A new international instrument: the proposed UNESCO Recommendation for the Conservation of Historic Urban Landscapes

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1 Introduction

Urban conservation is an important part of modern heritage policies. Since at least half a century, historic cities have acquired an incomparable status in modern culture and in modern life, a status defined by the quality of the architectural and physical environment, by the persistence of the sense of place, and by the concentration of the historic and artistic events that form the basis for the identity of a people. Last but not least, they have become the icons of global cultural tourism and coveted places for the enjoyment of a different lifestyle and for cultural experiences for millions of people.

But can we say that conservators have the tools they need to ensure the long term protection of the urban historic values? Unfortunately, if we consider the economic and environmental trends, we can easily see new threats emerging for urban historic conservation, with a lack of adequate tools to cope with them.

As the economic and social role of the historic city changes with time, as its own uses and functions are less and less decided by its own inhabitants, but rather by global forces such as the tourism or real estate industries, the meaning of urban conservation changes and needs to be reassessed. The first decade of the 21st century has already shown which are the emerging challenges for urban historic conservation: global population growth and migrations, the explosion of domestic and international tourism, the growing demand for specific historic “packages” and the increasing pressures for land conversion inside and – most of all- outside the historic precincts.

While many countries have been able in the past decades to develop adequate legislation and regulations for the protection of urban historic areas, the sustainability of public and private efforts towards conservation is far from being demonstrated, in a world where public resources available for cultural investments are scarce and dwindling. The toolkit available today to urban conservators is not small: it is formed by a good system of internationally accepted principles of conservation, reflected in important international legal tools such as the 1972 World Heritage Convention. Furthermore, the toolkit is supported by a large number of good practices developed over more than a century in different contexts, and on an elaborate planning and regulatory framework.

However, this apparatus is often weak and powerless in front of the forces of change that dominate the world and its urban scenes today and in the foreseeable future. Many of the most important urban historic areas existing in Europe, Asia and Latin America have lost their traditional functions and are under the pressure of tourism and other transformation agents. The planning and regulatory tools put in place are not always adequate to address the new challenges. Urban conservators are increasingly aware of the gap existing between the ideal world of the “Charters” and the practical realities, especially in emerging societies, and are advocating that new principles, approaches and tools have to be identified to cope with the new challenges.

2 The international debate

The 1972 World Heritage Convention has played an important role in fostering urban historic conservation. Today, historic cities constitute the largest heritage “category” on the World Heritage List, with over 250 inscribed sites out of a total of 890. The World Heritage Committee in the past few years has invested a considerable effort to identify the challenges for the conservation of urban heritage and to develop appropriate policy orientations.

In 2005 a major conference was organised in Vienna to discuss the issue and to define a new approach. The document issued by that conference, the “Vienna Memorandum”, constituted an initial step to support...
the action of the Committee and to revise the current conservation policies. Since then an important debate has taken place in the international conservation community. With the support from the States Parties to the World Heritage Convention, the World Heritage Committee, the Advisory Bodies ICOMOS, ICCROM and IUCN, and various professional organizations, including the International Union of Architects (UIA), the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA), the International Federation for Housing and Planning (IFHP), the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), the Organization of World Heritage Cities (OWHC) and the International Association of Impact Assessment (IAIA), the World Heritage Centre has started a process of regional consultation meetings to receive expert input on concepts, definitions and approaches to urban historic conservation.

Five regional expert meetings, in Jerusalem (June 2006), Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation (January 2007), Olinda, Brazil (November 2007), Zanzibar, Tanzania (November/December 2009) and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (December 2009), in addition to two planning meetings held at UNESCO Headquarters (in September 2006 and November 2008), constitute the core of the debate with identification of issues, approaches and tools. In general a broad support for the ongoing review process has been expressed, in which the 2005 Vienna Memorandum was widely recognized as a useful basis and work-in-progress. Furthermore, this debate has fostered a revision of the existing Washington Charter by ICOMOS, and last but not least the approval by the UNESCO General Conference to prepare a new Recommendation for the Conservation of the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL), to be adopted in 2011.

3 The issues

Tensions between globalization and local development

Global processes have a direct impact on the identity and visual integrity of historic cities and their broader setting, as well as on the people who live in them. While some cities are growing exponentially, others are shrinking and being radically restructured as a result of shifting economic processes and new patterns of migration. To address these issues, local urban strategies are becoming the key component of urban development planning. The increasing globalization of the economy is radically transforming many contemporary cities, benefiting some groups, whilst marginalizing others. In some countries, centrally controlled planning has given way to decentralization and market-oriented approaches. The result is that cities, and their planning processes, have become increasingly fragmented, while inequality and environmental degradation has increased.

Incompatible new development

With massive investments in urban real estate, infrastructure and revitalisation as the main driving force behind urban transformations, the physical landscape of the historic city is being severely altered. Within a real estate development process that is increasingly market-driven, contemporary architecture in historic cities takes an important role. However, the quality of these interventions in terms of compatibility with the surrounding context, relating to bulk, materialisation, etc., has not always been a priority for decision-makers. This put the issue of the harmonization of contemporary expressions within the context and setting of historic urban landscapes at the core of the discipline and practice of urban heritage conservation. Contemporary interventions in historic cities, such as new housing to cater for higher population densities, high-rise iconic buildings, projects related to retail and production capacity, as well as waste disposal, are all increasing in scale and might have detrimental and irreversible effects on the historic city’s physical and visual integrity, as well as on their social and cultural values.

Unsustainable tourism

The growth of tourism in historic cities has become one of the major concerns of urban conservators. While tourism can bring benefits to the preservation of cultural heritage, through improved infrastructure and enhanced understanding of the value of culture and traditions, it can also represent a challenge to its physical, environmental and social integrity. Given the expected increase of international tourism in the coming decades there is a need to develop sus-
tainable tourism methodologies, in order to better protect the local communities and their heritage values within historic urban landscapes.

Environmental degradation including climate change

The impact of environmental factors affecting the built heritage, such as pollution, vehicle traffic and congestion, garbage and industrial waste, acid rain, have all dramatically increased in recent decades. In parallel, countering the negative effects of climate change has emerged as one of the most daunting tasks of our time. Many historic cities are particularly vulnerable, since the speed and intensity of present climate changes is unprecedented and requires immediate political action. A number of key strategies called for the integration of climate change mitigation and adaptation into country policies and programmes, triggering a series of regulations and governmental policy instruments at all levels. The increasing relevance of impacts of climate change on built and natural environments underlines the need to consolidate an integrated approach to historic urban landscape conservation internationally.

4 The way forward

While most of the issues related to the present and future challenges have been identified, the new Recommendation will have to reflect a great variety of situations and stages of evolution that historic cities face within regions, as well as in different regions of the world. A document with universal value will necessarily encompass the diversity of approaches and value systems of the different cultures, and define concepts and tools that are to be adapted to their specific contexts. The discussion will review the main components of urban conservation and in particular the following:

- The system of values and meanings of urban heritage

Recognising the transition of the values associated to urban heritage conservation will open the way to the definition of the present and future value system. The historical transition of urban heritage values from “monument” to “social complex” to “living heritage” needs to be understood to support a new approach.

- The definition of Historic Urban Landscape

The concept of HUL interprets urban areas as layers of significance, descending both from natural and man-made features. Seeing the city as a layering of significances will help identifying the conservation policies and the “trade-offs” of conservation and development that are in front of communities and decision-makers.

- The meaning of authenticity and integrity of urban historic areas

The meaning of authenticity and integrity of urban historic areas needs to be understood within the local value systems that also influence conservation policies and practices.

- The management of change

Current principles and practices are still inadequate to define the limits of acceptable change, and the assessments tend to be ad hoc and based on subjective perceptions. A specific approach has to be developed to define the role of contemporary architecture and contemporary creation in historic places, as the need to respect a continuum has been frequently disregarded or misunderstood.

- Sustainable social and economic development

A reflection on the changing role of urban historic areas and on the way to synergize socio-economic development and conservation strategies is necessary, in order to identify the new policies and the resource stream necessary to maintain the historic urban landscape in a sustainable way.

- New urban conservation tools

New urban conservation tools for the management of urban values need to be defined. This may include tools to involve the participation of the communities of stakeholders in the definition of the value system of an historic place, tools to define and protect integrity of the urban fabric and the urban landscape, tools to identify the trade-offs and the limits of acceptable change in an historic context.
5 Conclusion

At its 33rd session in Sevilla, 2009, the World Heritage Committee requested the World Heritage Centre to convene an Expert Meeting to prepare a draft text for the inclusion of the (concept of) Historic Urban Landscape in the Operational Guidelines, with identification of case studies for continuing evaluation, for examination by the Committee at its 34th session in 2010 (Decision 33 COM 7.1).

Furthermore, on 16 October 2009 at its 35th session, the General Conference of UNESCO examined the preliminary study on the technical and legal aspects relating to the desirability of a standard-setting instrument on the conservation of the historic urban landscape and, following the advice of the Executive Board (Decision 181 EX/29), adopted a Resolution to authorise the Director-General to develop a new standard-setting instrument on the Conservation of Historic Urban Landscape in the form of a Recommendation (Resolution 35C/42). It should be emphasized that this proposed new standard-setting document would not be specific to World Heritage cities, but broadened to all historic cities.

Over 2010 a series of texts was drafted and discussed, which drew upon the definitions and approaches developed in the context of the HUL initiative and included most of the proposals put forward in this paper. The final draft text shall be presented and discussed at an Inter-Governmental Meeting (Category 2) with Representatives of States Parties to the World Heritage Convention in the spring of 2011 for finalization and eventually adoption by UNESCO’s General Conference at its 36th session in the autumn 2011.

With two more years to go, consultations at the international level will be of the utmost importance to ensure that the development and adoption of the new Recommendation receives the proper attention, input and political backing. At the same time, it illustrates that the interim development of the Vienna Memorandum in 2005 was needed to bridge this time of crisis and open up new avenues of thinking, until new guidelines have been negotiated and approved in 2011.