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EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

# Built Ethnological Heritage: from democratization to democracy[1]

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**Abstract.** Built ethnological heritage is acquiring an increasingly participatory and open meaning, in agreement with new conceptualizations of cultural heritage and an understanding of tradition as a dynamic process. However, there is a contradiction between the regulatory documents associated with cultural heritage that advocate these principles, and the types of cultural expression or assets that they recognize and aim to safeguard. This article aims to draw attention to these inconsistencies and proposes the replacement of the traditional comprehensive paradigm of vernacular architecture — excessively formalistic and focussed on constructions — with one that is more inclusive and culturally centred, in which expressions of modern industrial culture are recognized and where the subject community has agency and is effectively engaged. Furthermore it is t is argued that an understanding of this new architectural heritage be integrated without delay into the democratic structures of our societies. To this end, a process of change is required similar to that previously experienced by other cultural sectors, for instance, within the art world.
**Keywords:** Cultural Heritage; Vernacular architecture; Architecture Theory; Ethnology.

## [es] Patrimonio etnológico construido: de la democratización a la democracia

**Resumen.** El patrimonio etnológico construido está adquiriendo un sentido cada vez más participativo y abierto, en correspondencia con la nueva conceptualización del patrimonio cultural y el entendimiento de la tradición como proceso dinámico. Sin embargo, existe una contradicción entre los documentos normativos y patrimoniales que propugnan esos principios y el tipo de expresiones o bienes que reconocen e instan a salvaguardar. Esta aportación pretende llamar la atención sobre esas incoherencias y propone la sustitución del tradicional paradigma comprensivo de la arquitectura vernácula —eminentemente constructivo y formalista— por otro más inclusivo y cultural, donde se reconozcan las expresiones realizadas con medios de la actual cultura industrial y donde la participación de la comunidad se haga efectiva también como sujeto agente de la misma. Se propone así integrar sin titubeos el entendimiento de este patrimonio en las estructuras democráticas de nuestras sociedades y, para ello, se relacionará este proceso con el experimentado con anterioridad por otros sectores culturales, como el artístico.
**Palabras clave:** Patrimonio Cultural; Arquitectura vernácula; Teoría de la Arquitectura; Etnología.

**Summary.** 1. Introduction. 2. The subject of participation. 3. Reviewing vernacular architecture: Precedents from the art world. 4. Contradictions: There and back. 5. Paradigm change and the legitimacy of the modern vernacular. 6. Conclusions: Concerning democratic tendencies. References

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## 1. Introduction

As cultural phenomena — and speaking of culture as an intrinsically human pursuit — our concepts of art and of heritage have been transformed in line with social changes to the point that, today they are vastly different to what they were less than a century ago. This difference is magnified if we compare it with the slow movement — like the existing yet imperceptible geological movement — that these concepts have undergone from their origins in the far distant past until now. In both cases, art and heritage have adapted themselves such that they can be understood within the democratic framework of contemporary society rather than within the antiquated self-contained paradigm of respectively, strictly rules-based art, and the historic-artistic dialectic of the nineteenth century monument that first gave them form.

However, despite the presence of this new theoretical framework, which is already somewhat historic, not all areas of culture have taken it on board and this state of affairs causes inevitable conflicts when dealing with certain expressions of cultural heritage. This is so — and it is not the example — in the case of what is termed 'ethnologic heritage' (Agudo, 2016). Although this term unequivocally refers to the out-put of a human community and encompasses both tangible and intangible properties, it is clear that its treatment in reality seems to neglect its actual originators to be interpreted from an external context. This model follows from a mode of thinking that we have ostensibly moved on from in which an outside observer examines, interprets, and judges the cultural productions of another community of people, and for good measure, introduces to the equation some element of cultural relativism.

This inconsistency most probably has its origins in the epistemological foundations of approaches to this type of heritage which are not nearly as mature or solid as they should be, and is manifested in its associated nomenclature (Agudo, 1997; Moncusí, 2005). The different conventions of nomenclature used in legislation, for instance application of the terms ethnological or ethnographic to particular heritage assets, far from bringing the assets so described under the auspices of a particular discipline, instead underlines the inconsistency of their heritage status (Tornatore, 2011). Since the 1990's successive drafts of autonomous legislation in Spain have made space for this kind of heritage (Alegre, 2012), however, in general, there has been no attempt at a proper definition of concepts nor any application of specific measures to movable assets. Indeed, this is even the case with specific laws related to "popular and traditional culture", such as those passed in Catalonia (2/1993) and the Balearics (1/2002) — except when this type of heritage is aligned with industrial heritage as is the case with the laws applying in Castilla-La Mancha, Aragon, and Extremadura.

This article draws attention to the inconsistencies in the perspectives currently dominant concerning built ethnological heritage, both in the academic and regulatory spheres, and calls for the effective democratisation of its interpretation, conservation, and management. This democratisation is already a feature or modern society and must go beyond a high-handed, learned ideal that is only nominally recognised

in current heritage regulations. To demonstrate our points, we will relate the necessary process of change to that which took place in the art world several decades ago and where leading roles were taken by both individuals and society with the former moving from being merely spectators to becoming creators and users of assets and the latter acting interpreting the values that individuals might identify with.

## 2. The subject of participation

Mirroring what has happened in the art world, modern concepts of cultural heritage are vastly different to those of previous decades, and indeed, both fields hold many ideas in common. Among these, I would highlight breadth, which allows these fields to embrace an infinite variety of formats and modes of expression, including those that are intangible; and their democratisation, that situates the spectator-citizen as a protagonist rather than a passive observer.

Regarding breadth, it is clear that the traditional foundations, categories, classification and measurement systems, have been superseded to the extent that, today, heritage encompasses not only those manifestations that belong to the ideological superstructure of culture or what North American anthropology and anthropologists such as Alcina Franch (1989, p.43) term the 'ideological subsystem' in which art, religion and beliefs interrelate, but also other testimony, both material and immaterial, of cultural structure and infrastructure (González-Varas, 2015, p. 31). Of equal significance in the heritage context is the introduction of the concept of 'intangible heritage'. This word is often directly imported from the English into Spanish heritage documentation, unfortunately, the term 'intangible' in Spanish, has religious and spiritual overtones and, to confuse matters further, it is often used interchangeably with the term *inmaterial* 'immaterial'. To avoid potential misinterpretation of the term, some scholars have suggested the use of the term 'living heritage' (Ramón Corzo, 2008) to describe intangible assets and this fits well with their UNESCO definition: "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills — as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith — that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (UNESCO, 2003, art. 2.1).

Beyond arguments concerning terminology, the introduction of intangible heritage as a category is an extremely important advance. As indicated by Chiara Bortolotto (2007a), the principal novelty of this approach does not lie simply in the introduction of this type of expression but in its understanding "in terms of time (as an evolving process) and usage (not just for aesthetic contemplation)" (p. 40). It is as Ramón Corzo (2008) observes, a case of identifying meaning "in agreement with modern artistic sensibilities, in which we see the increasing presence of active engagement, and non-permanence as in installations, performances or so called, Action Painting" (p. 11).

With respect to democratisation, as expressions of our own societies, art and heritage are social constructions that have come to be interpreted in the first instance as genuine products of a given community for the service of said community. In the field of heritage, this vision has become ever more prominent throughout the last decades, moving away from the antiquated monumental paradigm, framed in terms of historical moments or artistic movements, and towards one that is more open and complex, defined by a set of values more in tune with modern society. The terminology used by UNESCO imposes

a relationship between attributes and values from whence conditions of integrity and authenticity can be verified. The first of these conditions refers to attributes and the second, the workhorse of theories concerning intervention in cultural assets, to processes (World Heritage Centre, 2008). In this way, documents such as the Krakow Charter (2000) define heritage as: "that complex of man's works in which a community recognises its particular and specific values and with which it identifies" (s.p.).

This last definition is an excellent illustration of the paradigm shift experienced in the heritage world and we can explain the change in terms of a step away from a model where assets are identified by independent or specialist bodies to one where heritage value is defined through community or democratic means. As is the case with contemporary art, it is no longer the intrinsic or "objective" value of an asset that gives it its (heritage) value, but rather the community, acting as an external agent or participant, that does so, according to a process that prioritises the *collective* interpretation of the subject over the properties of the object, these properties being extrinsic and afforded by the community rather than intrinsic.

Obviously, this new way of understanding heritage has also changed ways of investing in it. Today we talk about concepts such as "democratic restoration" (Lagasabáster, 2004), stressing its holistic, integrating character, where the role of communities is essential at every step in the intervention process. Further, the previously cited Krakow Charter, defines 'restoration', a 'direct intervention' according to Cesare Brandi (1963), as an: "operation directed on a heritage property, aiming at the conservation of its authenticity and its appropriation by the community" (s.p.), clearly making a direct relation between the process and the community where it takes place.

In addition, culture is a universal right, understood in the sense of participation through the United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948, art. 27.1) and in the sense of access through various countries' constitutions, including that of Spain (*Constitución española*, 1978, art. 44.1). This process of recognition took place in the latter half of the last century and has been called, 'cultural democratisation', constituting the intent to universalise access to culture, or more specifically, access to what Hervé Carrier (1992, pp. 101-102) defines as manifestations of 'high culture'. This classical concept of culture has been superseded and broadened by the anthropological definition, from which cultural democratisation ultimately derives, whereby citizens swap their role as 'consumers' of art for the rather different one of 'creator-producers of a unique culture' (Caride, 2005, p. 77) with more attention being paid to the process than the product. According to this conceptualisation of culture, each individual and community has a set of cultural rights, among which are included the right to promoting cultural diversity, active participation in cultural life, ease of access to decision making processes, and equal access to cultural services, with these rights being promoted by institutions through activities that stimulate social cohesion and generate cultural identity (Laaksonen, 2010, p. 11).

In recent decades, cultural heritage legislation, international charters and recommendations, have all emphasised the importance of community — especially in the case of ex-colonial, or 'host cultures' — in all that refers to the identification, understanding, conservation and diffusion of assets.[3] In the Nara Document on Authenticity (ICOMOS,

[3] "Parallel to this conceptual evolution, society has begun to incorporate a new set of ideas concerning public management that implies ever greater engagement on the part of the citizenry in this work. In this way, the management of cultural heritage must be wholistic, sustainable and participatory, and the maintenance and evaluation of cultural heritage must be a joint enterprise between communities and public bodies, with increasing importance being given to the engagement of the citizenry in the continued, sustainable management of assets"

1994) it was stated that judgements about value and authenticity cannot be based on fixed criteria, but rather that the properties of heritage assets must be considered and judged in their own cultural contexts (art. 11). Thus, a principle of cultural relativism was established that privileged the perspective of the affected community, recognising the specific nature of the values of their heritage through trustworthy sources of information. As the Nara Document explains, these information sources might be of various origins, and include diverse aspects such as: "form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors" (art. 13).

The express participation of communities, groups, and individuals in safeguarding those elements of heritage of which they are an active part is, today, unanimously recognised. Article 15 of the Convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003) urges states to ensure "the widest possible participation of communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management", precisely because such heritage is considered as an expression of these communities' identity (art. 2.1). Equally, international documents assume the dynamic nature of historic site alongside the need to enable their transformation. Using the terminology of González-Varas (2016, pp. 21-62), it could be said that just as the old 'culturalist' era of historic site conservation was displaced decades ago by one of 'socioeconomics' this is now making way for a 'holistic and inclusive' age which approaches the notion of the Historic Urban Landscape.

It is worth mentioning also that earlier documents, such as the Washington Charter for the conservation of historic towns and urban areas (ICOMOS,1987), advocated for participation and commitment on the part of inhabitants in order to conserve cities and historic urban areas (art. 3). These ideas are brought up to date in the Valletta Principles (ICOMOS, 2011) which also includes several new concepts, mentioning for instance: "intangible values such as continuity and identity" while never forgetting the aim to "safeguard the values of historic towns and their settings, as well as their integration into the social, cultural and economic life of our times" (s.p.).

## 3. Reviewing vernacular architecture: Precedents from the art world

Traditional views of vernacular architecture are somewhat limited to considering its intrinsic features, that is, aspects of its construction and design. The new significance given to communities — especially host communities — coincides with a cultural focus, that has already been applied to certain examples of vernacular architecture, and which has the aim of overcoming this antiquated outlook. Despite the lack of firm foundations for its study, for more than a century, the study of vernacular architecture in Spain, and also in the European context, centred on a set of rigid axioms. These axioms, such as anonymous authorship, being of the people, not adhering to fashion or the use of traditional or pre-industrial materials, were instituted at a time when pre-industrial architecture was still a living practice (Fig. 1), in the modern

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(draft of the Cultural Heritage Law for Castilla and León, explanatory memorandum, III, 2020). The author has suggested several amendments to this draft law with the intention of making the role of communities more effective in the sense intended by this article.

world however, this is no longer the case and these axioms are thus obsolete and easily undermined (Pérez-Gil, 2018a).

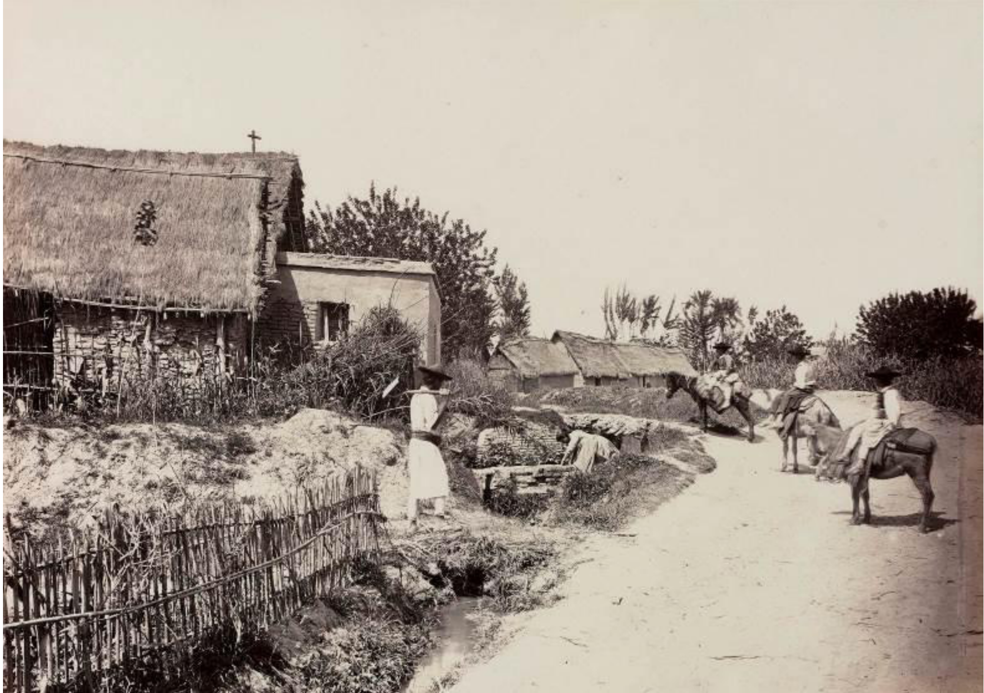

Fig. 1. Murcia (Spain), rural landscape around 1870. Photographed by J. Laurent (BNE, 17/3/46).

From the outset, it could be argued that there is little sense in talking about vernacular architecture in opposition to so called ‘polite’ architecture, since, from the heritage perspective there is only one architecture produced as a cultural expression. Yet, as Henri Glassie (2000, p. 21) points out, we continue to use the category because it is still useful. Concerning this issue, I would personally defend a cultural, anthropological or humanist approach in which vernacular architecture occupies its own place as such, and in cultural heritage terms, as that group of built, or architectural assets in which a certain community recognises specific, authentic values — either tangible or intangible — that characterise their cultural identity over time (Pérez-Gil, 2016, 2018b).[4]

Following this line, understandings of vernacular architecture would come to recognise the cultural nature of a given asset as the cultural output of a particular community. In this understanding, any such cultural output, clearly a material, architectural product would be seen above all as something that refers directly to that community (including its social and economic structures, its traditions, its philosophy, its relationship with the medium) from both the historical perspective (historical vernacular) and the modern perspective (modern vernacular). In this way, there can be no objection to

[4] Where culture is defined here in the anthropological sense of our concept of heritage.

the use of industrial materials and instances of clearly modern or hybrid constructions can be accepted as legitimate and authentic expressions of contemporary culture.

In this way, then, process takes priority over material (Pérez-Gil, 2019). This is the primary element that gives vernacular architecture its distinctive quality since its heritage value does not reside in its material composition or form. These material properties do not represent the construction's cultural value itself but are rather attributes through which value can manifest. Thus, without neglecting architectural values and their relationship to construction media, which must continue to be appreciated, its materiality becomes the means by which we can know and understand its creators and users, its culture.

This process-focus keys into UNESCO's definition of intangible cultural heritage which it recognises as: "the practices, expressions, knowledge and skills — *as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, cultural spaces* — that communities, groups and sometimes individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage", making clear its process-based and dynamic character, speaking of how it is:

> transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO, 2003, art. 2.1)

Vernacular architecture then combines obviously material, tangible values with those that are intangible, and in the exercise of respect for "cultural diversity and human creativity" (UNESCO, 2003, art. 2.1), there should be no problem if communities choose to avail themselves of industrial materials in order to continue creating their patterns of use, representations, expressions, understandings, and skills, passing them down the generations through the means appropriate to their own historic time. Furthermore, this new way of understanding vernacular architecture is no more than the incorporation of that portion of architecture and, indeed, of heritage within the general trends of modern society, in a process that other fields of cultural expression, such as art, have already undergone.

Towards the middle of the 1960's, the Neo avant-garde, gave a new direction to the art world. In his superb article on the subject, Arthur Danto (1964) outlined how the history of art had evolved from its first, memetic phase, going through a process of rupture with the first Avant-garde, until in modern times, it reached a point where Aesthetics was now a self-defined field. Danto went on to propose that in this new artistic landscape, where traditional rules were entirely subverted, a new theory of art was necessary, the so-called reality theory of art which would replace the old-fashioned theory of imitation so enabling an understanding of artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Barnett Newman, and Jasper Johns. He asserted that the history of art was emulating certain episodes in the history of science:

> where a conceptual revolution is being effected and where refusal to countenance certain facts, while in part due to prejudice, inertia, and self-interest, is due also to the fact that a well-established, or at least widely credited theory is being threatened in such a way that all coherence goes (ibid., p. 573).

Today, we might say something similar with regard to our understanding of vernacular architecture.

Several authors including Lucy R. Lippard (2004, p. 10) have suggested that one of the characteristics of modern art that needed to be reinterpreted was the progressive distancing from representational forms and classical techniques, in favour of more conceptual expressions that could be confused with everyday items or might even 'dematerialize', being manifested as an idea or an action. Nevertheless, as Robert Morgari (2003, p. 12) warns us, this: "moment of transition in the shadow that extends between the death of modernity and postmodernity, like the vanishing of one thing and the appearance of another," was not so much an anti-formalist as ultra-formalist.

Thus, from that point in art history, interest in the process became equally important, if not more so, that the material outcome when evaluating the status of an artwork. Simón Marchán (1994) is particularly eloquent on this topic, and his words are not only useful in dissecting the artworld's evolution, but also as a point of departure for the subject we are dealing with here. Indeed, to reframe, in heritage terms, Marchán's encapsulation of the upheavals in the artworld it is almost sufficient simply to substitute the concept of art for that of vernacular architecture, the material output and the artistic idea for, respectively, the attributes and the values of this latter:

> In the objectual-antiobjectual choice we see more a questioning of the traditional art object than an absolute overcoming of the object. In the face of a reductionist, narrow conceptualisation of art, linked almost exclusively to easel-based art, an expansion of the art domain is advocated (…)
>
> The hostility towards the traditional art object, the extension of the field of art, the de-aestheticization of aesthetics, the new sensibility in its different modes of expression, are inserted into the dialectic between objects and subjective feelings, in the production not only of an object for the subject but also a subject for the object, and into the *theoretical practice of the senses*, so revindicating perceptual and creative behaviours in generality. (Marchán, 1994, pp. 154-155)

## 4. Contradictions: There and back

At first glance, it would seem that the participatory principles elucidated in heritage documents such as those mentioned previously do fit well with and indeed, suggest the type of cultural vision of vernacular architecture that we have outlined in the preceding sections. However, this is not the case. This is due to the paradox that the traditional vision of vernacular architecture is at odds with notions of participation, at the same time, the documents that propose participation, rule out the cultural paradigm of vernacular architecture, permitting only the traditional.

In this way, although the Charter of the Built Vernacular Heritage (ICOMOS, 1999) identifies this as forming part of a "continuing process including necessary changes and continuous adaptation as a response to social and environmental constraints", in the following text it goes on to assert that: "The survival of this tradition is threatened worldwide by the forces of economic, cultural and architectural homogenisation" (s.p.). That is to say, it recognises the inherently dynamic nature of culture and traditions (the word tradition coming from the Latin, *tradere*, to hand over), while at the same time negating this very dynamism in relation to new and authentic eras, i.e., the modern vernacular.

This negation is most clear in the criteria imposed on interventions, whereby heritage documentation suggest restoration by means of traditional systems, and encouraging the use of local trades, materials and skills (as in the commendable work of architects like Hassan Fathy and Anupama Kundoo), while at the same time requiring that the substitution of parts or elements for modern equivalents must be done only "by the introduction of materials which maintain a consistency of expression, appearance, texture and form throughout the structure and a consistency of building materials" (art 3-4).

In its eagerness to safeguard specific values, it seems that documents such as those cited not only restrict the development of vernacular architecture in terms of how it should be done (the means), but also in terms of the who it is for (the community itself) so placing these documents in conflict with their own participatory principles (Fig. 2). Despite the active role granted to communities, of the recognition of the inherently dynamic nature of historic sites, and the need to allow these to be transformed, these transformations seem to retain a unique association with 'modern' architecture or 'new' architecture and without reference to the participation of said community. The Washington Charter (ICOMOS, 1987) proposes to conserve the historic character and all those tangible and intangible elements "that express this character", such as the formal appearance of buildings (art. 2). The charter states that: "Any threat to these qualities would compromise the authenticity of the historic town or urban area", stipulating that any intervention adhere to a specific conservation plan and if such a plan is not in existence the principles and regulations of the Venice Charter (ICOMOS, 1964) should be followed. However, the purpose of the Nara Document, cited in previous sections, was to replace and correct the Venice Charter's materialist assumptions with respect to the concept of authenticity by introducing other new sources of information to assess this concept, such as use and function, traditions and techniques, and spirit and feelings.

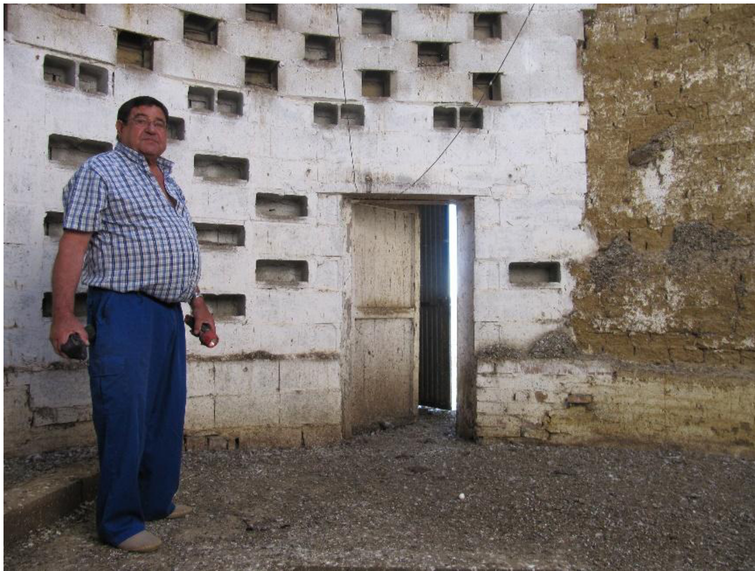

Fig. 2. Dovecote in Pozuelos del Rey (Palencia, Spain). The modern adaptation of a historical vernacular building represents an authentic expression of the present-day culture of the area. The modernisation was made by the building's owner and to make the dovecote functional rather than simply picturesque. Photographed by the author.

Moving to the case of the Valletta Principals (ICOMOS, 2011), here authenticity of towns and historic sites is related to the coherence of their tangible and intangible elements, although among those elements that must be preserved it lists: "the form and appearance, interior and exterior, of buildings as defined by their structure, volume, style, scale, materials, colour and decoration" (art. 4.1). The document goes on to say that projects involving new building works, that is, contemporary architecture, must be taken forward respecting the scale of the site and be in keeping with pre-existing architecture, following the formal criteria put forward in article 28 of the earlier Nairobi Recommendations.

As a rule, modern developments in the traditions of a given community are neither proposed nor conceived with reference to whether they alter the predefined image of said community. However, if this image is static, it is not tradition, but rather traditionalism. The San Antonio Declaration (ICOMOS, 1996) suggested a series of amendments to the Nara Document (ICOMOS, 1994), including that: "in the understanding of authenticity it is crucial to acknowledge the dynamic nature of cultural values, and that to gain such understanding static and inflexible criteria must be avoided" (art. 10). Further, among the many articles of the San Antonio Document, greater weight was given to effective community participation, distinguishing between static cultural sites (for instance, archaeological sites) and dynamic sites (like historic cities and landscapes). With respect to the latter, the document specified the following:

> Dynamic cultural sites such as historic cities and landscapes may be considered to be the product of many authors over a long period of time whose process of creation often continues today. This constant adaptation to human need can actively contribute to maintaining the continuum among the past, present and future life of our communities. Through them our traditions are maintained as they evolve to respond to the needs of society. This evolution is normal and forms an intrinsic part of our heritage. Some physical changes associated with maintaining the traditional patterns of communal use of the heritage site do not necessarily diminish its significance and may actually enhance it. Therefore, such material changes may be acceptable as part of on-going evolution (art. 5)

This concept of the dynamic nature of these sites is in harmony with more recent documents. Indeed, in the Yamato Declaration (UNESCO, 2004), the idea of authenticity was in fact rejected, since, given that: "intangible cultural heritage is constantly recreated, the term "authenticity" as applied to tangible cultural heritage is not relevant when identifying and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage" (art. 6).

In the same way, the Quebec Declaration (ICOMOS, 2008) refers to the preservation of the *spirit* of a place, which is a relational concept with a pluralistic and dynamic nature that attempts an understanding of the tangible and the intangible not as opposites but rather as interrelated. In the wording of the document: "The spirit of place offers a more comprehensive understanding of the living and, at the same time, permanent character of monuments, sites and cultural landscapes. It provides a richer, more dynamic, and inclusive vision of cultural heritage" (s.p.).

So, we might well ask, what is the source of these flagrant inconsistencies between the principles promoted in heritage documentation and the reality of the expression they permit? The main cause resides, perhaps, in the epistemological conflicts discussed in previous sections which have a widespread effect on current debates about the very concept of heritage. In particular, the emergence of the notion of the intangible with its inherently dynamic character is shaking the foundations of the consensus that had appeared to be forming concerning questions of authenticity.

In the specific case of vernacular architecture, attempts to understand this area continues to make use of assumptions very similar to those of a century ago despite the fact that these are now obsolete due to the fact that neither the world nor our ideas about heritage are the same today as they were then. Strictly material values continue to be prioritised alongside a very formalist approach only appropriate to nineteenth century monuments and which neglect the fact that, across the planet, for the most part pre-industrial materials have for many years been complemented by those of the industrial age. Thus, we see, attempts to safeguard vernacular architecture are restricted in scope to a consideration only of the historical vernacular and this, in turn, stagnates the dynamic nature of the tradition itself.

In addition, there are numerous further reasons complicating a proper recognition of vernacular architecture, at least in heritage terms. These reasons are rooted not simply in the prejudice that the vernacular should only include pre-industrial examples, but also a certain ideological bias. It is a fact that, quite apart from being produced using industrial means, the better part of modern architectural expressions built according to what Caniggia and Maffei (1995, pp. 24-25) call 'spontaneous consciousness' are a testament to poverty and even vulnerability. This feature alone appears to exclude them from recognition as heritage on the part of the relevant authorities, even if the users themselves were to identify them as such.

This so-called aporophobic (Cortina, 2013) prejudice can be seen at close hand in documents such as that outlining the terms of Rio de Janeiro's inscription onto the list of World Heritage List as a historic cultural landscape (World Heritage Centre, 2012). Although UNESCO already recognised certain urban architectural expressions as the "new towns of the twentieth century" (World Heritage Centre, 2008), Rio's inscription document fails to mention the favelas, often found on the borders of these urban landscapes and in the buffer zones of protected regions. Neither are these settlements mentioned in documentation released by Brazil's main heritage organisation, the *Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional*, nor by UNESCO except in passing, where they are referred to as "irregular settlements". However, they might be expected to appear in such documents, and they are conspicuous in their absence since their value is indisputable as they provide an iconic backdrop to the Cariocan landscape and these locations could well be considered the most appropriate representatives — more so than other Rio locations — for the city's more universal values such as samba or carnival.

While they may not necessarily be considered as heritage, beyond their obviously impoverished character, insofar as they comprise irregular, spontaneous settlements, often at the margins of the law, the favelas are a clear example of the modern vernacular. Emerging from Amos Rapoport's (1972, p. 18) category of the modern vernacular (High-style and modern), interest in spontaneous productions, such as these informal settlements, is increasing (Gómez, 2010; Dovey

& King, 2011). This is particularly the case in non-western contexts, such as the middle east where this type of structure might be the only form of indigenous cultural expression available to communities (Mahdy, 2009), but also closer to home (Fig. 3), as in the Portuguese *casas de emigrante* (immigrant houses) which, independent of their dubious aesthetics and lack of harmony with both the urban environment and the landscape, can be understood as a testament to a historic process in rural districts (Raposo, 2016).

Fig. 3. Labourer's hut with attached boundary fence in San Pedro de las Dueñas (León, Spain). Photographed by the author.

Furthermore, it seems that vernacular architecture, including historic examples, found in our most immediate environs and that we love so much, has always been the architecture of poverty (Fig. 4). In a total extasy of exaltation of the values of popular architecture as a basis for that of the Modernist Movement, authors such as Moreno Villa and Torres Balbás warned of the fundamental distance between the enforced austerity of the former and the consciously chosen austerity involved in the second:

> Thinking this way, we recognise that the difference between the popular and the puritan is like the difference between misery and cleanliness. We could also label poverty as a disability and cleanliness as ability. Since it is not the case that people enjoy the elimination of luxury (the reverse), the issue is that they can't access it; meanwhile they do enjoy that which we call 'clean', they delight in that kind of elimination. (Moreno, 1931, p. 190)

As David Lowenthal (2003[1985], p. 341) said, referring to the processes of moulding historical memory, "the past appears to best advantage in the renovated relics of everyday activities".

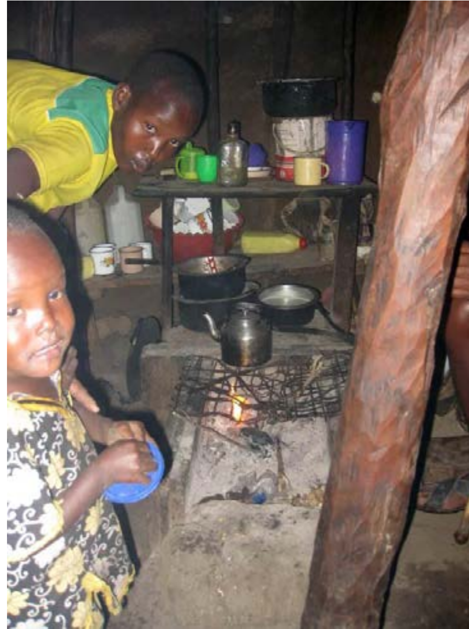

Fig. 4. Hearth inside a Kenyan home (Kenia).
Photographed by the author.

## 5. Paradigm change and the legitimacy of the modern vernacular

In order to bring about a more modern conceptualisation of cultural heritage in which community participation is effective, i.e., where communities are considered not solely as beneficiaries but also as individual agents in their heritage, it is necessary to change the existing formalist paradigm focusing on material buildings to one that is more culture based and inclusive. This implies, among other things, moving away from a definition of vernacular architecture that only includes assets from the historical vernacular (or only those modern constructions that use pre-industrial methods and materials) broadening it to include, without prejudice, the modern vernacular.

This change of focus is in-line with recent general trends in heritage thinking which are making this field ever more open and inclusive as it leaves behind its antiquated monumentalist trappings in favour of a living and dynamic concept of heritage. Ideas from the UNESCO model, such as that of "exceptional universal value" are being questioned in order to make space for other types of less spectacular architectural examples.

Modern vernacular architecture is a legitimate, and in our modern societies, the only authentic expression of culture, independent of the use of industrial techniques and materials. As certain authors, such as Upton (1990) and Vellinga (2006) have pointed out, traditions are dynamic and adapt to changes in the environment, in a: "continuous creative process through which people, as active agents, negotiate, interpret and adapt knowledge and experiences gained in the past within the context of the challenges, wishes and requirements of the present" (Vellinga, 2006, p. 89).

Materials, including industrial materials, are merely an instrument through which ideas are made reality; they are the tangible result of the intangible processes and this is the special feature of vernacular architecture. More important than the material composition of constructed elements is the degree of community, or individual, participation that they represent, and this participation can result in. The scope of this architecture can even include certain 'standardised' works, created in marginal areas, because the communities that make use of these buildings come to embrace and make them their own over time, modifying them in various ways according to personal and cultural systems (Fig. 5). Even UNESCO allows that in certain fields, such as architectural design, not traditionally recognised as forums for mass cultural participation, can in fact be so, as a result say, domestic alterations or vernacular traditions that reflect family structures of traditional practices (UNESCO, 2012, p.17). Indeed, numerous studies have shown this to be true, for instance the work of Francisca Márquez (2005) concerning social housing in Chile, and that of Luis Silva Velasco (2019) looking at the *pueblo de colonización* (housing built for populations relocated as a result of reservoir construction) in San Bernardo (Valladolid, Spain).

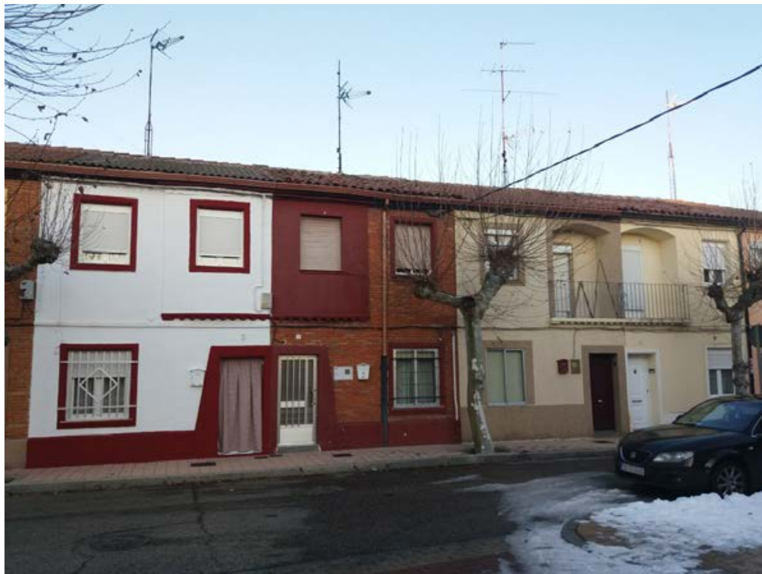

Fig. 5. Valladolid (Spain), San Pedro district. The uniform design of social houses, all built with a balcony, has been gradually altered by their owners over the half century since their construction. Photographed by the author.

Peter Burke has explored such processes of cultural hybridity. His work follows in the steps of other authors such as Nederveen Pieterse, and in an especially intelligent essay he discusses how the inexorable process of globalisation rather than leading to cultural homogeneity is taking us to something more like hybridity, where the indigenous continuously manifests in adaptations to external influences. Applying linguistic models, one could say that communities and individuals are engaged in a conscious process of 'cultural translation' applying specific tactics and strategies to cope with the unknown, in addition to an unconscious process of 'creolisation',

whereby different influences make way for a new culture. In Burke's opinion modern hybrid cultural forms do not necessarily contribute to an inevitable process of global homogenisation, rather they crystalise into novel forms as the world becomes ever more creolised (Burke, 2010, pp. 150-151).

Nevertheless, the Charter of the Built Vernacular Heritage (ICOMOS, 1999), despite affirming that this type of heritage is part of "a continuing process including necessary changes and continuous adaptation as a response to social and environmental constraints", it also maintains that this tradition is threatened by "the forces of economic, cultural and architectural homogenisation", which, alongside "global socio-economic transformation", makes these vernacular structures "extremely vulnerable", such that they are "facing serious problems of obsolescence, internal equilibrium and integration" (s.p.).

It is appropriate here to qualify this general, historically accepted, idea that vernacular architecture is in danger of extinction. What is in danger is not, in fact vernacular architecture as a whole, but rather the historical vernacular, and this belongs to times long past (Fig. 1). Today, as ever, communities and individuals continue to embody their culture in architecture. The fact is that culture is neither created nor destroyed it simply transforms and the processes of inculturation persist despite existing generational divides.

Clearly, one problem is that modern vernacular architecture is less well defined than the historic. However, as Albert Moncusí has observed, despite the tendency of governments to continue expounding models of folk-culture from the nineteenth century, focussed on territorial identities, modern Ethnology is heading in a different direction. This new path is one involving the de-territorialisation of identity and heritage, and that takes account of the dynamic, transformative nature of traditions (Moncusí, 2005). Concepts of cultural heritage also appear to be travelling along the same trajectory, steered there by a recognition of heritage's intangible elements, and questioning notions of authenticity, as Bortolotto (2007b) says: "the removal of the notion of authenticity and its accompanying vocabulary is doubtless a significant measure toward conceptualizing the approach to culture in the age of globalization and trans-culturation" (Bortolotto, 2007b, p. 41).

Without wishing to diminish the importance of valuing and safeguarding local identities, it is still true that, in the case of vernacular architecture, there has been a tendency — indeed there still is — to consider it as a product of a particular territory (the popular architecture of a given village, district, or region). However, this is not the case. Architecture as a cultural expression is not a product of a particular region, but of the people who live there. When it is evaluated on the basis of its formal harmony with its surroundings or its integration with the landscape (colour of materials, textures and so on) cause and effect are confused. It is not the case that these material works blend with their surroundings because they emerged from a particular place, they blend in because the people living their used the most accessible resources, i.e., those found locally.

So, what happens when the most accessible resources available happen to come from another region, or are of industrial origin? Well, of course, they must be used. They should be considered equally legitimate to those used in the historical vernacular because they are equally appropriate to the culture employing them. What is more, such materials may even be those that are most efficient and sustainable. As AlSayyad and Arboleda (2011) point out, certain traditional solutions much vaunted by profes-

sional architects are no longer viable or have become inefficient due to changes to the circumstances — political, environmental, or economic — that once made them practical. These authors state that the "myth" of sustainability has been formulated and indeed continues to be sustained by erroneous or old-fashioned principles which do not take into account processes of change: "the discussion on sustainability and the indigenous vernacular has limited itself to purely formal attributes, hence becoming for the most part a discussion on aesthetics" (p. 151). Once again, the preestablished narrative concerning the modern vernacular appears to be narrowly formalistic in focus.

Criticism of modern vernacular architecture on the basis of the origin or consistency of its construction materials is a materialistic stance, not a cultural one, and is difficult to defend. In the first place, it is often forgotten that many historical architectural features were constructed by specialist, foreign workforces and were not built by their ultimate local owners or users. A similar point may be made concerning certain materials, such as masonry, which require very specialist skills. Furthermore, many materials labelled pre-industrial, such as brick, tile, and adobe, are in fact the fruit of standardised processes that could be considered quasi-industrial and, indeed, a material's industrial status cannot define the construction procedures (Fig. 6) it is used for: when building a wall, it matters little whether a 'brick' is industrially produced or pre-industrial since they have the same form and function.

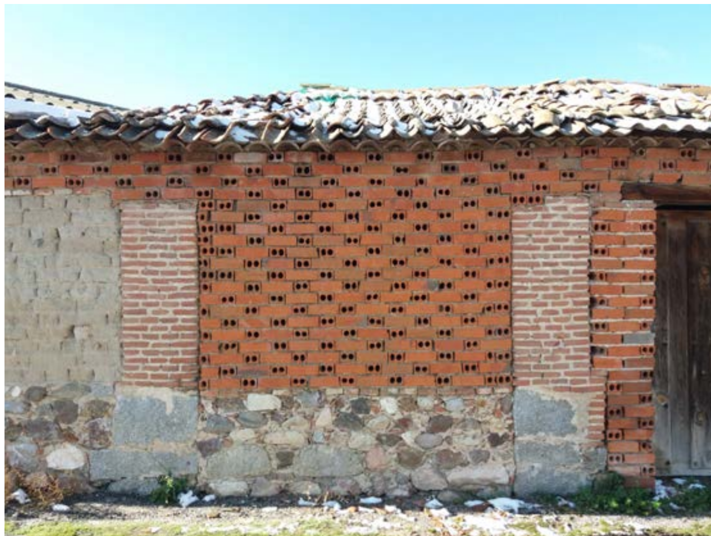

Fig. 6. Part of a construction in Santo Domingo de las Posadas (Ávila, Spain) built using various materials of industrial and pre-industrial origin. Photographed by the author.

More than a century ago, the conventional artworld was reticent, even affronted by the appearance of works making use of materials from outside its traditions such as the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp. However, the surprise was that these items became accepted, even admired. As Duchamp himself articulated in 1962, concerning his Neo- Dadaist approach: "I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty", (Duchamp, quoted in Crowther, 2019, p. 15).

## 6. Conclusions: Concerning democratic tendencies

The question is then, what would it mean to broaden the definition of vernacular architecture and, in virtue of the importance of its intangible significance, accept as such the modern vernacular?

In the first place, I must point out that this kind of recognition would not mean that all architectural works should be categorised as heritage. Achieving the status of heritage is a critical process that, as in any other field, or category, requires the recognition of value on the part of the communities involved. In this way, the current vernacular will have more difficulties in gaining heritage status within communities since identity depends a great deal on differentiation (we identify ourselves in counterpoint to something) and in a globalised culture, difference is attenuated (Pérez-Gil, 2016, p. 149). Thus, the modern vernacular would comprise a far narrower heritage category than that of the historic.

Another important question is whether, within architecture as a category, should we allow that 'anything goes' in the name of freedom of expression? Obviously, this does not seem either logical or sensible. Accepting modern expressions of vernacular architecture does not suppose the championing of ugliness nor does it admit any and every piece, and even less, constructions that would endanger the value of other assets in their environs, or the surrounding landscape (Fig. 7). As I noted at the start of this article, our current concept of cultural heritage is democratic because it originates from within democratic societies. However, these societies are regulated by a framework for coexistence that establishes, at the same time as a legal security, certain limitations on our actions. Thus, not everything goes, and the challenge, in this area as with other types of architecture and heritage, revolves around control in order to safeguard their ultimate value.

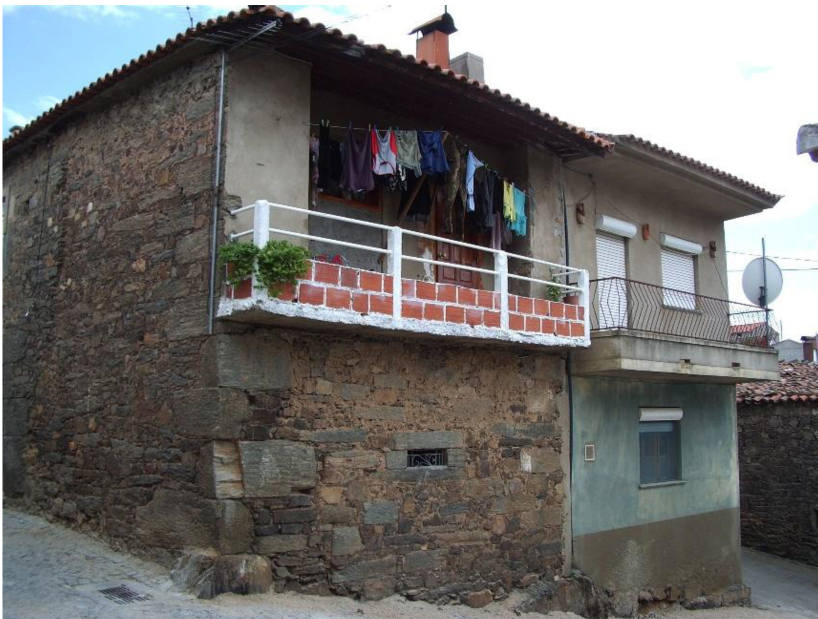

Fig. 7. House alteration involving the addition of a balcony in Poiares (Portugal). Photographed by the author.

Clearly, for modern vernacular architecture, this challenge is made even more problematic due to the need to respect the freedom, or spontaneous conscience of its creators. In this way, the process of safeguarding its value must be developed from the bottom up, with multiple participants including both the community and individuals. Not that the role of heritage administrators will disappear; in fact, it will acquire a greater importance in order to the exercise the appropriate degree of sensitivity and critical judgement. Furthermore, as Paola Jacques (2001, p. 150) has pointed out, in the case of the Brazilian favelas, if we consider the dynamic roots of traditions, those who are charged with looking after such assets will have the paradoxical task of both conserving and giving heritage status to something in motion. For this very reason, the UNESCO Convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage places greatest focus on safeguarding (understood as any measures intended to guarantee safeguarding), rather than protection, in order to better recognise the dynamic nature of intangible cultural expressions (Bortolotto, 2014).

To assist this mission, it will perhaps be necessary to use new tools including an integrated vision such as the notion of the Historic Urban Landscape (UNESCO 2011), that are capable of overcoming static, traditionalist attitudes although the application of such ideas will be difficult and is perhaps less suited to certain non-urban contexts (Azpeitia, Azkárate and de la Fuente, 2018; Lalana and Pérez, 2018). The objective consists of looking at this architecture as part of a complex and dynamic landscape, as an element of the same, that provides testimony for the life and values of a community over time.

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