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### Urban conservation in international charters

From the Athens Charter to the Historic Urban Landscape Recommendation

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## URBAN CONSERVATION IN INTERNATIONAL CHARTERS: FROM THE ATHENS CHARTER TO THE HISTORIC URBAN LANDSCAPE RECOMMENDATION

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents an analytical review of doctrinal texts that have been of key importance for the shaping of an integrated urban conservation practice internationally: from the Athens Charter to the Historic Urban Landscape Convention.

The 1931 Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments was published at the same time when the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne was summing up its controversial urbanist ideology in its own Charte d'Athènes of 1933. Whilst the Athens Charter focused on technical aspects of monument restoration, the preceding debate showed a raising interest in historic urban areas. CIAM's Charter too, despite including a section regarding historic urban areas, limited its recommendations to the protection of individual monuments or ensembles.

Substantial research of historic centres in European countries preceded the first national legislations and international charters targeted specifically at urban areas in 1960s and 70s. Notably, the 1964 Venice International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites finally extended the concepts of restoration and rehabilitation of monuments to protected areas such as historical city centres, recommending expanded heritage protection legislation worldwide. European national legislations followed suit. In 1975, the European Architectural Heritage Year saw also the first charter promoting the conservation of the historical built environment as a whole.

However, by the end of the 20th century, despite a good number of further doctrinal texts being adopted internationally and the publication of numerous books, articles and reports touching on the problematic of urban conservation, the paucity of theoretical and conceptual advance in this field remained evident. The delay in giving a sound theoretical structure to the field of urban conservation has been, quite understandably, caused by the complexity of the

urban environment and the ensuing difficulty of separating out the effects of different variables operating within it.

Charters over the past three decades called for integration of planning and urban conservation based on an appraisal of the historic urban fabric and its community, an approach which should eventually provide a more sustainable urban development. This means understanding and evaluating the significance of a place, on the one hand, and drawing out management implications for protecting this significance and identifying opportunities for a change, on the other. The 2011 Historic Urban Landscape Recommendation goes some way further to internationalise the theory and practice that has been developed so far predominantly within the European context. There are many issues that have been raised through charters over the last hundred years and many still need a proper theoretical framework that can allow them to be used in practice widely, beyond the places with strong heritage conservation traditions and legislations.

**KEY WORDS:** urban, heritage, conservation, international, European, charters

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## **Foundations at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its first decades were instrumental in laying the foundations of ‘urbanism’ as a discipline and, consequently, ‘urban conservation’ as an approach towards the historic urban fabric. Key ideas in this period have originated from the theories of Camillo Boito, Alois Riegl and Georg Dehio, which expanded our understating of heritage, followed by those of Patrick Geddes and Gustavo Giovannoni, who were truly ahead of their time in their concepts of ‘conservative surgery’, ‘civic survey’, and ‘diradamento’. Nevertheless, Geddes’s and Giovannoni’s works have been slow in dissemination outside their own circles and local/national context owing to their own particular circumstances, and thus, it is only in the last few decades that they have been reconsidered internationally.

As the crisis between the radically changing needs of the society and relatively slow adaptability of the urban environment deepened at the beginning of the 20th century, urbanists seem to have turned their hopes entirely towards planned models, such as those produced by the hygienic and zoning ideologies. Le Corbusier’s Plan Voisin for Paris, fortunately unimplemented, is iconic for this attitude. He proposed to demolish a neat quadrangle at the very heart of the historic centre in order to erect a new civic centre designed according to the principles of scientific rationalism, which he advocated through the *Congres Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne* – CIAM founded by himself three years later. Listed monuments were to be spared demolition, but to remain isolated, lost within the gridiron order of his plan.

## **The Athens Charter**

However, at the same time when the *Congres Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne* was summing up its controversial urbanist ideology in the Athens Charter of 1933,<sup>1</sup> the postulates of another conference, which took place two years before in the same place, were published: another Athens Charter. It is important to note that, while the 1931 Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments is merely concerned with the technical aspects of monument restoration and does not mention anything related to urban conservation, the preceding debate showed a raising interest in the historic urban fabric itself.<sup>2</sup> CIAM’s Charter too, despite including a section regarding historic urban areas, limits its recommendations to the protection of single monuments or ensembles.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Which, for obscure reasons, was only published ten years later.

<sup>2</sup> Choay F, *L’Allégorie du patrimoine*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992, p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> Jokilehto J., *A History of Architectural Conservation*, Oxford, Auckland, Boston, Johannesburg, Melbourne, New Delhi: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999, p. 285.

## The post-war impetus

The post-war decades witnessed a complex combination within the historic city, having to deal with the aftermath of war-time destruction, accelerated urbanisation, state-led urbanism and impetus of the architectural profession. New guidelines and legislation have been introduced in European countries with the aim of facilitating urban conservation as a response to both the reality of European cities and to the New Towns trend. In Italy, Associazione Nazionale Centri Storico-Artistici<sup>4</sup> was created in 1960 and formulated the Gubbio Charter in the same year, which recommended an integrated approach to historic city centres<sup>5</sup> as well as the formulation of financial measures for its implementation while retaining the original community.

Yet, France was the first country to attempt reconciliation of the two schools of thought - urbanism and conservation - in the 1962 Loi Malraux, which offered legislative support for conservation areas, not only as regards designation and protection but also financial provisions. This was both a heritage protection law and also an urbanism law, defending a certain understanding of towns initiated by Camillo Sitte, who insists that urban theory should be based on the actual, extant town.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it opposed the tabula rasa concept of demolition and renovation of old quarters with administrative and financial tools, allowing their conservation instead.<sup>7</sup>

Pan-European recommendations and charters followed shortly afterwards. By the end of 1962, UNESCO had adopted the Recommendation Concerning the Safeguarding of the Beauty and Character of Landscapes and Sites urging Member States to adopt, in the form of national laws, measures designed to give effect, in the territories under their jurisdiction, to its norms and principles, but unfortunately these were limited to preservation of aesthetic values and picturesque character.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in 1963, the Council of Europe began to seek the means to impose, upon its member governments, urgent measures for heritage safeguarding through several Recommendations and Orders.

Following on from these initiatives and in order to amend the theoretical framework set up

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<sup>4</sup> The National Association of Historic and Artistic Centres.

<sup>5</sup> “L'estensione a scala nazionale del problema trattato è stata unanimemente riconosciuta, insieme alla necessità di un'urgente ricognizione e classificazione preliminare dei Centri Storici con la individuazione delle zone da salvaguardare e risanare. Si afferma la fondamentale e imprescindibile necessità di considerare tali operazioni come premessa allo stesso sviluppo della città moderna e quindi la necessità che esse facciano parte dei piani regolatori comunali, come una delle fasi essenziali nella programmazione della loro attuazione.” Carta di Gubbio: Dichiarazione finale approvata all'unanimità a conclusione del Convegno Nazionale per la Salvaguardia e il Risanamento dei Centri Storici, 1960.

<sup>6</sup> Sitte C., *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*, Vienna, 1889.

<sup>7</sup> It set up the Secteurs Sauvegardés with the objective of revitalising historic centres and quarters and instituted global actions on public spaces and built ensembles.

<sup>8</sup> “Urban and rural planning schemes should embody provisions defining the obligations which should be imposed to ensure the safeguarding of landscapes and sites, even unscheduled ones, situated in the territory affected. Urban and rural planning schemes should be drawn up in order of urgency, specifically for towns or regions in the process of rapid development, where the protection of the aesthetic or picturesque character of the town or region justifies the establishment of such schemes.” *UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Safeguarding of the Beauty and Character of Landscapes and Sites*, 1962.

more than three decades before by the Athens Charter, the 1964 Venice International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, drafted by Roberto Pane and Pietro Gazzola,<sup>9</sup> finally extended the concepts of restoration and rehabilitation of monuments to protected areas such as historical city centres, recommending extended legal protection worldwide.<sup>10</sup> This is considered to embody the basis of modern conservation and of the reform, according to contemporary standards, of national legislations concerning cultural heritage.<sup>11</sup>

In 1968, the Venice Charter was followed by the CE Bath Recommendation, which adopted calls for the Committee of Ministers “to recommend to member governments that they take urgent steps to adopt special legislation or to adapt existing legislation with a view to preserving the character and general atmosphere of historic areas and the monuments they contain and to provide special funds for this purpose.” Like most of these international recommendations, its guidelines are rather vague, showing awareness of the urban heritage problems, but having limited applicability; this was due to lack of proper research that could form the basis for the proposed interventions.

### **1975 Architectural Heritage Year**

Until 1975, both international documents and national legislations promoted a preservationist approach much in the vein of the nostalgic hankering of Morris and Ruskin, which situated conservation at the opposite end from urbanist trends. As an official reconciliation of modern urbanism and conservation, the CE Amsterdam Declaration of the Congress on the European Architectural Heritage, concluding the Architectural Heritage Year, regulated the relationship of heritage conservation to urban and regional planning as well as asked for legislative and administrative measures. It also introduced the term ‘integrated conservation’ to international

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<sup>9</sup> Initially intended as guidelines for the Italian government and incorporating principles regarding historic centres formulated in the earlier Gubbio Charter, *The Venice Charter was adopted by ICOMOS.*

<sup>10</sup> “The concept of a historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which the evidence of a particular civilization, a significant development or an historic event. This applies not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time.” *Venice International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites*, 1964.

<sup>11</sup> ICOMOS was founded in 1965, as a result of the international adoption of the Charter the year before. It is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to the conservation of the world’s historic monuments and sites and UNESCO’s principal advisor in these matters.

specialist discussion.<sup>12</sup> Straight afterwards, in 1976, the Nairobi UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas reaffirmed that the protection and restoration of historic towns and areas should enhance their development and adaptation to contemporary life.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, within the scope of conservation, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a growing awareness of the role of processes in urban heritage, finally understood in its originally intended meaning.<sup>14,15</sup> This was a particularly productive period in many European countries for urban analysis methodologies – and their practical application – dealing with material urban fabric and its morphology, in both fields of conservation and urbanism.

The CE Granada Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage in 1985 and the CE Malta Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage of 1992 established statutory measures for integrated protection for architectural and archaeological heritage facing major urban development projects. It was only in 1987 that the ICOMOS Washington Charter on the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas stated that the focus of heritage expertise should be extended from historical centres to the entire built environment, identifying, at the same time, the need for multidisciplinary studies. Tools required for assessing of integrated urban conservation, identified by these documents include: policy and planning framework, management and regeneration action, environmental management, tourism and heritage management, and sustainability.

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<sup>12</sup> “The architectural heritage includes not only individual buildings of exceptional quality and their surroundings, but also all areas of towns or villages of historic or cultural interest.

...The conservation of the architectural heritage should become an integral part of urban and regional planning, instead of being treated as a secondary consideration or one requiring action here and there as has so often been the case in the recent past. A permanent dialogue between conservationists and those responsible for planning is thus indispensable.

...Planners should recognize that not all areas are the same and that they should therefore be dealt with according to their individual characteristics. The recognition of the claims of the aesthetic and cultural values of the architectural heritage should lead to the adoption of specific aims and planning rules for old architectural complexes.” *CE Amsterdam Declaration of the Congress on the European Architectural Heritage, 1975*

<sup>13</sup> “Historic areas are part of the daily environment of human beings everywhere. (They) represent the living presence of the past which formed them. ... (They) afford down the ages the most tangible evidence of the wealth and diversity of cultural, religious and social activities. ... Their safeguarding and their integration into the life of contemporary society is a basic factor in town planning and land development”. *UNESCO Nairobi Recommendation Concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas, 1976.*

<sup>14</sup> ICOMOS General Assemblies of the 1970s: ‘Modern architecture in historic ensembles,’ ‘The small town,’ and ‘The protection of historical cities and historical quarters.’ Also, the 1987 ICOMOS Washington Charter sets a very broad framework for conservation of a historic town and urban area, pointing to the connections of this to urban development but without being very specific.

<sup>15</sup> “Planning for the conservation of historic towns and urban areas should be preceded by multidisciplinary studies.... Conservation plans must address all relevant factors including archaeology, history, architecture, techniques, sociology and economics. The principal objectives of the conservation plan should be clearly stated as should the legal, administrative, and financial measures necessary to attain them. The conservation plan should aim at ensuring a harmonious relationship between the historic urban areas and the town as a whole.” *ICOMOS Washington Charter on the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas, 1987.*

This burst of international charters and national legislations from the 1960s onwards has emerged on a background of a theoretical shift in the way architecture and urbanism as well as all other connected disciplines address the urban environment. However, the practical approach remained a static one through the 1990s, chiefly analysing the city by isolating and examining successive periods of urban development. As a result, the operational value of this type of analysis was still limited. Despite the fact that theoretical issues formed the basis of standard urban analysis methodologies, they were often ignored in the actual analyses. Nevertheless, as a result of this theoretical and methodological development, the integrated conservation approach towards urban heritage finally became possible.<sup>16</sup>

In 1996, the UN HABITAT Agenda or Istanbul Declaration acknowledged that cultural heritage is indeed an important element for sustainable human settlements development.<sup>17</sup> Although this had been advocated by the Amsterdam Declaration since 1975, it was for the first time that a charter of Sustainable Urban Development recognised it too. Its chapter on conservation proposed, in fact, more comprehensive recommendations for urban conservation policies than all conservation charters and declarations.

The search for integrated urban conservation, however, had just begun and its main difficulty was – and still is – to identify and determine the nature and importance of the relation between material and immaterial – tangible and intangible – inputs in the ever-changing urban form, and furthermore, to correctly evaluate the necessity and opportunity to intervene.<sup>18</sup>

The 2008 ICOMOS Quebec Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of Place acknowledged this and made an important contribution to transferring these ideas from the theoretical realm into practice.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The 1985 CE Granada Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage and the 1992 CE Malta Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage established statutory measures for integrated protection for architectural and archaeological heritage facing major urban development projects. On a different continent, in 1987, the ICOMOS Washington Charter on the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas stated that the focus of heritage expertise should be extended from historical centres to the entire built environment, and most importantly identified at the same time the integrated urban conservation need of multidisciplinary studies in the field of: policy and planning framework, management and regeneration action, environmental management, tourism and heritage management, and sustainability. In the same year, the ICOMOS Brazilian Committee, in its Basic Principles for Preservation and Revitalisation of Historic Centres, affirmed the importance of intangible phenomena within the historic city, alongside with its material urban form.

<sup>17</sup> Chapter III – Commitments, part C. Sustainable human settlements development in an urbanizing world, point 8. Conservation and rehabilitation of the historical and cultural heritage, Habitat Agenda, <http://www.unhabitat.org> (accessed 30 December 2008), pp. 67-68.

<sup>18</sup> Choay F., *L'Allégorie du patrimoine*, p. 120.

<sup>19</sup> “The spirit of place offers a more comprehensive understanding of the living and, at the same time, permanent character of monuments, sites and cultural landscapes. (...) [It] is a continuously reconstructed process, which responds to the needs for change and continuity of communities, we uphold that it can vary in time and form from one culture to another according to their practices of memory, and that a place can have several spirits and be shared by different groups.” *International Journal of Cultural Property* 15 (2008): pp. 393-396.



The 2011 UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape introduced the approach of urban conservation principally to those places around the world where there had been no such a development in planning yet. We have yet to see the long-term consequences, but it is reassuring that this happens within an increasingly diverse context in heritage and conservation that recognises the importance of the local/indigenous cultural context and practices.

## Conclusion

Urban conservation is essentially the process of finding the appropriate degree of intervention in order to balance cultural, social, economic and political interests in any given case in a way that does not jeopardise the right of subsequent generations to inhabit and identify with the city. In effect, it is akin to a 'curatorial act' which, in its original, museological sense, is twofold: what is retained and what is added (which, in many ways, is determined by what is retained). This double perspective also appears in one of the earliest testimonies of human interest in and understanding of the conservation of the urban environment as a cultural necessity: the oath of allegiance taken by the young men of ancient Athens when coming of age.

*I will not hand over (to the descendants) the fatherland smaller, but greater and better, so far as I am able, by myself or with the help of all.*

(Ephobic Oath, 5th century BC)<sup>20</sup>

This archaic civic oath embodies several ideas that are essential for understanding the essence and *raison d'être* of urban conservation: first of all the very fact of taking such an oath of allegiance to one's polis, represents the identity given by this to the community and the strong value put on this attachment; secondly the idea of being responsible to pass on the city from one generation to the next; thirdly the understanding of the responsibility of each generation not simply to keep and preserve what has been inherited, but to enhance and add to it; and finally, the idea of this being not only an individual responsibility, but a shared one – the community as a whole is the subject of this relationship to its city, even if the oath is taken individually. Plato defined the polis as being composed of the 'present generation,' its 'ancestors' and its 'descendants'<sup>21</sup> and explained that individual's property rights are limited in significant ways by the interests of both prior and subsequent generations.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Siewert P, The Ephobic Oath in Fifth-Century Athens Source, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 97 (1977), pp. 102-111, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/631025> (Accessed: 10/07/2010).

<sup>21</sup> Plato. *The Laws* (Book XI, 923), p. 464.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* (Book IV, 707-708), pp. 464-465.