

A conversation with Jean-Louis Luxen

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Jean-Louis Luxen was born in 1940 in Kabinda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He has held high positions in the field of cultural and social affairs in the Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles, Belgium. Since the 1970's, he was deeply invested in the conservation and promotion of cultural heritage in Belgium and subsequently, in Europe and worldwide. Luxen holds a PhD in Law from the University of Louvain. He completed his studies as a CRB Graduate fellow in economics at Stanford University (1964-65). From 1972 to 1981, he was appointed as Head of Office for successive Ministers of Culture in Belgium. He also served at the Royal Commission on Monuments and Sites in Brussels until 2007. Since 2005, he is Professor Emeritus at UCLouvain in Belgium.

The role played by Jean-Louis Luxen at the European level

-Council of Europe (Strasbourg)

Luxen was particularly involved in European cooperation in the field of heritage conservation. In 1975, he was chairman of the National Committee for the European campaign for architectural heritage: "A Future for our Past". Likewise, in 1980, he chaired the National Committee for "Urban Renaissance".

As head of Delegation, he represented his country at the Ministerial Conference of Granada, in 1985, for the adoption of the European Convention on Architectural Heritage, and at the Ministerial Conference of Valetta, in 1991, for the adoption of the European Convention on Archaeology. From 1989 to 1993, he served two consecutive terms as President of the Steering Committee on Cultural Heritage at the Council of Europe.

Jean-Louis Luxen was the initiator of the "European Heritage Days" in Belgium, in 1989, and he was the first president of the organising committee.

Within the framework of the Council of Europe, he became particularly interested in heritage economics and chaired the Group of Specialists on "Architectural Heritage Funding", in 1990. During his chairmanship of the Heritage Committee, upon the entry of several countries from Central and Eastern Europe in the Council of Europe, Luxen participated in numerous institutional seminars in view of amending the legislation to the context of a market economy in countries like Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia and Croatia. Luxen conducted several expert missions in Member States and was also involved in developing training programmes in heritage skills.

European Union (Brussels)

In 1994, in Lisbon, Jean-Louis Luxen was the Rapporteur of the launching Conference of the European Commission's "Raphael" programme, the first one on cultural heritage.

Since 2002, as President of CHEDI (Culture, Heritage and Development – International), a non-profit NGO, he participated in several international co-operation programmes. Through ICOMOS and CHEDI, he partnered with several European cultural programmes, including two projects of the Research Framework Programme of the European Union: APPEAR, on the integration of archaeological sites in the city, and EPOCH, on the use of new technologies in the field of conservation and heritage enhancement.

From 2008 to 2013, Jean-Louis Luxen was appointed as the Senior Legal Expert of the Technical Assistance Bureau responsible for the implementation of the Euromed Heritage IV Program, a cooperation program between Mediterranean countries in the field of cultural heritage. He was specifically responsible for the "Strengthening of the Legislative and Institutional Framework," for which he organised several workshops in partner countries on major themes that include: inventories, illicit trafficking, rehabilitation of historic towns and urban areas, heritage economics and conservation funding, education and training, and cultural landscapes.

The role played by Jean-Louis Luxen at the International level

In 1993, Luxen was elected as Secretary General of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), based in Paris, for three successive mandates, until 2002. In that position, he was responsible for the organisation of ICOMOS activities, notably as an Advisory Body of the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO. For 10 years, Jean-Louis Luxen supervised the evaluation and monitoring reports of cultural properties inscribed on the World Heritage List and attended the World Heritage Committee sessions.

On a theoretical level, he took an active part in the Nara Conference on authenticity, in 1994. He also promoted the recognition of new heritage properties such as cultural routes, 20th century heritage and cultural landscapes.

He regularly took part in the works of the International Scientific Committees on Heritage Economics, Cultural Tourism, Historic Towns and Villages, and Presentation and Interpretation of Cultural Sites.

Jean-Louis Luxen is also involved in the prevention and fight against illicit trafficking in cultural goods. He is one of the signatories of the "Blue Shield" that coordinates interventions in response to disasters affecting cultural heritage among the four major professional organisations at the international level: ICOMOS, ICOM (International Council on Museums), ICA (International Council on Archives), and IFLA (International Federation of Librarians Associations), supporting the efforts of UNESCO.

He also cooperated ICCROM's training programme in Rome and in ATHAR's Center in Sharjah. He participated in numerous seminars and symposiums organised for the benefit of professionals from the five continents. He was invited as guest lecturer at several universities notably in York, Helsinki, Philadelphia, Alcalá de Henares, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Coimbra, Valencia, Naples and Istanbul.

Based on his experience in the World Heritage Convention and in the Euromed Heritage program, he was consulted by several countries for the development of management plans for cultural properties, especially for historical cities, namely: Jeddah, Bethlehem, Rabat, and Casablanca.

From 2007 until 2019, Jean-Louis Luxen was member of the Board of the "International Coalition of Sites of Conscience", a worldwide network based in New York and dedicated to transforming places of memory into dynamic spaces that promote civic action, transitional justice and human rights: "Connecting past to present, Memory to Action". He was the Treasurer of the Coalition and Chairman of its European branch.

Q1-Jean-Louis Luxen, how were you aware of Heritage economics before the time you served as ICOMOS Secretary General?

I started being interested in Heritage economics in Leuven, in relation with the "Grand Béguinage" being restored under the guidelines of Raymond Lemaire¹. As an assistant to the Administrateur général of the University, Prof Michel Woitrin², I was asked to compare the costs of old housing being refurbished vs new building. The conclusion was that the difference was not as high as expected and was worthwhile.

Later on, during the sessions of the Steering Committee on Urban Policies at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, after the two campaigns "A Future for our Past" (1975) and "For a Renaissance of the City" (1980), together with our colleagues from Luxemburg, we were asking for special studies on Heritage economics and Conservation funding.

¹ Raymond Lemaire (1921-1997), was an art and architectural historian, a leading expert in conservation and professor at UC Louvain and KU Leuven in Belgium. Lemaire was one of the main authors of the Venice Charter (1964). He was advisor to the European Union, the Council of Europe, and UNESCO. With Piero Gazzola he founded in 1965 ICOMOS and was its secretary-general between 1965-1975 and president between 1975-1981. He was also the special envoy of the director general of UNESCO between 1971-1997 to the historic site of the Old City of Jerusalem. He also founded a postgraduate program for the conservation of monuments and sites which is currently hosted at KU Leuven. After his death in 1997, the program adopted his name <https://set.kuleuven.be/rlicc>.

² Michel Woitrin (1919-2008), was a professor of economics and general administrator of UC Louvain, Belgium.

I think that this concern for economic aspects was brought from the Council of Europe to ICOMOS, especially with the report of Christian Ost³ commissioned by Raymond Lemaire and the European Commission. There were also British ICOMOS members interested in the subject (Nathaniel Lichfield⁴, David Lindstrom, Lester Borley⁵).

In 1981, I was appointed head of the Cultural Heritage Department, covering both the movable and immovable heritage as well as urban revitalization. Besides the cultural, sociological and scientific aspects, the issue of funding was obviously of major importance. Public funds, even if allocated according to priorities, were not sufficient and various types of public / private financing were to be promoted. That approach requires economic analysis, not only of costs / benefits evaluation of conservation / restoration operations, but also of the fallouts of investments on the economic and social urban context.

Q2-As former ICOMOS Secretary General, could you elaborate on when and how Heritage economics was embraced by the organization? Do you remember some opposition to it?

During the Scientific Symposium that took place in parallel with the General Assembly of ICOMOS, in Sri Lanka, in 1993, I made a presentation on the theme of "Heritage Economics and Conservation Funding", under the chairmanship of Nathaniel Lichfield. I think it was the first time that a special session had been dedicated to the theme. I was elected as Secretary General at the end of this General Assembly and made it clear that Conservation Economics would become an important concern.

I don't remember any opposition within ICOMOS, on the contrary. Immediately after Sri Lanka, ICOMOS was invited to the first General Assembly of the World Heritage Cities Organization, in Fez, Morocco. I was asked to make a similar presentation, stressing the social and economic importance of the rehabilitation of historic towns and urban areas, besides the cultural and architectural aspects.

The next two General Assemblies of ICOMOS were addressing related issues. In Sofia, in 1996: "Heritage and Social Changes". In Mexico, in 1999: "The Wise Use of Heritage".

This represented a re-orientation of the main concern in the Conservation community. I remember that, during the Granada Ministerial Conference in 1985 (Charter on Architectural Heritage), the majority of the Ministers of Culture, including Jack Lang from France, thought that it was under their dignity to consider the economic aspects.

Belgium and Luxemburg did however manage to ask for a "Group of Specialist" to establish a report on "Funding the Heritage Conservation". I was asked to chair the Group. The report was published in 1990. Later on, the concern for regional economics was duly accepted as an important theme.

I see similar reservations from writers and poets, when they are told that publishing is also a business and that market rules are to be taken into consideration. For them, Business is under the dignity of literature...

³ Christian Ost, Graduated from the UC Louvain (Ph.D.), Georgetown University, and the University of Geneva. He is president of the Raymond Lemaire International Centre for Conservation (KU Leuven) and former Dean of ICHEC Brussels Management School. He has been developing the field of heritage economics since the 1980s, under the initiative of late Professor Raymond Lemaire. He was in-residence scholar in 2008-09 at the Getty Conservation Institute, is member of the Advisory Board of Global Heritage Funds, and member (former chair 2000-05) of ICOMOS International Economics Scientific Committee.

⁴ Nathaniel Lichfield (1916-2009), was a British scholar/practitioner of town planning. He combined his parallel academic (University College London UCL) and professional responsibilities with a variety of public roles.

⁵ Lester Borley (1931-2019), was the Director of the National Trust for Scotland. He was involved in the creation and promotion of new forms of cultural tourism and published on heritage management and the development of cultural tradition.

An interesting step was the creation of an International Scientific Committee on Economics of Conservation (ISCEC) and the link established with the existing International Scientific Committee on Historic Towns and Villages (CIVVIH).

It took some time to establish a connection between the two Committees. CIVVIH was established under Hungarian funding, in order to prepare a Charter of Urban Conservation, adopted in Washington in 1987⁶. This Charter, in my opinion, was weak, and of less interest than the already existing important Nairobi Recommendation of 1976⁷ concerning the safeguarding and contemporary role of Historic areas. When I became Secretary General, CIVVIH was not very active. All the meetings were hosted in Hungary (Pécs) and were dealing mainly with traditional architecture in the Balkans. I managed to convince Ray Bondin⁸, from Malta, to host a meeting in Valetta, opening the work programme to more general issues. Ray Bondin became an active President.

I don't remember exactly how the Economics Committee started. Raymond Lemaire recommended to get in touch with Christian Ost, who, fortunately, agreed to take the lead. Rapidly, the importance of the economic dimension of urban rehabilitation became obvious and some joint projects took place. I was involved and I was supporting, but with no time to devote to the working. In my opinion, a closer cooperation should still be recommended.

Q3- Building on your experience, could you provide a retrospective on why it was important to start exploring such a field and establish ad-hoc committees?

The very first reason is to convince the Ministers of Finances that conservation expenditures are, in many cases, investments, and that funding is plainly justified for economic reasons. It also helps to convince the Ministers in charge of social affairs, in a time of unemployment, that restoration is a labor-intensive work. It is important also not to consider Heritage only for its artistic or historic values, but also as an economic asset and a social support for the quality of life.

The funding by the World Bank of museums in Tunisia, and of EU for the development of numerous archaeological sites and urban regeneration programs in Southern Europe was an important recognition of the cultural capital value of Heritage.

Q4- Considering your contribution to well-known international conventions and your recent article: "The Nara document: its achievement and its limits"⁹, do you think the principles of heritage economics are in conflict with the concepts of authenticity and integrity?

Heritage economics must be at the service of the promotion of Heritage and be inscribed within the principles of conservation. There should not be a conflict.

⁶ Charter for the conservation of historic towns and urban areas (Washington Charter 1987).

https://www.icomos.org/charters/towns_e.pdf (Accessed 13 January 2020).

⁷ Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas, 26 November 1976.

http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13133&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (Accessed 13 January 2020).

⁸ Raymond Bondin has a Doctorate in Conservation. he led the rehabilitation of historic cities in Malta for 20 years. He served as the President of CIVVIH for 7 years, was member of the ICCROM Council for 8 years and member of the ICOMOS Executive for 9 years. Raymond Bondin served also as Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Malta to UNESCO.

⁹ Luxen, J.L. (2019), The Nara document: its achievement and its limits. *Conversaciones...con Herb Stovel*, N.8, pp. 194-206. https://www.iccrom.org/sites/default/files/publications/2020-05/convern8_05_illuxen_ing.pdf (Accessed 13 January 2020).

However, it can happen that economic considerations could lead to dangerous interventions for the authenticity of a cultural property.

A very positive step took place recently. ICOMOS has been invited by the European Commission to develop principles and guidelines for interventions in Heritage Sites and in historic towns and urban areas¹⁰. The important contributions of the European Structural funds will be submitted to the respect of these principles and guidelines. In too many cases, European funding did affect negatively the authenticity of Heritage Sites: lack of serious preliminary studies, use of inappropriate materials, destruction of significant parts of the built heritage...

Similar guidelines should also be applied in the interventions of the World Bank and the bilateral agreements between countries.

Q5- When we consider the circular economy, one of the crucial aspects is the social impact and the establishment of the heritage communities around the heritage and its relationship with the surrounding environment. From your experience, could you give some concrete global examples of how local communities cherish and take care of heritage regardless of the official recognition (listed vs recognition)? And in relations to cultural diversity, Faro Convention, and Intangibles?

Japan was very concerned about the test of authenticity. That is why Japan funded the Nara Conference. The issue was namely the periodic reconstructions of the Ise temples, the most valuable heritage for the Japanese people, under very thoughtful maintenance. As a matter of fact, the authenticity of the Ise temples had already been recognized in the report of Michel Parent¹¹, in 1979. In this regard, it is interesting to observe that the Japanese heritage conservation practice, during centuries, has been applying the principles of the Venice Charter long before its adoption in 1964.

There is also the example of the sacred pools and sacred forests, in Africa, subject to a careful custody of the local people, preventing over-exploitation and desertification.

In other regions, a harmonious landscape is maintained just by the traditional agricultural practice: the rice terraces, the agro-pastoral fields, the vineyards...

Of course, when a built property is being preserved, receiving a social destination, or modernized as housing, or being re-used, the property remains in the economic circle.

In many cases, the appropriate conservation/restoration operations are maintaining the very value of built heritage, including the market value, whereas wrong interventions would have the opposite result.

At the local level, it is essential that the cultural and social value of heritage sites be understood by the inhabitants. We observe the best conservation practice when strong intangible values are attached to the cultural property or the historic area. It can be a cathedral, an official building or a square, with a feeling of virtual common ownership: Strasburg, Salamanca Plaza, Brussels main square, Tetouan medina, Djenne mosque, rock churches of Ethiopia, the Kyoto temples.

¹⁰ ICOMOS (2020), European quality principles for EU-funded Interventions with potential impact upon Cultural Heritage. Recommendations & Selection Criteria, November 2020.

http://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2440/2/EUQS_revision-2020_EN_TIRE-A-PART_pagesimple.pdf (Accessed 1 December 2020).

¹¹ Michel Parent (1916-2009), served as the President of ICOMOS from 1981 to 1987. He was inspector General of Historic Monuments and Director of the Centre de recherche on Historic Monuments in France. He authored numerous plays and was founding president of the Burgundy Nights Festival. He was a UNESCO expert, notably on Aswan, served as President of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

Q6- Despite the overall growth of metropolitan areas in Europe the urban population is decreasing. Urban conservation decisions should be made regarding the abandoned and underused heritage and landscapes due to population degrowth. How can we achieve a sustainable conservation in this quickly changing urban context?

The objective should be to maintain people in the cities. To a large extent, an active urban policy improving housing opportunities, public transportation and socio-cultural environment could contribute to an answer.

Is it commonly accepted to-day that heritage, both cultural and natural, must be part of a global physical planning. The Nairobi Recommendation was already stressing the importance of the "context" of cultural properties. The recent Historic Urban Landscape¹² goes a step further, extending the area of protection to a wider territory, in order to be able to implement global policies and management, and stressing the importance of an active involvement of the local community.

In some urban areas, the population is still growing. In France, for instance, Montpellier, Aix, Bordeaux. It seems that the quality of life and the urban harmony of these cities give some explanation to this trend. I like the expression of "urban harmony", which covers a balance between physical, economic and social aspects, but which also stresses the cultural and intangible values of a city.

Q7- looking at a changing world and post-COVID reality, could sustainability and in particular circularity be a response to a new world and new challenges? Is heritage economics today better accepted in the field of conservation?

Transferring the heritage to the next generations, the requirement of the Venice Charter, is at the very basis of the contemporary concept of sustainable development. Not only with immovable properties, but also with movable items. Circular economy follows that approach.

Conservation expenditures are currently much more considered as investments in the quality of life and a wiser use or reuse of scarce resources. The responsibility of heritage conservation and of urban harmony is becoming a priority, with designation of stronger political leaders to take this social dimension in charge. The next few years will require much attention – and investments – in the fight against climate change and in the energy policies. This could encourage reuse of heritage properties. However, this tendency can also become a problem for historic properties when it comes to implementing contemporary guidelines in the field of isolation and heating, given the heritage conservation/restoration requirements. Particular provisions should be foreseen for listed properties.

Q8- How can we harness the new tendency of exploring/enjoying/discovering local heritage assets in a way that enables local communities and cultural and creative industries to attain sustainability and self-sufficiency?

I see two complementary steps. On the one hand, a stronger physical planning and control of human settlements, in order to make the common public interest prevail. On the other hand, a bottom-up movement, allowing people, individually or best, in a collective effort, to act for a quality of life meeting their expectations.

¹² UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/hul/> (Accessed 13 January 2020).

A particular issue is cultural tourism. In the past several years, we have observed the development of urban tourism through "city trips", low-cost air travel and the success of cruises. We know that this can bring positive economic fallouts for the local economy. However, too depending too much on tourism can be dangerous, given its volatility. Mass tourism can also often be a source of severe inconvenience to the population and even a cause of deterioration of the heritage, both tangible and intangible. We don't know yet what will be the situation after the pandemic, but we can assume that a better control of mass tourism will stay as a priority.

We also observe a tendency for "slow transportation" and consumption of local products. Similarly, especially in these times of pandemic and of restriction of air travel, people have a tendency to give a closer look to the various heritage "supply" both cultural and natural. We can expect, or at least hope for the continuation of this tendency.