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The Organization of World Heritage Cities is composed of the 208 cities inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as possessing outstanding universal value for mankind. The OWHC was created to assist those cities, which have a combined population of over 122 million, to adapt and improve methods of conservation as well as to promote the most effective management of their heritage, enabling them to reap the benefits of social and economic development, capitalizing on these assets in practical ways in day to day decision making. Many World Heritage Cities are indeed models of good management. Their unique experiences in resolving problems can serve as examples of best practices for use by other cities.

Over sixty per cent of our cities are in countries belonging to the European Union. It is, therefore, one of the main concerns of the OWHC that greater interest be generated and greater priority be given to support the preservation and enhancement of the European cultural heritage. In this realm, Europe has much to share with the rest of the world.

It is stated in the Strategic Research Agenda of the ECTP that:
"European cultural heritage is the testimony of our common past and the base of our identity. It enriches the collective memory and is indispensable for the future of European citizens, and needs to be conserved with great care. Action is now urgent to preserve it from neglect and poor maintenance which currently destroys 10% of tangible cultural heritage every 20 years."

A continent with such a rich and varied history cannot afford to lose the evidence of its glorious past. The European Union with so many historic towns and cities within its boundaries, and not only those on the World Heritage List, must provide those cities with the opportunity for economic and social development.

The World Tourism Organization estimates that about 35 to 40 per cent of international tourist movements have a cultural motivation. This trend is growing and presents a great opportunity to our cities but at the same time a formidable challenge. We must seize this opportunity to renew and augment the life and economy of our cities by showcasing their uniqueness through both their built heritage and their intangible heritage. We must also accept the challenge to provide visitors authentic, local cultural experiences, while taking care to safeguard the centuries-old monuments and traditions and thus to maintain the ability to remain competitive on a long term basis.

Most of us will agree that Cultural Tourism can serve as an incentive to preserve historic monuments, to develop new economic activities, thus creating jobs and revenue, as well as to instill pride in the cities' inhabitants for their cultural heritage.

We all, I am sure, have had the opportunity to visit many historic towns in Europe, some forgotten by time, that now have experienced a rebirth with the increased interest in cultural sites. In this revival the Construction Sector has played a vital role. I found it very interesting, while reading the Strategic Research Agenda, that "today, 40% of construction activities are devoted to rehabilitation, repair and maintenance."

The OWHC has long promoted the cooperation of the various actors in the field of cultural heritage conservation and management. At its 7th World Symposium held in Rhodes in September, 2003, I had, as Chairman of the Organizing Committee, the honor and pleasure to work with Prof. Antonia Moropoulou, who served as Coordinator of the Scientific Committee for the Scientific Congress. Two separate sessions, the Mayors and Decision-Makers' Forum and the Youth Forum took place parallel to the Scientific Congress. The concluding session brought together these three groups - Local Authorities, Experts and Youth where the exchange brought forth guidelines which continue to determine the course of action of the Organization.

The Symposium was considered a turning point in the evolution of thought and policy within the OWHC. The Mayor of Rhodes, Mr. George Giannopoulos, was elected President of the OWHC by the General Assembly, which is composed of the Mayors of the World Heritage Cities. I would like to add that he was re-elected President at our World Symposium in Cusco, Peru last September. In Rhodes, Greek ideas and policies pervaded throughout the sessions thanks to the tireless efforts of Prof. Moropoulou and her team. And, at the conclusion of the Symposium, I had the honor to be offered the position of Coordinator for Development and European Projects, which I hold today. Thus, in keeping with the precedence that has been given and the initiatives that have been taken by Greece in the field of Cultural Heritage preservation, Rhodes has taken an active role in one of the key Organizations working toward this end.

The theme of the Symposium was "Keeping Heritage Alive—Education and Training for the Preservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage". In the conclusions and recommendations of the Scientific Committee, "keeping heritage alive" was perceived as a situation where sustainable cities include the active participation of the public in the development processes. In such a model of city development, research becomes a tool to define new concepts and investigate effective, innovative and compatible planning and intervention techniques and materials for sustainable preservation of Historic Cities and education becomes a necessity to keep societies informed.

One of the concepts developed at the Symposium was that of "Historic cities as open labs for research." The Symposium proposed that the evolution in the field of Cultural Heritage protection demands validation of newly developed concepts and strategies in situ. Historic Cities can and definitely should be used as open labs, transferring, applying and validating knowledge produced.

It has been said that the OWHC is the only international platform composed of Mayors, Decision-makers and experts whose task is to conserve and manage the heritage of their cities. They know only too well what hangs in the balance and their concern, as expressed to us daily, is great.

The job of a Mayor of a World Heritage City is not easy. Most Mayors are not heritage experts but the responsibility of preserving historic monuments becomes theirs once they are elected. Moreover, Mayors are in a singular position to understand the needs of their cities, to establish priorities and to implement the results of research and planning. The OWHC provides training courses for new Mayors helping them to become more sensitized to the issues of heritage.

Here again the recommendations of the Rhodes Symposium emphasized the need for Mayors of Historic Cities to realize that cooperation with relevant research, academic and educational institutions is essential in order to achieve the development of knowledge based decision-making systems. Furthermore, the cooperation should include appropriate ministries of national governments, the construction sector and stakeholders of historic buildings, while recognizing that the European Union funding programs are crucial to the advancement of conservation and good management.

There have been many successes in the efforts to conserve and restore our monuments but there have also been failures. That the construction sector be more closely involved in research, thus having first-hand knowledge of better methods, would result in improved implementation and in the long term lower costs. Through greater knowledge and experience in the conservation and enhancement of monuments and cultural sites, the European construction sector would acquire a comparative advantage in this field in relation to corresponding sectors throughout the world.

One of the most successful projects of the OWHC, called City2City, involves technical assistance from our more advanced cities to those cities, mainly outside of Europe, which require help in the area of conservation or management. In one instance, conservation experts and construction companies from Bergen, Norway have been helping the city of Ilha de Mozambique in carrying out projects. New markets throughout the world could open up for a European construction sector having greater expertise in the field of conservation. The OWHC as a network, linking all of the World Heritage cities throughout the world, could serve as a channel of communication to facilitate contact between its cities and European companies specialized in restoration.

In speaking of the conclusions and recommendations of the Rhodes Symposium, I referred to the link made between research results and the consequent need to keep societies informed. I would add that the cooperation of Mayors of historic cities with research and academic institutions would offer the opportunity for education to their citizens.

The public must be convinced of the importance of preserving their cultural heritage. This process often results in conflict between the local authorities and the community. Living in an environment with specific demands requires stricter control, for example, on the use of cars, the treatment of refuse, the type of paint or other materials used for repairing houses, as well as on the practices of businesses in these historic areas. To achieve a positive dialogue between the local authorities and the public and to ensure the effectiveness of actions taken, requires the support of experts to provide the needed information, arguments and methods.

The pilot programs initiated by the EU also aim to raise public awareness. Synergy is required of experts, local authorities, other levels of government, and the EU in order to bring about positive and significant results in preserving our heritage as well as providing a better quality of life for our citizens. The structure is already in place within the framework of the OWHC which could help this synergy to be more effective.

To keep our historic cities alive and full of inhabitants in livable dwellings requires funds from the European and National levels for research and projects, which will make the heritage of humanity a heritage with humanity. Time is not on our side. The stress placed on our monuments by man and the environment he has created, leaves our scientists and researchers struggling to keep one step ahead of ruin. Even a short pause in their efforts could have irreversible impacts.

Europe must be competitive in many ways and it is difficult to apportion funds, faced with so many priorities. But, to borrow once more from the economists the term, comparative advantage, Europe, in its ability to benefit economically and socially from its cultural heritage, does indeed have a comparative advantage. Let us not lose it.