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Cultural Heritage and Contexts Today: Three Concepts, Two Places, One Challenge

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Abstract. Today, cultural heritage once again takes its rightful place in everyday life beyond and despite the laws. The paper explores the evolving relationship between cultural heritage and contemporary urban contexts, focusing on the tension between dynamic living heritage and static legislative frameworks. It aims to start a debate to foster bridging the gap between emerging theories on different scales and their practical application in diverse environments thus suggesting a direct contribution to the contemporary debate in the field of architectural heritage and conservation of historical structures. The research presents three key concepts – the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL), New Contextualism, and the Narrative Theory of Conservation. It demonstrates that these frameworks share a common foundation in value-led assessment, shifting the focus from protecting physical structures to managing change and significance. Through comparative case studies of the Ancient Quarter in Hanoi, Vietnam, and the Chengene Skele Fisherman Village in Bulgaria, the study identifies a recurring legislative friction. In both cases, vibrant, community-driven urban fabrics (characterized by socio-functional ingenuity and living narratives) face potential stagnation due to rigid legal protections that prioritise visual compatibility and historical freezing over social continuity. The paper concludes that for cultural heritage to remain a relevant and active participant in contemporary life, conservation must be redefined as the management of change rather than the preservation of the status quo. It argues for a conjunction of heart and head, calling upon legislative bodies and institutions to adopt more flexible, inclusive, and resilient codes of conduct. Such frameworks should recognise the interdependence of tangible and intangible values and respect local communities as the primary narrators of their heritage. Ultimately, the research highlights that while laws are necessary to protect values, they must not sever the emotional and functional ties that keep heritage alive.

Keywords: Cultural heritage; historic towns; historic urban landscape; contextualism; theories in cultural heritage conservation; narrative theory; management of change; Hanoi – Vietnam; Chengene Skele – Bulgaria

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A BRIEF NOTE ON THE HERITAGE CONTEXT

The second half of the twentieth century brought profound changes to heritage concepts, driven by global shifts such as decolonisation, globalisation, technological progress and international collaboration. It is only natural that these processes reshaped our attitudes toward the environment and cultural heritage as a critical component of it.

Understandings of what constitutes "cultural heritage" have expanded significantly: the scale is more ambitious, the time required for value-recognition is shortening, and the repertoire now includes practically all typologies of our environment. This evolution necessitated complex new approaches as for only fifty decades heritage transitioned from being valuable in itself to serving as a vital identity anchor. Consequently, conservation arguments have shifted

from pure knowledge toward stronger social, economic, and political character (although in reality they have always possessed it, albeit less conspicuously). These interrelated changes in the global heritage context naturally elevate society's role in shaping the future of heritage, whether for nostalgic or economic reasons. It gradually became clear that community engagement is the key prerequisite for successful policies; only locals can keep cultural heritage "alive" by integrating it into their daily reality, proving that the formal separation of tangible and intangible heritage is no longer functional.

Within this context, the twenty-first century has seen the emergence of several new (or, more accurately, upgraded) concepts. This paper presents three of them, operating at different scales – city, building, and heritage site. The central argument is that all three share a common foundation: the recognition of value. This understanding also lies at the heart of the concept of heritage itself, fundamentally rooted in the attribution of significance. The following text demonstrates how these concepts extend established conservation principles and further highlights a key challenge of their practical application, drawing on two distinct yet comparable urban case studies – the Ancient Quarter in Hanoi, Vietnam, and the Chengene Skele Fisherman Village in Bulgaria.

THREE CONCEPTS

This section does not aim to trace the individual evolution of these concepts. Instead, it focuses on their shared understanding of value, based on the long-standing development of ideas and practices in the cultural heritage field. In doing so, they extend key principles beyond their traditionally exclusive sphere. As a result, these concepts offer opportunities for the meaningful inclusion of cultural heritage within contemporary social, economic, and environmental realities.

Historic Urban Landscape

At the beginning of 2024, UNESCO officially presented the Urban Heritage Atlas – a digital platform designed to support historic cities and a technical tool for applying the 2011 *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* [1]. Without dwelling on the "lack of consensus over the term" established across various cultural contexts [2], my understanding of the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) centres on a mindset that views the city as a layering of significance and diverse values, extending beyond pure cultural heritage [3]. Against this backdrop, HUL serves as a tool for resource management in urban contexts [4]. The introduction of such a shift back in 2011 was driven by the urgent challenge of global urbanisation. With 70% of the population expected to live in cities by 2050 after a 2007 UN report [5], new management tools became essential.

The HUL concept draws philosophical inspiration from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, where a city is defined not just by its physical structure, but by the relationships and meanings invested in it by its inhabitants [6]. This perspective responded to the post-war urban pressures of the 1950s-70s, which threatened historical fabrics through mass housing and motorisation [7]. Earlier documents in the heritage conservation field like the *Washington Charter* [8] established the link between tangible and intangible. A quarter of a century later, this no longer fully reflects the changing contexts. In response, the *Valletta Principles* [9] further emphasise the importance of social dimensions as an essential component of urban heritage. However, both ICOMOS documents [8,9] remained focused on protected historical cities and areas.

HUL goes further by applying conservation practices to the scale of the city as a whole. It seeks to overcome two significant challenges. On the one hand, numerous international conventions, doctrines and charters in the field of cultural heritage define what should be preserved but leave the question of how this should happen largely open to local interpretations and management decisions. On the other hand, there remains a widespread perception that the presence of cultural heritage limits or hinders development. The approach follows a six-step methodology – from mapping diverse resources to establishing appropriate partnerships and local management frameworks [4]. Many are borrowed from methodological approaches established in the practice of cultural heritage conservation, for instance: identifying and documenting values; understanding and assessing significance – historical, evidentiary, aesthetic, societal and other values; assessing condition and risk; maintaining values and minimizing risks; a transparent and consistent process for making decisions about change; considering the effect on values. [10, 11, 12]. Thus, by integrating values into social and economic growth, and by placing the local contexts at the centre of decision-making process, the concept appeals for resolving the perceived conflict between heritage and development.

Ultimately, HUL does not replace traditional conservation but rather expands its reach. It transforms them into a tool for managing urban development based on the values and contexts of the place. It treats the economic context as

a resource rather than a threat and engages local communities and political processes directly. In this framework, change is not a danger to be avoided, but an inevitable process to be intelligently managed.

New Contextualism

On July 11, 2025, two Wikipedia pages – Contemporary architecture and Contextual architecture – were updated with the term New Contextualism. All cited sources are strongly related to the Bangladeshi architect and researcher Mohammad Habib Reza, who proposes a holistic ten-layered model of context: social, economic, spiritual, historical, ecological, scientific/technological, geographical, cultural, architectural, and urban [13]. This aligns with urban regeneration theories by Lejano and Kan [14], which view city development not merely as physical change, but as the creation of social institutions and practices. They refer to "new contextualism" in urbanism as immediate human needs and urge planners to examine daily life details, and demand solutions tailored to specific local conditions "here and now".

Etymologically, contextualism (from the Latin *contexere*, "to weave together") involves integrating both the literal and abstract characteristics of an environment. However, the well-known philosophical approach in architectural theory and practice has faced a decline. While the mid-20th century fostered a multi-layered debate on context from different perspectives – perceptual, sequential experience of moving and townscape, everyday social practices and meaning, specific location, urbanistic collage, etc., the late 20th century often reduced it to mere "visual compatibility" and "conformity [...] with the surrounding built environments" [15]. Possible speculation is that New Contextualism seeks "to reclaim the notion of context today as a critical generative tool in design" [15] that engages in a dynamic dialogue with the existing environment and remains tolerant of change.

These seemingly new dimensions are actually well-established principles in heritage conservation. Alois Riegl's foundational (and quite avant-garde for the beginning of the 20th century) value-led approach already acknowledged the inevitability of change by balancing commemorative values with present-day contexts [16, 17]. Similarly, the *Burra Charter* [18] evolved from a concept for conservation (1979) to "guidance for the conservation and management of places of cultural significance" (2013), emphasizing that change over time is possible and acceptable. The Charter's core principles directly align with New Contextualism ideas. To give examples. By requiring an investigation into a place's history, use, associations, meanings, and fabric, the Charter addresses historical, social, spiritual and architectural contexts. The emphasis that the place, its setting, cultural and natural resources and people are important moves beyond the physical towards the urban, geographical, ecological and cultural layers. Finally, the Charter's consideration of needs, resources, opportunities affecting the future correspond to the economic and technical contexts.

Essentially, the value-based understanding of heritage today encompasses all ten "lenses" proposed by the New Contextualism model. Innovation can be found in linking diverse contexts with technological forecasting of future scenarios (including the help of AI) and seeking forward-thinking design in architecture and urbanism that is informed also by prediction [13]. It is only fair to acknowledge that proactive approaches are not uncommon in the cultural heritage conservation field. Climate change, urban resilience, the contemporary role of heritage, and the digital future, including AI and other emerging technologies, have become key areas of focus for organisations such as ICOMOS and UNESCO. For example, in 2022, UNESCO released the *Guidance and Toolkit for Impact Assessments in a World Heritage Context* [19], representing a step towards the integration of new technologies into heritage conservation processes.

I understand the New Contextualism as a call for architecture and urbanism to rediscover inspiration in various contexts. In other words – to recognize the interdependence between contemporary creativity and existing contexts, but also to broaden the horizons of contexts, and hence the creative resilience. So, it is more or less a new beginning for an older broad conceptualism, enriched by new contexts and perspectives.

Narrative Theory of Conservation

In 2020, Salvador Muñoz Viñas published *On the Ethics of Cultural Heritage Conservation*, a collection of works that questions classical conservation ideals such as authenticity, objectivity, and minimal intervention [20]. Drawing from his practical experience in paper conservation techniques, Muñoz Viñas argues that strict adherence to these principles often fails to respond to contemporary needs and the diverse meanings people attribute to heritage. Instead of traditional preservation, he suggests viewing the discipline as a "transactional activity" where in

the process of social and physical exchange between the object and the people of today something might be lost, but also something is gained.

The same year of 2020, Nigel Walter published his *Narrative Theory of Conservation*, asserting that heritage buildings have a right to a continuing life within contemporary contexts [21]. Naturally, the theory is rooted in an evolving understanding of value. It directly responds to the principles (and also criticisms) of the dominant value-based conservation today – an approach institutionalized by global documents like the *Venice Charter* and the *Burra Charter*, as well as influential institutions such as the Getty Conservation Institute. Walter's theory specifically addresses living buildings, that is "buildings that remain in use" and have not exhausted their usefulness. This alternative theoretical framework for decision-making utilises the metaphor of narrative. If a building is seen as a continuous story, then every generation has the right to add its own chapter. However, they must follow the established "plot lines" and take responsibility for leaving the narrative open for future generations. As both a researcher and practicing architect, Walter illustrates the narrative approach with very specific heritage buildings examples commenting on the imperfections of values (historical, aesthetic, scientific, social, etc.). The book is a warning that value systems applied solely through a subjective-expert lens risks freezing a building in a specific moment, essentially erecting a "barricade" between heritage and the community.

Fundamentally, both authors demonstrate a firm stance toward context, defining it as living and human. Context is inextricably linked to the values we attribute to a place and represents an evolving history that heritage conservation must not ignore. This is what is new – the context is in the people of the present who are using a heritage site (or object) today. These understandings directly address key 21st-century debates in the field. Firstly: change is inevitable, so we better not ignore it. Secondly: the values and needs of today's people are paramount, so we better think of heritage conservation also from the perspective of a social activity. Thirdly: contexts are important, but also various and changeable, so we better keep heritage conservation resilient and stay socially relevant. In the end, quite understandably, the authors leave many questions unanswered (without attempting to conceal this fact), the central one being: how can such a narrative and human-centred approach be applied in practice?

How We Become Modern by Going Back to the Past

The briefly presented new concepts and their references to cultural heritage conservation are not intended as a critique, but rather as an observation. They provide a basis for the claim that these three frameworks share a common root: value-related characteristics or resources. Indeed, value lies at the very core of the concept of cultural heritage itself. The selection of these specific concepts is deliberate, as they operate on different scales and address our environment in various ways: the Historic Urban Landscape as an urban management tool; New Contextualism as an urban and architectural professional design practice; and the Narrative Theory of Conservation as an alternative approach to conservation practice (Figure 1).

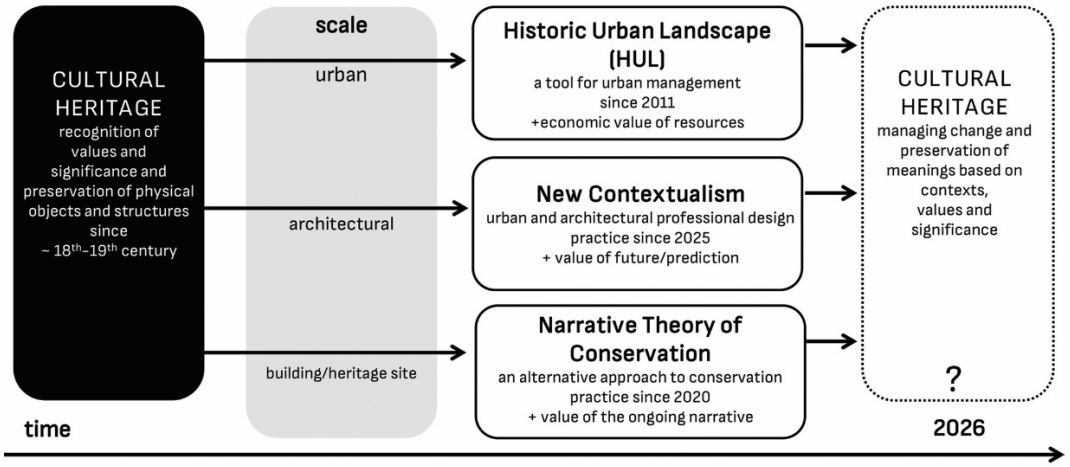


FIGURE 1. The shared value-based foundation of three contemporary concepts: bridging heritage principles and the management of change - is it possible? Scheme by the author.

It is promising that the discourse on context is reviving across different levels and through diverse concepts. It is also promising that these three concepts do more than just draw inspiration from values. They actively expand the definition of value. The Historic Urban Landscape introduces the economic value of resources and highlights the city's management potential. New Contextualism introduces the value of the future, focusing on forecasting the behaviour of new architecture within the existing urban structure. Finally, the Narrative Theory of Conservation turns toward the value of the "narrative" – the invisible stories that every building carries for the people of today.

By validating values as a broad platform for understanding the world, these concepts mark a significant transition from the preservation of physical objects and structures toward the preservation of meanings. They underscore the growing necessity of reading a diversity of contexts in order to effectively manage change. Keeping this in mind, back to heritage...

Back to Heritage

The three concepts in question validate certain debates from the beginning of the 21st century in the field of cultural heritage. By incorporating the economic context, they support looking at "integrated conservation" from a new perspective, which could now perhaps be seen more as "integrated development" [22]. This shift may push the famous debate between Gustavo Araoz and Michael Petzet toward a resolution, where heritage conservation is accepted as "managing change" rather than "not altering and destroying" [21, p.25-27].

Expanding the concept of value supports the global trend of restoring the strong (and perhaps unnecessarily severed by documents) link between tangible and intangible heritage, as well as between communities and heritage. This reinforces a contemporary contextual mindset: interdependence (instead of mere interconnectivity) between the tangible and intangible, and pluriversal (instead of universal) values and narratives.

The shared value-based foundation of these three theories is a prerequisite for bringing cultural heritage closer to contemporary life. It allows heritage to be removed from its state of exclusivity without being truly endangered. In other words, heritage can transition from being a passive witness of history to becoming an active participant in modern life. Consequently, this changes the role of heritage experts and professionals – from guardians of the status quo toward managers and translators of values and contexts for their communities.

TWO PLACES

While walking through Chengene Skele – a fisherman's village near Burgas (Bulgaria) – in the autumn of 2025, I remarked to my companions how much the place reminded me of the Ancient Quarter of Hanoi. What connects these two distant locations? The most immediate association is their specific urban structure, characterized by narrow, elongated buildings. Yet, my own connection ran deeper. The purpose of these short narratives is to capture the sensations of an outsider within the framework of the theories discussed, focusing on the atmosphere and perceived values rather than providing an exhaustive historical analysis.

36 Guild Streets

The Ancient Quarter of Hanoi is a vibrant place. It strikes you with its layers – an informal and extraordinary accomplishment. It is not hard to feel what lies behind the rows of narrow buildings full of life, no matter the number of floors, architectural style or materials used. Somewhere here, says the map, there is a Heritage House. Tucked between four and five-story buildings and romantically hidden behind an old tree, I found this carefully restored traditional merchant shop, barely four metres wide. Entering a room of normal size, I registered a courtyard at the back and a narrow wooden stair. On the second floor, I realized the house is remarkably deep, consisting of an alternating sequence of rooms and courtyards. I suddenly realized that my eight-story hotel was built on this very same principle. This is it: mass, void, mass, void – the famous Vietnamese tube-house. Whether it is the museum house, a three-story pharmacy, or a 10-story hotel with a rooftop bar, the scales and times are different, but the essence is one and the same (Figure 2).

In the Heritage House, I discovered a thin orange book titled 36 Guild Streets – a brief study that attaches great importance to lifestyle, daily activities, and the specific energy of these old commercial streets [23]. Though slightly nostalgic in its urbanistic analysis and focusing primarily on the oldest traditional tube-houses, it acknowledges the quarter's overall development as a "living township". It functions almost as a conservation manifesto, through which I learned that the Vietnamese Government designated the Ancient Quarter as a National Historic Site in 2004. My

further investigation revealed an evolving protection framework starting in 1993, moving through various regulations in 1995, 1999, and 2013 [24]. These documents impose precise tangible constraints such as restricting street-front building heights to between 6 and 12 metres and prohibiting modern materials like aluminium frames or dark-coloured glass. They are remarkably punctual also on details, for instance strictly limiting commercial signboards to a maximum size of 80 cm. The latest April 2025 Resolution continues to narrow the Quarter's potential to a static materiality of the past, addressing only strict conservation issues.



FIGURE 2. Vibrant layers of history: a 2025 collage of Hanoi's Ancient Quarter, evolving since the 17th century. Photos by the author.

What we call the Ancient Quarter of Hanoi today started its life in 1010, when the area was chosen as the capital. It was formed by clustered settlements of craftsmen and merchants who brought their traditions, places of worship, and specific craft practices. The "Quarter of the 36 Streets" (which turned out not to be the actual number of streets – they were much more – but a number chosen for its symbolic meaning of multiplicity and completeness) experienced its peak in the 17th and 18th centuries. This was when the Vietnamese tube-house was born as an adaptive local response to the influence of the "Chinese compartment", aiming to form a denser urban space without undermining the structure of the existing at the time villages. During the colonial era (1858–1954), the traditional tube-house acquired a European facade and new materials like reinforced concrete and glass. In the so-called "collectivist period" (1954–1986), many houses and temples were reorganized to house as many people as possible. The following economic liberalisation brought back the vibrant commercial past together with much higher buildings and disappearing courtyards [25]. One thing is for sure in my experience: the trade is still there, the vibrant life is all over the streets in full force, and the vibe is contagious.

However, something else is even more interesting. It is not at all difficult to sense this historical development during a walk and to "read" it without books. My most valuable discovery was the informal (perhaps unconscious) unified narrative in many chapters, written by several generations and materialised in the diversity of forms and colours. The thin red thread of this narrative is obvious – commercial functions and the social fabric. When I asked Stephanie (a brilliant culinary guide) what the heritage of Vietnam meant to her, my feeling of a single story from a single community was confirmed. She answered simply and without hesitation: "culture, connected to our ancestors". She was quick to explain – as a practice related to ancestor worship, they burn ghost money in the street on the first day of each month. I see this as a vital acknowledgement of community togetherness that has shaped a coherent urban structure in its entirety.

The spatial and material vestiges of Hanoi's layering have drawn the attention of researchers. In 2009, Cerise [26] examined the tube-house transformations from the 17th century until today, starting a more profound research of Hanoi's living identity and its narratives. In 2017, researchers suggested a morphological analysis using specialized software – a possible approach to dig into historical and social significance. One of the unexpected outcomes was the discovery that contemporary tube-houses possess significantly higher visibility connectivity compared to the traditional ones [27]. We could consider this as a scientific validation of tradition as a dynamic notion that "grows" with its various urban contexts. However, the current legislation remains traditional. It ignores the system logic rooted in social interaction and functional needs. It even ignores decades of layers – the pre-colonial era houses, for instance, were only protected in 2025.

My 2025 stroll around 36 Guild Streets revealed many layers and a lot of optimism. Now better informed, I wonder – was I in Hanoi in 2025 or in Hanoi since 1993? If the historical tax based on facade width once incentivised centuries of inventive development, what does today's administrative context of restrictions portend for the future of this unique urban structure?

Chengene Skele Fisherman Village

Chengene Skele is quiet after the rain. The streets are empty, and the colours of the houses and boats appear saturated and vivid. We sit under a wooden shed beneath a sign that reads “Cannery Row” at the end of one of the canals. This turns out to be “the square,” where the community gathers. A few people were there, sharing stories of how they arrived at this place. They spoke of how fishing is changing, fewer young people want to practice it, and tourists appear more frequently. “But why Steinbeck?” – I point to the small monument nearby. “We are few, we are not rich, but we are broad-minded and very tolerant of one another”, they reply.

The history of Chengene Skele is not centuries-old, but the tradition behind it is. The settlement emerged spontaneously in the 1970s after the expansion of the port in the nearby city of Burgas. The state decided to move the fishermen's boats to this small bay (a marsh at the time), where several canals were eventually dug for boat moorings. The specific needs of fishing and the 15-kilometer distance from the city led to the gradual construction of fisherman’s homes.

What does Chengene Skele tell me during a walk through its muddy streets? Structurally, it is guided by both functional and natural contexts: every fisherman needs access to the canals, and barriers are required to stop the winds. This dictates the dense, row-like layout and the elongated form of the buildings and plots. Materially, it is driven by the economic context. The first sheds and shacks on the deserted shore, lacking electricity and water and suitable only for occasional overnight stays, gradually transformed into permanent homes. This is how inventive architectural solutions were formed. Today, brick buildings coexist with prefabricated houses, and a boathouse sits alongside a van perched on a shed (Figure 3). The social context is the engine of the public realm – the streets, the infrastructure, and community hubs like “the square”, the pub opposite where everyone gathers, and a small chapel.



FIGURE 3. The 2025 Chengene Skele informal bricolage: spontaneous architectural ingenuity shaped by living traditions. Photos by the author.

From a planning perspective, however, the materialisation of this fishing tradition into such a charming and truly informal urban structure is technically illegal. Built entirely by the people, the settlement lacks official documents. Protecting the site as cultural heritage appeared as the only lawful way out. At a meeting of a specialized council at the Ministry of Culture in March 2026, it was decided that Chengene Skele should be protected as a “single ethnographic and urban cultural value from most recent times”.

What are we protecting? The proposed conservation regimes [28] are a valiant attempt to integrate the tangible and intangible, recognizing the significance of traditional fishing and local cultural practices, thus paving the way for the community to continue their narrative. However, certain requirements cast a shadow over the true meaning of Chengene Skele. For example, the requirements for “massive buildings” with a strict “roof slope of 40%” risk closing the plot of this ongoing narrative in favour of a fixed, fictitious image. This protection focuses on the visual context while neglecting the economic and social ones. A change in fishermen's techniques or needs would likely

trigger a different development path and, thus, other images. Would the settlement, which developed as a bricolage, then lose its inventiveness – the product of the adaptability of the local population and its traditions? Will administrative requirements prevent the fishermen from being active participants in creating their cultural environment? Will we truly like a future standardised image that replaces this unique informal architectural aesthetic?

"The fishing village should look like itself… It has its own charm," the informal "mayor" told national television in 2021. And I wonder again, in the context of the adopted protection, whether a walk in Chengene Skele in 2035 will feel the same as in 2025? I have yet to find out.

Contextual Parallels

36 Guild Streets in Hanoi and Chengene Skele near Burgas serve as examples of extraordinary socio-functional ingenuity, where the intangible shapes the tangible. Both places (still) continue to reveal their narratives to anyone walking through them. In both places, I observed a functional contextualism where the urban fabric and architecture do not merely follow abstract regulatory lines or imitate styles but instead solve practical life challenges – ranging from taxes and trade to microclimate and access to water. Both places are the product of specific communities whose livelihoods – be they craft guilds or fishing groups – directly dictate the spatial structure. The list of parallels could continue.

However, a more crucial parallel exists in the challenges both places face (or will face) during attempts at legal protection. Although these places have demonstrated enviable resilience to various contexts and developmental processes due to the interdependence between the tangible and the intangible, the modern lifestyle and the significance for local communities are now challenged by legislative friction.

ONE CHALLENGE

When concepts encounter reality, the scenarios for their application appear less promising. Legislation seems to have lost sight of what truly matters to people: to be exact – heritage is not "exclusive", but "inclusive", serving as a vibrant and integral part of the lives of contemporary communities.

While the Historic Urban Landscape, New Contextualism, and Narrative Theory embrace such a holistic mindset, legal frameworks lag behind in both scale and flexibility. I am far from suggesting that laws are redundant. We cannot expect every official, client, urban planner, architect, or conservator to instinctively adopt a contextual approach to their tasks. However, even for those who do, existing norms often hinder their work by strictly limiting potential changes. Paradoxically, the law itself – which by its nature should safeguard values – can become the very cause of their potential loss. Even worse, it risks severing the sustainable bond between a community and its heritage. If this connection is lost, for whom are we preserving it?

The legislative friction arises because operational documents at national and local levels have not yet fully embraced the concept of change. While the idea of managing change exists theoretically, and successful implementations do occur, it is not yet the standard. Here, I argue that a primary challenge in leveraging contemporary contexts (for the sake of both the past and the future) is the existing, lagging legislative framework, particularly in the field of heritage preservation. Ironically, as previously stated, the three advanced concepts in question actually derive from core heritage principles themselves.

Unlike traditional doctrines, which often view change as a threat to authenticity, HUL defines it as an integral part of urban tradition. By explicitly acknowledging the capacity of the urban environment to evolve without losing its significance, HUL replaces the preservation of the status quo with the management of change.

From the perspective of (New) Contextualism, change is not merely inevitable but fundamental to urban and architectural thinking. This concept is quite radical, proposing resilience as a function of past experience combined with the prediction of future change.

According to the Narrative Theory of Conservation, traditional models often attempt to protect the heritage of the past from the people of the present for the sake of the people of the future. In doing so, they break the living link between heritage and the community. Therefore, the theory asserts that for heritage buildings to survive, they must inevitably change.

This leads to the most tricky part: change is only legitimate when it is tailored to the needs and perceptions of local residents. This is a matter of morality and ethics, highly subjective concepts that are difficult to codify into

law. Thus, the challenge can be reformulated: can legislation, much like heritage itself, adopt a resilient stance and a code of conduct that permits change based on relevant justifications when diverse contemporary contexts require it?

OF HEART AND OF HEAD

"Today's heritage conjoins matters of heart and of head." This remains a timeless and increasingly relevant observation by David Lowenthal [29]. It was originally voiced during the landmark 1994 debates surrounding the *Nara Document on Authenticity*, a moment that questioned whether cultural heritage should be viewed solely through its material substance or also through its intangible essence.

In the meantime, United Nations data from 2025 [30] confirms that the urban transition anticipated in 2007 is well underway. Cities are now home to 45% of the world's 8.2 billion people, and projections continue to suggest that nearly 70% of humanity will live in urban areas by 2050. At the same time, approximately half of the world's cultural heritage is situated within cities. These are the undeniable facts of our time. It is, therefore, profoundly positive that today – from Bangladesh to England, and from Vietnam to Bulgaria – the thinking of experts, theorists, urban planners, architects, and conservators is expanding to include diverse contexts, working toward inclusivity rather than exclusivity. It is heartening that cultural heritage continues to serve as an inspiration for the future while remaining deeply significant to the present.

In this context, an aim of this paper is not merely to highlight the rediscovery of a value-based attitude toward our environment. It seeks to demonstrate that people have a natural, inherent need for the past, as it helps them navigate and cope with their present reality. This interdependence between people and heritage is not a new concept. It is a fundamental human bond that existed for centuries, even if it was not formally defined as a professional discipline. The three contemporary concepts presented here – Historic Urban Landscape, New Contextualism, and Narrative Theory – simply illustrate how we are reintroducing this vital link at all levels of management and design.

However, this paper also serves as a warning. Perhaps we have drifted so far from heritage in our daily lives that we now feel compelled to rediscover it for our cities and architecture, whether old or new. Therefore, there is a risk that while we rationally and scientifically forge laws and draft regulations, we may inadvertently destroy the natural emotional bonds between people and their heritage. And bonds do not always conform to legal codes.

This is not a critique of legislation in principle, but an alarm that laws do not always act justly toward the lived experience and perceptions of the people who inhabit heritage. Today, laws are necessary, but they should sustain the life of heritage rather than stifle it. This paper is a call to legislators and responsible institutions to listen more closely to the hearts of the people who continue to create and live within heritage. Let laws be more resilient and embrace the management of change. This would be a step forward towards the conjunction of heart and of head.

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