

HERITAGE AT RISK AND CIPA TODAY: A REPORT ON THE STATUS OF HERITAGE DOCUMENTATION.

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ABSTRACT:

Heritage documentation today is at a transitional stage. On one side the advancement of technology, which is reflected within CIPA by the diversification of topics and issues, has improved methodologies and data integration processes. On the other side there is a more widespread recognition of documentation as being an integral part of the conservation process, and not just an extra item to do if time and money allow it.

The paper looks at the status of heritage documentation in situations where risk is high, the role CIPA is playing, and perspectives of improving the way documentation is conceived and practiced by heritage professionals.

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the most dramatic events of the past couple of years, the war in Iraq, the earthquake of Bam in Iran, and the dynamiting of the Bamyán Buddhas in Afghanistan are particularly good examples of the importance of documentation of cultural heritage, in its wider sense of collection and procurement of information and data.

In the case of the Iraq war, US archaeologists tried to submit lists of sites and their coordinates to the Pentagon to avoid their bombing (a move that has been criticized by others: how can we think about saving heritage sites and not to be worried by the bombing of civilians?). In this case it was clear that a basic tool was missing, that is an official inventory of heritage sites to be used by a neutral party such as UNESCO to ask the invading and then occupying forces to avoid damaging actions on heritage sites. As early as 1970 UNESCO asked Member States to prepare lists of protected sites, for the purpose of documentation and management of cultural resources. Unfortunately this basic and important step is still not enforced, leaving many countries without a proper documentation system of their cultural heritage.

In the case of the Bam earthquake, the magnitude of the disaster and the loss of life put initially in the background the enormous task to be initiated by the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization to document the extent of the damage in the Citadel.

Although photos, plans, and some photogrammetric record existed, most of this was kept in a building within the Citadel, which collapsed during the quake. Fortunately most of these records were retrieved, but this is also an example of the risk of archiving original documentation material in proximity or even within the documented site.



Photograph: Franco Fracassi, AP
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/gall/0,8542,1113730,00.html>



Photograph: Hasan Sarbakhshian, AP
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/gall/0,8542,1113730,00.html>

Risk preparedness also takes into consideration the treatment of archived data and the preparation of new documentation if the one available is not sufficient for the purpose of conservation and possible reconstruction if the site is totally destroyed. In the case of Bamyán, a photogrammetric record existed but not at the detail needed for a faithful reconstruction, if such decision will be taken by the Afghan government, and this

illustrates a problem of scale and precision when a decision is made to document a monument.

We presented on purpose these three examples as they illustrate the wide range of documentation options required, from country level to monument level, but also the difficult decisions to be taken about the scale of the documentation, the amount of information to be collected, and the priority list to be compiled when hundreds of monuments are in the same condition of risk. For the purpose of a practical approach to the problem, we will discuss heritage at risk, how CIPA positions itself today, and we will end with some trends that are observed today.

2. HERITAGE AT RISK

In a paper that Palumbo presented three years ago at a conference in Corinth, later published by the Getty in the Proceedings of that same conference, he illustrated various types of threats that affect our heritage. Although we immediately think of threats such as earthquakes, fire, and material decay brought by atmospheric phenomena and water as the most common cause of damage, in reality most of these natural occurrences are caused or increased by human intervention on the natural landscape. By modifying the environment, humans have created the conditions for natural phenomena to have a stronger effect on what we build. There are also direct effects on our built heritage through pollution, insensitive development, abandonment, excessive tourism pressure, and, as we have seen also from examples above, war. Unconventional wars today have heavy consequences on cultural heritage. Many of the recent wars have ethnic origins, such as the recent Kosovo events.



Holy Trinity Monastery, Musuliste, Serbia
Photo from <http://www.kosovo.com/estrojica.html>

In these wars the first casualties are civilians (because of clear attempts at ethnic cleansing) and cultural heritage sites, for the same reason, as they represent the traces on the ground of the “enemy”. Very often, cultural heritage is targeted first because it is easier to get at. In recent Kosovo events, Serbian monasteries were burnt by mobs and in revenge mosques were burnt in Serbia.

Another consequence of war is the instability and the lack of law enforcement that in theory should be ensured by the occupying forces (a point stressed in the The Hague convention on the protection of cultural heritage in case of war, of 1956 and of its second protocol of 1999, a convention that unfortunately has not been signed or ratified by the UK and the USA).



Holy Trinity Monastery, Musuliste, Serbia
Photo from <http://www.kosovo.com/estrojica.html>

The lack of law enforcement creates the condition for widespread looting and vandalism, which has been epitomized in the destruction of the Baghdad Museum in April 2003 and the still ongoing salvage clandestine activities on some of the most important archaeological sites of Iraq.

But as we mentioned above risk is not only consequence of malicious acts or natural forces. Development is probably the cause for most damage to cultural resources, as it is linked to notions of progress, to the need for more and better infrastructures and resources, to the need for housing and agricultural land. This translates in huge areas being bulldozed or totally transformed to the benefit of the new project. One example of this is the Dampier region of North west Australia, where port and infrastructure expansion threatens to destroy a large number of rock art sites through construction and atmospheric pollution.



Threatened Rock Art, Dampier, Australia
Photo by R. Bednarik,
<http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/dampier/web/index.html>

The impact not only is on the innumerable unknown cultural resources (we mentioned above the need for comprehensive lists of archaeological sites which are rarely prepared by the agencies in charge of heritage conservation) but also and more importantly on the context of these sites, on the landscapes that millennia of human use made truly cultural, in the sense of stratification and accumulations of changes over time, without radical and irreversible transformations that are characterizing our approach to land use and “modernization”.

3. HERITAGE PERCEPTIONS AND APPROACHES TO DOCUMENTATION

Our understanding of cultural heritage is expanding, and now we believe that although Universal heritage values can be

shared, archaeological and historic sites, as well as living traditions and other aspects of intangible heritage have value because there is people that is giving them value. The recognition of the human dimension of cultural heritage is perhaps the most critical aspect of this new paradigm in heritage conservation, which is the understanding of the multiple values of cultural heritage and of the importance of local communities in shaping the significance of this heritage. This of course creates a difficult gap to be bridged, between a rational and scientific approach to documentation and conservation, and a shifting concept of significance based on changing values and perceptions.

There are also other practical issues to take into consideration, and they are presented in no particular order:

- the issue of cost of documentation: the wrong perception is that documentation is expensive and a luxury item, to be done only if there is enough time and money available
- the idea that the use of electronic means improves documentation. In reality electronic tools improve the speed of data collection, not its quality, which depends on the operators' skills and experience, not the tools
- the obsession with accuracy and precision, which is often the cause for increase in costs without obtaining real benefits
- the lack of training in documentation and survey among heritage professionals, which causes either documentation to be dropped or reduced in scale in conservation projects, or on the contrary to be allocated excessive resources and to become more important than the conservation itself.

All this creates difficult operating conditions for the documentation process, as it becomes unmanageable under financial, human resources, and technical capabilities parameters.

4. CIPA TODAY

The evolution of CIPA from a technical forum dedicated to the photogrammetry of historic monuments to an organization that debates theoretical and practical issues of documentation of cultural heritage is a positive trend. In providing various forms of assistance in identifying and selecting appropriate tools for heritage documentation, CIPA offers the opportunity to conservation professionals to compare and discuss methods and approaches. The message that CIPA sends out today is that there is no one size fits all solution, and that documentation projects do not need to be technological displays in order to achieve good results. So, while CIPA is rightly open to exploring and testing new technologies, it is also dedicated to the improvement of traditional and low cost methods. We believe that it is this balanced approach to documentation and its problems that makes CIPA a respected forum, demonstrated also by the quality of its congresses. The fact that CIPA is an international committee of both ICOMOS and ISPRS makes the organization open to both a technical audience and one more dedicated to the conservation. The ICOMOS audience was for a long time intimidated by the technical and technological jargon displayed in the organization, but the recognition of this gap and of the potential benefit of listening more carefully to the questions and problems of the "conservators" has allowed CIPA to grow out of its technical framework and improve its image with the ICOMOS side of its audience.

5. CONCLUSION

All these are positive trends, but there is still work to be done to improve outreach and the spreading of documentation consciousness among heritage practitioners. As we said at the beginning, many of the disasters affecting heritage today could be avoided with more and better documentation of our cultural heritage, thus the development of rapid and low-cost assessment methods for cultural heritage are highly desirable and would certainly increase the profile of our organization. In the same direction would go the development of documentation methods as part of risk preparedness in sites and museums. Besides playing the role of an organization where ideas are compared and discussed, CIPA could also increase its existing, but not still completely developed role of an organization that can bring together institutions to share knowledge and experience on specific problems. The biggest challenge ahead however is how to document sites and monuments not only in their physical but also in their intangible aspects, and how to develop meaningful ways to document "values" and feelings about a place.

Through partnerships and parallel initiatives such as RecordIM, CIPA is demonstrating vitality and willingness to work with heritage professionals and technical experts and we hope that this positive trend will continue to bear its fruits.

The technology is however one part of the documentation and conservation process, and most probably the easiest to solve. Without the collective will and supporting local and international legal power to implement these programs' the task ahead still remains difficult.