

# With a World of Heritage So Rich

## Lessons from Across the Globe for U.S. Historic Preservation in its Second 50 Years

### ***The Archaeological Institute of America Site Preservation Program***

By Ben Thomas and Meredith Anderson Langlitz

### **Beyond Bricks and Mortar: The Case for Holistic Approaches to Archaeological Site Preservation**

The dramatic destruction of cultural heritage inevitably generates headlines but the quiet and irretrievable loss of archaeological sites through neglect and a general lack of proactive preservation actions goes largely unnoticed. While traditional archaeological site preservation has focused largely on conserving material remains like standing architecture and monuments, the present and future of preservation lies in holistic approaches that, in addition to preserving material remains, raise awareness of the significance and fragility of archaeological sites and involve all stakeholders, especially local communities, in their preservation and stewardship.

#### **The AIA and Site Preservation**

Established in 1879, the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) is the oldest and largest archaeological organization in North America. Since its founding, the Institute has promoted public understanding of the archaeological record; supported archaeologists and their research; and advocated for the preservation of the world's archaeological heritage.

In 2007, the AIA initiated a site preservation program with the goal of providing grants for material conservation to archaeological sites around the world. In 2009, based on experience gained over two years, the AIA adopted a new paradigm for the program predicated on the idea that material conservation was not enough to ensure long-term site preservation. Successful preservation requires all stakeholders, including local community members, archaeologists, preservation specialists, and local and national authorities to be informed and involved in the process and invested in the future of the site.

Under the new approach, the AIA stopped funding expensive, brick and mortar focused conservation projects and instead began to award smaller grants (up to \$25,000) to more holistic initiatives that proposed to use a portion of the funds for direct conservation and the rest to implement community-focused, site-specific preservation initiatives, including outreach, education, specialized training, and economic development. By 2016, under the guidelines of the revised program, the AIA had funded twenty-nine projects on five continents.

#### **Site Preservation and Local Communities**

A visit to an archaeological site is an opportunity to learn about, reflect upon, and celebrate the diversity, achievements, and shared experiences of humanity throughout the ages. Maintaining and supporting these sites takes considerable effort but the results of these actions enrich our lives. The people most directly affected by activities at an archaeological site are the members of the

local community in which the site is located. As the energies needed to conserve these sites for tomorrow increase, it is crucial to recognize that the most effective and efficient caretakers are local communities and that they must be empowered to act as the site's stewards and ambassadors.

While community engagement is a critical component of AIA-supported projects, the manner in which this is conducted varies tremendously. Working with different groups around the world has made it clear that one cannot take a "one-size-fits-all" approach to community engagement. Archaeologists, heritage experts, and community leaders must work together to craft appropriate solutions for the local area and populace. Most AIA-supported projects employ multipronged approaches that include outreach, education, and training. The examples provided below highlight the variety of approaches being employed by projects around the world.

*Outreach and Awareness Building:* At the archaeological site at Nama, Chile, ancient stone and adobe structures are falling apart due to exposure, neglect, invasive farming, and the growth of the modern town (Fig. 1). An AIA grant is being used to combat this deterioration through a multi-faceted preservation program created in consultation with the local Aymara community that will protect the archaeological remains and reconnect local residents to their cultural heritage. Components of the program include workshops to inform local residents about the threats to the site and the strategies for addressing them; dissemination of information about the site and its significance to schools, community members, and visitors; the creation of a local heritage office managed by the Aymara Community of Nama; and an archive for site-related materials.



**Figure 1:** Archaeological remains of an ancient village at Nama, Chile are the focus of a community-based preservation program (Photo: Mauricio Uribe).

*Education:* Several AIA-supported projects including those at Gault, Texas; Lod, Israel; and Little Bay, Montserrat include young people, particularly school children in excavation, research, interpretation, and conservation (Fig. 2). By engaging the next generation in the exploration, care, and protection of archaeological sites, project directors are developing life-long stewards and champions for these sites. At Umm el-Jimal, Jordan preservation efforts included the creation of a virtual museum and education center as well as a curriculum that was integrated into the national school system. In New Jersey, thousands of local students have benefitted from the Mount Vernon Historical Society's education programs about the Black Creek Site, a Lenape Indian site listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



**Figure 2:** A student guides a family through the Little Bay Plantation on Montserrat (photo by Jessica MacLean).

*Training:* In some cases, involving community members in the preservation process means providing specialized training. In Cambodia, an AIA grant was used by Heritage Watch to organize a series of outreach workshops and to provide training, including language instruction, for local residents to prepare them to be tour guides and site stewards at the 12<sup>th</sup>-century temple complex of Banteay Chhmar. Tourism at the site is expected to increase dramatically

following the completion of a nearby highway. Training local residents as guides and stewards will allow the community to benefit from the increased tourism but also put in place a group of people who understand the necessity for responsible tourism and long term preservation. Recognizing the value of the program, the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts will use Banteay Chhmar as a model for sites throughout Cambodia.

Training can take different forms. The Easter Island Statue Project created a local monitoring and conservation team that will ultimately be responsible for the long-term protection of the iconic *moai*. The California Archaeological Site Stewardship Program trains local volunteers to regularly visit assigned sites on public lands and report conditions to the local supervising archaeologist. By regularly monitoring sites, the volunteers ensure that potential problems are detected early and corrected quickly, thus limiting damage at each site. Since the program's inception in 1999, nearly 1,400 people have participated in the training workshops.

*Community initiatives:* Preservation projects are opportunities for archaeologists and professionals to work with non-specialists in local communities. The Eastville Community Historical Society, a neighborhood-based organization in Sag Harbor, New York is using its AIA grant to support the preservation and community stewardship of the St. David African Methodist Episcopal Zion Cemetery, an important heritage site that represents the growth of a working class and diasporic community of African American, Native American, and Irish immigrant residents in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Efforts include restoration workshops, an adopt-a-grave program, and public lectures aimed at both school groups and community members (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3:** Attendees learn about gravestone care and maintenance at a workshop organized by the Eastville Community Historical Society in Sag Harbor, New York (Photo: AIA/ECHS).

### **Ensuring Sustainability and Success**

Several project directors have addressed the issue of sustainability by advocating for the inclusion of archaeological sites into broader development plans for a region—an often arduous process requiring patience, perseverance, and the involvement of stakeholders on many levels. The result of these actions is that sites like Thimlich Ohinga in Kenya and Tel Mozan in Syria are being incorporated into larger plans for the creation of eco-archaeological reserves and will benefit from the overall attention and protection being extended to the larger reserves. At Stafford Civil War Sites in Virginia, designating the area around the sites as a park protects them from encroachment by a landfill and other modern developments.

Ultimately, the success of archaeological site preservation depends on the actions of all stakeholders including archaeologists, local community members, and local and national authorities. Long-term preservation is possible when stakeholders are committed to the preservation of the site and cooperate with each other to identify and implement appropriate site-specific preservation actions. Empowering local populations to engage with the preservation process is critical to the long-term protection of sites.

Projects should be regularly audited and evaluated. Successful practices should be continued and ineffective ones discarded or revised. The results (both positive and negative) should be made available to the wider archaeological and preservation communities.

### **Conclusions**

The examples of AIA projects presented above demonstrate that cooperation and creativity combined with modest funding can have a significant impact in slowing the destruction and deterioration of archaeological sites. The AIA currently supports almost 30 projects around the world. While they vary in scope and scale, each project draws upon best practices outlined by the AIA site preservation program to provide customized solutions for local needs that emphasize preservation, sustainability, education, and community involvement. These projects that are focused on outreach and engagement cost considerably less to implement than traditional large-scale conservation projects and have far-reaching impacts. They also reaffirm the idea that an informed and engaged public, particularly the local communities surrounding heritage sites, are critical for the future of preservation. As the conservation crisis deepens, a community-based approach is the only effective way to address the scale of this global problem. In the 21st century and beyond, local communities will be the stewards, caretakers, and ambassadors for the sites around which they live and the preservation community should dedicate their resources to supporting them.

## References

More information for all the programs presented above can be found at [www.archeological.org/sitepreservation/projects](http://www.archeological.org/sitepreservation/projects).



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