



## Urban Heritage: What can we do at the closest point to local communities?

*Reflections from an expert*  
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As is always being said, the presence and participation of the local communities are essential factors for urban conservation. There is no doubt about this. Then the next question comes up - what should we do to realize this? How do we pick up their voices, get their understanding and reflect these in our concrete practices of urban conservation?

Of course, there are many possible approaches to be taken into consideration for urban conservation. But among them the public policies and their administrative systems are the essential basis to manage cities like complex living beings. Here the systems mean not only the matters of legal systems managing spatial planning but also the overall administrative systems to support the daily life of the peoples and communities. We, the people of a modern society, cannot survive without the support of the public systems. If even the general public systems are not designed to be able to reflect the peoples' voices in their policy making processes, how are we able to talk about the importance of community participation for conservation?

The proper circulatory policy-making process between the individuals, the communities and the upper or national governmental systems, by collecting the demands from the public, reflecting them in the policies and testing them in real life, then reporting the results back to the policy makers, is essential. Decentralization is the generic approach to promote the concept of direction, but the governmental systems are very varied from country to country.

A municipal officer working in a small historic town in Japan told me that his daily practice was to walk through the protected area every morning on the way from his house to his office. He said that by doing this he could see the changes of the city, even the very small changes, by catching the nuances in the atmosphere of the community environment through casual daily conversations. This is a very primitive approach, but it is a first step toward a mature municipal system that is well prepared for urban conservation. We need such trained personnel at the municipal or community district level of public offices which are actually supporting the communities on a daily basis. They are able to communicate with the communities in their own local languages and dialects.

As for the governmental policy-making system, the Japanese government agency in charge of cultural heritage protection stepped onto a new stage of heritage protection policy in 2018 by providing the legal basis for municipal-level comprehensive local heritage management plans for the recognition (cultural and natural resources mapping), conservation and utilization of heritage. The municipalities are now conducting surveys of natural and cultural heritage resources beyond the already-established demarcation of heritage types in their territory. The surveys are being done involving the communities and they are supported mainly by local researchers. The researchers in local schools and universities are valuable resources and are actually the individual experts who are appointed by local government offices to look after the local heritage.

Depending on the actual administrative systems of each country, it may be difficult to expect municipal offices to be able to take on the necessary local roles so readily. However through my experience working nationally and internationally for heritage protection, including urban conservation, the heritage systems involving communities will not be able to survive without being integrated deeply into the local daily administration systems. My answer to the question -- what can we do at the closest point to the communities -- is to develop municipal offices equipped with trained experts. It is therefore desirable to develop international capacity building programmes to train such municipal officers for each community.

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