

Yemen. A Humanitarian and Cultural Emergency

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Abstract Since March 2015 Yemeni people is experiencing one of the bloodiest conflicts in the country's history. A conflict that is going beyond the international non-armed conflict borders. A mixture of tribalism, sectarianism, proxy war, geopolitical interests and economic factors are heavily altering the Yemeni social fabric. Furthermore, both fighting parties are attacking cultural and archeological sites adding new losses to the long war casualty list. The paper tries to give voice to this cultural emergency, taking into account both the local context and the international legislation regarding the protection of cultural heritage during armed conflicts.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Role of Diplomacy in Supporting Cultural Emergencies. – 3 The Protection of Cultural Heritage in the International Treaties. – 4 The Post-Conflict Scenario and Reconstruction.

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1 Introduction

Yemen was created by its inhabitants, who rather than sculpting it, built it by putting one stone atop another in a labour that gradually became for the people as natural as breathing. This wonderful, innate propensity for building is one of the most striking aspects of the Yemeni people that you discover when you become acquainted with this country. (Costa, Vicario 1977, 11)

Paolo Costa opened his 1977 volume, *Yemen Land of Builders*, and through two brief sentences he was able to sum up the overwhelming feelings of a newcomer to the unique landscapes of Yemen. From the very first glance, Yemen appears to be a land where human action is expressed widely: from the mountains top till the valley (*wadi*) plains it is possible to find hydraulic works, settlements, observation towers, bridges and terraces. The uniqueness of the historical and cultural context of Yemen is present in both the rural and urban environment, due to the extraordinary architectural homogeneity of dwellings, urban planning and the traditional building

techniques, at least until the arrival of modern building techniques and materials such as reinforced concrete (Nicoletti 1985, 31).

The cities and the villages were constructed in the most defensible areas and their urban assets reflect the land they are lying on, whether along coastal plains or high mountain slopes. The great variety of these settlements are dependent on the geomorphological characteristics of the specific Yemeni region and, in turn, these become a part of the common sense of cultural belonging. Thus, the unique building and urban planning tradition led the country to develop settlements with distinct historic and architectural traits that were refined through development. Until just a few decades ago, Yemen had not opened up to the new socio-economic practices introduced by industrialisation and globalisation, and therefore its architectural features are well-preserved.

When dealing with the tangible and intangible architectural heritage of Yemen, the country's domestic architecture is inevitably described as an extraordinary example of 'spontaneous' or 'vernacular' architecture, which, according to the definition given by Bernard Rudofsky,¹ are creations of mankind that cannot be related to an individual architect or planner, but are the product of the design skills and tradition of a people. Paolo Costa identified these features in Yemeni architecture.

In Yemen, there are two main housing typologies: the first type is the 'tower-house' or 'multi-story house' predominant in the central highlands and north-eastern lowlands, while the second typology, horizontal dwellings, made of different units enclosed by a wall and united by open yards that integrate the domestic space, is prevalent along the coastal plain.

The architectural features of Yemen are not only identifiable in housing but also appear in the urban layout of ancient cities, which share similar elements with other Arab world's medinas, despite the prolonged Yemeni isolation. These fundamental components of the urban setting are: surrounding walls interrupted by monumental gates; the *suq*, a central market divided into sectors; worship places; the *bustan*; the *ḥammam*; and the *samsara* (or caravanserai), which provided lodgings for merchants and their animals. The Friday mosque and the *suq* are the core of the social life of each settlement and have been the most important elements of Middle Eastern cities since the early years of Islam. These urban centres are the personification of the cultural identity of Yemen and are embodied by domestic buildings, monuments and social practices, from craftsmanship to conviviality. As Lewcock (1986, 135-6) points out in his work *The old walled city of Ṣana'a*,

¹ Bernard Rudofsky (1905-88) was a Moravian-born American writer, architect, collector, teacher, designer, and social historian. He is quoted here for his 1964 work *Architecture Without Architects. A Short Introduction to Non-pedigreed-architecture*, where he provides a demonstration of the artistic, functional, and cultural richness of vernacular architecture.

the character of an historic urban centre is as much defined by its social, commercial and artisanal practices as it is by its buildings alone.

Starting from the end of the 1950s, a large portion of the Yemeni population travelled to the Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain) in search of work, but many returned to Yemen during the oil crisis of the 1990s. Those employed as unskilled workers in the oil-boom yards had difficulty in adapting to the traditional building techniques of their country of origin (Dresch 2000, 152). Thus, in a land 'without architects,' traditional building techniques shaped the living spaces of the entire nation, keeping rural areas authentic and intact, while urban areas bumped up against modern materials such as reinforced concrete.

In this context, it is the duty of local institutions and the international community to retain these building traditions and prevent the loss of an important component of the Yemeni cultural identity. The promotion and the transmission of traditional building techniques has proven vital to the preservation of the authenticity and the charm of Yemen's historic centers. Such actions can generate sustainable microeconomic systems, creating new opportunities in a context affected by poverty, unemployment and years of armed conflict. In recent years, national and international measures have helped to safeguard this ancient heritage by restoring Yemeni monuments and have helped to raise awareness of the issue of cultural heritage, primarily among Yemen's young people, who have been involved in various cultural cooperation projects. Yemeni institutions are not exempt from the lessons learned in fieldwork, particularly the importance of combining the enhancement of tangible and intangible heritage; this should be the cornerstone of future initiatives.

2 The Role of Diplomacy in Supporting Cultural Emergencies

Conditions have deteriorated during the past two years because of the humanitarian crisis and the ongoing conflict, which began in March 2015 with the launch of *Decisive Storm*, a military campaign headed by Saudi Arabia. After months of ground fighting and air strikes, the country is on the edge of bankruptcy and famine.² The issue of cultural heritage has been marginalised from the political agenda and the few national institutions carrying out safeguarding projects have either shut down or lack

2 <https://www.unocha.org/yemen/high-level-pledging-event> (2017-12-15).

resources.³ Furthermore, both the Saudi coalition and the Houthi militias have attacked cultural and archeological sites in different locations of the country, adding new losses to the already lengthy list of casualties. Bombing the Old City of Sana'a, a WHL site since 1986, is viewed by many as an attack on the country's pride as there were no military targets there.⁴ Of the attacks against heritage sites, targets include symbols of the rich cultural and historical past of Yemen including Marib Dam, Dhamar Museum (which contains ancient South Arabian inscriptions) al-Qahira citadel in Ta'izz, the old city of Sa'da and the archeological excavations of Sirwah and Baraqish. Striking monuments, museums, and places of worship is a crime and moreover a crude attempt to wipe out the traces of an ancient cultural identity that are protected by international treaties.

Recent figures report that Yemen now has more than 18 million people in need of humanitarian aid with over one million children heavily malnourished and more than two million people displaced.⁵ Streets, bridges, schools, hospitals and other civilian areas were targeted and have left the majority of the population facing enormous difficulties in getting medical assistance. And not only are the Yemeni people under constant attack, but also the heritage sites, artefacts and historic centres.

In the current conflict there is a mixture of tribalism, sectarianism, proxy war and economic factors significantly altering the social fabric of Yemen. Saudi geopolitical interests are at odds with those of Tehran. The former president Ali Abdallah Saleh is supporting the Houthis to remain in the political arena alongside his son, Ahmad Ali, while AQAP and the ISIL are fighting against the Houthis to gain more support in what is a strategic country. A climate of terror is breaking down a long history of coexistence among the different religious communities as previously absent Sunni-Shiite narrative creeps into how the war is being described (Baron, al-Muslimi 2016). Atiaf al-Wazir was one of the first blogger and activist how openly denounced

3 The SFD is a Yemeni independent institution that supports development opportunities through improving access to basic services, enhancing economic opportunities and reducing the vulnerability of the poor as well as building capacities at national level, including local authorities and community structures. Its funding comes from the WB, the AFESD, the Islamic Development Bank and other agencies. In the last years, the 4.7% of its resources have been addressed to conservation projects but now, its CH Unit remained with only few officers and no means.

4 Many articles were issued soon after the first attack on the Old City of Sana'a. Here we are reporting some examples: <https://committeeforculturalpolicy.org/old-city-of-sanaa-in-yemen-damaged-by-bombing/> (2017-12-15); <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2015/jun/12/old-town-of-sanaa-after-airstrikes-and-before-in-pictures> (2017-12-15); <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/middle-east/yemen/articles/Yemen-the-Unesco-heritage-slowly-being-destroyed/> (2017-12-15).

5 Ref. UN OCHA *Yemen: humanitarian needs overview 2017*. http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/YEMEN%202017%20HNO_Final.pdf (2017-07-4).

this phenomenon even before the war had begun. In her blog *Woman from Yemen* she described in many different ways how Yemeni people is affected by this narrative.⁶ As the conflict drags on, mounting civilian casualties and a worsening humanitarian crisis have led human rights activists to call for an investigation into human rights violations committed by all sides. UN agencies and NGOs have unsuccessfully called on both parties to avoid targeting civilian infrastructures and to respect humanitarian truces.

The UN SC has not condemned the Saudi military intervention in Yemen nor advised any of its members to withdraw logistical support for the coalition. In addition, the GCC proves to be too compromised to act as a mediator. The only solution proposed thus far was in 2014, during the National Dialogue Conference in collaboration with the UN Special Envoy Jamal Benomar is the creation of a federal system for the country divided into six regions to ensure a stable balance between the calls for independence and autonomy of the northern regions from the southern and allowing the Houthis to gain a place inside the new government.⁷ However, until the parties to the conflict give up their self-interested goals, peace talks are unlikely to produce concrete results and fighting will continue on the ground and the country will collapse.

3 The Protection of Cultural Heritage in the International Treaties

The concept of CH, reconsidered during the 1972 UNESCO Convention, facilitated the creation of an international cooperation system for the conservation, protection and valorization of cultural properties and natural sites, the value of which is universally recognized. UNESCO introduced the 2003 Convention in October 2003, which was ratified by 134 States. The adoption of the Convention became a milestone in the evolution of international policies for promoting cultural diversity as the international community recognised, for the first time, the need to support cultural manifestations and expressions through a legal and programmatic framework. While fragile, ICH is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization. Therefore, it is essential that member states take action to protect ICH, draft inventories, adopt legal measures and promote awareness in cooperation with all national, regional and international actors (art. 19(2)).

6 <http://womanfromyemen.blogspot.it/> (2017-12-15).

7 <http://www.merip.org/two-resolutions-draft-constitution-late-developments> (2017-12-15).

With such conventions, and more specifically the 1954 Hague Convention, the protection of CH became the legal responsibility of the international community. The prologue to this convention specifies that “damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind, since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world”. Art. 1 of the Convention defines the term ‘cultural property’ as “movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people, such as monuments of architecture, art or history, whether religious or secular; archaeological sites; groups of buildings which, as a whole, are of historical or artistic interest; works of art; manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest; as well as scientific collections and important collections of books or archives or of reproductions of the property defined above”. It broadens the definition by adding that “centers containing monuments” are also cultural property.

Yemen ratified the 1954 Hague Convention when it was first introduced and in 1971 was the turn of Saudi Arabia. Both states are also signatories of the other UNESCO Conventions for the protection/safeguarding of CH and of international treaties for the protection of human rights. Yet, the events occurred in the first half of 2015 demonstrate that both States are seriously negligent of the international obligations they are bound to. If the conflict is legally considered as a non-international armed conflict, then warring parties are obliged to “apply as, a minimum, the provisions which relate to respect for cultural property” (art. 19(1)). This means:

Respecting cultural property situated within their own territory as well as within the territory of other High Contracting Parties by refraining from any use of the property and its immediate surroundings or of the appliances in use for its protection for purposes which are likely to expose it to destruction or damage in the event of armed conflict; and by refraining from any act of hostility, directed against such property. (art. 4(1))

Undertaking to prohibit, prevent and, if necessary, put a stop to any form of theft, pillage or misappropriation of, and any acts of vandalism directed against, cultural property. (art. 3(3))

And again

no high contracting party may evade the obligations incumbent upon it under the present Article, in respect of another High Contracting Party, by reason of the fact that the latter has not applied the measures of safeguard referred to in Article 3. (art. 4(5))

However, these obligations have never been considered by the warring parties in Yemen, even after appeals launched by UNESCO General Director Irina Bokova, who warned all parties involved in the conflict to refrain from targeting the country's unique cultural heritage and using heritage sites for military purposes.⁸

UNESCO provided both the Saudi coalition and Houthis with a list of heritage sites and their geographical coordinates to prevent new air strikes. In addition, in July 2015, UNESCO called for an expert meeting that brought together national and international professionals to discuss an Action Plan for the safeguarding of cultural heritage in Yemen.⁹ Then in April 2016, UNESCO and ten leading global museums came together to raise international awareness of the richness of Yemen's culture and history through the *#Unite4Heritage* Campaign. An example of this awareness-raising initiative is Yemen's participation (for the first time) at the *15th International Architecture Exhibition of Venice*, where a joint Dutch and Italian effort set up the national Yemeni pavilion to celebrate Yemeni building tradition. Despite these efforts, a well-defined legal framework and UNESCO appeals, it appears that the international community does not value humanitarian law when geopolitical interests and partisan rivalries are at stake.¹⁰

However, in a significant move backing the relevant conventions in 2015, the ICC opened its first war crimes trial against Ahmaq al-Faqi al-Mahdi, a jihadi leader accused of demolishing ancient mausoleums in Timbuktu. The ICC condemned him on the 27 of September 2016 after having considered for the first time in its history, a case that treats the destruction of cultural heritage as a war crime.¹¹ This can be considered a positive sign for future possible prosecutions relating to current conflicts in the Arab world, including Yemen.

4 The Post-Conflict Scenario and Reconstruction

In August 2013, the Yemeni Government adopted Law no. 16, which was created to control conservation of cities, areas and sites of historical interest

8 <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1278/> (2017-12-15) and <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1450/> (2017-12-15).

9 <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1325/> and http://www.unesco.org/new/en/doha/about-this-office/single-view/news/safeguarding_yemens_cultural_heritage/ (2017-12-15).

10 An example of humanitarian law breaking is the open violation of the principle of proportionality when targeting civilian objects deliberately.

11 All the information regarding Al-Mahdi case can be gathered from the ICC website: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/mali/al-mahdi#> (2017-12-15).

of the entire country. This legislation came about from the growing awareness, among both the ruling class and the citizens, regarding the need to safeguard the cultural, architectural and artistic heritage of the *Arabia Felix*.

The ancient tower houses of Sana'a (or Shibam) and the stone villages of Yemen's mountains continue to fascinate us with their beauty and their complexity. Their architecture has its foundation in the buildings' craftsmanship. The building materials, humble and perishable, are primarily of natural origin; and so these incredible architectures require continuous maintenance. Therefore, it is imperative to implement new tools, including legislative, that allow for fast and effective interventions that are urgently needed. And, once a more lasting peace agreement is reached, it will be necessary to set up a national programme to address the cultural emergencies left by the conflict, following international restoration standards.

Thus, it will be important to:

- reinstate and specify management guidelines for both professionals and institutions, following Law no. 16;
- conserve the traditional building techniques as they are the only tools to preserve and respect the buildings themselves while integrating advances in modern technology;
- promote the local workforce, who is the custodian of a millenary tradition at risk of extinction. (Such a tradition has to be recognised, enhanced and transmitted to the new generations of artisans through specific professional trainings).

To carry out these steps it is imperative that the international community and the Yemeni government provide financing for the conservation of cultural properties as part of an emergency fund, created for first aid interventions of the heritage sites and historic centres. This economic aspect should be combined with an operational model to aid urban recovery, including the creation of an independent body entrusted with the supervision of these works.

The concept of urban heritage is well recognised in the culture of the restoration. Urban heritage is not just individual buildings or monuments, but rather individual buildings and monuments placed in a specific context. Examples of some Italian historical centres abandoned by their inhabitants because of poor planning, problems of mobility and the absence of essential facilities leads us to realise that we must be practical and work on a case by case basis. If we want life in Sana'a, Shibam, Zabid and other historic centres to continue, there is a need for a clear and unified vision to follow, broad-spectrum planning, qualified staff and appropriate legislation to regulate the activities. All this should be combined with the respect for the country's beauty, history, constructive traditions, spirit of the community, morphology, scenery and vision.

A conservation methodology that could be applied in this context is the

'adapted' restoration mentioned by Jaques Feiner in his 1997 work. Feiner has developed an analysis of the architectural styles and types of buildings in Sana'a, where he also advanced proposals for the conservation of the city, which combine the conservation of heritage with the right to use public and private spaces, typical of every city, in accordance with its traditions. He proposed interventions through restoration works that, though keeping their traditional character, would make them comfortably habitable. He also suggested promoting ancient knowledge by involving the local workforce specialised in the use of traditional materials and techniques.

In this way, it would be possible to proceed with the restoration of abandoned buildings or those in ruin, with the revitalisation of the urban fabric in the historic center, by boosting employment and generating income. Bonnanfant noted (1996) that, although the use and maintenance of local materials are more expensive than modern materials such as cement, ancient building systems are the only ones capable of ensuring the functionality of the structures without compromising their stability as they were conceived and developed for the climate and geological conditions of the region. In addition, they are also the only materials capable of conserving beauty, humanity, force, vital energy, and identity.

Finally, the creation of a managing independent body or committee would allow both the planning and the realisation of restoration projects, the qualitative works monitoring and compliance (with current regulations) and full financial transparency. There is no doubt that the future of Yemen is in danger, not only because of the political vacuum it could face but also because of the delicate re-building process it will have to undertake. As the international community has not been able to prevent violence from worsening, it must assist Yemeni institutions economically and logistically through the various UN agencies and NGOs. International aid must be used to sustain not only Yemen's humanitarian needs but also its cultural needs, as Yemeni heritage is a vital world heritage.

Practices, traditions and skills represent the common legacy of a community and a fundamental component of its living culture. (Urbinati 2012, 59)

Hence, concrete actions must be taken for both the conservation and reconstruction needs of Yemen's cultural heritage but also to support the people of Yemen in recovering after the difficulties they have faced, as well as build their resilience.

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