

Activating Nature-based Solutions within Urban Heritage: Navigating opposition and consensus for the future of historic cities and their users

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Urban heritage faces unprecedented threats that traditional methods of conservation were never necessarily intended to respond to. Soaring temperatures, flash floods and landslides, rampant wildfires, droughts and other climate-change induced challenges have put fragile heritage contexts at risk like never before. The existing resilience paradigm of heritage is perhaps not adequately prepared to deal with new and uncertain futures (Jones, 2022). While Green Infrastructures (GI) and Nature-based Solutions (NBS) have become widely accepted as key solutions to tackling these challenges within other urban contexts, they continue to frequently be met with scepticism in heritage-rich areas. Rather than being seen as solutions, they are themselves framed as threats to the authentic preservation, experience and identity of historic cities. While some technical NBS and GI solutions have begun to be tested and proposed in urban heritage contexts (Coombes & Viles, 2021), there remain strong objections to these potential solutions based on a perceived dichotomy between protecting the past and anticipating future challenges. This presentation explores some of the current state-of-the-art research on both sides of this debate in terms of recent research, international policy documents and relevant examples.

One specific example that well highlights the controversial nature of introducing new green elements into historic cities is that of Piazza Duomo in Milan. In January 2017, one of the biggest debates that erupted in the city of Milan was the overnight appearance of palm trees in the iconic piazza. The public works project was sponsored by the American company Starbucks as part of the process of opening up their first ever location in Italy and accompanied the works of restructuring the former Post Office building in Piazza Cordusio that would house the new Starbucks Reserve Roastery. The new garden located within the Piazza Duomo contained several plant varieties, but the presence of palm trees – perceived as being un-typical of the northern Italian city was a derisive point that caused significant backlash. On one hand there were serious calls to remove the trees while it also generated light-hearted ridicule and jokes about ‘Milano Vice’ in reference to the 1980s American television series Miami Vice. While not removed nor ever becoming beloved, the palm (and banana) trees remain to this day. The debate and public discourse was largely based on the argument of protecting the heritage integrity of the site versus the insertion of new green spaces. However, the reality of the situation is more complex as the new garden was in part based on the presence of a historical one from the last century that also included similar plant species. In this way, the new project could be conceived as returning the site to a more accurate historical presentation, though this nuance was significantly lacking from the public discourse. The example highlights the complexity and need for further discussion and research on the insertion of GI and NBS into historic contexts.

Keywords

Urban heritage, Nature-Based Solutions, Green Infrastructure, Sustainability, Heritage Policy, Urban Planning

References

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