World Heritage, urban design and tourism: three cities in the Middle East

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World Heritage, urban design and tourism: three cities in the Middle East, by Luna Khirfan, Farnham and Burlington, VT, Routledge, 2014, xx + 176 pp., £60.00 (hbk), ISBN 9781409424079/£60.00 (ebk), ISBN 1409424073

This is a good book for those interested in the World Heritage designation offered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), specifically as it pertains to historical urban landscapes. My few criticisms of the book are the small typeface, which makes it sometimes difficult to read, the lack of color photographs and figures, and the frequent use of Arabic or foreign words. While I can appreciate the need for Arabic terms since the book focuses on three historical cities in the Middle East, I found myself trying to figure out the meaning of certain foreign words based on the context or having to refer to the 'list of foreign words', provided at the beginning of the book. As for the lack of color photographs and figures, it made it often hard to decipher or understand the figures, especially the maps of the cities and the different designations. The black-and-white photos do not do a good job of showing the features the author would like the reader to see, such as the use of different colored stone in the restoration or conservation of one of the cities. These criticisms aside, I found the book to be a very informative and I enjoyed reading it.

The book is divided into three parts, covering context, place-making, and place experience respectively. In Part 1, the author sets the stage for the rest of the book by discussing the creation of the World Heritage List and its evolution, including some of the contradictions between tourism and designated World Heritage Sites. The three 'Un'-myths – namely unchanged, unrestrained, and uncivilized – are introduced, along with the reasons why they cannot be true given the conditions associated with tourism and place-making. The three cities that are the focus of the research are also introduced, these being Aleppo in Syria, al-Salt in Jordan and Acre in Israel. Aleppo and Acre are currently on the World Heritage List (1986 and 2001 respectively), while al-Salt is on the Tentative List as of 2004. All three of these cities are part of Greater Syria region, also known as the Levant, which includes Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and the western parts of Jordan. I found these three cities to be quite fascinating and I enjoyed learning about them.

Part 2 is about place-making. The author focuses on the documentation and value assessments of the three historical cities, with each city taking a slightly different approach. Aleppo used a spatial approach; al-Salt focused more on architectural heritage, while Acre was viewed as a layered city. Each of these approaches created different challenges and advantages. These approaches, coupled with the evolving definition of 'outstanding universal value' and inscription criteria, make for interesting case studies. The place-making strategies for each of the three cities are examined in some depth. Part 2 concludes with a discussion of the importance of public participation with regard to World Heritage planning and tourism. One of the key principles that appears to be reiterated several times throughout the book is the need to involve the inhabitants of a city to create a destination that everyone can accept. While none of the three cities did an excellent job at involving the public in the process, Acre seems to have made the best effort at including public participation and that appears to be reflected in their ability to overcome several of the other challenges faced by the other two cities.

Part 3 of the book considers the place experience, given all of the efforts and place-making strategies to become a tourism destination and be inscribed on the World Heritage List. As a tool to evaluate place experience, the author proposes a framework comprised of activities, conceptions, and physical attributes. These three concepts overlap to create the social element (activities and conceptions), cultural element (conceptions and physical attributes), and the spatial element (physical attributes and activities). At the very center of this framework is the idea of a distinctive place experience. Using this framework, the author analyzes the three cities examined in the study.
There were times when I thought the author made contradictory statements or that the writing was confusing, but I believe it may reflect the difficulties and complexity involved in shaping or creating tourism destinations based on World Heritage Sites or historic cities. One must remember that these cities are living entities – in that they have inhabitants that live, work and play there – and like any living entity they continue to evolve and change. The challenge is to balance the different perspectives – residents, businesses, tourists, government, and so on, which is no easy task. Khirfan has made an attempt to address some of these complex and interesting issues that affect historic cities as they seek to become tourist destination. This is therefore a great book for those involved with historic cities as they seek to achieve that balance between preserving those historic elements that make it an attraction from a tourism perspective, while at the same time allowing the inhabitants of the city to have a place in which they enjoy living, working and playing. I also think it is a good book for those interested in urban design and tourism in general. One can learn a lot about the future by looking to the past. If nothing else, the book is an interesting look at three historical cities in the Middle East.

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