An Inventory Project

OLD TOWN LAMU, KENYA

CULTURAL MAPPING OF PUBLIC SQUARES

Old Town Lamu is the oldest and best-preserved Swahili settlement in East Africa, retaining its traditional functions. Built in coral stone and mangrove timber, the town is characterized by the simplicity of structural forms enriched by such features as inner courtyards, verandas, and elaborately carved wooden doors. Lamu has hosted major Muslim religious festivals since the 19th century, and has become a significant center for the study of Islamic and Swahili cultures. The digital database system has since lent itself to developing a plan of action regarding conservation of the unique culturally infused qualities of the architecture and public space of Old Town Lamu.

Since its inscription as a World Heritage Site in 2001, Lamu Old Town has attracted many development projects that include newly built and renovated houses within the old urban fabric as well as newly developed areas near the township. The question of defining the equilibrium between development and conservation has become urgent and apparent, especially in the damages of sand Dunes at the beachfronts of Shela. In addition to the rapid growth and development, Lamu Old Town must prepare for the potential impacts of LAPSET project, an infrastructure system of railroads, highways and pipelines for the Lamu-Port-Southern-Sudan-Ethiopia Transit Corridor. Under these circumstances, a weeklong workshop format is helpful to outline new tools and concepts of HUL that are available and can best engage in today’s conservation management. The outcomes of the workshop are meant to establish guidelines for dealing with Lamu’s immediate and future conservation tasks.

During the summer of 2011 the University of Minnesota Center for World Heritage Studies in coalition with UNESCO conducted a workshop on Historic Urban Landscapes and an inventory project of Lamu Old Town, focusing on the study of Islamic architecture and open space. Thorough on-site documentation of public squares and urban fabrics led to the compilation of a digital database for inventory, management, and conservation.