A CRITICAL REVIEW ON THE REVITALIZATION OF HISTORIC URBAN CENTERS ON THE MEDITERRANEAN ISLANDS: A POLICY APPROACH

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Abstract

Historic urban centers (HUCs) having distinct physical, social, economic and symbolic meanings are faced with various challenges which call for urgent actions in many countries, including those in the Mediterranean basin which the cradle of western civilization. Parallel to the changes in the conservation attitudes at both local and global levels, in many cities in the world in general and in the Mediterranean region in particular, policies which incorporate the physical, social and economic assets, to revitalize the HUCs have been developed and implemented. Most frequently, international documents and conventions set the basis for these local policies. However, literature survey reveals that resulting outcomes of the implementation of these policies have not always been successful due to the lack of linkage between policies, techniques, people, culture, the environment and the economy.

Accordingly, the main aim of this paper is to bring some proposals for the conservation and revitalization of HUCs in the Mediterranean region, focusing mainly on the Islands, against the internationally defined criteria for success. Thus, in the framework of this paper, firstly, revitalization of HUCs in general will be discussed. Secondly, the importance of strategic planning approach for revitalization will be emphasized. Finally, based on these discussions, some proposals for the revitalization of HUCs in Mediterranean islands through a model will be put forward considering the complex challenges and processes of sustainable revitalization.

Key words: Mediterranean islands, historic urban centers, revitalization, integrated conservation.
Introduction

Historic urban centers (HUCs) having distinct physical, social, economic and symbolic meanings are faced with various challenges which call for urgent actions in many countries, including those in the Mediterranean basin which is the cradle of western civilization. Thus, not only as HUCs in particular, but also as the whole region in general, Mediterranean means a thousand things at the same time. “Not just one landscape, but countless landscapes. Not just a sea, but a succession of seas. Not just a civilisation, but civilisations stacked one on the other. Travelling through the Mediterranean region is finding a Roman past in Lebanon, prehistory in Sardinia, Greek villages in Sicily, an Arab presence in Spain, Turkish Islam in Yugoslavia.” (Braudel).

The Mediterranean has been used as a flexible concept whose spatial extent varies according to the perspective used - environmental, cultural, economic, geopolitical - as well as to the views of individual authors, bodies or commentators (Cori and Vallega, 1996).

No matter how we define the Mediterranean Region, the Mediterranean Basin is a bridge that facilitates contacts between ethnic, religious and culturally diverse societies which are occupying it. The Mediterranean is the birthplace of some of the oldest, most deeply rooted cultures and it is the region where monotheistic religions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism originated.

In the Mediterranean Basin, Islands have a special place as they are, most of the time, on the crossroads between the surrounding mainland countries. Thus, Mediterranean Islands, which were faced with colonial occupations like the island of Cyprus, still keep the indelible imprints of the occupiers on their landscape. In Sardinia for example, there are Pisan Romanesque churches and Genoese watch-towers; at Rethymnon (Crete) a mosque is found within the Venetian ramparts of the citadel, whilst at Famagusta (Cyprus) minarets sprout from the old Lusignan gothic cathedral. Just as islands have often been the first to be incorporated into empires because of their ease of conquest and strategic importance, so they are often the last to be decolonized. (Vogiatzakis, 2008)

Being away from the mainland, and accordingly being influenced by rapid urbanization later than the mainland, the traditional and local identities and values of the settlements on Mediterranean islands have mostly been preserved. However, since 1950s the population dynamics and the distribution of settlements have changed rapidly due to a shift in lifestyles, increase in tourism activities and economic directions; tourism has become the flagship sector of Island economies. As a result of these developments, traditional Mediterranean
cities in general and settlements on the islands in particular, started to change through suburbanization and accelerated deterioration of the traditional historic centers due to overemphasis on tourism developments which then lead to loss of identity and local values. Accordingly, there is urgent need to set up some policies for their conservation and revitalization.

**Revitalizing HUCs on Mediterranean Islands Through Strategic Approaches**

“Conservation and revitalization of the HUCs should not be considered as issues that are in contradiction but as issues that have a type of symbiotic relationship with each other. This symbiotic relationship has its definition in the concept of 'integrated conservation', which was originated as a new policy in The European Charter of the Architectural Heritage (adopted by the Committee of Ministers in 1975) and became almost universally accepted afterwards.” (Doratlı, 2005, p.751)

When considering conservation and revitalization in such a relationship—protecting the cultural heritage together with the consideration of economic, social, and cultural factors that shape the historic environment—there will be a need for an area-based approach. With their traditional character and architectural value, historic urban areas are considered as part of the cultural heritage of any country. Since 1960s historic urban areas have been re-evaluated with their overall positive qualities, and the efforts for protection of individual buildings in these areas have been replaced by policies for area-based protection. This new attitude implies revitalization of these areas as functioning parts of their cities. As stated by Tiesdell et al (1996), revitalization can be defined, in its simplest form, as a process through which the deterioration and decay of an historic urban quarter can be addressed, terminated and reversed. Thus, in order to provide an historic urban quarter with an appropriate level of economic competitiveness and with the basis to channel the various competing demands for spaces within them, determination of an appropriate strategic approach is an important issue to debate on. The underlying intention of a strategic approach with regard to revitalization of HUCs in particular as well as a traditional environment in general, is to identify what is valuable in a historic urban quarter/traditional environment, qualities that should be protected and enhanced; and along with identifying these, to determine where negative factors could be removed or mitigated and to identify where the opportunities for enhancement lie. Accordingly, it can be stated that revitalization is the development and restoration of specific urban areas that will meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is a clear fact that this statement overlaps with the
definition of sustainable development, which has been introduced at the Earth Summit- Rio in 1992.

As in the process of planning in general, strategic planning for revitalization of HUCs also includes various stages, among which the analysis stage is the most crucial one since both the key constraints and opportunities of the concerned historic area and the external conditions which would positively and/or negatively affect the area, are identified at this stage. The most important difference between strategic approaches for revitalization of HUCs and conventional conservation planning approaches for these types of areas is that, strategic approaches are action oriented and all actors who would be directly or indirectly influenced are involved in the process. In addition to this, as one of the stages of the strategic planning approaches, action plans will be prepared for revitalization, which would answer the questions: ‘Who would be doing what?’; ‘When?’; and highlight priorities; possible constraints; and, possible financial resources.

Depending on the source of the mismatch between the services offered by the fabric of the historic quarters and the contemporary needs, two types of revitalization would be utilized for reconciliation this mismatch. If the source of the mismatch lies in the physical fabric, there is a need for physical revitalization; if it is related to the economic activities within the fabric; economic revitalization has to be utilized. Physical revitalization is a straightforward adaptation of the physical fabric to contemporary needs through various modes of renewal2. Whereas economic revitalization is about utilization and purposeful occupation of the improved/enhanced building stock (through physical revitalization), which would sustain revitalization in a long term perspective. (Tiesdell et. Al, 1996; Doratli, 2004; Doratli et.al. 2005; Doratli et.al., 2007; Oktay & Hoskara, 2009)

Physical and economic revitalization should be considered as complementary to each other. Physical revitalization will help to increase confidence in the area, the maintenance of this confidence, however, requires economic revitalization. Adopting this approach, the process of revitalization would serve to support the goal and objective of the area-based protection of the cultural and historical heritage, since area-based conservation involves much more than preservation of only specific large building complexes.

Considering that every historic urban center is unique in terms of the values, which make it worthy of preservation, the type and level of obsolescence and the inherent development dynamics that it may face make it unique and different from other parts of its city. There can, therefore, be no uniformly strategic approach in terms of revitalization. There are three basic
strategic approaches for the long-term revitalization of historic urban areas (Tiesdell et. al, 1996; Doratli, 2004; Doratli et.al. 2005; Doratli, et.al., 2007; Oktay & Hoskara, 2009): functional restructuring; functional diversification; functional regeneration. The relevant strategic approach should serve the endowment of historic urban quarters with a fresh sense of purpose in order to ensure their survival. Only then may it be possible to give them a contemporary role. Ensuring survival of an historic urban area in the long run can only be possible with economic revitalization of that particular area (Doratlı, 2005).

With these discussions in mind and considering the urgent need for action, the model which has been suggested by the authors for revitalization of historic areas should be applied to the HUCs in traditional settlements of Mediterranean islands (Table 1). This model includes the following stages:

1. Analysis: This is the most important stage because in addition to classical data, key constraints, opportunities, full potential of the specific settlement is determined – through SWOT analysis technique.

2. Vision, goals and objectives: At this stage, given ‘Where we are’, it is clearly identified ‘Where we want to be’ through vision statement and goals and ‘What to do’ through the objectives.

3. Development of scenario and planning strategies: At this stage with reference to vision, goals and objectives, the future end state is somewhat pictured through a scenario; and a general framework for road map for the actions through planning strategies are developed.

4. Design principles & guidelines: It should be noted that in original definition of the stages of general strategic planning, there is no such a stage. On the contrary this may be part of a conventional planning study. However, since the model is targeting a specific historic area / traditional settlement, at this stage design principles and guidelines have to be determined.

5. Action plans: An important stage of strategic planning, since all activities, which are necessary for achievement of the goals and objectives; all responsible stakeholders with possible signs of probable public-private partnership; priorities; possible financial resources as well as probable constraints are determined.

6. Monitoring and feedback: Scanning and control of implementation activities for determination of possible mismatch between the implementations and plans.

If appropriately applied, the model has the potential to lead to the achievement of revitalization of any historic area / traditional settlement. However, it should be noted that it is
inevitably necessary to keep all the time in line with the conceptual model as well. After all, the proposed actions should classified as a physical revitalization or economic revitalization activities. This would be a kind of justification of the action plan, since physical revitalization proposals are the short term interventions, which would be undertaken under the responsibility of the central/local authorities; and economic revitalization proposals are more long term interventions that would be realized through public-private partnership.

Concluding remarks

Revitalization of historic centers especially on small island states in the Mediterranean region deserves special attention. Simply because islands, more than other localities depend on a delicate balance between environment, economy and society. They are particularly vulnerable to shifts in any of these factors due to their small scale and difficulty of recovery which can be costly in many respects but may also take much longer time. Additionally, there is a need to confront the threats generated by pressure of the tourism activities over the historic centers in order to keep the unique diversity and polyculture of the Mediterranean. It should always be kept in mind that although tourism would have various positive contributions to the protection of cultural heritage (such as being potentially an important catalyst for the safeguarding of historic fabric; increase local interest in the environment; and being a direct financial resource), over emphasis may transform the urban heritage into a stage-set, as well as over consumption of the precious historic environment (Orbasli, 2000, p.42; Graham, 2002, p. 1007).

Accordingly, the conceptual basis for revitalization of historic centers, which has been suggested by the authors would be considered as an appropriate discourse. It is a clear fact that the multifaceted nature of revitalization calls for utilization of strategic approaches. Pursuing the general strategic planning framework, the suggested model for revitalization of historic centers/traditional settlements would be a substantial tool. It may be argued that a standard model would not always be appropriate for different settlements. However, keeping the overall structure, it may be adopted to different conditions. As a final remark it should be noted that the most important factor in the realization of revitalization is the commitment and involvement of all stakeholders at all levels.
Table 1 Model for Revitalization of HUCs (Hoskara, et.al., 2009)
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