

Threats and Measures: Some Examples of how to Deal with the Protection of Cultural Heritage on both a Short and Long-Term Basis

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Resumen

Peligros para el patrimonio y medidas para contrarrestarlos - Ejemplos de protección del patrimonio cultural a corto y largo plazo

Las guerras y los desastres naturales son las dos causas principales de las situaciones de emergencia, que en su mayoría son imprevisibles. No obstante, la ignorancia y la pobreza son los enemigos más peligrosos contra los que se debe luchar. Se pueden aportar soluciones, ya sea en el plano jurídico (por ejemplo, elaborando legislaciones) o en el plano de la participación de la población en la protección de su patrimonio, sensibilizando y responsabilizando a las comunidades para que lo consideren como un legado de su pasado histórico. Además, es necesario fomentar la adquisición de conocimientos entre la población para que se percate de que la protección de los monumentos forma parte de un todo coherente. La realización de esas actividades exige la colaboración de los políticos, los docentes y los poderes públicos, así como la movilización personal de cada individuo.

Résumé

Menaces et mesures : quelques exemples concernant la protection du patrimoine culturel à court et à long terme

Les guerres et les catastrophes naturelles constituent les deux causes principales de situations d'urgence. Les causes sont majoritairement imprévisibles mais l'ignorance et la pauvreté sont les plus dangereux ennemis contre lesquels il faut lutter. Des solutions doivent être apportées aussi bien sur le plan juridique (législation) que sur celui de l'implication de la population pour la protection de son patrimoine. On suscitera ainsi une responsabilisation des communautés envers le patrimoine comme héritage du passé. En outre, il faut encourager l'apprentissage et les connaissances auprès de la population afin qu'elle considère les monuments comme un tout cohérent. La mise en place de ces types d'actions passent par les politiciens, les enseignants, les autorités légales et par la mobilisation de chaque individu.

What are the threats? To simplify my argument, I shall mention only three main categories: warfare and political action, disasters caused by nature, and human neglect and incompetence.

Wars are always destructive. The World Wars destroyed lives and devastated countries on a scale impossible for us to comprehend. Civil wars and internal wars over recent years have shown a pattern with increasing genocide and the destruction of symbols and monuments associated with the victims. Every war breaks traditions and cuts off the transfer of knowledge and experience to following generations, forcing them to start again from scratch and in frustration.

We have seen only too clearly in past years and wars how mankind destructively repeats itself in futile efforts to destroy the cultural heritage of "others". In destroying, or in efforts to destroy, they increase the value of their targets while also destroying their own history and the reason for such destruction. It is a well known fact that History cannot be hidden or eradicated. It is there, concealed beneath the ruins and rubble, waiting to come out into the light and put right the evildoers.

The same destruction is caused by political and religious fundamentalists who believe that by destroying monuments and symbols of their opponents they will get more disciples gathering around new symbols and will make them forget what was there before.

I say this with all due respect for individual freedom of thought and belief, but I cannot accept situations where religion and political affiliation are used for destructive purposes to humiliate and blaspheme.

Natural disasters have also followed mankind throughout history. Our optimism prevents us from preparing ourselves for such events, as we believe it can only happen once in a lifetime. The human memory is short and furthermore a natural disaster is seen as an act of god, so what can we do about that, but behave well and pray?

Finally human neglect, ignorance and incompetence are very dangerous factors in the destruction of our past.

Everything old, well known and ordinary can fade into the background to the point where we no longer realise its value and beauty. In a city we do not miss a building with its proportions and place in the cityscape until it is torn down. The burial mounds which were removed because they stopped farmers ploughing straight furrows were distinctive features of the landscape and served as landmarks. The old tool my grandfather used in his trade connected me to my roots, and so did the songs my mother sang to me as a child and which my grandchildren have never heard. These things have no value until they are gone, and here we have one reason explaining neglect and deterioration as well as destruction. Modernity has often meant destruction instead of rethinking.

What can we do?

Wars

How can we prevent war? I wish I had the answer! It is my belief that it all depends on us and that each and every one of us has the duty to struggle for peace and to do so in our everyday work. When museum people meet, they do not fight but exchange ideas and experience on how to conserve and explain the heritage. We must also be able to see our work as a contribution to peace and understanding.

Natural disasters

Through our experience as humans and as professionals sitting on the history book, we should be able to prepare ourselves for all kinds of disasters through foresight and planning. We do not put our archives in the basement under water-level near a river; we repair the roof on the storage building so that rain does not destroy the collections; in volcanic and earthquake regions we secure objects to prevent them falling off shelves. The most elaborate example I have seen is the National Museum in Wellington, New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa. The building stands on rubber cushions to reduce the effects of earthquakes; it is set on pillars designed to let floodwaters pass underneath the building and in the storage areas small objects are embedded in foam and the shelves are fitted with safety-belts.

Human ignorance is the worst enemy and the most difficult to fight

There are many ways to do this and I will touch upon a few. First of all we need to know what we have: which are the monuments to be protected, which are the collections and the objects, the tools and products to save for the future? We need to identify and make inventories of monuments, buildings, burial sites, sacred places, industrial sites, products and antiquities, and also of man-made constructions in the landscape, e.g. dams, ditches and walls. When we know that, we can start thinking of what we shall protect and how we shall protect it.

Every country needs laws and legislation for the protection of the cultural heritage. But a law means nothing if the population does not know about it and the meaning of it. In many countries we find a well developed legal system for the protection of heritage but nobody, either authorities or members of the public, ever implements it.

How can we make the population understand and be responsible? The population must be involved! Participation was the credo of the Latin American adult educator Paolo Freire in his political struggle to improve the conditions of the oppressed. Participation is also of the utmost importance in our work.

One example is Sweden which has one of the oldest laws for the protection of antiquities, dating from the 17th century, but it was not until the end of the 19th century, when the whole population had become literate, that an awareness of the values of the past took root. This coincided with a structural change in Swedish society, moving from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy and with migration from the countryside to the cities and industrial sites. Some people noticed that old techniques and tools were disappearing and being replaced by industrially produced cheaper products manufactured far away; they also noticed that modern agricultural methods destroyed archaeological monuments. In that situation they understood the importance of saving old objects and monuments as records of the past so that the story could be told. All over Sweden small groups of citizens started to collect objects, textiles and even old houses which themselves stood as records and could be used to house the collections. This is a popular and voluntary movement which has played a major role in the protection of heritage. The members of these small associations are protecting what

they have in their village museums, but also act as sources of information for regional and national museums. These people are involved and feel responsible for the heritage in their community. In Sweden today we have around 3,500 local museums and associations engaged in courses and studies of local history and organising craft days and festivities. They have a total membership of around 500,000.

I am aware of the differences between our countries. Sweden is a small country with the same population as any big city around the world. I cannot imagine how many associations we would have in India if 5% of the population were involved to the same extent.

Another more recent example comes from Kosovo. The foundation Cultural Heritage without Borders has been working on the restoration of a traditional Albanian type building, a kulla, which was demolished during the war. Our site architect has spent three years building up a team of local architects and craftsmen who are doing a fantastic job in cooperation with the owners of the buildings. Recently a week of cultural heritage days was organised, with exhibitions, lectures food stalls and the founding of an NGO for ongoing monitoring of local heritage. An "embryonic" museum was also formed as people began to collect old objects related to the building.

The National Museum in Sarajevo, with which I have been cooperating over the last five years, has staff who know what to do in a crisis. When the fighting started they carried most of the collections down to the basement and covered showcases and windows with whatever they had. Old exhibition panels covered showcases and all the curtains were used to make sandbags to cover the windows. The staff guarded the premises to prevent looting and hid the most valuable items in places known to only a few people. They managed to save the collections through their own hard and practical work. The fact is that more things were destroyed after the war because of leaking roofs and broken windows. But the museum lost momentum! Many of the members of staff disappeared and with them went their knowledge. There was no money for repairs, salaries or heating. The whole country needed food and jobs, so why should anybody give priority to the museum? I say that the reason is simple: in this country divided into ethnic groups which had been fighting one another for several years, the museum was the only institution that was a monument covering a country where all these groups had been living side by side in peace for many hundreds of years. The museum, with its documents and objects is a good example and a place where ordinary Bosnians can see that it is possible to live together.

The organisation I have been working with, Cultural Heritage without Borders, cannot protect heritage from being attacked, but we can be involved in the period after, working for the future by identifying and upgrading the values that have been destroyed and are being threatened. There was systematic destruction of Bosnian buildings, mainly mosques, by the Serbs and the Croats, while the Croats and Bosnians were shooting at Orthodox monuments, and so on. In Kosovo, the Serbs were destroying Albanian monuments. What we have been doing is identifying important buildings with relevance to the history of the area and local traditions and with future use. We do not take a stand for one group or the other, but try to show that the world outside cares about and sees their local heritage as part of a common human heritage.

Restoring a building is one thing, but what's more important is to restore self-esteem, professional pride and knowledge about old techniques and materials. Very often, old and well-tested techniques are forgotten and replaced by the use of modern materials that are not compatible with old materials. Every one of our projects is therefore, to a certain extent, a conservation and restoration seminar where our restoration architect cooperates with local architects, engineers, builders, carpenters, masons and end-users. Every project becomes a model for the next. Very often we find the old constructions and materials are the best and should be used again. Most can be combined with new demands for comfort and fire security. Everybody can see in the photos of the earthquake in Turkey some years ago that the 16th century mosques withstood the quake while the modern houses collapsed.

The establishment of well composed professional groups with extensive experience is an investment in the future. These groups will take on apprentices who will learn from the older generation and perpetuate craftsmanship. Our Swedish experience has shown a lot of positive effects, both for restoration work and for employment. Workers with experience, but with problems finding employment in present day conditions on construction sites, can use their skills on projects which depend more on fine, time-consuming craftsmanship rather than quick and easy solutions. All over Sweden we can see local groups working on the restoration of churches and other buildings of importance. In France, I have been told, masters of arts and crafts can be given the title of "National Master" with a duty to hand on their knowledge to future generations.

Knowledge

Probably the most important thing anybody and everybody can do is to increase the level of knowledge on cultural heritage as such, improving the understanding of the values of heritage and of the importance of heritage among the population as a whole, through politicians, teachers, law-enforcement authorities and people in the street. This is a gigantic enterprise and must be combined with general educational endeavours in any country wishing to protect its cultural heritage.

One very important factor in the protection of heritage is the fight against poverty. Poverty and ignorance go hand in hand. If you need to feed your family and the drought has destroyed your crops, it is difficult to turn down an offer to sell old objects you have found in the ground when you have no idea of the purpose they serve and who they belong to. Dealers from rich countries exploit this situation and "vacuum clean" such regions to satisfy customer demand in the west. We have many examples of looters destroying major archaeological sites in their search for «new» antiquities. The poor local population needs money for subsistence and custom officers are underpaid and know nothing about export regulations applying to national heritage, while the looters and smugglers know all the gaps and openings in border protection.

Whose responsibility is it and who is going to do it?

We, in parts of the world where antique dealers are found, have to combat the import of any illicitly exported cultural objects. As museum professionals we must respect museum ethics and never accept such materials, and in our daily life we need to inform both the public and dealers of the destructive effect of this illicit trade.

The States must have laws to protect their own heritage and resources to implement them, and the States must make it possible to train people to do this work. It is difficult to find people with suitable knowledge in countries without university courses in subjects such as architecture, archaeology, conservation, ethnology and law, and where there is very little teacher training.

General education for all, plus history as an important subject in public schools will be the way to develop awareness amongst the population on a long-term basis. We have to reach the younger generation. I think I had my first introduction to the cultural history of my community in elementary school through teachers who taught us to look at the surrounding landscape with new eyes, who interpreted what we saw and who taught us respect for the records and vestiges of our past.

Museums have a mandatory role in educating the public. It is not enough just to show the objects, they must be put into a context that relates to the visitor. It must be possible to understand how the stone-axe which I can see in the display case is linked to us and our time. The museum should also teach respect for heritage and inform visitors of laws and of ways of protecting what is left. An interesting example is a project many years ago in Mexico known as the "Little Museum House". Out in the villages, museum workers teamed up with schoolteachers and encouraged children to ask their parents and grandparents if they had any old objects at home and to explain the history of the objects. These were then placed in a small shed built for that purpose and the children helped organise an exhibition. The parents were invited to the opening and for the first time the villagers could see a visual presentation of their local history. They were involved and gained a better understanding of their own place in history.

Conclusions

- Develop institutions for the protection and maintenance of cultural heritage;
- develop a legal system for the protection of cultural heritage;
- make inventories of buildings, monuments, archaeological remains, museum collections, etc.;
- increase knowledge of cultural heritage and its protection amongst the people going through museums, schools and universities;
- museums are important educational and mediating institutions. Increase preparedness amongst scholars, politicians and the mainstream public by using the knowledge and experience of history;
- increase the awareness and vigilance of the population through education and involvement;
- combat looting and illicit trade in cultural property;
- have a broad-ranging attack on poverty and ignorance as the best protection for any kind of disaster.