Hollings Center Highlights: Preserving Afghanistan’s Cultural Heritage

Archaeology and the preservation of Afghanistan’s heritage is a subject that is generally absent from popular knowledge in the United States, even after more than a decade of deep U.S. involvement in the country. What knowledge exists in the public sphere tends to be rooted in the memory of the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in 2001. Despite the scars that years of war and economic scarcity have left on Afghanistan’s historical landscape, the country is chock full of rich and impressive archaeological sites and standing monuments. And while few people outside of Afghanistan know much about the country’s historic monuments, even fewer know that the US has worked closely with Afghan officials and cultural experts to preserve these sites.

To discuss these initiatives and Afghanistan’s archaeological scene, I sat down for an interview with Dr. Laura Tedesco, the State Department’s resident archaeologist and cultural heritage specialist who has spent the past three years working intimately on cultural heritage projects both in Afghanistan and from Washington, D.C. Her interview sheds light on Afghanistan’s archaeological wealth, as well as the successes and challenges of preserving the country’s monuments. The stakes are high.

Gavrilis: What is known popularly about archaeology in Afghanistan tends to be confined to the Mes Aynak site or to the ill-fated Bamiyan Buddhas. Could you tell us about some of the country’s other monuments and U.S.-Afghan initiatives to restore and protect them?
**Tedesco:** The United States has worked intensively with Afghan authorities to preserve many sites and monuments across Afghanistan. We’ve partnered with the Afghan Government and preservation NGOs based in Afghanistan to support projects in Herat, Lashkar Gah (the capital of Helmand province), Ghazni, at Mes Aynak in Logar, in Balkh province and in Kabul—namely at the National Museum of Afghanistan. In Herat, the United States contributed over a million dollars towards the restoration of the famous Qala Ikhtyaruddin, also known as the Herat Citadel. In Balkh, we are supporting archaeological investigations at Noh Gunbad, the oldest mosque in Afghanistan and possibly all of Central Asia. In Helmand, we are engaged with an Afghan owned and operated NGO to restore an 11th century mausoleum that was once linked with the Ghaznavid Empire and today serves a gathering place for local residents. At Mes Aynak, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul supported a team of French specialists in the preservation of rare Buddhist wall paintings, and at the National Museum in Kabul we are working towards the long-term preservation of the museum’s collections and expansion of its facilities so that it can house the nation’s patrimony for generations to come.

But these projects are not just limited to work on the monuments themselves. It is also necessary to raise awareness of these historical sites all over Afghanistan. For example, we funded a billboard campaign in four major cities and the major airports featuring photographs of prominent Afghan monuments with texts in Dari and Pashto. We also did a great children’s book for schools in Ghazni about the province’s historical heritage, which dates back thousands of years. Ghazni was a center of learning and art, and many early advances in Islamic science were made there. It has been designated the Islamic capital of culture in Asia for 2013. The idea behind all these initiatives was to work with the Afghan government to restore the monuments and to link Afghans all over the country to their rich history. And we were eager to show Afghans that Americans are respectful of the nation’s past and cultural diversity. These efforts are projects that celebrate Afghanistan as a nation and help promote national pride and unity among Afghans. Finally, well-preserved heritage sites can be an important source of revenue in the future.

**Gavrilis:** You mentioned Ghazni. Ghazni’s historic towers were part of an elaborate documentation initiative. At the same time, the security situation in Ghazni is not encouraging. What was it like to work in Ghazni?

The Ghazni Victory Towers, as they are sometimes called, were constructed in the 11th and 12th centuries to commemorate the power and wealth of the Ghaznavid Empire which stretched from Persia across into India during the height of the Empire’s power. The
towers stand in isolation today, and their condition has been deteriorating due a lack of resources for preservation. Before any serious preservation project can begin, international standards of preservation encourage a thorough documentation be conducted. This had never been done previously for the Ghazni Towers. So we decided to enlist the expertise of the U.S. National Park Service to conduct high-tech laser scans of the towers which create accurate drawings of the 20m-tall towers down to the millimeter (the towers once stood more than 44 meters in height but an earthquake in the early 20th century caused the top portions of each tower to collapse). The National Park Service specialists who came to conduct this work had never been to Afghanistan before, and they were doing this in July in extreme heat. It was so hot that the scanning equipment would shut down. So we had to start very early in the morning, just as the sun was coming up while the temperatures were bearable. But Ghazni is considered unstable, and so we worked under the care of the local Afghan Police authorities and under the protection of the U.S. military. We wanted to do this project for a number of reasons. One is that Ghazni is an earthquake zone. We wanted to map the towers to the last detail in case they are ever destroyed by an earthquake or in conflict, then the outcome of the scanning could at least provide the information required in the event that the Afghan government wanted the towers reconstructed.

Two young Afghan architecture students recently came to Washington to participate in the arduous task of rendering the detailed data collected from the laser scanning project. These architects worked side by side with the National Park Service specialists who had conducted the original field work in Ghazni. Although these data were gathered in a few days, it has taken two years to process it because it is incredibly intricate and labor intensive and required powerful computers. When it is finished, we will hand over the results of this work to the Afghan government’s Department of Historic Monuments and to Kabul University’s architecture faculty so they can study and archive the information.

**Gavrilis:** The Herat citadel was also part of a major restoration project. How did that differ from the work at Ghazni?

**Tedesco:** The Citadel of Herat, or Qala Ikhtyaruddin, is one of the most visible landmarks in Herat, and is central to the history of the city. It is truly one of the most impressive of the surviving citadels, or hisars, in the region. From its foundation before 500 BC as the ancient Artacoana/Aria, the town was re-built after its capture by Alexander in 300 BC during his campaign against the Achaemenids, when a citadel was probably constructed. The site witnessed the changing fortunes of various empires before being laid waste by Genghis Khan in 1225. Again destroyed by Timur in 1381, his son Shah Rukh went on to transform the citadel of Ikhtyaruddin after 1415, when the fortifications were entirely re-built with fired bricks and new buildings were erected inside the walls. The project to support the Citadel of Herat was a four-year undertaking, and the German government and U.S. government contributed equally to this undertaking. The restoration and
reconstruction of certain parts of the structure employed as many as 400 local laborers at a time, trained many in the trade of masonry and provided a boost to the local economy. It was a major undertaking with Afghan construction workers repairing walls, moving bricks, raising scaffolding and so on. Herat is a bustling metropolitan hub and we were able to do this in a way that we could not do it in archaeological sites of Ghazni. The Afghan government has yet to open the Citadel to the public on a regular basis due to administrative disagreements between the Herat Municipality and the Kabul-based government about the right to control revenue from ticket sales and responsibility for the Citadel’s maintenance and upkeep. Nonetheless, the restoration of the Citadel has been a major achievement for the Afghans who carried out the arduous work and for the United States, which supported the project. At the opening ceremony of the Qala Ikhtyaruddin in 2011, Governor Saba of Herat stated, “of all the projects the US supported in Afghanistan, this was the most important with the most impact for the people of Herat.”

Gavrili: There is also the recent competition to design a new Afghan National Museum in Kabul. Tell us about it.

Tedesco: The current National Museum of Afghanistan is an elegant building yet it is no longer able to house and protect Afghanistan’s growing material patrimony. The building was constructed around 1919 originally to serve as an administrative building for the nearby Darulaman Palace. It was never intended to serve as museum. The building lacks centralized air conditioning or heat, and during the civil war it suffered greatly in cross fighting. The roof was lost entirely, and the much of the building had been destroyed. It was rebuilt in the early 2000s, and serves today as the nation’s central museum. However, it is too small to properly house or display the collection. The Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture recognized this and suggested the idea of building a new National Museum building, one that could better serve the needs of the collection and serve as a symbol of Afghanistan’s rich past and of hope for the future. The support of public and private members of the international community is vital to this project.

The request resonated, and an international competition was organized to design a new museum. As a first step towards attracting the interest of the professional global architectural community, we sponsored a competition for the design of a new museum. One of the key things we looked at was whether designs were sustainable. We were looking for designs that were grand but also realizable. We were not looking for a museum that would be appropriate for Doha or Eastern Europe but one that would suit Afghanistan. The design had to evoke the country’s history—indoor gardens and the use of interior and exterior spaces together, tiles as decorative architectural elements and the appropriate materials in brick and wood that are found throughout the country. Because Kabul is in a seismic zone, a museum
building could not be overly tall or incorporate heavy stone towers in the design. So that was a key environmental consideration. This presented a real challenge for the architects to come up with something that was atmospheric and modern at the same time. And there are certain features that would be difficult or impossible to sustain in Afghanistan. So we were also looking for designs that could be effectively maintained in Kabul.

There was one magnificent finalist entry that envisioned a building whose silhouette mirrored the Hindu Kush Mountains and incorporated the use of natural light. It would have been an exquisite statement for Kabul, but structurally the building might have been unsound in a major earthquake. There were also many designs that did not make it because they would have been too expensive to construct and maintain. The winning entry married the use of garden space, interior and exterior spaces. It is also a relatively modest design. It does not overshadow the existing museum or the nearby Darulaman palace. It pays homage to them but supersedes them. It uses some of the same architectural language yet represents something entirely new for Kabul. The next step is to continue in our partnership with the Afghan government and for the Afghan’s to honor their commitment of pledged $2 million to the project and then launch an international campaign to raise funds to build the new museum.