Simulacra and Simulation: UNESCO’s Approach to the Relationship Between the Rehabilitation of World Heritage and Communities

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Just as the built environment can reflect society (King, 2005: 1), so the destruction of buildings can shatter the community reflected in them, like a brick through a mirror or a stone in a quiet pool. For this reason the rehabilitation of monuments is an act redolent with the symbolism of community rehabilitation. This paper examines how UNESCO has taken this relationship between the rehabilitation of heritage and the rehabilitation of communities into consideration in its approach to the rehabilitation of World Heritage sites, and how UNESCO’s approach has developed over time, with reference to two cases: the old bridge in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina; and the mosques and mausolea of Timbuktu, Mali. This paper, considering UNESCO official decisions and communications as primary source material, will show how UNESCO’s approach has developed from placing a focus solely on the symbolic value of rehabilitating heritage for communities to a more practical appreciation of the benefits that can arise from involving communities in heritage rehabilitation.

Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina

The old bridge of Mostar was an exemplary piece of Islamic Balkan architecture, designed by Hayruddin, apprentice to the famous Ottoman architect Sinan, and completed in 1566/1567. It was destroyed by Croat artillery fire in 1993 during the Bosnian war (Borowitz, 2005: 65). The bridge was rebuilt by a broad coalition of intergovernmental organisations and governments, including UNESCO, work was
completed in 2004 and the Bridge was inscribed on the List of World Heritage in 2005 (Armaly et al., 2004: 6-17).

UNESCO inscribes sites on to its List of World Heritage according to specified criteria (UNESCO, 1972: 11). The ten criteria (revised in 2004) are set out in UNESCO's 'Operational guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention' (UNESCO, 1972: 11; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2015a). Unusually for an architectural monument, the bridge (or more technically, the 'Old Bridge Area of the Old City of Mostar') was not, as might be expected, inscribed under criterion (iv) – 'to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history'. Instead, the bridge was inscribed under criterion (vi) – 'to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance' (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2005: 141). The World Heritage Committee's Guidelines state that criterion (vi) 'should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria' – but no other criteria were cited in the Mostar inscription (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2015a: 16). In other words, the Committee deemed the bridge to satisfy criterion (vi) in such a way that its preference for secondary, supporting criteria did not apply.

In satisfying criterion (vi), the Committee set out its rationale as follows:

'With the “renaissance” of the Old Bridge and its surroundings, the symbolic power and meaning of the City of Mostar – as an exceptional and universal symbol of coexistence of communities from diverse cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds – has been reinforced and strengthened, underlining the unlimited efforts of human solidarity for peace and powerful cooperation in the face of overwhelming catastrophes' (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2005: 141).

Put simply, the rehabilitation ("renaissance") of the bridge strengthened the bridge's power as a symbol of the coexistence of communities of diverse backgrounds and of human resilience in the face of catastrophe. As Sophia Labadi (2013: 122) put it: 'What matters is not that the bridge was reconstructed but that it embodies the values for which it was nominated and inscribed – that is, that it stands as a symbol of hope and reconciliation'. In its rationale for the inscription of the Mostar bridge onto
the World Heritage List, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee thus emphasised the relationship between the symbolic power of reconstructing heritage and coexistence. The Committee's rationale, however, – that the bridge's reconstruction reinforced Mostar's power as a symbol of coexistence – rested on the assumption that reconciliation had been achieved in Mostar, that the town really did enjoy happy coexistence of communities. The Committee's rationale might even be read to imply that the reconstruction of the bridge would itself 'reinforce' such coexistence. In fact, ten years after the bridge's reconstruction, Mostar is still deeply divided, its local government paralysed by divisions between the communities (Sito-Sucic, 2012; Sito-Sucic, 2013). The Committee's rationale for inscribing the bridge is thus undermined by the reality: the reconstructed bridge may have been intended to reinforce Mostar's position as a symbol of coexistence, but Mostar is no symbol of coexistence. In light of this, or perhaps because of it, UNESCO's approach to the rehabilitation of Timbuktu draws on the practical effects of community-led heritage rehabilitation, alongside the symbolic value of reconstruction.

**Timbuktu, Mali**

Unlike the Mostar bridge, Timbuktu (more specifically, the three great mosques of Djingareyber, Sankore and Sidi Yahia and sixteen mausolea in the city) was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1988, before its mosques and mausolea were severely damaged in the 2012 conflict (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 1988: 17). UNESCO has undertaken a comprehensive programme of rehabilitation of the Timbuktu site and, in doing so, UNESCO has developed its approach to the relationship between the rehabilitation of heritage and the rehabilitation of communities.

On the one hand, similarly to the old bridge in Mostar, UNESCO has emphasised the symbolic importance of the rehabilitation of Timbuktu and the impact of that rehabilitation on the community. Thus, on the reinstallation of the rehabilitated sacred gate of the mosque of Sidi Yahia – pulled down and damaged in 2012 – the director-general of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, said: "'The reinstallation of the sacred gate, a religious and cultural landmark of Timbuktu, marks a new and decisive step in Mali's reconstruction and peace building work'. (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2016). The symbolic value of the gate – as a 'religious and cultural landmark' – is thus linked to the reconstruction of Malian society.
Between the symbolic value of the Timbuktu site to the community and its more functional role, UNESCO presented as the rationale for the rehabilitation the fact that the mosques and mausolea had 'long been places of pilgrimage for the people of Mali and neighbouring West African countries', that they were 'an important part of the region's religious belief system', and that their destruction 'represented a tragic loss for local communities' (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2015b; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2015c). Implied in UNESCO's reasoning, the rehabilitation of Timbuktu restored an important cultural feature to local communities.

Alongside the purely symbolic value of rehabilitation of heritage, UNESCO has also noted the relationship between the rehabilitation of Timbuktu by the community, using traditional techniques, to the rehabilitation of the community. Thus, Bokova 'paid tribute to the inhabitants and masons of Timbuktu whose mobilization and skills played a crucial part in the reconstruction of the buildings. “Your work is a lesson in tolerance, dialogue and peace,” she declared (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2015c) – in other words, the rehabilitation of Timbuktu by the community has contributed to the rehabilitation of the community. Similarly in 2014 Lazare Eloudou Assomo, UNESCO representative to Mali, connected the rehabilitation by the community to preserving the cultural value of the site: “We want the community to rebuild their own heritage. It’s not just about rebuilding stones. It’s also about keeping the cultural significance and keeping the role that the mausoleum had in structuring the life of the community” (UNESCO, 2014). Discussing Timbuktu Vibeke Jansen, director of the UNESCO office in New York, similarly stated: “A community’s cultural heritage reflects its life, history and identity. Its preservation helps to rebuild broken communities, re-establish their identities, and link their past with their present and future” (UNESCO, 2014). These statements – and Jansen's most clearly – demonstrate the close relationship between heritage rehabilitation and community reconstruction in UNESCO’s approach to post-conflict Timbuktu, both as a symbol of community reconciliation and, through the act of rehabilitation, as a practical means of rebuilding communities.

Conclusion

The two examples considered in this paper – the old bridge of Mostar and the mosques and mausolea of Timbuktu – shine a light on UNESCO's approach to the relationship between the rehabilitation of World Heritage sites and the rehabilitation
of communities. In both Mostar and Timbuktu, UNESCO considered relationship between the symbolic value of the sites being rehabilitated and the reconstruction of local communities. In Mostar, however, for all the symbolic power that UNESCO ascribed to the reconstruction, the town remains deeply divided. Perhaps because of this divergence between how UNESCO evaluated the bridge’s symbolic value and the failure to achieve reconciliation in Mostar, in Timbuktu, UNESCO also emphasised a more practical link between the rehabilitation of heritage and community: namely, that rehabilitation of heritage by communities can contribute to rebuilding those communities and to preserving the role of heritage sites in society. UNESCO’s more recent approach is therefore to link both the symbolic value and the practical effects of heritage rehabilitation to community reconstruction.

Bibliography


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