Recovering Images of the Past: The Medieval Fortifications in Contemporary Portuguese Cities

Joaquim RODRIGUES DOS SANTOS, PhD. Student
Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, E. T. S. de Arquitectura y Geodesia, Portugal
joaquimr.santos@gmail.com

For many centuries, castles and city walls conditioned the urban development of cities; however, the decay of those defensive systems, caused by the fact that they weren’t prepared against fire arms, made them begin a slow decline. Their obsolescence made them be regarded as a physical barrier to the development of the cities and thus, there was, in many cases, a systematic demolition of those fortifications, especially in the 19th century. With the emergence of the heritage concerns, the old medieval defensive elements were gradually acquiring importance again, as part of the urban space, contributing and influencing the development of cities.

Analysing the Portuguese urban development since the middle of the 19th century until the present days, we can find an evolution in the way how the city was faced, and how a patrimonial view over the urban space was developed. The contemporary images of our historic cities are also a product of what was made yesterday - and not only in the ancient times; in fact, the images that we have about the cities (or parts of cities) which are considered testimonies of the Past were, in many cases, built in the last two centuries, by deforming and rebuilding those ancestral memories. Actually, in some cases, we are presently seeing in the historic cities what people from yesterday thought the cities would be in the Past; and that image was crystallized to the Future by them, as part of their heritage concerns. So, several principles were applied in heritage interventions involving military medieval structures in the urban space: considerable portions of cities were demolish on behalf of the value increase of military monuments, freeing them from buildings that were suffocating them, and thereby, recomposing the “original space frame”, and large areas surrounding the ancient military structures were object of “beautification interventions”, in order to re-qualifying the ambience of the built sets. Nowadays, the city walls continues to act as elements that are conditioning the urban planning process (producing different urban programs), because the circumscription of historic cores by a walled perimeter set a inevitable physical border with their inevitable consequences.

KEY WORDS: Medieval castles, heritage rehabilitation, urban planning.