World-Heritage Urban Historic Landscapes: Defining and Protecting Authenticity

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Will protecting historic urban landscapes require a complete overhaul of preservation doctrine?

The 2005 Vienna Memorandum on World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture – Managing the Historic Urban Landscape focuses on the dual challenges of enhancing the vitality of historic cities and of integrating contemporary architecture in an emerging conceptualization of historic cities as historic urban landscapes. This paper addresses some of the questions that this document, adopted by the World Heritage Committee at its annual meeting later that year, raises about defining and protecting the authenticity of such landscapes. It proposes that two documents summarizing expert meetings on authenticity in the 1990s — the Nara Document on Authenticity of 1994 and the Declaration of San Antonio of 1996 — be used as a starting point for addressing these questions.

In looking at the last 50 years of the heritage-conservation movement, one can detect that during each decade the international preservation community concentrated on unraveling one or two major challenges that, while not to the exclusion of other concerns, marked the period indelibly. Thus, the 1960s could be said to be the decade of building theoretical consensus; the 1970s was the decade of heritage inventories; the 1980s was the decade of site management; and in the 1990s the adoption of new heritage categories, such as cultural landscapes, sacred sites, and vernacular settlements, provoked an intense global discussion on the meaning of authenticity, which became the leitmotif for that decade. The conclusions reached in the 1990s about authenticity, which opened the way to the attribution of cultural values to both material fabric and immaterial characteristics in a site, have led during the current decade to extensive explorations into the domain of safeguarding the intangible aspects of the built heritage.

As part of the ongoing debate on intangibility, and particularly its implications on dynamic-heritage categories such as cultural landscapes, the theory and practice of heritage conservation in and of historic cities have faced new challenges that in essence may be said to spring from two unrelated trends. The first is a conceptual shift in the perception of the nature of heritage places; and the second trend is related to the accelerating demographic pressure to increase urban density. Further propelled by the triumphal emergence of the market economy as the preferred development model and by the transfer of traditional public authority to the private sector as aftershocks of the collapse of socialist models, historic cities are being treated as laboratories where mega-experiments on urban density are being tested.

Manifestations of such experiments extend from the epidemic of monumental “look-at-me!” public architecture triggered by the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao to a renewed and more virulent global wave of facadism, the large-scale reconfigurations of the public space along a Modernist vocabulary, and the insertion of buildings of unprecedented height in close proximity to historic districts.

When mega-skyscrapers threatened to sprout in or around urban sites inscribed in the World Heritage List, such as Vienna, Cologne, Saint Petersburg, London, and Valletta in Malta, the World Heritage Committee realized it was time to address the issue directly (Fig. 1). ICOMOS and the World Heritage Centre responded by convening a joint meeting of heritage experts and prominent architects in Vienna in May 2005 with the stated purpose of producing “a key statement for an integrated approach”.

Fig. 1. The Gazprom Tower, proposed for construction in St. Petersburg, Russia, and designed by RMJM London, will rise 1,300 feet (396 meters) on the edge of the Neva River, 3 miles (5 kilometers) from the historic city center, leading some critics to allege that it will interfere with the skyline of the city’s World Heritage District. Proposals of a similar scale in Vienna, Austria, and Cologne, Germany, have been deemed threats to the outstanding universal values of the setting of the two historic cities and raised the prospect of removing the sites from the World Heritage List. Courtesy of RMJM London.
approach linking contemporary architecture, sustainable urban development and landscape integrity based on existing historic patterns, building stocks and context."1 The meeting resulted in the adoption of a set of principles known as the Vienna Memorandum on World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture – Managing the Historic Urban Landscape. This document was meant to serve as the basis for a global discussion leading to a revision of the UNESCO recommendations on historic urban areas adopted in Nairobi in 1976. Articles 7, 8, and 9 of the Vienna Memorandum proposed the following definitions and concepts regarding the historic urban landscape and contemporary architecture:

7. The historic urban landscape, building on the 1976 “UNESCO Recommendations concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas,” refers to ensembles of any group of buildings, structures and open spaces, in their natural and ecological context, including archaeological and paleontological sites, constituting human settlements in an urban environment over a relevant period of time, the cohesion and value of which are recognized from the archaeological, architectural, prehistoric, scientific, aesthetic, socio-cultural or ecological point of view. This landscape has shaped modern society and has great value for our understanding of how we live today.

8. The historic urban landscape is embedded with current and past social expressions and developments that are place-based. It is composed of character-defining elements that include land uses and patterns, spatial organizations, visual relationships, topography and soils, vegetation, and all elements of the technical infrastructure, including small-scale objects and details of construction (curbs, paving, drain gutters, lights, etc.).

9. Contemporary architecture in the given context is understood to refer to all significant planned and designed interventions in the built environment, including open spaces, new constructions, additions to or extensions of historic buildings and sites, and conversions.

The concern of the various professional disciplines of the global heritage community of ICOMOS in dealing with the complex issues of conservation in the face of growth has varied in intensity and level of alarm, but there is basic agreement that the authenticity and integrity of the world’s urban heritage is under serious threat.2 To some that threat includes the paradigmatic shift from “historic town” to “historic urban landscape” proposed by the Vienna Memorandum, which, inter alia, would expand the values inherent in historic urban districts to include its dynamic historic patterns of evolution and change, thereby shifting the objective of conservation from preserving the authenticity of material form to protecting the historical processes and patterns of urbanization.

The appreciation of the dynamic nature of heritage resources in continuing use, and the fact that the process of change can indeed add to their value, or even be one, did not originate in the Vienna Memorandum; it merely focused the spotlight on the challenges posed by it. The traditional materials-based approach and practices of the heritage-conservation field had been challenged earlier by the acceptance and codification into theory of vernacular settlements and cultural landscapes as heritage categories that are dependent not on conservation but on the perpetual renewal of their form according to historically established patterns. Managing the authenticity of such places is an ongoing process that has undergone several stages and will continue to do so into the foreseeable future.

Protecting the authenticity of heritage has always been the fundamental end of all conservation work. For that reason and in order to understand threats to authenticity, it is necessary to understand how authenticity is defined and evaluated in the context of the various categories of heritage.

Until very recently heritage conservation in the Western cultural context had maintained a particular focus on the material elements of the site as repositories of the significance of the place. Most heritage-conservation theory and the protective tools derived from them were deeply rooted on this assumption. For that reason, the authenticity of a place was linked to materials, design, workmanship, and setting.3

As early as 480 BC the Athenians recognized the overriding importance of physical evidence, when, through the Oath of Plateia, they agreed to keep the Acropolis in perpetual ruins as a constant reminder of the ruthlessness of their Persian enemy, who had sacked its temples and monuments. Of course the Acropolis was eventually reconstructed, but in doing so the Athenians respected the memory contained in its extant elements by prominently exposing the earlier ruined walls as the base for the new Erechtheion and by deliberately integrating the column drums of the earlier Parthenon, as well as elements of the old Temple of Athena, in the new north wall of the Acropolis, where they are still visible today (Fig. 2).

Western cultures have always identified places such as the Acropolis as carriers of special communal values and memory that were re-affirmed each time a new generation assumed stewardship for the place and its historic meaning.

As Andrzej Tomaszewski, director of the International Centre for the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCCROM) from 1988 to 1992, has proposed, alongside such places there also existed places of great communal value that in their genesis were believed to have possessed inherent supernatural powers that were geo-graphically fixed.4 The original character of these places — often groves, caves, or springs — was not defined by human-made elements but by natural formations or the more ethereal concept of genius loci. Their importance, however, was recognized over long periods of time by the slow accrual of architectural forms intended to reinforce the shared beliefs about the power of the place. Thus, during antiquity the Oracle at Delphi was populated by treasures and temples, and in the Middle Ages the many places for the veneration of relics ambiguously related to both paganism and Christianity eventually became the sites of the great Gothic cathedrals. In time these places lost their original sacred meaning and came to be appreciated not for their supernatural powers but for the aesthetic values that rested on the imprint of the accretions left by human genius. In short, the repository of value shifted from the immaterial spirit of the place to the material evidence of its architecture.

This apparent need of Western cultures to venerate and preserve the material legacy inherited from the past has been codified in international heritage-conservation theory through the attribution of two types of values to the materiality of a place — aesthetic and historic. That is, either the physical elements of these places contained communal memories, or they enriched the observer through sensory delight.
When contemporary approaches to heritage conservation began to take shape in the early twentieth century, it was axiomatic that the intangible aesthetic and historic values that were attributed to a place (or to artifacts, in the case of moveable property) lay on the extant material elements. In spite of the broad range of divergent views of the time, exemplified in their most extreme opposition by the work and writings of Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin, all approaches converged on the materiality of heritage. When Cesare Brandi, recognized throughout Europe as the most influential conservation theorist of the twentieth century, finally reconciled all philosophical oppositions at the middle of the twentieth century, his entire theory of critical conservation continued to rest on the tacit assumption that all values attributed to a place ultimately rested on its material evidence.5

Another important aspect of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century conservation was its focus on the individual monument. When, through the transformation brought about by the recognition of its aesthetic or historic significance, a building or site transcended into the higher life form of a “monument,” the result in many cases was a permanent state of stasis, interrupted only to remove additions that did not support its attributed monumental values. Thus, at the very root of the heritage-conservation movement’s doctrine was the prevention of change.

The techniques that developed along these theories functioned well for a few decades, but it was inevitable that new situations would be encountered where the tool kit would prove insufficient to deal with the evolving perceptions of the nature of heritage sites and the new pressures of the twentieth century.

It was the highly influential Italian urbanist and theorist Gustavo Giovannoni who in the 1920s and 1930s first expanded heritage beyond the exclusivity of individual monuments.6 In his extensive theoretical writings Giovannoni cogently presented the idea that entire inhabited vernacular villages and ancient portions of towns and cities could also be monuments. Giovannoni’s principles stood in diametric opposition to the vision of architecture as an economic and political tool to improve the urban environment being advanced at the time by the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) under the leadership of Modern movement architects, especially Le Corbusier. CIAM’s solution for the cramped urban quarters inherited from the past was their complete demolition to open the way to glorious and airy villes radieuses, where only the great individual monuments of the past would be preserved. This confrontational opposition between the Modern movement’s urbanism and urban conservation still lingers today.

What is important about the work of Giovannoni for the purposes of this paper is the shift from a static to a kinetic approach in conservation, whereby adaptations in the historic fabric would be allowed to fulfill the evolving needs of modern society but would never compromise the overall authenticity of the urban monument. In spite of the revolutionary nature of this change, Giovannoni, like all his contemporaries, continued to assign all value to the extant material form of the city. His ideas and concepts were the foundation for all mechanisms developed and implemented to protect the authenticity of historic cities during the remainder of the twentieth century.

Just when the world seemed to have achieved a perfect theoretical balance that would sustain the appropriate evaluation and protection of the authenticity of heritage place, the application of the World Heritage Convention opened a whole new set of controversial conceptual issues about the nature of heritage and its authenticity.

Formally known as the Convention concerning the Protection of the World’s Cultural and Natural Heritage, the World Heritage Convention, which came into force in 1975, is simply a pact managed by the United Nations Education, Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) to foster international cooperation in the conservation of the cultural and natural heritage.7 The best known instrument of the World Heritage Committee is the World Heritage List, to which States’ Parties to the Convention may nominate sites within their territories that have outstanding universal value. A principal objective of the convention is to protect the authenticity of sites inscribed in the list. Since the leadership of ICOMOS played a major role in drafting the convention and its initial Operational Guidelines, the original definitions and tests of authenticity for all nominated sites reflected the predominance of the material aspects of heritage as summarized in the preceding paragraphs.8

During the convention’s early years, when the universally known, iconic sites were being inscribed, authenticity as being material based went unchallenged, since the individual monuments being nominated were the object of static conservation and the cities inscribed were being controlled by principles derived from the theories of Giovannoni.
The 1980s, however, were a particularly fertile time in the evolution of the field of heritage. New categories of heritage sites, such as cultural landscapes and places of memory, emerged whose conservation defied then-prevailing theories and practices and, more seriously yet, seemed to undermine the accepted meaning of authenticity. Issues such as the replacement of ephemeral construction materials, first raised by Japan, defied the principle that authenticity resides exclusively in the original construction materials. It was proposed instead that authenticity rested as much on the intangible ancient traditions of reconstruction and replacement of deteriorating parts as it did on the physical elements. While a perfectly logical concept, this was a major theoretical tectonic movement that almost inadvertently shifted the resting place of values from the material evidence to the intangible (and even unconservable) intellectual construct of ancestral communal memory.

Other new types of heritage categories with intangible carriers of significance for which the test for authenticity proved ambiguous were emerging in the context of the World Heritage Convention. Some of these sites were distant cousins of the heritage category of “intentional monuments” first identified by the well-known Austrian theorist Alois Rieg1 in 1903; however, he unfortunately did not provide any clarification beyond identifying the types of values attributed to them. According to Rieg, intentional monuments are those built with the specific purpose of preserving the memory of a specific person or event. In that sense, they are similar to our places of memory, where the material evidence of the place is at times nonexistent or secondary to the significance of the place. In both Rieg’s intentional monuments and our modern places of memory, the values reside on the communal will to associate a place with individuals or events.

No heritage category, however, challenged conventional theories, notions of authenticity, and management models as much as the rapidly evolving category of cultural landscapes, whose very nature is identified as dynamic and in a constant process of historic change.

The fact that change in historic sites, urban districts, and buildings that are still in use is inevitable has never been disputed by the international doctrinal documents of ICOMOS, beginning with its acceptance by the 1964 Venice Charter and extending on down the line through the later charters: the Florence Charter on historic gardens, the Charter for the Conservation of Historic Town and Urban Areas, and the Charter on Built Vernacular Heritage. However, change in these contexts was acceptable as a necessary evil enabling better conservation and was never a character-defining element or a positive cultural asset.

Among the range of cultural-landscape types, the historic urban landscape (HUL) defined by the Vienna Memorandum has been particularly controversial in that it suggests that in historic cities the process of change per se can be an integral component of the significance of the place. The implications of allowing historic cities to continue to evolve along historic patterns have been explored in a sequence of international meetings and in an unprecedented Internet global dialogue among ICOMOS members.

The characteristics of HULs and the principles governing them, which seem to be emerging out of what has proven to be a cacophonous debate so far, may be summarized as follows:

1. The carriers of significance in HULs include the historic building fabric, urban grid, and spatial qualities of its public space but go beyond them to include such intangible carriers as traditional land use, associative communal memories, communal rituals, and the historic patterns of urban evolution, all of which require conservation and protection.

2. HULs extend beyond the traditional boundaries of historic cities or districts to encompass the larger territory of their urban, rural, and/or natural settings, which also require conservation and management.

3. The physical character of HULs is defined as much by their urban and architectural traits as by their natural setting, the geographic and topographic elements that preceded them and shaped their growth, and the resulting viewsheds.

4. Conservation planning and its resulting interventions must be conceived as an integral part of the overall urban-management effort to bring about socioeconomic development and a better quality of life for the existing population.

5. Contrary to the traditional view, new structures in historic settings should be designed as enhancements the visual character and richness of the HUL, rather than as integrated background infill. New construction seems to be refocusing on scale and away from architectural expression.

The above brushstrokes clearly indicate that HULs, in the World Heritage context at least, are considered a new breed of heritage that combines traditional notions with dynamic contemporary concepts reflecting overarching concerns about community development and sustainability. The controversy over the acceptance of HULs derives largely from the absence of a theoretical foundation to guide their conservation and the uncertainty of the long-term effects it would have on the historic urban fabric. The text of the Vienna Memorandum recognizes this gap in stating that the “international charters and recommendations have not yet fully integrated this evolution.”

The ongoing debate between ICOMOS and specialists of the World Heritage Centre will eventually produce the much-needed theoretical foundation to support the conservation and management of HULs. In the meantime, however, two documents dating from the 1990s may prove useful in determining the authenticity of HULs and for measuring the impact of proposed changes on their cultural values: the Nara Document and the Declaration of San Antonio, each the end product of two cathartic meetings held respectively in Japan and the United States as part of the authenticity debates of the 1990s. The Nara Document principally addresses the nature of authenticity in a universal context that is applicable to Western as well as non-Western cultures. The more extensive San Antonio text goes considerably further by delving deeply into authenticity as a reflection of the full range of values attributed to heritage in the multicultural contexts of the Americas. The text also guides the analysis of
such authenticity in three heritage-site categories: historic towns and districts, cultural landscapes, and archaeological sites. In spite of its focus on the Western Hemisphere, the principles and analyses of the Declaration of San Antonio have found worldwide resonance.  

The Declaration of San Antonio gives extensive consideration to the values that support authenticity from seven different perspectives, all of which are relevant to HULs: authenticity and identity, authenticity and history, authenticity and materials, authenticity and social value, authenticity in dynamic and static sites, authenticity and stewardship, and authenticity and economics.

Unfortunately, as was the case with the earlier reference to Rieg’s work, the declaration also stops short of a substantial analysis of the changes in professional practice that would be needed to implement the vision it presents. Nevertheless, within the recommendations that are given at the end of the document, the implementation of the following actions and ideas may be discerned as important new tools yet to be developed for dealing with the emerging heritage category of HULs:

1. The concept of HULs is much larger than that of historic towns. Existing legal boundaries of historic towns are insufficient, even meaningless, in providing the desired protection to the entirety of a HUL. Even the World Heritage requirement of protected buffer zones around historic towns and districts has been deemed insufficient in the context of HULs. Major conceptual changes are needed in professional and legislative approaches to the conservation of historic cities to incorporate this vision.

2. Because the range and nature of values attributed to HULs and identified also in the Declaration of San Antonio have expanded to include intangible attributions for whose application no thorough methodologies have yet been developed, the HUL management team needs to go beyond the traditional disciplines of architecture, urbanism, conservation, and history to include new expertise from the natural and social sciences. For instance the large territorial expanse of HULs would necessitate a greater role for geographers; eliciting and interpreting the values attributed to HULs by community groups and other stakeholders would require sociologists, demographers, and ethnologists; and the integration of HULs in the overall development of the community would call for the participation of economists and other financial experts.

3. The legislative mechanisms that have been developed to protect the material fabric of historic cities are insufficient to protect the many intangible carriers of significance in HULs, such as the role of traditional and historic inhabitants, viewsheds, communal practices and rituals, and specific historic uses of the public space. Whether legal protection for some of these intangibles is possible or even desirable is still unclear.

4. The requirement for impact statements should be expanded beyond proposed major public works to include effects on inherent values of HULs. Other types of planning decisions may have nothing to do with the physical urban infrastructure but may severely impact the intangible elements.

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Notes


2. According to the most recent edition of the World Heritage Operational Guidelines, authenticity in terms of the material evidence refers to the originality of the extant historic fabric as a carrier of values. Integrity refers to the amount of extant authentic historic fabric and its ability to convey the full significance of the place.


7. For the full text of the World Heritage Convention, see http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/.

8. The World Heritage Committee, the main body in charge of the implementation of the World Heritage Convention, has developed precise criteria for the inscription of properties on the World Heritage List. These are included in the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, a document that is periodically revised to accept new concepts, knowledge and experience. See http://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines/.


10. Article 5 of the Venice Charter states: “The conservation of monuments is always facilitated by making use of them for some socially useful purpose. Such use is therefore desirable but it must not change the layout or decoration of the building. It is within these limits that modifications demanded by a change of function should be envisaged and may be permitted.” For the full text of the charters mentioned, see http://www.international.icomos.org/charters.htm.

11. UNESCO, Vienna Memorandum, Article 10.


13. In considering the Declaration of San Antonio, recognition must be given to the Charter of Brasilia as its major template and inspiration. The Charter of Brasilia was one of the regional-background documents for the San Antonio Symposium. The ICOMOS National Committees of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay jointly drafted the Charter of Brasilia, available at http://www.icomos.org/usicomos/Symposium/SYM96_Authenticity/Southern_Cone_English.html