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Defending the Character of the Town

The International Charter of the Protection of Historic Towns, accepted by the latest general assembly of ICOMOS, is closely connected with the Venice Charter. While the latter serves as guidelines for the conservation and restoration of individual monuments, the former provides guiding principles for the protection of historic quarters, what is more, whole towns.

As the town is the most complex monument, its protection is the most complex concept of monument protection. The values to be preserved of an historic town are summed up by the Charter as follows:

«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 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.
- 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.»

This time I would like to talk mainly about the ideas contained within point c., on the one hand because this one is the most complex criterium, and on the other hand because it is the point where a town is the most vulnerable. Fortunately, the pattern of a town can only be changed by an all-out intervention, as in many countries — unfortunately mine not being an exception — it has often been done through demolishing whole quarters and building them over launched and carried through by the government. But to spoil what is included in point 2.c. of the Charter no all-out intervention is necessary; it is enough to slip in a few elements not fitting to make its character become obscure. However, it is namely this which defines the individual character of a town, besides its topographic characteristics.

What is it that makes up the characteristic prospect of a town? A lot of things. The most important of these is the fact if a town has a dominant architectural peculiarity, such as the gothic arcades of Bern and Bologna, and the two-storey arcades of Chester. The characteristic elements of Maltese towns are the bay-windows of wooden construction.

The colour effect typical of a town is also significant. Greek towns are always white, towns built of wood are generally colourful, no matter if we think of the Russian or Scandinavian towns with wooden houses, or the timberframe house (fachwerk) towns of Germany and its connected areas. Grey basalt is determinant in Edinburgh. But there are also linkings of colours typical of individual towns, too. The character of Sidi bou Said in Tunisia is defined by the combination of white and blue. The dominant colour of traditional Hungarian villages is white, while the windows are generally brown. These rules should not be broken through the course of developing a settlement. What is more, in some countries this is ordained by building bylaws. In Jerusalem only houses with stone elevation are allowed to be built.

Colour is naturally closely connected — as in Jerusalem, too with the dominant building material and the face-work. Brick fronting is so characteristic of Dutch towns that we feel brick front-work Dutch-like even in modern architecture. A characteristic feature of traditional Bulgarian architecture is covering the roofs with flat stones.

Windows are no less determinant. Sash-windows, natural in Britain, are unthinkable in Hungary on a historic building. It is a bad present-day habit that in the course of restauration undivided windows are built in, no matter what the historic windows were like.

Roof structures are typical elements of the character of a town. One of the interesting characteristics of my native town, Budapest, was the fact that a lot of houses have turret-like structures on their roofs, serving only for decoration. This is in fact something of no use as the turrets have no function, and they are the object of much criticism — but they are typical of the town. It is a pity that after the destructions of the 2nd World War a lot of these little turrets have not been restored. On the other hand it is interesting that the post-modern architecture of our days often goes back to this tradition.

However, the character of a town is formed not only by the buildings and their parts. Pavings should also be placed here. Gratings are important characteristic elements, let us think of Leningrad for

example. But the so-called «street furniture» should also be listed here. The telephone booths of London are as important elements of the character of the town as the posting boxes of Budapest. It is unfortunate that neon signs have outplaced traditional sign-boards all over the world, and it is a good thing that in some places a good artist can create new traditions. There are some mobile characteristics of towns as well: trams, buses; let us think about the double-deckers of London. These, too, have to be protected.

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La protection du caractère urbain

Parmi les valeurs à protéger des villes historiques le caractère est le plus vulnérable, ce qui nous porte à avoir particulièrement soin des éléments du caractère. Quels sont ces éléments? Les configurations architecturales caractéristiques de la ville (par ex. les arcades de Berne), les couleurs, les formations de façades, les tuiles, les structures des fenêtres caractéristiques. La toiture peut l'être aussi. Les éléments n'ayant pas le caractère de bâtiment sont importants, comme le dallage des rues, les grilles, les enseignes, les cabines téléphoniques, les boîtes aux lettres et même les autobus et les tramways. (Exemples pour chaque.)

Защита городского характера

Самая уязвимая из ценностей достойны охраны исторического города, это - характер, так особенно надо следить вниманием за элементами устанавливающие характер. Какие они? Архитектурные формы характерны на города /например аркады Берна/, характерные цвета зданий, облицовки фасада, формы крыш, кровельные покрытия, оконные проёмы. Не только здания важны, а другие элементы города, как облицовка улиц, решётки, вчеськи, телефонные будки, почтовые ящики, даже автобусы и трамваи. /Примеры даны/