

PRINCIPLES OF URBAN CONSERVATION

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In vergelyking met Europa het ons stede en dorpe 'n relatiewe kort geskiedenis. Daarbenewens is daar minder ou geboue. Daarom is die behoefte om ons erfenis te bewaar onderstreep. Aandag is gevestig op die feit dat nie net individuele geboue nie, maar ook gebou-groepe en inderdaad selfs groter areas en die omliggende land-

skap wat deel van 'n oorkoepelende bewaringstrategie uitmaak, ingesluit behoort te word. In hierdie artikel word kortliks gekyk na sommige algemene beginsels met betrekking tot bewaring en die toepaslike wetgewing en ander meganismes wat gebruik kan word om hierdie sensitiewe areas te beskerm.

1. INTRODUCTION

The urgency of conservation as regards the built environment within the South African context is underlined by our relatively short history, as compared with countries of Europe, resulting in a smaller supply of older buildings. Dr Rupert has pointed to the fact that, despite our achievements to date, for every building restored, 40 to 50 are demolished. Given that a measure of awareness of the problem exists, the fundamental question arises as to what methods and techniques are available to intensify and expand our positive efforts to conserve. This article explores principles involved, with special emphasis on implementation in the Cape Province.

2. SOME GENERAL PRINCIPLES

2.1 Declaration of Conservation Areas: A Change of Emphasis

In the context of European towns or cities it has become evident how masterpieces of historic architecture can lose much as a result of changes in their original setting, and that groups of historic buildings can have just as much artistic value as isolated specimens of architecture of a much higher class. It is also becoming more accepted that relatively recent buildings, as well as those having no great artistic value but giving the town an individuality of its own, may merit preservation. Groups of buildings or single buildings can also arouse interest where they are characteristic of a region. And last but not least, the necessity to link the protection of historic buildings with care for the sur-

rounding landscape of which they are a component part, like trees, water or hills, is being realised.

In the U.K. provision was made for listing buildings in the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, but after many years of observing the effects of this provision, emphasis has shifted from single buildings to conservation areas involving groups of buildings in the context of their environment, historic town centres and, in certain cases, whole towns.

2.2 An Intergrated Approach towards Conservation at the City Level

All conservation should be consciously integrated into the urban planning of the city, and form part of its redevelopment. This is important, because, nearly always, the oldest parts of the city are standing at points of greatest development, in the path of the most drastic changes.

It could be said that, up until relatively recent times, the man-made environment developed gradually and naturally, new elements being integrated into the existing fabric. To some extent it continues to do so; however, at the same time, another process is at work – one characterised by disintegration and resulting in increasing destruction of the original environment. Except in a few salient cases, it is not easy to state immediately what forms part of the first process and what of the second. A certain time perspective is required in order to differentiate between the two,

in view of the complexity of the changes taking place. Abrupt alterations may gradually once more become part of the 'original' environment.

In order to maintain the natural environment properly, it is necessary to reconsider and restate repeatedly what the historic features are. Ideas about the historic features of an environment keep changing as time goes on, as do ideas about the preservation of individual buildings and monuments. This implies that one should strive to be conscious of the social realities or considerations underlying the organisation of urban space during different historic periods.

Even when buildings of a historic quarter have no particular aesthetic value or cultural association, its plan may deserve preservation. The division of the area into building plots, reflected in the width of buildings and thus in their scale, is an important element of the original town structure; it is of great importance as regards the impression created by streets and squares. The preserved elements of the original structure of the town may merit maintaining. (*Figure 1*)

Problems arise when it is necessary to erect new buildings either as 'infill' between existing or in a location related in some way to existing buildings. To quote Binckes on this point: "... there is no doubt that facsimiles of existing work are never satisfactory; such structures are devoid of truth and cannot therefore be assigned any environmental

value; the lie is usually very evident indeed. The alternative approaches have been described as 'harmonic integration' (new buildings related to existing in general form, size of openings, general tone and colour but not necessarily material), and 'harmonic contrast' (new buildings employing contrasting forms, materials, etc. but at least in most situations of related overall scale) (Figure 2). The latter is possibly the more 'architectural' of the two approaches but is not applicable in all cases and requires very skilful design."

2.3 Recycling

As the task of the town planner is to seek solutions that respect, as far as possible, the values of historic areas, but at the same time meeting the modern social demands – it is essential, above all, to establish the functional tasks that can be carried out by historic quarters and single buildings without damage to their artistic value. This is a key problem of conservation, for excessively dynamic functions may damage the too frail framework in which they are housed, while too little life may mean that historic towns and urban areas become depopulated and decline. Architectural forms cannot be protected from the dangers threatening them if they are not given the right substance. At a level of implementation, it may be stated that the National Building Code, presently being reformulated, needs to give more recognition to the particular problems imposed in the recycling of old buildings.

2.4 The Traffic Aspect

Hoogenhout has made a forceful plea for following the example of European countries where the historic city centre is painstakingly preserved, no matter how narrow or almost impossible for traffic its picturesque little streets may be, whilst less important side streets are developed to serve as effective arterial roads. At the same time he has succinctly stated that when one considers the exorbitant cost of street widening, the mind boggles at what could have been achieved if these amounts had been devoted to conservation.

Whilst it has been postulated many times that street traffic be restricted in historic urban areas and pedestrians given priority, demands have also been

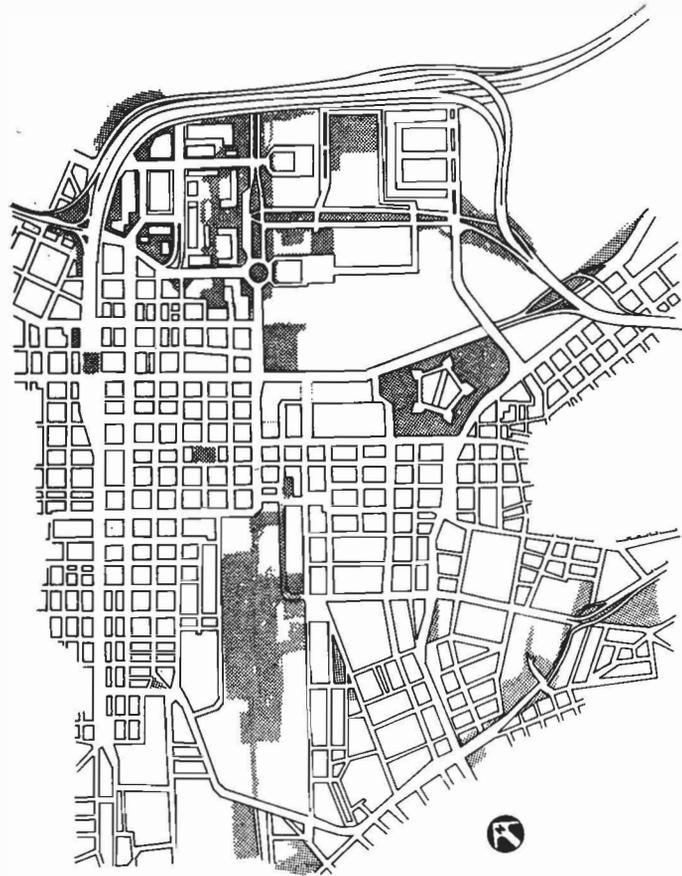


Figure 1 "The preserved elements of the original structure of the town may merit maintaining"



Figure 2 Examples of 'harmonic contrast': (Above) Extension of Göteborg town hall by Asplund (1937) (Left) A new multi-storey building with concrete skeleton between 18th century houses on the Singelgracht in Amsterdam, 1971. (Architect : Abel Cahen)

made to remove car parks from historic squares. These postulates might be considered absolutely right provided that they are supplemented by certain reservations:

Firstly – motor traffic in the historical area can be limited if transport needs can be satisfied otherwise, particularly such needs as good deliveries, access to dwellings, linking the old town with other districts, car parks, etc.

Secondly – the complete elimination of car parks from historic squares, to avoid spoiling their architectural value, though frequently justified, is not always essential. The correctness of such a decision depends on the character of the square, its shape and the size of the car park. If an historic square, that once throbbed with life, is left empty, this is not a satisfactory solution either. So parking in old squares should not be categorically excluded, but be subject to certain restrictions, only being allowed in places where they do not mean deterioration of the values of the square or street.

Thirdly – if total elimination of vehicular traffic is too difficult or can entail undesirable consequences, it may be advisable to renounce such a radical solution and to submit the wheeled traffic to more or less rigorous limitations.

The aim should be, in general, to satisfy the needs only to an extent that is essential. It is generally recognised today that the network of streets in the central districts of large cities cannot be redesigned to take the whole of the potential volume of motor traffic; in connection with this, a large part of the needs in this respect are met by public transport services. This applies above all to the street network of historical areas.

3. LEGISLATION

It has been much emphasised of late that there is a lack of comprehensive heritage legislation in South Africa. This has a bearing on both the natural and built environments. The Environmental Conservation Act No. 100 of 1982 does not make provision for urban areas. Furthermore, with regard to urban areas it is maintained that the National Monuments Act – touched upon below – has become obsolete in the sense that its jurisdiction does not stretch wide

enough to take the constantly changing environment into account.

3.1 Provisions of the National Monuments Act

The National Monuments Act, No. 28 of 1969 (as amended) empowers the Minister of National Education to declare as a national monument any property “of aesthetic, historical, archaeological, palaeontological or scientific value or interest which in the national interest he considers should be preserved, protected and maintained.” Thereafter the owner of such property may not destroy, damage or alter the monument. Over and above the individual owner, the Monuments Council may also render, *inter alia*, financial assistance to a registered authority or body of persons.

3.2 Areas Surrounding National Monuments

In 1973 an interdepartmental committee was established by the Minister of Information to extend the powers of the National Monuments Council. Nevertheless an authoritative opinion at the time held that there was sufficient power in terms of the Cape Provincial Townships Ordinance as well as the Municipal and Divisional Council Ordinances to protect conservation-worthy buildings, conservation areas and areas around where necessary and *practicable*. At the same time, however, it was pointed out that it was actually extremely difficult to lay down restrictions in a town planning scheme for the protection of conservation-worthy buildings which are in private ownership, especially where they are not declared as national monuments. A scheme cannot, for example, prevent an owner of an undeclared building from demolishing it. What, in fact, can be done, is to avoid placing such buildings under the threat of public improvement schemes such as the building of new roads, etc.

4. STRATEGY

4.1 A Specific Approach

The City Engineer of Cape Town, in his report “City for the People”, proposed a particular strategy, the essential elements of which may be summed up as follows:

- (a) Preservation of buildings within the present framework by means of outright acquisition (considered to be prohibitively costly) or by proclamation as National Monuments with the owners consent – a procedure necessarily reserved for buildings of exceptional importance.
- (b) Preservation to take place on an economic basis involving the following possibilities:
 - * Evaluation and listing of buildings.
 - * The necessary restrictive legislation to prohibit the demolition and maintenance of listed buildings.
 - * Various concessions involving:
 - (i) revised rateable valuation;
 - (ii) departures from the Town Planning Scheme for recycling of buildings, and
 - (iii) building waivers.
 - * Financing possibilities where an owner objects (despite the foregoing):
 - (i) an “Urban Preservation Fund” administered by the Local Authority for purposes of acquisition; and
 - (ii) subsidy by the State or Provincial Administration.

4.2 Listing of Towns, Areas or Buildings

In the Netherlands emphasis is placed not just on the preservation of historic architecture and its immediate environment, but also on the historic settlement as it has evolved, such preservation forming part of a total planning policy. For this reason, the typology of the rural and urban settlements of the Netherlands forms the main starting-point in the investigation which precedes the initial choice of conservation areas. Together with broadly-based, on-the-spot reconnaissance, such typology gives some idea of the extent to which the structure of a settlement is intact. Since any protective measures will only become effective several years later, knowledge of planning policy is also necessary. The preliminary investigation will bring to light sufficient details to enable priorities to be determined for designation policy. Thereafter, very specific examination will be necessary in the case of a group of settlements not included in the initial selection. An

overall assessment of the form of a settlement, its buildings and the public and open space, and of the functional and visual relation of the settlement to its direct environment, will make it possible to determine the content and boundaries of the area to be conserved. Such an assessment is normally made by the Monuments and Historic Buildings Preservation Department.

Resolution No. 1 of the Urban Heritage Conference held at Grahamstown during 1974 recommended that the Institute of South African Architects be requested to establish urban and regional committees to assess the historical and aesthetic value of buildings suitable for restoration and adaptation, and to convey the results of their surveys to interested bodies. Furthermore, Resolution No. 4 recommended that the Minister of National Education be requested to institute steps towards the compilation of a list of historic buildings and sites on a national scale. Such lists have, in fact, been produced for Grahamstown and the central areas of Cape Town and Port Elizabeth.

The implications with regard to the implementation of any listing within a defined conservation area will obviously be crucial. This could possibly form part of a strategic plan dealing with conservation aspects with the express purpose of exerting a real influence on land-use planning decisions. The inclusion of *all* listed buildings or areas in a town planning scheme is not seen to be practicable because of the magnitude of the claims for compensation which this could lead to in specific instances. Nevertheless, the Cape Provincial Town Planning Regulations make provision for a conservation zone within which buildings must comply with the requirements accepted by the Administration after reference to the Historical Monuments Commission. In this respect the Municipality of Cape Town is in the process of incorporating areas of special architectural, aesthetic or historical significance into its town planning scheme. These zones would not prescribe building restrictions but enable a holding action to take place and negotiation, where needed, between applicants and Council officials. Since the development potential of the site would not necessarily be affected, it is foreseen that

possible claims for compensation would be kept within reasonable bounds.

It is of interest to note that the Cape Provincial Institute of Architects in the publication "Buildings of Central Cape Town" states that in other countries the listing of buildings is given legal standing. In the absence of statutory protection the term "listing" was regarded as contentious and therefore it was decided to adopt the term "cataloguing" as an alternative.

4.3 Building Control

Obviously, building control in the conservation context would be aimed at achieving a "sympathetic form of development". This concept is easier to apply in the case of, say, the Braak or Bird Street in Stellenbosch. It is another matter when it comes to an isolated building or buildings in a city. It is doubtful whether, at a city scale, much can be achieved by merely imposing height, building line and similar restrictions on new development within an historical precinct.

5. SUMMING UP

The following possibilities, not necessarily in precise order of importance, are available in terms of existing legislation:

- * Integration of conservation with planning at all spatial levels. This relates to the protection of historic areas and buildings, wherever possible, by taking the full range of alternative locations for development into account. In particular, this implies the application of a more sensitive approach to street-widening as it affects historic town and individual buildings than has been applied in the past.
- * Sensitive recycling of historic areas and buildings.
- * Limitation of traffic within particular historic urban areas without necessarily adopting radical solutions such as its complete elimination.
- * As regards historic buildings of exceptional importance: proclamation as National Monuments with the owner's consent, together with the financial and protective provisions contained in the Act.
- * The cataloguing of buildings or areas, graded so as to include the preservation of buildings or areas of less than

national importance as well.

- * Demarcation of conservation zones in terms of town planning schemes.
- * Conservation action by voluntary organisations and individuals.

The final two possibilities, below, based on overseas precedents, imply changes in existing legislation. In turn, such changes hinge upon an evolving recognition of the need for conservation, stimulated by education and research at all levels, and its ultimate higher placing on the list of financial priorities, including:

- * establishment of revolving funds: a building is bought, restored, adapted or renovated and then re-sold subject to conditions, the money so obtained being used to repeat the operation;
- * introduction of the necessary restrictive legislation to prohibit the demolition and compel the maintenance of listed buildings.

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