



50th ISOCARP

International Planning Congress
Urban Transformations - Cities and Water

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The Historic Urban Landscape.

Managing the Historic Urban Layering and its Relationship with Water.

Key note address by Francesco Bandarin

I am very honoured to be with you today at the inaugural session of this important Congress.

The theme you have chosen for this event is of the utmost importance in an urbanising world that is looking for new ways to ensure sustainability and quality to urban environments.

Indeed, since time immemorial, the relationship between water and cities has been at the core of urban development processes, and often the spring for the economic, artistic and political success of cities.

I would like to use the time you have given me to present to you some points that I think are relevant for your reflection, and necessary to understand where the current debate on cities is placed internationally.

It is difficult indeed today to discuss of the future of cities without a good understanding of the global processes that are dominating our lives and the urban scene.

In the past 10 years I have had the opportunity to explore these issues within my experience at UNESCO, in two policy areas. The result of these activities are, I think, important and deserve to be shared with the community of urban managers and planners.

The first policy area has to do with the future of historic environments, and with the need to integrate conservation of urban heritage and urban development in new ways, at the same time respectful of the past and open to innovation and creativity.

You can imagine how this integration is important when we consider the role of water in urban development, as water management has been the key aspect of traditional urban development in all its aspects, whether for human uses and irrigation, for transport and exchanges, for food production or simply for leisure.

The second policy area deals with international development policies, and the discussion – underway in this very moment at the UN General Assembly in NY- on the future International Development Agenda, the Post-2015 new Sustainable Development Goals.

1. The HUL recommendation

In 2011, UNESCO adopted an important Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, the first text issued by the Organisation on the issue of urban conservation since 35 years, that is since the 1976 Recommendation on historic areas.

What was the origin and purpose of this new Recommendation? And what are its implications for the urban planning profession and practice?

At the origin of this new text there was an increasing dissatisfaction of UNESCO and in particular of the specialised body in charge of the World Heritage Convention, the World Heritage Committee, with the state of urban heritage conservation in many parts of the world.

Rapid urban transformations – and not only in the Asian context- started impacting the historic areas protected by UNESCO at a worrisome pace. Difficult situations were examined in places like Potsdam, Cologne, Vienna, London, just to refer to Europe.

New urban developments, high-rise and tower constructions, modern interventions not respectful of the urban continuum, new infrastructures were all elements that threatened the quality and integrity of the historic urban environment.

At the same time, economic changes and in particular the development of the tourist industry has impacted on the social structure and on the functions of the historic city.

UNESCO started debating this issue in many for and gradually came to the conclusion that a new approach needed to be studied, aimed to broaden the concept of historic environment and to make compatible conservation and urban development.

The Recommendation is the result of this process, and while it states very clearly that it assumes all the conservation principles expressed in the International Charters and Documents of ICOMOS and UNESCO, it also proposes a new urban conservation paradigm, that extends the concept of historic environment beyond the classical historic districts or areas, to embrace a broader territorial context and new dimensions, previously less considered, such as the intangible values and the natural context.

Rather than entering into the doctrinal discussion on architectural conservation, the Recommendation is intended to suggest a new integrated approach to conservation, based on the understanding of the values that need to be preserved, of the relationship established through time between the different parts of the city, embracing a better understanding of the needs expressed by the changing social structures that live in the urban environment, of their cultural expressions and practices, and of their economic and functional needs.

Furthermore, the Recommendation fosters contemporary creative expressions as part of the heritage values of an urban environment, and supports the reconnection between the urban planning processes concerning the historic areas and the modern city.

In a way, this new approach suggests that, in order to meet the challenges of sustainability, lessons have to be learned from the layered dimension of the historic urban environment, and that the past should be seen as a resource to understand the city processes and to improve quality of life.

Such an approach – the so called HUL approach- has been received very positively by local planners and administrators, eager to preserve the heritage values embodied in their urban heritage, but also opposed to approaches only focused on physical conservation and indifferent to the ever-changing social and cultural dimensions of the city.

In recent years, urban planners and landscape planners have moved – in response to the challenges of urban sustainability- from a 'zone-based' vision 'of urban management and planning towards a 'landscape-based' approach.

This change of perspective is in my view extremely significant and should be given due consideration at all scales of intervention.

The relevance of this approach for the theme of your Congress is clear.

Water is by definition an element that requires a global, integrated, cycle-based approach for its management.

This is true whether we consider urban rivers and lakes, ocean waterfronts, or simply water management and infrastructure systems.

In fact, since time immemorial, water obliges us to look at the city in an integrated way, and it is therefore an important dimension of a landscape approach to urban planning.

All this was very well known in the past, as proven by very successful cities like Venice, Amsterdam and in many Asian cities like Suzhou in China.

But modernity has not valued these relationships, as shown by the almost complete suppression of the waterway system that characterised cities like Milan or Tokyo, for instance, or the complete marginalisation of the incredibly important canals system of Bangkok.

There are countless examples of this, and I am sure you are much more informed and aware of them than me.

In the past 30 years, the waterfront redevelopment has been the key feature of many urban revitalisation processes, since the first American experiences in Boston and Baltimore to the European examples of London, Barcelona and Genoa to cite but a few among a very large number.

I think these models have been interesting to experiment revitalisation practices, the public response and the public-private financial schemes.

Think of cases like Bordeaux, for instance, a city that has changed its face in the past 15 years thanks to a major redevelopment project focused on the creation of a new relationship between the citizens and the riverfront, and on an intense cultural use of it.

But even in emerging countries the relationship between water and the city is being given a new significance. I would like for instance to mention the great achievements of the City of Hangzhou in China, that has redefined its own urban identity around the historical West Lake, now in the World Heritage List, around the adjacent XiXi Park, a restored marshland and flood basin. In the Historic centre of Hangzhou, an exceptional Architect, Wang Shu, 2012 Pritzker Prize winner, has redesigned the main street, giving value to the water line that is crossing it, instead of covering it like modern development is prone to do everywhere.

These example should stimulate us planners to develop integrated planning tools, able to value the historical environment and to use it to respond to the growing need of a higher of urban quality of life.

2. The Post-2015 International development Agenda

In this very moment, at the UN General Assembly, a very important discussion is taking place on the new definition of the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

In the past 4 years, UNESCO has spearheaded the inclusion of Culture in all its dimension, heritage, expressions, creativity, institutions, in the new Development Agenda.

This has allowed to rally a very important International consensus and to create links with international and national organisations that share the same goals.

As an example, under the patronage of UCLG, a coalition in support of the Culture and Development policy has been created, with over a 1000 organisations signing in. They have launched a major campaign to support Culture in the Post-2015 Agenda.

In May 2013, just a year ago, UNESCO organised a major international Conference on the theme "Culture, key to sustainable development".

The Declaration that was adopted at the end, the Hangzhou Declaration, clearly identified the role culture plays in many aspects of development, ranging from peace and reconciliation, to social inclusion and stability, to economic development and poverty reduction to environmental sustainability.

As most of the population of the world lives now in cities, the Declaration focused particularly on this aspect, stating that:

A vibrant cultural life and the quality of urban historic environments are key for achieving sustainable cities. Local governments should preserve and enhance these environments in harmony with their natural settings.

Culture-aware policies in cities should promote respect for diversity, the transmission and continuity of values, and inclusiveness by enhancing the representation and participation of individuals and communities in public life and improving the conditions of the most disadvantaged groups. Cultural infrastructure, such as museums and other cultural facilities,

should be used as civic spaces for dialogue and social inclusion, helping to reduce violence and foster cohesion.

Culture-led redevelopment of urban areas, and public spaces in particular, should be promoted to preserve the social fabric, improve economic returns and increase competitiveness, by giving impetus to a diversity of intangible cultural heritage practices as well as contemporary creative expressions. The cultural and creative industries should be promoted, as well as heritage-based urban revitalization and sustainable tourism, as powerful economic sub-sectors that generate green employment, stimulate local development, and foster creativity.

Today, in the discussion in New York, it is in the Goal on cities that Culture finds its greater recognition. Culture and Heritage should be seen as resources for the city, not as weights, costs and use restrictions.

As Cities are at the core of future development strategies, they will be the protagonists of the new Sustainable Development Goals. In fact, the first great appointment after the approval of the Goals in 2015 will be the 3rd Habitat Conference that will take place likely in May 2016.

For all these reasons, UNESCO has decided to embark on an ambitious program related to cities, with the aim to present to the Habitat III Conference a Global Report on Urban Culture and Heritage, discussing its situation in the different parts of the world and its role in sustainable urban development.

I think that ISOCARP can play a role of protagonist in these important global reflections. Today, you are discussing a theme that is of great relevance for sustainability and quality of life, Water and Cities.

I think that it would be extremely important to frame this issue, and the other that you will choose for your future discussions, within these global processes.

We need to do this because Urban Planning has gone through radical changes in the past decades, due to social, economic, political and technological transformations.

You all know how different were the concepts, the practices and the technical tool-kit of Planners just a few years ago.

I think we will all agree that Urban Planners have to adapt their profession to a changing world, if they want to continue playing a significant role in producing livable and sustainable urban environments.

Thank you.