

NEWS FROM CHICAGO HOUSE

W. RAYMOND JOHNSON

Dear Oriental Institute Members and Friends of Chicago House,

I apologize for the delay in putting out the *Chicago House Bulletin* 2007–2008, which will now appear in the spring issue of *News & Notes*. I am writing from Luxor, where the urban renewal program which has affected so many of our friends and neighbors has now caught up with us. In response to many queries about the state of things in Luxor, the Government of Egypt's development programs, and the impact of these programs on Chicago House, I wrote the following which appeared on the Internet on November 17th; some of you may have seen it. We are reproducing it here to update you on what is happening in Luxor, but also to share the historical background of these events.

I would like to assure our friends and supporters that through all of this, the preservation work of Chicago House in Luxor has not been curtailed in the least. In fact we continue to expand our programs, and are presently working at a third temple site in addition to Luxor Temple and Medinet Habu. At Khonsu Temple, Karnak, our epigraphic team is doing emergency documentation of reused, inscribed floor blocks as part of a restoration program sponsored by the American Research Center in Egypt. I am pleased to report that current events here have only strengthened our resolve to expand our preservation efforts, and we are going strong.

You will hear more from us soon.

Best wishes from Luxor,
W. Ray Johnson
Director, Epigraphic Survey
Chicago House, Luxor, Egypt

A number of issues have been raised [on the Internet] lately regarding the urban renewal program in Luxor and its effects on the local population, tourism, antiquities preservation, and the archaeological community. The Epigraphic Survey of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago based at Chicago House is one of many archaeological missions in Luxor which has borne witness to and been impacted by these changes, and is one of the many voices of the scientific community here who have joined in the development conversation between the city, the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), archaeological missions, and the local population since the inception of the program by the city several years ago. The community of archaeologists in Luxor has been far from silent during this whole process. We may not have been very effective in curtailing some

of the more onerous aspects of the present program, but we have certainly not been silent.

Since I started working for the Epigraphic Survey in 1978, I have witnessed the transformation of Luxor from a sleepy, charming, provincial town into a 21st century tourist mecca, and I am still hard pressed to believe that so many changes could occur in such a relatively short period of time. In 1978 the horse and carriage and a few battered Mercedes were the main modes of transportation in Luxor; Peugeots came later, and I remember when the first big tour bus hit town in the 1980s. I have witnessed a series of development programs that were launched in response to changing conditions in Luxor, largely due to increasing tourism. The most radical until now was the riverbank development project of the late 1980s that



Aerial view of Chicago House, Luxor, Egypt, headquarters of the Epigraphic Survey of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Photographed by James Henry Breasted, Jr., March 10, 1933



The Chicago House front garden from the roof, September 14, 2008. Photo by Ray Johnson

transformed the natural, tree-lined riverbank of Luxor where sheep and goats still grazed, into a concrete, terraced mooring and touristic area four kilometers long. This was accomplished in response to the rapidly increasing numbers of gigantic tour boats that began to appear in the late 1980s that dumped rubbish and tore up the natural riverbank wherever they moored; the riverbank had to be developed to provide services vital to the boats and upkeep of the riverbank. In that project the existing infrastructure along the Corniche was respected, the riverbank was extended outward, the Corniche was widened, and a pedestrian walkway with garden areas was created along the edge of the riverbank for the local families and tourists alike which is still tremendously popular with everyone.

This current development program is the most ambitious one to date and is more radical than anything ever seen (even in the pharaonic period, which is saying something). As has been stated, the program has its good and its bad points. It has been mentioned that the plan was developed by Abt Associates, Inc. and the links to their reports are easily accessed.

The development program for Luxor, much of which has already happened, was announced to the archaeological community in 2006 in a PowerPoint presentation given by Luxor governor Dr. Samir Farag at the Luxor Museum, after which there was a fairly lively discussion among those present; I was one of them. During the discussions it was made clear that the programs planned for the antiquities sites themselves were designed by the SCA and city together, and were about to be launched. We had about two weeks warning.

The issues that the new development program address have been of concern to the Government of Egypt (GOE) and SCA for a long, long time, but until now the SCA alone did not have the resources to deal with them properly. The main issues are:

1. The need to enlarge and upgrade Luxor's infrastructure and antiquities site facilities to accommodate radically expanded tourism, east and west bank.
2. The encroachment of the modern community on antiquities sites, east and west bank.
3. The excavation and development of new antiquities sites (like the sphinx road between Luxor and Karnak temples) for tourism, which (the thinking goes) will also safeguard the sites from future encroachment.

The Government of Egypt and city authorities have been primarily concerned with expanding the existing infrastructure of Luxor to accommodate many, many more tourists. Their primary incentive (as in all the development programs for most cultural heritage sites throughout the world these days) is to make money. And at the moment (at least for now), tourism is booming. Luxor is crammed with tourists, all the hotels and tour boats are full, and the streets clogged with tour buses, and it's not even high season yet. Hundreds of buses hit town from the Red Sea coast resorts daily in the morning, see as many sites as possible all day, and return at dusk. The 6:00 PM convoy back to Hurghada is sometimes more than 250 buses long, stretching three kilometers along the Luxor Corniche. Add to this the traffic generated by Luxor's growing local population and you have a LOT of clogged streets. So this issue is a crucial one; the

city cannot handle the present traffic even now (not to mention future projected traffic).

Increased tourist traffic is the major reason for the street widening all over town lately, which unfortunately has been at the expense of many historic residential and public buildings from the turn of the last century and earlier. The sphinx road project is requiring another chunk of historic Luxor to come down. In response to this, and to the demolition of the modern community in western Thebes, two years ago the Epigraphic Survey expanded its photographic documentation program of Luxor's ancient landscape to include those parts of 'modern' Luxor before, during, and after demolition (b&w and digital) to insure some record of what is swiftly disappearing. These days our photography team is hard pressed to keep up. Other archaeological missions have been recording the changes occurring around them as well. We are dedicating a part of our Photographic Archives at Chicago House for this special material, and are currently designing a cataloguing system for it.

As most of you know by now, the Chicago House facility and its neighbors along the several kilometers of the Luxor Corniche are being directly affected by a new Corniche widening and development program sponsored by the Government of Egypt. The original plan proposed tearing everything down along the Corniche to create a completely new touristic zone along the Nile between Luxor and Karnak temples. A revised plan, announced this spring, allowed a number of existing



Matt Stolper and family being shown the facsimile drawing process by Christian Greco at Medinet Habu. Photo by Ray Johnson



The Chicago House team in the front garden, November 11, 2008. Photo by Yarko Kobylecky

facilities to stay where they were (Chicago House, the Coptic Catholic rest house to the south, the Luxor Museum, and a bishop's residence, all minus their entire front gardens). Most of the residential areas along the Corniche are slated for removal, also the Mina Palace Hotel, the Bank of Alexandria, the convention center to the immediate north of Chicago House, and the Officers' Club and rest house, while the Etap-Mercure Hotel will be obliged to remove its entire front wing. The plan is to move the widened Corniche to the east, and cut away the riverbank to create a new pedestrian walkway at the river level.

No one took this quietly. There were diplomatic appeals to the Government of Egypt; much networking on the part of the many, many friends of Luxor and Chicago House (including the SCA – sincerest thanks to all of you); and a lot of talking to everyone (including the governor). Finally, we were informed on November 5th by Dr. Farag that the amount of land along the Corniche required by the city has been reduced. For Chicago House this means that instead of losing our entire front garden area, 22 meters (as was originally discussed), we will lose 'only' the front part of it, 14.5 meters, including our local staff's gatehouse and rest area (we will build them a better one). It is my understanding that the Luxor Museum front garden area will remain intact, of tremendous importance for the fragile collections housed within, and less front garden area will be taken from the Coptic Catholic rest house to our south. Property owners will be compensated for the amount of property taken,

and the city will finance and build the new enclosure walls. The foundation emplacements have already been dug for our new front wall, roughly dividing our front area in half along its entire 124 meter length, and reinforced concrete pillars will go up later this week. The city has promised to keep as many trees as possible from the garden along the new Corniche sidewalk, so our fingers are crossed.

Chicago House can live with these changes, and we are grateful that we will be allowed to continue our service to the Luxor archaeological community with our library facility and temple documentation/conservation programs, in the spot where we have been since 1930. But some of our neighbors are not so fortunate. One of the saddest parts of Luxor's new development program (which has been commented on previously) is that rather than encouraging the mingling of the tourists with the local population, which enriches the visitors' experience (and generates valuable income for the locals), the Government of Egypt's policy promotes segregation of the two groups. That is a great pity since meeting Egyptians in their natural home setting is one of the great joys of visiting this country, and this city. We should all continue to strongly urge the GOE to reconsider its program in this regard.

A related issue is the encroachment of the modern community on the antiquities sites. The city's clearing of the residential area around Karnak (including the residence and historic offices of the Karnak Franco-Egyptian Center) and creation of a huge

plaza all the way to the river, occurred at the same time the residents of Gurna and Dra Abu El Naga were moved from their homes — which were then torn down — and re-settled in the newly constructed community of New Gurna to the north. This form of site management — clearing away all modern encroachment from the vicinity of antiquities sites — has been the ideal of the Government of Egypt and SCA for generations, conceived when there were far, far fewer buildings around Karnak or houses over the Gurna necropolis. Now, finally, the GOE has the power to implement its program, and as you all know, it has been a painful process. The sight of gigantic bulldozers demolishing the mud-brick houses over the fragile necropolis was something that none of us will ever forget; the sorrow of the Gurnawis was heartbreaking. Far from being silent while this was going on, the Egyptological community talked at great length with the SCA and the city about that program, not that it did much good; the city had its mandate, and forces had been started that were beyond anyone's control. The result is that the community of Dra Abu El Naga is gone, and most of Gurna. But talking eventually had a positive effect, and the program was curtailed. Now parts of Gurna and most of Gurnet Murai will remain standing as monuments to the more recent history of western Thebes (the present inhabitants will still be resettled elsewhere).

As has been noted, the sad reality for the scientific community and local population in Luxor — and in many cultural heritage sites all over the world — is that the prime motivation for the city's new development program is increased tourism. The entire Government of Egypt is behind Luxor's program, and the goal is clear: to create the means by which the maximum number of tourists can visit the maximum number of sites in the shortest time possible. The challenge of our community is to continue our conversation with the city, the SCA, and the local population to help Egypt mitigate any potentially negative affects on the antiquities sites that we are all committed to preserve. There are many years ahead for this program; this is just the beginning. In this case, you win some, and you lose some, but believe me, it's not for lack of trying.



Chicago House staff 1935-36 in residence courtyard, James Henry Breasted center (in vest)



The Chicago House front garden wall going up, December 12, 2008. Photo by Ray Johnson

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90th Jubilee

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