GET THE FACTS - HERITAGE INFORMATION SERIES

40. Heritage and the City

Urban spaces are palpably places of drama and spectacle: they are 'theatres of state'. Renaissance Venice provides a particularly clear example of how the iconography of the built environment can supply symbols and metaphors for a city. Ritual and ceremony were used to exploit the symbolism of this urban landscape in order to 'legitimate the institutions of the state'. Central to this was the Piazza San Marco: 'a regulated space ... of discourse, an open-air theatre for the celebration of republican virtues and the location of the city's most solemn rituals'. They also suggest that the same landscape can be interpreted in different ways by both contemporaries and antiquarians alike. Architectural monuments, commemorative memorials and historical artefacts constitute the material elements of heritage. An appreciation of how heritage has been used and perceived at certain times and for particular purposes enables historians to gauge interpretive fluctuations across a range of categories. This demonstrates the fluid nature of heritage: it constitutes an ongoing reconfiguration of the past as dictated by the needs of the present. This sense of reconstruction and reinterpretation can refer to the 'monumental works' of a city, but it can equally be applied to more discrete objects such as historical documents, souvenirs and museum collections.

Ref: The Texture of Heritage: A Reading of the 750th Anniversary of Stockholm by Stuart Burch