

EUROPE GROUP MEETING | ICOMOS 2019
Scientific Symposium *Contemporary interventions on cultural heritage: theory and practice*
13 - 16 june 2019

Intervenção do Presidente da Comissão Nacional da UNESCO

Embaixador José Filipe Moraes Cabral

Friday, 14 june, 12h00

Ladies and gentleman, dear Friends

I wish to thank ICOMOS Portugal for inviting me to participate in this meeting and to share with you some of my experiences regarding heritage issues. Allow me to congratulate the organizers for this important and timely initiative.

Allow me also to thank Professor Maria de Lurdes Rodrigues and those in ISCTE for receiving us here, in this prestigious institution of learning. And, of course, I wish to extend warm greetings to Soraya Genin and the other representatives of ICOMOS and of the European Commission, as well as to all participants in this symposium.

As a diplomat, I had the chance of living in a number of countries and of visiting many others, in Europe, North and South America, Africa and Asia.

The immense diversity and richness of our shared historical and cultural heritage became thus for me and my family something natural and very obvious, something which we experienced on a daily basis in its many forms, both tangible and intangible, from monuments to natural landscapes, from traditions to artifacts and works of art.

We also became acquainted and deeply conscious of the different ways in which different countries treated their cultural and natural heritage, of the pressures these were subject to, of the wide variety of attitudes concerning the tensions between the demands of social and economic development and the preservation of the integrity of often unique landmarks, of the different ways in which the population in general valued or prized their cultural wealth.

More recently, during my time as Ambassador in Paris and Permanent Representative of Portugal to UNESCO, I had the privilege of being a member of the World Heritage Committee between 2013 and 2017. It was a unique experience which allowed me to get acquainted with

the numberless conservations issues and problems that afflict World Heritage sites all over the world, including Europe, as well as to benefit from the vast experience and knowledge of national experts and the Committee's advisory bodies concerning these issues, some of which were indeed very complex and polemic.

I recall, for instance, the long and hard discussion regarding the Historic Centre of Vienna, which was finally inscribed on the World Heritage List in danger in 2017 due to high-rise projects to be developed in the middle of the city.

Or the difficult issues concerning Liverpool, which had also been inscribed on the World Heritage List in danger in 2012, due to a projected massive redevelopment project of the historic docklands north of the city centre.

And in a different context which does not have a perhaps a direct bearing on today's discussions but that demonstrates the same type of carelessness or indeed greed behind some of the attitudes guiding the conservation of our common universal heritage, let me to mention the conservation issues related to the already much dilapidated Great Coral Reef or the growing destruction of the Bialowieza forest and its unique biodiversity through relentless logging. As you know, both sites are inscribed in the World Heritage list.

Whereas the Government of Australia and the Queensland authorities have managed, after the uproar the situation created in the Heritage Committee, to put together a plan that addressed the main issues concerning the conservation of the Reef, to my understanding, albeit the similar uproar that the integrity of Bialowieza caused in the Committee's meetings both in Istanbul and Krakow, the European Court of Justice has just recently condemned Poland for her continuous disregard concerning the preservation of the forest.

Vienna and Liverpool – and they are only two examples, both European, taken from an unfortunately large list of similar situations – sadly illustrate the importance of the theme of this symposium.

We used to stress, in the World Heritage Committee, that to place a site in the endangered list should not be seen as criticism of the country in question but as a mean to help that country address the problems that the property faces in terms of its conservation.

Well, this is the nice way of putting it. In fact, having a site moved to the list of endangered properties should not make anyone proud, especially not those responsible in the first place for its preservation and integrity.

Contemporary interventions on cultural heritage is indeed one of the main issues that need to be addressed regarding built heritage, historic centres, urban landscapes and all heritage in general. For the simple reason that the preservation of the integrity and authenticity, or even the survival of certain sites as we know and value them, depend on the quality of those interventions.

I believe that Europe has a very special historical and conceptual responsibility in this field and that European countries must act in an exemplary way where heritage conservation and safeguarding are concerned.

Or, in other words, our practice in this field must indeed meet the theory that we so often extol and the criteria that we promote. We must do what we preach.

One must recognize that the pressures on historical and cultural sites tends, unfortunately, to grow and not to diminish. Beyond the natural tensions that arise between conservation and development, other pressures make themselves felt which entail a negative impact on the cultural value of such sites, such as tourism, crowd management and real estate speculation.

We are confronted today with a wide variety of interventions in protected sites. From small conservation works to projects of a much larger dimension, namely infrastructures, sport and tourism facilities and space adaptation due to the need to accommodate growing numbers of visitors or new facilities conceived to attract even more and that finally destroy the integrity of the site.

Some of these projects are the work of famous architects, but sometimes it appears they have not been well thought through in terms of preserving the unique value of the site in question.

I do not deny the possibility of an economic use of certain historical and cultural properties, as long as it is done in a reasonable way which guarantees its preservation in terms of authenticity and integrity.

What worries me are initiatives decided on the spur of the moment, without careful study of all their implications, or those decisions that are exclusively motivated by a quick and short term gain that finally destroys the wider and more permanent value of the site in question.

What also worries me is that often those that have the task of deciding, namely public administrations, ignore the technical expertise and the advice that is given to them namely by such respected and experienced institutions as the World Heritage Centre, ICOMOS or IUCN, and impose a different solution, often with dire consequences.

Contemporary interventions may be the result of the natural evolution of spaces and societies and can indeed have positive impacts on their economic and social sustainability. But it is also obvious that some interventions do have very negative impacts on the fabric of sites, altering heritage attributes and impairing their values.

And often it is impossible to backtrack on the results of such interventions. The integrity of the property in question is thus forever lost or seriously compromised to the detriment of us all and of future generations.

In theoretical terms, the way to deal with a conservation issue or with a project that might hinder the historical significance and value of a given property is often very clear, obvious and

straightforward. Where things become complicated is when one moves from theory to practice, as we all know. This is precisely the subject of this timely symposium.

Often it is very difficult to find a consensus among the conflicting interests of promoters, heritage experts, local population and other stakeholders. Neither are there clear and simple solutions that fit all cases. Legislation and administrative rules are sometimes lacking. In many cases the different authorities that intervene in the process have themselves conflicting perspectives and different stakes they wish to uphold.

Decision-makers should of course listen carefully to the different perspectives and demands and try to accommodate them. But their paramount concern should be to find the best solutions that preserve the heritage value and significance of a given property intact. Unfortunately this is not always the case and we have seen the historical and cultural dimension of a site sacrificed for a quick, often transient, benefit.

Sometimes it takes courage, political courage, to uphold conservation objectives against economic objectives, to stand up against opposing pressures, to stay deaf to the uproar caused by what seems to be an unpopular decision. The decision of the Portuguese Government, some twenty years ago, not to proceed with the building of a dam in order to guarantee the preservation of the Foz Côa prehistoric site was indeed a courageous one.

This is particularly relevant when one is dealing with World Heritage sites which must be considered the property of all Mankind, not just a possession of a certain country, region or place. When a State strives to inscribe a property in the World Heritage list and sees his aim fulfilled, that State takes on, at the same time, the very serious responsibility and the commitment to preserve the site in the best possible condition and to uphold its heritage value for its fruition by future generations.

I strongly believe that the involvement of what is nowadays called civil society is decisive in these processes. The best guarantee for the preservation of a historical and cultural site are the people that benefit from them and that are conscious and proud of their unique and unreplaceable value. They are the strategic allies of the preservation and conservation of the integrity of cultural heritage. But for this, we should strive, as a priority, to reinforce the awareness of the significance of cultural heritage among the population in general.

To include in school curricula a subject dealing with the importance of preserving our historical and cultural heritage, as already happens concerning the protection of the natural environment, will surely be an important step to further these goals. From the Portuguese National Commission for UNESCO we are already working on such a project.

As the concept paper for our meeting rightly states, rehabilitation of built heritage has become a central activity for the Portuguese construction sector and the pressures from the recent significant increase in tourism, from many more foreigners buying houses in Portugal and from property speculation, have accelerated this process, creating very complex problems mainly

in historic centres and classified areas. These are problems that in fact go well beyond the preservation of integrity and authenticity of built sites and have an obvious impact on the livelihood of local residents.

As President of the Portuguese National Commission for UNESCO I have been confronted with several projects and initiatives that may have negative impacts on Portuguese World Heritage sites. I have strived to clarify the contours of such projects and to find the best solutions that, whilst allowing for these initiatives to go ahead and meet contemporary demands, will guarantee the preservation of their value as heritage sites.

In this task, I am very grateful to ICOMOS Portugal for their help and expertise. ICOMOS Portugal has been for many years a trusted and valuable partner of the Portuguese Commission for UNESCO. I therefore wish to thank its actual President, Soraya Genin, and its former President, Ana Paula Amendoeira, for helping us to carry out our responsibilities.

This year is particularly important to the Portuguese National Commission for UNESCO, since we celebrate our 40th anniversary. But 2019 is also important because forty years ago our Parliament ratified the World Heritage Convention in Portugal. The first four sites were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1983. We have now 15 properties on the List and do hope that two more will join shortly. We strive to live up to our commitments in terms of their conservation but we also have our problems in that domain.

Cultural heritage is not an easy subject. Heritage conservation is expensive, heritage sites are intertwined with our lives and identity, heritage theories evolve along the years and differ around the world.

ICOMOS has an eminent role in addressing these issues, in fostering the reflexion and deepening the knowledge concerning heritage matters and in providing standards and orientations. Its work is fundamental in giving us all credible guidance in how to preserve our heritage and to pursue the aims of UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

ICOMOS has been doing just that and we look forward for its continuous reflexion and assessment on how to improve the quality of interventions on cultural heritage.

I thank you!