CITY & TIME AND PLACES: BRIDGING THE CONCEPT OF PLACE TO URBAN CONSERVATION PLANNING

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Abstract

The primary objective of the paper is to revisit the concept of place in order to ascertain its possible use as an interface for siting the multi-referential perspective coveted in integrated conservation (IC) planning. A second is to discuss why the concept of place may be seen as closely intertwined with urban conservation studies. The traditional concept of place is a theoretical construct that implies on a created environmental form, imbued with symbolic significance to its users. The author’s actual rethinking of place favors the envisioning of the concept under an interdisciplinary light, emphasizing the identification of places as they are expressed by their social, physical and psychological representations. Place studies in today’s postmodern cities admit new conceptual issues, among which, the concepts of placemaking and placemarketing. Increasingly, placemaking projects are including conservation areas in their actions, promoting their development by employing placemarketing strategies. Therein seems to lie a possibility for bridging IC planning to place studies, since place may be seen as an appropriate mediator to establishing communication between disciplines in IC planning. It is speculated that from this merging, one can expect that an adequate practical methodological interface will be generated. The paper describes two research projects carried out in the city of Porto Alegre, employing environmental perception techniques. The projects managed to identify places by means of the perceived meanings, memories, and values people attribute to urban structural components, and which may be useful to illustrate the point.

Key words: Place theory, environmental perception, heritage conservation

1.0 Introduction

To better approach the complexity of today’s cities demands a refinement of the adequate communication among the different disciplines that focus on the urban environment. Actually, there is a critical need for a suitable inter-disciplinary approach that enables to transfer the level of knowledge brought forward by the different disciplinary concepts to the context of the real world of the city. Moreover, scholars claim that what is happening now is merely a juxtaposition of disciplines, mingling the concepts from one discipline in

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the theoretical framework of the other. This, of course, is a situation that requires a critical change. In fact, there is a pressing prerequisite to search for new interfaces that may bring about opportunities to bridge the disciplinary knowledge already acquired in Integrated Conservation (IC) planning, to the non-disciplinary perception of the public at large.

It is the contention of the present paper that *place theory* may forward a convenient path for implementing such a bridging.

There are two major objectives in the paper. The primary is to revisit the concept of *place* in order to ascertain its possible use as an interface for siting the multi-referential perspective coveted in IC planning. A second is to discuss why the concept of *place* may be seen as somewhat intertwined with urban conservation studies, at least on the lines of the author’s current research work.

Initially, the paper revisits some aspects on the conceptualization of *place* that may be associated to IC planning. In particular, it highlights the links put forward by the cultural memory of cities. The paper proceeds by focusing on the actual practices of *placemaking*, an urban design policy increasingly adopted in the daily actions of postmodern urbanism. Next, it underlines that, in many cases, placemaking may prove useful to induce a desired merge between the interests of the urban conservation professionals, and the needs and aspirations of the public at large. After that, the paper brings to light the concept of *placemarketing*, also a common policy in the actual practice of today’s urbanism. This practice is regarded as operational for implementing policies aiming at the urban development of a city, since it may forward viable economic alternatives for financing the policies. In parallel, it points out that many of such development policies may as well include issues related to the urban heritage conservation. In sequence, the text presents two research projects carried out in the city of Porto Alegre, seen as helpful to illustrate the points raised in the discussion. One of the projects deals with the case of an old building located in the center of the city - the “Usina do Gasometro” (the Gasometer mill) - and its later insertion in the city’s network of distinctive urban *places*. The other project accompanies the revitalization of a disused *brownfield area* located in the old industrial district of the city, called “Navegantes” (“navigators”, in English), and its re-development as a new commercial mall. Both cases were processed in accordance to the methodological framework employed in environmental perception researches, also raised as another point of interest to the area of IC planning. Finally, the text examines the possibilities opened by the actual state of art of the *place theory* research, and its role on IC planning. It is believed that the *rationale* of place is wide enough to contemplate two aspects that overlap in IC actions: it faces the degree of uncertainty needed to register the intangible phenomena that permeate the urban environment and that stimulate people’s perceptions; and it faces the analysis of the tangible physical forms that are responsible for materializing those perceptions. In this view, *place is regarded as a mediator*, able to provide a good level of communication among the different disciplines involved in the urban conservation field, the approach of which calls for, simultaneously, a high degree of abstraction as well as for a solid level of pragmatic concreteness.

**And why is that so?**

Before answering that, it seems necessary to firstly raise a specific question related to the very core of conservation planning: *What would be the ultimate object of research in IC planning?* Would it not be precisely the understanding of a *place* in all its interdisciplinary complexity? Therefore, would it not be a *place* the ultimate object of integrated conservation? A *place* seen in all its interdisciplinary connotations, i.e., an object *socially* constructed as a *place*, impregnated with *political expression* as a *place*, at the great
variety of physical scale that places present, demanding the same practical financing resources to develop its latent potential just as places do?

Initially, it seems useful to parse on some of the new directions actually inserted to the realm of place studies, and that now make almost mandatory to contemplate the topic under an integrated view. In addition to that, the recent insertion of two pragmatic tools to the concept, placemaking, and placemarketing, have been leading towards more pragmatic results in planning places - and, eventually - for developing a network of urban places, dispersed along the urban territory. Finally, it must be recalled that it is people and their use of the built environment that contribute, over time, to the differentiated status a place can attain in the city’s urban life. Of course, to stress the expression over time means that one must inescapably recognize that the presence of historic factors is deeply imbricated in the notion of place. In fact, there are several leads that point out to this direction, the most crucial of them being that places are a social construct: Places result from the interaction between a community and their collective use of space. Memory that bursts out from this interaction becomes engraved on the recondite domains of the community’s cognition, intertwining social, historical, and psychological components into a place’s significance.

2.0 The concept of place: place in the spatial studies literature

Place is a well-accepted theoretical construct of the area of spatial studies. However, it is not confined solely within the boundaries of those studies. In fact, it is a concept that operates at the crossroads of current social, political, economic, and environmental issues. As such, it is usual to find the various disciplines involved in the area approaching the subject according to each individual rationale. In this way, one may say that there is a psychological interpretation of the concept, an architectural interpretation, and so on. As a general rule, place, in the urban-architectural literature, is a construct that implies on the existence of a created environmental form, and that this form is imbued with a symbolic significance to its users. Environmental psychology writings, in turn, point towards a similar direction, and understand place as the units where human experiences and physical form are fused together, creating a unitary context.

Of course, there is no single factor that can explain all the phenomenology involved in the man-environment interactions that take place in a place. There is a common acceptance, though, that a place is layered with the symbolic attributes that evoke the role this place played in some of the most significant times the city has experienced. Therefore, the acknowledgement of the presence of memory as a component of the place’s structure must be accounted for as an inherent attribute, since it is memory what can bring about the good (or bad) images a place evokes (BOYER 1996; LYNCH 1975). As a consequence, it is memory the factor that can be pointed out as responsible for triggering the strongest congruence one may expect between the theory of place and the planning of the heritage conservation.

Places may be regarded from several perspectives. Indeed, the study of place covers a fairly large spectrum of varied disciplines. Among them, there are those that envisage places from their topological characteristics, a characteristic strong enough so as to attribute a specific individuality for each place in particular; and there are also those that try to understand the decisive role places play in the fulfillment of human living experiences. Places may be studied from the viewpoint of a behavior setting, for instance, and, in this case, it is people’s environmental behavior performed on them what really matters from the scientific standpoint. Whereas places may uncover the sensorial aspects linked to them, when one is trying to understand people’s reactions while in a place. But
there are some other interesting facets that can be detected when studying a place. Social representations, for instance, may be identified in places. They depict the symbolic representation of society’s territorial identity, revealing the experiential awareness that may be stimulated by places. Physical representation of places, in turn, register the imagery that places are imbued with, a collection of images that can transmit, at a glance, a suggestive reminder of the historical urban forms the city has acquired all along its evolution. And why it has showed those forms. More importantly, though, is the preservationist spirit that may be recognized pervading throughout the multiple facets observed within the concept of place.

3.0 The planning of place: place in the urban-architectural world

Places are part of the collective “imaginary” of people - for good or for evil. Everyone has a place to love. Everyone has a place to hate. Everybody knows a place. Every architect wishes to design a place. But, place, in the urban-architectural practice, implies on the planning of a socio-physical construction. Well, this is not an easy task. Considering that from the very inception of the concept place is regarded as a theoretical construct, the design of a place, in physical terms, comes closer to the unattainable utopian level of aspirations that sometimes is associated to the more poetic side of the profession’s objectives. Even so, the design of places is a recurrent goal of architects and urbanists. Luckily, in the last decades of the twentieth century, subtle alterations in the original concept started to open new possibilities for the endeavor. For some, these variations are closely related to the increasing questionings about society’s ways of living advanced by actual postmodern reasonings. Of course, variations in societal lifestyle will bring about corresponding changes in the conceptualization of places. A new type of societal modus vivendi will demand new types of places. As a consequence, there will be changes in the practice of urbanism - or, as it is increasingly being denominated -, in the practice of postmodern urbanism.

Born as a reaction to the rising criticisms that claimed that the design of places was heading to a process of creating “non-place places” or “placelessness” (RELPH 1976), the new interpretations of the concept motivated new types of design. One of such types aims at creating entirely new places, usually inspired by - and referring to - a central theme. Conversely, one other type aims at re-making pre-existing old and abandoned structures, stressing the predominant forms, and usually employing these forms as a recurrent theme. Environmental design, in both cases, employs an efficient iconography, destined to stimulate a precise and intentional perception. These places are called theme-places, and the process of creating them, placemaking. Furthermore, if, on the one hand, some of these theme-places are newly built constructions, most of them, on the other hand, are located in old historic areas, where they can “capitalize” upon the accumulated perception people had already acquired about the site along time.

There are mixed reactions about the new conceptions of place, which not remain confined to the architectural profession. Of substantial importance are the new visions by which the philosophical thinking is approaching place today. Place, in that area, is now basically understood as being “(…) eventmental, something in process, something unconfinable to a thing. Or to a simple location. (...) The primacy of place is not that of the place, much less of this place or a place (...) - but that of being an event capable of implacing things” (CASEY 1998 p.337). This vision seems to have already reached the architectural thinking, as the recent ideas of architects like Bernard Tschumi and Paul Virilio lead to believe. More closely related to the present discussion, though, is the acknowledgement that placemaking attained a status of its own in the fields of urban design and planning. It
entangles the idea of creating an *event* in those fields. Or a network of events. As, for example, in the city of Barcelona, where the creation of a system of places was proposed as a continuation of the 1992 Olympic games planning achievements. The network included a variety of buildings and sites, some of them registered on the conservation lists. The public sector indicated the urban renewal areas, and called for the collaboration of the private sector to face the placemaking demands. Moreover, in certain countries today there are even associations specializing in the promotion of places, aiming at enriching people’s experience of public life. One of the most efficient is the “Project for Public Spaces/PPS”, an american nonprofit organization that offers technical assistance for creating and sustaining public places, and whose vision of a place understands that “Creating a place depends more on effective management than it does design and requires the involvement of many different disciplines because of the extremely complex issues that need to be addressed” (PPS 2002 p.39). It goes without saying that conservation elements play an important role on PPS undertakings.

Nonetheless, insofar as conservation aspects are concerned, there are mixed criticisms about those postmodern practices, particularly when they try to blend preservation and the creation of new developments. Ada Louise Huxtable, the austere urban architecture critic, abhors the practices, seeing them as “(...) the ultimate demonstration of the use of history, real or invented, as a marketing ploy”, worrying with “(...) the carryover of its ‘lessons’ to buildings and areas where the remnants of an indigenous and legitimate urbanity created by culture and custom are being replaced by merchandising make-believe” (HIXTABLE 1997 p.101). But even her acknowledges that there are grounds to accept this sort of procedure, especially when involving scrupulous developers, who “(...) have saved landmarks and raised consciousness about an endangered heritage” (ibid. p.96). Contrarily, there are authors who do not dismiss the practice, confronting the strong criticisms raised by the unauthentic historical inaccuracies it involves, claiming that “(...) most major structures in the western city since the Renaissance have been bastardized historical re-creations, often of Greek or Roman architecture. Even the most urbane and praiseworthy buildings have sustained the false front and a faulty imitation of times past” (HANNIGAN 1998 p.195). Eduardo Rojas, the IDB’s (Inter-American Development Bank) urban development specialist, on the other hand, ponders about the merits of the new practices, arguing that “The most current approach to protecting urban heritage emphasizes the role it can play in promoting the revitalization of areas where historic buildings are located. (...) This in turn generates positive externalities that attract economic activities into the target area, propelling the rehabilitation process into a self-sustained stage” (ROJAS 1999 p.23). This sort of reasoning is normally associated to IDB’s funding projects for urban renewal. The revitalization of Bairro do Recife, in Recife, Brazil, for example, proposed “(...) to attract business from the cultural and recreational sectors by preserving the area’s heritage and enhancing its image, thereby increasing its value as a tourist attraction (...)” (ROJAS op.cit. p.71). This revitalization project supports the idea that it is necessary to introduce new activities to the heritage areas, in order to promote the continuity of their use in the present times (ZANCHETTI 1995 p.105). This is somehow very similar to Lynch’s early reflections, when he states that “In central, public places, we would think less of freezing some idealized moment than of allowing the scars of time to accumulate visibly. (...) In place of sanitizing the past by purifying and freezing it, we should contaminate the present with it” (LYNCH 1975 in BANERJEE & SOUTHWORTH p.631).
4.0 The pragmatism of place: place in the postmodern society

Variations in the concept of place are helpful to understand some postmodern escapist projects, which combine historic and fantasy features, like Disney’s environments. A new important variation introduces into the process of placemaking, a well-planned marketing of that place - the so-called placemarketing - which functions as a strategic managerial policy. There is at least one good argument to justify placemarketing, and that is that the making of a place can imply on a millionaire exercise (as Disney’s placemaking can readily testify). Therefore, the prevalent reasoning is that places can be good not only for the mind; they can be good for business as well.

In postmodern times flourished a controversy arguing if it is a valid thought to consider the historical assets of the city’s memory playing a protagonist role in the tourist and culture commodities setting (HANNIGAN 1998; MARQUES 1995). This, of course, implies that, in the name of financing the conservation of a place, “the regimes of memory and money overlap to some degree in the tourist economy – in the city’s museums, theaters and cafes, and ethnic neighborhoods – where the performance of life is a salable commodity”, as somberly observed by ZUKIN (2002 p.21). Of interest to this paper rests the fact that, more recently, place-makers began to seriously include the preservation of the built traditional heritage within their goals, even if they do so at the cost of reinventing the traditional built environment as a fantasized entertainment environment. Moreover, it is also worth to remember that, intermingling in the very core of the concept of place, one can find at least two points of convergence with the urban heritage conservation field. Firstly, the concept entails the existence of a tangible physical form, created by mankind; secondly, it also involves an intangible psychological aura, inherent to that form. Furthermore, historical aspects are frequently a powerful leitmotiv to act upon the genesis of a place. The cultural memory of a city is one of the strongest factors to decide which buildings or sites will move beyond their condition of mere spaces, and be raised to the status of a truly great place.

In fact, one can say that the making of places in the early twenty-first century turned out to become a process that integrates all dimensions involved in the conceptions of place, namely, socio-psychological, marketing-managerial, and urban-architectural (CASTELLO 2000). In this way, the study of place moved on from its traditional emphasis on physical aspects and evolved to a new stage, a stage in which an interdisciplinary approach became the mandatory practice.

5.0 The perception of place: place as a methodological interface

Two research works, carried out in Porto Alegre, the capital city of the southernmost Brazilian state, Rio Grande do Sul, focusing basically on the interaction between people and their physical settings, led to the identification of a collection of elements - buildings and sites - perceived as impregnated with significance to the city’s inhabitants. Two different geographic areas were the subject of research - the city historic center; and an old industrial district. The methodological operations comprehended three analytical inputs extracted from the social, human and environmental design fields: an experiential, a perceptual, and an architectural approach. The threefold approach allowed for gathering information on varied topics: the area’s townscapes and their morphologic-functional features; an inventory of the major imagery of the areas, collected with the help of environmental perception techniques; and a register of the spatial preferences and
experiences performed by the areas’ users and dwellers while engaging on their daily practices.

Crucial to the concerns of this paper were the findings relative to two specific sites, the old Gasometer plant (presently lodging a multifunctional activity center), in the old center; and the Renner factory plant (presently lodging a shopping mall and an entertainment center), in the old industrial district of the city. Both areas are located along the coastal riverside.

Case 1 - The spatial heritage element that will become a place - Research on the central area took place on two different occasions, firstly in 1986, and once again, in 1995. In the first fieldwork, the Gasometer plant was just an old building in ruins, surrounded by an empty area bordering the edge of the river. Even so, it already enjoyed a resilient presence in people’s memory, probably by its privileged location in the central area’s visual structure. Symbolically, its location lies precisely at the interface of nature and culture, that is to say, at the interface of the river waters and the concrete of the old central fabric (Figs.1 and 2). By its position at the very edge of the central peninsula, it has the strength of a mark, a monument that provides an image of permanence, an image of reference, an image deeply immersed in the cultural memory of the population. Later on, in the 1995 survey, the building had been rehabilitated and its surrounding areas had been qualified by the implementation of some minimalist design strategies, mostly addressed to the building’s basic maintenance. In the process, it gained new functional designations and started to work as a multifunctional activity center (including, among the activities, a movie house, theater, art gallery, library, coffee house, workshops and assembly rooms). But, more importantly, it was brought back to working again.

Figure 1 - Gasometer. Photo: H. Amaral Studio. (hastudio@terra.com.br)

Figure 2 - Gasometer location in downtown’s peninsula. Source: Research Group in Regional Environmental Planning/ UFRGS
Case 1 - The conservation of the spatial heritage as a place - After the first conservation measures, man-environment interaction in the site of the old Gasometer plant began to reach unexpected peaks. The old abandoned central space gained the label of a genuine place. A new place, which is now one of the most popular sites in the central area, and which enjoys the reputation of being socially constructed. Furthermore, it created an entirely new behavior setting for the leisure times of the community (Fig.3), fully marked by sociability and urbanity. The newly conserved area also gained in political status. It symbolizes, today, the awareness the inhabitants of Porto Alegre share about the political power they possess, since it is in the Gasometer newly born agora that most of the public manifestations take place. Certainly, the scale of the new place has much to do with its public acceptance, since it can provide enough physical room for any type of manifestation, either of angry political protests or just for the sheer cultural enjoyment of attending a pop concert. Popular concerts, by the way, are frequently performed there, the Berlin symphony orchestra once played there, it was the Gasometer area the place chosen by the “porto-alegrenses” to celebrate the mythical New Year’s eve of the year 2000. In sum, it is there that the city likes to gather when it has to deal collectively with collective matters. The placemarketing process relies heavily on the political power the place symbolically stands for. It hardly seems accidental that the Gasometer place became adopted as the symbol of a single political party’s continued governing of the city. Its use as a brand of the city and of the political administration the city has been endorsing, is symptomatic of a two-folded marketing strategy, integrating both placemarketing and city-marketing (Fig.4).

Case 2 - Another spatial heritage element that will become a place - Research on the Renner factory site took place also on different occasions, in 1988 and 1998. The passage of time showed a constant migration of industries towards more favorable metropolitan locations. This outwards movement hastened the transformation of the whole district into a derelict brownfield area. It followed a widespread decline, social and physical.

Results obtained from the perceptual side of the analyses, however, revealed a surprising richness in terms of the persistence of certain images, a perception readily disclosed by the use of cognitive maps, drawn by the interviewees, a common practice in environmental perception research. Actually, it was quite a welcome surprise to find out that the mental imagery about some environmental elements was still vivid in people’s minds. The predominant images in resident’s perception pointed out to a rather homogeneous set of elements, evoking the industrial times and industrial life that had distinguished the region’s evolution. Structured like symbolic icons, a number of
contextual landmarks attained high rankings on the most perceived elements listings. Another interesting phenomenological circumstance revealed that a good number of elements rested cohesively concentrated on a single location, in the surroundings of the bridge over the river Guaiba, the river that gave birth to the city (Fig.5). Besides the symbolic “gates” to the city represented by the bridge, the area is punctuated by memorable visual marks, such as the river itself, the local sanctuary of Our Lady of Navegantes, seat of the city’s catholic patron, and a series of old factories, among which, the Renner factory complex. All in all, and despite the presence of a complex traffic intersection, the area managed to conserve a resilient image (Fig.6).

![Fig. 5 - the CD Navegantes place. Photo: H. Amaral Studio (hastudio@terra.com.br)](image)

**Fig. 5 - the CD Navegantes place. Photo: H. Amaral Studio ([hastudio@terra.com.br](mailto:hastudio@terra.com.br))**

**Fig. 6 - CD landscape elements. Basic Photo: S. Ferreira**

**Case 2- The conservation of another spatial heritage element as a place** - The opening of a modern factory *retail outlet*, located on this area of more intensive man-environment interaction, offers a good illustration of how places can function as proactive agents for boosting the goals of IC planning. The retail outlet - namely, the “Distrito Comercial Navegantes” (Commercial District Navegantes) (Fig.7) - made possible to turn an empty plot of land into a real, revitalized area, and to transform a group of decayed buildings into a lively *place*. Placemaking is also present. DC’s marketing relies on history, revived through the preserved elements of the built environment; and on the natural features of the place, remembered by the nearness to the old river.

![Figure 7 - Retail outlet project. Source: Fleck, Bauer and Ferreira, architects.](image)

The DC-Navegantes compound shows today a high level of reinvigorated energy, conferring an unequivocal upgrade to the area. In terms of environmental planning, this upgrading has a clear linkage to the conservation planning of the site’s environmental assets, starting by the proper reuse of the installations of the old Renner plant, precisely on the area which concentrates, on a single locus, the whole group of most remembered elements. Altogether, in the DC area there is a strategic articulation of some of the most powerful contextual images people hold about their old industrial environment, kept in a
permanent dialogue with the physical, behavioral and symbolic realms of the urban present (Fig. 8).

Although minimalist, the urban project of the Commercial District Navegantes bears a surprising richness, manifested through a diversity of characteristics that gather together sensorial stimuli, historical memory, conservationist ideals, existential experiences, and financial management dimensions. As such, the methodological approach employed in the study has as much to do with the theory of place as with the practical principles of IC planning. Thus, social, economic, technical and psychological goals get amalgamated into a comprehensible methodological framework that leads to an integrated interplay between disciplines, bridging places and IC planning.

6.0 Conclusions

The concept of place, positioned as it is at the very interface of physical, social, and behavioral disciplines, seems to provide a likely means for tackling the challenge of communicating across disciplines, an objective attentively cherished by urban conservationists. The two cases discussed are symptomatic of the possibilities opened by the use of the place approach for promoting an interconnection among diverse disciplines. Consequently, they also provide grounds for understanding that there are benefits that may be earned when one tries to approximate place theory to the purposes of the IC planning area. Certainly, the cases chosen are modest, but they surely indicate solid directions to follow, when the intention is to widening up the opportunities for bridging the disciplinary knowledge the technical side of IC planning has already accumulated over time, to the non-disciplinary perception people show in relation to the elements of urban conservation.

We have seen that place today, as a pragmatic experience, demands a twofold set of active agents, placemaking and placemarketing, that work together in the completion of the place. And that work together not only to preserve the physical integrity of the socio-cultural assets of a city - i.e., the places that a city is endowed with - but, also, to explore the aggregate values that can be obtained when these places are put to work in the city’s urban development policies. Placemaking and placemarketing simultaneously provide grounds for the material conservation of the assets and, also, for their subjective sustainability. Placemaking is a handy tool to bridge professionals’ and people’s views, thus providing an alliance between disciplinary and non-disciplinary factors. Placemarketing, in turn, bridges the managerial and economic conditions that regulate the success of a place. In addition, keeping a place’s character and a place’s use live and in action means that people will keep rooted to one of their essential environmental symbols, hence providing for its sustainability.

Although much of the evidence for these considerations must lie within the realm of conjecture, there is the possibility that within the concept of place may effectively reside a positive methodological interface for IC planning. Urban conservation planners pay an enormous importance to preserving those physical characteristics that help to define a
place. They also are strongly influenced by the symbolic meaning a place has on the societal level, with all its implications on sense and identity. They are the first to acknowledge the power of a place in aggregating value to the latent assets interspersed along the urban environment. Therefore, bridging the new pragmatic components of place theory, to the knowledge of IC planning professionals, may bring advantageous results. The planning and management of integrated conservation will be able to capitalize on the multifaceted dimensions involved in a place - behavioral, sensorial, experiential, historical, preservationist, economical, financial - and to foster a sustained development process for the city as a whole, while maintaining the integrity and continuity of the elements perceived as the city’s most praised cultural assets.

Bibliography


