

Disappearing World Heritage: the timber houses of Istanbul

The Historic Areas of Istanbul were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1985. The nomination dossier defined historic areas of timber houses as part of its World Heritage value and highlighted this as being part of the special character of two of the core areas – Suleymaniye and Zeyrek. The other two core areas are the ‘archaeological park’ (which includes Topkapi Palace, Ayia Sofia, the Hippodrome and the Blue Mosque) and the Land Walls of Theodosius.

Following a severe earthquake in the early 16th century, timber was adopted for building houses, because of its superior seismic performance, and remained the normal material for most domestic architecture in the city until the end of the Ottoman empire. The loss of this heritage is seen most acutely in the World Heritage Site; since inscription, between a third and half of the timber houses in Suleymaniye and Zeyrek have been demolished.

Regularly since 1992, the World Heritage Bureau recorded its concern about the demolition of timber houses and the poor standard of restoration of the Land Walls. In 2004, the World Heritage Committee notified the Government of Turkey that consideration would be given to placing Istanbul on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2006 if no management plan for the city was promulgated and if the more general conservation concerns were not addressed. In December 2004, the Turkish Timber Association (an NGO) launched the ‘Save the Roofs’ Campaign, with endorsement from UNESCO and the Turkish Government, to promote simple repairs, especially to roofs, as a means of saving the timber architecture of the inscribed historic districts, with Zeyrek as the priority. At the launch of the Campaign, the Governor of Istanbul announced that the government had allocated 64.8 million dollars for restoration projects in Istanbul.



House repaired by ICOMOS Turkey



House repaired by Turkish Timber Assoc.

In 2005, with finance from the World Heritage Fund, ICOMOS Turkey restored a small house, with a budget of less than \$20,000, to demonstrate that timber houses are capable of conservation, and the Turkish Timber Association conserved another house for as little as \$14,000. Unfortunately, these lessons in modest but effective conservation have had almost no tangible effect and very little of the money promised by the government has been spent.

In June 2005, a new law was passed which permits municipalities to declare neglected historic districts as development areas. The word ‘demolition’ appears in the law a

number of times and demolition and reconstruction without the retention of any original fabric is already taking place in Zeyrek and is planned for a major project in Suleymaniye that has been announced by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality.

In two streets near the Pantokrator Church, a major Byzantine monument, only 15 historic houses remain after five demolitions in the last two years. Two demolitions were carried out by a carpentry training workshop funded by the European Union.



One of the two demolitions carried out by EU funded project

The Turkish authorities are reluctant to see Istanbul put on the 'In Danger' list, but have yet to develop any effective strategy to safeguard the city. The problem is not lack of money, but rather lack of awareness and lack of technical capacity in local government. The authorities need to be made aware of their responsibilities to conserve Istanbul and of normal international standards. There is a strong need for a Technical Mission from ICOMOS to review (1) the conservation of timber houses, (2) the poor standard of conservation of the City Walls, (3) the need for a holistic management plan which incorporates major infrastructure development into conservation planning, and (4) to review planned developments such as the new bridge planned across the Golden Horn near the Sulimaniye Mosque and the creation of a 'new Manhattan' directly opposite Topkapi Palace and Ayia Sofia, which could have severe negative effects on the setting of the World Heritage Site.



Haydarpaşa train station



Haydarpaşa project, "new Manhattan"



New bridge for the Golden Horn