THE PATINA OF THE CITY

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Abstract

This paper puts forward a reflection on the ambit of urban conservation by taking patina as the object of discussion. Patina is understood as the effect left by the passage of time on the exterior surfaces of urban elements and on social practices. Patina is important for the perception of the age value because it points to the perception of the passage of through the idea of ageing and decay. In the first instance, the article traces one evolution of the concept, beginning with the physical-chemical plane, as patina is both an action and an effect caused in paint and metals, and leads on to a critical approach, given that patina results in alterations in the object, the treatment of which will be conditioned by the values which it aggregates. The second section sets forth a broadening of the concept, and reaches the understanding that patina is manifested in the city in two dimensions – the physical-material one and the immaterial one – and on two scales – that of the city and that of place. Finally, the third section discusses the possibilities of treating the patina in the processes of urban revitalization, based on the notions of permanence and transformation, continuous actions and episodic actions. The understanding is reached that as a result of the regeneration capacity of the patina; it is a sine qua non that the actions of urban revitalization and rehabilitation take this into account when seeking to maintain the equilibrium of modifications. Therefore, when interventions are made in old areas, the patina of which has become an inherent part of their identity, the attempt should be made to grade the transformations in time, inevitably so for contemporary uses, in such a way that the patina may regenerate itself on the old surfaces and re-emerge on the surface of the new elements.

Key-words: Patina, restoration, urban conservation

Introduction

This article discusses the understanding of the forms by which patina manifests itself in the city by taking into account both the physical-material and immaterial dimensions. Patina is understood as the effect left by the passage of time on the exterior surfaces of the urban elements. The concept of patina, understood as the effect of time on the exterior surfaces of urban elements, has been the subject of much debate and discussion in the field of urban conservation. This paper contributes to the understanding of patina by exploring its physical and immaterial dimensions in the city.

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urban elements and on social practices. Thus all materials which make up urban spaces are considered to be part of the built environment as well as the city’s cultural manifestations. Patina is important for the perception of the age value because it points to the perception of the passage of time and to the idea of ageing and decay.

The article is structured into three sections. Section one traces one evolution of the concept of patina, in the first instance limited to a physical-chemical plane and later dealt with on the critical plane. The second section seeks to transcend the understanding of the concept of patina to the ambit of the city and, finally, the third section discusses the possibilities for the treatment of patina in the processes of urban revitalization.

1 What is patina?

In order to embark on this discussion it seems opportune to make an incursion into the concept of patina. It was first recorded in Baldinucci’s dictionary, published in 1681. According to him, patina is "a term used by painters, called by others a skin, namely that general dark tone which time causes to appear on paintings" (Baldinucci apud Weil, 1996, p. 398-399). In Weil’s judgment (1996, p. 399), "Baldinucci’s use of the term indicates that it came to refer generally to the effects of time and only later was applied to such effects on metallic objects" 1.

From the original meaning, which referred to a given action which occurs on a certain object so modifying its appearance, and, therefore, how it is appreciated aesthetically, patina evolved as a physical-chemical concept to designate the oxidization of paint by the action of time and its gradual transformation, or the layer greenish by copper carbonate which is formed on bronze statues, so causing alterations to them, an acceptance of the meaning which does not appear in Baldinucci’s definition. Thus, historically, the formation of two visions on the concept of patina can be identified (García, 2001): the cultural or aesthetic vision, which gives positive or negative value to the action of time on the surfaces of the work of art, and the scientific or objective vision, which understands patina from the technical-scientific point of view. Some adherents of this latter approach have come to propose the abolition of the use of the term, on account of its imprecision, and to substitute it with terms which precisely describe the physical-chemical phenomena which alter the surfaces of works of art (Mannoni, 1996). In this paper, patina will be explored as a cultural concept, although it will recognize the importance of the scientific approach, which contributed to the use of the concept of patina in the field of restoration of buildings.

Patina expresses two notions simultaneously: one which refers to the action of time on a given object and the other is about the result of this action on the object i.e. patina appears both as the cause and the effect. It is used as a concept with regard to metals (sculptures and medals) and paint (paintings), which can be aimed at by the painters, which characterizes a kind of intentional patina. This fact justifies Weil’s classification (1996). The author distinguishes between two types of patina as action: natural patina (the genuine one) and artificial patina (patination).

Having this in mind, this study is centered on the natural (genuine) patina. And, on this topic, Weil (1996) examines another question: natural patina as an effect can be ornamental (aerugo nobilis), i.e. it can aggregate aesthetic value to an object, or be

1 “Most dictionaries give the origin of the word as deriving from the Latin word for plate or pan (patena), though it is often mentioned that the connection is uncertain. (…). The most likely origin of the word patina is the old Italian word patena used to refer to a shiny dark varnish applied to shoes. (Weil, 1996, p. 398-399).
destructive (virue aerugo), since it is formed at the expense of its own substance. Therefore, the treatment of patina must consider both the type of effect that it causes on surfaces, as well as its capacity to regenerate them, since, once removed, depending on the physical-chemical characteristics of the materials, it may or may be able to regenerate itself.

The understanding of patina as something negative normally arises from the fact of it being a symbol of that which is old. On account of this, even if in an unconscious way, it is common for an analogy with the time-line of human life to be outlined in which beauty is related to youthfulness, and ugliness to becoming old. The metaphors used to describe decay are the same as those which describe human fragilities and ailments: “the fatigue of metals, the ageing of glass. Like any patient, ailing art objects are said to require first aid, diagnosis, and treatment” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 143).

On the other hand, still according to Lowenthal’s (1985) understanding on natural patina, ageing and degradation lend credibility to old buildings and adorn them. An old patina on bronze, for example, attests both to its age and to its genuineness. The patina of time, thought of as something aesthetic, was present in the vision of the Venetians who defended time as something which improved the colors of a painting; the post-Renaissance painters welcomed the effects of patina, as did sculptors the dark incrustations of their bronze objects and architects the smoothness of weathered stones.

Dealing specifically with the effect of patina on architecture, Dechartre (apud Carbonara, 1988, p.43) argued that what should be respected is everything that the centuries have garnered little by little” (...). Making this disappear is an anachronism (...). It is a crime to cancel the successive marks which are on stone (...). Stone freshly carved according to an old style is a false witness”.

The understanding of artificial patina as a practice which seeks to reproduce the effect caused by the action of time has been appropriated by “an industry of patina kitsch”, which proceeds to ensure “these symbolic values are ‘glued’ onto objects in the cheapest way possible”, this being the reason why it is said patina should be applied or a patina covering made (Wetering, 1996, p. 420). In fact, patina emerges as “a symbol, as a sign that something is old, worthy of respect, and genuine” (Wetering, 1996, p. 419).

To sum up, patina is an action which may be natural or artificial, and as a result, natural patina may be ornamental (noble) or destructive. Since patina leads to alterations of the object, the discussion reaches another plane, which dispenses with a critical approach (Philippot, 1996). And these are the values aggregated to the object which will condition its treatment.

First of all, it can be the effect on a given asset which has nothing more than a use value, such as, manufactured goods: a car or a domestic appliance. To quote Lowenthal (1985, p. 144), ”a rusting car, a corroded washing machine, a verminous mattress, peeling wallpaper excite general disgust”. In this case, the only proceeding for treating patina seems to be that of cleaning it up or removing it i.e. the removal of the patina so that the object works correctly and thus only aggregates a use value.

Secondly, this effect can occur in a work of art, which expresses an artistic value and a historical value. This should be about a useable work of art, such as architecture, it aggregates, besides artistic value, a use value. Therefore, what is the correct way to behave when faced with patina? How should the concept be operated on the artistic and historical plane and, if this is applicable, should it still take into account the use value?

Brandi (2004), in his Theory of Restoration, offers one form of approach. For him, patina, as a historical record, a priori should be maintained under any circumstances. From the
artistic point of view, the decision should be conditioned on an artistic judgment i.e. the patina must be considered to the point beyond which it does not alter the image of the work of art. Brandi’s (2004) solution is, nevertheless, circumscribed by the aesthetic-historical bi-polarity by means of which his theory unravels.

Patina, to agree with Weil (1996), is evaluated as an indicator of age. This being so, up to what point should it be conserved? Putting this another way, patina reveals, in addition to an artistic and historical value, an age value, quoting the denomination dear to Riegl (1999). He holds that the age value is discovered at first sight by the non-modern appearance of the object and that this opposition to the present is best manifested in imperfection, in the absence of the original character and in a tendency towards the erosion of shape and color; it is a value perceptible to all, not only specialists.

This notion, however, was already rooted in the work of Ruskin (1989) who argued strenuously in favor of the preservation of architecture over and above its utilitarian and aesthetic character i.e. by extrapolating it from its condition as a work of art destined to fruition and a utilitarian function. In making the case in favor of the preservation of architecture as a work of the past, ahead of its being a work of art, and, in arguing stoutly that the greatest importance of an old building was in transmitting the marks left on it by time for future generations, so intervening minimally in its former appearance, Ruskin (1989: 193) was already giving shape to the age value, even though it would only receive this designation later on, and he reached the point of writing: “the greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, nor in its gold. Its glory is in its Age.”

But, transcending the plane of utilitarian objects and of works of arts for the city, how should we proceed to the maintenance of the patina? Or, even before attempting to answer this question, what is and how does the perception of the patina of the city come about? This is the material for the next section.

2 What is the patina of the city

The city is a culturally complex and multi-faceted artifact, the product of superimposing temporal layers, manifested in its physical structure. It is one of the objects most appropriated by man, the scenario of advances and changes of society and aggregates use value, historical value, age value, artistic value and as many others as each citizen attributes to it in his daily living in it.

In the words of Peixoto (2004: 13), the city is a “superimposing of innumerable layers of material, the accumulation of things which refuse to go away (...) horizons of stone, in which the most modern is cheek by jowl with decadence, the future with past. An archaic soil, strewn with vestiges and memories”.

By its being the great depository of the material and immaterial undertakings of man throughout the ages, the city, in its buildings, streets and neighborhoods and also in its cultural manifestations, materializes the age value through the ideas of ageing and decay, which are fundamental for identifying the passage of these human endeavors through time. It is precisely at this point that the importance of the mark left by the patina of the city lies.

The city can be further understood as a grouping together of places – products of the social relationships made up of a network of meanings woven by civilizing culture down though the ages (Carlos, 1996). Space is, then, transformed into place to the extent that it acquires meanings attributed to it by man, thus conferring an identity on it (Tuan, 1983; Carlos, 1996).
The concept of place, by aggregating this historical dimension produced by the superimposing and juxtaposing of the social relationships in it and developed with it, ends up being an inherent part of the discussions of patina of the city. Heath (2001) has already pointed to a relation between patina and place by conceptualizing it as a gradual appropriation of the objects by a local culture, which generates a process of altering given meanings with time by means of superimposing cumulative human adjustments, which occur in response to social, economic and technological forces, and thus differentiate one place from another. This also leads to the conclusion that patina is a dynamic process, for, when it is removed, it regenerates itself, and, for this reason it is essential that the actions of urban revitalization and rehabilitation consider it, and should seek to balance the modifications in such a way as to allow for its regeneration on old surfaces and its gradual incorporation into new elements.

This is why the relationship between patina and place is indissociable and is it moreover more latent in those places in which their identity is directly characterized by the age value. In such places, the maintenance of the patina has become fundamental to the perception of the various moments in history through which the place has passed and for visualizing the age value.

The place might be the neighborhood, the square, the street, i.e. an area of the city lived in and recognized by the users (Carlos, 1996) through its physical-material aspects, like the configuration of the public spaces, the form of urban fixture, the façades, the vegetation and the cladding materials; and of its immaterial aspects, such as its social practices. From this understanding, it arises that patina is manifested of the city in these two dimensions: the physical-material and the immaterial.

In the physical-material dimension, the patina is linked to the age-worn exterior appearance and/or configuration of the urban elements. On the one hand, this perception comes about from the recognition of the decay of the surfaces of streets, squares, façades, urban fixture and urban facilities, provoked by mechanical wearing out and by the accumulation of residues resulting from weathering and continuous use (Photos 01 and 02). Decay is not destruction nor a stationary state but a growing and continuous process (Piper apud Lowenthal, 1985).

Photo 1: Patina is manifested by the accumulation of residues caused by weathering, Ouro Preto-Brazil, 2005. Source: Authors’ archives.
On the other hand, patina is also recognized in the configuration of the spaces i.e. in the forms and styles associated with what is old. One can obtain an example that elucidates this perception of the patina when one observes a building or an area of a city in decay which belongs to a past style: should an intervention be undertaken that removes from it the residues resulting from weathering and continuous use, it continues to show patina on account of its out-of-fashion style, however, not because of its decayed state. Nevertheless, the perception of giving value to what is old because of an old-fashioned style is not necessarily unconnected with historical value, for history informs us that one style is older than another, according to the point of view of Riegl (1999). For example, in principle, a Gothic cathedral reveals a higher value of being old than a Baroque one because history informs us that Gothic architecture preceded Baroque.

Carbonara (1990: 44), when dealing with patina on the physical-material dimension, states that “the surfaces are without any doubt also ‘sites of degradation’, and even include the most impetuous degradations when one thinks about the phenomena of atmospheric pollution. But it is not right, on account of this, to forget, as frequently happens, that one is also dealing with a ‘place of historical testimony’ (by virtue of the age-old signs of time and human actions) and with a place that if no longer artistic – because of the gravity of the sudden damage – is at least aesthetic, because of the picturesque and figurative values which are summed up under the name of patina”.

Should patina cause a destructive effect on a work of art, (a building, for example) to the extent of destroying its potential unity (Brandi, 2004), the consequence for its artistic value does not, necessarily, reveal an aesthetic value, in the sense of aesthetic fruition or appreciation, of beauty. This means that the building no longer has a potential unity which characterizes it as a work of art, but it does not stop being an object of aesthetic appreciation, as is the case with a ruin.

In this dimension, the patina is revealed on two scales: that of the city and that of place. On the city scale, what allows us to apprehend the patina are the different configurations of the places between each other, these being representative of the different eras of urban evolution (Photo 03). In the case of a city conceived and constructed in a short period of time, like the modernist capital of Brazil, Brasilia, the patina results only from the almost homogeneous decay of the surfaces, without revealing, however, the passage of time through the difference between the configuration of one place relative to another. Nevertheless it is important to stress that this scale is merely an abstract one, the fruit of a
mental comparison between the parts of the city, since it would only be possible to take in this very broad vision from high up.

Photo 03: Patina is manifested in the different configurations of the places, the historic district of São José and, in the background, the district of Boa Viagem, Recife-Brazil, 2005. Source: Author’s archives.

At the scale of place, the patina is visible in the decay of surfaces (Photos 01 and 02) and in the different styles of the façades and of the urban fixture, such as benches, street lighting posts and railings (Photo 04).

Photo 04: Patina is manifested in urban furniture (wrought-iron gate), Ouro Preto-Brazil, 2005. Source: Authors’ archive.

After identifying that a given place is characterized by the age value at the level of the city, it is expected that, on experiencing it at the level of place, the latter shows signs of decay. If this does not occur, there is a sensation of finding this odd since, to quote Lowenthal (1985, p. 151), “that old buildings should look old is not an uncommon view. Unlike people, buildings are expected to gain something in the process of growing old’ and ‘it is part of the quality we admire in them that they have their history written on their faces’.”

In the immaterial dimension, the perception of patina is linked to social practices, which are products generated by durable, collective principles, historically constructed through an everyday process of experiences and adjustments (Bourdieu, 1989; De Certeau, 1994).
In this dimension, the perception of patina comes about by maintaining traditional social practices related to a place, such as: processions, carnival groups, street traders, people sitting on the pavements and the lay out of vases on window sills, which are striking features of Brazilian cities (Photo 05). By being related to the place, social practices best reveal the patina on this scale, and not on the city scale. In a procession, for example, the patina results from maintaining rites, routes, the hymns and prayers which give it its character.

Photo 5: Patina is manifested in social practices, street-trading in Recife-Brazil. Source: Authors’ archives.

According to Mário Sette (1978, p. 9-10), “we do not only see the city’s face but also its spirit (...) Furthermore, in every city there is (...) a very peculiar impregnation, like a personal aroma which the years do not destroy (...) Its face, its smell, its colors, its sounds! (...) there is in this a sense that transcends the mere civilized nucleus as if we might attain the rays of a temple of ourselves. (...) In each one of these streets (...) there also lived someone who preceded us in the world (...) This procession which takes to the streets during every Lent (...) they have seen it as we see it, they have heard the same bells, they have carried the same barandões (poles of streamers), they have adored the same image”.

Nevertheless, it must be stressed that this distinction between the physical-material dimension and the immaterial dimension for the perception of patina is only didactic, for the material elements evoke a perception of the immaterial, such as the step worn out by use in a church which conjures up various generations passing through this place, and that immaterial aspects need a physical base in order that they may take place.

3. The treatment of patina of the city

If we consider the city as a cultural object, based on Brandi’s critical theory, in principle, the patina should be maintained. At historic sites, the maintenance of the age value is indispensable for their identity and authenticity. In these places, the patina is an element in perceiving the characteristics of the site itself, which it is fundamental to maintain. But the city is also an object of use, comprising public and private spaces and an architectonic object. Therefore, how should one balance the changes needed or arising from the contemporary uses of the spaces and of architecture and the cultural value related to the patina? And what are the forms of maintaining the patina? These are fundamental questions that must be dealt with when one intervenes in places in which identification is bound up with their age value.
Before endeavoring to answer these questions, it is important to understand that patina of the city is associated with two factors: permanence and transformation. The dynamics given by the passage of time and by human intervention may favor either permanence or produce the transformation of the places. Permanence is understood as being the maintenance of the physical-material and immaterial characteristics of the place and of the city. By transformation is understood the change of use, of façades, materials and social practices which alter the aspects through which the patina is manifested. The greater the permanence the greater the patina will be, and the greater the transformation, the less the patina will be.

Some factors whether internal or external to urban phenomena guarantee its permanence or produce its transformation. A community which maintains continuity of its traditions and forms of dwelling and living linked to the past, for example, favors the permanence of its characteristics and consequently the maintenance of the patina. On the other hand, a major urban reform, like the sea port and urbanistic ones which took place in the district known as the Bairro do Recife (Recife, Brazil) in the early 20th century, one of the objectives of which was to wipe out the vestiges of colonial architecture and to give an air of modernity to the district, and one which also replaced the original users, port workers, residents, small businessmen, by people from better-off classes, may be taken as a transformation, in contrast to the previous case. The result of this reform was the rupture of permanence, and consequently of the patina, manifested both in the physical-material dimension as in the immaterial one of the place.

Urban rehabilitation and revitalization actions are, therefore, transformation instruments which may be undertaken either as a continuous action or as an episodic action. Continuous actions are those which occur within the very dynamics of the place, also called *cultural weathering* (Heath, 2001). Episodic actions are timely, without continuity and out of context, and may produce abrupt transformations in places, and wipe out the patina. It is, therefore, important that actions are associated with a critical judgment which considers the degree to which the patina may be removed and the possibility of its being recomposed. It is fundamental to establish a process of episodic intervention which can be likened, to the maximum possible extent, to a continuous transformation process, (which come close to being maintenance actions) which respects the internal dynamics of the place.

The revitalization process is an episodic action, but it is possible to insert the transformations needed during the life of the city, so that the patina may be maintained, since they take place gradually.

Under this process, within the immaterial dimension, it is important to maintain some traditional activities and to incorporate the new actors and uses so that a new dynamic may be given to the area, thus maintaining the continuity of the characteristics and everyday customs of the place.

As to the physical-material dimension, ruptures in the process of constituting the patina must be avoided or every effort made to minimize them so that it can regenerate itself. It is, therefore, undesirable that the restoration of buildings is undertaken at one stroke over the complete setting of the historic site, but rather that the interventions in buildings take place piece-meal and within a time period needed to reconstitute the patina. In this sense, the choice of strategy for the restoration of buildings assumes a central importance in the processes of revitalization. There are two apparently distinct visions regarding the treatment of very old architectonic surfaces.
The first, basically put forward by Paolo Marconi (1984), recognizes the importance of the aged appearance left by the patina on buildings, but he argues that the building is a “live” element under constant modification. The building is conceived so as to be maintained by means of permanent actions which repair faults, paintwork, replace damaged parts, etc. Thus, in his point of view, it does not make sense to maintain a patina which is the product of the natural wear and tear of materials or caused by external forces such as pollution. According to this position, the patina of buildings must be a process limited in time i.e. circumscribed by the period between two repair interventions.

The second, which has Carbonara (1990) as its greatest champion, argues that patina aggregates cultural values on to the building (aesthetic and age values), and therefore the patina needs to be maintained in the cases of buildings or groups of buildings of outstanding cultural value to the city. Carbonara proposes that the intervention on the surfaces of buildings should follow a procedure similar to that used on paintings i.e. cleaning, filling in gaps and the minimal removal of the aggregated elements necessary, only, to maintain the continuity in time of the building, but without removing its time-dependent features, and therefore those that reveal its age.

The positions of the two authors are not antagonistic, with regard to intervention on the city scale. Marconi is correct to affirm the need to intervene for continuous maintenance purposes and even for more thorough-going intervention depending on the degradation degree of the architectonic surfaces. At the same time, Carbonara is absolutely right to state the danger of intervention which sets out to re-fashion surfaces when this threatens their very material integrity.

In this sense, it is important to minimize the transformations on surfaces, and to avoid, to the maximum extent possible, refashioning them and especially inserting new elements which may alter the material authenticity of the building and may not be compatible with the process of ageing in the surroundings as, for example, the use of glass and new materials in which the surface may not manage to become integrated with the process of ageing in the surroundings (Photo 06).

Photo 06: Surface in glass which does not blend in with the ageing of the surroundings, Aachen-Germany, 2005. Source: Authors’ archives.

In addition, all the instances which are about patina must be dealt with: the scale of the object in relation to the place and the city, as well as the physical-material and immaterial dimensions. It is not only the physical-material or immaterial aspect which must be given value, for one of the instances will be corrupted. If all the patina of the surface of the buildings is removed in one intervention and the uses are maintained, one scenario is
created. On the other hand, should the patina of the surfaces be maintained and the use transformed, the identity of the place is altered.

Transformations in cities are inevitable, and therefore they must be balanced in all forms of the manifestation of the patina. The up-dating which contemporary life requires in historic buildings and fabric cannot be left out of consideration. However, in order to intervene in these areas, it is fundamental to consider the aspects and dimensions in which the patina manifests itself. It is therefore a decision which must be taken case by case when analyzing such dimensions.

Conclusion

This article initially has set out to widen the concept of patina, commonly associated with the material instances of the surfaces of paintings, sculptures and buildings, to the city scale. And, by putting forward this widening of the concept to a multi-faceted and complex artifact like a city; it has reached the understanding that the patina also manifests itself on the immaterial dimension by virtue of social practices.

The patina is the element which leads to the perception of the value of something being old. The variable key to the patina is time; it only exists by passing. In accordance with the affirmation that patina is a dynamic process, because when it is removed it can regenerate itself, it is essential that urban revitalization and rehabilitation actions take it into consideration and seek to balance the modifications. Therefore, when intervening in historic areas in which their patina has become an inherent part of its identity, the attempt must be made to grade in time the transformations which are inevitable for contemporary uses, in such a way that the patina can be regenerated on the old surfaces and appear on the surface of the new elements.

On the other hand, the transformations which occur in the historic areas of the city where the revitalization process is an episodic action, which is without continuity and decontextualized, can produce abrupt changes in these places, and wipe out the patina. Therefore, care should once more be taken that the actions must be associated with a critical judgment which considers the degree of patina removal and makes it possible for it to recompose itself. For this reason, it is necessary that episodic intervention processes are likened, to the maximum extent possible, with the process of continuous transformation and that they respect the internal dynamics of the place.

Patina, is undeniably a guideline to be considered in revitalization processes, which cannot be limited to an action of replacing objects with new ones and giving new uses to the places by wiping out the vestiges left by the action of man and nature down through the ages. Patina must be considered so that places do not lose their identity, authenticity and historicity and so that the city does not cease to display its main feature: that of being the great depository of the material and immaterial undertakings of mankind throughout history.

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