



Proceedings of the International Conference
Preventive and Planned Conservation
Monza, Mantova - 5-9 May 2014

2

Sguardi ed esperienze sulla conservazione del patrimonio storico architettonico



A cura di **Stefano Della Torre**
Curatela editoriale **Maria Paola Borgarino**



NARDINI EDITORE

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**POLITECNICO
DI MILANO**



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WHAT KIND OF CONSERVATION POLICIES FOR ISLAMIC HISTORIC CITIES?

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Abstract

This paper aims to focus on how, and if, a globally valid approach such as the “preventive and planned conservation” could determine the valorization of the specific cultural *milieu* represented by the historic Islamic urban landscape, along with a differentiated cultural production.

This particular approach is the result of exquisitely Western scientific speculations (and based on that culture), established and improved in the course of time. We do not want to refuse *in toto* Western methods and approaches; we highlight the need of an in-depth analysis and adaptation of these instruments when applied to the specific conditions under which cultural identities are produced: in this case, to the Islamic historic urban landscape.

Islamic culture entertains in fact deeply different relations with the meaning of time, space and history; and so it does with the built environment. According to the established historiography, the Islamic city is a living organism self-reproducing and self-regenerating following a main rule: the continuous dichotomy and contraposition among permanence of forms and functional differentiations. This principle, that guides the urban mechanisms, is already in itself a particular kind of natural endogenous conservation process, intrinsically related to Islamic urban settings.

Assumed that, conservation policies shall not be directed to a physic built environment, which is continuously involved in self-regenerating processes, but rather to these same processes that mark the built environment and the specific idea of city shaped by the Islamic culture. What kind of conservation, or rather regeneration, could be thus intended as the premise for valorization processes and new cultural, economic and social productions?

“Don’t worry: it means that the Saints wanted a new house”, said the old *mâallem* (“bricklayer”, from the Arab) Athman to console me when a quite ancient *marabout* (“saint” or, in this case, “tomb in which a pious or religious man is buried”) collapsed in front of my eyes, during the rehabilitation works of Ksar Loudaghir in Figuig, Morocco.

This sentence is not only the typical thing one says in similar circumstances; this sentence reflects a clear and particular attitude of the Muslim culture: Muslims are not interested in the object itself, but in the idea represented by that object and in the use of that particular building. In this sense, we can argue that the function of the building is the most important element, while the form is the consequent aspect. We should then indicate the mosque as the place to pray (the Arab word for mosque is *masjid* and literally means ‘the place for prostration in front of God’), the public bath as the place to rest and take a bath, the house as the place to live, and so on. Is for this reason that in the cities of Islam “between the architecture of a mosque and that of a private Muslim house, there is a difference in plan but not in style, for each Muslim dwelling is a place of prayer: the same rites are celebrated here as there” (Burckhardt 1967). The quoted terms ‘mosque’ and ‘house’ could be easily replaced by the terms ‘*madrasa*’ (educational institution) or ‘*funduq*’ (caravanserai), among others, without originating a modification in the meaning of the quote. In fact, if “a house is built in a style in no way differing from a mosque” (Burckhardt, 2009: 14), we can easily argue that in the cities of Islam there is no architectural typology differentiation. Islamic architecture is monotypological or, better, non-typological, and the only permanent and repeated element is the court, *dar*, which assumes different spatial meanings and dimensions according to its elementary public or private function.

A simple and precise theme emerges after the observation of any Islamic city from an aerial perspective: the continuity of the built urban environment where the voids - the courts - represent the unique organizer and regulator element (Fig. 1, 2). In this urban continuum ‘monuments’ are not conceived as emergencies - as defined by Aldo Rossi - among the residential fabric, but instead as poles and nucleus defining the settlement order and orientation. Due to its double original function for religious and civil affairs, the Great Mosque is, in fact, the central element in the town, being the physical and functional nucleus where all the main urban streets and pathways are oriented (Fig. 3).

“Towns and cities with their monuments (*haykal*), vast constructions, and large buildings, are set up for the masses (*umum*) and not for the few (*kebusus*). Therefore, united effort and much co-operation are needed for them” (Ibn Khaldun, 2004: 433) affirms the 14th century Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun. The English term ‘monument’ is here adopted to translate the Arab word ‘*haykal*’ and to simplify, but distorting, its original and more extended meaning. *Haykal* (from the Hebrew *hēykāl*) refers in fact to different but logically connected concepts: it indicates, at the same time, ‘temple’, ‘framework’,

‘structure’ and, extended, ‘skeleton’ and ‘human body’. Flipping through the pages of *Muqaddimah*, we meet another term, frequently used by Ibn Khaldun and translated again with ‘monument’: ‘*atbar*’, which is commonly used for ‘heritage’ or ‘archaeology’. In the Arab language, there are no words to indicate the term ‘monument’ with the meaning assigned by the Western cultures. Only comparing the two terms ‘*haykal*’ and ‘*atbar*’, one can find the true meaning of ‘monument’ in the Islamic culture. If ‘*haykal*’ means ‘structure of a building’ - or sometimes precisely ‘building’ -, ‘*atbar*’ refers to the sphere of narration: therefore, the monument in the Islamic culture does not exist as a static testimony of a past (as it happens in the Western cultures), but is a dynamic representation, or narration, of something.

The concept of ‘monument’, and the related theory of conservation, has been scientifically theorized in Europe starting from the first half of 19th century. These theories are a quite recent invention and they are the result of Western speculations on the meaning and the role of history, memory and art in Western cultures. In fact, “si le monument, c’est-à-dire (étymologiquement) l’artefact qui nous interpelle pour nous faire souvenir, fait partie d’un “art de la mémoire” universel, que l’on trouve pratiquement dans toutes les cultures, l’invention du monument historique est solidaire de celle des concepts d’art et d’histoire. Elle appartient à l’Europe postgothique qui a élaboré ce concept au fil d’un long travail, dont la première strate peut être repérée au Quattrocento.” (Choay, 2013: 11). In order to understand the meaning of ‘monument’, as we are accustomed to use and apply, we will adopt as scientific reference point the theory of monument developed by Alois Riegl in his *Der moderne Denkmalkultus*, largely commented by Françoise Choay and specifically indicated by ICOMOS in 2005 Special Expert Meeting on *The Concept of Outstanding Universal Value*. Riegl basically defines the monument as “une œuvre créée de la main de l’homme et édifiée dans le but précis de conserver toujours présent et vivant dans la conscience des générations futures le souvenir de telle action ou telle destinée (ou de combinaisons de l’une et de l’autre).” (Riegl, 2013: 43). This coincides, for the Austrian art historian, with the *gewollte* (intentional) monuments, which have been created by their authors with the specific intention to commemorate a precise moment or event of the past. Opposed to the intentional monument is the *ungewollte* (unintentional) historic monument, which has not been created with a memorial aim, but that becomes monument through an *a posteriori* attribution of a value for which the historical distance is fundamental.

“Value is not something that monuments, groups of buildings or sites possess intrinsically: all value is given by people, as an acknowledgment of worth” (ICOMOS, 2005: 9). By affirming this, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS, which is one of the three advisory body to the World Heritage Committee) express the same point of view theorized by Aloïs Riegl. UNESCO, through the attribution of an Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) by meeting one or more of 10 criteria, defines, in fact, what can be considered universal heritage and therefore what is inside the World Heritage List (WHL) and what is not. By adopting this specific approach, UNESCO expresses the point of view of the international community, transcending national and cultural boundaries. This approach could be placed halfway among a global vision, expressed by the attribution of an OUV, and a local vision of the heritage, expressed by the individuation of attributes and criteria.

It is evident that a value acknowledgment is influenced by many factors, mainly by cultural specificities, that presently are not enough represented and deepened by the international instruments. The *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, in fact, has been introduced only in 2001 in the framework of the 1972 *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, the fundamental instruments that, regularly updated, guides all the issues in terms of universal heritage. UNESCO itself recognizes the need of a more representative and comprehensive WHL, able to wider represent the different world cultures. The efforts in this direction have been fixed immediately after the 2002 *Budapest Declaration on World Heritage* converged in the 2005 *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage*. With the aim to identify and fill the major gaps in the WHL, from 2005 the *Operational Guidelines* comprehend a paragraph (indeed still very short) to *A Representative, Balanced and Credible World Heritage List*. After almost twenty years, the *Nara Document* seems thus to have been received: “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” (Knut Einar, 1995: 48). This statement expresses a fundamental issue, but, until now, represents just a general guideline to avoid the standardization of a universal approach.

As we have seen, all the mentioned documents, theories, approaches, methods and instruments come from the Western cultural tradition and do not

reflect that specific cultural *milieu*, previously analyzed, represented by Islam. In fact, if we assume that the 'monument' does not exist in Islamic culture as a testimony of something in the past, all the mentioned definitions and categories applied in this context impose a careful analysis. In fact, how can we apply the category of 'monument' in a monument-free environment? And, consequently, how can we adopt conservation policies and methods on a tangible heritage of a culture that has created this specific urban landscape?

The case of the city of the Islamic world represents a particular and precise - and a very interesting - example of what one can call "endogenous self-regeneration process". From this point of view, and in order to preserve the historic cities, the fundamental question to be answered and the basic challenge to be engaged are how to support this natural process, if already in act, or how to awake it, if, for some reasons, has been halted.

The interest in proposing such a theme lies in the acknowledgment of the particular and unique character of the cities of the Islamic world, which expresses a condition deeply different from those we normally cope with. In fact, discerning the differences, the aim of the paper has been to highlight the need of specific instruments and tools for the intervention in this context.

The imposing of conventional Western approaches - established and theorized in Europe for European environments - on historic cities of Islam demonstrates its general negative effects. Considering some examples such as Damascus or Cairo historic cores among others, we highlight how these methods may be adequate to preserve single objects (still considered as monuments) but are totally ineffective to the valorization of the whole historical established districts or cities. Giving that the cities of Islam are something very different from the cities created by Western-Christian cultures, we need to develop new and different instruments to deal with them. We need furthermore to find and invent (in the Latin meaning of *invenire*) urban analysis systems which are not based on a traditional aerial view observation (generally valid for any Islamic town), but on the urban specificities and characteristics typical of historic Islamic urban environments. The map reading, in fact, it is without doubt helpful in the understanding of generic Islamic cities, but not in the understanding of the specific urban artifact. Through this analytic instrument, we can only read the typical and permanent element: the already mentioned urban continuum, which express that, in the Islamic urban *koimè*, "Ogni città è in sé tutte le città" (Berardi, 2005: 74). In a few words, we highlight the need of developing analysis instruments able to let us understand

the language of this specific urban environment, aware of the possibility of a necessary rewriting of the consolidated urban historiography of Islam.

Only a more precise knowledge of the contest, through instruments taking into account the complexity of the urban-cultural conditions, can lead to the individuation of adequate methods and approaches - or to the adaptation of the existing ones - in taking up conservation or rehabilitation actions. In fact, we cannot apply Western theories of conservation - even the most modern and updated - to a cultural *milieu*, which considers history and its products according to a layering superimposition and continuous counterbalancing of built elements.

By and through the rewriting of some key elements in the urban history of Islam and the individuation of new analysis instruments, we will understand how the imposing of the cited categories and approaches, inheritance of a colonial past lasting till present, have already influenced the meaning and the sense of the Islamic historic urban landscape.

The problems (the most evident is the depopulation, with consequence in impoverishment and degeneration, of historic cores for the benefit of more modern, but unplanned settlements) faced by the historic centers in Islamic areas are undoubtedly clear, evident and universally recognized. It is precisely for this reason, and in consideration of the specific character of the urban phenomenon, that we have the task to focus our attention to the role played by the decision-makers in the framework of rehabilitation projects and their final aims, in order to give significance to the entire physical and cultural transformation process, intended as the time of judgment and choice.

The introduction, among the international instruments, of the concept of 'Historic Urban Landscape' (HUL) can be considered a first step towards the definition of a more culturally representative approach to heritage, which will enable us to cope, in a more appropriate way, with the Islamic urban and architectural culture. Considering "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" (UNESCO, 2012: 52) is an important step in the modern practice of urban conservation and recognizes the value of diversity in cultural expressions. The introduction of the HUL concept establishes the framework for developing a broader and different point of view.

In the case of Islamic cultures, the HUL concept suggests to support the natural endogenous processes of self-regeneration, intrinsically related to Islamic urban settings, which are living organisms self-reproducing and self-

regenerating following the main rule of the continuous dichotomy and contraposition among permanence of forms and functional differentiations.

Therefore, going beyond the notion of physical conservation of the artifact, it is this the value of the Islamic urban culture that we need to highlight in heritage valorization processes? Can we then try to rewrite the present state of Islamic cities through transformation and self-regeneration mechanisms of historical contexts?

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2

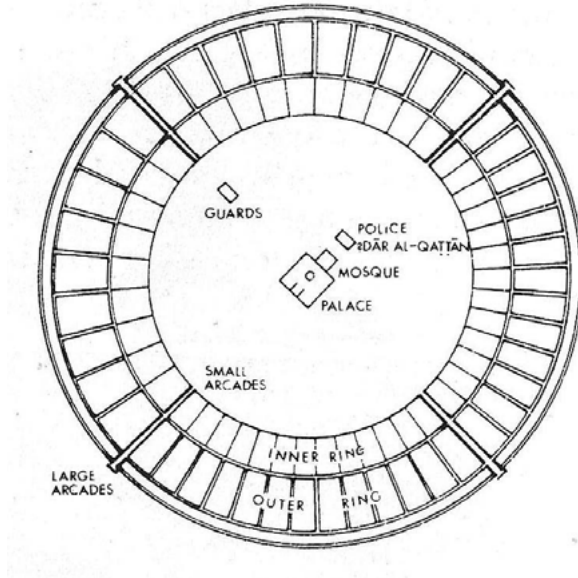


Fig. 3