Protection of cultural and natural heritage (in times of peace, as well as conflict or natural disaster situations)

Museums and collections are particularly at risk during situations of armed conflict or natural disaster, owing to the inherent vulnerability and tremendous symbolic value of heritage. In response, international organizations, museums and heritage professionals must combine their expertise and networks, reinforcing their capacities to protect cultural heritage. In recent years, emergency response efforts have been launched to counter the destruction of heritage in Afghanistan, Côte D’Ivoire, Egypt, Haiti, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Syria and Yemen, exemplifying the international community’s response to these highly complex political and logistical challenges in times of civil strife and warfare. In this context, the role of museums in the protection of heritage should be redefined, particularly in light of their increasingly recognized role in fostering international cultural relations and intercultural dialogue, as well as heritage protection education.

Background Note

Museums and heritage protection: a new paradigm

“The social role of museums, along with the preservation of heritage, constitutes their fundamental purpose” (UNESCO 2015 Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society, article 30).1

The mission of museums is constantly shifting in response to changing socio-political realities, necessitating a spirit of innovation and flexibility. The destruction of heritage is a particular challenge, although not a recent phenomenon. The destruction of the Old Bridge of Mostar in 1993, as well as the Buddhas of Bamiyan and the National Museum of Afghanistan in 2001, the looting of the National Museum of Iraq in 2003 and the destruction of mausoleums and the burning of manuscripts in Timbuktu, Mali in 2012 are all examples of deliberate attempts to erase the identities and histories of societies. The 2016 conviction of Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi for war crimes and the destruction of historical monuments in Timbuktu, the first conviction of its kind, is ground-breaking in

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1 In the following referred to as "UNESCO 2015 Recommendation".
this regard, raising international awareness of the growing, systematic destruction of cultural heritage around the world.

The destruction of cultural heritage in times of conflict is not only a cultural emergency, but a security and humanitarian imperative. It requires that we work to protect tangible heritage from damage and destruction, while also safeguarding the cultural rights of the concerned populations, including their right to access their cultural heritage and to fully participate in and enjoy cultural life, rights which are essential for social cohesion, stability, livelihoods and resilience.

The international heritage community has become increasingly aware of the difficulties museums and cultural institutions encounter in conflict situations. The recurrent destruction and deterioration of museum collections and heritage should encourage the international community to reflect on the significance of this heritage, as well as the means to prevent and counter the damage where possible. In recent conflicts, museums and their collections have often been targeted because of their symbolic value as expressions of cultural identity or pluralism.

In order to fulfil their fundamental heritage preservation functions and their potential as beacons of cultural diversity, inclusive education, social cohesion and sustainable development, museums must be fully acknowledged as keepers of our common heritage. Accordingly, they are called upon to redefine their role and to strengthen their capabilities to protect heritage, both in times of peace and in situations of natural disaster or military conflict.

Museums can adjust to this new reality by expanding their institutional focus; in addition to the preservation, management and protection of their own collections, in accordance with the principles of international norms for the protection and promotion of heritage, museums may use or offer their considerable expertise, honed through these activities, for the benefit of other institutions, communities or countries. Within their respective social contexts, museums could thereby assume the additional functions of core facilitators, incubators and educators of heritage protection, particularly in times of conflict or natural disaster.

The heightened international demand for the engagement and expertise of museums to address the challenges of heritage protection can be attributed to:

a) the recent massive threats to cultural diversity through ‘cultural cleansing’,
b) the emerging role of heritage and its protection for the development of strategies for international cultural relations,2
c) the well-documented, cross-sectoral impact of heritage protection within communities and countries,3 and
d) the recognition of the expanded social role of museums and their contribution to intercultural dialogue, social cohesion, and sustainable development, as

An integrated approach to disaster preparedness in museums

An effective emergency response depends upon preparedness and risk reduction, both of which are fundamental responsibilities for every museum. Risk reduction and disaster preparedness aims to minimize the detrimental effects of natural and human-made disasters, as well as military conflicts, on visitors and personnel, as well as the collections and the technical infrastructure of museums themselves. Risk reduction and disaster preparedness should be integrated as indispensable aspects of museum management. The more detailed the policies of disaster preparedness and risk reduction, the more effective the protection of cultural property in situations of disaster or conflict.

In practical terms, this implies, for example, that museum storage facilities provide not only the optimal conditions for object conservation, but also provide maximal protection in extreme situations. This includes provisions for a swift, yet coordinated removal and/or evacuation of objects.

The inventorying and documentation of collections represents perhaps the most important means of protecting heritage collections. For this documentation to be useful for staff and institutions in charge of emergency and recovery operations, documentation data must be accurate, systematic and allow for the unequivocal identification of an object. Compatibility, accessibility and recoverability are the most important features of useful documentation. Museums should increase their efforts to ensure basic, comprehensive documentation and where possible use digital tools and communication technologies.

In addition to object storage and object documentation, disaster preparedness and risk reduction are of vital importance for displayed objects as well. Apart from preserving and protecting the objects on display, museums could use their exhibitions to raise public awareness of the role of disaster preparedness and risk reduction as integral parts of heritage protection in museums and by museums.
By fully embracing the concept of disaster preparedness as one indispensable pillar of museum management and operation, museums acquire the capacity to assume an active role as expert institutions for risk assessment and disaster preparedness, even with regard to heritage belonging to other institutions, communities, or countries. In line with their expanded role in society, museums could take the lead in planning and carrying out pertinent capacity building programmes, in promoting and drafting contingency plans, in creating civil society support networks and disaster relief task forces, or in advocating for comprehensive and state-of-the-art digital documentation of heritage as a fundamental prerequisite for cultural property protection in both everyday and extreme situations.

**Role of Research in Heritage Protection**

Basic research, both in museums and on museums, is key to museum protection. Research not only necessary reveals the cultural, historical or social significance of individual objects or object groups. Research also contributes significantly to the educational and outreach activities of museum professionals in the areas of preservation, documentation, presentation, and communication of collections, raising public awareness of the importance of heritage protection and of the responsibility of all citizens to contribute to it, as well as preventing and combating the illicit trafficking of cultural goods. Finally, research into the history and provenance of objects and object ensembles represents a fundamental ethical responsibility of museums and provides the ground on which dialogue and constructive relationships between museums and countries of origin, indigenous peoples, cultural institutions or private individuals may be facilitated.

While many museums have a long-ranging history as research institutions in their own right, not all museums are in a position to conduct independent research. However, the unique expertise of museums in preserving, documenting and presenting cultural and natural heritage renders them valuable and often indispensable partners in different interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary research schemes. This is particularly true in cases where museums are able to inspire or facilitate research into the development or optimization of new technologies in cultural property protection, such as instruments

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14 S., e. g., ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, articles 2.3., 2.4., and 2.5.


16 For the concept of transdisciplinary research, see Uwe Schneidewind and Many Singer-Brodowski, Transformative Wissenschaft. Klimawandel im deutschen Wissenschafts- und Hochschulsystem. 2., verbesserte und aktualisierte Auflage (Marburg, 2014), 42–43.
and procedures for the scientific analysis or the 3D digitization of movable cultural and natural heritage. In addition, museums can serve as think tanks, incubators, and ‘real-world laboratories’ for research on how peaceful, culturally diverse, inclusive and socially cohesive societies may be created or sustained. By actively engaging in research focusing on cultural diversity and social cohesion, museums directly contribute to the protection of heritage, as many threats to the integrity of cultural property are deeply rooted in social, economic or cultural conflicts.

With growing societal demands and more complex challenges to the sustainable protection of heritage, the knowledge base for heritage protection in museums and by museums needs to be broadened and deepened in order to build up institutional resilience. Therefore, museums need to step up efforts to reach out to research institutions, authorities and societal stakeholders, creating the transdisciplinary research environment in which societal challenges may be addressed efficiently.

Partnerships with societal stakeholders for heritage protection

The relationship between heritage and society is both interdependent and mutually beneficial.17 While “the preservation, study and transmission of cultural and natural, tangible and intangible heritage, in its movable and immovable conditions, are of great importance for all societies, for intercultural dialogue among peoples, for social cohesion, and for sustainable development”,18 peaceful and inclusive societies19 are characterized by the recognition of cultural diversity, the free exchange of ideas and knowledge, intellectual and moral solidarity, as well as full and equal opportunities for education for all.20 Therefore, societies by default have a vital interest in, and a shared responsibility for, the protection of heritage. As expert institutions for heritage protection (see above, 1.) and “spaces for cultural transmission, intercultural dialogue, learning, discussion and training”,21 museums occupy a key position at the intersection between societies and heritage, with all their efforts directed toward its protection.

In this regard, museums possess an extraordinary potential to foster and strengthen partnerships for heritage protection with societal stakeholders, such as governments, international institutions, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, indigenous peoples, civil society, business, the private sector, the scientific and academic community and the military, drawing on the significant resources and capacities of these actors in their respective realms of expertise.22 Such bonds are of particular relevance in emergency situations caused by natural and human-made disasters, as well as military conflicts. Risk assessment, emergency planning, and disaster response training focusing on the protection of heritage in museums must invariably involve the participation of civil society support networks and other societal stakeholders, particularly at the local and regional levels, in order to be comprehensive, efficient and sustainable. This is true

21 See „UNESCO 2015 Recommendation“, article 2.
in particular when international treaties and agreements fall short of addressing a pressing issue, leaving it to the people on the ground to respond to an emergency situation.

In addition to the field of disaster preparedness, partnerships for heritage protection between museums and societies should also focus on building capacity and raising awareness. Forging alliances with research institutions and institutions of higher education will not only facilitate the availability and employment of qualified museum personnel, but also enhance the exchange of knowledge and the development of innovative, transdisciplinary research schemes (see above, 3). Finally, educational activities, such as permanent and temporary exhibitions, volunteer programmes, educational activities (in particular in cooperation with other educational institutions), public events, local and regional outreach initiatives, and social media campaigns can inform museum audiences of the intrinsic value of cultural property, as well as the manifold challenges facing the integrity of cultural property and strategies for its protection.

By initiating operational partnerships with societal stakeholders and by raising audience awareness with regard to heritage protection, museums not only fulfill their fundamental obligation to care for the objects in their own collections, they establish themselves as hubs of far-reaching and sustainable public networks for heritage protection, which operate both in everyday and extreme situations (see above, 1).

Conclusion

As outlined above, museums can redefine their role in society and expand their contribution to the challenge of heritage protection by striving to serve as expert institutions in this regard (see above, 1.). They can also take a leadership role in the establishment of public networks for heritage protection, concentrating and reinforcing the resources and capacities of communities, peoples or countries (see above, 4.).

In order to take on this increasingly diverse portfolio of tasks, museums need considerable support from Member States, focusing on specific policies for institutional development, museum personnel education, establishing state-of-the-art facilities for storage, preservation and documentation, increasing access to innovative information and communication technologies, instituting financial and political incentives for research on collections and their protection, as well as funding schemes fit to accommodate the increased responsibility of museums for the valued resources of societies, especially in situations of disaster or conflict.

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23 Cf. „UNESCO 2015 Recommendation“, article 27.
24 Cf. „UNESCO 2015 Recommendation“, articles 10, 11, 12.
26 Cf. „UNESCO 2015 Recommendation“, article 22.
27 Cf. „UNESCO 2015 Recommendation“, articles 27 and 35.
They should also recognise the importance of local and national, private and governmental stakeholders in heritage protection and, through outreach and education, demonstrate that they can play a key role in creating a sustainable solution to protecting heritage.\(^{31}\) Most importantly, Member States can contribute to the global effort to halt the irrevocable damage to heritage by strongly encouraging museums to adhere to the standards and principles of international instruments for the protection and promotion of heritage \(^{32}\) and to engage actively in international alliances and expert networks for heritage protection at a global level.
