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March 5, 2015

# Light at the End of the Labyrinth? From Historic Preservation to Heritage Placemaking: New Approaches to the Interpretation of Historical Authenticity

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## **Light at the End of the Labyrinth?**

From Historic Preservation to Heritage Placemaking:  
New Approaches to the Interpretation of Historical Authenticity

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The first draft text of the “Dubai Document on Reconstruction in the Gulf Region” offers us all a constructive call “to challenge conventional thinking in the conservation field.” It presents the quite extraordinary history of Dubai’s recent development and the cultural impacts that oil wealth have brought to the city and its inhabitants, not least important being demographic and socio-economic changes, as a result of which locally-born Emiratis now compose about a fifth of the total population. And of this fifth all those under—let’s say twenty years of age—have little memory whatsoever of Dubai’s traditional lifeways, except perhaps for grandparents and parents’ tales. Yet these changes in general heritage perception, though undeniably dramatic and far-reaching, are not unique to either Dubai or the Gulf.

Modernization, globalization, urbanization, and the mass movement of people from their original homelands in a search for work or pleasure are global characteristics of the age in which we live. Most relevant for the theme of this seminar are the effects that these global shifts have had on inherited cultural identities and on the character of the built environment. In what the architectural historian Nezar Alsayyad has termed the “end of tradition” (Alsayyad 2004)—gleaming non-places designed by superstar architects, whose occupants share a digitally networked hybrid culture expressed in the idioms and cultural conventions of email, skype, Facebook, and Twitter. More than ever before, the imagined past is severed from the experienced present, creating a tense and destructive planetary bi-polarity between reactionary and homogenizing forces, a phenomenon that sociologist Benjamin Barber has called “Jihad vs. McWorld” (Barber 2010).

All too often, socio-economic development is seen as a relentless movement away from the past into the future, with heritage places bulldozed for new city centers, destroyed as the idolatrous totems of nonbelievers, or preserved as commercialized tourist attractions or quaint curiosities of bygone days. Today’s focus on material and technological advancement, is a familiar formula for the physical or cultural deterioration of the inherited built environment and landscape, as well as obsolescence of “inefficient” traditional skills and practices, and the shattering of once-coherent cultural identities into a shifting, pattern-less mosaic of numberless individual ambitions and desires.

The Dubai Document seeks to establish that the meticulous physical reconstruction of lost or destroyed heritage places can serve “as a cultural tool to reconnect people with their

history and tradition,” and in the next few pages, I would like to reflect on how such an ambitious social goal might actually be achieved. I believe we must begin by making a crucial distinction: between 1.) the Dubai Document’s call to utilize the reconstruction of heritage places “as a cultural tool to reconnect people with their history and tradition,” and 2.) the quite different question of whether such reconstructions meet the technical criteria of authenticity and integrity demanded by the Operational Guidelines of the World Heritage Convention for the inscription of a particular property (Intergovernmental Committee et al. 2013). This distinction is essential, I would argue, because the perceived social necessity for *restoring* or *re-connecting* a population with local tradition and history is far different from the standards and procedures of physically conserving its surviving material embodiments.

Indeed conservation theory and practice as it has evolved over the past two centuries is based on the principle of the physical *continuity* of monuments, be they buried underground or surviving above. Reconstruction, based on either meticulous or shoddy documentation, traditional materials or new ones, is implicitly seen as an admission that physical continuity has been lost. Thus reconstructions were, and still are in some quarters, frowned upon as inherently inauthentic imitations of *real* monuments (i.e those that have survived the test of time). Article 15 of the Venice Charter (1964) makes it clear that at archaeological sites “all reconstruction work should... be ruled out ‘a priori.’ Only anastylosis is ok. Thus the use of reconstruction for interpretive purposes at archaeological sites is generally viewed with disapproval by the Venice Charter and World Heritage Guidelines—even when such reconstructions could serve as effective interpretive tools in the many (and growing?) number of places around the world where little original fabric has survived.

### **Finding Our Way Out of the Labyrinth**

Can disruptions in continuity and subsequent reconstruction with new materials possess any heritage value at all? It is a strange and amusing fact that one of the earliest uses in Greece of that emblematic building material of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—reinforced concrete—was used in Sir Arthur Evans’s art nouveau reconstruction of the so-called “Palace of Minos” at Knossos (Gere 2010). And that imaginative modern rebuilding is based on far less reliable documentation and a far freer flight of the imagination than anything here in Dubai. Though central to the modern appreciation of ancient Cretan culture, there is nevertheless no light at the end of this famous Cretan labyrinth: Knossos has lingered for decades on Greece’s Tentative List, along with the other Minoan Palaces of Phaistos, Malia, Zakros and Kydonia. The issue of somehow explaining the authenticity of Evans’s restorations has been entrusted to a special committee to somehow rationalize their continued existence and irreversibility (UNESCO World Heritage Centre” 2015), and diluted through the use of a serial nomination, in the hope perhaps that a serial nomination and closer oversight may someday dilute Knossos’s original sin.

The situation with regard to partially restored standing buildings is even more complex: Article 9 of the Venice Charter decreed that restoration and partial reconstruction had to be clearly distinguished from original fabric, a concept that has sometimes produced modernist incongruities (Hardy 2008). Yet the large-scale reconstruction of the war-pulverized city of Ypres in Belgium after World War I bears no clear mark between scant surviving original fabric and postwar reconstruction. The equally devastating destructions of historic centers during World War II and later conflicts has given rise to what we might call a “war exception” to the

Venice Charter's objections, codified in the 1982 Declaration of Dresden, the 2000 Riga and Krakow charters, and used without serious authenticity-based objections in the reconstruction of the historic centers of Warsaw, Krakow, Vilnius, and Riga, without disqualifying them for inscription on the World Heritage List. The more recent and celebrated cases of Sarajevo's Mostar Bridge, the Kasubi tombs in Uganda, and the earthen structures of Timbuktu in Mali likewise do not imperil their World Heritage status, nor will presumably some future reconstruction of the historic centers of Damascus, Aleppo, Hatra, and Samarra—all of which have been violently destroyed or extensively damaged in the present, ongoing hostilities.

The reconstruction work in Dubai, however, is somewhat different. It is not the result of a fanciful fin-de-siècle restoration or due to the direct damage of military action or civil upheaval. It presents the rather more complex and worldwide phenomenon I previously mentioned: the intentional transformation of an urban landscape on an unprecedented scale. It is *change*—technological, demographic, sociological, and economic—not hostile forces' bombardment and intentional vandalism that obliterated much of Dubai's built heritage (see Bukhash this volume). In his opening paper, ICOMOS President Gustavo Araoz shared with us his conviction that a new approach to conservation practice is now needed, especially in cases where the acceptance of diverse cultural perspectives are needed and the material fabric may not be the primary bearer of heritage significance. In an earlier paper "Lost in the Labyrinth: Mapping the Path to Where Heritage Significance Lies" (2007) and subsequent articles (2011, 2013) he suggested that the basic building blocks of heritage authenticity and significance may now no longer rest on the physical preoccupations of the Venice Charter, or even on the prerequisite of unbroken continuity advanced by the Nara Document. He has observed that we are caught in a 21<sup>st</sup> century labyrinth of twisting paths of intangible meanings, motivations, and goals that trap us in a theoretical uncertainty with no easy means of finding our way forward by relying on traditional conservation theory.

In place of the sanctification of original fabric as inviolable and irreplaceable, Araoz has suggested that physical heritage elements are no longer self-evident embodiments of singular meaning or outstanding universal value, but rather vessels in which diverse and changing values about history and identity are contained. Heritage process may thus be seen to trump heritage object, with the primary goal of conservation not just the preservation of ancient stone, brick, or adobe but safeguarding the public's connection to and serious reflection on the legacy of the past on the present as a vital process for every society.

The cultivation and safeguarding of informed and deeply-felt collective memory, not only stones, must become a prime objective of 21<sup>st</sup> century heritage practice— even if the Operational Guidelines of the World Heritage Convention, with their once-and-for-all-time judgments on integrity, authenticity, and Outstanding Universal Value actually create a global archipelago of expert declared authenticity that stands hermetically sealed from contemporary context—fenced-off, ticket-boothed islands of escape from today's chaos, turmoil, and change. What Araoz has recognized is the need for a new approach to heritage practice in which one-way, top-down didacticism gives way to active public engagement, in which reconnecting "people with their history and tradition," as the Dubai Document puts it, should become the primary aim. The way out of the labyrinth, as Araoz suggests, is to look to new mechanisms beyond strictly object-centered criteria might help conserve perceptions of heritage value,

significance, and historical rootedness in the midst of unprecedented demographic movement, landscape transformation, and technological change.

The call for a new conservation paradigm of accepting change and adapting to it was greeted with indignant howls of heritage treason by some. “After all,” wrote one of the critics, “conservation does not mean ‘managing change’ but preserving, preserving, not altering and destroying: ICOMOS, the only global international organization for the conservation of monuments and sites is certainly not an International Council on Managing Change” (Petzet 2010: 7). Somehow the defense of the Venice Charter’s abhorrence of reconstruction became the battle banner of this fight to defend the *status quo* in conservation theory. In fact, a resolution passed at the 2011 ICOMOS General Assembly in Paris noted “the increasing disregard of existing theoretical principles for the justification of re-construction, and a new tendency towards significant commercialization of reconstruction activities.” The resolution (17GA 2011/39) encouraged the ICOMOS community, “as a matter of urgency, to launch a debate on this new and growing phenomenon of reconstruction” as a threat to accepted technical requirement and norms of authenticity.

Yet the result was not entirely what might have been expected. In response to the resolution, the ICOMOS International Committee on Interpretation and Presentation, which I have the privilege to chair, initiated a survey of ICOMOS national and international committees to gauge current attitudes about reconstruction. Completed responses to survey questionnaires were received from professionals working in 58 countries and 15 wider geographical regions representing a wide range of expertise, including management and planning, architectural conservation, interpretation, museology, education, archaeology, and cultural tourism.

Two key assertions of the resolution were indeed supported by the respondents. The growth on a global scale of the reconstruction of monuments and ensembles was considered significant by 71% of respondents and a full 68% were convinced that existing conservation theoretical principles restricting the use of reconstructions were being increasingly ignored. And of the 71% of the respondents who perceived an increase in the use of reconstructions all of them pointed to specific reconstruction projects in their geographical area of specialization or fieldwork, mentioning well over 100 examples of recent or ongoing reconstructions. However, as regards the sources of funding for reconstructions, only 8% of the respondents were aware of reconstructions that had been funded solely for commercial purposes, with an additional 13% from public-private partnerships. A full 50% reported that funding came from non-commercial sources such as public budgets, intergovernmental organizations, educational institutions, or heritage-related philanthropy. Indeed, the survey respondents noted that the most appropriate justification for physical reconstruction was *not* commercial but the necessary rehabilitation of damaged urban or cultural landscapes (see, for example, the proposals of Alaidaroos, this volume) highlighting the legitimate interpretive, research, and commemorative uses to which reconstructions are now being put. Significantly, the respondents were almost evenly divided on whether physical reconstructions were a problem (44%) or a benefit (38%) for heritage sites.

### **So What Are Reconstructions Good For?**

Even the strongest supporters of architectural reconstructions acknowledge that their quality can vary greatly. “The best reconstructions evoke a strong sense of the past; the worst evoke a

sense of the past that never was,” noted John Jameson, editor of an edited volume on the issue of archaeological reconstructions (2013). “And therein lies the problem: While they claim to represent the past, reconstructions exist on a spectrum that ranges from strong documentary evidence to pure fantasy.” Credibility is therefore the *sine qua non* of reconstructions if they are to serve as valuable tools of public interpretation, and the principles outlined in Article 3 of the Dubai Document offer a sound basis to insure reconstructions’ historical reliability. When based on adequate research—in addition to the documented testimony of tradition bearers--reconstructed buildings can provide an immersive, multisensory environment in which visitors to localities that have otherwise been brutally “modernized” can acquire a heightened understanding of local culture and a more palpable sense of the place and of its past. And what is wrong with that? They lack the elements of physical and cultural continuity. But then so also do increasingly wide swathes of our contemporary world.

That conscious effort to overcome cultural discontinuity and create physical and cultural contexts to reconnect residents with the distinctive character of the place they live in is the role that is currently being played by the techniques of “placemaking.” It is a movement of public engagement, civic responsibility, and aesthetic appreciation that has up to now been focused on the arts and the design of public spaces as tools for social cohesion and enhanced livability for communities in crisis or decline (Bedoya 2013). Rooted in community participation, placemaking involves not only the study, planning, design, and management of public spaces, but the design of programming as well. I would argue that the reconstruction of Dubai’s historic structures represents a similar effort. With the combined contribution of historians, archaeologists, heritage experts, planners, and memory bearers, Dubai’s reconstructed historic built environment can serve as an accessible public space to foster knowledge of and appreciation for local tradition and memory. It can be an example of “heritage” placemaking that facilitates creative activities and cognitive connections that help communicate the traditional spirit of this place.

It is in this focus on encouraging the public to value heritage—not sanctifying original fabric—but seeing the continuum extending from the past, through the present to an unknowable and unpredictable future that the Dubai Document may have its greatest impact. Changes brought on by modernization do not necessarily flow in only one direction: from the authentic to the fake. Rapid modernization can also motivate change in a different, more reflective direction, one that *acknowledges* the loss of place-based identity and does not exclude the valuable monuments, cultural expressions, and original fabric that have been lost.

Reconstruction, I would argue, is not a conservation approach but an engagement approach that can help reconnect people with place, history, and landscape. In places where modern development has bulldozed or otherwise stripped the landscape of its traditional features, reconstructed heritage structures based on careful research, documentation, and traditional building techniques can become sites where contemporary communities can be encouraged to maintain and transmit the particular forms of tangible and intangible heritage to younger generations and generations yet to come. As the Dubai Document puts it, “[r]econstruction of urban heritage, including its tangible and intangible components, constitutes a key resource in enhancing the livability of urban areas, and fosters economic development and social cohesion in a changing global environment.”

Therein perhaps lies the light at the end of the labyrinth: the recognition that heritage is an immensely important social process in the present, not a global collection of technically conforming World Heritage sites. The quandary is how to do it. The challenge now is to demonstrate to the conservation community (read: World Heritage states-parties) that carefully researched reconstructions have a valid place. In the meantime, in the absence of a paradigm shift in the Operational Guidelines, the light at the end of the labyrinth is the gleam of public reconnection, not with the often seductive and sometimes exclusivist vision of physical continuity as the *sine que non* of heritage authenticity.

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