

## A Brief Review of the Relationship Between the Organization of World Heritage Cities (OWHC) and UNESCO and the Immediate Benefits of Membership in the OWHC

### Relationship

In 1972, UNESCO adopted the “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage”, which provided for the inscription of natural or cultural sites on a “World Heritage List.” Numerous such sites have been inscribed on the list in succeeding decades, including a relatively modest number of sites in the United States. The sites in the U.S. have tended to be in the category of natural sites. One significant exception is Independence Hall. Independence Hall was inscribed in 1979 as a cultural site.

Nineteen years after the adoption of the Convention, in 1991, 41 cities which had one or more World Heritage Sites (WHS) within their boundaries adopted a declaration stating their desire to set up a network of what they called “World Heritage Cities”. Two years later, delegates from 58 participating cities met in Fez, Morocco and founded the Organization of World Heritage Cities (OWHC). It does not appear that Philadelphia participated, notwithstanding that it had a WHS within its boundaries.

While the OWHC and UNESCO are different organizations, they are organically associated inasmuch as a portion of the territory of each member of the OWHC must have received UNESCO’s blessing. Under the By-Laws of the organization, in order to become a member, a city must have within it “a living urban fabric or contemporary interest whose outstanding universal value has been recognized by UNESCO”. The OWHC and UNESCO have also agreed to work together to further efforts to preserve the heritage of member cities.

The OWHC is, however, its own organization.

The OWHC by-law regarding membership has historically been interpreted to require that the WHS constitute an “area” within the potential member city’s boundaries. This requirement appears, however, to have evolved over the years. While the WHS in some cities may constitute a significant portion of its territory – Dubrovnik in Croatia would be an example – the WHS in others is often a very small fraction of the city’s territory. In each of Delhi and Istanbul, for example, the portion is three percent or less. In still other cities, the WHS appears to be even smaller. Recognizing this, the Secretariat of the OWHC has now recommended that the by-law be formally amended simply to require that a WHS exist within the potential member city. This amendment would clarify that Philadelphia, with a WHS in the form of Independence Hall, would be qualified for membership. This, together with the wealth of its other historical and cultural assets (see the attached “Case for Philadelphia as a World Heritage City”), makes Philadelphia an ideal candidate for membership.

The leadership of the OWHC has made it clear that it would like to have the City join. If Philadelphia does so, it will become one of over 260 World Heritage Cities spread across the globe. Not currently well understood in the United States, where there are currently no U.S.

World Heritage Cities, the designation is well known elsewhere. (See the following discussion of the immediate benefits that would flow from the designation.)

### Immediate Benefits

The OWHC states that its primary objectives are to favor the implementation of the World Heritage Convention, to encourage cooperation and the exchange of information and expertise on matters of conservation and management, and to develop a sense of solidarity among its member cities. Toward these ends, it has developed an extensive menu of opportunities for member cities to take advantage of. These include, among others:

- Participation in the Organization's biennial World Congresses. In 2013, the member cities gathered in Oaxaca, Mexico to discuss the topic of "Sustainability" and how it could be implemented. As a then "Observer", Philadelphia was allowed to attend and sent a small delegation of City officials and representatives of the Global Philadelphia Association to participate in the learning that was being shared. In 2015, the World Congress will be held in Arequipa, Peru, and will be devoted to the topic of "Resilience," a critical topic in urban centers around the world. Philadelphia has proposed to present on how the topic relates to the development of the former Philadelphia Naval Shipyard and is waiting to learn whether its proposal will be accepted for presentation.
- Participation in the regional conferences that take place in the intervening years. Because of the current paucity of member cities in the United States and the existence of only two in Canada, if Philadelphia were to become a member it would be assigned to the Northern Europe/North America Region. Philadelphia has already been allowed to participate in the 2014 Regional Conference in Regensburg, Germany, and representatives from the City and the Global Philadelphia attended and had the opportunity to develop relationships with representatives from the other cities in the region.
- An entrée to the formation of one-on-one relationships with other World Heritage Cities. The OWHC is actively encouraging such relationships through its "City2City" program and there will be numerous opportunities for the City to pursue individual initiatives with the cities of its choice. This is one of the most powerful of the immediate benefits of membership. A thoughtful and entrepreneurial approach to it will yield numerous new opportunities for the City.
- Presentation of its message through the portion of the OWHC's website that has been uniquely set aside for each member city. Philadelphia has been favored with a sub-site of its own, and text provided by Dr. David Brownlee, the Francis Shapiro-Weitzenhoffer Professor of the University of Pennsylvania, already appears on the site. Separately, Mayor Nutter has been interviewed and the text of the interview appears elsewhere on the site.
- Opportunity to engage in the celebration of Solidarity Day for World Heritage Cities. Last year, while still an Observer Member, Philadelphia celebrated this occasion by re-naming

the portion of Walnut Street running alongside Independence Park (the 500-block) as “World Heritage Way”.

- Participation in the OWHC program known as “Youth on the Trail of World Heritage”, which seeks to engage young persons in the appreciation of their historical and cultural heritage.
- Publication of news about Philadelphia’s activities in the context of World Heritage.

While not an immediate perk, as such, it must be noted that upon admission to the ranks of the OWHC, Philadelphia’s citizens will have secured immediate recognition of the importance of the City’s historical and cultural heritage from its peer World Heritage Cities. What is striking about the prospective designation as a World Heritage City is its durability and credibility. This will not simply be a case of Philadelphia winning a travel magazine’s blessing or a top ten listing in some survey, however important those may be. This designation will be long-lasting, something that Philadelphians can point to with pride for generations. Moreover, a designation of this sort is not something that a city can confer upon itself through its own claiming. The designation would constitute an imprimatur conferred by an organization of world stature.

#### A Final Note

Amidst these very significant short-term benefits, and a host of beneficial longer-term outcomes that are described elsewhere, one might wonder whether there is some detriment, short- or long-term, that might accompany the World Heritage City designation. Perhaps, it might be speculated, there would be a cost in the form of inhibiting future growth.

Happily, this concern would be misplaced. First, insofar as the UNESCO-blessed WHS of Independence Hall is concerned, Philadelphia – and the nation – have already taken the steps required to preserve this sacred building and space. A national park surrounds and buffers it, and no one would suggest any dilution of its existing protections. The City and the country already keep UNESCO advised regarding their efforts to preserve and manage Independence Hall. Second, while Philadelphia has numerous other historical and cultural treasures, assets which cumulatively have bolstered Philadelphia’s case for membership, each has existing protections of its own quite independent of UNESCO. The City has developed and lived with these, has honored them, and has found ways to thrive in the process. Third, and finally, there is a growing recognition, well-supported by the evidence, that carefully-conceived preservation efforts actually conduce to stimulate and support development.

There is, in short, virtually no downside to Philadelphia’s becoming a World Heritage City. In contrast, there are numerous upside benefits immediately to be obtained, as noted above. These, together with the long-term outcomes that lie ahead, make the designation one that is important to strive for and secure as soon as possible.

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