

EDITORIAL

The Everyday Custodians of Urban Heritage

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Historic districts are commonly evaluated through visible attributes: age, architectural distinction, material integrity, and association with recognized events or persons. These criteria remain important, but they can narrow the meaning of conservation. A street is not sustained by facades alone. It is sustained by repeated practices: opening a shop, maintaining a courtyard, preparing for a festival, repairing timber, remembering former uses, or recognizing who needs assistance. Such practices are often treated as background activity even though they are the means through which a place remains culturally legible.

Critical heritage studies has established that heritage is not simply inherited material but a contemporary process of selection and value-making. The practical implication deserves stronger emphasis. If value is produced through social practice, the people who carry that practice are not incidental beneficiaries of conservation. They are custodians, even when they lack formal titles or professional credentials.

Urban conservation may increase investment, tourism, and civic recognition. It may also raise rents, restrict ordinary adaptation, favor visitor-oriented businesses, and turn homes into short-term accommodation. When residents and local trades are displaced, a district may become visually coherent while losing the relationships that made it distinctive. This is not an unavoidable side effect of success. It is a conservation failure.

The concept of “authorized heritage discourse” helps explain why such loss can remain institutionally invisible. Expert systems tend to privilege monumental, aesthetically unified, and nationally validated forms of heritage. Everyday use appears messy by comparison.

Shop signs change; buildings acquire additions; households adapt rooms; markets produce noise and congestion. Yet these modifications may record continuity rather than decline. A policy that demands an idealized historical appearance can erase evidence of how communities actually inhabit a place.

This does not mean that every alteration should be accepted or that material expertise is unnecessary. It means that decisions should distinguish between damage and adaptation. The key question is not simply whether a building has changed, but whether change supports or undermines the cultural relationships through which its value persists.

Everyday custodianship can be recognized through concrete policy. Conservation plans should map social uses as carefully as architectural features. Who uses a space at different times? Which businesses or institutions anchor local networks? Where does repair knowledge reside? Which groups are excluded from formal consultation despite depending on the area? Such mapping should be repeated because communities and pressures change.

Participation must also move beyond public meetings held after technical options have been narrowed. Residents should help define the problem, the evidence considered, and the criteria for success. Payments, childcare, translation, accessible venues, and varied meeting times are not peripheral administrative details; they determine who can participate. If only property owners and well-resourced organizations can attend, consultation will reproduce existing power.

The 2011 UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape encourages integration of conservation with social and economic development. Its

promise lies in refusing the false separation between heritage and urban life. That integration should be made measurable. A conservation program should report not only restored surfaces and visitor numbers but also housing stability, continuity of local trades, availability of public space, and resident influence over decisions.

Maintenance is a particularly important site of everyday expertise. Skilled repairers often know how local materials respond to climate, use, and time. When procurement systems favor large standardized contracts, this knowledge can disappear. Training and contracting should therefore support small workshops, apprenticeships, and intergenerational transfer. Repair is not only a technical intervention on an object; it is a cultural practice that connects material knowledge with livelihood.

At the same time, traditions should not be romanticized. Some working conditions are unsafe or unfair, and some inherited spatial arrangements exclude particular groups. Living heritage is not an instruction to freeze social relations. It is an invitation to make change through dialogue with the people who understand a place, rather than through their removal.

Urban heritage policy needs a broader account of who conserves. Professionals provide indispensable analysis, but the daily continuity of historic environments is produced by people whose labor and memory are rarely named in management plans. Protecting a building while making their presence impossible is not neutral preservation. It substitutes an image of the past for a living relationship with it. Conservation becomes more rigorous, not less, when affordability, participation, repair knowledge, and ordinary use are treated as evidence of heritage value.