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A New International Instrument: the proposed UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) Remarks and Questions

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Overview

UNESCO's new *Instrument* establishes a comprehensive set of principles to guide current practice of urban conservation of heritage and historic urban landscapes. It also sheds light on important challenges facing this practice. This *Recommendation* highlights the importance of such assets and their vital role in sustaining and adding value to existing and future built environments. Previous standard-setting documents are recognised, in addition to the acknowledgment of the diverse contexts of historic urban landscapes around the world. However, this *Instrument* discounts a number of safeguarding criteria according to particular perspectives; namely structure, values identified, contemporary architectural intervention, heritage/historic scales, sustainability principles and regional levels of application. The following remarks and questions are therefore proposed.

Structure

In terms of structure, the *Recommendation* follows the standard structure of UNESCO proposals, which often start with a preamble consisting of a number of statements. These are followed by definitions of significant terms and finish by stating the relevant guidance. This *Instrument* is also accompanied by another set of statements assembling an action plan, which is intended to be applied by the State Parties¹.

¹ **States Parties** are countries which have adhered to the *World Heritage Convention*. They thereby agree to identify and nominate properties on their national territory to be considered for inscription on the World Heritage List (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties>).

This approach of presenting a written proposal for safeguarding heritage has previously been criticised because of its grammatical and pragmatic structure and application, which are derived from the author's professional expertise, and which are employed in explaining the subsequent authority given to the 'Proposal' as a standard for safeguarding heritage. However, this typical structure of previous documents was believed not to illustrate sufficiently how the community will share such a safeguarding process. The application of Waterton et al's (2006) *Critical Discourse Analysis* on the texts of both the *Burra Charter* (1999) and the *Venice Charter* (1964) resulted in identifying the texts of such documents as "... a series of categorical statements that signal authority and expertise in an explicitly unidirectional flow of information, with a seriously diminished dialogicality of text. In short, there is a reduction of all differences of opinion into a text of consensus" (Waterton et al, 2006: 347).

This investigation was confirmed by Christopher Landorf in 2008, who, in his turn, investigated the *Venice Charter* (1964) and the *World Heritage Convention* (1972) concluding that such "[g]uidelines need to be more specific about the planning process and local facilitators need to be trained in culturally aware negotiation techniques ... Additional evidence of the continued empowerment of local stakeholders needs to be a requirement of the reporting process" (Landorf, 2008: 620). Thus, this new *Recommendation* on HUL should have been structured in a more accessible way for various users, including local authorities, experts and concerned communities.

Cultural Heritage Values

The proposed *Instrument* emphasises safeguarding the values used to determine a site's inclusion on the World Heritage List (WHL), namely authenticity, integrity and outstanding universal values. It also recognizes a number of other values associated with cultural heritage, such as cultural and intangible merits. For example, the tenth paragraph under the 'Definition' section states that "[t]his wider context includes the site's topography, geomorphology and natural features; ... It also includes social and cultural practices and values, economic processes, and the intangible dimensions of heritage as related to diversity and identity" (UNESCO, 2011).

However, the *Document* does not clearly catalog or define these merits. It also does not clarify how these are related to previous definitions. Furthermore, these values are not described in their relation to the historic urban landscape (HUL). Again, such ambiguity has been widely criticized by various scholars, to name a few Rowney in 2004, Younés in 2008, and De Marco in 2009. Accordingly, clarifications of the characteristics of these values will contribute to the further and wider acceptance of this *Recommendation*, in addition to facilitating its practical application in the ‘real world’.

Contemporary Interventions

In paragraph 13 of the ‘Definition’ section, it is stated that “[t]he Historic Urban Landscape approach considers cultural creativity as a key asset for human, social and economic development and provides tools to manage physical and social transformation and to promote harmonious integration of contemporary interventions” (UNESCO, 2011).

The precise meaning of harmony in this instance is not defined. Is it *harmony* of colour, scale, urban form and height? Is it the *harmony* of social, cultural, economical and intangible identities? Or is it the *harmony* of both of these concepts together?

Heritage and Historic

The *Document* establishes regulations to include both historic urban areas and urban areas of heritage value. However, the value and character of a historic area may be different from the value and character attributed to heritage assets, which are already listed on the WHL. Additionally, historic areas do not necessarily follow the UNESCO guidelines, as they are not designated by the WHL. The application of such documents to historic areas, which follow national guidance, is hence open to various interpretations, which could result in inappropriate application of the proposed *Instrument*. More importantly, in some countries, particularly in the Asiatic Mediterranean Region, the borders and the statutes of historic areas are not yet clear.

Policies

Paragraph 21 states that “...modern urban conservation policies, as reflected in existing international recommendations and charters, have set the stage for the preservation of historic urban areas” (UNESCO, 2011).

Where do the recommendations by the Council of Europe, the Organization of World Heritage Cities (OWHC), Europa Nostra and other such institutes stand in terms of this new *Instrument*? This question is based on the fact that a range of recommendations, which are approved by these organisations, are capable of being applied at an international level. They also advocate a range of significant suggestions on the HUL. It is true that this *Recommendation on HUL* is based on a number of UNESCO’s previous significant guiding documents, such as the *World Heritage Convention (1972)* and the *Vienna Memorandum (2005)*; but it is not clear that preceding key guidance by the Council of Europe or OWHC are recognized, despite this document’s intention to be broadly applicable to both historic and heritage assets.

Sustainability

Paragraph 22 states that “[p]olicies for urban heritage conservation should be integrated within a broader urban context, and historic forms and practices should inform sustainable contemporary development ...” (UNESCO, 2011). Within the context of the HUL, how does this draft understand *sustainability* and *sustainable* development? Are these terms open to regional or local interpretations?

Regions

UNESCO defines five regions of world heritage properties according to its activities. However, these often share similar characteristics. It is impractical to develop guidelines for each context of heritage in each State Party, which has the HUL on the world heritage list. But, it has been widely argued that it would be very helpful and realistic to develop particular documents, along with this general one, for the heritage contexts of these regions. Such shortage of precise *Documents* for the heritage context in some regions was discussed in Rowney (2004), Yahaya (2004), and Landorf (2008). Although each of these

scholars recommended guidance for particular areas, they also all identified the tendency of most of standard-setting *Documents* to tackle issues related to the heritage of the West, which were widely considered as ‘Eurocentric documents’.

In fact, this has been highlighted many times over the past four decades even by the text of few heritage *Documents*. For example, the *ICOMOS Tunis Declarations* of 1968 stated that:

...this situation is more serious for cities of the Islamic world than for European towns, where the ancient city is almost always the geographical hub and centre of urban expansion; in the Islamic world the old city is usually surrounded by fortifications and is separate from the modern town, which develops independently outside it. This attracts the residential and economic life essential to their existence away from the medinas and reduces them to 'living on a sometimes artificial activity in handmade goods and on the tourist trade. (ICOMOS 1968).

Additionally, heritage has been equalized by its designation values on the WHL. These values, however, have various characteristics according to their contexts. They likewise have a varying hierarchy of importance according to their definitions by the communities and local authorities in question. For example, what may be understood by local authorities, experts and communities as an Outstanding Universal Value of heritage in Damascus/Syria might not be the same semantic in Bath/the UK . Furthermore, the characteristics of identity value of the intra-muros city of Damascus are different from the features of identity in Bath, in terms of social, cultural, intangible and architectural aspects (Alsalloum, 2011).

Action Plan

The recommendations of the ‘Action Plan’ are innovative and practical. However, each region has a level of advancement in general and a technological level of development in particular. How are these recommendations, therefore, going to be implemented or considered in the light of these various levels?

Conclusion

There is a need for further and more specific guidelines, which are capable of integrating the processes of safeguarding, conserving and developing. Furthermore, this document should define all of the terms it uses, in addition to clarifying all values associated with the HUL. It is also critical to develop supplementary guidance for each heritage setting accommodated in the particular regions. It is important to acknowledge that it is impractical for UNESCO, alone to issue such a large amount of guidance; but, it is very logical to authorise a well-defined and structured document on the HUL, which is able to be further 'personalised' for each region, and then for each State Party under the supervision of UNESCO World Heritage Centre and with efficient participation from relevant local authorities, experts and communities.

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