UNESCO Recommendation for the Historic Urban Landscape: Applications in the Asian Context

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Introduction and background

In 2007, the World Heritage Committee reviewed 84 State of Conservation reports for cultural properties around the world. Of these, 33 reported on issues of harmful impacts of urban development and regeneration projects such as contemporary architecture, tall buildings and infrastructure projects (van Oers 2010: 7). It was therefore recognised by stakeholders that a new approach was needed in the relationship between development and conservation, especially in the context of cities.

Urban heritage conservation has become an important sector within public policy across the world within the last 50 years (UNESCO 2011). As the focus moves from conserving architectural monuments to that of a broader perspective incorporating varied processes addressing a range of diverse values, policies should also change. In addition to adapting the policies that already exist, new tools may have to be created to deal with these issues (UNESCO 2011).

In order to support member states in addressing the challenges of balancing modernization, development and investment within historic cities, UNESCO is now advocating the “Historic Urban Landscape” concept. This concept extends the notion of “historic centre” to include the broader urban and geographical context, as well as spatial organizations, social, cultural and natural values.

The Recommendation for the Conservation of Historic Urban Landscapes that is currently being developed under the auspices of UNESCO aims at creating a framework, tools and assistance for the integration of conservation into urban development strategies. To develop a holistic and integrated approach to urban conservation, the Recommendation will also address key challenges of today such as climate change, environmental pressures and rapid urbanization. The Recommendation will be tabled at the upcoming UNESCO General Conference in the fall of 2011.

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To understand the rationale behind the development of the Historic Urban Landscape approach for urban conservation, one has to look at the broader context of international modern conservation practice. The Historic Urban Landscape concept responds to the evolving approaches to conservation and urban management which have been developing over the past few decades.

The discourse about conservation and post-war reconstruction which stemmed from the post-war context of Europe produced *The Venice Charter*, which aimed at conserving ancient monuments (and their settings) mostly for their artistic and historical values [ICOMOS 1964: article 3]². This approach, however, in spite of having influenced conservation practice worldwide, has proven not to be universally applicable. One reason for that was its focus on architectural, especially monumental, heritage, at the expense of heritage embodying socio-cultural and other values.

Today, there are many international guidelines which have further developed the ideas expressed in the *Venice Charter* to be take a more broadly encompassing view of heritage. Within the development of new international guidelines and charters, the definition of heritage has slowly moved from having been focused to individual monuments and their immediate settings to include the broader settings as well as the natural and socio-cultural context of historic cities.


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Among these documents, the definition of “historic areas” in the 1976 Recommendation has played a major role in underpinning the concept of the historic urban landscape. The 1976 Recommendation stressed the fact that “(e)very historic area and its surroundings should be considered in their totality as a coherent whole whose balance and specific nature depend on the fusion of the parts of which it is composed and which include human activities as much as the buildings, the spatial organization and the surroundings”.

However, since 1976, urban conservation has undergone a development from static to dynamic approaches, and from centralised to decentralised systems [Jokilehto 2010b: 41] which is not reflected in the 1976 Recommendation. Even though the principles set out in the 1976 Recommendation are still valid, scholars and practitioners agree that new approaches are needed to address new challenges related to current dynamic processes and living heritage [Folin-Calabi and Rossler 2008: 130-131].

In the Asia-Pacific region, which has seen the highest rates of urbanization and increasing pressures on urban heritage in the past decades, various declarations on cultural heritage have already started to address these issues in a localised context. *The Hoi An Declaration on Conservation of Historic Districts of Asia* (2003) recognizes that historical cities and towns make up the majority of living cultural heritage in Asia, but are threatened by development resulting in loss of heritage and identity (ICOMOS 2003). The Declaration states that the people who inhabit and use historic urban areas are important stakeholders in the conservation process, and notes the importance of having a wide variety of stakeholders involved in projects and in facilitating effective communication between all parties (ICOMOS 2003). The Declaration also points out a number of key issues in Asian cities. Tourism does not have to have a negative impact upon heritage and conservation, and in fact, can support cultural heritage if it is managed in the right way. Planning for disasters associated with the climate change is another issue. There are many wooden structures present within historic urban areas of Asia which are particularly vulnerable to climate-induced threats and the effects of climate change.

*The Xi’an Declaration on the Conservation of the Setting of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas* (ICOMOS 2005) also addresses issues with historic urban landscapes relevant to the Asia region, in particular, the settings of places. It says, “The setting of a heritage structure, site or area is defined as the immediate and extended environment that is part of, or contributes to, its significance and distinctive character”
The interaction between the physical aspects and the surrounding natural landscape is underscored. It is not only the cultural, social and economic aspects which are considered important, but also the intangible aspects (ICOMOS 2005: 2).

*The Hanoi Declaration on Historic Urban Landscapes* (2009) stresses that sustainable development should take heritage values and cultural identity of cities into consideration. It also recommends that the local community be involved in the identification, conservation and development of heritage values (Hanoi Declaration 2009).

**Historic Urban Landscapes and Cultural Landscapes**

Cultural landscapes have been defined in the World Heritage context as “cultural properties” that represent the combined works of nature and man. They illustrate the “evolution of human settlement and society over time” (WHC 2008, Article 47). There are three types of cultural landscapes defined by the *Operational Guidelines* for the World Heritage Convention (WHC 2008, Annex 3):

(i) a landscape designed and created intentionally by man;
(ii) an organically evolved landscape which may be a relict landscape (where an evolutionary process came to an end in the past but is still evident in the landscape) or a continuing landscape (retains an active social role in contemporary society closely associated with the traditional way of life and in which the evolutionary process is still in progress);
(iii) an associative cultural landscape which may be valued because of the religious, artistic or cultural associations of the natural element.

The cultural landscapes concept derived from the need for an integrated approach between cultural and natural heritage [Folin-Calabi and Rossler 2008: 123-128]. The category of “cultural landscapes” within the World Heritage framework became necessary when practical difficulties in the nomination of rural sites, containing natural as well as cultural elements, became more and more obvious [Fowler 2003: 23].

The historic urban landscape concept on the other hand derived from increasing conservation issues and threats to the Outstanding Universal Value and the integrity of World Heritage properties [Folin-Calabi and Rossler 2008: 123-128]. These conservation issues can be partially attributed to the narrow
definition of urban heritage in the World Heritage framework, which does not include the full consideration of the natural and social environment. According to Article 1 of the World Heritage Convention, historic towns and town centres fall into the category of “groups of buildings”. In Annex 3 of the Operational Guidelines, it is further suggested that historic towns or town centres can be classified as “towns no longer inhabited, inhabited historic towns and new towns of the twentieth century” [WHC 2008: 88]. For inhabited towns it is stated that the main focus of a nomination should be the architectural interest [UNESCO, Operational Guidelines 2008: 88], which is a principle that has not been changed since its introduction into the Operational Guidelines of 1987. The World Heritage framework itself still promotes a quite static and restricted framework of urban heritage.

Despite the differing starting points of these two concepts, both approaches call for an integrated approach to conservation, including cultural, natural and social aspects of the place.

**From the Vienna Memorandum to the Recommendation for the Historic Urban Landscape**

The early seed of the Historic Urban Landscape concept originated during the 27th WHC session in Paris in 2003 when the Committee called for the organisation of a symposium to discuss issues of concern with cultural heritage and development. The purpose of the symposium was to discuss how to regulate development in historic urban contexts while preserving their values, particularly those on the World Heritage List. The symposium produced the Vienna Memorandum, which was the first outline of principles and guidelines that focused on the relationship between conservation and urban development while preserving the integrity of historic urban landscapes (van Oers 2010:8).

Although superseded by the Recommendation, the Vienna Memorandum remains a milestone in terms of recognizing the importance of sustainable development in urban conservation practice. The three general principles outlined in the 2005 Vienna Memorandum are:

(i) opportunities and risks should be assessed completely during the planning process, resulting in well-balanced development;

(ii) contemporary architecture needs to complement the historic urban landscape values without compromising the historic nature of the city; and
(iii) economic developments need to take the long-term heritage preservation goals into consideration (van Oers 2010:11).

Out of the context of the Vienna Memorandum, the Declaration on the Conservation of the Historic Urban Landscape was adopted at the UNESCO General Conference in October 2005. The Declaration stressed the need for a recommendation as a standard-setting instrument for the conservation of historic urban landscapes, which has led to the development of the current Recommendation.

**Historic Urban Landscape: definition and key concepts**

The Historic Urban Landscape Recommendation works toward the goal of sustainable development by suggesting a landscape approach for the identification, conservation and management of historic areas. The relationship between the tangible elements, the way that these are organised spatially, the natural setting and features, and their values (cultural, economic and social) are all important in this sense (UNESCO 2011).

The historic urban landscape is defined as:

>The historic urban landscape is the urban settlement understood as a historic layering of cultural and natural values, extending beyond the notion of “historic centre” or “ensemble” to include the broader urban context and its geographical setting. The historic urban landscape approach suggests that intelligent planning of the larger urban area starts with understanding the evolution of the historic urban landscape at this larger scale, and then seeing the current city as a depositing of many layers over time into that setting. In every case, the history needs to be made known and multiple layers need to be revealed and celebrated (UNESCO nd:3).

It is important to note that the historic urban landscape notion includes both the tangible as well as the intangible aspects of a place. It acknowledges that the recognition of intangible heritage is necessary to understanding a historic urban landscape. Cities contain many forms of ritualized behavior which sustain the buildings or tangible aspects of the city (Smith 2010:47). Spiritual, mythological or symbolic
references can be tied to the entire historic urban landscape, or to sections or individual points in the landscape (Jokilehto 2010b:48).

There are three key points in the historic urban landscape approach that have changed the way that urban heritage conservation is viewed.

(i) Landscape encompasses both previous and current dynamics and there is a relationship between the natural and built environment. Buildings are no longer viewed singularly but as an element of a broader context. Continuity within the landscape is important in heritage conservation.

(ii) The role of contemporary architecture should be taken into consideration. New buildings are often the result of a marketing strategy and are viewed as an expression of the culture of the particular city. Historic architecture can become shadowed by buildings such as these.

(iii) The impact of tourism and urban development on the changing role of cities. When development is undertaken in a historic town and the developers are from the area the values of the town are often recognised. However, if the developers are from elsewhere, as is becoming more common, there is little knowledge of the historic values of the town. Municipal authorities are often unable to meet the requirements of both the international developer and the local community (van Oers 2010:12-13).

The condition of integrity is the key characteristic of the historic urban landscape. This includes social-functional integrity, structural-historical integrity and visual integrity. The visual integrity should ensure that spatial views and panoramas should be considered, as well as borrowed landscapes and views into distant settings (Jokilehto 2010b: 44).

**Historic Urban Landscape: towards application**

It is intended that the UNESCO Recommendation on the Conservation of Historic Urban Landscape will be adopted at the 36th session of the UNESCO General Conference in 2011. In adopting the Recommendation, Member States will commit to adapting the Recommendations to their specific contexts, to disseminate it widely across their country, to facilitate its implementation through the use
of supporting policies and to monitor its effectiveness upon the conservation and management of historic cities and urban settlements (UNESCO 2010).

In order for Member States to implement the historic urban landscape approach, six steps are suggested:

(i) Mapping and surveys of the natural, cultural and human resources within the city.

(ii) Consultation with stakeholders is necessary to determine what value to protect so that they can be passed on to the next generation. The attributes for these values also need to be noted.

(iii) Determine if these attributes are susceptible to socio-economic stresses and the impact upon them of climate change.

(iv) Integration of urban heritage values and the risk of impacts on these values needs to be incorporated into the framework for the development of the city. These are called city development strategy (CDS) or city conservation strategy (CCS). Different zones of management can be outlined in these frameworks, such as (a) strictly no-go zones, (b) sensitive zones that need attention to planning, design and implementation, and (c) allowing development such as high rise.

(v) Prioritise conservation and development actions.

(vi) Partnerships and local management frameworks appropriate for the CDS and CCS projects should be established. Public and private sections should be coordinated through mechanisms developed for that purpose (UNESCO 2010).

In order for Member States to undertake the steps above, a Historic Urban Landscape Support Programme is devised which contains seven actions:

(i) A website will be created to assist the communication and exchange on the historic landscape approach. This will allow stakeholders such as local governments and site managers to communicate with each other.

(ii) Institutional partners who are relevant to the historic landscape approach will form a working group that will be able to assist Member States.

(iii) Technical assistance packages, sponsored by bilateral donors and private sector parties, will be developed for regions such as Africa, Central Asia and small island states. There will be an emphasis on sites such as historic cities that are listed as in Danger on the World Heritage List.
(iv) Aspects of the historic urban landscape approach will be subject to scientific research.
(v) Conferences and symposia will be organised in order to allow international discussion on the historic urban landscape approach.
(vi) Didactic materials, curriculum design and teacher training relating to urban conservation and the historic landscape approach should be supported along with ICCROM and category 2 centres established under the auspices of UNESCO.
(vii) Every six years a review of the implementation of the Recommendation will be undertaken by the Member States. The review will focus on the impact of the Recommendation on conservation and management of urban settlements and historic cities and will be used to formulate best practice guidelines and specific advice to the stakeholders (UNESCO 2010).

Some concerns have been raised among scholars and practitioners about the practicalities of implementing the Recommendation. This includes the need for clearer definitions and policies in order to guide its implementation. A point to note with the historic urban landscape approach is the question as to how to determine the boundary of the area. Some definitions include only urban and not open areas; however, some urban areas contain open spaces which are part of the urban environment (Jokilehto 2010a:58). There are also problems with the settings of urban areas which were previously predominately agricultural areas. These areas are now subject to development pressures and are changing in character. Settings are important for historic urban areas as they encompass the broader landscape context and therefore need to be managed and conserved; however, in today’s society, urban landscapes can be quite large, with some extending hundreds of kilometres. The question then is should all this built area be considered historic? With larger areas comes a need for greater flexibility in guidelines.

**Historic Urban Landscape: relevance and application in the Asia-Pacific context**

In the Asia-Pacific region alone, there are over 20 World Heritage towns and cities and another 40 municipalities which host some of the region’s most notable World Heritage landmarks. These World Heritage towns and many other historic districts, quarters and neighborhoods which are not on the World Heritage List face a multitude of challenges as Asia’s cities continue to grow and modernize at an unprecedented pace.
In the context of Asia’s rapidly expanding urban population, which will – according to the Asian Development Bank – grow by approximately 70% within the next 20 years, these towns and cities will see major economic and social transformations which will affect all aspects of well-being, including the integrity of the heritage. As high rise residential and retail buildings replace heritage buildings, the lower-income people who lived there are also displaced (UN HABITAT 2010:194). Globalisation has resulted in major changes to urban life, including an increase of tourism. The Asia-Pacific region is predicted to have the highest region of tourism growth by 2020.

Urbanisation and globalisation – urban growth is transforming what makes urban areas unique, particularly in Asia, where urbanisation and globalisation are occurring at a rapid rate. While globalisation brings economic, social and cultural benefits, if urban growth is not managed effectively the changes that occur can result in loss of community identity, urban fabric integrity and the sense of place (UNESCO 2011).

Development – effective management of historic urban areas involves services and tourism as a means of maintaining the areas and their cultural heritage. This can be done through the availability of information technology and sustainably planning, building and design practices. If these opportunities are not recognised urban cities can become unsustainable and unviable leading to the loss of heritage assets (UNESCO 2011).

Environment – a changing focus on the environment, especially water and energy consumption, needs new approaches which include natural and cultural heritage (UNESCO 2011). Environmental problems in Asian cities, if left unaddressed, will result in consequences felt across the whole world.

Reflecting this range of issues that are particularly apparent in Asian cities, urban World Heritage sites in this region have been under scrutiny. In recent years, a number of Reactive Monitoring Missions have been undertaken by the advisory bodies to the World Heritage Committee in response to problems arising from development and infrastructure issues. These include missions to as Luang Prabang (Lao PDR), Macao SAR (China), Lijiang (China) and Georgetown (Malaysia). Two of these case studies for Georgetown and Luang Prabang are presented below.
Case study – George Town, Penang, Malaysia

The historic urban site of George Town, Malaysia was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2008, along with Melaka as part of a serial nomination of the Straits Settlements. Established by the British in 1786, George Town has colonial buildings as well as over 5000 traditional shophouses which exhibit stylistic designs with Chinese, Malay, Indian and European influences.

In the early 1970s a conservation policy was introduced to the town plan. In the mid 1980s a public conservation movement was started as there was rapid urban change on Penang Island. In 1985 the first formal public policy was implemented to protect buildings in the town. German experts helped to put together an inventory of the heritage buildings in George Town and a heritage conservation policy was approved by the State Government in the late 1980s.

A Reactive Monitoring Mission was undertaken in George Town in 2009 (Logan and Boccardi) in response to a threat posed by four proposed commercial developments. Two of the developments were planned to be built within the George Town property boundary, while the other two were planned to be built within the buffer zone (Logan and Boccardi 2009:6). The mission concluded that the development proposed for areas within the inscribed area had the potential to affect the outstanding universal value of the property, whereas the two within the buffer zone would have less impact (Logan and Boccardi 2009:4). The report recommended that the proposed building heights be reduced so that they were less visible. It also recommended that changes be made to the management guidelines to ensure that the property is managed more carefully in relation to development in the city (Logan and Boccardi 2009:5).

Case Study – Luang Prabang, Lao PDR

The second case study is focused on the historic urban landscape of Luang Prabang in Lao PDR which was inscribed in 1995. Luang Prabang is a well-preserved town that illustrates the blending of traditional Lao architecture with that of European colonial architecture from the 19th and 20th centuries. Much of the town, which is situated on the Mekong River, remains intact.

The town is currently under pressure from development and increasing tourism. There were several proposed new developments for Luang Prabang including a new airport, a new town to be located on the Mekong River opposite the World Heritage property, and a bridge across the river. These
developments were feared to impact the World Heritage property both visually and through noise pollution and to generally affect the setting and cultural landscape of the area (Boccardi and Logan 2007:2; Reeves and Long 2011:12). Moreover, as tourism increases in the town and more hotels and guesthouses are built, the local people move out of the area, resulting in gentrification (Reeves and Long 2011:8). Therefore, it was feared that not only is the cultural landscape of the town in danger of disappearing, but also the intangible cultural heritage which is linked to this (Reeves and Long 2011:17).

A Reactive Monitoring Mission was undertaken at Luang Prabang in 2007 by the World Heritage Centre and ICOMOS (Boccardi and Logan 2007). The mission focused on development pressures, particularly adjacent to the boundary of the town and also illegal building activities within the boundary of the town. The Mission report noted that the existing conservation measures needed to be strengthened in order to cope with the pressure from development (Boccardi and Logan 2007:2). The mission suggested that a more inclusive approach to conservation be taken, which would take into account the natural features such as wetlands, cultivated areas as well the intangible heritage elements of the town. To provide this protection, a buffer zone including the surrounding areas of Luang Prabang should be established. Moreover, greater community involvement and interaction with policy makers and heritage site managers would be helpful.

**Conclusion**

Over the last 50 years, the conservation of urban areas has become more important in the heritage sector. The overall shift has seen the focus move from buildings to that of the overall landscape in which the city is located. This incorporates all layers of the city, both tangible and intangible. As development and tourism impact more and more on historic urban cities, a new approach was needed in order to consider all aspects of these cities. Therefore, UNESCO have built upon existing conservation practices, guidelines and charters to create a more encompassing approach, outlined in the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape. It is hoped, that once adopted, the management and conservation of historic urban cities will be more sustainable and consider all the layers of cultural landscapes. In order for the Recommendation to be successful, it is essential that all stakeholders are involved in the conservation and management of historic urban landscapes.
George Town, Penang, Malaysia (Photo from wikipedia.org)
Luang Prabang, Lao PDR (Photo: UNESCO)
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