

# InterAction - Library

## How Architectural Conservation Can Serve Social Development

From **Monday Developments**

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The allied fields of cultural heritage conservation and humanitarian relief went their separate ways long ago, despite countless common interests and a shared sense of purpose. Their field projects now bear little resemblance to one another, and collaboration is rare. 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 have emerged to challenge the sanctity of the boundary and seek new forms of field-based collaboration. This new thinking from both sides of the professional divide now offers the opportunity for rapprochement.

At the heart of these initiatives is the idea that both cultural asset protection and humanitarian relief amount to social development, and both are spokes of the same ideological hub. A good example is found in the concept of "transcriptive conservation," which borrows from both biological and sociological theory to render more permeable the boundaries separating cultural heritage protection from development. If proven effective on the ground, this approach could pioneer a new mode of collaboration to the benefit of communities receiving diverse forms of external aid.

Conventional cultural heritage conservation projects identify neglected objects and structures and endeavors to prevent their physical decay. How these buildings and sites contribute to the health and productivity of local communities is typically of secondary interest to investors, whose concern is with the retention of historically or culturally singular fabric. The resource conserved is usually a particular place, memory, work or art or piece of emblematic architecture. The social relevance of these projects is often weak, yet few dare to question the desirability of keeping intact what is beautiful and extraordinary from an art historical perspective.

The transcriptive model of cultural heritage conservation begins with the criterion of social relevance, passes through the object, and ends with fresh forms of cultural production; it seeks to siphon useful, successful solutions from historic sources into new construction, blending them with current technologies. The result is hybrid architecture that takes advantage of innovative thinking across a broader spectrum than construction reflecting either traditional or current building practices. In this approach, the object being conserved is not a thing; it is a set of transferable solutions in the form of a material, technique, structural system or functional design. Solutions are borrowed on a highly complex but pragmatic basis based on the needs and expectations of a specific constituent community.

In societies where building traditions still constitute a significant source of social and cultural capital, such hybrid construction solutions are superior to current practice with respect to their contribution to social development. They offer ease of long-term maintenance, local cultural compatibility, and

familiarity to the user. It seems natural that a material, structural detail, or design solution proven sound and efficient through repetition and longevity should infiltrate new design intended to serve the same community or region. If this is true, why hasn't the concept been embraced by the development community?

Part of the answer is obvious. Many forms of appropriate, transferable, and traditional technology have already been adopted into the routine of humanitarian relief provision. Agriculture and rainwater collection systems revived in rural areas injured by premature or mandatory upgrading offer a good example. Still, architecture has generally not been part of this trend. Few studies exist documenting the long-term social and economic advantages of hybrid technology; short-term cost comparisons, on the basis of which most development agencies award construction contract, rarely favor traditional methods, materials, or designs. Hostage to the vagaries of the manufacturing and labor industries, housing construction has routinely sacrificed appropriateness or even safety for profit. Looking at the devastation of 2001's earthquakes in Gujarat provides a vivid example of this unfortunate truism.

The failure of standard concrete housing units erected in the aftermath of the El Salvador earthquakes of 2001 provides another vivid illustration. External relief agencies responded to that crisis by funding the speedy construction of as many prefabricated houses as their budget would allow. This met with a mixed reaction at the local level; of course the homeless were happy for shelter, but the specified units were not consistent with their cultural expectations and were viewed as an indirect form of forced assimilation, and one that increased dependence on unfamiliar materials and processes. Many rural, especially indigenous, communities saw the disappearance of architectural idioms as tantamount to the loss of a native language.

Had it been applied in El Salvador, the transcriptive conservation approach would have combined the material advantages of the region's time-tested architecture (natural thermal retention through employment of mud brick and spatial distribution corresponding to social functions) with the innovations of seismic reinforcement and chemical consolidants. This hybridized architecture, the product of targeted study and careful needs assessment, promises better durability and popularity because it is strong, familiar, serviceable, affordable and attractive to the people who use it. When enough evidence is in hand, the superiority of these forms is easily and widely acknowledged.

Until then, collaboration across disciplinary lines is essential in order to implement projects consistent with the model of hybrid architecture and transcriptive conservation.

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