FIT OR MISFIT IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Martijn Stellingwerff
Form & Modelling Studies, Faculty of Architecture, TU-Delft, Delft, the Netherlands

Introduction

Since a discussion at the 2009 EAEA conference, the central theme of the EAEA is rephrased to the study of Architectural Envisioning. The subsequent conferences in Delft (2011) and Milan (2013) focussed in general on Envisioning Architecture, and specifically on Design, Evaluation and Communication. Now in Łódź (2015), the conference focus is on Envisioning Heritage. In this paper I will focus on terms and words as different factors in envisioning. The words bring connotations and immediately set a frame that limits and focuses our perception.

To be honest, at first I had great difficulty to match my research activities to this theme. Fortunately, the organiser of this conference, Anetta Kepczynska-Walczak, kindly convinced me that ‘the definition of heritage is open and multifaceted, so I believe you will find your area within it or on the boundary or edge with other disciplines’. This encouragement started my search to define ‘heritage’ and to come up with a number of comparisons to other approaches.

My working hypothesis for this paper is: the word ‘heritage’ already implies a way of looking at the subject matter, which is protective, this might hinder the open debate in many different circumstances and keeps alternative conceptions unconsidered. I cannot proof this hypothesis completely, but I pose that using the neutral term ‘built environment’ and the cultural broad and versatile term ‘vernacular architecture’ will be more useful in an open discussion regarding fit of elements from the past in a contemporary way, with an eye on the future.

Heritage, its valuation and characterization

Often, the debate on heritage -what it is and how we should deal with it- is larded with anecdotal and subjective qualifications. The World Heritage Centre publishes a list of criteria, such as ‘to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius’, ‘to be an outstanding example of a type of building’, etcetera. To be included on the World Heritage List, sites must be of outstanding universal value and meet at least one out of ten selection criteria\(^1\). The list deals with the extremes, the best and the exemplary. Being on or off the list is a binary decision with huge repercussions for local politics and related planning decisions.

Visualisations of “Genius Loci”\textsuperscript{2} and detailed descriptions about the concerned heritage artefacts let us better understand with what reasons and in what culture the artefacts were made. Such noted particularities are valuable and they valuate heritage in a broader sense and provide crucial insights to make decisions regarding our existing built and natural context.

However, heritage is in my view a quite encumbered word. It gives me connotations to words like protection, preservation, and fixation. Heritage is for a museum. In fact, we can find collections of heritage buildings, for example ‘Den Gamle By’, an Open-Air museum in Århus, Denmark. Of course it is extremely important to handle with care regarding historic objects and environments, but in my view using and re-using the parts and pieces of our built environment is the most sustainable way to deal with the past, present and future.

**Built Environment**

At the other side of the word-spectrum is a much more neutral word: ‘built environment’. This includes every built artefact and is open to many interpretations. While the heritage list evokes binary decisions (either on or off list), a neutral view on the built environment allows for rich and weighed modes of development, including destructive, protective, transforming and inclusive approaches towards existing objects.

The built environment is an amalgam of localities and connections, a maze, a jungle and an ecosystem... The built environment can be seen as an almost infinite composite of plans with partial local order, but with even more contextual disorder, breakpoints, borders, themes, exceptions, improvisations, interventions, juxtapositions and decay. The heterogeneity of the built environment is an obvious result from changing conditions over time. Growth, stagnation, war, climate change and innovation are just a few parameters that influence unique local developments. Nevertheless, we can determine structure, dimensions, scale, functions, building materials, ornamentation and e.g. style. Those aspects can be described precisely, they can be compared and they can be applied to areas on a map.

Whether or not a new plan suits (in) a specific (heritage) context is difficult to be determined. The previously mentioned heritage list and descriptions and advanced visualisations of heritage mainly focus inwards, onto the heritage itself, sometimes in a very protective way. Qualifications with an inwards focus onto heritage are difficult to use as criteria for the evaluation of appropriateness of new plans for a heritage site or for a neighbouring plot. Of course, one can determine if a new plan next to e.g. an important heritage site is either harmful or supportive for the qualities of that site. However, with the above mentioned aspects, (structure, dimensions, scale, etc.), a more objective judgement about fit or misfit of a new plan can be assessed.

Vernacular Architecture

Between the loaded term ‘heritage’ and the neutral term ‘built environment’ there is the concept of ‘vernacular architecture’ that brings a different precision and more diverse opportunities to discuss fit and misfit regarding built artefacts and their context.

Recently I participated in an edX MOOC (Massive Online Open Course) on Vernacular Architecture (HKU02.1x, The Search for Vernacular Architecture of Asia, Part 1). The developers of that course shed light on definitions of vernacular architecture, people, culture, climate, materials, construction and landscape. They use vernacular architecture to describe the past and the existing, but also threads and chances. My view is that vernacular architecture allows for maintenance of local qualities while formulating future steps, with an open view to re-interpretation, regarding new demands and technical / organisational innovations.

Fit or misfit Examples

From the previous part can be concluded that contextual appropriateness of new plans can be evaluated by using a set of more general and objective aspects, such as maps that show the local dimensions, scale, use, building materials etc. From those maps, conclusions can be drawn about e.g. continuity or differences in scale of the buildings in different adjacent neighbourhoods. Even with such a map of aspects, a ‘fit or misfit’ in the urban context, regarding a valuable heritage aspect, related to new developments, is difficult to discern.

Fig. 1. Fit or misfit [scale, function, material]…: Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, 7 State St, New York
Source: Google Streetview.
No one can objectively tell if it is e.g. appropriate or not to make a huge change in height between an existing and a neighbouring new object. The ‘fit or misfit’ can however be evaluated regarding a concept or a list of principles. One can judge if e.g. an innovative façade cladding for a new building is in line with specific material requirements within the context of a typical medieval city centre.

In order to illustrate the wide range of possible approaches, I selected three totally different examples. These examples do not cover the whole field, they only slightly indicate a variety of possible mixes that are valued or disgusted by equally totally different people…

Figure 1 shows a confrontation of heritage with new high-rise developments in New York. Although there is a mismatch regarding scale, function and materials, there might be value in the strange juxtaposition of religion and profit (mammon).

Figures 2ABCD show typical Belgian stone-roads (steenweg) with totally unrelated buildings and free expressive individuality. Many more examples were shown and discussed in ‘Archibelge, Het Lelijkste Land’, a recent documentary film about the Belgian urban context. This spread of buildings is sometimes described with the term ‘sprawl’. Local individual utopia’s are combined along the straight stone-roads. There is no attempt to connect or adapt to neighbours.

Fig. 2ABCD. Typical Belgian Steenweg with eclectic mesh of residential and commercial buildings

Source: Google Streetview.
What is created is a unique collection of ever changing mismatches. In a way this is consistent and can be described as Belgian Vernacular.

Figures 3ABCD are total opposite. They are from the neighbourhood where I live, in Delft. The strange issue here is the extreme continuity, or to paraphrase Koolhaas, ‘pseudo-authenticity…’\(^3\). We see beautifully ornamented labourer houses from 1924-1926. The whole area is protected via a heritage list and mentioned as valuable by UNESCO. Therefore twelve recent new added row houses were detailed in a similar manner, but everything a bit bigger, as if the building is on steroids. Of course these new houses follow new techniques and demands, but their appearance is from 90 years back. Probably this shows continuity in appreciation of the vernacular type and ornamentation. In my view it is a bit too conservative.

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Conclusion

The world is full of examples in which people take care for or neglect heritage. Many approaches are possible and many ways of reasoning appear valid in different occasions. Using specific words to describe situations can already direct towards certain connotations and perceptions. Our way of thinking depends on words and concepts. The word ‘heritage’ brings connotations to protection, while built environment brings a much more neutral view. The word ‘vernacular architecture’ opens up the debate about culture and is applicable both for valuation of heritage as well as for future approaches.