
THE HISTORIC URBAN LANDSCAPE APPROACH – HERITAGE AND URBAN REGENERATION IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

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This paper examines the reasons and the process that has led to the elaboration and adoption of a new tool for the preservation and adaptive reuse of the contemporary historic city.

Urban conservation has developed mostly in the second half of XXth century and is now an established discipline, based on a system of internationally accepted principles of conservation.

However, the system often proves to be weak and powerless towards the recent challenges linked to urbanisation and environmental change, to the shift of decision-making power from national to local governments, as well as from local to international actors in the areas of tourism, real estate or business.

More than a decade of systematic monitoring has revealed that many of the most important historic urban areas of the world have lost their traditional functions and are in a process of transformation that threatens to undermine their integrity and historic, social and artistic values.

To respond to these challenges, a new UNESCO Recommendation has been prepared in cooperation with a large group of experts. The Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in November 2011, can be considered as the culmination of this process.

Keywords

urban, heritage, regeneration, landscape

How to Cite

Fontanari, Enrico. "The historic urban landscape approach — heritage and urban regeneration in the twenty first century". In Carola Hein (ed.) *International Planning History Society Proceedings, 17th IPHS Conference, History-Urbanism-Resilience, TU Delft 17-21 July 2016, V.04 p.387, TU Delft Open, 2016.*

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7480/iphs.2016.4.1304>

INTRODUCTION

In this day and age, an assessment regarding the state of advancement of conservation processes and the evaluation of cities can be difficult tasks given their diversified nature and inherent problems, especially for locations that have been recognized as important urban heritage or defined as World Heritage Cities. However, in combining the diverse realities of these cities, it can be possible to verify their possible similarities and common aspects.

In regard to what has been realized in terms of urban conservation, certain results of this type of research can hereby be registered:

- There have been certain progressive improvements made for the processes of identification and classification of cultural heritage. Likewise, the very dimension of the patrimony itself has grown due to an expansion of its definitions, particularly with its relevance to urban contexts.
- There is a common recognition and understanding for the necessity to conserve historically significant building of even “minor” importance (although this objective has not always been fully achieved).
- There have been positive progressions in the fields of town planning with the development of planning instruments and the layout of projects for the conservation of historical urban patrimony.

Certain problems, however, still remain open, and it appears particularly relevant that the issue of relations between conservation and development has yet to be fully resolved. This topic does not necessarily refer to measures of compatibility (meaning the defence from pressures of possible transformations), but it is intended more in terms of the attempt to make cultural heritage into an instrumental device for development. It is this challenge which presents itself differently according to the distinct countries in question and their socio-economic conditions. Notwithstanding this factor, it can be demonstrated how certain changes in our recent history have still been able to define a common international scenario, for which certain noteworthy characteristics deserve mention:

- At this point in history a great trend in urban expansion has developed, bringing about an elevated growth of urbanisation in both developed and developing countries. This phenomenon has reached the point whereby in certain cases, such as in Latin America, it can be said that the phases of rapid urbanisation, started after the Second World War, have almost been concluded. The South American continent in particular has become one of the areas with a highest percentage of urban population in the world – at over 80% - and the emigration flow from the rural areas to urban areas has been almost completely expended.
- This process of widespread urbanisation has favoured a fundamental change in the role that historic centres play within urban contexts; and in many metropolitan areas, this does not often correspond to the city’s real centre. As a result, an outgrowth of new urban centres tends to develop in other parts of the city, and the actual historic centre subsequently ends up yielding its central functions (almost becoming a “marginal periphery”), losing its attributes of centrality.
- Minor centres of this type consequently face the inevitable alternative of unqualified abandon or their transformation into mono-cultural zones of tourism. This determinant further highlights the difficulties of establishing a balanced rapport between conservation and development. It becomes quite evident, in developed countries for example, that a clear contradiction emerges between mass tourism and the necessity for conservation of urban places, which, for their physical characteristics, should restrain access to a limited number of people at a time. And it is this condition that gives rise to the growing attention regarding the important topic of governing tourist traffic in cities of art.
- This fundamental crisis of historic centres, which are foregoing their functions as central urban places, is accompanied by their general mutation from being characteristic urban locations, with a wide range of functions, to becoming mono-functional places destined solely to commercial or recreational uses. In this instance, there is a type of private appropriation of historic centres’ public spaces, which tends to transform city inhabitants from citizens into “clients”.

Nonetheless, if look at the methodology used to promote the preservation of historic centers, we can notice that in spite of the attention that should be given to a trans-disciplinary approach to conservation, there is currently little integration of expertise dealing with the process of heritage conservation and urban development. As reaction to the danger of leaving the urban heritage management activity compartmentalized, the launch of the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) realized by the Unesco with the proposal of a new recommendation in 2011 represents a proposal for a new approach.

The HUL aims to respect and celebrate diversity – of heritage resources and cultural traditions – by proposing a critical process of identification and analysis to arrive at informed decisions regarding the policies and tools aimed at strengthening sustainable urban conservation and management.

Urban conservation is now an established discipline, the conservation practices over the past decades have been successful in creating a global awareness of the importance of urban heritage and have made easier the safeguarding of historic areas and cities. However, we can now to look at urban heritage as a resource for the entire city and for its sustainable development. By implementing the HUL approach, this goal can be achieved in a clear way.

URBAN PLANNING TOOLS FOR CONSERVATION

On one hand, tools of regulatory protection, especially in developed countries, can generally be considered a prevalently common enterprise. On the other hand, however, these measures do not appear sufficient for impeding some detrimental trends, including a loss of residents, immoderate mono-cultural functions (particularly tourism), the permanence of ample urban areas in degraded or “critical” states, etc. For this reason, there is presently a gradual change of course on the part of urban operators, who tend to give more attention to the operative aspects of intervention rather than to the regulatory ones. This is due to the commonly held assumption that planning and regulations are not adequate in guaranteeing the start of a true and effective process of urban revaluation and revitalisation for historic centres. Although essential, regulatory planning is not a sufficient component in itself for effectively implementing urban re-qualification. Hence, among the new operative methods and approaches that can favour processes of urban recovery, the HUL approach represents an innovation that could reverse the actual decline of urban planning, which nearly ended as unified management system of complex urban processes.

Today, urban planning has lost its ability to govern the processes of urban-rural migrations, the rise of mass public and private transport systems, the industrial or commercial growth. Also with reference to the governance system of the cities, new attention during the phases of project planning and operations of urban intervention requires a greater recognition of the increasingly relevant role of the local dimension and particularly of the municipalities, as managers and co-ordinators of such processes. Furthermore, these elements are inevitable given that the topic of conservation of historic centres is always viewed and managed within the issues of the governing and control of urban development, for which the historic centre is a central component. This component, both essential and strategic to local governments, should be dealt with in consideration of the general framework of objectives for urban development, which are typically entrusted to the local authorities.

The main problem is no longer the definition of regulations and unitary approaches regarding urban restoration (that however remain necessary and important passages, even if not entirely sufficient), but rather the identification of distinct models and methods of approaching the problems of urban development, which in turn lead local governments to adopt historic centers as strategic components for the re-qualification of their cities. Often, more than a methodological problem, the question arises of how to introduce new mentalities within the administrations of these historic cities.

In particular, we have to think about the fact that now the cities are interconnected, and the main processes that determine their future are of a global nature, due to the shift of production centers, the increase of communication speed due to Internet, the accelerated and increase movement of people for work and leisure, beside the recent well known immigration phenomena, which are now putting forward new challenges also for the urban historic core.

Urban conservation is not immune from these processes and it can no longer be conceived as a separate reality, to be protected from these social pressures by plans and regulations. The relative success of urban conservation in some cities in the last decades, has created the illusion that some parts of the cities can be separated from the natural evolution of the urban context. This was perhaps possible for monuments or single buildings, but not for a living open system as a city, no matter how historic or protected.

Urban conservation, following the declined capacity of urban planning to face the new global challenges, is close to reach its limits and is losing the ability to deal with the new challenges to the conservation of the urban heritage.

Today we face a twofold challenge. Urban planning, intended as a top-down political and administrative process to regulate urban dynamics, has demonstrated its limits, and is being substituted by a variety of management, participatory and design tools. In the same time, urban conservation has also proved unable to ensure effective and long-term integrity of both the physical and social fabric of historic urban areas.

These issues are growing to a greater complexity if we think about the relationship between urban management and the concepts of sustainability, energy consumption, resource use, social inclusion and the transformation of urban mobility and work patterns. The growth of the attention in the planning debate to the Ecological Urbanism and Landscape Urbanism, opens up a new dimension for urban conservation itself. The historic city can become a model, a resource to respond to the new needs, to define innovative physical and social patterns, a place which offers examples and experience in designing urban open spaces e producing new urban forms.

This is the central message of the 2011 Unesco HUL Recommendation, a document which has the goal of redefining the role of urban heritage in society and the parameters to be used in managing its conservation, evolution and integration within a broader urban decision making process. The principles of this new approach to urban conservation are now integral part of disciplines involved in urban management, particularly in the area of civic engagement and participation, the analysis of urban form, the reflection on the context and the sense of place, the analysis of people's perceptions and memory in the creation of urban values, the understanding of the importance of natural processes in guiding urban development and management and of the economic role of the historic city.

URBAN HERITAGE AS A KEY ASSET FOR URBAN REGENERATION

Urban heritage can become a key asset of urban regeneration because it can join in on reducing a series of negative phenomena. Regeneration is a social, financial, physical, sustainable, demographic and collaborative issue. In the local redevelopment of disadvantaged areas (neighborhoods, cities, metropolitan areas, etc.), regeneration is a new method that acts on a steady and unchanging "target": the city, a socially complex environment that must be defended and preserved for its particular social and cultural qualities.

Urban sprawl has become particularly unsustainable, because suburban settlements involve costs that are too expansive for the welfare structures and greatly inconvenience environmental issues: regeneration can help reduce the waste of natural or agricultural lands because it plans on reusing the existing urban network without creating new wasteful development.

This action can have two positive consequences. On an urban area level, it would cooperate in the containment of sprawl because the limitation of new constructions at the edges of the city would reinforce existing urban structures and support a better service distribution. Regeneration of heritage could also spread to landscape infrastructure and open spaces, reinforcing the connections in a wider urban area, without creating new big public works. The reuse of linear or reticular heritage elements (such as canals, local roads, etc.) could also have an effect on traffic reduction and avoid the construction of expensive infrastructures such as highways, interchanges, etc. Inside the urban precinct, regeneration could aid the reconstruction of the “city over the city” and push towards a densification of the existing urban fabric (and not by substituting existing structures with higher buildings, such as office towers or real estate complexes).

Densification is the idea of producing a more “dense” and intense urban life by reactivating the existing structures. This can also happen by amplifying the density of what’s built, or by adding new structures over the existing ones, but always in the spirit of stratifying, reusing and regenerating the heritage. In this sense, densification can also be activated – and it would be better to say “especially” – in case of low quality urban fabric, informal, marginal and unprivileged urban areas¹.

HERITAGE AND URBAN REGENERATION IN EUROPE

The idea of heritage stratification and regeneration has always been at the center of European urban dynamics and in this frame we can insert the concept of historical urban landscapes.

Europe’s recent history is an “experiment” that, with many difficulties, tries to integrate and manage huge cultural differences and common beliefs. The life and urban heritage of the city have often been considered as the main resources for the accomplishment of this project. Europe is where the concept of heritage has been developed. Products of a long progressive process of stratification, its cities have always had to do with transformation of preexisting structures. Near one third of UNESCO World Heritage sites are concentrated in Europe (36 in Northern Europe, 37 in Western Europe, 77 in Eastern Europe, 140 in Southern Europe). Around 70% of these sites are in just five countries (51 in Italy, 44 in Spain, 41 in France, 40 in Germany 40 and 29 in United Kingdom). These include 20% of the sites in the whole world.

The concept of “Europe of the cities” has been, for a long time, one which describes not only a network reality but also a particular “feeling” of local interdependence, of administrative independence and of vibrant social environments. “Europe of the cities” is an “urban society” that is built on the tangible presence of a common past, where the construction of cities, architectures and open spaces is a way of expressing the populations’ citizenship and identity.

The European territory has been compared to a “palimpsest”, a manuscript with traces of another previous text: a place where traces of previous presences are always present². Until industrial modernity, it was much more convenient to reuse or adapt existing buildings rather than create new ones. If something new was built, or an old city site was changed, this was either for safety reasons, or because natural or political causes suggested not to occupy a certain place anymore, or simply to get rid of what was already clearly disposable.

Every time a new “layer” was added, creators or imitators, architects or engineers, artists or workers, reorganized and modified existing materials to adapt them to new social and economic social conditions. The “imprinting” left on European cities by each of these layers in time has very different effects. Heritage has always been connected to material goods acquired from the past: stones, buildings, streets, open spaces, acquired and reused in order to confirm existing identities or to build and create new ones³. The “choice of heritage” has always been a challenge, but it is only in modern times that this choice has been conceptualized as a “loss”: the risk of losing a part of the past and maybe miss something that might be crucial for humanity.

In Europe, the stratification processes have created an urban heritage that can be described by three overlapped city networks: a grander web of a few capital cities that have been models and examples for the development of other settlements; a narrower web of medium sized cities that organizes and characterizes urbanity in Europe; and a dense even fabric of small cities and towns that covers the whole region.

Size, role and functions of each kind of these cities are various and different. The three networks overlap in many ways and determine very diverse territorial conditions. This aspect is crucial in order to describe the relationship between Europeans – the uninterrupted urbanization that covers the entire region as an “urban continuum” – and the part of their urban reality that must be considered as “heritage” to preserve and protect. This means that the above mentioned three networks are modeled on similar processes of development and stratification, and that they have evolved in different ways and times.

If we look at the “material aspects” of urban conservation and regeneration, we can recognize some peculiarities and innovations in the experience of European cities. The European city is the result of a stratification process of urban elements produced by the civilizations that have built and modified the urban history of the region. This layering process and its consequences can be associated to specific European city typologies, which on the basis of the functional, political and administrative role played by the historical centers in their urban area, can be described as an ensemble of intertwined networks of settlements that structure what is now a single complex urban continent.

The administrative structures and subjects of urban governance, in the different settlement conditions (compact city, urbanized regions, etc.), from one hand have to consider the relevance assigned to Cultural Welfare in Europe, on the other hand have to face the challenges resulting from the aging of population, new immigration and the recent economic crisis. A first approach towards a new perspective for the future of European society is found in connecting environmental issues with the re-use of heritage and historical urban landscapes.

If Europe is the place where the concept of heritage was first developed, it is important to understand how this concept was created and how it has evolved. The threats to European urban heritage mainly come from the fact that Ancient centers either still play a crucial role in the social and functional life of the cities, or they are completely excluded from it. In Europe, heritage is the result of a long and intermittent experience. Rich in contradictions, this experience has produced a tradition of intervention projects, policies and strategies that has always been considered of public administration domain. But, above all, it has come to create the intimate profile of many cities. A general overview of the developments in urban conservation shows how many monuments are strongly integrated in the urban structures and still continue to be used by locals for important collective events and activities. Inspired by these conditions, regeneration can help the reconstruction of a “city over the city”, with a densification of the existing urban fabric.

In this case, densification is not to be intended as the substitution of existing structures with higher buildings (such as office towers or grand real estate complexes), but rather as the idea of producing a “dense” and real urban life by reactivating existing structures.

Urban conservation has been a successful policy and planning practice in Europe in the past half a century, as proven by many national urban conservation laws, plans and projects that have been proposed and implemented all over the world. Today, new challenges have emerged for urban conservation, prompted by the social and economic change processes driven by the European Union. As a consequence, regeneration policies and protection of local and regional urban heritage in Europe can no longer be conceived as separate actions or realities.

In the recent years, the European Commission has proposed specific investment priorities for urban areas, which gather funding for cities in a number of key strategic ways. The national level then reflects the region's degree of decentralization in the countries. High levels of implementation of the UNESCO policies and risk management characterize the European scenario. A wide system of national and European partnership networks for regeneration plays a crucial role in fundraising and supporting regeneration and conservation actions.

If culture and heritage mean to support urban conservation and regeneration in Europe, they must keep in mind the important evolution from the complexity of the old porous cities of the past to the simple functional metropolises of today. In the last decades of the XX Century, historical centers have been subjected to an intense cycle of renovation, first in Western and then in Eastern countries of the European region. This wave of regeneration has solved the “problem of the historical center”, as defined by the Modern Movement (housing, decline, health, etc.). If the salient feature of rehabilitation and revitalization in Europe is that of preserving existing structures, one of the distinguishing features of European regeneration experiences has regarded operations on open spaces (widespread renovation of squares and streets, transformation of waterfronts, public transportation, and the organization of social-cultural gatherings like collective events and public parks), as well as operations set up to strengthen urban identity and branding. But new practices and strategies are emerging after the recent economic crisis, and they seem to shift their focus towards maintenance and management aspects. These approaches are creating a new post-crisis scenario, based on a future characterized by creative industries, cultural tourism, and construction and conservation activities.

Because of the strong cultural roots and long term recognition of cultural identity, cultural appropriation by local communities is not an issue in Europe. Nevertheless, there are some aspects of innovation that are important, such as: the recent evolution of cultural institutions in gaining a more social and collective role, and new policies for the creation of social cohesion and against gentrification.

Together with an innovative and forward-looking definition of what we should consider part of urban heritage, through the HUL concept we are proposing an approach aimed at rethinking the way in which we address and plan urban conservation, development, redevelopment and regeneration. Urban heritage in Europe offers important models for sustainability and social inclusion, and it greatly represents a way to think of the future of the city.

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