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ROLE OF UNESCO IN HISTORICAL BUILDINGS AND CULTURAL HERITAGE PRESERVATION

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ABSTRACT:

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of UNESCO's pivotal role in preserving historical buildings and cultural heritage globally. It examines UNESCO's mission and the successful administration of World Heritage Sites, emphasizing its response to emerging challenges. The study explores the integration of technological advancements in preservation efforts, capacity-building initiatives, and collaborative endeavors for global cultural heritage conservation. It also addresses UNESCO's strategic response to emergencies and conflicts affecting cultural heritage and its influential advocacy campaigns. In conclusion, the paper emphasizes the enduring impact of UNESCO's multifaceted strategies and underscores the ongoing need for global collaboration in safeguarding shared cultural heritage.

Keywords: UNESCO, Cultural Heritage, Historical Buildings, Preservation, Global Collaboration

INTRODUCTION:

Historical buildings and cultural heritage preservation play a crucial role in safeguarding our rich history and heritage. They serve as tangible reminders of our past and provide invaluable insights into the civilizations that came before us. These buildings and sites hold great cultural, historical, and educational value, attracting tourists and researchers worldwide. Preserving and safeguarding historical structures and cultural heritage hold great significance in ensuring the transfer of our shared memory to future generations. As an organization dedicated to protecting

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and promoting cultural heritage, UNESCO plays a crucial role in safeguarding these invaluable treasures. Through its various initiatives and programs³, UNESCO works towards preserving and restoring historical buildings and cultural heritage sites to ensure their longevity and accessibility for future generations. Preserving historical buildings and cultural heritage is vital for multiple reasons.⁴ Firstly, these sites are integral to our identity and sense of belonging, representing different societies' cultural diversity and achievements. They bridge the past, present, and future, fostering a deeper understanding of our shared history.⁵ Additionally, historical buildings often possess exceptional architectural and artistic value, showcasing the skills and craftsmanship of previous generations. The conservation of these structures protects their physical integrity and allows us to appreciate their beauty. Moreover, historical buildings and cultural heritage sites contribute significantly to local economies through tourism, generating employment opportunities and sustaining local businesses. Therefore, the conservation of these sites is not solely about preserving our heritage, but also a vital aspect of promoting sustainable development on both local and international scales.

UNESCO's Mandate:

Article 4 of the "World Heritage Convention" pertains to the preservation of properties listed on the World Heritage List. It indicates that "Each State Party to this Convention recognizes that the duty of ensuring the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the cultural and natural heritage (...) situated on its territory, (...) and) will do all it can to this end". UNESCO has undertaken various initiatives to safeguard historical buildings and cultural heritage.⁶ These include promoting proactive

³ A. Cernaro, O. Fiandaca, R. Lione, and F. Minutoli, "The Analysis of the Maintained/Disowned Relationship among Firmitas, Utilitas, and Venustas to Preserve the Cultural Heritage: An H-BIM Approach for the Management of Historic Buildings," Research Gate (April 20, 2025, 8:00 P.M.) ([PDF](#)) [The Analysis of the Maintained/Disowned Relationship among Firmitas, Utilitas, and Venustas to Preserve the Cultural Heritage: An H-BIM Approach for the Management of Historic Buildings](#)

⁴ E. Briz, L. Garmendia, I. Marcos, and A. Gandini, "Improving the Resilience of Historic Areas Coping with Natural and Climate Change Hazards: Interventions Based on Multi-Criteria Methodology," International Journal of Architectural Heritage, (April 20, 2025, 8:00 P.M.) [A Methodology for Vulnerability Assessment of Cultural Heritage in Extreme Climate Changes](#).

⁵ J. Mensah, "UNESCO world heritage sites and sustainable local community development," Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage, (April 20, 2025, 8:00 P.M.) [UNESCO world heritage sites and sustainable local community development: Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage: Vol 10, No 2 - Get Access](#).

⁶ B. Törnquist-Plewa and I. Pietraszewski, "Creating Cultural Heritage for a Better Future. The case of the 'District of Mutual Respect' in the Polish city of Wrocław," International Journal of Heritage Studies, (April 20, 2025, 8:00 P.M.) [Full article: Creating Cultural Heritage for a Better Future. The case of the "District of Mutual Respect" in the Polish city of Wrocław](#).

geosciences to protect heritage sites against geohazards, utilizing interdisciplinary approaches involving arts, sciences, engineering, and socio-economic disciplines. Additionally, UNESCO emphasizes preventive conservation concepts to minimize deterioration caused by air pollution, with strategies focusing on primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention measures.⁷ Furthermore, UNESCO collaborates with international organizations to ensure the preservation of modern and contemporary architecture, reflecting on legislation and the complementary role of supranational bodies in heritage protection. Moreover, UNESCO cooperates with the EU to safeguard intangible cultural heritage, mainly targeting wider audiences, including children and teenagers.

Through various initiatives, UNESCO collaborates with local governments and communities to recognize and protect “cultural heritage” sites. The Faro Convention emphasizes the role of heritage communities in cultural heritage management, promoting participatory processes.⁸ Additionally, UNESCO works with the Jordanian government and local communities to safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) through capacity building, awareness-raising, and integrating ICH into the education and tourism sectors. Recognizing local communities as key actors, UNESCO aims to enhance their engagement in the stewardship of World Heritage sites and ensure equitable sharing of profits. Furthermore, the “UNESCO Convention” for the Protection of the ICH underscores the importance of community involvement in protecting ICH, despite some watering down of this concept during intergovernmental meetings.. Collaborative efforts between UNESCO, local governments, and communities are crucial for the sustainable protection of cultural heritage sites.

UNESCO's Conservation Efforts:

Identifying and Assessing Historical Buildings and Cultural Heritage Sites:

UNESCO plays a vital role in identifying and assessing historical buildings and cultural heritage sites worldwide. Various studies highlight the importance of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in preserving cultural and natural heritage, emphasizing the need for adequate

⁷ UNESCO, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/capacity-building> (last visited April 20, 2025).

⁸ L. Zhao, Y. Li, N. Zhang, and Z. Zhang, “Public policies and conservation plans of historic urban landscapes under the sustainable heritage tourism milieu: discussions on the equilibrium model on Kulangsu Island, UNESCO World Heritage site,” Built Heritage (April 20, 2025, 8:00 P.M.) [Public policies and conservation plans of historic urban landscapes under the sustainable heritage tourism milieu: discussions on the equilibrium model on Kulangsu Island, UNESCO World Heritage site | Built Heritage | Full Text](#)

protection mechanisms.⁹ Assessing historical buildings' value-at-risk (VAR) is essential for disaster risk management, with frameworks developed to evaluate their significance and prioritize safety measures. Additionally, risk assessments using Multi-Criteria Decision-Making (MCDM) methods help determine the priority of buildings based on criteria like risk rate, heritage value, and occupancy. Machine learning (ML) techniques, such as “Kernel Canonical Correlation Analysis” (KCCA) and “Support Vector Machine” (SVM), are utilized to assess the safety state of historic buildings, enhancing monitoring and prediction accuracy. From 1979 to 2013, the World Heritage Centre and the Advisory Bodies produced 2,642 reports on the state of conservation (SOC) of various properties.¹⁰ These reports assessed the condition of 469 properties situated in 130 different States Parties. This implies that around 82% of the 160 States Parties with at least one property listed on the World Heritage List have experienced the impact of factors that necessitated the intervention of the World Heritage Committee.

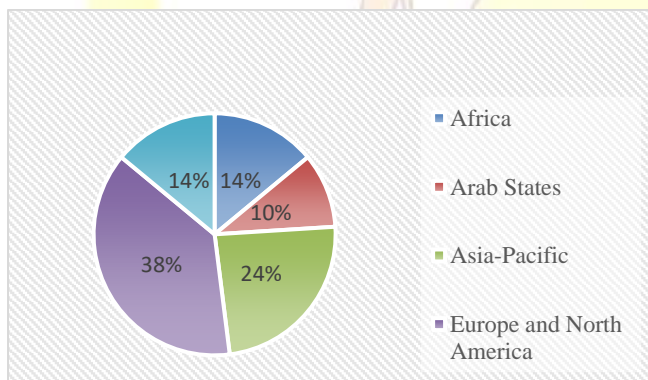


Figure 1: Geographical distribution of the 469 properties.

UNESCO's efforts and collaborative research contribute significantly to the global preservation and protection of historical buildings and cultural heritage sites.

Developing Conservation Guidelines and Standards:

UNESCO's heritage conservation guidelines have evolved over time, with a growing stress on local communities and well-being. In 2011, ICOMOS provided guidance on Heritage Impact

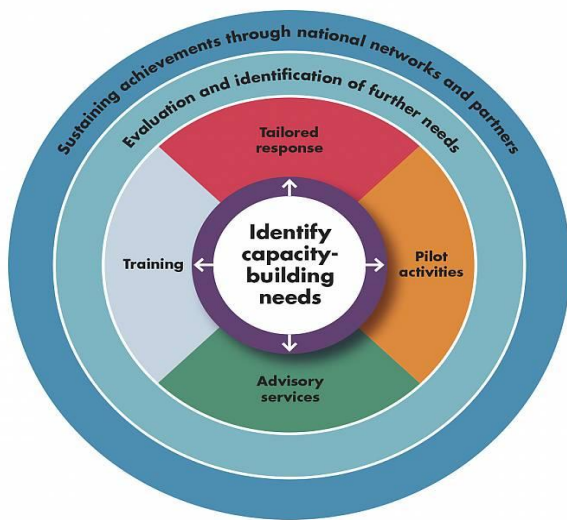
⁹ UNESCO, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/faq/135> (last visited April 20, 2025).

¹⁰ X.-H. Peng and Z.-H. Zhang, “Research on a Machine Learning-Based Method for Assessing the Safety State of Historic Buildings,” *Computational Intelligence and Neuroscience*, (April 20, 2025, 8:00 P.M.) ([PDF](#)) [Current Applications of Artificial Intelligence in Psychiatry](#).

Assessment for “Cultural World Heritage Properties”¹¹, leading to over 100 requested valuations by 2016. Additionally, guidelines for the valuation of historic “timber” structures were established to ensure safety considerations with minimal impact on the original building fabric. The reconciliation of heritage preservation and progress is a key research topic, evaluating the success of criteria in guiding contemporary interventions in historic places. Furthermore, methodological guidelines have been established for the conservation of decorative elements like polychromed plasterwork, aligning with international conservation standards and laws.

Providing Technical Assistance and Capacity Building:

Capacity building is a crucial aspect of UNESCO's mission, and it is one of the five functions that the organization carries out. To successfully put into operation, the 2003 Convention for Safeguarding the ICH, UNESCO¹² has significantly emphasized its global capacity-building program. Established in 2009, this program aims to assist nations in protecting their ICH, utilizing its potential for “sustainable development”¹³, and fostering widespread public awareness and endorsement of the Convention.



¹¹ O. Lo Presti and M. R. Carli, “Promoting Underground Cultural Heritage through Sustainable Practices: A Design Thinking and Audience Development Approach,” Google Scholar (April 20, 2025, 8:00 P.M.) [Olga Lo Presti - Google Scholar](#).

¹² UNESCO, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/partnerships/> (last visited April 20, 2025).

¹³ H. Hayajneh and G. Cesaro, “The UNESCO Contribution to Safeguarding and Preserving Jordan’s Cultural Heritage,” JJHA (April 20, 2025, 8:00 P.M.) [UNESCO project envisions twin goals of heritage preservation, job creation | Jordan Times](#)

Figure 1 describes the capacity-building schema.

UNESCO's Funding and Partnerships:

Funding Programs for Historical Buildings and Cultural Heritage Preservation

The provision of financial funding for the protection of historical buildings and cultural heritage is essential,¹⁴ given the economic difficulties linked to their upkeep and renovation. The International Assistance Scheme under the “World Heritage Fund” prioritizes the safety of cultural and natural sites, especially those at risk. Projects falling within three categories can receive support through International Assistance provided by the World Heritage Fund, such as “Emergency Assistance, Conservation & Management Assistance, and Preparatory Assistance¹⁵.”

Collaborations with Member States, NGOs, and Other Organizations:

Preserving the exceptional universal value of World Heritage sites has become a progressively difficult task in our contemporary world. These sites face various threats, including “unregulated urban development, unsustainable tourism practices, neglect, natural disasters, pollution, political instability, and conflicts”, making conservation a challenging mission.¹⁶ The World Heritage Centre collaborates with various stakeholders to promote the 1972 Convention and protect UNESCO World Heritage sites, ensuring their long-term sustainable development and preserving their unique characteristics. UNESCO has official partnerships with 418 NGOs, but collaboration with NGOs is not limited to these official relationships. UNESCO engages in a wide range of activities with various NGOs on an ad hoc basis at the international, regional, and national levels.

Additionally, UNESCO collaborates with governmental entities, universities, research institutes, private sectors, and youth organizations to discuss the future of education. Furthermore, UNESCO functions at the intersection of “natural and social sciences”, providing essential advice on disaster risk reduction and supporting international cooperation in this

¹⁴ C. Margottini and G. M. El-Qady, “The Aswan Declaration on Sustainable Conservation of UNESCO and Other Heritage Sites Through Proactive Geosciences,” Springer International Publishing, (April 20, 2025, 8:00 P.M.) [Oltre le barriere del tempo e dell'autorialità? Osservazioni sul concetto di patrimonio UNESCO | Restauro Archeologico..](#)

¹⁵ UNESCO, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/4311> (last visited April 20, 2025).

¹⁶ M. Ivanova, “Co-operative Initiatives of UNESCO and EU for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage,” KIN Journal, (April 20, 2025, 8:00 P.M.) [\(PDF\) Co-operative Initiatives of UNESCO and EU for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.](#)

field[31]. Moreover, UNESCO partners with universities in strategic collaborations with international NGOs and IGOs, benefiting students, stakeholders, and communities through practical experiences and resources.¹⁷

Case Studies of Successful Preservation Projects:

Minaret and Archaeological Remains of Jam: Case Study of Restoration of Historical Buildings

The Minaret of Jam, standing at a majestic height of 65 meters, is an elegant edifice originating from the 12th century.¹⁸ Adorned with intricate brick designs and featuring a distinctive blue tile inscription crowning its peak, it stands out for its architectural finesse and embellishments, marking the pinnacle of artistic and architectural achievement in its locale. Its significance is further underscored by its dramatic location nestled within a profound river valley flanked by imposing mountains within the Ghur province.



Figure 3: The Minaret and Archaeological Remains of Jam in Afghanistan[34].

According to the 2023 World Heritage Report, there are many factors and threats that may have affected this historic building, as reflected in Table 1:

Factors affecting	Threats
• Civil conflict	• The Absence of a legal safeguard

¹⁷ UNESCO, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/convention/> (last visited April 20, 2025).

¹⁸ J. Loza, "Engaging local communities in conservation and governance of the World Heritage in a transnational context: An example from the Maloti-Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site (Lesotho/South Africa)," in *Managing Transnational UNESCO World Heritage sites in Africa*, Cham: Springer International Publishing, (April 20, 2025, 8:00 P.M.) [Engaging local communities in conservation and governance of the World Heritage in a transnational context: An example from the Maloti-Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site \(Lesotho/South Africa\) | SpringerLink](#).

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Erosion and siltation/ deposition • Unlawful activities • Management systems/ plan • Tendency of the Minaret 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate establishment of a proficient agency dedicated to safeguarding monuments. • Insufficient personnel devoted to the protection and conservation of resources. • Lack of Management Plan
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Table 1: describes the factors and threats to the property[33].

UNESCO has taken a few significant initiative steps for the restoration of this property since 2002, which have cost approximately 98,750 USD.

Year	Description	Amount Approved (USD)
2021	Public Awareness Project	5,000
2015	Preparatory work for a conservation plan	73,750
2002	Training for national and local authorities	20,000

Table 2: describes the -

The World Heritage Committee expresses profound concern over Afghanistan's challenges, particularly in the humanitarian, educational, and cultural realms. Despite concerted efforts by national and international bodies, preserving cultural heritage¹⁹, exemplified by the Minaret and Archaeological Remains of Jam, continues to be hindered by resource constraints and adverse field conditions exacerbated by natural disasters. Urgent measures are required to stabilize the Minaret, enhance access to the site, and address conservation issues, including boundary delineation and drafting a revised Conservation Plan. The Committee reaffirms its commitment to supporting Afghanistan in safeguarding its heritage and calls upon the “international community” to provide assistance in this endeavor²⁰. Furthermore, it emphasizes

¹⁹ H. Hayajneh and G. Cesaro, “The UNESCO Contribution to Safeguarding and Preserving Jordan’s Cultural Heritage,” JJHA (April 20, 2025, 8:00 P.M.) [UNESCO project envisions twin goals of heritage preservation, job creation | Jordan Times](#).

²⁰ O. A. O. Alahmadi, “Development of a Risk Assessment and Management Model for UNESCO World Heritage Site,” IJAERA (April 20, 2025, 8:00 P.M.) [\(PDF\) Development of a Risk Assessment and Management Model for UNESCO World Heritage Site](#).

the importance of adhering to humanitarian and international heritage preservation laws to protect Afghanistan's diverse cultural legacy. Lastly, the Committee underscores the need for periodic reporting on conservation efforts and pledges to monitor the situation closely during its forthcoming sessions, thereby retaining the “Minaret and Archaeological Remains of Jam” on the List of “World Heritage” in Danger.²¹

Challenges and Future Directions:

Threats to Historical Buildings and Cultural Heritage:

Heritage building restoration is essential to preserve these buildings' historical and cultural significance, which can deteriorate over time due to various external factors. However, restoring heritage buildings is complex and goes beyond simply applying a fresh coat of paint²². It involves addressing unique challenges specific to heritage buildings and requires careful preparation. Comprehending these challenges is paramount for devising the most suitable restoration approach. UNESCO reports 2014 delineate two primary and secondary threats to historical buildings and cultural heritage, expounded upon in detail in Table 3.

Primary factor	Secondary factor	% of properties affected
institutional and Management	Management systems/ plan	71%
Buildings and Development	Housing	37%
Social/cultural uses of heritage	Impacts of tourism/visitor/recreation	26%
Management and institutional	Legal framework	24%
Transportation Infrastructure	Ground transport infrastructure	23%
human activities	Illegitimate activities	22%

²¹ UNESCO, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/partners/> (last visited April 20, 2025).

²² UNESCO, <https://www.unesco.org/en/partnerships/ngo-foundations> (last visited April 20, 2025).

Management and institutional	Financial resources	19%
Management and institutional	Management activities	19%
Management and institutional	Human resources	17%
Buildings and Development	Major visitor accommodation and associated infrastructure	14%
Modification/Biological resource use	Land alteration	12%
Social/cultural uses of heritage	Identity, social cohesion, and changes in local	12%
Physical resource mining	Mining	10%
Local circumstances affecting the physical fabric	Water	10%
Other human activities	Intentional damage to heritage	10%
Buildings and Development	Explanatory and visitation services	10%

Table 3: This comprehensive documentation offers valuable insights into the specific nature and scope of the threats such heritage sites face, providing a foundation for informed decision-making and strategic planning in preservation efforts.

Climate Change and Natural Disasters:

Climate change and natural disasters pose significant threats to historical buildings. Extreme weather events like storms, floods, and heatwaves, exacerbated by climate change, can lead to irreversible damage to cultural heritage, including historical structures. Research emphasizes the importance of developing resilience-building methodologies and prioritization frameworks to support decision-making for conservation efforts in the face of climate-related hazards²³. Mitigation strategies, such as disaster risk management frameworks and repair techniques, are crucial to safeguard historical buildings from the escalating risks of climate change and natural disasters.²⁴

CONCLUSION:

UNESCO plays a vital role in safeguarding historical buildings and cultural heritage worldwide. Through its diverse programs, conventions, and initiatives, UNESCO has been instrumental in raising awareness about the significance of preserving cultural heritage, fostering international collaboration, and providing technical expertise and monetary support for conservation efforts. The organization's identification of World Heritage Sites not only acknowledges their exceptional universal value but also encourages countries to commit to protecting and conserving these sites for future generations. Additionally, UNESCO's focus on community engagement and sustainable development underscores the need for comprehensive preservation strategies that balance conservation with socio-economic considerations. Despite encountering challenges like insufficient funding, natural disasters, and armed conflicts, UNESCO remains unwavering in its dedication to protecting humanity's shared heritage for the benefit of present and future societies. Hence, UNESCO's role in the protection of historical buildings and "cultural heritage" is indispensable in promoting global unity and ensuring the ongoing appreciation and enjoyment of our diverse cultural legacy. Addressing these challenges requires sustained advocacy, international collaboration, capacity-building, and

²³ Heather and little, <https://heatherandlittle.com/blog/5-heritage-building-restoration-challenges/> (last visited April 20, 2025).

²⁴ L. Ding, H. Hu, and J. Ji, "Holistic Value-at-Risk Assessment Framework for Fire Risk Assessment of Heritage Buildings Based on Analytic Hierarchy Process and Text Mining," ASCE-ASME J. Risk Uncertainty Eng. Syst (April 20, 2025, 8:00 P.M.) [Holistic Value-at-Risk Assessment Framework for Fire Risk Assessment of Heritage Buildings Based on Analytic Hierarchy Process and Text Mining | ASCE-ASME Journal of Risk and Uncertainty in Engineering Systems, Part A: Civil Engineering | Vol 9, No 1.](#)

innovative approaches to ensure the long-term conservation of historical buildings and cultural heritage sites.

