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Conserving and managing cultural heritage settings in changing landscapes

Yukio Nishimura
 Former Vice-President, ICOMOS
 Professor, University of Tokyo

Cultural heritage becomes a part of its environment, and cannot be separated from its surroundings. In a world of rapid urbanization and constant change, the preservation of cultural heritage in its environment has naturally emerged as an important issue. High-rise buildings spring up in major cities, often interfering – at least visually – with neighbouring heritage sites, and the explosive increase in cars, trucks and motorcycles, a common phenomenon in many developing nations, can affect the urban structure of an entire region. Beyond that, changes in people's lifestyles can fundamentally influence their attitude towards cultural heritage. This is particularly true in Asian countries, where the economy is booming and many urban areas are subject to the increasing pressures of modernization, which often bring irreversible effects. Dealing with these urgent issues was the main topic of the 15th General Assembly and International Scientific Symposium of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Appropriately, it was

held in China, a nation whose landscapes are undergoing vast changes due to rapid economic growth. The event was held from 17 to 21 October 2005 in Xi'an, an ancient capital of China. More than 1,000 participants from over 75 countries attended, and 177 papers selected from over 600 abstracts were presented at the accompanying international scientific symposium, Monuments and Sites in their Settings – Conserving Cultural Heritage in Changing Townscapes and Landscapes. This theme encompasses a number of pressing questions concerning the settings of monuments and sites, including how to define settings in the first place; how to identify threats and define appropriate responses; how to manage dynamic changes in evolving townscapes and landscapes and, among the challenges surrounding the concept of setting, how to recognize cultural routes – linear settings for monuments and sites. Despite the fact that the term 'setting' is difficult to translate into many languages, it



The thriving modernisation and urbanisation of Byblos, Lebanon, reaches to the very heart of the ancient city, one of the oldest in the world.

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The rich cultural heritage of the Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet, is being affected by rapid economic growth and development.

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faceted, including many intrinsic elements, and cannot be considered as a separate phenomenon. Identifying and managing settings in an appropriate way can help to maintain the human dimension of urban environments and landscapes, both spiritual and material, adding to the overall quality of life of the area. A setting is dynamic, and it is shaped and given value by people. In order to fully grasp this dynamic, interactive model of setting, changing contexts and values need to be acknowledged. Planning should be supportive, including decision-making structures at the regional level, where cultural heritage can flourish creatively and harmoniously with surrounding development. During the meeting, the Xi'an Declaration on the Conservation of the Setting of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas was adopted by the General Assembly on 21 October 2005. The goal of the Declaration is to contribute to the conservation of cultural heritage settings in the following ways: by acknowledging the importance of setting; documenting and interpreting setting in diverse contexts;

developing tools and practices for conservation and management; monitoring and managing change; and working with local, interdisciplinary and international communities for cooperation and awareness in conserving and managing settings. (Full on the ICOMOS website at http://www.international.icomos.org/xian2005/xian_declaration.pdf). The Xi'an Declaration begins with a definition of 'setting', emphasizing that setting must be recognized as a contributing factor to the overall significance of cultural heritage. The text underlines the positive influences that maintenance of an appropriate setting can have on the significance and the distinctive character of cultural heritage. The Declaration also stipulates that a multi-disciplinary approach is necessary in order to understand and interpret a site's setting. Settings are based on tangible and intangible values, requiring a variety of sources of information: not only formal records and archives, but also artistic and scientific descriptions, oral history and traditional knowledge, perspectives held by local communities, and views and vistas. It goes on to stress the importance of planning

tools in management settings, including the use of assessment and monitoring mechanisms as well as the involvement of the different communities concerned. The Declaration also extends the scope of heritage conservation. Instead of simply addressing individual monuments and sites, it gives importance to the overall setting. However, the text also recognizes that change occurs quickly, and management of settings must not necessarily prevent or obstruct change. It does require, however, that creative solutions be found to ensure that development and changes to the living environment occur in harmony with surrounding cultural heritage. Furthermore, the Xi'an Declaration on the Conservation of the Setting of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas represents a milestone for ICOMOS and other international organizations in this field, as it not only requires an interpretation of the setting of cultural heritage, but also calls for action for its conservation and management in rapidly changing societies. ☺