

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

HERITAGE INTERPRETATION AS A TRANSMITTER OF THE VALUES OF LIVING RELIGIOUS MONUMENTS. PROPOSAL FOR APPLICATION TO THE CATHEDRAL OF VALÈNCIA (SPAIN)¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

Some religious buildings have a high architectural, historical, urban, spiritual and social significance at the global level, and therefore constitute an important part of the heritage of many countries. It should be recalled that in the UNESCO World Heritage List (n.d.), among the 1,154 sites inscribed, we find that, within the 897 cultural sites, approximately one third could be classified as sacred or places of worship, representing the different cultures and faiths existing in the world. In this way, we observe that this type of heritage assets are key elements of the cultural and tourist offer of the territories where they are located, especially in urban destinations. However, many of them do not have a heritage interpretation programme that would highlight to the public the important values for which they are recognised.

When it comes to establishing the value of heritage assets, we find much scientific literature that addresses this issue and whose authors agree in recognising the ‘significance’ of these assets as the basic criterion of their value (Mason, 2002; de la Torre, 2013; among others), which is applicable to both tangible values (architectural, artistic, historical, urban) and intangible values (spiritual, social). It is also clear to experts that the significance criterion is the foundation on which the legal protection of heritage elements is based (Díaz-Andreu, 2017), and also the designations of World Heritage Sites (UNESCO, 1972). Regarding values, it should be remembered that architectural value is established on the basis of design, materiality, form, style and construction. The artistic value is due to the fact that it is consid-

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ered as an outstanding work of art, the result of the creativity and expression of people. This value is particularly relevant in the case of movable heritage housed in religious buildings, as they are often important works of art or objects of great significance. Historical value is related to the existing links between the heritage item and the record of events over time, or with some fact, idea or historical figure relevant to society.

In terms of their urban value, religious buildings play a role as geographical landmarks in the landscape as they are highly recognisable and visible from a distance, making it easier for people to find their way around and navigate a place whether they are familiar or unfamiliar with the space in question. This function was clearly established, in the case of cities, in the work of Lynch (1960). This function also helps people to construct a 'mental image' of the city. The continued presence of historic religious monuments has permeated the collective memory of societies, generating links over generations and turning them into territorial references and symbols of identity (Sgard, 1999; Zapiain, 2011). They also form an intrinsic part of the interpretative narrative and visual or iconographic identity, and even of the current skyline of many cities.

The intangible values associated (beliefs, rituals, traditions, customs, knowledge, etc.) with religious buildings are even more significant in many cases (Cirvini, 2019), and are easy to appreciate and value not only for people of all faiths, but also for non-believers (Voyé, 2012; Hallinan and Erdekian, 2020). It is worth mentioning the fact that, from the moment the original liturgical use and traditional religious activities are perpetuated in the present, the building together with its traditional practices comes to be considered as 'living heritage' with a lot of historical memory and a alive present. In this way, people develop emotional connections and feelings, and definitely, a collective social appropriation of heritage as individuals share similar experiences and memories that are preserved in their social and cultural imaginary. In this way, heritage assets end up having a social meaning and significance within today's culture.

There are also other functions that religious buildings provide to society. Thus, one can consider the socio-economic impulse linked to the direct and indirect benefits derived from productive activities (e.g. tourism), which take place in the monument itself or in the area of influence. There is also the effect of urban regeneration that they produce in their surroundings, and the educational function, the development of creative thinking, inclusion, tolerance and well-being, or the role as driving forces of cultural activity, in general.

For all the above reasons, it is not surprising that, globally, there is a new process of awareness-raising about the importance of safeguarding religious heritage as reflected in the *United Nations Action Plan for Safeguarding Religious Sites: In Unity and Solidarity for Safe and Peaceful Worship* (United Nations, 2019). However, as stated, intellectual and emotional access to religious heritage is not always commensurate with the significance of its values, and it can be hypothesised that there is much room for improvement that can be addressed through the implementation of strategies and programmes based on heritage interpretation.

The aim of this paper is to explore how heritage interpretation can contribute to improve the enhancement of religious monuments so that they can be properly understood and emotionally enjoyed by the public while, at the same time, serving as a support for their conservation and visitor management. In particular, the case study of Valencia Cathedral is addressed.

2. HERITAGE INTERPRETATION, ASSET CONSERVATION AND VISITOR MANAGEMENT

One of the main challenges faced by institutions managing living religious heritage, in sacralised buildings, is to make liturgical use compatible with public visitation and tourist use since the confluence in time and space of religious, cultural and tourist practices can lead to inconvenience for liturgical celebrations and their worshippers. The volume of people, whether parishioners or tourists, in a religious building must be considered and managed appropriately to avoid overuse, congestion and saturation. Overuse can lead to potential long-term impacts, and saturation and congestion can cause safety problems and physical and psychological discomfort for people, thus decreasing the quality of the experience (WTO, 2004; Viñals *et al.*, 2014). In any case, the issue of the compatibility of uses in large religious buildings can be addressed and is possible; it is a matter of managing the physical space of the building and the flow of visitors.

Once the problems of compatibility of uses have been resolved and the religious buildings can be visited by the public, it is necessary to analyse how the visit activity is to be carried out. The management of public visitation requires, as Viñals (2021) points out, the implementation of certain specific heritage enhancement and management tools, including heritage interpretation, which is key to strategic communication and awareness-raising (ICOMOS, 2008; UNESCO, 2019), and also serves to strengthen the conservation and management of the heritage property and visitors (ICOMOS, 1979, 1999, 2010; Chiapparini, 2012; International Conference on Conservation, 2000; Continenza *et al.*, 2017; Thouki, 2021). With regard to the management of spaces and visitors, it should be noted that the efficient development of an interpretation programme starts with an analysis of the zoning of the physical space of the heritage element and the location of the main tangible attractions that will support the interpretive stations in order to design the pattern of the visit and, thus, channel visitor flows into specific spaces. This will help to preserve fragile and vulnerable areas from tourist use and to distribute visitors reasonably among the different areas to be visited and then, avoiding congestion and saturation, as Moscardo (1996) stated. Authors, such as Jones (2007), Coccozzis (2005), Littlefair and Buckley (2008), Moscardo (2009), Ballantyne and Parker (2011), Hu and Wall (2012), and Enseñat-Soberanis *et al.* (2018) have also addressed the issue of how heritage interpretation can contribute to preventing and minimising impacts on both natural and cultural heritage sites.

It remains to be added that heritage interpretation can also bring economic benefits for the institution that can be reinvested in the maintenance and conservation of the building. The public is willing to pay for interpretative services when it is a route with an interpreter-guide because they understand that this service involves costs.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper was carried out by means of a general bibliographical review on the interpretation of heritage and on public visits to religious buildings in order to develop the conceptual framework of the work, with special attention being paid to documents (letters, recommendations, etc.) issued by international heritage organisations.

In addition, all the existing documentary and graphic information on the Cathedral of Valencia has been compiled and a survey of plans has been carried out with a 3D laser scanner. Likewise, it has been possible to find out *in situ* how liturgical activities and public visits are carried out through direct observation and participant observation techniques, and personal interviews with the managers and staff in charge of the Cathedral and the Cathedral Museum, as well as with heritage experts.

4. OBJECT OF STUDY: THE CATHEDRAL OF VALÈNCIA

The Cathedral of Santa María de València was built as a consequence of the conquest of the city by the Christian King James I in 1238. It is located in the historic centre of Valencia, in the neighbourhood of La Seu, belonging to the Ciutat Vella district. Both, the Cathedral and the historical centre of Ciutat Vella have been declared as Asset of Cultural Interest. The Cathedral is owned by the Archbishopric of Valencia and has a Master Plan (Herrero *et al.*, 2000) which focuses on the aspects of maintenance and conservation, with very few references to public visits and tourist use.

The structure of the Cathedral was basically built between the 13th and 15th centuries, thus imposing the Gothic style on its general appearance; it was completed in the 18th century.

In addition to its architectural value, the Cathedral has a set of movable assets of great artistic value and a history closely linked to the city of Valencia and the papacy. But, above all, it has important intangible spiritual values related to the Christian tradition. Today, the Cathedral continues to represent a key social value for the city.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION ON THE VALUES OF THE CATHEDRAL OF VALENCIA AND THE BENEFITS OF APPLYING AN INTERPRETATION PROGRAMME

The Cathedral holds some very significant tangible and intangible values from an intrinsic and touristic point of view that, on occasions, are not adequately valued, especially the intangible ones, as occurs in other European religious buildings (da Rocha, 2012).

From the architectural point of view, it could be said that the educational values are the main strength, since the building has been under construction for more than five hundred years, showing the evolution of different architectural styles and techniques from the Middle Ages until its construction was completed in the 18th century. It is also possible to speak of the attractiveness of the Cathedral due to its monumentality, uniqueness and originality, and the fact that it is a living heritage element that has maintained its original use since its foundation. It is also a building that is accessible both in terms of its opening hours and the facilities offered for visits to all kinds of public.

On the other hand, the Renaissance fresco paintings of the Musician Angels, located in the dome of the High Altar, are the most significant artistic elements. This is an outstanding work, the first of its kind in the Iberian Peninsula and one of the most representative and relevant examples of Renaissance painting of this style outside Italy (Puig, 2019).

They are also very attractive due to their beauty, size, colour, subject and composition. Mention should also be made of the Goya works, as these are paintings with a religious theme, which is unusual for this artist and cannot be found in a religious setting; it is the only cathedral in Spain that has paintings by this artist.

Regarding historical values, it is worth remembering that the archbishop Rodrigo de Borja left this cathedral for Rome to be named Pope Alexander VI. He is one of the most important historical figures of the Church of all times. Furthermore, the Cathedral was the metropolitan seat of the kingdoms of the Crown of Aragon at the height of its power (15th century) and houses the reliquary of the kings of the Crown of Aragon, including the Holy Chalice of the Last Supper of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, and from an urbanistic point of view, it should be pointed out that the Cathedral and its bell-tower (*El Miguelete*) have traditionally been and are currently urban landmarks of great significance for georeferencing, orientation, transit and meeting points for both the city's inhabitants and visitors. Even today, they continue to be the most grandiose buildings in the neighbourhood of La Seu.

As far as spiritual values are concerned, these are undoubtedly the most important. The Holy Chalice has a very high symbolic and spiritual significance worldwide, as it is a relic that has been highly valued by believers since the Middle Ages, and has been the object of worship and devotion ever since. Recently, the Holy See (Apostolic Penitentiary, 2014) has established the celebration of the Jubilee Year of the Holy Chalice (every five years) in recognition of this value.

Regarding the celebrations, it should be noted that religious manifestations are rooted in Valencian tradition. It is worth remembering that the Solemnity of Corpus Christi was the most important festivity in the city of Valencia from the 14th century (the second oldest in Spain), until the irruption of the Fallas in the 18th century (Ariño, 1992). Nowadays, it is still the most notorious religious festivity.

The social value of the Cathedral is evident due to the great cultural, urban and socio-economic revitalizing effect it had in the past and continues to have at present on its immediate surroundings, especially linked to tourism.

After what has been said, several reflections emerge. Thus, firstly, it can be commented that, although the urban and social value of the Cathedral are very relevant; the most identifying ones would be: the architectural value, based on its educational vocation, the artistic-historical value that represents the entry into Spain of the Italian Renaissance pictorial influences by the Valencian popes of the Borgia family, and the spiritual value, which is the most significant, and is based on the worship and veneration paid to the Holy Chalice.

Secondly, it is worth considering the advisability of designing and implementing a heritage interpretation programme that adequately addresses the presentation to the public of each of these identity values through their conversion into interpretative messages. The programme could also play a role as an instrument for improving visitor management. Even without having a study on the perception of visitors in relation to physical and psychological comfort when visiting the Cathedral, without having estimated the recreational carrying capacity, and considering that the number of daily visitors in the Cathedral is around 1,000 people, it can be seen that this has not led to any problem of saturation or occasional congestion in the monument. The authors of this work believe that the margin for growth in the

flow of visitors is large, and that the figure of 700,000 visitors a year could even be reached in a relatively short period of time, taking into account the trend observed in recent years. This situation would require efficient visitor management because, although the Cathedral is a resistant building and would cope well with this volume of people, and would also constitute an appreciable source of income, the safety, comfort and satisfaction of visitors would not be guaranteed and this could have serious negative reputational repercussions.

The interpretation programme should be accompanied by qualified staff. In addition to interpretive panels, which can be used for people who decide to take a self-guided tour, it would be desirable to have a team of heritage interpreter-guides to lead groups and also individual visitors. Personal interpretation is the best way to connect an audience with a heritage element (Brochu and Merriman, 2007). In addition, interpreters serve to personally introduce visitors and invite them to follow the code of ethical conduct and etiquette, reminding them of expected behaviour at the site. They are also useful for managing the timing and logical interpretative sequence of the visit and group movements; thus, avoiding congestion in certain spaces or deviations from the pattern of the visit and inconvenience to parishioners. In the same way, the guide-interpreters would help to prevent groups from encountering each other in order to provide the best experience of undisturbed immensity and meditation in a religious space of such importance as the Cathedral.

Finally, it should be noted that heritage interpretation can contribute to defraying maintenance and conservation costs, as it is a marketable service for which the public is willing to pay. In this way, different types of interpretive visits could be designed to form a portfolio of carefully and respectfully designed products that do not detract from or interfere with worship and liturgical rituals, while providing memorable experiences for the public.

6. CONCLUSIONS

After analysing the benefits associated with heritage interpretation and having tested its possible application to the Cathedral of Valencia, some ideas are outlined below by way of conclusions.

It is a proven fact that heritage interpretation is a fundamental tool for the understanding and emotional enjoyment of heritage resources and sites. It has been shown that in the case of religious heritage, where tangible heritage is combined with the associated intangible elements, the implementation of an interpretation programme that helps to connect any type of public with spiritual values is even more necessary.

It has also been demonstrated, following the literature review, that beyond the original objectives of heritage interpretation, there are scientifically documented cases where it has contributed to conservation and visitor management in a variety of ways.

In view of these premises and knowing the values of the Cathedral of Valencia, it is considered that the application of an interpretation programme would be highly appropriate. It would greatly improve its presentation to the public and, therefore, would raise its heritage consideration, its reputation, its social value and its attractiveness as a religious cultural asset in the eyes of the local population, visitors and tourism in general. This would lead to a greater appreciation by the public, thereby increasing their awareness of

the need to protect the site; in other words, it would reinforce the social dimension of the protection process.

In addition, it should be noted that heritage interpretation is a tool that will facilitate visitor management at the Cathedral, as it would help to manage the recreational carrying capacity of the different physical spaces in accordance with the established zoning and the visiting pattern that follows the interpretative route. All of this, bearing in mind that the Cathedral has a large margin for growth in the number of visitors in the short and medium term.

It should be remembered that the interpretative visit is a marketable product from which economic benefits are derived that can contribute to the maintenance and conservation costs of the Cathedral.

As lines of future work, the analysis of the key elements, means and strategies for the development and implementation of an interpretation programme for the Cathedral is identified. The need to digitalise the spatial information and to have a 3D model of the monument, it is also foreseen in order to be able to manage the building through HBIM (Heritage Building Information Modelling) tools. Thus, it will be easy to carry out practical analyses of the recreational carrying capacity of the different spaces available at any given time, and consequently offer the best interpretative route, as has been experimented in other Valencian religious buildings (Salvador García, 2020). Finally, and with the aim of managing visitor flows on an urban scale in the neighbourhood of La Seu, it would be appropriate to combine these results of the Cathedral in an urban tourist itinerary (streetscape) through the use of a Geographic Information System (GIS). Once these aspects have been addressed, it is proposed to study systems that provide all this information in real time for decision-making; to this end, it is suggested that the use of sensor systems be analysed.