

ABSTRACT

Defining heritage itself is a challenging task and it becomes even more challenging when a 'living' dimension is added to it. Nevertheless, the use of the theme 'living heritage' has become increasingly popular within heritage discourse in recent years. Debates on living versus dead monuments (the dominant terminology of the past regarding heritage) originated in the formative period of conservation discourse when emphasis and interest seems to have focused on the latter. Lately, particularly since the 2005 UNESCO *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, the term 'living heritage' has been linked to 'communities' and the 'continuity' of traditions and practices. Furthermore, various countries use the theme to identify heritage that comprises living dimensions or the continuity of traditions, skills and even craftspeople (elaborated by Yasuhiro Oka in this volume).

For this discussion, living heritage is characterized by the concept of 'continuity'; in particular the continuity of a heritage site's original function or 'the purpose for which they were originally intended' and the continuity of community connections (continuity of a core community). In response to the changing circumstances of the core community, heritage sites continue to evolve or change with added tangible and intangible expressions (continuity of expressions). The core community is also responsible for the continuous care of the heritage through traditional or established means (continuity of care). In this sense, change is embraced as a part of the continuity, or living nature, of the heritage place, rather than something which is to be mitigated or kept to a minimum. Based on recent research and field activities of ICCROM, this paper will characterize 'living heritage' based on continuity and change as dominant concepts. Conservation is therefore about managing continuity and change for which new decision-making processes have to be developed.

Introduction

'Living heritage' has become a recurring theme over the last ten years. ICCROM launched a programme on Living Heritage Sites in 2003 as part of its Integrated Territorial and Urban Conservation (ITUC) activities. The rationale behind the programme was to emphasize the living dimensions of heritage sites; their recognition and relevance to contemporary life, including benefits and people's interests and capacity to engage in continuous care as true and long-term custodians of these sites. Retaining living dimensions which contain and support diverse sociocultural activities was considered as important as the material fabric. The goal of the programme was to promote awareness of the living heritage concept within the domain of conservation and management of heritage sites. Specific objectives included: the creation of tools necessary to develop a community-based approach to conservation and management; promotion of traditional knowledge systems in conservation practices and increased attention paid to living heritage issues in training programmes. In this way, it was hoped to increase awareness and sensitivity towards living heritage; by encouraging the use of local resources, traditional practices and know-how; strengthening efforts to retain local craft traditions; and increasing support for social and religious activities and functions promoted by sacred places.

The five-year programme started with a strategy development meeting held in Bangkok in 2003¹ and the Forum on Living Religious Heritage held in Rome in 2003 (Stovel *et al.*, 2005). The Mekong River Project emerged from the strategy meeting and aimed at carrying out several pilot studies in the region, with the main activity conducted in Phrae, a region in the northern part of Thailand. Interim results of this project and some of the ongoing research were discussed at a workshop on "Empowering Communities" held in 2005 in Thailand (Wijesuriya *et al.*, 2005). This was a theme which emerged from various pilot projects and experiences in other parts of the world. A number of internships, individual research projects and several fellowships were carried out at ICCROM to further develop and synthesize the results based on which, a workshop was held in Bangkok in 2009.² Since 2003, several PhD dissertations have been submitted to a number of universities on these themes and many of those candidates engaged in discussions with ICCROM staff.