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THE SAFEGUARDING OF URBAN AND
ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE IN ARAB COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

Since the last few years, in practically all regions of the world, greater attention has been focused on the problems of safeguarding not only historic monuments, but also the environment in which they are located: in other words, old quarters and historic cities. More recently, and to an increasing extent, this is being extended to include the natural environment, in view of the phenomenon of urban and population growth, which is especially rapid in the Third World.

While the concept of the protection and safeguarding of the historic urban heritage and historic urban landscape is now relatively well understood, in particular since the adoption by the General Conference of UNESCO in 1976 of the Warsaw-Nairobi Recommendation and the 2011 Paris Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscape, the application of this concept is far from complete, and persistent and therefore patient efforts still need to be exerted by heritage conservationists, who are seen by some as ‘romantics’ or the ‘enemies of progress’.

Hence one of the key concepts in any policy for the rehabilitation and restoration of a historic quarter is that of involving the population concerned as closely as possible. Naturally, there is a risk of rejection wherever preservation measures are advocated on the basis of alien models and concepts which do not take account of the way of life and the specific culture of each historic town.

For more than 40 years, UNESCO has endeavoured to put into practice this approach of allying the restoration of monuments with the revitalization of historic centers, in the safeguarding campaigns such as The Medina of Fes in Morocco, the Historic Walled City of Sana’a and the City of Shibam in Yemen .

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Introduction

In the foreword of a booklet published by the World Bank in 2001 on “Cultural Heritage and Development – a framework for action for the Middle East and North Africa”, we can read under the signature of Mr. Jean Luis Sarbib, Vice President: “the wealth of cultural heritage endowments of the Middle East and North African countries is not only a testament to the importance of the region’s contributions to humanity’s history. It also

represents an enormous capacity to support an inspire the development of the region's countries into future”

This approach from the World Bank recognizing the rich heritage of the region as an asset and starting to bring support to its preservation and development was one of the mayor changes at the turn of the last century on the side of such an important financial institutions. The idea to develop and implement programmes of rehabilitation and valorization of urban cultural heritage with the support of the World Bank was part of the large process of awareness and knowledge about historic centers which started in Europe in the middle of the 20th century.

Since that time, in practically all regions of the World, greater attention has been focused on the problems of safeguarding not only historic monuments, but also the environment in which they are located: in other words, old quarters and historic cities. We can refer, for example, to the “Malraux legislation”, in France, promulgated in the '60 for the protection of one of the oldest areas of Paris called “Le Marais”.

More recently, and to an increasing extent, this is being extended to include the natural environment, in view of the phenomenon of urban and population growth, which is especially rapid in poor countries.

While the concept of protection and safeguarding of the historic urban heritage is now relatively well understood, in particular since the adoption by the General Conference of UNESCO of 1976 of the Warsaw-Nairobi Recommendation, and more recently in 2011 the adoption of the UNESCO Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscape, the application of this concept is far from complete. Persistent and patient efforts still need to be exerted by heritage conservationists, who are seen by some as “romantics” or “enemies of progress”.

This is what prompted in the Eighties of last century, the experts of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) to draft a charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas which is designed to supplement the Venice Charter of 1964.

The basic text of this Charter was in fact adopted in 1986 in the historic city of Toledo and subsequently promulgated by the General Assembly of ICOMOS held in 1987 Washington.

We may well ask how, in the modern age, in the face of the multifarious changes affecting the world in which we live, we can be able of seeking to integrate our cultural heritage in our everyday environment and thus preserve that heritage from destruction.

This is a fundamental question, for the mere concept of protecting and safeguarding the cultural heritage is likely to fuel a purely theoretical debate, whereas the threats to that heritage are very real.

The broad issues involved in restoration

The conflict between those who, at the various levels of decision-making, are in favour of the preservation of old quarters, and those who feel that preservation is not a worthwhile operation, springs from a difference of approach to the question of the heritage. Should we restore? And if so, how and what should we restore?

It must be realized that conservation requires much more time and greater effort, and therefore considerably more funds, than does the planning and implementation of new construction projects.

All those who, in the past 40 years, have taken an interest in the preservation of historic quarters have noticed that both urban planners and public finance officials are more inclined to favor renovation and reconstruction projects in self-contained, isolated sites than to give their approval to the rehabilitation of ageing structures, an operation whose requirements in terms of cost, time and human resources are often not sufficiently well established. It is quicker, more profitable and more efficient to bulldoze everything flat and to build afresh, without any constraints.

However blunt this claim may seem, it is nonetheless one that is made, and is often used as an argument against those who are concerned with the safeguarding and protection of the cultural heritage. It is up to the latter to find justifications and valid arguments in favor of preservation and enhancement. As the French historian of art André Chastel has written, 'This sense of discontinuity and conflict is exacerbated by the fact that the expansion of industrial civilization everywhere, in the centre of towns, in the surrounding suburbs and in rural areas, puts modern, and generally dreary and stereotyped, structures cheek by jowl with older buildings. For the first time in history, a fierce battle for the possession and planning of building space is being fought between those who value the past and those who lay claim to modernity, and there is a constant need to justify one's position'.

A strategic approach concerning "urban heritage"

The new approach of cultural heritage and the global agreement on an innovative and development-based vision of culture fine-tuned and streamlined through the experience of the World Commission for Culture and Development (under the Chairmanship of Mr. Pérez de Cuellar) the Stockholm Conference of 1998, are presently made operational and integrated into all aspects of UNESCO's programs and budget.

It is important to remember that UNESCO's Constitutive Act charged the Organization to "see to the conservation and protection of the universal heritage of works of art and of monuments of historical or scientific interest". For more than sixty years, UNESCO has been active in promoting and organizing international action in this area which is the key of our identity and the source of our inspiration.

In the sixties a large number of Third World States, entered UNESCO recognizing that "political emancipation is relatively meaningless if it is not accompanied by cultural emancipation" and have expressed their attachment to manifestations of cultural identity, particularly the tangible ones.

This resulted in a rapid development of UNESCO's programmes, notably in the field of conservation of historic urban fabric and historic cities. Special attention was therefore given to this issue.

Through the years, urban heritage which was held in the states' lap started to be of interest for the private sector and the 80's has seen flourishing a great number of private initiatives.

In parallel to this evolution, the international campaigns for the safeguarding and preservation of heritage of mankind probably offer one of the most privileged arenas for implementing the idea of common and

universal heritage. The perception of a cultural site, which in former times was limited to religious monuments and those relating to political authority, has been extended: it now includes common or garden constructions such as dwellings, workshops and tiny shops. Just as the period considered being worthy of interest now includes the 19th and 20th centuries. Railway stations, factories and ancient harbors are now regarded as cultural sites in so far as they testify not only to architecture but also to economic and social life. Accordingly, in the same way as archaeological sites, all sites should now be protected without fail as a legacy to future generations.

A city's future should therefore be based on its identity and particular features in order to preserve what may be called the "urban landscape". This "urban heritage" should be the starting point for the development of all urban policy. The heritage and its accumulation over time — the history of its buildings, streets, districts and residents --- should be regarded as the force and foundation of all sustainable development of historic cities and of their future.

The uncontrolled frenzy of construction, land speculation and massive rural to urban migration or excessive tourist development, have resulted in ecological, aesthetic and cultural disasters at the very heart of historic cities. The need to harmonize the new economic and social needs of the

inhabitants with the original urban pattern without compromising identity and authenticity is now a major challenge.

In view of the special, elemental role of culture in the quality of life, strategies should be worked out to protect historic centres and promote spaces for encounter and exchange so that the city's cultural identity may be grounded in its history, architecture plurality and diversity. This should enable the development of the historic heritage of cities to be regarded as a vector for sustainable development.

Cultural heritage as a tool for development

In the strategy research paper on cultural heritage and development in the Middle East and North Africa prepared in 2001 by Mr. Michael Cernea, former Senior Adviser for Social Policy of the World Bank, it is stressed that "in the past, narrow development models have overlooked the importance of cultural dimensions in inducing and managing development, underestimating the intrinsic economic capacity of the cultural sector for empowering development. Like many national governments, the World Bank has by passed many of the sector's issues and needs. Despite some exceptions (for example, the successful rehabilitation of old Ilafsia in Tunis, under an urban development project), the economic resources of the

cultural patrimony have been seldom mobilized...” but, during the past five or six years several governments of the Middle East and North Africa have increasingly called on the World Bank to assist in addressing the needs of the cultural sector particularly for linking urban and tourism investment projects with direct support for heritage preservation,

- a. safeguarding endangered patrimony assets in ways that incorporate them into development strategies and yield economic and social benefits,
- b. expanding the institutional capacity for managing these national resources."

It is time that the benefits of cultural heritage have often proved difficult to value in traditional economic terms.

This question was discussed in detail during the Florence Conference in October 1999, entitled “ Culture Counts”, cosponsored by the Government of Italy and the World Bank in cooperation with UNESCO.

In one of the thematic working group of Florence Conference dedicated to "Valuing Heritage — Beyond Economics" Mr. Jean Luis Luxen, the then Secretary General of ICOMOS asked "Why do we conserve? Who will benefit from the investments?"

When asking such questions, it is clear that the human being is at the core — the user, the visitor. Dealing with cultural values requires a kind of idealistic approach, an intercultural dialogue, whereby the prime responsibility lies with the public authorities, not with the funding agents ... Culture has an important social dimension: the quality of the place where one lives. In this sense, the built heritage is a resource for human development.

The diversity of heritage in various economic contexts or cultures makes the process of assessing cultural heritage itself a cultural value. Cultural heritage has an important dynamic perspective, which makes it difficult to determine what return to expect and how to set priorities for investment. Heritage conservation is essentially future oriented. Immediate benefits or externalities should always be evaluated for their long-term effects ... Economists have an important role, but other experts must help in the decision-making process, in full dialogue with the local population, while making them aware of the importance of heritage."

UNESCO International Campaigns

While in the mind of the public, UNESCO is inextricably linked with the idea of the preservation of heritage, credit for this belongs historically to the international campaigns, beginning with the first of these, concerning the

In fact, the governments and authorities concerned no longer consider these sites simply as reminders of their illustrious past. They are increasingly seen as factors to be taken into account in the country's development and as pillars of the tourist industry. Awareness of all the facets of the heritage takes different forms in different places. But several countries in the region have plans for or have begun work on new museums. This is the case of Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and, of course, Egypt, in the Middle East alone.

Steeped in history, the countries and societies of this region are cultural lodestones which are exploited by the tourist industry, still in its early stages in the region, but fairly well developed in some countries, such as Morocco, Tunisia, Syria and Egypt. Certain countries already receive substantial numbers of tourists and have gained experience. Others now opening up to tourism can benefit from that experience to avoid making the same mistakes.

The wealth of the cultural, artistic, archaeological and urban heritage of the countries of the Arab region has been noted by donors, who have made financial and technical contributions to heritage-safeguarding projects in the region. Bilateral contributions in this field have, in most instances, been linked to the work of archaeological missions. The main donors are primarily countries with a long tradition of archaeological research in the Middle East and North Africa.

The best-known examples are the contributions made in the context of the international safeguarding campaigns launched by UNESCO:

Monuments of Nubia (Egypt),

Nubian Museum in Aswan (Egypt),

The Archaeological site of Carthage (Tunisia),

Medina of Fez (Morocco),

Ancient Cities of Sana'a and Shibam (Yemen)

Archaeological site of Tyre and its surroundings (Lebanon).

Out of these examples, I would like to drive your attention in particular on two of them: the Medina of Fez, in Morocco, and the ancient city of Sana'a in Yemen

Medina of Fez (Morocco)

The campaign to preserve the Medina of Fes was launched in 1980. The scope of this campaign was very large involving major elements of urban renewal sometimes well beyond UNESCO's mandate. The estimated cost in 1980 was about 500 millions US Dollars.

Fund raising for this campaign was among the main difficulties experienced by UNESCO, and there existed somehow a misunderstanding about the role of the international community about the financial subsidies for this historic city, which is one of the largest living medieval cities in the world.

Although listed on the World Heritage list in 1982, the conditions in the Medina were rapidly deteriorating, accompanied with a process of social and economic change. This process which has direct consequences on the physical urban fabric (creation of slums, densification, and increase in number of abandoned houses falling into ruins or to be demolished) has

been considered by the Moroccan authorities and by several experts as reaching a critical phase.

It was therefore urgent to prepare a credible plan of action "whose nature will make the thousands of individuals or collective operators in the Medina believe that this trend is in fact going to be modified and that the Medina can once again be an area interesting for real-estate investment."

Since 1988/1989 and with the assistance of UNDP, the Moroccan authorities started a new project which consisted in the preparation of a global pre-feasibility study for the preservation of what in fact concerns a living city, a city which is playing an important economic and social role, and which has in the same time a very high cultural and spiritual value in the kingdom, since its foundations by Idriss in the 8th century A.D.

Following the presentation in 1992 of the UNDP project to which UNESCO was associated, the World Bank and a number of donor countries were interested in launching operational activities in cultural heritage field.

This trend happened at the same time with a concrete involvement of Moroccan donors starting with the late King Hassan II himself sponsoring and financing the restoration works of Al Madrasa Al Misbahia.

A pilot project of restoration of Dar Adyel Palace was launched by UNESCO in 1995 with the support of Italian Fund in Trust under the supervision of the Division of Cultural Heritage of the Ministry of Culture and ADER-FES. Works were completed by end 1998.

A loan of 17 millions US Dollars was signed in 2002 between the Moroccan authorities and the World Bank following several technical missions undertaken by experts notably from the MIT advanced School of Architecture, in the framework of an urban rehabilitation project.

The issues are still very complex and missions from UNESCO are repeatedly sent, at the request of the Moroccan authorities, in order to advice on situations where heritage is at risk like the consequence of the decision to cover by a structure in concrete slabs the river "Oued Boukhrareb" (July 2003).

The effort being extended principally by the Moroccan authorities and the growth of interest in international circles combine to make it a flagship campaign at the end of the XX century. The Moroccan authorities have provided several million dirhams for the launching of a number of rehabilitation projects. These projects link the restoration of monuments and the stabilization of the infrastructure to the restructuring of the crafts quarter and the revival of traditional techniques.

Indeed, this campaign was much more than a mere embellishment operation. As is often the case in many cities of the world heritage, it raises socio-economic questions involving the development of sites and the redefinition of the architectural and urban functions of buildings. It also has implications for the protection of their environment. If they are to remain part of the living heritage, historic monuments must be reintegrated into contemporary life.

The case of Sana'a (Yemen)

Due to its geographical position in the mountainous region of southern Arabia, Sana'a has enjoyed a long and rarely interrupted reputation as a centre of Islamic civilization and learning, and has conserved building techniques based on specific local traditions. Old Sana'a can be considered as a unique city of great architectural beauty.

Following a period of voluntary isolation, the country has opened up to the world only recently, and Sana'a, the capital, has entered into a phase of extremely rapid development. The homogeneity of the old town (sheltering today approximately 40,000 people) appears to be jeopardized by vehicular through-traffic. The conversion of wadi saila into a traffic artery and the

decay or demolition of parts of the city walls are signs of the pressures affect rip the structural unity of the historic fabric.

Similarly to Fez, the chief problem consists of attempting to preserve the viability of the old town as a whole by establishing a sound relationship between the old town and its new extensions. As stressed in a preliminary report prepared with the assistance of UNESCO, the main objectives should be the improvement of the residential environment in terms of accessibility and services in order to uphold the commercial functions of the old town and maintain the mix of its socio-economic groups. Improvements should be linked with a policy for safeguarding the specific qualities of the existing housing stock.

The example of Sana'a the capital of the Yemen Arab Republic is absolutely typical of the conflict which brings the supporters of 'modernity' into conflict with those responsible for safeguarding the heritage of the past. After the appeal launched by the Director-Genera on behalf of the International Campaign to safeguard the old city of Senate, Paul Balta wrote in: "Le Monde" "Sana'a is one of the most fascinating and most endangered cities in the world, possessing a unique, strange and breathtaking beauty. There can be no traveler who has not instantly fallen in love with this site."

Yet the city whose origins go back more than 2,000 years is now threatened by the 'modernization' which has occurred since the fall of the monarchy in 1962. The narrow streets invaded by vehicles which leave no room for pedestrians, rubbish piles up in the streets, the gardens are left abandoned and above all, hideous concrete buildings have sprung up.

Faced with a serious and complex problem, the authorities therefore turned for help to UNESCO which, at its General Conference held in Belgrade in 1980, adopted a resolution requesting the Director-General to undertake technical studies for the safeguarding of Sana'a with a view to an appeal for international support, an appeal which was eventually launched on 19 December 1984.

The studies carried out on Sana'a, in conjunction with the Department of Antiquities of the Yemen, have shown that it was no longer enough to discourse philosophically on preservation and restoration by referring to the Venice Charter of 1964 or the Nairobi recommendations of 1975; account must also be taken of all the problems involved in the integrated development of the historic area as a whole in its economic and social environment.

This is a possible reply to one of the most common criticisms leveled at those involved in conservation work, who are accused of wishing to put the

old parts of cities on display in glass cases' and turn their inhabitants into 'a tourist attraction', like a combined zoo and fun fair.

The project devised for the safeguarding of Sana'a seeks to ensure: the preservation of the medieval city with its mosques, its hammams, its madrasas, its samsaras or caravanserais, its palaces and its traditional houses where the inhabitants of the old city will be provided with all modern conveniences such as sanitation, piped water supply, electricity and telephone.

Likewise, traffic regulations and the provision of car parks will help to restore to normal the pedestrian precincts overrun with traffic incidentally."

However, the Yemeni authorities do not have all the human and financial resources necessary to carry out such a vast programme, and it is for this reason that international public opinion informed about the need to safeguard Sana'a, as was also done in the case of the monuments of Nubia and Borobudur.

The late President of GOPHCY (General Organization for the Preservation of the historic cities of Yemen) wrote:

"The Old City of Sana'a possesses a uniqueness in Yemen and in the world which can only be compared to the special quality of Venice; that is,

its value lies not so much in the merit of the individual buildings, important though they may be, as in the unforgettable impression made by the whole an entire city of splendid buildings combining to create an urban effect of extraordinary fascination and beauty.

But today Sana'a, described by the poets as the 'pearl of Arabia', with its white and ochre minarets, domes and tower-houses, is threatened by the irreparable decay that modern development inflicts on historic cities.

Conscious of the need to preserve and protect this heritage of mankind, the Yemeni Government has called upon UNESCO and in turn UNESCO was mobilizing international support to aid in carrying out a multidisciplinary programme of action for the preservation and restoration of the historic core of Sana'a'.

The Yemeni Government has equally taken steps to strengthen the administrative structure responsible for the campaign in order to make maximum use of the resources available both from outside and from within the country.

In addition to the work undertaken by the Yemeni Government and within the UNESCO/UNDP project YEM/88/006 1 -Assistance for the Preservation of the Old City of Sana'a- considerable aid has already been

received from France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Netherlands and Norway”

Among the first rehabilitation projects which started in the old city, we should mention Samsarat al Nahas, near the Central suq.

Caravanserais or “Samasir” were used as rest houses for merchants and caravans from different parts of the Arabian Peninsula and further from Asia through the “Silk Road”, to Sana’a, which was an important centre for commercial activities.

Restoration of Samsarat al Nahas was carried out by local contractors and jointly financed by Norway and Yemen.

Several Similar projects were implemented for the restoration of Al Qasimi quarter, and the Samsarat Al-Jnmruk with the support of Netherlands, the Samsarat Al-Mansouriah with the support of Germany, Bayt Al Ambassi with Switzerland, the Ma’ad Abhar neighborhood with Italy, the Southern part of the City Wall with France and DPRK.

With the provision of soft loans through the World Bank al the sewage system was established in the Old City followed by the paving of the streets with the contribution of Yemen and the support of the Netherlands and Germany.

Conclusion :

Historic preservation, for example, was one of the first cultural domains to be considered "bankable". Already in the 70's, for instance, both UNDP and the World Bank began to devote funds to the preservation of the built environment and for crafts development. In historic city centres, the adaptive re-use of historic monuments as public buildings, often as museums, has proved cost-effective and has helped rejuvenate the economic base of the old part of the city, generating both income and employment. "Preservation pays", a slogan coined in the United Kingdom in the 1980's soon found adherents across the globe, as the idea of "conservation as development" gathered legitimacy, both in theory and in practice. We could talk of the "economy of heritage". I imagine that financial institutions, such as the World Bank, have even more interest in cultural heritage because it presents management issues, financial and economic aspects. Nevertheless this economy of heritage has no common points with the running of an ordinary business, as well as dealing with unique identity resources is not similar to managing goods. We can consider at this stage that are still in an experimental phase.

The challenge is still to reconcile economic opportunities and conservation. This "cultural capital" should not be diminished, instead it should be replenished. This principle has not often been taken into account and the failures of "top down" approaches have resulted in a profound hiatus between ordinary civic life and official concern for the cultural past and, all too often, in uncontrolled private exploitation.

At the same time, the heritage is destined to play a major role in development especially on account of the growth of tourism which in many countries constitutes an important source of income and employment. The role of tourism as a means to raise resources for heritage conservation and development in general becomes evident. A recent UNESCO Round Table of experts recognized the great potential of tourism, but also warned that tourism has to be managed within a global strategy, one that puts mechanisms in place that allow the local population to obtain "economic advantages and satisfaction from any touristic development, in terms of jobs, income and self-pride. National or local authorities should make a profit in terms of direct and indirect taxation on heritage resources as well as in terms of image and international recognition."

Despite enormous efforts made and a greatly increased popular attachment towards heritage based on an ever-increasing public awareness

of the richness of the heritage, the heritage is still seriously threatened, not always well preserved, and most observers agree that a variety of factors have combined to produce a spectacular and inexorable acceleration of human and natural causes of loss or deterioration. Given the shortage of financial resources, if we want the States to fulfill their responsibilities, the area of cultural heritage should be integrated into a central cultural policy at the national planning level. This policy should allow those institutions and specialists who are directly responsible to gain sufficient weight when interests are in conflicts and heritage is threatened to disappear.

Heritage with tourism and today's information technologies must be appropriated and made accessible in more imaginative ways, shared more widely within and between nations, used more creatively to re-invent a living culture which will soon be valued as the heritage of the future — and last but not least, nurtured more wisely as an important source of income and employment.

Thank you,

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