Orienting the Knowledge of International Urban Conservation in the Light of the Arab Revolutions

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This paper engages the specialists' network of urban conservation to reflect on the apparent mismatch between the knowledge and values system of experts and those of wider society in the light of the 'Arab revolutions'. A postcolonial perspective is adopted to problematise the 'thinking and doing' of a transnational community concerned with a sensitive treatment of spatial transformations in 'historic' cities of Arab-Islamic legacy in the Mediterranean. A progressive research agenda is put forward to engage critical heritage studies and the anthropology of development at the intersection where a post-western perspective is needed to disentangle the production of international cultural heritage knowledge from a scientist / positivist paradigm. Multi-sited ethnography is suggested as a methodological strategy, and the Old City of Tunis as a site to test dis-continuities with colonial and Western epistemologies, as related to the knowledge practice of urban conservation professionals.

Keywords: International networks of Urban Conservation, Knowledge practices, Postcolonial theory, Arab revolutions, Tunis

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Introduction

In the last decade processes of urban conservation and development in the Southern Mediterranean were debated in international policy arenas, and studied along disciplinary debates, until the Arab revolutions from 2011 onwards have shaken long-standing regimes. These tumultuous events referred to in Arabic as الثورات العربية (al-Thûrât al-'Arabiyy) translate into English as Arab rebellions or Arab revolutions, and are generally labelled in western media as Arab spring or Arab awakening. This paper will argue that the sense of crisis and rapid change that followed the popular uprisings is an opportunity for the international urban conservation community to reflect on its practices and re-orient debates over 'historic cities' in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean towards new directions.

The paper will explore the potential of a research agenda that would depict - and overlap - a number of specialised perspectives of urban conservation which currently converge on the body of Southern Mediterranean cities. Cities that are placed into the 'development' side of the urban scholarship divide [Robinson, 2006]. The objective is twofold. First, to critically trace respective epistemologies and knowledge practices; and second to follow how they relate to each other. The proposal is to test claims about the parochial nature of transnational (wannabe global) policies and practices by tracing steps that link an essentialised language, often filled with blurred notions, back to specific concepts and intellectual traditions underpinning theories of urban 'conservation' and 'development'. A postcolonial perspective [King, 2005; Mitchell, 2001, 2002; Said, 1979; Robinson, 2006] is strategically adopted to dis-embed specialist knowledge practices from dominant Modern and Western epistemologies, thus making space for other forms of knowledge, arguably embodied in the urban form and social practices longly associated with cultural-religious norms of Islam, as practiced in the Maghreb and Mashreq [Abu-lughod, 1978, 1987; Bianca, 2010; Hakim, 2008; Radoine, 2011]. The suggested method (multi-sited ethnography) enables researchers to investigate circulation/translation of meanings, thereby bringing under analytical lenses the tensions and contradictions (relationships and disjunctures) within narratives of international urban conservation for development, which are being framed, concurrently, in different locales and at different scales. The focus would then be on how transnational knowledge practices join different rationales of 'continuity' (conservation) and 'change' (development) in the built environment with spatial transformation taking place in - or envisioned for - a number of layered, long lived, cities of the Southern Mediterranean attracting the attention of international organisations.

Finally the paper introduces the conservation agenda for the old city of Tunis as a potential site to test dis-continuities with colonial and Western epistemologies as related to the knowledge practices of urban 'heritage experts'.

Background to conservation and development for old cities of the Southern Mediterranean

> 'The history of the Mediterranean is above all the history of Mediterranean cities'
> (Benheim, Hidouci and Messiah, 2012: 16)

From a geopolitical perspective independent states in the southern and eastern Mediterranean established between the end of the Second World War and the early 1960s (chronologically following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and a period of European colonial mandates) transformed in several instances into repressive regimes: in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, under the projected image of republican democratic institutions or, as in the case of Morocco, of a constitutional monarchy.

Other countries witnessed civil war due to sectarian politics, as the case of Lebanon (1975 to 1990) and Algeria (1991-2002). Crucially, the ongoing struggle between the Palestinian[2] and Israeli states to control the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River reverberates on the wider geopolitical region.

Plausibly old cities situated in the occident, Maghreb [المغرب], and orient, Mashreq [المشرق], of the southern Mediterranean share commonalities with those on the northern shores (Europe, Balkan Peninsula) in terms of climatic conditions, material culture, and traces of ancient civilisations. Still, these 'other' cities are typically categorised in international policy documents by virtue of additional concomitant factors: a significant legacy of Islamic civilisations; a majority of their population being ethnically Arab and/or using a dialect of the Classic Arabic language; sharing the ruling power of the Ottoman Empire for about three centuries (1550s to 1880s); being subject to European colonisation projects[3] (1830s to 1960s); and recently witnessing popular revolts against authoritarian regimes installed in the middle of the twentieth century.

After suffering a long period of neglect, decay, and marginalisation started during colonial administrations and continued in the post-independence period [Balbo, 2010:12], what are labeled nowadays as old / traditional / historic parts of these cities[4] have increasingly become, since the 1990s, sites of attention across the national/international spectrum as locales in the global tourism market capable to attract foreign investments.

In the following paragraphs I will try to disaggregate how these perspectives interrelate, starting with the identification of 'local' institutional actors and special interest groups, then tracing ways in which they interact with 'international' (aid/development) organisations, and between each other, when addressing visions of spatial transformation for the older core of the city that arguably still dispenses (cultural) identity for a wider urban agglomeration. To this point I found the following quote a useful synthesis of dynamic and emergent qualities of the 'city' that become objects of debate.

'Perfectly apt and fantastically adaptable, "city" indicates, together, a physical environment, its forms of inhabitation, the human beings that make, inhabit, and mythicize it, and the complex networks of their relationships, both permanent and volatile. "City" has evolved throughout history to continue to adhere to its complex, never complete, and changing "whole", now open and yet still always identifiable.' [Stoppani, 2010: 3]

International organisations typically frame the problem as 'physical and economic rehabilitation' of Mediterranean cities falling under the metaphorical line of a global North-South divide (ie cities outside EUropean shifting boundaries) which are then classified as 'aid recipients'. Supporting measures are usually delivered in the form of development projects implemented through technical advisory and financial contributions, whose objectives typically include: i) halting and possibly reversing physical deterioration of the urban fabric classified as 'heritage'; ii) improving living conditions of low-income residents; iii) amend national legislative and institutional frameworks; and iv) training of professionals and administrators.

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[2] The state of Palestine is recognised internationally by about 130 states, including the members of the Arab League, while its status at the United Nations is still currently debated.

[3] With variations in form, style and duration between French (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Syria and Lebanon), British (Egypt and Palestine) or Italian (Libya) control.

[4] Each of these terms framing the time-layered urban fabric in specific dialectic relation to the new / modern / contemporary urban development that has engulfed 'the old city' in the last century.

National and municipal governments increasingly link visions of economic growth, through the development of 'sustainable' tourism (as an industry), to projections of spatial transformation seen as requirements to be(come) a 'heritage destination' of global appeal. The political and administrative apparatus of each state thus intersecting (with particular specificities) with wider agendas of cultural heritage conservation and urban development put forward by international and transnational organisations. These interrelationship are typically marked by an oscillatory movement between iconoclastic, future oriented, visions of development associated with modernist planning, and a desire for conserving traces of the past thus reaffirming the value of a particular (national) cultural identity. As Mitchell remarked '[o]ne of the odd things about the arrival of the era of the modern nation-state was that for a state to prove it was modern, it helped if it could also prove it was ancient, since [...] deciding on a common past was critical to the process of making a particular mixture of people into a coherent nation' [2001: 212].

Performing the interface of institutional agendas between aid organisations and nation states, specialist interest groups (intellectual elites, professionals, academics) advocate for the conservation the historically and culturally layered urban fabric to extend beyond the preservation of monumental elements. These groups contrast two types of governmental attitudes perceived by specialists as equally problematic, sweeping modernist planning visions on the one hand and policies of laissez-faire resulting in physical decay on the other.

From the 1970s, a parallel process of international recognition of cultural values embedded in buildings and urban fabric, gained momentum following the World Heritage Convention[5] adopted by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1972. Within a decade a number of the old cities in question was registered, by signing up to this international legal tool, into a list designed to specifically include sites representative of 'universal outstanding value'[6]. It is also useful to point out that the creation of sites of 'national heritage'[7] since independence from colonial powers, and surely after creation of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, has been often used as a tool for regimes' propaganda and, as such, official heritage sites have become associated for residents with the contested legacy of oppressive governments.

A progressive research agenda for Urban Conservation and Development: Revisiting categorisations of (old) cities in the Mediterranean

The term 'old city' is adopted in this paper to define human settlements that started their life long before our time, and have reached us, across many transformations and generations, in some traceable form.

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[5] The 'Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage' is a legal instrument ratified by State Parties. As we write it has been ratified by 190 countries which' thereby agree to identify and nominate properties on their national territory to be considered for inscription on the World Heritage List' [http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/]

[6] For a critical perspective of this practice refer to Turtinen, 2000; Labadi, 2007; De Cesari, 2010.

[7] The literature addressing these topics is quite extensive and I'm listing just a few authors here to give a feeling of the spectrum covered. Some highlighting the disjunction between the past and the present and the use of traditions /material culture in the definition, manipulation, invention of national identity (Lowenthal, 1985, Hobsbawm, 1992, Levinson, 1998, Choay, 2001, Serageldin M., 2000); Others the use of the transnational construction of 'world heritage' by nation-states to mask the multi-vocality of sites and 'project carefully constructed images of the past, the nation and cultural diversity' (Labadi, 2007), often at the expenses of minorities and the grassroots (De Cesari, 2010).

'We can conceive a city as a "whole" that exists only if it is in a perpetual state of change […] As it changes … and continues to redefine itself through accretions, micro-trauma, new growth and considerable mutations - expansion becomes relative, and almost secondary [Stoppani, 2010: 2].

This section of the paper will highlight ways in which processes of labelling, and categorisation, of old cities in the southern and eastern rims of the Mediterranean contributes to frame specific developmental narratives and thereby reduce the spectrum of possible imaginaries of urban transformations. The questioning of unsettled / hybrid terms is therefore suggested as a strategy for enquiry in order to make explicit associations as well as fractures in a transnational urban conservation knowledge constructed across the metaphorical shores of the Mediterranean: from the international to the national (and vice versa); from colonial to postcolonial (and neocolonial?); from Islam to the West (and vice versa); back and forth between religion, secularism (or *laïcité* ?); as a dialogue linking Europe, the European Union, and its neighbours; as a place in-between the Universal and the Particular, Modernity and Tradition, modernism and the search for identity.

The labelling of the policy initiative 'Medinas 2030: Rehabilitation of Historic City Centres' (defined by the European Investment Bank as a 'knowledge management program' of the Marseille Center for Mediterranean Integration) offers one example of the type of bureaucratic wording critiqued by this paper. This generic formula can be then found, reassembled in a number of variations, across a varied spectrum of aid organisations. In their language, rehabilitation can be exchanged for regeneration, conservation, revitalisation; historic is synonymous with ancient, old, heritage; and southern and eastern Mediterranean is placed alongside with North African, Middle Eastern, Oriental, Arab, Islamic. Each of the labels cited above carrying then a double effect of reduction of urban complexity, as well as insertion within a particular discourse (each label slicing the field of enquiry in a particular way), that limits the imagination of possible urban futures to the section of urban life captured by the categorisation. But as Robinson arguments in Ordinary Cities '[s]imilarities and differences […] are promiscuously distributed across cities and do not neatly follow the lines of cultural, regional or structural categorisation of the world of cities' [2006: 63].

A close reading of definitions adopted in international policies of conservation and development could then disclose sets of conceptual relation implicit in any choice of wording, which cannot be considered neutral in value.

The first issue coming to mind is a latitudinal divide between policy, theory and practice for cities located on different shores of the Mediterranean basin: on the Northern rim cities are in Europe, 'Western' and modern, while those in the remaining shores [8]are Southern or Eastern, 'others' and developing. In second instance, categorisations following a linear conceptualisation of historical time proper of the philosophical project of modernity constructed, in its association with discourses of colonialism, 'the idea of the non-contemporaneousness of geographically diverse but chronologically simultaneous [sic] times' [Osborne, 1992, in Robinson, 2006:16]. A discontinuity in the continuum past, present and future, which has been used - and arguably still is - to forge dichotomies such as history/present time, conservation/development, and traditional/modern; all of which carry important consequences for how urban transformation in old cities are conceptualised and carried into practice.

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[8] Cities in the Balkan Peninsula being hybrid, geographically in Europe but politically outside of the European Union, while Turkey remains somehow isolated as a geopolitical conundrum on the edge between Europe and Asia.

The core of a more holistic urban conservation and development agenda should then be positioned at the intersection of two problématiques: on the one hand, the tension between how different conceptualisation of the Past are negotiated between specialists, interested groups within society, and politicians [Lowenthal, 1985; Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000; Sedky, 2009]; and on the other the critique of an hegemonic paradigm of progressive Time, as a product of nineteenth-century Europe, by which '[p]eople came to believe that the pattern of human affairs manifested neither the working of a divine will nor the self-regulating balance of a natural system, but the unfolding of an inner secular force' [Mitchell, 2002:1]. These complex philosophical problems becoming essentialised by mainstream agendas (due multiple political, ideological, and economic reasons) in rationales of urban transformation which distract the public from what are essential coordinates to navigate issues of continuity and change. Due the scope and length of this paper, I will just introduce those I see as crucial: the individual, together with the beliefs of their community; a complex understanding of time, valuing both life and death in a perspective of dynamic transformation; and, last but not least, the physical and existential spaces we inhabit /dwell as human beings [Heidegger, 1978 (orig. 1927)].

Exploring fruitful contradictions: the case of the Tunisian Revolution

This paper proposes then a trajectory for a progressive agenda of urban conservation based on a postcolonial reading of insights from the Arab Revolutions of 2010-12, particularly with reference to the case of Tunisia and the old city of Tunis. Further, it argues that current times of crisis and revolutionary movements on a regional scale, present researchers and reflective practitioners with the opportunity to reconsider longstanding assumptions validating international urban conservation knowledge and its practices. As a matter of fact, narratives constructed in the last two decades (eg culture and development, sustainable tourism, sites management, etc.) are likely to become reconfigured to adapt to rapidly changing contexts in cities and states of the Arab Mediterranean region, and attempt to remain viable. To ask how transnationally conceived knowledge practices have so far articulated agendas of 'rehabilitation of historic cities in the southern and eastern Mediterranean' is thus a timely question to open up possibilities for a more postcolonial, post-western [Winter, 2012], practice of urban conservation in development. Particularly for old cities which are still, too often, assimilated to French colonial constructs of the *médina* as epitome of the non-European city: outmoded, random, labyrinthine and chaotic.

The case of the Tunisian revolution offers an example of what I would consider 'fruitful contradictions', tensions to be explored as a starting point to re-orient the expertise of international urban conservation. Dramatic changes brought about by the 'Revolution of Dignity', from the Arabic ثورة الكرامة [Thawrat al-Karāmah], make Tunis a very interesting site to explore the research agenda outlined so far when coupled with long-standing concerns for the conservation of its old city, in Arabic المدينة العتيقة [Madina al-Atiqah]. Since 4 January 2011, Tunis has become a centre of global attention, as Tunisian people - protesting against unemployment, corruption, and a repressive police-type regime - forced president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to remit the power he seized in 1987. Tunisia, a state strongly modernised in the 1960s by president Bourgouiba after independence from the French Protectorate, in the last couple of years has witnessed a significant change in the political sphere with the emergence and electoral affirmation of Ennhada: a party previously banned and explicitly inspired by Islamic values. In current times of transition and uncertainty, national debates are centred around tensions between reformism (sided with Modernity) and the quest for a Tunisian identity (cultural, religious as well as political) as significantly represented by the very name of the party Ennhada (النهضة) that can be translated as 'renaissance' [Ghorbal, 2012].

What could be learned then by exploring tensions in the dialectic pair change/continuity as they reverberate on urban transformation narratives that will emerge and attempt to define the future of old cities, particularly in Tunis? Looking at post-revolution changes from the 'heritage' perspective of protected areas in old cities, such as the capital Tunis, concerned specialists report a mushrooming building activity, with unauthorised demolitions and new constructions starting as soon as control measures were halted due to a transitional phase in government that resulted in a in a power vacuum [Fig. 1].
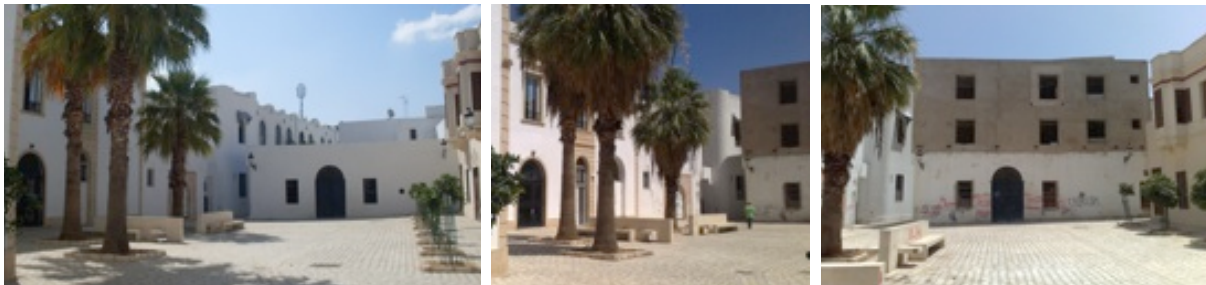
Figure 1. Medina of Tunis, Place Khereiddine Pacha: left to right the square in August 2010 at completion of the urban conservation project by ASM [source: Wikimedia], and in June 2012 after illegal construction of two floors facing the Museum of the City [source: author].

Once considered together, these two phenomena present 'post-regime heritage' [Silverman, 2012: 3] with an apparent contradiction between a reaffirmation of religious-cultural identity in the political sphere and, at the same time, a negation of value for the 'historic' built fabric representative of past architectural achievements and thus frequently associated with nostalgic feelings for 'traditional' values and ways of life. Such apparent contradictions are suggested here as the starting points for reorientation of urban conservation. The desired contribution of this paper is then to bring forward debates on urban conservation coming from the Islamic world, as well as reflecting on the implicitly hybrid nature of conservation practices for Arab-Islamic cities of the Mediterranean often constructed on the basis of Western epistemologies.

The Old City of Tunis as a crossroad of urban conservation and development
Moving from theoretical propositions, this section outlines the potentiality of the old city of Tunis as a selected site of investigation. The city, capital of Tunisia, is layered with a rich Arab-Islamic cultural legacy from the seventh century onwards as well as traces of ancient mediterranean civilisations (notably Carthage) and, in 1979, was Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site as 'Medina of Tunis'.
The research assumption is that analysing (dis)continuities between Tunis and transnational policies / institutions one could observe how definitions translate, and unfold, into the specific context; how practices take control over abstractions; how the politics of urban conservation becomes embodied in the process and actors.
The case is particularly pertinent to the question of how knowledge practices of urban conservation professionals articulate cultural heritage conservation and diverse development agendas, as the medina of Tunis has been described 'as the best, scientifically researched Arab old town' [Escher and Schepers, 2008: 129].

In addition, Tunis features a remarkable continuity in urban conservation practice and a respectable international reputation within experts networks, specially in the Mediterranean, due to the longstanding experience and innovative approaches of the *Association de Sauvegarde de la Médina de Tunis* (ASM) operating since 1967.

The term médina, since the French Protectorate (1881-1956) has been used to denote the non-European city in opposition to the *ville nouvelle*, the modern colonial city. Derived from the Arabic word for 'city' مـديـنة [madīnah] used especially in the Maghreb, it is still widely adopted to refer to the historic centre of the city, and precisely because of its hybrid nature deserves a more accurate 'translation' [Marcus, 1995] to question its local/colonial/postcolonial aura and thus open multiple directions for research. For example, specialist knowledge of the 'medina' - represented by architects planners as an artistic jewel and/or urban object - is arguably related to both colonial and scientific paradigms [McGuinness, 1997; Bacha 2006b]. As an ideal construct, the 'medina' has been symbolically charged in many ways: firstly, as emblem of resistance against colonial domination [Abdelkafi, 1989: 251] and then of national identity; more recently being branded as 'cultural asset' to be revitalised via tourism [Escher and Schepers, 2008; Saidi, 2012]; and last but not least, retaining value as a place of tradition and religious significance. In the last century, the process of 'heritage' construction [Bacha, 2008], and knowledge practices of urban conservation [McGuinness, 1997], have evolved in close relation to France - both as colonising power and provider of modern epistemologies - making the case of Tunis specially apt for problematisation via postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial critique: where critical heritage studies meet anthropology of development

To develop this agenda in an innovative way, the suggestion is to seek a more engaged exchange between two bodies of critical work: heritage studies and the anthropology of development (expertise). Along which lines then could one open up a conversation between these two fields, thus developing a stronger sense of knowledge articulation beyond disciplinary compartmentalisation? As a start, the critique of an 'authorised heritage discourse' [Smith, 2006] focuses on the modalities by which experts place values on the built fabric, and aims to redefine values as socially constructed systems of meaning [Zancheti and Jokilehto, 1997; Gibson and Pendlebury, 2009].

To this point, the debate following 'Decennial reflections of a "geography of heritage" (2000)'[Tunbridge, Ashworth and Graham, 2012; Harvey, 2012; Silverman, 2012; Shackel, 2012; Winter, 2012a] illustrates how ideas of 'heritage' as process rather than product, as dissonance instead of consensus, as a tool for claims of power and identity - with scalar implications (international, glocal) and an ambiguous relationship with economics - have resinated and further developed. The field of critical heritage studies in the last decade has grown exponentially and is currently very much alive, debating its diversity and future directions. While 'one of the most important recent intellectual developments of heritage studies is an understanding of heritage as a present-centred and future-orientated process' [Harvey, 2012], what is at stake 'here is the dilemma of how to best arrange knowledge production for the study of heritage' [Winter, 2012a: 1] when the language of critical heritage theory derives from the social science and humanities, while professional disciplines of conservation train experts 'in material-centric disciplines that privilege scientific and/or positivist methodologies' [ibid: 2]. Winter goes on to question the 'possibility and limitations of creating boundary crossing conversations' [ibid: 3] between science and humanities, across separate knowledge practices of academic theory and conservation practice, and ultimately around the multidimensional issues of human development.

In particular pushing critical heritage studies 'to account for its relationship to today's regional and global transformations, in ways that validate its conceptual development and respond to the new ideologies of globalisation' [Winter, 2012b: 11], in 'an arena of knowledge production that responds to and engages with pressing challenges by moving beyond the limited repertoire of epistemologies currently privileged' [ibid].

At the intersection where a post-western perspective is called to problematise how the production of international cultural heritage knowledge became entangled with a scientistic, positivist paradigm there is space for opening a dialogue with an anthropology of development that imports complex, processual thinking to critically address the construction of policy, of spending categories, and ethnographically explores the community of professionals/experts in international development [Green, 2009; Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Mosse et al., 1998; Mosse, 2005, 2011]. Winter [2012b] argues in the International Journal of Heritage Studies that

'[a]s ways of knowing culture and the past, these scientistically oriented knowledge practices [archaeology, architectural conservation and museums] would provide the epistemological and intellectual foundations for the transnational cultural agencies that would emerge in the aftermath of the Second World War. As various commentators such as Wallerstein (2006) and Escobar (1995) have observed, in the post-colonial decades of the 1940–1960s, the scientific paradigm continued its ascendency in the international arena, even in the domain of culture, as its supposed universality enabled European knowledge to sidestep the post-colonial critique, including accusations of its role in unjust imperial rule' [ibid: 6-7]

the conversation ideally continues where Mosse in An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice [2005] states that

'[n]o longer moored to the assumptions of the old colonial and Cold War world order and its "science of development", notions of growth progress, modernization aid or development demand constant conceptual work to remain politically and morally viable' (ibid:1).

This articulation of theory and practice, across heritage and development, is then crucial to problematise the transnational constructs of urban conservation in the Southern Mediterranean depicted in the first part of the argument. As demonstrated by the aforementioned literature 'in anthropological hands, policy discourse is desembedded from the expert communities that generate, organize (and are organized by) its ideas' [Mosse, 2011: 2]. This lesson could then be applied to explore the community of experts in international urban conservation (professionals, policymakers, scholars) which so far have remained prisoners of an insulated debate despite some attempts to reach out.

The research agenda sketched so far would then problematise urban conservation policy (linking theorisations of heritage to current urban transformations) from the perspective of development practice, thus valuing different types of knowledge and reflecting on participatory learning processes where different voices are recognised, within and beyond communities of expertise [De Cesari, 2010] and, at the same time, question development policy (as a link between theory and practice) from the perspective of urban conservation, dealing with 'the latent conflict that exists between continuity and change in the urban structures and their elements' [Zancheti an Jokilehto, 1997] beyond essentialised notions of 'cultural heritage'. New investigations would then be trans-disciplinary and reaching across the theory / practice divide in urban conservation and development, as the problem could be fruitfully addressed from the perspective of complexity thinking (systemic, emergent, dynamic, adaptive, etc) [Morin, 1974].

Methodological reflections

On a personal level, the interest in understanding reciprocal connections between built form and cultural practices [King, 1980] specially in Arab-Islamic cities of the Mediterranean has connected my academic and professional experience as architect planner for about fifteen years. Initially drawn to international 'development' practice by an aspiration to see / explore / test how conservation of material culture could be integral to a human development agenda (beyond critiques of elitist practice not contributing to the cause of 'the poor'), I became frustrated from testing the recurrent dissonance between development policy wording and the actual challenges of professional practice framed as consultancy. In the end, ethical questions about spending large funds (often borrowed by the state) in 'projectised activities' of a limited shelf-life, lead me to step outside of professional practice to look at the problem from an academic research perspective.

This double identity on the one hand allows a vantage point spanning across two sets of knowledge practices (built environment technical disciplines as well as social sciences), while on the other it can be challenging to differentiate which 'hat' the researcher is wearing in relation to the diverse knowledge toolkits adopted when reflecting on the object of study. The matter being further complicated in the hybrid realm of internationally constructed scientific and technical epistemologies. In practical terms, a practitioner turned researcher could face the dilemma of how to map and interpret multiple perspectives embodied in expertise networks of urban conservation professionals and policymakers - of which s/he partakes knowledge practices - without loosing the focus proper of academic analysis. On the other hand, an academic could be challenged to understand the epistemological and political implications faced by those who enact professional practice across 'interfaces and fractures' linking local specificities to transnational policies, in a way that pays due respect the complexity of the problem seen from a practical/ operational perspective. In thinking about how one might approach this challenge, two potential paths lie ahead, each with its knowledge practices so far separated along a theory / professional practice divide. I believe that both trajectories contribute to knowledge (as learning process), but the respective planes of 'thinking and doing' do not intersect enough to provide a multidimensional image. While the articulation of 'thinking and doing' through reflexive practice could open up new lines of enquiry on the study of urban conservation processes, interrelations between practitioners and theoreticians are arguably under researched [9]. For example, how does the practitioners thinking influence their doing, and how this doing is institutionally organised?; or can the doing contribute to a process of public learning or not[10]?

To overcome this methodological conundrum this article proposes to frame investigations through 'multi-sited ethnography'. Developed in anthropology to investigate a 'cultural formation, produced in several different locales, rather than the conditions of a particular set of subjects [as] the object of study' [Marcus, 1995: 99], this method allows the researcher/ethnographer to compose locations at different scale, and of varied nature, within a single terrain [Marcus, 1995, 1999]. Specially relevant for the proposed research agenda is the possibility to: first, track the 'circulation' of meanings, eg through associations, connections, disjunctures and fractures; and second, to explore 'translation' from one cultural idiom to the other through multiple languages, specialist lexicon and spatial constructs (morphologies) in the urban fabric.

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[9] I owe much insights on this aspect to conversations with Michael Safier at the Development Planning Unit, London.

[10] On a preliminary basis, the author has explored these questions with regards to the role of foreign professional expertise in supporting the priorities and autonomy of local actors in cultural heritage conservation and valorisation in the case of Aksum, Ethiopia [Nardella and Mallinson, forthcoming].

Fieldwork in multiple sites could then be designed to probe associations between agendas of urban transformation (conservation and development) for one, or more, old cities and global normative frameworks.

At the broader scale this would entail mapping the terrain of how knowledge practices articulate transnational policies (as sites of enquiry) of urban 'conservation and development' about the 'Southern Mediterranean': eg through the design of technical and legal tools for interpretation, conservation, and management of 'heritage' sites; and/or policies for 'sustainable' economic development.

'International' actors preliminarily identified in generating both policies and practices include: intergovernmental agencies and their non-governmental advisory bodies; multilateral financial institutions; supranational and state-funded cooperation/development agencies; philanthropic and specialist institutions.

At a detailed scale, the validity of universalist claims of expert knowledge (and related taxonomies) could be confronted with the specific qualities of spatial transformations occurring in selected old cities of the southern and eastern Mediterranean (as relational site of investigation).

Where meanings associated with 'international' categories morph in a significant manner when placed into a particular urban context, one could argue an implicit parochial (Western) nature of 'universalist' epistemologies found in the larger scale.

The investigation would then purposefully track knowledge practices, as ways of articulation and transmission of knowledge by specialists, acting across the international-local spectrum of policymaking and practice. Emerging policy concepts and categories, still unsettled in their definition, would become topical items of investigation in order to question the apparent consensus surrounding 'international' urban conservation and development agendas by following which tensions emerge in the expert community during the 'solidification' process that typically transforms a policy idea into an official dogma [Ellerman, 2001] sanctioned by one or more organisation (eg cultural heritage as a contributor to economic development).

Conclusions

This paper aimed to engage experts networks of urban conservation to reflect on the apparent mismatch between the knowledge and heritage values system of specialists[11] and those of wider society as revealed in the light of the Arab revolutions, particularly the case of Tunisia and Tunis old city.

Reflecting on embodied in tensions emerged in the aftermath of the popular uprisings - namely those related to continuity and change - the aim has been to highlight the necessity and scope for a reorientation in current mainstream international urban conservation practices directed to old cities in the Southern Mediterranean.

A postcolonial perspective has been suggested to problematise the 'thinking and doing' of a transnational community of expertise concerned with spatial transformations in old cities that are valued specially for their Arab-Islamic urban legacy and ancient roots in Mediterranean civilisations. The suggested research agenda, strategically adopting a multi-sited ethnographic methodology, could open up new directions by exploring dis-continuities across scale (from transnational to the neighbourhood) and knowledge frames that guide policies and spatial transformations currently discussed in urban conservation expertise networks.

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[11] For an outline of the literature see Avrami, Mason and de la Torre, 2000; de la Torre, 2002; Gibson and Pendlebury, 2009; and publications of the research project on the Values of Heritage carried out by the Getty Conservation Institute (1998-2005).

Further, I would argue that reflecting on apparent contradictions that emerge in the current 'transition' phase of Arab Revolutions should inspire researchers and reflective practitioners to confront long standing parochialisms hiding at times behind a 'mere' technical understanding of the problem (joined to supposedly shared values and terminology); otherwise concealed under an international ideal of universally valid, co-produced, knowledge that could be applied to many contexts; and often implicit in the (af)filiation with the cognitive tradition of Architecture as a specific way of seeing and representing the city and the urban. At the same time, it would be important to further ground the argument in macro-scale dynamics of the last two decades and to intersect this analysis with an outline of how debates on the conservation of historic (parts of) cities [12] have shifted in relation to the powerful paradigm of culture and development [UNESCO, 1996; Schech and Haggis, 2000].

The broader scope of the paper is then to continue on the path of distancing specialist knowledge from Orientalist [Said, 1979] representations of people inhabiting old cities of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean as lacking awareness of their cultural heritage[13] and thus needing to be guided on the right path, where such constructs often echo colonial and imperial knowledge practices of the last century that aimed at constructing an image of 'others' as inferior to European, Christian, Modern epistemologies.

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[12] See for reference Bandarin and van Oers [2012], chapters one and two.

[13] See Bacha, 2006, 2008 in the case of Tunisia; and AlSayyad, Bierman and Rabbat, 2005; and Sanders, 2006 for a useful comparison with Cairo.

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