



Arab Cultural Heritage Forum

A Think- Tank Meeting informing a Vision for the Conservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage in the Arab World

Sharjah, UAE, From 6th to 8th February 2018

Description of Sessions:

Panel One/ day One:

Notions and Perceptions of Cultural Heritage in the Region:

The first session will focus on exploring the differences in our conceptions of heritage, especially on local communities' level, represented by distinguished speakers from different parts of the Arab Region. The discussion will aim at enriching our understanding and possible collective appreciation of heritage, and form a general agreement on the notion of the subject matter that will be discussed throughout the forum. Discussions will be guided by the following generic questions:

- How is heritage made? i.e., what is recognised as valuable, by whom and who decides? Who decides that an object or a monument is 'heritage'?
- What does it mean to attribute a heritage value to a place¹ within the context of public culture? Who then owns a heritage place? and how is it appreciated and recognised as valuable?
- Within the current conditions that the Arab region is undergoing, does cultural heritage have a role in uniting communities on one hand, and connecting individuals and communities to a specific place, monument, or artistic expressions on the other?
- Is there a regional culture in the Arab region? What is it? How do different parts of the Arab region with their diversity contribute to its formation and identify with?

Panel Two/ Day One:

Cultural Heritage within the general context of "public culture" in the Arab Region:

It is customary for publishers in Iraq, Syria or Lebanon to sell their books in Morocco, Algeria or Tunisia. The target audience for some satellite channels from countries such as Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia (to name a few), is the people of the region as whole. This session will address the dynamics between different media modalities such as movies, theater, music, etc., and the formation of different elements of culture, especially the notion of cultural heritage. Through a panel discussion of a group of distinguished artists and thinkers, this session will explore the extent to which media reflects realities of the general culture, and in turn affects in shaping it, and the potentials of media in strengthening the role of culture in creating or enhancing a sense of belonging to the region as a whole. As statistics show that the number of social media platforms' users in the Arab region

¹ Following the Burra Charter definitions, Place means a geographically defined area. It may include elements, objects, spaces and views. Place may have tangible and intangible dimensions.



are much higher than average compared with other world regions, the discussion will also address the influence of the internet and social media as one of these relevant modalities. The questions to be addressed in this session will include:

- How do various media forms (films, music, literature, poetry and novels) influence the public awareness of cultural heritage in its tangible form?
- What is the role of the internet and social media in shaping the notion of cultural heritage?

Panel Three/ Day Two:

The importance of Cultural Heritage in the Region:

The story of heritage can contribute to the spirit of the place, and it would be difficult for a community to safeguard a heritage place without its appreciation of a place's story or the meanings it can convey. Moreover, in many cases, the potential of economic revenue in important heritage places is prioritized over the significance of a living heritage or the "spirit of a place". In this session, a group of prominent thinkers, practitioners and artists will explore the relationships between communities in the region and their tangible cultural heritage, and the balance between the much needed revenue on one hand, and on the other, the appreciation of the spirit and embedded meanings of a heritage place, be it an old town, a cultural landscape, a monument or a place of worship. The session will further discuss the following questions:

- Why is it important for a community to appreciate its tangible heritage or the historic built environment that affects its quality of life?
- How can heritage be relevant to current and future realities and challenges affecting the lives of local communities or livelihood of historic places?
- How can the conservation of cultural heritage and works of art benefit from a set of values and meanings embedded in them?

Panel Four/ Day Two:

Challenges in understanding and protecting cultural heritage:

The recent deliberate and violent targeting of cultural heritage in some parts of the Arab region confirms the significance of this heritage. A full understanding of the social conditions and impact of this destruction is needed to devise protection strategies, especially that official conservation policies in times of peace proved insufficient to protect this heritage in times of conflict, not to mention threats of natural decay or urban development. It is important to understand the reasons for this failure to address the challenges facing cultural heritage protection policies in the region. To address these issues, this session will discuss questions such as:

- Why is a debate and dialogue about the conservation of cultural heritage is inadequate or at times lacking in the region?
- Can access to cultural heritage be considered one of the human rights?
- What are the meanings and significance embedded in typical cultural heritage forms in the region?
- Who is Cultural Heritage preserved for, and why is it deliberately and so violently targeted?



Panel Five/ Day Two: *Influences affecting Cultural Heritage:*

International conservation principles were largely developed after the Second World War, especially with the creation of UNESCO and other heritage protection organizations such as ICCROM, ICOMOS, and ICOM. Heritage conservation policies in the region, and other third world regions, followed international trends of heritage conservation without participating effectively in their formation. Despite the fact that the Arab region contains rich cultural heritage and remains of the past of outstanding universal and human values, official systems of heritage protection inherited management forms influenced by foreign systems and views that remained after independence and creation of new nation states; in other words, national perceptions of heritage that followed respective independence were heavily influenced by colonial or orientalist ideas. This session is dedicated to discuss these and other influences on the concept and notion of cultural heritage and the resulting conservation or protection strategies, such as the impact of international heritage conservation organizations, but also internal influences of beliefs and ideologies on the concept of heritage and its conservation. The key questions that will be addressed in this session include:

- What is the impact of Orientalism and Colonialism on the concept/ notion of cultural heritage and the current approaches to conservation practices?
- What is the impact of Western approaches on what is considered cultural heritage in the Arab region?
- What is the impact of beliefs and ideologies on the concept of cultural heritage, and on conservation approaches, theories and practices?

Panel Six/ Day Three: *The Role of Education:*

Awareness of cultural heritage significance and its fragility can be very much enhanced by formal education systems. Informal education also has a role in public awareness. This session will cover the current role of education on different levels, from primary to postgraduate education. Available curricula in schools include some notions of heritage, but this is often considered by experts in the field as insufficient, this is even more true in informal education such as the available general readings for children, family excursions, children games, etc. A group of educators and heritage professionals will discuss what is to be expected from education, with some emphasis on higher education. In addition, in many parts of the region, university graduates with heritage-related specializations (such as archaeology) face difficulties to find jobs in the market. On the other hand, university programmes, do not cover country needs to conserve its heritage. Questions to be addressed will include:

- How do current education systems at all levels (formal and informal) affect our understanding of cultural heritage in all its forms?
- How can cultural heritage education in the Arab world be best assessed and improved at school and university levels?



- How can education be better organized to involve and inform young people and promote public awareness?

Panel Seven/ Day Three:

External Impressions and Reflections:

A group of internationally renowned experts and philosophers in cultural heritage conservation will present the history and development of heritage understanding and conservation in general, focusing on similarities and diversity of heritage world-wide. This session will also present the concept of World Heritage, and outstanding universality of cultural heritage. Based on the previous discussions this session will address questions in this area that would include:

- How is cultural heritage in the Arab Region understood by the “others”?
- How can Arab professionals and other related sectors help influence and effectively communicate authentic understanding or meanings of cultural heritage?

Panel Eight/ Day Three:

Follow-up Strategy and Action Plan:

The forum is hoped to be a first step to inform future directions aimed at establishing thought and conceptual foundations for approaches to cultural heritage conservation in the region. In order to achieve this goal, this session will focus on the way forward and how the outcomes of this event can benefit various aspects related to our understanding of cultural heritage and its protection in a wider cultural and regional context. A group of experts with a long experience of working in the region, and who have a deep knowledge and understanding of the needs in the region, will discuss the elements necessary to establish an informed cultural heritage strategy for the future, to be adopted by official heritage institutions and improving cultural heritage policies, as well the role that can be played by public figures, artists, journalists, and cultural specialists and thinkers and, eventually, decision makers. The key questions of this session would include:

- How can cultural heritage be protected in line with the previous discussions?
- How can we develop a regional plan or elaborate assessment to address the subject on regional level?