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EARTHEN HERITAGE

CONSERVATION, ADAPTIVE REUSE AND SUSTAINABLE DESIGN



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UNESCO Management Plans and Community Collaboration: A Comparative Analysis from Lyon, Djenné and Yazd

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Abstract

This article compares the management plans of three UNESCO World Heritage cities—Lyon (France), Djenné (Mali), and Yazd (Iran)—to assess local community engagement in heritage conservation. The study explores cultural, social, and economic factors shaping participatory approaches, examining the roles of institutions, civil society, residents, and property owners. Management Plans and their implementation are analysed, which show how local initiatives are received and sustained over time. The comparison of the three cities reveals trends in community involvement, showing how spontaneous actions contribute to heritage durability, accountability and long-term preservation. Urban landscape preservation efforts further assess how proposed measures translate into practice and their impact across different contexts, examining how heritage awareness spreads differently in each city and emphasizing the importance of local engagement in achieving effective and sustainable conservation strategies.

Keywords: *historical urban landscape; management plan; earthen heritage; community engagement*

1. Introduction

Since its foundation in 1972, more than 322 World Heritage (WH) cities have been protected under the UNESCO aegis, including 75 earthen urban properties. In 2011, UNESCO published the Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscape (HUL), a holistic approach aimed at including social, cultural and economic factors in its conservation practices. This approach cascaded into the management plans of several of these WH cities. Since the mid-1990s, UNESCO has required each WH site to acquire a Management Plan (MP), a document for the preservation and governance of heritage sites. Analysis of these documents can help foresee the future direction of urban earthen heritage preservation. This paper aims to investigate the different approaches towards management plans and their role in urban heritage, stressing the importance of community engagement to raise awareness within the local population about the importance of heritage preservation. The authors identified three case studies from different geographical and cultural areas, united by similar earthen urban heritage. The cities are Lyon, France; Yazd, Iran; and Djenné, Mali. The rationale for their selection stems from the analysis of their governance

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systems and the different - but comparable - approaches to Management Plans. Djenné drafted a quinquennial plan in 2018 to address UNESCO requests. Yazd included its management plan directly in its 2017 inscription documents. Lyon interpreted the HUL recommendations to include a MP in a comprehensive *Plan d'action (2024-2030)* for the whole metropolitan area. The paper aims to provide useful insight and proposals on how to draft an MP taking into account participative and collaborative factors.

2. Methodology

The investigation started from the vast collection of open-access documents provided by UNESCO on its three properties. They were analysed to gain an understanding of the local contexts and their challenges, as well as how the different State Parties interpreted the preventive conservation approach of the MPs, especially towards community engagement in heritage governance. The combination of earthen heritage and community engagement has proven to be relevant in heritage practices, ranging from customary conservation to institutionalised co-creative activities. This combination unites the three case studies: they all present different forms and tools of local population involvement in heritage preservation. The customary *crépissage* (re-plastering) of the Great Mosque of Djenné; the hybrid systems of the *waqf* in Yazd; and the *inventaire participatif* of earthen heritage in Lyon are relevant examples. The comparison of the three Management Plans assessed the main similarities in the approaches adopted and the differences, to highlight similar international tendencies, especially towards the role of the locals.

A series of in-depth interviews was conducted with local interest-holders. Different opinions on the heritage site, its management and its future perspectives helped assess the strengths and weaknesses of Management Plan, and the topic of community collaboration each provided insights into the decision-making processes. The three methodological steps progressed as follow: a state-of-the-art assessment; a present-time critical comparison of MPs; and an informed final opinion of local stakeholders involved.

3. Community Engagement in Urban Heritage Preservation

Community participation in heritage protection, conservation and management processes is an internationally debated issue. It aims to promote inclusive and dynamic actions that can contribute to sustainable development, long-term conservation and co-management of heritage for the benefit of the heritage and the community (ICCROM, 2015). The promotion of participatory activities is based on the idea that 'conservation is about people' (Van Der Ploeg, 2004, p. 24). It is only through direct contact with local communities that it is possible to identify what they recognise and value, and to involve them in conservation and maintenance activities, thus developing the "heritage community" of the Faro Convention (2005). A paradigm shift regarding the role of communities in the recognition, conservation and management of WH sites was sanctioned in 2002 with the drafting of the Budapest Declaration. On this occasion, in order to ensure a fair balance between conservation, sustainability and development, States Parties were called upon to promote the active involvement of communities at all levels in the identification and protection of World Heritage properties. In addition, States Parties were invited to undertake communication activities to increase "public awareness, involvement and support for World Heritage" (UNESCO, 2002), recognising the important role of communities in heritage conservation.

In 2007, this approach was further strengthened by integrating the four strategic objectives of the World Heritage Convention identified in 2002 (credibility, conservation, capacity building, communication) and a new objective (communities). This change is motivated both by the recognition that "heritage protection without the involvement and commitment of communities is an invitation to failure" (WHC, 2007, p. 2) and

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by the awareness that "heritage protection should, wherever possible, reconcile the needs of human communities, because humanity must be at the heart of conservation" (WHC, 2007, p. 2). The 2011 Recommendations on Historic Urban Landscapes identify participatory processes as a fundamental tool for heritage management practice. Indeed, the Historic Urban Landscapes approach aims to preserve the quality of the human environment by learning from the traditions and perceptions of local communities, whose participation in decision-making processes contributes to a clear identification and understanding of the needs of the population and promotes the preservation of local cultural traditions. The involvement of local communities in the processes of cultural heritage conservation requires a profound change in the working methods of the bodies involved in this activity. Aware that "cultural heritage is created by people and for people" (ICCROM, 2015, p. 3) and that "communities have capacities and assets that outlast political or professional structures and complement specialised knowledge and skills" (ibid.), processes need to be developed that are capable of harnessing these capacities and assets.

With this in mind, the above case studies will be examined, with a focus on analysing the approaches adopted and the actions implemented, in order to identify possible future intervention strategies.

4. Djenné, Mali: customs and traditional practices in a crisis context

Djenné is famous for its earthen architecture, including the Great Mosque. A World Heritage Site since 1988, it was placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2016 due to the deteriorating security situation in Mali. Ongoing instability has hindered the implementation of a new MP, with the latest version covering 2018-2022.

Djenné's heritage management follows a centralised model inherited from French colonial rule. The Ministry of Culture, based in Bamako, oversees heritage sites through regional branches and cultural missions that manage WH-listed sites. The MP reflects this structure, highlighting the



Fig. 1 – *Replastering ot Djenne mosque by the community in 2012* (Mission Culturelle de Djenné, F. Yamoussa).

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Cultural Missions as the main local stakeholders (DNPC, 2018, pp. 54-58). Community engagement is briefly acknowledged in the MP, but is not actively encouraged. Instead, the plan prioritises partnerships with international organisations such as the Aga Khan Trust and focuses on awareness campaigns rather than direct local engagement (DNPC, 2018, p.80).

Despite state control, customary institutions remain central. The *chefférie* (village chiefdom), led by the *chef du village*, regulates public life and professional corporations, including the *maçons* (builders), responsible for maintaining the Great Mosque (Joy, 2012). Religious leaders also influence preservation decisions. With state governance weakened by conflict, these traditional structures have regained importance. A key example of local conservation is the annual *crépissage* of the Great Mosque (Fig. 1), a collective event where the community, led by *maçons*, replasters the mosque with fresh mud (Joffroy & Yamoussa, 2011). This tradition not only preserves the building, but also allows artisans to refresh its decorative elements.

International institutions such as UNESCO and the Aga Khan Trust have challenged this practice and advocated standardised restoration techniques. The Aga Khan Trust's first 'modern' restoration of the mosque was controversial because it altered the existing form based on historical images (Joy, 2012). As Lassana Cissé explained: "The Aga Khan decided to intervene. The rehabilitation of the mosque was derived from historical images [...] thus giving it a form that was never the original one" (Cissé, L., personal communication, Feb. 2024). Nevertheless, traditional *crépissage* has proven effective, especially in the absence of conservation strategies. Local builders and communities have played a crucial role in preserving Djenné. As Charlotte Joy noted: "Since the conflict, the local community has become central [...] The fundamental part of heritage conservation is still happening" (C. Joy, personal communication, Aug. 20-24).

The case of Djenné illustrates the challenges of heritage conservation in a fragile socio-political context. The effectiveness of an MP is difficult to assess in such circumstances, but community involvement remains essential. Recognising and integrating traditional conservation practices into institutional strategies will ensure long-term conservation and a balance between formal policies and local knowledge.

5. Yazd, Iran: awareness-raising in a top-down governance

The case of Yazd demonstrates a hybrid approach to urban earthen heritage conservation, where centralized governmental structures work alongside local institutions. Inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 2017, Yazd retains its traditional urban fabric, largely escaping modernization (ICOMOS, 2017, p.125). Its governance strategies were outlined in the nomination documents. The Action Plan, prepared by ICCHTO (Iran's Cultural Heritage Handicrafts and Tourism Organization), promotes a collaborative approach between national institutions, local authorities, traditional organizations and residents, recently commended by UNESCO (UNESCO, 2023, p.3).



Fig. 2 – *Stakeholders visit during IWEA training workshop, February 2019* (CRAterre, T. Joffroy).

In practice, this collaboration took shape through co-creation workshops (Fig. 2), meetings, and local conservation campaigns (ICHTO, 2017, p.31-34). This participatory strategy allows for a pragmatic management structure. Dr. Mohammad Talebian, former director of ICHTO, emphasized the necessity of blending centralized oversight

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with local custodianship: "The institution collaborates with municipalities and the locals as a control tool, controlling *[monitoring]* the heritage that's the purpose" (Dr. Talebian, personal communication, Jan. 2025). A practical example of this community-based monitoring is a WhatsApp channel where residents report potential risks to heritage sites. Majid Hajmirbaba, a scholar at CRAterre, described its role: "There is a WhatsApp channel to send photos and denounce inappropriate interventions […] there is also a technical bureau to help inhabitants" (M. Hajmirbaba, personal communication, Jan. 2024).

While such peer-surveillance can raise ethical concerns, it heightens heritage awareness. Beyond monitoring, Iran's heritage governance encourages local stakeholder involvement. Dr. Talebian referenced the case of Tabriz Bazaar, where local merchants directly contributed to restoration efforts. This model, in Yazd, led to the formation of craftsmen teams to train residents, fostering skill transmission and community engagement.

A key distinction between Yazd and Djenné lies in the recognition of customary institutions. Yazd's local *waqf* plays an active role in preservation. *Waqf*s, or religious endowments, hold property in trust for charitable purposes, frequently including heritage buildings. Their role extends beyond property ownership to financing restoration projects. As Dr. Talebian explained: "In a lot of places in Iran where there is a system of *waqf*, they pay the budget because they have the trust foundation for a restoration project in the *waqf* area." (Dr. Talebian, personal communication, Jan. 2025)

This framework strengthens local monitoring structures, ensuring the integration of religious and civic bodies in heritage management. Yazd shows how social and cultural dynamics influence urban conservation strategies. Traditional institutions, local universities, and community groups are active participants in decision-making. This inclusion not only preserves heritage but also fosters awareness among residents: in 2019, 40% of residents believed they should share responsibility for heritage conservation with local authorities (Nasrolahi et al., 2019, p.1745). Ultimately, the Yazd model shows the importance of acknowledging customary techniques by involving the stakeholders who uphold them.

6. Lyon, France: controlled animation of governance practices

The third case study is the French city of Lyon. Its architectural heritage includes a remarkable tradition of earthen construction, which is deeply tied to the city's history and identity. Today, districts like Croix-Rousse and Saint-Just, part of Lyon's World Heritage area, exemplify this heritage, with a high concentration of earthen buildings. Unfortunately, despite academic efforts, earthen architecture remains under recognized in Lyon. The city's 1998 UNESCO nomination dossier overlooked this heritage entirely, prioritizing monumental structures and historic neighborhoods instead.

The 2013 UNESCO MP for Lyon similarly failed to address earthen architecture, offering no specific preservation initiatives. Only in the 2018 *Plan Local d'Urbanisme et Habitat* was earth acknowledged, with guidelines for interventions limited to visible façade (Ville de Lyon, 2018). This lack of comprehensive recognition highlights a deeper issue: both residents and public administrators remain largely unaware of the value of these constructions. Without adequate tools for their preservation, Lyon's earthen architectural heritage continues to be at risk. In Lyon's case, it emerges how the involvement and the responsibilisation of the local community is a recommendation and a necessity to guarantee earthen heritage preservation. Emmanuel Mille, who completed a doctorate at CRAterre, stated: "All the risk factors come from unfamiliarity [on earthen buildings] by actors, inhabitants and users" (E. Mille, personal communication, Feb. 2024)

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A first shift in this tendency can be seen after 2016, when the international congress on earthen architecture, *Terra2016*, was hosted in the city. A large *inventaire participatif* was carried out: local residents were asked, through an online questionnaire, to actively locate and map the earthen buildings of Lyon, effectively conducting a census that listed more than 100 within the historical city (Mille, 2023, p. 114-119).

After some years, earthen heritage recognition and community involvement were jointly addressed in the most recent MP of the city, adopted in 2024. The document states that "heritage is a collective responsibility" (Ville de Lyon, 2024, p. 100) and devotes an entire strategic axis of the Plan towards dynamize governance meaning a differentiation of governance practices: a stronger inter-institutional dialogue, and a collaborative network of actors, users and stakeholders. On paper, the actions seem ambitious and well-oriented, but none has been carried out yet, probably due to the novelty of the Plan. Moreover, as expected in the western, European context, these actions follow a vertical axis, from the central institution towards the local residents and associations, in which the first maintains a managerial, directive role.

7. Comparative Analysis: Key Factors in Community Engagement

The synthesis of findings from the case studies allow a comparison of participatory strategies, levels of community involvement, and the effectiveness of implemented measures.

In fact, the usage of a similar comparison tool, the Management Plan, allows to stress on similarities and to identify corrective factors. A MP evaluation tool exists, and it is provided by UNESCO in its Resource Manual "*Enhancing our Heritage Toolkit 2.0*". This paper will take into account the directives and the guidelines of this document in three main levels (Table 1): the institutional frameworks and systems; the involvement, the collaboration and the coordination between right-holders; the openness to inputs. The heritage management systems in Djenné, Yazd, and Lyon share a centralized, top-down structure.

Each country's Ministry of Culture oversees conservation through local branches: Djenné's Cultural Mission, Yazd's ICCHTO office, and Lyon's multiple institutional layers (Ministry, Region, Prefecture, Municipality). This high level of institutionalization limits horizontal collaboration (Sokka et al., 2021). A key comparison factor is the involvement of local communities and non-institutional stakeholders, which is theoretically encouraged in MPs but faces cultural and economic barriers. Another factor is the MP adaptability to integrate institutional actors, civic society, and customary practices.

In Djenné, international institutions and foreign governments, such as the Aga Khan Trust, the World Monuments Fund, and missions from Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands, are active financial and technical partners (Sacko, 2021). However, the local community plays only a passive role, limited to awareness campaigns, despite being the

Table 1 – *Management comparison table* (Authors, 2024).

WH city	frameworks and systems	present collaboration	openness and potential
Djenné	vertical (Ministère de la Culture, DNPC, Mission Culturel)	international figures (Aga Khan, World Monument Funds, foreign missions)	masons' corporation (*barey ton*), customary institutions (*chéfferie*)
Yazd	vertical (Ministry of Culture, ICCHTO local, on-site branch)	local bodies and academia, religious trusts (*waqf*)	property owners, users of the buildings and local population
Lyon	vertical (Ministère de la Culture, Préfecture, Métropole, Ville de Lyon)	institutional and technical bodies, museums and foundations, tourism bodies	local population (*conseils du quartier),* civic society associations and academia

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main actor in traditional conservation. The masons' corporation is responsible for the customary *crépissage* of the Great Mosque, but this practice is often ignored or replaced by standardized, externally funded interventions. A major example is the Aga Khan Trust's 2006 restoration of the mosque, which sparked controversy as locals felt disconnected from their own heritage (Joy, 2012). Integrating customary conservation methods into management plans presents an opportunity to recognize the role of resident-led initiatives which could enhance earthen heritage preservation.

In Yazd, the collaboration is on a higher degree, as ICHTO is actively searching relationships with local institutions and universities. In several other cases in Iran ICHTO developed a relation also with private entities and local businesses: in the Bazaar of Tabriz, the very own bazaarists became interest-holders and funders of part of the restoration. In Yazd, such a relation can be beneficial in raising awareness and capaciting local business owners, especially since the city is starting to feel the pressure of touristification (Rastegar, 2021): a new attitude towards heritage can mitigate tourism transformative pressure over the historic city.

Finally, in Lyon, the MP is included in a much larger, infra-departmental planification tool. Doing this, the Plan addresses effectively the UNESCO recommendations for the holistic approach of Historic Urban Landscape. The Plan was redacted in a joint team involving institutional and technical bodies at different levels, local foundations, cultural resources and tourism bodies. The great absent of the Plan is indeed the local community: a potential that can be expressed, as the *conseils du quartier* (district associations) and the civic society are a large part of the interest-holders. At the same time, their inclusion can implement a larger sensitisation towards earthen heritage recognition. This role can be also undertaken by academia, which can play an active part in disseminating and knowledge-sharing.

8. Conclusions: Recommendations for Broader Preventive Conservation

The evaluation of the results achieved by each city in terms of heritage preservation and community engagement highlights some common elements and some discrepancies that can be summed up in recommendations for preventive conservation. In fact, this strategy of heritage care is probably the most suitable for earthen heritage (Joffroy 2012), as it reduces the need for larger restoration interventions. Earthen heritage, with its intrinsic fragilities, need care, sometimes directly by the users: most of the damage is caused by inappropriate interventions and a lack of ordinary maintenance. This is why the local community should be at the centre of awareness raising and collaborative campaigns, to reduce the risk of damages and the occurrence of threats. Awareness raising helps preserve not only the physical building, but also the technical, traditional and cultural know-how that led to the construction of these architectures and that can promote their conservation. It is necessary to preserve both the material aspects and immaterial practices, inseparable in earthen heritage.

There is, of course, a larger and more complex discussion of the durability of actions proposed in MPs and their impact on urban heritage landscape preservation. Local communities' knowledge and expertise are often sidelined in practice, and it remains challenging to rely solely on local populations for WH preservation. The central issue, therefore, is to find the right balance between community and institutions (Joffroy, Ould Sidi, 2005) which requires time, attentive listening, careful observation, and collective reflection: elements that are often lacking.

Recommendations for enhancing community engagement and promoting participatory conservation strategies can be drafted. Inputs from local communities lead to an horizontal relationship and the identification and involvement of right-holders, in order to avoid conflicts and to provide a plurality of conservation

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practices. Academia should take an active and central role in collaborating with the institutions and in recognizing customary conservation activities that should not be deemed "inadequate". Finally, the HUL approach should be the background of the whole Plan. Lessons learned from the three cities can inform future WH properties management plans and global practices by developing insights into the role of community engagement and fostering the long-term sustainability of urban heritage.

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