Digitalization of cultural heritage. New approaches for documentation, preservation, interpretation and community involvement.
The case of Palestine, with potential relevance for Eastern Africa and the Western Indian Ocean.

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Local communities are usually highly interested in their heritage and motivated to engage with it. However, in many cases such involvement still fails to be implemented. This is either due to a lack of knowledge and skills, to financial limitations of the heritage projects, or to deficiencies in local capacities. It is therefore clear that community involvement does not happen spontaneously. Community involvement can empower people to take responsibility for the historic environment and to open space for socio-economic opportunities as well. Therefore, there is a need for integration of new tools, technology and research which can serve to enhance perceived value to community members towards heritage sites. Digital technologies can improve conservation documentation and preservation techniques, enhance interpretation with interactive media, enrich archives with sensory experiences and augment histories with crowdsourced data. This new approach represents potential for widening public engagement, releasing personal interests in areas such as the protection of local monuments and rational local decision-making in efforts to preserve heritage sites.

Approach and Relevance

The strength of preservation is its mission to empower future generations with the benefits of cultural heritage in full. Much of the information on historical sites are either hidden in archives and libraries, or not linked or synchronized to form a clear and full narrative. Digital technologies present tools and methodologies that can improve the understanding of culture heritage and landscapes over time. By collecting existing documentation and linking it digitally to particular locations in a virtual environment, we can represent a biography of the historical site, from which we can then begin to understand its development over time. This allows us to create a sense of time and appreciation of the past which would be difficult to grasp without the use of digital visualization. Digital documentation will aid in bringing together and managing the large amounts of information that are distributed over many national archives and unpublished reports. This concept invokes cross-disciplinary collaborations with, among others, archaeologists, historians and archivists involved in efforts aimed at communicating information about cultural heritage and based on theoretical frameworks from the digital humanities, cultural theory, history of the built environment and archaeology. The approach suggest that digital representations provides a method of incorporating heterogeneous and diverse information to present the contexts in which descriptions, texts, photographs, letters, videos and oral history can be better understood, interpreted, combined and distributed.
Objectives

This session seeks to explore the implications and challenges of digital technologies for cultural heritage. The session will focus on how digital technologies can contribute to debates about connecting communities to their landscape and build relationship between the cultural and natural past, present and future. The session will show the relevance of using innovative digital technology and practices for the preservation, presentation and sustainable management of cultural heritage and landscapes for the coastal nations of Southern and Eastern Africa. Through the session, examples, and spin-off activities will be shared from a case project from Palestine by showing the progress of introducing a digital platform based on low-cost technological solutions and Virtual Reality. The platform visualizes different aspects of history and provide a means to incorporate elements of its tangible and intangible heritage. The platform acts as a medium for the preservation, documentation, interpretation and intervention, assisting in research, education, tourism and increasing community involvements and public awareness regarding the significant value for cultural heritage sites and historically important landscapes. The session will also show how this new approach enhanced public awareness and encouraged local community to take responsibility for the historic environment.

Conclusions and outcome

Information and communication technologies allow today a far more dynamic, interactive and participative communication. Social networks, as well as “apps” for smartphones and tablets offer almost unlimited opportunities for information exchange, dissemination and circulation of information, allowing everyone to share views on the cultural heritage with a global community. It has become possible to recreate digital portals by linking information
and compare data around a historical site, which allows for inclusive understanding of cultural heritage in its
topographical and cultural contexts. It also permits multiple researchers, stakeholders and the public to contribute
to the knowledge base of cultural heritage.

**Target audience**

We welcome academics and practitioners from diverse disciplinary perspectives including architecture and
landscape architecture, archaeology, anthropology, philosophy, geography, education, ethnology, geography,
heritage, history, media and museum studies, tourism, sociology and urban studies.

**Session program**

First hour: Presentation of the project work, digital approach and outcomes, followed by discussion.

Break: 15 minutes.

Second hour: Demonstration of some ongoing projects with virtual headsets.