HERITAGE CONSERVATION

extremely cohesive, urban form of Islamic cities is an outcome of their long tradition of self-governance, whereas the more formal structure of Roman and medieval towns in Europe mirrors the greater presence of central power and municipal authority - expressed through the controlled layout of streets and squares and the exposed elevations of public buildings.

Cities, culture and the social environment

Historic cities, buildings and sites are central to creating and reflecting national and individual identities, constituting a physical continuity with the past. Furthermore, it is increasingly recognized that issues of cultural identity are of profound social significance in a rapidly changing world. Culture is intrinsic to development, making economic and social gains sustainable. Considerations of conservation in development should thus be seen not only in the light of preserving the built and natural environment, but also the fundamental elements of the social environment equally.

The earliest known efforts to preserve architectural objects of cultural value date from the 15th and 16th centuries, when some of the Catholic Popes in Europe exerted their influence and financial power to protect Roman ruins. It was not until the 18th century however that more organized forms of architectural protection occurred in Europe. Only the 20th century saw a more widespread and systematic protection of the built patrimony worldwide.

Although each generation has an obligation to preserve and transmit the cultural and historic legacy it has inherited, it is not uncommon to witness the destruction of historical or cultural amenities. Cities around the world are facing a similar dilemma: how to develop without destroying the architectural and urban legacy? Many cities have paid a high price for modernization and development in the name of progress. Escalating land prices and speculation in historic centres make land too dear for low-rise structures leading to irreversible heritage losses.

Preservation action

There is no shortage of earnest words on what should be conserved or on the pressing need for action. But the gap between words and action appears to be growing. Despite a renewed emphasis on the importance of conserving the built patrimony, many cities that have grown around historic sites are threatened by a host of factors, including neglected and crumbling infrastructure, overcrowding, inadequate public services to meet population needs, and financially weak government. Nevertheless, acknowledgement

Changing cityscapes

Over the past fifty years, largely as a result of economic forces, many cities have been transformed from concentrated and identifiable towns into amorphous urban areas. Although the contribution of cities to the national economy of both developed and developing countries is crucial, the forces of urban growth often destroy the very social, cultural and environmental fabric they were intended to improve. Changes accompanying urban growth frequently involve the destruction of distinctive and meaningful built and natural elements, eradicating the physical expression of former indigenous ways of life that are very much part of the settlement culture.

Since architecture is a long-term and large-scale physical witness to the past, future generations will continue to refer to it as a reflection of the spirit of the historic culture. The residential stock - the 'commonplace' of daily life - testifies more than anything else to the genuine social and cultural structures of past and present civilizations. Similarly, the historic urban structure of settlements often reflects local political systems. The seemingly unplanned, but

of the cultural dimensions of the built environment, and the need for preservation, is growing. But, cultural sensitivity alone is not sufficient to solve the problems faced by city managers. Cultural resources tend to be particularly vulnerable to changing values and development priorities, and there is an obvious need to press much harder for the promotion of a 'development with conservation' planning approach in all cities with historic significance, particularly so in developing countries.

The cultural heritage of cities includes historical buildings, increasingly threatened by pollution, neglect, replacement and lack of knowledge. The cultural heritage of townscapes is often threatened by lack of respect for its specific character, as when a new building is out of scale or out of context. But in a world largely driven by economic forces, cultural issues do not always prevail.

Marrying the future to the past

During recent decades, the rehabilitation and regeneration of historic centres has been increasingly recognized as an efficient tool for urban development, synthesizing cultural values with economic opportunities and benefits. Worldwide, rehabilitation projects have demonstrated that maintaining and enhancing historic buildings or historic areas can be economically rewarding, and, in the long term, increase the value of private and public property. Somehow, using culture for revitalizing cities produces remarkable results. Admittedly, there are drawbacks: raising the socio-economic status of an area is often a necessary and unavoidable ingredient of rehabilitation – but it can also lead to the displacement of former residents.

In the historic cities of developing countries, city administrations are now facing a stage of development where the conservation of the urban heritage - and its integration into wider development opportunities - has become a major challenge. It is a challenge that is likely to increase in importance, with a growing recognition of the need to preserve and, indeed, strengthen the structures and edifices upon which whole societies and lifestyles have been built. There can be little or no socially sustainable development without preserving cultural continuity. The cultural identity of cities and nations is an essential element in helping present and future generations retain their natural and built patrimony, as well as helping to build a better and sustainable, people-centred culture in the future.

Bernd Decker