

The Washington Charter: Charter on the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas (1987)

Preamble and definitions

1. All urban communities, whether they have developed gradually over time or have been created deliberately, are an expression of the diversity of societies throughout history.
2. This charter concerns historic urban areas, large and small, including cities, towns and historic centres or quarters, together with their natural and man-made environments. Beyond their role as historical documents, these areas embody the values of traditional urban cultures. Today many such areas are being threatened, physically degraded, damaged or even destroyed, by the impact of the urban development that follows industrialization in societies everywhere.
3. Faced with this dramatic situation, which often leads to irreversible cultural, social and even economic losses, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) deems it necessary to draw up an international charter for historic towns and urban areas that will complement the "International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites," usually referred to as "The Venice Charter." This new text defines the principles, objectives, and methods necessary for the conservation of historic towns and urban areas. It also seeks to promote the harmony of both private and community life in these areas and to encourage the preservation of those cultural properties, however modest in scale, that constitute the memory of mankind.
4. As set out in the UNESCO "Recommendation Concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas" (Warsaw- Nairobi, 1976), and also in various other international instruments, "the conservation of historic towns and urban areas" is understood to mean those steps necessary for the protection, conservation and restoration of such towns and areas as well as their development and harmonious adaptation to contemporary life.

Principles and objectives

1. In order to be most effective, the conservation of historic towns and other historic urban areas should be an integral part of coherent policies of economic and social development and of urban and regional planning at every level.
2. Qualities to be preserved include the historic character of the town or urban area and all those material and spiritual elements that express this character, especially:
 - a) urban patterns as defined by lots and streets;
 - b) relationships between buildings and green and open spaces;
 - c) the formal appearance, interior and exterior, of buildings as defined by scale, size, style, construction, materials, colour and decoration;
 - d) the relationship between the town or urban area and its surrounding setting, both natural and man-made; and
 - e) the various functions that the town or urban area has acquired over time.

Any threat to these qualities would compromise the authenticity of the historic town or urban area.

3. The participation and the involvement of the residents are essential for the success of the conservation programme and should be encouraged. The conservation of historic towns and urban areas concerns their residents first of all.

4. Conservation in an historic town or urban area demands prudence, a systematic approach and discipline. Rigidity should be avoided since individual cases may present specific problems.

Methods and instruments

5. Planning for the conservation of historic towns and urban areas should be preceded by multidisciplinary studies.

- Conservation plans must address all relevant factors including archaeology, history, architecture, techniques, sociology and economics.
- The principal objectives of the conservation plan should be clearly stated as should the legal, administrative and financial measures necessary to attain them.
- The conservation plan should aim at ensuring a harmonious relationship between the historic urban areas and the town as a whole.
- The conservation plan should determine which buildings must be preserved, which should be preserved under certain circumstances and which, under quite exceptional circumstances, might be expendable.
- Before any intervention, existing conditions in the area should be thoroughly documented.
- The conservation plan should be supported by the residents of the historic area.

6. Until a conservation plan has been adopted, any necessary conservation activity should be carried out in accordance with the principles and the aims of this Charter and the Venice Charter.

7. Continuing maintenance is crucial to the effective conservation of an historic town or urban area.

8. New functions and activities should be compatible with the character of the historic town or urban area.

Adaptation of these areas to contemporary life requires the careful installation or improvement of public service facilities.

9. The improvement of housing should be one of the basic objectives of conservation.

10. When it is necessary to construct new buildings or adapt existing ones, the existing spatial layout should be respected, especially in terms of scale and lot size.

The introduction of contemporary elements in harmony with the surroundings should not be discouraged since such features can contribute to the enrichment of an area.

11. Knowledge of the history of an historic town or urban area should be expanded through archaeological investigation and appropriate preservation of archaeological findings.

12. Traffic inside an historic town or urban area must be controlled and parking areas must be planned so that they do not damage the historic fabric or its environment.

13. When urban or regional planning provides for the construction of major motorways, they must not penetrate an historic town or urban area, but they should Improve access to them.

14. Historic towns should be protected against natural disasters and nuisances such as pollution and vibrations in order to safeguard the heritage and for the security and well-being of the residents.

Whatever the nature of a disaster affecting an historic town or urban area, preventative and repair measures must be adapted to the specific character of the properties concerned.

15. In order to encourage their participation and involvement, a general information programme should be set up for all residents, beginning with children of school age.

16. Specialized training should be provided for all those professions concerned with conservation.