Dealing with Heritage in Risky Situations: Background Notes on Three ICOMOS Initiatives

In October 2001, in Dubrovnik, ICOMOS held the annual meeting of its Advisory and Executive Committees. On that particular occasion, a two-day session was organised to present, explain and compare three different initiatives on threats to cultural heritage. These are the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Risk Preparedness (ICORP), established at the Rabat meeting of the Advisory and Executive Committees in 1997, the Heritage at Risk Programme which led to the publication, in 2000, of a first Annual World Report on Monuments and Sites in Danger, and the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS), which ICOMOS co-founded in 1996 with the International Council on Archives (ICA), International Council on Museums (ICOM) and International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). Its mission is to 'collect and disseminate information, and co-ordinate action in emergency situations' including natural disasters and armed conflict.

All these activities have grown over the last five years but have a particular relevance to Dubrovnik, whose bombing in 1991, lead ICOMOS along with UNESCO and other professional organisations, to reflect on the special threats to cultural heritage and to work to organise a network leading to tangible outcomes of common interest. Events like the Great Kobe earthquake of January 1995 also helped raise awareness. If improving conservation practice was to be the main objective of these organisations, they could no longer afford to neglect those emergency situations that take a heavy toll in human casualties as well as all types of cultural heritage. Already, these considerations had been a focus for ICOMOS, which had organised major scientific meetings on earthquake protection for historic buildings and cities in Central America in the 1970s.

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The Dubrovnik workshop provided an opportunity to clarify the goals and means of the three ICOMOS initiatives and to find ways for the National and International Scientific Committees, which form the Advisory Committee, to play a greater role. The three actions are complementary. ICORP as an international programme, is a mechanism through which experiences and expertise can be shared between the different components of the ICOMOS network. It has a particular focus on forward planning, including the development of preparedness guidelines for built heritage or collecting information on available expertise.

ICORP is lead by a programme co-ordination group formed from delegates of national and international scientific committees. It has contributed to the development of the 1997 Kobe/Tokyo Guidelines on Risk Preparedness for Cultural Properties, an outcome from the symposium organised to learn lessons from the 1995 earthquake, which are to be used as a foundation for ICOMOS activities in the field.
Heritage at Risk is an initiative which was set up after the 1999 General Assembly to collect and present information at the national, or thematic, level on sites under threat and to provide an annual overview of trends affecting cultural heritage. It is managed by a taskforce of the Executive Committee and benefited from the volunteer editorship of Marylyn Truscott and Jane Harrington, from Australia ICOMOS, for its first two reports.

Finally, the ICBS is a permanent committee of the four main non-governmental organisations in the field of cultural heritage, established to help communications and common action to improve the level of preparedness as well as to co-ordinate response activities. It is working closely with UNESCO and has been recognised as an advisory body in the 2nd Protocol, added in 1999, to the Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Properties in the Event of Armed Conflicts, 1954.

Preparedness, response to sudden events or lasting threats, support in recovery, are some of the key words appearing in an increasingly strong way in the standard conservation vocabulary. Whereas they might have previously been more common in the fields of museums or archives, they are now core components of the management of immovable cultural heritage. ICOMOS has played a key role in opening up the different professional fields so that heritage is not only cared for in the normal course of events by statutory controls, professional and scientific skills, but also in times of crisis when there is an even greater need for care and management to reduce loss.