

ARAB WORLD – HERITAGE @ RISK!

The Arab region has been characterised by its long civilised history. In addition to being the homeland of religions and due to its strategic location among three continents, it was a center for transmitting the culture and civilisation influences among the world nations. Historic areas/zones in the Arab region have a high population density and they currently include industrial, trade and residential zones mingled together. Nonetheless, the majority of their populations belong to the limited-income class and living conditions are not at all suitable. All this depicts how serious the problems are which these places are facing, despite the fact that they are the treasure of a unique heritage of civilisation.

Problems Facing Historic Sites

Citizens' Poor Awareness of Heritage:

Despite the abundance, variety of monuments and sites of cultural heritage in the Arab region, people's lack of awareness of heritage is the most important and influential factor in the non-conservation of that heritage. This may be attributed to the unfavourable social and economic status of the population in these areas.

The Environmental Conditions in the Region:

These conditions vary between urban areas and regional ones. This variation is manifested in the ratio of carbon dioxide in rain, the rate of ice formation, the rates of heat and moisture change, salt-efflorescence and salt-subefflorescence. Some of these conditions have been affected by natural environmental factors such as wind, rain, earthquakes, or human-caused environmental factors.

Deterioration due to Natural Conditions:

Major changes to stone result from carbonates dissolving in water and the erosion of the carbonate minerals. Also, the presence of nitrificiant bacteria helps the formation of sulfuric and nitric acid.

Deterioration due to Human-Caused Environmental Conditions:

- Drinking Water Systems: Potable water distribution networks in historic areas are often worn out and in very bad condition.

- Sanitation and Sewage Systems: The main and secondary sewage systems are inadequate and worn out and outdated in most of the Arab countries.
- Traffic: In historic areas, there is usually heavy traffic which affects building foundations near ground level.
- Soil Conditions in Historic Areas : It has been noticed that most cultural heritage places in historic areas and in historic towns were built in a system of bearing walls in trenches with backfill-soil.
- Garbage: Garbage collection is one of the major problems in old cities and is one of the main factors that accelerates urban deterioration as many historic cities are still dependent on primitively organised individual efforts.
- Wars: Wars between states or between citizens of the same state have destroyed many historic areas and towns which were once tourist attractions. We refer to what has happened in Lebanon, Iraq and Kuwait.
- Earthquakes: Earthquakes have destroyed major historic sites and monuments, such as the Great Mosque in Baalbeck in Lebanon (see p. 127).

Deterioration due to Modern Urbanisation:

Deterioration of urban aesthetics in historic and archaeological areas due to the construction of modern buildings that do not match the ancient ones in form, colour, or appearance. An architecture has appeared that has no link whatsoever in content and entity and is alien to either the local environment or the architectural features of heritage.

Recommendations:

- Laying down laws and measures necessary for preserving the environment .
- Enlightening the public as to the dangers of environmental pollution and its causes.
- Preparing studies on a national level to tackle the subject of ground water in order to preserve historic areas.
- Tree planting in order to clean the environment in urban historic areas.
- Using the equipment in factories and the necessary means to maintain a healthy and clean environment.
- Developing projects and plants to get rid of garbage in a scientific way.
- Observing the international conventions when conducting special studies on historic areas and cities, eg the ICOMOS Charter for preserving Historic Cities (Washington, October 1987). This is required for the preservation, restoration, and development of historic areas by practical means matching and harmonising with contemporary life.
- Strengthening heritage education as a part of the national education strategy.