios La Prusia in Nicaragua, excavates an invaluable ecological heritage from the grip of impending development pressure. La Prusia, a small community inhabited by 1000 people is centered within a triangle of three critical sites: Mombacho the volcano, Granada the city, and Laguna Apoyo the lake. The impoverished peri-urban area has witnessed a long history of political instability as a result of military conflicts in the 1980s between the Nicaraguan Sandanistas and the Contras, funded by the US CIA. This political instability has created systemic difficulties in funding infrastructure, education, and food security that have limited the mobility and independence of local farmers while degrading the environment. While the area witnessed a train of charities, which inadvertently deprived the area of self-sufficiency, new non-profits like Casas de la Esperanza are rethinking housing development by centering the area’s rich ecological heritage. The area’s rich volcanic soil, pristine sweetwater lake, and dense rainy season provide conditions for diverse agriculture now in danger of being rendered obsolete by the encroaching eco-tourist industry from neighboring Granada.

The housing development funded by Casas de la Esperanza began by strategically mapping the existing canopy of trees (Fig. 7). This existing vegetation and protected critical root zones became the basis for a working-class housing development project that infused production, storefronts, and community space (Fig. 8). While a conventional development would demolish invaluable vegetation, this project threaded all new infrastructure into existing vegetation without disturbing soils critical to the health of the trees. The papayas, guavas, pineapples, bananas, and other fruits and vegetables produced within the development enable traditional types of commerce, exchange, and social interaction deeply rooted within the ecological heritage of the site (Fig. 9).

![Infrastructural diagrams showing systems threaded into existing tree canopies](source: Images by Dane Carlson and Simon Bussiere.)
Fig. 8. Photomontage Perspective: Social space, production and commerce beneath the canopy of an existing mango tree

Source: Image by Dane Carlson and Simon Bussiere.

Fig. 9. Commerce, productive and social space overlays

Source: Image by Dane Carlson and Simon Bussiere.
Conclusion

These three projects reflect the connection of disparate historical, landscape, and cultural pieces into a productive cohesion of heritage, activity, and socio-economic advancement. Taken together, they challenge the notion that image and aesthetics are the dominant factors to consider in the identity of each project, and collectively they provide a glimpse into a set of hybrid contemporary landscape and architecture modalities. Hotel Santo Stefano in Sardinia may never be realized; certainly Bandra Park in Mumbai is an unlikely proposal as well. However, the continued research, design and ambitious construction work in La Prusia may help illustrate that scholarship and practice concerned with envisioning heritage may be well served to place less emphasis on the strictly visual perception of heritage - such as the stylistic elements of architectural beauty and image – rather than a systematic approach that centers how heritage operates within ecologies and complex social and cultural landscapes.