

Collecting with(in) the city

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Collecting with(in) the city

**CAMOC & COMCOL
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Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum
Photo: Francoise Boleschowski



Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum by Marysa Otte
Photo: Francoise Boleschowski

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
Words from the Hosts	8
Keynote lectures	12
Collecting Activism	26
Digital City Experiences	44
Practices of (co)curating	62
Working with artists	116
Decolonial practices	130
City identities and conflict	152
Oral histories revisited	174
City Identities – plural narratives	188
Senses	210
Folk Perspectives	266
Rapid Ideas Collection - participants reactions	284

Folk Perspectives

Saryan Museum arising out of ashes of Hargeisa

Saeed Husein

Biography

I was born in Hargeisa Somaliland in 1953, I came from middle class family in the context of my community. I was enrolled in school on 1961 and had completed my primary education in 1968, I Finished my high school education in 1973. During this period my country Somalia was ruled by Marxist regime and students were forced to conscription. I escaped from the program and travelled to UAE in search of employment, after 2 years I applied to the State University of NEWYORK that offered me an acceptance letter and visa procedures. I graduated 1980 and proceed home so from there on; I was employed by the United Nations at various occupations on development & Humanitarian services. I retired on 2016 and I established SARYAN Museum as founder and Director of the museum. I am currently working on my Museum and par time job with government on consultancy basis, my interest falls on Museum Management and; ICOM –Comoc participations if I am invited.



Introduction

In 1988, after a long lasting bitter civil war occurred between the Military Socialist Somalia Government, and the resistance armed groups (SNM); Hargeisa city was demolished by carpet bombardment of the Somalia's National Army Air force, and within days, Hargeisa turned into rubble and ashes. Jets, piloted by mercenaries, were taking off from Hargeisa airport to bomb down town Hargeisa. As a result of these indiscriminate actions, at least 400,000 of Hargeisa residents fled to Ethiopia for safety of their lives, and crossed the border to Ethiopia as a safe haven. During the course of the shelling an estimated 50,000 were killed and over 80% of the residential areas, hospitals, water system and electricity were devastated.

How the museum started

The essay focuses on the scenarios before and after establishing the Saryan museum. Hargeisa City was flourishing, it was a commercial city centre that had links with many other African, Asia and Europe cities, it had international banking services, schools, libraries, mosques, theaters and City Centre Museum. Sadly, all of a sudden, these grand developments instantly disappeared, Precious artifacts, Arts, documents, valuables and libraries were lost.

Meanwhile, looking at the aforementioned scenario, I was hurt, and could not bear any longer to observe, and tolerate how the city that I grew up in ended up into this critical situation. Interestingly the notion of recording about the unique history of Hargeisa was spinning in my head for a good number of years. Finally, my inner emotional feeling gradually transformed into reality. When I retired from my long professional services with the United Nations, and I saved enough to start the project, I decided to allocate some of my pension savings to establish a private museum in Hargeisa, Somaliland. My contribution was not a "show case" or, but rather a voluntary service and dedication to restore history for the coming generations.

After the war, Hargeisa Somaliland's capital no longer had a Museum or places of historical interest. Therefore, establishing a museum became a necessity. In addition, a new concept in Somaliland, why? Because the war effects changed social values, it created unexpected generational gaps. And the indigenous Hargeisa residents were overwhelmed by a massive new influx of displaced rural villagers and gripped the land. The villagers had an opportunity to spread and occupy wherever they could settle including government buildings including the old museum building although prior to that physical damage it was looted by the defeated by the government forces like they did to the theatre, and libraries. During that period the vast majority of Hargeisa residents dispersed to all over the world.

Therefore, as unforeseen societal changes came into being, nevertheless, to overcome all challenges and to revive remnants of civilization, the Saryan Museum establishment as 2017 was imminent. The absence of museum(s) for a long time cost Somaliland the loss of its historical and cultural heritage. Somaliland lost artifacts of incalculable value. Therefore, urgent needs to act swiftly to capture the narratives, collect, protect, preserve and promote the history and culture of Somali society. This applies to all the Somali peoples occupying the Horn of Africa.

The establishment of a museum allowed for the safeguarding of Somali heritage and stopped the illicit trafficking of cultural property that has gone on unabated for years. As mentioned before, the areas mostly affected by this widespread devastation during the conflict included the Museum, archives and places of marked historical moments and archaeological sites of great interest. Therefore, under the prevalent situation, Saryan Museum attempted to initiate extra efforts to ensure, and address the gravity of the situation at the same time explored remedial solutions to impede further damages.

The Role of the Saryan museum

Saryan museum to cope with the situation it played and plays vital angles pertaining educational and communicative roles in the country included researching. The Saryan Museum is a repository of collections of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, expertise and skills. "The museum therefore, has the duty to make its resources available to all potential users. The delivery of these resources becomes part of the museum's educational activity.



Material re-collection:

While most of the lost treasures cannot easily be retrieved, but the Saryan Museum has committed to collecting, and securing the remnants of the national wealth for the benefit of the coming generations and for prosperity. It also desires to restore, salvage the affected areas, train personnel (custodians) and facilitate capacity building for other heritage managers in the country; however, the museums is hampered by lack of funds to pursue at higher expectations.

At any rate, while the conditions unchanged, the Saryan Museum succeeded in raising funds to preserve up to 2,500 objects ranging from ethnographic objects, archives, documentations, historical maps, archives, coins, photos of celebrities, photos of heroes and citizens. The museum occupies on a land space donated by the government to an area of 3,000 Sq meters and it facilitated two large display halls. Reception office. Administration offices, theatre with capacity of 150 audience, library building and recreation garden.

This creation of the museum has given me personally an immense self-satisfaction, and secured a needful achievement for my people. Nevertheless, the other side of the coin was annoying, which showed contradictory opinions.

Challenges and Critical Views:

The critiques' opinions specifically, emanated from close relatives, who innocently blamed me that I wastefully invested my money where it was not necessary. Instead, they suggested business enterprise. Anyway while the ideas from traditional kinsmen had its own concern, yet their naïve thoughts looked weird to me, nevertheless it never stopped my dedication to continue the journey as long as my vision stands for higher achievements.

On the contrary all the negative attitudes did not last long, (seeing is believing), when people saw that the number of museum visitors is marginally growing, particularly from the school children visits, Somaliland diasporas holiday makers and also the international tourists frequently paying visits. While the visitors' turn out of the museum was increasing for a good period, However it was unfortunately impacted by the pandemic of Covid 19, same like it impacted all the other museums in the world.

The Social Role of the museum.

The Saryan Museum witnessed of the communal change. Its approach has been to identify the micro changes in the community, identifying their causalities and extrapolating the effect of these changes. The Saryan Museum proactively acts to justifiably inform and analyze the changes occurring. It has taken up the role of a thought leader and chaperone to the community for which it serves. It has provided an apolitical platform for intellectuals to propagate their message. It has also sought to reinvigorate Somali culture and to inculcate a sense of identity and pride in it. Despite the challenges, City Museums must be proactive and must find ways to help their communities transition, bridge factious antagonisms and build an environment that encourages the pursuit of shared communal progress.

The Saryan Museum objectives were not totally confined with the collection and safeguarding tangible treasure & wealthy artifacts only, but it gave important community interactions, and collected stories in open air and even conducted under the tree sessions. One of the most exciting stories Saryan collected is an extract about consciousness related charges of an advocacy intellectual group from Hargeisa. The details of the story pertains to how the imprisonment of qualified intellectuals who voluntarily engaged in self-help schemes of Hargeisa hospitals in 1982, for patriotic intentions sabotaged and rewarded them to long years of imprisonment. Saryan museum hosted the survivors for group discussions of their experiences in the prison. They were actually released in 1989, however after long years elapsed we got an opportunity to assemble at Saryan Museum compound under an acacia tree and chatted.

Within the conversation, it was noted that the prisoners experienced horrible mistreatments including physical and psychological torture occurred during the solitary confinement environment. Meanwhile the most attractive piece of the discussion entails as to how smartly the group developed communication links among themselves, in the following paragraphs I intend to paraphrase about a book called the mourning tree authored by one of the inmates called Mohamed Barud Ali. Following is an excerpt from his book Mourning tree.

“Walls Have Ears.” Quoted.

“When you have so little, you find joy in insignificant things,

The most important and useful means of communication between us was through the cell walls. We use to knock off the walls of adjacent cells to inform neighbors that we are still alive. The invention of an alphabet similar to the Morse Code started to develop from this. An inmate called Yusuf Gydh was familiar with Morse Code. There were two sounds one could make on the walls. A higher frequency rap made with knuckles of the middle fingers and a low drumming note produced by the side of the closed fist. The high frequency note represented (.) and the low one (O).

For example, good morning (o.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.;ooo.o.o.o.o....o.o.o.....o...o.o.o) it took us a few hours to learn this alphabet and since we have nothing else to occupy us. We were able to use it the same day.” “As the writer told me, they continued daily conversation through the wall for almost 7 years they remained in prison”

*I believe, this valuable piece of communication, and discourse among the group experience shared in solitary confinement cells, reflect brilliantly, how human intellect is capable of producing a significant method of survival in difficult situations As the conversation proceeded between Saryan Museum and the group. They told us that through the wall information transmission they benefitted a lot to an extent they read books. Apart from the human touch, they also noted that they obtained spiritual uplifts, endurance, patience, prayers’ and sense of being inside the cell. I asked them how other inmates outside their group survived, and they told

me, all other prisoners were individuals arrested for various reasons, therefore, they could not communicate for obvious reasons, due to lack of trust and confidence building, and most of them had no means of communication.

Museums and Community Social Responsibility: The Role of the Museum in Human Rights Advocacy

Saryan museums are more than just institutions that preserve history, culture, and heritage; they serve as spaces for critical engagement, education, and social responsibility. By curating narratives of injustice and resilience, the museum fosters awareness, encourages dialogue, and inspires action on human rights issues. We have the power to connect past struggles with present realities, helping societies reflect on their values and the lessons learned from history.

For instance, Saryan Museum’s exploration of the horrific experiences of UFFO prisoners highlights the vital role museums play in confronting abuse, injustice, and inequality. Through exhibitions, storytelling, and interactive discussions, museums ensure that such historical atrocities are neither ignored nor forgotten. By documenting these events, they contribute to truth-telling, justice, and the collective memory of a society. This helps prevent the repetition of past wrongs and reinforces the importance of accountability in governance and human rights protection. Some critics argue that human rights advocacy falls outside the traditional mandate of museums, viewing it as political interference. However, this perspective overlooks the evolving role of modern museums, which no longer function as passive archives but as active participants in shaping societal discourse. Around the world, museums have become platforms for amplifying marginalized voices, addressing difficult histories, and confronting contemporary injustices. Whether through exhibitions on colonialism, genocide, or civil rights movements, museums play a crucial role in fostering a more informed and conscientious society.



Source from: Ali Eid Omer

Ignoring human rights violations or failing to address them within museum spaces risks perpetuating silence, impunity, and historical erasure. Museums should not shy away from tackling difficult subjects but instead embrace their responsibility as agents of education, awareness, and advocacy. By doing so, they reaffirm their commitment to truth, justice, and human dignity, ensuring that future generations learn from the past to build a more just and equitable world.

Children's Artifacts & Drawings

To foster an engaging and enriching environment for children, Saryan museum has dedicated a special space for artistic and creative activities, including drawing and other forms of artistic expression. This initiative aims to enhance children's enjoyment, satisfaction, and talent development while encouraging them to interact with the museum in a meaningful way.

The children's participation in museum activities has garnered significant attention from local kindergarten and primary schools, many of which have incorporated visits to the museum into their educational programs. These visits provide young learners with hands-on experiences that complement their classroom education, allowing them to explore history, culture, and artistic expression in an interactive setting. Through drawing and artifact-related activities, children develop a deeper connection with their heritage while refining their creative skills.

Additionally, the museum has become a popular destination for children from the diaspora who visit during holidays. These young visitors show great enthusiasm for the museum experience because it offers them a dual advantage. Firstly, they gain an opportunity to learn about their ancestral history, cultural heritage, and traditional ways of life. This helps them bridge the gap between their current environment and their roots, fostering a sense of identity and belonging. Secondly, they actively participate in the museum's children's programs, where they can showcase their artistic talents and engage in creative activities alongside local children. This exchange of experiences enriches their understanding and appreciation of their heritage while fostering cultural connections between local and Diaspora communities.

By providing a platform for artistic expression and cultural learning, the museum plays a crucial role in nurturing young minds, instilling a sense of pride in their heritage, and inspiring future generations to engage with history and the arts.

Conclusion

The museum attracts visitors from all over the world, with the majority coming from the United States, Europe, and Asia. Visitor evaluations consistently rate the museum between 3 and 5 out of 5, reflecting their varying interests and experiences. The feedback collected serves two key purposes: it provides valuable suggestions for improving displays and coordination, and it enhances staff morale by recognizing their dedication to excellent service.

Folk Perspectives

Diving into the living heritage of cities: The Case of Old Tbilisi

Ana Shanshiashvili

Biography

PhD Art historian, Ana Shanshiashvili is a founder and the Executive Director of Georgian Heritage Crafts Association uniting more than 300 artisans from different regions of Georgia. As a Silverware and Crafts Researcher, she is an invited lecturer, participant of a number of international projects, conferences, symposiums, she is the curator of a number of exhibitions, craft festivals and the author of several articles and books on the history and present of Georgian crafts. In 2019 she was a Director of Georgian State Museum of Folk and Applied Art. In 2016-2022 She was a National Board Member of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Georgia. Since 2020 Ana has been leading the documentation projects including the production of short video stories about the living heritage in Cities. Ana is a Member of the Cultural Council of Michelangelo Foundation; Board Member of ICOM Georgia and recently joined the UNESCO Global network of ICH Convention facilitators.



The Multi-Ethnic Tapestry of Old Tbilisi

Tbilisi has evolved over the millennia as a vibrant multi-ethnic city, which has been a cultural and economic centre of the entire Caucasus for centuries. The city especially flourished in the 19th century, when it became the hub of craftsmanship and trade, where local marketplaces - the culturally diverse bazaars brought together the different types of income generating activities, ranging from hairdressers and bakers to urban musician bands performing on the wedding and festivals, water- and wine-sack carriers, sulphur baths' scrubbers, craft workshops producing and selling the plethora of handmade goods and vendors offering customers clothes, shoes, various types of textiles, rugs & carpets, ceramic tableware, equipment, gold, silver, stone and wood works of different origin from local to Armenian, Persian, north Caucasian and beyond.

After Sovietization the rapid industrialization accelerated rural to urban migration and subsequently, the change in the lifestyle and cultural practices. The culture of artisanal guilds, local festivals and urban folk performances gradually became adapted to the new context, shifting from streets to the stage, from workshops to professional schools and academies. The most dramatic changes, however, are related to the eventual demise of the Soviet Regime in the late 1980s, followed by the decades of transitioning as a post-Soviet society. Many of Tbilisi's inhabitants, like other Georgians, have been obliged to partake in diverse income-generating activities to find new ways of supporting their families through difficult periods, and in many cases, to settle in the city through rural to urban migration, bringing their traditions with them. And today, new construction projects in the old part of the city and the growing tourist demand in the recent years has led to higher costs of living and growing gentrifications, which obviously, have a strong impact on the local living heritage on one hand giving impetus to certain developments such as re-emergence of crafts workshops and small marketplaces, but on the other hand, bringing on additional threats of commodifying the existing living heritage in Old Tbilisi.

Empowering Communities as Stewards of Their Heritage

The project "Community-based Inventorying of ICH in the Urban Context of Tbilisi, Georgia" was implemented within UNESCO's "Intangible Heritage and Creativity for Sustainable Cities" Program and received generous funding from Yong Xin Hua Yun. This initiative sought to address several interconnected goals: pilot testing UNESCO's community-based inventorying methodology in Old Tbilisi, building local stakeholder capacity in community-based inventorying techniques, identifying key challenges facing Living heritage in urban contexts, developing recommendations for safeguarding income-generating activities, and raising public awareness about the contribution of Living heritage to sustainable urban development. At its core, the project aimed to empower local communities to identify, document, and promote their own cultural heritage, focusing particularly on traditional income-generating activities including crafts, performing arts, festivals, and other traditional occupations in Old Tbilisi. This community-centered approach represented a significant departure from top-down heritage management practices, acknowledging that cultural heritage can only be effectively preserved when the communities who practice and transmit these traditions are actively involved in the process.

Adapting to Challenges

The project unfolded in several stages, beginning with broad stakeholder engagement and capacity building. The official launch in November 2020 brought together 40 participants representing diverse sectors including heritage workers, professional associations, museum representatives, non-governmental organizations, universities, and local authorities. This initial brainstorming session identified more than 15 cultural elements that would later be included in the inventorying activities.

However, the project team immediately faced significant challenges when a COVID-19 lockdown was announced across Georgia just one day after the launch event. This necessitated a rapid pivot to digital platforms and alternative methodologies. The team developed a comprehensive plan for online activities, demonstrating remarkable adaptability in the face of unprecedented circumstances.

Despite the restrictions, the team organized a fieldwork practicum as a part of the training program led by the international facilitators, where participants could interview living heritage practitioners remotely, with technical support provided by the organizational team while adhering to COVID regulations.

Extensive Documentation Efforts

The project team undertook extensive database compilation, drawing from multiple sources including GHCA's database of craftspeople and local museums, ICOMOS Georgia's list of endangered skills practitioners, the State Folk Centre's records of musicians and instrument makers, the other professional Association's contacts, and local ethnic diaspora networks.

The role of local museums, such as the Museum of Musical Instruments or the Mirza Fath Ali Akhundov Museum of Azerbaijan Culture in Tbilisi, deserves special mention. These institutions maintain vital connections with relevant musicians, luthiers, and practitioners, serving as important repositories of knowledge and artifacts upon which the project was built. Their collections preserve cultural heritage, while their networks of relationships with artisans and performers create living bridges between historical traditions and contemporary practice. By collaborating with these institutions, the project gained access to authentic source materials, expert consultation, and community connections that significantly enhanced both its scholarly foundation and practical implementation.

This comprehensive approach resulted in the identification of approximately 40 living heritage elements and a database of more than 500 bearers in Tbilisi.

This meticulous documentation process culminated in the 11 inventory entries for potential inclusion in the National Inventory and production of 20 short videos¹ featuring living heritage bearers discussing their work, hereditary traditions, challenges, and visions for the

future of their professions. These videos covered diverse traditions including metal inlay, rug and carpet trade, bath-related traditions, Georgian bread making, duduk and argan music, goldsmithing, blacksmithing, musical instrument making, wooden balcony construction, and the Ashug (Ashik) tradition.

From Documentation to Safeguarding: Practical Recommendations - As the project approached completion, a wrap-up workshop brought together local facilitators, the project team, researchers, and practitioners to discuss lessons learned and draft recommendations for safeguarding measures. The discussion centered on challenges specific to urban environments, strategies for reaching wider audiences, enhancing recognition of bearers, and addressing transmission challenges.

The project results were presented to the wider public in a hybrid format presentation. To maximize public engagement, the team organized an "TBILISI ICH WEEK" online film festival in July 2021, sharing all 20 videos across multiple platforms including the GHCA website, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and specialized social media groups focused on Old Tbilisian themes.

Practical Recommendations

Based on discussions with the community, facilitators, and researchers, the project team developed detailed recommendations for safeguarding the living heritage of Old Tbilisi. These recommendations included incorporating endangered urban living heritage elements in the National Inventory list, supporting apprenticeship programs and integrating living heritage elements into formal and informal education, recognizing bearers through honorary citizenship or national living treasure designations, raising public awareness through media outreach and festival participation, and enhancing income-generating activities through product marketing support and connections with ethical travel companies.

The knowledge and experience gained through this project helped us find answers to several critical questions:

What are the specific issues when approaching living heritage in cities?

Unlike rural areas, cities are vibrant centers characterized by significant migration and dynamic cultural exchanges, which directly affect living heritage transmission. In urban environments, the influx of new cultural elements occurs continuously, creating both challenges and opportunities for traditional practices. The rapid pace of urban development often threatens traditional spaces where heritage practices once flourished. Therefore, when approaching living heritage in cities, we must consider these migration dynamics, the pressure on traditional spaces, and the constant evolution of urban cultural landscapes. The heritage elements themselves frequently adapt to these changing conditions, sometimes blending with new cultural influences in creative ways that demand flexible safeguarding strategies for living heritage.

How to identify living heritage elements and reach out to bearers in urban environments?

Identifying heritage bearers in densely populated, multi-story apartment districts presents significant challenges, as modern urban architecture often restricts the traditional connections between neighbors. Some areas of Old Tbilisi, where inner courtyards and connected balconies unite various apartments, still maintain the tradition of close neighborhood relationships that facilitate cultural transmission. However, in most urban settings, these community spaces are disappearing.

To effectively reach bearers in urban contexts, multiple data collection methods must be employed:

- Face-to-face meetings with community members in remaining traditional neighborhoods
- Engagement with professional cultural institutions with established networks
- Collaboration with various diaspora community representatives who maintain connections to their heritage
- Utilizing social media and digital platforms to identify practitioners

What could be the role of museums in safeguarding living heritage in cities?

The role of museums with specific profiles—such as those dedicated to musical instruments, folk art, or specific ethnic groups—is immense in maintaining vital connections with relevant musicians, luthiers, and practitioners, serving as important repositories of knowledge. To fulfill this role effectively, museums must embrace a more dynamic, community-centered approach to knowledge preservation and transmission, which includes:

- Living Connections with Source Communities - maintaining ongoing, reciprocal relationships with source communities. Developing exhibitions that demonstrate traditional techniques, explain cultural contexts. Creating opportunities for community members to interact with collections, share knowledge, and participate in programming, including access to/use of museum collection as a source for inspiration.
- Active Knowledge Preservation – moving from passive repositories to active knowledge preservation centers that capture the stories, techniques, and cultural contexts that give objects meaning.
- Educational Programming and Knowledge Transmission- Employing intangible cultural heritage bearers as teachers and educators; This might include master classes, workshops, or residency programs. Creating programs that facilitate knowledge transfer between older practitioners and younger community members;

- Community-Centered Commerce i.e. Museum shops prioritizing selling authentic crafts made by traditional practitioners from relevant communities, providing economic support while maintaining cultural authenticity. Providing information about the makers, techniques, and cultural significance of items sold, transforming commercial transactions into educational opportunities.

How do we perceive urban living heritage as opposed to intangible cultural heritage practiced in rural areas?

Living heritage elements in cities often include practices that are integrated into everyday urban life—crafts connected with the repair of furniture, clocks, shoes, and other daily necessities. These urban practices are frequently undervalued compared to the more visibly distinctive intangible cultural heritage elements practiced in rural areas. We must recognize these urban professions as valuable components of our heritage worthy of documentation and safeguarding. The very ubiquity of these practices in urban environments often masks their cultural significance and the specialized knowledge they embody. Reframing these everyday urban practices as living heritage helps us appreciate the full spectrum of intangible cultural expressions across rural and urban contexts.

How can living heritage contribute to preserving tangible heritage in urban environments?

Living heritage bearers play a key role in maintaining the original function of certain buildings or neighborhoods, creating a symbiotic relationship between tangible and intangible heritage. Living heritage often gives function and meaning to traditional buildings and spaces. For example, the *kesemaster* (traditional bath attendant) is an indispensable part of the sulfur bath culture in Tbilisi, embodying knowledge and practices that give cultural significance to the physical bath structures. The presentation and preservation of tangible heritage often depends on maintaining the historical function of buildings or districts in cities.

When buildings maintain their traditional functions through living practices, they avoid becoming mere architectural shells or tourist attractions divorced from their cultural context. This functional preservation approach creates more sustainable and authentic urban heritage landscapes that remain meaningful to local communities while also attracting cultural tourism that can support both the practitioners and the maintenance of historic structures.

Conclusion

By adopting a community-centered approach and adapting to unprecedented challenges, the project has not only documented valuable traditions but has also empowered local communities to take an active role in preserving their cultural identity. The project's findings suggest that effective safeguarding of urban intangible cultural heritage requires recognizing the value of everyday urban practices—from bath attendants to clock repair artisans—that are often overlooked despite their cultural significance. The symbiotic relationship between tangible and intangible heritage emerges as particularly critical in urban contexts like Old Tbilisi, where traditional practitioners give original function and meaning to historic structures.

The methodologies tested, relationships built, and awareness raised through this initiative provide a foundation for sustainable heritage management that balances preservation with the evolving realities of urban life. As Tbilisi continues to develop, the insights and recommendations from this project offer valuable guidance for ensuring that the city's intangible cultural heritage remains a living, vibrant part of its identity for generations to come.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNEyomugFhWMR1clN9vuKJHq9EcqTsKW8>

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