

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266150462>

# Historic Urban Landscape and Islamic City. New gazes on the idea of monuments

Article · July 2013

---

READS

44

1 author:



[Cecilia Fumagalli](#)

Politecnico di Milano

15 PUBLICATIONS 0 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

# Historic Urban Landscape and Islamic City. New gazes on the idea of monuments.

Cecilia Fumagalli, Politecnico di Milano (Italy)

## UNESCO's Cultural Heritage: Western models and global approaches to the idea of 'monument'

In 1972, during its seventeenth session, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the *Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage*<sup>1</sup>, which thus far, and after a series of revisions and improvements, is the fundamental reference in the heritage field. At that time, the consciousness raising of the new global conditions have determined the urgency of such Convention. Among them is the awareness about the "changing social and economic conditions which aggravate the situation with even more formidable phenomena of damage and destruction"<sup>2</sup>.

The First Article of the Convention defines as "cultural heritage" all monuments, groups of buildings and sites, "which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science"<sup>3</sup>. In the Convention's framework, the monument is intended as a single object with an architectural, archaeological, sculptural or pictorial character; groups of buildings could be considered cultural heritage because of their particular homogeneity, their architecture or their position in the landscape; sites, at the end, should present a particular combination of work of man and nature or have an archaeological character. According to Alois Riegl's position, those three categories could be summarized as historic monuments: "[...] le monument historique n'est pas initialement voulu (*ungewollte*) et créé comme tel; il est constitué *a posteriori* par les regards convergents de l'historien et de l'amateur, qui le sélectionnent dans la masse des édifices existants, dont les monuments ne représentent qu'une petite partie. Tout objet du passé peut être converti en témoignage historique sans avoir eu pour autant, à l'origine, une destination mémoriale"<sup>4</sup>. Beside the 'not intentional' historical monument, Alois Riegl identifies the 'intentional' historical monument notion: in this case, the monument is planned and *a priori* established in order to answer to a memorial need. 1972 Convention moves within this ambiguity of meaning among "monuments" (those defined by the First Article) and "historic monuments"<sup>5</sup> (the combination of monuments, groups of buildings and sites).

The First Article of the Venice Charter, one of the many written references for the UNESCO Convention draft, defines the monument as follow: "The concept of a historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilization, a significant development or a 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."<sup>6</sup> This passing of time, the historic dimension and distance between the artifact and us are decisive in the definition of the historic value. The historians' gaze suggested by Riegl becomes clear when he finds or imposes a scale of values and attributes in order to define the historical character of the objects he looks: "value is not something that monuments, groups of buildings or sites possess intrinsically: all value is given by people, as an acknowledgment of worth"<sup>7</sup>.

The same point of view seems to be the one adopted by UNESCO for the attribution of an Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) and for the World Heritage List (WHL) selection. Going through the attribution of an OUV, 1972 Convention expresses a global ("the international community as a whole") point of view that transcends any national boundaries. Only in recent times, after 2001 UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity<sup>8</sup>, the concept of cultural diversity has been introduced in the Convention<sup>9</sup> framework, in order to ensure a more representative and comprehensive WHL (even if we are still far from a truly comprehensive approach). The efforts to achieve this have been fixed after 2002 Budapest Declaration on World Heritage and converged in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage* in 2005 and definitely stated in 2012: "The Global Strategy for a Representative, Balanced and Credible World Heritage List is designed to identify and fill the major gaps in the World Heritage List".

Through the attribution of OUV, UNESCO expresses the acknowledgement of a global character through a series of attributes – 10 criteria – showing the cultural diversities of the universal heritage subjected to a

judgment in terms of value. Therefore, we should bring the UNESCO Convention halfway between a global vision (expressed by the OUV) and a local vision (attributes and criteria) of the heritage.

“All judgments about values attributed to cultural properties [...] may differ from culture to culture, and even within the same culture. It is thus not possible to base judgments of values and authenticity within fixed criteria. On the contrary, the respect due to all cultures requires that heritage properties must be considered and judged within the cultural contexts to which they belong.”<sup>10</sup> This statement, even if it is necessary in the framework of a modern culture inscribed in the constant dichotomy of global and local, does not absorb the specific cultural dimensions; this statement represents a general guideline to avoid the standardization of a universal approach.

## **Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) and Cultural Diversity**

All the mentioned themes are reflected in a more critical way in urban environments. It is therefore necessary to inscribe the question in that “fixed stage” of architecture, intended as part of the human condition that “is represented in the city and its monuments, in districts, dwellings, and all urban artifacts that emerge from inhabited space”<sup>11</sup>. The city, together with its primary elements and its permanencies, is the most accomplished artifact of the human action. Here the man realizes as a collective person; here he can constantly experience the forms of the past that have built the human settlement<sup>12</sup>. The critical element expressed by the city, as the place where all the mentioned contradictions summarize and explain themselves, seems to be received by the General Assembly of UNESCO which, in 2011, approved the *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* (HUL). Before any further consideration<sup>13</sup>, it is necessary to highlight that this text, even if extremely important in the framework of the debate on the city considered as whole heritage, is only a ‘recommendation’ and not an operative ‘resolution’: as a recommendation, in a few words, it shows a not common vision of UNESCO and its Member States. However, the issue of such *Recommendation* arises from the awareness that a large number of Heritage Sites is inscribed as ‘historic cities’ or monuments located in an urban environment. Introducing a wider and more complex notion of urban heritage, the Recommendation defines the ‘historic urban landscape’ as “the urban area understood as the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes, extending beyond the notion of ‘historic centre’ or ‘ensemble’ to include the broader urban context and its geographical setting.”<sup>14</sup> The importance of this statement lies in the acknowledgement of the dynamic and living nature of the urban phenomenon, which intrinsically is a progressive fact. The city is by its nature a living organism; its shape is always the shape and the image of a precise historical time, where the so-called permanencies remain as reference elements in the building and reshaping of the urban morphology, along the passing of times. Thanks to the definition previously cited, the city becomes an ‘urban landscape’ when it is considered as the product of a historic process, which involves the human being – intended as a collective society – and its environment. Indeed, we cannot avoid considering the recent mutations of the built urban landscape that involve, at the same time, our relations with space, time and collective memory. Such recommendation is thus an important step in the heritage and urban sustainable development studies, reclaiming a broader view on this matter: it represents a significant improvement of the classic theories laid beyond 1972 Convention. However, the acknowledgement of this critical point seems still ambiguous and, thus far, not adequately deepened if it is applied to some historically and historiographically defined contexts. Even if the historic cities is now observed as a cultural and socio-economic asset (and no more as a spatial and functional entity), the rules – or the recommendations – set by UNESCO and the theories adopted refer to a particular history such as the western European one and its sphere of influence<sup>15</sup>.

So, if, for example, UNESCO affirms that the HUL approach “considers cultural diversity”<sup>16</sup>, what happens when this global strategy to the heritage and its conservation or development, result of Eurocentric ideologies, meets a well-defined cultural *koinè*, as the Islamic historic urban world?

Europe and Islamic world (in this text we will refer to Islam not as a religious entity, but as a precise cultural identity) share a long history of, mainly one-way, exchanges at different levels, starting from the Early Middle Age, passing through the colonial period and lasting until today. The ambiguous relationship between West and Islamic world has developed along time and space, first with the European commercial interests in the Middle East luxury goods, than because of the resources – especially human – of black Africa and finally with the European hegemony plans. The result of centuries of tight relations is a progressive imposition and,

at the same time, a particular assimilation by Islamic world of Western models, both at the political, social, economic, cultural and, consequently, architectural and urban levels. In fact, during the colonial period the European powers defined new rules and schemes, by redrawing the political map of the Arab world, which have dramatically changed the entire, previously established, political and social structure, and, along with them, the architectural and urban aspects. With the advent of nationalistic ideologies (again transmitted and inherited by Europe) and with the subsequent proclamations of independence by colonies and protectorates, the question of a revision – or at least a rethinking, if not a change – to adapt the imported Western structures to the local and particular needs and situations, has never become an important issue.

Such uncritical superimposing of alien concepts, methods and structures on far-back established conditions reflects in the political, social and civic life also at the urban and architectural levels. From one side, the construction of 'ville nouvelle' by the colonizing Western powers has led to an unpredictable situation: while the middle class of many cities chooses to live in a Westernized environments (continuously replicated until today), the poorest class accumulates – or is confined – in the old city cores. The rift, then, between the richest and the poorest has grown on and on and, while new towns grow without rules, the historical nucleus are rapidly deteriorating or disappearing. On the other hand, from the point of view of heritage conservation, the imposing of the 'conventional' Western approach demonstrates its negative effects: even if since decades inscribed in the World Heritage List, many important Islamic historic cities (such as the cities of the South Mediterranean as Cairo or Damascus) shows, in their urban pattern, how these methods may be able to preserve single 'monuments' but are totally ineffective to preserve and valorise entire historical districts or cities.

### **'City' and 'monument' in the Islamic culture**

Following the new and most updated notions and concepts – even if not yet adequately deepened and defined, as we have already seen – developed and introduced by UNESCO, we will point now our attention to that specific cultural *koinè* represented by the Islamic urban world. In fact, all the mentioned statements and considerations applied on this context impose a careful analysis, able to highlight the specific and particular links between the Islamic city and its cultural milieu, between urban development and tangible heritage. These statements, again, reclaim careful considerations about the meaning of monument (*gewollte* or *ungewollte*, to refer again to Alois Riegl's thought), memory, heritage and city in the Islamic culture.

The Islamic society has an essentially urban character: being and living in an urban environment means, for a Muslim, belonging to the Islamic community (*Oumma*) and to the Islamic world (*Dar-al-Islâm*)<sup>17</sup>. The town is the world of justice (*Dar al-'adl*), separated by the unlimited space without rules and laws of the desert, and opposed to it. The foundation act of the Islamic city coincides with an act of the Prophet itself: Muhammad's move (hegira) from Mecca to found Medina, in September 622, set forth the city as the privileged place for the development of the entire Muslim culture<sup>18</sup>. In the Muslim society, give up the nomadic life for a sedentary life in a town represents a kind of hegira: in this sense, as Mohammed said, the entry in the community of believers corresponds to the new status of the citizen. The horizon of the Muslim citizen is, depending on the case, narrower or wider: when narrower, it embraces the family, the house or the clan; when wider it reaches the whole world of Islam (the *Oumma*), beyond the urban walls and the nation borders. In a few words, the city represents the idea of a controlled – and walled – space, surrounded by the domain of the immeasurable, the unlimited, the chaotic, the unknown and the unorganised (*bâdyia*).

The evident homogeneity and density of the urban built fabric – opposed to the *bâdyia* –, where 'monuments' (mosques) are not conceived as emergencies of the residential fabric but instead as poles or nucleus generating the settlement order (the Great Mosque is, generally, the element that settles the orientation of the whole urban fabric), allow us to advance the hypothesis – easily demonstrable – that Islamic cities are eminently collective. In order to understand this specific character of the Islamic city, we should consider the so-called *waqf* (in Maghreb *hubus*), which provide basic urban services (such as mosques, Koran schools and public baths) to all the citizens. The peculiar characteristic of this 'foundation' is its condition of eternity and irreversibility: it is a good that cannot be sold, donated or inherited; it is just a collective service, which shape and mark the image of the city and its daily life.

Here, in town, the human being – the believer – does not exist as a single person, but as part of the entire Islamic community, the *Oumma*. "Towns and cities with their monuments (*haykal*), vast constructions, and

large buildings, are set up for the masses (*umum*) and not for the few (*khusus*). Therefore, united effort and much co-operation are needed for them”<sup>19</sup>, affirms the 14<sup>th</sup> century Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun. The city is, then, the necessary fact for the realization and concretization of the Islamic social and religious ideals.

If we analyze, from a literary point of view, the previous quote from Ibn Khaldun, we will point out that the English (but also French and Italian) translation from Arab adopts the term ‘monument’ to represent the extended meaning of the Arab word *haykal*. *Haykal* comes from the Hebrew *hēyḵāl* and refers to different, but logically connected, concepts: it generally means ‘temple’ but also ‘framework’ or ‘structure’ and, extended, ‘skeleton’ and ‘human body’. Comparing the word *haykal* and the word *âthâr*, frequently used by Ibn Khaldun in his *Discours sur l’histoire universelle* and translated again as ‘monument’, one can find the true meaning of monument in the Islamic culture. If *haykal* is the structure of a building, or a building in itself, *âthâr* refers to the sphere of narration and it is commonly used for ‘heritage’ or ‘archaeology’. We can argue, therefore, that the monument in the Islamic culture does not exist as a static testimony of a past (as happens in the Western cultures), but is a dynamic representation (i.e. narration) of something, subjected to the rules of the passing of times, as the city is. In this sense, as the Prophet’s founding act of Islam, the whole city, considered in its complexity and entirety, is both *haykal* and *âthâr*, is then both settled urban structure (opposed to the nomadic and chaotic) and dynamic narration over the time and space.

## Open conclusions

Therefore, if we consider that the monument, as we know it in the framework of the European city, does not exist in the Islamic world, how could we apply this category when working on this context? An in-depth study is now urgent, in order to understand how the definition and the individuation of historic monuments (as defined by UNESCO) can exist and arise in a ‘monument-free’ environment such as the one of Islamic culture. A city that continuously built on itself, without an interested regard to its tangible past (as the Islamic city of the origins is), need a different approach, able to highlight and define its specific character. By and through the analysis about how the imposing of such rigid categories, inheritance of a colonial past or target to be reached in the name of a supposed modernization, has already influenced the meaning and the sense of the urban landscape in Islamic cities, we could be able to develop or improve the instruments for a more and more comprehensive and meaningful approach to the conservation of Historic Islamic Urban Landscapes. Such analysis could maybe envisage the rewriting of the urban Islamic historiography, in the light of eventually new and different points of view and perspectives.

“Academic and university institutions and other centres of research should be encouraged to develop scientific research on aspects of the historic urban landscape approach, and cooperate at the local, national, regional and international level. It is important to document the state of urban areas and their evolution, to facilitate the evaluation of proposals for change, and to improve protective and managerial skills and procedures.”<sup>20</sup>, suggests the *Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscapes* of 2011. As we have seen, even if more and more efforts have been directed towards the resolution of the problem, the issue remains open.

Focusing the attention toward the role played by the decision-makers and final target, in order to provide a scientific and operative framework able to develop the most appropriate instruments for the intervention in the historic Islamic urban landscape, intended as living heritage in evolution, the objective is to answer to these and other eventually emerging questions. It is thus important to understand first the domains in which we should be engaged in order to give significance to the entire physical and cultural transformation process, intended as the time of judgment and choice.

“The traditional vision of things is above all ‘static’ and ‘vertical’. It is static because it refers to constant and universal qualities, and it is vertical in the sense that it attaches the lower to the higher, the ephemeral to the imperishable. The modern vision, on the contrary, is fundamentally ‘dynamic’ and ‘horizontal’; it is not the symbolism of things that interests it, but the material and historical connections”<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO 1972, *Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage*, Paris, 17 october-21 November.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

- 
- <sup>4</sup> Choay, F. 1992, *L'Allegorie du patrimoine*, Editions du Seuil, Paris.
- <sup>5</sup> Choay, F. 1994, *Sept propositions sur le concept d'authenticité. Seven Propositions on the Concept of Authenticity*, in *Nara Conference on Authenticity*, UNESCO World Heritage Centre.
- <sup>6</sup> ICOMOS 1964, *International Charter for the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites*, Venezia.
- <sup>7</sup> ICOMOS 2005, *Special expert meeting of the World Heritage Convention: the concept of Outstanding Universal Value*, Background Paper, Kazan, 6-10 April.
- <sup>8</sup> See UNESCO, *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, in 31C/Resolution 15.
- <sup>9</sup> See Annex 4 "Authenticity in relation to the World Heritage Convention", Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, 2005.
- <sup>10</sup> See note 8.
- <sup>11</sup> Rossi, A. 1982, *The Architecture of the City*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> For an exhaustive study on HUL see Pini, D. 2013, *The Historic Urban Landscapes: A Comprehensive Approach to Conservation*, in *Islamic Urban Heritage. Research, Preservation and Management*, Summer School, Turkey, June 20 – July 17, IRCICA, Al-Turath Foundation, Istanbul, 2013.
- <sup>14</sup> UNESCO 2011, *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape*, "36 C/Resolution 15", par. 8.
- <sup>15</sup> See Choay, F. 1992 *L'Allegorie du patrimoine*, Editions du Seuil, Paris; Rowlands, M., de Jong, F. 2007, *Reclaiming Heritage*, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek.
- <sup>16</sup> UNESCO 2011, *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape*, par. 12, "36 C/Resolution 15", UNESCO, Paris, 25<sup>th</sup> October-10<sup>th</sup> November.
- <sup>17</sup> See Marçais, G. 1928, *L'Islamisme et la vie urbaine*, in "Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions & Belles Lettres", Paris.
- <sup>18</sup> Fusaro, F. 1984, *La città islamica*, Laterza, Roma-Bari.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibn Khaldun (translated from Arabic by Franz Rosenthal) 1958, *The Muqaddimah. An Introduction to History*, Pantheon Books, New York.
- <sup>20</sup> UNESCO 2011, *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape*, 36C/Resolution 15, par. 4, art. 26.
- <sup>21</sup> Burckhardt, T. 2007, *Cosmologia Perennis/Perennis Cosmology*, Fundacion de Estudios Tradicionales, Buenos Aires.