

Historic preservation: a new culture in old worlds?
("Managing monuments as a national resource")

Yudhishtir Raj Isar, Director
The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture
at Harvard University and the Massachusetts
Institute of Technology

This short paper poses an ingenuous question: is not historic preservation itself a "new" culture in the "old" world of non-Western societies? This perverse play on the metaphor in the title of the VIII ICOMOS International Symposium - "Old Cultures in New Worlds" - has been inspired by the precarity of heritage conservation as a system of values, a mobilizing ideology, in the so-called Third World, a precarity I have been freer to observe in my present position than in a previous professional incarnation. My present responsibilities have in effect brought me into closer contact with the broader debate on some of the sociological factors affecting the conservationist enterprise than did my hortatory mission as an international civil servant.

While something more than lip service is undoubtedly paid to the safeguard of highly symbolic "monuments" in most countries, the record is significantly poorer in the conservation, rehabilitation and re-use of entire historic quarters, in the maintenance of a dynamic between the old and the new in the built environment of our towns and cities. Yet broad societal participation in historic preservation conceived in such environment conscious terms is one of the characteristic features of "modernity" in the cultures of Europe and North America. It is this widely shared urge to preserve that has been responsible for the success of historic conservation efforts in these countries.

It's absence in the Third World may be another sign of the deep cultural divisions between traditional and modern sub-cultures, of the contrast between the values of a small elite that has been socialized in the "specific, universalistic, and pragmatic orientations which typify "modern" culture" as opposed to the patterns of tradition to which the vast majority remains tied.¹ It suggests that the champions and practitioners of historic preservation in many of these countries are, like other would be protagonists of social, political and economic change,

¹ This opposition has been developed in political science literature. See Gabriel A. Almond and G. Bingham Powell, Comparative Politics: A Development Approach, Boston, Little Brown and Company, 1966, p.72

somewhat awash in models, norms and procedures whose applicability in non-Western contexts is increasingly open to question. Indeed the limited scope of preservation efforts spearheaded by rather small segments of the various national intelligentsias contradicts the optimistic rhetoric that characterizes the discourse of the preservation movement. The contradiction stares us in the face at every level. Suffice it to consider here how little response there has been at the national level, to the majority of Unesco's international campaigns for the safeguard of monumental edifices or ensembles that are considered highly representative of national history and identity and of "outstanding value to mankind." When even such properties garner so limited a degree of popular support then perhaps we are justified in questioning the very terms in which the cause is outlined.

In this perspective, the essentially sociological questions posed below have a bearing on both national and international resource mobilization for preservation in these countries.

What are these questions?

Based as it is on a grammar of values elaborated in the West and imported only quite recently into the ideological frameworks of the modernizing elites in the Third World, how can the preservation ethic possibly be given the broad popular support-- in structure as well as in sentiment -- that has been the basis for its success in Europe and North America?

Behind the universal prominence of heritage conservation as one of the givens of enlightened public policy is there not a severe lack of fit? Just as the lessons of such "hard" disciplines as economics and business management must be tempered with the insights of the psychological and social sciences should not the promotion of historic preservation be so informed? Does this purpose not need to be harmonized with the simultaneous and accelerated integration of the new, that is so compelling an imperative in developing societies, as part of a newly defined balance between continuity and discontinuity.

Kevin Lynch pointed out years ago that "under the banner of historical preservation, (western society has) saved many isolated buildings of doubtful significance or present quality, which are out of context with their surroundings and without a means of supporting their meaning to the public."² The reigning preservation discourse in non-Western societies is, I fear, one that generates far too little meaning. Reflecting aloud during an Aga Khan Award sponsored symposium in Istanbul (1978) the Turkish architect Dogan Tekeli asked "what differences in the social structure of the underdeveloped countries might make it more

² Kevin Lynch, What Time Is This Place, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1972, p.35.

possible to sell conservation ideas to them?"³ He went on to point out the need to understand such factors in all societies, in order to propagate the idea of historic conservation.

Why these questions?

To pose such questions may appear misguided. After all, it might be argued, the problems of industrialization and urbanization, the pressures of growth and redevelopment, are daunting adversaries everywhere, although they may be particularly overwhelming in developing countries. We all know that it is a terrible uphill struggle to mobilize people to safeguard bricks and mortar when even a square meal and a roof over their heads are permanent uncertainties. Such recurrent references to the economic calculus obscure the real issue, however. Paucity of resources is commonly supposed to be the principal obstacle to more and better conservation in developing countries. But the history of the conservation movement shows that all decisions to conserve are to begin with and to end with cultural decisions, not economic ones. Using an economic analogy though, what counts is the strength of social and cultural demand for the conservation of old buildings, i.e. the volume of the aggregate individual motivations, socially defined and expressed.

It might be argued also that heritage preservation does figure prominently among the declared aims of governments everywhere. Doesn't the very existence of the World Heritage List testify to a universally shared commitment to the safeguard of the heritage of our common past?

There is no doubt that this international honour roll has had a multitude of positive effects. But we must ask nevertheless whether the level of commitment it has generated leads to more than piecemeal actions that benefit only the most symbolic major monuments. Not nearly enough, we would argue, and always at the expense of the humbler yet more pervasive, more environmentally vital, urban historic fabric.

Giving primacy to the monumental, particularly to the preservation of great edifices as shrines of national glory is an option that is understandably congenial to our politicians. Today's political elites are indeed busy creating a global pattern of cultural nationalism that is strikingly similar (and understandably so) to forceful impulses of the emergent nationalisms in nineteenth-century Europe. As one historian puts it:

Since the doctrine of nationalism required people to believe that every nation had existed for many centuries ... the proof for its existence depended on the continuity of its linguistic and cultural

³ From Conservation as Cultural Survival, Proceedings of Seminar Two in the series Architectural Transformations in the Islamic World, The Aga Khan Awards, Geneva, 1980, p.27

coherence. Since not even that coherence was obvious to the naked eye, historians had ... to demonstrate that the ruins and documents of the past ... were part of the cultural heritage of each nation, monuments to the existence of cultural continuity.⁴

Much of the contemporary drive for conservation appears to revolve around such newly defined pseudo-heritages. Whenever this is the case, it is not surprising that popular response to such arguments from above is limited. There remains, however, the need to uncover the causes of popular indifference to the built environment handed down from the past even when immediate questions of well-being, rather than nationalist rhetoric, are at stake.

Half a millenium vs. half a century

David Lowenthal has pointed out that the West's "passion for preservation reflects a half millenium of changing attitudes and artifacts."⁵ He cites the dawning awareness of historicity, nationalism, the acute sense of loss resulting from unexampled change, the growing consciousness of individual identity and the antiquarian rediscovery of ancient sites and monuments as factors that gave it initial impetus in the early nineteenth century. He locates another attitudinal "divide" at the close of the same century, when "rising doubts about the continuance of progress, disquietude over social and political instability, growing awareness that the present was utterly unlike any past all engendered acute anxiety over the direction and pace of change."⁶ These factors fanned the converging winds of nostalgia, idealization, and revivalism and supported a new surge of preservation activity.

In our own time, resurgent national and ethnic allegiances, developmental psychology and psychoanalysis, disaffection with the present and pessimism about the future, the increasing accessibility of the monumental heritage and above all the acceleration of destructive and disruptive change, the "increasing evanescence of things and the speed with which we pass them by" complete the catalogue of origins and motives behind the West's impulses to preserve. These impulses are now embodied in art historical, archaeological, historical and aesthetic interests at the specific end of the scale and a

⁴ From Peter Munz, The Shapes of Time: a new look at the philosophy of history, Wesleyan University Press, 1977. Quoted by David Lowenthal in The Past is a Foreign Country, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p.393.

⁵ David Lowenthal, op. cit., p. 384

⁶ David Lowenthal, op.cit., p.395

"increasing evanescence of things and the speed with which we pass them by" complete the catalogue of origins and motives behind the West's impulses to preserve. These impulses are now embodied in art historical, archaeological, historical and aesthetic interests at the specific end of the scale and a vaguely defined if clearly held attachment to pastness and its material vestiges on the other.

That the socio-economic structures of Africa, Asia and Latin America are undergoing in the span of decades transformations similar to those experienced in the West over several centuries does not mean that cultural awareness and attitudinal change in Africa, Asia and Latin America are following similar paths, and at the same pace. We may be aware of the fact that only some of the values described above operate in the non-Western world today -- the nationalism and idealization but not the disquiet or the doubt. We may recognize that the responses to them take different paths. But we are ill-equipped to chart out these differences. We do not have even the beginnings of an adequate theoretical rationale for this purpose. We are still unable to identify the differences in a precise way, except to observe that practice seems still sadly uninformed by local knowledge, local sentiment, local needs, so that the essence of our built environment is deemed worth preserving by all those who inhabit it.

There is, of course, a paradox. This is that traditional societies were in fact highly conservationist in the sense that the architectural and spatial languages, the ways of organizing human settlements and edifices were preserved, and precisely because they were highly valued. Individual buildings and neighbourhoods might perish, but they would be replaced by new ones equally consonant with the prevailing sense of scale and of place.

Twentieth century technological, social and economic changes have brutally ruptured the sense of continuity, however. The process has been too sudden, too abrupt for these once stable societies to conceptualize the dilemmas of their present in the same ways that Western society has learned to do over more than two centuries of looking back to and working with its own past. Thus we are faced with too many disquieting signs that preservation is simply not seen as part of the dynamic of an evolving society but rather as an activity apart and somehow irrelevant. Perhaps it is inevitable that people in societies undergoing such rapid change will believe that the new is better by definition, for it alone seems charged with the promise of a better life. Writing on Islamic societies, Ronald Lewcock observes that

admiration for Western technology and culture and the resultant inferiority complex in many Islamic countries has led to doubt about the value of Islamic achievements. This ... makes it difficult to persuade people that the artifacts of their own culture are worth preserving...Many inhabitants of ...Islamic

countries are not convinced that a building in its old form is of greater value than a building remodeled by Western technology.⁷

Such reactions are typical of those found throughout the developing world, where for many people history itself has come to be something shameful and has to be somehow exorcised before it can become acceptable to the popular ideology of modernity. Dogan Kuban suggests that "the more conservative people are, the more they will destroy, because only through this sacrificial rite can they prove themselves worthy initiates into the modern world."⁸

Among the few examples of strong popular mobilization for heritage preservation is the Sri Lankan support for ancient religious structures in the "Cultural Triangle" of Sri Lanka. In this and other examples it transpires immediately that popular sentiment is ready to preserve a religious edifice, whose sacredness is the essential rationale for its protection, the only compelling motive, regardless of the most authentic antiquarian and aesthetic reasons.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to set out some directions for further inquiry. It is therefore programmatic with respect to the fuller understanding of possible popular motives to preserve the heritage that might be obtained through an ethnography of the preservationist enterprise itself, and a sociological analysis of popular attitudes towards it. It is symptomatic that the preservation movement itself has not generated such lines of questioning. Since the vast majority of people in non-Western societies do not venerate pastness, great age or historical significance in themselves (and perhaps still enjoy an abundance of material beauty in the objects of everyday life they make and use), the "vocabulary of values" that inspires historic preservation in the West is no doubt only partially applicable there.⁹ The search for alternative vocabularies of values has hardly begun. It is my conviction, however, that until and unless it does, our common cause will be pursued in an uneasy, cultural limbo between two worlds.

⁷ Ronald Lewcock, "Three Problems in Conservation: Egypt, Oman and Yemen", in Conservation as Cultural Survival, p. 66.

⁸ Dogan Kuban, op.cit., p. 5.

⁹ For the expression "vocabulary of values" I am indebted to Prof. Oleg Grabar (oral communication).

Historic preservation: a new culture in old worlds?

Yudhishtir Raj Isar

Summary

Is not the broad, environmentally oriented ideology of historic preservation, to which we all subscribe, a "new" culture in the "old" world of non-Western societies? This question is based on the observation that in many such countries the safeguard of highly symbolic monuments is indeed attended to in the name of cultural nationalism and identity but that preservation of the historic built environment remains very limited. The broader notions of conservation, themselves of relatively recent origin in the West, are rarely found in the Third World beyond small specialized segments of the national intelligentsias. Is not this hiatus yet another sign of the deep cultural divisions between traditional and modern sub-cultures and of the reliance of the latter on models, norms and procedures whose applicability in non-Western contexts is increasingly open to question?

This paper attempts to pose some sociological questions that this state of affairs suggests, questions that are pertinent to better resource mobilization for historic preservation in these countries. It seeks to trace the development of conservation as a salient social value in the West and to contrast it with popular sentiment in the Third World. Here historic preservation appears to be based on the transfer of an imported "vocabulary of values". Until the search for an alternative vocabulary of values is seriously begun is the cause of conservation not destined to be pursued in an uneasy cultural limbo between two worlds?

La conservation du patrimoine: nouvelle culture à l'usage des Vieux Mondes?

Yudhishtir Raj Isar

Sommaire

L'idéologie que charrie la notion de préservation d'un patrimoine historique défini de manière très large, et à laquelle nous souscrivons, ne représente-t-elle pas pour les Vieux Mondes -les sociétés non-occidentales- une " nouvelle" forme de culture? Dans ces pays, le patrimoine monumental investi d'une grande valeur symbolique est préservé au nom d'une revendication culturelle. Toutefois, ces efforts demeurent circonscrits. Les choix plus larges qui favorisent la conservation d'ensembles et de quartiers historiques, relativement récents dans les cultures occidentales, sont pratiquement inexistantes dans les pays du Tiers Monde, en dehors des cercles restreints des spécialistes. Cette lacune illustre les ruptures culturelles entre traditionalistes et modernistes. Comme on le sait, ces derniers adhèrent en effet à des procédures et des modèles dont la pertinence est aujourd'hui remise en cause.

Cet article pose des questions d'ordre sociologique susceptibles d'éclairer les contraintes sous jacentes aux politiques de conservation dans le Tiers Monde. Il tente de poser les jalons du développement historique, en occident, de la notion de conservation en tant que valeur sociale. Par ailleurs, il cherche à cerner les sentiments populaires dans les pays du Tiers monde vis à vis de la conservation qui, aujourd'hui semble reposer sur le transfert d'un " vocabulaire de valeurs" étranger à ses valeurs socio-culturelles. Cette entreprise ne serait elle pas vouée à l'échec si ce vocabulaire ne venait pas à être révisé?