



Fig. 1. House after a fire in Gjirokastra. Image by CHwB.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF NEGLECT: CONFRONTING NEGLECTED HERITAGE AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

**Jonathan Eaton**

Program Officer, Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHwB), ALBANIA  
jonathan.eaton@chwb.org

*This essay discusses how human neglect of cultural heritage can be both a result of conflict and natural disaster, as well as an exacerbating factor in such cases – compounding the difficulties and resulting in greater damage and loss. I examine the concept of neglected heritage as a long-term crisis that builds over time, often only becoming highly visible in situations of particular stress. Drawing on my own experience living in Albania and working with Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHwB) there, I discuss how the neglect of heritage can be addressed as part of the mission of institutions and organizations working with heritage in situations of conflict or natural disaster. “The Consequences of Neglect” was originally given as a presentation on 4 April 2015 during the course First Aid for Cultural Heritage in Times of Crisis, organized in Amsterdam by ICCROM and UNESCO Netherlands, with support from the Prince Claus Fund.*

**Keywords:**

neglect – built heritage – disaster – conflict – Gjirokastra

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Gjirokastra is a historic city perched dramatically on a mountainside in southern Albania. It is the kind of city that has inspired travelers for centuries, with its hundreds of towering stone houses — built in a unique architectural style that won Gjirokastra a place on UNESCO’s World Heritage List in 2005. At the heart of the city, the massive Hadëri house stands on the peak of a low ridge, dominating the surrounding neighborhoods. The house was once a shining example of Gjirokastra’s architectural wealth, but today, it is in ruins. Abandoned for years, then partially consumed by fire, Hadëri house is a symbol of the slow-moving crisis that has gripped Gjirokastra’s historic fabric. In early 2014, local authorities took the extraordinary step of demolishing parts of this listed historical building to keep it from collapsing on neighboring houses or passing pedestrians (GAZETA SHQIP, 2014). In the wake of this destruction, the organization Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHwB) decided to take action, proposing an alternative means of temporarily stabilizing the structure, in order to prevent further collapse until funds could be secured for a full restoration. Yet this intervention, critical as it is, could only act as a temporary ‘band aid’. How did the building get to this point? In fact, Hadëri house had been doomed since long before it was consumed by fire. It was the building’s neglect and abandonment years earlier that made it especially vulnerable to disaster. The following essay is a way to think about

neglect and the effects it has on heritage sites such as historic Gjirokastra. It is a reflection on the ways that we approach neglect, and particularly neglected heritage sites, as a crucial factor for long-term disaster preparedness and recovery. At the conclusion of this essay, I offer three proposals for breaking the cycle of neglect: 1) short term measures to halt further decay; 2) full restoration and revitalization; 3) acknowledging the structural causes of neglect, in order to address them in the long term. To illustrate these proposals, I draw on the case of Gjirokastra and the work that CHwB has been conducting there.

### 2. CONFLICT, NEGLECT AND DISASTERS

CHwB is an organization that sprang up in response to the targeted destruction of historic buildings as a genocidal tactic of the 1992-1995 Bosnian War (RIEDLMAYER, 2002). Following on this, CHwB was founded on the principle that the cultural and ethnic dimensions of conflict must be addressed, and one powerful way to do this is by working directly with the historic sites threatened by conflict. The organization, now in its 20th year of existence, describes itself as “dedicated to rescuing and preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritage affected by conflict, neglect or human and natural disasters” (CHwB, n.d.). In comparison to the founding activities of CHwB — restoring historic structures that were damaged or destroyed during the Bosnian War— this statement



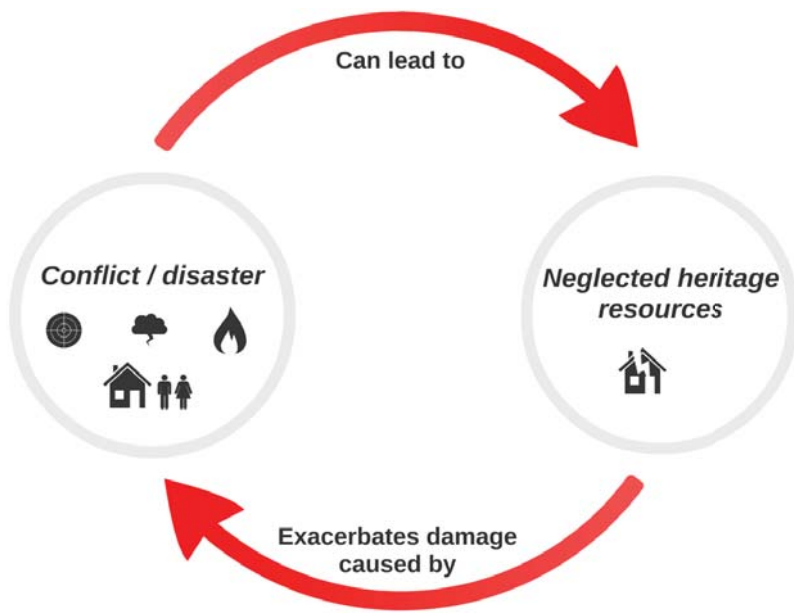


Fig. 2. The cycle of damage between conflict/disaster and neglect. Source: “The Consequences of Neglect,” presentation given during the course First Aid for Cultural Heritage in Times of Crisis, Amsterdam, 4 April 2015. Image by Jonathan Eaton.

reflects a broadening of focus, covering not only the threat of conflict, but also that of neglect or human and natural disasters. At first glance, the sentence “affected by conflict, neglect or human and natural disasters” reads well. It is even a bit poetic. But upon closer inspection, to quote Sesame Street, “one of these things is not like the others.” Conflict and disasters evoke situations where heritage is actively threatened, as a direct or indirect consequence of human action or a natural occurrence. ISIS bombs an ancient temple in Palmyra (STACK, 2015); an earthquake levels historic areas in Nepal (BARRY & NAJAR, 2015); developers pave a new highway over the remains of a Byzantine church (STEFANOVIĆ, 2015; NOVOSTI, 2015). These are immediately identifiable crisis situations. Although the appropriate level and character of the response will vary, each of these represents a discernible event that can galvanize the public to take action.

Neglect, however, can be more difficult to pin down. For one, it is harder to assign blame. Is a crumbling historic house the fault of the owners, of governmental heritage agencies, of the disinterest of the general public, of the economic situation in that city or country? Neglect creeps in over time, eating away at a historic building bit by bit, rather than dismembering it with a single bomb blast or a torrent of water. Neglect “is not like the others.” But does it belong with them? I argue in the following essay that neglect represents a long-term, slow-moving crisis that builds over time, often becoming highly visible only in situations of particular stress. Cycles of neglect are both caused

by and exacerbate the damage wrought by conflict and disaster. Therefore, breaking those cycles must be a crucial component of emergency preparedness and response, as well as post-disaster/post-conflict recovery.

Neglect holds a mutually reinforcing relationship with its more flashy companions, ‘conflict’ and ‘disaster,’ each of these playing off of and exacerbating the others (Fig. 2). When conflict or disasters (fires, floods, earthquakes, etc.) occur, people are confronted with a situation that is beyond their control. Preparedness can go a long way toward mitigating the effects of such catastrophes, but in many cases, such situations lead to heritage resources that are neglected or completely abandoned. In some instances, people must flee from fighting or relocate after their homes become uninhabitable from floodwaters or an earthquake. Immediate response resources are limited, and they must rightly go toward alleviating suffering and providing urgently needed food, shelter and medical care. For some people, the task of repairing damage to a historic home is too difficult. Others may decide in the wake of a conflict or disaster to relocate permanently to a new city or a new country. In such cases, heritage resources, particularly privately-owned historic buildings, can be left to decay.

McEntire et al. (2010: 54) point out that there exist many types and causes of vulnerability to crises, depending on both social and physical elements. Neglect bridges the two, bringing the weight of a social situation to bear on the physical integrity of historical

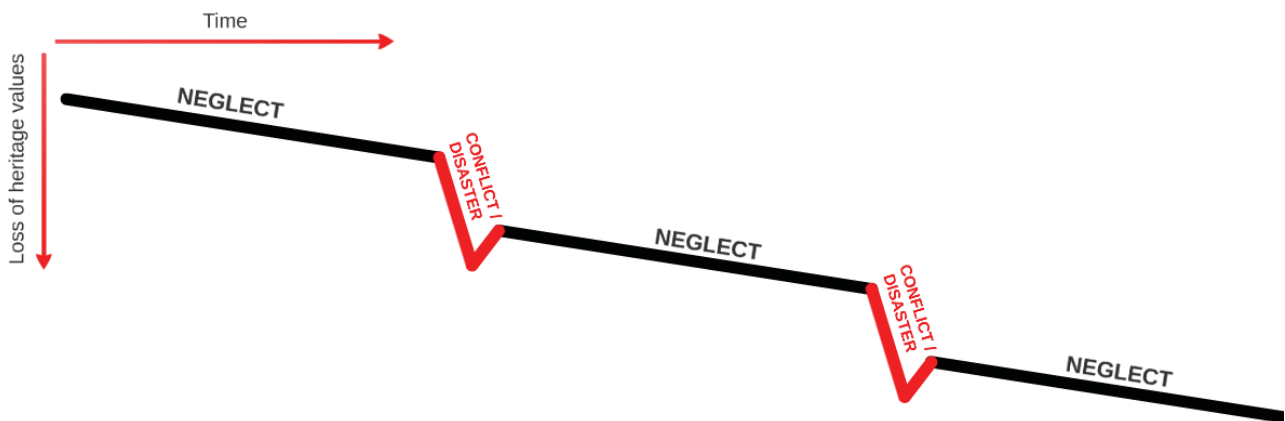


Fig. 3. The loss of heritage values over time, given the relationship between conflict/disaster and neglect. Source: “The Consequences of Neglect,” presentation given during the course *First Aid for Cultural Heritage in Times of Crisis*, Amsterdam, 4 April 2015. Image by Jonathan Eaton.

structures. “Therefore, it is argued that ‘natural disasters’ are also created by humans by increasing the vulnerability of people towards extreme physical events...” (KULATUNGA, 2010: 305). When a historic building has been neglected, whether due to conflict, disaster, economic migration or any other reason, this abandonment or lack of investment leads to a steady loss of heritage values over time as weather, accidents and vandalism take their toll.<sup>1</sup> In the case of a historic building, neglect causes its structure to weaken, making it more vulnerable to catastrophic damage in the event of conflict or disaster. Perhaps the decay of electrical wiring puts the building at risk of a fire, or a small hole in the roof has allowed water to start entering the walls. In such cases, it is only a matter of time before a heavy rain or a small earthquake causes a wall or part of a roof to collapse. If there has been a major disaster, such as a large earthquake or wide scale flooding, or in the aftermath of a war, then perhaps there would be some recovery-related post-disaster investment, which would go toward stabilizing or repairing some of the damaged heritage resources. However, in general, these investments tend to be short-lived and often do not address the full needs of damaged and neglected heritage (MACKEE, ASKLAND & ASKEW, 2014: 203; MACKEE, 2011; TABOROFF, 2003: 236-7; LOOK & SPENNEMANN, 2000 & 2001). The results of conflict or disaster often cause additional neglect, due to further abandonment or greater lack of resources, leading to more loss of heritage values over time. Without some intervention, the cycle repeats itself, and the heritage site is eventually lost for good (Fig. 3).

### 3. FALL OF THE STONE CITY?<sup>2</sup>

To illustrate the process outlined above, I would like to return to the example of Gjirokastra, Albania, a historic city and World Heritage Site where I have spent time personally and through my work with CHwB. Gjirokastra’s heritage is certainly suffering from neglect. In 2015, CHwB’s office in Gjirokastra conducted a detailed condition assessment of 650 listed historical monuments in the city (most of which are privately-owned houses). The assessment report, subsequently adopted by the Institute of Monuments of Culture in Tirana, found that a staggering 169 (26%) of these historic buildings are in poor or very bad condition, while 373 (55%) have been altered illegally. Of these, 122 have lost all or nearly all of their historical/artistic value and 170 have been transformed almost totally. Most troubling, 35 monuments are in ruins while 79 are unoccupied, meaning that 18% of the listed historic monuments in Gjirokastra are abandoned. According to the report, “vacant monuments still represent the biggest threat for monuments” in Gjirokastra (CHwB, 2015b:4). All in all, only a fraction of Gjirokastra’s historic buildings have survived in well-maintained condition from the fall of the communist regime to the present day.

Long before Gjirokastra was inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List in 2005, it was first declared a ‘museum city’ by the communist regime. Under communism, private property was abolished. So, having overturned the semi-feudal system that had provided the income necessary to maintain

<sup>1</sup> “Loss of heritage values” means the loss of any element that gives particular value to a heritage site. This value can be historic, artistic, aesthetic, social, functional, or many others, as judged subjectively by various groups of people who identify with, inhabit or otherwise engage with a heritage site.

<sup>2</sup> Gjirokastra is often known as the “City of Stone,” and *The Fall of the Stone City* is the English-language title of a novel by award-winning author Ismail Kadare, who was born in Gjirokastra.

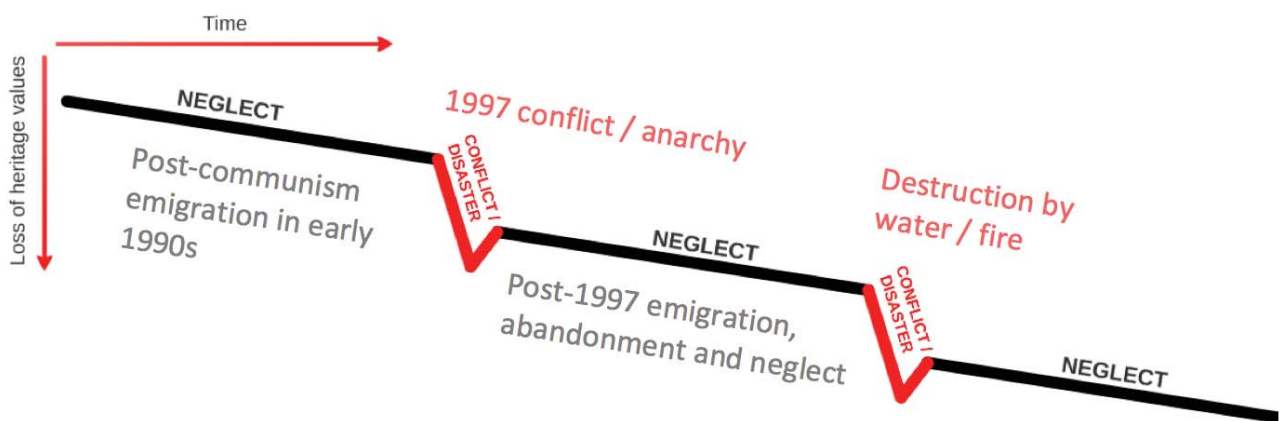


Fig. 4. The loss of heritage values in Gjirokastra, illustrating the cycles of neglect and conflict/disaster over time. Source: "The Consequences of Neglect," presentation given during the course First Aid for Cultural Heritage in Times of Crisis, Amsterdam, 4 April 2015. Image by Jonathan Eaton.

Gjirokastra's large, historic homes, the state took over this role. In order to preserve the hundreds of historic structures in the city, the regime established a large craft workshop, which operated until the fall of communism in Albania in the early 1990s. When the communist state finally collapsed, so did the entire social and economic system of Albania. The borders of the country opened, and people were able to move freely internally and externally for the first time in decades, kicking off a massive migration from rural areas to cities, from small cities to the capital Tirana and from all parts of Albania to Italy, Greece, the United States and elsewhere (VICKERS & PETTIFER, 1997). Many residents of Gjirokastra left for Greece (just 30km away) or Tirana (much further) to find work (VULLNETARI & KING, 2008: 147). This emigration left many of Gjirokastra's towering houses with no one but the elderly of the family to care for them. To make matters worse, many properties face unclear or contested ownership. In many cases, properties were returned to all the descendants of the owner(s) that had held them when they were taken by the former regime. These families, which had expanded and emigrated, often failed to agree on whether to keep these houses or sell them and who had the responsibility to maintain them — a responsibility which was de facto abdicated by the state with the return of the properties and the closing of the craft workshop. To make matters more difficult, many of the houses that were returned to their original owners continued to be inhabited by the families that were placed there by the communist regime. The occupying families often refused to maintain the buildings, since they were not their property. These factors combined to make Gjirokastra's neglected heritage more

vulnerable to decay throughout the 1990s and placed it in a weakened position when crisis struck in 1997.

In the free market capitalist frenzy that broke out following the fall of the communist regime, thousands of Albanians had invested their life savings in pyramid/Ponzi schemes. The collapse of these schemes in 1997 sparked a chain of protests and revolts that led to the complete disintegration of government and a period of violent anarchy that lasted several months before order could be restored (THE NEW YORK TIMES, 1997). During this period, heritage sites, including museums, were the focus of widespread damage and looting. In some cases (e.g. the Museum of Bajram Curri), museums that were looted in 1997 have never reopened. In the case of Gjirokastra, the events of 1997 caused damage to the city's already weakened heritage infrastructure, both through indiscriminate acts of violence and targeted looting of heritage (GILKES, 2002). The aftermath of the 1997 anarchy and conflict saw further emigration from Gjirokastra, exacerbating the neglect of the city's historic center, placing even more abandoned homes at risk of destruction by harsh weather, fire or vandalism (Fig. 4).

During the past five or six years, Gjirokastra's historic center has seen a bit of a revival. However, in many cases, particularly outside of the centrally located bazaar neighborhood, the cycle of neglect continues to affect historic houses in the city today — often with dire consequences. In 2012 the palatial Hadëri house (Fig. 5), having been abandoned for years and already crumbling from lack of maintenance, succumbed to a disastrous fire that tore through the remaining wooden interior of the house. The fire destroyed much

of the roof structure, as well as most of the rooms on the building's upper floors—further weakening a building with already precarious structural stability. Gurgai house developed a small hole in its stone roof, allowing water to seep slowly into the structure of the building. A particularly heavy rain in the winter of 2014/2015 caused the exterior face of one of the building's stone walls, already weakened by moisture, to collapse (Fig. 6). These two houses are only some of the latest in a long string of examples where disaster has severely damaged historic structures that were made even more vulnerable due to long-term neglect. And fire and water are not the only hazards facing Gjirokastra's weakened historic fabric. The city lies in an active seismic zone, as well. On the very day this essay was written, Albania experienced three perceptible earthquakes within a 24-hour period, registered by the European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre at 4.0, 3.3 and 4.8 on the Richter scale (EMSC, 2015). Unless neglect of heritage is addressed, heritage resources—from archaeological sites to castles to historic houses to museums—are at an ever-greater risk of being severely damaged and destroyed when disaster strikes.

### 3. HALTING THE CYCLE OF NEGLECT

Clearly neglect has a detrimental effect on historic structures. However, as the examples above show, the consequences of neglect are even more dire when coupled with the effects of political, social and natural disasters. How can this cycle be interrupted? What actions can counter the cycle of neglect and reintroduce resilience to historic buildings, so that they can better resist and survive when faced with a crisis? I propose a three-part approach, in light of the experience of CHWB in Gjirokastra: 1) a 'band aid' approach to shore up damaged structures and halt further decay; 2) full restoration of derelict historic buildings, combined with revitalization to give them both a function and an occupant to maintain them; 3) addressing the root structural causes of the buildings' abandonment and neglect.

Over the past several years, CHWB has tested out a few methods of halting the neglect-fueled deterioration of heritage in Gjirokastra. In 2014-2015, the organization implemented a program called 'Gjirokastra: Where the Change Begins', which introduced for the first time in Gjirokastra temporary measures to halt the further



Fig. 5 & 6. A portion of the Hadëri house in 2014 (left), two years after a devastating fire. One wall of the Gurgai house (right) collapsed in 2014 after a heavy rain. Images by CHWB.





Fig. 7. A view of Hadëri house (left) shows support structures that shore up the remaining walls. Image by CHwB.

collapse of structures in danger (CHwB, 2015a). For this pilot project, two houses were selected, each at different stages of decay. The Hadëri house, nearly completely ruined, was selected to demonstrate techniques for installing temporary cover and rebuilding or shoring up walls and arches (Fig. 7). Meanwhile, the Gurgai house, which was a few steps away from ruin but still able to be saved, was selected to repair a hole that had recently opened in its stone roof (Fig. 8). These ‘band aid’ measures are similar to those implemented in places such as Italy following the devastating L’Aquila earthquake in 2009. They are not meant to be a permanent solution; rather they only halt temporarily the buildings’ further collapse, helping the building to survive until funding can be

secured for a full restoration. However, in cases like the Hadëri house, the building remains in a semi-ruinous state, without an occupant to maintain it and without resolving the underlying causes of its abandonment. These measures address the effects rather than the causes of neglect, but they are a valuable first step in ensuring the survival of heritage resources and signaling the importance of halting their decay.

In the best case, these temporary stopgap measures are meant to be followed up by a full restoration of the building and a revitalization effort that gives the newly restored building a social and economic function to provide for its maintenance. Such a process occurred with two other houses that CHwB restored in



Fig. 8. Two photos of Gurgai house show the hole in the roof and repair works underway to restore it. Images by CHwB.



Fig. 9. View of the Babameto I house before the restoration project conducted by CHwB. Image by CHwB.

Gjirokastra, both owned by the Babameto family. The smaller house, known colloquially as Babameto II, was restored in 2012, while restoration of the larger house, known as Babameto I, was completed in 2013.<sup>3</sup> Both of these houses were abandoned and in a mostly ruined condition when CHwB undertook their full restoration. In each case, however, the goal was not merely to deliver a fully restored, but still abandoned structure. The goal was to revitalize them as living elements of the historic fabric of the community. Babameto II, located in the historic bazaar on the ‘Street of the Craftsmen’ is currently operated as an artisan center and shop, while Babameto I has become a youth hostel and cultural center (Figs. 9 and 10). In each case, an agreement was reached with the owners that the buildings would be leased rent-free for a period of five years to the local non-profit Gjirokastra Conservation and Development Organization, who would manage and maintain them. Such a process breaks the cycle of neglect by getting people back into the houses, in order to use and care for them. Addressing neglect in such a way makes these buildings much less vulnerable to conflict and/or disaster and more quick to recover afterward (KULATUNGA, 2010). Yet, at the end of the five-year period, their owners will once again take full control, and the future of these houses from that point on is less certain.

Present in this strategy is the hope and the possibility for longer-term community-based revitalization. For this to occur, the owners will need to see the benefit of continuing to use and maintain these buildings,

either as income-generators or as family residences. Other owners of historic homes in Gjirokastra will also need to see the benefits of inhabiting/employing their houses and maintaining them using the proper materials and techniques. At its core, this is an attempt to begin to address the root structural causes of the neglect that plagues historic Gjirokastra, some of which include: the cost of maintaining large historic houses, the desire for the conveniences of ‘modern city life,’ the out-migration of Gjirokastra’s citizens, particularly young people, and the lack of opportunities for work in the historic part of the city. In order to improve community resilience and aid recovery from disaster, Kulatunga (2010:308) emphasizes the importance of cultural leaders and knowledge transfer — both of which are interrupted by the long-term neglect of heritage resources. Through its work in Gjirokastra, CHwB has observed the same. In order to change the fate of Gjirokastra, in order to stop the neglect, the city’s residents have to see their historic homes as a resource, rather than a burden (CHwB, n.d.). They have to be drawn to live in the historic neighborhoods up on the mountainside, rather than in the newer concrete jungle in the valley below, and to do so without turning the historic part of the city into a concrete jungle itself.

It is understood intuitively that situations of conflict and disaster often lead to the neglect of heritage. However, prior neglect also affects heritage in times of conflict and disaster, exacerbating the damage and hindering recovery. More research is needed on

<sup>3</sup> The appellations ‘I’ and ‘II’ refer to the buildings’ respective status according to Albanian cultural heritage law, with Babameto I being a ‘first-category’ monument, which is the highest level, and Babameto II being a ‘second-category’ monument. These two tiers denote the differences in how listed monuments should be treated, in terms of maintenance and alterations (Albanian Law Nr. 9048, dated 7.4.2003, “For Cultural Heritage”).



*Fig. 10. View of the Babameto I house after the restoration project conducted by CHwB. Image by CHwB.*



how and to what extent this occurs. More research is also needed in terms of understanding the complex and varied structural problems that can lead to heritage being neglected or abandoned, in order to better recognize how to address these problems at their source. The case of Gjirokastra presents some evidence that neglect increases historic buildings' vulnerability to crisis situations, including conflict and disaster. It also provides some possibilities for addressing these vulnerabilities, through a combination of temporary interventions, restoration and revitalization. Implementing these approaches in tandem can help a historic city be more prepared to face disasters and help the communities living there

recover more quickly in the aftermath of a disaster. However, the resources to intervene in such ways are limited. Organizations such as CHwB and others around the world are trying to understand how they can most efficiently allocate their resources to fight threats to heritage. Their success will lie not only in how they address the volatile threats of conflict and disaster, but also how well they can mitigate and reverse the cycles of neglect.

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