

The British University in Egypt

BUE Scholar

Architectural Engineering

Engineering

2024

Revitalizing Historic Plazas for Integrated Urban Conservation

Mona Helmy

mona.helmy@bue.edu.eg

Follow this and additional works at: https://buescholar.bue.edu.eg/arch_eng



Part of the [Architecture Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Helmy, M. (2024). Revitalizing Historic Plazas for Integrated Urban Conservation, *Advanced utopian studies and sacred architecture*, ASTI, Springer. P. 51 - 60. eBook ISSN: 2522-8722, Print ISSN: 2522-8714

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Engineering at BUE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Architectural Engineering by an authorized administrator of BUE Scholar. For more information, please contact bue.scholar@gmail.com.



Revitalizing Historic Plazas for Integrated Urban Conservation

Mona Helmy

Abstract

Historic plazas play a major role in improving or creating place identity, place memory, and belonging of heritage areas. They maintain elements of tangible and intangible heritage, such as accommodating social networks, traditions, lifestyles, traditional crafts, festivals, or rituals. Above all, they manifest a unique sense of place, and collective memory of cities to local communities, contributing to the historical character of heritage areas. The paper claims that the revitalization of historic plazas intends to reconcile conserving their historical urban landscape (HUL) to meet the changing requirements of local communities. It argues that revitalizing historical plazas is an innovative approach that helps to overcome the current urban conservation gaps in many heritage areas. Likewise, it strengthens the perceptions of the built heritage and historic buildings, while retaining their historic character and increasing their social vitality and performance. Furthermore, the distinctiveness of historic plazas can uncover the hidden forms and fabrics in historic areas and inspire their future development. This review paper aims to describe how historical public spaces as places of social interactions and traditional cultural activities are significant in conserving historic living areas. It aims to investigate a variety of approaches to the conservation of historical buildings/sites through the revitalization of historic plazas as multidimensional spaces in selected case studies. The methodology used is to study the usage of current patterns of selected historic public places; to analyze various strategies implemented to revitalize those patterns. The main objective is to contribute in formulating a practical

approach to enhance the liveliness and the quality of life of historic plazas; to fit the residents' culture as an integral part of urban conservation.

Keywords

Historical plazas · Revitalization · Heritage areas · Urban conservation · Historical urban landscape

1 Introduction

Several approaches were adopted by different countries to keep their heritage well maintained, which is often done according to their history, contexts, circumstances, and visions. Hence, decisions between restoration, renovation, reconstruction, or preservation were adopted in many countries around the world. In a country like Italy, which has 58 listed sites as world heritage sites (UNESCO 2021), many approaches and theories were adopted towards a successful and efficient practice of heritage conservation. Several traditional approaches, such as complex methods of restoration promoted by Cesare Brandi, and conservation supported by Marco Dezzi, among other approaches. In addition, new approaches, such as the “Preventive conservation”, as a pro-active approach of urban conservation was suggested to be adopted in Italy (Della Torre, 2020).

In recent years, the growing practice of urban conservation in many cities around the world reveals that the concepts and the practical experiences of conservation have been reformed. They have been expanded from focusing only on the conventional limited architectural restoration of historic buildings and sites to embracing a wider scope of urban intervention, i.e., revitalization of the historic urban fabric in which those buildings and sites are located in. The developed practices centered on enhancing the socio-economic conditions of the historic buildings' surrounding areas, improvement of infrastructure, and enhancing the

M. Helmy (✉)
Architecture Department, Faculty of Engineering, The British University in Egypt (BUE), El Sherouk City, Egypt
e-mail: Mona.helmy@bue.edu.eg

public amenities, among other related aspects, as a process of achieving an “integrated urban conservation”. The emerged integrated urban conservation has been widely developed and advanced following the UNESCO 2013 recommendation on adopting the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach to be a holistic development strategy.

This paper argues that there is a strong interaction and a mutual relationship between heritage buildings and public places around them in their urban contexts in tangible and intangible qualities.

2 Historic Urban Landscape

The Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) is an approach that combines and integrates the entire tangible and intangible components of heritage environments. According to UNESCO’s recommendation, a holistic approach “..integrates the goals of urban heritage conservation and those of social and economic development..”. It deals with urban heritage as a social, cultural, and a financial resource for cities’ development. The UNESCO recommendation in 2011 regarding the HUL, promotes that the historic urban landscape approach “..moves beyond the preservation of the physical environment and focuses on the entire human environment with all of its tangible and intangible qualities..”. (UNESCO 2013, p. 5). It seeks to enhance planning and design sustainability by considering the built environment current conditions, together with the historical sites’ intangible aspects of heritage, e.g., socio-cultural diversity, community values, along with socio-economic and environmental factors. Thus, those elements of the historic urban landscape vary between built and unbuilt/tangible and intangible components of heritage sites. Those comprise historical buildings, open public places, natural landscape, socio-cultural qualities, and authentic activities related to the site, among others, in which those elements have dynamic forces that shape and re-shape their development, vitality, meaning, and urban and mental images.

In many countries, the historical city centers have been always a main stage for urban revitalization initiatives, from a historical conservation point of view. In this context, Ebbe claims that the conservation of cultural heritage through urban revitalization approaches leads to “..preserving city livability, increasing competitiveness, and creating a wide range of income-earning opportunities..”. From a different perspective, it can be also seen on an aterritorial scale as a new approach to deal with properties, which can be considered a dynamic approach in dealing with cultural and urban heritage (Ebbe, 2009).

Other concepts, such as historical architecture, monuments, or tangible/intangible heritage are used in the literature, to define or discuss the cultural heritage in an area.

The conventional concept of looking at heritage sites as a representation of monument, or as a complex of buildings is no further sufficient to protect and conserve the qualities of heritage from deterioration, decay, or exclusion of historical significance. (Ruoss and Alfar, 2013). Hence, the HUL as a holistic approach is being adopted as an efficient approach of conserving the historic urban landscape.

3 Urban Plazas

Urban plazas are places for several human activities, such as relaxation, socialization, and mobility, among others (Cooper and Francis, 1990). Urban plazas are not only functional and aesthetical public places, yet they often represent the culture and the identity of their cities (Krier, 1979). Many scholars consider urban plazas as Cities’ Living Rooms, or as a symbol that creates an important part of the city mental image (Lynch, 1981).

Although scholars, such as (Stanley et al., 2012) defined plazas, as part of the urban open spaces, as a non-roofed grounded space, other scholars connected urban plazas with socio-cultural/socio-economic activities (Gehl & Gemzoe, 2001; Krier, 1979), or to focus on its visual and image aspects, such as (Lynch, 1960). As per Merriam-webster.com, an urban plaza is an “open area usually located near urban buildings and often featuring walkways, trees and shrubs, places to sit, and sometimes shops”.

Urban plazas’ typologies vary between their form or their function. Form oriented typology of plazas fluctuates among the enclosure of the plaza, its urban surrounding, its geometric shape, or its components. In that typology, closed, dominated, linked, nuclear, and amorphous plazas are good examples (Helmy, 2005). Functional typologies of plazas are mainly categorized under residential, religious, market, or plazas connected to public buildings (French, 1978). From a usage perspective, plazas can be categorized into pedestrian, traffic, or mixed.

4 Historical Plazas

Public places are a fundamental feature of historic areas in which they are centers of livability, sociability, and collective memory. As Litva et al. (2002) assert, “.... they represent sites of interactive settings in which social relations and a sense of place are constituted, developed, and contested”.

This research focuses on historic plazas as a representative to the historic public places. In the scope of this research, those plazas are linked or connected to historical buildings, or they are part of the historical urban landscape at large. As a part of enhancing, conserving, revitalizing, or

Fig. 1 Tangible and intangible components of Historical Plazas. By the author



developing the HUL, some interventions are taking place in historical plazas to maintain and develop or represent them. Hence, many historical plazas are nowadays perceived as experience places, venues for urban life, meeting spaces, convivial spaces, or creative places.

The Historic public places provide free access and common space for people in an equitable way, in terms of age, gender, income, or ability, allowing everyone to live in a quality neighborhood.

Historical plazas, like other plazas, vary in terms of their tangible and intangible components and qualities. Yet, historical plazas are unique in terms of their historical or symbolic values that are interconnected to their historic urban landscape at large. Variables of historic plazas depend on tangible or physical aspects, such as their surrounding heritage building(s)/monuments and their type and value, the physical structure of the plaza, and its included urban elements. Other intangible or non-physical variables in historic plazas could be various activities practiced in the plazas, whether it is spiritual or physical. According to Elbeah et al. (2022), “the livability of places is set by many factors, which are in turn influenced by a variety of tangible and intangible elements..”. In this context, UNESCO defines intangible heritage as the traditions or the inherited “living expressions”. Those living expressions could be events, rituals, oral traditions, performing arts, or socio-cultural experiences, such as social traditions or demonstrating authentic crafts (UNESCO, 2004). Figure 1 illustrates the tangible and the intangible components of historic plazas.

5 The Role of Historic Public Places in Conserving Historic Living Areas

Public places are catalysts of social life, culture, and traditions of cities. They contribute and reinforce cities’ identities at large. The importance of public space for boosting sense of places as well as a sense of community is evident in many historic cities. Historical public places are not

only hubs for human activities, yet they manifest collective memories that are accumulated over time. Cattella et al. (2008) pointed out that “spaces can contribute to meeting needs for security, identity, and a sense of place”. Authentic activities that represent the local culture, and special events are important intangible components of urban heritage that revitalize the city. Ehrenreich (2007) has argued that traditional social events and festivals are attracting people over the centuries, in which historical plazas are playing a big role in staging those events.

The general characteristics of historical areas are portrayed through their public places, such as streets, alleys, parks, squares, and plazas, and the surrounding historic fabric, and significant sites, such as monumental buildings and structures. The current changes and transformation in the urban form of those areas are due to several urban interventions. Nowadays, those interventions consider the role of public places to maintain a livable, and community-oriented urban development.

Over the course of this research, historic plazas are studied in several examples that represent various contexts, physical shapes, urban components, and activities, which are packaged within different approaches of conserving the HUL.

6 Urban Revitalization

Urban revitalization can be defined as a process that improves economic, social, environmental, cultural, and historical (re)development of deteriorated, and neglected historical areas. It involves various urban strategies that should lead to the livability of historic places, which in return, contributes to the overall conservation and sustainability of historic areas. As Cantacuzino pointed out “Conservation means the act or process of preserving something, which already exists, of keeping something alive..” (Cantacuzino, 1990).

In this context, Tiesdell et al. define the urban revitalization as: “The process through which the mismatch between

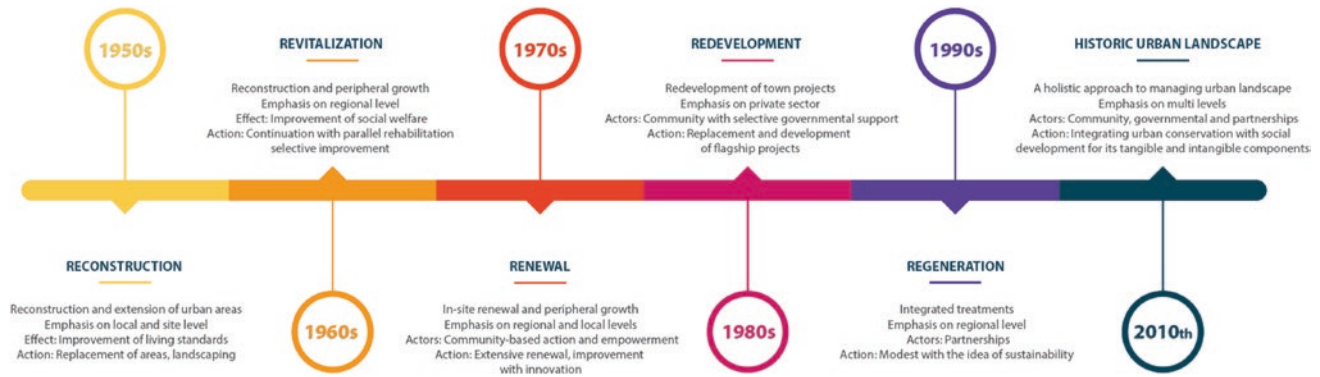


Fig. 2 Chandan and Kumar (2019) & UNESCO (2013)

the services offered by the fabric of the historic quarters and the contemporary needs can be reconciled” (Tiesdell et al., 1996). Holcomb and Beauregard (1981) claim that “..urban revitalization implies growth, progress, and infusion of new economic activities into stagnant or declining cities that are no longer attractive to investors or middle-class households..”. Revitalization can be dealt with as a “process through which the deterioration and decay of historic urban quarter can be addressed, terminated or reversed”. According to Couch (1990), urban regeneration is “seeking to bring back investment, employment, and consumption and to enhance the quality of life” within the historic urban areas.

Urban revitalization is a process of retrieving livability of historic areas. It involves several oriented interventions, such as the regeneration, renewal, redevelopment, and rehabilitation, among other interventions, e.g., programs that attract, encourage, and facilitate private and public investments. These interventions can include activities designed to improve historical areas, strengthen existing economic activities, attract new opportunities, support renovation, and most importantly, enhance public places and amenities.

The urban revitalization, as an umbrella for various strategies or actions, is being seen, discussed, and practiced differently in various contexts, cultures, and in the light of local visions and policies. Sutton and Fahmi (2001) claim that approaches to the urban conservation are restoration, renovation, and rehabilitation. Chandan and Kumar (2019) argue that urban conservation has gone through different strategies over the past decades. For example, it focused on the “Re-construction and Revitalization” in the 1950s and 1960s as a strategy for growth, we find that it was shifted in the 1970s to the “Renewal” as a strategy for development in historic sites.

This research argues that urban conservation trends that are linked to a certain period of time exists. Yet, using certain trend(s) for urban conservation is a response to various views, or problems to the historic areas, people’s needs, or

governmental decisions. It is also argued that a combination of more than one trend or strategy can be used. Figure 2 shows a cross-section in the history of the urban revitalization and its main paradigm shifts until the UHL concept as an approach to urban conservation and revitalization.

7 Typologies of Revitalizing Historic Plazas

Among the various conservation approaches to revitalize historic plazas, a set of historic plazas’ examples representing those approaches are selected based on certain criteria. Those criteria are: their historical value, cultural context due to diverse geographical locations, and the existence of their liveliness. Typologies of selected plazas, either form oriented or functional oriented weren’t a criterion of selecting the examples of conserved historic plazas; as the research focuses on tracing the intervention approach of revitalizing the plaza in response to its history, physical structure, and context. Examples of historic plazas are also examined in terms of their accessibility, and events/activities pattern(s) taking place in their current status. Figure 3 shows the analysis criteria of the selected historic plazas.

The selected historic plazas are examined and analyzed as shown in Figs. 4, 5, 6 and 7; to represent different tools and methods of reviving the historic plazas within the same intervention approach. Through a cross-sectional view of those examples, the research portrays various practical approaches of revitalizing and enhancing historic plazas.

8 Discussion

As shown in Figs. 4, 5, 6 and 7, urban revitalization of historic plazas has been achieved through a multiplicity of approaches that vary between the following:

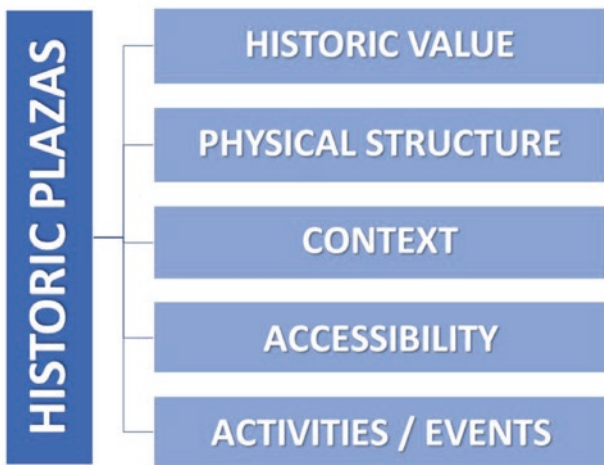


Fig. 3 Criteria of analyzing the selected examples of historic plazas. By the author

- **Extreme conservation:** Usually used in historic plazas that were not exposed to robust vandalism or decay. The conserved historic plazas relatively maintain their original identity and sense of place, which is being done through their tangible and intangible spatial aspects, e.g., Bait Nassif historic plaza, located in Jeddah, KSA is an extreme example of conserving, not only the physical plaza, but also it has planned activities and events that showcase the history of the plaza, which recall the place historical memory.
- **Reconstruction/Renovation:** While renovation is often used to fit new needs for the users, we find that its extreme implementation, which is the reconstruction is often used in response to a certain decay that took place in historic plazas. Reconstruction of historic plazas is done due to several reasons, such as complete intentional or unintentional decay of the plaza, or due to massive contextual change. The reconstruction approach often replicates the original plaza, e.g., as in the Commerce Square in Lisbon, or in the historic center of Warsaw, Poland. Renovation is used in plazas where they are located in a historical context, in which it can enhance the quality and the liveliness of the plaza through a partial or a whole renovation. The degree of the intervention of this approach is related to the possible changes in the urban context. Pompidou plaza in Paris, France is an example of high degree of renovation due to the construction of Pompidou Cultural Center in the heart of the historic part of Paris.
- **Renewal/Redevelopment:** Both related approaches are done in historic plazas to implement new objectives that vary between functional, visual, or aesthetic, among other objectives. As shown in Fig. 6, the

Gendarmenmarkt in Berlin, Germany was redeveloped to allow visual consistency of the three historic buildings included in the plaza by creating a connected platform as an integrated base. The San Martin Plaza of Cordoba in Argentina has gone in a renewal project to draw and reflect the historic buildings on the plaza, in which the history and the plaza's sense of place are manifested.

- **Regeneration/Rehabilitation:** both approaches are being implemented in historic plazas for different objectives that aim to add value and quality to the place. They often add remarkable changes, yet maintain authentic place characteristics. For example, adding the huge wooden canopy-like structure in Metropol Parasol Plaza of Seville in Spain has resulted in a comprehensive sustainable development, reflected in place social liveliness, enhanced economy, and added environmental and climatic mitigation. Moreover, the top of the wooden structure, which is called as “City Terrace” offered new sceneries and visual perspectives of the city. The added huge glass Pyramid to the ancient Louvre Plaza in Paris made a whole new vital experience above and under the ground floor.

9 Conclusion

Urban revitalization of historic plazas is a very important component of the overall conservation of heritage areas. Recent holistic concepts and approaches that aim to integrate the goals of urban heritage conservation, such as HUL, are evidence of such importance.

This research claims that the delimited notion of conserving historic buildings in the segregation of their historic urban context is no longer valid. It states that revitalizing historic plazas is significant in urban conservation as an integrated approach. As reflected in the discussion, this proposed approach can be reached through different strategies and tools.

By examining and analyzing various examples of successful conserved urban plazas, the research highlights a phenomenon that links using divers conservation intervention approaches of historic plazas with certain motivators and objectives to each approach. It argues that several practical approaches can be followed to enhance the liveliness and the quality of life of historic plazas. Although those approaches are diverse and may follow complex or overlapped motivators and objectives, they should consider the history, context, structure, and function of historic plazas in the light of contemporary human and urban needs. Table 1 shows a suggested model for the most used conservation practical approaches of historic plazas as part of their urban context.



Fig. 4 Examples on revitalizing urban plazas using the conservation approach. By the author

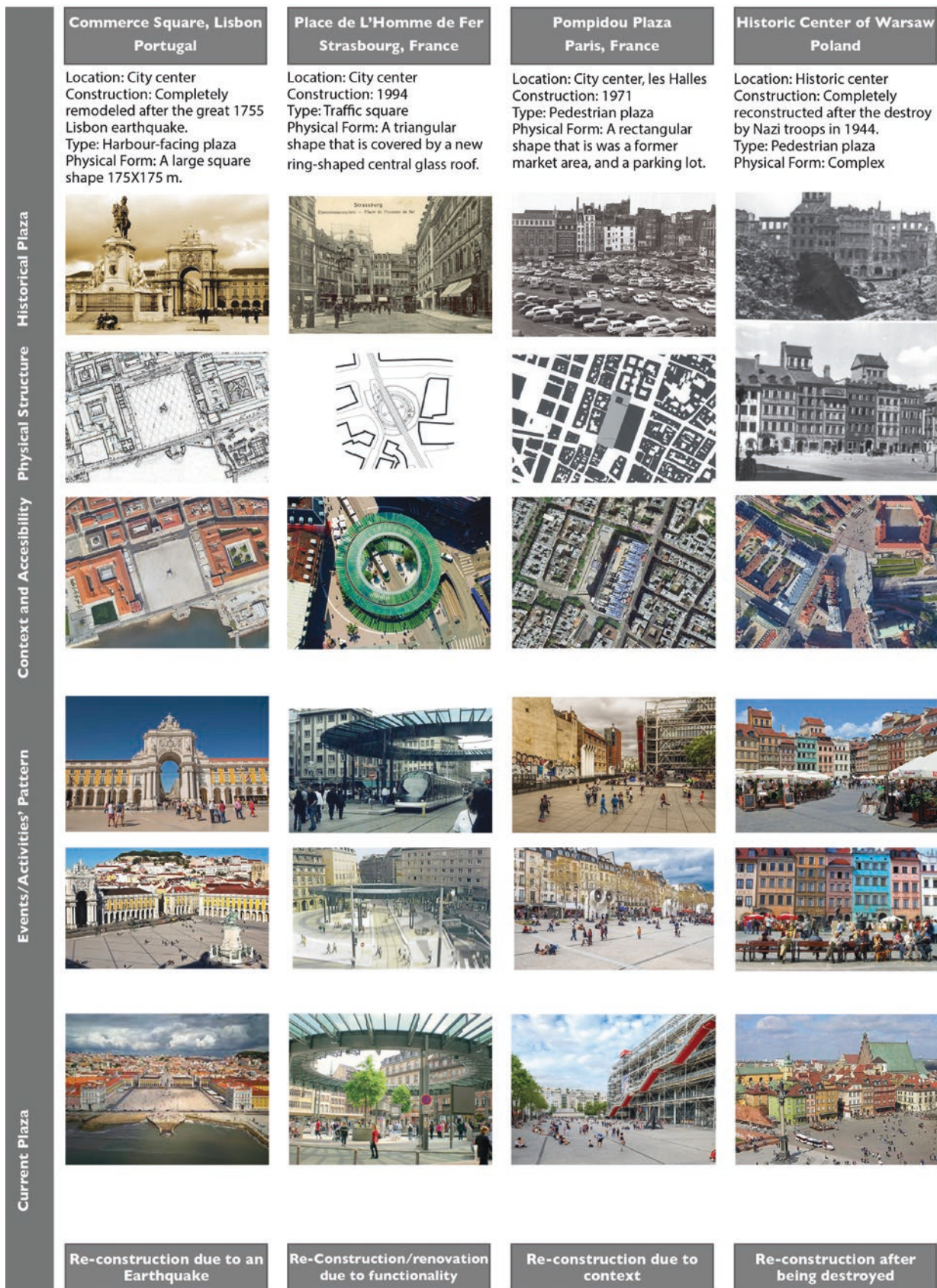


Fig. 5 Examples on revitalizing urban plazas using the re-contruction/renovation approach(s). By the author

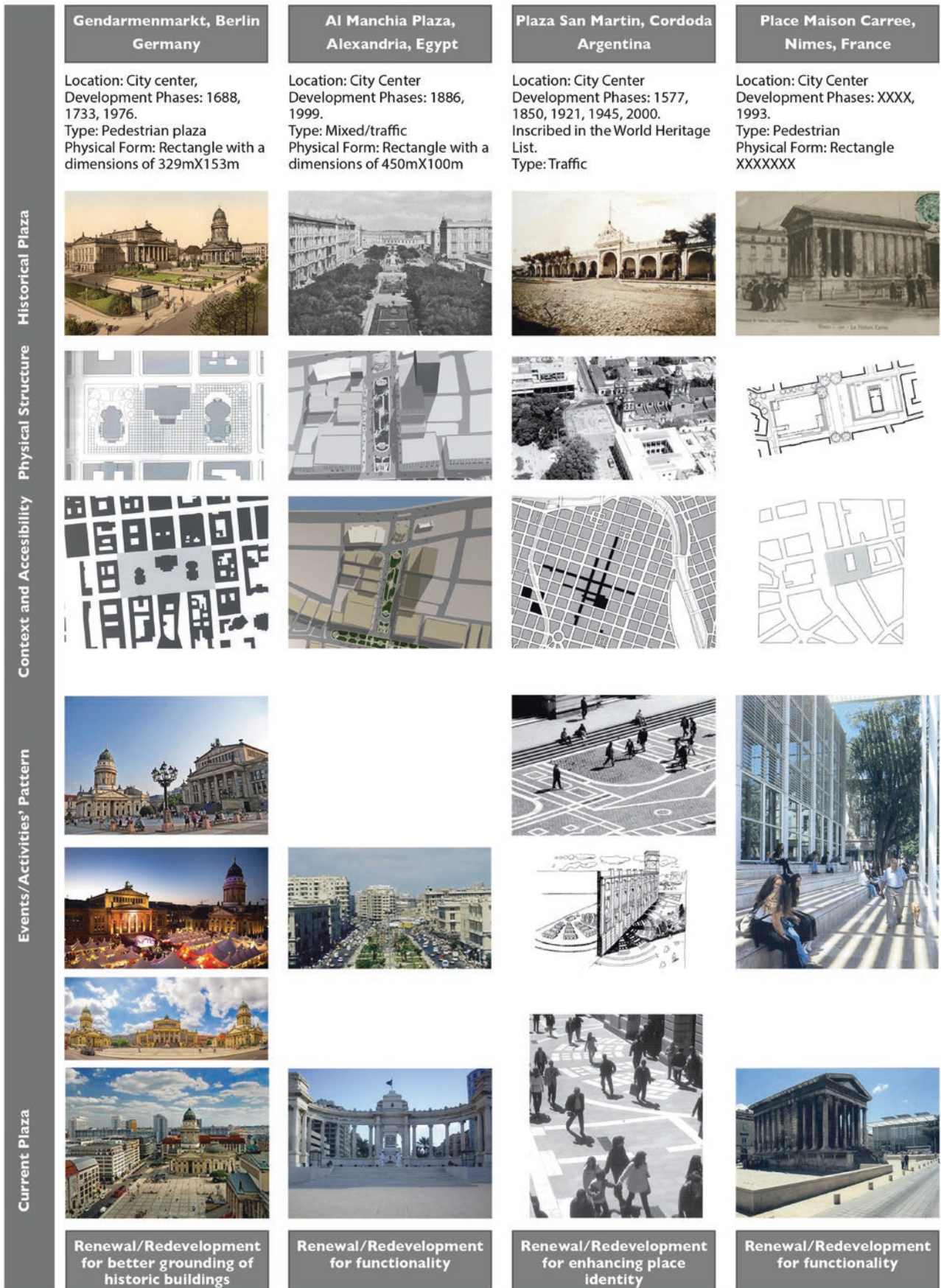


Fig. 6 Examples on revitalizing urban plazas using the renewal/redevelopment approach(s). By the author

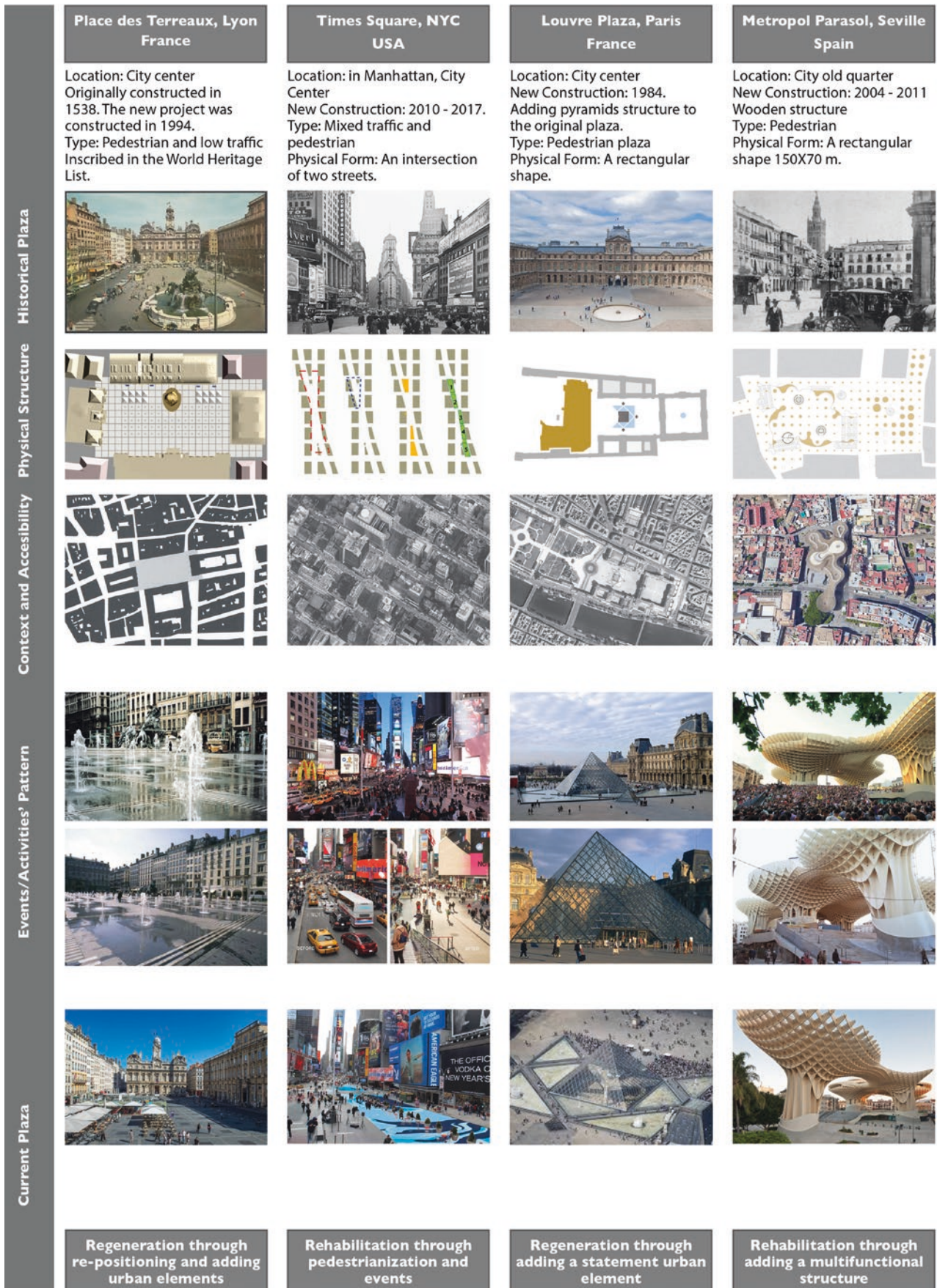


Fig. 7 Examples on revitalizing urban plazas using the regeneration/rehabilitation approach(s). By the author

Table 1 Approaches of conserving historic plazas. By the author

Approaches	Where	Why
Conservation	Sites not exposed to robust vandalism	To maintain the same condition
Reconstruction	Sites with complete or partial decay	To recall the same condition, or to add
Renovation		To maintain or to fit new needs
Renewal		
Redevelopment	Any types of sites	To fit new aims or objectives
Regeneration		
Rehabilitation		

References

- Cantacuzino, S. (1990) A policy for architectural conservation. In A. H. Imamuddin, et al. (Eds.), *Architectural and urban conservation in the Islamic world, papers in progress* (Vol. 1, p. 14). The Aga Khan Trust for Culture
- Cattella, V., Dinesb, N., Geslerc, W., & Curtisd, S. (2008). Mingling, observing, and lingering: Everyday public spaces and their implications for well-being and social relations. *Health & Place, 14*, 544–561.
- Chandan, S., Kumar, A. (2019) Review of urban conservation practices in historic cities. *International Journal on Emerging Technologies, 10*(1), 74–84. ISSN No. (Online): 2249-3255
- Cooper, C., & Francis, C. (1990). *People places: Design guidelines for urban open space*. Van Nostrand Rienhold.
- Couch, C. (1990). Urban renewal theory and practice. Basingstoke: Macmillan Lisbon charter (1995). ICOMOS. <https://www.icomos.org/en/charters-and-otherdoctrinal-texts>
- Della Torre, S. (2020). Italian perspective on the planned preventive conservation of architectural heritage. *Frontiers of Architectural Research, 10*(1), 108–116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foar.2020.07.008>
- Ebbe, K. (2009). *Infrastructure and Heritage conservation: Opportunities for urban revitalization and economic development*. Urban Development Unit, World Bank. Can be downloaded from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/10260>
- Ehrenreich, B. (2007). *Dancing in the streets: a History of collective joy*. Granta Books.
- Elbeah, B., Elshater, A., & Toama, A. (2022). Tactical urbanism for improving livability in lost spaces of Cairo, a book chapter published 2022. In *Advances in architecture, engineering, and technology* (pp. 3–13). Can be downloaded from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86913-7_1
- French, J. S. (1978). *Urban space*. Kendall-Hunt Publishing Company, Iowa.
- Gehl, J., & Gemzoe, L. (2001). *New city spaces*. The Danish Architectural Press.
- Helmy, M. (2005) *Townscape fundamentals for public art in squares and plazas*. Master Thesis, Ain Shams University.
- Heritage sites development: Planning, managing and monitoring cultural heritage sites in South East Europe*. CHERPLAN.
- Holcomb, H. B., & Beauregard, R. A. (1981). *Revitalizing cities*. Association of American Geographers.
- Krier, R. (1979). *Urban space*. Rizzoli international Publications Inc.
- Litva, A., Coast, J., Donovan, J., Eyles, J., Shepherd, M., Tacchi, J., et al. (2002). The public is too subjective: Public involvement at different levels of health-care decision making. *Social Science and Medicine, 54*(12), 1825–1837.
- Lynch, K. (1960). *The image of the city*. M.I.T.Press.
- Lynch, K. (1981). *A theory of good city form*. M.I.T.Press.
- Ruoss, E., & Alfarè, L. (Eds.). (2013). *Sustainable tourism as driving force for cultural heritage sites development: Planning, managing and monitoring cultural heritage sites in South East Europe*. CHERPLAN.
- Stanley, B. W., Stark, B. L., Johnston, K. L., & Smith, M. E. (2012). Urban open spaces in historical perspective: A transdisciplinary typology and analysis. *Urban Geography, 33*(8), 1089–1117. <https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.33.8.1089>
- Sutton, K., & Fahmi, W. (2001). The rehabilitation of old Cairo. *Habitat International, 26*(2002), 73–93.
- Tiesdell, S., Oc, T. & Heath, T. (1996) *Revitalizing historic urban quarters* (pp. 18–39, 41–42, 135). Cornwall: Architectural Press.
- UNESCO. (2004). *Recommendations of the international conference on the safeguarding of tangible and intangible cultural heritage: Towards an integrated approach*. UNESCO. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention#art2>
- UNESCO. (2014). Developing historic cities: Keys for understanding and taking actions, Published by UNESCO World Heritage Centre, France-UNESCO Cooperation Agreement UNESCO/CLD. Can be downloaded from <https://smartnet.niua.org/sites/default/files/resources/228542M.pdf>
- UNESCO. (2013). New life for historic cities: The historic urban landscape approach explained (02/07/2013) © UNESCO | World Heritage Centre Can be downloaded from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/727>
- Veirier, L. (2008). Historic districts for all: A social and human approach for sustainable revitalization Manual for professionals, produced for the UNESCO (pp. 22–24). Can be downloaded from https://mirror.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/10362_1_594123.pdf