

TOLEDO AND ITS SETTING: WORLD HERITAGE IN DANGER

The New Municipal Development Plan for the City of Toledo (POM), which was provisionally approved on 2 June 2006, seems to unhinge some of the points relevant for the protection of the World Cultural Heritage at the time of the nomination of Toledo for inscription on the World Heritage List. Independently of further developing of the existing planning on a municipal or regional level the commitments acquired by the State party when Toledo was submitted for inscription on the World Heritage List in 1985 in accordance with the World Heritage Convention remain binding for evaluating the present situation. In order to investigate whether these obligations have been met, in the case of Toledo – contrary to some other cases of earlier inscriptions in the World Heritage List – there are very detailed and precise instructions in the nomination dossier with information on the core zone, special planning zones and a “zone of respect and protection of the landscape and urban silhouette.” As the town of Toledo has decided to create new facts by following the New Municipal Development Plan and to start building developments which can hardly be reversed, it is ICOMOS’ view that the World Heritage Committee should at least be given the opportunity to reflect on time on the consequences for the World Heritage status of Toledo.

Apart from the still respected planning zone of Los Cigarrales and the “special planning zone of the entrance of Toledo by the Madrid Highway” the only purpose of the new Municipal Development Plan seems to be – to put it simply – to prepare the last remaining plots of land in the surroundings of the core zone of the World Heritage for the construction of new buildings. Quite obviously there is a strong development pressure in the area of Toledo, so that under these circumstances it is difficult to make objections against additional extensions of the modern quarter in the east and southern side of the Tajo River, especially since this quarter was planned to be at a considerable distance from the historic city. Nonetheless, the development on both sides of the – so far unobstructed – view axis of the highway to Madrid would have devastating consequences for the familiar view of Toledo as an elevated and fortified city dominating its surroundings. From various important positions the planned housing developments on the hills belonging to the buffer zone would considerably harm the famous silhouette of the town and thus the visual integrity and authentic character of the World Heritage site.

By all means the historic city and the surrounding landscape must be seen as an inseparable unit, while the extensive development of large areas of the buffer zone is going to violate the integrity and authenticity of this outstanding ensemble. This concerns particularly the banks of the Tajo River (las Vegas) and the corresponding view axes towards and from the old part of the town. In this context the proposed development of the area of Vega Alta and Vega Baja (respectively located on the East and West sides of the old historic centre) must be seen as particularly critical; here the new Municipal Development Plan provisionally approved in June 2006 recognises as “developable” the land classified as “protected” by the General Municipal Plan for Urban Planning (PGMOU) provisionally approved on 28 November 1985 according to the documentation presented by Spain in December 1985 for inscription of Toledo on the World Heritage List, which led to the positive resolution of the World Heritage Committee in November 1986. Only after the nomination had been submitted a great part of the Vega Baja was reclassified as “developable” land and its possible uses were also changed, without having previously informed nor consulted the World Heritage Committee. If the new Municipal Development Plan is definitely approved in the next months, one of the consequences will be that important areas of Vega Alta and Baja will be built up, causing the loss of the morphology, the distinctive character and the surrounding landscape of the town, which were considered as outstanding values for its inscription on the World Heritage List.

In this context, it is convenient to draw our attention to the famous paintings by El Greco where the entire cultural landscape around Toledo with the hillsides in the background and the riverside are depicted such as "*View of Toledo*" (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), "*Laocoön*" (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), which complements this view; furthermore the most famous "*View and Plan of Toledo*" (Greco House and Museum, Toledo) or "*View of Toledo*" in the background of the painting of *San José* (Chapel of San José, now in the Sacristy of the Cathedral, Toledo). It is evident that many people visit the wonderful town of Toledo attracted by the outstanding paintings of El Greco and will not tolerate if the "setting" of this town, painted by this artist in such a special way, is lost in an ever-increasing urban sprawl.

One of the ICOMOS' most serious concerns, given the imminent risks observed through the excavation works already undertaken, is the area of Vega Baja because of the Visigoth remains preserved in the ground and representing an important epoch in the history of Toledo and Spain. The foundations and other remains of Visigoth buildings – probably unique in Spain and also substantial for knowledge of urbanism of the Visigoth culture – are presently being almost completely exposed in the course of a large-scale excavation and apparently there are no plans to preserve these important historic traces in their integrity. It seems necessary to remain that even the best documentations as results of excavations cannot replace the underground archive of an archaeological site. Excavations should therefore be better restricted to partial areas, unless emergency excavations are necessary (compare the recommendations of 1956 in the Charter of New Delhi: "Each Member State should consider maintaining untouched, partially or totally, a certain number of archaeological sites..."). Consequently, it is quite surprising to see the extensive use of bulldozers for an archaeological excavation, even if presumably the archaeologists working in Toledo are trying under enormous time pressure to save at least what can be saved. Nonetheless, when visiting the place it is reasonable to think: What will remain of the Visigoth's traces apart from the planned modern town quarter – which according to illustrations on the construction site signs looks comparatively banal? What will there be in the future as a reminder of the Visigothic tradition of Toledo? Moreover, faced with the building-up of these important open spaces we should be worried about certain view axes towards the historic city like the still existing possibility of contemplating the ensemble from a panoramic viewpoint, and also about the connection with the former Roman area and the Roman circus. Sadly enough, the circus is already being cut in two by a road, which presumably is going to be upgraded as an access road to the new town quarter?

The town of Toledo blends harmoniously into the surrounding landscape which is intimately linked to its characteristic physiognomy. Both the natural and cultural values of this particular setting are a substantial part of the ensemble which cannot be understood without the adjacent valley of the Tajo River and its Vegas Alta and Baja.

If the new Municipal Development Plan (POM) is definitely approved, this will result in an irreparable loss of the above cultural and natural values, the urban model, the morphology, the authenticity and the integrity of the World Heritage of Toledo. This will also mean the loss of its character, its identity, its panoramic views and its landscapes, which have been – and still are - protected in a considerable extent by the Spanish regulations and by the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

Surely, it still must be possible to avert the dangers to the World Heritage site of Toledo in connection with the new Municipal Development Plan. That is why ICOMOS invites the responsible authorities and institutions to make an effort for preserving the integrity and authenticity of Toledo, which should be used and transmitted to future generations in the best possible conditions.

Prof. Dr. Michael Petzet
President of ICOMOS
July 2006