The Historic Urban Landscape. Managing Heritage in an Urban Century
Francesco Bandarin and Ron Van Oers


The authors, Francesco Bandarin (Assistant Director-General for Culture, UNESCO and formerly Director of UNESCO World Heritage Centre) and Ron Van Oers (Programme Specialist for Culture, World Heritage Centre), are well-placed to focus their considerable professional, technical, and scholarly expertise in a timely way in what is an engaging and highly readable, critical review of the topic of conservation of the world’s urban cultural heritage. A recurrent theme is that of embracing concepts of historic districts and complete historic towns/cities as communities of people where change is a fact of life: the historic urban landscape paradigm.

The book is both an historical overview of urban conservation thinking and practice from the late nineteenth century onwards and an instructive review of the need to rethink in a more holistic way approaches to urban conservation in the twenty-first – the urban – century. The text addresses multi-faceted issues of urban conservation at an international scale at a time when more people are living in cities, a growth trend set to continue and bringing with it a suite of challenges as cities undergo change, and in particular historic cities.

An underlying and resonant aspect of the book is its focus on cities not as a collection of buildings or monuments isolated from their cultural context and setting, or urban planning schemes seen in isolation, but as places in which people conduct a range of activities. It is an idea reminiscent of the innovative urban planning thinking of Patrick Geddes (pp. 12-13) with ‘the city as an organism in evolution, where physical and social components interact in a complex web of change and tradition.’

Allied to this for the authors is the work of Camillo Sitte – with his focus on urban spaces as opposed to individual buildings – whose 1889 book City Planning according to Aesthetic Principles ‘gave voice to the idea that the historic city carried with it an “aesthetic” value, superior to that of the modern city.’ (p.10).

In chapter 1 there is a most useful historical overview of the origin of modern urban conservation paradigms. It offers a sound theoretical underpinning for the book’s thesis made by the contribution of thinkers and planners from the later nineteenth century onwards. It is in this chapter that we see the deep significance of the work of people including Sitte, Geddes, and Giovannoni to modern conservation practice. Referring to Choay (1992) the authors propose that it is Giovannoni’s ‘technical approach to urban conservation that constitutes to this day the basis of urban conservation practice; it was he who coined the term “urban conservation.”’ (p.14). This chapter alone resolutely shows the importance of the adage that, if we want to know where to go, it’s a good idea to know here we have come from.

Chapter 2 addresses the emergence and expansion of urban conservation through an examination of the main international conventions, charters and heritage conservation organisations. The chapter finishes with the observation that modern urban conservation principles suffer from their derivation from architectural conservation principles. We see how ideas have moved from the architectural monuments restoration approach of the 1964 Charter of Venice to the wider understanding of the importance of urban conservation expressed in the 1987 Washington Charter. It was the latter that enriched the international toolkit in the field with recognition of ‘elements such as urban patterns, public spaces, natural and man-made settings.’ (p.72). Nevertheless weaknesses inherent in theory and practice remained. These pushed practitioners to explore new ideas, but ideas based on historical views seen in Chapter 1. Emanating from new thinking came the landmark Vienna Memorandum of 2005. Aimed at revising and updating modern urban conservation the Memorandum introduced the Historic Urban Landscape paradigm, stressing ‘the link between physical forms and social evolution, defining cities as a system integrating natural and man-made elements, in an historical continuum, representing a layering of expressions throughout history.’ (p.72). It is this concept of layering that for me forges a clear link with the cultural landscape link as well as urban cultural landscapes being lived-in places.

Chapter 3 outlines the global processes underlying the need to revise conservation thinking and practice. Chapter 4 engages with what the authors see as innovative approaches that have emerged in
the field of urban planning and conservation in recent decades. It also delves into how cultural heritage – and, particularly, the historic city - has assumed an important role as a factor of identity and social stability, and as an economic sector, connected to tourism and creative industries. Chapter 5 examines the array of tools aimed at addressing specific issues in regulation, community engagement, technical analysis and financial support, noting that a number of tools relative to planning and management of urban processes are based on spatial and social integration and on community involvement and collaboration.

Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, in analysis of modern thinking on urban heritage points to a need to reassess the divide between conservation and development in the theory and practice of urban planning. This is seen in the context of the historic city as not only a collection of architectural monuments and associated fabric, but also as a complex layering of meanings: a place where values residing in tangible and intangible heritage underpin spirit of place. In this connection a notable comment (pp.183/184) suggests that the opposition between historic environment and new development is set aside in favour of design and management factors based on long term values, renewable energy flows, and respect for the relationship between spiritual and material consciousness. The Hannover Principles are given as an example to follow.²

The Historic Urban Landscape approach (p.188) – a tool for management of change – is proposed as a means of addressing pressing challenges in urban conservation: forces of change; integrating conservation and development into a unitary process; recognition of cultural diversity; dynamic nature of urban heritage; impacts of tourism; economic sustainability of heritage conservation. The final point on page 193 summarises for me the crux of the book’s message: ‘transition from the classical paradigm of conservation to the one of managing change’ and addressing acceptable levels of change.

Boxed examples give real examples from around the world, and the text is supported handsomely with full colour images. This is an important book, destined one hopes to be essential reading for those involved in urban conservation globally: scholars, practitioners, managers, students.

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