International Symposium on the Restoration and Conservation of Historic Cairo

Session on Techniques of Conservation Sunday 17 February 2002 9.00-13.00.

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Abstract: Techniques of Conservation in relation to historic monuments are guided by the recommendations set forward in a number of international conventions. Authenticity in design, materials, workmanship and setting are the main criteria for the inclusion of monuments and sites into the World Heritage List. The Venice Charter stipulates some general guidelines on how to maintain authenticity in restoration, but each individual case may be subject to different solutions and there will always be room for a variety of approaches, which are not only of a purely technical character. Public awareness and participation are required and debate between all stakeholders is essential to help setting priorities right and ensuring implementation of long lasting solution. This is the very reason for this international symposium. The key words in preservation and restoration are: Survey, documentation, appropriate use, preventive maintenance, reversibility of intervention and continuously monitoring. But in view of the complexity of the urban setting in Historic Cairo any restoration project creates the imminent risk of making mistakes in a very delicate balance between the current needs of a fast growing urban population and respect for authenticity and unique heritages values.

Background paper for introduction (oral presentation only).

It is indeed a privilege to be invited back to Cairo. May I just start being a little nostalgic: I was here for the first time in 1974 as a student of architecture. I recall the eye-opening experience to arrive here in the very middle of the orient and feel the intriguing atmosphere of this old historic city with its bustling activities. I took part in the survey of Beit Siheimi and the Madrasa al-Gawharia attached to the Al Azhar Mosque. Later stayed for three month in the local family hotel at Al Muez Street just opposite Darb al Azfar and each day I walked down to the Wakala Bazara and continued the survey of this dilapidated building in the very heart of Gamalyyia.

Now, after 25 years I realise that these buildings are restored and indeed the whole of the historic Cairo is under radical transformation in a very ambitious and swift restoration programme planned for a period of 8 years.

I was asked last year to undertake a mission on behalf of ICOMOS to report on the state of conservation in Historic Cairo and I should like to take point of departure in the observations I made during the mission and presented in a reactive monitoring report to the UNESCO World Heritage Office. The general observations and recommendations were discussed at the latest World Heritage Committee meeting in Helsinki this December, when a number of recommendations were adopted (Overhead).

Arrangement of this seminar is part of the follow up on the recommendations.

As the author of the reactive monitoring report I am of course personally concerned about the outcome of the report. Drafted as an internal report intended to help furthering a constructive dialogue, I am pleased to know that parts of the critical observations and subsequent recommendations are been positively considered. During this seminar we will have the possibilities to deal with the implications of this comprehensive restoration programme in some detail as well as discussing the needs of initiating an integrated urban renewal programme, which goes beyond the restoration of individual monuments.

I am uncomfortable, however, when single passages are quoted out of context with the spirit of the entire report. I understand this has been the case in some instances leaving a purely negative impression of the current efforts of restoration carried out by the Ministry of Culture and the many people, who are taking part in demanding and challenging work.

I understand from the debate, mainly hosted in the literary magazine Akhbar Al-Adab, that the discussion focus not so much on expertise or the varying concepts of authenticity as on whether it is relevant to accept foreign interference in matters considered a national responsibility alone. I am very much opposed to this argument.

- Firstly the World Heritage Convention clearly stipulates that the monuments and sites included in the World Heritage List constitute a common heritage subject to a system of international co-operation and assistance. Systematic monitoring and reporting is part of the obligation by the state parties and specific reports and impact studies are required

each time exceptional circumstances occur or work is undertaken, which may have an effect on the state of conservation of the site (para.75 Operational Guidelines). This is clearly the case in Cairo as a consequence of the damage effected by the earthquake in 1992 and the subsequent comprehensive restoration programme. -

- Secondly, international recommendations, such as the Venice Charter emphasises on the multidisciplinary approach with recourse to all the sciences and techniques which can contribute to the study and safeguarding of the architectural heritage.

And we - all of us dealing with the planning and management of the urban environment - may see only a small fraction of this complexity. Generally ,we tend to focus on the parts which have our special interest often with point of departure in the professional training or based upon personal taste. It is commonplace, but never the less an important in fact to have in mind, when we discuss preservation issues in Historic Cairo

I know very well that I will never be able to grasp and understand the complicated history of Cairo to the same extend as my old friend Medhad al Benabbawy or any of you who are natives of Egypt with a professional career in different fields. I think however I can help facilitating a discussion about the aim of the restoration on basis of an international experience and looking into the situation with a different view, which may open for new ways of doing thinks eventually. Furthermore, a much more comprehensive approach to heritage preservation is required taking account of the economic and social life of the community

This is the very idea behind a seminar like this on Historic Cairo: 1)To further a constructive dialogue and exchange ideas concerning the best way to preserve Historic Cairo and 2)secure that not only the historic fabric but also the special feeling of the place will survive during a process of revitalisation and social development.

To some extend the current debate in Caro about restoration principles reflects the old debate in Europe between Viollet le Duc and Ruskin during the 19th century, when extensive rebuilding of monuments in France which were restored from mere ruins to become impressive Medieval fortresses. According to Viollet le duc ' to restore a building is not just to preserve it, to repair ot, and to remodel it, it is to re-instate it in a complete state such as it may never have been in at any given moment' Subsequently, this common practice were being condemned by Ruskin, who wrote of restoration: 'Restoration means the most total destruction which a building can suffer'. From out of the academic debate about theories and principles in restoration evolved a modern concept of the aims of restoration, that cultural heritage is recognized as such because its qualities have withstood the test of time and we have the responsibility to preserve this quality. I may quote William Morris, the 19th cent advocate of conservation in England, who considered that old buildings and cultural property belongs not only to our forefathers, but also to our descendants, and that we are only trustees for those that come after us. These considerations are being reflected e.g. in the Charter of Venice and the World Heritage Convention. Authenticity therefore is a key criterion for inclusion into the World Heritage List and it is likewise important to maintain this authenticity in restoration.

This morning is specifically devoted to discussions about techniques of preservation, but in view of the complexity of the matter, I should like stress that it is not only techniques related to the preservation of the physical fabric making the best use of materials and craftsmanship, but also relate to more intangible aspects such as i) preparing building surveys and making proper interpretation of the history of the building in relation to the present condition, ii) ensuring public awareness and participation and iii) making plans for appropriate use and to secure regular maintenance and upkeep for the future.

Snap shot experiences

I cannot go through all details in the monitoring report, but I may present a few snapshots for further consideration during the seminar (- playing the role as a tourist to Cairo) and as an invitation to debate later this morning session after the site specific presentations.

Surveys and assessment of heritage values in the environment

It is important to remember that not all cultural heritage assets are known in advance or appreciated as an environmental assets that enhance quality of life. Nominated as a World Heritage site in 1979, Historic Cairo should of course be appreciated as a unique historic city worth of preservation, but still, there are highly varying concepts of what it really mean and what make-up the real character and feeling of the place (- the boundary of the WHS is actually not exactly defined. I have noted that previously unrecorded historic buildings and structures are now being listed).

When it comes to the survey and appreciation of the individual buildings, I am much impressed by the efficiency and accuracy by which the engineering consultant carry out the survey drawings with the help of computerised instruments of topography (total station), numerical modelling software and similar advanced IT. I find that many of these drawings are superb, but as a rather old fashioned architect restorer I am badly missing the personal and subjective observations on site as a supplement to the computerised straight lined drawings. I find that there is a need of supplementary observations and interpretations, which can be provided only by a trained architect. To sustain this professional approach there is a need to establish a degree in this field of preservation of historical monument as soon as possible, which can be related to on the job training in relation to the restoration and urban renewal programme in Cairo.

The training can be established in different form and the most immediate needs can be overcome by providing post gradual training courses as a combined theoretical and on the job training programme offered to building engineers. This can possibly be done in co-operation between the private and the public sector having common interest. ICCROM as an international advisory institution to UNESCO and the WH Convention, could possibly assist in setting up an appropriate curriculum and help providing the required training.

The best use of materials

In this short introductory speech to the session on techniques of conservation I will not deal much with the materials and their correct use in restoration.. We do know how important it is to apply the best materials and how difficult it is to get the same good quality as before. I think Bernard Maury may tell us how much effort was made to obtain original stone for the restoration of the Harawi House in stead of resorting to the use of the ordinary *helwan* stone presently used. We also know about the damaging effect of Portland cement and the obvious reason to resort to the well known properties of lime and hydraulic limes and use cement - ordinary or white -for structural purposes only.

I find that this theme is best treated in relation to site specific cases - but I find that there is a great need for translation of relevant scientific materials into Arabic and make it easily accessible both as a reference and as a tool of education. This shortcoming may be mitigated through the preparation of a special conservation handbook on Historic Cairo based on the considerable experience accumulated over the years. The initiative will be presented on Wednesday and be subject to further discussions during the seminar.

Appropriate use of monuments

It is outlined in the Venice Charter that making use of the structures for some socially useful purpose always facilitates the conservation. At the beast a proper function should be decided before any project preparation starts. I am sure that all consulting engineers or architects will agree that it is essential to know about the future use of the building and start to establish a building programme in a dialogue with the future users of the building before any line is drawn on paper.

For me it was a special experience to get back and see the Wekala Bazara restored because I know this particular building down to the very detail. Compared with the dilapidated condition 25 years ago it was pleasing to see the restoration recently completed, but also discouraging to realise that exact plans for the future use of the building are still pending - not to mention the problems to secure running cost of maintenance, when the building is out of use !. In this respect it was encouraging to visit the Wekalat al Ghuri, because the present users are taking part in the restoration and the director assist in the formulation of the building programme.

Public awareness and participation

I cannot follow the local debate about the preservation of Historic Cairo very close, but I understand that there is indeed a tense public debate and I find this very good, since it demonstrates that the is a public concern and awareness about heritage issues.

When I see the large signboards in front of the Ibn Tulun Mosque announcing the name of the Aswan Est. Contractor I become immediately on the guard, what is happening here ? What are they doing to this most precious and unique historic monument. And this natural reaction will be irrespective of the actual work, whether it is good or bad. In my opinion it is an obligation of the Board of Antiquities to secure that proper information is communicated to the public at all levels. The signboards need to explain what is going on. The people living in the immediate vicinity of the building need to know how the construction works will influence on their environment. This information could be exhibited at the site and it should be normal practice to arrange public hearings and meetings where plans can be presented and discussed. Such procedures would help raise interest and ensure more public involvement, which is an important

condition for developing a democratic society in which local population feel that the money is spend in the best possible way and they will benefit.

I also understand that the place for a permanent exhibition on Historic Cairo as a World Heritage Site and presenting changing exhibitions on the restoration programme is about to be established in the Takiyya. The prominent and central location next to al-Azhar Mosque provides excellent possibilities of showing models and projects in order to create public debate and generate more awareness. There is also an excellent opportunity to show enlarged samples on the many old glass plate negatives with motives from Historic Cairo, which may help promoting a debate on how and what to restore if Cairo shall maintain its character in the future.

Integrated urban development

In the local issue of Al Ahram on Friday 1th February there was critique of a restored urban area near the Al Amr Mosque called Asr el sham' (palace of candles). The people living in that quarter are criticising the beautification and superficial work done to the facades of the houses. The new street lamps of French colonial style are not functioning any more (allegedly electricity was connected from one of the houses the day of inauguration) the flower boxes (?) have turned into waste baskets as no place for garbage disposition. The windows has been replaced with some type of mashrabeyya to give the street scape some original historic flavour ; the level of the streets has been raised but the levels of the entrances of houses remained below the new level of pavement (varying between half a metre and one metre below the new street level) causing difficulty to get in and out from the houses, particularly for the elderly. Needless to tell that this kind of urban renewal create some mistrust in the local community and it will be necessary to start quite another active involvement of all stakeholders in a process of urban renewal. Such participatory process will ensure a real improvement of living condition and not only be a facelift which add to disengagement and animosity towards any authority. A social dimension is needed and restoration of the historic monuments cannot be handled in isolation from the surrounding urban environment.

The planned replacement of about 3000 inhabitants and demolition of about 500 flats and more than 60 workshops in order to create a 300 metres demarcation area along the whole length of the 2.2 km long aqueduct is in my opinion a mistake for several reasons. Firstly, because the exposure of historic monuments in splendid isolation from the living environment is an old fashioned concept of 'a museum in the open', which has been realised with disastrous results in different parts of the world in a misconceived attempt to attract tourist. In my opinion a revision is needed in favour of a much more flexible and integrated approach by which the monument is considered an integrated part of the urban environment. Here I find there is a need to involve all stakeholders in the area and start a process of urban renewal, which may take long time to realise and give reason to much discussion, but I am convinced that the result will be worth the effort.

There will have more time to discuss this specific project to morrow, but I mention it in relation to the theme 'techniques of restoration' because we have to realise that any restoration project - and especially an integrated urban renewal project needs to take account of the human factor. Active involvement of the people makes the programming much more complicated but any urban renewal project needs to take consideration of the needs of people living and working in the area.

Regular maintenance and upkeep

The Venice Charter emphasises that it is essential to the conservation of monuments that they be maintained on a permanent basis. Actually conservation is the action taken to prevent decay and regular maintenance is the most cost-effective form of conservation. 'One stitch in time saves nine' is a popular saying which also can be used in connection with historic buildings and it is indeed self evident that 'continuous care' is the best and cheapest way of dealing with historic buildings.

The earthquake on 12 October 1992 raised great concern about the condition of the many monuments in Cairo, and no doubt, safety is of paramount importance, and there was indeed a need of urgent intervention
When I realise the scale of the current restoration programme I worry, if there the skills and the capacity available to deal with all these projects in a way which will secure the quality through out. I therefore feel that it is important to set the priorities right. Perhaps it would be appropriate to decide first on the immediate structural problems and secure that the roofs are watertight. Then the more delicate fine art restoration can be completed at a subsequent time at a somewhat slower speed, which will also give ample time for proper scientific documentation.

Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are at the heart of the principles and practices of conservation, which contribute positively to both decision-making and accountability. Regular monitoring and evaluation is stipulated in the Guidelines of the World Heritage Convention. The regular reporting on the state of conservation should also be adapted as a regular routine at a national level.

As a practical planning and management tool, monitoring and evaluation should indeed be incorporated as and integrated conservation policy by the Supreme Council of Antiquities. This practise by which the condition and management of each listed site is put to test at regular interval may also apply to restoration projects during implementation in order to check the quality of the work and see that the work is completed according to the project. I think it is recommendable to start - let say- a five year planning process based on monitoring and evaluation of all the listed buildings to establish a list of priorities linked up with a financial plan to secure the best value for money.

Monitoring relates to a wide range activities related to financial planning, scheduling, progress monitoring, performance evaluation and research works pertaining to the various fields of operations (utilities, environment, socio-economic projects). If this practise were adapted long time ago the present ambitious restorations programme aiming to restore 157 monuments within an eight year schedule would not have been necessary. And there would be more time to decide on priorities and prepare the individual projects including amble time for a public debate, which ensure that the people can be well information of all details of the project.

And be aware, the involvement of all levels of management and staff in this process is indeed a very important. As an educational process, explaining the purpose, principles and uses of the monitoring and evaluation process, staff can be more engaged in there daily work and feel more personal responsibility.

Training and establishment of professional career structures.

Visit to Madrasa and Mausoleum of Sultan Barquq, one of the intriguing and impressive building complexes - not yet restored. The guards were sitting outside and I tried to make myself understood that I wanted to visit the place. It was difficult to be allowed in, finally with a reference to Midhad al Binawary, the Inspector of the Northern district, I succeeded. But only to be closely attended by the guard, who was very suspicious about my sketching and no chance was left for a peaceful contemplation of the beauty of the mausoleum. I was feeling that day, that much could be done for little money, by educating the staff and the guards and make them understand that there role is to provide service and assistance to the visitors. Perhaps also a daily routine including the duty to clean the place and keep it need and tidy would serve the function of maintaining the buildings at minimal cost.

I am using the word ‘visitor’ and not ‘tourist’, because it would be a great mistake to focus too much on tourists - meaning the tourist from abroad - who may be very welcome due to the considerable revenue earned from international tourism. I know that the present budget of the Supreme Council of Antiquities is generated from tourist revenues, but Historic Cairo is first and foremost a living city, where people live and work. The main aim of the restoration programme should indeed be to maintain the unique feeling of this historic city as a living environment to the benefit of the local inhabitants. Therefore I believe that it is very important to include a programme of socio-economic development, which will require a good co-operation between the Supreme Council of Antiquities/through the Historic Cairo Studies and Development Centre, the Governorate and the Physical Planning Department (GOPP) of the Ministry of Housing and Utilities. This is a real challenge to the preservation and development of Historic Cairo as a World Heritage Site.

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