

Cultural Property Management and Physical Planning: Lessons for Cameroon.

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ABSTRACT

Historic preservation or conservation is a distinct and important aspect of physical planning developed because of disturbances or threats to structures or sites of historic importance or masterpieces of architecture. Conservation seeks to enhance, preserve and retain the symbols of the past. In many ways, the planning and preservation movement in Cameroon have had similar but separate patterns of institutional development. Although the Town Planning profession is older and more refined than the preservation movement, there is a shared concern for the quality of the built environment. This paper has attempted to look at the concept of cultural properties and examined the classification criteria, attributes, as well as methods of managing cultural properties in Cameroon, with a view of making suggestions of creating a theoretical framework/policy on how historic preservation in physical development planning could be enhanced in future. The objectives of this paper are to appraise and synthesize cultural values of historic properties and to identify how the current perspective of managing facilities in Cameroon influences the conservation process in order to conserve cultural values of historic properties. A literature review and “practices” in Cameroon as well as survey have informed the basis for this paper. Findings from the results showed that for a theoretical framework/policy for cultural values of historic properties to be developed, there must be integration and linkages of cultural values of historic properties with management of facilities in the conservation of historic properties in Cameroon. To embrace the issue of preservation of cultural properties, there is the need to acquire the necessary technical, legal and institutional framework and information.

Keywords - Cultural properties, Preservation, Conservation, Management, Physical Planning.

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I. Introduction

Cameroon is a nation of diverse customs and traditions, which is captured in the variety of historical architecture and monuments as well as vestiges from the country's colonial past. The historical places of Cameroon represent the country's rich ancient heritage and traditions, yet constantly being destroyed because of modernity.

Cultural property is the term used by the United Nations to denote sites of archeological (prehistoric), paleontological, historical, religious and unique natural value (Good land, 1988). Cultural property therefore encompasses relics left by previous human habitations such as battlegrounds, middens, shrines and unique natural environmental features such as waterfalls. Worldwide, cultural property is rapidly irreversible and unnecessarily being depleted because of rapid population growth and poorly planned economic development. This loss represents a permanent diminution of the international and national patrimony. The ability of today's generation to destroy cultural property is without precedence. With every destroyed site, future generations lose an opportunity to be enriched by their cultural history. The conservation of cultural property must always be given absolute priority. With careful planning and co-operation, economic progress need not be at odds with the preservation of cultural heritage. Indeed, it can be forcefully argued that, the preservation of cultural property is beneficial and necessary for progress.

In any particular place and time, natural and cultural processes may be at work jointly in varying degrees of combination, depending on the phenomenon being considered. Cultural processes are a prerequisite to the identification, appreciation and utilization of the natural processes. In other words, as far as man's welfare is concern, natural processes become fully meaningful and useful when they have interacted with their cultural counterparts. Man's reaction to the environment is governed by his perception of the environment, which in itself is a function of culture.

II. Problem Statement

Historic properties according to ICOMOS (1999) are conserved using a conservation process called Value-Based Management. Historic stakeholders recognize Value-Based Management as the dynamic process of conserving historic sites and places. The phrase "historic stakeholders" refers to individuals or groups who have a stake in Historic properties. These normally consist of Historic property owners, local communities, Town Planners, Historians, Conservation specialists and Architects, Historic Property Surveyors, Government, and Non-Governmental Organizations. Value-Based Management emphasis is placed on conserving and protecting the significance of the historic site and place as defined by government authorities or other owners' conservation experts.

These Value-Based Management processes use Cultural Values of Historic properties to guide decisions about conserving the historic site and place. Primary Cultural Values of Historic Buildings in particular are employed which are social, economic, political, historic, aesthetical, scientific, age, and ecological significance.

However, conserving Cultural Values of Historic property in Cameroon is always in conflict by historic stakeholders, communities and the domination of power (power to decide) and this always leads to the loss of cultural historic property. It is at this backdrop that the following questions were posed: what is the current practice in conserving Cultural Values of Historic properties in Cameroon?; does the current perspective of managing facilities in Cameroon influence the conservation process in order to conserve Cultural Values of Historic properties?.

2.1 Rationale for the preservation of Cultural Property

Objects are a part of the study of human history because they provide a concrete basis for ideas, and can validate them. Their preservation demonstrates recognition of the necessity of the past and of the things that tell its story (Michael Falser, 2015). In the Past is a Foreign Country, Lowenthal David, (1985) observes that preserved objects also validate memories. While digital acquisition techniques can provide a technological solution that is able to acquire the shape and the appearance of artifacts with an unprecedented precision in human history (Michael Falser, 2015), the actuality of the object, as opposed to a reproduction, draws people in and gives them a literal way of touching the past. This unfortunately poses a danger as places and things are damaged, the light required to display them, and other risks of making an object known and available. The reality of this risk reinforces the fact that all artifacts are in a constant state of chemical transformation, so that what is considered to be preserved is actually changing, it is never as it once was (Dallen, 2011). Similarly changing is the value each generation may place on the past and on the artifacts that link it to the past.

The world's cultural legacy consists of rich archaeological and paleontological deposits that illuminate past life on earth. Unique historical structures tell us how our ancestors lived and worked, while important religious sites are symbols of our struggle to understand the meaning of life and our relationship to our creator. Much of the responsibility to preserve cultural property stems from the fact that the present generation is uniquely able to destroy much of that legacy. Exponential population growth, coupled with powerful technologies and industrialization, is causing a serious cultural crisis akin to the crisis of decreasing biological diversity. It can be argued that the preservation of cultural property is beneficial and necessary for progress. Too often, a society's progress is simply measured in monetary terms rather than based on the wellbeing of the people. Moreover, the preservation rather than the destruction of cultural property is more likely to generate economic benefits. The concern about the loss of the world's cultural property is increasing along with sophistication about its study and preservation. UNESCO adopted the first International Convention concerning the protection of cultural property in 1954. Because priceless pieces of art and other cultural objects were destroyed, stolen or lost during World War II, UNESCO's member nations adopted the *Convention for the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict*.

2.2 Aim and Objectives of this paper

The main aim of this paper is to examine the concept of cultural properties, its attributes and to propose the development of a theoretical framework/policy for conserving Cultural Values of Historic properties in order to sustain the physical planning of historic property special buildings in Cameroon. This aim was achieved via the following objectives:

- Appraisal and synthesize of Cultural Values of Historic properties;
- Understanding the current practice in conserving Cultural Values of Historic properties in Cameroon;
- Identifying how the current perspective of managing facilities in Cameroon influences the conservation process in order to conserve Cultural Values of Historic properties;
- Develop a theoretical framework for conserving Cultural Values of Historic properties in Cameroon.

2.3 Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that a successful preventive conservation strategy will influence the conservation process in order to conserve Cultural Values of Historic property.

III. Significance of preserving Cultural Property

Cultural properties are preserved due to the following reasons:

1. The preservation and study of cultural properties can be very useful in the successful design of present and future economic development projects. The preservation and study of unique natural sites can improve our understanding of how physical and biological systems function.
2. The knowledge and understanding of a people's past can help present inhabitants to develop and sustain national identity and to appreciate the value of their own cultural heritage.
3. Each site has its own intrinsic value in the scientific study of the nature and development of the earth, its life and civilization.
4. Development of cultural properties can have significant benefits for a nation's tourism industry.
5. The destruction of a site is irreversible. The stock of sites comprising a country's cultural heritage is unique and non-renewable. Once destroyed, the sites cannot be contained. Their value and the information they contain are lost forever. Their loss represents not only a diminution of national patrimony but also a loss of humanity.

IV. Methodology

A literature review and "practices" in Cameroon have informed the basis for this paper. Survey responses from Historians, Town and Regional Planners, Directors in the Ministries of Housing and Urban Development, Tourism and Leisure, Culture, Architects and Conservators have provided insights. The critical realist research paradigm acted as the philosophical stance that informs the data gathering process that included the expert interviews and document reviews. The town of Buea and the city of Douala in the South West and Littoral Regions in Cameroon respectively are the embedded case studies used. Content and Template Analysis were used in analyzing the data.

V. Empirical Issues

While different scholars and practitioners looked at conservation as being more than aesthetics but also futuristic, a planner, Meyerson (1956) among others, started to criticize the excessive reliance of planners on comprehensive plans. He wanted a closer look at shorter-range plans and community concerned problems since historic artefacts are essentially found in neighborhoods. According to Mulloy (1967), the British National Trust was founded in 1895 as a non-profit, quasi- governmental association empowered to purchase or accept as gifts places that are valuable to the nation because of their natural beauty, historical associations or unique qualities. The developing countries are now learning from these developed countries but as of now, not much has been done.

In Cameroon, not much has been done in the way of research and formal studies into the various aspects of historic preservation. It is generally astonishing that there have been no formal studies on historic preservation. Most of the available empirical issues are not on historic preservation but on traditional settlement patterns. Gans (1962) cautioned planning practitioners to be more aware of the diverse smaller scale building blocks of planning like conservation and be more appreciative of the beauty and functionalizing of the existing neighborhood organization.

Historic preservation as a distinct kind of urban planning is relatively recent in origin. This assertion is a pointer to the fact that preservation is a new aspect of urban planning. Historical preservation remains a troublesome aspect of urban planning but can be integrated into comprehensive urban planning practice. Conservation is past and future oriented and it links the past with the present and the future. Block (1954) observed that misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past. Similarly, a man may also wear himself out fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past if he is totally ignorant of the present. Therefore, the past, present and even the future are inseparable.

Okedele (1985) wrote on the search for traditional urban form as a means of solving urban development problems in Nigeria. He emphasized on the advantages of the traditional settlement in Yoruba

towns and suggested that there should be unity of purpose, that is, conviction about traditional form and character we desire in our cities.

VI. Classification criteria of Cultural Property

Cultural properties are classified into two broad categories according to Good land and Webb (1987). The first categories are those that fall within the *Tangibles* and the *Intangibles*. Examples of intangible cultural properties are: Languages, Customs and Religions. The tangible cultural properties are grouped into two sub crops, namely the movable and the immovable. The immovable (tangible) cultural properties includes, battlegrounds, holy springs, Gardens, Town caves, volcanoes and waterfalls; meanwhile the movable (tangible) cultural properties include fossils, Artefacts and Antiques. The second category of cultural properties is archaeologically, historically, religiously and naturally classified.

- Archaeological (Prehistoric) cultural properties include shrines, middens and shards.
- Historic cultural properties include battlegrounds, towns, buildings to name but these.
- Religious cultural properties include tribal sacred sites, temples, burial grounds, holy springs or wells.
- Natural (geological) cultural properties include volcanoes, caves; (paleontological) fossils; for both fauna and flora.

VII. Attributes of selected Cultural Properties in Cameroon

The choice of historic buildings (*second category of cultural properties*) in Cameroon is being affected by age. The age of a building could be explained in terms of the location of the buildings, the material used in the construction and the architectural design. These in turn can affect the preservation methods and present a better understanding of the history associated with the buildings. Now that the age of a building is being explained in terms of location, it therefore means that, there is a significant relationship between the age of buildings and location.

There is therefore no doubt to say from every indication and according to the architectural design that, the age of a building has effects on historic preservation. In the city of Douala, for example, an older area like *Akwa* is located in the core centre of the city. In Buea for example, where the core or traditional setting is *Buea town* and *Soppo*, the old traditional compounds within this town are gradually but increasingly being demolished and broken down to give way to more modern housing units.

It is rather important to upgrade such old traditional compounds and or historic buildings so that there should be continuity and change rather than continuity in itself. The reason for this is that the present generation and those yet unborn should be able to appreciate the type of materials used for construction before and now. The figures 1, 2, 3,4,7,8 and 9 are some examples of historic buildings being renovated, upgraded and or renewed for the purpose of preservation. Figure 5 is a monument that is constantly being renovated. Figure 6 is an old traditional building yet to be renovated and the suggestion is that it should be renewed rather than demolished.



Figure 1. Old presidential Lodge in Buea
Now hosting the PM's Lodge



Figure 2: German Governor Von Puttkamer palace now the
Governor's palace in Buea



Figure 3: Residence of the Commissioner of British
Southern Cameroons in Buea



Figure 4: Old traditional building in Buea



Figure 5: Bismark fountain in Buea, 1930



Figure 6: Old German building in Dja (Villa Mandessi Bell)



Figure 7: ENIEG Kumba Administrative Building



Figure 8: Palace of the Kings Bell, built by the Germans in 1905 for King Auguste Manga Ndumbe –Government square, in the administrative quarter, Bonanjo, Douala.



Figure 9: Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Douala consecrated in 1936.

Source: Field survey, 2024

It is desirable to preserve the few that are still preservable (as shown above) especially the historic ones. The relationship between architectural design and materials used is such that provides knowledge about the history of construction over time and the kind of buildings constructed at different times. Overall, age is an important factor in historic preservation of buildings and artefacts because it has a bearing on other factors considered in historic preservation. The importance of preserving these past forms of housing is to ensure physical variety in the urban fabric and at times for adaptive re-use. Preserving buildings and artefacts from various periods guarantees visual variety in our towns and cities where an identity is created. The beauty of a town or city can be enhanced by upgrading these historical monuments. This also relates to the maintenance of the buildings.

In the study of urban form and non-motorized transportation in the historic city of Douala by Ashu S.O (2006), he observed that the urban design structure of the city is a reaction of the historic trend rather than a continuation. The city has an indigenous origin (Akwa), although it has grown considerably because of colonial intervention. This goes same with the town of Buea whose indigenous origin is *Buea town*. All the two urban areas maintained the traditional urban design structure especially in the old core areas while the developments in the newer areas have been greatly modernized. This implies that the traditional urban design structure is gradually deteriorating or almost fading out due to absence of any distinct preservation policy. There is therefore need for historical continuity to be strictly enhanced especially in the design of city structures. Historic areas and buildings must be preserved as functioning components of towns and cities in Cameroon.

VIII. Results

The findings show that on the overall, there was a good response gained from the data collected. It was found out that in order to develop a theoretical framework/policy for Cultural Values of Historic properties; there should be integration and linkages of Cultural Values of Historic properties with management of facilities in the conservation of historic properties in Cameroon.

These two concepts should be brought together to establish a theoretical framework for conserving Cultural Values of Historic properties from management of facilities perspective in order to sustain physical planning of the historic properties in Cameroon.

IX. Recommendations

To embrace the issue of preservation of cultural properties, there is the need to acquire the necessary technical, legal and institutional framework and information. Cameroon has a voluminous body of national legislation for preserving cultural properties but lacks adequate well-defined policies and procedures needed to put the laws into effective action. There is no formal document on historic preservation in Cameroon.

- There is therefore need for the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Tourism and Leisure, to identify all the traditional and or historic artefacts in all the regions within the national territory;
- There is need for the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, in collaboration with the aforementioned ministries to prepare a decree/order fixing modalities that will guide against destruction of sites of State history. The goal of such a Decree/Order is to enable the inhabitants to understand that the preservation of sites of State history and unique architecture are symbols of social history;
- Historical continuity has to be maintained by preserving historical or cultural properties and giving them adequate maintenance because, they constitute a functioning component in our towns and cities. Thus the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development should design a comprehensive physical planning framework and also to enact a decree/law that would address the preservation of historic areas and cultural properties;
- The society as a whole should also be enlightened and educated about the importance of preserving the historic and cultural artefacts and properties.

X. Conclusion

From the aforementioned discussions, the destruction of cultural properties has an impact on physical planning in Cameroon. Thus, professionals in city planning and urban design should seek to collaborate with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Tourism and Leisure, to develop a new paradigm that will utilize multi-disciplinary approaches to increase cultural property conservation. Preservation is more than a question of aesthetics. It touches our basic values. Pride in the past is the surest foundation for confidence in the future. We must jealously guard our roots in history. This systematic framework/policy if adopted may help to prevent the destruction that leads to a magnitude of loss of Cultural Historic property in Cameroon.

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