

Urban morphology, historic urban landscapes and the management of historic cities

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A recent editorial in this journal focused on the gap between research and practice in urban morphology (Whitehand, 2007). In the case of historico-morphological aspects, it drew attention to the desirability of links with supranational organizations concerned with urban conservation. For the past decade I have been engaged extensively as an international consultant by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and partner organizations on assignments related to the management of historic cities. As such, I should like to take up the invitation at the end of that editorial to comment on developments in UNESCO that are pertinent to practical applications of urban morphology.

Urban morphology is little recognized, understood or applied in relation to the management of historic cities in my country, the United Kingdom. By comparison, in France and Italy urban morphology (whether expressed as such or not) has been a cornerstone of strategic urban planning and conservation policies and practice since at least the 1960s. In these countries safeguarding the panorama of cities as well as their urban grain and functional diversity has been the norm rather than the exception. One has simply to compare the urban landscape of Paris with that of central London, or the conflicting scales and limited range of activities in the historic core of York with the smaller scale multi-functionality of a parallel cathedral city such as Chartres, to note the differences (Rodwell, 2007b).

The concept of *historic urban landscape*, as adopted and promoted in recent years through UNESCO and supported by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), is an attempt to articulate an overarching tool that comprehends the holistic management of historic cities: from the protection of their visual image; through the conservation of their historic built environment and its enhancement by way of appropriate contemporary interventions; to continuity of the socio-cultural human activities that constitute an indispensable component of its sense (or spirit) of place (Van Oers, 2006).

At the global scale, the practice of urban conservation – as opposed to the preservation of individual monuments and ensembles treated in

isolation – is a relatively young discipline that has few internationally agreed principles, let alone tools. In the United Kingdom, the two principal ingredients are *architectural and historic interest* and *streetscape* (or *townscape* – arguably a misnomer) and the protective system is fragmented: limited to individually identified listed buildings and conservation areas. There are no policies or guidance – and no perception of the need for them – that deal with historic cities as a whole (Rodwell, 2007b, 2008b).

Initially across much of Europe and North America, then by globalizing extension across the continents, planning theories based on the separation of functions (land-use zoning) and the concentration of high land values in the centres of cities have tended to focus commercial pressures for development into their most sensitive historic areas. Add to this the current fashion for iconic modern architecture that ignores its context and one has a heady cocktail for conflict.

The conflict, however, is not just physical – a question of tall and out-of-scale buildings or inconsiderate design, materials and colour. The notion behind the holistic management of historic cities is to secure their evolutionary development, taking into account issues of ecological sustainability as well as geo-cultural distinctiveness and identity. It is as much people-driven as it is artefact-driven: focused on the inhabitants and others who conduct their daily lives within historic cities, without which they serve a limited range of activities and lack the essential ingredients of spirit of place. A historic city that is overtaken by tourism, for example, ‘may preserve the container, but what about the contents’ (Rodwell, 2008c)? An anthropological approach – one that is directed towards identity, sense of belonging, creative continuity, and the dynamics of socio-economic processes and evolving human aspirations – is increasingly recognized as the way out of the received notion amongst conservators and their peers that ‘the city is a monument; unfortunately it is inhabited’ (Rodwell, 2007a, 2008a).

The sequence of international conventions over recent decades has disclosed a considerable progression and enlargement of perceptions. The 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention only

categorized *monuments, groups of buildings* and *sites*. In 1992, *cultural landscapes* were defined; in 1994, *authenticity* was reassessed to become more geo-culturally inclusive; and in 2003 and 2005 respectively, *intangible cultural heritage* and *cultural diversity* were recognized by UNESCO conventions (Rodwell, 2007b). In 2005, *historic urban landscapes* came to the fore through the UNESCO Vienna Memorandum – essentially as a holding measure that responded to a specific set of circumstances at that time (Rodwell, 2006; Van Oers, 2006).

This progression may, in the overall scheme of things, be considered rapid, but in terms of the threats posed by negative pressures it has, especially since the early 1990s, lagged behind. The pace of change and the dynamics of development in historic cities have accelerated, as have demographic and socio-economic changes especially in many non-Western countries (including the Eastern Bloc of Europe); high-rise and iconic contemporary architecture are aspirational tokens of modernity to cities as diverse as Liverpool and St Petersburg (Rodwell 2007a, 2008b); additionally, international tourist numbers are forecast to double by 2020. In short, the challenges facing the tangible and intangible heritage of historic cities today threaten to be overwhelming and the instruments and tools to respond to them are lacking.

It is within this context that the UNESCO initiative on historic urban landscapes has gathered momentum. Since 2005, regional meetings have taken place in Jerusalem, St Petersburg (Rodwell, 2007a) and Olinda, all with the view to refining a definition of the term and elucidating a management tool kit. The current proposal is to submit a formal UNESCO recommendation on the safeguarding of historic urban landscapes for adoption by the UNESCO General Conference in 2011. This recommendation will apply to historic cities wherever they are in the world; concurrently, management guidance for cities that feature on the World Heritage List will be reformulated.

It hardly needs stating that the historic urban landscapes initiative is underscored by a high level of ambition. The concept is beyond the comfort

zone of established, specialized disciplines: not least, traditional scientific approaches to the conservation of historic monuments as artefacts. The process to date, therefore, has involved many corporate and individual partners working to common purpose: debating how best to protect historic cities whilst not inhibiting their constructive, positive development.

Urban morphology – interpreted as a discipline that has the potential to embrace not simply a two- and three-dimensional methodology that studies and characterizes the physical evolution of historic cities, but one that facilitates a fuller understanding of their functional and socio-economic evolution – has a major contribution to make in the sustainable evolution and development of historic cities worldwide. Personally, I am very keen that the discipline is embraced and challenged by a wider audience.

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Change of Book Review Editor

Dr Piper Gaubatz has completed her term as Book Review Editor of *Urban Morphology*. Her successor is Dr Ian Morley, Department of History, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Fung King

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