

Communication of Association 'Heart of Damascus' On June 6, 2006

World Monument Fund agreed the proposal of association 'Heart of Damascus' to put Old Damascus in the list of the 100 most endangered sites of the World. Association thus becomes a privileged interlocutor to develop an action of protection of Old Damascus.

Why is it important to put Old Damascus in the list “watch” of WMF?

The unique site, the only one of this type, of Old Damascus, represents a complex heritage safeguarding case. We deal with a city still alive with more than five thousand years of history.

The ancient city is, in some of its districts in a state of advanced decay under all the aspects of heritage but also social, public health, urban.

Every day, negligence and the influence of promoters without scruples, this ancient city with considerable richness, suffers of irreversible time and men damages. With a lack of organized means, with the difficult socio –economical context, Old Damascus has today many difficulties.

Since 1979, the ancient city of Damascus is registered with the UNESCO World Heritage of Humanity. However since this date, safety, maintenance and development actions were insufficient compared to what must be really need.

However, alarm is given since many years; and the few people who act inside or outside the country appear to be alone, without real force. The Director of the Department of Old Damascus (Office of the Governorship of the Old Damascus), however recently gave a strong alarm while sending to UNESCO in March 2006, a very documented file entitled “Conservation plan of Old Damascus”, supervised by the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums of Syria, and Ministry of Culture of Syrian Arab Republic.

We contribute to make these alarms being followed by actions in order to rectify this situation.

Without delay, it is urgent to constitute multi-disciplinary teams with experts, with heritage protection organizations, with inhabitants, and with volunteers which can propose an integrated and global project of safeguarding, maintenance and valorisation on a directing diagram close to the one developed for Old Aleppo.

We do not forget anyway that the case of Damascus, with its position of capital, is much more complex to treat which will need to constitute an appropriated expert committee with an executive power.

The fact of putting Old Damascus in the 100 most endangered sites of the world will allow us to discuss openly the problem, and in front of the experts of the whole world, to continue the maid actions developed for the valorisation and protection of this city.

Why we built this association “Heart of Damascus”?

We estimate that this city is the alive memory of Eastern and Western civilizations, and that its position, with the crossroads between three continents makes it impossible to circumvent. We estimate that it is the city of damascenes and all the inhabitants of the world because it is registered with the World Heritage of UNESCO since 1979. Because it is single, magic, splendid we have to contribute to its valorization and its protection.

To respect Damascus is to respect humanity; it is to seek the respect between civilizations.

As volunteers, we wanted open eyes on this city and be aware of dangers which threaten its heritage and more, its sustainable development.

Naturally we could not act as persons; we needed an organization, an official institution and a group of volunteers who can support our efforts.

Association "Heart of Damascus" is made up members French and Syrian and we want to work in all transparency in Syria in collaboration with the institutions of heritage protection, and the Syrian authorities.

What we did for this city?

We develop, as volunteers, a common action in favor of the protection of the ancient city of Damascus inside walls and its buffer zone since April 2006.

This work started four years ago, and before the creation of this association, we made a lot of background work to prepare future action. Of course, this work cannot be measured, since it is the background of an action, which it will be desirable for Old Damascus. We collaborate with World Heritage for protection organizations. Amongst other things, we prepared this file to submit Old Damascus in the list of World Monument Fund 2008 of the 100 most endangered sites in the world.

Our association has now several programs which aim to make known and to respect the Syrian heritage.

In addition to the action for the protection of the old city of Damascus, we want to take part in collaborative and multidisciplinary scientific project for the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums of Syria, and develop a cultural meeting between French and Syrian artists which will take place at the time of the event 'Damascus, capital of the Arab culture 2008'.

What interest for Syria to support these programs' development?

It has an economic interest: to develop cultural tourism which is the second source of income in Syria with more than 2 million visitors last year.

The programs of association fall under the effort of valorisation and protection of the Syrian Heritage.

To follow a patrimonial policy, it is also to support long-term investments.

The heritage thus represents a very important economic sector which justifies setting up a strategy of communication to which our association will contribute. That will make it possible to put forward the qualities of this country. In particular, Old Damascus is a window for the country and takes part in its fame.

Syria has also a scientific and cultural interest in these programs: opening to the world, international scientific programs, congress, trips studies, and festivals.

Dr. Oriane Matte.

President of Association Heart of Damascus.

Safeguarding the Syrian Heritage, Promoting the cultural exchanges between France and Syria.