

**ICOMOS
DESK REVIEW
WORLD HERITAGE LIST 2010**

« 17th Century canal ring area of Amsterdam inside the Singelgracht »

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. General comments on the dossier

2. Criteria

Analysis of the criteria on the basis of which the property is nominated:

- relevance and validity of each criterion
- other criterion not proposed by the State Party relevant

How well are the values recognised in the nomination?

3. Comparative analysis

**Analysis of the comparative analysis included in the nomination dossier
(weakness/strength, possible addition)**

4. Conclusions

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1. General comments on the dossier

- 1. The first comment is that this dossier seems to me of utmost professional quality, both in its general presentation, its graphic and photographic material, and in its content.**
- 2. It not only addresses all the specifically requested items but also openly discusses broader future issues of consequence to the City's urban form. It is indeed true that the 19th Century inversion of sea access, through the creation of a direct sea link, and the building of the Railway station just north of the historic centre have created an irreversible change in the City's urban form.**
- 3. The further ongoing development of rail transport right through the World Heritage(WH) area raises the problem of the choices needed to ensure the sustainability of the City as a whole, including the historic centre. Problems of demolitions and other damage related to rail developments are to be seen in the broader perspective of keeping scarce urban space in the historic city for people, instead of cars and trucks.**
- 4. The intensive urban development on water space extending north of the station is another change in urban form that requires new North-South transport links, unavoidably through the WH area.**
- 5. These developments inevitably raise the change in land-use of areas adjacent to the historic centre and the place of high-rise buildings close to the WH area. These issues are openly addressed.**
- 6. To sum up the dossier goes beyond the specifics of heritage conservation and places itself in the realm of the emerging new UNESCO approach towards Historic Urban Landscapes (HUL process).**

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2. Criteria

Analysis of the criteria on the basis of which the property is nominated.

The dossier chose to retain three of the ten possible criteria, what was in line with the rules, according to which one criterion of the list of ten was sufficient. These criteria were:

- (i) to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius.**
- (ii) to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town planning or landscape design**
- (iv) to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage (s) in human history.**

The justification statement, based on these criteria, addresses planning, development controls, implementation and international influence.

- Planning of the area reveals a great mastery of land and water interface, of land parcelisation in small plots, of bulk control, design and materials vocabulary, tree planting and simplicity in urban block design made of rowhouses (architectura minor), punctuated by a limited number of iconic monuments (architectura major).**
- Development controls were entrusted to a public private partnership system bound by countervailing powers.**
- Implementation has spanned over a very long period and confirmed the sustainability of the master plan. It has also confirmed the continuity of a “Baukultur” made of technological/engineering strength and interest for the art of landscape design.**
- International influence has been acknowledged by urban historians at large and lately by the international Symposium “New Urbanism and the grid: the Low Countries in International Context. Exchanges in Theory and practice” (Antwerp 8 May 2009).**

How well are the values recognised in the nomination?

Admittedly additional criteria could have been used, namely (v).

Indeed the interaction of human settlements with the maritime environment has been a trademark of the Dutch planning practice throughout history.

The religious values and their influence could also have been more emphasized.

As a whole the merchant values and ethics are sufficiently present in the dossier not to jeopardise the nomination.

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3. Comparative analysis

**Analysis of the comparative analysis included in the nomination dossier
(weakness/strength, possible addition).**

- 1. The nomination dossier (3c page 107 sq) includes a “comparative analysis (including state of conservation of similar properties)”. It starts with a survey of “Amsterdam in the International history of town planning”, i.e. a literature survey about Amsterdam’s place in the town planning literature. It goes on with a comparison of Amsterdam with other historic cities in the Low Countries and in European countries such as Italy, France, England, Germany and Denmark. It confirms the uniqueness of the canal ring area.**
- 2. As to St-Petersburg, Russia, the dossier points out the influence of Amsterdam but also the difference in urban Planning (imperial vs merchant) and the difference in implementation (fast implementation through imperial enforcement). More could perhaps be said about the remarkable difference in plot subdivision typology (“parcelisation”, or “parcellaire” in the Françoise Choay terminology). The St-Petersburg approach (subdivision in large palatial parcels) is strikingly different from the small plots for merchant row-houses, beautifully illustrated in the old maps of the dossier). This difference could perhaps be expanded, the more so that much of today’s planning tends to move towards large parcels for large buildings, whatever their energy consumption.**
- 3. The superior mastery of water flows in Amsterdam vs St-Petersburg is underlined. This aspect could not enough be emphasised, at a time when sustainable water management has become of international concern. In the wake of globally rising water levels, Holland is continuing its long tradition of water management. It is probably the world pioneer in protecting itself against future floods, to the benefit of its historic areas as well as to the benefit of its newer settlements.**

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4. Conclusions

- 1. The dossier is to me most impressive, if only by its size and presentation. It seems successful in its justification to have the specific canal ring area inside the Singelgracht on the World Heritage list.**
- 2. The canal ring's lay-out (residential canals and service streets), its land subdivision in small plots and its implementation framework and control have proven both their robustness and their sustainability, along several centuries.**
- 3. Its integrity and authenticity are well underlined (3.d, pp.130 sq.). It has been able to accommodate changes in functions as well as changes in building styles and building techniques. The photographic material illustrates very well this adaptability.**
- 4. The boundary between public space and private space has been preserved. This is the more important to be underlined that the public-private boundaries are frequently blurred in "modern" planning (anonymous "green spaces" à la Sarcelles instead of public spaces and gardens).**
- 5. Conservation policies are treated at length, both inside the boundary and at its edge (e.g. pp. 173 sq.). The issues confronted by the area at its edge are clearly stated (see my general comment).**
- 6. Consequences for the UNESCO nomination are well stressed. Perhaps the consequences OF the nomination might also be pondered, taking into account recent German cases. The chapter 6 "Monitoring" (only 9 pages) might be somewhat expanded to address the monitoring of the WH site once the nomination has succeeded.**

About the author.

President, Foundation for the Urban Environment (www.ffue.org). The Foundation is a charitable institution of public interest, authorised by Royal Decree. It has sponsored five books between 2000 and 2009.

President, International Society of City and Regional Planners (www.isocarp.org). Theme of 2008 Congress (Dalian, China): "Urban Sprawl". Theme of 2009 Congress (Porto): "Low Carbon Cities".

Vice-Chairman, Scientific Committee of the European Environmental Agency, in charge of urban and spatial matters (www.eea.europa.eu). This included the report "Urban Sprawl in Europe" (2007) and "Quality of Life in Cities (2009)

Honorary SG of the International Association of Public Transport – UITP. Among its publications, the Millennium Database (first published in 2001) compares 100 conurbations as to mobility, land-use and environment.

Was one of the three partners of the Groupe Urbanisme-Architecture (with R. Lemaire, co-founder of ICOMOS, and J.P. Blondel), created in 1968 by the Catholic University of Louvain to produce the Master plan of a new university town, near Brussels (adopted in 1970), and co-ordinate its implementation. This new university town, called Louvain-la-Neuve, was built along the model of traditional European university towns. It received the Abercrombie Award 1982 of the International Union of Architects (UIA). It has a day/night population of some 30.000. In 2009 he edited a book about the environmental features of this 40years old experience - published at Editions du Certu (French national centre for transport and planning studies).

Was Delegate of the Belgian Government at the UN Habitat Conferences I and II (1976/1996) and at the Kyoto Conference on Climate (1997). Member of the German Akademie der Künste, Berlin (Sektion Baukunst). Council member of Europa Nostra, the Paneuropean federation of heritage associations, and chair of its Industrial and Engineering Heritage Working Group. Member of ICOMOS CIVVIH and Club of Rome-EU.

Member of the Lee Kwan Yew World City Prize Council.

Some publications: "Brussels: Perspectives on a European Capital", co-edited with Carola Hein, shared the Society for Human Ecology 2008 Award for best publication of the year. Other publications include "Water Resources and Land-Use Planning; A Systems Approach" and "Human and Energy Factors in Urban Planning: A Systems Approach" (both in 1982).

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