Transcript: Interview with Hossam Mahdy - Conservation of Cultural Heritage

Mehiyar 0:00 Welcome to the Nahrein Network podcast series. Today we're with Dr Hossam Mahdy conservation expert. It's good to have you here. And could you tell us a bit about your work? You're one of the few people who work on examining exploring Islamic conservation.

Hossam Mahdy 0:15 Well, thank you for having me on this podcast, Mehiyar. I am a conservation architect. And I dedicated quite a big period of my career into the question of conservation of built heritage. I'm Egyptian. So I started practicing in Egypt. And I was quite astonished to find that the biggest threat we used to consider or heritage is the local community, even in the cases of an Islamic building, surrounded by Muslims, who still would conserve it, build a fence around it, and the state guard. So I embarked on this very long journey of the question of what is conservation, for whom we do this, and how, and I did a lot of studies in that area. In a nutshell, I think that we basically in the Middle East in general, we have such a heavy colonial legacy, that we are basically continuing the practices that were in colonial times, without questioning much why you are doing this and how we are doing it. So you began to look into the language, I mean, to talk to people about their heritage, we professionals very often use either English or French, or even Arabic terms, but not really relating to the everyday talking of the people. So I began to look into the question of terminology and Arabic terminology and how that we can, we can find the language that we can speak and be precise and be scientific, but also be understood to refer to the same value system that local communities do. So I have been working on terminology for conservation, arabic conservation, for quite a while, I produced a glossary, but I'm also working that plus, to further extend our lives to that I'd be looking into the theory of conservation and how we are really practicing this activity without really questioning why we're doing this and according to what values so in the Middle East very often it is, it is seen like a high culture notion. A bit like the ballet or classical music are something that we we inherited from the colonial period, our elite continued to have it as practices that they enjoyed as a kind of activity, but not really anchoring it to our own history and our own culture or cultures in different localities. Digging into the history, the intellectual history of Arab writers and Islamic practices, I found out a lot of very interesting concepts that we as professionals, in, in handheld in the field of heritage we don't refer to, for example, clearly Islamic Arabs had a very strong tradition of poetry in front of the ruins. "Atlal" it's called in Arabic, and this is actually a continued after, when Muslims went to countries like Iraq and Egypt and Syria, Turkey, where there are a lot of ancient civilizations remains. This poetry has been also composed to reflect on the pyramids and Palmyra on top, this raw and so on. So we have an intellectual heritage of more than 14 centuries of poetry, admiring or reflecting on the ruins, something like that is not referred to in in my field as a professional conservation architect, for example, other issues like for example, in

the Quran, there are so many verses, instructing Muslims to travel and visit the remains of ancient civilizations and reflect on the bigger picture of life. There are more than 20 verses in the Quran about that. So it...it's very strange that actually somebody destroys an ancient ruins in the name of Islam. And actually, people buy that. But the reality is that the way conservation is practiced, and the way heritage is presented in the media and in, you know, cultural circles, it's always this high culture, kind of elitist notion that has nothing to do with the Arab or Islamic or even folk culture. I mean, again, the folk culture; for example, in Arab countries, like all these different, you know, epics that are told in coffee shops with a Rababa or some poetry and some singing, like I was a little hilarity and Tara been shot dead and desire papers and all these folktales, they are actually under the Arabian Nights, they include so much reference to ruins and to ancient buildings in a positive way, which tells something about the value of heritage in pre modern time. But the problem is that we have this incredible kind of break away from pre modern period. And the way modernization had been introduced throughout the Middle East is basically more to say, Europeanisation or Westernization, and that's really one aspect, of course, the establishment of the modern state nation states rely heavily on the ancient history of each of these nations. And because that was according to the European model of establishing a nation state. So for example, in Egypt, you know, the, the pyramids, and Sphinx and so on, are the symbol of Egypt of modern Egypt. Rather than having digging into all these, you know, centuries of traditions, different levels, intellectual levels of traditions, about the pyramids, we are now dealing with them as an image that represents Egypt, almost like a brand kind of thing. And that, that makes it so shallow. And of course, mass tourism, and the illicit trade in antiquities, bring in, you know, the dollar sign in the eyes of people, especially with poverty. So the whole thing is denuded into a commodity, or a place where, you know, tourists will come and you can make some money from and not anymore part of the sense of place, or the you know, or the identity of place, as it used to be before also, that the real challenge for me as a conservation architect how to bring all this to practice, because I'm a practical man. I'm an academic, but I'm a practical man, and they wish to give this background to the way we preserve buildings, the way we present with things and deal with them. You know, I once was in, in Cairo, you know, working on history in historic Cairo, and I asked a man I told him, you know, what about if I give you a nice flat, somewhere else, would you please move out? Would you accept to move out because you know, the government, they want to procreate this open air museum of historic Cairo and take out, you know, all the residents? And he said, No, I wouldn't go. I said, What about if I give you a flat in the Malik in the best neighborhood? of Cairo? He said, No. And they said, why? And he said, because, you know, here, this is my home, this is an he's talking about the street, you know, this is my area. And they said, well, it will be your area there. Also, he said, No, you know, here, I don't I walk without money in my pocket. Without ID, I can add any of these houses in the industry that we're talking about. Because as a child, I used to play at all these places, they know me, I would enter any house to eat and maybe sleep or whatever. And they would know me and my parents and my grandparents, and I know every one of them. And if I go out for a few days, my elderly mother, everybody will take care of her. So there is this invisible aspect of the historic city that, for example, we as conservation professionals, we don't see because that's that's, that's, you know, that doesn't, it's not

part of our mandate. So again, it's kind of the way we practice conservation, or the way we deal with it as a basically some sort of mechanical operation of, you know, consolidating a building or cleaning it or whatever. But so much of the intangible, we ignore so much of the, of the meaning for the local communities, sometimes you actually, you know, it's almost like killing somebody but modifying his body or something. Sometimes the building itself loses its meaning and becomes alien to the people who lived all the lives and all the systems around this building, and was part of their identity. But not anymore because we bring we bring in a different way of interpreting the building to go without really, you know, getting into the narrative, the local story and human aspect of things. So that's it You know, it's partly academic concern and practical and professional. So for example, last year, I organized a workshop in Cairo about historic mosques trying to address the question, you know, how historic mosque finds the balance between the function of a mosque as a religious building for the locals, and it being a touristic venue for international tourists. And it was quite revealing to find out that actually, most of the problems are caused by the governmental agencies and the professionals, and actually, both tourist groups and local community are really, you know, they're suffering from, from the arrangement, the way the whole thing, organized is managed, in a way as if the locals are some sort of dangerous crowd. And tourists are such a precious thing that they are surrounded always by police and, you know, to be protected, and so on. And the whole experience through the baby with the dirty water, because you don't feel any more that you are in a spiritual place when you enter there. So it's not any more a mosque that you would enjoy playing in. And it's not anymore, then where you could really have a feel of the spirit of this place, and how how it was built and how it is to function and so on. The reason for this is very complex. I mean, partly, it's theoretical part. But partly it is the way that institutions are structured the way the legal system works to protect buildings, and historic areas. And it differs from country to country, in countries where, like in Iraq and Syria, where there is so much so many different layers of heritage, and so many different groups, also who have different views. Each group has its own view of this heritage, though the concept of shared heritage is well known now. And it is quite propagated by UNESCO and is encouraged by everybody, but the reality is on the ground, it's politics that really under power is really what dictates, you know, who says what happens to heritage, how heritage is managed, is conserved is presented is interpreted. And I think, you know, I think in the Middle East, one serious issue is really local participation, and political environment, the lack of democracy, where, you know, the, where, for example, in Egypt, although there is no many different groups or sects, ethnically or so on. But because of that, because of top down decision making, it's so difficult to really bring in any other views except the formal governmental views in other countries like Syria and Iraq, where there are a lot of like, mosaic of different ethnicities and interests and so on. Hence, the political environment, one layer, and one meaning of the building will be always favored, on the expense of so many other layers and meanings. And that is such a shame, because even for those who are trying to impose that meaning or claim, once, once there is no tension between different groups, they would, they would see the loss, because all these layers, none of them cancels or, you know, conflicts with the other this is, this is part of the story, and it's a very rich story. And one also important issue that I found always difficult is the way we are, we are professionals in the field are up

towards the Western practices, that would have been a good idea if we took if we took the whole baggage, but what we do is that we we take only the technical issues, we take only certain issues and and we ignore the reality, the local context, of course, so much of so much of this is is affecting the way the way things are done, because the result is that the professional and the specialist very often loses any proper communication with the local community, or with the users of this heritage. The owners of this heritage are the guardians of this heritage because their professional very often speaks a language that is alien to them refers values that are not really their own values with a worldview doesn't mean much to them. So I think there is a need really to re address the way we look at Heritage the way we conserve it. But of course, it's a very complex situation, as I said, because of all these different obstacles.

Mehiyar 15:08 Hossam, we will go back to some of these issues. But could you tell us a bit about what you do? Exactly. And your background? You have a PhD in Islamic conservation. And you've just completed also a fellowship in UCL Qatar, could you tell us about your academic background, and also about your experience in the Middle East in this field.

Hossam Mahdy 15:31 I graduated in 1981, as a architectural engineer from University in Cairo, I got a master's in conservation, in Cairo, Egypt and Luxor but also I worked in urban conservation in Jordon, in Erbil and Salalah in Oman. I also worked in Abu Dhabi I was leading a team of conservators caring for heritage of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. I'm also advisor to ecommerce on the nominations of World Heritage List to UNESCO. So I assist them in assessing evaluating the nomination and the nomination files, then donated sites to give recommendations to UNESCO regarding the inscription, but also I work with NGOs in Cairo. That's really something that I do with a lot of passion. Because, you know, in Cairo for the last few years, there have been a lot of threats in the heritage because of very aggressive development projects that are not really taking into consideration the damage that is doing to the heritage, particularly the list, monumental heritage. I think one of our colonial legacy is that we have this listing system for monuments. And we don't have really legal protection for lesser heritage that is kind of like either vernacular or just heritage value of historic value. And not really that monumental, but also the urban fabric of the city that is not protected by anything. Because initially the laws were protecting only the monuments. So there are a lot all these motorways and flying overs and that are really twice, you know, wiping so much of the very important heritage fabric in Cairo. That's really a big issue. And also there is all these aggressive development, like they call it Dubai by the nine where they are really erasing huge areas, considering them slums. And they are, they are, they are historic fabric, historic urban fabric to build, you know, plus towers, like similar to the Dubai kind of stuff, you know. So I'm working with, with local NGOs in Cairo on how to try to try our best to raise awareness and to document and try to put some pressure to prevent this from happening, to try to find a way raising awareness not not only for the locals, but also more importantly for decision makers and, you know, the public opinion. And that's not easy. So that's, that's something that is really I mean, like

destruction is so very, it's very easy. It's very quick in comparison to conservation, or building up something and happening very fast in YouTube these days, which is at the moment part of what I am really concerned with. So I'm working, for example, at the moment where, you know, on the documentation and evaluation of the historic quarter of Gallup and Cairo. And this is this just to be the port of Cairo on the Nile, and during the middle ages, from the 15th century to the 19th century, this was the center of international trade between East and West, between Europe and the Far East. So, all these warehouses were, you know, merchandise were stored and sold, and then through the Nile to them, and the Mediterranean were sent to Europe. And goods from Europe were also brought to this area, where again, they were sold to merchants who would go to the far eastern sell them. So it was very important. Yet, the moment is not protected. And all these because it is by denial. There, there are all these, you know, developers who are really trying to, to get their hands on it. So I'm, I'm working with, with a team of Art Historians, architectural historians, to identify the remaining buildings there, and the remaining urban fabric, such as streets and open space. Mehiyar 21:06 Can I just asked you Hossam, how effective do you think the practice of raising awareness, you know, lots of international organizations speak about this, we need to raise awareness, we need to get more local people, local communities to actually take better care of their heritage or World Heritage, depending on how it's viewed? What does that actually mean raising awareness? Hossam Mahdy 21:30 I think, actually, it is quite tricky. This concept. And in many cases, it is almost like a lost cause in many cases, because, first of all, when you talk to the locals, unless you talk their language, it's only ticking a box and live. Their language doesn't mean... I'm not saying Arabic. I mean, like, if somebody, let's say, doesn't have a health unit, and they're there, they're worried about their health. And they're worried about security, for example. You know, they they will, it's so difficult to get somebody who has these worries, to worry about heritage, because you know, you have a hierarchy of priorities. All of us we have i. If I'm worrying too much about my health, or my children, or education or security, you know, the heritage will not come first. That's one issue that you cannot, you cannot claim to raise awareness with people who, while you are not really sensitive to their priorities and their issues. And that's a huge issue, because very often, somebody will come in with raising awareness programs, and they are not, they are not specialized in something to do with health or education. So the fact that people are dying out, because of some silly disease that with a tablet you can prevent. It's not their business because their heritage. For example, I give you an example, I was working with a foreign team in Luxor over six years, and we were spending millions of pounds on this management planning of heritage, while the locals, they have no sewage network, so the sewage or they had water networks, so the sewage was going into their land, and their agricultural community. So the crops were actually almost poisoned. So that was a huge issue. But all these millions were going to the go into the archeology it was you cannot spend them or part of that on, on a sewage system, for example. So the raising awareness, you cannot. So that's one problem is that when you're talking about the local community, unless unless it is the raising awareness is part and parcel of much more interaction that is sensible and sensitive, you know, and real partnership, not just kind of like dropping some, some guys give lectures and some booklets and then tick a box. So that's an issue. And of course, the raising awareness also

of you know, the other groups, like for example, you know, the decision makers and professionals who are sometimes practicing according to quite old fashioned way of seeing heritage. That that is also can be problematic, because for example, you get somebody who is employed by the state, they get very little salary, so they're always worried, worried sick about money, and then you get and they were trained according to some 19th century school of archaeology or conservation, and you come in and put them into a workshop for a few days, to suggest, you know, to introduce to them and a new way of dealing with Heritage, somebody with this kind of mindset. And some with these circumstances, the impact is almost zero. And even if you manage to get to that person, then they work with an institution structure. They are mandated by certain law, they are dealing with community and local, these things, they all are part of the equation. So raising awareness is very tricky. And sometimes it's, there is some very naive idea that all people are not aware how old this is, or the story behind that building. If we tell them that, you know, then they will care. Well, yes, yes or no, I mean, yes, it's good to the people know, the story is another value, their political value and the historical value of the heritage in their vicinity, unless the heritage and its conservation is part of their way of life and their values. It's like, introducing, you know, the.. the the somekind of classical music piece to a traditional community, they may manage to enjoy it. But once once you once they finish listening, it will be over. And that will be it will be hard for good, because it's not part of their culture. And it's not, it doesn't, it doesn't weave into their way of life, and the way they see things or the way they value things.

Mehiyar 26:35 This goes deep into the concept of for want of a better term, sustainability, nebulous concept, which is used by everyone now in this field of heritage, increasingly in archaeology, and what do I mean by sustainability, cultural continuity. And so one way in which that's that concept has been approached in practice has been through raising awareness and through the notion of community. So the community plays an important role, if not the most important role. Do you find it problematic, that there's this significant focus internationally on a nebulous concept such as community. What exactly is a community when it comes to sustainable heritage? And do we need a more holistic approach that incorporates the state structures of power to the stakeholders of the the cultural and the political and the social environment that we are speaking about?

Hossam Mahdy 27:38 I think one problem is that you know, traditional societies particularly in the Arab region, had always a holistic approach to life, but then came in, you know, this commercialization of like, for example, the recycling for example, I mean, in Cairo, for example, the domestic refuse used to be recycled 80% while in the UK, we are trying to reach 4%. But now they are modernized, and so, they are not any more efficient because they are modernized, because in the past, they used to recycle everything as part of the way of even the stuff that was produced was recyclable. The problem is that you know, like, for example, somebody you know, would have like, a read mat, then they are the communities produced with plastic mat coming from China. And they are stronger, they are cheaper, they are cleaner. So, no no read mats are produced anymore, but then

some, somebody 10 years later and suggest to the community to try to reintroduce read mats. So what I'm saying is that the problem is that this holistic approach that the sustainability concept is trying to to create to introduce is actually is part and parcel of the way people live and see life in traditional communities. The problem is that political structure the commercial setup, who are not who are modernized in the sense that they live as they continue to live to a great extent by traditional values, not modern values. So, you very often you find that in, in villages in historic areas of cities, where people are not educated according to Western Western system, they are actually carry on so much of the traditions that are not really part of the formal, you know, discourse or some Western or at least are globalized, if you want to say. So, you know, so for example, you know, for example, that the religious leaders will have a huge impact on traditional communities. Fracture of the community with that can be tribal or can be the extended family. So people who live like that, their values and their, their way of life, I mean, actually, we can learn a lot about holistic approach from them. The problem is that because they are marginalized, and then they are not part of the mainstream economy or politics or way of doing things they are, we are introducing to them sustainability kind of like, packaged in a very certain way. And it doesn't always, it doesn't always, you know, work with with them or understood properly by them. Because the whole philosophy I mean, like, in the West, or, in modern times, we come from different kinds of specialized islands that we're trying to bridge together to say this is a holistic approach. Whereas the traditional, mainly inspired by Islam, but also by other religions and philosophies, the whole life is considered with all different aspects overlapping. So you don't have you don't have this total separation. For example, pre modern times, you don't have somebody was developing, and somebody was conserving within a city. And each of the groups has totally no concern of the other. And there is some sort of struggle, power struggle between them share, you know, the developer wants to, to, let's say, erase a historic area and build a new neighborhood, while the conservator wants to, to preserve all that, and doesn't care about the development. What he cares is heritage. In the past, and until now occur in the minds of traditionally thinking people, you have both as the two sides of one coin. So actually, if the building is good, then you don't demolish it, just because you can build a bigger one or a nicer one. It's and that's a form of recycling. So even if the function is not working, you will do you will find a way of reusing the building. So what I'm saying is that the concept itself of or the approach the way you we have this kind of pigeonholes, like development, heritage, modern, you know, structures and landscape is different than urban scape and so on. That is a different worldview, than the traditional worldview, particularly in the Arab Muslim lands, but also by other traditional communities, where you actually all that is overlapping and is working together. You don't think of the heritage, separate from development, separate from, you know, health separate from education. So the concept of itself, sustainability, the way we introduce, it surely is quite alien, even for, you know, from the cultural point of view, even in modern modern areas and for the modern mind. You know, it's lacking so much on the cultural aspects. So very often sustainability is based on the economy, the environment, and society, these are the three pillars, that sustainability is always produced, but culture is not there, spirituality is not there. Besides that these three things are totally different. So even within the community of architects, for example, the

ones who are working on sustainable green eco friendly buildings are a totally different group than the ones who are working on high res, you know, towers like Burj Khalifa, and whatever. And the high, the high tech, you know, aspects of buildings. They don't care about about the environment, whereas the others, they care so much about the environment. And they hardly care about the economy. So this kind of dichotomy, or dichotomy is between so many different aspects of urban life or communal life, then you begin that to a community that actually either lives by traditional worldview, or lost this but did not acquire the bottom one where the specializations are these different island, and therefore it's it doesn't, it's very different. We talk about local participation, but how can people participate if they don't really grasp what the whole thing is about?

Mehiyar 34:29 So if indeed, that is the case, your perspective of it, then does that mean that we have to, especially in US, European, cultural institutions, universities, we have to reconsider altogether? How conservation is promoted heritage conservation projects that we are seeing in the Middle East Egypt, in Iraq. It's these projects that are parachuting in foreign expertise. What do you say about these dynamics?

Hossam Mahdy 35:00 Yeah, I totally agree Mehiyar. I think I think that there is a very big problem with addressing tangible, tangible heritage. And without the intangible, there is also a big problem in addressing the technical aspects as if you are fixing car on kind of engine or some kind of antiquity. And actually that term Antiquities Ministry of antiquities department, they will, it tells something that actually, there is a dealing with the dealing with heritage in the Middle East, because it is it has all these ancient civilizations, and because all the biblical stories happened in there, there is always this dealing with with it as if it's potential museum pieces. And even if they are big buildings, or even if they're even cities, but it's, the problem is that not only that, intangible is part of the of the of the tangible and the intangible is actually the driving force for the tangible without the intangible, the tangible is useless is meaningless, in the eyes of anybody who actually cares. Beyond the antiquity kind of vision that can the antiquity or the Museum, Museum kind of approach, that actually, you'd like to fix it, and put it in a glass box, more or less, you know, but actually, this is a living heritage, this is a living culture. And because it is living, you cannot, you know, definitely no matter how good you do technically, in the way, you actually killed the life out of it, you're doing a huge damage. And that's the problem of the outside institutions when they are too much in a hurry, use, you know, some images of a fixed heritage resorts or, you know, some sort of restored building that used to be, you know, the dilapidated or whatever. And it's not only the damage that's happening to this particular resource, but actually setting the example because these institutions, when they go in, they set an example. They are considered the, you know, industry standard, these are the, you know, cutting edge of the field. So for the local professionals for the, for the native professionals there for them, okay, this is what we are supposed to do. And it's not it's not really it's not, sometimes it does more damage than it does good. And I think, I think one good example of that, if you address vernacular heritage, if you assume for one minute that you are dealing with the vernacular heritage as a technical issue of fixing some

buildings that are dilapidated, then you're missing the whole point. I mean, I was discussing within my activities with an eco Moss, I am part of the vernacular architecture, Scientific Committee of E commerce. And when, when, when the the war continued in Syria for so long, we decided we want to do some help, you know, some, some technical support to Syria. For the vernacular heritage, they have this beautiful earthen domes, villages of earthen domes in northern Syria. And then I was shocked to find that actually, everybody is talking about documenting and, and fixing them. Actually, it is not about the dorms, I mean, the dorms are part of that story. But the real story are those who built them, and to keep maintaining them because to live in a mud building, you need to maintain it twice a year at least. And the people who lived in there, the way you've lived, the way they produce bread, the way the different, you know, skills and crafts. And so if these people are now living, you know, somebody's driving a cabin in Germany, now when we fix the mudstones, who they will come back, they are going to live in these buildings. After living in a high rise, will they have the or the earthen oven again and live in an earthen building that if it rains heavily, it has to fix it quickly, otherwise it will collapse. I mean, what I'm saying is that it is a living heritage. And it continued to be live to be living because people who lived in them lived according to our way of life and .. and they have certain skills and certain values. So unless we address all that together, there's no point in fixing the dorms. You If they go back, the first thing they will do is demolish it and build the high rise, reinforced concrete building, because that's, that's how they have been, you know, in the way we didn't worry too much about the craft, because the craft is intangible. It's not tangible, or about, you know, the way of life, the way people weave their clothes and the way they did, whatever, so that the whole way of life in these villages. So this is, I think, an extreme example, because vernacular heritage is really living is really about the way of life. And also it is about the way the community or people interacting with the environment. So usually, these buildings are very well adapted to the environment, they use the environment, they use, building materials from the environment, the way the buildings are, that are built, their performance environmentally is very good with regards to the environment. And the whole thing is, so it is about the nature, it's about the environment. It's about the community, it's about the crafts, as well as the mud domes, of course, because it is so complicated, it's very easy to, you know, to kind of like identify an element that you can do, tangibly, appears nicely in photographs to in the in the final report of a project. And it is tangible, it is visually pleasing. And then you do it. And that's it. But the reality is that it's so much more complex than that,

Mehiyar 41:30 Can I ask you what is the difference between community heritage and World Heritage?

Hossam Mahdy 41:38 Well, there shouldn't be a difference. But it's I mean, World Heritage is a sort of a tag or a sort of brand that you give to a to a building. And by doing that, usually the leadership of the country would would have kind of scored some good goal and look prestigious, but but the world heritage, I mean, like, in essence, the World Heritage system, is about conservation of this heritage is about if heritage is, is really valuable for

humanity, then, if the if the guardians and the owners of that heritage may not have the technical skills, or the or the resources, material resources or human resources to actually care for it, then it is a support system. That's the initial, you know, purpose of listing a building on the World Heritage List. But of course, it became like a prestigious thing that attracts mass tourism, it attracts, funding and so on. But according to the according to the operational guidelines of the convention of World Heritage, by UNESCO in 1972, community participation is important compute community, you know, must be part of the nomination process of to the World Heritage list must be a part of the management and conservation of the heritage. So getting the World Heritage tag, I mean, it shouldn't be something that's different from the heritage, you know, people's heritage or community's heritage. So, I think I think, again, it's to do with politics and to do with power games and so on, essentially, heritage heritage, according to the World Heritage convention, regardless of its category, is it international heritage? Is it national, is it local heritage should be mainly managed and, you know, conserved with the participation of the community, with the people who use it and live in its vicinity, and are the guardians of that heritage. But as they said, I mean, again, when you have all these dynamics cludes usually a foreign language, international experts, some prestigious political prestige, economic potential economic benefits by tourism or by some sort of branding over the place, all these things, then you're talking about, you know, and even kind of power struggle. I mean, in front of all these all this is very difficult for a community that is not really very conversant in in the way the dynamic of UNESCO and the heritage community works, would be able to really find a foothold within the way things are happening on the ground, unless, unless it is given into them. But it's the whole, the whole game is really beyond the understanding and the way you of seeing things of this local community.

Mehiyar 45:11 The pyramids are a World Heritage Site, Babylon now is also in Iraq. It's a World Heritage Site, or the pyramids, also a community Heritage Site. What is the relationship between people locally and the pyramids? Why are these questions important? Because also about sustainability. They're about the people that live close to these world heritage sites. This is why it becomes more complex, it's not a straightforward thing to say, this is a community site. And this is a World Heritage Site.

Hossam Mahdy 45:45 Absolutely. Actually, you it's good that you mentioned the pyramids. For example, because the pyramid not only because of the listing, but because of the international tourist industry. Now, the locality of the of the pyramids is basically people who live on international tourism. They live on either guiding tourists selling souvenirs to tourists forging antiquities, and selling them as if they are original to tourists. That's what they do, basically, the whole village, this is what they do, why this is happening. As I mentioned earlier, when you don't have balance of, of the different players, then one becomes subservient to the other. So when you when the local community, local people, I mean, I'm not really very fond of that community word, but when the locals have no power whatsoever, not only that, they are quite deprived of so many basic, you know, human rights and, and needs and so on. And then they are all of a sudden introduced to very

powerful, rich, very opinionated, very different bunch of people, then they become subservient, they are ready to carry the bag for them, they are ready to hire the horse for them, they are ready to sell them anything they want, they are happy to translate to the and and with time, this is what you get are for the people around the pyramids in Egypt or around Luxor temple and so on. Because that we have we have whole more than one century of this imbalance, that rather than presentation and interpretation of these important sites, according to the according to the centuries old views of the locals and the Nationals, these were introduced in the colonial period as part as the roots of European culture. As so actually, these restrictions were posing in our in the in the tourist pictures, they were considered as some annoying detail when a European visited the pyramids. And when European visited the pyramids. I mean, I was asking an older colleague about why the pictures of historic Cairo by the you know, very hardly photographs of historic Cairo has no people in and the guy who was he was much older than me. So he lived before the independence. He told me, they actually got the police to empty the street for them from Egyptians and you have all these images of for example, the locals carrying to locals carrying a lady up to climb the pyramid and all sorts of other things. You're talking about more than one century of subservient culture that produced a totally damaged, you know, group of people around that heritage. Now, when you say is it local heritage? I think yes, it is a local entities national and international. But when we talk about local, we need to be a little bit more in depth, we stop looking at childhood things. I mean, I think these people, if they were empowered, if they were educated, if they were given breathing space, they will be they will not be the way they are now. I mean, you don't get the same for people who are living you know, next to i dont know, the Notre Dame de Pury or some St. Peter's in Rome or some because they are actually they are not so marginalized. They are not frowned upon and forced to serve, they have their own lives. They have their own dignity; they have their own values and when you go and visit you respect all that and you enjoy it as part of the whole experience. So all that is not happening. It is even more reiterated by all the interventions that continue to now we have that grand Egyptian Museum within the pyramids plateau, where all that will be even more and no, no consideration, actually, part of the village that is very close has been bulldozed. And they were offered some high rise buildings in the middle of the desert somewhere quite far, so that they don't interrupt the tourists. But again, some will produce some kind of shantytown somewhere and become reinforced concrete and become a village or a town very quickly, because that's the source of income, that's the source of work opportunities, and to marginalize, who are totally, totally deprived of so many of the rights. And I think the problem, the various I think one of them, probably one, one issue really problematic is that all these international agencies when they go, and they actually, they actually have very good intentions, they do a good work, technically speaking, when they do something about the parameters things, Grand museum, Egyptian Museum, there is a lot of very good intention, and really meaning well, but the problem is that, I mean, I don't blame them, that they don't speak Arabic; they they are not aware of the inter Arab 14th century heritage of Arab poetry about the ruins, including the pyramids; they are not aware of the Islamic concept of the pyramids of the ruins of previous civilizations, including the pyramids; they are not aware of all the issues that are concerning the main concerns of the people who are living close to the pyramids. I

mean, now, there is a rumor that the Egyptian Government has this huge project, the nickname of Champs-Élysées, hofo Champs-Élysées. And basically, it's a huge kind of Boulevard, going from Giza, you know, from the built up area up to the pyramids with green. And I don't know what sweeping in front of it. I mean, if this is realized, you're talking about hundreds of 1000s will be replaced relocated of people who have been living there, some of them for generations. Again, it's for the picture for that. I mean, like, the problem is really that quite a bit of the problem is not only the international agencies that go there, but of course, the corrupt local groups, persons and systems that are so dysfunctional, to the point that actually if you want to do a decent job, it's almost impossible, because so much of what's happening on the ground, there is feeding the corruption and the approach that is quite insensitive, I would say, there's so much feeding on that. That it is basically just technical, you, you clean the you clean the stones, or you you make a good system of, I don't know, protection from weathering, or this or that and make a nice Visitor Center, you know, all these things, which are good, of course, and needed. But you know, all the other things, all the other aspects. It's not only that the international. I think one reason why international agencies and international projects are not addressing the other aspects. Because there is a huge resistance and huge denial on the ground, from the locals and from the national levels, also of decision decision makers of these of these issues. I mean, sometimes when I speak to an Egyptian colleague, or friend who is responsible somewhere in the decision making level, he would say, you know, you're talking... Are you enemy of egypt? I mean, why you're talking like this? The reality is not that bad, the reality is good, you know, and he would show you some nice pictures, particularly the ones in the night with beautiful lighting.

Mehiyar 53:47 What you call resistance are vested interests in the status quo. These are ways of doing things that have been done for a long time. In terms of the future, in Iraq, in particular, we have a significant amount of culture destruction as a result of war, conflict, and, of course, the Islamic State. We have in Iraq, in other countries in Egypt, in our culture destruction as a result of socio-economic development, you know, these large mega projects, you know, the kind of changes we've seen, and we're continuing to see, at a very rapid pace, social infrastructure of the region is actually changing quite quickly. And we those who are concerned with what's happening haven't yet been able to develop systems to even monitor what's happening. I mean, of course, there is the work of Amina in Oxford, which I think you worked for, for some time, in digital archaeology in the Middle East program. Pace of change is so significant that within 1015 20 years, we will have significant amount of cultural loss, which is perhaps unprecedented in the history of this region. What do you think the impact will be, you know, what, what is the long term impact of this kind of socio economic development?

Hossam Mahdy 55:01 Well, you know, you're right in your worries. And, you know, when I think of Europe after World War Two, all the cities that had a lot of money, lost their historic course, or high rise buildings. And, you know, boulevards and so on. And the ones that didn't have much money actually came out in the 70s, and 80s, with beautiful, historic

cores, that became really very precious. And so it was actually a blessing in disguise, that they didn't have enough money to have all these developments the way it happened in other cities. And I think it's unfortunately, it will be, it's going to be the same in the Middle East, wherever there is enough resources for reconstruction, then the damage will be huge. It's part of the whole problem of the Middle East. I mean, when when the Arab Spring in 2011 happened, I became so optimistic because, you know, the whole thing is really tied to politics at the end of the day. So, you know, if I think as far as it's not only that, that there are all these developments, aggressive developments are happening and are pushed forward. But more importantly, the lack of democracy, the lack of freedom of speech, and the lack of equality, and justice, it adds to all this because all that is happening for the benefit of the few. And, and all the all those who are marginalized they are, they don't have a channel to air, their resistance or their refusal, or even to present their own interests. Actually, because they are the end of the day, they just want to make a living. They become part of the picture, and they are happy to help in all this destruction. Not because not because that's what they their best interests, but because that's the only way of survival, I feel that unless there is political progress in the Middle East, the loss will be huge, because particularly in the Middle East, the intangible is so much more important than the tangible and intangible is tied directly to, you know, it only can survive a within a minimum kind of freedom and of justice, particularly when faced with huge developments that are, you know, have a lot of money behind them and a lot of political power, very strong political party. And what I'm saying is that, without the minimum accepted justice, and freedom and human rights, and it will be very easy to kind of like, tick a box of what really the local community says or wants or whatever. But it's only if the local community or the locals, or the people on the ground, have equal stand with everybody else, if not more, because they are the ones who are guardians of that heritage. So it's only then that things will work out, I don't want to end it with a pessimistic or dark view. I think one thing aspect I learned from working with heritage is that it's such a wonderful thing, that it is a living heritage, that it is actually what I call traditional communities that actually the majority of the people on the ground in these places. They actually, I mean, despite all the problems, and despite everything, there's so much worth worthwhile and could be conserved and could be, could flourish, because conservation is not freezing. So conservation is also allowing so much to go on and develop also, but develop in within the parameter and within the values that produce that heritage, working between east and west or between the Arab countries and Europe. I think we are privileged, we are more privileged than the West because our heritage is still alive. It's not it's not a painting on the wall or it's not a site that fence and you go and pay a ticket and visit is still alive despite everything. So there's a huge value there in comparison to the heritage of interesting industrialized nations, that totally give away so much of their identity of their heritage and talking about the intangible and tangible together not without possibility of you know separating,

Mehiyar 59:50 Those connections are still there in terms of continuity the connections between tangible or intangible heritage but they are increasingly under pressure because of globalization, conflict, socio economic change, is that the point you're making? Is that live in heritage is really essentially about people and they and they embody, they continue

to embody that heritage? And it continued to the vernacular, which is about the uses of heritage, it is still alive is still something that is very much present. Is that the hope that you have that it will that is the continuity, that is the sustainability that is perhaps the future of cultural heritage? Is that how you look at it?

Hossam Mahdy 1:00:29 The empty half of the glass, you would see the chaos, you would see the lack of interest, you will see the damage that the uneducated, uninformed development and so on. But if you look at the full half of the glass, you'll see that actually, they're all these, I mean, the way that human relationships, right the values that are within the religious, or within the family, or the actual, the actual culture that produced or this heritage and lived heritage for centuries. This culture is still there, but it is manipulated, and it is marginalized, and it is pressed to a corner. So you get out the worst of it, that you see a lot of very bad issues and so on. But one reason for that is that they are not really synchronized with what's going on. And this they are not synchronized, because the what's going on is quite alien, the culture and the these traditions. So yes, I think despite all that, maybe maybe one country also is beautiful and you threatened is Yemen. And you look at that. And you look at if you deal with Yemenis if you go there, and you can see that actually, Yemen is probably the most rich, in my opinion in the whole region, because the intangible is almost as if not touched, almost, despite everything. So the tangibles will have been bombarded by the Saudis and so much is gone because of the Civil War and so on. But that the intangible is there, and that is, so much of the heritage value is there. Again, it's not if you look at the Heritage, not as heritage piece that you put in, not an antiquity you put in a glass box, but it's it's it's a living, you know, living traditions and living cultural phenomena. They are there. And, you know, they just need to breathe and they need to be given breathing space and allowed to be out of, you know, all the conflicts, political and military and economic agoda, but they're there.

Mehiyar 1:02:37 On that note of hope, and inspiration. Thank you, Dr. Hossam Mahdy, you've explained many things in very clear simple ways, which for many listeners, have probably a hard time trying to grapple and negotiate some of these concepts. Thank you very much, Dr. Mahdy I've learned a lot from this conversation.

Hossam Mahdy 1:02:56 All the best.