

2014 ICOMOS International Polar Heritage Committee Conference

The Future of Polar Heritage; Environmental challenges in the face of climate change: detection and response

By Andrés Zarankin

It was ten-thirty in the morning on Saturday, May the 24th, when I said goodbye to Marcia, my wife and Lika, my daughter, and went out toward Confins' airport in Belo Horizonte. A long day and several flights were waiting for me before I could get to my destination in Copenhagen and participate in the 2014 ICOMOS International Polar Heritage Committee Conference, which this year had as its central theme *The Future of Polar Heritage; Environmental Challenges in the face of climate change, detection and response*. The meeting, organized jointly with the *Polar Archaeology Network*, would bring together colleagues from many countries in order to exchange working experiences at North and South Poles. At midday, after nearly 24 hours of traveling, I arrived in Copenhagen and the city has welcomed me with a bright sun and a blue sky. I barely had time to leave my bag in the hotel and went straight to the IPHC delegate meeting at the National Museum of Denmark. This museum is housed in a Rococo-style stunning mansion, which occupies an entire block. The mansion had been Prince Frederick V's palace before it was settled as a museum in 1849, when paintings, crafts, ethnographic objects, weapons and antiques from Danish history started being collected. The person responsible for organizing collections back then was Christian Jurgensen Thomsen, a central name in the history of archeology. His work, first in the Royal Commission for the Preservation and Collection of Antiquities and later at the National Museum of Denmark, allowed the development of the three ages system (stone, bronze and iron), one of the direct antecedents for the establishment of classificatory procedures seeking to understand the human process of 'evolution' – in other words, the beginning of professional archaeology.

I had just entered the museum when I met with IPHC's President Julian Bickersteth and general secretary Nigel Watson, who greeted me while finishing the preparations for the delegate meeting. In this reunion, for members of IPHC only, several issues were discussed, like the activities conducted by Julian Bickersteth, Susan Barr and Nigel Watson as representatives of IPHC.

At nine in the morning on Monday, it was the official opening of the event, with the words of the National Museum Director, Per Kristian Madsen, and the Director of the Greenland National Museum Director, Daniel Thorleifsen (co-host), Max Friesen chair of the Polar Archaeology, and Julian Bickersteth, followed by a lecture of Professor Bo Elberling on Climate Change and the vulnerability of our Arctic Heritage.

The discussions at IPHC meeting were divided in two axis: a) *Detection*; in which was pointed ways to detect climate change on Polar cultural heritage and its consequences, b) *Response*; focused on solutions to reduce the impact of this phenomenon.

Most of the works in the 'detection' axis presented in the first day were centered in Greenland, but there were also some presentations about Alaska and Antarctica. Several research projects were the result of many years of monitoring and showed that some of the greatest threats to

Polar heritage are associated with erosion objects and structures erosion, permafrost melting, rising of sea levels, among others. There were also discussions about techniques to measure climate changes and their effects on heritage. Another issue in discussion was Polar tourism, which has little to do with climate change, but also brings impact to the field.

On Tuesday, it was the day to discuss the second axis themes, i.e., how to respond to climatic changes and the ways it affects heritage. The answers were focused in two main points. In one hand, an attempt to increase conservation and preservation projects specific for each place (a good example is the Scott Huts (by New Zealand) and Mawson's huts (by Australia)). In the other hand, it was stressed the benefits of applying new register technologies, like 3D scanners. These would not only allow information to be saved, but also turns out to be a way of establishing a closer relation to public sphere. For instance, it would be possible to create virtual sites enabling online visitors to have a different contact with Polar heritage.

A particular point I consider to be very interesting was a discussion about what was called 'Heritrash'. These are the detritus of human activities that exist in polar regions. Some people say they are no more than garbage, but some say they are a potential source of information or an unrecognized heritage. A clear case is the twenty-century whaler's stations in the South Pole (including sub-Antarctic region). Are they garbage or heritage? Should they be conserved or disposed as "contaminants" of the place?

In the end of the second day, Julian had the hard job of closing the congress and, in his reflections, he has done some connections between questions shared by researchers of both Arctic and Antarctic regions, like geopolitics issues, climatic changes, fund research for conservation and preservation of Polar heritage and, finally, that basic question of what should be conserved and treated as priority: the endangered or the meaningful? These questions will surely be discussed in future events.

On Wednesday, there was a tour in the National Museum Conservation Center. Placed in an old factory, it is one of the biggest centers of conservation and deposit for collections in the world. All of us were flabbergasted by the professionalism and wonderful work that is done in this place. From there, we went to the Open Air Museum, which has more than 52 domestic structures from several historical moments and regions of Denmark and surroundings. Amazing!

On Thursday, I leave Copenhagen. Behind me, four days of intense and prolific discussions, in which was the biggest conference to date of IPHC until now both in amount of participants and in countries involved. Without a doubt the election of the Denmark National Museum was the right one. All organization was built perfectly and there was no unforeseen. I consider the results of the meeting very important and encouraging. There's a clear consciousness of the challenges we have ahead and an agreement on how to face them.