

Xi'an Declaration on the Conservation of Setting of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas

Written by Gaëtan Juillard

Wednesday, 30 May 2007 18:23 - Last Updated Thursday, 31 May 2007 20:16

Adopted in Xi'an, China by the 15th General Assembly of ICOMOS on 21 October 2005 (Final version - 22.10.2005)

Meeting in the ancient city of Xi'an (China) on 17-21st October 2005, at the invitation of ICOMOS China on the occasion of 15th General Assembly of ICOMOS and the celebrations marking the 40th anniversary of its longstanding endeavour to ensure the safeguard and conservation of the World's cultural heritage as part of its sustainable and human development;

Benefiting from the broad range of cases and reflections shared during the General Assembly's International Symposium on Monuments and Sites in their Settings – Conserving Cultural Heritage in Changing Townscapes and Landscapes and learning from a broad range of experiences from China and world-wide authorities, institutions and specialists in providing adequate care and management of heritage structures, sites and areas such as historic cities, landscapes, seascapes, cultural routes and archaeological sites in the context of accelerated change and development;

Taking note of the international and professional interest for the conservation of the settings of monuments and sites as expressed in the *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites – the Venice Charter* (1964) – and in the many texts it has inspired, particularly through ICOMOS National and International Committees, as well as the *Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994) and conclusions and recommendations of international meetings like the *Hoi An Declaration on the Conservation of Historic Districts in Asia* (2003), the *Declaration on the Recovery of Bam's Cultural Heritage* (2004), and the *Seoul Declaration on Tourism in Asia's Historic Towns and Areas* (2005);

Noting the references to the concept of setting in UNESCO conventions and recommendations like the *Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding of Beauty and Character of Landscapes and Sites* (1962), the *Recommendation concerning the Preservation of Cultural Property Endangered by Public or Private Works* (1968), the *Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas* (1976), the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, (2003) and more specifically the *World Heritage Convention* (1972) and its Operational Guidelines, where setting is listed as an attribute of authenticity and as needing protection through the establishment of buffer zones, and the ongoing opportunity this brings for international and interdisciplinary co-operation between ICOMOS, UNESCO and other partners and for developments on topics like authenticity or the conservation of historic urban landscapes expressed in the *Vienna Memorandum* (2005).

Stressing the need to address adequately the rapid or incremental transformation of cities,

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landscapes and heritage routes which result from changes in lifestyles, agriculture, development, tourism or large-scale disasters of natural or human origin, and to recognise, protect and sustain adequately the meaningful presence of heritage structures, sites and areas in their settings as a way to reduce the threat these transformation processes constitute against the cultural heritage in the full richness of its authenticity, meaning, values, integrity and diversity,

Participants of the 15th General Assembly of ICOMOS adopt the following Declaration of principles and recommendations, addressing it to intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, national and local authorities and all institutions and specialists able to contribute through legislation, policies, planning processes and management to better protect and conserve the world's heritage structures, sites and areas in their settings.

Acknowledge the contribution of setting to the significance of heritage monuments, sites and areas

1. The setting of a heritage structure, site or area is defined as the immediate and extended environment that is part of, or contributes to, its significance and distinctive character.

Beyond the physical and visual aspects, the setting includes interaction with the natural environment; past or present social or spiritual practices, customs, traditional knowledge, use or activities and other forms of intangible cultural heritage aspects that created and form the space as well as the current and dynamic cultural, social and economic context.

2. Heritage structures, sites or areas of various scales, including individual buildings or designed spaces, historic cities or urban landscapes, landscapes, seascapes, cultural routes and archaeological sites, derive their significance and distinctive character from their perceived social and spiritual, historic, artistic, aesthetic, natural, scientific, or other cultural values. They also derive their significance and distinctive character from their meaningful relationships with their physical, visual, spiritual and other cultural context and settings.

These relationships can be the result of a conscious and planned creative act, spiritual belief, historical events, use or a cumulative and organic process over time through cultural traditions.

Understand, document and interpret the settings in diverse contexts

3. Understanding, documenting and interpreting the setting is essential to defining and appreciating the heritage significance of any structure, site or area.

The definition of setting requires an understanding of the history, evolution and character of the surrounds of the heritage resource. Defining the setting is a process of considering multiple factors to include the character of the arrival experience and the heritage resource itself.

4. Understanding the setting in an inclusive way requires a multi-disciplinary approach and the use of diverse information sources.

Sources include formal records and archives, artistic and scientific descriptions, oral history and traditional knowledge, the perspectives of local and associated communities as well as the analysis of views and vistas.

Cultural traditions, rituals, spiritual practices and concepts as well as history, topography, natural environment values, use and other factors contribute to create the full range of a setting's tangible and intangible values and dimensions. The definition of settings should carefully articulate the character and values of the setting and its relationship to the heritage resource.

Develop planning tools and practices to conserve and manage settings

5. The implementation of effective planning and legislative tools, policies, strategies and practices to sustainably manage settings requires consistency and continuity in application, whilst reflecting the local or cultural contexts in which they function.

Tools to manage settings include specific legislative measures, professional training, development of comprehensive conservation and management plans or systems, and use of adequate heritage impact assessment methods.

6. Legislation, regulation and guidelines for the protection, conservation and management of heritage structures, sites and areas should provide for the establishment of a protection or buffer zone around them that reflects and conserves the significance and distinctive character of their setting.

7. Planning instruments should include provisions to effectively control the impact of incremental or rapid change on settings.

Significant skylines, sight lines and adequate distance between any new public or private development and heritage structures, sites and areas are key aspects to assess in the prevention of inappropriate visual and spatial encroachments or land use in significant settings.

8. Heritage impact assessments should be required for all new development impacting on the significance of heritage structures, sites and areas and on their settings.

Development within the setting of heritage structures, sites and areas should positively interpret and contribute to its significance and distinctive character.

Monitor and manage change affecting settings

9. The rate of change and the individual and cumulative impacts of change and transformation on the settings of heritage structures, sites and areas is an ongoing process which must be monitored and managed.

Incremental as well as rapid transformation of the urban or rural landscapes, the ways of life, the economies or the natural environment can substantially or irretrievably affect the authentic

contribution that the setting makes to the significance of a heritage structure, site or area.

10. Change to the setting of heritage structures, sites and areas should be managed to retain cultural significance and distinctive character.

Managing change to the setting of heritage structures, sites and areas need not necessarily prevent or obstruct change.

11. Monitoring should define approaches and actions to appreciate and measure as well as prevent or remedy decay, loss of significance or trivialisation and propose improvement in conservation, management and interpretation practices.

Qualitative and quantifiable indicators should be developed to assess the contribution of the setting to the significance of a heritage structure, site or area.

Indicators for monitoring should cover physical aspects such as intrusion on views, skylines or open spaces, air pollution, sound pollution, as well as economic, social and cultural dimensions.

Work with local, interdisciplinary and international communities for co-operation and awareness in conserving and managing settings

12. Co-operation and engagement with associated and local communities is essential as part of developing sustainable strategies for the conservation and management of settings.

Inter-disciplinary engagement should be encouraged as standard practice in conserving and managing settings. Relevant cultural heritage fields include architecture, urban and regional planning, landscape planning, engineering, anthropology, history, archaeology, ethnology, curation and archives.

Co-operation with institutions and specialists in the field of natural heritage should also be encouraged as an integral part of good practice for the identification, protection, presentation and interpretation of heritage structures, sites or areas in their setting.

13. Professional training, interpretation, community education and public awareness should be encouraged to support such co-operation and sharing of knowledge as well as to promote conservation goals, improve the efficiency of the protection tools, management plans and other instruments.

The experience, knowledge and tools developed through the conservation of individual heritage structures, sites and areas should be extended to complement the management of their setting.

Economic resources should be allocated to the research, assessment and strategic planning of the conservation and management of setting of heritage structures, sites and areas.

Awareness of the significance of the setting in its various dimensions is the shared responsibility of professionals, institutions, associated and local communities, who should take into account

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the tangible and intangible dimensions of settings when making decisions.