

International Focus on Young Professionals in Culture Heritage Conservation

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Abstract

International cultural heritage conservation instigated by UNESCO has had multiple paradigm shifts since its establishment, changing from fabric-focused conservation to a more people-centered approach involving multiple communities. There are numerous researches on the significance of involving communities in cultural heritage conservation. This paper, however, looks specifically at the young heritage experts and their capacity-building programs introduced by two international institutes –UNESCO and ICOMOS– which has not been discussed in today’s research. The author has had experiences in participating in the World Heritage Youth Forums organized by UNESCO World Heritage Center in 2015, and is a current member of the Emerging Professional Working Group in Japan ICOMOS. This paper is based on her observations and experiences as a participant in multiple international forums and it aims to report a preliminary summary on how international organizations, related to cultural heritage conservation, are starting to put effort in capacity-building of young professionals and its pros and cons.

Keywords

World Heritage; Youth Forum; Emerging Professionals; capacity-building; paradigm shift.

Paradigm shifts in international cultural heritage conservation

Since cultural heritage conservation as a concept set ground in the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), there have been multiple paradigm shifts that have reflected the global trends and issues of each era. In the international practice, the approach has taken a change from mere conservation of monuments to “management of heritage where conservation is one component”, which is a modification from the conventional, fabric-focused conservation approach of the nineteenth century to a more recent, people-centered approach that incorporates living heritage as a component of tangible heritage preservation (Thompson and Wijesuriya, 2018: 186).



Behind the paradigm shift was the global impact on cultural and natural heritage sites. The concept of international cooperation for cultural heritage conservation initiated at the League of Nations in the 1920s (Cameron and Rössler, 2013) and evolved during the two World Wars to create peace “in the minds of men and women” (UNESCO, 1945) and to restructure education and culture (Sanz and Tejada, 2016: 69; Ueda, 1951; IIC, 1930: 6). The end of the Second World War was soon taken over by the rapid urbanization and industrial growth in the 1950s and 1960s, where the cultural heritage preservation paradigm took another turn. New transport, residential, and commercial developments to respond to high rural-urban migration flows affected the globe (Orbasli, 2008; Bandarin and van Oers, 2012). The European countries first dealt with restructuring war-torn cities, while the southern hemisphere began creating their own nation states for the first time after decolonization. UNESCO’s first International Safeguarding Campaign took place in the 1960s, in order to protect the Nubian monuments in Abu Simbel and Philae in the Upper Nile Valley in Egypt, and it gave the first example of a multinational project for saving a cultural heritage facing development issues (Cameron and Rössler, 2013: 11-12).

The international cooperation in conserving cultural heritage in the twenty-first century is currently entering a new phase, as the heritage is democratized (Millar, 2006) and is no longer confined to expertise and politics. Jane Thompson and Gamini Wijesuriya of the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) further divided the paradigm shifts of cultural heritage policy work into three phases: the “one size fits all” model that focused on the physical structure of monuments and sites (1964-1994); a period of recognizing multiple attributes and values for heritage protection (1994-2014); and the current stage of “reciprocal benefits beyond heritage”, where the people-centered approach is taken to give heritage a more dynamic role in sustainable development, as a part of an ecosystem to be protected within the communities (Thompson and Wijesuriya, 2018). With it, preservation of the quality of human environments while enhancing productive and sustainable use of heritage is becoming a new norm. In addition, conservation is no longer just technical assistance for cultural heritage preservation, but something holistic that involves education and training of local staffs and community members, in order to enable sustainable conservation by including local experts, municipalities, and community members that are excluded from the international mechanism.

Although recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, and civil societies in relation to their cultural heritage (Coombe, 2009), and their capacity building and education are gathering attention in cultural heritage conservation even in the World Heritage management (UNESCO, 2019b), not many have discussed the young professionals’ roles in conservation. In recent years, there have been global active movements to build capacities and networks among young experts of cultural and natural heritage conservation, which this paper will touch upon.

Young experts’ involvement in the World Heritage conservation system

As a focal point of World Heritage matters, the World Heritage Center as a secretariat has played an essential role in education to enable youth and community participation in preservation and promotion of World Heritage sites, such as through the usage of the educational kit of World Heritage in Young Hands (Cameron and Rössler, 2013: 215-216). The capacity-building of youth group evolved under the World Heritage Education Programme (UNESCO, 2019c) with a pilot project of the First World Heritage Youth Forum in Norway in June, 1995 (UNESCO, 2019d). Ever since, there are regional or international youth forums held annually to discuss the significant matters that the World Heritage faces today during the annual World Heritage sessions.





Emerging professionals of Japan ICOMOS. Image: ©Hiroki Yamada.

I personally had the privilege to join the World Heritage Young Experts Forum in Bonn, Germany, as a participant, and on the first World Heritage Youth Forum in Asia as a facilitator, both held in 2015. Both were funded by the hosting countries and organized in collaboration with UNESCO. As for the Young Experts Forum, young experts from 20 to 30 years old with experience, from 32 countries, gathered to interact and discuss the topic: “Towards a Sustainable Management of World Heritage Sites”. In the eleven days of the gathering, we visited sites with sustainable usage, practiced hands-on activities, as well as discussed possible solutions for sustainable management. It was presented as a Declaration, with a message to the states parties, the necessity to involve youth and local community to counteract conflicts and damages, at the 39th World Heritage Committee.

As for the first World Heritage Youth Forum in Asia, I was on the organizer’s side as one of the volunteer facilitators to run a similar program to the one in Bonn, and apply the method regionally. Because the scope was limited to Asian participants, they were less experienced and many were still in undergraduate level, nevertheless they actively engaged in discussions, which were also declared at the end of the program.

There were two possible outcomes from both programs. First was the opportunity to create a new network among those who share the same passion, but are scattered in different parts of the world. The selected members were committed to the protection of either cultural or natural heritage, and this gave us an opportunity to understand the similar struggles we were facing in the conservation field or as starting professionals in our own countries. Second, was the expansion of the networks outside the groups that gathered for the occasion. Right after the Forum in Bonn, an online platform was created by the 33 participants to spread information about best practices and lessons learned, as well as to disseminate information on conferences, workshops, volunteer work, and online publications. Though it is inactive at the moment, many young experts contacted the platform to join the new international movement, which shows the strong interest of young experts to connect, learn, and communicate across the borders.



Similarly, in 2017, the International Emerging Professionals Working Group was created in the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), an Advisory Body to UNESCO, in response to the 2016 ICOMOS Annual Report's call to expand the membership base for the Emerging Professionals. Emerging professionals are those that have joined the cultural heritage conservation with a limited professional experience. It is an initiative to involve emerging professionals in ICOMOS projects and activities including training, mentorship, public advocacy and knowledge dissemination, in order to recognize and include them in the organization (ICOMOS, 2017). After the Resolutions were passed at the 19th ICOMOS General Assembly in Delhi, India in 2017, there is at least one Emerging Professional seated in the board of the National Committees (NCs) and International Scientific Committees (ISCs), making their presence greater. Globally, International Emerging Professionals representing each country are meeting multiple times a year online to discuss further on their involvement in ICOMOS. With the support of the Board, ICOMOS is trying to shift into involving experts of younger generations to share the knowledge and experiences that were developed by the present leaders in the conservation field.

Currently, as an Emerging Professional of the Japan ICOMOS National Committee, I have started organizing events along with other members of the Committee to make our presence known to the other members. Our first project was organizing the event "Know and Participate in ICOMOS" that was held on September 15, 2018, where we had set a platform to casually discuss and learn about the ICOMOS structure with the members of each NC and ISC. As the Emerging Professionals are scattered in Japan, we use online mediums to have meetings and we aim to be able to commit to activities and planning at the ICOMOS National Committee.

Conclusion

The Youth Forum organized by UNESCO is facing difficulties in continuing to manage the online platforms that were voluntarily started and are run by young experts without any support of states parties and the international organization. However, ICOMOS is successful in creating a ground where young experts are not only given a voice in the already existing structure, but are also given chances to learn and work with the more senior experts as mentors. Though the intention of the programs and structures are different and incomparable, the two organizations are looking at the young generation of experts as an asset in the future of conservation practices. From my experience of joining both schemes, the biggest takeaway was the network that will last longer with the possible collaboration of projects and presentations at conferences in the future. The risk, however, is the difficulty of continuing the process after its initiation. Even for ICOMOS, Emerging Professionals will have to make strong commitments to continue receiving the institutional support that it currently has, to show that the investment is worthy for the conservation of cultural heritage in the long run. While further analysis is needed, this paper is written to briefly touch upon current movements of capacity-building for young heritage experts in international cultural heritage conservation. While it is one of the mandates for UNESCO to invest in educating younger generations, it has not yet achieved an obvious outcome because of the lack of follow-ups after the programs. It is essential that UNESCO and ICOMOS analyze the impacts of such capacity-building programs and forums to actually make a significant difference in the long run.

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