
Ancient City of Damascus (Syria)

No 20

1. Basic data

State Party

Syrian Arab Republic

Name of property

Ancient City of Damascus

Location

Damascus

Inscription

1979

Brief description

Founded in the 3rd millennium B.C., Damascus is one of the oldest cities in the Middle East. In the Middle Ages, it was the centre of a flourishing craft industry, specialising in swords and lace. The city has some 125 monuments from different periods of its history – one of the most spectacular is the 8th-century Great Mosque of the Umayyads, built on the site of an Assyrian sanctuary.

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report

10 March 2011

2. Issues raised

Background

In cycle (I) of the periodic reporting, carried out in 2000, the buffer zone issue of the Ancient City of Damascus is referred to twice. Firstly, the State Party indicates that buffer zones have been introduced “in regions where there are not yet any buildings”, but without providing any mapping or administrative details; secondly, the State Party recognises the importance of protecting the view from the outside of the ancient city’s historic ramparts, which mark the limits of the property. Lastly, there are several ancient quarters which are situated *extramuros*, and thus outside the property, but which are extremely important in historic terms.

During the decade which began in 2000, the various mission reports and reporting records refer on a number of occasions to the need to geographically delineate an overall buffer zone, and to define specific regulations for it, in view of urban development pressure.

Decision 31COM 7B.58 (Christchurch, 2007) included a request that the State Party should “define the boundaries of the proposed buffer zone and (...) officially provide a map of this zone to the World Heritage Centre for approval by the Committee”. Meanwhile, the development of a

major urban planning project, near the city wall in the north, made this measure particularly urgent. The joint UNESCO/ICOMOS mission, sent out in 2008, noted the lack of any effective buffer zone, and the undesirable impact this was having on the management of the property’s urban environment. The importance of the ancient historic quarters and the important need to precisely defining the buffer zone boundaries were reasserted in decision 32COM 7B.63 (Quebec City, 2008).

In 2008, the State Party set up a Conservation Committee to set up concertation between stakeholders, study urban planning projects and carry out a thorough study to define the various parts of the buffer zone and the appropriate forms of regulation. The suggestions were submitted to the city’s governor, and were approved on 28 January 2009.

The World Heritage Committee decision 33COM 7B.63 (Seville, 2009) reiterated its request to the State Party to “complete the establishment of the buffer zone to be submitted for approval to the World Heritage Committee”.

Modification

The state of conservation report sent by the State Party in January 2011 refers to decision n° 37A of 26 January 2010 concerning the definition and regulation of the buffer zone. Its boundaries are defined by the blue line on the map provided in the annex.

The management of the zone includes several levels of regulation linked to the situations of various parts of the city outside the city walls:

- The historic districts to the north and west of the property (violet zones) are protected by the Antiquities Law, and as such benefit from the same level of protection as the property itself *intramuros*, particularly as regards any restorations.
- The historic monuments (red) will be studied individually by the Protection Committee and specific regulation will be defined for each one, depending on its individual context.
- Zones A and B (green), which are directly linked to the southern and south-eastern parts of the city walls, will be specifically studied with the assistance of the Antiquities Authority.
- The other parts of the buffer zone (white) ensure that protection is continuous over the whole length of the city walls of the ancient city. Their regulation depended up to now on the general provisions of the city’s Urban Plan. The development plans will be reviewed quarter by quarter, and they will now be subjected to the stricter general regulation applying in the buffer zone. New constructions may be authorised in these areas, but their height must not exceed three stories, and their architectural design must offer a high degree of compatibility with the values of the property and its landscapes, under the control of the Antiquities Authority.

- The River Barada and its natural environment will be covered by a specific programme, with the assistance of the Antiquities Authority.

The buffer zone thus defined by the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums was approved by ministerial decision n° 27 of 26 June 2010.

The property has an area of 82.13 ha, and the buffer zone has an area of 42.60 ha.

3. ICOMOS recommendations

ICOMOS considers the fact that a duly mapped buffer zone has been officially approved by the State Party is a positive step. The buffer zone includes protective elements which refer explicitly to the outstanding universal value of the property and the importance of its conservation. The general provisions are supplemented by the announcement of projects affecting specific quarters or zones. ICOMOS considers that the World Heritage Committee should be kept regularly informed about the progress of such projects.

While the whole of the city walls which define the limits of the property are now surrounded by a clearly defined buffer zone, a significant proportion of the historic quarters outside the walls are not included in the zone, even though the Committee has on many occasions drawn the State Party's attention to their importance, and to the need to link them with the property itself. ICOMOS therefore considers that the proposed buffer zone is an important step in the protection of the immediate environment of the property and its landscapes, but that the State Party must continue its efforts and reflection in this matter.

Recommendations with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that the proposed buffer zone for the Ancient City of Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic, be **approved**.

ICOMOS further recommends that the State Party give consideration to the following points:

- Consider extending the buffer zone as currently defined so as to ensure a better connection between the historic quarters of the ancient city and the inscribed property;
- Continue the regulation and control efforts, either currently under way or announced, for the various parts of the buffer zone, and to keep the World Heritage Committee up to date with progress in this matter.



Map showing the boundaries of the proposed buffer zone