



The Lebanese Immigrant statue stands near the site of the Aug. 4 blast, which damaged much of Beirut's rich cultural heritage.

BEIRUT Receives Cultural FIRST AID

THE WORLD'S PREMIER CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS WAITED A WEEK to issue their statement. Their timing avoided any sense of equiv- alency with the human aid pouring into Beirut following the August 4 storage-facility explosion in Beirut that killed, injured or rendered homeless hundreds of thousands of people. But on August 11, a joint statement was published in English, French and Arabic by a coalition of organizations including the World Monuments Fund, the Louvre, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the United Nations Edu- cational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

“Damaged libraries, museums, and historic buildings will require cul- tural first aid,” it said. “Their collections will need urgent protection and salvaging. We pledge to do all that we can to contribute to the complete recovery of the heritage that has been damaged in Beirut by this blast.”

The use of the future tense (“will require”) represented a commitment

When disaster strikes, who is best placed to administer first aid to world heritage? The aftermath of August's shocking events in Beirut shows how civil society can make the difference. By **DAVID LASSERSON**

to long-term recovery. But actually, Lebanon's cultural heritage was already receiving "cultural first aid." In the same way that people had jumped to the aid of the wounded, a highly effective volunteer task force had convened spontaneously in defense of the nation's cultural treasures.

An indication of Lebanon's rich archeological heritage can be found in the National Museum. Over 100,000 objects range from prehistoric finds to Phoenician civilization, and from the Roman Empire to the Mamluk period. Visitors encounter artifacts from sites included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, such as Byblos, Baalbek and Tyre. Cultural heritage in Beirut extends far beyond archaeology, from the legacy of maps, documents and photographs from the Ottoman and Colonial era, to literary archives, art, and the architecture of the city, including the celebrated old districts of Gemmayzeh and Mar Mikhael.

When the blast hit, Gilbert Nicolas, an architect who has worked with museums, was driving one kilometer away in Achrafieh, an old downtown district noted for its arts scene. Escaping uninjured and seeing damaged buildings all around, he sought out a favorite place—the Sursock Museum, a recently renovated modern and contemporary art space.

"It's a place that I love and that I visit a lot. The building combines different styles of architecture, Ottoman, Italian and Lebanese. The interior of the house is very rich, filled with wood and architectural ornaments, and they have a big collection of Lebanese artists. I was shocked by what I saw."

Inside, he found not only extensive damage, but also a shocked and bewildered staff. "All the beautiful colored glass was shattered. There was dust and glass everywhere. The ceiling had collapsed, things were on the ground, pieces had been hit by flying glass and debris. No one knew what to do. We started taking photos and making a first assessment just to see what had happened, if there was any electrical danger, or the possibility of a flood. And we began cleaning up paintings and taking them to a storage room underground to secure them."

After his day at Sursock Museum, Nicolas went to the University of St. Joseph, a campus adjacent to the port where the explosion occurred. Its Museum of Lebanese Prehistory was heavily damaged, and with an architect's eye he found the walls deformed and at risk of collapsing. Nearby, the university's celebrated Bibliothèque Orientale, an important research library, had blown-out windows, exposing content. Nicolas' concern was for the collections and also the structure—the mudbrick ceiling, the wooden beams, the big windows.

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Time was of the essence. The arrival of winter would bring rain and wind. The primary institutions holding the precious cultural heritage of Beirut needed urgent help—cultural first aid.

"This is a rich culture, a mix of historic buildings and objects. We can't say that everything will be erased and we still start from zero. No! We want to save what we have. It's a time to show that Lebanon is rich. Of course we knew that everyone at that point was worried about the damage to residential buildings, hospitals, schools. But we said we will work in a parallel team, we will work for museums."

With a couple of friends, he mobilized. They put out a call among their circle—architects, museographers, archaeologists, interior designers, "everyone who knows how to take dimensions, how to document, how to assess a building in danger of collapse." They received more than 70 responses, from young professionals keen to help, and from Nicolas' former professors from university.

What was their task? Cultural first aid, also known as Disaster Risk Management or Cultural Property Protection, has a similar structure to humanitarian assistance, according to Elsa Urtizverea, Heritage Protection Coordinator at the International Council of Museums (ICOM), based in Paris:

"First aid for heritage is the first action to be taken when a disaster occurs. It consists of four steps: situation analysis; on-site risk and damage assessment; primary security and stabilization, and finally early recovery. It stops there. Once it's secured we can talk about reconstruction and rehabilitation. The international community working with heritage built this protocol because we know that the number of risks and dangers is increasing, from war to climate change to hazards."

With winter approaching, it was imperative to complete the first three parts of the cultural first aid operation—situation analysis, on-site assessment, security—before nature worsened the problem. The new task force started sending teams to assess damaged buildings and collections. From their position on the ground they reported to Blue Shield International, an organization that works globally to protect cultural heritage in emergency situations, to ICOM's international heritage protection officers, and to ICOM Lebanon, the local network of museums.

On August 8th, four days after the explosion, one of these officers, Elsa Urtizverea, arrived in Beirut from ICOM in Paris to conduct situation analysis and on-site assessment. She explained the difference Nicolas' task force made: "One of the museums I visited had its doors and ceilings destroyed by the

explosion. They could tell me straight away ‘that wall might collapse’ and include it in their assessment. Without them, we would have had to engage engineers and other professionals to come into the museum, to make an assessment that we would have paid for—but with so much of the city damaged, it wouldn’t have been easy to source experts at this level. We saved a huge amount of time.”

The large, organized volunteer group made other efficiencies possible. With multiple teams going out, Blue Shield International created a new online platform for them to fill in their assessments and upload photography via mobile phones.

Meanwhile, British writer and film-maker Lydia Wilson, who had spent years doing fieldwork in Beirut, realized that this threat to the heritage of the city was itself a historic moment, and the damage, assessment and recovery should be documented. Lydia was quick to contact Nicolas, and videography and documentation were among the specialisms requested in his call-out for volunteers. Among the footage she has been gathering from the team, she finds a powerful sense of the city and its heritage in the hearts and lives of people. “The librarian at the Bibliothèque Orientale was crying when she said, ‘I’ve been coming here since I was a student. This is my home. I clean it as if it’s my home. I love it as if it’s my home.’”

For Nicolas also this deep sense of connection means that every day is personally painful. “It’s really hard, going there, seeing all the buildings that you used to love, the art collections, your friends... We’re trying to recover personally from this damage. It’s like healing yourself by healing what you love most. We feel like by recovering our culture we are recovering our emotions.”

In the historic districts of Gemmayzeh and Mar Mikhael an estimated 640 buildings with heritage status were found to be damaged, with 60 in imminent danger of collapse, according to an initial report by UNESCO. For Nicolas and his task force, these old residencies are themselves a living museum.

“There are antiquities and furniture inside belonging to the residents, who may not know how to look after them. When we were doing our assessment of one building, the owner told us, ‘I have a shattered painting. It’s very dear to me, but I don’t know how to save it.’ If we left these objects during the winter in poor condition and not secured, we might lose them altogether. We’d like to help with restoration. So now we’re collaborating with university lecturers, training the team to manipulate objects, save and clean them.”

For Elsa Urtizverea, the sustained and highly organized commitment of Nicolas and his task force

Global experts in cultural restoration see the highly effective local response in Beirut as a possible model for the world.



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could have a lasting influence on ICOM’s global operations: “Months after the disaster they are still working 7 hour days. Frankly they are beyond their tasks as volunteers. It’s a valuable lesson learned from our side. Local communities are the first to safeguard their cultural heritage, something we’ve seen in places such as Mali. But I was amazed by how professional this group has been.”

Urtizverea is not the only one rethinking how civil society can be engaged in safeguarding world heritage. A new initiative launched November 16th, “Our World Heritage,” calls for the heritage community, especially governmental organizations, to “expand preservation to the local level through grass-roots initiatives.” The highly organized citizen task force in Beirut could be a model for the world.

Beirut’s museums and collections are now moving beyond first aid, and entering the next stage, which needs the sustained international support pledged in the August declaration. The Louvre, Centre Pompidou, V&A, and British Museum are among those offering materials and restoration expertise. Assistance in restoring libraries has come from the foundation of Sheikhha Bodour al Qasimi in Sharjah. There is still a need for financial support. Urtizverea identifies two organizations with deep roots in the sector which are fundraising for their futures: the Beirut Heritage Initiative and Impact Lebanon.

Many of Nicolas’ generation are choosing to leave Lebanon. Speaking on a recent panel hosted by Aspen UK, Dr. Zeina Mohanna of Amel Association International described six crises overwhelming the country, and driving up emigration: a political crisis, with the legitimacy of the government questioned; a social and economic crisis, with well over 50 percent below the poverty line; a monetary crisis, with the currency devalued; an environmental crisis, with a persistent waste disposal problem; a healthcare crisis with the effects of the pandemic; and finally the effects of one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in history.

For Nicolas, the reason to stay is the seventh crisis—a crisis of identity: “We will lose more. We will lose our history. It’s eye opening, our need for history, for our roots. During our assessments, we discovered a lot of collections that were hidden in the storage rooms that need to be saved, and need to be shown.

“I think that young people need to feel that they are fighting for something. We want to go to the next stage after securing the collections—to restore the buildings. Maybe this cultural work, maybe this history, will keep us here.” ♦

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