

Forum UNESCO – University and Heritage

Jonathan Bell

A unique project that has UNESCO and universities worldwide joining forces to safeguard the cultural heritage is described by Jonathan Bell, a graduate of Harvard University and the Sorbonne, who has extensive academic and hands-on experience with Buddhist murals in China and Tibet. As a UNESCO consultant, he helped develop and administer a number of cultural heritage projects around the world, particularly Forum UNESCO – University and Heritage. He is currently pursuing graduate studies at Columbia University.

The world abounds in astounding cultural heritage sites inextricably linked to the history, tradition and lives of one or more peoples. Fashioned by human genius or created by the careful hand of nature, these sites are living testimony to a past that can never be recaptured. They serve as monuments to the accomplishments and value systems of an entire race and act as empirical links to epochs long since past.

As the planet ages, so do these sites so profoundly interwoven with our own human history. The ravages of pollution, mass urbanization and natural disaster combine with neglect to leave these structures and natural sites in a dangerous state of disrepair. The threat of their complete disappearance is far from myth. Intervention is, therefore, a constant necessity if we are to maintain for the future what remains of the past.

The sheer number of historic sites and cultural monuments makes organizing efforts to preserve them a daunting task. As professionals continue to work towards their goals, both in the short and long term, it becomes more and more evident that the needs of these sites far surpass their available resources of expertise, technology and funding. However, much of the manpower and know-how, as well as the financial means, necessary for the development and completion of preservation and restoration projects rests within many institutions of higher learning. These projects geared towards the enhancement of cultural heritage can, in turn, provide universities and other specialized institutions with valuable hands-on training opportunities for their students and appropriate venues for the allocation of external funding. There is a self-reciprocating relationship between the professionals and their

academic counterparts that needs to be exploited.

Despite the seemingly natural relationship, a large gap has traditionally existed between public and private funding sources, on the one hand, and professionals in the field of cultural heritage protection, on the other. *Forum UNESCO – University and Heritage* is the result of a desire to incorporate the astounding technical, human and financial resources of universities and bridge this gap in internationally guided efforts to preserve the world's cultural legacy. Created in 1996 on the occasion of an international gathering at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Spain, Forum UNESCO is a network of universities whose aim is actively to involve students and professors in cultural heritage work. As the only United Nations agency entrusted with the protection and enhancement of the world's cultural heritage, UNESCO recognized its founding role in the creation and promotion of such a network. Together with the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and the Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA), and the International Union of Architects (UIA), UNESCO undertook the establishment of Forum UNESCO to facilitate the preservation of cultural heritage.

An international database of courses related to cultural heritage work (e.g. architecture, preservation, conservation, museology), scholars, and various ongoing projects is housed within the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia. This body of information, accessible to anyone interested, has already greatly helped to draw the world of restorers,



The project of restoration work on old wooden houses in Istanbul came to light during the Melbourne meeting of Forum UNESCO – University and Heritage.

preservationists and others much closer together. It is also a valuable resource for students hoping to gain experience and participate in restoration projects around the planet. From this point in Valencia, a web of universities and institutions involved in the preservation, conservation, and restoration of cultural property spreads across six continents. The institutions involved generally provide extensive

course work and fieldwork in related disciplines and are linked through representative groups of students and professors.

Perhaps even more interesting and important than the database, are the yearly meetings hosted by different universities boasting an interest in preservation work. These conferences attract professionals and educational representatives from numerous countries to discuss restoration methods, exchange ideas and adopt projects whose results can be followed. As annual exchanges that attract more and more participants each year, they are proof of the popularity and success of the Forum UNESCO network between universities and other institutions. Not only are they well attended, but each event ends with a list of adopted projects exemplified by international co-operation between universities.

For example, in 1998 in Melbourne, at the third International Forum UNESCO – University and Heritage conference more than 140 representatives of various universities and institutions from around the world gathered to address the problems of preservation work and commit themselves to projects focused on the enhancement and protection of valuable vestiges of the past. The conference, held at Deakin University, convened an international community of professors, deans, rectors and students involved in cultural heritage work who reaffirmed their devotion to conservation and restoration efforts. Some twenty-five projects and activities, designed to enhance cultural heritage sites and presented by the participants themselves, were signed into action during the five-day gathering.

On 5/6 July 1999, a Forum UNESCO – University and Heritage Rector's meeting

was held at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. This event was attended by ninety-five representatives of various institutions in thirty-one different countries. University presidents, rectors, and deans were present alongside government and NGO officials. Discussion of the immediate and long-term goals of the network dominated, with a focus on efforts to better inform the public and policy-makers of cultural heritage efforts and their importance. Harvard University, for example, presented an ongoing project in which government officials are trained in both the public and private domain of cultural heritage issues. The university offers a class for members of the United States Congress to sensitize them to urban problems and issues of heritage preservation. Harvard is also interested in co-ordinating workshops about issues of urbanism and heritage on a global level.

Proof positive

Since its inception four years ago, the participants have already adopted and completed an exhaustive list of restoration and preservation projects touching every corner of the world. The University of Punjab, Pakistan, has conducted in-depth research on the history, design, and landscaping of the Shalimar Gardens in Lahore, Pakistan, as well as devised a thorough plan for their preservation and enhancement. In March 1999, the Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia, held an international workshop examining the ongoing restoration of the San Fernando de Bocachica Fort, a site currently included on the World Heritage List. Most recently, in June 1999, Lund University in Sweden, in co-operation with Yildiz University in Turkey, began restoration work on old wooden houses in Istanbul. This project, now well under

way, came to light during the Melbourne meeting and currently demonstrates the advantages of collaboration between various institutions.

Another project whose progress has been notable was adopted during the second International Forum UNESCO – University and Heritage held at Laval University in Quebec, Canada. The project consisted of an international competition for the design of a poster and logo promoting the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Jointly hosted by Savannah College of Art and Design, Georgia, USA, and UNESCO, the competition resulted in applications from hundreds of entries from young persons around the world. Once the final decisions are made, the 1970 Convention will be represented by a new unique logo and benefit from heightened publicity.

The strength of this network lies specifically in the contact between the co-operating institutions and in their mutual encouragement. When specialized institutions work side by side on a project, there is an important exchange of knowledge, technological know-how and resources that have local impact. This exchange not only sees a particular project through to its end, but also engenders future co-operation as well as attracts attention to current needs in the field of cultural heritage work. An example of how international and inter-institutional contact lead to increased local efforts can be found at the Universidad de Buenos Aires in Argentina. There, work is currently underway to create a national database of heritage projects, restoration techniques, and other pertinent information. In September 1999, the university organized a workshop on the rehabilitation of old buildings for future use, in which

new technology in the field was presented and emphasis placed on the importance of interdisciplinary and community participation in such efforts. Experience gained primarily from the Forum UNESCO network and its meetings inspired the Universidad de Buenos Aires to take similar measures at home.

As we step across the threshold into the future, it is vital that we do not turn our backs on the past. The lessons that we have learned since our beginnings on the planet still mark the land. Archaeology has taught us of the glory of civilizations long gone and the exploits of our predecessors. Monuments and other surviving human expressions still serve as models of technology and physical records of events and people that might otherwise be forgotten. The heritage

being lost every day is the inheritance of the entire human race.

As more and more sites find themselves in danger and in immediate need of international assistance, individual institutions have less time and fewer resources available to devote to their preservation. However, joint effort can effectively meet these needs. Proper planning and co-operation can preserve those monuments and places considered to be of unique importance to humanity's cultural history. Forum UNESCO was created as a meeting place for professionals and the public, and a forum for new ideas and strategies in the conviction that international interdisciplinary co-operation coupled with public education and support can ensure that our past will survive into the future. ■