

SNIS Project final report

Mapping controversial memories in the historic urban landscape: a multidisciplinary study of Beijing, Mexico-city and Rome

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Executive Summary

1. Research plan

Within the international community, the **preservation of urban heritage is now considered to be one of the main challenges of the 21st century**. Interest in heritage is growing rapidly among experts and laymen, but new threats are emerging from conservation practices themselves (museumification and the commoditization of heritage) to larger economic, political and ecological crises. In order to meet these challenges, ways of thinking about conservation have evolved dramatically over the last decade, including holistic approaches specific to urban settings and intangible cultural heritage.

The **2011 UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (RHUL)** resulted from this process. It aims to blend the protection of monuments and archeological sites with the management of living cities and cultural landscapes. It seeks to foster integrative participatory processes that enhance tangible and intangible heritage values for the various stakeholders involved, with a focus on *subaltern* social actors more usually outside of the process, while allowing room for a more balanced management of urban planning in line with the development of cities' economic activities.

Our research aimed to contribute to a **critical reflection on the concept and implementation of the RHUL by studying heritage dynamics through memorial processes** in three capital cities, each well-known for rich historical resonance, not only in World Heritage sites but also in the built environment in general and all affected by rapid and significant transformations. The first chosen case study is a UNESCO branded historical center situated in Mexico City, the second a residential area composed of alleys and hutong near the World Heritage Forbidden City in Beijing, and the third a post-industrial neighborhood in the historical periphery of Rome. The project formulated a series of questions in keeping with the logic of our comparative approach: 1) What extent are policies regarding sustainable heritage governance implemented at the local level? 2) How did municipal or local authorities understand and apply these new developments that potentially interfere with their politics of urbanization? 3) How did they combine urban change with conservation of heritage? 4) How did they find a balance between the preservation of historic landscape and its local values and the transformation of the urban fabric without losing its economic attractiveness, functionality and livability for its inhabitants?

To explore these very important themes related to the alteration of historical areas and their relationships to the production of space affecting the transformation and disappearance of collective memory of local residents, the project based its main hypothesis on Maurice Halbwachs's *La mémoire collective*, which scrutinizes the relation between built environment

and collective memory. More than 60 years after its (posthumous) publication, we elaborated the **following research questions** arising from this seminal work:

- With which tangible and intangible references [*références mémorielles*] do local actors engage when relating to their urban landscape?
- How do collective memories evolve in the context of rapid urban change?
- What resistance and/or “compliance” strategies can be observed as reactions to potential eviction from the historic urban landscape?

The research plan focuses on **case studies that reflected an urban situation affected by fast and significant transformations in social and spatial terms**. It particularly examines the product of such interaction, which manifests through **resistant or compliant strategies** of inhabitants reacting to the changes usually driven by the property-led redevelopment in collaboration with local authorities. First, the paradoxical transformations of the Historic Center of Mexico—modern constructions that exert pressure on the traditional establishments, especially in the southwest part of the Center—and the museumification in the core zone challenged by communities of street vendors. Second, residents’ eviction for large-scale commercial projects driven by the district government of Gulou area, contested by preservationist associations alongside local populations, and third, an abandonment of urban revitalization projects in Ostiense by local authorities reinforcing the gap between residents’ interests in their neighborhood and private economic investment.

This comparative approach to the alteration of historic fabrics illustrates **heritage dynamics** defined as an on-going redefinition of conservation practices through specific memorial processes; the production, transformation and disappearance of collective memory. It also seeks to **confront and elucidate the complexity of memory** in very different cultural environments. In order to empirically observe how popular memory practices develop, not only in places that are officially recognized as being of high heritage value, but also in other types of urban settings such as social housing, local markets, streets, shops, ruins/remains, we explored how stakeholders identify with a space while, reciprocally, highlighting the role of memories in the appropriation of the built environment. To this end, the project developed an **interdisciplinary methodology based on ethnographic, geo-governance and architecture/urbanism methods**.

The research project faced a **methodological challenge**, including a risk of failure (a priori limitation of the usual “spectacular” results), related to the acquisition of empirical data or the difficulty to put diverse approaches into dialogue around a common language (moreover in English, the native language of nobody in the research team!). Considering the potential failure as heuristic, the project’s design was built on the diversity of cultural contexts, and this became its strength. The methodological position explains the focus on the **singularity of local case studies and therefore the singularity of their results** (each piece of fieldwork mobilized its own methods adapted to its cultural and political context) but also the **limits** of its findings, which is not the same as the limits of its potential, which remains rather wide after our fieldwork.

A strong, underlining, principle of our research design was a **critical reflection on the comparative approach**. The idea was to sidestep forcing comparative aspects by framing hypotheses that would eventually allow “natural” comparisons between selected fieldwork. To avoid this tautology, and to provide relevant findings for our research design, we used an **inductive approach** and postulated the **singularity of each case study that reflects geopolitical realities**. Both the project co-ordinations and local teams shared that perspective on the research process as it permitted bringing findings back to theoretical arguments, linking controversial memories and urbanization or debating on international comparative

issues. From that perspective, case studies located in Beijing or Mexico City investigated by the local team, with a strong academic approach toward the heritage dynamics, became more significant than the previous one. Led by a local non-governmental association, the local team in Rome emphasized its role as a mediator between civil society and academia in terms of networking activities with scientific institutions, professionals and local inhabitants (stakeholders).

2. Results obtained and analysis

Thanks to the SNIS financial resources, the research was carried out over 24 months. But, if 2 years is enough to start an ambitious research project like this one in regular academic practice, in any country and any geopolitical context, it is unfortunately barely enough time **to launch and carry out such research, see first results and expose obtained results, especially consolidated, empirical and theoretical outputs**. In the end, the time constraint forces researchers to act with precipitation during the last months of research, a collective stress at the time of the delivery of such results. In our view, it is important that the evaluation of these results takes into account the time constraints under which the research was carried out. We also would like to note that, according to research policy at EPFL that strongly supports the education of junior researchers, the project design comprised two PhD candidates that were the full principal members of the research. Therefore, the brevity of the research period is further reinforced (no PhD thesis is achieved in less than 4 years), and we are conscious that what we present here are mid-term results rather than final ones. Those conclusive findings will be analyzed in the writing of the two PhD theses, due in January 2019 (in accordance with the directives of our Doctoral Schools).

Despite this, during these 24 months, and in alignment with our research plan, **we reflected on theoretical frameworks nurtured by local fieldworks including workshops in the different cultural contexts**. Each local team conducted interviews and collected data using participant observation in Beijing, Mexico City and Rome. In all, about 40 interviews were conducted in Rome, more than 50 in Mexico City and 25 in Beijing. We examined narratives and practices of stakeholders involved in the local heritage dynamics through mapping of local memories linked to the built environment and analyses of successive local urban planning and domestic heritage policies. To this end, when it was possible, we launched participative workshops with inhabitants in order to fine tune our understanding of local realities and scrutinize the implementation of heritage policies within changing urban contexts with methodologies using GIS, mental map and “situationist derive”, etc. (this was not possible in China). The results we obtained allowed us to identify correspondence between the theoretical framework and our empirical data but, more importantly, a gap between the results expected at the beginning and end of the financed research in terms of the theoretical and methodological dimensions.

So far, each piece of fieldwork was conducted **autonomously** (research *in silo*) with reduced interconnections between case studies as each location reflected a singular context of the RHUL implementation. To ensure a global comprehension of raised issues across continents, regular information regarding local first findings were disseminated through workshops or conferences among the research team. Communications via Skype, WhatsApp or Wechat were also established to keep members updated regarding data or analysis of specific case studies. Based on the results and analyses of three singular cases study, we propose a first analysis (see annex 1) based on empirical findings in Beijing, Mexico City and Rome (see annexes 2, 3 and 4).

Methodological results

Mapping the controversies in the complex domain of Collective Memories in urban context, as was initially proposed, showed **limits in evidence by following our principles of interdisciplinary**. In fact, because of the methodologies of our local partners, the qualitative dimension (predominantly based on ethnographic methods) has largely prevailed over the quantitative dimension applied by geo-governance approaches (GIS, etc.). Moreover, due to the differences of geopolitical contexts (access to data, commitment of the specialist in the field, difficulty in developing a common language that evolves over time, etc.), the results are heterogeneous (see annex 5). The result is specific local studies that are less homogeneous than was planned in the initial project.

Mexico City is the only case study where the original methodology was tested and used by the local team, thanks to the help of the GIS specialist on the ground and the expert background of the PhD candidate trained as an architect. In Mexico City, it was possible to contrast the methods of geo-referencing and Mental Maps; both can be considered complementary. The first tended to explicitly indicate the places associated with various memories. The second indicated places as part of their imaginary while giving information through speeches and descriptions. When making graphical comparisons of the results of all interviewees, both kinds of mapping produced very similar maps.

In **Rome**, the initial methodology based on geo-governance and qualitative surveys was tested at the beginning of the project on the ground (local workshop in the popular neighborhood of San Lorenzo). As the documenting process did not allow the identification of stakeholders' debates about relations between the 3D architectural models (various scales were tried), pictures and representations of local inhabitants, the initial methodology was abandoned in favor of 2D devices and technically lighter methodologies. The Roman local team then relayed this onto ethnographic methods (participative observations, interviews, walking interviews, mental maps, focus groups, etc.) for their data collection. The (relative) failure of the first test in San Lorenzo was heuristic for the research as it allowed the GIS specialist to fine tune his methodology for the international workshop in Mexico City, where it was of greater interest to local stakeholders and inhabitants involved in the project. This geo-governance approach was eventually tested with even greater success in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, as part of a bachelor's degree in the HES-SO (see annex 6).

In **Beijing**, due to the political sensitive area of Gulou which had already undergone two major highly contested projects—with significant media coverage—it was difficult to implement such a popular, participative approach. We prioritized focused interviews with ethnographic participative observation of the selected zone. During the summer of 2015, the project benefited from a master's thesis undertaken by an Italian student engaging in an exchange program between PoliTO and EPFL (Anna Pagani, *Hutongs-Transformations: A Battle between memories*, under the supervision of F. Graezer Bideau and M. Bonino). The Chinese local team also used virtual maps produced on a website by local preservationist associations (see annex 2). The violence of recent evictions prevented easy access to relocated residents who did not want to discuss the recent, traumatic past. This sensitive situation also affected the Chinese scholars of Tsinghua University who launched participative research in the closed area of Qianmen, that refused to join the September 2015 local workshop in Beijing. A year later, other discussions based on the participative approach were organized by one of our local contact Sinapolis, in the frame of “Urbanitis Forum”.

These different results demonstrate the difficulty of developing a unified methodological protocol that requires adapted and continuous training with researchers (see annex 5).

Theoretical results:

Combining the conceptual frameworks of heritage, collective memories and controversies was an ambitious task, nurtured by empirical research findings and methodological approaches. In the practice of fieldwork, we discovered that the **topic of UNESCO instruments was not on the local agenda**. Issues at stake for Beijing, Mexico City and Rome lay rather in the management of the built environment (privatization of archaeological sites, renovation of historical buildings for tourism income, etc.). Our research therefore **shifted towards ordinary, practical realities that directly solicited the attention of public authorities**. To this end, we focused first on local populations that directly faced the economic crisis in the countries in which we worked. The realities of inhabitants concerned by heritage dynamics in their changing neighborhoods are at the forefront; critical approaches to UNESCO urban programs became secondary. During the analyses of our results, these returned to the forefront as we integrated the potential and limitations of the RHUL implementation within local authorities' political agendas.

Our research project, and initial expected results, primarily focused on a theoretical and critical perspective on the RHUL implementation. In the practice of fieldwork, we soon confronted **activities of safeguarding local memories in everyday life**. As inhabitants or institutional stakeholders on the ground expressed little of their interests/opinions towards UNESCO's instruments, we have not yet reactivated a critical lecture of the heritage tool commonly used in urban setting. Our methodological "detour" through intense fieldwork did not permit time to retrace concerns related to UNESCO's directives because the daily interests we encountered were more concerned with solving practical problems (how to stay in their neighborhood with upgraded living standards). Although recent UNESCO guidelines, among other UN-agencies, have identified concrete problems faced by local inhabitants of labeled World Heritage cities have to face, so far they do not seem to affect the implementation of heritage directives. The multi-site research identified a gap between the project of RHUL implementation and its significance at the local level. In our three selected areas it revealed no correspondence of the UNESCO intention to spread a new comprehensive approach toward the conservation of historic urban landscape and the local reception of this Recommendation.

Fieldwork undertaken in Beijing, Mexico City and Rome also revealed no classical fragmentation of memories in areas that went to a *heritageization* process, as might have been expected *a priori* between official and popular, but rather a **porosity** of the memories that are continuously activated and reactivated by different social actors involved in the process. The "thickness of memory" is expressed in the imbrication of one to the other rather in radical confrontation. In Beijing, most of Gulou's inhabitants—long term, native, residents (*bendiren*), or newer residents, "foreigners" (*waidiren*) more recently settled there—wanted to leave the area for a better quality of life. Nonetheless, they remained opposed over many issues, and referred to their local memories of the past neighborhood as strategic rhetoric for higher compensation in the case of eviction (see annex 2).

Each case study also highlighted a **common practice of anecdotally reflecting on "the other urban actors"** (as in a sense of otherness as practiced/understood in cultural and social anthropological perspective) as if their actions could not be associated with real issues but rather considered as minor events. These "minor" appropriations of public spaces in the neighborhood reflected major socio and spatial change that affected all inhabitants involved in heritage dynamics. This was the case with the occupation of the old theatre in San Lorenzo by a local inhabitants association to preserve the local "spirit of liberty" (the neighborhood is well-known as the *Libera Repubblica di San Lorenzo*), which is commonly perceived as anecdotal, in comparison with the gentrification process occurring in the neighborhood or

with the performance of ‘folklorised’ native Indians on symbolic areas of the Historic Centre of Mexico City for tourism. In Beijing, the “other” was identified with non-natives of the area, who usurped local identity for commercial and tourist purposes.

A final word on the **international composition of the team and skills languages**. At the beginning of the project, we all thought we were interpreting notions in the same way, sharing common references usually in English or French, starting with Halbwachs’s notion of Collective memory publicized in the early 20th century. Conscious of this issue, it was much discussed at the kick-off meeting. However, the translation of ideas in the different languages of the project (English, French, Italian, Spanish and Chinese) made our research questions even more complex in their formulations. We rapidly faced local appropriation of these complex research questions, as experienced during the San Lorenzo workshop in Rome where there were many translations of our project, including semantic issues and theoretical approaches. On this aspect, we can say that the project contributed to the circulation of ideas and practices.

3. Practical application of results

So far, obtained results of the project, have provided an opportunity to **interact with local representatives** of important institutions related to heritage issues. For example, in Beijing we were in contact with the Chinese Academy of Cultural Heritage, in Rome with ICCROM, in Mexico City with UNESCO national offices and other municipal relays involved in historic city preservation.

These various exchanges contribute to a **RHUL visibility at the local scale**. Within all institutional limits, we were nonetheless able to raise understanding about the intangible dimension of the HUL, which defines it as much as tangible heritage. Thanks to our investigation from the ground, or from below, we also helped scrutinize the RHUL and highlighted local practices that may contest or radicalize the intangible aspect of heritage.

At the academic level, we helped **circulate urban studies and heritage studies across three continents**. Through international and local workshops, local heritage issues developed in a specific context were disseminated to another. For instance, the singular Chinese eviction situation toward inhabitants of the historic center of Beijing was of great interest to the Mexican team, as Municipal authorities did not act the same way to protect symbolic areas of the historic center of Mexico-city. Thanks to the project, the Chinese and the Mexican teams were able to link different settings. More ideas than heritage dynamics circulated among the project’s scholarly community, lessons learned in terms of interdisciplinary methods were also shared. The various geopolitical contexts of the research also highlighted the importance of including non-academics within the interdisciplinary reflection. There a real need to involve “others” in participative research if the interdisciplinary approach is to be achieved. Scholars from various academic disciplines will exchange ideas and methods, but as our research project demonstrated, each researcher from social science or architecture stays in their comfort zone without transforming their approach to the topic. It is through participative practices at the local scale that interdisciplinarity can be deconstructed and replaced by what the Anglo-saxon or German tradition calls transdisciplinarity.

4. Further explorations

Beyond the singularities of the case studies, the research was able to identify **common issues** across continents. These concern the politics of heritage; the fragmentation of the territory, borders and urban scars; the feeling of nostalgia and the recycling of memories; and

controversies related to the appropriation of public spaces that generate conflicts or negotiations. We have already started to reflect on these common issues in the book in preparation we plan to edit next winter (see annex 9).

According to UN-agencies, **cultural economy linked to heritage issues** has a benefit for all, but this requires democratic consultations. As each cultural context cannot provide such room for discussions, there is a need to negotiate about issues of public space appropriation. The progressive *heritageization* of urban spaces should preserve the everyday negotiations of public spaces. This would be a further avenue for re-interrogating the violence of dominating power embedded in such controversies. In Beijing, it would pursue the first approach among the strong opposition between native and foreign residents of Gulou, but mostly among inhabitants that moved out in the time of the eviction and those waiting for a better compensation. In Rome, it would mean going beyond the official territorial borders and mapping to question the paradoxical post-working class gentrification occurring in Ostiense, mostly led by academic institutions. In Mexico-City, it would question a surprising *heritagization* process that does not include total eviction of popular classes nor the oblivion of urban spaces linked to their memory (local markets, informal economy).

To date, the case studies have missed the opportunity to strengthen their relations to visual analysis. A deeper reflection based on the use of photography could be activated (after its abandonment in early February 2015, due to the impossibility of financing a project that could be carried on by Francesca Cerri, see kick-off meeting program in annex 7). Thanks to a mobility grant in the Martin Centre for Architectural and Urban Studies at Cambridge, this perspective will be developed in the Mexican case with a project entitled “Urban cinematics: a new visual approach to popular memory” under the direction of Prof. François Penz.

To finance the two outstanding PhD theses, the coordinators of the project aim to submit a new project to the FNS (synergia or cooperation program). This would allow them to develop **a methodology of mapping popular (or alternative) urban heritage within territories**, which will be at the intersection of local heritage, urban policies, and ordinary practices. According to the selection of complementary case studies, a methodological protocol that could be applied on more homogenous zones such as Latin America than various case studies across continents could also be fine tuned.

5. Practical and policy recommendations

Results of the SNIS project team presented at the final meeting were in line with current ideas relative to the RHUL implementation as it has been recently noted in the *Toward operationalizing UNESCO Recommendations on HUL* (ICOMOS 2016). With slight variations, according to the specificities of local contexts, they concern the empowerment of local communities, the participation management of local stakeholders, the capacity building of inhabitants involved in these urban transformations, the common good of so-called community, and the appropriation of public spaces.

UNESCO is currently launching research with the collaboration of experts in heritage such as ICOMOS (Francesco Bandarin is editing a third volume about the HUL including several case studies across continents). The research we launched two years ago about cities that are not in the scope of recent projects could be of great interest to the UN-cultural agency.

At the local scale, we may provide recommendations in the special issue of *Les Cahiers du Lasur* (to be published in Fall 2017) or the forthcoming edited book may be relevant to concerned city; it will take into account specificities of the local context. The Historic City center of Mexico City is following more heritage policies and instruments of UNESCO than

the Beijing Municipalities that conform to domestic regulations and produced local decrees with Chinese characteristics (see annexes 3 and 2). As far as Rome is concerned, the progressive privatization of the postindustrial neighborhood of Ostiense makes for complex policy recommendations.

6. Information regarding past and expected publications

All past and expected publications are indexed in annex 8. These include: the completion of two doctoral theses (due to end of December 2018); a working paper (annex 1); a special issue of the Cahiers du LaSUR in collaboration with CdH; an edited book completed for the end of 2017; and some journal papers.

7. Annexes:

Annex 1: working paper to be submitted to *International Journal of Heritage Studies* or *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable development*.

Annex 2: Report on the Gulou case study, Beijing, RPC. (Haiming Yan).

Annex 3: Report on the historic center of Mexico City, Mexico. (Martha de Alba).

Annex 4: Report on Ostiense, Italy. (EtiCity).

Annex 5: Report on Mapping and spatial approaches: from design to implementation (Jean-Christophe Loubier).

Annex 6: Bachelor thesis on Santo-Domingo, Dominican Republic (Gala Mayí-Miranda).

Annex 7: Programs of workshops organized in the SNIS framework.

Annex 8. Overview of the research dissemination (e.g. conferences, publications, teaching, etc.) between 2015 and 2017.

Annex 9: Table of content of the edited book (in preparation).