Introduction
The Historic City – Challenges and Possibilities

Afroditi Chatzoglou, Archontia Polyzouidi, Marie Louise Stig Sorensen and Shadia Taha

Introduction
The recent focus on historic cities and the built environment represented by the papers collected here, marks the analytical opening up of the city as a special kind of heritage site. In particular, current discussions signal a shift from the singular focus on the tangible elements of individual buildings and monuments to the intangible characteristics of the architectural heritage within historic cities. Behind this shift lies the central question of how conflicting values and changing meanings of historic city landscapes can be interpreted and how in turn they should be responded to through specific management policies.

The emphasis on architectural conservation that characterizes the management of historic cities is based on the Athens Charter (1931) and the Venice Charter (1964), and is concerned with aesthetic enhancement, the techniques of conservation and the restoration of the architectural form of the monuments. It was first after World War II that research focusing on the urban morphology of historic cities emerged in different disciplines such as archaeology, history, geography, architecture and town planning. Conzen, representing this change of focus, identified ‘townscapes as composite historical artefacts’ (Whitehand and Larkham 1992: 6). He introduced historicity as the key attribute for the management of urban townscapes (ibid: 6). The contributing quality of the wider urban landscape in which heritage assets were placed was also increasingly recognized as reflected by presentations at the Congress on the European Architectural Heritage (1975).

‘Protection is needed today for historic towns, old quarters of cities, and towns and villages with a traditional character as well as historic parks and gardens. The conservation of these architectural complexes can only be conceived in a wide perspective, embracing all buildings of cultural value, from the greatest to the humblest - not forgetting those of our own day together with their surroundings’ (The Declaration of Amsterdam 1975).

In the 1990s, the concept of landscape received particular attention within the humanities. Different aspects and qualities of landscapes were being explored and discussed, such as the landscape as a ‘cultural image’ (Daniels and Cosgrove 1988: 1), as ‘an anonymous sculptural form already fashioned by human agency, never completed, and constantly being added to, and the relationship between people and it is a constant dialectic process of structuration: the landscape is both medium for and outcome of action and previous histories of action’ (Tilley 1994: 23), or as ‘memory’, ‘identity’ ‘social order’ and ‘transformation’ (Knapp and Ashmore 1999: 10-19). This had obvious implications for our understanding of townscapes, but the differences between townscapes and landscapes have also emerged as an interesting and important field of research in its own right. Accordingly, the temporal and physical complexities of historic cities as particular kinds of places have become increasingly recognized. Its buildings, structures and street patterns are not only dominant physical features that call for a range of responses including conservation and protection, but they are also the evidence of our historicity and the effects of change. They are deeply important as evidence of past societies’ and peoples’ tangible as well as intangible heritage. The latter element, the intangible heritage that is also found in the historic city and which relates as much to its ‘essence of place’ as to any concrete features, was the focus of the 2003 Unesco Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. This convention emphasizes the interaction of communities and groups with their environment, nature and history, and in so doing recognizes how cultural space is constantly recreated in order to provide a sense of identity, continuity and human creativity. Within this perspective, architectural heritage is expressed as a dynamic process constantly changing to suit the present. The continuity of historic cities depends on the ways heritage is built, understood, managed, interpreted and valued, raising questions about how historic cities manage change, alter meanings and create new interpretations both in terms of the entire city and in terms of their constitutive parts. How, then, can we preserve the identity and diversity of historic cities? In this shift of focus from buildings to the sense of places, the question about which values and criteria should be used to examine the built heritage has necessarily also been raised.

In our contemporary world, historic cities have a multi-dimensional character which is subject to constant change. They often present a past that refers mainly to a particular period of the city’s history; but glimpses of different phases and histories are revealed through individual buildings, listed monuments, and restoration work. There is always a historical palimpsest underneath the façade of the historic city. In addition to the built environment, the natural and cultural features also form part of the scene in which different individuals, interest groups, and researchers create their narratives about the city. The historic city and its features become the point of reference for a complex and interactive number of events, activities and experiences. The physical and cultural environment influence people who form their own perception about the city’s history and past.

Historic towns, as developed since the post-medieval period, usually spread around the commercial centre and market place, and these functioned as the city centre’s heart in terms of both administration and social and cultural interactions. In the twentieth century, towns were transformed from compact self-sufficient systems into big cities that often were inhabited by heterogeneous populations in terms of ethnicity, religion and culture. In such cities, the historic centre has to be redefined...
environment as a ‘socio-economic resource’, but simultaneously emphasizes the importance of cultural identity as the impetus for sustainable development. Taking this argument further, he advocates ‘bottom-up’ solutions for the achievement of the sustainable city; solutions that involve sustainable development as an ‘on-going process of cultural diversity related to the dynamics of social and cultural process and the evolving aspirations of peoples and communities’ (chapter 2). These, he argues, will be far more effective than ‘top down’ technical solutions (Rodwell 2007).

The idea of sustainable development as a universal process that applies to all societies and historic cities is further questioned by William Feighery. International guidelines for the conservation of historic cities were formed according to the needs and values of Western societies. This raises important questions about the appropriateness of methods, conceptions and practices when applying these guidelines in other parts of the worlds. For example, China’s reforms modelled after Western post-industrial consumer economics (Nyiri 2006:70) led to the implementation of a regeneration plan for the city of Xi’an following urban design from the West. Taking a critical position on the objectives of the plan, William Feighery (chapter 6) demonstrates how the economic and politic focus of urban development has given rise to an approach to heritage that is tourist-oriented. In this case, the production of space and landscape is commodified allowing little recognition of local values and diverse social practices. Further, Feighery’s account presents not only the effect of tourism, conservation and re/construction, but also provides insight into the impact of development on the Hui ethnic minority. Xi’an is also an example of religious and ethnic contestation. The Xi’an city government’s master plan aims to reconstruct the Tang Dynasty heritage of the city, but in the process it risks undermining the rich cultural heritage of the Hui population, who are not included in the execution of the plan. He further highlights the challenge of accommodating competing interests in order to ‘articulate an intangible heritage rooted in everyday social practice’ and contrasts a ‘past constructed through hyper-traditions or staged authenticity and a past recreated through living cultural traditions of local people’.

A similar theme is pursued by Antonio Arantes who examines how historicity as a sense of continuity is produced, conserved and modified to promote economic and political agendas of the tourism industry without considering local people’s cultural patrimony and identity (chapter 4). By taking a ‘landscape of histories’ approach Arantes considers the development of the Discovery Coast in the Southern Bahia region of Brazil. He demonstrates how the different histories, scenic landscapes, urban districts with entertainment activities, and architectural heritage of exceptional historic value are produced, donated and consumed by foreign investors and visitors. The problematic outcomes are obvious, and underscores that historicity, material culture and heritage sites should be a social practice not only resulting from but also accessible and available to local populations as a means of identity and connection to their place (Appadurai 1986).

Public participation and inclusion of local people in the management of their heritage is therefore a major challenge in the preservation of historic cities. Historic cities as heritage sites promote learning experiences through interactive processes between local governments and local communities. This is further analyzed by Lei Gao and Jan Woudstra who
discuss the management of Chinese heritage gardens (chapter 7). The paper presents the outcome of a survey conducted in two historic Chinese gardens towns which focused on functional use, historical knowledge, maintenance expenses, lifestyle, and heritage. Both towns are designated World Heritage sites and are subject to conservation legislation, but the practical management has followed two different approaches resulting in very different outcomes in terms of local involvement and the survival of garden cultures. Their analysis shows the benefits conservation can give to local communities when local governmental policies embrace their active participation in the management of the built environment. For example, in the Xidi gardens, the government does not permit local people to interfere in the management of the gardens, and these are now deteriorating, whereas in the Hongcun gardens, fewer management restrictions, allowing for individual initiatives, have led to the flourishing of traditional characteristics and design features of the gardens. Yet, the case study suggests that continuous development and historical continuity depend on people’s perceptions and active participation in the formation of meanings.

Similar pressures are found throughout the world albeit shaped differently depending on the specific geo-political context. The historic city of Cambridge exemplifies the pressures from development and tourism, but at the same time it also illustrates the roles that the particular local conditions have in forming the responses to these pressures. John Preston identified the ‘split personality of Cambridge’ as town versus gown, history versus change, locals versus students, and residents versus visitors. Implementation policies are therefore continuously framed around the attempt to answer ‘Whose city?’ and to embrace the diversity of its multi-cultural landscape (chapter 5).

Sylvio Mutal stresses the importance of including social and environmental as well as cultural dimensions when dealing with heritage conservation. He emphasizes that rehabilitation of historic/inner cities requires comprehensive policy and planning which go beyond heritage in order to achieve a sustainable outcome. In this sense sustainable heritage should not be treated in isolation from other components in the creation of an effective, holistic program for sustainable conservation of historic cities for the future (chapter 9).

To enable an overview of these far-reaching and complex issues a number of synthesis papers are also included in this volume. One of the most significant challenges for the historic city is clearly the need for ongoing cooperation between organizations at different levels including local governments, national institutions and, at times, also international organizations. Local governments should embrace local residents, academics, researchers and international organizations within the decision-making process. Jong Hyun Lim adds that ‘international organizations should rethink their conceptual base, which is founded on western concepts, only then will international guidelines be applicable to other cultures’ (chapter 8).

Winter (chapter 10) argues that future trends regarding urban heritage are expected to be more complex than at the present and that developing countries will face the most severe challenges. This is due to the dramatic transformations that have occurred in such countries regarding planning, as well as their extensive building activities including demolition, alteration and new infrastructure projects. He concludes that there is a

© Afrodit Chatzoglou, Archontia Polyzoufi, Marie Louise Stig Sorensen, Shadia Taha

‘heritage preservation mode of thinking about the governance of historically significant urban spaces’ and illustrates this with examples of management of historic cities of the ‘developing world’. He sees such examples as representative of the ‘wider global trends that are likely to unfold in the coming decades as a form of navigation into our urban cultures’.

Furthermore, in the quest to use heritage as an economic resource and attract more tourism a tension had developed. On one hand the heritage contributes to the economy and sense of place, but, on the other hand, it also results in ‘sameness and blandness’ (Logan 2002). Historic cities may be seen as hindrances towards development and modernisation by unsympathetic developers and planners, and the cultural heritage is often compromised. Winter suggests complicated challenges need effective planning and management; he also stresses that successful conservation schemes will be more effective if they are customized to local conditions and contexts.

The papers collectively address historic cities as places with social, political and economic qualities that make them different from other kinds of heritage places, such as monuments. They also make it clear that one of the main differences is that the historic city is part of, and embedded within, everyday life. The contributors take this perspective as a point of departure for their exploration of ways to connect the intangible heritage with the tangible physical landmarks. They recognize this will involve many different approaches, willingness and time. In particular emphasise the need of implementing local governmental policies, the challenge related to the inclusion of local minorities, the accumulation of guidelines from international cultural organizations and their embedded western values and perceptions, and the need to better understand cultural identity and how they are based on particular experiences and claims on history. Yet the various ways historic cities are understood and the different disciplines employed to address historic, archaeological, sociological, and architectural issues, influence the notion of ‘placeness’ (Relph 1976) causing a differentiation of historic cities as well as people’s perception of themselves within particular parts of cities. ‘How do people act upon places and how do places act upon them?’ is a question that contributes to this volume and participants of the conference address as part of the evolving process of heritage studies.
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the 800th Anniversary Office for funding the 10th Annual Cambridge Heritage Seminar as part of the events organized for the celebration of the 800th anniversary of Cambridge University as well as the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities. We would also like to thank the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research for supporting this publication.

References


Nyiri, P. 2006, Scenic spots: Chinese tourism, the state and cultural authority, Seattle, University of Washington Press.


Endnotes

1 Ratified by The Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments (1931) and later by The Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (1964).

2 Ratified by the UNESCO Vienna Memorandum on World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture – Managing the Historic Urban Landscape.