The World Bank Symposium on Preserving the Architecture of Historic Cities and Sacred Places

Keynote Address

by
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Washington, DC, May 3, 1999

You cannot have effective development without a sense of history and cultural continuity. This was the essence of the message of World Bank President James D. Wolfensohn at the opening of an international symposium on "Preserving the Architecture of Historic Cities and Sacred Places".

Held at the headquarters of the World Bank Group in Washington DC on May 3, 1999, the symposium was a collaborative effort involving 17 institutions and bringing together 300 participants from over 40 countries. Delegates used four plenary sessions and eight different expert gatherings to review current methodologies and to explore responses to the challenges facing the world's historic cities and sacred sites.

On behalf of the World Bank Group I want to say how grateful I am to Ismail Serageldin and the team for their work in putting this Symposium together. But most particularly, my gratitude goes to all of you for coming to this meeting, which is extremely important in the life of our institution.

Let me also explicitly thank the cosponsors of this event: the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, the American Institute of Architects, CEC International Partners, the Center for Jewish Art at The Hebrew University, the Council of Europe, the Eisenhower Foundation, the Government of Brazil, the Inter-American Development Bank, the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, International Council on Monuments and Sites, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, the J. Paul Getty Trust, UNESCO, U.S. National Park Service, and the World Monuments Fund.

Forgive me for reading a list of names, but it is important to recognize these contributions individually and I want to express my thanks to them for joining with us in this event.

It seems hardly necessary for me to address this group on the importance of culture, the importance of preserving cities and architecture and the importance of preserving sacred sites. And you might well ask why it is that this meeting is taking place in the World Bank, which is renowned for its lack of sensitivity and its concern with money alone. It is
vilified for its structural adjustment loans, made the brunt of most attacks on why the world is not a better place, and is lumbered with the question of why are we so efficient that we've allowed poverty to increase and not to diminish.

I am familiar with the charges because I spend a lot of my time defending our institution from these charges. But they are charges which, in my judgment at least, are not valid. They have some elements of truth in relation to some projects and some activities in which we are engaged. But this institution basically is concerned with the issue of poverty and global development.

We have a group of clients which number 4.8 billion people. Three billion of them live under $2 a day. A billion three hundred million of them live under $1 a day. Two billion of them do not have access to power. A billion and a half of them do not have access to clean water.

And as we look forward, we see two very important development trends: the first is that the number of clients is going to become more numerous. In the next 25 years, we will have two billion more people on the planet. And many of them will be poor, and 60 percent of them will live in cities. We will see the scope of megacities, cities of 10 million people or more, growing by the year 2015 from 17 megacities now to 26 megacities, 22 of which will be in the developing world.

So we are faced with a serious problem, not just of numbers but of concentration, and in terms of the overall dynamics, we are faced with the potential for an increase in poverty and an increase in inequity. The trends demonstrate that essentially, the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer. That applies to countries and it applies within countries, not totally but pretty broadly.

And so, as we come to look at the activities of the World Bank Group in the next 25 years, we are confronted with a very difficult economic situation and a very difficult human situation. For us, the issue of poverty is central. It is played out in slums, it is played out in villages, and it is very real.

As we look forward, I am pressed by my Board to try and come up with ideas as to how it is we can address this question. How can we address the overwhelming issue of poverty, the overwhelming question of a concentration of people in cities, and with that concentration, the pressure on public services, the pressure on public spaces, the degradation that accompanies movements of people into cities. My Board and others say you must deal with the economics, you must deal with the question of food and sustenance, you must deal with the question of education, you have got to focus on the question of equity.

And that is true. We have just been through the spring meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and all the talk is about international financial architecture. There is a need, they say, to change the architecture not your architecture, but financial architecture. That means we have to decide whether the Bank and the Fund should operate separately; how indeed we should operate. Issues of
transparency, issues of fiscal policy and monetary policy, issues of exchange rate protection, issues of budgets, all become the subject that we are concerned about.

In the recent financial crises you will have seen them summarized by the size of packages to bring about stability; $58 billion, $17 billion, $42 billion in Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia. Similarly the headlines in the last couple of days about a rescue package for Russia, within the last months how much money is being put together for Brazil & everything is reduced to numbers.

There are great pressures for a numerical manifestation of the problems, tremendous arguments as to whether you should have capital markets open or closed, or how quickly they should open; tremendous arguments about the flow of funds and the over-dependence on short-term borrowings. If you get three economists together, you are guaranteed a lengthy debate on the subject. And if you had attended our meetings, this was the concentration of the discussions, except that what we were saying at the World Bank was that that is only part of the argument.

There is a human aspect to the argument. There is a cultural aspect to the argument. There is an aspect of the argument which relates to the soul of people, to the core of people, to the way they want to live their lives, to what is meaningful for them, to their culture, to their history.

Let me tell you, it is not that easy to get that point across in the midst of the 140 Finance Ministers. But the point is right. You cannot have development unless you have some sense of history and cultural continuity. I went to Mali on the first of my 85 visits since I took this job. I hope there are no Malians here, but even if they are, they know the story. I had no idea that there was a place called Timbuktu; for me it was the place my father told me to go to when I was bad. "Go to Timbuktu," he would say. I thought it was a creature of his imagination. To be honest, I did not know where Mali was. I surely did not know that its history included an empire that stretched up to Egypt. I had no notion of the history of this country. I had no notion of the richness of African culture. I did know little bits, but too little.

But for the Malians, and for young Malians, the issue of building their country and their self-esteem and their future had to be grounded in their history. And I speak not just of Mali. I think of the projects that we are doing in places as various as Morocco and Vietnam and in the Mayan areas in Central America.

And I kept trying to say to my colleagues that if you are talking about building international architecture, it has to be built on structure, on governance, on justice, on legal systems, on social systems, but it also has to be built on history and culture.

This is not an elitist observation, although I have been accused of that because of my activities in elitist institutions in this country, particularly in the performing arts. But it is because when you go to
developing countries, the thing that differentiates countries one from
the other is the issue of history and culture.

I am very sensitive to it because I was born in Australia, and in
Australia the oldest mosques, churches, and synagogues were less than 100
years old. And, in fact, the history, which was one that we were trying
to forget — namely, that we were convicts — was something that people wanted
to put behind them. And then we had this tremendous influx of migrants
which built the country, and we had a certain atmosphere in Australia
which was all new. And yet, in the last 25 years, the last 30 years, the
thing that has brought tourism, the thing that has made the place
interesting, the thing that has made the cities interesting, is a
restoration of those same convict sites, that same modest history, and of
course, the history of the aboriginal people and their culture.

This, if you like, is a trivial observation compared to the histories
that are represented in this room. But it was a personal experience which
made me, as I went around the world, long for the sense of history, the
sense of identification of the countries that had formed part of
Australia's development.

And so as we come to this conference, our task is at several levels. The
first is to have a group of distinguished practitioners and those that
are interested in the field, meet at the World Bank to demonstrate that
there is a body of intellect and commitment which is concerned with
preservation of historic places and cities. I need that. The world needs
that. And it needs it inside a financial and development institution in
addition to the meetings that you have in academic and cultural milieus.

It is important that people should recognize you do not have to have a
dollar sign on something for it to be valuable or for it to be essential.
And I take the view that what we are discussing at these meetings and
will be discussing in the breakout groups are, of course, of intellectual
and cultural and great social interest, but they are also fundamental to
the question of development.

I have said to my colleagues that you cannot have an international
financial architecture built on sand. You have to have the base. And what
you are talking of in this meeting is the base. It is a base that we can
justify with the argument that it promotes tourism, that it creates arts
and crafts, that it helps us in an elegant way to improve infrastructure.
It also holds the community together and in the preservation of religious
sites it keeps the community together. And it allows the maintenance of
previous social structures so that you have social environments in the
city that are good for people but also attract tourism and business.

All of us are familiar with those arguments, and they are right. But I
hope very much that we can leave this meeting confirmed in the belief
that there is another argument which is equally important, to me more
important. It is that for us to address the question of poverty and
development, that development must relate to the national histories and
cultures. It should not be a globalized culture. It has to have a sense
of identity linked with the past and with cultural history. And it has to
give people the opportunity that through their past they can have a
spirit and creativity for the future. I believe this, and I guess all of you believe it.

I think it is important that we not just keep the argument at the level of tourism and jobs and the rebuilding of infrastructure. Some of us have to say that there is a level of commitment and a level of understanding which is beyond material issues. It is a level that is related to the very being of the countries in which we operate. It is a level that is concerned with the essence of what people are about. And that essence has to be protected physically in terms of the architecture of cities. It has to be protected in religious places. But what we have to protect too is the soul and the essence and the center of the people whose development we are dealing with.

That to me is the real purpose of this meeting, and I am very hopeful that with your voices and with the voices that hear you, we can get this movement more firmly established within the framework of a financial development institution. If we do not, the future is pretty bleak. We will have the sort of architectural development that unfortunately we have had too often in recent times. In the presence of the Institute of Architects, I have to say that some of it is wonderful. Indeed it is. But quite a lot for millennia past was also wonderful, and what is important is that we should have the continuity from the past for the future.

I was in Guatemala in the highlands recently, where I saw a World Bank project for schools, and we had a red brick schoolhouse with a perfectly nice pitched roof, with a regular door. While I was talking that morning to Mayan elders, part of that civilization that is extraordinarily rich, that built cities and pyramids, as I was talking to them, I see the red brick schoolhouse. And I just shuddered. I shuddered because there was no allusion whatsoever to Mayan history. It would have cost nothing to relate it to that distinguished history. And for the kids that were going to be educated there, it meant nothing, this school.

And in Central Africa, I visited another school where they were teaching the kids French, and they had these pictures up on the wall of children learning French. There were white children being knocked over by a car, an ambulance coming along, someone calling out, "Au secours, au secours", a fire hydrant, and then the ambulance taking the kids to the hospital. And all this in a village in Africa, which had no fire hydrants, which had no white kids, which had no ambulances.

These images and I could give you dozens more stick with me. Because whether it is physical recognition of history or intellectual or cultural or just decent good sense, this aspect of development has to be central to the process of dealing with poverty and development.

And so I am very grateful to have the chance to share with you my rather primitive thoughts on the subject. I wish you well in your meetings, and wish too that I could be with you instead of having to go off and deal with the numbers in Brazil, Russia, and other places, which I have to do. I look forward to the results of the meeting, and I am extremely grateful to our cosponsors, extremely grateful to all of you for participating in something which, for the World Bank, is more than a conference. It is a
reorientation, and I am grateful to you for your contribution. Thank you very much.