

# Conservation<sup>of</sup> Historic Cities (as Complex Monuments)

Vs

## Integrated Urban Conservation

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Some still argue that, by definition and common sense, conservation of urban heritage means putting it under a glass-bell, protecting it from natural decay and man-made changes by engaging the impressive technical know-how developed over the last two centuries. Others declare that testimonies of the passing of time and accumulation of styles and periods actually add up to its heritage value. Still others have recently asserted that urban heritage conservation must, and is becoming increasingly integrated into contemporary life. This article explores the historical development of these points of view, giving at the same time a brief account of steps towards integrated urban conservation taken by two largely opposed scholarly communities, noting common elements and discrepancies between them, and concludes with a possible conservation typology based on different degrees of intervention.

It seems there is a continuous confusion between conservation professionals when it comes to deciding what we conserve at city level. 'Why' and 'how' we should conserve historic cities and urban areas has been discussed over and over again in conservation, planning, and administrative circles. The question of 'why' and 'how' should, in my view, lead straight to 'what' to conserve. But this link is not always very clear, and it seems that, thirty years after urban conservation was identified as an issue, theoretical and conceptual research is still needed in order to backup such decisions.

This is the consequence of the fact that most education in this field is focused on 'how' to conserve and its appanage of practical skills and knowledge, rather than on 'what' to conserve and its conceptual prerequisites. In essence, there are at least two major conservation approaches: the first and most common is concerned with an almost algorithmic practice for similar initial conditions, while the second is concerned with the questioning of the very rationale of this field. Therefore, once something has been identified as worthy to be protected by law, conservation's instrumental arsenal is employed and contemporary technologies, as well as knowledge of the traditional ones, allow for the best operational results. The problem, however, lies with the identification of what constitutes heritage, which, in the case of urban conservation areas, tends to be still rather arbitrary due to the lack of a proper theoretical framework for the urban heritage discourse. This needs to be expanded and refined, reflecting the perspectives and participation of academia, public, and administration, in order to inform dialogues across social, political, and disciplinary boundaries. The concept of 'urban conservation' has no disciplinary base due to the limited offspring of theoretical literature, and has generally failed to accommodate terminologies, as it is situated at the articulation of two worlds with parallel existences: heritage conservation and urbanism.

#### FROM ISOLATED MONUMENTS TO URBAN AREAS

The evolution of views about urban conservation is very much indebted to the very emergence of the category of 'urban heritage.' Françoise Choay refers to this as the 'invention' of urban heritage,<sup>1</sup> but, as we will see, it is merely a 'discovery': it has always been there. In order to apprehend the evolution of our understanding of the notion of 'heritage' over the past century towards including urban heritage, we should be aware of the expansion of the concept in two major ways. The first acknowledges the understanding that monuments can be attributed not only *a priori*, but also *a posteriori* memorial value: it expands from monuments which originally had a memorial purpose, towards including incidental carriers of memory. The second extends the notion of 'heritage' from tangible, material values towards incorporating intangible, immaterial values. The two developments of meaning are closely interrelated, pointing to a shift from perennial only toward taking the ephemeral and fragile in. Alois Riegl was the first to distinguish between traditional and modern approaches towards heritage, between 'intentional' and 'unintentional' monuments,<sup>2</sup> bringing into attention more inconspicuous aspects of heritage such as minor traditional buildings, which are not of special interest in themselves, but together form an identifiable pattern with heritage value. Accordingly, the term 'urban heritage' was coined by Gustavo Giovannoni<sup>3</sup> at the beginning of the twentieth century to define urban fabric as a *sui generis* entity, and not as the sum of its independent monuments, which was the understanding of the historic city in his time and still is today to a certain extent. How did we get it wrong then? It is probably exactly that lack of conceptual research aforementioned, or, in other words, we cannot see the woods for the trees, as we are so much involved in the technological advancement of conservation. Hence, the archivist model prevails in our society's view of urban heritage. In this, the town is metaphorically assimilated with an archive: its buildings, streets, symbolic places are regarded as charters about our history and our culture. The concept of archive, based on the idea of authenticity, was firstly theorised by Camillo Boito;<sup>4</sup> it necessarily implies a certain identification, selection and preservation of the material as close as possible to its authentic form, although comprising successive stages. This approach might work at the level of individual monuments, but we seem to forget that the traditional city is essentially characterized by its permanent reuse, adaptation, and even destruction to make room for the new; hence, the archivist concept cannot be properly instrumentalized at urban scale. It is easy therefore, when superficially dealing with conservation, to end up with museum-city-centres and thematic towns, which are giving up their vocation as

places of urbanity to become inert objects of display. And this is exactly the flaw of certain conservationist theories, which not only makes them vulnerable to criticism, but also puts tools in the hands of those opponents who advocate the complete dismissal of conservation in certain cases. Historic centres and areas in cities are researched, put through a strainer – with more and more generous criterial holes, but still somewhat aleatory – and offered different grades of protection and, afterwards, of cultural marketing. The success of the actual instances of urban conservation ranges from perennial interventions to remarkable failures. This implies there is more out there than conservation precepts; urban fabric, regarded as a living organism, is far more complex and, very important, is in continuous change.

#### BUILDING VS. CITY: 'PROCESSES'

As a consequence of this enlargement of the notion of 'heritage,' a new meaning for 'conservation' has developed; therefore a second element to be considered is that of the development of conservation theory and philosophy in general. If the problem of identification of what heritage consists of is somewhat simpler for architectural objects – be they buildings or ensembles in any state of conservation from ruins to standing structures – for urban areas or historic cities the problem is far more complex and difficult. While, as far as buildings and ensembles are concerned, we are looking for epitomes of architectural styles or at least of *Zeitgeist from a social, cultural, political, or economic point of view* but when it comes to urban areas we are concerned more about processes that transcend periods, yet remain coherent and recognisable. These processes are understood here, in the philosophical sense of the word, as designating the course of becoming rather than being, or, as Aristotle puts it in trying to explain the world as a changing world, the fusion of being with non-being. In applying this meaning to the city, we acknowledge its continuous transformation, which is defined by both actual urban features and also input of an immaterial kind at the same time, resulting in permanently changing urban form. Urban processes are indeed responsible for the diachronic evolution of urban form. At the small scale of isolated buildings, it is possible to identify successive stages of form and analyse them separately against their historical background; on the contrary, at city-scale, the inherent complexity of the city determines the necessity of analysing its dynamic urban processes – as opposed to static successive stages – which are in line with wider social, cultural, political and economic dynamics. But while this essential difference is acknowledged at conceptual level, it is lacking at operational level. This means that even when urban analyses identify these processes and their evolution over time, it proved difficult to transpose them into criterial categories and quantify and evaluate them for conservation purposes.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, these processes are ongoing and continuously transform the urban environment – which is ultimately defined by them. Therefore, urban areas and historic cities, as dynamic organisms, would be firstly part of contemporary human life and only subsequently testimonials of its past. This point of view is crucial when trying to pinpoint essential characteristics of urban conservation.

Traditionally, urbanists have denied the role played by historic areas for urban development. Georg Dehio denounces the extremist positions of nineteenth century: preservation for its own sake and sacrificing truth to beauty on one hand, promotion of modern civilisation and technology and tolerating monuments only in 'historical reserves' on the other.<sup>6</sup> As the crisis between the radically changing needs of the society and relatively slow adaptability of the urban environment deepened, urbanists seem to have turned their hopes entirely towards planned models, such as those produced by the hygienist and zoning ideologies. However, at the same time when *Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* was summing up its controversial urbanist ideology in the *Athens Charter* of 1933,<sup>7</sup> the proceedings of another conference, which took place two years before in the same place, were published: another *Athens Charter*. It is important to note that the 1931 *Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments* is merely concerned with the technical aspects of restoration, and does not mention anything related to urban conservation, although the preceding debate showed a raising interest in the historic urban fabric itself.<sup>8</sup> Giovannoni's understanding of 'urban heritage' as part of an original urbanist theory could have been seminal, had it not been overshadowed for political and ideological reasons.<sup>9</sup> Without this integrative understanding, the two schools of thought could not be apparently further apart from each other: CIAM and its epigone Team X, arguably more human, were concerned with



invention of spatio-functional prototypes for urban planning; at the same time, conservationists who were not perceived as a group presence in the arena of urbanist thought were entirely devoted to providing a framework for heritage conservation.

Between the two schools, modern urbanism has been indeed favoured by the moment, and its principles have been easily adopted and served well the European governments of the period, who found its economically aware rhetoric rather tempting. This was the case until the failure of modern urbanism became clear. By the end of 1950s, the majority of historical centres and quarters were heavily degraded. Europe in general had to face a dramatic urban housing demand as war had ruined its cities and many city quarters were dilapidated and insalubrious. As the existing cities failed to satisfy contemporary requirements of health, space and circulation, the hygienist ideology became a threat for them. It would have been easy to apply to already damaged old centres radical solutions of demolition and reconstruction following the zoning principle, already tested on peripheral quarters, but the destructions of World War II triggered a crisis of national identities, leading to a reconsideration of heritage values from a point of view philosophically indebted to John Ruskin and William Morris' ideas from a century before.



Fig. 1: View of the evolved vs. modernist city in Johannes Göderitz, Ronald Rainer and Hubert Hoffmann, *Die gegliederte und aufgelockerte Stadt* (Tübingen: 1957)

In consequence, new conservation legislation has been introduced in European countries with the aim of facilitating building restoration as a response both to the post-war reality of European towns and to the reconstruction trend. France was the first country to attempt reconciliation of the two schools of thought, urbanism and conservation in the 1962 *Loi Malraux*, which offered legislative support for conservation areas, not only in designation and protection, but also in financial provisions. This was both a heritage protection law and also an urbanism law, defending a certain understanding of towns initiated by Camillo Sitte, who insists that urban theory should be based on the actual extant town.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it opposed the *tabula rasa* concept of demolition and renovation of old quarters with administrative and financial tools, allowing instead their conservation.<sup>11</sup> Pan-European recommendations and charters followed shortly after. By the end of 1962, UNESCO adopted the *Recommendation Concerning the Safeguarding of the Beauty and Character of Landscapes and Sites* urging Member States to adopt, in the form of national laws, measures designed to give effect in the territories under their jurisdiction to its norms and principles, but unfortunately these were limited to preservation of aesthetic values and picturesque character. Furthermore, the Council of Europe began in 1963 to seek means to impose upon its member governments urgent measures for heritage safeguard through several Recommendations and Orders. Corroborating these initiatives and with the scope of amending the theoretical frame set up more than three decades before by the Athens Charter, the 1964 *Venice International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites*, drafted by Roberto Pane and Pietro Gazzola, finally extended the concepts of restoration and rehabilitation of monuments to

protected areas such as historical city centres, recommending extended legal protection worldwide. This is considered to embody the basis of modern conservation and of the reform of national legislations concerning cultural heritage according to contemporary standards.<sup>12</sup> It was followed in 1969 by the CE Bath Recommendation, which adopted calls for the Committee of Ministers "to recommend to member governments that they take urgent steps to adopt special legislation or to adapt existing legislation with a view to preserving the character and general atmosphere of historic areas and the monuments they contain and to provide special funds for this purpose." Like most of these international recommendations, its guidelines are rather vague, showing awareness of the urban heritage problems, but having limited applicability, because of lack of proper research that could form the basis for the proposed interventions.

The result was that, until 1975, both international documents and national legislations promoted a preservationist approach much indebted to the nostalgic hankering of Morris and Ruskin, which situated conservation at the opposite end from urbanist trends. As an official reconciliation of modern urbanism and conservation, the CE *Amsterdam Declaration of the Congress on the European Architectural Heritage*, concluding the Architectural Heritage Year, regulated heritage conservation's relationship to urban and regional planning, and asked for legislative and administrative measures. It also introduced the term 'integrated conservation' to international specialist discussion. Straight after, in 1976, the *Nairobi UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas* reaffirmed that the protection and restoration of historic towns and areas should enhance their development and adaptation to contemporary life. Consequently, in conservation, the 1970s and 1980s have witnessed a growing awareness of the role of processes for urban heritage, finally understood in its originally intended meaning.<sup>13</sup> This was a particularly productive period in many European countries for urban analysis methodologies and their practical application dealing with material urban fabric and its morphology, in both fields of conservation and urbanism. However the practical approach remained a static one through the 1990s, chiefly analysing the city by isolating and examining successive periods of urban development. As a result, the operational value of this type of analysis was still limited. Despite the fact that theoretical issues formed the basis of standard urban analysis methodologies, they often were ignored in the actual analyses. Nevertheless, as a result of this theoretical and methodological development, the integrated conservation approach towards urban heritage, much sought after in the last century, finally became possible.<sup>14</sup> The search for integrated urban conservation, however, had just begun and its main difficulty was and still is to identify and determine the nature and importance of the conflict between material and immaterial tangible and intangible inputs in the ever changing urban form, and furthermore to correctly evaluate the necessity and opportunity to intervene.<sup>15</sup>

#### THE NEXT STEP DEALING WITH URBAN AREAS

Although the term 'conservation' has been used until the twentieth century in its original sense of keeping or preserving, when the eponymous discipline became increasingly complex, it required a nuancing of its terminology and clear definitions. A first attempt was again made by Giovannoni; in *Enciclopedia Italiana* for the entry '*restauro*' he identified the following categories: consolidation; re-composition through anastylosis; liberation; and completion or renovation.<sup>16</sup> The modern concept of conservation encompasses an even more diversified range of approaches towards heritage, and indeed urban fabric, which can be classified<sup>17</sup> according to the degree of intervention. They range from investigation, legal protection and interpretation to preservation, restoration, reconstruction, re-creation or replication, and alteration. Even though the necessity to intervene results from binomial urban processes, urban conservation, while taking into consideration the immaterial component, can inherently deal only with the very substance of the urban fabric in trying to ameliorate an identified inner conflict.

**Investigation, legal protection and interpretation** all of these actually mean non-intervention in the physical sense of the word. This is only applicable to dead cities, archaeological sites reburied in soil following survey, and even then a certain amount of maintenance is needed, due to the eventual decay processes generated by the investigation itself.

**Urban Preservation** including maintenance, repairs and stabilisation in order to protect the fabric from processes of decay and retard deterioration, except where decay is appropriate to its value. This is generally the procedure favoured in those historic urban areas turned into museums.

**Urban Restoration** to a known earlier state, by introduction of additional material where loss has occurred, but using only original materials and traditional techniques. It is based on the existing material and at the same time on the logical interpretation of all available evidence, so that the place is consistent with its earlier form and meaning. This involves anastylosis and reinstatement, and may involve removal of accretions.

**Urban Reconstruction** again to a known earlier state, but this time by introduction of new material within the fabric, where loss has occurred, using modern techniques and materials, and only if this is essential to the function or understanding of heritage.

**Urban Re-creation or Replication** in exceptional cases as a result of extreme situations where crucial heritage has irrecoverably been lost. Reproduction of historical settings had different motivational and conceptual dimensions.<sup>18</sup> On one hand, the crisis of national identities caused by the destruction of world wars had as a result the desperate attempt of reviving *genius loci* by selective reproduction of historical settings destroyed during wartime bombardments.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, we are confronted with a regrettable misunderstanding of conservation, resulting in the extended practice of pastiche in architecture and urbanism with the declared ambition of creating thematic city centres. This is always linked with a "freezing" view of conservation, which is fundamentally opposed to integrated urban conservation, or is chosen as a facile solution by the unskilled architect.

**Adaptation** indubitably the most common case, whereby integrated conservation allows alterations and additions compatible with the original fabric, which do not detract from the value of heritage, and where they are essential in order for the urban fabric to continue to serve a socially, culturally and economically useful purpose. The utmost difficulty lies with the just initial evaluation of the intervention's necessity or opportunity, its localisation and determination of its nature and importance.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the concept of 'urban heritage' expanded from isolated monuments to urban fabric around the turn of the nineteenth century, but conservation practice developed from mere preservation towards integrated conservation only a century later. And this was in spite of certain anticipatory ideas, nevertheless peculiar, which emerged at the same time with the conceptual development but did not actually profoundly affect the practice of urbanism and heritage conservation until very late. Moreover, only by the end of the twentieth century, had conservation policy extended internationally to entire urban areas and historic towns, leading to the integration of heritage values into the planning process. As we have seen, like with any planning activity, conservation is highly political, as it cannot succeed without political support, hence proper legislation. Modern urbanism was the choice of European governments in the first half of the twentieth century; urban conservation came into being as an equally political choice, only this time imposed/recommended by organisations such as the UN and the EC.

When it comes to deciding over the degree of intervention, there are two main streams in contemporary urbanism in Europe, determined by specific national historical and political context. The first approach towards urban conservation as part of town planning seeks democratic active participation in planning decisions consequently expecting that in this way the solution would better satisfy everyone's interests by reflecting the will of the community. This view is fundamentally different from the second one, more common, which seeks rather to achieve, by exclusively appealing to professionals, an environment that would enhance a democratic community. This is in other words, by extrapolating from urbanism to urban conservation, the dichotomy between conserving democratically and conserving for democracy.<sup>20</sup> Yet in spite of the aforementioned theoretical and regulatory evolution in the field of urban conservation, historic centres slowly undergo degradation and depopulation, losing their commercial, services and craft functions as a result of housing policy linked to a commercial policy focused on their outskirts. At the same time, using adaptation to modernity as a pretext, others endure developments that do not respect their scale either formal or functional, such as tall buildings,

huge commercial areas, high-speed routes, and oversized parking areas. Contemporary cities are victims of their unmanaged economic development leading to hypertrophy of office, commerce, tourism functions or, on the contrary, to their transformation into museum-cities. In other words, unilateral approaches resulted in more damage and only a holistic approach seeking a delicate equilibrium between them can lead to the accomplishment of the goal of integrated conservation.

## NOTES

1. Françoise Choay. *Allégorie du patrimoine* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992), Chapter V.
2. Alois Riegl. *Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen und seine Entstehung* (Leipzig-Vienna, 1903).
3. Françoise Choay. Introduction to the French edition of Gustavo Giovannoni. *Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1998), 13.
4. Camillo Boito, "I nostri vecchi monumenti: Conservare o restaurare?," *Nuova Antologia* 87(1885): 480506.
5. Even now UNESCO's criteria for listing World Heritage Sites fails to acknowledge essential differences between cities and any other types of heritage.
6. Georg Gottfried Dehio. *Denkmalschutz und Denkmalpflege im neunzehnten Jahrhundert. Festschrift an der Kaiser-Wilhelm-Universität zu Straßburg, den 27. Januar 1905* (Straßburg, 1905).
7. Which, for obscure reasons, was only published ten years later.
8. Choay. *Allégorie*, 126.
9. *Ibid.*, 145.
10. Camillo Sitte, *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen* (Vienna, 1889).
11. It set up the *Secteurs Sauvegardés* (Conservation Areas) with the objective of revitalising historic centres and quarters, and instituted global actions on public spaces and built ensembles.
12. ICOMOS was founded in 1965, as a result of the international adoption of the Charter the year before. It is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to the conservation of the world's historic monuments and sites and UNESCO's principal advisor in this matters.
13. ICOMOS General Assemblies of 70s: 'Modern architecture in historic ensembles,' 'The small town,' and 'The protection of historical cities and historical quarters.' Also the 1987 ICOMOS Washington Charter sets a very broad framework for conservation of historic town and urban area, pointing to the connections of this to urban development but without being very specific.
14. The 1985 CE Granada Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage and 1992 CE Malta Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage established statutory measures for integrated protection for architectural and archaeological heritage facing major urban development projects. On a different continent, in 1987, the ICOMOS Washington Charter on the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas stated that heritage expertise focus should broaden from historical centres to the entire built environment, and most importantly identified at the same time the integrated urban conservation need of multidisciplinary studies in the field of: policy and planning framework, management and regeneration action, environmental management, tourism and heritage management, and sustainability. In the same year, the ICOMOS Brazilian Committee, in its Basic Principles for Preservation and Revitalisation of Historic Centres, affirmed the importance of intangible phenomena within the historic city, alongside with its material urban form.
15. Choay. *Allégorie*, 120.
16. Jukka Jokilehto. *A History of Architectural Conservation* (Oxford, Auckland, Boston, Johannesburg, Melbourne, New Delhi: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999), 222.
17. Adaptation to the specifics of urban context of categories from the Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Heritage Value (ICOMOS New Zealand, 1992), art. 13-21 and Burra Charter (ICOMOS Australia, 1999), art. 15-25.
18. The instances where built ensembles, such as the Getty Villa in Malibu, or entire urban settings, such as Huis Ten Bosch, have been replicated within an entirely foreign location are obviously outside the urban conservation discourse.
19. As typified in the case of Stare Miasto in Warsaw.
20. Roger Paden. "Values and Planning" (In *Ethics, Place and Environment*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2001), 28.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank to the participants of 'Eternity and Transience' B2(E) Symposium for their feedback and Dr. D. Bell, Prof. J. B. Whyte and Mr. J. Lowrey for their most helpful comments.