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Abstract for the The Re/theorisation of Heritage Studies

June 5-8, 2012 Association of Critical Heritage Studies Inaugural Conference, Gothenburg, Sweden

Keywords: Urban Heritage, Historic Centers, Governance, Urban Redevelopment, Latin America

Competing Perspectives of the Historic Center: Does Urban Rehabilitation Always Mean Exclusion?

Concern over the viability of urban heritage management as a tool for equitable economic development and poverty reduction has emerged as cities compete for recognition at the global and national level and international development banks increase lending for culture and heritage. The examination of historic districts as contested spaces, both physically and symbolically, characterizes them as spaces of struggle in the contemporary city. The careful selection of symbols and imagery, the manner in which the city, state, and local government engage citizens, tourists, real estate investors, and international donors must be considered in the rehabilitation of historic districts. In postcolonial states, the manner in which images and symbols of colonial domination are portrayed may require more cautious consideration. At the same time, local economic development is critical to the sustained importance of historic districts and tourism can obviously provide substantial income. However tourism often provides low-paying, service sector jobs for the majority, while reserving parts of the city for certain people and excluding others; real estate has been identified as holding greater potential for income generation, particularly for urban sites, as historic districts are often centrally located within the modern city.

The use of historic preservation as a way to increase cultural capital and re-brand the city in the international arena, particularly for developing countries, can take a heavy toll on the local population, as well as municipal budgets. These impacts can be exaggerated when actions are justified by global institutions, acting in the name of all humanity. This paper will examine urban heritage management and its ability to connect social, economic, and democratic issues to promote sustainable urban futures through a case study of the historic center of Quito, Ecuador. Quito, the first city in Latin America to be recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978, represents a strong example of an internationally financed historic preservation project and the dynamic struggle between the forces of planning and order and the spontaneous organization of the city. This paper will examine the contested role of the historic center: examining the use of heritage as a tool for development and seeks to understand the role multi-scalar governance in the redevelopment of heritage sites (Swyngedouw, 2004). It will explore the notions of rehabilitation as a means to bring the urban community together or as an amplification of urban fragmentation. Based on mixed

methods field work carried out in Quito, Ecuador, the paper will question whether we “ask too much of heritage” (Lowenthal, 1998). The paper will illustrate that heritage can be used as an instrument for more than conservation, but it also demonstrates that changing perceptions and re-imaging neighborhoods is a slow process which requires more than clearing public spaces and rehabilitating old buildings.

References

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Unless historic preservation is rooted in local struggles for justice and equality, preservation projects are in danger of representing the growing division between class and race that exist in Quito and other Latin American cities