Between 2006 and 2007 the University of Minnesota Center for World Heritage Studies and the Azerbaijan University of Architecture and Construction (AzUAC) conducted a UNESCO inventory project of Icheri Sheher—the walled inner city of Baku, Azerbaijan—documenting a catalogue of over 500 structures constructed between the 7th century BCE and the present. The surveyed buildings included landmarks such as the Maiden Tower (7th-6th c. BCE – 12th c. CE) and the Palace of the Shirvanshahs (15th-16th c. CE), as well as vernacular structures. The full inventory of buildings represents a diverse cultural landscape reflecting a wide range of historical and cultural influences.

In the Middle Ages Baku thrived as a center of commerce, due to its location at the crossroads of the Silk Road trade routes, as well as its status as a port on the Caspian Sea. In the sixteenth century the city was absorbed into the Safavid Empire and, after that, the Russian Empire. The growing demand for oil in the late nineteenth century brought expansive growth to the city. Baku modernized and became a major urban center of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century and later, in 1991, the capital of an independent Azerbaijan. Into the twenty-first century Icheri Sheher continues to retain a high degree of historic and architectural integrity, a fact recognized in 2000 with its inclusion on UNESCO’s World Heritage List. However, an earthquake in November 2000, as well as continued urban development pressures, led to its placement on the list of World Heritage in Danger in 2003.

This change of status highlighted the need for a complete and up-to-date inventory of the buildings of Icheri Sheher, to guide conservation and management of the site. A preliminary UNESCO mission in September 2005 laid the groundwork for a pilot study and inventory project, completed jointly by faculty and students from the University of Minnesota and AzUAC in 2006. Following the pilot study, AzUAC students completed inventory fieldwork in late fall 2006. Center for World Heritage Studies staff then compiled and synthesized the data into a database, and produced a publication of building surveys selected from the full inventory.

Since completion of the inventory a number of important steps have been taken toward long-term protection of Icheri Sheher, including a moratorium on new construction in the area, the preparation of an Integrated Area Management Plan, and initial steps in the development of an Urban Conservation Master Plan for the City of Baku. A number of issues, however, remain to be resolved and pending compliance with World Heritage Committee decisions, Icheri Sheher today remains on the List of World Heritage in Danger.