WHY HISTORY: THE MEANINGS AND USES OF TRADITION

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Researchers of traditional environments can benefit from understanding the themes of their work in a historical context. Take the ideas embodied in the title of the 1992 IASTE conference. Reflection reveals that "development" implies both the inevitability and the appropriateness of growth and the obligation to arrive at some logical value system for choosing what to retain and allow to change in any physical setting. "Tradition" involves two other ideas: the existence of a past of a culture which is dead and exists only as a memory, and the parallel existence of a body of beliefs that draw from that memory and facilitate judgments about "development." One can immediately see that tradition and development are often incompatible; development can proceed only when tradition is "forgotten." Nevertheless, it is only through traditions, real or fictitious relationships to half-forgotten and largely misunderstood pasts, that people recognize themselves. The value of a built environment, therefore, is a conglomerate of its actual physical existence and the historical memories and myths people attach to it, bring to it, and project on it from other, often distant, places. Considering the complex, contradictory nature of this process, is it not appropriate to imagine a bill of rights for built environments? A full historical consciousness of what tradition is may require that we go beyond local ideas of restoration and identify more universal moral norms to regulate our concerns.

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AS A HISTORIAN, I AM HONORED TO ADDRESS AN AUDIENCE of specialists in traditional environments. Yet, being relatively unfamiliar with the contemporary problems in this field, and knowing that this paper should be more than a mere recapitulation of related histories of art and architecture, I wondered what direction of thought, what kind of meditation on my part, would interest an interdisciplinary audience concerned with such a topic. I concluded that the most ap-
appropriate way to find this direction lay in analyzing the theme of the conference: "Development and Tradition: The Cultural Ecology of Dwellings and Settlements." This theme contains, first of all, two fairly concrete terms, "dwellings" and "settlements," for which relatively simple definitions can be provided — even though specialists might develop complex arguments about both). Not being particularly knowledgeable of the history of dwellings in the narrow sense of housing or the contemporary intellectual issues which are of major concern to politicians, architects and planners, I will avoid talking about dwellings directly. As to settlements, the term is broad enough to include what I am concerned with.

The title also includes four more complicated, abstract terms. I shall not deal with what a "culture" is, as we can more or less agree in this context with its dictionary definition as "socially transmitted products of human work, thought, and behavior." As such, it is automatically the concern of anyone who moves beyond the bare techniques or the pure forms of building. "Ecology" is already more difficult to define, as it implies the study of completed and discrete units ("houses," as implied by the etymology of the word, or, in a more picturesque way, "shells"), within which culture — that is to say, a finite system of knowledge and cognition — can be housed. "Cultural ecology" would mean, then, the study of the settings, more specifically the modes of housing and sheltering, in which a or any culture can or does express itself most successfully or most happily (both happiness and success being clearly relative terms, but convenient at this level of definition).

Whether called cultural ecology or not, such studies are relatively frequent and can operate in two ways. One can show patterns of dwellings — Yemeni houses dominating the landscape, Moroccan urban dwellings snugly fitted with each other inside a city, a nomadic camp, an African village — and, from the visual observation of the settlements, or of plans and drawings derived from measurements (or sometimes sketched in an impressionistic manner), one can derive certain conclusions or questions about the ways of life of the inhabitants. This can be done because of a variety of assumptions made, correctly or not, in the interpretation of a built environment: for instance, that the location and character of gates and of other passageways tells something about privacy, or that public and private spaces can be identified by looking at images or drawings. An exercise in cultural ecology can, then, simply be the transformation of visual impressions or analyses into written, spoken, or graphic statements.

Or else (and this is the second possible procedure) one can acquire information about a culture, a human group, from all sorts of sources — written documents by or about that group, orally transmitted accounts, ethnographic observations, at times representations — then transfer this to images of dwellings and settlements, and label the latter with whatever information has been acquired. Thus, as I know that male and female quarters are separated from each other in a conservative and well-to-do Muslim society, I can understand certain features in the plans of fancy contemporary houses from Saudi Arabia which otherwise could have been imagined in Arizona or any other dry and warm climatic setting.

In short, there is no methodological nor intellectual problem in dealing with the term cultural ecology if one keeps either one of two objectives in mind: to investigate something which exists and has been built or used by men and women and to transform it into statements; alternatively, to begin with verbal statements and seek a visually perceptible or a sensory setting for whatever has been read or heard. In both instances there is a direct process of interpretation, moving from or to visual material and ending up with an act of presentation for others to understand. In either case, it is a frequently attempted type of scholarly endeavor.

DEVELOPMENT

Matters become more difficult when one turns to the last two terms of the conference's title, "development" and "tradition."

The main implication of the word development is the existence of change, but it also apparently involves the appropriateness of, or, at best, the inevitability of change. And one can see immediately where the problem lies. Are change and development necessary attributes of any living organism? Are they not precisely what defines life? Something "undeveloped" or "underdeveloped" is reprehensible or, at best, regrettable. Growth is good and praiseworthy and means differentiation in time between various phases which are set in a continuum, and to the older part of which one never comes back; historical development, thus, is always irreversible. We easily recognize these changes in ourselves and in those who surround us, and we know that they are unavoidable.

Granted the inevitability of change, the argument about it is construed in a different way. Change and growth are fine if they derive from some natural (i.e., controlled by physical and biological processes) activity, like the acceptance of an ultimately necessary and unavoidable death or the improvement of the physical setting for any living organism by the planting of a tree. But change is bad if it derives from the impact of agents which can be controlled individually (smoking, for instance), or which imply a peculiar or alien vision (European
romanticism, for instance, in non-Western societies). Thus, much praise was heaped on the Kampung improvement projects of Indonesia in which a relatively small amount of change brought a huge amelioration of life (FIG. 1A, B). Yet matters become more confused when one considers how natural change can also be devastating and “harmful.” It is difficult to argue that such agents of change as epidemics, genetically determined diseases, or destruction by tornados can be controlled or avoided. And yet their impact can only be considered negative. If nature is not always good and man not always bad, how is one going to decide what are appropriate developments?

The question is philosophically a very interesting one and an essential one for some of the points I will make here. There are, it seems to me, four possible logical positions one can take on the question of development.

One can be called the position of the ostrich. According to this view, all changes are essentially bad and ought to be canceled and their results removed, and, if this cannot be done, they ought to be ignored. Such is, for instance, the position of Amish communities in the United States who hold onto ways of life and behavior of two centuries ago. (Similar examples exist within other primarily religious communities.) This is clearly a difficult position to defend, as it flies in the face of reality and, when pursued, leads to contradictory and hypocritical attitudes and actions, of which many examples can be given.

The second position could be called the Teflon position. Here, everything is accepted as long as it is new and is replaced the moment something else appears. Common in fashion, the Teflon position is, among other places, evident in the advertising of architectural magazines. Its central point is that changes and development go in tandem with growth — that is to say, with life itself. To stop growing is to die, and death is, if not bad, at least irrelevant, because its victim is hori jiu, “offside, or out of play.” To live is always to change. “Life is not a destination but a process,” as is argued by some recent advertisements. Therefore, in planning or in building, even in dreaming about the future, everything is possible and could be good.

A third position can be described as the smorgasbord. By this standard, a set of possibilities for growth exist, but they cannot all be used. Therefore, some mechanism must be devised to make choices. Such mechanisms can be conscious or unconscious, but in either case they are most of the time affected by considerations which are aesthetic, political, cultural, budgetary, commercial, and probably of many other types used alone or in combination. Remarkable aspects of the smorgasbord position can be found in the architecture of Alexandria between 1880 and 1950, when practically every possible style of architecture was used for public or private buildings. Or else it can be found in contemporary Saudi Arabia or in the Gulf States, where wealth and exposure to advertising media have led to a most extraordinary array of architectural creativity, some quite wild, others quite stunning (FIG. 2).

The smorgasbord position is pretty universal, although it may be possible to graph out significant temporal and topical variations in its intensity. Justifications for choices have tended to be made after the fact, although a comparative and chronological study of the briefs sent out by governments or individuals over the past thirty years might lead to interesting...
insights about the choices sought by patrons, and equally curious results might emerge from a study of the statements made by architects about their choices in designing and building. I recall my own surprise at reading and hearing the distinguished Danish architect of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Riyadh argue that he was inspired by the Taj Mahal when the two buildings to me seemed very dissimilar. The advantage and the fun of visual analyses, especially in deconstructionist times, is that one can see anything in anything. But the more pertinent point here is that the choices made in developing architecture, the environment, or anything else seem to require a justification, which, in turn, implies the existence of a responsibility in the making of the choice. The problems lie in identifying the individuals, communities, or other entities to which one justifies oneself way, for instance, in the enormous building activities of Iraq over the past decades. There is a great deal of logic in the absolute position, whatever its specific modalities may be, and even though it often fails in practice or is replaced by subsequent absolutes.

Except for the first of my positions, which is clearly an obscurantist one, there is something to be said for all the others, and their very existence indicates that development itself is a complex concept. Just as with sex, with which it has a lot in common, development contains elements of expectation, behavior and judgement which often clash with each other.

TRADITION

Let me turn now to the last of the words in the title of the conference: "tradition." There are two main ideas behind this word. One is that of a body of culture which existed before a development took place; tradition is the past of a culture, and, like any past, it is by definition dead (otherwise it would not be past). As such, it can become a ghost and a source of inspiration, but it no longer exists except as a "monument," as a memory (if not a souvenir), as a statement of another time. The second idea is that tradition is a body of habits, beliefs and behavior which exists, but which is, in a sense, independent of development. Traditions are philosophical and theological systems which affect the minds and souls of men and women. It is reasonable to imagine that such systems could and should affect development, because they are vehicles for moral and aesthetic judgement and, therefore, provide a stamp of approval for anything done.

It is to the further development of these two aspects of tradition that I will devote the rest of this paper. I will concentrate primarily on the first aspect — tradition as a known and subconscious past — because, like all practitioners of any craft, even intellectual ones, I tend to shy away from ethical issues. But it is with some consideration of ethics that I shall conclude.

What, then, is a tradition in the first sense I have provided, that is to say, as the no-longer-quite-operational past of a given place, country or region? How does it affect those who live with that tradition or who seek to build new buildings, dwellings or monuments in the areas involved? In the past, tradition in this sense would have been considered to be history, but matters are now more complex. The question of history is currently closely linked with a series of concepts which have been bandied around in several recent international forums, especially under the inspiration of UNESCO and
Let me begin with a quotation from Choay's book, and I shall then provide a series of examples—some personal from my years as a teaching professor, others from the world at large. All these cases together should serve to propose first a broad definition of tradition as it would affect the environment and our responsibility to it, then lead to a more problematic implication of that definition, almost a questioning of its value.

The quotation with which I wish to begin is from Viollet-le-Duc, the great French architect of the nineteenth century who is responsible, among other things, for so much of the "fixing up" of cathedrals and other, primarily medieval, monuments of France. It goes as follows: "Faites que nous puissionsoublier tout ce qui fut fait avant nous. Alors nousaurons un art neuf, et nous aurons fait ce qui ne s'est jamaisvu; car s'il est difficile à l'homme d'apprendre, il lui est biendifficile d'oublier." ("Make it so that we can forget everything done before us. We would have then a new art, and we would have accomplished something never done before; for, while it is difficult for man to learn, it is even more difficult for him to forget.") Let us not worry about what would have led an architect who had spent a lifetime restoring older and partly ruined monuments to write such an invitation to forgetfulness. The key issue of this statement is its logic: something new can come only out of forgetting, not merely ignoring, the past. To put it in terms of this conference, development cannot be matched with tradition; they exclude each other.

The specific political passions and positions which exist around the religious holiness of Jerusalem and the legal problems of some of the lands occupied by Israel make this particular example seem absurd, almost an attack on propriety. Yet, when the king of Saudi Arabia offered as a Muslim and as the protector of the Holy Places (Mekkah and Medinah) to pay for repairs needed on the Dome of the Rock, the king of Jordan argued that it was a Jordanian problem, because Jerusalem had been held by Jordan, even though this annexation had not, any more than the present Israeli one, been recognized by the international legal system. And a very similar story could be spun around the Christian communities and the Holy Sepulchre, where the issue is less directly one of countries, but rather of various and warring Christian communities. India is witnessing comparable incidents and arguments over monuments on its territory with unfortunately tragic consequences as two communities clash to decide whether a mosque which had been a Hindu temple would remain a mosque in new social configurations once the state is no longer Muslim.

But let us try to think the Jerusalem case (or any other one) through dispassionately. What each one of the contributors to my story—the Israeli architect or the kings of Saudi Arabia and of Jordan—says is quite simple. A land comes with whatever is on it, and whoever rules or governs that land becomes responsible for all that is on it, because, temporarily or permanently, he or she owns it. But, at the same time, there are relationships to spots on earth that are independent of the ownership or the rule of land. All people who profess a certain belief, or who descend from a land, may have acquired, or earned, a right of say to that land or to whatever is on it; successful, comic or tragic examples of the consequences of these possibilities and expectations abound at the moment in eastern Europe, western and southern Asia, and Africa.

Here is another example of a somewhat different kind. In years past much fun was had at the expense of Turkish authorities who claimed that the Turks had descended from the Hittites, who built their huge cities and palaces on the Anatolian plateau two millennia before the arrival of any Turk. But, seen as a pedagogical device rather than as an intellectual or historical position, this nationalist and intellectually untenable claim helped preserve Hittite antiquities and create a first-rate Turkish school of archaeologists dealing with the Hittite past. By contrast, the same argument for appropriating what is on one's territory as one's own did not create many Turkish specialists of Armenian art, even though many Armenian monuments remain on Turkish territory. And, while European and American archaeologists worked diligently on classical pagan and Byzantine remains, their right to do so was not determined by their Christian beliefs or allegiances. Nor
Similarly, it is a British collection of eccentrics that gathers Stonehenge, as though they had something in common with the construction of all works of art with the representations of kings. These examples show that the appropriation of the past is selective and affected by ideological purposes, even though positive appropriation has led to significant informative results.

These examples, which can easily be multiplied in many different places and from many different times, lead to the following conclusions. Every space contains a physically definable past of buildings and memories of past buildings, and, even when a settlement occurs in hitherto unutilized space, the men and women who plan it and who live in it possess their own memories of buildings. This conglomerate of a physical presence with memories attached to it and the memories of buildings elsewhere brought by new settlers is the fabric of what tradition is. Its central feature lies in that it is not simply a set of forms or of rules dealing directly with buildings, but also the historical memories and the myths attached to these buildings or to the act of building in general. The result is that all building activities and all the results of building contribute to the makeup of a tradition, of a history — that is to say, of images, habits, expectations and judgements.

Let me address each of these terms in turn. First, there are the images of places that figured in one's own growth. A key variable here is the lag between those places which formed memories and those where one's life actually developed. For example, the whole population of Cairo can be divided between those whose memories are of the houses of small villages in the Nile Valley and those who belong to the by-now six or seven generations of urban dwellers who have grown up in apartments. Only a small elite actually are aware of that type of courtyard house which is generally considered to be typical of Egypt. Collectively held images are of public spaces — mosques, churches, schools, shopping streets, and (now) superhighways and stadiums. How these images function and how they operate on the making of new settlements is an issue for psychologists of architecture to study.

Habits are also relatively unstudied, largely because too many aspects of life have been radically changed over the past two or three decades. In urban areas, first rapid (even if crowded) transit and the printed press, then radios, telephones, television, centralized shopping, and the enormous paraphernalia of electronic machineries for consumption — not to speak of schools and military service — have altered and are still altering habits of life and operating memories in ways which transform emotions and desires into expectations. This brings me to my third aspect of tradition. Almost
everywhere in the world, advertising and other means of selling and of communicating (television programs and newspaper stories included) have transformed people into buyers of dreams. We imagine ourselves in the commodities — houses, clothes, airplanes — or with the instruments — automobiles, Cuisinarts, computers, telephones — that are shown to us, rather than that are part of the reality we can afford or even hope for. The point is that expectation is never (or almost never) of something that was, but of something that may be. We are all destined to have our expectations constantly built up and renewed by forces other than ourselves, and we are relatively rarely affected by history and tradition.

Finally, a tradition means judgement. And therein lies its most dubious or, at least, delicate side. What I mean by judgement is the possibility of choosing what will be kept of the past and what will not, what will be accepted as one’s own and what will be rejected as alien, what will be handled as a treasure and what will be left to rot away.

The first issue here is to determine the criteria by which judgements will be passed. These could be aesthetic criteria, but everyone knows that no group will ever agree unanimously on an aesthetic decision. They could be criteria of potential use in the contemporary world, and most people know of so many schemes that tried to incorporate the remains of the past into the fabric of contemporary living (sometimes successfully as in the Place des Vosges in Paris, but so often inadequately as in most western Asian examples known to me outside Istanbul). They could be historical criteria, either examples of the history of a land or universal achievements of human creativity, as happened with the long list of monuments which became enshrined in a UNESCO document. Or they could be economic criteria, especially in relationship to tourism, and many have heard the complaint that the Egyptian government was more generous in helping the discovery and preservation of monuments from ancient Egypt than those of its living Muslim or Christian worlds, because Tutankhamon sells and medieval Cairo does not. In other words, considerations that have nothing or little to do with the needs of a tradition are used to maintain one world but not others. There can be political criteria, as happened somewhat during the imperial regime of Iran and as certainly characterizes, or characterized, much of the amazing public art of Iraq in recent years, not to speak of sculptures elsewhere. In a similar vein, an enormous investment was made by Soviet authorities in the elaboration of traditions in the Central Asian republics, so that now, with independence, there is credible internal agreement on certain traditions, which are often unclear to outsiders, and are of dubious merit to historians.

A SHARED PATRIMONY

What these examples and considerations lead to can be summarized in the following manner. Under the terms “tradition” or “history” lie many different themes ranging from political, ideological and religious wills imposed on people and on lands, all the way to the concern of travelers and aesthetes for the preservation of certain monuments important to them, and perhaps reasonably considered as a part of mankind’s inheritance and, therefore, responsibility.

And this leads in turn to an idea which may be particularly appropriate in the context of the work of architects and planners. Over the past years much has been said, at times even done, certainly thought, to relieve the burdens of life on the masses of the world. Some of it has even been said or done in the name of high religious and humanitarian principles. And always, whatever broad and universal doctrine was being proclaimed, the key was to find the appropriate ways in which the doctrine could be adapted to some local situation, taking into consideration the constraints of each place. But it is clear from the examples I have given that local considerations are not the only ones: that dreams and expectations can come from far away, and highly local monuments and even living or pious compounds can be major attractions of the whole world. Is it then appropriate to imagine that built environments and monuments have rights of their own, that the mosque of Visoko in Bosnia (FIG. 3) or Louis Khan’s Parliament Building
in Dhakka cannot be considered as simply fulfilling local needs? They belong to the whole world and must be protected even from those who are technically their guardians. Just as there is a morality of human rights, there may as well be a morality of man’s building art. Crafts and paintings or sculptures are better (or at least legally) protected in ways absent from architecture, because museums can keep things without showing them. To my knowledge at least, most of what has been done so far, in terms of international legislation or proclamation, has dealt with technologies of preservation and restoration. But a full consciousness of what tradition is may well require that we go beyond restoration and identify the moral norms which should regulate our concerns for the built environment.

Let me move a step further. To argue for a bill of rights for human creation is to say that there is a system of value for the traditions of mankind which argues that these traditions have no nationality, no regional meaning, that they belong to all men and women. But is this not contradicted by the whole experience of men and of the governments who want to nationalize monuments and environments, who want to preserve the right to keep them or to modify them, possibly to destroy them? A universalism of the environment may be contradicted by our own experience and our own habit of blithely identifying things as “French” or “Japanese,” “Peruvian” or “Chilean,” “Somalian” or “Ethiopian.” But, then, if architecture is not “French” or “Somalian,” is it only “living settlements” or “religious”? If it is both, where does the quality of “religious” or of “French” lie? In monuments which would thereby have acquired national characteristics, or in the people using these monuments or looking at them? The Eiffel Tower is not French, but anyone looking at it thinks that it is and makes it so. It is people, not settlements or monuments, that need traditions, because it is through a real or fictitious relationship to half-forgotten and largely misunderstood pasts that one recognizes oneself.

Let me conclude with two points for further reflection and with one question. The first point is that history seen as tradition (as opposed to the history of the historian) consists of choices made by men and society at many moments of growth and development. There are many reasons for these choices, and I have discussed some of them. But the main issue is that traditions are contradictory and vary enormously depending on the person or group that enunciates them. They are not sustained by the forces which formed them. Hence, the suggestion of a bill of rights for the manmade environment would, at least, assure preservation in documents if such preservation is impossible in fact. One must recognize that most things made by man will die in their physical appearance, but that they can be allowed to die in dignity, and that they can be remembered and recalled when needed.

The second point is that it is tradition which allows one to judge things made according to ethical and not only functional standards. A problem to work out for further reflection is how these judgements are actually made.

And this leads me to my question. This paper requests that groups of professionals, or indeed any group of men and women, become aware of the choices, at times between incompatibles, that are required of growth and of the effective use of traditions. Who is going to make these choices? Who should? Politicians, professionals, historians, cities, local inhabitants, a nation, all of mankind? Each group has a reasonable stake in the environment, but all cannot be involved in decision making. We all know the ways in which bad decisions are made. Is there a way for good ones?

REFERENCE NOTES
2. Ibid, p.46.