

# Approach to the general problems of the cultural heritage in urban contexts

## Aproximación a los problemas generales del patrimonio cultural en contextos urbanos

IRINA GREVTSOVA

Universidad de Barcelona, Campus Mundet, paseo de la Vall d'Hebrón, 171, 08035 Barcelona  
irina.grevtsova.bcn@gmail.com

Recibido: 20-04-2012. Aceptado: 15-07-2012

**ABSTRACT.** The safeguarding of urban areas in historic towns is an emerging trend in many cities in Western Europe. The planning process of urban conservation includes protection, conservation, design and enhancement activities based on the multidisciplinary studies in which many specialists are involved. The town planning balances between two types of treatment of historic areas - architectural interventions and musealization of heritage sites. The main objective of this paper is to identify the main principles of each strategy and define their impact on the whole planning process. Gradually, the article presents the main terms and principles used for urban planning and protection of historic heritage. Finally it identifies the principal problems and issues faced by professionals working in this area.

**KEYWORDS:** interventions in historic towns, safeguard of urban areas, urban heritage, accessibility, heritage interpretation

**RESUMEN.** La protección de las zonas urbanas en las ciudades históricas es una tendencia emergente de muchas ciudades en Europa occidental. El proceso de planificación de la conservación urbana incluye las actividades de protección, conservación, diseño y difusión basado en los estudios multidisciplinares en los que muchos especialistas están involucrados. La planificación de la ciudad se balancea entre los dos tipos de tratamiento de los conjuntos históricos: la intervención arquitectónica y la musealización del patrimonio in situ.

El objetivo principal de este artículo es identificar los principios fundamentales de cada estrategia y definir su impacto en todo el proceso de planificación. Gradualmente, el artículo presenta los principales términos y principios que se utilizan para las intervenciones urbanas y la conservación del patrimonio histórico urbano. Finalmente, se identifican las principales cuestiones y problemas a los cuales se enfrentan los profesionales que trabajan en esta área.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** intervenciones en ciudades históricas, protección de áreas urbanas, patrimonio urbano, accesibilidad, interpretación del patrimonio.

### Introduction

In the second half of the xx century, many historic urban centers presented vast degradation areas. The increasing number of immigrants who occupied the urban areas led to the further destruction of buildings and urban environment. The fact that the

majority of historic and cultural monuments were located in these areas aggravated the situation and caused major concern about the historic urban elements.

Under these circumstances the international heritage community began to react and since then many international heritage conventions have been



**Fig. 1. Two photos illustrating the contrast that can be observed between the rehabilitated Gothic district and the immigrants area in Raval (Barcelona)**

organized and principles and guidelines have been set up. In this context a serial of documents beginning with the 1931 *Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments*, through *The 1964 Venice Charter*, *The Washington Charter on the Conservation of Historic Towns and Areas* and finishing with the recently proposed *Valletta Principles for the Safeguarding and Management of Historic Cities, Towns and Urban Areas* have been approved. These documents are aimed at regulating and establishing the main principles of the conservation and of safeguard of the historic urban areas.

The status of historic buildings, the basic principles of conservation and the basic directions of development of city districts were fixed in the regulations adopted by the *Washington Charter on the Conservation of Historic Towns and Areas*. This document emphasizes the need for protection of historic urban areas and their integration into urban development and dynamization. Also, it points out the importance of comprehensive preliminary research. The historic buildings and architectural ensembles in the present condition should be included in the development of security plans. At the same time, the new way of planning takes into account the construction of new infrastructures, necessary for the city growth, and its adaptation to the conditions of historic developments.

These principles were updated by the recently published text *The Valletta Principles for the Safeguarding and Management of Historic Cities, Towns and Urban Areas*, adopted by the 17<sup>th</sup> Icomos General Assembly in November 2011. This document introduces and de-

fines new socioeconomic factors caused by the fast growing changes affecting the historic towns. It emphasizes the importance of «heritage as an essential resource, as part of the urban ecosystem», and it gives more attention to the safeguard actions of urban heritage elements and environments.

### **A new understanding of urban space in architectural planning**

As we said before, in the second half of the xx century, many historic urban centers presented vast deserted areas. This condition complicated the task of their protection. Simple preservation of buildings and architectural ensembles could lead to their complete isolation and further degradation. Therefore the priority in the new urban planning was the rehabilitation of the historic areas and the improvement of the quality of the historic centers in order to make them attractive for habitation (fig. 1). Thanks to this strategy, the local residents of the cities settled the historic center and became conservators of their cultural heritage.

The historic areas also have become centers of commercial and social life of cities and at the same time have begun to create all necessary conditions to attract tourism (fig. 2). In modern cities, monumental and architectural heritage are being regarded as the main object of dynamization and attraction of economic resources. This feature determines the new urban planning, which has become an integral part of policy development of historic areas.

In the architectural design, these characteristics are causing the introduction of new terms and determining new standards for urban development. An important emphasis is being placed on design of multi-functional public spaces that should be shared, free accessed, open and collective. At the same time, the key word to describe the singular specificity of the new urban environment is the



notion *accessibility*, which means the creation of public spaces that can be used by any public. *Accessibility* in this sense is synonymous of high quality urban environment (fig. 3). In other words, the design of the accessible space should take into consideration the characteristics and features of all people, including people with disabilities.

In addition, the architectural planning and interventions also include a wide range of questions starting with a detailed design of small architectural elements and finishing with urban planning of large environments. The main contents of urban planning involve the design of street paving, street furniture and architectural elements, as well as the planning of recreation and transit areas. One of the basic solutions for the improvement of the historic centers of cities is the separation of pedestrian and vehicles traffics, aimed to improve the quality of urban space. The architectural planning

of pedestrian areas creates convenient and easily accessible sites without interfering barriers, open spaces for recreation and cultural well-designed environment. This method opens the possibility for more direct acquaintance of a visitor with the cultural monuments and more careful preservation (fig. 4). Moreover this conceptual approach makes the cities more human, making the citizen and his needs its main actor.

### **City as a large depository of cultural heritage**

The historic monuments and urban elements obtained the heritage value not so many years ago. Throughout the history of cities and the evolution of urban spaces under cultural, social and political circumstances, the perception of buildings and architectural ensembles has been constantly changing. Urban buildings got through from simple objects of contemplation and documental source in



☉☉ Fig. 2. The urban streets of historic areas are characterized by stormy commercial activities and filled with tourists

☉☉ Fig. 3. However public spaces in historic urban areas don't always remain it free access. The dynamic public activities generate the need to protect the playground area with fence that divides a public square into two spaces: for public and private use. Square Villa de Madrid, Gothic district, Barcelona

☉ Fig. 4. Open pedestrian areas are comfortable for discovering the medieval heritage, Gothic area, Barcelona

☉ Fig. 5. Interpretative sign located in a medieval area, Barcelona



All cities, almost without exception, have its own memorial sites and cultural heritage. Therefore the preservation and safeguard of historic urban areas have a widespread application and have affected not only the largest metropolitan areas, but also small settlements with its local heritage.

The historic context presents complex structures including different kinds of urban patterns and also human factors that are constantly in a process of continuous evolution and change. The *Valletta Principles for the Safeguarding and Management of Historic Cities, Towns and Urban Areas* establishes the main elements normally composing the historic cities and towns.

Historic towns and urban areas are made up of tangible and intangible elements. The tangible elements include, in addition to the urban structure, architectural elements, the landscapes within and around the town, archaeological remains, panoramas, skylines, view lines and landmark sites. Intangible elements include activities, symbolic and historic functions, cultural practices, traditions, memories, and cultural references that constitute the substance of their historic value.

The sustainable development of these areas can be provided by the limit of urban expansion and the safeguard of urban heritage. In this sense, the museum's preservation of historic contexts serves as the main tool in regulating the rapid changes occurring in towns and urban areas. This method of treatment has already been applied in many historic cities and as a consequence some urban areas have transformed into open air museums.

ancient times to historical monuments of great historical and national value after the French Revolution. The modern vision of cultural monuments was formed after the Second World War when the value of all testimonies of the past were recognized worldwide. At present historical buildings and cultural monuments located in historic cities have got its legal protection fixed by official documentation. Most of them have acquired a great significance as heritage objects and are considered as cultural properties. These changes aroused a special interest on historic towns, which set a new value of our cultural heritage —the value of modernity.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> F. X. Hernández Cardona y J. Santacana Mestre (2009): «Las museografías emergentes en el espacio europeo occidental», *Hermes. Revista de Museología* (Gijón: Ediciones Trea), núm. 1, pp. 8-20.



Figs. 6, 7, 8. Interpretative signs located in a medieval area Barcelona and Calafell, (Tarragona, Spain)

Thanks to the museum approach, the urban environment acquires new functions. The historic cities become not only depositors of heritage elements, but also places to study, large open air libraries and classrooms with all kind of infrastructures and services which are necessary to give access to urban history. In addition, the historic towns and urban areas become places where we can get excited, enjoy the historic environment, travel to the past and live history. The same streets, monuments tell visitors about its history, its main commemorative and historical events and characters (figs. 5-9). More and more, the city streets, squares and other urban spaces take on the function of orientating visitors in historic patterns and historic environments of cities.

### Heritage interpretation: a main tool to explain urban contexts

In many cases the transmission of cultural messages about the heritage elements located in urban contexts is not so easy. In this sense, the challenge of explaining urban heritage sites is solved by *heritage interpretation*.

This notion was firstly defined by Freeman Tilden in his book *Interpretation of our heritage*, which now is a bestseller in the scientific community and a principal source of citation by site interpreters. «Heritage interpretation is an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information». Such definition was given by Tilden to describe how to

interpret heritage sites. He also describes the six main principals which sum up the basic ideas on heritage sites. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between this concept and many others. This concept was firstly introduced in the context of US natural parks and was specifically used to improve public services and open air activities in a natural environment.

Later on, the success of the activities based on the principles of interpretation, the practices and heritage methodology have been distributed and widely applied not only in the US but also in European countries. Since the 1960-70 heritage interpretation has become an important field of investigation for a wide majority of heritage professionals. Over time this has lead this concept to be applied to the cultural heritage and its vast field of activities. These principles have been the basis of creation and development of modern cultural tourism and ecotourism, transforming the cultural property into cultural tourism resources, thus enhancing the value of heritage to the public.

So from the beginning, the heritage interpretation has had different variations in a vast field of cultural and natural heritage sites that has generated the creation of a plural vocabulary of definitions by the professional heritage community. This vocabulary has been incorporated in the legislative and regulative documents and has led to the

● Fig. 9. Interpretative sign. Didactic iconography presenting the historical evolution of the monument. Castle Calafell (Tarragona, Spain)

creation of new tools in heritage management. In spite of all passed conceptual transformations of the original definition of heritage interpretation, the main idea remains the same: effective communication of the significance of cultural heritage sites (fig. 9).

In urban contexts, the notion of heritage interpretation given by the authors Santacana and Cardona is the following «the interpretation means the installation of the necessary connection between cultural monument and the observer». <sup>2</sup> According to the authors the interpretation is the essential instrument to value the urban heritage. The same authors continue with this term and define three principles of a new museum presentation in European cities. The second concept is based on the philosophy of contemporary art that concludes that any object can be musealised in open urban space and exposed to the public. The third concept refers to the task of all modern museums in open air contexts and defines them as institutions to produce knowledge. And the last statement defines the heritage sites as exhibitors behind which lie invisible and ephemeral stories, the spirit of the places.

In conclusion, the four concepts, in which the museum planning of urban contexts is based, presents an open concept and can be interpreted in various ways. Nowadays, there are no strict rules and regulations that would systematize and limit the museography in urban contexts. The museum presentation can reflect and show as many cultural layers of historic cities as it has. Also, it allows creating a site interpretation by professionals, as well as by citizens. In many cases the latter ones can explain and generate knowledge about urban heritage in a very close and special way.

## Conclusion

In this article two aspects of a wide range of questions coming from the safeguarding of urban heritage elements were approached. Urban planning is used for the preparation of urban structure, the design of physical access and for planning environmental design. Heritage professionals normally define the heritage elements to be preserved, set



up museum contents and design the visit basics. In general terms, the urban planning responds to the needs of technical questions. The museum planning has educational functions.

Among other important disciplines that are involved in the planning process it is worth mentioning - territory development, landscape architecture, museology, archeology, anthropology and others.

The multidisciplinary team involved in the rehabilitation of urban areas generates several issues, among which the main problem is the professional methods to be used. In this sense, many discussions originate between architects and museum specialists in terms of intervention and conservation standards in historic areas. Different visions sometimes generate misunderstanding between participants and may slow down the working process. In this context, it is important to establish collaboration and find the balance between necessary interventions and careful safeguard of the cultural heritage.

Another important feature which should be taken into account during the urban and museum planning is the local community who lives in historic areas. This characteristic distinguishes the

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

urban heritage from the other categories of open-air cultural heritage. The treatment of this type of heritage is very different from archeological sites or industrial areas, where the environment is usually defined and separate from the residential use. It influences the planning process on all levels. So the tasks to preserve and manage the urban areas should be developed from a perspective taking into account the needs and interests of the local community.

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