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Architectural
Research

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Problems and solutions in the protection of historical urban areas

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Received 30 August 2011; accepted 21 October 2011

KEYWORDS

Historical urban areas;
Principles of protection;
Measures of protection

Abstract

Historical urban areas are the memory of a city, and the overall landscape they constitute displays the typical scene of a city in a certain historical period. Thus, they are of value for protection. The current study gives an overview on the origin and protection of historical urban areas in the world. Moreover, the study also focuses on the principles, methods, and current problems in the protection of historical urban areas under the guidance of related laws and regulations in China. Finally, some effective measures to protect historical urban areas are suggested.

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1. Origin of historical urban areas

Areas with an intact former style are often seen in ancient towns. These areas used to be large in number, and people do not find them of great value. However, most of these areas have vanished after major urban planning endeavors.

In some cities, the transformation of old urban parts has led to the complete disappearance of historical blocks.

Historical urban areas are part of the history and memory of a city, and history would be discontinuous without them. They are excellent representatives of the style of a city and the basic elements of urban landscape. Any lone building in these areas is not qualified for special protection as a relic protection unit, and thus it is often ignored. However, when buildings are seen together, they constitute a landscape that displays the typical scene of a city in a certain historical period, giving them a higher value.

In other parts of the world, the concept of historical urban area protection originated in the 1960s, when the economy was revived after the Second World War. A huge number of people poured into cities, and dwelling blocks were made in vast numbers. At that time, dismantling old blocks, broadening roads, and constructing high-rises were the most common practices. However, people soon realized that these practices destroyed the continuity of the history and undermined the uniqueness of the city. Aside from relic buildings, people recognized that they had to preserve some

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typical historical blocks to maintain the former elements of the city.

The *Historical Urban Areas Protection Law*, which was promulgated in 1962, is the earliest legislation for protecting historical blocks. According to this law, valuable historical blocks are defined as “historical urban areas.” Moreover, buildings within the protected areas should not be dismantled, and they can only be renovated under the guidance of national architects, who can obtain national funds.

In 1967, England issued the *Civic Amenity Act*, which stipulates that urban areas with unique artistic values and historical features should be protected, considering their “collective value.” Moreover, external spaces, road structures, and even particular old trees, should be protected. The *Civic Amenity Act* specifies that buildings within the historical urban areas should not be dismantled, and the reconstruction and renovation of these buildings are only allowed with registered plans in detail. Thus, development projects are encouraged to avoid these areas.

The *Cultural Property Protection Law*, which was issued in Japan in 1975, defines the “protected zones of traditional building complex.” Building, extension, rebuilding, and other activities that may change the landscape within the protected areas, as well as the cutting down of trees, must be approved beforehand. The urban planning authority is required to make protection plans and a list of traditional buildings and other elements of the historical landscape that will be protected. Plans should be made for protection and repair, and the infrastructure should be maintained properly and have fire prevention measures. In addition, parking and exhibition should be given due attention.

In October 1987, the International Council on Monuments and Sites approved the *Washington Charter* for protecting the ancient urban center of a city and other historical landscapes. According to the charter, the spatial layout and the relationship between the block and its environment must be given special attention. The *Washington Charter* also emphasizes the functions and roles of the blocks in history. This charter differs from the *Venice Charter*, which focuses on the protection of cultural relics.

The *Washington Charter* requires the active participation of the residents in historical urban areas and the improvement in the infrastructure in local areas. Furthermore, residential conditions should be improved, and the protection must be made part of the agenda in the economical and social development of the town.

2. Origin of historical urban areas in China

The legal protection of historical urban areas in China originated in 1986. The State Council declared the list of the second batch of historical and cultural cities. In the document, blocks with historical or local features, building complex, towns, and villages are required to be protected, and the local government should declare these areas as “historical and cultural protected areas.”

This practice was reinforced by the promulgation of the *Law on Protection of Cultural Relics* in 2002, although the historical blocks, building complex, towns, and villages are redefined as historical urban areas, historical villages, and historical towns, respectively.

In August 2008, the *Protection Rules of Historical Cities, Towns and Villages* (2008) specified that “historical urban areas refer to areas declared by the government of the province, the autonomous region, or the city that had particularly abundant cultural relics and intense historical buildings, and that can fully and vividly represent traditional layout and landscape at a proper scale.”

Historical urban areas, together with cultural relic units, and historical and cultural cities, are important elements of Chinese cultural heritage. What, then, are the differences between the former and the latter two?

First, true historical relics within historical areas should be protected, rebuilt promptly, and maintained. Dismantling and completely rebuilding ancient buildings are not encouraged. Although the appearance may still be preserved, this practice can lead to the loss of information and discount of heritage value. In this sense, the protection of historical urban areas is similar to that of cultural relics. In some cases, historical areas are replaced with a completely new replica of the original, which undermines authenticity, and is therefore improper.

Second, the protection of historical urban areas should be focused on the historical landscape. The exterior should be kept in its original style, whereas the interior can be decorated in the modern style and furnished with necessary equipment. The protection of historical urban areas is different from that of cultural relic units, which stipulates that cultural relics be preserved intact. In addition, the elements of a historical landscape, including roads, lanes, yard walls, banks, and trees, should be protected, which is different from the protection of cultural relic units. Finally, the continuity in function and cultural succession should be protected. Historical urban areas are home to a huge number of residents, and these areas are the living form of cultural relics. Aside from the buildings themselves, the culture attached to them should be protected as well. The normal social life and the cultural diversity should be preserved and conserved, respectively. Moreover, the living environment and the local economy must be improved and promoted, respectively. This is similar to the protection of historical and cultural cities.

The property and culture of historical urban areas should be protected. Meanwhile, the local environment should be improved and the local citizens should be provided with services.

3. Principles and methods of protecting historical urban areas

In 1997, the Ministry of Construction, in forwarding the *Regulation of Protecting Tunxi Old Street Historical and Cultural Zone* (2005), specified that the principles of protecting historical urban areas are different from protecting cultural relics. First, different from people living in cultural relic units, historical urban areas can still provide a normal life for their residents and perform their functions while preserving their vitality. Second, measures should be taken to refine the infrastructure and improve the living standards of the residents. Finally, the authenticity of the historical properties should be preserved, instead of constructing replicas of ancient buildings or blocks. The *Code of Conservation Planning for Historic Cities* (2005), which was

issued in 2005, specifies that the historical appearance and spatial layout should be protected. In addition, the code requires the protection of the streets and lanes inside and the environment outside the protected areas. The planning of historical urban area protection should include the improvement in the living conditions of the local residents and the maintenance of community vitality.

According to the *Regulation for Protecting Historical Urban Areas* (exposure draft) issued by the Ministry of Construction and State Administration of Cultural Heritage, measures should be taken to protect the authenticity, integrity, and functional continuity of historical urban areas. Moreover, the government should play a leading role in improving the local infrastructure and living environment, with the participation of the local residents.

The requirement of authenticity means that the real historical properties should be protected, rebuilt, and renovated, instead of protecting their replicas. The requirement of integrity implies that historical buildings and all other elements of the landscape, including roads, lanes, yard walls, bridges, streams, banks, and even old trees, should be protected. The requirement of functional continuity connotes that the local residents can live according to their own will, the original social function of the historical urban areas should remain undisturbed, and the local vitality should be reinforced. Moving the local residents to make place for tourists is discouraged.

4. Problems with the current protection of historical urban areas

- (1) In some areas, the government mandated commercial enterprises to dismantle all the houses and replace them with high-rises to solve the problems of poor houses and inadequate infrastructure. The protection of historical urban areas has been misinterpreted as city transformation, resulting in the destruction of historical urban areas.
- (2) In some places, real historical urban areas were replaced with fake ones. Furthermore, real historical blocks were dismantled for the sake of convenience and commercial motivation. As a result, historical urban areas with enormous value become worthless replicas of old streets.
- (3) In some areas, land value and commercial potential are very important. The functions of these areas have changed from dwelling areas to bars and catering, and from general shopping streets to luxury shopping areas. Original residents have moved away, and enterprises have been attracted. Consequently, the environment was ruined for temporary commercial benefits. The truth was replaced with fakeness, vivid life with acting, and local features with fads. These historical urban areas no longer remind the people of the past. The construction of replicas of old streets out of tourism or commercial motivations is totally different from the protection of historical urban areas.
- (4) In many areas, a dense population is considered as a barrier to the protection; therefore, many people have been moved. Some people have been moved out of their original houses, and the culture has been destroyed.

The relocation of local residents from historical urban areas should be weighed carefully. Although relocation is

necessary for the protection, it may undermine the local culture. Relocation should aim at optimizing the function of the old area. In addition, alongside the renovation of old area environments, relocation cannot be regarded as a time-limited target because it is not the only means of protecting historical urban areas.

5. Measures of protecting historical urban areas

The *Protection Rules of Historical Cities, Towns and Villages* (2008) specifies that the protection scope of historical urban areas includes buildings and structures, and different measures should be taken according to the nature of the properties to be protected.

The *Code of Conservation Planning for Historic Cities* (2005) specifies the ways of protecting various properties. Cultural relic units should be protected and repaired according to the *Law on Protection of Cultural Relics* (2007). Historical buildings should be maintained in their original conditions; the interior can be rebuilt in the modern style and furnished with necessary equipment. However, they should not be destroyed completely and then rebuilt.

New buildings with a style similar to the original ones can be preserved or refined.

New buildings with a different style from the original ones should be rebuilt or demolished.

Other elements of the landscape should be protected and maintained.

The *Protection Rules of Historical Cities, Towns and Villages* (2008) also specifies that no new buildings and extensions should be made within historical urban areas, except the necessary infrastructure and public buildings.

Historical buildings within the key area of historical blocks should be kept intact in terms of height, size, exterior appearance, and color. Buildings, structures, and other facilities outside the historical urban areas can only be dismantled with the approval of urban planning authorities at the municipal and county levels in conjunction with cultural relic authorities at the same level.

New buildings and structures within the historical and culture blocks should conform to the regulations for protection.

6. Adopting proper methods for protecting historical urban areas

Historical urban areas are key elements in the protection of the history and culture of a city. Their protection does not only involve planning, but also a comprehensive endeavor. The methods and policies for the protection of historical urban areas should be given special attention.

Aside from the physical structures, the culture and cultural diversity in historical urban areas should be protected as well. In other words, their functions should not be undermined, and the living environment should be improved, which are essential for the protection of historical urban areas. The protection of historical urban areas includes protecting the exterior appearance, transforming the interior to meet the needs of the modern people, and

improving local infrastructure and environment by taking gradual steps. In this process, the local government should play a leading role and involve the participation of local residents. The protection of historical urban areas should not be confused with the development of real estate, and the profits of investments should not be the major concern.

In recent years, there have been successful cases of historical urban area protection, and they have the following points in common. First, the traditional landscape, as well as the functions and culture, are well preserved. Second, the gradual and mild steps avoid possible conflicts in the community, facilitate the succession of the culture, meet the real needs of the local residents, and lessen the burden of the government. Finally, the cooperation between the government and its citizens produces a favorable result, in which the government is responsible for improving infrastructure and the environment, and the residents are responsible for improving their own living conditions. Thus, the heritage and culture are preserved, and the environment and living standards of the local residents are improved.

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