

Is Preservation Missing the Point? Cultural Heritage in the Service of Social Development

Introduction

The allied fields of cultural heritage conservation and social development have traditionally worked independently and with little collaboration, despite countless common interests and a shared sense of purpose. The careful observer will notice a common philosophical commitment to hands-on work and to the notion of public welfare writ large. Both disciplines champion the concepts of sustainability, appropriate technologies, and external support in a state of equilibrium with local capacity building. Still, they proceed with their work largely unaware and uninterested in each other's doings.

As the intensity of global networking and the rate of cultural homogenization increase, this estrangement becomes less and less practical. Recently, a number of new ideas from both sides of this professional divide have emerged to challenge the sanctity of this separation and to seek new forms of field-based collaboration. At the heart of these initiatives is the idea that progressive and collaborative forms of cultural asset protection constitute social development. Due to the traditional and near-total estrangement between the fields, reintegration appears ideologically appealing but functionally unlikely. As long as these artificial boundaries remain, constituent communities will miss out on benefits they would have reaped from development-oriented cultural heritage conservation initiatives.

Preservation's Purpose

For much of its young life, the field of international cultural heritage preservation has understood the primary purpose of its work to be preservation for its own sake. The complete restoration of a site or monument to a former – perceived or actual – state of grandeur has been the profession's rallying cry and, though few practitioners could enumerate them with any clarity or consistency, the social advantages stemming from this work are assumed to be self-evident. The field has congratulated itself for the masterly technical accomplishments that accompanied these restorations. In this way, the science of conservation has made enormous strides that are documented extensively in the professional literature.

Meanwhile, long-term social impacts have been, as one might expect, far less thoroughly understood.

A fixation on the conservation of individual sites and monuments has made the international cultural heritage conservation field a natural and willing partner of the tourism industry. Tourism now provides three core ingredients for the cultural heritage profession: substantial funding, a global agenda and sturdy rationales for the routine prioritization of monumental architecture. Though many of the earliest “modern” preservation battles were local in character and undertaken by local actors, the community-based approach to protecting the built environment has not proved as durable or appealing as project selection based on art-historical criteria. Such criteria are increasingly indistinguishable from those underlying the logic of tourist-focused consumption.

With these and countless other incentives for collusion, managers of tourism and managers of cultural heritage have discovered a highly successful kind of symbiosis. Operating from the unimpeachable but traditionally weak bastion of non-profit institutions, preservation has provided boutique services that generate enormous profits for the tourism industry, sometimes dwarfing their own returns along with the attendant benefits to the constituent communities tied to their projects.

It is easy to trace the flows of funding and expertise into and out of conservation projects. In doing so, a few patterns emerge: that governments often support the preservation of places and objects considered to be central to a highly affirmative patriotic narrative, that wealthy private donors often pay for the preservation of places and objects they personally consider precious, tasteful or exotic, and that industries with a heavy reliance on tourism often support the preservation of places and objects that travelers will pay to see. Conservation specialists are hired to protect the key destinations of the tourism trade, and by doing so safeguard the lynchpin of a meta-industry that embraces hotels, airlines, taxis, trains, restaurants, and so forth. These specialists often perform services with a very high net market value for rates that are quite low in relative terms, subsidized by the non-profit industry and buoyed by the notion that cultural heritage protection is an intrinsically charitable endeavor.

When pressed, some cultural heritage conservation professionals will complain of the Faustian bargains involved in their field’s lopsided relationship with the tourism industry and lament the apparent absence of viable alternatives. The remainder of this paper will seek to spoil this vacuum and outline a development-oriented focus the field should take action to engage.

Social Development

In an increasingly globalized and inter-dependent world, the stability of individual countries and regions has rightfully become the concern of the entire world. When communities confront periods of crisis in the course of natural or man-made cataclysms, the processes of redevelopment must dwell on the foundations of social well being in traumatized communities; this is not just a matter of moral obligation, it is a highly pragmatic strategy for countries – including the US - whose long-term interests are interconnected with peaceful, productive markets.

Working together, government agencies, aid organizations, humanitarian relief groups, environmental organizations and others apply their resources locally to provide necessary provisions for troubled communities. Plans for post-trauma recovery and rebuilding are often quickly drafted and implemented; conventional wisdom asserts that stepping back to study the traditional social needs and expectations of a beleaguered community is a luxury that cannot be afforded when basic survival is not yet assured. Even when traditional or emblematic built environments are used as targets during conflict episodes, the cultural heritage profession rarely presents itself as a potential partner for these reconstruction programs. The field tends to remain aloof, waiting to offer expert assistance only after stable resolutions have been achieved and other more “basic” forms of assistance have been delivered. In most cases, this sluggishness costs the conservation community its chance to be a creative and serious contributor in the stabilization process.

But rather than a “hands-off” attitude, the cultural heritage preservation field has much to offer communities in crisis, particularly where building traditions still play a vital role. Whether the crisis is of epic proportions—as in conflict or natural disaster scenarios—or of a less dramatic and more incremental nature, the traditional built environment must be tallied as a critical asset that should be leveraged against the long-term success of a redevelopment program.

Post-conflict scenario and preservation

In an attempt to illustrate the role the preservation profession could play in social development programs, it is useful to examine an extreme scenario that throws the core issues into sharp relief. Violent inter-ethnic conflicts frequently result in destruction of the iconic built environment because it represents a place where emblematic and psychologically potent associations can be exploited directly for purposes of widespread demoralization within an enemy population. In most cases, the cherished structures and places linked to the cultur-

al values and traditions of ethnic group “A” are anathema to political rivals in group “B.” For this reason, they commonly become targets and used as convenient, efficient levers for human suffering.

Unfortunately, current examples of this phenomenon abound: demolition and bloodshed surrounding the sacred temple complex of Ayodhya, in Gujarat, India; the calculated destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan; the felling of the Old Bridge in Mostar, Bosnia; the toppling of Hussein statues in Baghdad; the razing of the World Trade Center towers, and so on. With the destruction of symbolic buildings, political messages are sent and large social groups are intimidated or demoralized.

Despite the ubiquitous, glaring and predictable association of inter-ethnic violence and emblematic built environments in the context of inter-ethnic conflict, it is curious to note that expertise in the protection or renewal of architectural icons is generally treated as irrelevant to post-conflict rehabilitation planning due to the false assumption that purposeful destruction of cultural heritage and iconoclasm are merely symptoms of much larger political machinations. Though a mosque or statue may have been purposefully destroyed in order to demoralize a minority ethnic group or facilitate demographic engineering, the repair of the same object is most often a low or altogether missing priority on the “to-do” list of reconstruction agencies. Accordingly, experts in the domain of the historic built environment are typically not invited to play a meaningful role in core processes like post-war refugee return.

The field tends to remain aloof from political controversy and views its own activities as a mollifying kind of ethically-positive, politically-neutral stewardship. When the objects of its interest and investments themselves become political bargaining chips in the context of inter-ethnic conflict and the available neutral ground shrinks, these attitudes are put to a severe test. In general, the profession has confronted these challenges by offering its expert assistance only after stable political resolutions have been achieved. This strategy removes the cultural heritage professional from urgent social development processes.

It is imperative that such habits and assumptions be overturned; cultural heritage conservation professionals need to embrace their untapped potential to contribute in direct and meaningful ways to collaborative social revitalization efforts where group identity and cultural territory are violently contested.



1 and 2: The tragic destruction of Mostar's Old Bridge raises all the familiar questions about reconstruction; Mostar now has a new bridge, but where have the famous Bridge divers disappeared to? What would entice them to return?

Burden of proof

If all this is true, why have the preservation and development communities ignored these concepts?

Part of the answer is obvious. The preservation profession as a whole has no compelling incentive to contemplate or increase the social development benefits of its work because its patrons—governments, tourism managers, and private connoisseurs—have little vested interest in vulnerable communities. When forced to speculate about social benefits associated with their work, conservators often rely on trickle-down impact models that posit the following:

Structures of high art historical significance are inherently inspiring and, the most endangered ones are in communities also in need of social development, so conservators will save them, hiring locals to assist who will gain self esteem when they are reminded of a more illustrious past while welcoming foreign visitors who pay to bask in the aura and invigorate the local economy, etc.

This logic collapses in large part because it is syllogistic; it is anchored at both ends by values that are generally foreign to the steward communities. Other loopholes can be found: not all steward communities identify directly or in a positive way with the monuments of greatest interest to external patrons; tourist revenues rarely accrete locally; and the benefits of tourism are sometimes nullified or outweighed by its assorted disadvantages to the host community. Whether or not these criticisms are valid, it is strange that the proposed benefits that emerge from the trickle-down model are never quantified or studied by the institutions that defend it. Its effectiveness, rather, remains a subject of perpetual and almost philosophical speculation.

This point leads to a second reason why international cultural heritage conservation has yet to forge a substantial role in social development: relief and poverty reduction institutions capable of testing the relevance of traditional built environments in larger processes of community strengthening have no reliable data with which to calculate a return on their investment, and accordingly opt against such an expensive gamble. The data are missing because few studies documenting the long-term social and economic advantages exist, because cultural heritage professionals frequently do not demonstrate an interest in measuring the social impacts of their work. This unfortunate cycle keeps the conservation profession marginalized, the development profession less efficient, and struggling communities underserved.



In Mali, multiple interpretations of significance compete within a single World Heritage Site – a protected area containing the cliffs of Bandiagara – where the primary tourist target, at above left, receives conservation funding while local communities struggle to build a local school that reflects the best qualities of both traditional and contemporary architectural design. Slowly, conservators are asking unconventional questions like: Which structures are more deserving of subsidy? Which scenario embraces the more sustainable conservation strategy?

For now, the burden of proof rests with the cultural heritage conservation field regarding the potential value of its contributions to social development processes. A specialized role for historic preservation professionals is needed that allows them to contribute in communities where normal patterns of innovation and obsolescence have been interrupted. If such a specialization existed, field research could result in thorough case study analysis, which would in turn inform timely and constructive interventions, confirming that built environment issues should be prioritized alongside infrastructure and environmental in prescribed contexts.

Activating this positive chain reaction requires a new attitude toward inter-disciplinary partnerships, forged among col-

leagues from all relevant disciplines with a shared concern for post-conflict stabilization, group security, humanitarian relief, refugee return, and the psychological preconditions for individual productivity. Recognition among these professions of common goals and responsibilities could lead to new and fruitful projects in some of the places and sites the international cultural heritage preservation field finds most important. Until then, specialized organizations will need to continue to work across disciplinary lines to implement projects consistent with extending the role of the preservation profession in social development programs.

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