

Welcome by Peter Rowe, Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen – as Dean of the Design School, here at Harvard – it is a distinct pleasure to welcome you to this conference, dealing with protecting cultural and natural heritage in the Western Hemisphere.



As the last of a series of world-wide events – organized in celebration on the 30th anniversary of the World Cultural and National Heritage Convention – the primary purpose of this seminar is to look, both backwards and forwards in time, across the array of heritage issues confronting us in the Americas; to highlight successful practices; to look into leading new initiatives; and to explore emerging partnerships for the preservation of world heritage.

Here at the Design School we are grateful to our Center for Urban Development Studies for organizing this event, and to the UNESCO World Heritage Center and the US-ICOMOS for their co-operation and aegis in helping to place the conference in a broader institutional context. In particular, I would like to thank my colleague – François Vigier – for both his intellectual leadership and tireless pursuit of a myriad of logistical details, and Francesco Bandarin – of the World Heritage Center – for so generously giving us the opportunity to host this event. I would also like to thank and congratulate Ismail Serageldin – one of our distinguished alums – for his fine lecture last evening. Its always a pleasure – Ismail – to have you here.

I am not an expert on the matters of cultural heritage that lay before you. However, I can say something about their importance within an educational context and, here, within the professional programs at the Design School. Certainly, since the time in the late 1970s, –when design professionals here in the United States – turned away from wholesale modernism as a preferred credo, in favor of historical precedents, fittedness with local culture, and, in short, the importance of links with the past and its potential role in the future, we have embraced the idea of cultural heritage and suffused it into our teaching programs and educational mission. In essence, we do believe that understanding how culture has shaped the built environment is absolutely critical in the professional education of architects, landscape architects, urban planners and urban designers here at the School.

More specifically what we have done falls roughly into three categories, or modes of educational engagement, both among ourselves and with our students. First, for some time now the teaching of the history of the built environment has focused less on the artifact and more on the social, economic, technological, and environmental trends and forces that have created particular expressive constructed outcomes in specific cultures. Indeed, our core course for architects titled ‘Buildings, Texts and Contexts’ amply exemplifies this focus – even in its title – as do many of our other offerings with a historical or strongly cultural perspective.

Second, as some of you might know ‘design studios’ – the place in the curriculum where students practice their creative problem-solving skills – lie at the heart of professional design education for architects, landscape architects and urban designers. In this mode of education – at least since the early 1980s – the School has mounted numerous design studios, often with sponsorship from the host city, that have explicitly explored issues of preservation, revitalization, conservation and adaption in historical or otherwise culturally particular settings. In these terms, sites have included the Medina of Tunis, Medieval Cairo, Tripoli in the Lebanon, Beirut, Beijing, Suzhou, Caltigirone in Italy, Hangzhou, Rome and several other major European cities, as well as natural sites in the Banco Forest, Xochimilco, the Abidjan lagoon and in American National Parks.

Third, over the past ten years, there have been direct involvements of the Design School in cultural heritage activities. These include technical assistance, provided mainly by the School’s Center for Urban Development Studies to: the Moravian urban cultural heritage, the Ottoman Quseir in Egypt; to Medieval Cairo; to Timbuktu; to the old city of Lublin in Poland; to Samarkand; and to the Medina of Fez. Also, faculty in the School have taken on several innovative studies, involving interactive computer technology in the representation of cultural sites. Included here are the works of the architect Palladio and the City of Vicenza – done jointly with MIT; Brunelleschi’s Duomo in Florence; the Vatican in Rome; and the Old City of Jerusalem. In addition, on the institutional front, the Center for Urban Development Studies serves as a member of the core group of institutions of the Cultural Heritage and Development Network – a 1996 initiative, as you probably know, of the World Bank and UNESCO, to coordinate the activities of development-aid organizations involved in the preservation and conservation of cultural heritage. Moreover, in 1999, the Design School joined the UNESCO-University Forum on Cultural Heritage – an initiative that brings together 95 universities in 32 countries and representatives from ICOMOS, ICOM, ICROM, IFLA, the Council of Europe, the World Monument Fund and the International Association of Universities. And, lastly, but certainly not least, Professor Eduard Sekler, of the School, organized the UNESCO effort for the preservation and restoration of the historic district of Katmandu, Nepal, and continues, even today, to act as an advisor.

Now, to say that we – here at the Design School – are all ‘died in the wool’ traditionalists or conservationists – as a consequence of this array of educational and direct involvements with heritage – would be a blatant misnomer. Indeed, if anything, this School is probably most renowned for its commitments to modernity and to the contemporary scene.

Instead, I think what concerns many of us most are ideas of cultural production – in built environments – linked to broader ideas of tradition, as well as within critical theoretical and social frameworks that, in and of themselves can also be seen as belonging to an idea, or ideas, about tradition.

Moreover, here it is the Roman or Latinate meaning of tradition that perhaps comes most into play i.e., ‘traditio’ – meaning to bring across, or more usefully, helping to bring across and of

offering guidance between one era and the next in a constructive manner, that is as much about the 'here and now' as it is about the past i.e., choosing – in a way – what to inherit.

This then, of course, leads to several interesting and challenging intellectual and creative issues for designers. For example, what exactly does one 'bring across,' either in creating new environments, or when intervening in older patterns of building, settlement and territory? ... and, how does one do this in a manner that does not arbitrarily arrest cultural expression and social development? Also, how do we decide – as a practical let alone theoretical matter – about such determinations, for whom and to what ends? And – institutionally speaking – how can we 'have our proverbial cake and eat it too,' by finding the right pathways for contemporary building and development that are likely to form valorized aspects of our heritage, while simultaneously preserving, conserving, and re-interpreting what remains in place?

In short, cultural and natural heritage – viewed in the light of contemporary design practice – is far from straight forward. Yet, as I said at the outset, we, at least here in the Design School, believe it is a vital and, if anything, an increasingly important consideration. Certainly, in the absence of other broad, overarching ideological perspectives – about which I suspect we would be suspicious of anyway – what we choose to inherit from the past and present, and how we take up with that inheritance, is a *sine qua non* of contemporary design and planning education.

And, in looking at the seminars agenda, I also notice a similar concern for the tension between conservation and development needs, and for the balancing of multiple interests in both natural and cultural settings, as well as concerns for who does the 'heavy lifting' – so to speak – in our efforts to protect our heritage in a propitious manner.

Again, I would like to extend to everyone a very warm welcome and to thank you all for taking time away from your busy schedules to participate with us in what – I'm sure- will be a very successful conference.