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Conference Reports
The Future of Asia's Past:
An International Conference on the Preservation of
Asia's Architectural Heritage, Chiang Mai, Thailand
January 11—14, 1995

J. David Murphy*

The historic, but environmentally-threatened, city of Chiang Mai in
northern Thailand was an appropriate venue for what may well have
been the most significant Asia-oriented cultural property conference
to date. It was not overstatement to advertise the conference as an
“unprecedented gathering of scholars, government officials, tour op-
erators, industrial developers, archaeological experts, and the inter-
ested public...designed to stimulate awareness of the impact of in-
creased tourism, economic development, and threats such as natural
disasters and pollution on Asia's rich and often fragile architectural
heritage”.

The conference was a collaboration of The Asia Society, a leading
American educational institution; The Siam Society, an organisation
under royal patronage dedicated to the promotion of artistic, sci-
entific and cultural affairs of Thailand and neighbouring countries; and
the Getty Conservation Institute, an operating programme of the
J. Paul Getty trust committed to the preservation of cultural heritage
worldwide.

The Future of Asia's Past is a three-part project that began with
two conferences presented in New York by The Asia Society, dealing
with issues of conservation in Cambodia (1992) and in Vietnam and
Laos (1993). The Getty Conservation Institute had also previously
co-sponsored three conferences devoted to conservation, site man-
gegement, and policy in Asia—Cultural Heritage in Asia and the Pa-
cific: Conservation and Policy (Honolulu, 1991 and Sri Lanka,
1993) and Conservation of Ancient Sites on the Silk Road (Dunhu-
ang, China, 1993). In spite of these laudable efforts, Asian cultural
property conferences have been relatively rare. This is particularly
unfortunate if for no other reason than that, as Vishal Desai of
The Asia Society observed in opening remarks, Asia is unques-
tionably now “at the centre of the global stage”.

The Chiang Mai conference was arguably the most ambitious such
undertaking in Asia¹. The impressively large number of speakers and
conference registrants included representatives from UNESCO, the
World Bank, the World Monuments Fund, national governments,

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scholarly institutions, private foundations, non-governmental organizations, museums, conservation institutes, industry, and the arts media.

The conference was structured around six thematic plenary sessions: Preservation Policy in Asia, Cultural Tourism and Monuments, Vernacular Architecture and Colonial Legacy, Public and Private Partnerships, Threats to Architectural Sites, and World Monuments Watch: The Endangered Heritage Program of the World Monuments Fund. Interspersed between these "macro" sessions were numerous "micro" sessions devoted to the management of specific sites, and the particular challenges facing each.

The overriding theme of the sessions was effectively captured in his opening address by Rear Admiral Usni Pramoj, the Representative of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit of Thailand, who warned that "economic growth today could lead to cultural poverty tomorrow". The dizzying pace of economic development in the Asian region has threatened architectural heritage on a scale that the world has never seen before.

The plenary session on Preservation Policy in Asia identified other pervasive themes, such as the politics of cultural preservation, and the desirability of a uniquely Asian "charter" of cultural heritage. It also highlighted some controversial Asian perspectives on preservation. M. C. Subhadradis Diskul, Director Emeritus of the SEAMEO Regional Centre for Architecture and Fine Arts, Thailand, pointed out that the Thai government takes the view that heritage may be preserved in a "revivalist" manner by constructing all future government buildings in traditional style. Moreover, foreign influences are regarded as important to the Thai heritage. Chinese architectural style, as an example, was popular in the 19th century, and the Grand Palace complex in Bangkok contains a Western building with a Thai roof. It was argued that developing countries cannot stop modern architecture; "art dies otherwise". Public preservation efforts in Thailand are complicated by a "conflict of laws" in which ecclesiastical law gives control of temples to individual abbotts.

Asian art scholar and Director Emeritus of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Jan Fontein, observed that historically in Asia "living" religious monuments were altered ad hoc by believers and rulers who made additions and overpainted wall paintings in an effort to render temples "grander", thus ensuring karmic rewards in the next life. "Unfortunately, in modern times this laudable display of devotion is not always restrained by considerations of conservation or good taste, and can threaten the architectural integrity of historical monuments." Ironically, seclusion, poverty and neglect are what have saved some Asian monuments. While wide preservation experience is being built up in developing countries such as Indonesia and Thailand, others are not so fortunate. It is sobering to bear in mind that in the terror of the Pol Pot years in Cambodia almost all trained conservators lost their lives, a tragedy that has caused an almost complete discontinuity in construction and maintenance.

The vital importance of heritage was highlighted by Karna Sakya, a travel industrialist, in that countries with Hinduism and Buddhism as their religions. Participants that tourism was an extent of controls placed on some states, such as Cambodia, to help rebuild their societies.

Session moderator Leslie Nostra, suggested a definitive definition which enables people to enjoy the life of other people, reflecting the conditions and the intellectual climate of the world to be unfamiliar". He drew on some "very broad" definition of culture, he said. For example, the "total" of culture is "the totality of culture with nature and culture". He agreed by the ICOMOS U...
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The vital importance of tourism to the Asian economies was high-
lighted by Karna Sakya, President of the Nepal Heritage Society and
a travel industrialist, in the Cultural Tourism-plenary session when
he observed that in his country tourism was the third religion along
with Hinduism and Buddhism. There was little argument among par-
ticipants that tourism was an integral factor in site development; the
extent of controls placed upon tourism was the only issue. Indeed,
some states, such as Cambodia, are relying on cultural tourism to
help rebuild their societies.

Session moderator Lester Borley, Secretary General of Europa
Nostra, suggested a definition of “cultural tourism” as “that activity
which enables people to explore or experience the different ways of
life of other people, reflecting their social customs, religious tra-
ditions and the intellectual ideas of a cultural heritage which may be
unfamiliar”. He drew on the ICOMOS Venice Charter and sug-
gested a broad definition of historic monument to include its urban
or rural setting. Indeed, Karna Sakya regarded whole townships and
villages in Nepal (“the total physical expression of man’s interaction
with nature and culture”) as monuments. Mr. Borley advocated the
principles for the balanced development of tourism discussed and
agreed by the ICOMOS UK Cultural Tourism Committee.
The rapid displacement of the Cambodian traditional temple recon-
construction with the maintenance of the Asian tradition of temple recon-
struction and maintenance of the traditional temple reconstruction was
highlighted by Krama Saky, President of the Asian Heritage Society and
Member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Working Group of
Monuments and Sites. He emphasized the importance of integrating the
traditional temple reconstruction with modern tourism. Krama Saky
suggested a comprehensive approach to temple reconstruction, focusing
on the integration of modern construction techniques with traditional
methods. He also advocated for the incorporation of local knowledge and
practices in the reconstruction process.

The visit of the ICOMOS UK Cultural Tourism Committee
in Cambodia was significant in terms of cultural exchanges and
understanding. The Committee observed the unique combination of
traditional and modern elements in the reconstructions of several
important temples. The visit was an opportunity for the Committee to
examine the preservation techniques and the cultural significance of
these historic sites.

The ICOMOS UK Cultural Tourism Committee, along with
Krama Saky, is committed to promoting the cultural heritage of
Asia-Pacific countries and ensuring that traditional practices are
preserved for future generations. The visit to Cambodia
highlighted the importance of integrating modern technologies
with traditional methods in the reconstruction of historic sites.
Themes in this session included the necessity of involving the local populace in tourism policy as well as its benefits, the value of tourism as a stimulus to the revival of ancient or traditional building techniques and crafts, and even the harmful effects of the grotesque misinformation of some tour guides. Not surprisingly, much of the discussion of tourism-related issues and policy pervaded the individual site management sessions. The numerous anecdotes of tourism horrors included the revelation by Huang Kezhong, Vice Director, National Institute of Cultural Property, China, that local peasants had illegally established a “ghost town” theme park inside the grotto area at Dazu in Sichuan province.

The plenary session on Vernacular Architecture and Colonial Legacy sparked some debate but there was, perhaps surprisingly, general consensus that colonial buildings were a valuable component of the heritage of Asian countries. Indeed, Augusto Villalon, Commissioner for Cultural Heritage, Philippine World Heritage Committee, UNESCO National Commission, admitted in his paper that the Philippines’ extensive rice terraces were its only “monument” with no colonizing influence.

Moderator Waveney Jenkins of the Heritage Trust of Malaysia argued in a paper (using as her main example the traditional wooden Malay house) that while vernacular architecture “has always been seen as the country bumpkin of conservation giving precedence to its classical cousin — completely out of place in any serious discussion of cultural heritage and architectural identity”, there was a possibility that the superb monuments of earlier eras might be the exception to the norm, and the vernacular the real subject of the mainstream.

In a far-ranging, well-illustrated presentation, William Chapman, Director of the Historic Preservation Program at the University of Hawaii, traced the extent and evolution of colonial architecture in Asia, drawing parallels to architectural legacies in other once-colonized regions, particularly Africa and the Caribbean. Interestingly, much of the colonial period architecture attempted, in however simplistic and sometimes patronizing a fashion, to incorporate aspects of local building traditions, such as details of pagodas constructed on schools; indeed, “the striking thing about so much colonial architecture is how greatly local traditions are invoked, if not fully respected”.

A. G. Krishna Menon, Director of the TVB School of Habitat Studies in New Delhi, raised the questions of whose culture was being saved, and which groups were the indigenous inhabitants. He reminded participants that for many Asians preservation does not always take on the same urgency as it does for Western conservation professionals: traditions will carry on even without preservation. The principles and practice of modern conservation in India are Eurocentric in origin; they seek conformity with international conservation guidelines such as the Venice Charter. Because such international charters reflect values and society and culture, imp Menon saw the persistent “theatre of resistance” to

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tcharters reflect values and attitudes not originally prevalent in Indian society and culture, implementation problems have resulted. Mr. Menon saw the persistence of vernacular architecture in India as a “theatre of resistance” to the phenomenon of globalization.

Discussions generated by the session on Vernacular Architecture pointed up an additional, perhaps unintended, conference theme — the element of “neocolonialism” inherent in the pattern of Western consultants and conservation professionals advising Asians on how to preserve their heritage.

Pagan (Bagan)
Central Burma
(Myanmar).
Over 2000 structures
in a 16 sq. mile area.
11 to 13th centuries
AD

373
In the plenary session on Public and Private Partnerships, a prominent theme (one that pervaded the conference as a whole) was that non-governmental agencies had a role in remedying the perceived failings of government. Frances Affandy of the Heritage Society of Bandung, Indonesia pointed out, for example, that problems arise because Indonesian cultural legislation must be crafted, accepted and implemented by each level of government. Moreover, there are very few links between regionally based cultural departments and locally based urban planners. She argued that the gap between law and implementation in an expanding country experimenting with Western capitalism, resulted in ignorant exploitation or even extinction of sites. The fact that heritage societies are consulted at all by governments such as Indonesia’s is an achievement itself when legislative systems tend to be paternalistic and public participation rare. Such groups must be seen as consensual cooperating bodies rather than as confrontational pressure groups.

The plenary session on Threats to Architectural Sites in the Asian context generated a good deal of emotion. M. C. Mehta, an Indian environmental lawyer involved in litigation aimed at saving the Taj Mahal from pollution, gave an impassioned address that no doubt inspired numerous participants to sign his petition to save the monument. He detailed several other examples of imperilled major sites in India, including the Red Fort in Delhi and the Kamakhya Temple in Assam. Giorgio Solar, Director of the Conservation Division of the Israel Antiquities Authority, outlined the threats to heritage sites in wartime. Mr. Solar’s presentation was particularly graphic and meaningful given his own vantage point in a troubled region. He observed that the 1954 Hague Convention does not address terrorism, guerilla war or civil wars — a situation not lost upon Asians. The remarks of Vann Molyvann, the President of the Supreme Council of National Culture, Cambodia, particularly with reference to Angkor (possibly the only symbol for unity in Cambodia), served as a stirring reminder to participants that ancient monuments are often the forgotten victims of horrendous domestic conflict. But as Mr. Solar put it, “when the value of human life is diminished, protecting old buildings and stones becomes a luxury”.

The final plenary session was given over to trustees and the Program Director of the World Monuments Fund who unveiled their proposal for an endangered heritage programme called World Monuments Watch. The programme is to involve national input into the compilation of a global survey of the most dramatic examples of endangered sites. The threats envisaged could include economic depression, overpopulation, political turmoil, war, vandalism and lootings, development and pollution. Nomination to the “World Monuments Watch” list is a process seemingly aimed at mobilising public opinion, following the example of environmental groups. Following completion of the survey in 1997, the World Monuments Fund intends to provide a series of crisis response grants to a minimum of ten imperilled sites annually.

The merits of such interventions were seen to be, first, that they give money to governments for reasons; second, that such monies devolve to political policy; third, that they speed and agility. The relation to existing organizations was sufficiently explained.

The highlight of the conference Management Sessions. The difference presented is apparent from these sessions: Luang Prabang (Laos), Borobudur (Indonesia), Kyongju (Korea), Mohenjo Daro (Pakistan), Dunhuang (China), Herat (Afghanistan), and Ayuthaya (Thailand) — all of site experiences — an innovation for the Asia.
ten imperilled sites annually, as determined by a panel of experts. The merits of such intervention by a non-governmental organization were seen to be, first, that potential donors could avoid having to give money to governments — an unpalatable prospect for various reasons; second, that such organizations could freely voice opposition to political policy; and third, that they could act with more speed and agility. The relationship of the World Monument Watch to existing organizations such as UNESCO and ICOMOS was not sufficiently explained.

The highlight of the conference for many participants was the Site Management Sessions. The extraordinary richness of the material presented is apparent from the mere listing of the sites examined in these sessions: Luang Prabang (Laos), Nara (Japan), Angkor (Cambodia), Borobudur (Indonesia), Ajanta (India), Bagan (Myanmar), Kyongju (Korea), Mohenjodaro/Harappa (Pakistan), Hue (Vietnam), Dunhuang (China), Herat (Afghanistan), Samarkand/Bukhara (Uzbekistan), and Ayuthaya (Thailand). To a significant extent, this sharing of site experiences — an extensive cross-fertilization of ideas — was an innovation for the Asian region.

Typically each session was presented by a panel consisting of a national representative, an international conservation consultant and/or an art scholar, each closely associated with the site. These sessions could be enjoyed on the most basic sensory level — as spectacular travelogues — as well as on higher planes for those involved in site management, conservation and policy. Technical issues ranged from earthquake dangers to the computer matching of stone fragments (including the broken heads of statues). Site management issues included urban relocation, compromise solutions in zoning matters, vehicle bans, tourist control and afforestation. It is not possible in this short space to do justice to the extensive data that emerged in presentations and papers. A few examples, reflecting some of the conference themes, must suffice.

The normally politically cautious Chinese highlighted one underlying tension in Asian cultural property matters when Fan Jinshi, Deputy Director of the Dunhuang Academy, and a longtime veteran of the project, despaired of the conflicts between conservators and local tourist authorities.

The panel on Borobudur, consisting of Jan Fontein and Samidi, Head of the Restoration Division, Directorate of Protection and Development of Archaeological Heritage, Indonesia, pointed out some contentious issues in conservation. The Borobudur “hidden base” controversy involved the covering of some reliefs in order to allow reinforcement. The issue of the appropriate “environment” of the monument invited controversy over the clearing away of an encroaching village to allow for the “original” view of the structure as a “cosmic mountain”.

For many participants, a lingering image of the conference was the interplay of the “macro” and “micro” views represented by Cam-
bodian Minister Vann Molyvann, an unscheduled member of the Angkor panel, repeatedly interrupting a technical presentation by John Sanday, Project Director of the Preah Khan Conservation Project of the World Monuments Fund, in order to provide a broader picture because he was "so impressed with what his ancestors did".

The consensus of the site sessions and the conference generally was perhaps best captured in the paper of Jan Fontein: "When we look back at the ups and downs in the history of the preservation of all these monuments, which are often the survivors of ancient, rich and diversified cultures of which most other vestiges have disappeared, and if we study the story of their almost miraculous survival against all odds, the message is clear: stay alert, proceed with caution, profit from the experience of others in other countries, without ever losing sight of what is typical and unique of the site entrusted to your care."

For many in attendance, the conference made it clear — if we needed convincing — that, as in so many other areas of endeavour, Asia must now be regarded as the central focus of world cultural property issues.

Notes

1 Important contributions have been made by national conferences, and by smaller international conferences such as the International Cultural Tourism Conference, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 24–26 November, 1992. For overview purposes, useful reference may be made, in particular, to Cultural Heritage in Asia and the Pacific: Conservation and Policy, Proceedings of the 1991 Honolulu Symposium, edited by the Getty Conservation Institute; and to Trails to Tropical Treasures: A Tour of ASEAN's Cultural Heritage, World Monuments Fund, 1992.


Heritages for Europe's Cultural Diversity

David Lowenthal*

In September 1994 the European Council, in a gathering of over 150 diverse representatives for three days of discussion in Budapest. Four international bodies, the 19th on 'Heritage, Diversity and Budapest on the 20th Archaeology in conjunction a practical demonstration The meeting followed on the protection of minority groups and racism. Its conclusions were presented at the European Conference of Minorities.

Citing the extraordinary event, the Council's preamble noted that "...the human and rapid technological and economic decline in the principle of a Europe based on the premise of respect for the values of those transformed within the former Yugoslavia, had left Europe at the heart of a number of communities." Participants were pressing heritage issues such as war, heritage and the need for peace.

Following the inaugural speech of Europe's Deputy Secretary General, the President of European Union of European Union, and the President of the European Parliament, the conference concluded with a declaration of heritage, with the participation of representatives from Germany, Hungary, France, and other countries.

The second, chaired session, was devoted to the theme of cultural diversity and conflict, with contributions from Bosnia, France, Austria, and other countries. The third session focused on the protection of heritage in the context of the European Union.