

## Involving society in the enhancement of old city centres

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**Topic:** T2.2. Heritage education and social inclusion.

### Abstract

*Old city centres should be known, valued and preserved as part of the history and of the cultural and architectural heritage of cities. For this purpose, it is common practice to declare them sites of cultural interest, and to list their residential buildings with different grades of protection. However, for the inhabitants of the city centres, the listing status of their residential buildings is perceived as a problem, rather than an attractive added value for their property, since it limits their possibilities of intervention (refurbishment, expansion, elevation, etc). On many occasions, the lack of recognition of this vernacular architecture or humble architectural heritage has, as a consequence, the abandonment or reduction of maintenance as well as the alteration or destruction of the specific features that make them unique (or even essential) as part of the urban scene. In order to involve both the inhabitants of the old city centres and the visitors in the enhancement of these areas and to guarantee their preservation, different educational actions can be undertaken. To clearly define these actions, the first step is to carry out a study on the perception that owners and tenants have of this type of architecture. This paper proposes a series of questions to perform a survey among the citizens in order to evaluate the social opinion. Finally, this paper suggests a set of actions to be taken to improve the conception the citizenship has about the values of old city centres.*

**Keywords:** heritage education, old city centres, preservation, vernacular architecture

### 1. Introduction

With the creation of the Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando (1744), activities or proposals related to the protection of heritage began to be carried out in Spain, giving value, at that time, only to what was considered "old, artistic, aesthetic or historical", but with no legislative consequences until 1777. That year, King Carlos III established, through the Royal Order of October 3<sup>rd</sup>, the obligation of protecting the artistic heritage and inspecting the monuments that were discovered.

Ancient Monuments were defined, for the first time in article 1 of the Royal Decree of King Carlos IV (July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1803), as movable and immovable properties, whose value is based on

being "ancient" (Punic, Roman, Christian, Goth, Arabic and late middle ages). In order to carry out the inventory of assets to be rehabilitated and monitored, the Historical and Artistic committees were created, by a Royal Order of June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1844, with the first declarations of "national monuments", date from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (Ayuntamiento Toledo, 2017).

The first International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments took place in Athens, in 1931. Seven main resolutions were made, among these: "*historical sites are to be given strict custodial protection*", "*problems of preservation of historic sites are to be solved by legislation at national level for*

*all countries” and “attention should be given to the protection of areas surrounding historic sites” (ACRHM, 1931).*

In Spain, the Law of National Artistic Heritage published during the Spanish Republic (May 13th, 1933), established a minimum of 100 years of age to grant historical-artistic value. It remained in force throughout Franco’s dictatorship (1939-1975), and was mainly applied at the end of the 70s, when the renovation strategies that were being carried out in the Spanish historic centres had to be stopped (Carrascosa González, 2001). In 1975, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted, in Amsterdam, the European Charter of the Architectural Heritage, proclaiming that: *“The European architectural heritage consists not only of our most important monuments: it also includes the groups of lesser buildings in our old towns and characteristic villages in their natural or manmade settings”,* recognizing that *“entire groups of buildings, even if they do not include any example of outstanding merit, may have an atmosphere that gives them the quality of works of art, welding different periods and styles into a harmonious whole”,* and therefore, *“such groups should also be preserved”* (ECAH, 1975).

After Franco’s dictatorship, in 1985, the Spanish Historical Heritage Law (BOE-A-1985-12534) was approved, removing the 100 years of age requirement to grant artistic historical value and replacing the term of “historical-artistic sites“ with “historical sites”, defining them as *“a group of immovable assets forming a unit of settlement, conditioned by a physical structure representative of the evolution of a human community as a testimony of its culture or as a value for the use and enjoyment of the community”*. Therefore, the character of collective asset that historical sites have is underlined (Carrascosa González, 2001). However, in 1990, barely a dozen of the more than 300 historic-artistic sites declared in Spain had an approved plan according to the Historical Heritage Law (López Jaén, 1990).

In 2021, the law had a revision (BOE-A-1985-12534). It is worth pointing out that, according

to article 20, *“the declaration of a Historical Site, Historical Asset or Archaeological Zone, as Assets of Cultural Interest, will determine the obligation for the municipality or municipalities in which they are found to draw up a Special Plan for the Protection of the area affected by the declaration. In addition, this plan should include the possible areas of comprehensive rehabilitation that allow the recovery of the residential area and the appropriate economic activities”*.

However, nowadays, it is not strange to observe the urban decline of some areas within the Spanish old city centres. It is well known that one of the causes of the decay of the residential buildings in old city centres is due to the sole interest of some owners to speculate with the commercial value of the land. With this aim, they deliberately neglect maintenance in the hope that the building is declared ruinous and can be demolished (Guardiola-Villora, Basset-Salom, 2012).

This situation, consequence of the the lack of appreciation of listed buildings, will only be reversed by educating citizens, making them understand that residential listed buildings are an essential and valuable element of the city's urban landscape, as stated in the preamble of the Historical Heritage Law: *“in the conviction that the more historical heritage grows and is better defended the more it is appreciated by the people who live with it.”*

## **2. Social opinion about residential uses in Historic City Centres**

Society’s valuing of heritage, is a social factor included in the List of factors affecting the Outstanding Universal Value of World Heritage properties (UNESCO, 2008).

To evaluate the perception that owners, tenants, and visitors of old or Historic City Centres (HCC), together with the opinion the rest of citizens have about the residential use and the residential architecture in the HCC, an online survey, with closed multiple-choice and open-ended questions, has been designed.

The questions, based on other authors studies and methodologies to assess social vulnerabilities in heritage (Benitez et al., 2020, Turbay et al., 2020) have been organised around the following topics: monuments, Historic City Centres, streets in HCC, residential use in HCC, commercial value in HCC, modern standards, listed buildings and main issues in HCC.

The survey was randomly sent to 500 people, of which 35% responded, which may indicate the lack of interest about this topic. The profile of the survey respondents (age, gender, studies) is shown in figure 1. Among them, 10% live in HCC (with 3% being tenants), 12% own a dwelling in HCC (7% live in it), 12% work in HCC and only 1% are members of an HCC neighborhood association.

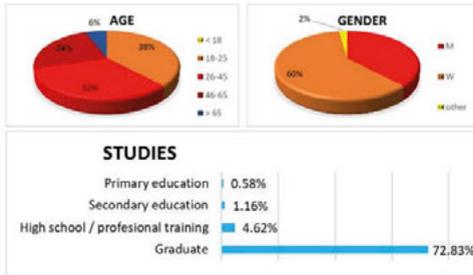


Fig. 1. Survey respondents profile

To illustrate some of the questions, additional information, related with the HCC of Valencia was provided. However, they could be extrapolated to any HCC, without a requirement to know the city of Valencia to give an answer. Questions and answers related to each topic are shown in figure 2 and analysed in the following epigraphs.

### 2.1. Monuments and Historic City Centres

As observed in the graphs in figure 2a and 2b, more than 80% of the respondents believe that it is important to preserve monuments and HCC, and both play an important role in trip planning (visiting monuments and walking through HCC). However, when focusing on

their own city, neither politicians (27%) nor citizens (37%) are concerned about or know their city's monuments well.

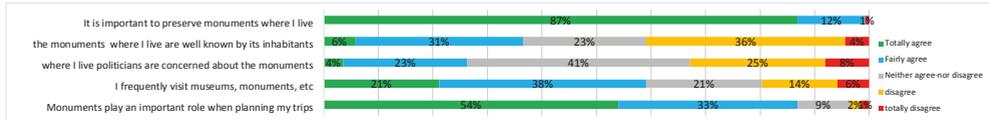
### 2.2. Streets in Historic City Centres

The urban fabric is, undoubtedly, one of the main identifying characteristics of an old city centre. The layout of blocks, plots and streets allows us to distinguish if we are in a city of Roman, Islamic, medieval or nineteenth-century origin.

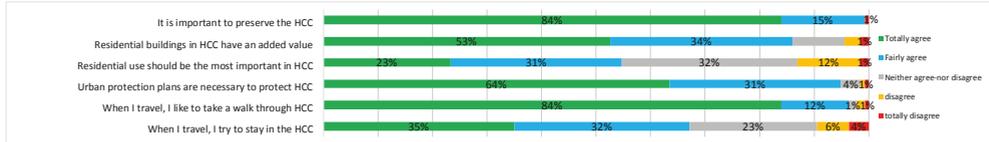
At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the theories of Le Baron Hausmann inspired the opening of new and long straight streets across the existing urban fabric. These actions were justified with the new hygienist theories that stressed the decadence, squalor and unhealthiness of the oldest parts of the city, simultaneously propitiating the demolition of the surrounding walls. These interventions, carried out with the excuse of improving air quality, the entry of sunlight and mobility (problems still identified with historic centres today), generated huge real estate deals, fostered by the revaluation of the land, as well as speculation. Which modified the new-theories' original designs, increasing the number of storeys and reducing the number of planned green spaces.

The questions and answers corresponding to the perception that the respondents have of the urban fabric are shown in figure 2c. 64% and 28% totally agree or agree, respectively, with the importance of preserving the urban fabric of the HCC (see plan of Tosca in figure 3) to the present day, with 85% affirming that it must be maintained in future. On the other hand, 52% of the respondents would live in the HCC despite restrictions on access by car and 23% despite the narrowness and darkness of the streets, however, 65% are against widening them. The 42% among those who disagree with the enlargement of the streets, but would not live in the historic centre, is linked with the next topic on the residential use of HCC.

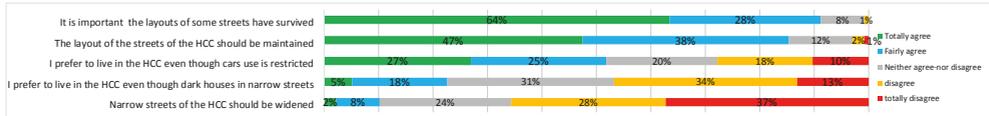
a) MONUMENTS



b) HISTORIC CITY CENTRES



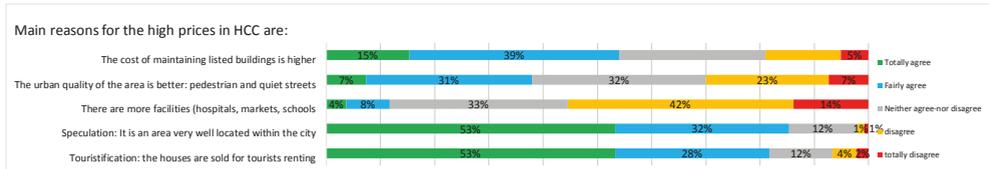
c) STREETS IN HISTORIC CITY CENTRES



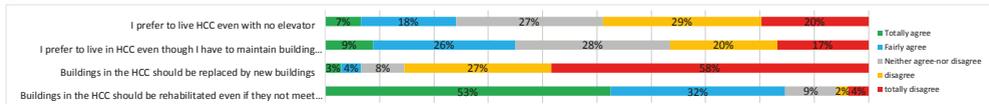
d) RESIDENTIAL USE IN HISTORIC CITY CENTRES



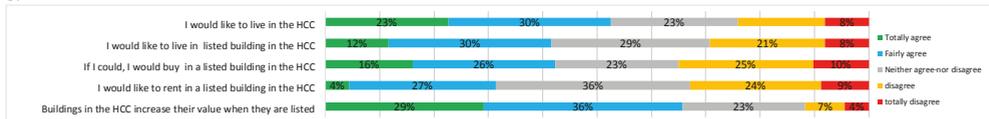
e) COMMERCIAL VALUE IN HISTORIC CITY CENTRES



f) MODERN STANDARS



g) LISTED BUILDINGS



h) MAIN ISSUES IN HISTORIC CITY CENTRES

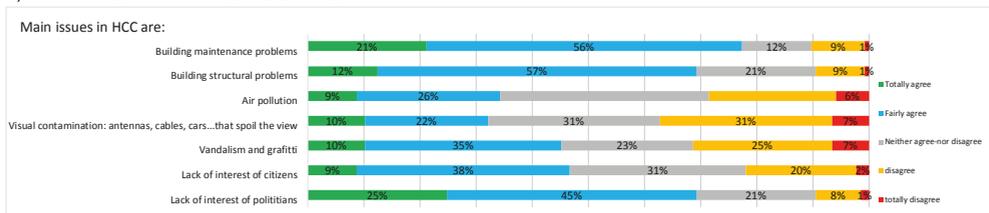


Fig. 2. Survey questions and answers



### 2.3 Residential use in Historic City Centres

Figure 4, showing the population density of the city centre of Valencia, was included in the survey, to illustrate the question: “Do you think that the population of the HCC centre is decreasing?”, with which 59% agreed.

All the questions and answers about the causes of depopulation of HCC are shown in figure 2d: The main cause (84%) are high prices, followed by the absence of a garage (63%), the age and lack of standard thermal and acoustic insulation in the houses (61%) and the absence of services and facilities nearby (39%).

This topic was also addressed with an open-ended question. The most repeated answers being: gentrification, speculation, tourism, transformation of houses into tourist apartments, accessibility, and lack of interest on the part of the administration in the rehabilitation of the historic centre.



Fig. 3. “Valentia Edetanorum vulgo del Cid”, T. U. Tosca, ca 1738 (Llopis & Perdigón, 2010)

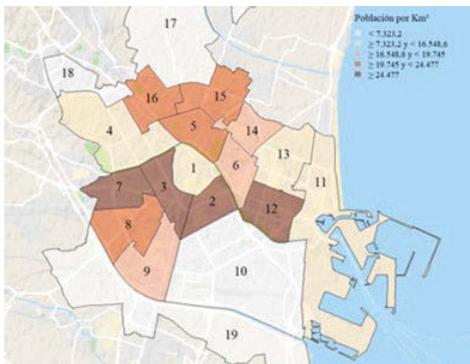


Fig. 4. Population density in Valencia (Ayuntamiento de Valencia, oficina de estadística, 2021)

### 2.4 Commercial value in Historic City Centres

The high prices of homes in the HCC of Valencia are confirmed by the data provided on the website of the real estate agency “Idealista”. The main causes of the high prices, according to the survey respondents are: speculation (84%), touristification (81%) and/or the buildings maintenance costs (54%).

### 2.5 Modern standards

With regards to the lack of compliance with housing modern standards in HCC, 85% think that buildings should be rehabilitated to avoid their ruin even if they do not meet completely these standards. 35% indicate that they would live in a building in the HCC despite having to maintain it and 25% despite not having an elevator. Only 7% strongly believe that old buildings in HCC should be replaced by new ones (figure 2e).

The improvements that can be made to the old buildings in the HCC are limited by the level of protection established by the Special Protection Plan of the area. Usual grades are summarised in the following epigraph.

### 2.6 Listed buildings

There are three main levels of building protection:

- Total protection: when most of its main components (façades, structure, roof, stairs, layout, etc.) are of interest for conservation.
- Partial protection: when only some of the main components are of interest for conservation.
- Environmental protection: when some morphological characteristics that are part of the scene (composition of the façades, the treatment of color, etc.) are to be conserved.

In addition, the law contemplates the typological protection when some typological characteristics (the subdivision, the construction techniques, the location of the inner courtyards, etc.) are intended to be conserved.

About 65% of the respondents were familiar with the levels of protection as well as the limitations they entail.

Regarding the appreciation that respondents have of these levels of protection, results show (figure 2g) that despite the fact that 63% would like to live in the HCC, only 42% would live or buy a home in a listed building, and barely 31% would like to rent in one of them. However, 65% affirm that listed buildings in the HCC with any level of protection would increase their economic value.

## 2.7. Main issues in Historic City Centres

The last topic in the survey refers to the main issues of the HCC (figure 2h). In a first series of closed-ended questions, the respondents highlighted building maintenance problems (77%), structural problems (69%), disinterest from politicians (70%) or from citizens (47 %) and, in a lower percentage, air pollution, vandalism, graffiti and visual contamination produced by antennas, cables or cars.

An open-ended question was also formulated in this section. The only added problems to the above-mentioned were: accessibility, acoustic contamination, abandonment (empty plots and ruined buildings) and touristification.

From all the responses, the lack of interest from citizens and also politicians is, undoubtedly, the key point on which action must be taken to involve the society in the enhancement of the HCC.

## 3. Proposals

In this section, a set of actions to improve the conception the citizenship has about the values of old city centres are discussed.

As stated previously, the urban fabric is one of the key elements that identify HCC. An example of dissemination on this point can be found in the Museu Valencià de la Il·lustració y de la Modernitat (MUVIM). In the lobby of the museum, there is a large three-dimensional model that reproduces the city of Valencia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (figure 5), just as Tosca drew it (figure 3).

Another example is the panel in figure 6, located in “La Galería del Tossal” in Valencia, showing the original trace of the Islamic Walls and the points in which some remains can be seen.

These initiatives are interesting, however, they only reach people who visit the above-mentioned museums. Therefore, to involve the greatest number of citizens, it is essential to take them out on the streets.

A resource used with some frequency to exhibit the evolution of the different layers of the urban fabric are the so-called "archaeological windows", (figure 7) which show urban elements that have been hidden throughout history as the construction of cities evolved, providing a very good pedagogical approach, not only for visitors, but also for citizens.

A less invasive action could be to display a series of information panels, strategically located at specific points along the streets, alleys or lanes of the old city centre, representing the area



Fig. 5. Model of Valencia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in MUVIM, made by V. Gómez Herraiz and L. Gómez Calvo.



Fig. 6. Remains of the Islamic Walls in Galería del Tossal

in the historical cartography (figure 8). This type of material could be part of a series of exhibitions that would present, in addition to the historical cartography of the city, old photographs of the buildings that are still standing, showing citizens and visitors the past and the nowadays urban scenes (figure 9).

With this very purpose, it is possible to find, in the internet, blogs, and social media groups (AC, 2008; VAHG, 2009) where citizens share pictures of their cities in the past and compare them to the present.

It cannot be forgotten that in this era of hyper-connectivity, the participation of citizens in the protection of HCC is essential. A clear example is the action taken by the citizens platform "Salvem el Cabanyal- Canyameler -Cap de França" (SC, 1998), created in 1998 to fight against the extension of a large avenue towards the sea, tearing the grid pattern of the historical city centre and the destruction of about 500 buildings, (Hervás 2017). Thanks to their determination, and the organization of the annual open door festival to show the historical and cultural values of this neighbourhood, among others activities, it was declared an asset of cultural interest in 1993. They managed to involve all the citizenship, saving the area from destruction in 2016.

#### 4. Conclusions

According to the survey, the HCC plays an important role in tourist travels, but not in everyday life, as 47% of the respondents are not interested in buying, renting or living in the old city centre of their town.

However, the majority do agree in maintaining the street layout and rehabilitating the existing buildings, but only 51% manifest that the main use should be residential.

This scenario shows, sadly, certain disaffection of the survey respondents towards their HCC. Despite the educational and dissemination work that some groups or societies do every day, like

the Society for the Protection of Old Buildings (SPAB, 1877), this is the usual situation. It should be up to the competent authorities to take the initiative to improve the citizens' appreciation of their own historic centres.

As a conclusion, to prevent social risks that can affect the value of heritage properties, it is therefore imperative to carry on a series of awareness campaigns to involve the society in the enhancement of the old city centres.



Fig. 7. a) Archaeological window in Mexico (Mancera, 2018) b) Archaeological window in Sta Maria, Lugo (López, 2020)



Fig. 8. Castle's square sign showing the Islamic pattern of the city on Requena (Spain) and Googlemaps satellite image ©2022 CNES / Airbus, Maxar Technologies

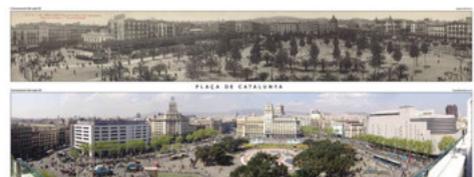


Fig. 9. Comparative photography of Barcelona, c.1915-2006 (Fotosdebarcelona.com, 2021)

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