[Reframing] “World Heritage”

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This article critiques the concept of heritage preservation as currently practiced under the aegis of international agreements such as the 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Too often such efforts result in the internationalization of cultural monuments as frozen icons for tourist consumption. Alternatively, heritage preservation may be used in nationalization campaigns that serve primarily political, not cultural, ends. Effective heritage preservation should rather be multidisciplinary and socioeconomically sustainable, linked to the present cultural context of the sites in which it occurs. The article is based on close observation of recent work in the old city of Tripoli, Lebanon, and reference to other preservation efforts, particularly in Cairo, Egypt. As a conclusion, it offers an alternative approach to preservation that in the case of Tripoli would involve encouraging the local population to engage in the continued production of built heritage.

This article addresses the concept of World Heritage based on my research on urban conservation projects in historic medieval cities in the Arab world. Over the years, this research has developed into a critical inquiry of the concept of “World Heritage” as conceived by the international treaty of the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by the UNESCO in 1972, and as practiced through “universal” tools and implementation strategies imposed by international funding agencies involved in heritage-protection projects. The research is currently focused on the medieval city of Tripoli, Lebanon, but the questions and the issues, I believe, have wider implications.

My claim is that cultural heritage has occasionally suffered at the hands of both national and global constructs and actors who claim to defend and preserve it. The position I take is that restoration or conservation efforts should neither be about the internationalization of heritage, which often results in packaged, frozen icons to be understood by the world public; nor should it be about the nationalization of heritage, which often results in its translation into the contemporary political construct of national identity. Heritage should rather remain linked to the cultural context to which it belongs; it should be defined as that which is beyond the physical and visible; and it should be recognized...
as an open process of production and transformation sustained by roots in the identity of a local community.

This is the argument I will try to construct and elaborate here based on a critique of the concept of "World Heritage." By focusing on Tripoli, I hope to demonstrate the inapplicability of this concept and of the supposedly universal tools used to implement it in a densely populated historic urban center with its own culture-specific political and social dynamics, and subject to region-specific forces of modern development and postwar reconstruction (FIG. 2). I will also attempt to propose an alternative approach to urban conservation projects within living historic cities — one that deviates from the present emphasis on frozen icons detached from their context and packaged for consumption by the tourist industry.

My principal site of analysis is the historic core of Tripoli, the second largest city in Lebanon, with an estimated population of 500,000 people. In 2003 Tripoli was one of five historic cities (along with Baalbek, Byblos, Sidon and Tyre) to receive World Bank funding for rehabilitation. In April of that year the bank approved a US$31.5 million loan to help the Lebanese government stimulate the local economy and conserve and manage the built heritage of the five cities.

Interestingly, Tripoli was not among the cities listed by UNESCO in 1984 as World Heritage Sites in Lebanon. Only Baalbek, Byblos and Tyre were listed then, as a result of the recognition their ancient monuments received under the international classification criteria of "outstanding universal value" (FIG. 3).

CRITIQUE OF THE CONCEPT OF WORLD HERITAGE

Before I turn to a more specific case of Tripoli, I must address the notion of universality embedded in the concept of World Heritage and the inherent contradictions it contains.

As applied to projects throughout the world, these contradictions surface in attempts to recognize the diversity of cultural practices while at the same time searching for universal values. Such a discrepancy makes any selection criteria of "outstanding universal value" problematic.

During its early deliberations, the World Heritage Committee posed the question, "What is it that constitutes the 'outstanding universal value' of a cultural or natural treasure?" By way of an answer, the Convention specified that a property or site must satisfy the following selection criteria: "A cultural monument: could be a masterpiece of creative genius; have exerted great architectural influence; be associated with ideas or beliefs of universal significance; or may be an outstanding example of a traditional way of life that represents a certain culture." These terms celebrate a grand assortment of abstract and undefined ideas such as treasure, genius, monument, universality, and that which is outstanding!

Above all, however, the concept of World Heritage as defined by the Convention’s terminology and selection criteria reveals a contradiction between what is designated as a “cultural” monument and the process of its universalization. This
process can only lead to a divorce between heritage value as defined by the Convention and local cultural context, one where any sense of regional or local identity is doomed to be lost.

In practice, applications of the Convention so far also reveal a tendency to freeze monuments into an iconic existence and lock their interpretation into a singular reference to a particular historic era. This interpretation is then packaged and marketed to a global audience through the tourist industry. Ultimately, this process is based on disciplinary memory, a concept Anderson has defined as distinct from social memory.

Monuments with supposedly universal value are classified according to their place in an art-historical timeline, according to such concerns as typology, style and building technique. An archeological method is then employed to restore them to an appearance corresponding to a layer of historical use that is deemed most authentic, pure and unique. This problematic universality also neutralizes the plurality of meaning in any cultural product, and denies the dynamic process of cultural regeneration of the built heritage — especially as it cuts social and economic links between the local communities and inhabitants of such sites.

PROFILING TRIPOLI

Tripoli presents a totally different challenge to the international practice and criteria than that ideal case for which the Convention was designed. The city’s historic core dates to the medieval period, when the ancient port city, currently called al-Mina, was destroyed by the Mamluks. Following its destruction in 1289, the Mamluks rebuilt the city inland near the hill of the Crusader castle of Raymond de Saint-Gilles. The historic core that now exists here has 195 monuments dating from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, 45 of which are nationally registered as historic monuments. The majority of these buildings date to the fourteenth century, and constitute in their totality an intact medieval urban fabric. They range from religious, to civic, to secular buildings and include mosques, madrasas, khans, and hammams. They include buildings that have been alternately used, reused, neglected, altered, and added onto for many centuries as dictated by a changing urban dynamic.

Though most are now in a sad condition of neglect, they have so far been spared from restoration and renovation under the universal frame of the Convention. Instead, the entire ensemble still bears the marks of having been intensively inhabited since the fourteenth century.

Dealing with a living city with urban artifacts of this nature provides a twofold conservation challenge. The first challenge lies in the fact that the numerous historical buildings and their surroundings form an historic urban fabric. The built heritage in this case is far removed from the condition of a single monument or archeological ruin. The second challenge lies in the fact that the city is a fully inhabited, evolving entity. Its functioning monuments are thus dynamic social spaces whose rehabilitation would require the rehabilitation of a whole city across multiple layers: economic, social, political — as well as physical.
Figure 4. The Mosque of AlBurtasi, Tripoli.

Figure 5. The Saqraqiyya Madrasa, Tripoli.

Figure 6. The portal of the Mosque of AlAttar, Tripoli.

Figure 7. Khan AlSabun, Tripoli.
Cases like Tripoli, no doubt, present a serious conceptual challenge to the internationalist view that cultural heritage should be “preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole.”8 And it revealed the elitist and discriminating application of the so-called criteria of “outstanding universal value.”9 This remains the case, and the practice, despite adoption in 1994 of what came to be called the Global Strategy for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention.

The 1994 Global Strategy report represented a major reform of the conception of cultural heritage underlying the 1972 UNESCO Convention. In particular, it represented a shift of focus from concern for single works of monumental architecture to a conception of heritage that recognized cultural groupings. As it then stated:

the history of art and architecture, archeology, anthropology, and ethnology [should] no longer be concentrated on single monuments in isolation but rather on considering cultural groupings that were complex and multidimensional, which demonstrated in spatial terms the social structures, ways of life, beliefs, systems of knowledge, and representations of different past and present cultures.9

Alongside the reformed conception, the Global Strategy report critically acknowledged that “all living cultures — and especially the ‘traditional’ ones — with their depth, their wealth, their complexity, and their diverse relationships with their environment, figured very little on the list.”7 And it accepted that there existed “imbalances on the List between regions of the world, types of monuments, and periods.”10 Therefore, it recommended that “the list should be receptive to the many varied cultural manifestations of universal value through which cultures express themselves.”7

Yet, despite these statements recognizing the presence of a diversity of valuable cultural expressions, the Global Strategy still reiterated “universal value” as its main criterion, and it still endorsed a restricted set of implementation strategies and tools. In addition, the Operational Guidelines of the World Heritage Convention did not evolve in correspondence with the reformulated views of heritage value, despite the testimony presented at various international meetings of experts such as those in Nara in 1994 and Amsterdam in 1998.

For example, formal characteristics and physical properties, such as design, material and technique, still dominate the test of authenticity.13 The Nara conference subjected these standards to considerable debate, and in the end yielded the Nara Document on Authenticity. However, this claimed that “the essential contribution made by the consideration of authenticity in conservation practice is to clarify and illuminate the collective memory of humanity” — another concept worthy of critical assessment.14

Despite changes in the framework, then, practices remain stuck within the older conceptual frames of the Convention. Restoration policies and efforts still focus on monuments, still look for outstanding universal value, and still find in tourism the force of economic development. One can see this particularly well in the case of Cairo, another medieval living city, and one that was inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 1979.

CAIRO AS AN EXAMPLE

Today, implementation methods associated with the rehabilitation of historic buildings in Cairo remain largely focused on restoring them as icons of the time at which they were born. This has meant that historical buildings that are part of everyday life are turned into museums of sorts, guarded by the threshold of a ticket booth. Very few projects, such as the Azhar Park project, sponsored by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, aim to “go beyond mere technical restoration to address the question of the social and environmental context, adaptive reuse, institutional sustainability, and training.”15

Restoration projects in Cairo have also revealed how the UNESCO model process is subject to influence according to the political agendas of funding sources. A good example is the restoration of certain Fatimid monuments there by the Bohras, a religious group branching from the Ismaili sect, thus also
claiming descent from the Fatimids. By funding the restoration of Fatimid monuments, this group can be seen as making a claim for a certain historical layer of the city and its artistic production over others. In particular, the restoration of two fine monuments — al-Azhar, built by al-Mu’iz in 971; and al-Hakim, built by al-Hakim between 990 and 1003 — has replaced much fine carved stucco and brick work with white, imported Italian marble. This material has emphasized notions of light and reflection that are central to the doctrine of the Ismailis, representing the guiding light of the “Imami” (fig. 9).16

Such restoration work is not only technically problematic but it introduces serious issues that revolve around the important question “Whose heritage?” In addressing such issues, it is therefore critical to avoid divorcing the built heritage from its present cultural context. Such an alienation from local social practices ultimately raises issues of claim and reclaim, authentic and reconstructed historical narratives, all of which may merely justify a group’s role definition or political agenda.

This is neither a case of nationalization, nor of internationalization, of cultural heritage. Nevertheless, it does reveal the vulnerability not only of the conceptual frame but also of implementation strategies on the ground. This example also raises issues relating to the layering of a city’s history and built environment. Which layer is worthy of recovery, restoration and celebration, and by whom? What this implies is a negotiation of heritage that cannot avoid being discriminating, even when it comes to individual monuments. Al-Azhar, for example, while originally being built by the Fatimids, subsequently evolved to incorporate Mamluk and Ottoman layers. Similarly, it incorporated a shift of function from a Shi’i symbol of enlightenment to a Sunni educational landmark. Such transformations give it equally important roots in today’s cultural practices as in historical memory.

Such examples show how any conceptual frame or implementation strategy for urban conservation projects within the context of a living city has to accept the present dynamics of that city and the nature of its monuments as “open texts.” I use this phrase in the Derridian sense, as subject to reading, interpretation and regeneration by its users. If this process is to remain sustainable and open ended, members of the local community must be empowered to participate in it. Otherwise, the historical significance of the building may be hijacked.

As is the case today, this is most likely to result in the uncovering of particular layers of history, or the freezing of monuments or urban settings into iconic, static museum pieces. Such limitations of interpretation, generally engineered to facilitate tourism, ultimately block creative regeneration of meaning.

THE PROJECT FOR THE REHABILITATION OF TRIPOLI’S HISTORIC CITY CENTER

The ongoing effort to inscribe the old city of Tripoli on the World Heritage List will no doubt pose similar challenges to existing conceptions of heritage and the implementation strategies used to facilitate it. This was made obvious to me as I set out to document the twin process of negotiating Tripoli’s “built heritage,” and then attempting to “represent” it. The project to rehabilitate the historic city center is funded by the World Bank as the major component of the Cultural Heritage and Urban Development project, or CHUD. This heavily politicized process has so far involved international and local key players, agencies and experts. But it has hardly brought any participation from the principal stakeholders, the population that inhabits and regenerates the city every day.

On April 21, 2003, when the World Bank approved the loan for the project, it issued the following statement of objectives: “The World Bank last week approved a US$31.5 million loan to create the conditions for increased local economic development and enhanced quality of life in the historic centers of five main secondary cities, and improve the conservation and management of Lebanon’s built cultural heritage.”17 It went on to quote Joseph Saba, World Bank Country Director for Lebanon that, “This project treats Lebanon’s cultural assets as economic assets and integrates them into the life of the community to achieve local growth.” Saba continued: “We saw an opportunity to focus the Bank’s attention on private sector development, on education and proper commercial exploitation of ancient ruins so that local residents can benefit.”18
To understand better what is meant by “proper commercial exploitation,” one has to understand that the CHUD project, as stated in its own agenda, “is based on the World Bank’s country assistance strategy for Lebanon, which recognizes the importance of preserving Lebanon’s built cultural heritage and developing environment-friendly tourism.”

The stated objectives of the project, particularly those pertaining to the integration of the project into the life of the community, may have been appropriately formed. However, they were compromised almost from the beginning through the selection and articulation of designated tasks for consultants by the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), the project’s executing agency. In the case of Tripoli, it specified that these should initially be limited to infrastructure, public open spaces, and facades along the main spine of the *souq* (fig. 10). Upon the recommendations of the Debs-Tabet consultant team hired to conduct the study and produce a design proposal, these were later articulated to include the following:

*Urban rehabilitation and/or construction of: (a) Facades in the old *souq* of the historic city; (b) Public spaces rehabilitation in the old town; (c) Historic monuments (*Khan Al Askar, Khan & Hammam*); (d) *Abou Ali River* public spaces and around the Citadel; (e) On-street parking and meters in the old town; (f) Lot 131 rehabilitation; and (g) Selected houses.*

The selection and prioritization of areas and types of intervention did not therefore involve any community-based process. Neither were there surveys, negotiations, nor any other form of participation.

Recognizing the limitations imposed by funding structures that prioritized public space, facades and infrastructure, the Debs-Tabet consulting team did opt to collect data and conduct extensive surveys to build an understanding of the social profiles and economic dynamics of the city’s inhabitants. And their goal was to incorporate the findings into the proposed urban conservation project (fig. 11). But, once more, funding conditions limited the scope of such work,
since construction money could be spent only on publicly owned property. Thus, all the privately owned khans, shops and residences that make up the connecting tissue of the old city remained outside the funding equation (fig. 12).

Instead, funding parameters stressed that design intervention be limited to infrastructure and open public spaces, an orientation that pushed public space design and the restoration of the facades of monuments. It thus gave priority to that segment of the city which served as its main public artery and spine of its souq, and that could also serve as an important launching point for interventions to come.

The consultants, who believed in a more integrated approach that acknowledged the human/social layer of the city, did manage finally to negotiate a proposal for the restoration of an urban residential block as a possible model for future financial packages (fig. 13). But again the issue of private ownership had to be overcome. The negotiated result was that the funded project would offer to hire residents to upgrade the infrastructure, as long as they agreed to spend 30 percent of their pay on restoring and upgrading the old houses in which they lived. The consultants also proposed the rehabilitation of Khan AlAskar and its adaptive reuse as a community cultural center, including workshops and exhibition spaces to support local arts and crafts and facilitate a new social spatial discourse (fig. 14).

Despite the efforts of the consultants, the most serious failing of the CHUD project setup was that it did not allow for proper involvement of the community at the early stage of negotiating the city’s heritage. The very selection of what to restore and how is an act of historical editing that is rarely either innocent or objective. By preferring to engage only with public institutional and governmental offices, such as the municipality and its council, the project limited itself to being an exercise of disciplinary memory that did not reflect the contemporary cultural understanding of the city’s inhabitants. This became intertwined with a funding process that operated only within the realm of public ownership and an economic-development agenda that targeted the tourist industry. Thus, a process emerged whose very structure has alienated the local
community, and if not corrected, will likely disconnect the restored sections of the city from the daily lives of its inhabitants. Such an outcome will likely also produce resistance. In the case of Tripoli, this lack of engagement with local concerns has caused tensions between the funding agencies and their local experts on one side, and the local community and its representatives on the other. Further, by failing to engage the larger community in the process, resistance to the project has itself been taken over by certain prominent members of the community who were its representatives on the municipal council. In certain cases these figures have sought to present themselves as the true authorities on the city and its history. Among them, for example, is Omar Tamari, a prominent historian of Mamluk Tripoli — the historic layer the city is most known for, because it is the only city the Mamluks planned and built that remains to a large extent intact.

The argument of these local authorities is grounded on claims of “authenticity,” based on their vision of the city as a Mamluk creation with which they retain historical ties. But this claim, too, is problematic because it is based on their self-designation as heirs to and custodians of that heritage. Yet, with this claim to legitimacy, they have set out to defend the city from what they perceive as an intrusion imposed from above. They see this as involving an illegitimate expertise hired internationally — and from Beirut’s Christian elite. One soon begins to see how all forms of heritage appropriation sooner or later can be traced to one political position or another. The question “Whose heritage?” also re-emerges. Or, rather, in this case, “Whose cultural identity?” since local cultural identity remains largely based on heritage.

To better answer the question, a recent study by Nijkamp, Bal and Medda has argued that one must first adopt a broader definition of heritage: “a broad concept including values, attitudes, customs, historical memory, language, literature, art, architecture, etc. A very important and visible part of heritage consists of the built environment, the context of urban living.”

PROPOSING AN ALTERNATIVE

By arguing against the frame of internationalization and globalization and for a broad definition of heritage, it is possible to propose an alternative approach to conservation. This would not base itself on recognition of “unique and outstanding monuments,” archeological methods of conservation, and disciplinary memory. Rather, it would recognize cities as dynamic entities whose living built heritage is produced every day by diverse spatial practices and is sustained by social memory. Such social memory is based on events and associations with the place and on interactions with it on daily basis, rather than on its physical properties alone.

Underlying this alternative conservation ethic would be a premise that cities themselves can be the trustees of cultural heritage, and, more importantly, that sustainable city life should be the carrier of socio-cultural heritage, to fine-tune the term. This is then a call to reorient the conservation enterprise toward local or regional identity as an alternative to the more ambiguous “cultural identity” or the even more problematic “national identity.”

Local identity is that which lies in the rooted social, economic and political practices of the local inhabitants, and of the everyday (fig. 15). It is an identity that emanates from living with historic monuments and dwelling in them on a daily basis, and it belongs to the city’s inhabitants who pass by them, meet in them, pray in them, and so on. These are places that are an extension of their daily existence — places where community members are missed when they do not show up for work, a regular meeting, or prayer.

A representation of that social discourse with historic buildings can be seen in the soap workshops of Tripoli. An article in the Khaleej Times recently reported on perceptions of and affiliations with places in the old city in which people dwell (figs. 16, 17):

In a corner of Tripoli’s ancient souk where his father taught him the secrets of their trade, Mahmoud Sharkass...
uses the same gestures to teach his own teenage son Ahmed how to produce the handmade olive oil soaps the family has created for two centuries. “Ahmed no longer goes to school. He is my only son and must learn the trade of his ancestors,” says Mahmoud, as he cut blocks from a bar of laurel-perfumed soap in his workshop at the Khan of the Egyptian, the ancient inn in Tripoli’s old town . . . “I follow to the letter my own father’s methods. I am happy just to introduce new colours and certain methods of carving the soap to diversify its forms,” says Mahmoud, seated beneath a portrait of his father dated 1940. It was in 1800 that one of his ancestors introduced the technique of making soap based on olive oil and bay laurel into the Khan, then a caravanserai for Egyptian traders.24

Such strong affiliation with historic buildings is an important element of local identity construction. However, it is a construct that is jeopardized by turning the monuments into museum-like public institutions cut off from the people’s daily lives. Ordinary residents should not need to purchase a ticket to pass guarded gates to gain access to them.

When using the term local identity, I am also referencing the field of modern urban and regional planning. According to Mignolli and Nijkamp, this . . . considers local identity conservation as its main goal. And, in doing so, it directs an effective means of sustainable city and territory development. To highlight the importance of protecting and valorizing the identity of places and communities obliges decision-makers — limited by the perennial problem of financial resources and the complexity of certain decisions — to establish priorities and methods for cultural goods recovery within the context of global actions for territory development and human evolution.25

Figure 15. Houses and shops in the old city of Tripoli.

Figure 16. (Top) Khan AlMasriyeen, or the Egyptians, Tripoli. Figure 17. (Bottom) Soap workshop in Khan AlSabun, Tripoli.
This approach deliberately aims to create implementation methods and design strategies that are multidisciplinary and socioeconomically sustainable. It embodies the effort to move away from conservation policies focused only on the unique and outstanding using conventional archeological methods. Developing sustainable urban cultural heritage will mean recognizing the layering of a city and its open process of production. And it will require integrated multidisciplinary methods of conservation, development and management.

Mignolli and Nijkamp have developed such a frame that blends the disciplines of economy, planning and heritage preservation. They claim it presents “a general framework for local identity analysis and historic environment preservation within the context of a more comprehensive urban ecological planning paradigm.”26 “Based on the notion of sustainable development [it offers] a taxonomic approach designed with a view to the creation of an evaluation framework that addresses historic entity, public and private values, public and private action strategies, and impacts on various relevant social groups.”27 They also assert it gives “due attention . . . to three sources of value: the intrinsic values of cultural goods, the potential of cultural goods for local or regional development, and the needs and the willingness of the local community concerned.”28

Any economic development plan integral to urban conservation or rehabilitation must first invest in the people and support them in staying in the old city and continuing to produce its heritage. If tourism is to be introduced, it needs to be an invitation to a full experience and interaction with the place and its people, and with the social practices of today. It should not be limited to gazing upon the masterpieces of yesteryears.

NOTES

1. This article was presented as a keynote address at the Ninth IASTE conference held in Sharjah, U.A.E., in December 2004. Its title then was “World Heritage: A Redefinition.”
2. For the full text of the Convention, see whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?id=175.
3. Five sites in Lebanon are today inscribed on the World Heritage List. In 1984, the World Heritage Committee inscribed four of these sites: Baalbek, Anjar, Tyre and Byblos. The Ouadi Qadisha and the Forest of the Cedars of God were inscribed on the list in 1998. For the full list of inscribed properties, see whc.unesco.org/en/list/.
4. See whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?id=160.
5. Ibid.
7. For a discussion of Tripoli’s history, and for monographs of its monuments, see H. Salam-Liebich, The Architecture of the Mamluk City of Tripoli (Cambridge, MA: 1983); R. Saliba, Tripoli: The Old City (Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 1994); and N. Jdejian, Tripoli through the Ages (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1980).
10. Ibid., p.3.
11. Ibid., p.4.
12. Ibid., p.3.
14. Ibid., p.2, item#.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. See www.cdr.gov.lb/newsdata/ned0321.htm
23. Ibid., p.2.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., abstract.
28. Ibid.

All photos are by the author.