

ICOMOS

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON MONUMENTS AND SITES
CONSEIL INTERNATIONAL DES MONUMENTS ET DES SITES
CONSEJO INTERNACIONAL DE MONUMENTOS Y SITIOS
МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ СОВЕТ ПО ВОПРОСАМ ПАМЯТНИКОВ И ДОСТОПРИМЕЧАТЕЛЬНЫХ МЕСТ

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Heritage Alert - historic center of Colón (Republic of Panamá)

Dear Madam, Sir, Your Excellency,

ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, is the preeminent organization representing professionals involved in conserving cultural heritage world-wide. With a membership of over 10,500 members from 130 countries, ICOMOS advocates for the preservation and protection of cultural heritage places and is an advisory body to the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention. ICOMOS' International Scientific Committee on Historic Cities, Towns and Villages (CIVVIH) was established in 1982 bringing together ICOMOS experts from different professional backgrounds around issues relevant to the planning and management of historic cities, towns, and villages.

To add to the already substantial national alarm, raised among other by ICOMOS Panama, ICOMOS is issuing a worldwide **Heritage Alert**, our most consequential expression of concern, to amplify awareness of the threats to the historic center of Colón and draw urgent attention to its poor state of conservation and condition of neglect.

Colón is probably the first city to combine the railroad with a port in the region. It is the terminal city on the Caribbean side of the Transisthmian route, which connected the Canal Zone and Panama City. Due to its significant historic past and the quality of its urban planning and architecture, it was declared a national historical monumental complex through Law 47, on 8 August 2002.

Colón is a palimpsest, a historic urban landscape (HUL). Like the HUL definition explains, Colón has a layering of cultural and natural values and attributes, extending beyond its boundaries to include the broader urban context and its geographical setting. Despite being the object of countless projects and plans, Colón is currently abandoned to total neglect. The legislation, the diagnoses and plans made for the city's historic center have been forgotten or ignored. Over time, all this has led to its terrible state of conservation characterized by an increasing number of urban voids that generate a feeling of desolation within its historic center. To make things worse, the historic center of Colón is now threatened by demolitions and an amendment to the law that currently protects it, which was passed on 21 September 2021 without the modifications suggested by heritage conservation organizations (Bill 654, that modifies Law 47, of 8 August 2002, which designates the Old Quarter of the city of Colón as a historic monumental complex).

ICOMOS recommends not to remove historic buildings or complexes already protected by law from their current legal protection. Their current state of conservation, although it may appear deplorable, does not justify their demolition, nor does it necessarily mean that they are not recoverable. Furthermore, we recommend improving the time frame for tax incentives and exemptions (including the possibility of renewal), as well as reinforcing sanctions in the amendment to the law, as mentioned in the accompanying ICOMOS Heritage Alert press release. We also suggest the creation of a Manual of Standards and Procedures for the Restoration and Rehabilitation of the historic center of the City of Colón, as part of a regulatory framework with competence in the territory of the historic urban landscape (as defined by the General Law of Culture of Panama).

In terms of management, ICOMOS recommends a series of short, medium, and long-term actions to improve the current state of conservation of the historic center of Colón also set out in the press release. We emphasize the need for an integrated approach to planning and management to guide the evolution of this historic urban landscape and to ensure that all aspects of its cultural significance are maintained. Of particular importance is the establishment of a buffer zone(s) to take into account the historic center's broader setting.

A management structure should be established including both a management body and a management plan with adequate funding and governance to be able to work effectively. Without such a general management plan, activities will continue on an ad-hoc basis without the necessary coordination, often in response to political pressures with little long-term considerations, leading to further losses in heritage values and wasted resources. To safeguard and conserve the historic center of Colón, the commitment of all concerned stakeholders is necessary.

We hope that Panama's and Colón's authorities – who hold the fate of this historic city in their hands, will take on board ICOMOS' call and suggestions for action. ICOMOS, through its International Scientific Committee on Historic Cities, Towns and Villages (CIVVIH), offers the full scope of its expertise to support you in preserving the historic center of Colón, which is both of national and international importance.

Yours sincerely,



Mario Santana
Secretary General of ICOMOS



Claus-Peter Echter
President of CIVVIH
ICOMOS International Scientific Committee
on Historic Cities, Towns and Villages