



Nupur Prothi Khanna, Antara Sharma and Ritika Khanna

ICOMOS: HERITAGE & DEMOCRACY

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An expanding and flourishing Asia is struggling with urbanisation taking a serious toll on the natural and cultural heritage of most of its towns and cities. The loss of memory of the ecological basis of Asian religion and cultural practice makes this phenomenon especially alarming. The chasm/departure as visible in our cities therefore reiterates this recent marked shift from traditional ecological wisdom, a foundation of our ethos, towards a uniform, non-defining global aspiration of a city, its inhabitants and administrators as an attempt to emulate a model that carries the tag of ‘development’.

In this context, the 19th Triennial ICOMOS General Assembly and Scientific Symposium on the subject of “Heritage and Democracy” was an attempt to reiterate the people centric approach to heritage as a means to acknowledging our past but also leading it into the future in a responsible way.

The five-day General Assembly was preceded by a series of meetings commencing with the annual get together of the International Scientific Committee of Cultural Landscapes (ISCCCL). Organised at the Sanskriti Kendra and then the India International Centre the two-day interaction of nearly 50 cultural landscape experts from 24 countries deliberated on the works being undertaken in the field in their regions. This Committee in its own capacity, or through the efforts of its individual members or as part of a larger consortium was also responsible for the ratification of resolutions on “Conservation of the Lake Burley Griffin and Lakeshore Landscape, Australia”; Adoption of the ICOMOS-IFLA “Document on Historic Urban Public Parks”; “Incorporating the Interconnectedness of Nature and Culture into Heritage Conservation”; and “Mobilizing ICOMOS and the Cultural Heritage Community To Help Meet the Challenge of Climate Change”.

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The central idea of the symposium was inspired from a recent, marked shift in heritage discourse globally towards a genuine people-centric engagement. The Scientific Symposium aimed to stimulate broad discussions that could identify sustainable means to work towards equity, ensuring intellectual and physical access to heritage monuments and sites, and acknowledging and building upon intangible associations with such places,



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empowering them to protect and interpret the future of our past in times of war and peace; with the increasing support of digital technology. Over 150 academicians, heritage professionals and students from a wide range of disciplines such as archaeology, history, architecture, conservation, urban planning and environmental sciences presented their research during the two days of the symposium.

The Scientific Symposium was divided into four main sub-themes. Each sub-theme was further divided into various sessions which enabled focused discussions on how to negotiate particular challenges to collectively safeguard our past. The sub-themes were — Integrating Heritage and Sustainable Urban Development by engaging diverse Communities for Heritage Management; The Role of Cultural Heritage in building Peace and Reconciliation; Protecting and Interpreting Cultural Heritage in the Age of Digital Empowerment; and, Culture-Nature Journey – Exploring the Complexities of Human Relationships with Natural and Cultural Places.

As sub-theme 4, the symposium provided a platform for dialogue on the “Culture-Nature Journey” (CNJ), which was an extension of the Nature-Culture Journey launched in 2016 at the IUCN World Congress in Hawaii. This was an important landmark as Delhi is the first Asian destination for the journey. In collaboration with IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property and ICOMOS, CNJ sessions were designed as workshops, knowledge cafes, case study kiosks and paper presentations. The foundation of these interactive assemblies was the relationship between people and the natural environment that gives shape to our physical environment and belief systems. The range of discussions held under this sub-theme built on the growing evidence that natural and cultural heritage are closely interconnected in most landscapes and seascapes, and that effective and lasting conservation of such places depends on better integration of philosophies and procedures regarding their management. ■