

# The Future of Historic Cities: A Practitioner's Experience

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## Abstract

This paper on future trends for the development, conservation and management of historic cities emanates from practical work I have carried out. Over the years, it became evident to me that physical-built heritage and human development were two sides of the same coin and unless taken "as a whole" there would be no point in undertaking any conservation programme as such in isolation. It is now widely recognized that a holistic approach should be taken in the conservation of historic cities and urban spaces. I have formulated guidelines for effective project implementation, as well as basic criteria for urban/historic city development/management. For developing countries/cities, holistic development policies and programmes should be put in place directly related to heritage considerations. By this I refer to Sustainable Human Development, summed up in the words "enlarging peoples' capacity". This approach is aimed at empowering people and creating growth and employment. Development in historic cities would have to concentrate on housing, health and education. Adaptive reuse of historic buildings as well as implementation of contemporary architecture in old settings is an example for the conservation and development of historic cities. We need to implement local level project units which can relate to the local population, developmental agencies and public private partnerships. Sustainable tourism has to be related to the two sided coin of developmental heritage. We hope to see in the future historic cities that are *just, beautiful, creative, prosperous, and environmentally friendly.*

## Introduction

This is not an academic paper, and I am not an academic. I am merely a practitioner in development cooperation. Views expressed in this paper on future trends for the development, conservation and management of historic cities emanate from practical work I have carried out over the years, particularly in historic cities and inner cities in developing countries across the globe. I am privileged to have been born and lived for the first twenty-five years of my life in a World Heritage City - Istanbul. This exposure and my interaction with the city's outstanding historical environment has induced in me a constant dialogue with cultural and social qualities as they have developed over centuries. This has been the basis for my international professional work in human development for almost 50 years. Heritage has been an integral component of my beliefs and practice when it comes to human development and all it entails. I am not a conservationist per se, rather I consider myself a progressive conservationist in so far as I believe 'conservation' is dynamic, forward- looking, futuristic and working along the solution of contemporary social issues of all times.

## Historical Background

When addressing issues of historic preservation at UNESCO and the United Nations, it became evident to me over the years that physical-built heritage and human development were two sides of the same coin, and unless taken "as a whole" there would be no point in undertaking any conservation programme. I can assert that if isolated from development programmes, conservation will prove to be costly, complex and in no way resolve the variety of causes and problems which are at the heart of the apparent *raison d'être* of advocating conservation policies and programmes in the first place. They are not sustainable in isolation and basically they do not in any way resolve the ever growing deterioration of heritage monuments and/or the urban fabric.

Let us now have a brief overview of the concept and practice of conservation of built heritage over the last 60 years or so. Since the end of World War II, there has been a progressive development of the notion of cultural heritage embodied in vestiges of historical monuments/sites, particularly in the urban environment. Needless to say, after World War II a lot has been done in Europe to restore, renovate and conserve the built heritage. It was, however, looked upon exclusively as landmarks of historical value which had been damaged and/or destroyed by armed conflict, decay, adverse economic conditions and at times natural disasters. In the years following the aftermath of the war, actions taken regarding conservation gradually led to international considerations of the matter of the built heritage and resulted in a revision of the 1931<sup>1</sup> Athens Charter, which had laid the foundation of an international movement for the safeguarding of heritage. The Athens Charter (1931) fell short of the needs as perceived in the 1960s. In fact the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) - an NGO on conservation of built heritage - noted in its charter drawn up in Venice in 1964, that "problems affecting the built heritage had continually become more complex and varied".<sup>2</sup> It was on this basis that the Athens Charter was revised. ICOMOS in Venice made a thorough study of the principles involved and enlarged its scope in a new document the ICOMOS Venice Charter. I recall that the fundamental point was to indicate that conservation and restoration had to go beyond the monument as such and would have to include its surroundings in a sort of integrated way with the urban ensemble. This was in contrast to an approach that focussed on the treatment of individual buildings. As years passed, many of us in developing countries had difficulties even with this revised document. It was narrow and it did not look at the urban ensemble as a whole, let alone social and environmental dimensions. It was certainly European centred and lacked connection to the realities in the urban world as it was developing in Africa, Asia and Latin America. We were then pleased to see that even in Europe conservation of built

heritage was linked to the improvement of living conditions of the inhabitants of given historic city districts as a result of socially oriented development policies launched by local governments, such as the unique case of Bologna in Italy. This was an excellent progress, yet it did not persist due to lack of continuity in local government practices.

I will now focus on the lack of continuity in conservation practices during the 1960s and 1970s, which are now back on the agenda of urban development and urban management. These issues could now be essential to the 'future of historic cities', but the question remains how they will be carried out and instrumentalised. Internationally, following The European Architectural Heritage Conference in Amsterdam in 1975,<sup>3</sup> the UN-Habitat Conference in Vancouver in 1976,<sup>4</sup> and the World Urban Forum in Barcelona in 2004,<sup>5</sup> it has become evident that monuments could not be sustainably preserved in isolation from the urban fabric, both physical and social. Again, internationally historic areas started to be considered as part of the daily environment of human beings living in them, conditioning such areas to represent the living presence of the past with policies and programme to safeguard them – along with their integration into the life of contemporary society. This became a major factor in urban planning and urban development.

International governmental and non-governmental organisations have over the years launched conventions (for example the 1972 Unesco Convention on Heritage with regular revisions);<sup>6</sup> and recently a special Memorandum on the Urban Landscape has been approved.<sup>7</sup> ICOMOS itself, several decades after the Venice Charter in 1964, witnessed new problems and new complexities such as the challenge to maintain coherent and sustainable urban environments within which historic monuments are seamless elements and living repositories of knowledge. In this context, and with a view to expand its relevance beyond the Euro-USA range, ICOMOS in 2006<sup>8</sup> clarified the Venice Charter and its interpretation on various issues making some changes in the preamble of the Charter and some articles. These, fundamentally, are highly theoretical and still focus on the conservation aspects of purely stylistic, architectural, artistic and historic nature.<sup>9</sup>

In my opinion, it still remains a charter on conservation as such and does not give operational guidelines on how to get to a holistic approach to historic city development strategies and subsequently to comprehensive integral projects. This is obvious, as those cannot be governed by charters and conventions. In fact, the relationship between heritage conservation and integral urban rehabilitation is not an easy enterprise in the international field. There is only one designation process for cultural heritage, namely UNESCO's World Heritage Convention, which lists sites of 'outstanding universal value' to humanity, outlines their heritage characteristics, and makes known what the constraints on development should be. Living historic cities or centres are inscribed by the World Heritage Committee reckoning "the spatial organization, structure, materials, forms, and where possible, functions of a group of buildings essentially reflecting the civilization or succession of civilizations which have originally prompted the nomination".<sup>10</sup> While such a definition means that it is not just a great monument that is listed, but also the older building stock that surrounds it, the listing is still done from the heritage point of view. At present there are 911 prosperities, these include 704 cultural properties on the World

Heritage List. The convention hardly looks at those sites as foci in the urban world and does not aim at their integral rehabilitation and their dynamic sustainability along social, economic, environmental and cultural realities as they are manifested in various parts of the world.<sup>11</sup>

It becomes evident that while thinking 'global' historic cities need a local approach for specific actions in the future. The concept launched by the World Heritage Convention on Historic Urban Landscapes in Vienna in 2005,<sup>12</sup> is the nearest, in my opinion, to a holistic approach to historic city conservation and development. Regional considerations of this memorandum at Olinda, Brazil, in 2007<sup>13</sup> have shown that there is a more detailed definition of cities, landscapes and urban spaces. It was recognized some years ago that the preservation and conservation of historic cities is a sustainable process and should address issues of climate change, pollution, ecosystems, degradation, resource scarcity, transportation and infrastructure challenges as drivers of urban generated issues. This again, I believe, is only the beginning. We have a long way to go to combine conservation and urban development. Meanwhile I will reflect on some practical work which may well be the basis for a coherent and realistic further advance of the discourse on the future of historic cities.

## **Rehabilitation of Historic Cities: Why, How and What?**

In the case of historic centres/cities, as operations in the field unfolded over the last decade, it has been recognized that cities are not constituted only by material and physical heritage, buildings, streets, squares, fountains, arches, sculptures, land marks – but include the natural landscape, and above all, residents, customs, jobs, economic and social relations, beliefs, and urban rituals. Today more than ever it is particularly the recognition of a society or social groups which confirms the centre of the city as a historical area. The interpretation of the term 'historical' encompasses architectural, social, urban and environmental expressions which are recognized as relevant and which express the social and cultural life of a community.

Ministries of Culture across the world have been the pioneers in establishing the norms and ethics of conservation and restoration of historic buildings and quarters. They have been preparing nominations for the inscription of 'cities/centres or towns', in the World Heritage List and yet, the complexity of conservation, development, management and funding of historic cities/centres calls upon new actors to be able to deal with issues such as:

- Improving the conditions of access (internal and external road network, intersection, parking lots and transportation relations with the metropolitan area and regional communication).
- Improving basic amenities (drinking water supply, sanitation, energy and telecommunications) and other basic services (such as household refuse collection, civil protection).
- Improving and rehabilitating the housing stock.
- Promoting and selecting a variety of economic and commercial activities that are compatible with the historic city and can meet part of the maintenance and development costs.
- Developing and upgrading municipal services.

- Conserving historic monuments, the cultural and urban heritage making, if necessary, adaptive re-uses for adequate maintenance and economic gains.
- Codifying and easing the regulatory, administrative and land constraints on the use of land and open spaces.
- Inserting and maintaining green areas and considering CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and effects on climate change.

These interrelated actions have been considered in many historic cities in the world as targets and objectives of municipal governance, calling for a municipal strategy with various components. It is therefore becoming evident that present day thinking on the *why*, the *how* and the *what* of rehabilitation of historic/inner cities entails a comprehensive policy and programme which goes beyond heritage. Heritage is only one component and if treated in itself in isolation it is *not sustainable*. I dare to repeat that in view of its paramount importance.

Let me now try to consider the following two points: What should be rehabilitated and how should/can it be done. This involves considering different types of spaces within the urban make-up as well as the means of acting upon them. The new approach to rehabilitation calls for innovative forms of financing which respond to objectives and guidelines of particular strategic nature with special 'Master and Management Plans' designed for the historic centre, within the framework of broader strategic plans for the city. At present, investment incentives seeking the participation of the private sector and citizens are being put in place. There is, however, universal acknowledgement that investments can only be brought into effective fruition in city/centre 'rehabilitation programmes', if simultaneously the local government enhances its services, improving infrastructure, transport and the environment. Economic activities have to be promoted both in the formal and informal sector. To facilitate the implementation of complex tasks of rehabilitation in historic cities or inner cities it is necessary to establish a 'Central Executive Agency' attached directly or indirectly to the municipality. This agency should act in collaboration with various sorts of corporations, public and/or private.

In third world countries/cities the establishment of local central authorities, with a citizens' participative process 'Project Implementation Units' (PIUs) are coming into being making it easier for international banking community to make major loans and grants available. Amongst the other pre-requisites for successful historic city programmes are political will, an open-ended Strategic Master Plan, community involvement, investment opportunities and national and/or international loans, as well as private sector participation and local-national-regional co-operation. Examples of Rehabilitation and Social/Human Development Projects underway in the world which meets such parameters of site-implementation conducted by different agencies are found in some cities among others, Edinburg, Cairo, Fes, Istanbul, Barcelona, Mexico City, LaHabana, Salvador do Bahia, Quito, Panama, Zanzibar, and Vilnius.

For developing countries/cities in particular, holistic development policies and programmes will have to be put in place directly related to heritage considerations. By this I refer to Sustainable Human Development. The advocacy for Sustainable Human Development (SHD) can be summed up in the words: "enlarging people's capacity". This means it is not

merely about economic growth but about equitable distribution. It is about generating and rejuvenating the environment rather than destroying it, and empowering people, including them in decisions affecting their lives. It also involves seeing traditional cultural values not as regressive, primitive and backward but as progressive, contemporary and futuristic and this recognising diversity.



**Figure 1** The Plaza Vieja in Havana is being restored to accommodate local residents who have been living in those units as they were squatted (!) venues. Presently OHC, sole agency in collaboration with municipality and Ministries of Culture and Housing is rehabilitating the Plaza square and the buildings surrounding.

### **Adaptive Reuse of Historic Buildings: Why, How and What?**

Buildings greatly contribute to the significance, identity, and physical condition of a given urban area. It is therefore normal and favourable to retain the historic building stock and the urban fabric in order to maintain and enhance values related to history, continuity, familiarity and identity, and above all sustainable human development and environmental equilibrium. These are all elements which need to be omnipresent in historic areas.

Adaptive reuse of buildings is an excellent method of conservation and meaningful development of historic cities. This is a process by which older and/or historic buildings are developed for their cultural value while receiving economically, socially, culturally viable new uses of a sustainable nature. For example, they may be adapted for housing or public amenity buildings, or for tourism purposes. Sensible and creative reuse of buildings is an activity advocated by "progressive preservationists" and particularly professionals in the urban development field. While in the last fifty years or so most developing countries have applied this principle primarily for cultural purposes, it is now becoming evident that within a market economy cultural/urban heritage can be considered a financial asset. Investment in historic areas is now closely related to these changing attitudes towards the financial and sustainable benefit of conservation as advocated by the World Heritage Convention of UNESCO. At times, what has been done to preserve and sustain the urban heritage fabric has become destructive and unsustainable. Examples of this are some of the adaptive reuse in some of the former countries of the Soviet bloc which show that there have been trends to initiate these without a sustained policy of projects of adaptation, terminating them in haste (at times exclusively for short-term gains of particular groups), without necessarily taking into account either the principles of conservation or the

Fes - Medina



**Figure 2** Ancient houses in Fes, Morocco are restored to accommodate housing units or other adaptive re-use purposes including musea, galleries, hostels. Ader Fez, sole agency in charge of operations in collaboration with municipality and local population.

sustainability of the buildings and/or the urban fabric, let alone the social and human aspects of rehabilitation with a long-term perspective in mind.

Let us briefly look at some of the common reasons considered in the initiation of adaptive reuse of historic buildings. A common reason is obsolescence of single-purpose structures or those which no longer are serving an economically viable function; related to this is also changes in demand for building stock based on social and economic shifts. Another reason is that existing structures with historical significance are required to be retained rather than demolished. Thirdly, economic incentives, such as tax exemption, credits or grant programmes, or shifting market interests, may call for rehabilitation or the upgrading of basic infrastructure. While we are relating urban heritage to investment and to reuse, we should be cautious not to create an exclusive real-estate market for urban/heritage fabric and/or buildings. There is an element of economic gains along with social responses but investment and adaptive reuse should in no way be looked upon as an exclusively business operation in real estate.



**Figure 3** Insertion of contemporary architecture in old settings. Richard Meier's ModernArt Museum in the Historic Centre of Barcelona. Architectural integration is guaranteed with presence of local inhabitants, tourists and visitors alike.

It has been noted over the years that in some historic urban areas developers have been ignoring the views of experienced progressive conservationists (and I do not mean conservative conservationists!) about what has to be preserved and how. If at all, adaptive re-use is to be considered as a means of historic city rehabilitation of a sustainable order as set out above, there must be a jointly approved policy and agenda between the public and private sector, and the appropriate public authorities. Several factors have to be into account when deciding on the adaptability of existing buildings. These are prerequisites to the whole design process, and includes questions and considerations about the cultural significance of the building or groups of buildings, legal issues, the perceptions and wishes of different stakeholders, impacts on its surrounding both architecturally and socially, as well as various technical matters about cost, access and physical conditions. In addition, it may be opportune to look into the ability of combing 'old' and 'new' within the same building.

The challenges of sustainable human development, trends of globalization, and urban poverty alleviation call for the full mobilization of different domestic and international actors, resources and capacities. Bridging the public-private divide through dialogue and joint action could yield major development benefits. It may well improve the overall quality of policies, while ensuring effective task divisions between state, private sector, and civil society in promoting a true sustainable development. This, in turn, may increase ownership and accountability with non-state actors participating in shaping policy, exercising choice and delivering goods and services. This is very much so in historic cities.

We are all too familiar with the fact that deficiencies in the provision of urban services are caused by factors of high demographic growth, concentration of the poor, and the inadequate management and technical skills of municipalities and overall government agencies to deal with urban services.



**Figure 4** Quito, Ecuador. A special agency in charge of the total rehabilitation of the historic city centre of Quito is completing an integral rehabilitation project in the historic centre with funds provided by a loan of the Inter-American Development Bank along UNDP support. The San Francisco Square has been regenerated to provide functions inherent to activities of local population, markets etc, along visitation areas ignescent to the San Francisco Church compound and streets leading to various historical monuments along housing units, homes for the elderly, recreation areas, city square parks. Quito can be considered a success story of urban renovation with environmentally friendly public services and other urban facilities including hotels, restaurants etc.

The insufficiency of municipal taxes and other revenues are of relevance. As it stands, both supply and demand of services are affected by limited budgets that prevent municipalities from providing adequate services, especially for the poor. This also affects policies and practices with regard to conservation efforts and the inclusion of the historic environment in the living city.

## Conclusion

The traditional notion of groups of buildings as announced originally by the UNESCO World Heritage Convention is not sufficient to protect their characteristics and qualities against fragmentation, degeneration and, eventually, loss of significance.<sup>14</sup> There is, however, currently a deepening of the definitions of cities, landscapes and urban space, and this may provide a new basis for understanding and agreeing to the place of the historic places within the living city. It is now recognized that preservation and conservation of historic cities is a sustainable process and should address current issues of eco system degradation, resources scarcity and transportation and housing challenges as main drivers of urban issues. In addition, the question of integrity and authenticity in historic urban landscapes as currently conceived by UNESCO requires the integration of tangible and intangible assets to achieve full understanding. The conception of boundaries within the city in relation to core, buffer and setting, must move beyond current notions to embrace holistic constructs. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on implications of proposed urban conservation and development, including explicit assessment of institutional and financial gaps and the management strategies and instruments that are needed to ensure urban conservation. Existing conservation processes and methods applied to heritage cities, while helpful, are therefore still insufficient for meeting contemporary and emerging needs. In response to these needs an updating of recommendations and guidelines is required. Outcomes are desired and a sharing of methodologies and case studies are urged. A diverse, robust tool kit is needed and should be the focus of collaborative efforts. To meet the specific needs of historic cities, tools to include policies, programs and interventions should be shaped and adapted in an open creative exchange. Such development should include hazard-disaster-preparedness-mitigation, methods for the integration of archaeological sites in the midst of historic cities, adequate consideration for contemporary architecture, as well as the specific guidelines on tourism. The latter should include recommendations for how tourism industry revenues at least in part are directed toward conservation proper as embodied in historic city development projects. Historic city/centre should be maintained as a place of living and working, a place of every day activities but also a place that safeguards its heritage and makes it possible to enjoy and enhance it. Contemporary architecture in old settings along the lines of various UNESCO Memoranda and ICOMOS redrafted Charter 2006 should also be encouraged and put in place. It guarantees sustainable conservation for the future.

If we look ahead, a historic city in the future will have intangible heritage flourishing in its own right. Rather than being conserved largely by accident of time, it should be conserved and adequately developed by deliberate decision and including private and public stakeholders. Combining it with other

aspects of development rather than the loss of heritage being lamented it will be integrated in the life of the city. We are hopefully to see in the future historic cities that are *Just, beautiful, creative, prosperous, environmentally friendly*, with easy access/contact, compact and yet with a built-in diversity, avoiding seclusion of any kind.

## End Notes

- 1 ICOMOS 1931, *International Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments (Athens Charter)*, Athens, Greece.
- 2 ICOMOS 1964, *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (Venice Charter)*, Venice, Italy.
- 3 European Charter 1975, *European Charter of the Architectural Heritage*, Amsterdam.
- 4 UN-Habitat 1976, *Conference on Urban Sustainability*, Vancouver, Canada.
- 5 UN World Urban Forum 2004, *Cities: Crossroads of Cultures – inclusiveness and integration*, Barcelona, Spain.
- 6 UNESCO 1972, *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, UNESCO, Paris.
- 7 UNESCO 2005, *Vienna Memorandum on World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture – Managing the Historic Urban Landscape*, UNESCO, Paris.
- 8 ICOMOS 2006, *Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas*, Istanbul, Turkey.
- 9 UNESCO 2006, *The INTBAU Venice Declaration on the Conservation of Monuments and Sites in the 21st century*.
- 10 UNESCO 2008 (revision), *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, UNESCO, Paris (first published in 1977).
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 UNESCO 2005, *Vienna Memorandum on World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture – Managing the Historic Urban Landscape*, UNESCO, Paris.
- 13 UNESCO 2007, *Olinda Report of the Regional Conference 'Historic Urban Landscapes in the Americas'*, UNESCO, Paris.
- 14 UNESCO 1972, *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, UNESCO, Paris.