The Tragedy of Line C: The World’s Great Cities have a Monumental Problem. by Building for the Future, Must They Erase the Past?

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THE WORLD’S GREAT CITIES HAVE A MONUMENTAL PROBLEM. BY BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE, MUST THEY ERASE THE PAST?

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Rome—all roads leading to Rome are measured from a patch of grass in the middle of Piazza Venezia. Overlooking the square, a 400-foot monument celebrates the reunification of Italy. It was here, at the piazza, that Mussolini hung over a balcony and declared, to the electrified crowds below, a new Italian empire. Both the republican and imperial forums, with their triumphal arches and ruined temples, stand a few steps away. And at the end of the road leading southeast from the piazza, against the sky, looms the Colosseum.

But something else in the corner of this historic city center illustrates the spirit of a place enamored with the old while striving for the new—a metro stop turned excavation site.
For the past three and a half years, Rome has been building a new subway line underground to link the city’s two other underground lines. Instead of skirting the historic center, Line C will drive right through it. The plan is convenient for locals and tourists alike, who currently have to ride the bus or walk to get from, say, the Colosseum to Piazza Navona, a distance of 1.6 miles. But by carving through the underbelly of the centro storico, the line also passes beneath neighborhoods that made up Rome’s commercial and political center 2,000 years ago.

Most of these ruins—the heart and soul of ancient Rome—are 12 to 35 feet underground. To avoid them, the city planned to dig the subway tunnel nearly 100 feet below street level. However, entrances into the system are problematic. One stop originally planned for Largo Argentina, the site of four Republican temples and the theater where Julius Caesar was murdered, got scrapped. And when preliminary digs found ruins where planners initially wanted a Piazza Venezia metro stop, the city judged the remains so important that the Venezia stop will be built elsewhere.

The result? The proposed Line C that was meant to serve the centro storico may make hardly any central stops at all. Some locals aren’t happy. “All of Rome has underground archaeological finds. So if we remain prisoners of manic conservationists, we cannot dig anywhere. Farewell subways,” Mauro Suttora, an Italian journalist and editor, wrote on his eponymous blog. “A metro without stops—what sense does that make?” asked Mario Staderini, secretary of Italy’s Radical Party.

Many of Rome’s residents aren’t surprised by the changes to the subway plan. They know it has to be this way. In a city that’s littered with historic sites—the ruins of an empire that once made the Mediterranean into its private lake—the balance between modern development and historical preservation has never been easy. Urban planners and locals alike are used to facing down an increasingly prescient question: How to develop and modernize while still preserving a rich cultural heritage?

NOT JUST FOR THE ELITES
Without a city’s residents fighting to protect their cultural heritage, even the best preservation policies can founder. Given their roots among the educated and wealthier classes, preservationists have had a historically difficult time appealing beyond elites. Many assume that urban preservation is just about aesthetics, an issue for people who don’t have to worry about paying their rent or putting food on the table. But urban planners and conservationists insist this is not the case. Preserved buildings and neighborhoods help more than just the upper classes.

Some of it is simple math. Since knocking down an old building to build a new one costs money, the investor is faced with the challenge of how to recoup that outlay. A new structure’s purpose, therefore, will likely be commercial or residential—in both cases targeting wealthier tenants. “Just using the existing buildings means you can actually afford to have poor people living in them, and that generates greater diversity, greater variety of cultural traditions. That in itself is

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worth value,” says Sean O’Reilly, director of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation in Edinburgh. Historic areas also tend to have a greater variety of buildings, adding to the diversity of uses. This creates a range of professions and classes coming together, all making for a vibrant neighborhood.

On a practical note, older structures tend to be built to last. Take the trend of placing “maintenance-free” plastic windows in an 18th-century building that always used glass. The plastic windows cost less, but their lifespan is often 20 years at most, whereas the glass, if maintained correctly, could last for centuries. Old buildings are “green,” particularly their thick stone walls doubling as natural insulation. Even compared to sustainable architecture, some old buildings come out ahead, particularly when you factor in the cost of bulldozing one building, trucking its materials to the landfill and replacing it with a new structure.

The least tangible reasons for preservation, though, might be the most important—primarily, historians say, the cultural and social aspects. “A sense of place is critical to a healthy community. So much ‘sense of place’ comes out of the built environment that we inhabit,” says Don Linebaugh, director of the University of Maryland architectural school’s historic preservation program. “So it’s a form of identity, both personal and political and national…and [it] can have a huge impact on the way we live our lives.”

INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGES

In the past few decades, archaeological remains and historic sites have faced ever larger, seemingly unstoppable threats that can destroy old neighborhoods faster than any amount of water seepage. These new dangers include rapid urbanization, uncontrolled development and invasive tourism. And they all are rooted in the same modern phenomenon—globalization. Every city on earth now takes part in the world economy, and historic cities are particularly vulnerable to the real estate and tourism markets. Even in cities like Rome, where urban residents want to protect their cultural heritage, historic buildings are under threat. Residents enjoy increasingly less power over how their cities look and function.

These are relentless pressures, and conservationists hasten to argue that they aren’t fighting simply to freeze cities in time. Instead, they use the catchphrase “controlled change.” Controlled change means avoiding unregulated, rapid development. As long as development occurs—and, to keep a city thriving, it should—investors and urban planners need to pay close attention to how new structures fit in with the rest of the city. Instead of knocking down an old neighborhood to build a strip mall, for example, old buildings could be carefully repurposed to provide more shops.

Yet viewing urban development through the lens of preservation, while trying to wed both efforts, is relatively new and quite tricky. After all, it’s not enough to have a perfectly preserved 14th-century church if its surrounding medieval neighborhoods are being razed to build skyscrapers. Nor is it a job well done to keep a medieval neighborhood, but squeeze out the residents and businesses that give it character. It’s a fine balance—keeping a city modern, but not over-commercialized; preserved, but not Disneyfied.

CITIES ARE LIVING BODIES. YOU CAN’T FREEZE THEM INTO MUSEUMS, AND YOU CAN’T PREVENT DEVELOPMENT
“Cities are living bodies,” says Lodovico Folin-Calabi, program specialist at the UNESCO World Heritage Centre. “You can’t freeze them into museums, and you can’t prevent development. What you can do is put together a platform of good principles.”

International associations like UNESCO and the World Heritage Committee are adapting solutions against increasingly global urban challenges. The World Heritage Committee is compiling a new list of recommendations for cities, Folin-Calabi says. This “toolkit,” set to be adopted in 2011, will update a set of 1976 recommendations. The new list aims to help cities balance preservation with development.

The United Nations created the World Heritage Committee, the most influential international preservation agency, in 1972 in reaction to two major threats. The first was Egypt’s plan to build the Aswan High Dam, which would have flooded the Abu Simbel valley along with its 3,000-year-old Temple of Ramses II and 2,000-year-old Sanctuary of Isis. UNESCO launched an $80 million campaign in 1959 to move the temples higher to dry ground. The second threat was flooding that nearly destroyed Venice in 1966. Again, UNESCO stepped in. Six years later, the Heritage Convention was adopted.

All 187 countries that signed the convention promise to conserve their cultural heritage—buildings or sites deemed to be of “outstanding universal value” from a historic, artistic or scientific point of view. Properties selected by the committee’s panel of experts, one from each of the 21 different member states, are placed on the World Heritage list. There are 911 World Heritage properties today, including 250 in urban areas. Signatory nations have access to the World Heritage Fund, which provides restoration and preservation assistance. Just $4 million is available annually, but the visibility as a World Heritage site can attract funds from other national and international organizations.

Listed sites also have to submit any major development projects to the committee for analysis. If the committee decides the project is detrimental to the site’s “outstanding universal value,” it can be removed from the list. This might seem a small price to pay for a billion-dollar development contract, but urban planners and preservationists argue that the system can work. “The World Heritage Committee is acting like a schoolmaster,” says François Vigier, president of the nonprofit Institute of International Development, which researches urban development in emerging economies. “That’s a very healthy relationship,” he adds.

Vigier points to the case of Old Damascus, a World Heritage site in Syria. In 2007, the local government announced it would redevelop Damascus’ ancient center. Plans included turning King Faisal Street, a road dating back to the 8th century, into a 130-foot-wide highway, destroying shops and homes along the way. Preservationists, along with the local media, erupted in protest.

So did the World Heritage Committee. Although the street would run outside the walled city center—and, therefore, outside of official World Heritage-listed property—the committee’s experts saw the neighborhood as a “buffer zone” around the Old City. Undermining the historical character of that district, they argued, would irreversibly damage the city’s cultural value. And, they added, the larger suburban area is linked inextricably to the World Heritage-listed Old City because of the neighborhoods’ shared histories, architecture, social patterns and commercial activities.
BULLDOZING THE PAST

After the committee threatened to de-list the Old City if development continued apace, plans to change King Faisal Street were withdrawn. But another project to dig up Damascus’ oldest road, the Via Recta, to update its sewer system, continued—destroying the Roman columns that lined the street and triggering the collapse of several houses. Although the committee demanded Damascus run archaeological impact assessments before continuing, the damage had already been done.

By contrast, that same year, construction began on a four-lane, 2,100 foot bridge across the Elbe River in Dresden, Germany. Supporters, including the municipality itself, said the bridge was necessary to ease traffic congestion. Opponents said it would damage the ecology of the area and spoil the beauty of the Elbe River Valley. Negotiations stalled. In 2009, the World Heritage Committee pulled the Elbe Valley from its list. The bridge remains under construction.

“Our international experts assessed that the outstanding universal value of the site, because of the works, was irremediably lost,” says Folin-Calabi. He points out that while only two sites, the Elbe Valley and Oman’s Oryx Sanctuary, have been pulled from the list, both removals occurred in the past three years. “There is a trend of being a little bit more severe,” he says.

ROME: IMPERFECT PRESERVATION

In many ways, the city of Rome is one of the world’s best examples of controlled change. While new construction occurs, it’s only allowed after thorough review. Rome’s residents are, for the most part, acutely aware of the need to preserve their ancient ruins and historic neighborhoods. This is typical of Western Europe, where most people seem to accept the importance of urban preservation, or at least carefully weigh its value against development. Even so, the battle—to raise funds, recruit personnel, and combat global pressures—is still being fought.

Much of Rome’s ability to control change comes from strongly established legal protections. Italy’s most recent (and exhaustive) law on heritage, passed in 2004, states that “cultural properties may not be destroyed, damaged or adapted to uses not compatible with their historic or artistic character or of such kind as to prejudice their conservation.” The English translation of the law is 153 pages. The statute also defines punishments, including imprisonment of up to one year and a fine of up to €38,734.50 for removing, modifying or restoring those properties.

Of course, for many sites, legal protections come too late. Since the end of the 19th century, Rome’s historical center—3,460 acres in all—has lost some 250 acres of buildings and 1,730 acres of gardens, vineyards and open space.

Furthermore, developers need permits for every step of the process. Even if a builder obtains a permit to knock down one building and put up a new one, the site’s subterranean value must first be surveyed. By reviewing past studies, making exploratory trenches, or (usually) both, archaeologists can get a fairly clear picture of what might be under the ground. And when they find ruins, as they nearly always do in the centro storico, construction grinds to a halt and excavation begins. Only when it’s completed—and only if the ministry of culture and the municipality determine that the findings are not important enough to scrap the project—can development resume.

While the safeguards sound strong in principle, in practice, the government
attempts to simplify the process and minimize protections, explains Elizabeth Fentress. Fentress, an archaeologist who has worked in Rome for 30 years and is the president of the International Association for Classical Archaeology, says that the builders’ lobby in Italy is particularly influential. “The real war is between the current government, which regards antiquities as a pain, and the soprattendenza [ministry of culture] and the public, who care,” Fentress says. Some residents, for example, are upset over the planned parking lot off Largo Lorenzo Perosi in the centro storico. The underground, multistory lot is a stone’s throw from Via Giulia, a road that was built by Pope Julius II in 1508, designed by Bramante and punctuated with famous buildings like the Palazzo Farnese and Church of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini. Local residents protested the project, fearing damage to the area’s beauty and, possibly, to the foundations of the historic buildings themselves. Some archaeologists were wincing as well, particularly since testing revealed several-hundred-year-old ruins. But after years of wrangling—the parking lot first got the tentative go-ahead back in 2004—the project was given the definitive green light this April. That surprised many, given that another multilevel car park, originally planned for the Pincian hill overlooking Piazza del Popolo, was called off in 2008 to avoid destroying ruins and undermining both the hill’s Aurelian walls and its scenic 19th-century walkway.

SHREDDING THE FABRIC
Rome’s major challenge, though, is not the threat of modern development—it is preserving a cultural heritage already exposed to the vagaries of a modern city. After all, as soon as a site is unearthed, it starts deteriorating. “It’s not like the American situation, where most of your cultural heritage sites are in museums. These things are outside. There’s a slow path of decay that’s going to be taking place, no matter what,” says Darius Arya, a Rome-based archaeologist and director of the American Institute for Roman Culture. “The best thing you can do, if you want to preserve these sites, is just have them buried.” But that’s not practical—or in line with the spirit of a city so renowned for the tangibility and accessibility of its past.

Instead, conservationists can only limit the amount of damage by fencing off delicate areas or opening sites to visitors at certain times of the year. But to undo inevitable wear and tear, restorations and repairs are necessary. And in Rome, as elsewhere, the major difficulty is resources. The cash just isn’t there. Italy’s current debt runs to more than 115 percent of its gross domestic product, and the ministry of culture’s budget has been cut by €280 million through 2012, bringing the proportion of its budget Italy spends on culture to just 21 cents of every €100.

Rome has already witnessed the effects of these limited resources. Part of the Domus Aurea—the fantastical palace erected by Emperor Nero in the first century—collapsed earlier this year, even though the city had long been aware of water damage to the structure. The Aurelian Walls have collapsed several times in the past decade, despite frequent calls for an overhaul. And in May, three chunks of mortar fell off the Colosseum—hurting no one, but underscoring the need to better protect the nearly 2,000-year-old site. Weeks later, Rome announced that it was searching for private sponsors for a €25 million restoration of the amphitheatre.
Meanwhile, the cultural fabric of the city is under threat. Though less tangible than the Colosseum or Forum, Rome’s culture is just as important to residents and preservationists, who have widened their definition of conservation in recent years.

In cities with sudden population booms, the tradition of carefully weighing the values of cultural heritage against modern development, regardless of the final outcome, is not necessarily established. Beijing, a city of nearly 20 million—up more than 3 percent in the past two years alone—has seen a striking development boom. In 2005, its growth scale equaled all development in Europe for the same year. From 2007 through 2009, China consumed 40 percent of the world’s concrete and steel.

Such rapid building is sparked, of course, by China’s status as the world’s new economic power. Its GDP, which has soared more than tenfold since 1978, now stands at more than $4.9 trillion, second only to the United States. But the new development reflects a cultural ideal, too. The people of Beijing “all want to be sharing the achievement of the reform policy. They don’t want to be left behind,” says Hu Xinyu, a native of Beijing and former managing director of the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center. “‘Old’ sounds like a bad word to them.”

Despite its focus on the future, China’s government recognizes, at least officially, the importance of cultural heritage. Beijing’s Forbidden City is on the World
One of Beijing’s most controversial changes concerns its hutongs, the neighborhoods characterized by traditional courtyard residences and narrow alleyways. These courtyard homes were a major part of the fabric of the old city as early as the 13th century, when Beijing was first laid out. In the 20th century, the communist government moved families into the hutongs because of a housing shortage. Without adequate maintenance, the homes deteriorated. So, in the early 1990s, the municipality changed tactics, initiating the Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal Program—which became just another development program. High rises replaced 500-year-old neighborhoods. According to one estimate, while more than 3,000 hutongs remained in the early 1950s, by the early 2000s, there were only 1,500. By now, only 900 might remain. Many are little more than tourist destinations. Since most of the hutongs are not properly cared for, many seem like slums. Most lack proper sanitation. Few have private, modern toilets. Some hutongs still have sewage systems from the last dynasty, a century ago. Heating can be ineffective or nonexistent, and kitchen appliances ancient. Still, a recent survey by the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center found that 61 percent of current residents of hutongs in Beijing’s designated historic districts would rather stay in their traditional housing than move to high-rise apartments—a sign, perhaps, of the importance of heritage and community in China’s modern cities.

Yet those priorities may be changing. Only 44 percent of residents aged 16 to 25 reported they want to stay in the hutongs. These youths are also more upbeat about modern (and largely anti-preservation) trends, with two-thirds saying they “feel good” about commercial-
ization, compared to one-third of those over 60. And while 60 percent of all those interviewed said they consider their houses worth preserving, another 30 percent thought their houses were “pathetic and not worth preserving.”

CAIRO OVERCROWDING

Cairo faces many of the same issues as Beijing, including a massive population boom and a patchwork of laws that are often ignored. Although policies exist to protect the city’s medieval core, even there the approach to preservation of anything other than monuments can be quite laissez-faire.

Real estate development in particular exerts enormous pressure on Cairo. The city has a population of 16 million, estimated to increase by about 3 percent annually. “When you translate that into the number of dwellings you need to build every year, it’s a formidable challenge,” says Vigier, an expert on Cairo and the president of the Institute of International Development.

Adding to the difficulty is rent control on apartments in even the city’s most historic neighborhoods. Since rent has not increased in decades, owners have ceased investing in the properties. The tenants themselves, who may only reside there temporarily, also neglect maintenance. In many cases, the resulting deterioration becomes so advanced that the buildings collapse and eventually get bulldozed—leading owners to replace them with multi-story complexes instead of traditional structures.

In principle, regulations in the city’s historic areas restrict the construction of new buildings, while mandating their appearance and size. In the past, such rules have rarely been followed. “They say the new buildings should be traditional, but all of this is interpreted in very loose terms,” says Siravo, who has spent the last 15 years working on preservation issues in Cairo. “So you have a lot of pseudo-historical transformation, and often the bulk and height of buildings doesn’t even conform to what the regulations say.” There is more control today. Any construction in the medieval core of Cairo is under strict supervision, says Vigier. Still, the juxtaposition of medieval monuments against modern high-rises, even in central Cairo, causes unsettling confusion.

Enforcement difficulties persist due to the power of developers, and a general lack of awareness of preservation. Developers’ influence is even visible on Cairo’s protection lists. Galila El Kadi, an architect, expert on Cairo and researcher at France’s Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, explains that the lists should preserve worthy historical properties from development or bulldozing. Usually, architects and preservationists propose buildings to add to the list of protected sites. In Cairo, however, the municipality often will approve just 70 percent, and in other Egyptian cities, that number can be even lower, she says. Once a building makes the list, the battle continues. Developers may exert pressure to de-list a site. And while monuments are very difficult to destroy, historic, residential and commercial buildings are less so.

“It’s always a choice. Do you preserve stones, or do you help the value of the lives of people? If you can do both, it’s a lot easier to conserve stones”
The second issue, though, is even more pernicious. “The majority of the Egyptians don’t care at all about their heritage, even the antique heritage,” El Kadi says. “There is only a very small minority who is fighting.” These elites play a crucial role in Egypt’s increasing awareness of the importance of preservation, particularly through their mobilization of the media.

One recent project has demonstrated how Cairo can balance development and preservation. In the Darb al-Ahmar neighborhood, one of Cairo’s poorest and most densely populated, households live on less than one U.S. dollar per day. In 1992, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, which focuses on revitalization of Islamic communities, launched a project to turn a 74-acre dump bordering the neighborhood into a park. The project proved so popular that the foundation expanded its restoration and revitalization program into the neighborhood itself. Workers removed trash, renovated houses and upgraded the sewage network. They restored historic landmarks, including the 14th-century Umm al-Sultan Shaban mosque. Projects of renovation and restoration are also linked with social programs, like the “Bride-to-Be” program that instructs Egyptian women on sexual health, child-rearing and financial issues. Another program trains Darb al-Ahmar residents in how to restore sites and then put them to work, including restoration of the neighborhood’s 12th-century Ayyubid wall, built by the nation’s Sunni rulers to guard their citadel.

Such merging of preservation and revitalization makes projects relevant and increases awareness, not just of the importance of preservation, but of how both can go hand-in-hand. “It’s always a choice. Do you preserve stones, or do you help the value of the lives of people? If you can do both, it’s a lot easier to conserve stones,” Vigier says.

AWARENESS OF THE PAST

Like the Darb al-Ahmar project, “controlled change”—that careful balance between preservation and modern development—incorporates historic values and structures with new ideas. It can provide a roadmap for a city, whether toward a greener, more environmentally-friendly landscape, or toward providing more jobs for its residents.

Proper preservation also educates a city about its history. And awareness of the past is crucial. “Societies that have no history tend to be volatile, and lacking a compass. And part of those roots is physical,” says Stent. He points to the case of Shenzhen, China, which has been called the only city in China where people speak without a distinct local accent. “They’re rootless, and you read now about these people jumping out of their factory dormitories to their deaths,” Stent says.

The easiest way to help these cities build physical roots? Preserving, or repurposing, their older structures. But that is difficult in practice, as Beijing or Cairo—or even by the continued challenges of a city as well-acquainted with the importance of preservation like Rome—prove.

Still, it is an important battle to fight. Like other ecosystems, from coral reefs to rainforests, historical urban areas are disappearing quickly. They, too, need concentrated efforts from all levels to be saved. Like the world’s other resources, these treasures of the past are irreplaceable. Once they’re gone, they’re gone for good.