Multi-Lateral Approaches to Cultural Heritage Preservation

It is a privilege to be able to contribute to this conference volume about several projects in Afghanistan that the US Embassy has supported over the years in cultural heritage preservation. All of the participants of this conference have become involved in the field heritage protection because we share a particular understanding of the value of cultural heritage in Afghanistan, both for Afghanistan itself and for its global value and significance. The unique heritage of Afghanistan reflects the nation’s complex and diverse history dating back millennia and this history, as reflected in monuments, archaeological sites and traditions such as poetry and dance, are inextricable from understanding the breadth of Asia’s rich past. We understand that the work we do has meaning during this auspicious period in Afghanistan’s history, and that this work will have value well beyond our years.

The elegant and simple plaque that stands at the entrance to the national Museum in Kabul which has written “A Nation Stays live When Its Culture Stays Alive” encapsulates perfectly the underpinning reason for United States support for preserving Afghan cultural heritage. As In a quick overview of how far the National Museum has come along, so as not to duplicate what other conference speakers will discuss, can be captured in images of destruction that are all too painfully recent. However, there has been great progress over the years through the efforts of the international community and the citizens of Afghanistan themselves. The US Embassy was relatively late to come into the realm of contribution to cultural preservation, and our participation in that realm of experts working on Afghanistan’s cultural heritage preservation would not have been possible without partners. The work is unachievable without collaboration. Among our most important partners and supporters are Dr. Omara Khan Massoudi, former Director of the National Museums of Afghanistan, and Mr. Omar Sultan, former Deputy Minister for Culture.

Since 2002 the United States has supported over 50 projects in the field of tangible and intangible cultural preservation, and has contributed more than $20 million dollars to these efforts. This essay presents a selected overview of only a few of those projects. These serve as examples of successful, multi-lateral programs upon which future work can be built.

PROJECTS AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

At the National Museum in Kabul in 2011 the US Embassy worked with a local organization, Sayyid Majidi Architecture and Design, to help enhance the overall security of the museum by, primarily, erecting a perimeter wall and guard towers, and relocating the vehicle parking to a safe distance from the Museum building. Over the course of years spent working with Dr. Massoudi, we discussed how best to
realize this goal, originally his vision, and how to operationalize such concepts in the historical and environmental context of the Museum, while ensuring line-of-sight dynamics, aesthetic values, and community engagement.

Also at the National Museum, the Department of State has had the privilege to support a multi-year partnership between the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute and the museum staff since 2012 for the cataloging and rehousing of the entire collection. This partnership also involves sustained training and conservation work of the patrimony housed in the Museum. (see Fisher, this volume and Hakimzada & D’Alesandro, this volume). This kind of collaborative effort is simply not possible without active partners such as the staff of the National Museum and the team from the Oriental Institute, who work there daily and reside in Kabul full-time. It is elements such as daily commitment to the work and carrying out the tasks of the partnership in the unique context of the National Museum that help to create genuine sustainability in cultural heritage management.

RESTORATION & PRESERVATION OF HISTORICAL MONUMENTS

Another ongoing partnership of the US Embassy, Kabul is with the Agha Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) in a multi-year project to stabilize Afghanistan’s most historic mosque, Noh Gumbad, located in Balkh province. The work proceeds best when the Embassy plays a supportive role and so the partnership has a main focus on the experts carrying out their work. Noh Gumbad is one of the earliest examples of Islamic architecture with very few known antecedents. The importance of the outstanding work being carried out by the ATC with U.S. support cannot be overstated in our era where cultural sites are being destroyed at shocking rates.

In Herat, one of the region’s most important historical cities, the Afghanistan Cultural Heritage Consulting Organization (ACHCO), with support from the US Embassy, conserving the Shahzada Abdullah Mausoleum that dates to the Timurid Period, 15th century AD, and the Abdul Qasim Mausoleum that dates to the 20th century AD. These co-located mausolea reside in the historic Khunandiz district of central Herat. Though one is ancient and one is modern, both are living monuments that are actively used by Heratis on a daily basis for devotional visits and as places of social gathering. The structural stabilization, restoration of tilework, and general preservation tactics are essential.

Also in Herat, AKTC has carried out superb work in restoring the Citadel of Herat, Qal'a Ikhtiyaruddin. This work has been part of a partnership with the US Embassy and the German government, without which this project could not have proceeded. One key underpinning and essential feature of this effort was the participation of hired laborers. An element that can often go overlooked in cultural heritage preservation is the economic impact of job creation (see Presidential Address, this volume) Working with local artisans has the collateral effect of maintaining skill sets that can be lost to modernization, and senior artisans have the opportunity to transfer their knowledge in traditional craft techniques when their talents are
engaged in cultural preservation projects. (see Nazari et al., this volume). The multi-year project at Qal’a Ikhtyaruddin supported 70,000 man-days of labor over five years in the completion of this project. This translates directly to employing 50 laborers for five years continuously. This has a substantial impact on the local economy and scores of families, and is unquestionably one of the major benefits of sustained cultural preservation work.

**DOCUMENTATION OF HISTORICAL MONUMENTS**

Finally, one project that was exemplary of collaboration—which could not have happened without the support of the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture, the provincial government in Ghazni, and the security assistance provided by the US military—was the digital documentation of the justly-famous Minarets of Ghazni, the Victory Towers of the Ghaznavid sultans Masud III and Bahram Shah.

This documentation project was undertaken in 2011 and in advance of Ghazni’s designation as the ‘Cultural Capital of the Islamic World in Asia.’ The Ministry of Information and Culture of Afghanistan has been a great collaborator for all of the US Embassy projects, but for the Ghazni minarets we had to work together to identify a particularly efficient mission that could be completed in a short amount of time. Documentation is the first step in any preservation work, and so creating laser scans of the minarets was the perfect plan. We invited specialists from the United States Parks Service to scan the towers, which took three days. However, rendering the data from the scanning, which is an intricate, tedious process, took over two years. The outcome and details of that work has been displayed inside of the Timur Shah Mausoleum in Kabul for viewing by the Afghan public and is made freely available through the U.S. Library of Congress. All data and results of the Ghazni Towers Scanning project is provided freely to local and international scholars and students of Afghan heritage and Islamic architecture.

Part of the realization of this project included inviting two young, talented Afghan architects to travel to the US for several months to assist with the laser scanning. They were supported with an ICOMOS internship to work aside the Park Service specialists in rendering the data from laser scanning. This highlights the Afghan involvement and, again, the necessity of working collaboratively. We all must believe fundamentally that the preservation of Afghanistan’s cultural heritage is most important, most valuable, and what an honor it is for all of us to be part of that process.