

# **ICOA1293: HANDS-ON COOPERATION**

## **The Regional Restoration Camps Experience in the Balkans**

### **Subtheme 02: The Role of Cultural Heritage in Building Peace and Reconciliation**

**Session 1:** Heritage as Peace Builder, Tying and Benefitting Community

**Location:** Silver Oak Hall 1, India Habitat Centre

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**Abstract:** To build enduring peace and reconciliation, people must learn to work together. Cultural heritage has an essential role in that it can be a focal point for understanding and generating respect for the values of others. The Regional Restoration Camps (RRC) is a heritage conservation training model that works towards dialogue and understanding by creating ‘safe spaces,’ within which participants focus on learning and applying knowledge — about heritage and each other. The practical works during the Camps are organized in a way that fosters trust through teamwork and achievement—enhancing conditions for personal belief, greater togetherness, and compassion. The camps are planned and implemented so that young professionals and craftspeople, both women and men, from Southeast Europe can meet and learn about each other and their respective cultural backgrounds. By fostering personal understanding, this activity is contributing toward the creation of new cultural polities based on dialogue and works toward preventing conflicts like those the region suffered in the 1990s.

Since 2007, Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHwB) has organized 38 Camps, which have covered topics such as building restoration, artifact conservation, community development, interpretation, entrepreneurship and heritage management. The development of these camps has been supported and encouraged by international professionals, educational institutions and multilateral donors. After ten years of the Regional Restoration Camps, the authors feel that this model can be extended to other areas pre-or-post-conflict, as a means of utilizing cultural heritage for peace building and reconciliation. This paper will describe the methodology of the Camps as well as ideas for implementation in other regions of the world.

**Keywords:** *conservation, rights-based approach, peace, reconciliation, conflict*

## Introduction

Culture has long been recognized as an essential aspect of recovery having a positive force both for social reconstruction and cohesion and for eventual reconciliation (Almagro, Tandon, 2015). The spaces can foster empathy and cross-cultural understanding that are enduring enough to withstand the pressures of identity politics and authorised discourses that promote division and fear (Hadzic, Eaton, 2017).

In 2007 after ten years of engaging in the post-war rehabilitation of cultural heritage in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHwB) became conscious of the fact that more effort must be done to actively bringing people together from war-torn countries. The devastation of cultural heritage across Western Balkans was still evident.

“The massive intentional destruction of cultural and religious property in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Kosovo during the 1991–1999 Wars of Yugoslav Succession was the greatest destruction of cultural heritage in Europe since World War Two. The devastation – which took place almost entirely during violent campaigns of ethnic cleansing waged against civilians in an attempt to create ethnically homogenous territories – was one of the defining features of the conflicts. Bosnia-Herzegovina was most severely affected particularly its Ottoman and Islamic heritage. Among the most iconic images of the wars was the burning of the National Library during the Siege of Sarajevo in August 1992 and the shelling of Mostar’s Old Bridge in November 1993”<sup>1</sup> (Walasek, 2015)

The Old Bridge in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina was reconstructed in 2005. However, recent efforts to begin the reconstruction of Ferhad Beys’ Mosque in Banja Luka faced fierce opposition from the local Serbian community. In Kosovo, the March Riots of 2004 reminded everyone of the fragility of peace. During these riots 35 Orthodox Monasteries<sup>2</sup> were severely damaged, including four inscribed on the World Heritage List (Sandberg, 2004; CHwB, 2004, Riedlmayer, 2012). The wounds were still fresh. However, heritage had to be recuperated, both as the sign of resilience and as a token of security for the expelled communities to return to their places of origin.

In that rather grave mixed atmosphere of grieving over the atrocities of devastating conflicts while hoping for better tomorrow, CHwB developed a platform that would bring together young professionals from the region to build a dialogue based on similarities rather than differences. It was at this moment the platform of the Regional Restoration Camps was created.

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1 (Walasek, 2015)

2 (Andras Riedlmayer, 2012)

## Regional Restoration Camp

First Regional Restoration Camp was organized in September 2007, and was hosted in the World Heritage City of Gjirokastra, Albania. Not only did Gjirokastra serve as a neutral place, it also allowed participants from the former Yugoslavian countries to arrive without the necessity of a visa<sup>3</sup>, Albanian did not suffer from interethnic conflicts and the location provided the perfect laboratory with its Outstanding Universal Value. The camp was organized to run for two weeks, whereby for CHw Bit was very important to engage participants in as much of a hands-on experience as possible. The objectives of the camp were three-fold; 1) bring together young professionals from the countries that were in recent conflict, 2) train them in good conservational practice based on an internationally acceptable approach using historical materials and techniques, and 3) set good conservation practice examples with tangible results.

The days were divided among lectures that were held in the evening hours, while all the practical work was conducted during the day. The practical work included conservation of the floor of the Zekate Monument of the 1<sup>st</sup> category of national significance, cleaning and repairing stone block in the courtyard of the same monument, and conservation and repair of traditional render in the ground floor rooms of the building where Regional Directorate of National Culture<sup>4</sup> was accommodated. The lectures were delivered by national and international experts in the field, while the practical work was led by the local craftsman and international conservators of works of art. The participants came from 7 countries of the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo Montenegro, Macedonia, and Serbia.

Already in the first days, we felt the tension was getting higher especially among participants from Kosovo and Serbia. News on Kosovo being about to declare independence from Serbia Independence of Kosovo is February 17th 2008<sup>5</sup>, and the narratives of history and intent of both Kosovan and Serbian state were fiercely discussed among participants. But, when the morning work on the conservation sites commenced it seemed as if there was a subsidence in this debate. Participants were in mixed groups and craftsman engaged with everyone, wither to mix the mortar, clean the wall surfaces or hew the timber for new beams. In the evenings the discussions would resume, but as the days passed, we observed more active listening taking place, while on sites we noticed solidarity and teamwork picking up.



*Fig.1- Participants from Kosovo, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina lifting a floor joist with a Kosovan craftsman*

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<sup>3</sup> Citizens of BiH required a visa, however during Summer months a permit to enter was acquired at the border

<sup>4</sup> Regional Directorate of National Culture – subordinate unit of Ministry of Culture in charge of preservation, monitoring and management of cultural heritage in the region of Gjirokastra

<sup>5</sup> Kosovo declared Independence from Serbia on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008

Now is the moment, where we, as organizers started to understand what we only subconsciously were aware of what was needed, the intensity of the manual labor. In our understanding, once we have participants coming from countries that are conflicting, they are fierce either through their silence or through their vocal interpretations of history and what had happened, each talking from his/her perspective. Once they were given a tool to use and work with, and independently if they were in a working group with a colleague from the “enemy” country, the focus was not anymore on “who” but on “how.” The whole intention then became profession oriented, render the piece of wall in a best possible way, find the best suitable ratio of mortar, hew the timber beam, so craftsman is satisfied with the outcome. This re-focusing of intent, according to our understanding became crucial. Due to the team spirit and spirit of accomplishment, even as if only subconsciously, the differences were set apart, and the feeling of success of a collective work and achievement prevailed. (Fig.1) This spirit became extremely obvious towards the end of the camp, when all participants independent from the country of origin, truly bonded. No matter its ten years since this first camp, we get to hear from them, and how they all stayed connected.

Through its time of development, Regional Restoration Camps grew, from 2007 to 2017, from a few students in Albania to multiple sessions in four countries, with a diverse array of participants. For the first five years camps operated in Albania, and given the progress of dialogue in the region, it became imperative that the camp steps in and on the territories of the countries where we felt would be challenging to keep the camp. In 2012, the geographical expansion of camps included, besides Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia. Both in Bosnia and Herzegovina, camps were held in cities that were having an ongoing difficulty in dealing with the post-war circumstances. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, we started with the town of Stolac and Jajce, while in Kosovo we began with the city of Mitrovica. Both Stolac and Jajce were devastated gravely during the war, where Stolac more than Jajce was (and still is) facing communal and political challenges of post-war recovery and integration of expelled communities. Mitrovica in Kosovo, on the other hand, is always a divided city, among South part, predominantly Kosovan, and a North part, mostly Serbian. While at the same time, after 22 years, in Serbia we managed to bring Kosovan and Serbian craftsmen together.



*Fig.2– Craftspersons from Kosovo and Serbia working together*

## Expansion and Recognition

With the geographical expansion, the camps were also enriched by new themes and topics. Camps now were divided among the building conservation ones and the ones for movable artifacts conservation. The first international recognition of the efforts came in 2014 when Regional Restoration Camps were awarded European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage / Europa Nostra Award, under the category of education, training, and awareness-raising. The motivation for the award is encapsulated as “The Jury especially admired the sustained success of this project in providing practical training for young professionals and inter-regional networking opportunities. This success has been proven: since 2007, 370 participants from 19 countries have taken part in a succession of intensive, well-organized two-week camps in the Balkan region. The jury appreciated the involvement of master craftspeople and academic teachers from local and international institutions in providing this valuable learning environment.”<sup>6</sup> However, even more, important was the background text following the award announcement where it was stated that “The aims are to use cultural heritage to build relations among young professionals, creating conditions for reconciliation as a prerequisite for peace and democracy, as well as to preserve traditional crafts and techniques.”<sup>7</sup> (Europa Nostra, 2014)

Following the EU Prize, camps were awarded and with the Grand Award by the Society of Conservators in Serbia for: “Exceptional contribution to protection of immovable cultural heritage and immaterial patrimony, popularization of diverse cultural heritage of Serbia, and especially for development of international cooperation in connecting different actors in the process of protection of cultural heritage in its whole.” (Embassy of Sweden, 2015). This award was the first time that the Society of Conservators in Serbia has awarded an entry outside Serbia. And in the perspective of the Balkans, this award became a confirmation that the path chosen with camps was the right one for CHwB.

## Current Status

Ever since 2012 CHwB is running approximately six regional restoration camps per year, in multiple locations and countries. Today, in 2017, we are proud to confirm 940 participants of the camps coming from 25 countries and being supported by the team of 40+ craftspersons and 100+ international and national experts in the field of cultural heritage preservation. The program is financially secured to run for two more years.

The importance of Regional Restoration Camps grew not only in the aspect of bringing young professionals together but also in teaching the best practices. The persistence in teaching the use of traditional materials and historical techniques of buildings has set forth models of best practice in communities where we work.

The Camps today are also thematically defined into ones dealing with building conservation, dynamic interpretation, conservation of movable artifacts and artisanship/entrepreneurship. They are also hosting accredited part of academic curricula for participating Universities assuring the better employment opportunities for young finished professionals.

## Conclusions

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<sup>6</sup> [www.europeanheritageawards.eu](http://www.europeanheritageawards.eu)

<sup>7</sup> [www.europeanheritageawards.eu](http://www.europeanheritageawards.eu)

“I found it really difficult [being at the camp sometimes]. Beside nostalgia and enthusiasm for past times and similar cultural background, I tried to ignore wars that happened. So, I found it difficult to deal with that fact because in my own family history I don't have any close relation to war, and when I saw... baggage that other people have... I don't know, there was an actually tension, and I think that all of us tried to deal with overcoming [our] personal histories...” (Rocker 2017:8<sup>8</sup>)

Almost two decades have passed since the last conflicts in Balkans. However, many feel that physical atrocities have stopped and that the conflict continues only in a different way. The youth are exposed and taught official narratives of history with often a very nationalistic take on past conflicts. Only in Bosnia and Herzegovina schooling in quite a few places is practiced in physically divided schools, one entrance door for each nationality, and separate curriculums for each nationality. In this reality, we cannot build romantic thesis about the times of peace. On a contrary nationalism is brewing and differences are being created on an everyday basis.

We at CHwB Albania acknowledge that we are the bearers of the post-war presence. For us working with the built heritage affected or borne in that troubled past is a chance for learning, impartial dealing and activelyengaging. Stones of destroyed Mosques and Churches are not only the physical material. Their restoration/reconstruction and interpretation are the opportunity to re-establish a necessary balance of justice.

In that respect, we ask participants of our camps for two things: 1) Never to compromise on the value of cultural heritage given spatial development policies and 2) Never to compromise on one's right to his/her heritage.

Cultural Heritage without Borders – Albania is an independent organization dedicated to rescuing and preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritage touched by conflict, neglect or human and natural disasters. We see our work as a vital contribution to building democracy and supporting human rights. CHwB is neutral when it comes to conflicting parties, but not to the rights of all people to their cultural heritage (CHwB, 2017).

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<sup>8</sup>Observation of a participant documented by PhD candidate Ms Kailey Rocker as part of her PhD studies at Department of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA.



Fig.3– Participants from around the Balkans participating in the Regional Restoration Camp in Rogljevo, Serbia

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