GUIDANCE NOTE

Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in urban contexts

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Introduction to the guidance note[1]

Intangible cultural heritage (or living heritage) covers a range of domains, including oral expressions such as poetry and song, performing arts such as dance and theatre, social practices, including rituals and festive events, foodways, and skills and knowledge involved in craftsmanship, knowledge and practices related to nature and the universe, encompassing agricultural practices and fisheries, as well as forms of urban practices and expressions. These forms of knowledge and practice are typically enacted and transmitted by communities, groups or individuals (hereafter 'communities'); which they consider as part of their living heritage.

With increasing numbers of people living in urban environments, and rapid urbanization processes worldwide, the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in urban contexts is an issue to be addressed. The practice of living heritage has long been intertwined with the processes of urban development and planning; while it is fragile in the face of inadequate or unsuitable urban planning provisions, living heritage has the potential to contribute positively to urban ways of life, social cohesion, better living conditions and ultimately, to the functioning of the city itself. In turn, urban planning can facilitate the safeguarding of living heritage by considering communities' and practitioners' needs in terms of spatial organization. Distinguishing between these potential positive and negative roles and risks, and understanding how and when living heritage can be incorporated into urban planning structures, are important areas for consideration when designing relevant policies in this area.

The UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter, the Convention) encourages States Parties to acknowledge the dynamic nature of intangible cultural heritage in both urban and rural contexts (Chapter VI of the Operational Directives), while endeavouring to recognize the importance and strengthen the role of intangible cultural heritage as a driver and guarantee of sustainable development (paragraph 170). This also includes the key role of intangible cultural heritage in other aspects of sustainable development in urban contexts, such as food security, water management systems, inclusive economic development, and environmental sustainability, among others. While there is a large body of literature and numerous instruments within UNESCO and the wider UN system relating to the role of culture in urban contexts, they do not refer specifically to the role of living heritage from the perspective of the Convention. Further guidance is therefore needed for stakeholders of the Convention seeking to engage in and enhance dialogue between the urban planning and living heritage sectors.

The UNESCO 1972 World Heritage Convention recalls the importance of 'adopt[ing] a general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community and integrate the protection of that heritage into comprehensive planning programmes' (Article 5). This is relevant when considering how to integrate the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage into urban planning processes. Furthermore, there is a need to highlight the synergies and links between the 2003 and 1972 Conventions. Although the 1972 Convention does not directly address intangible cultural heritage, the term 'living traditions' refers to the property's relationship or association with intangible cultural heritage, which is taken into account when assessing the property's authenticity and Outstanding Universal Value. The relationship between tangible and intangible cultural heritage must therefore be considered when it comes to urban properties inscribed on the World Heritage List.

Of the other UNESCO instruments that consider this subject, the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (UNESCO, 2011; hereafter 'HUL Recommendation') remains the most significant. The HUL Recommendation proposes a vision in which urban development and heritage conservation complement each other. With a focus on the protection of historic areas, the Recommendation recalls the need to safeguard urban heritage – including both tangible and intangible aspects – to achieve a balance between

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urban growth and quality of life, improve the productive and sustainable use of urban spaces, and promote social and economic development. As a point of clear synergy with the 2003 Convention, the HUL Recommendation also highlights the need to promote community participation in decision-making, yet it does not mention the contribution of intangible cultural heritage to urban planning or the need to integrate it in urban planning processes.

Another example is the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, which was created in 2004 to promote cooperation with and among cities that have identified creativity as a strategic factor for sustainable urban development. The 350 cities around the world that currently make up this network work together towards a common objective: placing creativity and culture at the heart of their development plans at the local level while cooperating actively at the international level. The network represents eight creative fields: architecture, crafts and folk art, design, film, gastronomy, literature, media arts and music. Most, if not all, of these categories are intrinsically related to intangible cultural heritage domains. It should be also noted that, in many cases, these cities have living heritage safeguarding at the centre of their creative industries.

Within the wider UN system, the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities recalls the importance of safeguarding cultural heritage for sustainable development. In this regard, countries have committed to 'making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable' and specifically, within this goal, Target 11.4 aims to 'strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage'. Under this overall international framework, the New Urban Agenda (2016) aims to make cities more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable and notably calls for the inclusion of 'culture as a priority component of urban plans… and strategic development policies that safeguard a diverse range of tangible and intangible cultural heritage and landscapes' and to 'protect them from the potential disruptive impacts of urban development'. Furthermore, this agenda shares a vision of 'cities for all', referring to the equal use and enjoyment of cities and human settlements, echoing the principles previously laid out in the World Charter for the Right to the City, a civil society initiative that emphasizes the promotion of human rights, equity and the participation of all stakeholders in shaping urban spaces. In addition, several UN frameworks and guidelines make reference to the importance of culture and cultural heritage and their spatial dimensions – such as 'Urban Planning for City Leaders' (UN-Habitat, 2014); the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning (UN-Habitat, 2015) and 'Our City Plans' (UN-Habitat, 2024).

Sustainable urban development can be defined as 'the spatial manifestation of urban development processes that creates a built environment with norms, institutions and governance systems enabling individuals, households and societies to maximise their potential [and] optimize a vast range of services' (UN-Habitat, 2015). In other words, cities should be planned, built, and managed to maintain environmental quality, support socioeconomic development, and safeguard the quality of life, needs and livelihoods of their present and future populations.

In terms of process, **urban planning** includes the design and regulation of uses of spaces and their physical forms (built and natural), encompassing proposed economic functions, resource and environmental conservation strategies, and zoning areas (residential, industrial, commercial, cultural, leisure and others) (UN-Habitat, 2015). Most urban planning focuses on functional, socioeconomic and environmental structures, without targeting in-depth questions of how spatial organization and management can impact the cultural dimensions of urban life, and more particularly communities' intangible cultural heritage. It is therefore a question of considering which actions are required to ensure that cities facilitate the ongoing transmission of living heritage, both as a crucial component of social well-being and a contribution to the right to the city.

An **urban plan** is a technical document for districts, cities or regions to create a broad, long-term vision for future spatial organization, land uses, and a course of action for the built environment. An urban plan can have multiple goals such as economic and social development, cultural heritage preservation, and environmental protection, among others. Depending on its scale, timeframe, and planning jurisdiction, a plan can be referred to as a comprehensive plan, master plan, partial plan, among others. An urban plan usually contains a map of future land uses for a planning jurisdiction, as well as policies, regulations, and strategic actions and interventions regarding multiple elements of an area.

Urban planning is usually composed of <u>multiple and inter-connected layers or structures</u>[2] which can have a direct and positive impact on sustainable development, including the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. These structures are:

- **Ecological structure:** This relates to the landscape, landforms and biological components of cities, including flora, fauna and other forms of life, as well as physical elements such as soil and water, and the resulting dynamics from the relationships between them. Knowledge and cultural practices related to local flora and fauna, climate and ecosystems, for instance, can contribute to the connectivity of natural areas and corridors, risk management, rural development and environmental sustainability.
- **Functional structure:** This is composed of multiple layers of the urban structure, where land is organized into specific zones or uses that are supported by networks or systems such as transportation and mobility systems (roads, railways and other transport hubs; cycling and pedestrian lanes; waterways; and other spatial connectors), public spaces, public services/utilities (water, gas, electricity, communications), and other urban facilities that are key for the transmission and viability of intangible cultural heritage. These layers are influenced by local urban management practices and regulatory systems; therefore, their relationship with and contribution to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage can be subject to such local specificities.
- **Socioeconomic structure:** This relates to planning for social inclusion and economic efficiency, which are considered in terms of access to productivity, employment, housing, and the attractiveness of a city as an investment destination, among other factors. The socioeconomic structure also involves ensuring social inclusion and reducing inequality; for example, through equal access to health and education and fair incomes regardless of age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other statuses, which are key drivers of well-being and quality of life in cities.
- **Built heritage structure:** This relates to buildings, monuments, squares, public spaces, urban neighbourhoods, sectors or districts of relevance and public interest, which bring significant place-making and social and economic value to cities. The significance of built heritage usually includes values attributed to the intangible and tangible dimensions of such places[3]. The built heritage structure may be treated as an imperative element in the structuring of an urban plan, notably with regard to gazetted historical monuments or districts which bring significant social and economic value to cities.

While there is growing understanding and recognition of intangible cultural heritage amongst urban planners, the lack of awareness among decision-makers about how to identify the needs and benefits of intangible cultural heritage remains a critical issue. In general, intangible cultural heritage is not given prominent consideration in urban planning, except in contexts where it has potential for income generation, such as tourism. However, there are substantial margins of manoeuvre for urban planners to fully understand and explore the potential of living heritage, so as not to limit its consideration to tourism or other profit-generating activities.

The present Guidance note provides directions on the contribution of intangible cultural heritage to sustainable urban development and the importance of integrating its safeguarding into urban planning processes. As with the Convention's previous thematic initiatives, it cannot be stressed enough that for this purpose, communities concerned should be at the centre, assisted where necessary by other stakeholders, including local authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academic institutions, civil society organizations, and the private and informal sectors. Given the rapidly evolving nature of this intersectional field, and the diversity of stakeholders involved, policy guidance should also be flexible, to accommodate different urban environments and contexts, communities and types of living heritage. More specific guidelines, tools and case studies might then be developed based on the specific needs and contexts identified.

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[2] The structures described have been defined based on multiple urban planning components identified in frameworks and guidelines such as 'Urban Planning for City Leaders' (UN-Habitat, 2014), 'International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning' (UN-Habitat, 2015), 'Our Urban Plans' (UN-Habitat, 2024) and 'The HUL Guidebook' (UNESCO, 2016); in addition to the review of urban plans of multiple cities where these structures were also identified.

[3] Rogers, A. P. (2019) "Values and Relationships between Tangible and Intangible Dimensions of Heritage Places", Values in Heritage Management: Emerging Approaches and Research Directions, Getty Conservation Institute.

Guidance note on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in urban contexts

With more than half of the world's population currently living in cities, urbanization is rapidly shaping the way humans live and interact. While living heritage in cities has historically emerged through settlement and urbanization processes, these phenomena present urban planners with major social, environmental and spatial challenges today – already affecting the well-being and cultural heritage of communities, groups and individuals (hereafter 'communities') worldwide. Stakeholders of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage face a dual challenge: to develop and implement plans that help communities to safeguard their living heritage in the context of rapid urbanization, globalization and rural-to-urban migration, while drawing on that heritage as a source of livelihoods, social connection, resilience, and environmental sustainability in urban settings. In many of these environments, several communities converge with different cultures and backgrounds, enacting a diverse range of cultural expressions and practices that co-exist. Urban heritage must therefore be considered not only through its built or material forms, but also through its living uses and practice, and specifically, how it is situated in and shaped by urban spaces.

This guidance note on safeguarding living heritage in urban contexts imposes no new obligations on States Parties. It is coherent with existing statements of the Convention, including Article 3 on the relationship with other international instruments, and aligns with but does not aim to duplicate the mandates of any other multilateral agreements, frameworks, processes, or instruments relating to sustainable urban development or cultural heritage. Key principles to be observed include Chapter VI of the Operational Directives (2016), the Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage (2015), the World Heritage Convention (1972), the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (2011), 'Urban Planning for City Leaders' (UN-Habitat, 2014), the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning (UN-Habitat, 2015) and 'Our City Plans' (UN-Habitat, 2024).

The overall aim of this guidance note is to strengthen dialogue and knowledge among different stakeholders in intangible cultural heritage and urban planning, while deepening their knowledge of the relationship between the two fields. At present, intangible cultural heritage experts often lack knowledge of relevant urban planning tools and issues, while urban planning experts need to be aware of and understand the concepts and relevance of living heritage in cities. Practitioners, bearers and communities face a related challenge; due to the complexity of urban planning issues, it is important to establish a clear and practical way to communicate with planning teams, and to ensure inclusive participation in the process to reflect multiple perspectives and social and cultural diversity.

In summary, this guidance note proposes a comprehensive, flexible, rights-based and people-centred approach to safeguarding living heritage in urban contexts, while addressing the urban planning perspective specifically. It encourages the integration of safeguarding measures for intangible cultural heritage into urban development policies and planning, through the following key actions:

A. Setting a vision for the integration of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding into urban plans and for sustainable urban development

1. In general, urban planning should be guided by a vision of urban spaces that communities aspire to create, inhabit, use and benefit from as a shared resource. To support this, key planning areas where the integration of intangible cultural heritage with urban environments is relevant should be identified. These include historical areas, peri-urban and rural areas, buildings of interest, public spaces and facilities, urban ecosystems, natural heritage and ecological and transport corridors. The protection and enhancement of such areas should be carried out and leveraged to encourage communities to

create greater relevance and a sense of community initiative in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

a) Effective coordination between the cultural and urban planning sectors needs to be fostered to ensure a balance between new infrastructure/amenities and the requirements of living heritage safeguarding. Public spaces and buildings should support and serve the specific needs of communities enacting their living heritage, taking into account the latter's evolving nature.

b) Urban planning should facilitate and strengthen the relationship between tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as with the creative economy and livelihoods more broadly. This interconnectivity is vital for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in urban contexts.

2. Understanding the two-way relationship between intangible cultural heritage and sustainable urban development is essential. Living heritage can contribute to the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development. In turn, sustainable urban development can support the viability of living heritage and the communities concerned. This relationship can promote socio-cultural welfare, good relations between and within different communities, economic prosperity, and environmental quality in cities.

a) Linking intangible cultural heritage to urban planning structures is a way of recognizing and strengthening its important role as a driver of sustainable development. The structures of urban planning – ecological, functional, socioeconomic and built heritage – can be closely related to the practice of living heritage, and it is therefore important to assess how each structure can contribute to safeguarding efforts.

b) Identifying the main components of urban planning structures that relate to or influence intangible cultural heritage elements – positively or negatively – can help identify safeguarding opportunities in urban planning processes.

B.   Effective coordination and participation

3. Urban planning approaches, strategies and regulations can vary significantly between cities, regions, and countries. Depending on the scale of a plan, authorities from different sectors and levels may be involved. The identification of stakeholders should ensure the involvement and participation of concerned communities, groups and individuals in living heritage safeguarding processes, guarantee broad representation, and engage relevant decision-makers with the authority and capacity to support the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

a) The key responsibility for the incorporation of intangible cultural heritage in urban planning should rest with national and local authorities, sectoral institutions (e.g. housing, environment, infrastructure, transport, urban planning and development, community and cultural development, among others), as well as relevant subnational departments.

b) More localised agencies, institutions and organisations, as well as private sector and civil society entities, along with communities, should be the key actors for integrating living heritage in planning, especially in smaller urban areas and neighbourhoods concerned with specific urban development or regeneration processes.

4. The involvement of community members in urban planning processes through participatory approaches should be ensured for the efficient definition of urban planning objectives. Dialogue is key to fostering community involvement in urban planning policies and strategies, avoiding conflicts and raising awareness about the implications and potential impacts of planning decisions on intangible cultural heritage.

Creating a consultative body or a coordination mechanism is encouraged to facilitate dialogue and the participation of communities, groups, and, where applicable, individuals related to intangible cultural heritage, as well as experts, centres of expertise, and research institutes.

a) In situations where urban planning risks altering residential areas or public spaces, communities tend to form organized groups to advocate for their interests. In some cases, non-governmental organizations, associations or specialized agencies may represent less-established, vulnerable and minority groups and communities, or raise concerns about planning decisions that could affect specific practices, places of worship or activities.

b) Academic institutions and technical specialists – such as urban planners, engineers, architects, archaeologists, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, geographers and cultural heritage experts – provide multidisciplinary advice and support for urban planning and development processes. They conduct technical studies to inform planning, policy and decision-making, handle planning applications for regulatory requirements, prepare design briefs, and assess the socioeconomic impacts of urban plans.

5. At the national and local levels, effective coordination between the cultural and planning sectors is essential. This includes relevant stakeholders – such as communities, groups and individuals, associations, and institutions from multiple sectors and disciplines. Such coordination is required to address any barriers to collaboration and identify joint opportunities for advancing efforts to safeguard intangible cultural heritage in urban contexts.

a) It is recommended that multisectoral and multilevel steering committees, working groups or similar coordination entities be established to address this issue jointly. This can help overcome institutional silos and promote transparency, impartiality and inclusion throughout the planning process.

C. Identifying benefits and risks in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage

6. The identification of threats and risks to the viability of an intangible cultural heritage element, as well as the potential benefits of safeguarding it, should be carried out with the participation of communities and other relevant stakeholders. Risks may include any type of process or change in an urban, peri-urban or related rural and industrial areas that may disrupt the viability of the element concerned and which may need to be anticipated and addressed for safeguarding purposes. Accordingly, benefits refer to positive social, economic, environmental and cultural impacts, among others, that can result from the practice and viability of an element of intangible cultural heritage.

a) Incorporating intangible cultural heritage into urban planning can offer a range of benefits, including the following:

o A strengthened sense of identity and belonging to a community or place, with associated benefits to well-being;

o A means of sustainable livelihoods and protection of local economies;

o Strengthened inter-generational understanding, communication and interaction through the practice of intangible cultural heritage;

o Enhanced intra and inter-community tolerance, including increased respect for cultural diversity and mutual understanding;

o Fostered livability and cultural vibrancy of urban spaces, and;

o In some cases, environmental protection, climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction or preparedness and post-conflict recovery, particularly through specific knowledge, traditions and practices of communities with ecological or environmental understanding or coping mechanisms.

b) The risks posed to living heritage by fast-evolving urbanization processes are wide-ranging, and include the following:

- The most significant risk is the intervention in, or physical modification of, spaces where intangible cultural heritage is traditionally practiced and expressed (such as historic buildings and neighborhoods, public spaces, markets, bazaars for local trade and craftsmanship), which can have direct and visible consequences;

- Economic engagement of practitioners and communities in urban contexts brings out specific risks to the practice of intangible cultural heritage, such as over-commercialization and decontextualization;

- Excessive promotion and overtourism also poses risks to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage;

- Other overarching threats include population mobility, fragmented social structures, rapidly changing lifestyles and waning interest in living heritage among youth, the erosion of community and practitioners' rights vis-à-vis their living heritage practices enacted in urban spaces, and the displacement of communities due to gentrification and rising costs, among other factors.

D. Mapping and characterization of intangible cultural heritage

7. Incorporating intangible cultural heritage in urban planning processes requires the identification, mapping and documentation of intangible cultural heritage elements with the participation of communities, relevant non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and other relevant stakeholders. Community-based inventories, as well as broader mapping and characterization of living heritage, are essential, not only for the proper documentation of intangible cultural heritage but also to raise awareness of the importance of safeguarding it in urban contexts. These inventories should serve as valuable inputs for the development of urban plans and the definition of safeguarding measures.

a) Understanding the spatial dimension of living heritage and the cultural attributes of a place is important. The characterization of intangible cultural heritage elements should include: the name of the element, its scale and range (this refers to the spatial dimensions in which the element occurs or is practiced), a location map including related locations, routes and spaces (when applicable), a description of the element, the communities, groups and individuals concerned, modes of transmission, present-day values and functions for the communities concerned, as well as any urban assets related to the element.

b) Inventories should also consider the presence of subcultures in urban contexts, which are often characterized by spontaneity. These include a wide range of activities and practices that represent the lifestyle and values of minority communities.

c) The diversity of communities and their different opinions and ways of identifying with intangible cultural heritage should be recognized. In the elaboration of intangible cultural heritage inventories, special attention should be paid to the particular inclusion of Indigenous Peoples, marginalised social groups, individuals with special needs, and young people, as they all may play a crucial role in its identification and transmission.

E. Capacity-building, awareness-raising and networking

8. It is necessary to raise awareness among urban planners and developers about the value of intangible cultural heritage so that its safeguarding is considered an added value for urban development. To this end, it is essential that bearers and professionals in the sector become a resource to advise urban planners. Furthermore, it is crucial to raise awareness among intangible cultural heritage experts about how sustainable urban development strengthens the safeguarding of living heritage.

9. Capacity-building and awareness-raising activities, as well as research, can make important contributions to the creation or updating of regulations and provisions to incorporate intangible cultural heritage in urban plans. In this sense, it is important to leverage existing legislative instruments in cities (e.g. heritage impact assessments) to encourage the incorporation of measures for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

10. Digital tools are an effective means to foster inclusive involvement and to share interactive urban plans and ongoing activities with the public. They are playing an important role in awareness-raising and dialogue. Cities and stakeholders should be encouraged to integrate digital tools into urban planning processes.

11. UNESCO is well positioned to promote the exchange of good practices, case studies and experiences relevant to living heritage in urban contexts, and to assist States Parties and international organizations in the development of national and regional forums, networks and coalitions, drawing on strategic alliances between UNESCO field offices, UNESCO Category 2 Centres, urban planning and national heritage institutions and agencies, as well as practitioners and communities.

The Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage endorsed this guidance note at its twentieth session (New Delhi, India, 8 to 12 December 2025).