

ICOMOS-CIAV Taskforce for the Protection of Vernacular Built Heritage Threatened by Armed Conflicts

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Context

More than ever before in its long history, the built heritage in the Middle East is endangered by armed conflicts. Since the so-called 'Arab Spring' in 2011, popular uprisings, revolutions, civil wars, terrorist attacks and aerial bombardments by NATO, Russia and other armies have been devastating the built heritage across the Middle East and West Africa.

The scale of damage is unprecedented, not only because of the depth and geographical wide spread of political, socio-economic, socio-cultural and religious problems, but also because of the destructive power that up-to-date technology is

capable of, including drones, fighters without pilots and smart missiles.

The damage to natural and built environments in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya have brought these countries to an unlivable state, which has caused, among many other problems, a heartbreaking toll of human lives and suffering. Consequently, millions have been displaced in their countries, the neighbouring countries and beyond. Furthermore, as the influx of refugees is reaching Europe, the wisdom of Western military interventions in the Middle East is being questioned. In such a grim context, concerns about the built heritage seem an unaffordable luxury. Nevertheless, numerous admirable



Fig. 1 Traditional houses in 'Suq al-Malh', Sana'a, Yemen (the Old City of Sana'a was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1986), a wealth of vernacular built heritage threatened by war (© Hossam Mahdy 2007)

initiatives, committees, task forces and projects have been started by UNESCO, ICOMOS, ICCROM, universities, and groups of academics and professionals to do whatever possible to monitor, protect, document and conserve the endangered built heritage. The most notable of these is the ICOMOS Working Group for the Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage in Syria and Iraq, chaired by CIAV expert member Samir Abdulac.

The vernacular built heritage

While the vernacular built heritage is included in different initiatives and schemes to monitor, protect, document and conserve the built heritage in war-torn countries, it requires more attention. The significance of the vernacular built heritage is not limited to its fabric. It is part of a wider cultural landscape and the pride of communities, their honest expression, identity and way of life.

Therefore, monitoring, documenting and protecting vernacular buildings may not actually conserve the integrity of the vernacular built heritage, should the communities be displaced, traditions lost and the landscape destroyed. Thus, there is a need to address the particular nature of vernacular architecture as part of the efforts to protect the built heritage threatened by war. This can be broken up into simpler questions:

- What are the specific characteristics of the vernacular built heritage that require special attention with regard to war threats?
- Before war, what can be done to prevent or reduce threat to the vernacular built heritage?
- During war, what can be done to protect the vernacular built heritage?
- After war, what can be done to restore, reconstruct and/or revitalise the vernacular built heritage?
- Does post-war reconstruction impact the authenticity and integrity of vernacular built heritage in the same way that it does for other heritage categories?
- How is the safeguarding of the vernacular built heritage affected by the mass displacement of the communities that used to live in these heritage sites? What can be done about this?
- When vernacular historic houses are bombed during wars and their inhabitants need to rebuild them quickly to live in them once again, how can this be done without the loss of authenticity?
- What can CIAV do?

A proposal for creating a taskforce

The proposed taskforce aims to focus on the specific needs for the protection of vernacular heritage before, during, and after armed conflicts. Furthermore, the taskforce aims to compliment the valuable efforts already made by ICOMOS and others as well as to fill gaps pertaining to vernacular architecture and not to duplicate already established initiatives and projects.

While the taskforce is based on the theoretical and philosophical understanding of the specificity of the vernacular heritage and its significance and conservation requirements, it aims to contribute to the protection and conservation of the vernacular heritage in war-torn regions at present, such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya.

The proposed taskforce is a CIAV group; thus no steps will be taken without the approval of the CIAV bureau. Any interested CIAV member is most welcome to join the taskforce by writing to the coordinator at the following e-mail address: hossammahdy1960@yahoo.co.uk