

International Conference on Contemporary Architecture and the Urban Historic Context

Sevilla – 19 to 21 March 2013

Rationale

In November 2011, the General Conference of UNESCO adopted a recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape that underlined the need of the Member States to “adopt the appropriate legislative institutional framework and measures, with a view to applying the principles and norms set out in this Recommendation in the territories under their jurisdiction;” and to “bring this Recommendation to the attention of the local, national and regional authorities, and of institutions, services or bodies and associations concerned with the safeguarding, conservation and management of historic urban areas and their wider geographical settings.”

This recommendation follows the recommendation of the World Heritage Committee at its 29th session in July 2005 recommended “that the General Conference of UNESCO adopt a new Recommendation to complement and update the existing ones on the subject of conservation of historic urban landscapes, with special reference to the need to link contemporary architecture to the urban historic context” (Decision **29 COM 5D**).

In preparing for this General Conference recommendation, the World Heritage Centre has reviewed existing standard-setting documents, organized four expert meetings (in 2006, two in 2007, and 2009) and three planning meetings at UNESCO Headquarters (in 2006, 2008, and 2010) to facilitate consultations, discussions and the drafting of a new standard-setting instrument on the subject of Historic Urban Landscapes. The outcomes of this process have been published in World Heritage Papers No. 27 on “Managing Historic Cities”, while a preliminary study together with the relevant observations and decisions of the Executive Board was submitted to the 35th session of the General Conference (October 2009), which requested the Director-General to bring forward a new Recommendation on the conservation of historic urban landscapes (35C/Resolution **42**).

With the rapid increase of demographic and concomitant economic pressure on urban settlements, urban cultural heritage of all types is more and more at risk and the cases that had been studied and decided upon in the World Heritage Committee meetings are getting more numerous. Paramount in these cases, though not exclusive, is that of new high-rise buildings in or around World Heritage urban heritage and of the visual impact of such constructions on the World Heritage of the cities and on their attributes.

Though the recommendation adopted in November 2011 recognizes and supports the evolution of historic cities respectful of their heritage – tangible and intangible, it also recognizes the need for further research on the concept of historic urban landscape and on the tools and instruments needed by all parties to enable the appropriate and objective implementation of the terms of the recommendation. If the policy rationale has been properly stated in the recommendation, its implementation still requires the development of the objective criteria and tools – practical guidelines – on how to link contemporary interventions (architecture) to the urban historic context: whether or not a new building fits harmoniously into the environment

into which it is set from the point of view of its physical attributes and also of its functions, the problem being both that of “harmony” with and respect of its surroundings as much as harmony with the life of the historic setting: new functions can be disruptive and endanger the World Heritage and the historic fabric as much as if not more than the form.

These are the two major aspects that need to be addressed in priority to enable the recommendation on historic urban landscapes to be effective. This conference will address the two aspects with a concentration on the visual impact, while functions, being easier to grasp and evaluate will also be considered.

Description

A major international 3-day¹ conference will be organized in Sevilla (Spain) with the aim to bringing together a significant number of high-level scholars, professionals from different fields, policy makers and critics to bring new light to this issue and to try to identify new paths and new instruments and tools that would enable decision-makers and professionals from the urban, architecture and heritage fields evaluate and decide in a more rational and objective manner.

This conference will establish:

- 1) A stocktaking of earlier major meetings on this subject and their outcomes;
- 2) Position papers that will set the full landscape of the issue and address new avenues for the understanding of the relationship between contemporary architecture and historic settings with all its complexities. It will set the grounds of the discussions – how do we read contemporary architecture, the role of beauty, the urban necessities, etc.
- 3) Viewpoints from outside the architectural practice (including cognitive specialists, neuroscientists, art historians, urban development experts, mayors, urban and regional planners, urban economists, energy conservation specialists, etc.)
- 4) A regional categorization of how architectural practice deals with the issue of contemporary architecture in the urban historic context (i.e. Latin American, Arab, European, African and Asian best practices)
- 5) A set of practical guidelines and the identification of possible evaluation tools ranging from minimal and harmonious intervention at one end to serious rupture at the other end of the spectrum, with a corresponding checklist of attributes to consider and, (b) an action plan for further research in the topics that have been considered as needing more study

Goal of the Conference

The goal is to identify evaluation tools, guidelines and mechanisms on how to address contemporary architecture in the urban historic context. These would then be further developed in other seminars, meetings or conferences.

¹ 2.5 days of conference and half a day of visit