Canberra Declaration on Historic Urban Public Parks

ICOMOS-IFLA

**Preamble**

Historic urban public parks are an essential and inalienable part of the traditions and plans of many towns and settlements. It is the main purpose of this declaration to emphasize that they must be safeguarded as historic sites for the use and enjoyment of future generations.

Historic urban public parks were created or procured for the well-being of the public. They have for too long been regarded as “reserve grounds”, i.e. commodities to be “filled” or used for events for which they were not designed. Many have undergone changes detrimental to their historic design, vegetation, character, and uses. The importance of integrating public parks in town planning schemes was acknowledged in the 19th and the early 20th century, so many of them date from that era, but some urban parks are very old.

Definitions to concepts like “boulevard”, “avenue” etc. can be added as footnotes to the declaration by the members in their respective countries as necessary.

#### Historic Urban Public Parks - Definitions

1. The concept “public park” rests on the principle of openness and accessibility for all people to visit and enjoy. The concept is not limited or defined by size.

2. Public parks are in public ownership and represent “common wealth”. They are owned by one or more public bodies or public foundations. The owners are responsible for the oversight, knowledgeable care, upkeep and preservation of the parks.

3. The concept “park” is sometimes used synonymously with words such as “garden”, “gardens”, “square” and similar expressions. (Conversely, the word “park” can denote “grounds” in some languages.) Fundamental to the identity of historic urban parks is their dependency on such elements as vegetation, architectural elements, water features, paths, or topography that contribute to character, seasonal interest, shade, and spatial and visual identity.

4. Historic promenades, boulevards and tree-lined streets constitute a special category of public space. It is important that adequate care be taken of the preservation of their particular characteristics.

5. In many cases historic urban public parks may be alongside or linked by boulevards or tree-lined streets (see the previous passage). Together they form green arteries that are to be preserved as entities as well as in all their parts regardless of the fact that the said parts were possibly created at different times.

**Special Character-Defining Elements of Historic Urban Public Parks**

Spaces, Views and Vistas

6. A historic urban public park may include one or more defined spaces. The sizes, relationships and proportions of these spaces, whether wide or small, narrow, open, or closed, must be understood, their original purposes and meanings recognised and appropriately conserved or protected.

7. There may also be views, focal points and viewpoints within historic urban public parks that are integral to their design and contribute to their identity and appreciation.

#### 8. Historic urban public parks are places with defined perimeters, yet their visual dimensions extend beyond their limits. The distant panoramas, sight-lines, vistas and views provided by them are part of the integral, heritage-character-defining elements of the parks. The vistas and views may even be the reason why the parks came into being in the first place and why they have been visited and appreciated by generations. Views of historic urban public parks are often important parts of historic streets and wider city or town areas’ identity.

Historic urban public parks often have a range of values including social values to local or wider communities, aesthetic values for their design or character, cultural meanings such as places where public protest or major gatherings have occurred and functions, such as celebrations etc. Due to their value to communities, these values, meanings and functions should be explained, celebrated and preserved. They often form the core of why public parks continue to matter to people.

9. Historic vistas, views and viewpoints are to be preserved: planting of new vegetation, as well as siting or re-siting of elements outside parks, such as built form, art works, water features or commemorations must not interfere with them. Infrastructure such as bus shelters, directional signs, utility posts and boxes, and other urban installations such as billboards that would obstruct or detract from heritage-character-defining vistas or historic character must not be erected within key views. Interpretive signs should be located where they are visible to visitors, but do not dominate on views or on the other experiential qualities of the park.Parks and their immediate surroundings – that serve as their buffer zones - must be kept free from vending machines, transformers, and other such structures that would detract from their ambiance.

10. The vegetation of historic urban public parks must be freely seen by people from the surrounding areas. Thus the views towards parks must not be blocked or diminished by elements such as billboards, large traffic signs, parking structures or other infrastructure. Also some parks have enclosing vegetation that is important to their character, for example giving them a strong sense of enclosure. A historic urban public park constitutes a physical as well as visual respite within the surrounding built environment and it is important for passers-by to see and to enjoy the movement, colours, sounds and shade of the vegetation. Active programmes of renewal and replanting of this vegetation play an important part in retaining it.

11. In some circumstances historic urban public parks were conceived in relation to adjacent urban spaces, streets, canals or buildings; in others, their introduction influenced the quality of the neighbourhoods and of the streets, areas and built form that developed around them. They are thus often intrinsic components of historic town planning schemes.

Under these circumstances, the preservation of parks and their settings, in matters of quality, design and scale, is equally important**.** Changes to the height or massing of adjacent buildings can adversely impact spatial relationships, views and vistas, microclimate (sun / shade / wind) and the authentic character of the primary historic design, and such changes must be avoided. Increasing height of adjoining buildings can increase shade or wind downdraft, actively and negatively impacting on the health and condition of parks and their vegetation, as well as the experience of their users.

12. Similarly edge condition elements such as street width, paving materials, street tree planting, lighting and other heritage-character-defining features and elements must also be carefully considered and conserved. Care is required in deciding on new elements or new materials adjacent to historic urban public parks to ensure these complement their character.

##### **Topography**

##### 13. Historic landforms, topography and grades such as mounds and swales as well as historic features such as terraces and rockeries are an integral part of the lay-out and character-defining elements of a historic urban public park. Even minor changes in these can be detrimental to the overall design, rhythm and the relationships of spaces, views and vistas with each other, and should be avoided. Large underground structures should not be built within historic urban public parks. Major disruption for infrastructure upgrades (drainage, electricity or other service pipelines) should be avoided or minimised where possible. Options to locate these outside historic urban public parks should be investigated and followed wherever possible.

Light

14. Natural light, sunshine and shade, are some of the reasons people find relaxation and solace in parks and gardens. For many urban dwellers historic public parks offer the only opportunity to enjoy these natural qualities in densely built city centres.

If night lighting is to be added to enable enjoyable and safe public use after dark, lamp posts and fixtures must be selected and located so that they enhance the character, spatial relationships, views, vistas, sight-lines and other historic-character-defining elements of parks rather than detract from them. Thus compatibly-designed posts and fixtures should be used, rather than standard street light posts and fixtures. And in some areas, night lighting of parks should not spill into the night sky.

#### Historic Study, Preservation and Management

General Remarks

15. Preservation, restoration and rehabilitation of historic urban public parks and their resources must be based on careful research, original documents including photographs and evaluation of their condition in relation to an inventory of the existing park conditions and future uses. These studies must be done by qualified or appropriately experienced experts.It is equally important to research the evolution of planning and development of historic parks and their setting as well as their importance for local communities and to establish and actively maintain archives of related historic documents that can be used as basis for their on-going maintenance, management and preservation.

All such work must be documented, and the records must be deposited and preserved in accessible public archives, to assist reference, understanding and ensure the benefit of future generations. Such records can and should inform future conservation and management decisions and actions.

16. Overuse of historic urban public parks can adversely impact both enjoyment of them and retention of their historic character, quality and resources. Overuse can also stress their vegetation. Therefore appropriate management procedures must be established to control the number of visitors based on the carrying capacity of each park and the historic buildings in them, which should be calculated and monitored regularly.Options such as restricting areas from free access, limiting hours of entry (or numbers per hour *etc*) should be investigated, trialled and monitored.In order to alleviate the overuse of historic parks, municipalities should create and maintain well-designed new parks for their inhabitants] and in programming parks their carrying capacity should be determined so that use can be supported without damage. Regular checks on carrying capacity and monitoring of damage or other impacts should inform such planning and management decisions.

17. Original and later compatible elements and furnishings, such as fences, gates, lamp posts, railings, paving materials, rubbish bins, seating, art works and vegetation of historic public parks should be preserved and repaired or replaced-in-kind at the end of their life-cycles. Re-assessment of the significance of non-original, later and compatible elements should be undertaken at regular intervals and inform planning and management decisions.

18. The general principles of preservation and restoration of historic urban public parks are the same as those for other historic parks and gardens, as cited in The Florence Charter, Article 10.

**Accessible Design Adaptations**

19. Because historic urban public parks are publicly-owned cultural resources and thus should be accessible to all people, some of their components or areas may require modification in order to ensure new uses and access to all people and individuals with disabilities. The accessibility approach that is recommended should integrate, rather than segregate, those who are challenged. Thus, design professionals should use an integrated approach to design solutions for all users, rather than creating separate facilities for individuals with disabilities. Any new accessible design interventions should fit sensitively and unobtrusively into historic urban public parks without compromising their character-defining elements, values and experiential qualities. Options to do so with minimal change, minimal introduction of new materials or signage should be actively investigated before any changes or interventions are made.

Universal Application

The above principles and recommendations apply to all historic urban public parks anywhere in the world.