ISRAEL – HERITAGE @ RISK!

In the case of Israel, cultural heritage should be divided into two categories: the urban and settlement context, and the archaeological and open areas context.

The Urban Context

In the first category, the main risks are results of development pressures and a lack of training for professionals at all levels. The first three points are closely related and all together have much to do with the fact that the country is small and population is growing.

A good example is the case of Tel Aviv, which has been getting the attention of the conservation community only in the last ten years. This modern 20th century city has an extraordinary concentration of buildings and neighbourhoods built in the 1930s. They were designed and often built by Jewish architects leaving Germany and Europe, many of whom were students of the Bauhaus school or influenced by it. Therefore, Tel Aviv has an excellent representation of this architecture with its building details and techniques.

For many years, this heritage was not under any threat as the city was developing in other directions, the original owners were still alive and satisfied, and the real estate value of these buildings was not a pressing factor. All this has changed, and the pressures are constant and big to demolish and build anew and higher or to add floors.

A thorough survey has been conducted with local and international financial assistance (World Monuments Fund). Buildings, groups of buildings and areas were identified, classified and partly documented. A local master plan is being developed – but the problem and risk remain: almost all the property is privately owned, and the city is interested in investment, urban revitalisation and development.

Another case would be the old city of Beer-Sheva (Beersheba), built during the late Ottoman period between 1900 and 1917. In this case, the problems are more technical, but as always related to economy and law (ownership, plans), as well as to awareness.

The town was built of very soft limestone taken from ancient sites. This stone, with no exception, is decaying badly at the lower courses, as result of capillarity and salt crystallisation. A lack of knowledge of proper solutions, a lack of financial means for proper solutions, a lack of awareness and training (for both, architects, engineers and technical experts) and years of neglect are the main risks to this important and unique example of a "modern" late Ottoman town. The other problem was once the lack of proper protective legislation and planning which has improved but, unfortunately, is still in a weak situation when coming to deal with private property.

The old towns of Akko (Acre) and Jerusalem are examples of widely recognised important cultural heritage towns – with typical problems of: over population, law enforcement to prevent changes with no authorisation and tourism pressure. These towns are well protected by legislation and surveys, by government investments in proper planning, new infrastructure and awareness – but suffer from over-congestion and the specific political-cultural situation. While the cultural heritage places are not at risk, the residential areas which really create the towns are at risk as result of lack of collaboration between citizens and government or city authorities, financial and ownership issues and insufficient professional training. A good management plan was prepared for Akko, and there is a management system in place – but a lot has still to be done.

A category of heritage which is at big risk in Israel is the one of cultural landscapes. This is certainly due to development pressures but also results from changes in economy priorities. In the past years, agriculture played a major role in the country's economy and ideology. Agricultural land was strictly protected and clearly specified as being used only for its original purpose. The loss of the importance of agriculture to the national economy as well as to old ideologies has opened the possibilities of those protected areas being re-designed for new land use and construction. Since no-one thought until relatively recently that such areas had to be protected for conservation purposes, there was no adequate legislation, and economic and construction pressure prevailed. In this case, proper policy, national and other master plans and raising awareness actions are urgently needed.

The Archaeological Context

In Israel, archaeology is well protected by legislation and designation processes. Still, it is at permanent risk as a result of economy and lack of proper financing, national priorities and lack of policy, law enforcement and looting, and sufficient training.

Economy and financing is closely linked also with national policies and priorities. There is simply not enough of the budget allocated to conservation, even of the most important archaeological heritage. All this heritage is State owned, much of it designated as national parks, and managed by specific national organisations. Most of the financing for maintenance and conservation of those sites comes from the government budget and from entrance fees to sites. This is much too little to be able to provide even the minimum maintenance. Certainly, with such a situation and with tourism being one of the most important sources of income for the country, emphasis is given to attractive tourist sites. Even those, such as Masada and Caesarea face permanent problems of insufficient funding.

Priorities and policy are essential as Israel is rich in archaeological heritage and poor in financial and human resources. Over the last 15 years priorities for conservation and development were determined by tourism. Decay risks, scientific values, long term thinking, other social values (non-economy related) were hardly existent as considerations. Therefore, sites with high scientific value but low tourism attraction did not get financial support.

Another problem is the excavation policy. Excavation permits are approved to those who have the proper degrees in archaeology, academic institutional backing and can show proper long term financing of an excavation and publication as well as professional staff conservation policy. Financing of the development of a conservation policy, financing of the actual conser-

vation and conservation professional capacity is not a requirement for granting an excavation permit. This leaves the majority of excavated sites with no conservation plans or allocated budgets for this purpose.

Another priority issue, and sometimes risk, is tourism-oriented archaeological development. This is not necessarily always a risk, but always creates pressure on archaeologists, conservators and planners, and determines priorities of national financing of cultural heritage.

Law enforcement is essential, as one of the biggest risks to archaeological sites is looting and illegal excavations and mainly those in more remote areas, or as yet unknown to science. The Israel Antiquities Authority has a strong anti-theft and looting unit, but these activities still constitute a risk to archaeological heritage. Looting is a permanent activity and, unfortunately, has a good market.

The lack of training is a risk despite more than ten years of effort by the Israel Antiquities Authority to provide training in the field of conservation – the lack of knowledge and bad practices are still a big risk. The above-mentioned training is not regular, informal and is at the technicians level – it is important to include professional conservators, architects, engineers, planners etc, as none of the universities provide such training.

General issues

What seems to be a risk for cultural heritage in this region when looking from the outside – i.e. the political situation and hostilities – is not and was never a major risk. In the long years of war and hostilities it was quite rare that cultural heritage sites were damaged. Some risks and damage are the result of cultural issues and mainly religious fundamentalism and extremism. This seems a potential risk for the future, but can be already demonstrated in different actions mainly on and around places holy to Judaism, Christianity and Islam – when actions and decisions are taken by religious and political authorities and not by the ones in charge of cultural heritage.

ICOMOS Israel