



Urban World Heritage Sites and the problem of authenticity

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 March 2009

Received in revised form 17 September 2009

Accepted 21 September 2009

Available online 21 October 2009

Keywords:

World Heritage Sites

Conservation

Authenticity

ABSTRACT

The number of designated World Heritage Sites (WHS) has proliferated across the world over the last two decades. Often associated with relatively self-contained *sites* of historic or architectural importance and their immediate surroundings, an increasing number of *urban* WHS now extend to broader areas within cities. The urbanness of WHS presents a series of challenges related to the designation, assessment and management of conservation objects in the context of dynamic and heterogeneous urban systems. One dimension that is often commented on is the tension between authentic conservation and commodification. However, there are also issues around how the 'urban experience' is treated. In this paper we discuss the difficulty of translating traditional conservation concepts, which we centre on the concept of authenticity, to the diverse and dynamic urban contexts urban WHS represent, and the concerns over their management that result. Specifically we explore the 'coming to ground' of the WHS designation in three British urban contexts. It is argued that the urban problematic of conservation is leading to something of a crisis in WHS designation as a primarily object-based logic is forced to contend with the complexities of place. This is beginning to lead to a changing set of practices related to urban WHS management.

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Introduction

In 1972 the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage, otherwise known as the World Heritage Convention. The rationale of the convention was that there are places of 'outstanding universal value', that these are part of the heritage of all humankind and that their protection is therefore a shared responsibility. The most well known outcome of this was the identification of cultural and natural properties and their inscription as World Heritage Sites (WHS) that effectively sit at the pinnacle of international heritage status. Sites were, and still are, considered on the basis of nominations put forward by national governments. Sites are inscribed on the basis of their 'outstanding universal value', 'cultural and/or natural significance which is considered so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity' (UNESCO, 2008; para 49). To be considered to have outstanding universal value (OUV) a site must meet at least one of ten criteria (see Table 1) and must meet tests of authenticity and the related concept of integrity as well as demonstrating an adequate protec-

tion and management system. The first 12 WHS were inscribed in seven countries in 1978. By summer 2009 the total had reached 890 sites (689 cultural, 176 natural and 25 'mixed') across 148 states.

World Heritage Sites are often associated with relatively self-contained *sites* of historic or architectural importance and their immediate surroundings. However, WHS inscriptions have included historic cities from the inception of the designation with Cracow (Poland) inscribed in the first World Heritage list in 1978. As the World Heritage list has grown so have the number of WHS that extend to broad and heterogeneous areas within cities. The Organisation of World Heritage Cities, founded in 1993, lists 242 cities (<http://www.ovpm.org/cities, xxxx>), varying vastly in scale and extensiveness of site, but including, for example, historic Cairo (Egypt, inscribed 1979), Havana (Cuba, 1982), the City of Bath (UK, 1987), Prague (Czech Republic, 1992), Naples (Italy, 1995), Karlskrona (Sweden, 1998), Hoi An (Vietnam, 1999), Zanzibar Stone Town (Tanzania, 2000), and the historic centre of Bordeaux (France, 2007). Often located in or around the central areas of cities, the designation of a WHS can effectively transform those places into World Heritage cities, especially as the authorities responsible for managing the site are required to consider the impact on the site of developments beyond the site boundary.

It is our contention that urban WHS, and more specifically the 'urbanness' of urban WHS, has opened up a series of problems for WHS management, resulting in what has become a nascent

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Table 1
The Criteria for Selection of World Heritage Sites (UNESCO, 2005).

i	To represent a masterpiece of human creative genius
ii	To exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design
iii	To bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared
iv	To be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history
v	To be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change
vi	To be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance
vii	To contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance
viii	To be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features
ix	To be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals
x	To contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation

crisis. Part of this is about the conflict between the preservationist ethos of the WHS designation and attempts by local authorities to extract economic benefit or at least secure appropriate economic and social development. In this sense problems around the WHS designation revolve around attempts to fix ideas of conservation value on dynamic, heterogeneous urban landscapes. It might be argued that there are fundamental tensions between the desire to preserve a sense of the past and recognising that heritage cities are the product of layers of development and habitation.

In this context urban WHS present a particularly telling example of the contestations and multi-scalar perspectives that frequently exist with urban conservation. WHS governance (in the UK at least) is led by local government bodies that have a remit that extends much wider than cultural issues. Local government is engaged in a complex interaction between frequently divergent local interests, national government and agencies and international conservation bodies. This latter dimension is unique to WHS and arguably presents a top-down view in which questions of value (and places themselves) are objectified.

As in most conservation contexts, these issues have revolved around the idea of value and authenticity and its subsequent management. Articulating what authenticity is and how it should be sustained has proven particularly difficult with urban WHS. In the examples we discuss this has often been less to do with the particular material artefacts in which outstanding universal value is said to rest as in providing a broader framework for these objects that is considered appropriate. This has led to both ICOMOS/UNESCO seeking to develop its own conceptual framework for thinking about historic cities and to a higher degree of scrutiny by these agencies over development taking place. In turn there has been a greater willingness to 'get tough' with national and local governments.

Thus the paper begins by briefly reflecting on some of the tensions of WHS management that might be considered near-universal, such as the pressures of commodification and tensions over 'ownership', before focusing on issues more specific to urban WHS. These include the very different economic and governance contexts of urban WHS, as part of cities, when compared to more discrete monumental sites. Crucially, a significant part of the conflict that arises in the management of urban WHS derives from a lack of clarity and consensus over the nature of authenticity when translated to an urban scale, and this is the focus of the next section. UNESCO is seeking to develop the idea of 'historic urban landscapes' to give greater clarity to this vexed issue. This section is followed with a discussion of the UK urban WHS of Bath, Liverpool and Edinburgh and specifically the tensions that have led to UNESCO missions visiting each city.

The urban challenge for WHS

The rapid escalation in the growth in WHS has been underpinned by the keenness of national and local governments to nominate WHS. This in turn is linked to the kudos benefits of such status, but also, critically, the economic benefits, especially in terms of tourist development, that are assumed to flow with such status (see e.g. Smith, 2002 on Maritime Greenwich). Inscription of sites is made on the basis of qualities of 'outstanding universal value', and yet a clear motivation for achieving this status is the benefits of increased economic activity that ensue. For,

'the term "World Heritage Site" is instantly recognised as designating something very special, in tourism terms a definite "must see"... . Needless to say, such sites are magnets for visitors and the enrolment of a new property on the World Heritage list, with the concomitant publicity, is virtually a guarantee that visitor numbers will increase.' (Shackley, 1998: Preface)

However, in the act of inscription, a site is becoming something different; it will be regarded conceptually in a different light and will acquire a new set of institutional and economic relationships. Some of these are almost inherently freighted with difficulty; a site has acquired a global accolade, determined by international conservation bodies, but the management and future of the site must 'come to ground' and be mediated principally by local governance processes.

So, for example, the pressure to present heritage locations in ways deemed suitable by the tourism industry, to commodify them for tourist consumption, raises tensions with management objectives centred around notions of cultural authenticity. Van-der-Borg et al. (1996) considered seven European 'art cities' and concluded that tourism menaced not only the vitality of their local economies, but also the integrity of their heritage and the quality of life of their residents. Furthermore, sheer weight of visitor numbers can present major practical problems. For example, the picturesque, but tiny, hilltop city of San Gimignano in Tuscany apparently receives three million visitors a year, causing severe environmental problems (Cleere, 2006).

The desire to construct a location more acceptable to tourists was one of the motivations behind radical changes made to the way the Historic Centre of Lima was managed, post-inscription as a World Heritage Site, described by Maaria Seppanen. The goal was to cleanse the area to 'become a colonial fantasy re-enacted from an imaginary past' (Seppanen, 1999: 69). Physical improvements included works such as restriction of traffic and guidelines on such issues as commercial signage, familiar the world over. However, there was also a very particular focus on *uses* in the area

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