

Valletta Position Paper on Historic Cities and Sustainable Urban Development Policies

Introduction

In its definition and popularisation of the term sustainable development, the 1987 Brundtland Report represented a turning point in raising awareness of the critical challenges facing our planet. Most recently, the 2009 Copenhagen Summit on climate change reinforced the need to take action. At the heart of this debate is the question of non-renewable resources. These include extracted materials, fossil fuels and the heritage.

In a wider view sustainable development is good housekeeping: taking care of and developing existing resources in the best way. This makes the heritage, in a broad sense, a starting point for planning and development in a sustainable society.

The Historic City

Historic cities possessed numerous attributes that characterise today's concept of the sustainable city. They were rooted in their natural environments and adapted to them climatically. Together with their hinterlands they constituted rich, complex and balanced ecosystems that have been tested and shaped over time by carefully considered development.

The historic city was often densely built-up and closely-knit. It was multifunctional, with strong virtues of proximity and accessibility which limited the need for infrastructure and transport. It was functionally and socially mixed, supported a wide range of complementary activities, and embodied multiple cultural values. The historic city was vibrant, convivial, and has proved to be eminently adaptable to incremental and harmonious change. It was human in scale, employed locally sourced materials, and expressed geo-cultural diversity. This has provided a strong sense of tangible and intangible identity.

The non-sustainable city is characterised by functional separation, urban dispersal and transport dependency. The historic city, on the other hand, offered flexibility and unlimited networks which provided a freedom that still today favours creativity and innovation. The historic city today fosters a sense of belonging and well-being amongst its citizens. The heritage and dynamics of historic cities are also a primary asset for attracting creative industries, businesses and visitors.

Historic cities may be seen as a source of knowledge for the functional and social organisation and spatial distribution of urban activities and natural elements, and an archetype for cities seeking sustainability. They minimise the use of resources, favour interaction and solidarity, and secure cultural continuity.

Conclusion

In view of the above, the members of the ICOMOS International Committee on Historic Towns and Villages (CIVVIH) meeting in Valletta, Malta, on 10 April 2010 believe that historic cities could serve as a source of inspiration for defining policies for sustainable urban development.