The HUL concept and cities as cultural landscapes: Canberra a missed opportunity

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Abstract

The 1980s and early 1990s were particularly fruitful for the conservation discipline in terms of critical debate and understanding of the concept of heritage, in which also a comprehensive definition and operational framework for Cultural Landscapes was elaborated. It also proved to be of great significance as a driver to re-think other heritage categories and their conservation principles that were established in earlier periods. This was particularly so with its proposition of the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) notion as a tool to reinterpret the values of urban heritage, and an indication of the need to identify new approaches and new tools for urban conservation, as explored by Bandarin and van Oers (2012) in The Historic Urban Landscape. Managing Heritage in an Urban Century. Of seminal importance in HUL is the primal shift in thinking on the urban environment away from purely physical architectural fabric to that of one fitting the cultural landscape model. The paper explores these shifting ideas and refers to current planning of Canberra as an example of an increasingly missed opportunity of how to apply the HUL paradigm.

Current urbanization policies often ignore the importance of cultural heritage preservation and promotion and the great potential of creativity in addressing social, environmental and economic urbanization challenges. How does culture weigh in addressing urbanization challenges today?

United Nations Conference on Trade & Development (UNCTAD) ‘Culture vital for development progress, Deputy Secretary-General tells meeting’ (http://unctad.org).

Background

The late 1980s and early 1990s were particularly fruitful for the cultural heritage conservation discipline in terms of critical debate and understanding of the concept of heritage, in which also a comprehensive definition with operational framework for the three categories of World Heritage Cultural Landscapes was elaborated in 1992. Next to guiding the conservation of physical elements under this new heritage category, it proved to be of great significance also as a driver to re-think other heritage categories and their conservation principles that were established in earlier periods.

One field of major impact has been urban conservation. The Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach, through its recognition of the layering of significances and values in historic cities, deposited over time by different communities under different contexts, relates closely to the cultural landscape framework, but to improve management processes, several issues need to be discussed and resolved, including:
• how the notion of landscape embraces, in particular, its importance as a repository of social history and community values;
• how the cultural landscape concept relates to the historic urban environment: what are the similarities and possibly differences that exist between the two;
• how the identity of a city consists of a plurality of identities and traditional value and belief systems, as expressed and maintained by resident communities;
• how to sustain and enhance this as a way to brand the city;
• which practical tools can be developed and integrated into urban landscape planning and conservation practice. (UNESCO 2011)

Historic Urban Landscape

A major initiative by UNESCO in the field of conservation of urban areas associated with change that is taking place in the world’s cities in general and Asia in particular is the concept of the HUL. It was first set out at a UNESCO (2005) conference in Vienna in May 2005 on conservation of World Heritage cities. Called the Vienna Memorandum on World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture – Managing the Historic Urban Landscape it included a definition of HUL. It followed concern by the World Heritage Committee about impacts of modern developments on historic urban areas and compatibility with the protection of their heritage values. This was particularly so with its proposition of the HUL notion as a tool to reinterpret the values of urban heritage, and indication of the need to identify new approaches and new tools for urban conservation (Bandarin and van Oers 2012).

The Vienna discussion was extended at a Round Table on Conservation of Historic Urban Landscapes held at the University of Montreal in 2006. In her summary of the Round table discussions, Christina Cameron noted that the Memorandum ‘signals a change towards sustainable development and a broader concept of urban space. The way forward seems to be through the concept of “landscape”, not so much the designed and evolved landscapes that are familiar to most conservation specialists, but rather associative landscapes.’ (cited in Bandarin and van Oers 2012: 196) Here Cameron was taking up Julian Smith’s notion of HUL as coincidental with the definition of associative landscapes which he later expounded and noted that ‘it is useful to think of landscapes as ideas embedded in a place, and to consider the recording of cultural landscapes as exercises in cognitive mapping rather than physical mapping. The challenge of this approach is that it must be experienced. And it must be experienced within the cultural framework of those who have created and sustained it’ (Smith 2010: 46).

In contrast to HUL the focus of urban conservation has historically been on architectural fabric and planning ensembles with an emphasis all too often on famous buildings or monuments. Nevertheless, changes in line with expanded thinking generally on heritage conservation in the later 1980s started to be seen in urban conservation. Reflective of this, for example, are the:

• 1987 ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns (Washington Charter);
• 2000 ICOMOS Hoi An Declaration on Conservation of Historic Districts of Asia;
• 2007 ICOMOS Seoul Declaration on Heritage and Metropolis in Asia and the Pacific.

Notably the Seoul Declaration, in relation to a wider understanding of heritage, proposes that:

These heritage sites contribute to the life and memory of the metropolitan areas by the diversity of their uses. ... Along with geographical features and the living social ecosystem, cultural heritage contributes strongly to the personality and character of the metropolis. It is a source of a truly sustainable development of the metropolitan areas in Asia and the Pacific in achieving their strategic and economic roles (ICOMOS 2007: 6).

Here came an understanding of the significance of built urban heritage as the places where people live their everyday lives, where social values and a sense of place exist. In this regard Bandarin and van Oers suggest that:
landscape terminology, when applied to historic cities and towns, could assist in moving beyond architecture of cities and towards a more holistic sense of landscape scale...

“landscape” has become the lens through which the contemporary city is represented and the medium through which it is constructed (Bandarin and van Oers 2012: 197)

An example of this is the old canal town of Zhuijiajiao, near Shanghai.

Changes have taken place in Zhuijiajiao, but they are changes that can be seen not to be simply cosmetic, fashionable vernacularism. Such towns have rich histories, traditional architecture, and daily life that make them distinctly and unmistakably Chinese. Notably the local community consists of people who have traditionally lived here for generations; people who want to continue to live here because it is a community, not merely a population. It is a cogent example of changing social values where tourism now substantially helps the local economy, but where changes have not destroyed the place from the point of view of tangible values (traditional buildings and canal setting), and from the point of view of intangible values (people’s lives, community feeling and sense of place). Significantly the place still belongs to them and they belong to it. In one building you may catch a glimpse of a local aged persons’ group playing mahjong. Heritage conservation planning addressed the views and feelings of local people who wanted to stay in their community: here is the essence of the city as cultural landscape. The sense of authenticity and that of integrity are palpable.

The establishment in the 2005 Vienna Memorandum of the HUL concept was, in effect, a high-water mark in the shift away from the preoccupation with the historic city as visual object to an interest in the historic environment as a space for ritual and human experience.

Ron van Oers summarises the thinking on HUL in the following definition:

Historic Urban Landscape is a mindset, an understanding of the city, or parts of the city, as an outcome of natural, cultural and socio-economic processes that construct it spatially, temporally, and experientially. It is as much about buildings and spaces, as about rituals and values that people bring into the city. This concept encompasses layers of symbolic significance, intangible heritage, perception of values, and interconnections between the composite elements of the historic urban landscape, as well as local knowledge including building practices and management of natural resources. Its usefulness resides in the notion that it incorporates a capacity for change. (van Oers 2010: 14)
Cultural capital

The culmination of thinking on new international approaches to urban conservation was the 2011 UNESCO General Conference Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscape (HUL), with its recognition of the layering of significances and values in historic cities deposited over time by different communities under different contexts. It is an approach that dovetails closely into the cultural landscape concept and we can see therefore widening appreciation of the idea of cities as cultural landscapes (Taylor 2015). Not that this is anything new to the body of knowledge in cultural geography which has a rich history in understanding cities as cultural landscapes.² The Recommendation recognised the challenges of urbanisation today, as well as the importance of cities as engines of growth and centres of innovation and creativity that provide opportunities for employment and education. The Recommendation identified urban heritage, including its tangible and intangible components in their natural context, as a key resource in enhancing the liveability of urban areas and fostering economic development as well as social cohesion. The Recommendation suggests a landscape approach for identifying, conserving and managing historic areas within their broader urban contexts, by considering the interrelationships of their physical forms, their spatial organization and connection, their natural features and settings, and their social, cultural and economic values (Introduction, para 5). The concept of, and approach inherent in HUL are summarised in the UNESCO publication New life for historic cities (UNESCO 2013). The opening statement of this publication neatly encapsulates HUL thinking:

Urban heritage is of vital importance for our cities – now and in the future. Tangible and intangible urban heritage are sources of social cohesion, factors of diversity and drivers of creativity, innovation and urban regeneration. … The key to understanding and managing any historic urban environment is the recognition that the city is not a static monument or group of building, but subject to dynamic forces in the economic, social and cultural spheres that shaped it and keep shaping it (UNESCO 2013: 5).

Critical to the HUL paradigm is the recognition that cities are the engine houses of creative industries. Within this concept of creative endeavour communities are able to define their...
cultural capital: the economics of art and culture in which tangible and intangible assets with economic and cultural value inhere (Throsby 2001). Throsby further suggests that heritage reflects four different but compatible types of capital: physical, human, natural, and cultural and that within cultural industries thinking we should not see economic value and cultural value as opposing factors, but rather how cultural value can enhance economic value.

Such is the case of Zhuijiajiao mentioned above where local craftspeople, restaurants and people offering boat rides, are benefitting from tourism. Whilst one sees from time to time criticism of the role of tourism, it can and does have positive outcomes to keep local traditions alive and economically viable. In the context of such changes Harrell (2013) provocatively makes the following iconoclastic comments on a demonstration of ritual techniques and rural implements in the newly opened Bimo Cultural Park, Lingshuan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan, Southern China for a group of informed visitors at a tourism conference. The local people also performed abbreviated rituals for good health for visitors, one of whom indignantly proclaimed this was the end of Yi culture:

preserved cultural heritage continues to exist, even in changed form, and we can just as easily see that preservation, too, is part of a process of cultural change, and that forms that emerge in the intentional process of preservation are just as much links in the chain of cultural continuity as are the forms that emerge out of less self-conscious and more organic processes. If the Bimo rituals were still effective, it did not matter that they took place in a cultural park, to benefit tourists, in exchange for money (Harrell 2013: 286).

In contrast in the context of Zhuijiajiao the question one may legitimately ask is how often economic values supersede cultural values in modern city planning and urban renewal to the detriment of community heritage values and well-being of some urban communities.

If we understand cities as cultural landscapes we need to understand that a major theme underpinning the cultural landscape paradigm is the relationship or interaction between culture and nature and the association between people and natural elements. Here natural elements are not seen as merely physical entities, but entities and landmarks that reflect deep associations in the landscape and have meaning for people as in the Central Axis in the plan of Canberra, Australia’s capital city (Taylor 1996). Here there is a parallel with Julian Smith’s proposal that urban cultural landscapes fitting into the HUL paradigm are, in effect, synonymous with the idea of an associative cultural landscape or what he nicely called at the Montreal Round Table, ‘landscapes of the imagination.’ Whilst they have physical presence it is their meaning that gives them their underlying sense of place. Such a belief in landscape stems from the fact that all landscape and meanings are a result of our values and ideologies, our habits and our customs (Taylor 2012). The meanings inherent in such landscapes as Canberra’s Central Axis are palpable, but are equally so in our ordinary, everyday landscapes. This is rooted in the notion that all landscape is a cultural concept. The Central Axis is a conflation of culture and nature, but overriding this is the fact that it is a landscape of the imagination. It is also worth noting that the inception of the three categories of cultural landscapes for World Heritage purposes in 1992 recognised the culture–nature interaction as summarised by Mechtilde Rössler (2006: 334):

Cultural landscapes are at the interface between nature and culture, tangible and intangible heritage, biological and cultural diversity; they represent a closely woven net of relationships, the essence of culture and people’s identity.

Canberra

An example par excellence of the interface between culture and nature is the city of Canberra, the federal capital of Australia, a remarkable example of twentieth-century city planning. From its inception in the nineteenth century, and before the Walter Burley Griffin entry won the 1911 international competition for the city’s design, the concept and ideal of an Australian federal capital envisaged a city in the landscape. This set in train the foundation for Canberra as a remarkable city. In the true sense of the word it is a unique city, for there is no other city
like it in the world. Walter Burley Griffin declared in 1912 that he had ‘planned a city not like any other’ (Griffin in anon 1912). These were prophetic words, for its development over the years has maintained its status of being unlike any other. Why is this? There are roads, houses, offices, schools, shops, parks – all the components we associate with urban development – as in any other city.

The underlying reason lies in the way landscape defines and articulates the city morphology starting with the Griffin plan. Changes over the years to the form of the city and hence to the Griffin ideal have taken place. Nevertheless the landscape basis which binds form and content remains vividly coherent in the city plan. The form of the physical landscape – natural and created – is a palpable, tangible presence defining the city, but equally so is its content or intangible, symbolic meaning. Underlying the city’s spatial structure is the fundamental premise of Canberra as a city in the landscape. Its spatial structure has been progressively and incrementally planned from the beginning to maintain continuity with existing design elements, in particular the hills, ridges, and valleys.

From the symbolic heart of the city and the nation in the National Triangle as seen in the magnificent view south from Mount Ainslie along the Central Axis of Canberra, with its serene symmetrical beauty, out through the tree-lined streets, neighbourhood and district parks and open spaces to the hills, ridges, and valleys – the National Capital Open Space System (NCOSS) – it is the landscape nature of the city that predominates physically. In turn this tangible physical presence has inextricable, intangible meanings and values, confirming that landscape is not just what we see, but a way of seeing (Cosgrove 1984: 1).

When you look out over the magnificent prospect from Mount Ainslie towards Parliament House…across the city to the surrounding hills that form the embracing backdrop for the city, or enjoy the tree-lined streets, gardens, and parks of the suburbs, the landscape itself is more than physical elements. It has a meaning and significance that inform what Canberra is (Taylor 2006: 187).

**City as evolving process: Need for HUL approach for Canberra.**

Canberra was conceived and planned as a city not like any other for the first 75 years of its conception from the Griffin plan of 1911–12 with planning guidelines specifically modelled to maintain it as the city in the landscape. It was an approach cumulatively over the years that may

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*Figure 3: Central land axis of Canberra from Mount Ainslie. (K. Taylor)*
be seen to be a forecast of the HUL paradigm. Since self-government in 1988, planning has been
governed increasingly by the mantra of increasing urban densification, urban consolidation and
high-rise buildings without regard for the fundamental significance of its historic landscape
ethos, leading to loss of landscape space and trees and blocking views of the surrounding hills
that are quintessential to the setting and ambience of the city. Action needs to be focused on
the following to reflect the HUL:

- Special nature of the city as with its visions of a planned ideal city: a city not like any other;
- *Genius loci* of the city inherently centred on the culture-nature interaction;
- Preparation of metropolitan plan for the whole city rather than separate piecemeal plans
  for separate suburbs or groups of suburbs;\(^3\)
- Within metropolitan plan, need for precinct plans for suburbs that relate to specific
  character of the suburb(s) and where local residents are consulted; currently the model
  is the development of precinct codes that are then incorporated into the Territory Plan as
  technical amendments without local community input; planning for cones of view and
  protecting significant vistas;
- Need to establish appropriate partnership between planning authority and residents for
  local area (suburb) planning.

**National Heritage Listing**

In 2009 two separate nominations for National Heritage Listing for Canberra were submitted.
They are summarised in *Celebrating Canberra: A nation’s cultural and democratic landscape. Exploring
Canberra’s national heritage* (Australian Heritage Council 2012). The Canberra–Central National Area and Inner Hills nomination was the preferred option of the Australian
Heritage Council and with inclusions from the other nomination was submitted to
the Commonwealth government. The Commonwealth has reported on its
deliberations, but nothing has transpired
because of opposition from various local
Canberra vested development interests.
In the case of Canberra, regarding
Cultural capital by powerful luddite lobby
development groups on an equal footing
with economic capital is seen as a descent
into a chaotic abyss.

**Conclusion**

In 1933 Fernand Léger at the Fourth
International Congress of Modern
Architecture opined that:

> there are some essential qualities to
which the average person is attached
and which he insists on having. If you
destroy those qualities, then you have
to replace them. The problem is an
essentially human one. Put your plans
back in your pocket, go out to the
street and listen to the people breathe;
you have to be in touch with them,
steep yourself in the raw material, and
walk in the same mud and the same
dust (quoted in UNESCO 2008: 2).

![Figure 4: Inner Canberra area proposed for National Heritage Listing by Australia Heritage Council June 2012. (K. Taylor)](image-url)
It is therefore fundamentally important to listen to communities and learn how to communicate findings to planners, politicians and developers who will be influential in making land-use policy decisions. A model for listening to community voices of ordinary people in an historic urban setting is found in the work of Chin and Jorge (2006: 10) in Malacca:

We began by listening: Listening to the young; listening to the old. Listening to shopkeepers and craftsmen, traders and fishermen … We began listening to those who are often not heard. And to countless more who often dare not speak.

References

Australian Heritage Council 2012, Celebrating Canberra: A nation’s cultural and democratic landscape. Exploring Canberra’s national heritage, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Australia, ACT.


Chin, L.H. and Jorge, F. 2006, Malacca Voices from the Street, Lim Huk Chin, Malacca.


**Endnotes**

1 These observations on Zhuijiajiao are from personal communications by staff from the College of Architecture and Urban Planning (CAUP), Tongji University, Shanghai, explaining how CAUP staff and students worked with Zhuijiajiao community to establish local values for a conservation approach to the old canal town and its community rather than demolition and new urban structures. It is interesting that recently the central Chinese government has set about promoting a ‘New Urbanization Strategy’ nationwide and paying greater attention to poverty alleviation, rural development and ethnic minority’s culture. Also the work of WHITRAP (World Heritage Inst for Training and Research Asia Pacific) at Tongji University, is notable in that it is actively pursuing the HUL concept in China and Asia.

2 For example the work and writings of people such as Donald Meinig, Wilbur Zilenski, J. B. Jackson, Peirce Lewis, A. E. Smailes, E. Relph.

3 Canberra’s underlying plan is a grouping of six towns linked by open-space corridors. Each town is subdivided into suburbs with groups of suburbs forming districts.