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# Historic Urban Landscapes: A Review on Trends and Methodologies in the Urban Context of the 21st Century

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**Abstract:** This article makes a critical reflection, questioning the notion of historical urban landscapes as a conceptual paradigm used for the basis of urban conservation in the twenty-first century. The study begins with a brief summary of the origins and subsequent evolution of this concept, highlighting the two key reference milestones: the Vienna Memorandum (UNESCO, 2005) and the Paris Recommendation (UNESCO, 2011). Subsequently, the focus of attention will be on highlighting the problems and difficulties posed by the management and protection of historic urban landscapes today. In this sense, the focus of attention will be placed on the assumption that change is an inherent part of the urban condition, since there is no consensus on what the limits of acceptable change in historic urban landscapes should be. It also emphasizes three factors that make this more difficult: (1) the reminiscences of the doctrines of the Weberian administration in the current models of government; (2) the subjective nature of the systems of indicators applied to the scope of historic cities; and (3) the opportunism of tactical urbanism, which, despite its shortcomings, is becoming an outstanding alternative for the methodological development of the historic urban landscapes.

**Keywords:** historic urban landscapes; critical reflection; indicator systems; tactical urban planning

## 1. Introduction: Towards the Convergence between Heritage and Landscape

For some time, heritage and landscape have constituted unrelated terms. Still, for much of the nineteenth century, a monument was considered and conceived as something completely isolated from its environment. A great step towards overcoming this situation was produced in the first third of the twentieth century by Gustavo Giovannoni. This creator was, indeed, the first to call attention to and reflect on the concept of environmental respect in modern terms, in the valuation of minor architecture works and the defence of historical centres [1]. This though will be transferred to the Charter of Athens (1931), a pioneering document in its emphasis on defending the physiognomy of the city and the environmental context of monuments [2].

It would be more than three decades for the Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding of Beauty and Character of Landscapes and Sites (UNESCO, 1962) to refer, for the first time expressly, to the concept of urban landscaping [3]. In the same vein, the Charter of Venice (1964) will also recall that “the concept of a historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting” [4].

From then on, this interest in presenting the historical sites in association with the environment in which they are integrated, will be present in most framework documents. The 1970s were especially fruitful, with the Convention for the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage of 1972, the European Charter of the Architectural Heritage of 1975, the Nairobi Recommendation of 1976,

and the Quito Colloquium of 1977. Already in the following decade, the Toledo Charter of 1986 and the International Charter for the Conservation of Historical Cities and Historic Urban Areas of 1987 (Washington Charter) maintained the same line of thought.

The year 2000 was a particularly fruitful year due to the appearance of two fundamental documents. The first, the Krakow Charter, is not sufficiently known—perhaps because of its solely European scope—despite the importance of some of its Articles (Article 8 and Article 9) in regard to the subject we have been discussing. However, it is the second document, the Council of Europe Landscape Convention, which will eventually become a key document, urging the signatory European governments to “*integrate landscape into its regional and town planning policies and in its cultural, environmental, agricultural, social and economic policies*” [5].

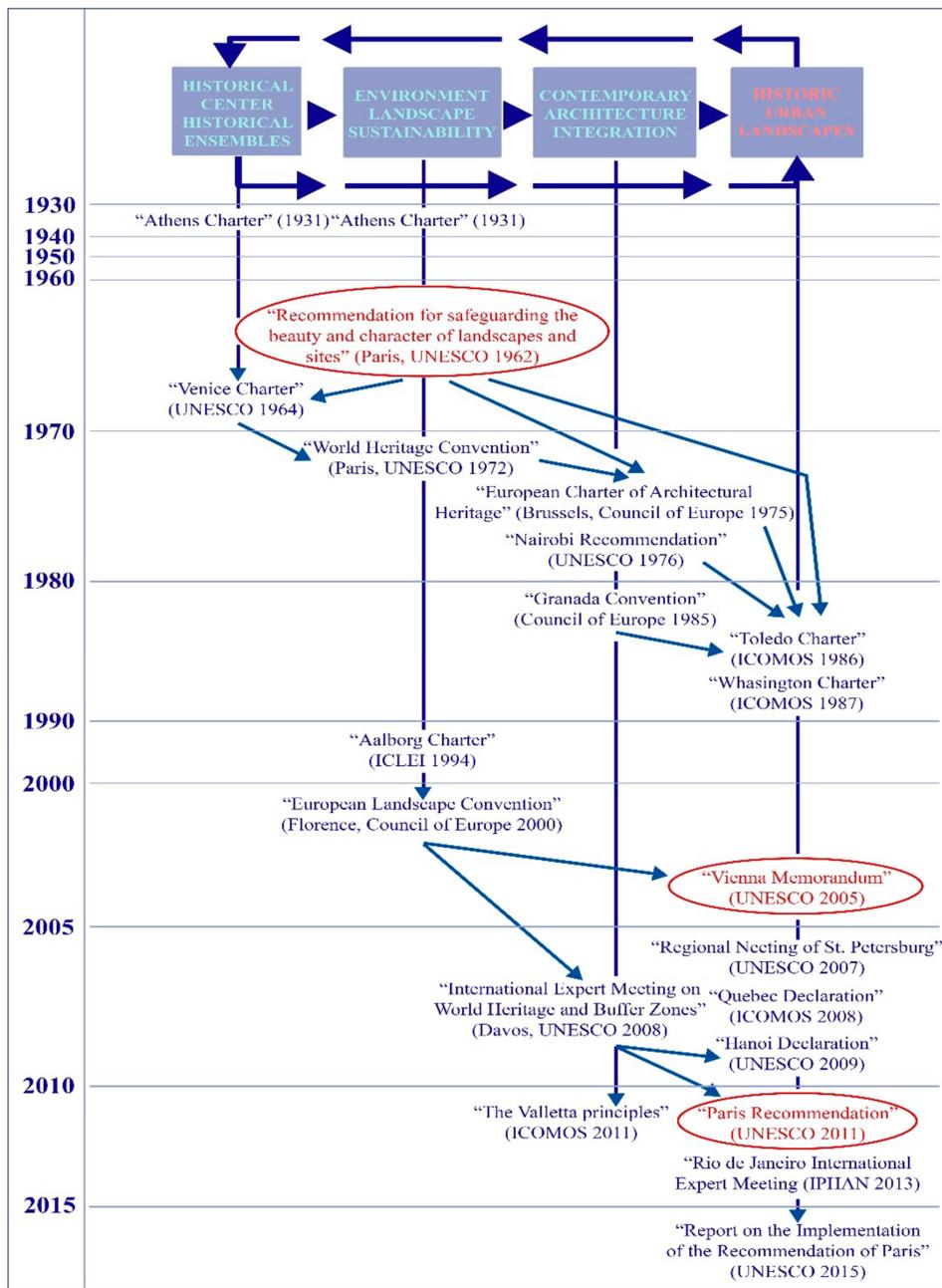
The argument we want to develop in this article begins with the International Conference on “World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture”, held in the Austrian capital in May 2005. That meeting led to the so-called “Vienna Memorandum”, a document that did not attract the unanimity of many and which has been the source of a heated debate in recent years [6] (p. 276).

At this conference in Vienna, UNESCO recognised the obsolescence of international regulations, unusable in the face of unstoppable growth and the transformation of cities on a planetary level, particularly those listed on the World Heritage List. In this context, the objective of the conference was to create a key document for an integrated approach that combines the apparently contradictory dynamics of permanence and change, favouring the renovation of historic urban areas with the incorporation of contemporary architectural contributions [7].

The drafters of the document, to achieve such objectives, it would be necessary to renew the conceptual instruments on which the current international regulations were founded. It was perhaps for this reasons that a new concept was introduced “historic urban landscapes” to replace other terms with strong roots and tradition in the historiography and theory of heritage, such as “historic centres”, “historic areas”, and “historic cities”. They were not aware, however, that they were opening Pandora’s Box, by replacing concepts with solid traditions, as we have said, with new, much more holistic terms, which were also dangerously ambiguous. In fact, this ended up becoming the most relevant point of the debate.

In defence of the document, it must be said that it opened a debate and, in this sense, it fulfilled the proposed objectives. As one of the editors of the “Vienna Memorandum” pointed out, the intention was to create a transition text that would be important because of its capacity to enable a dialogue on contemporary development in historic cities and to set in motion “the first attempt in twenty years to review and update the modern paradigm of urban conservation” [6] (p. 121).

Starting in Vienna, and in response to the request of the World Heritage Committee made at its 29th meeting in “Durban, South Africa, 2005” for the drafting of a new recommendation that would expand on the idea of historic urban landscapes, multiple meetings were held among the advisory bodies (ICOMOS, IUCN, ICCROM) and associated institutions, to the point that it is very difficult to sift through the huge number of minutes, reports, and documents generated during the last decade (Figure 1). There are, fortunately, some recent publications that can guide us through the labyrinth [8].



**Figure 1.** The diagram presents the fundamental referential milestones that have marked the convergence between constructions and their environment to land on the concept of historical urban landscapes and their subsequent evolution. (basic graph documentation: A. Azkarate, A. Azpeitia, 2016).

Finally, in the Paris Recommendations on the Historic Urban Landscape of 2011, the definition of historic urban landscape was finalized. As of today, this term refers to *“the urban area understood as the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes, extending beyond the notion of “historic centre” or “ensemble”*. After the Paris Recommendations, the meetings to define and settle the concept of historic urban landscapes have continued to today, which once again presents the difficulties contained in this complex notion [9].

## 2. Historic Urban Landscapes: Problems and Difficulties

At the theoretical level, the notion of landscapes does not merit discussion (paradigm of sustainability, incorporation of the human dimension, intangible values, dynamic character of the city, etc.). It is a concept with the necessary freedom to assume, without complexities, its commitment to the socio-systemic multiplicity that encloses the urban phenomenon in the 21st century. However, its practical materialization is much more complex. Why? What are the reasons for this difficulty?

The “novel cultural operation” [6] (p. 256) (represented by the Vienna Memorandum of 2005 and the Paris Recommendation of 2011) claims the need for change in a city in order to be dynamic, to be alive, it needs to develop, which demands contemporaneity, mobility, dynamism, and progress. “Change management” is the magic statement that appears again and again in the ocean of letters, statements, and recommendations. However, here is one of the keys to this whole mess, neither Vienna nor Paris explain how this change is to be managed and administered.

As one of the authors who has best known how to reflect on the problem has pointed out, “in the case of the historic urban landscape, the justification that is used (that we face new challenges that require new concepts to face them) and, above all, the implications derived from broadening a field that is already extensive and ill-defined, and absences that can be detected in various documents, generate a deep uneasiness, since they convert an approach based on the concept of historic urban landscape into something very difficult to apply (...) and an empty and banal rhetoric. And in this situation, vagueness and generalities are interpreted as a sign of weakness, as a demonstration of everything that can ultimately be done” [10].

Unfortunately, as time passes, he seems to be right. At the 41st session of the World Heritage Committee, held in Krakow on 6 July 2017, UNESCO officially registered the historic centre of Vienna on the list of World Heritage in Danger. After more than a decade promoting conferences, conventions, recommendations, and all kinds of events intended to shape and establish the notion of historic urban landscapes in the international arena, this failure has been resounding and has required the threats issued to Vienna in 2002 with the construction of the *Wien-Mitte* railway station to be made effective.

The current decision has come about following the permits granted by the city of Vienna for the construction in the *Karlsplatz* area of the Ice-Skating Club, the Intercontinental Hotel and the Vienna *Konzerthouse*. These urban updates include high-rise buildings, notably altering the skyline of the Austrian capital and the visuals of its historic centre [11].

Unfortunately, there are numerous recent examples of this type of practice in World Heritage cities. Already widely known is the case of Seville, with the 2016 construction of the “*Torre-Sevilla*” skyscraper [10] (pp. 321–323). Despite UNESCO’s threats in 2008 that it would include Seville on the list of World Heritages in Danger, due to the profound alteration of the city’s landscape [12], the intrinsic ambiguity of the notion of historic urban landscapes allowed the city to justify its construction through counter-reports commissioned by the Ministry of Culture of Spain, the Junta de Andalucía, and the City Council of Seville [13].

The events that took place in the city of Vienna have parallels with the “Andalusian case”, since the central government of the Junta de Andalucía has again in recent months greased the wheels necessary to authorize the construction of a Hotel-skyscraper in the city of Malaga. This project entails an irreversible impact on the image of a city with more than three thousand years of history. The ball is once again in UNESCO’s court, and as we have already noted, it has confirmed the failure of the objectives established at the International Conference on “World Heritage and contemporary architecture—The management of historic urban landscapes” in Vienna, 2005.

While these lines are being written, another similar case is being resolved, this time about the construction of a Skyscraper Hotel in the city of Málaga [14,15]. This project, if carried out, would entail an irreversible visual impact on the image of a three-thousand-year-old city. We would love to be wrong, but we suspect that once again, the real estate interests will be able to go beyond the “good” considerations issued by UNESCO.

### 3. Questions Regarding the Management of Historic Urban Landscapes

At the regional meeting held in Rio de Janeiro (UNESCO, 2009) [16], the holistic nature of the concept of historic urban landscapes as a basis used for new models of urban growth in historic cities was emphasized. The importance of extending the notion of historic urban landscapes beyond the traditionally protected city centres, including the buffer areas, was noted. In this sense, the meeting stressed the need to extend the management derived from this concept to all new legal heritage categories, with a much more integral character: cultural landscapes, cultural spaces, areas of ethnological interest, etc. Obviously, all this requires the development of new tools to allow real management of this new conceptual framework.

In this regard, after the “Vienna Memorandum” (UNESCO, 2005), the development of indicator systems has become an experimental field in full swing in the framework of the debate on the new heritage strategies of the 21st century [17]. Some of the first proposals put forth by UNESCO itself, in this specific field of historic urban landscapes, were raised in the workshop held in Chandigarh in 2007 [18], or at the convention held in St. Petersburg the same year [19]. At the end of this latter event, a line of work was proposed with four blocks of key indicators in order to analyse the evolution of historic urban landscapes, promoting urban planning policies that prioritize conservation and sustainable development. Refer to the Figure 2.

| KEY INDICATORS, ST. PETERSBURGO (UNESCO, 2007)   |  |
|--|--|
| <b>CULTURAL-TANGIBLE / INTANGIBLE</b>  | <b>ECONÓMIC TANGIBLE/INTANGIBLE</b>  |
| buildings, open spaces, green spaces, public space, designed ensembles, parks and gardens, composition, silhouette (horizontality with vertical accents), metropolitan/regional planning, transportation and movement, views, events and activities. | performance in terms of revenues (taxes, tourism, GDP), expenditures (on conservation), relation to the metropolitan/regional economy, marketing potential, image of the city. |
| <b>SOCIAL TANGIBLE/INTANGIBLE</b>  | <b>ECOLÓGICAL TANGIBLE/INTANGIBLE</b>  |
| accessibility of the city (for living, working, leisure, services) for the population, quality of the housing units, range of housing categories (social housing, middle incomes, high income), civic pride.   | biodiversity, water, air, water quality, air quality   |

Figure 2. Themes, St. Petersburg (UNESCO, 2007).

With a scope restricted to historic centres, in April 2009, promoted by the World Heritage Centre and the UNESCO Regional Office in Cuba, a reflection group was created to implement the management policies in Heritage of Humanity cities. The result was the project “Sustainability Indicators in World Heritage Urban Areas”, which proposed a system divided into three levels. Refer to the Figure 3.

| LEVELS OF INDICATORS, LA HABANA (UNESCO, 2009) |  |
|--|--|
| <b>1. GENERAL INDICATORS</b>                   | focused on the description of the socio-economic context of the city under study.  |
| <b>2. COMMON INDICATORS</b>                    | focused on measuring general aspects that link cultural heritage with the sustainable development of historical centres. |
| <b>3. SPECIFIC INDICATORS</b>                  | focused on the specifics of each city and the problems arising from their management.                                    |

Figure 3. Type, La Habana (UNESCO, 2009).

More recently, the so-called “City Prosperity Index” (CPI), developed by UN-Habitat in 2012, is the benchmark, where political dialogue and data monitoring are combined with two clearly marked objectives:

1. Create a strategic policy planning instrument where information is adapted to contextual needs at different scales.
2. Establish global analogies by fostering knowledge transfer and mutual learning [20].

Both the “City Prosperity Index” (CPI) and the other indicator systems are, in short, analytical procedures to study the conservation, evolution, and future perspectives of historic urban landscapes, in a manner “that could provide assessment criteria that may have shared references with other people, places, cities or countries” [21]. However, we believe it is important to note the difficulties present in these types of analogies between different historic cities and urban landscapes. Establishing shared evaluation criteria is only possible in the case of generic indicators, as it is absolutely impossible for all those specific indicators to be adapted to the particular needs of each case. Consequently, the scope and depth of these shared referents is superficial and limited. We believe that the objective pursued by the ICC to create a comprehensive system that unites a flexible monitoring system adapted to the specific needs of each location with another generic system common to all cities only results in two lines of parallel but unrelated information. One is composed of common data, superfluous and of little interest, while the other is composed of specific data from specific contexts that do not allow any sort of comparison between both lines of data.

Despite the recent proliferation of these types of analysis systems, we must be aware of the great difficulties in finding truly homogeneous indicators in terms of urban conservation and cultural heritage. In this area, most indicators are not qualitative. Indeed, they are indicators based on information obtained from subjective assessments of reality, so we must not forget that, in many cases, they will be indicative in nature. If we assume that the criteria and variables that make up contemporary heritage are constantly being modified and resized by virtue of their markedly dynamic nature, it is a mistake, in our opinion, to aspire to find permanent standards in the design of indicator systems. They must be flexible, revisable and adapted to each context, so as to allow the monitoring, control, and prediction proposed by UNESCO.

Despite the attempts made by UNESCO and the UN-Habitat, there is currently no standardized system of indicators specifically adapted to the sustainability of historic cities [22].

Apart from the limitations indicated regarding the application of indicator systems, the global nature of the conceptual development of the notion of historical urban landscapes allows many disciplines to attempt to tackle the problem, and requires a transversal administrative and legislative framework to facilitate the development of new governance models. The problem is that at this time, the memories of the Weberian administration paradigm [23], especially in Western societies, still has great weight with the survival of administrative systems based on academic departments and segments without a truly comprehensive vision of the territory and landscape, and without assuming

the transversality that implies. While at the administrative level, we do not experience a convergence equivalent to that found in the conceptual field, the possibility of a truly effective application of the conceptual framework of historic urban landscapes is an illusion.

The permanent nature and the search for definitive solutions is one of the traits that has traditionally defined contemporary urban planning throughout history [24]. Consequently, the regulatory development in urban matters has been aimed at providing rigidity and static sense to a procedure based on the aforementioned Weberian administration paradigm. This dynamic has turned current urban management into a complex, slow, and costly process, which requires the coordination of multiple actors in dense urban projects planned and directed predominantly by public institutions and the private sector. This process is impregnated by a heavy invisible “ballast” of administrative procedures, procedures, legal requirements, technical complexities, etc.; constraints which have been defined perfectly by Dan Hill under the qualification of “dark matter” [25]. This circumstance can be observed particularly in the case of the antiquated systems of cultural governance, where the participation of new social and/or economic actors is demanded [26]. In addition, the planning impetus that emanates from public institutions remains stuck in the middle, because the behaviour of highly complex systems, as is the case of the urban environment, is not predictable with accuracy. If we add to this the fact that the institutional apparatus is governed by ephemeral legislatures looking at long-term planning strategies, the contradiction is more than evident.

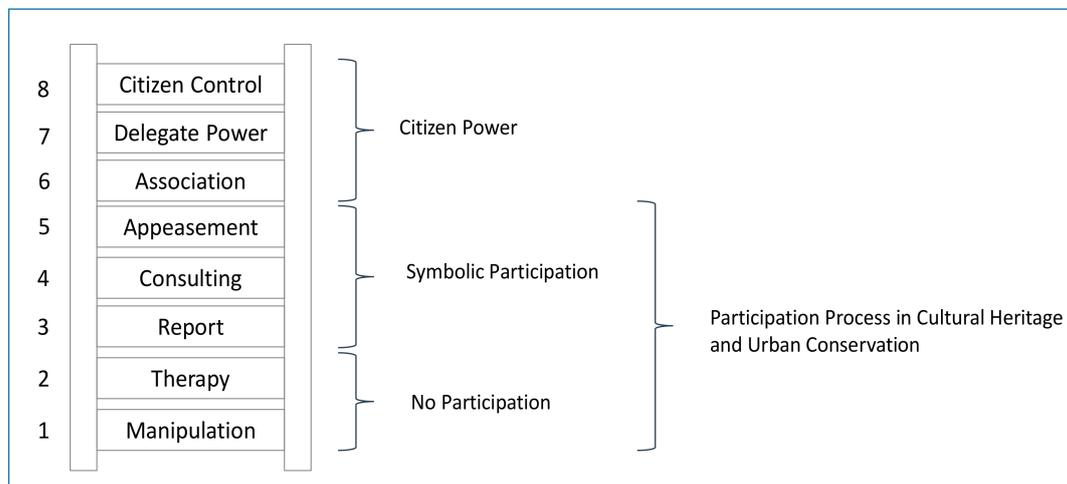
In response to this situation, practices derived from the emerging discipline of the so-called tactical or ephemeral urban planning [27], which advocates equal participatory management that includes all social stakeholders involved in the protection of urban and cultural heritage as a basic instrument of sustainable development; something that in our opinion, at the present time, is merely a desire whose real implementation is, to say the least, complicated.

Castillo points out: “*participation is at the base of the formation of the current concept of cultural heritage*” [28] (p. 418). Citizens’ associations bring together people from different spheres, enriching the debate on the historic urban landscapes of their cities with a transdisciplinary approach that generates spaces for collective construction. However, citizen participation is particularly controversial, especially in situations in which the administrations involved in the protection of cultural heritage do not adequately perform their functions, usually due to pressures derived from financial markets, which in many cases are contrary to the criteria of conservation and sustainability [10] (pp. 324–329).

Although the incorporation of social participation processes into the field of cultural heritage is an issue that, in recent decades, has had broad development and reflection at the legislative level nationally and internationally, it is important to notice how, in our opinion, they deal with extremely complex processes which are frequently biased in favour of the interests that underlie the administrative and academic spheres, which continue to consider cultural assets as intrinsically valuable elements where there is only a place for the pre-eminence of the scientific and the political over the social spheres. Thus, we are convinced that the prescriptive nature acquired by social participation processes as a result of their legislative incorporation has accelerated the degradation of the participatory mechanisms at the service of political interests so that the “*cosmetic use of citizen participation can justify decisions made from the top down*” [29] (p. 218). In this sense, it is important to note the significant difference between developing superficial social participation processes, that is, those in which such participation is reduced to an inclusive act in decision-making; and participatory processes where there is really enough capacity to influence the final result of the process (practically non-existent). The superficial social participation systems, even defined as the “*new tyranny*” [30] (p. 2), generally focus on the strengthening of identity and symbolic practices, but rarely include positive results to optimize economic redistribution or improve living conditions [31,32]. They are therefore, in most cases, “*ideological tools that instrumentalize the most vulnerable people*” [33] (p. 196), which, in our opinion, could well be defined as “*Social manipulation processes*”.

In the diagram in Figure 4, it can be seen how the citizen participation processes in the field of cultural heritage and urban conservation are mainly framed within the first five rungs, corresponding

to the levels of non-participation, or in the best cases, symbolic participation. At the first level, the participation processes are used to “educate” citizens, while at the second level, participants can express their opinions and make judgments, but without any certainty that their proposals will be taken into account in the final decision making.



**Figure 4.** Eight rungs of the ladder of citizen participation [34].

As we have indicated above, we are convinced that there is still a long way to go. From our point of view, the citizen participation processes, especially in the field of cultural heritage, require a deep prior debate, with it being necessary to point out a differentiation that often goes unnoticed. The development of equal social participation processes in urban and peripheral areas are not the same as those social participation processes in actions concerning heritage assets with a singular value. In this sense, we consider it necessary to emphasize that the practices of tactical urbanism are especially adapted to these peripheral areas by proposing the revitalization of depressed areas and underutilized public spaces. While in the case of the core urban areas affected by complex contexts, they present much more limited effectiveness, and practically none in the case of the intricate needs of the guardianship, individual or collective, required by the cultural assets.

Finally, it is evident how historic urban landscapes demand the development of a methodological corpus that can effectively materialize the conceptual framework it promulgates; especially if the intention for this notion devised by UNESCO is for the paradigm to be used as the basis for the “New Urban Agenda 2030” and the urban planning models of the twenty-first century.

In the current urban environment, any conceptual archetype based on the Weberian administration paradigm and on a vertical and compartmentalized governance model that aims to be a master formula for change management, is in danger of being used by the big financial markets as a pitch-disguised ploy bordering on the Utopian.

The notion of historical urban landscapes is incapable of answering many questions: What are the “limits of acceptable change” capable of reconciling the management of old towns and the modern areas of historical cities? How are new heritage values capable of assuming contemporary expressions, the immaterial dimension and the natural elements? How can this new all-embracing, systemic and transversal concept be adapted to the sectorized legal framework in force to be able to obtain real legal protection and models of effective governance in the urban environment? These, together with many other issues, to our mind complicate a plausible and effective application of the objectives proposed with the theoretical framework of the historic urban landscapes; a paradigm, which, as we have already mentioned, does not go beyond being a general and diffuse utterance that acts as a whirlpool that engulfs everything without providing effective tools capable of managing the huge number of items it covers.

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22. We must also note the problems and difficulties involved in the selection of reliable indicators in the field of urban landscapes: Ambiguity in terms of its meaning (especially in the case of subjective indicators), scarcity or heterogeneity of statistical sources, lack of representativeness, difficulties in establishing analogies, etc.
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