

Historical centres: changing definitions

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ABSTRACT

Since the end of the Second World War, the architectural and planning culture has been showing a fluctuating attention to the theme of historical centres and their enhancement. First of all this uneven progress explains the difficulty to reach a homogeneous definition and this is still lacking. During a long phase of this period, the historical parts of the town were considered as objects to be preserved in an integral way, as urban monuments. This is mostly due to the high symbolic value of these settlements, that represent fundamental landmarks. Identity building and empowerment of local communities are indispensable conditions for any development programme, especially in the case of centres or other historic environments at risk of abandonment.

The progressive evolution of this concept brings awareness of the impossibility of separating – either in analytical or in planning terms - historical centres from their urban and territorial contexts, which are linked by mutual, deep relationships.

This article attempts to retrace the steps signaled by the publication

of international documents and conventions, from the Charter of Gubbio (1960) to the Charter of Krakow and the European Landscape Convention (2000); they obviously represent particular points of view, not exhaustive of the richness of the positions in the debate, but extremely significant in terms of diffusion and consensus.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this article is to identify the main concepts emerging from the long scientific and cultural debate around the definition of a historical centre, especially in Europe, after the Second World War.

Despite the presumable *immobility* of the subject matter, the idea of a historical centre has evolved a lot in the opinions of experts and academics, following a trend of a progressive widening of the field of interest.

The different definitions, processed by experts and academics in international contexts, are evidence of the efforts made to delimit this field; documents produced during these confrontations have represented, for long periods, important landmarks for reflection and action, in particular for planning and urban renewal.

The purpose of this article therefore is to re-build the steps of a conceptual route, referring to the definitions produced at the dates of the selected events, and so to arrive at an identification of the essential terms for a *contemporary* definition of historical centre.

First of all it is necessary to suggest that the route described will not be a linear one, essentially for two reasons:

1. The historical centres theme is situated, by its nature, between *town planning* and *heritage protection*. Each area claims autonomous spaces for theoretical elaboration and definition of objectives and intervention methodologies. But they move from different points of view, because the subject of observation is different. Planners look at historical settlements as a component of territory, and their objectives are balanced development and the effectiveness of functional

relationships with the other components (new settlements, services, green areas, infrastructures, production areas, etc.). Heritage protectors are more focused on the physical and cultural values of the asset, and their objectives are conservation and safeguarding for future generations. The contents of the documents produced by the organizations associated with the two areas reflect these different approaches.

2. Two different kinds of values are related to the safeguarding of historical towns: the physical value, from which aesthetic and contemplative meaning derives; and the testimonial value, which assumes a documentary and a symbolic role for communities, due to the conservation of the memory and identity of the sites.

These two kinds of values represent, paradoxically, the same rationale for very different approaches to the restoration of historical heritage: the need to preserve it, even “extracting” it from people’s use in the primary interest of conservation; and the necessity to re-interpret it in a design sense, even locating new functions and identity, to ensure the maintenance of a symbolic and an urban role (in the worst cases, even trying to ensure the survival of the settlement). Protection and transformation are opposite and irreconcilable positions.

From these premises, it is possible to argue that the ambivalences of the theme can be appreciated during the last fifty years, through the emergence of contrasting statements, and which continue to represent an obstacle for the identification of criteria and guidelines for policies to enhance historical centres. The simplest example of this problem is the conflict between the conservationist’s approach to management of historical buildings, that gives priority to the preservation of integrity, and the developer’s approach, that pays more attention to the functional question, mainly to find an answer to the great problem of the abandonment of small historical towns and villages. Therefore there is a clear importance of research into common key concepts of historical centres, but this research is neither simple nor univocal. Even if the European Union stated that balance between regions was a primary development goal, there is still a strong cultural resistance – especially in

backward areas – to looking at historical settlements as an economic and social resource, as well as a cultural one.

The story of the theoretical elaboration around these concepts will be discussed using the documents and publications produced between 1960 and the present at an international level. The documents selected (Declarations, Charters and legal texts) are linked by their efforts to explain and synthesize positions and are strongly representative of policy guidance; hence they mark crucial steps of the debate, express principles of action, and take part in agenda formulation. Finally, these documents also represent balances of reflections on activities and of projections of future opportunities and needs.

Synthesising the contents of the documents, it is possible to find an increasing effort:

- to enlarge the whole of the categories of cultural value which are to be protected;
- to define, in a wider way, the idea of a historical centre, more integrated with its territorial context.

The most interesting steps in the evolution of the debate, as can be inferred from the reading of these documents, can be summarised in three transitions:

- from a position of protection of isolated monuments to an increasing interest for the territorial context, that can integrate and enhance identity and value;
- from a conception of heritage as an object for survey and passive observation to a trust in its capability to generate new processes for the development of cultural identity;
- from an attention to the physical dimension of interventions to the social ones, especially in terms of care for the maintenance of local community and economic activities in historical sites.

This article does not propose a chronicle of ongoing historical heritage protection but it attempts to define, through the identification of some key concepts, the possibility of a definition which may be *always dynamic*. The final part will present a critical review of a recent innovation in the Italian normative system of heritage protection, as introduced by the so-called

“Urbani Code” in 2004.

1. DOCUMENTS

As is well known, protectionist culture developed from the end of the World Wars, above all for the need to defend historical heritage first from war events and then from the threats from an urgent need for reconstruction. In Italy, conventionally, the first event in which the historical centres theme was brought to the attention of the urban studies debate was the **first Charter of Gubbio** (1960), produced in Italy at the end of a congress treating with “*Safeguarding and rehabilitation of the historical and artistic centres*”. At the end of the congress, the Charter was signed and the National Association of Historical-Artistic Centres (ANCSA) was founded. The Congress did not directly address the subject of identification and definition of historical centres (Dainotto, 2003). Mostly, the Charter states priorities, specifically concerning the need to institute heritage censuses and to define intervention categories; a new attention is also expressed regarding social structure and a concern for the maintenance of communities and of economic activities within the settlements.

In 1964 in Venice, in the 2° Congress of Architects and Monuments Technicians, in which the ICOMOS¹ organisation was created, a first relevant step is made towards the protection of historic settings, with the formulation of the so-called **Charter of Venice**.

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 an historic event. (art. 1)

Forward (art. 6): *The conservation of a monument implies preserving a setting which is not out of scale.*

This is an important enlargement of the scope of analysis and action to extend protection to the setting.

1 International Council of Monuments and Sites

At the national level the contribution of the **Franceschini Committee** (1967) brings very interesting reflections, even if it failed in its primary goal of setting out a new law for protection and enhancement of historical, archeological and artistic heritage. The Committee's work on the definition of cultural and environmental heritage also included *urban and non-urban structures that present a particular asset for their civilization values, which must be conserved for the enjoyment of the community*.

In practical terms, it resolved that an entire settlement, with clearly defined boundaries, could be included in the category of monuments, and so have the same status of objects submitted for special protection. Historical centres, regulated by Italian laws since 1939, and, later, the sites identified by the so-called Galasso law, were to become areas with a "special" territorial status.

Also the idea that the purpose of conservation is for the *enjoyment of the community*, suggests a democratic and universal right to enjoy the common heritage, and this seems to put into the background the importance of the ordinary functional role of the historic buildings (residential, cultural, economic).

The succeeding article explicitly refers to historical centres, defined as *urban structures that constitute a cultural unit or the original and authentic parts of settlements, and attest the character of a living urban culture*; it asserts the need to have dedicated, specific planning and financial tools.

These are the peak years of planning and analysis methodologies, linked to the concept of zoning, and with theoretical assumptions for classificatory practices; the **law n. 1444/1968** will represent the crucial normative reference of this approach, influencing all planning activity of 70's. Historical centres are, because of their value, "extracted" by urban plans in order to set them in a particular normative position, but in the most part of situations it means a *non-choice*. The effect is a real stop of transformation and improvement practices, and the consequent progressive degradation and abandonment of centres.

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The definition of the A zone “historical centre” of the law 1444, identifies *areas of urban settlements having historical, artistic character or particular environmental value, or parts of these*². In fact the practice which was most utilised – the coincidence of the A zone boundary with the town-walls – ignored the possibilities of relating to the historical setting, expressed in the definition in the law.

Nevertheless, at the same time, another expression of the need to “look over the walls” in the identification of the historical value of settlements comes from the **Italian Restoration Charter** (1972, Ministry of Education) that, coming from a different disciplinary field, represents an important conceptualisation for approaches to conservation.

The most important concept expressed is that the identification of Historical Centres must consider not only the old urban “centres”, in a traditional sense, but also in a more general way, consideration should be given to all *human settlements* which have structures, complete or fragmentary, or even partially transformed over time.

The second relevant statement concerns the historical *character* has to be referred to the value that settlements have as evidence of past civilization and as records of urban culture, apart from intrinsic artistic, formal or environmental values.

The statement is relevant from different points of view. Firstly it expresses an ideal of historical value not strictly linked to the objective quality of the site, questioning the equivalence between *history* and *value*. Implications of that concept also pave the way to reflections about the question of the admissible time scale and about the equality between testimonial value and belonging and the identification value, produced for the community.

Additionally, Restoration Charter confirms the importance of consideration of the external villages, which is a frequently used form of historical

2 The explanatory circular of Ministry of Public Works n. 3210/1967 asserts that these settlements can be identified as (translation of the author):

- a) *urban structures in which the majority of blocks contain buildings erected before 1860, even in absence of monuments or buildings having particular artistic value;*
- b) *urban structures enclosed by ancient walls, entirely or partially maintained;*
- c) *urban structures, built after 1860, that constitute examples of special building practice.*

urbanization, especially in Italy, and that often represents de facto a unit with the main nucleus³.

The document refers to particularly valuable situations where the environmental setting in which historical centres are situated is an intrinsic factor of the entire quality (for examples the circle of hills around Florence, the Venetian Lagoon, Roman centuriations in the Padana Valley, Trulli's unique area), and so selecting an group of excellent cases. The safeguarding of the entire area constitutes a key instrument for the enhancement of historical centres, and it requires an analysis of locality and the role of the centres.

A new concern is for the impending threat of functional overload of the historical parts of many towns, particularly of business functions, that need to be "lightened" as Piccinato suggested. There are also functional pressures regarding mobility questions, in particular the territorial connections and relationships between historical sites and modern urban additions, and with territory in a larger sense; for these themes planning, and specifically protection norms, is seen as the real solution.

In this view, historical centres have a preeminent role in territorial organisation, not for only for being a keystone of urban activities, but as a place to safeguard as the precious and delicate guardian of collective memory. So the need to avoid alterations becomes clear, even loosing importance and role of these centres, that historically were the privileged places of public and civil life.

In the same period, and with the same approach, the question of historical centres was brought to attention of the international community by the Unesco Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage (Paris, 1972), in which historical centres are considered as "cultural heritage", enlarging their significance from only a physical/symbolic meaning to forming spiritual, cultural, economic and social capital and the expression of a civilisation. The value of belonging to a community is thus increased, because safeguarding the historical heritage ensures an essential

3 In Italian planning practice it's not rare to find villages coeval to the historical main centre, classified as B zones ("Completion" zones) by the local plan, because of greater major flexibility and hence a greater appeal for owners.

setting for balance and cultural development.

The concept is further confirmed in the **Declaration of Amsterdam** (1975), from the Congress of the European Architectural Heritage⁴: architectural heritage is *an irreplaceable expression of the wealth and diversity of European culture*, but it adds that its protection *depends largely upon its integration into the context of people's lives*, that seems to allude to an active dimension of enjoyment. Furthermore, *architectural heritage consists not only of our most important monuments: it also includes the groups of lesser buildings in our old towns and characteristic villages in their natural or manmade settings*. This establishes that the areas can extend beyond the town walls and can also include the natural environment as a complementary factor of the setting, and allowing, in that way, the formulation of the concept of historical landscape.

This idea seems to be still conditioned by the fear that any external transformation could corrupt the quality of the historical site, therefore we can consider it a vision which is still unbalanced towards protection and preservation of readability of the original aspects of the sites (even if there are wide controversies between experts about the correct way to establish what is “original”). The basic belief is that we are responsible for our heritage and that we must transmit this unaltered to future generations, otherwise *part of man's awareness of his own continuity will be destroyed*. The concept of conservation is however consistently enlarged and enriched with many important functional connotations. In fact it confirmed the great educational value of historical buildings, but also that they offer *the right conditions for the development of a wide range of activities*. The abandonment of built heritage is a serious threat, but it is equally important

4 The Congress of Amsterdam, the crowning event of European architectural heritage Year 1975, and composed of delegates from all parts of Europe, wholeheartedly welcomes the Charter promulgated by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, which recognizes that Europe's unique architecture is the common heritage of all her peoples and which declared the intention of the Member States to work with one another and with other European governments for its protection. The Charter of European Architectural Heritage, adopted by the Committee, together with the succeeding Declaration, has to be considered the "Charter of Integrated Conservation".

to pay attention to an inappropriate use of contemporary technologies and an unbalanced concern for mobility problems. The road to travel is that of integrated conservation that can be *achieved by the application of sensitive restoration techniques and the correct choice of appropriate functions*, which are necessary also to reverse the *departure of the poorer inhabitants*, who need to be involved in rehabilitation processes.

For these reasons, European architects hoped for a better dialogue between protection and planning experts, even with the conviction that historical centres belong to field of competence of the former, and that the most important tool is the *cataloging*.

Ten years later, the **Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe**. (Granada 1985) basically confirmed this guidance, inserting in the definition of heritage also *rural buildings conspicuous for their historical, archaeological, artistic, scientific, social or technical interest which are sufficiently coherent to form topographically definable units*. In the Convention, European States were also committed to demonstrating the unity of the cultural heritage and the links that exist between architecture, the arts, popular traditions and ways of life at European, national and regional levels alike. The value of the heritage is also recognised as multidimensional, and, consequently, any intervention strategy has to adopt the same character.

At world level the importance of the safeguarding of historical towns – in consideration of *their role as historical documents*, and *the values of traditional urban cultures* – is asserted in the ICOMOS Charter of Conservation of Historic Towns (Washington 1987), that also states the principle of the involvement of the inhabitants in the interventions.

In 1987 was enacted the **Italian Charter of Conservation and Restoration of artistic and cultural objects**, which expresses the point of view of a precise cultural position, not only in Italy. Historical centres (to which a specific annex is dedicated) *can be defined as a residential settlement whose meaning is irreplaceable in the history of a cultural area of humanity*⁵.

5 Translation of the author

Its uniqueness requires a special normative regulation, the lack of which is noted. The “historical” attribution could not be generalisable, and it is necessary to evaluate the individual qualities which identify worthy historical centres; the attention is hence concentrated just on physical interventions, neglecting immaterial aspects.

Regarding the individual elements which need to be addressed in order to safeguard the whole centre, consideration must be given, not only to the built elements, but also to other constituent parts such as external spaces (streets, squares) and internal features (e.g. courts, gardens, empty spaces, other relevant structures (walls, doors, rocks), as well as any natural elements which make up the whole, for examples, natural contours, streams of water, geomorphological singularities (like Orvieto’s cliff)⁶.

This statement seems to take a step backwards in respect to what was affirmed in the Charter of Amsterdam, which talked about *environment* and not about single elements.

Therefore the comparison with what experts of urban renewal were expressing in the second **Charter of Gubbio** (1990) appears more strident⁷. It marks a moment of progress in the disciplinary debate around the theme and a first weighing up of the experiences of a decade of urban renewal interventions that is not completely positive: historical towns are still threatened, first of all by the speediness of transformations, and because trust in planning begins to waver, but the policies being proposed are seen as the right answer, especially the territorial network policies.

The most relevant concept introduced in the new Charter is that of *historical territory, global expression of cultural identity and the subject in all its parts (existing city and periphery, built landscapes, rural land) of an organic action strategy*⁸. Therefore the concept of the historical centre has emerged from merely classifying or delimiting needs, and stops being considered as a “zone” in a conceptual sense; now it lives and has relationships with all other territorial components.

Further, its value represents an identity resource, as well as a cultural one.

6 Translation of the author

7 XI International Congress ANCSA, Gubbio, 26-27-28 ottobre 1990

8 Translation of the author

Historical-cultural identity is a guarantee of environmental quality; conservation has become a need, because it is now seen as having a recognised value (social, economical, cultural and aesthetic) involving, first of all, the living community.

On the International scene, the Italian debate is the most advanced about these themes.

The **Charter of Megaride** (Naples, 1994), in fact, reasserts many of Gubbio's principles and brings them to maturation; memory is regarded as a quality factor of places; it asks for respect, but also has the capability to re-interpret and innovate it, giving these places back to *being a necessary part of the new organisation of urban space*⁹.

The **Charter of Krakow** (2000) was produced after a three years work by the International Conference on Conservation "Krakow 2000" and of its final plenary session "Cultural Heritage as the Foundation of the Development of Civilisation". First of all, it rejects a unifying definition, and this is surely an interesting innovation: heritage *cannot be defined in a fixed way. It can be only defined in the way in which a particular heritage can be identified*. Then it highlights the lack of flexibility within some protectionist positions, recognising that heritage values change over time.

*Plurality in society implies also a great variability in the ways that ideas of heritage may be formulated by an entire community. Monuments, as single elements of heritage, are bearers of values that can change over time, at different moments of history*¹⁰.

Implications for the concepts of identification and of the safeguarding of historical residential heritage are evident: *architectural, urban and landscape heritage are the result of an identification associated with different historical periods and with variations in socio-cultural settings*.

Therefore the identification and recognition of heritage value – which cannot be entirely objective and measurable – *is a process in constant evolution and change*. The analysis of the dynamics of change is an operation preliminary to intervention, as relevant as historical and

9 Translation of the author

10 Translation of the author

typological analysis. Change *involves all population sectors, and requires an integrated planning process inside which a great variety of actions are located*. This multidimensional character of the historical centres is the starting point.

The irruption onto the scene of the **European Landscape Convention** (2000) produces the apparently final affirmation of two key principles:

1. The relevance of the perception of the community (living or visiting), that becomes a proper, defining factor of landscape;
2. The recognition of the quality of the so-called minor or degraded landscapes, eliminating, de facto, any principle of a hierarchy of quality.

Even the concept of heritage starts to show some limits, in particular for significant portions of territory as historical centres and parks. Even landscape without history and without quality, in fact, merits attention, that must be expressed not in the form of protection, strictu sensu, but of projects, enhancement and management.

This starts a path that seems to lead to a unitary conception of territory, in which quality and disvalue factors have to relate to each other in a transformation and management process. The worry that “protecting all could mean protecting nothing” can be answered by prefiguring an integrated approach to the enhancement of historical centres (and of heritage in a larger sense), strictly related to all material and immaterial factors.

The temporary end point of this path seems to lead to the formulation of some common key concepts, even in the face of contradictions inherent the duplicity of positions of conservationists and planners. These are:

- The relevance of the relationships between historical settlements (towns, villages, nuclei) and the setting, from which derives the necessity to adopt a territorial scale for observation;
- The enlargement of the concept of heritage users and the necessary involvement of the community in projects;
- The increasing importance of the functional daily role of heritage.

THE URBANI CODE: A STEP BACKWARDS

In Italy the contraposition between heritage protectors and planners is also a conflict of professional competences, significantly expressed in the difficult relationship between the State (specifically the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities) and the Regions about the cultural heritage and landscape matters. The State produced some “historic” laws for the protection of heritage and, most recently, the so-called Urbani Code (Legislative Decree n. 42/2004), that aims to re-organise these powers, re-centralising some competences.

The law defines areas of landscape heritage as being subject to specific safeguards because they are *material and visible representations of national identity and expressions of cultural values* – also *complexes of buildings that compose a characteristic aspect having aesthetic and traditional value, including historical centres and nuclei*¹¹ (art. 136, point c). The text continues with operational criteria for the identification of sites, the public interest declaration and the regulation of the admitted uses¹². So the laws aim at a precise *identification of buildings and sites* (art. 139). This seems to be a return to zoning, mostly because historical centres enter the typical normative condition of monuments and sites needing a boundary. But the most important consequence is that an entire centre can be subject to restrictions or footnoted with specific use regulations and goals for quality.

The backward step of apparently regarding historical centres simply as sites – and the return from territorial to local scale – naturally implies conceptual consequences, first of all the transfer of competences to the State, overriding, in the opinion of planners and regional and local administrators, the principle of subsidiarity. A strange protectionist drift seems to have been produced by fears of deregulation or of weaknesses in local administrations

11 Translation of the author

12 *The proposal (for identification) is formulated with reference to the historical, cultural, natural, morphological, aesthetic values expressed by the particular aspect and character of the buildings or sites considered and to their identity value in relation to the setting in which they are located (art. 138)*

and planners. However, this re-definition (and overlap) of competences seems to ignore the fact that the processes of re-appropriation and re-interpretation of historical towns by local communities are well advanced and probably have taken an irreversible direction.

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