

World Monuments Fund Unveils 2008 Watch List

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by James Murdock

The World Monuments Fund (WMF) announced its 2008 World Monuments Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites today. This year's list highlights buildings and other heritage sites that are threatened by political conflict, unchecked development, and, for the first time, climate change.

Two places, much in the world's headlines, made this year's list for different reasons. New Orleans was cited for the ongoing risk that climate change presents to its future. "Historic neighborhoods, already pummeled by Hurricane Katrina, are now struggling to restore homes while also preparing for future challenges posed by rising sea levels and the likelihood of stronger storms," the WMF writes. Iraq, meanwhile, also earned a spot on the list: "Ongoing conflict has led to catastrophic loss at the world's oldest and most important cultural sites."

In a statement accompanying the list, WMF president Bonnie Burnham said: "On this list, man is indeed the real enemy. But, just as we caused the damage in the first place, we have the power to repair it, by taking our responsibility as caretakers of the world's cultural heritage seriously."

The WMF was founded in 1965. Since creating its biennial Watch List in 1995, more than 75 percent of the threatened sites have been saved. The text of this year's list, organized by category, follows below.

The 2008 World Monuments Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites:

Sites Threatened by Global Climate Change:

The 2008 Watch List includes a number of sites threatened by global warming.

Herschel Island, Canada, home to ancient Inuit sites and a historic whaling town at the edge of the Yukon that are being lost to the rising sea and melting permafrost in this fastest-warming part of the world.

Scott's Hut, Antarctica, a time capsule of early 20th-century exploration. Ironically, it is being engulfed by vastly increased snowfall thought to be a result of changes in the weather—changes the station was built to monitor.

Chinguetti Mosque, Mauritania, located in one of Islam's seven holy cities and one of many sites in West Africa endangered by the encroaching desert.

Sonargaon-Panam City, Bangladesh, a former medieval trading hub and crossroads of culture, whose long-neglected and deteriorating architecture is increasingly threatened by flooding in this low-lying country, one of the most vulnerable to the impacts of global warming.

Leh Old Town, Ladakh, India, a rare intact medieval city in the Himalayan region, now trying to balance development and modernization with sustainability as its traditional architecture faces changing weather patterns, including heavy rains, that it was not built to withstand.

New Orleans, Louisiana, United States, whose historic neighborhoods, already pummeled by Hurricane Katrina, are now struggling to restore homes while also preparing for future challenges posed by rising sea levels and the likelihood of stronger storms.

Sites Threatened by Conflict:

Whether past, ongoing, or imminent, conflict has become one of the most severe threats to cultural heritage.

Cultural Heritage Sites of Iraq, where ongoing conflict has led to catastrophic loss at the world's oldest and most important cultural sites, and where the damage continues.

Bamiyan Buddhas, Afghanistan, tragic illustrations of the importance of cultural heritage and the consequences of its destruction. The leftover fragments and historic context remain endangered and their future is in question.

Church of the Holy Nativity, Bethlehem, Palestinian Territories. The site of one of Christianity's oldest churches is now deteriorating as a result of modern political tensions.

Famagusta Walled City, Cyprus, featured in Shakespeare's "Othello," now neglected as political deadlock over the island's sovereignty continues.

Sarajevo City Hall, Bosnia and Herzegovina, an architectural testament to the cultural diversity of the city, damaged by war.

Srinigar Heritage Zone, India, where traditional structures built to survive earthquakes are suffering as a result of ongoing instability and conflict in the Kashmir region.

Freetown Historic Monuments, Sierra Leone. Once known as the "Athens of West Africa," the city is emerging from protracted civil war and now seeking to protect and preserve the monuments that played a part in its history, including one of the most important sites related to slavery on the continent.

Sites Threatened by Economic and Development Pressures:

Often historic sites suffer in the interest of short-term gains that result in long-term losses. New construction often means destruction of historic places. The 2008 Watch List includes a broad range of sites facing encroachment or outright destruction.

Tara Hill, Ireland, a sacred landscape at the very heart of historic Ireland, now threatened by a highway meant to ease the commute from Dublin.

Rock art at Dampier, Australia, and Macusani-Corani, Peru, where millennia of history are threatened by industrial developments that will be gone in decades.

Machu Picchu, Peru. One of the world's greatest treasures, once an isolated sanctuary, is already endangered by unchecked and unmanaged tourism, and now further threatened by even greater access to the site, with no greater protection.

St. Petersburg Skyline, Russia, a center of architectural achievement in Russia and now the proposed location for an enormous Gazprom skyscraper that will forever change it.

Old Damascus, Syria, one of the oldest continually occupied urban centers on earth, is seeing its remarkable historic center abandoned and demolished to make way for modern construction.

Hasankeyf, Turkey, where a dam that will be used for half a century will flood a site that was already ancient when Alexander the Great conquered the known world.

Historic Cities:

With contemporary culture placing more value on modernity, historic cities and their local traditions are having an especially difficult time maintaining their way of life in a rapidly changing world. Some of the cities on the list include:

Srinigar Heritage Zone, India, where traditional structures built to survive earthquakes are suffering as a result of ongoing instability and conflict in the Kashmir region.

Lima Historic City Center, Peru, founded by Francisco Pizarro in 1535 as the political and administrative center of the Viceroyalty of Peru. Its wealthy inhabitants built houses, palaces, gardens, and churches that were considered the most opulent and ostentatious in the Americas. Hundreds of monuments and thousands of residences in the city's historic center are abandoned and threatened by collapse.

Amber Town, India, a city that was first occupied as a fortified citadel in the eleventh century. With recent increases in tourism to Rajasthan, more than 3,000 visitors a day now come to the town, and old buildings are being torn down to make way for new shops and hotels.

Huaca Historic Neighborhood, Mexico, established in 1870 to provide housing for migrant workers outside the city walls of Veracruz. The housing was grouped into complexes with shared patios and interior passageways—similar to communal living ideologies that developed in Europe during the Industrial Revolution. The neighborhood is threatened by real estate speculation, lack of resources, and structural deterioration.

Kandy, Sri Lanka, rose to prominence in 1470. It was laid out as a "medieval grid city" and is unique in South Asia. All traffic through this part of Sri Lanka must pass through the town, causing congestion and pollution. These and other pressures of urbanization are taking their toll on Kandy.

Modern Architecture:

Modern buildings continue to be misunderstood, unappreciated, and therefore at high risk of demolition around the world. Nine sites, including group listings as well as individual sites, were placed on the 2008 Watch list.

Main Street Modern, United States. Once symbolizing ideals of progress and democracy, and the forward-looking philosophy of the post-War era, the civic buildings of American towns—libraries, schools, town halls—were designed in the Modern style. Now perceived as out-dated or even old-fashioned, these buildings are being demolished at an alarming rate, putting an entire corpus of important architecture in America at risk of disappearing.

Modern Shanghai, China. Within the ever-changing commercial center of China, the architecture of the Shanghai of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s—the “other” boom period—is at risk of being lost in the blur of this current phase of progress.

Florida Southern University Historic Campus, United States. The largest complex of integrally designed architecture by Frank Lloyd Wright in the world is now suffering both from neglect and the breakdown of some of the innovative materials used to create it. Built in part by students under Wright’s supervision, this extraordinary campus now has a chance to be reborn—if support for its protection can be found.

St. Peter’s College, Cardross, Scotland. Already a “Modern ruin,” it was once revered as a masterpiece of post-War architecture, but was made quickly obsolete in its intended use as a school for Catholic priests after the Second Vatican Council decided that priests should be educated within communities instead of in isolated seminaries such as Cardross.

The Salk Institute, California, United States. Its iconic view of the Pacific Ocean is threatened by new construction at the end its central courtyard.

Montemar Institute of Marine Biology, Chile, a masterpiece of South American Modern architectural invention. Its design and function are both endangered by planned renovations and additions.

Joan Miró Foundation, Spain. The youngest building on the list (1975), its innovative roof construction is now causing damage to this popular museum.

Geographical Regions of Note:**Africa and the Middle East:**

Africa and the Middle East are home to some of the oldest civilizations in the world and this list demonstrates the enormously rich and varied heritage of these regions as well as its fragile state. For the first time, the number of sites on the list in sub-Saharan Africa alone make up more than 10 percent of the total worldwide; they represent ancient and indigenous cultures as well as the complex history of the continent in the last few centuries.

Ikom Monoliths of Cross River, Nigeria, a group of 2,000-year-old, mysteriously decorated stones, possibly used as an ancient form of communication.

Historic Kilwa, Tanzania, beautiful coral structures built in this centuries-old cultural hub, now decaying and in danger of disappearing into the sea.

Wa Naa’s Palace, Ghana. An extraordinary monument of earthen architecture, this royal palace is one of few remaining examples of a rapidly disappearing Sudanese style of building.

Loropeni Ruins, Burkina Faso, the best preserved of many fortifications built in the eighteenth century to protect local villagers from marauding slave traders and bandits.

Medracen and el-Khroub Numidian Royal Mausolea, Algeria, the monumental tombs of the kings who ruled this part of North Africa before the Romans invaded.

Shunet el-Zebib at Abydos, Egypt. An architectural ancestor of the pyramid and one of the oldest mudbrick structures still standing in the world, this monument of the pharaoh Khasekhemwy, which has survived since 2750 B.C., is at risk of being lost within decades.

Al Azhar Mosque in Fez, Morocco, an austere example of twelfth-century Islamic architecture that is still an

active center of religious life in the city despite major structural damage several years ago.

The ancient baths of Qusayr 'Amra, Jordan, the remainder of the country retreat of an eighth-century Umayyad prince, now isolated in the desert. Inside, rare examples of figural Islamic art that document the early evolution of Islamic visual culture are in danger of being lost.

Bumbusi National Monument, Zimbabwe, an ancient center for religious activity and later the home of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century settlements. This is a rare surviving example of the Great Zimbabwe architectural tradition and remains a sacred site to this day. Its rock art, as well as the ruins of its stone buildings, are largely threatened by the activities of wild animals living in the surrounding Hwange National Park—elephants and buffalo push over walls, while baboons pick up and relocate stones from one wall to another.

The Americas:

From Guatemala to Queens, New York, the cultural heritage of the Americas includes a wide range of revered—and neglected—sites from Maya ruins in the jungles of Central America, to the motels of Route 66.

Tutuvuni Petroglyph Site, Hopi Tribal Land, Arizona. A unique collection of Hopi clan symbols carved into rock, this key to Native American language and culture—described as the “Rosetta Stone” of Hopi civilization—is being vandalized into oblivion.

Brener Synagogue, Moises Ville, Argentina, where Jewish settlements little known outside of the country preserve the history of an extraordinary migration to South America by Eastern Europeans who came to be known as gauchos judios, “Jewish cowboys.” The Brener Synagogue, built by this once-thriving community, now needs protection.

New York State Pavilion, Queens, New York, often the first monument seen by visitors to New York City—on the way into town from the airport—the New York State Pavilion is one of the few remaining structures built for the 1964 World’s Fair. An icon to some, an eyesore to others, this remarkable complex, including the “Tent of Tomorrow” is endangered by neglect and indifference as much as it is by rust.

Historic Route 66, United States, once the only year-round route to the West Coast, this highway evolved into an iconic getaway route, dotted with whimsical architecture and amusements as the American road trip became a right of passage. Now a pilgrimage route for modern travelers, the beloved sites along Route 66 are deteriorating and need protection.

Teuchitlán-Guachimontones Archaeological Zone, Mexico, at the center of a recently discovered and little-known Mesoamerican cultural tradition, and considered the site of one of the earliest civilizations on the continent. Located in the seismically active Tequila region of Jalisco, the site may be destroyed by the tequila industry before researchers have a good understanding of this unusual culture.

Capitanes Generales Palace, Guatemala, a royal palace built in 1549 that contained a governor’s residence, a jail, government offices, and a mint. It was damaged and repaired on several occasions following a series of earthquakes that struck the region and, following a catastrophic earthquake in 1773, was partially abandoned. The complex’s current uses include barracks and parking in the semi-destroyed palace, police quarters in the former jail, and a garden in the government offices and ruins of the mint.