

# Preface

## **Cultural sustainability: handle with care**

The concept of cultural sustainability is relatively young: it first appeared in 1987 in the seminal Brundtland Report commissioned by the UN. The title of the Report, *Our common future* already contained a combination of apocalyptic vision and encouraging suasion that would characterise the discussion on cultural preservation for the coming decades. It was the extension of a concept (and the related worries) framed for the growth of world population in 1798 by Thomas Malthus, and focused upon the expected clash between the economy and the environment in 1969 by thirty-three African Countries: the *National Environmental Policy Act* defined sustainable development as «economic development that may have benefits for current and future generations without harming the planet's resources or biological organisms». It already contains the uncomfortable mix of fear and hope, transforming a technical concept into a sentimental urgency. Replicating the legitimate obsession of the debate on sustainability for future generations, the Brundtland verb ends up reducing the concept itself of sustainability to a dimensional issue.

This reveals the different degree of urgency that the debate on culture and society attaches to the various layers of sustainability. In such a philosophical framework dominated by a skeptical view of society, the main threat that cultural heritage faces is related to its physical decay and the eventual risk of extinction: cultural heritage is fragile by nature; moreover, it is surrounded by a barbarian society whose practices can irreversibly harm it. Actually, despite some really fragile artworks and cultural manufactures like the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* by Mantegna or some Greek Theatre in the Mediterranean basin, substantially cultural heritage is reasonably solid and durable. And, despite the commonplace view according to which many barbarians are ready to destroy artworks, we should highlight that often it was the cultivated (or simply powerful) milieu to weaken cultural heritage, breaking the male sexual organs and whitening the ancient statues, taking the marbles from the Coliseum to build baroque façades, stealing artworks from weak Countries to pretend that they were witnesses of our imaginary past.

Once we focus upon the forced emphasis on the presumed vocational decay and neglect of cultural heritage, sustainability takes a further dramatic feature, related to its financial dynamics. Not occasionally, the Brundtland call to awareness was crafted in a period when public budget started to appear constrained and not unlimited, how it might have seemed until the Eighties. The flow of privatisations, the growing weight of the Chicago economics, the policy orientations of the Reagan-Thatcher approach contributed to drag the cultural system and its conventional interpretation in less granted dynamics. In those years the postgraduate courses in cultural economics and management started to flourish. This ended up shifting the main focus of sustainability on its financial layer, starting a lively and intensive discussion on how museums, theatres and archaeological sites could strengthen their budgets adding commercial challenges such as restaurants, merchandising, sometimes seductive temporary exhibitions, to their core activity which remained structured as it had been for two centuries. Focusing upon financial issues, the quest for sustainability generated a bias in the interpretation of the cultural value chain, due to the separation between the semantic factors (which also include the setup of cultur-

al supply) on one hand, and the financial dynamics whose effectiveness was related to special effects aimed at attracting an audience incorrectly believed superficial and hasty, on the other hand.

### **Stones for clones**

Connecting the apocalyptic view of material sustainability with the mechanical view of financial sustainability, cultural heritage has been managed invariably for two centuries: its shapes and formats had been crafted as justifications for the power of the emerging bourgeoisie, and after more than two hundred years they were no more able to establish a dialogue with contemporary society.

This depends upon the conventional view according to which past society was more cultivated and civilised, simply forgetting that the affluent layer of society was a minority, but it had the power and the privilege of writing history; the rest of society was simply invisible. Now, if the shared perception is still that cultivated people know everything, and that the others have no tools enabling them to interpret cultural contents, we just need to preserve the material shape of cultural heritage, in order for future generations to receive it whole and unreduced. We keep stones physically safe, and transmit their material integrity to clones: a homogeneous and static audience. In such a simplistic framework, our obvious worry is both material and financial. In the institutional setting where public budgets are no more unlimited and unconstrained, we just need to attract paying visitors and possibly some corporate sponsor.

This interpretation ignores many factors that could shed light on cultural heritage as a unique source of value in a changing economic, social and cultural paradigm in which the acknowledgement of the self as member of an elitist club is gradually disappearing and being replaced by the desire for exploration and discovery. In such a framework, the cultural value chain is generated by the semantic cauldron guarded and displayed in each component of cultural heritage (art-works, manufactures, remains, ruins, etc.). Once this value is recognised, shared and diffused, society proves ready and eager to maintain it alive and possibly eloquent, in order for next generations to receive much more than the mere material shape of objects. Physical sustainability is quite normal, financial sustainability often proves redundant.

What cultural heritage needs is cognitive sustainability: the technical knowledge and the critical interpretation aimed at extracting the value of cultural heritage in connection to its historical and social dynamics, its symbolic, political and sometimes ethical meaning, its technological features, its connections with its spirit of time. When Bizet steals *Carmen* from Merimée the battle of Sedan has been already lost, the Commune de Paris already experienced, and staging a prostitute and a serial killer would relieve the audience from its troubles; simply watching a cigar maker and an oedipal brigadier the audience cannot enjoy any discounts: the contradictions, gender conflict, and violence belong to the society where the audience comes from. Not occasionally, in the same years Eugène Delacroix starts to paint sea views, adopting the uncertain dioptré that will craft the glossary of the Impressionists. To next generations we can transmit an indefinite and self-fueling cultural value chain.

### **Cubes vs. trails**

The centrality of cognitive sustainability does not imply any reductions of our attention for the material and the financial layers through which sustainability can be effectively pursued. It only requires a new map of urgencies, and a clear definition of the value chain, in order for the ethical bias to be possibly avoided: the discussions on the cultural system (from market dynamics to policy design) normally tend to overemphasize presumed spiritual factors affecting both managerial choices and consumer practices; such an interpretation reveals the improper combination of the ownership of an hermetic glossary on one hand, and the evident inferiority complex towards industry on the other. The cultural system conceives itself as a special area where only technicians can evaluate and decide, and at the same time as an ordinary sector where monetary metrics prevail upon any other possible indicators of health, consistency and perspective.

The analysis of sustainability can lead us to avoid the drifts of specialty and normality as the opposite sides of our troubled waters, a sort of Scylla and Charybdis between which cultural heritage struggles to grant itself a difficult and precarious equilibrium. Values need a dry and precise definition. In such a less poignant framework, material sustainability remains crucial, but it can be simply

faced and pursued through the technical acknowledgement – and regular control – of the degree of frailty and risk of each single artwork, manufacture, remain and ruin. Specific and effective interventions can grant appropriate and consistent safeguard, thus eliminating the feared risk of decay and extinction. On the opposite side, financial sustainability has evidently suffered the typical capitalistic bias of identifying value with money. Certainly, sound budgets are a comfortable symptom of solidity, but it could be reductive to consider them the main signal of success.

Although the dimension of revenues is an eloquent proxy of the scope for action, to focus upon it ends up inducing heritage management to pursue wide audiences also relying on the attractive power of blockbuster icons such as Impressionists, van Gogh, Klimt and the few that might appear familiar to whoever; the danger dwells in the frequent strangeness between these iconic traps on one hand, and the cultural identity of museum collections and identity on the other. Within a strategic orientation, audience's dimensions are much less important than the length of the visit, the inclination to come back, the willingness of bringing newcomers and widely share the cultural experience, the desire to participate more intensively to heritage life. This range of goals manages to establish systematic, interactive and motivated relationships between heritage and society, gradually transforming occasional newcomers into habitual visitors and eventually addicted consumers. This can grant a progressive growth in the degree of sustainability, fully respecting the *core business* of heritage: to generate value, to establish relationships, to activate critical thoughts.

In such a simple framework, the value chain is activated by the semantic eloquence of heritage, which requires a technical and critical analysis of the exhibition glossary. The still dominating format of a decorated white cube clearly proves obsolete: it is related to the taxonomic and hierarchical approach of the Nineteenth-century society, whose prominent members were worried to wash their dirty conscience as exploiters of the new manufacturing slavery; this is why culture was adopted as the symptom of ethical values, being given the burden of theatrically counterbalancing the emerging inequalities. Critical voices highlighted quite soon that such a format

made museums like cemeteries, also due to the ritual practices of visit, where position, movements, words and silences still are conventionally dosed. The critical exploration of contemporary society requires trails, rather than a static list of objects hanging on the wall.

### **Subjective discoveries**

Cultural value chain arises (and gets energy) from the semantic effectiveness of heritage. This does not require any special effort on the part of cultural institutions, although the current view is oriented towards pro-active projects aimed at attracting the audience. This is generated by many commonplace misunderstandings: visits do not generate value with no prior knowledge; society is ignorant and indifferent; museums (and conventional cultural venues) are the only ones able to transmit cultural values. Actually, museums and cultural sites are simply stubborn in expecting society to adapt to a glossary firmly sculpted on bronze. Cultural values are taught, imposed, at best suggested, but almost never conveyed in a dialogic exchange. This violates the fundamentals of cultural demand, whose thread is crafted establishing semantic connections among the experiences carried out, like in an indefinite neural network whose dynamics recall the library described by Jorge Luis Borges: books talk to each other in an unpredictable, often mysterious way, and only experiencing it we can get value from this magmatic cross-fertilisation.

The subjectivity of appraisal and appreciation leads us to a crucial point, within the dilemmas related to value – and therefore sustainability – of cultural experience.

While in the Nineteenth- (and Twentieth-) century society among the main motivations for museum visits often was the urgency of self-assessment as members of an elitist club, the turn of the Millennium, along with the gradual fading of serial manufacturing dogmas and the symmetrical rise of accessible technology able to expand the emotional, cognitive and intellectual spectrum, highlighted a radically different orientation of the audience: visitors enter because they do not know what they will discover; of course, they might have some prior information about artworks, but they cannot (*rectius*: do not want to) predict their reaction, and consequentially the value that they will attribute to the experience itself.

This is something that they will be able to do only at the end of the visit. A sound extraction of their willingness-to-pay can occur after the cultural experience, due to the cross-fertilisation of previous visits, along with readings, discussions, within a versatile and multi-disciplinary framework.

In such a respect, the design of museum trails proves central for effectively and consistently pursuing sustainability, whose main value is related to the scope of strategic projects that cultural institutions can carry out, without being subject to the tight and rigid constraints they should face in a non-sustainable situation. Subjective discoveries require narrative connections between temporary exhibitions and permanent collections, possibly relying upon deposits to extract otherwise invisible artworks and manufactures. Furthermore, the cultural discourse aimed at optimising the perception of value on the part of a widely heterogeneous audience would be fueled and enriched activating a sort of tentacular network with cultural institutions located in the urban fabric, in order for visibility and dialogic ability to be clearly perceived by both residents and voyagers. This would imply a new interpretation of museums' endowment, no more as exclusive property, but as common heritage whose adoption, exhibition but also research and interpretation would strongly benefit from shared projects and joint action. Sustainability cannot be interpreted as the static dimension of heritage to be kept safe (implicitly dramatising danger, enemies, indifference), but as a dynamic process whose flow of knowledge and critical interpretation is being systematically enriched, in order to grant present value and future enjoyment.

### **Hybrid stumbles**

The evolution of cultural value, activated through the passage between the late-industrial framework and the emerging economic, social and cultural paradigm, has been dramatised in the pandemic years, when the attempt at indefinitely delaying the acknowledgment of a radical mutation was vertically cut by the awareness that our relationship with space and time had irreversibly changed. It is time to rethink many consolidated dogmas, among which the heaviest – and probably the least justified – states that «art must not be de-contextualised». If this is the shared principle, no museum

could be accepted, being the most violent and evident form of de-contextualisation of art: even without diving into controversies such as the Elgin marbles' dilemma, the exhibited artworks forming museums' endowment were neither conceived nor crafted to end hanging on a wall, together with often stranger artworks along a didactic (and pedantic) timeline.

After all, the pandemic break induced the less dogmatic institutions to experiment innovative methods and tools aimed at facilitating and enhancing real interactivity, subjectivity of trails and exchanges, all based upon versatility and multi-disciplinarity of offer.

Such an unconventional approach radically re-designed the functions themselves of a museum as a complex process aimed at flexible dialogues with a heterogeneous and hopefully evolving audience.

In the cultural value chain, *for all* means *for each*. What we need is to reshape the glossary of cultural dialogue. The many varied attempts at combining the conventional description/explanation with some sensorial involvement might risk spoiling both factors, since each of them proves inadequate to establishing a multidimensional exchange with each visitor. Interaction does not mean theatricalisation, but width of the cultural discourse aimed at inviting and allowing each visitor to select and experience the layers and stages of the exchange in order for her/him to get the maximum benefit from the visit, in such a way actively contributing to sustainability: the dialogic value, based upon the semantic effectiveness of heritage, generates a dense financial fallout. This implies that monetary outcomes are not a goal, but simply the effect of cultural appraisal and appreciation.

A further reflection is related to the possible contribution of AI to sustainability. In such a respect, it could be somehow dangerous to associate the pursuit of sustainability to the (already) conventional algorithm aimed at tuning future choices to the past ones, in such a way encouraging a process of specialisation of each visitor through the accumulation of homologous works, styles and genres.

Looking at the issue from a non-prejudicial perspective, we should consider that versatility, exploration, discovery and surprise actually lead each visitor to perceive growingly intensive desires, which is eventually reflected in a wider demand. Within this framework, the adoption of AI as a stumbling tool simply pictures what we all do in



a bookshop, buying more and more varied books than the one(s) we came in for: a suggested algorithm should aim at displacing visitors, pushing each of them towards unpredictable, and in any case different, areas and languages, responding to her/his expectation of exploring and discovering further layers and stages of her/his cultural endowment and therefore to her/his critical interpretation. The cultural value chain passes through random access elaborations as well as hypertextual explorations. It is consolidated by shared experiences and systematic enrichment. Sustainable is a community whose solidity is favoured by creative processes and their impact upon social capital. Symmetrically, active communities intensify and share creative intuitions, critical interpretations, and managerial challenges, in such a way strengthening the pursuit of sustainability.

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**Tools for Culture**