INTANGIBLE VALUES AND TOURISTIFICATION OF PUBLIC SPACES IN THE ANCIENT CENTRE OF NAPLES (ITALY)

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ABSTRACT: The identity of the ancient city centre of Naples has been historically founded on the co-existence of tangible and intangible values underpinning a compact fabric of centuries-old architectural and urban stratifications. Their lasting character and presence in public spaces contributes to the image of Naples as an authentic and multi-layered city, recognized as Historic Urban Landscape and listed as a World Heritage Site twenty-eight years later. At the same time, preservation of these values poses a challenge with regard to the change of roles in some public spaces due to material, economic and social pressure, particularly touristification. This cyclical process determined by physical transformations of the urban configuration and new functional characterization of "overtouristic" areas is especially affecting public spaces located along the main tourist routes in the ancient centre, for example the churchyard of Santa Chiara. The article aims to reflect on the prospects of these areas, examining the role played by touristification in the conservation of their identity as crucial in the management of historic urban preservation. This is supplemented with more general reflections on significant spaces such as churchyards and gardens, which are turned into public areas, shaping both cities and their citizens, with the aim to define the right balance between the reasons behind development and the conservation of heritage and authenticity.

KEYWORDS: conservation; identity; touristification; Naples; churchyards

1. Introduction

Conservation of historic cities, especially their public spaces, poses complex challenges that are not limited to issues in design and technology. In fact, social and economic factors determine the transformative processes that have shaped these spaces over the course of history. This article deals with these dynamics, basing on the case study of the ancient centre of Naples, which constitutes the oldest part of the city. This public space is a UNESCO heritage site since 1995 and an exceptional example of stratification, where pre-existing architectural and urban structures have changed roles owing not only to historical transformations but also to their current use. Latest international recommendations concerning historical conservation demonstrate that the preservation of the urban fabric is closely connected to the livelihood of the place's identity, emphasising the protection of authenticity as the cornerstone of a sustainable and liveable city. As elaborated below, the ancient centre of Naples – the object of this study – exemplifies the coexistence of these issues and represents an emblematic case that facilitates deeper reflection on the role of intangible values in the debate about the conservation of historic public spaces. Compared to other European cities, Naples is unique since its centre's ancient urban configuration is almost unchanged, giving it its highly recognizable character. However, during recent decades, there has been an increase in tourism in this area, which has assumed such proportions that it can be linked to the global phenomenon known as overtourism (UNWTO 2019). As investigated in extensive subject literature, overtourism threatens the identity of places that define the singular image of Naples. In particular, squares and churchyards are increasingly coming under tourist pressure and can be analysed in terms of the impact of overtourism's transformative processes on the perception of these places. Thus, this article examines how touristification is impacting the authenticity of these public spaces and to what extent their conservation is undermined by these changes.

2. Framing the study area: the ancient centre of Naples

The urban fabric of Naples is an exceptional example of historical, architectural and urbanistic stratification. Lasting traces of the past in the oldest districts of the city constitute an outstanding universal value that has led UNESCO to include the Historic Centre of Naples in the World Heritage List in 1995. The second criterion behind this decision is related to the livelihood of the ancient foundation of its urban layout, which has shaped today's planimetric structure of the city and contributed to the definition of its authentic character and image.[1] This is particularly evident in the oldest area of the city, which is the focus here. Located in the UNESCO Historic Centre, it can be identified as the ancient center, the part of the historic city that corresponds to

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1   Criterion (iv) states: "Naples is one of the most ancient cities in Europe, whose contemporary urban fabric preserves the elements of its long and eventful history. The rectangular grid layout of the ancient Greek foundation of Neapolis is still discernible and has indeed continued to provide the basic form for the present-day urban fabric of the Historic Centre of Naples, one of the foremost Mediterranean port cities. From the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, Naples was a focal point in terms of art and architecture, expressed in its ancient forts, the royal ensembles such as the Royal Palace of 1600, and the palaces and churches sponsored by the noble families."

the archaeological area of the Greek-Roman settlement, as shown by the architecture historian and theorist Roberto Pane. In the significantly entitled essay *Centro storico e centro antico* (1971), the scholar proposed an innovative distinction between two apparently equivalent concepts that were still used as synonyms in the budding Italian debate on the conservation of historic cities.[2] Despite the plurality of heterogeneous expressions used in current debates, such as "ancient cities," "historic cores," "ancient settings" and "pre-existences," which neglect the conceptual difference between ancient and historic centre, Pane demonstrated that "everything ancient is historical, but not anything historical is ancient" (1971, 15). The concept of ancient is defined by a primitive nucleus formed until the Middle Ages, and is therefore historical in reference to the city as a whole. However, the decision to focus the protection program only on the ancient centre should not be understood "in the sense that, with the exception of this nucleus […] anything else can be more or less indiscriminately restructured" (15). The essential difference from other urban areas concerns the conservation of road layouts and therefore of public spaces, recognized by modern urban culture as an expression of ancient urban values.
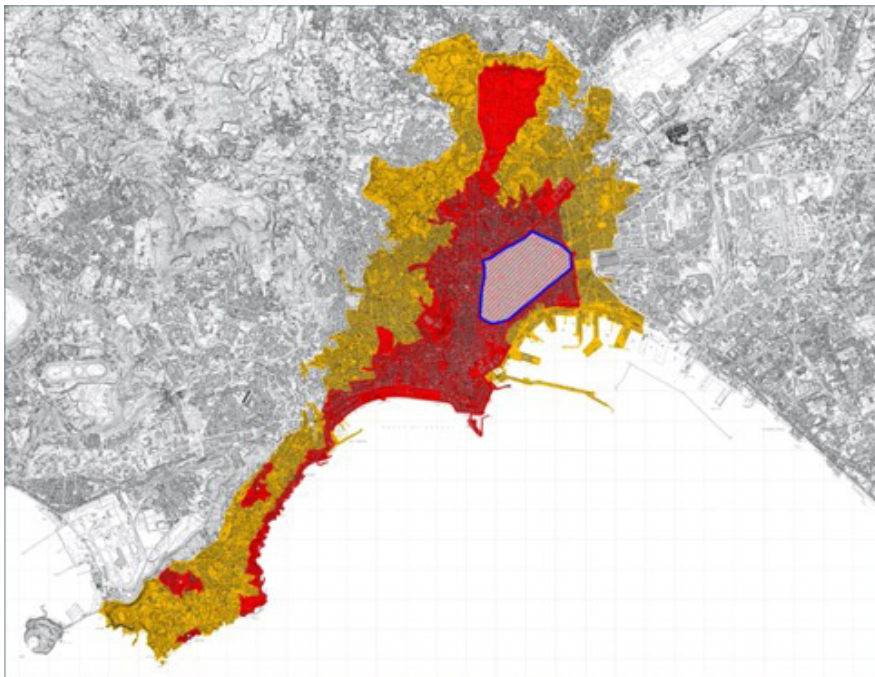

Fig. 1. Boundary of the Historic Centre of Naples, UNESCO. Red: World Heritage Site. Yellow: Buffer Zone of World Heritage Site. Blue: The ancient center according to Roberto Pane. Re-elaboration by the author

2   Within the Italian debate on the conservation of historic cities, which developed during the 1950s and 1960s, the terms "ancient" and "historical" were commonly and improperly used as synonyms, even if the titles of the monographs published in Italy before 1958 show that the expression "historic center" seemed to be relatively young. The first monograph where this expression appeared was *Centro storico di Genova: preliminari allo studio del piano di valorizzazione, conservazione e risanamento* (1958). A survey carried out in the catalogue of the National Library System (SBN) has shown that the term appears in four titles between 1956 and 1969, twenty between 1961 and 1965, and ninety-five between 1966 and 1970 (De Pieri 2012).

According the current Town Plan of Naples, the ancient center is included in *zona A Insediamenti di Interesse Storico* (Comune di Napoli 2004) and corresponds to an area of about 146 ha, identifiable with the ancient Neapolis, or the Greek fabric within walls from the fifth century AD, with the addition of a buffer zone between this area and the contemporary city. The current urban planimetric configuration clearly shows the grid of rectangular *insulae* framed by *plateiai* and *stenopoi*, which became *decumani* and *cardi* in the Roman Age (Napoli 1959). Among the many monumental architectural elements enriching the ancient center is the extraordinary concentration of religious complexes, often built on pre-existing structures from Roman times, which occupy entire *insulae* of the fabric in several places. The presence of these monastic citadels, in some cases decommissioned and used as schools and universities, has significantly contributed to the current layout of squares and public spaces, often defined by the area of churchyards or arranged from cloisters and gardens that have become accessible to citizens. According to ICOMOS reports, this area has several peculiarities related to both the material characteristics of architectural and urban heritage and to the permanence of immaterial identity defined by the relationship between the community and public space.[3]

3. Conservation and threats: current phenomena and their impact on the area

In light of the peculiarity of the historical characteristics and identity of the discussed area, the ancient center of Naples suffers from endemic problems that significantly impact the conservation of its characteristic values and its spatial development. In fact, there are enduring problems of social and economic nature that can be related to demographic, in this context especially to overcrowding. With a population density that is already high at municipal scale, the ancient center has the demographic density of approximately 32,000 inhabitants per square km.[4] This is associated with the physical and economic degradation that has historically characterized the oldest districts. Although the ancient center has been the focus of an increasing number of academic studies, it has been formidably difficult to translate academic contributions into actual intervention programs (Aveta & Marino 2012; Pane 2014). As noted in the periodic reports of ICOMOS, most buildings in the ancient fabric are in fact dilapidated due to difficulties with programming necessary maintenance operations on privately-owned heritage sites (ICOMOS 2006). The considerable delay in acting for the conservation of architectural heritage was also exacerbated by unconvincing interventions made over the last few decades. They have often resulted in the loss of original and stratified construction materials of architectural heritage by taking the form of superficial make-up operations that have sacrificed elements of facades above

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3   "It is difficult to identify a city or cities with which Naples might be compared. Its cultural roots are so completely different from those of any other Italian city that comparison would be worthless […]. Uniqueness is a quality that is hard to define, but Naples seems to come very close to having it, however defined" (ICOMOS 2006).

4   Demographic data concerning urban districts is available at the website of the Municipality of Naples: https://www.comune.napoli.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/50 (accessed 27 March 2023).

all, such as ashlars, pilasters and traditional plasters.[5] In addition to these factors, the main threat to the conservation of public spaces is certainly the growing impact of touristification (Cerreta, Della Mura & Poli 2020; Iovino 2021).

Fig. 2. Main tourist route and principal monumental attractions in the ancient center of Naples. Re-elaboration by the author after: campania.info (accessed 5 March 2023)

The prestige afforded by UNESCO's recognition has increased the tourist flow, which may have rehabilitated the image of Naples internationally, but has also triggered the process of commodification of the historic city, becoming a threat to the *genius loci* (ICOMOS 2008). The gentrification associated with huge flows of tourist has already upturned the precarious balance necessitated by the conservation of such a richly historical area, the transformative processes affecting both the biodiversity of the ancient fabric and the identity of many

5   This problem was encountered by the program called S.I.RE.NA (Society for Recovery Initiatives of Naples), which was promoted by municipal administration and aimed at obtaining funding for conservation and maintenance works to be carried out by private citizens. Regarding the facades of historic buildings, it would have been necessary to pay specific attention to the issue of painting, considering that the interventions have often been limited in these cases to simple restoration works refreshing existing colors (AVETA 2012).

public spaces. Along the main tourist itinerary of the ancient center, many areas changed their character, traditional craftsmanship being replaced by restaurants and fast food chains. These developments are particularly evident in the areas of Port'Alba, originally featuring bookshops, via Costantinopoli and via San Sebastiano, with their music shops, and San Gregorio Armeno, known for crib art. The exchange of traditional crafts for places driven by economic trends in tourism has also shown the risks of heeding the latter only, since such business is unpredictable, as demonstrated by the recent pandemic (UNWTO 2020). The impoverishment of the traditional character of some public spaces has inevitably affected their livability and perception in the eyes of local community, triggering processes that are incompatible with the logic of sustainable development in historic cities, as confirmed by the latest international recommendations (UNESCO 2011).

4. Operating tools for managing the touristification and identity of ancient spaces

The current model of tourism endangers the identity of places, threatening to distort their authenticity through planning and management that pay specific attention to the ancient center. The Management Plan drawn up by a commission of experts in 2011, following recognition by UNESCO, intends to define clear methods of managing historical, cultural and environmental resources in the spirit of balance between socio-economic aspects and intangible values (Sistema di Gestione 2011). This vision is defined by four strategic axes, the first one dedicated to Protection and Conservation, while the second intended for Production, Commerce and Tourism, with measures aiming to achieve sustainable promotion of the tourist image of Naples. As for the *Neapolis* area, this tool provided for the Citadel of Studies, Arts and Culture by improving the museum network, ensuring systemic management of tourist-cultural sites, and enhancing the understanding of intangible heritage. In relation to this axis and in agreement with the HUL approach that informs this tool (UNESCO 2011), the Management Plan identifies local strengths to consist in the promotion of traditional craftmanship, particularly crib art, food and wine, goldsmithing and textile art, as well as the presence of the port, which matches other hubs of tourist mobility. In fact, the plan devotes specific attention to cruise tourism in the effort to counteract the "hit and run" trend in this category of visitors. It can be related to the concentration of tourist groups along the main itinerary for the ancient center, limited only to main consumerist or scenic attractions, for example squares. Despite the above, programming clearly failed as the Citadel of Culture has turned into a Citadel of Food, which is exemplary of the risk to reduce the identity of public spaces merely to catering establishments (Belfiore 2023). As shown by available detailed studies, funding for plans and projects, interest from investors, consensus among citizens and support from the world of culture, it is clear that the problem has been political even before becoming related to planning. Similar references to the protection of authenticity are made in the Strategic Marketing Plan for the Tourist Development of Naples 2020 (Comune di Napoli 2017). This document also lists the safeguarding of authenticity on both social and physical level among fundamental management requirements, which dovetails with strategies outlined in the UNESCO Management Plan, where emphasis is placed on "the need to avoid

a radical change of social fabric […] prevent a profound alteration of the context, especially in reference to intangible values, rooted in the place thanks to the presence of the community that becomes its bearer and interpreter" (Sistema di Gestione 2011, 48). These critical issues therefore require rethinking the priorities of the local government, starting with amendments to the Management Plan that are necessary to adapt it to the current situation, acknowledging the impact of overtourism in recent years and the failure to comply with sustainable strategies proposed in 2011.

Fig. 3. Views of via Benedetto Croce, the ancient *Decumanus inferior* – the main tourist path in the ancient center of Naples. Photographs by the author, September 2023

5. Case study: churchyards and the Bell Tower of Santa Chiara

One emblematic example of transformations in the ancient centre of Naples is the current situation of the main squares along the principal tourist itinerary. These spaces display the aforementioned impact of overtourism as well as the effect of physical and social degradation, which are in fact amplified due to increased tourist and economic pressure. The following analysis focuses on Piazza del Gesù Nuovo and the area of the churchyard of Santa Chiara – key access points to the ancient centre, where new traffic regulations led to pedestrianization. The square is located along the *decumanus inferior*, just outside the original Greek city walls, a site long used as burial place, according to recent archaeological findings (Napoli 1959; Giampaola 2010). Over the centuries, the public space acquired new symbolic and physical meanings thanks to the presence of the monastic complex of Santa Chiara, built in the early

fourteenth century (Pane 1969), and thanks to the construction of the church of Gesù Nuovo.[6] The current arrangement of the square, however, is the result of intense urban transformation that took place in a short period of time between the Second World War and the early 1970s.

Fig. 4. The *insula* of Santa Chiara and the current situation of Piazza Gesù Nuovo.
Photograph and re-elaboration by the author, February 2022

In fact, due to the bombing of 4 August 1943, which hit the insula of Santa Chiara and almost destroyed the church, obliterating one building close to the churchyard that served as a separation filter (Pane 1944; Di Stefano 1964; Guerriero & Rondinella 2011). In the next two decades, a heated debate developed, involving the city's cultural circles, local offices of Soprintendenza, and citizens in general.[7] Two diametrically opposed positions were represented by the historian Roberto Pane and the architect Marcello Canino, who have been fundamental not only for Neapolitan cultural heritage but also the Italian one (Carughi 2005; Rondinella 2010). Pane's position was based on admiration of the site's historical characteristics and therefore underscored the need to respect the perimeter of the monastic *insula*. In fact, the first project, presented in 1963, proposed to rebuild the wall along the borders of the *insula* and create a front pedestrian portico with traditional shops, at the same time ensuring the conservation of the basement in the eighteenth-century building that served as a separation

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6   The square gradually acquired the shape close to today's thanks to Prince Roberto Sanseverino, who decided to build his palace there. Completed in 1470, it was transformed into the current church of Gesù in 1584, with the specific intention to create public space, determining the formation of "one of the rare squares of Naples," according to Roberto Pane (1975–77).

7   The public dimension in the problem of the *insula's* urban arrangement is confirmed by the role played by the press. When the Municipality commissioned Roberto Pane to draw up an arrangement proposal in 1963, a torrent of articles followed, explaining various positions in the urban debate and involving key local newspapers such as *Il Mattino*, *Il Tempo*, *Corriere della Sera e La Stampa* (Carughi 2005; Rondinella 2010).

filter at the eastern front (Pane 1963). Marcello Canino, on the other hand, was supported by private institutions that were supposed to finance the works and proposed to completely isolate the church and annex the churchyard to the square. The idea was strongly criticized by art historian Cesare Brandi since it would have drastically altered the morphology of the site owing to the contrasting character of the cloistered monastery, which is fenced and separated from public space.[8] The debate continued and it was only in 1971 that a solution was reached, leading to the presentation of a new project developed by Pane in collaboration with Roberto di Stefano. It was decided to conserve the eighteenth-century basement along the square as well as the remains of the walls, respecting historical aspects, both tangible ones (in terms of the monastery's layout) and intangible (the purpose of the place). As for the churchyard area, the concept of traditional shops was dropped by Soprintendenza. Instead, a garden was created, marking a break in the compact fabric of the ancient centre.

The current situation of the square is therefore representative both of approaches to the conservation of the historical urban fabric in Naples, and of the current developments in the city's ancient centre. Around the churchyard, traditional craftsmanship has been replaced with restaurants, while the residential function has shifted toward short-term rental (Cerreta, Della Mura & Poli 2020). Meanwhile, the garden in the churchyard of Santa Chiara has been transformed into a playground for children and a dog park. It is now mainly used as a meeting point for tourists, clearly in contrast with the historical character of the site, which the urban planners decided to preserve in the 1970s. In fact, the close perimeter and the garden were meant to evoke the history of the monastery, which is so obscure that new proposals to isolate the church are being made, demonstrating ignorance of decades-long discussions about the area (Lama 2005; Pane 2005).

Fig. 5. Current arrangement of the garden in the churchyard of Santa Chiara, now a playground for children and a dog park. Evidently neglected, it is a place for selling souvenirs. Photographs by the author, September 2023

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8   Marcello Canino's isolation proposal was enthusiastically welcomed by the Provincial Tourist Board, which would finance the works, but was criticized by Cesare Brandi, who called it "completely wrong and desperate […] an idea that cannot even pretend to be restoration, because Santa Chiara was never isolated; monastic churches were never isolated" (Brandi 1965, 3).

A similar situation concerns other squares and churchyards in the ancient centre, which are located, like Santa Chiara, in key points of the tourist itinerary. Clear examples include the public space in front of the churches San Paolo Maggiore and San Lorenzo Maggiore in Piazza San Gaetano or the area next to the church San Domenico Maggiore, perceived by the local community as the most crowded meeting point for tourists and a place suffering from impoverished identity. On the other hand, the identity of cloisters and gardens has been visibly conserved and their authenticity preserved. In fact, these spaces are part of religious complexes that often have cultural and educational functions, which excludes them from the commercial tourist circuit. Emblematic examples of this can be recognized in the cloister of Santi Marcellino e Festo, which hosts the Department of Political Science and the Paleontology Museum of the University of Naples Federico II, and the cloisters in the monumental religious complexes of San Gregorio Armeno and Monteverginella. Despite neglect and vandalism, these places offer space for meditation and rest for those citizens who can enjoy their dense architectural stratification. Any future consideration regarding the arrangements of these areas should therefore follow the above guidelines, avoiding trivial simplification and fostering deeper understanding of complex, stratified meanings.

Fig. 6. Left: the churchyard at San Paolo Maggiore in Piazza San Gaetano (March 2023). Right: Piazza San Domenico Maggiore, next to the church (August 2021). Photographs by the author

6. Final remarks: perspectives for the future of ancient spaces

Following the re-elaboration of the image of Naples in the 2000s, the ancient centre has become the place where maximization of economic profit is prioritized, which is linked to both communal self-organization (souvenirs and restaurants) and the interests of large corporations (rentals and

cruise traffic). The emergence of the city as an object of historic preservation reflects not only the advancement of planning as a discipline but also the choices made by policy-makers (Bandarin 2019). There is a clear tendency to promote a more conscious "slow tourism" to support fiscal and economic diversification policies that internalize costs of tourism and redistribute benefits. In the globalized era, dominated by the capitalist spirit, it is necessary to see the historic city as an organism that constantly evolves – one where change cannot be prevented but ought to be managed in consistency with intangible values. Development of a fairer, sustainable city model basing on its identity corresponds with the principles outlined in international documents, starting from the 1964 Venice Charter. Theoretical awareness is particularly clearly expressed in the Nara Convention, which links the evaluation of the place's identity with multidimensional aspects that "may include form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors" (UNESCO 1994).

On the basis of the above, the following recommendation can be made regarding the conservation of public spaces in historic cities: the development of the historic city and its conservation are not at odds but in dialogue. The plurality of design-based as well as technological and governmental solutions must acknowledge the place's intangible values, which are fundamental for the preservation of identity, also in physical terms. The conservation of public space must therefore be based on respect for the *genius loci* and on efforts to cultivate the authenticity of these places.

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