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international council on monuments and sites

ICOMOS Heritage Alert: The Historic Center of Colón (Republic of Panamá)

Press Release

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The historic center of Colón (Republic of Panamá) 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 with Law 47, 8 August 2002.

The historic center of Colón was included by the World Monuments Fund in its [2010 World Monuments Watch List](#) to draw attention to the need to protect the city's historic resources. Following the inclusion on the Watch List, the nominator of the site received funding from the U.S. Department of State's Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation for a survey and inventory of the cultural and architectural resources in the historic center. Unfortunately, nothing much has changed since then...

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.

Based on its considerable body of conservation doctrine, ICOMOS calls for the conservation of the original buildings and urban fabric, adapting these to contemporary needs and to protect the broader urban context and its geographical setting, instead of just isolated buildings.

Considering the adoption on 21 September 2021 of 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 the following:

- Not to remove any 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.
- To reinforce tax incentives and exemptions, applicable to the process of conservation and enhancement of the historic center of Colón (some already exist), with a more realistic expiration date and the possibility of renewal.
- To strengthen the corresponding sanctions for those who violate the law, speculate on real estate, abandon their properties or undertake works without the necessary permits on any building within the protected area.
- Create a Manual of Standards and Procedures for the Restoration and Rehabilitation of the historic centre 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).

Furthermore, ICOMOS recommends a series of short, medium, and long-term actions to ensure effective management and improve the current state of conservation of the historic center of Colón:

- **Short-term:**
 - Establish a working group bringing together all the stakeholders directly or indirectly concerned with the historic center of Colón.
 - Undertake cleaning, repair, and painting of facades and public spaces, as well as emergency measures for buildings which are in particularly poor condition (for example: stabilization, shoring and temporary bracing).

- **Medium term:**
 - Continue and update the inventory and diagnosis of the historic center of Colón.
 - Regulate land tenure issues to sanction those who violate the law, speculate on real estate, abandon their properties or undertake works without the necessary permits on any building within the protected area.

- **Long-term:**
 - As recommended by UNESCO, an integrated approach to planning and management is essential to guide the evolution of cultural heritage places over time and to ensure maintenance of all aspects of their cultural significance. This approach goes beyond the site itself to include any buffer zone(s), as well as the broader setting. Its effective management may also contribute to sustainable development, through harnessing the reciprocal benefits for heritage and society. Understanding our cities in this way provides us with important knowledge to guide planning decisions and manage change.
 - A management structure should be established that includes 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.

ICOMOS has written to the authorities responsible for the cultural heritage of the historic center of Colón both at national and municipal level with this call for action and its suggestions. ICOMOS, through its International Scientific Committee on Historic Cities, Towns and Villages (CIVVIH), offers the full scope of its expertise to support them in preserving the historic center of Colón, which is both of national and international importance.

About ICOMOS

The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) is a unique non-governmental, not-for-profit international organisation committed to furthering the conservation, protection, use and enhancement of the world's cultural heritage.

ICOMOS is dedicated to the development of common doctrines, the evolution and dissemination of knowledge, the creation of improved conservation techniques, and the promotion of cultural heritage significance. It has built a solid philosophical, doctrinal and managerial framework for the sustainable conservation of heritage around the world.

As an official advisory body to the World Heritage Committee for the implementation of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, ICOMOS evaluates nominations and advises on the state of conservation of properties inscribed on the World Heritage List.

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