TOWARDS NEW INTERNATIONAL GUIDELINES FOR THE
CONSERVATION OF HISTORIC URBAN LANDSCAPES (HUL)

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Abstract

At its 29th session in July 2005 (in Durban, South Africa) the World Heritage Committee recommended “that the General Conference of UNESCO adopt a new Recommendation to complement and update the existing ones on the subject of conservation of historic urban landscapes, with special reference to the need to link contemporary architecture to the urban historic context” (Decision 29 COM 5D).

In view of an ever-increasing number of cases, where development or regeneration projects were considered a threat to the Outstanding Universal Value or integrity of sites registered on the World Heritage List, the World Heritage Committee expressed a need for the establishment of new guidelines and tools to properly assess urban development schemes and contemporary architectural interventions in historic context. The issue was not a new phenomenon indeed, but had been under debate in the urban conservation discipline for decades already. However, it is believed that the conditions under which urban projects are currently being developed have changed profoundly. This, supplemented by the fact that the last UNESCO Recommendation on the subject of urban conservation was established more than 30 years ago, makes a review of current issues and ways to deal with them more pertinent than ever.

This paper provides an outline of new approaches being developed on the conservation of historic urban landscapes as part of UNESCO’s role as a standard-setting organisation and in preparation of a new Recommendation on the subject.

Keywords: Urban landscape, UNESCO, World Heritage List

Introduction

A corpus of standard setting documents,1 including charters and recommendations, exists on the subject of historic cities and their broader setting, which have been useful to

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1 In particular the 1964 “International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites” (Venice Charter), the 1968 “UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Preservation of Cultural Property endangered by Public or Private works”, the 1976 “UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas”, the 1982 ICOMOS-IFLA “International Charter for Historic Gardens” (Florence Charter), the 1987 ICOMOS “Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas” (Washington Charter), the 1994 Nara Document on Authenticity, as well as the HABITAT II Conference and Agenda 21, which was ratified by Member States in Istanbul (Turkey) in June 1996.
guide policies and practices worldwide, with good results. However, conditions have changed and historic cities are now subject to development pressures and challenges that were not fully understood at the time of adoption of the last UNESCO Recommendation (a ‘soft law’) on urban sites more than thirty years ago, in 1976, i.e. the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas.

With the current size and foreseen increase of the world’s population living in urban areas, supplemented by insufficient policies to recognize and facilitate sustainable use of heritage assets, pressures on historic cities will continue to rise, making historic urban landscape conservation one of the most daunting tasks of our time. As a direct consequence, the time allocated at World Heritage Committee sessions to debating the impact of contemporary development in or adjacent to World Heritage designated cities has increased dramatically.

Ranging from traffic and tourism pressures, to high-rise constructions and inner city functional changes, the issues negatively affecting the protection and conservation of World Heritage sites are numerous and often inter-related. However, in the case of threats to the Outstanding Universal Value and integrity (physical or visual) of historic urban landscapes, and as opposed to uncontrolled urban development or large-scale planned development (such as public works), there’s a clear emphasis on targeted urban regeneration projects that use the project’s location in or around a World Heritage site to attract attention, investment and visitors. As argued before, there’s nothing wrong with this, as long as the special qualities and cultural-historic values for which the site was listed are not jeopardized or destroyed in the process (van Oers. 2006). It is in these cases that the World Heritage Committee will intervene to express its concerns and demand a re-direction of projects.

To illustrate the current crisis some recent figures. At its 31st session in Christchurch, New Zealand (June/July 2007), the World Heritage Committee reviewed a total of 130 State of Conservation (SoC) reports, prepared by the World Heritage Centre in collaboration with the Advisory Bodies ICOMOS, IUCN and ICCROM (on a total of 830 inscribed World Heritage sites). Of these, eighty-four SoC reports were prepared for cultural sites, which are of relevance with regard to the safeguarding of historic urban landscapes. Those SoC reports that focused on potential negative impacts of urban development and regeneration projects, including threats posed by contemporary architectural interventions and high-rise constructions, numbered thirty-three: an alarming 40 percent of the cultural sites that were reported to the Committee.2

2 These were: Timbuktu (Mali); Old Town of Djenné (Mali); Historic Cairo (Egypt); Ancient Thebes with its Necropolis (Egypt); Qal’at al-Bahrain – Ancient Harbour and Capital of Dilmun (Bahrain); Archaeological Site of Volubilis (Morocco); Bahla Fort (Oman); Meidan Emam, Esfahan (Islamic Republic of Iran); The Ruins of the Buddhist Vihara at Paharpur (Bangladesh); Historic Ensemble of the Potala Palace, Lhasa (China); Old Town of Lijiang (China); The World Heritage Properties in Beijing (China); Historic Areas of Istanbul (Turkey); Tower of London (United Kingdom); Westminster Palace (United Kingdom); Old Bridge Area of the Old City of Mostar (Bosnia & Herzegovina); Historic Centre of Prague (Czech Republic); Historic Centre of Tallinn (Estonia); Old Town of Regensburg with Stadtamhof (Germany); Historic Centre of Riga (Latvia); Historic Centre of St. Petersburg and Related Groups of Monuments (Russian Federation); Historic Centre of the City of Salzburg (Austria); City of Graz – Historic Centre (Austria); Fertő/Neusiedlersee Cultural Landscape (Austria/Hungary); Cologne Cathedral (Germany); City of Vicenza and the Palladian Villas of the Veneto (Italy); Historic Centre of Sighisoara (Romania); Old Town of Avila with its Extra-Muros Churches (Spain); Old City of Salamanca (Spain);
Clearly, traditional views towards development and conservation of World Heritage sites are shifting and responsible authorities—in both developed and under-developed countries and on all continents—encounter difficulties in addressing the issue in mutually satisfactory ways. The reconciliation of development and conservation of protected sites needs a new and strong impetus, demanded by a multitude of authorities, with revised guidelines for decision-makers and the World Heritage Committee to assess in a systematic and objective manner potential impacts on values and integrity.

**Background**

During its 27th session in Paris, in 2003, the World Heritage Committee called for the organization of a symposium to discuss how to properly regulate the needs for modernization of historic urban environments, while at the same time preserving the values embedded in inherited townsapes, in particular of cities inscribed on the World Heritage List. In response, the World Heritage Centre in cooperation with ICOMOS and the City of Vienna organized the international conference ‘World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture – Managing the Historic Urban Landscape’ which took place in Vienna, Austria, from 12 to 14 May 2005. At this conference a first outline of principles and guidelines was adopted, the so-called “Vienna Memorandum”, which promoted an integrated approach to contemporary architecture, urban development and integrity of the inherited landscape.

The notion of ‘landscape’ is a cultural construct involving the existing natural environment, but described and classified in cultural terms. A ‘cultural landscape’ is considered to be the “combined works of nature and of man” (Operational Guidelines, 2005, §47), where the emphasis is on a long-term, structural and harmonious interaction between man and the environment—symbiosis rather than subduction—that has created a complete new characteristic and idiom.

Thus it could be argued that an urban landscape consists of a pre-existing environment (involving topography, and physical and natural features), which has been modified in part or completely through the process of urbanization by a stratigraphy of patterns, plots (built and unbuilt), infrastructure and building stock geared towards the provision of urban space for housing, work, transport, and leisure activities. Urban morphology scholars define the urban landscape as a cumulative record of the succession of booms, slumps and innovation adoptions within a particular locale, which thereby acquires its own *genius loci*. While the sustainability of urban landscapes can be debated (indeed whether or not they can be considered harmonious interactions between man and the environment), it is clear that disregarding this record of accumulated knowledge and experience of our forefathers would be a scandalous waste of effort and energy that no society can afford (Whitehand, 1993: 6).

The World Heritage Committee at its 29th session in July 2005 in Durban, South Africa, welcomed the Vienna Memorandum as a necessary additional tool for discussing and assessing contemporary architectural interventions, including high-rise constructions, in World Heritage cities and their wider setting. The World Heritage Committee furthermore recommended “that the General Conference of UNESCO adopt a new Recommendation to

Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City (United Kingdom); Colonial City of Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic); Luang Prabang (Laos) and Samarkand (Uzbekistan). Ref.: WHC.07/31.COM/7B.
complement and update the existing ones on the subject of conservation of historic urban landscapes, with special reference to the need to link contemporary architecture to the urban historic context” (Decision 29 COM 5D).

Following the Committee’s decision, the Vienna Memorandum formed the basis for the ‘Declaration on the Conservation of Historic Urban Landscapes’ (HUL) which was adopted by the 15th General Assembly of States Parties to the World Heritage Convention in October 2005 at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris (Resolution 15 GA 7). It is important to note that the Vienna Memorandum is not a Charter, nor was it intended as a finalized document that could guide urban development and conservation for decades to come – the document represents a consensus-product, established with involvement of various professional entities, and served as a catalyst to open up the debate and further refine the concept and tools.

New Issues and Approaches in the Management of Historic Cities

Subsequently, the World Heritage Centre has started a process of reviewing the existing standard-setting documents, in particular the ‘UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas’ (Nairobi, 26 November 1976). To determine if there was a need for an update that included the notion of historic urban landscape, the World Heritage Centre organized several expert meetings to facilitate evaluation, debate and the establishment of an action plan for follow-up activities should a new standard-setting document be required. An Expert Group has been established that consists of 15 international professionals from different geo-cultural regions, disciplines, and international organisations and research institutions.

The main evaluations coming out of these meetings included key issues that have profoundly changed the discipline and practice of urban heritage conservation. Among the most prominent are:

1) The importance of landscape, as a stratification of previous and current urban dynamics, with an interplay between the natural and built environment.

Previously handled by ‘zoning’, the emphasis today is on continuity – of relationships, values and management. The adoption of a holistic approach in heritage conservation has meant an increase in the complexity of processes to identify, protect and manage values –as opposed to mere artefacts–, the proper understanding of which is only starting to emerge. But already it has become clear that the traditional notion of groups of buildings, historic ensembles or inner cities, identifying them as separate entities within a larger whole, is not sufficient anymore to protect their characteristics and qualities against fragmentation, degeneration and, eventually, loss of significance. A landscape approach, where all is layered and inter-related –and thus integrity becomes a key consideration–, seems more appropriate to deal with the management of change in complex urban environments.

2) The role of contemporary architecture, previously considered as ‘contextualisation of new buildings’.

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The role of contemporary architecture today appears to be more related with city marketing strategies, than with the making of urban space. In particular the surge in iconic buildings as the cultural expression of dynamic cities is worrisome, because many of them are deliberately juxtaposed with historic monuments or ensembles in order to create what is believed to be an image of progress. Charles Jencks explains that the word and concept of the iconic building has had a long and continuous history, and is therefore nothing new. However, he signals that with the emergence of today’s iconic architecture we witness “the empty circularity of its meaning, its appearance as pure sign with only media significance” (Jencks, 2005: 68). While the debate over the need for occasional iconic buildings as necessary new additions to our more traditional built environment is legitimate, the issue at hand is more pressing. Increasingly decision makers and general public consider this type of architecture to be a fine substitute for yesterday’s styles, while forgetting that when exceptions to the rule become the rule, this will have serious consequences for in particular the functioning of the city. In Jencks’ words: “urban decorum, common decency, shared streets, and collective transport are necessary for the city to work. That’s why there are building codes” (Jencks, 2005:17). Respect for the inherited townscape, therefore, when designing new interventions, is more than just nostalgia and ensures that monuments, historic ensembles and districts “work” - and continue working together as a whole.

3) The economics and changing role of cities, with an emphasis on the non-local processes, such as tourism and urban development, with outside actors of change.

When local actors generate development projects in historic towns or cities, cultural and historical significance and values of the place are often known and shared, which makes reaching a consensus over how to properly deal with them relatively easy. More and more cities are pushed into the role of drivers of regional growth and development, therefore they try to capture capital and companies that are shifting around the globe in search of a locale to make a profit, but that have little or no knowledge of, or care for, local significance and values of the place. The ensuing balancing act that municipal authorities have to perform is virtually impossible, with often only one choice given: take it all, or lose it all. But even in this unfair game, historic cities have leverage in being able to offer something unique, in return of which concessions can be asked as regards overall planning scheme or architectural solution chosen for the urban project to mitigate the impacts on the historic environment. It is in this negotiation process that there’s a desperate need for guidance by new, internationally accepted guidelines.

In resumé, new dynamics in architecture and urban development, including global/non-local processes, have brought about new challenges to urban heritage conservation and management, as specially experienced by the World Heritage Committee at its annual sessions, which require new approaches and critical review of the standards and guidelines set three decades ago.

Preparation of a New Recommendation on the Conservation of Historic Urban Landscapes

Following a review of key Charters and Recommendations, including the Vienna Memorandum (see Table 1), which led to the conclusion that fundamental changes in concept and perception of heritage have occurred during the past 30 years, the Expert Group supported the drafting of a new (or revised) standard-setting document. The process
established to facilitate the development of this revised recommendation includes the organization of major meetings during 2007 and 2008 in the various geo-cultural regions of the world to raise awareness and receive expert input, review results of other seminars and conferences on the subject organized by different organizations and universities, and commission renowned experts to write fundamental texts on issues pertinent to the safeguarding of historic urban landscapes.

In the Spring of 2008 a report will be prepared for the Executive Board aiming at facilitating the adoption of a Resolution requesting the Director-General of UNESCO to bring forward a new or revised Recommendation on the conservation of historic urban landscapes. It should be emphasized that the proposed standard-setting document would not be specific to World Heritage cities, but broadened to all historic cities. The cycle of regional consultations and specialized expert meetings will be completed over 2008 and 2009, after which the drafting of a series of texts will commence during 2010. The final draft text would then be presented to the Spring session of the Executive Board in 2011, for adoption by UNESCO’s General Conference at its 36th session (2011).

In this medium-term planning three more years of work are required, where the consultations at the international level are of the utmost importance to ensure that the development and adoption of the new Recommendation receives the proper attention and political backing. At the same time, it illustrates that the interim development of the Vienna Memorandum was needed to bridge this time of crisis in urban and World Heritage conservation, until new guidelines have been negotiated and approved.
## Comparative Analysis of Key Charters and Recommendations

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### Definitions

**1968**
- **a) Immovable:** Archeological, historic and scientific sites including groups of traditional structures, historic quarters in urban or rural built up area and ethno-cultural structures.
- **b) Movable:** (not relevant here)

**1976**
- **Historic and architectural areas:** group of buildings, structures and open spaces in an urban or rural environment, the cohesion and value of which are recognised from the archaeological, architectural, prehistoric, historic, aesthetic or sociocultural point of view.
- **Environment:** Natural or man-made setting which influences the static or dynamic way these areas are perceived or which is directly linked to them in space or social, economic or cultural ties.

### General Principles

**1968**
- **a) Preservation of the entire site or structure from the effects of private or public works**
- **b) Salvage or rescue** of the property if the area is to be transformed, including preservation and removal of the property.

**1976**
- **a) Historic areas and its surroundings to be considered in their totality as a coherent whole whose balance and specific nature depend on the parts of which it is composed.**
- **b) Elements to be preserved include human activities, buildings, spatial organisation and their surroundings.**

**1987**
- **a) Conservation should be integral part of coherent policies of economic and social development and of urban and regional planning.**
- **b) Qualities to be preserved include urban patterns, relationships between buildings and open spaces, formal appearance of buildings, relationship with surrounding setting and functions.**

### Identified Threats

**1968**
- **a) Urban expansion and renewal projects removing structures around scheduled monuments.**
- **b) Injudicious modifications to individual buildings.**
- **c) Dams, highways, bridges, cleaning and levelling of land, mining, quarrying, etc...**

**1976**
- **a) Newly developed areas that could ruin the environment and character of adjoining historic areas.**
- **b) Disfigurement of historic areas caused by infrastructures, pollution and environmental damage.**
- **c) Speculation which compromises the interests of the community as a whole.**

**1987**
- **a) Physical degradation and destruction caused by urban development that follows industrialisation.**
- **b) Uncontrolled Traffic and parking, construction of motorways inside historic towns, natural disasters, pollution and vibration.**

**2005**
- **a) Continuous change acknowledged as part of city’s tradition: response to development dynamics should facilitate changes and growth while respecting inherited townscape and its landscape as well as historic city’s authenticity and integrity.**
- **b) Enhancing quality of life and production efficiency help strengthening identity and social cohesion.**

**Socio-economic changes and growth that would not respect historic cities authenticity and integrity as well as their inherited townscape and landscape.**

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## Comparative Analysis of Key Charters and Recommendations

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### Proposed Policy and Recommended Strategies

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| a) Enact and maintain legislative measures necessary to ensure the preservation or salvage of endangered cultural properties  
  b) Ensure adequate public budgets for such preservation or salvage  
  c) Encourage such preservation thru favourable tax rates, grants, loans, etc...  
  d) Entrust responsibility for the preservation to appropriate official bodies at national and local levels.  
  e) Provide advice to the population and develop educational programmes | a) Prepare detailed surveys of historic areas and their surroundings including architectural, social, economic, cultural and technical data.  
  b) Establish appropriate plans and documents defining the areas and items to be protected, standards to be observed, conditions governing new constructions, etc...  
  c) Draw up priorities for the allocation of public funds  
  d) Protection and restoration should be accompanied by social and economic revitalization policy in order to avoid any brake in the social fabric | a) Conservation plans must address all relevant factors including history, architecture, sociology and economics and should ensure harmonious relationship between the historic urban area and the town as a whole.  
  b) New functions and activities should be compatible with the character of the historic area.  
  c) Special educational and training programmes should be established. | a) Planning process in historic urban landscapes requires a thorough formulation of opportunities and risks in order to guarantee a well-balanced development.  
  b) Contemporary architecture should be complementary to the values of the historic urban landscape and should not compromise the historic nature of the city.  
  c) Economic developments should be bound to the goals of long term heritage preservation. |

Based on the presentation of Jade Tabet, former WHCOM Member, Lebanon, for the Expert Planning meeting on HUL, Sep.2006 at UNESCO HQs.
References

