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The Landscape of the Ganges River in Varanasi. The Asymmetric Contradiction of Non-Restoration

Emanuele Morezzi

Architecture and Design Department, Politecnico of Turin, Italy - emanuele.morezzi@polito.it

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ABSTRACT

The essay will analyze the river landscape of the west bank of the River Ganges in Varanasi, India. The peculiarities of the place, its contradictions and its cultural differences, create a complex landscape in which conservation strategies, recommended by the regulations, may not be the best possible solution.

One of the most exciting challenges of conservation is represented by the requirement to deal with different standards, cultural habits, social contexts that often are in sharp disagreement with demands of environmental protection and respect for cultural heritage. This meeting/ clash between the reasons of conservation and the local areas, frequently creates interesting reflections about the restoration purposes and, more rarely, about the possibility to evaluate transformation strategies of different cultural contexts, otherwise difficult to apply in countries conscious of the architectural heritage maintenance. The interest of the restoration of topics related to landscape and its protection and conservation, has origins in the debate of the second half of the twentieth century, when the protection of a single architecture was inadequate to protect the *genius loci* and the building cultural values. To this end, throughout the past decades, contemporary theory was focused in demonstrate how the restoration goal can't be enclosed and limited only to the architectural boundaries (or the cultural or artistic ones), but on the contrary, had broader boundaries, which could include the environment immediately surrounding the building, embracing entire landscape portions (Giusti, Romeo, 2010). Conservation attention, in recent years, it was then occupied to define the most appropriate intervention strategies towards architecture and landscapes that were not locally defined, and whose boundaries were not so easily decipherable (Niglio, 2012). The search process has been a significant moment in 2008, when ICOMOS signed the *Quebec Declaration on the preservation of the Spirit of Place* (ICOMOS, 2008). This document is important, mainly, for two reasons: first it define the “*spirit of the place*”, as constituted by “*tangible (sites, buildings, landscapes, routes, objects) as well as intangible elements (memories, narratives, written documents, festivals, commemorations, rituals, traditional knowledge, values, textures, colors, odors, etc.), which all significantly contribute to making place and to giving it spirit, we declare that intangible cultural heritage gives a richer and more complete meaning to heritage as a whole and it must be taken into account in all legislation concerning cultural heritage, and in all conservation and restoration projects for monuments, sites, landscapes, routes and collections of objects.*” Second, the document

is principally innovative in the approach towards the protection of cultural heritage. Indeed, it seems clear, from the analysis of the document, how to achieve the aims and purposes of a full conservation, restoration works cannot be separated from research not only in architecture field, but have to exit outside the technical, historical and technological understanding, in order to point the attention to the psychological, social, religious and ideological implications. On this theoretical basis, the essay intends to analyze the context of the river city of Varanasi, in Uttar Pradesh, India. The choice of this specific case study depended on the specific desire to find a river background characterized by an high complexity in terms of symbolic and cultural values, in which the composition of the *spirit of the place* was equally distributed between tangible and intangible elements. In fact, the river Ganges banks in Varanasi are particularly interesting because of the variety of contradictions they represent (Chakrabarti, 1998).

On one hand historic buildings that overlook the river are considered the most authentic symbols and manifestations of the most respected local architecture, on the other, the same buildings are not affected by any type of restoration or consolidation, as if to demonstrate the validity of the John Ruskin's theories about conservation. The *spirit of the place*, so central to this investigation, is charged in this case to a further problem: the apparent imbalance between the significant intangible values (cultural and religious), and the poor condition of the buildings,



Fig 1 - Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India. The city is divided by the Gange river, but only one side is built, in order to respect symbolic and religious needs.



of tangible heritage. This complexity, is valid both on an architectural scale, investigating the degradation and diseases existing in the monumental structures that overlook the river; and at urban scale, where there is a significant difference between the high construction density on the west bank river; compared to the total absence of buildings on the opposite side. From this analysis, the essay is supposed to be able to reconstruct a perfect connection and operational methodology of intervention on this heritage, aimed to reach a preservation of the *spirit of the place* of this particular river landscape.

Western bank of Ganges, in Varanasi, is one of the holiest sites of the Hindu religion. The city itself, has always been considered sacred by the faithful, for its geomorphological features (the city is divided in two by the river; but only the western shore is built and inhabited), historical (sources state the city center is inhabited by more 3500 years) and religious (the town is important both for Hindus and for Buddhists, it is situated a few kilometers from Sarnath, the place where Buddha gave his first public speech). Within a reality as dense in terms of cultural and symbolic, the *ghats* are located along the western shore of the river are undoubtedly one of the most important centers of Hindu religion (Pramar, 2005). The peculiarity of this architectural ensemble lies in its conformation: in spite of their importance, such structures are varied, characterized by different functions and morphologies, located along the river to form a sequence rarely interrupted from the built heritage constituted by sacred and religious structures. From architectural standpoint, those buildings were built between the fifteenth and seventeenth century, during the Maratha empire, normally made of local stone *slebs*, all characterized by the presence, near the river, of a stair that degrades naturally to the water, helpful to the faithful for the ritual purification and ablutions. Of course, beside the fine architectural workmanship in the construction and in the design project, the importance of these structures exceeds the simple artistic or architectural interests, embracing themes of spiritual and symbolic order (Briony, 2013). For example, the Dashashwamedh Ghat is considered one of the holiest places of Hinduism (the local mythology wants was built directly by Lord Brahma to welcome Lord Shiva). Despite the religious value still present in the building, the urban transformations, mainly voted for a major expansion of the city, have incorporated the original structure that now seems swallowed up by residential constructions. Nowadays both for the changing nature of the *ghats*, both for this expansion, it looks difficult to identify the sacred structure from those belonging to the building fabric, often made up of small votive temples, chapels or shrines.

The present structure gives us a complex wealth, in which the sacred and the profane are completely bonded into a single organization establishing the contemporary city. The only connection elements which still appear as “authentic” are represented by overlooking of the river banks, true elements of connection between all these *ghats*, and the *spirit of the place*, devoted to the holiness of the area (Tillotson, 2013). A similar consideration can be suggested for the others *ghats* along the river, such as the Manikarnika Ghat, very sacred place for religion. In this area, in fact, unlike what we have seen previously, the primary function is not related to the holy ablutions, but it is a place for cremation of bodies and the consequent spreading of ashes in the river. Despite the great sacredness of the place, to which access is often only



Fig. 2 - Varanasi, ghats landscape. The river bank is made by old and new architectures, which continue to transform themselves.

permitted to family members of the deceased and to those who officiate the ceremony, also in this case, the poor condition of the structures and the complete conurbation between the sacred area and the built environment surrounding, creates more than a single monument isolated from the context, on the contrary, a background, a reality in which sacred and profane, historic monuments and new edifices, are indivisible and inviolable (Hedge, 1991).

The analysis of these realities, facing their contradictions and their problems will allow the implementation of a deep reflection related to the heritage conservation and the identification of suitable methods of intervention. It appears essential to emphasize how, nowadays, these heritage isn't affected by any kind of cleaning operation, maintenance (except in rare cases and for reasons often linked to the need to consolidate the buildings) and protection: in fact, this practice is the primary reason which generated these interesting urban areas, full of multiple meanings and values. From the premises connected to the idea of the *spirit of the place* it is appropriate to emphasize that, beside the characteristics of the context, a suitable conservation project should not be focused exclusively on architectural or structural issues, but rather heads its goal to actions to the whole context, thus including also the intangible heritage and its expression. As other researchers already state (Romeo, 2013), to apply strategies of isolation of the cultural contexts (in which westerners have been applied



Fig. 3 - Varanasi, Darbhanga Ghat. The architectural and historical heritage is surrounded by the river and by new less historical structures.

in order to separate the monument) from the urban fabric considered “minor” it constitutes, in the case of the western bank of the Ganges in Varanasi, a wrong choice. A similar strategy of intervention demonstrates to consider, in the balance of the conservation project, more important the conservation of tangible qualities of the place (the architecture of *ghats*) than the preservation of, much more rooted, intangible ones (the sacredness of the place, the rituals still taking place, the long history of spaces). The contradiction of the case study therefore deserves a hypothesis that is as contradictory related to the exercise of restoration: a non-intervention, as in the Ruskin’s theories, which would allow the persistence of the buildings’ life (ensuring the structural strength and stability) without changing its current feature which, as we have seen, is the result of a secular transformation devoted to enhance the *spirit of the place*. Similarly, in fact, expanding our reflections to an urban scale, it’s important to underline the huge difference between the banks of the river, fact which shouldn’t be considered as a coincidence. According to Hindu rituals, in fact, if the right side (in this case, following the course of the river, the western bank) is bound to the activity of life and pureness as well, the left (eastern bank) relates to the death and impurity. This point originates the specific choice to construct and inhabit just an half of the city divided by the river, the western precisely, and leave completely as undeveloped the opposite one, ideally to allocate space for the souls of the dead burned on the opposite side of the river. Only by understanding these issues and

reasons related to the domain of symbolic and spiritual place, it is possible to approach in proposing an appropriate contribution to the preservation of these sites. In fact, as it appears reasonable the will of preservation of any fabric that has, over time, incorporated the sacred structures of the *ghats*, in the same way it appears necessary to protect the void space present on the opposite bank of the river. From this point descends the final contradiction of this essay: the *spirit of the place* can be said as preserved only if the conservation will consider not only the historic buildings and their spiritual and cultural values, but also the emptiness present on the opposite bank, as an expression of the architectural, social, religious and cultural values of the environment (Romeo, 2011).

The complexity of the assets of Varanasi would seem then generate further contradictions even in the intervention on the cultural heritage on a urban scale: implement a simple preservation and maintenance program, preferring it to any kind of radical action on historical architectures, even if aimed to a better understanding or enhancement; protect any type of architectural manifestation, even if not characterized historically and culturally, in order to preserve the context; protect the vacuum and the absence of buildings of the eastern bank of the river, thus avoiding any kind of intervention of construction or modification (Giusti, 2012). These appear as the only possible intervention strategies relating to a fluvial environment extremely complex and characterized by a strong *spirit of the place* which deserves to be preserved and conserved.

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