

# BUILT COLONIAL HERITAGE - UNESCO'S NEOCOLONIAL TOOLS?

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## BACKGROUND

The colonial era has ended, but built traces of its regimes remain. The integration of colonial architecture within the global heritage frameworks of UNESCO raises both opportunities and questions regarding sustainable management. Former colonial sites now part of the World Heritage List are particularly exposed to clashing discourses of preservation, as international ambitions tend to overshadow the local experience.

How are the legacies of built colonial structures approached and accounted for? How much attention is given to the local context? How is preservation balanced with development? Research suggests an ongoing international lack of sensitivity for such issues in formerly colonised regions, with outcomes bordering on the neocolonial. Ndoro & Wijesuriya (2015) note that while heritage management is not in itself a colonial phenomenon, it often continues to rest on western perceptions of monumentality and expert knowledge in former colonies post-independence. The concept of shared heritage, drawing on the dual legacies of colonial and native actors, is inclusive in principle but often downplays local management in reality. From these perspectives, UNESCO's listing frameworks may become yet another externally enforced, culturally restrictive set of tools in non-western parts of the world.

## RABAT, MOROCCO - NEOCOLONIAL 'URBAN APARTHEID'?

Morocco was part of the French colonial empire between 1912 and 1944. During this time, colonial urban planning policies created an architecturally divided city. The *medina* (old urban core) was preserved as "traditional Moroccan heritage", while other parts were developed and modernised for western settlers and tourists. Though driven by attention to the local context, Wagner & Minca (2014) argue that this preservation worked as a restrictive force, separating the native population from partaking in modernisation and modernity. The colonial framework deciding which sites to preserve and which to develop for western consumers still influences urban management in Rabat. This can be said to illustrate Ndoro & Wijesuriya's point above. With the 2012 inscription of Rabat into the World Heritage List, a colonial process of heritagization has itself been made into heritage. Rabat's 'shared heritage' of traditional architecture and modern urban planning is put forward in the listing, while the spatial segregation of its urban landscape is downplayed. It can be argued that by presenting Rabat's architectural fabric as unproblematic in its listing motivation, UNESCO allows for or even stimulates a development where the western experience is prioritised over the local. A marginalisation with colonial roots thus continues, spatially, economically, and culturally.

## Whose heritage?



## Whose agency?

## AIM

- To illustrate how UNESCO's approaches to built colonial heritage may work to perpetuate colonial legacies
- To highlight the complexity of the postcolonial experience

## METHOD

- Two case studies, discussing postcolonial cities that are now World Heritage Sites.
- Critical examination of how built colonial heritage is approached by UNESCO, and how this affects local communities.

## LUANG PRABANG, LAOS - HERITAGIZATION OR SOLIDIFICATION?

Luang Prabang was listed in 1995 due to its combination of traditional and European-Colonial architecture. Its World Heritage status has made tourism a driver for local development - a factor which has met with increasing concern from UNESCO and ICOMOS. A joint report by these actors frames the effects of tourism as inherently harmful to the city's architectural heritage, emphasising the threats of urban densification, (re)construction and gentrification. But is this the whole picture? Staiff & Bushell (2013) rather suggest that such perspectives are based on a discourse of solidification. Similarly to western perceptions of authenticity, the urban environment and its heritage is viewed as something fixed, not to be altered. Change, e.g. through tourism, thus primarily becomes an external and threatening force. The fieldwork of Staiff & Bushell points to several aspects of the tourism industry that in fact are perceived as positive by locals, as they provide jobs, income, and a general stability of life. This includes changes in the architectural environment, such as renovations and even imitations. For the locals, heritage value is clearly more dynamic than UNESCO's listing criteria suggest. The question is to what extent this experience is allowed to flourish in an international, predetermined model of sustainable heritage management. Is UNESCO here prioritising a colonial past over present renegotiation and development?

## SOURCES



## CONCLUSIONS

The two case studies illustrate how UNESCO's approaches to colonial built heritage tend to frame sites as architecturally frozen in time, and according to western understandings of preservation. For Rabat, the issue is a lack of attention to the restrictive dimensions of colonial urban planning. In Luang Prabang, local approaches to tourism as a part of dynamic heritage-making are seemingly overlooked. In both cases, international views of built colonial heritage work against community development in ways not too far removed from those of the colonial days.