

People can't live in museums

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By Michiel van Iersel



Graffiti on the wall of a gallery in Toronto (photo: Katie Craig)

Abstract

History repeats itself. Exactly forty years after the International Federation of Housing and Planning organized a conference on 'City Reconstruction' and the 'Future of the City', it is time for an update on the way in which historic cities are developing. Back then, the whole idea of 'protection' was criticized, but the revolutionary spirit of the sixties didn't last very long. Throughout the world a growing number of historic inner cities has been sealed off from everyday life in recent years. They are turned into open-air museums where buildings become part of the permanent collection and residents are treated as visitors. The historic value of cityscapes, the need for their protection, the loss of traditional sources of income and an increasing dependency on the tourist industry force many of them to isolate, conserve and prepackage their built heritage for mass consumption. Especially in Europe, the old continent, numerous cities are completely trapped in time. Economic forces are slowly colonizing the social habitat, from Tallinn to Oporto and from Krakow to Bath. These cities are neither growing nor shrinking, but are simply in a state of paralysis and try to turn their inertia into a unique selling point. As a result, less lucrative activities such as dwelling and recreation are increasingly being pushed out of city centers as urban planners and city marketers work closely together in sanitizing and scripting the historic core.

In 1967, the same year as the IFHP conference, Marshall McLuhan said that: "the city no longer exists, except as a cultural ghost for tourists". This paper examines recent cases of the museumization of cities. It will start out with the story of authentic Venetians who are driven out of their city. Next the paper describes various international examples of the impact the heritage industry can have on cities, such as the planned reconstruction of the Stadtschloss in Berlin and the demarcation of large parts of Rome as an open-air museum. Drawing from these case studies the paper anticipates the threats and opportunities that historic cities face and discusses the paradox of preservation through exploitation. Furthermore, it will focus on alternative strategies for dealing with historic inner cities. Ranging from historical examples of radical interventions by artists and architects to a very recent proposal by Umberto Eco to create a so-called Uffiziland on the outskirts of Florence, these strategies test the limits of conservationism. Finally the paper offers a glimpse of the future of historic cities from the perspective of Amsterdam, a city of monuments that is continuously adjusting to change.

About the author

Michiel van Iersel (1978) is a consultant in the field of the arts, culture and urban development with Amsterdam based LAgrouop *Leisure & Arts Consulting*. He has worked for several museums, including the Hermitage in Amsterdam and MoMA in New York. He conducted research in various historic urban environments, including Amsterdam's Jewish quarter and the neighborhood of Dorsoduro in Venice. Michiel is co-founder of MuseumLab.org, a weblog about museum innovation.

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Vanishing Venice

Ever wondered what Venice will look like 700 years from now? If you raise this question among those who are directly involved in the future of the city, the answers will differ widely, depending on the person you speak to. Urban conservationists will predict, rather somberly, that due to the natural ageing process certain parts of the city will slowly disintegrate and eventually will become inaccessible. The city's planners will refer to the current situation in Rome where some areas have become completely isolated from their surroundings as a direct result of the excessive efforts to turn them into tourist destinations. Most scientists and engineers will warn you that sooner or later this sea-locked city will be swallowed by the rising Laguna, like a modern day Atlantis. Contrary to these pessimists, those working in the tourist industry will tell you how the latest communication technologies and product innovations will further enhance the carefully crafted reputation of Venice as the perfect getaway for generations to come. And foreign investors will boast about the scale and pace of the conversion of run down areas into trendy neighborhoods. However, in spite of the many contrasting opinions, there is a widely shared belief in the dynamic nature of Venice. But what if this belief proves wrong and all forces that help to shape the city were to be outbalanced by an even larger development? What if Venice would shift into reverse mode and become the first living city that will be entirely converted into a museum?

Over the last few decades, the unfettered influx of tourists and investors has worn out large parts of Venice, both physically and socially. In a period of only fifty years, thousands of local residents were forced out of Venice because of the invasion of foreigners and the impact this has had on property prices and on the general livability. With 171,000 residents, the population of the historic center of Venice reached a peak in the early fifties, but in the following decades this number has dwindled to barely 60,000 inhabitants in the current situation. Some even speculate that if this trend cannot be stopped or reversed the authentic Venetians will completely disappear from the demographics of the historic center, along with most functions that are normally associated with urban life (Povoledo, 2006). Local shops are already being replaced by tourist boutiques that all sell the same mass-fabricated memorabilia. Houses that have been handed over from one generation to another, are now being sold to foreign real estate agents who convert them into picturesque rental apartment with exclusive canal view. But after the last grocery shop has closed its door, and all but a handful of people have moved to Mestre on Italy's mainland, the local life will come to a complete standstill in this 'inertiapolis'. Unfettered by social responsibilities and blessed with an effective flood defense system it will be able to lean back and let tourism take over.

Some might dismiss this scenario as overly bleak, but there are many signs that proof the plausibility of it. One striking example is the restoration and conversion of the warehouses on the Punta della Dogana (Customs Point) in front of Saint Mark Square across the Canal Grande. This monument, where for a long time ships used to dock and the city received duty fees from foreign merchants, will become an art museum showing the private collection of the French luxury items tycoon Francois Pinault. Rather than looking for grassroots initiatives that can revive the place, the buildings will become yet another tourist destination that that will generate very little pleasure and only few benefits for the local community.

Since the advent of global tourism and with the help of mass media, cities like Venice have been propelled into the international arena. The tourist boom has forced Venice to isolate, conserve and package its built heritage for mass consumption. The city is desperately trying to look good and wants to achieve this by presenting an image of 'the city that never changes'. Visitors will not be disappointed in their pursuit of instant gratification, because Venice has worked hard to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The joy of recognition awaits them around every corner. And in order to stay on top of the game, much like movie stars, Venice feels the obligation to accept cosmetic enhancements and reconstructive surgeries in order to please the audience. More and more the cityscape starts to resemble the works of Canaletto, whose paintings of Venice are covered with thick layers of varnish in order to hide the cracks in the paint and to protect them against obtrusive spectators. This strategy adds new meaning to the words of architect Rem Koolhaas who said that "the cosmetic is the new cosmic" (Koolhaas, 2004). And just as plastic surgery can prove fatal for human beings, it can be similarly destructive for historic cities.

Cultural ghost for tourists

Sadly enough, Venice is not the only city that appears to be stuck in the past. Many other cities are subject to the same retro boom. Throughout the world a growing number of historic inner cities is sealed off from everyday life while they are turned into open-air museums. Buildings become part of the permanent collection, guided tours draw attention to the local masterpieces and residents find themselves treated as (uninvited) guests. In order to compensate for the loss of traditional sources of income and in anticipation of a strong demand for authentic experiences these cities go to great lengths to restore their cultural heritage and sometimes even completely regain their original appearance as a result of large scale reconstruction projects.

The post-war economic boom gave way to the birth of mass tourism. This moment proved to be a real turning point for historic cities. Tourism forced them to adjust to popular taste by overprotecting their built environment and by accentuating the outside appearance of buildings. Cities like Bruges and Florence became weak reflections of the vibrant merchant towns they once were. In 1967 Marshall McLuhan aptly observed that "The city no longer exists, except as a cultural ghost for tourists." (McLuhan, 1967).

Especially in Europe, the old continent, numerous cities are trapped in time. Economic interests are slowly colonizing their social habitat. There has been a lot of attention in recent years for the rapidly expanding megacities in emerging countries and much has been written about the many post-industrial cities that are facing decline as they struggle to uphold their position within the international urban hierarchy. This paper wishes to emphasize the fragile position of cities that are neither growing nor shrinking, but are simply in a state of paralysis trying to turn their inertia into a unique selling point. This applies to the many cities that carry the burden of maintaining their rich heritage. In most of these cases, less lucrative activities such as dwelling and recreation are increasingly being pushed out of city centers as urban planners and city marketers work closely together in sanitizing and scripting the historic inner city. What was once a physical manifestation of the *zeitgeist*, is now a ghostly playground for tourists.



People standing in front of the leaning tower in Pisa, Italy (Photo: Dappers)

The group of cities in Europe whose historic centre is being overtaken by the heritage industry is growing with every step of the EU's enlargement, unlocking the tourism potentials of cities like Tallinn, Vilnius, Krakow and Dubrovnik. UNESCO's World Heritage list provides a good overview of the geographical scope of the phenomenon. Among the cities enlisted is a small category of historic centers that to some extent could already be defined as open-air museums. In these places the conservation of the past has become an obstruction for change. The list reads like a summary of endangered species

and includes the historic centres of Avignon, Bath, Bruges, Florence, Pisa, Prague, Salzburg, Toledo, San Gimignano, Siena, and Venice. Most of them have experienced a long and prosperous phase in their existence without the terror of war or any serious social or natural disturbances that could fundamentally destabilize their future. But even cities that had the misfortune of being in the frontline of (ideological) wars are catching up fast. The city of Warsaw was largely destroyed during the war, but those who survived decided to rebuild it brick by brick. In 1980, Warsaw's reconstructed Old Town was inscribed onto UNESCO's World Heritage list. This, together with the end of communist rule and Poland's entry into the European Union has set off a sharp increase in the number of tourists.

Until fairly recently the development of most cities showed a normal pattern of growth with regular cycles of expansion and decline. But some cities on the UNESCO list have lost their significance as centers for trade or religion and therefore were eager to develop a vast heritage industry. This new economy, with its museums, archives, churches and other places of historic significance, employs many people. And as there will always be more memory to express, more beauty to gawk at and more victories or losses to commemorate, this industry will continue to grow with new visitor centers, costumed tour guides, theme restaurants and authentic guesthouses. But you only have to cross the main square of any of the abovementioned cities to start wondering where this transition will lead us, and whether there will still be a way back once we find ourselves completely gridlocked?

Rivalling the Louvre

The phenomenon of historic cities that are being museumized can be regarded as the final step in a long process. Cities have always functioned as a display of local culture or universal aesthetics, but in a time of global turmoil cities have become safe havens for the preservation of local identity. Museums and monuments serve the needs of those who suffer from anxiety, nostalgia and nationalism, providing them with beauty, stability and other manifestations of the picturesque. Cities, buildings and landscapes are adapted to satisfy the 'eye of the tourist' (Urry, 1990) and people are attracted by the same kind of beauty that is proper to great works of art. Monuments are lining the streets like paintings on a wall.

For many visitors the famous painting of Mona Lisa equals the Louvre and the acquisition of a single masterpiece can help museums to establish their name. The importance of a visual icon also applies to cityscapes. This became evident when the Spanish city of Bilbao gave birth to the Guggenheim Museum. The media attention that surrounded the opening immediately put Bilbao on the world map, and also helped to cover up a history that was dominated by nationalist sentiments and terrorist attacks. But the media was also instrumental to other cities for upgrading their cultural profile. Images of buildings and cities have started to circulate in travel guides and other media. Millions of people have visited Italy after reading the Da Vinci Code or Brunelleschi's Dome, trying to trace the footsteps of the main character. Thousands of visitors to Krakow have been misled by street vendors and tour guides who made them believe that Oscar Schindler rescued the Jews from the present-day Jewish Quarter, not knowing (or ignoring the fact) that the real ghetto was demolished right after the war.

In the postmodern condition of the 21st century nothing is what it seems. Age-old cities are rewriting their own history if it's no longer favorable to them. Popular tourist destinations recycle and copy historical facts and fictions in order to reach new audiences and to expand their territory. The buildings and streets of the historic centre become the exclusive domain of event managers and conservationists. It is not so much a case of the closing off of public space, as of the complete occupation of that space with programmed meaning (Hajer & Reijndorp, 2004). The scenography of the costume drama is applied to the street scene, in which at best, the tourist masses will play the extras in a scene of urban life. But the blinding lights that illuminate the beautifully restored facades obscure the fact that our heritage nowadays can only be maintained within a framework of heavy-handed rules, zero-tolerance management and zoning laws. What appears to be a safe haven is at best a cultural sanctuary where every movement is closely watched by CCTV cameras and security personnel.

There are many examples of cities that were once thriving centers of trade and cultural production before they got mummified. This year the mayor of Rome announced plans to demarcate a large area in the Italian capital as a museum district. The designated area will contain the Imperial Forums, the Colosseum and the Campidoglio and will swallow several buildings that are currently occupied by the local government. According to the mayor this will enable the city "to free some important buildings and turn them over to the archaeological and cultural life of the city" (The Times, 2007). Town planners are hoping that once the museums and monuments are unified, they will be able to rival the famous Musée du Louvre. This shouldn't be too hard for a 'museum' that covers an area twice the size of the Ile de la

Cité (the island in the centre of Paris). With a record number of 8.3 million visitors in 2006, the Louvre still claims the title of the world's most popular museum. But taking into account that almost 3 million people are currently living in Rome and considering the fact that the millennium year attracted 26 million visitors, it should be possible for Rome to set a new record. But at what cost? There's no question that because of this move it will be virtually impossible to build anything new in the designated area, except more museums. The only two recent examples of contemporary architecture in the historic centre were both museum projects and took almost a lifetime to materialize. In a city where every cobblestone, wall or shop sign confirms the holiness of the past the museum represents the past, present and the future.

While Rome is further isolating its heritage, Berlin wishes to rebuild it. In the heart of the German capital construction is under way for a replica of the royal palace that was destroyed during World War II. The original palace was constructed in the 18th century and stood next to Berlin's Dom cathedral. The so-called Stadtschloss will replace the nearly demolished Palast der Republik, the East German equivalent of a parliament building. Right across the square there are two more reconstruction projects being realized: the Bauakademie and the Alte Kommandatur (Old Army Headquarters). If things go ahead as planned, the area from the Museum Island (where most of Berlin's main public museums are located) to the Akademie will become one giant museum sphere. It is unlikely that it will manage to bring much life to the central Schlossplatz outside museum opening hours, since the area will lack the diversity of the Beaubourg in Paris or Trafalgar Square in London (Dowling, 2007).



Reproduction of a Michelangelo painting on the streets of Soho, London (photo: Steven Shingler)

The National Gallery in London, which borders on Trafalgar Square, has also adopted the idea of the city as a museum, and has taken it to extremes. It has put full-scale framed reproductions of 30 masterpieces from the collection - including famous works by Caravaggio and Van Gogh - on the outside walls of buildings in the streets of Soho. By naming it 'The Grand Tour' the National Gallery is referring to the time when the wealthy upper classes undertook a journey of cultural enlightenment across Europe, in a life-changing trip that could last for months or even years. But we have come a long way since the beginning of the nineteenth century when the French writer Stendhal famously wrote: *I was in a sort of ecstasy, from the idea of being in Florence, close to the great men whose tombs I had seen. Absorbed in the contemplation of sublime beauty ... I reached the point where one encounters celestial sensations ... I had palpitations of the heart, what in Berlin they call 'nerves.'* (Stendhal, 1817).

Nowadays, people who visit Florence spend only a few hours in the city and are still thrilled by the 'sublime beauty' of this city. They might even experience 'palpations of the heart'. But given the pressure that tourism puts on local resources, these daydreamers are becoming the city's nightmare.

Breaking the spell

Many historic cities are fast asleep, dreaming of glittering monuments and droves of tourists that are coming in by the busloads. They are no longer aware of the negative effects this may have on the vital parts of their city, ranging from depopulation to cultural inertia. But how can they be convinced that short-term gains from tourism will not be enough to guarantee a sustainable future? And what alternative strategies are there to offer?

In the International Herald Tribune the Italian philosopher and writer Umberto Eco proposes another dream-like world, consisting of full-scale mock-ups of ancient monuments that should be created in the vicinity of age-old cities (Eco, 2007). In order to relieve overcrowded cities like Florence and Venice and to protect them from becoming open-air museums, he suggests that special historic theme parks should be developed that would draw away the masses that are currently occupying the narrow streets of most tourist hotspots. He coined the term "Uffiziland" to brand these sites. According to Eco, most people prefer to see a spotless copy of a temple or statue instead of the decayed original, especially when it's placed in close vicinity to other perfect fakes and when it's easily accessible by car and tourist coach.



Young woman in front of a scale model of Amsterdam in the miniature city of Madurodam, The Netherlands

In his account of his travels in the land of Kubilai Khan, the Venetian merchant Marco Polo describes what can be considered the mirror image of Eco's vision. As a guest of the Mongol court in the thirteenth century he writes that: "*the Great Khan discovered that the residents of the capital of his empire (present day Beijing) would rebel against him, he ordered the building of a new city next to the old one, with only the river in between. And he removed the inhabitants of the old city and settled them in the new one, leaving only those whom he did not suspect of any rebellious movements (Polo, 1958).*" This despotic act is inconceivable nowadays, but perhaps that people will want move to Uffiziland on a voluntary basis.

Both Eco's and Khan's strategy can be observed in the world around us. There are already copies of Amsterdam in Turkey and Japan and in the miniature city of Madurodam you can look down on realistic scale models of its most important buildings. And because historic inner cities are increasingly closed off

to traffic, residents and companies are driven away or voluntarily move to new areas. Ironically, cities that won't succeed in creating their own antithesis will fade away in solitary confinement while 'new towns' like La Defense (Paris) and Canary Wharf (Berlin) help to revitalize their respective cities.

Can any such relocation really take the pressure of historic cities or will it only divert the attention from the real problem? By circumventing the historic center this part of the city might enter a state of oblivion and slowly sink into a coma, unless heart massage is used. When the catastrophic eruption of Mount Vesuvius completely destroyed and buried the ancient city of Pompeii, the slopes of the volcano were covered with layers of lava. But over the centuries the area provided uniquely fertile ground for the blossoming of art, culture and business in modern Pompeii and nearby Naples. What is needed in many cities is a similar disruptive development that challenges the status quo and eventually balances the existing dominant role of protectionism. This is not to say that we should repeat the radical planning reforms and destructive urban renewal that we have seen in Paris in the 19th century under the rule of Haussmann (although it did liberate the city from the mud and makeshift shanties and provided a source of inspiration for Baudelaire and the Dadaists) or with the Forum des Halles some decades ago.

There are other forms of 'creative destruction' that put the emphasis on the first part of the expression and leave out the destructive intentions. By (temporarily) loosening zoning laws and housing regulations, cities can create space for new initiatives. After the wall came down, Berlin experienced a renaissance of urban culture, largely because some parts of the city became a virtual no-man's-land where new things could happen. The 'Alternative Spaces Movement' in New York benefited from the same situation when small factories moved out of Soho in the 1970's, leaving a large number of historic buildings that later became known as lofts and attracted many artists. The 19th century cast-iron buildings in Soho were subsequently discovered by more affluent residents and tourists and along with its many galleries and trendy restaurants eventually became museumized in an official historical district.



Yona Friedman, *La Ville spatiale*, 1960, Collage

But even more radical interventions will probably be needed to really waken up historic cities. We can still learn from Yona Friedman's concept of the Spatial City ("*Ville Spatiale*"), consisting of inhabited 'hyperstructures' elevated on piles above the old city. Such structures would increase the habitable surface area in cities and would create independent urban levels from both an aesthetic as well as a functional viewpoint. His ideas were never realized, but you can experience some of its intended effects at the Centre Pompidou. Contrary to Bilbao, where the Guggenheim Museum has reduced the city to a single building, the multilayered structure in Paris is the world in miniature, or a city within a museum. And one could even apply some of the strategies of the Surrealists or the Situationists, the two French art movements that both blurred the boundaries between the studio and the street and deconstructed the historical and cultural meaning of public space with playful interventions and mind tricks.

Venice of the north? Amsterdam of the South

The term Venice of the North refers to various cities in Northern Europe that contain a lot of water, but Amsterdam comes closest to its Southern namesake. The historical centre is renowned for its concentric canals, largely built during the Dutch Golden Age in the 17th century. Beyond the canals, the similarities between Amsterdam and Venice have a basis in the cities' long histories of overseas trading, and the central role of the arts and culture in urban life. However, in recent years the cities appear to have embarked on two sharply contrasting developmental paths. Venice is standing still, and holding its breath, and meanwhile, Amsterdam is breathing in fresh oxygen.

In 1967 Amsterdam based its new conservation policy on the conclusions of the international congress on the Future of Cities, which was organized by the International Federation of Housing and Planning in the same year. The word 'protection' was cleverly avoided and instead the emphasis was put on safeguarding the diversity of the built environment and local communities and on stimulating mixed-use developments. The revolutionary spirit of the sixties didn't last very long in other cities, but it had a profound effect on Amsterdam. This two-faced city, that brings together the legacy of Anne Frank and the notoriety of the Red Light District, has constantly swung back and forth between progressive and conservative forces. There has always been a strong support for revisionist ideas, from digging up filled-in canals to the reconstruction of long-gone buildings, but the city has remained its creative power.

The key to Amsterdam's success lies in the fact that it is the capital of a fairly egalitarian country. According to the Amsterdam Federation of Housing Associations, The Netherlands has the highest percentage of social housing (35%) in the European Union and even in the old, and high status, centre of Amsterdam the share of social rented housing is larger than 30% (Schuiling & Van der Veer, 2004). This results in affordable housing for people with low incomes in parts of town that under normal market conditions would have been too expensive for them. The last years have seen an increase in the absolute number of people who live in the centre, while maintaining the balance between privately and publicly owned real estate. And no matter how prominent tourism has become over the years, thanks to the introduction of a tourist tax and clever zoning laws the increase occurred in a controlled manner.

In addition to the extraordinary position of not-for-profit social housing, Amsterdam offers many more solutions to the problems of old cities that have become alienated from their surroundings. The city is connecting the local with the global, making investments in local infrastructure, both physically and virtually. The construction of a new subway line that crosses the center is well under way, the central train station is completely renovated, a high speed rail connection with Paris will start operating in 2009 and experiments with high speed internet for all residents should result in full coverage within a few years. Furthermore, with the redevelopment of the South Bank of the IJ, Amsterdam is acquiring a new inner city area, that will be counterweighed by an equally important development of the 'Zuidas' on the south side of the city ring. The construction boom is accompanied by a cultural renaissance. The city known for Rembrandt and Van Gogh also has contemporary counterparts in creative icons like Marcel Wanders and Viktor & Rolf. Almost all cultural institutions are either refurbished, extended or completely replaced by state of the art facilities. And the dizzying amount of heritage and artistic treasures is disclosed in new and unconventional ways, utilizing the latest communication technology that enables users to construct a more diverse and personal interpretation of the city. The focus on human scale and individual inventiveness is even reflected in the city's slogan which simply reads: *I Amsterdam*.

Whether Venice will be a lively Italian town or an overprotected open-air museum in the year 2707 remains to be seen. Together with dozens of other historic cities it has entered the new millennium by taking a step back in order to cash in on tourism. But in a rapidly changing world Venice, just like all the others, has to move on and take up the challenge to become a truly unique 'Amsterdam of the South'.

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