

An Examination of Earthen Heritage Sites on the UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger



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ABSTRACT

With a history dating back thousands of years, adobe is a tangible element of traditional building knowledge and local culture. Earthen structures, which are a component of cultural continuity, are inherently physically fragile and can be easily affected by risks that may arise as environmental, social, economic, and political conditions change. This situation poses a threat to certain earthen heritage sites of outstanding universal value, paving the way for their inclusion on UNESCO's List of World Heritage in Danger. All sites on the list are located in different geographic and sociopolitical regions and face distinct conservation challenges and risks within the context of region-specific threats. In this context, the study examines the conservation challenges of nine distinct earthen sites listed in the aforementioned report—using them as universal case studies—through a comparative analysis based on UNESCO site reports and periodic conservation status documents. These sites are located in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab States, and Latin America and the Caribbean, including “Timbuktu, the Askia Mausoleum, the Ancient Towns of Djenné, the Historic Town of Zabid, the Old City of Sana’a, the Ancient Walled City of Shibam, Ashur, the Archaeological City of Samarra, and the Chan Chan Archaeological Site.” This study aims to evaluate the common and evolving conservation challenges at various World Heritage sites through a holistic conservation perspective, taking into account their unique environmental conditions. Research findings indicate that the risks facing endangered earthen heritage sites fall under three main categories. These include environmental and climatic crises and related phenomena such as desertification and erosion; human-made threats such as armed conflicts and security crises; and socio-economic disruptions such as legal and administrative issues and the resulting abandonment of traditional production practices. According to the findings, while the sites generally share similar or common vulnerabilities, the nature and severity of the threats vary depending on local conditions. Thus, while socio-political crises—such as conflicts and deficiencies in administrative capacity—are prominent in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab States, in Latin America, the climate crisis and natural factors are disrupting conservation processes, thereby threatening the universal earthen heritage. Therefore, sustainability of endangered earthen heritage is not limited to physical deterioration and interventions. It has also been recognized that this heritage is subject to a multidimensional structure influenced by factors such as geographical characteristics, climatic dynamics, socio-political conditions, and governance capacity, underscoring the necessity and importance of holistic conservation strategies.

Keywords: UNESCO, World Heritage in Danger, Earthen Architecture, Conservation Challenges, Comparative Analysis