

World Heritage Sites – Cities without Life

“UNESCO labels old cities that have survived wars, vicissitudes of history, earthquakes and pestilence as World Heritage Sites for humanity’s benefit in good faith humanity, but they often wither away, become less populated and get reduced to just theatrical backdrops,” says author Marco D’Eramo. In these heritage sites that once throbbed with life, according to him all you get to see today are similar types of stalls that sell muslins, cottons, batiks, bracelets, beach wraps and other quaint specialties, and snack bars.



Old cities are labeled as World Heritage Sites following a long drawn bureaucratic procedure in Place Fontenoy, Paris. The goal is to preserve the historic samples for the generations to come. The dictionary meaning of preserve is embalm, freeze, or prevent wear and tear as well as scars caused over time. This means halting time, fixing the cities in snapshots and preventing them from undergoing changes and evolving.

Of course, some monuments are to be protected, but if the 450 BC Acropolis in Athens was preserved as it used to be, the Propylaeum, the Parthenon, or the Erectheum would not have been there. If Rome was preserved as the city was in the 16th/17th centuries, the world would have been deprived of the admirable pot-pourri of baroque, antiquity, and mannerism which the city produced. Had the Marais, Paris, been declared as a heritage site, we would have long forgotten the Beaubourg.

Therefore, it is imperative that a balance is maintained between construction and preservation. People are definitely excited about living in cities that have museums and architectural marvels and not mausoleums. Marco D’Eramo who visited San Gimignano after about 30 years pointed out that he could not find a single butcher, greengrocer, baker within the walls of the city. This, according to him, is because people don’t live in the center of the city any longer as the modern condos are built outside the city limits in the suburbs and settings within the walls of the city almost resemble a set created for medieval movies. He also noted that if the city is smaller, it withers away faster if declared a heritage site.



This is not specific to Italy alone. Luang Prabang in Laos had almost the same experience. The historic center, capital of Luang Prabang Province, is currently a tourist trap as all the houses have been converted into restaurants and hotels with the streets donning identical markets, as seen around the world, selling old necklaces, leather belts and canvas handbags. If you want to find out where and how the Laotians live, you will have to pedal at least a few kilometers out of the city center.

It would not take much time for you to realize that you are in a heritage site, if you take a walk across Porto, Portugal. You will be confronted with the innkeepers' monotonous monoculture and waiters and bar-tenders scouting for customers. You can recognize them immediately as most of them wear hiking boots and hideously short shorts.



As many as 190 countries have accepted the idea of preserving some of their historic cities as World Heritage Sites till 2014 after World Heritage Convention was adopted by UNESCO General Conference in 1972. World Heritage Committee, established in 1976, identified the first heritage site in 1978. Since then, till 2014, as many as 981 sites spread across 160 countries have been declared World Heritage Sites through 38 ordinary as well as 10 extraordinary sessions. They include 759 cultural sites, 193 natural sites, and 29 mixed sites.

Among cultural heritage sites (entire city, a part of it, a district only or just a historic center), there are 254 cities and 138 of them are in Europe. Moreover, 50 percent of the cities in Europe are spread across only four countries: Italy – 29 (includes Vatican City and San Marino); Spain – 17; and France and Germany – 11 each. Italy boasts the highest density of world heritage sites in the world.

While more and more sites are being declared as World Heritage Sites, more and more regions, cities and towns are queuing up for getting themselves preserved. Councilors, mayors and tourist offices are striving to obtain this coveted status for the regions, cities and town they represent unaware of the dire consequences. Don't let your precious city center die. Let it live its own life.

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