



Historic monument with integrity?



Saved spirit of place?



Will the street be friendly and nice?

## Urban Development, Cities and Unesco s proposed “Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape”

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### Preamble

The number of people living in cities is growing rapidly. Still the problems of especially the fast growing big cities have been seriously neglected by most professionals in the heritage sector and also by their organisations. I do hope that the UNESCO proposal “Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL)” will lead to the interest, engagement, research and knowledge needed. It states that the increasing globalisation of the economy together with growing population and migration, is radically transforming many contemporary cities and especially the fast growing big cities which are exposed to new pressures. It describes the challenge for urban historic conservation as:

- Rapid urbanization threatening the sense of place and identity of communities
- Uncontrolled, poorly conceived and/or badly implemented urban development
- Intensity and speed of changes, including global warming
- Unsustainable consumption of resources

The recommendation warns about a drastic deterioration of urban environment quality. It describes conservation as a strategy to achieve balanced urban growth and quality of life. It addresses the need to look at urban heritage conservation as a basis in sustainable development. It underlines the fact that existing tools used in conservation sector and in many cases also available knowledge and competence in the heritage sector is insufficient to meet above mentioned challenges.

The recommendation is meant to be an international standard-setting document, developed to address the new challenges that have emerged in the field of urban conservation since the adoption of the last UNESCO Recommendation on heritage, i.e. the 1976 Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas. Very important is that *the document is not specific to World Heritage cities, but broadened to all historic cities.*

This paper is meant only to give a very brief overview of the proposed recommendation. As a whole ICOMOS agrees with its message. ICOMOS official comments to Unesco are of clarifying nature to be more direct to avoid misunderstanding or to modulate a certain statement.

### The threats.

Increasing globalisation of the economy together with growing population and migration, is for sure a reason for the radical and devastating transformation of many cities. But I think that the spirit of the time is an arising problem as well. Too many decision-makers are not at all interested in saving

historic quality, spirit of the place, special characteristics of a city or even energy. It is more important for them to show that they are modern and not nostalgic no-men or women. That makes it still more important to increase our ability to argue for less destroying solutions and to involve people in common in an adequate way.

The Historic Urban Landscape Recommendation has not arrived a day too early. It rather arrives in the last moment regarding the current deterioration of urban environment quality in many cities. As stated in the recommendation excessive building density, standardized and monotonous buildings, loss of public space and amenities, inadequate infrastructure etc cause an inhuman environment debilitating poverty, social isolation, and an increased risk of climate related disasters as consequence of insufficient town planning efforts. In our classic European cities we would rather talk about high - risers in the centre, colossal, divergent and inhuman scale, new buildings upon the roof space and urban sprawl and suburbanization or isolation and lack of integration. But the basic idea is the same.

### **The definition of Historic Urban Landscape**

It is fundamental to see the urban landscape on its geographical setting as a historic layering of cultural and natural values. The recommendation suggests that intelligent planning of the larger urban area starts with understanding of the evolution of the historic urban landscape at this larger scale, and then seeing the current city as a depositing of many layers over time into that setting. It says, that before every new intervention, the history needs to be made known and multiple layers need to be revealed and celebrated

Personally I would rather see the word topography used more because it is that important. Cities where nature step by step is buried lose their sense of place and will soon be like any other *metropolitan jungle*



*The integrity of the town hall is diminished*



*Normally it is not that bad but nearly.*

### **Urban heritage values**

From the recommendation text it can be understood that conservation house by house is not any longer important. ICOMOS has proposed a new text which is more modulated in favour for house by house conservation, which of course will be important also in the future. But still it is necessary to stress the fact that professional people in heritage sector seems to be very quiet when disastrous interventions in our cities are planned. The heritage sector must take more interest in and learn more about how to save not only the building itself but also its integrity, the integrity of a group of buildings and the integrity of important parts of the city. We have to learn how to act from people working with protection of nature.

ICOMOS has concerning respect for contemporary architecture, mentioned in the recommendation, underlined that it must not become dominant over historic structures. Scale, volume, material, quantity etc must not exceed historic architecture but needs to follow the principle of continuity. ICOMOS also has underlined the importance of protection of the urban heritage values of the visual fabric, human made and natural, of the different part of the cities and the need to be very clear about that. ICOMOS suggests that the first bullet-point above should be changed to:

- Intensification of many forms of urbanization, including greater building density and urban sprawl, which threaten the sense of place and identity of communities

### **Conservation policies and international debate**

The recommendation states that urban conservation is a way to achieve balanced urban growth and quality of life. It says that urban heritage, including its tangible and intangible components, constitutes a key resource in enhancing the livability of urban areas and sustaining productivity, in a changing global environment. My opinion is that it also ought to say that it is something that we have to prove every day in every day practice and in research. However, present and future challenges require the definition and implementation of a new generation of public policies identifying and protecting the historic layering of cultural and natural values in urban environments. Different ways to support that is discussed in the recommendation.

ICOMOS has in its answer opposed to a too uncritical reference to Vienna memorandum from 2005 especially its article 21 about its fundamentalist wording about “that history must remain readable”. In many historic cities it has encouraged conflictual and oversized interventions that do not respect the scale of the existing city and the need of continuity

### **Conservation tools and skills**

To meet today s challenges in a successful way the recommendation underlines the fact that existing tools used in conservation sector are insufficient. The shift from an emphasis on architectural monuments primarily towards a broader recognition of the townscape more as a whole make difference and demands new tools to:

- define the value system of an historic place or townscape
- define and protect integrity of the urban fabric and the urban landscape,
- identify the trade-offs and the limits of acceptable change in an historic context.

The cities functions are less and less decided by their own inhabitants, but rather by global forces such as real estate industries and tourism, which has to be handled. Therefor it is stated in the recommendation that it is a need to develop tools to empower a diverse cross-section of stakeholders to identify key values in their urban areas, develop visions, set goals, and agree on actions to safeguard their heritage and promote sustainable development. These tools should facilitate inter-cultural dialogue by learning from communities about their histories, traditions, values, needs, and aspirations and by facilitating the mediation and negotiation between conflicting interests and groups.

It also states that there is also a need to develop technical tools that should help protect the integrity and authenticity of the architectural and material attributes of urban heritage. The use of sight-lines, viewing-points, simulated skylines etc can become more frequently used if more easy to construct. Today it is my experience that this is a weapon used by the developer in a skilled and tricky way with the goal to mislead.



*Buildings were used to strengthen topography*



*When will the experience of city on islands get lost?*

### **The Management of Change**

A living city must change in a more direct way than a single building. That is way it is necessary to develop tools to handle that change especially in a fast growing city to keep and improve visual integrity and identity as skyline, relation between the built structure and topography etc. It is absolutely important to make clear to the decision makers that we with urban conservation do not mean to “conserve” a city. What we mean is to conserve its values. I have understood that the meaning

of the word conservation changes from British English to American English and for sure it gives negative associations to many people in the Nordic countries.

### **Sustainable Social and Economic Development**

The recommendation addresses the need to better frame urban heritage conservation strategies within the larger goals of overall sustainable development, its economic, ecologic, social, and cultural aspects. It states that future of humanity hinges on an effective management of resources. Considering that in a wider view *sustainable development means good housekeeping, taking care of and developing existing resources in the best way*. That makes the heritage, in a broad sense, a starting point for planning and development in a sustainable society. At the heart of this is the question of non-renewable resources. Many researchers state that we are close to the edge also concerning the material resources on earth. *That is something that could really become a starting point for a respected heritage sector if we understand to use it to our favour. As I know these aspects are not covered in any of ICOMOS international committees, but ought to be.*

Regarding economic growth both practice and research shows that historic urban areas really contribute to economy in many regions of the world. Research is carried through. *ICOMOS has an active international committee on economics that covers that type of issues. However we all have to learn more about it to use the knowledge in argumentation.*

### **A personal reflexion**

Fundamentally it is *a question of knowledge, competence and attitude. But it is also a question about resources*. To define the fundamental values of a place the conservation officer need overview, in some cases international examples. Very seldom the conservation officers in reality have the possibility to obtain that. Also if You have the competence to take part as integrated member in the planning process or to be engaged in alternative solutions of a problem it will take more time than what is usually is available. As mentioned before we have to learn how to act to change the situation from Nature Conservation sector. *Fundamental however is that we have to do the work ourselves. Nobody else will help us*. To begin with concerning the large cities we must:

- learn how to use the existing laws to our favour
- encourage research and raise knowledge
- take interest in heritage as driving force for economic and social development
- argue with conservation as sustainable housekeeping
- take if possible active part in planning process and communication
- use photo and simulations

### **Conclusion**

The Recommendation as well as the HUL approach in general is the beginning of a process. It will be useful in identifying both current consensus as well as new areas that need deep consideration. It will be useful as confirmation of the approach of the international community. We appreciate the attempt to describe the heritage as a driving force for positive development from social, economic, ecologic and cultural point of view instead of something exclusively static and an obstacle. Still we have to prove it ourselves.

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