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Euromed Heritage
التراث الأوروبي المتوسطي

Participation, a powerful tool for conservation of traditional Mediterranean architecture

*Traditional houses make the charm of historic centres and contribute to the unfolding of social activities within the communities. Increased awareness of this heritage and the involvement of people in its management are essential tools for preventive conservation. **Xavier Casanovas**, Professor at the Polytechnic University of Catalonia and coordinator of the **Montada project- Forum for the promotion of traditional architecture in the Maghreb**, tells us how ...*

(Interviewed by: Giuliano Salis)

Montada represents a new step in a journey started before: could you tell us more?

Montada falls in the wake of other projects realized in previous phases of Euromed Heritage. After the identification and classification of traditional Mediterranean architecture and construction techniques associated to it (Corpus and Corpus Levant - EH I), we developed an integrated method of conservation, including the development of tools and techniques for conservation and rehabilitation (Rehabimed - EH III). The current project will now proceed to the creation of a participatory model for heritage management and its promotion as a factor for local development, and putting in place a public awareness campaign that aims towards the appropriation of their heritage by the populations.

What is the current situation of traditional architecture in the region?

Traditional architecture involves inhabited houses as opposed to monumental heritage, and as such, it is at risk of disappearing, especially in southern countries. Indeed, it is not protected by specific legislation and there are no specific measures to support people undertake its rehabilitation, maintenance and conservation. When a home becomes uninhabitable, the general policy adopted by the authorities is to leave the house to collapse and move its inhabitants into new buildings built on the outskirts of cities. This is, moreover, what people prefer, since they associate these assets with decay and poverty. Raising the consciousness of decision makers and the populations to the cultural value of this heritage and its great economic potential is therefore urgent.

What other phenomena are behind people's distancing and lack of interest in this heritage?

People who currently live in historic houses are generally not their original inhabitants: they come from the countryside with a culture and practices different from those of the city – outdoor living, living in close contact with animals, etc. As result, these people have a weak attachment to the heritage in which they live. We are also witnessing the phenomenon of gentrification: a population with higher financial means returning to inhabit the historic centres where they find architectural elements that cannot be found elsewhere, and carry out renovations that are sometimes spectacular, as in the case of Marrakech. The direct consequence is an increased standard of living and general hike in prices, which forces people with lower incomes to move elsewhere.

In which areas is the project implemented?

We aim particularly at six cities of the Maghreb, which represent as many situations: Salé and Marrakech in Morocco, Dellys and Ghardaia in Algeria, Kairouan and Sousse in Tunisia. We can encounter there problems resulting from pressures due to tourism development, or the collapse and abandonment of a large number of down-town houses because of an earthquake, as well as examples of appropriate measures for conservation as in the M'Zab Valley (Algeria). This diversity allows us to obtain the information necessary to draw generalisations and transfer the experience to other cities in the countries in question, or in other Mediterranean countries.

People's participation in the conservation process is at the heart of your approach: what are the actions you will achieve and by what means?

In each city we will create a local forum called "The city, a living heritage": it involves a working team which will be responsible for the stimulation of a public debate, the elaboration and management of activities, and ensure safeguarding their sustainability. The forum consists of local partners and representatives of local and national administrations, and it will get the technical and scientific support from EIDEM, a multidisciplinary team of international experts in the field of heritage, handicrafts, tourism, mediation and cultural activities. We are considering specific actions, such as meetings and public debates involving neighbourhood and shopkeepers associations, or public surveys, etc., which should allow us to determine the perception and opinion that people have about their heritage. In parallel, an integrated process of rehabilitation will be implemented: EIDEM will analyse the collected information and will formulate guidance and technical advice, which it will submit to local and national bodies, which will carry out urban interventions immediately or in the future. Based on the needs identified in each city, we will organise specific awareness activities, and training in rehabilitation, various craftsmanship, cultural tourism and its promotion, and the creation of cultural activities, etc. These target current and future professionals. This approach will allow us to capitalise to the maximum on the knowledge gained and allow appropriate actors to transmit it in a stronger and more sustainable manner.

What other activities, including awareness, will you implement?

We are planning urban cultural initiatives such as theme parties, heritage routes, itineraries, as well as conferences or public meetings. In Sousse, for example, there was the tradition of making soap from the oil produced in the region. We could well imagine creating an itinerary of artisans, explaining their work and technique, and identify artisans still active and disseminate their activity, and hold a fair based on this tradition and link it to the "Soap Days of Sousse"... The purpose of these activities is to educate people who do not always realise that their city has an important asset to protect and enhance, and from which they can benefit, both culturally and economically. We have also planned for educational activities in at least four schools per city, where we will create an educational tool involving children, parents and teachers from other schools. The result of all these activities implemented through the project will be presented in national meetings and at an international conference, which will increase their impact, dissemination and sustainability.

What do you wish to achieve by the end of the project?

Help change public and all stakeholders attitude towards traditional architecture, by making them understand that this heritage can become a tool for sustainable economic development, managed by a system of shared governance. Through the experience we gained with Rehabimed, we realised that people are looking for more involvement, which makes us confident about the results expected with Montada.

For more information about the project:

http://www.euromedheritage.net/euroshared/doc/MONTADA_en.pdf

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