

*Facing Our Challenges*

Dear Friends,

Two influential conferences that bracketed my month of March were a study in contrasts. For three intense days at the X (tenth-year) Global Baku Forum in Azerbaijan, discussions were about the critical issues of world peace, energy reliance, and leadership and how they interrelate. How the conflict in Ukraine has revealed a critical food reliance in Africa and triggered Europe's about-face from dependence on Russian oil; the growing role and ambitions of Azerbaijan, the conference host, to be a lead world producer and broker of energy; how the 2030 energy conversion deadline is looming without substantial progress; the new alliance in the Middle East between Iran and Saudi Arabia brokered by China; what drives the emergence of demagogues and what can we do to affect all this; the failure of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks; reform of the UN Security Council; and are the US and China in a cold war?



These dizzying topics were led by world leaders such as the courageous Viktor Yushenko, former President of Ukraine; the Saudi diplomat HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal bin Saud; and Karry Kennedy from the US arguing passionately for human rights. All this thanks to the vast rolodexes and sage views of conveners Ismail Serageldin, Founding Director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, who made meaningful comments on many topics; and Vaira Vike-Freiberga, former President of Latvia, adding wise observations about the character of Russia's aggressive leader. The event closed with an energetic debate among young leaders in their twenties presenting what they might propose to do about these immense and urgent issues.

At the other end of the spectrum and the month, the increasingly influential TMM-CH Conference (standing for *Transdisciplinary Multispectral Modelling and Cooperation for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage*) was held in Athens, convened by Antonia Moropoulou of the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA). It took a granular look at how emerging technologies can be appropriated to serve the needs of conservation. Conservation practitioners, scholars and European officials came together to talk about alignments between the built environment and the Green and Blue climate goals, and how the heritage conservation field can address the pervasive issue of conflict and its social disruptions. Hundreds of technical presentations in breakout sessions drew a global virtual audience of tens of thousands of listeners-in, according to the conference organizers.



What role does culture play in charting world affairs and how do cultural institutions, professionals, and creatives contribute to shaping a world in dynamic transition? At the Baku forum, the role of culture was not a topic, but it was a subtheme as participants explored their deep yearnings to find a way back to stability, self-sufficiency, and balance in their communities. At the Athens gathering, heritage as a tool for development was the explicit or implicit topic of every session, but the sessions themselves often dwelt on esoteric local solutions and demonstrations.

Culture at its deepest level can be defined as personal identity – the way our lives and personalities are shaped by our experiences. A group of people who recognize, acknowledge and accept one’s identity and its influences constitutes a community. Seeing the world from this perspective makes it possible to envision how an individual person could affect positive, meaningful change. The Baku forum brings together people whose vision is to orchestrate that change through broad actions on a global stage. The TMM-CH Conference gathers people who are fashioning intricate solutions to fit a specific local environment, situation or place. From their different perspectives, they seem to be acting in unison.

My own focus, as CHiFA followers know, is on positioning cultural heritage as an asset for creating sustainable local environments. In disinvested communities, political leaders rarely see heritage as such an asset. If anything, degraded historic environments are seen as obstacles to community wellbeing and prosperity. The many arguments to the contrary – from the tangible value of the energy embodied in existing buildings to the attractive power of creative industries in a community – are not being heard when opportunities for huge development schemes seem more compelling.

Whether case by case or through bold, sweeping changes of perception, we need to change this mindset. Oddly enough, the horrifying violence and conflict that we are experiencing today may be the change agent. Conflict creates devastation, and devastation requires rebuilding. If this means starting over from scratch to recreate a culture that will help a given community to grow and thrive, the seeds of opportunity may be ready to sprout. The theme of this year's TMM-CH conference, "Recapturing the World in Conflict through Culture, Promoting Mutual Understanding and Peace" may not be so far-fetched.

Bonnie Burnham  
President  
Cultural Heritage Finance Alliance  
[bburnham@heritagefinance.org](mailto:bburnham@heritagefinance.org)

---

CHiFA | PO Box 231211, New York City, NY 10023

[Unsubscribe \[bburnham@heritagefinance.org\]\(mailto:bburnham@heritagefinance.org\)](mailto:bburnham@heritagefinance.org)

[Constant Contact Data Notice](#)

Sent by [bburnham@heritagefinance.org](mailto:bburnham@heritagefinance.org)