

Cultural heritage in time of coronavirus

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Let time pass and we'll see what it brings
Gabriel García Márquez
Love in the time of cholera

Last March 11, two days before coronavirus cases began to be detected in Uruguay, I was in Paris, ending my participation in one of the annual meetings of the ICOMOS Board of Directors. My plans were to stay in Madrid one more week to enjoy my usual cultural tours before undertaking the long return to the Río de la Plata. While Paris was still a stranger, that noon a colleague alerted me that schools in Spain were being closed, as well as a number of public places.

I was immediately able to recall all the walking and subway rides I had taken in Paris in the past week, and I was concerned. Fear seized me and all I could do was connect with my travel agency to plan my early departure from the old continent. Fact that happened the next day.

Once I arrived in Montevideo, I fulfilled my mandatory quarantine. Days later I was informed that this Spanish colleague and another Australian colleague had coronavirus. It is indisputable that 2020 will be remembered as the year of the COVID 19 pandemic.

Since the social distancing of more than a month and as a reminder of the International Day of Monuments and Sites celebrated on April 18 last, I would like to share some reflections on cultural heritage in times of coronavirus.

To go through these reflections, I will mention three axes of the narrative: from a social, a cultural dimension and finally a possible projection to think about the inevitable day after.

1. Social uncertainties

Pandemics and pests are not alien to the history of humanity. Only this occurs in a 21st century, at a time when we felt almost omnipotent and rediscovered that we are biologically connected.

These new times reveal radical health, social, cultural, economic and political uncertainties that, as Yuval Noah Harari (1), one of the most provocative contemporary intellectuals, the real capacity of citizen empowerment is put to the test.

And what does this citizen empowerment consist of?

It is the ability to choose that we have when we have accurate information, in scenarios of trust fostered by both health and political authorities. This confidence, according to Harari, is evident when seeking to string together ties that support the community.

Likewise, we are increasingly witnessing the phenomenon of a centrality of the states and their control devices that come into play to measure body temperature and medical condition, through important security controls in public places. This is what Harari calls "totalitarian surveillance". For the first time in history, governments today have the ability to monitor their entire population at the same time and in real time, increased control, "subcutaneous surveillance" to stop the pandemic.

We would thus be moving in a sort of loop between the free choice of the citizen and the extreme vigilance on the part of the State, recalling George Orwell in "1984".

However, we are witnessing differences in state policies. According to the Korean philosopher and essayist Byung-Chul Han (2): "Asians are fighting the virus with rigor and discipline that is inconceivable to Europeans. Surveillance focuses on each person individually, and this is the main difference from the European strategy. The rigorous Asian procedures are reminiscent of those disciplinary measures taken in seventeenth-century Europe to combat the plague epidemic." (Interview in Diario Clarín 04/17/20)

Harari in his recent opinion column in the Financial Times of March 20, 2020, titled What the World Will Be Like After the Coronavirus, mentions another option we are facing. This would be delimited between nationalist isolation and global solidarity. Although these scenarios are dynamic and changing at other accelerated rates, the author warns that the emergency measures that are being adopted will have to be established as fixed routines. Social distancing in a way has changed the forms of work that have been transformed in a month more than in recent years.

We can ask ourselves how these new ways of working from home are changing our customs. How do these remote communications influence our social relationships?

2. Emerging cultural realities

From a cultural dimension, it would be interesting to explore how monuments and sites are being cared for and preserved not only locally or nationally, but across the globe. How are all those who, in one way or another, work to conserve these assets? How many lives of cultural heritage workers and professionals has this pandemic taken away? And if we think about intangible heritage, we could ask ourselves how cultural traditions and ways of life are being affected and changed by the new sanitary provisions. In these days, moving photographs of empty heritage sites have circulated, silent witnesses of this pandemic that seem to say: we are still here.

At a time when the value of human life is in frank danger and the priorities of governments are placed on health and food needs, the cultural and artistic manifestations have been postponed. However life goes on, and we can count on a pleiad offers ranging from national to world museums, which invite us to visit them

virtually, as well as to enjoy excellent plays or famous operas from the secure enclosure of our houses.

What place then, would cultural heritage occupy at this juncture? How would the three essential pillars of heritage be addressed without leaving home: i) protection, ii) conservation and iii) dissemination?

We can think about the immediate and long-term impact of the pandemic in relation to the livelihoods of communities and their cultural heritage and also reflect on the vulnerability of people who are dependent on tourism linked to cultural heritage and World Heritage sites.

Furthermore, the coronavirus constitutes a threat to the enjoyment of our cultural landscapes and to the rights and personal safety of those who live and work in them.

Humanity faces a historic challenge: do we adopt the path of global solidarity or disunity that will only prolong the crisis? Harari points out that we need a spirit of cooperation and trust and warns us that both the epidemic and the resulting economic crisis are global and could only be resolved with global cooperation. To defeat the pandemic we must then share information globally and this is the great advantage of humans over microorganisms.

From ICOMOS, the international working group OCDI –RBA on approaches to human rights and cultural heritage (3), of which I am a member, warns that this pandemic may expose the fragility of heritage communities and requests governments to take into account the necessary supports to ensure your dignity, as well as your sustainability.

Likewise, this working group emphasizes the need to strengthen the cultural heritage values and human rights of the communities by offering collaboration, encouraging creativity and resilience in terms of empathy.

3. The new normal

Finally, I would like to reflect on the day after or the new normal. One thing is certain: we will not be the same once mobility restrictions are lifted and borders are opened.

As the planet breathed and changed, so it will be with us. Different yes, but to what extent: solidarities, individualists, nationalists, globalizers?

Many paths and suggestions have been raised in the area of cultural heritage. In this past month, ideas have been contributed and proposals have been disseminated for the day after.

I share the example of ICOMOS Nepal (4) that offers three suggestions:

i) Continue the study of the impact of the pandemic and the resilience of communities to address local cultural heritage.

- ii) Continue the discussion about technology and access to cultural heritage through virtual tours and interactive sites.
- iii) Study in the short and medium term the economic impact of the pandemic. Relate the sustainability of cultural activities and other sectors such as tourism, local development and risk management.

To end these reflections on the occasion of the Day of Monuments and Sites in these times of pandemic, day after day I am amazed and check how cycles are closing and necessarily see how other opportunities emerge that will undoubtedly become our promising scenarios.

I endorse Harari's words:

This storm will pass. But the choices we make now could change our lives for years to come.

References

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(3) COMOS OCDI RBA working group . On the crisis of the pandemic COVID-19 Response from the ICOMOS Our Common Dignity Working Group Right Based approaches
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(4) ICOMOS Nepal 2020

Impact of Pandemics on Cultural Heritage ICOMOS Nepal contribution to discussion Shared Cultures, Shared Heritage, Shared Responsibility
International Day for Monuments and Sites, 18 April 2020