

EGYPT

Social Unrest Threatens Egypt's Cultural Heritage

Blue Shield¹ Statement, January 31, 2011

Following the recent events in Egypt, the Blue Shield expresses its great concern about the safeguarding of the country's invaluable cultural heritage amid the existing turmoil.

Starting last Friday evening, a number of important museums and sites in Egypt have fallen prey to looters. Thankfully, in certain cases, it has been reported that members of civil society stood to protect museums and heritage sites all over the country. This demonstrates not only the attachment of the local population for their cultural heritage and their determination to protect it, but also the vulnerability of cultural institutions, sites and monuments during times of great conflict.

It is universally recognised that Egypt has an incomparable history and heritage which has had a profound and lasting influence on peoples throughout the world. Any loss of Egyptian cultural property would seriously impoverish the collective memory of mankind. Egypt has an exceptionally rich cultural heritage and it is imperative that every precaution necessary be taken by all sides involved in this strife to avoid destruction or damage to archives, libraries, monuments and sites, and museums.

Blue Shield urges all sectors of Egyptian society to do everything in their power to curb or prevent all actions that could result in the damage or destruction of their cultural heritage. The Blue Shield also praises the courageous citizens of Cairo and the rest of Egypt who spontaneously mobilized to protect the Egyptian Museum and other cultural institutions. We call on all Egyptians to continue giving the fullest support to all efforts to prevent damage to heritage sites and institutions throughout the country.

The Blue Shield Mission is "to work to protect the world's cultural heritage threatened by armed conflict, natural and man-made disasters". For this reason, it places the expertise and network of its member organisations at the disposal of their Egyptian colleagues to support their work in protecting the country's heritage, in assessing the damage that has occurred, and for subsequent recovery, restoration and repair measures.

The member organisations of the Blue Shield are currently liaising with Egyptian colleagues to obtain further information on both the situation and on the possible needs and types of help required so as to mobilise their networks accordingly.

A more complete report on damages, needs and actions will be published subsequently, in order to facilitate coordination.

Historic Cairo

The historic components of Cairo, World Heritage since 1979, consist of uniquely separate areas – the city's pre-Islamic origins



Cairo, Darb al-Ahmar, empty plot (photo: W. Mayer)

Cairo, Darb al-Ahmar, history versus modernity (photo: W. Mayer)





Cairo, Darb al-Ahmar, new buildings next to the historic mosque of Aslam al-Silahdar (photo: W. Mayer)

in the south, the Citadel, the largest and best-preserved fortification in the Middle East, and the residential area between the two cemeteries. Historic Cairo has the largest concentration of Islamic monuments in the world. It occupies a stretch of 3.87 square kilometres of urban fabric accommodating about 320,000 inhabitants. This area includes 313 listed monuments.

In 1998, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Supreme Council for Antiquities (SCA) carried out a study entitled “Project for Developing Historic Cairo” to restore 157 monuments. Over the next eight years these restorations were mainly executed by four large contractors. In the last ten years, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture devised a model for community development in Darb al Ahmar. This project started as a combination of community participation, rehabilitation and restoration. However, due to various difficulties the Aga Khan Trust for Culture recently handed over this project to the governorate of Cairo.

Since the start of the Revolution on January 25, 2011, most monuments and antique sites in Egypt are more at risk than ever. For a long time, there were no police at the sites and building regulations were not implemented. Consequently, in the World Heritage area of historic Cairo some of the anonymous architecture, an important part of the historic fabric, could be pulled down and replaced by high-rise buildings.

When Naguib Mahfouz, Egypt’s famous novelist, wrote about the glory of Cairo, the city had her “crown” of several hundred

minarets and domes, towering above the residential buildings. Today the monuments are hidden behind tall residential buildings erected either without permission or without consultation of the conservation department.

Wolfgang Mayer

Abu Mina

The archaeological site of Abu Mina, dating back to the end of the 4th century AD where the grave of St. Menas was venerated since the late Roman Empire, was the most important pilgrimage site in Egypt until the early Middle Ages. The site was discovered in 1905 and since that time excavations have been carried out until today. In 1979 the site was inscribed on the World Heritage List, as one of the five most important sites in Egypt.

In 2001, however, UNESCO put Abu Mina on the World Heritage in Danger list. Because of agriculture around the site, with water canals all around, the groundwater level rose and the foundations of most buildings, set on mud with lime, were shrinking. Many walls and wells collapsed and the crypt of St. Menas had to be filled with sand to protect it against collapse. Until today, hardly anything has been done for a sustainable conservation of the site.



Abu Mina, view of the archaeological site (photo: W. Mayer)



Abu Mina, recent "restoration" work using gypsum lime stones (photo: W. Mayer)

The Great Basilica

The church complex as part of the pilgrimage site consists of three individual buildings: the Great Basilica, the Martyr Church above the crypt and the Baptistery.

The Basilica was a three-nave columned basilica with a three-nave transept. Several marble bases from the rows of columns could be seen in their original location and on the original walls remnants of the marble facing were evident – until 2011. During the "restoration" of the basilica, carried out by the biggest construction company in Egypt, the original walls were destroyed and replaced by gypsum-lime stones. The question arises: How could it be possible that for this work heavy material was used that destroyed a monument built at the end of the 5th century, probably during the reign of Emperor Zeno (474–491 AD)?

Wolfgang Mayer

Port Said's Architectural Heritage Threatened by Neglect and Ruthless Development

The ongoing demolition of Port Said's historical buildings, in tandem with longstanding government neglect, have put the coastal

city's heritage in jeopardy. Here are excerpts from an article in *Ahram Online* of 27 October 2012:

In his unique diaries, world-renowned Egyptian intellect Samir Amin speaks of the coastal city of Port Said, where he was born in the 1930s, discussing its exceptional architecture, which bespeaks the diversity that has long characterised the city. (...) Port Said, which lies in northeast Egypt, is now going through a grave crisis, with the looming destruction of its architectural heritage. Following Egypt's January 25 [2011] Revolution, the subsequent security vacuum – coupled with the loose grip of the government and absence of municipal supervision – all whetted appetites to encroach upon the city's properties. Khaled Abdel-Rahman, a young pharmacist and Port Said resident, has posted hundreds of old pictures of his beloved city on Facebook, sounding alarm bells in hopes of rescuing what is left of the city's historical legacy. Abdel-Rahman's photos are a testament to the appalling tragedy that has come to afflict the city's edifices. (...)

The list includes the Trade Centre nestled on the Cornice near the Port Fouad Ferry. Built in the 1930s in the Italian architectural style, the distinctive building was among the possessions of a renowned Jewish family. Port Said's beacon, along with a number of waterside buildings, also features on the list. This includes the now-closed Italian Cultural Centre, which, it is feared, could suffer the same fate as the Arderado Cinema that faces the possibility of being pulled down. The Nasinwally Hotel, an adjacent hotel, is another historical building that had been one of the city's landmarks in the 1940s, and now, among other constructions, suffers from comparative neglect.

"The problem partially boils down to the lack of general culture among the public. Interest in heritage is at rock bottom," said Abdel-Rahman, noting that the city lacked a single cultural institution to help raise cultural awareness among its denizens. (...) "Thanks to corrupt municipal councils and the language of money, various forms of encroachment upon public properties and funds have become rife," he added. (...)

"With the recent management reshuffle, the governorate also failed to take thorough measures to stop such demolition operations," said writer Osama Kamal. He noted that, with the inactive role of city planners, the government's alternative vision to weather the mounting population-density crisis is to tear down historical buildings and replace them with high-rise towers. (...) Ahmed Sedky cited plans to tear down an edifice in Safiya Zaghoul Street, despite its being fully intact, just to make use of its distinctive location and spaciousness, as a classic example of corruption. Built in 1903 and featuring distinctive architecture and carved Greek statues, unique stone iron-inlaid and rich wooden windows, the building is deemed one of the most prominent heritage landmarks in Port Said. Sedky blamed the Ministry of Culture for paying no heed to such buildings, underscoring that building protection policies, urban charters, and construction codes were all non-existent. He also pointed the finger at the Cultural Coordination Authority for its "failure to raise awareness among the general public about the value of historical sites." (...)

Sedky called for halting all demolition decisions until legislation and licenses were reconsidered. He also proposed looking at ways and means to capitalise on historical buildings as part of an integrated strategic scheme along the lines of Solidere (a Lebanese development and reconstruction company), which specialises in restoration work in downtown Beirut and had breathed new life and investment into the area. (...)

In 2003, the Port Said-based French Cultural Association embarked on a documentation project of the city's heritage, reg-



View of Port Said (photo: www.travelin.pl)

istering 400 buildings to date. Also, the body arranges cultural-awareness workshops bringing in French pundits and architects to establish an advocacy force to preserve the city's architectural history. Sohair Zaky of the Cultural Coordination Authority contends that the body has no authority over judicial seizure of buildings and the demolition decisions. "The authority is merely entitled to report to concerned entities while seizure power rests

with the governorate," he explained. The governor of Port Said was not available for comment on the issue.

*Sayed Mahmoud
"Egypt's threatened heritage: Port Said's history
breathes its last", in: Ahram Online, 27 October 2012*

¹ The Blue Shield is the protective emblem of the 1954 Hague Convention which is the basic international treaty formulating rules to protect cultural heritage during armed conflicts. The Blue Shield network consists of organisations dealing with museums,

archives, audiovisual supports, libraries, monuments and sites. The International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS), founded in 1996, comprises representatives of five non-governmental organisations working in this field, among them ICOMOS.