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# Identitary Role of Design in the Context of Heritage Interpretation

**ABSTRACT:** The contribution discusses the importance of design as a key factor in the presentation and communication of identity in the field of cultural heritage reuse. It exposes the role of design as an inseparable part of the interpretive process, which can make a key contribution to the inclusivity, experience and acceptance of a heritage object in its original social environment. The author argues that with the help of design it is possible to achieve unique products or create experiences with a strong identity message, which serve as a link between the past and the present and guide the preservation of heritage for the future. The concepts of heritage environment, context and heritage values are defined. Furthermore, the article discusses the possibility of values being exposed, re-evaluated or neglected through design approaches.

In order to better understand the role and effectiveness of numerous aspects of design in the practice of interpretation, the methodological approach is multidisciplinary and is based on heritology and hermeneutics. It comprises the deductive method, which consists of the study and analysis of fundamental literature from fields that range from heritology, museology, sociology, architecture and design. Additionally, a qualitative research method is based on the analysis of case-studies.

The paper addresses the ethical issue of the neglect of design practice in the area in question. It also highlights the criticism of the heritage industry and the associated issue of commercialization, and concludes with a thought about the meaning of material design in the context of the non-material conception of heritage phenomena.

**Keywords:** Heritage; Heritage Design; Identity Design; Heritage Interpretation; Inclusion

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## 1 Introduction – Designing in Heritage Contexts

Design interventions in the heritage environment can be key to raising awareness about the importance of preserving and protecting heritage as a quality of life in the area of origin. When designing for heritage or within heritage frameworks, it is therefore crucial to understand the contextual importance of heritage as a value for the communities to which a certain intervention relates and affects them in one way or another. The possibilities and challenges brought by various design interventions in the heritage context are also in the foreground.

Experts – especially architects and designers working in the field of heritage – should approach what are often very challenging situations by considering how a certain intervention can contribute to the meaning of (cultural) heritage. In recent decades, design interventions in the heritage environment have gained great importance and recognition among the public, which also applies to the field of contemporary architecture and design (Meurs 2016, 11).

The article aims to explore and emphasize the critical role of design in the reuse of cultural heritage, particularly how design contributes to the presentation, interpretation, and communication of identity within heritage contexts (Kuipers 2017, 65–69). It investigates how design can enhance the inclusion, experience, and acceptance of heritage objects, enabling them to serve as meaningful bridges between the past and the present. Furthermore, the article discusses how design can influence the exposure, re-evaluation or neglect of heritage values, thereby shaping the way heritage is perceived and preserved for the future.

### 1.1 Heritage Environment, Heritage Place, Heritage Site

Heritage includes aspects of the environment that arise from the mutual influence between people and space over time, where it is a matter of a broader understanding of spatial entities and the values of the cultural environment. When we talk about design in the context of heritage, we usually mean built or urban heritage that has a special cultural value for a nation that is preserved, maintained and restored under special conditions, as defined by the Cultural Heritage Protection Act (Cultural Heritage Protection Regulations – ZVKDS 2024). As for international policy, sever-

al legally binding international conventions have been adopted under the auspices of UNESCO and other organizations to ensure the safeguarding of both tangible and intangible heritage (starting from the 1954 Hague Convention, to 1970 UNESCO Convention, as well as The 1972 World Heritage Convention, the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, among others). These international conventions collectively form the foundation of a legal and ethical framework for the protection of cultural heritage, as they reflect the growing recognition of heritage as a public good that contributes to identity, social cohesion, and sustainable development. All of this creates a heritage environment (heritage place / heritage site) that gives a certain character to cities, places, areas, individual buildings or parts thereof and landscapes. Heritage environments or individual elements are designated for their social, cultural, historical, aesthetic, indigenous or scientific significance, as well as for their representative value or rarity (Government Architect New South Wales, Heritage Council of NSW 2018, 14) – or as a combination of the above.

### 1.2 Values in Heritage

The values that individuals or groups attribute to the heritage environment or its individual elements are the reason why a certain cultural landscape can be defined as heritage (Smith 2006, 13). Heritage values are the qualities that we attribute to heritage and that give meaning to heritage phenomena. The significance of heritage is the sum of all the values attributed to an individual place or area of heritage (Pirkovič 2022, 51). The meaning of heritage values, which each culture can understand in its own way, can change, especially in the context of time (Smith 2006; Harrison 2012; Waterton and Watson 2015).

The values of a particular heritage environment (towns, buildings or objects) are linked to its cultural significance, which is a combination of historical, symbolic, spiritual, aesthetic and social values, as perceived by past, present and future generations. This definition is best known because of the influential Burra Charter, first adopted in 1979 by ICOMOS Australia (Australia ICOMOS 2013). The term ‘values’ is used in the sense of positive qualities or qualities attributed to stakeholders, rather than in the sense of ethics or beliefs.

Historical value lies in the historical character and cultural content that provide a connection to the past and a sense of continuity. The symbolic meaning and power of certain places and objects contribute to people's cultural identity. The spiritual value of a place or object can encourage insight into the meaning of religious, sacred and spiritual practices and experiences. The aesthetic quality of a cultural object is also an important element that can inspire new artistic creativity. The social value of place enables connection with others, and a shared social experience (e.g. 'pride of place') can help promote local values (Pirkovič 2023, 66) and social cohesion (Sable and Kling 2001; Throsby 2001, 84–85).

## 2 Identity through Cultural Expression

As mentioned above, the formation of identities takes place through the active definition of values. The concept of identity, is at its most basic, defined as something that makes a certain entity recognizable due to qualities and characteristics that bring it together or diversify it from other entities. It could be defined as the encounter of an individuum, a single person, a group, and a culture. Cultural identity therefore extends the concept of identity from individual to the community and represents a place for creating bonds that are defined in common recognition in local references. According to the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity identity is the foundation of cultural diversity (diversity means to compare two different identities), which is a source of exchange, innovation and creativity for humankind (UNESCO 2005).

Heritage shapes identities by means of transferring meanings that cultures have given to their material and immaterial products from the past to the present and to future generations. Every item of heritage has the quality to form and uphold identities. Identity is the basis of cultural diversity (Follesa 2021, 21; Albert 2013, 6; Barthes, 1993): the sense of identity is formed through the shared values of a certain community, practices, traditions and its points of reference, material and intangible contents. Identity, like heritage itself, shapes the life expressions and needs of people, which represent the diversity of cultures and the wealth of heritage. This helps to shape the attitude of the communities of people to form connections in the context of understanding culture, memories and knowledge (Anico and Peralta 2009).

Local knowledge assumes a particular importance in triggering territorial development processes and, by means of appropriate strategies, can become new instruments for the circular economy (Ashworth and Graham 2016). Design can, in this sense, move from serving as a tool to industry to instead become a service to society (Interpret Europe 2024). It can even assume a more political role in defining social processes by contributing to development of product systems that can amplify the values of a certain territory and empower its identity and visibility (Follesa 2014, 79). Moreover, local identity is a living entity that is in constant transformation and feeds on new cultural practices, social relations and acts of transmission. It is vital for active processes to take place where new identity-related constructs can be formed in order to contribute to the protection and safeguarding of identity. Creating new connections through processes of contextualization is how local values of territoriality and other specific traditions can be continuously renewed, reconfirmed and thereby preserved.

### 2.1 Designing for Identity

Can cultural – even national – identity also be represented through a material manifestation – an object? If an emblematic object is taken into consideration, the answer is certainly affirmative. This also means that it can be created, or designed, for the very same purpose. One of the most representative (as well as most used)[2] Italian items – at a national but also international level – is without a doubt the famous Bialetti moka pot: an object with the ability to express a complex mediation between nationalism, contemporaneity of the period in which it was created, but is at the same time also a surprising remnant of the country's infamous Fascist legacy (Garvin 2021). When Alfonso Bialetti set out to develop his first coffee-machine in the 1930s that would be simple to use and affordable (unlike all the other large-scale appliances that existed at that time), this was also due to his choice of the material: aluminium. During Mussolini's economic self-sufficiency policy, when domestic consumption was lagging behind, he successfully imposed an embargo on foreign stainless



2 According to some estimates, an astonishing 90 % of of Italian households own one (Schnapp 2001).

steel and implemented a monopoly over the development of aluminium in Italy. Thus, aluminium emerged as the propagandistic metal of his Fascist revolution, perpetuating cultural narratives of Italian craftsmanship that echoed back to Ancient Rome, while its technological sophistication appealed to the modernist imaginations and symbolized a glorious future in the utopian fascist aspirations (Romagnoli 2016).

**Figure 1:** Bialetti moka pot as it first appeared according to Alfonso Bialetti's design in 1933. The name is a tribute to the city Mokha in Yemen, one of the leading and most famous production areas of coffee in the world. Source: https://www.bialetti.com/ee_en/our-history.

The aluminium moka pot emerged just in time to combine the political, economic and cultural ambitions – just like coffee itself, which played a prominent role in the mythology of the empire, considering Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia, the homeland of coffee plant. In fact, colonial imagery of coffee advertising, as well as *caffès* that emerged in that period, acted as key sites for promoting the fascist imperial projects in East Africa, standing as an architectural and artistic legacy that remains in place to this today. In bars, as well as wholesale shops, advertising and interior design reminded Italian consumers that coffee was a colonial prod-

uct (Garvin 2021). In particular, advertising imagery that developed in the 1920s and 1930s reinforced the idea of colonialist products and imperialist supremacy as the basis of brand identity (as shown on Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** 'Qui Commando io!' ['Here I command!'] Coffee advertisement by Studio Tytan, Trieste, Italy, 1925–30. Source: The Wolfsonian–FIU, Miami, USA (XX1990.3681).


Fascist modernity was thus underlined by a truly colonial vision, which contributed to the emblematic moka pot becoming a symbol of the period. This demonstrates how dictatorial politics shaped everyday spaces and objects (Garvin 2021), as well as the coffee-drinking habit itself (with which the country is still associated today) – reminders of the inescapable presence of history and the inescapable power of ideology in our daily lives.

## 3 Design between Traditions and Contemporaneity

Identity can be considered as a dialogue between elements of continuity (history, traditions) and changes brought about by innovation. Adapting historical contents in the so-called operation of adaptive reuse can result in a successful dialogue with the creative industries (and thus design), where traces of the past can be used as a source of memory and at the same time of the future. From a design point of view, the readaptation of the new identity design is a mature work of adaptation that knows how to eliminate the folkloristic and superfluous and bring the project back to the essence of the contemporary language. The design challenge is to establish a dialogue between historical and identity-related aspects and translate them into a new stylistic language. In-depth knowledge is essential to be able to comprehend which elements of local specificity cannot be substituted or neglected. It is about adapting to contemporaneity without exaggerating the expressive and symbolic canons of the 'original'.

Design can thus assume an active role in virtuous processes of identity awareness within communities. The role of design in highlighting the importance of heritage lies in the use of strategic practices of cultural heritage reuse to achieve unique cultural products with strong identity message that serve as a link between the past and the present and a guideline for society to preserve heritage for the future (Waterton and Watson 2015; Thompson 1990, 85).

Several case studies strongly support the thesis that design is in fact a key factor in presenting and communicating identity in the reuse of cultural heritage, acting as a link between the past and the present and helping guide its preservation for the future. They illustrate how design, tradition, politics, economics, and heritage interact in concrete ways (Macleod 2005, Di Giovine 2008), and indicate how design functions as communication of identity, linking the past and the present or serving as a guidance tool for preservation.

Illustrious successful projects can serve as exemplary case studies that can be highlighted for this purpose, starting with the acclaimed example of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum, which transformed the city of Bilbao and became an effective symbol of the city's identity.

Another case in point of 'constructed' identity can be observed in *Gardens by the Bay* in Singapore: an outstanding project that exemplifies iconic architecture, innovative use of sustainable technologies, environmental

sustainability and horticultural displays. This award-winning project has helped establish Singapore as one of notable cities where national and international sustainability practices have been exemplified. The area was conceptualized as a national effort to create a public garden for all Singaporeans to enjoy, as it raises the quality of the living environment and contributes to the social cohesion of the nation. It exemplifies a design intervention that positively influences and transforms an entire cityscape into an area that adds more value to people and the planet, while at the same time also fully capturing the essence and vision of the city behind Singapore's identity as the world's premier Garden city.

**Figure 3:** Supertrees Grove, one of the attractions in Singapore's Gardens by the Bay – the city-state icon as well as a 'people's garden', bringing together communities from across Singapore and people from around the world. Source: https://www.bbc.com/storyworks/travel/garden-of-wonders/gardens-by-the-bay.

Another case-study example of a city where the importance of design for its development has been clearly emphasized, is the nearby Austrian city of Graz, which was declared an international creative city (CIS) by UNESCO in March 2011, a title that gives the city additional prestige in terms of economic development.

Experimental laboratories are another example where approaches such as design thinking have been applied in real contexts in cooperation with

governments and public administrations. The main role in the implementation of such strategic services is played by the so-called *PSI labs* (Public Sector Innovation Labs, i.e. laboratories for creative innovations). Over the last decade, depending on the categories and mapping, they have been defined in different ways: public policy lab, government innovation lab, design lab, social innovation lab. In recent years, the European and global network of these laboratories has grown stronger, including entities with different interests and different methodologies, but with the common goal of public sector innovation (Zampella 2018). Labs strengthen government capacity by creating a narrative of change and enabling collaborative processes that demonstrate through examples and models how the inclusion and implementation of design and other innovative approaches in government management could be better and differently achieved (Mortati, Christiansen and Maffei 2018).

*Strategies* are also important in addition to labs. Governments around the world are introducing strategic innovation directions with a wide range of activities – a well-known example is the South Korean government initiatives 'Sharing City', 'Listening' and 'Citizen engagement', where the focus is more on citizen-driven and collaborative design of services and systems (Joo 2019).

The creation of spaces, communities (collectives that would support and encourage innovation in crafts, such as the Nesta States of Change project (States of Change 2016), an independent not-for-profit organization that helps governments become better problem solvers), networks, professional roles and functions are also essential in promoting a creative culture.

Continuous improvement of international and regional cooperation is an extremely important aspect in the field of cultural heritage – the promotion of culture is otherwise one of the essential elements in the EU's international relations, and the strengthening of cooperation in the field of cultural heritage is one of the three main goals of the European Agenda for Culture. The European Union's Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy identified cultural diplomacy as a new area for joint external action, and the new European Consensus on Development has recognized the role of culture as an important element and an active encouragement factor (European Commission 2017).

All examples of the approaches listed contribute to the promotion and development of the potential in the field of creative industries, especial-

ly in the field of design. The mutual exchange of ideas, the exploitation and application of new technologies and learning from mistakes play a fundamental role in the creative sectors. Governments and higher education institutions have a relevant role to play in attracting, developing and retaining talent, where a good understanding of the challenges and opportunities is essential for any planning and policy making.

It is important to highlight the role that design undoubtedly plays within the context of connecting with the heritage environment, products and the people. Design as a tool for the protection of heritage has since its origins aimed to address the relationships between the past, the present, and, consequently, also the future, and thus represents one of the opportunities in the field of protection and preservation of heritage.

## 4 Conclusion

Design interventions in heritage environments and contexts can be crucial for raising awareness about the importance of preserving and protecting cultural heritage as a quality of life in the area of origin, as they tend to preserve and spread knowledge about heritage through their involvement in creative processes. They are an inseparable part of the interpretative process, which can significantly contribute to inclusion, experientiality, and acceptance of heritage. Design approaches within the heritage environment can act as incentives for activating practices of community participation, inclusion, creation of social bonds, and community engagement towards rehabilitation and better awareness of its own traditions.

By drawing on the past and creating new meanings, people can transform the ways of social action, where heritage takes on an important social and cultural role. With the help of strategic practices of reusing cultural heritage, it is possible to achieve unique cultural products, whose strong identity message can serve as a link between the past and the present and guide society to preserve heritage for the future by upgrading and by implementing it in everyday life. These practices not only support the sustainability of heritage, but also contribute to broader goals such as social cohesion, cultural resilience, and the diversification of local economies through heritage-based innovation.

Moreover, when design strategies are informed by local cultural narratives and sensibilities, they not only help to articulate a sense of place, but

also reframe heritage as a living and evolving component of social identity. In this way, design becomes a mediating agent between the tangible and intangible dimensions of heritage, fostering a dialogue between historical layers and contemporary values.

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