

## “The Role of the Expert in Cultural Heritage.”



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What is an expert in cultural heritage? How do we identify such a person? Is this a qualification that does objectively exist or merely the product of a group of people who have convinced the rest of society that they have some type of academic or political power entitling them to be such an expert?

Firstly, the concept of cultural heritage is not frozen in time but evolves in a similar way to the values of a group of people, at both small-scale – urban neighbourhood or rural community, and large-scale – a country or international institution like UNESCO. As this concept evolves, disciplines from the field of knowledge are added and evaluated to provide answers to new problems and emerging paradigms. The majority of cultural and heritage institutions were created in response to the call to preserve what was considered exceptional from the perspective of the History of Art, Architecture and Archaeology, through knowledge of Archival and Library Sciences, resulting in the first museums and systematic policies to make inventories and protect monuments and works of art. Over time, the academic world and public policies began to recognise the value of more popular phenomena, thus turning them into what we now call the "intangible heritage", giving value to knowledge arising, for example, from Anthropology, Ethnology and Linguistics, as well as broadening the perspective of artistic expression and artisan craftwork, previously restricted to the domain of scholarly elites.

The process of constructing public policy to promote heritage conservation, which has been in operation in many countries for over a century, has also created opportunities for specific professional qualifications in Law, Administration, Public Sector Management, Communication, Economics and Tourism. At the same time, in order to solve technical problems in certain areas of heritage, professionals in fields as broad as Chemistry, Biology, Geology and Engineering began to incorporate heritage programmes and projects, eventually specialising in this area.

A few years ago, heritage inevitably stopped ignoring wider topics and requests from important sections of society, such as urban mobility, sustainability and climate change (which are also supremely multidisciplinary topics in their own right), housing rights, property speculation and gentrification processes, minority and mass migration movements, gender equality, LGBT rights, and more. In previous decades it would have been difficult to find heritage professionals anywhere in the world concerned about including minority or immigrant cultures in their field of work; nor did accessibility for

the middle and lower classes to the principal art collections appear to be essential to reinforce democracy. It is clear that, depending on which problems are smouldering the most beneath the surface of a city, area or region, to refuse to incorporate some of these subjects can be highly antidemocratic and destructive, whereas taking account of them can constitute a quality leap in public policy or in the common interest in the long term.

So, just as the implementation of heritage policies must encompass less obvious disciplines, professionals principally concerned with heritage conservation must also become involved in other debates where heritage is not the central issue and where they can collaborate actively in the quality of broader-ranging development proposals and programmes. Similarly, these discussions must also promote the inclusion of benefits like those which the preservation and dissemination of certain traditional expressions and techniques can bring to the environment, or educate people about the exceptional nature of certain buildings which, for many reasons, generally go unnoticed as a potential for greater social cohesion or economic development.

Heritage conservation must take account of all the problems and issues of a society and its territory. There are no truly assertive responses to social demands without an in-depth interdisciplinary focus, in which heritage will always play a part. Professionals in this area must be very humble because they will always be learning and they will have to listen to other professionals and to the local population, whose knowledge is very far removed from the knowledge of their own expertise.

I suggest that a heritage expert may be recognised not as someone who is very specialised in one or other relevant discipline – such as Architecture or History, for example – or who has spent many years working in it, but as someone who has a broad vision of the demands presented by the material he is working on, who identifies the sources of knowledge necessary to "decipher" it – through bibliography, secondary sources, professionals and people who have a relation of affection with the subject – and incorporates them from the outset into the processes of research, discussion and decision-making.