<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>The future of Asia's past: an international conference on the preservation of Asia's architectural heritage, Chiang Mai, Thailand January 11-14, 1995</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Murphy, JD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citation</td>
<td>International Journal of Cultural Property, 1995, v. 4 n. 2, p. 369-376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issued Date</td>
<td>1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10722/42399">http://hdl.handle.net/10722/42399</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights</td>
<td>This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.; International Journal of Cultural Property. Copyright © Cambridge University Press.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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, scient-
ific 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-
agement, 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 Vishakha 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 Asia. The impressively large number of speakers and
county registrants included representatives from UNESCO, the
World Bank, the World Monuments Fund, national governments,

* Faculty of Law, University of Hong Kong.
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. Subhadra Diskul, Director Emeritus of the SEA MEO 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 tourism was highlighted by Karna Saky, President of a travel industrialist, in the Philippines, who observed that in his country, as in India, with Hinduism and Buddhism, tourism was a "field of activities that extends to all aspects of life of people and the cultural life of other people, reflecting the conditions and the intellectual makeup of the society". He drew on a "broader and more complex concept of cultural tourism" and suggested that the "totality of culture can be unfamiliar". He drew on the example of the "traditional village in Nepal ("the total cultural environment")" as a principle for the balance between tourism and the cultural environment that is agreed by the ICOMOS Unit.
complete discontinuity in the Cambodian tradition of temple reconstruction and maintenance.

The vital importance of tourism to the Asian economies was highlighted 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 participants 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 traditions and the intellectual ideas of a cultural heritage which may be unfamiliar". He drew on the ICOMOS Venice Charter and suggested 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.
us, non-governmental organiza-
tions, industry; and the arts
and six thematic plenary ses-
tional Tourism and Monu-
mental Heritage, Public and Pri-
sanal, and World Monu-
tage Program of the World
these "macro" sessions were
the management of specific
was effectively captured in
Sri Pramoj, the Representa-
Thailand, who warned that
cultural poverty tomorrow,
ment in the Asian region has
able that the world has never
Policy in Asia identified other
of cultural preservation, and
other of cultural heritage. It
ian perspectives on preser-
vator Emeritus of the SEAc-
re: and Fine Arts, Thailand,
takes the view that heritage
herself by constructing all future
Moreover, foreign influ-
Thai heritage. Chinese archi-
lar in the 19th century, and
contains a Western building
"Public preservation efforts
and some states, such as Cambodia, are relying on cultural tourism to
complete discontinuity in the Cambodian tradition of temple recon-
struction and maintenance.

The vital importance of tourism to the Asian economies was high-
litely by Karma Sakya, President of the Nepal Heritage Society and
it 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-
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, Karma 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.
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 Heritage 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, improved. Menon saw the persistent "theatre of resistance" to discussions generated pointed up an additional element of "neocolonial consultants and conservators to preserve their heritage.
necessity of involving the site and its benefits, the value of
cient or traditional building
tful effects of the grotesque
surprisingly, much of the
olicy pervaded the individual
eraduce anecdotes of tourism
Kezhong, Vice Director,
china, that local peasants had
k park inside the grotto area
architecture and Colonial Leg-
perhaps surprisingly, general
valuable component of the
asto Villalon, Commissioner
Committee, UN-
his paper that the Phillippi-
“monument” with no co-
Heritage Trust of Malaysia
ample the traditional wooden
architecture “has always been
ation giving precedence to
ace in any serious dis-
tural identity”, there was a
of earlier eras might be the
lar the real subject of the
presentation, William Chapman,
gram at the University of
of colonial architecture in
legacies in other once-co-
Caribbean. Interestingly,
are attempted, in however
fashion, to incorporate as-
as details of pagodas con-
ting thing about so much col-
ations are invoked, if not

The TVB School of Habitat
ations of whose culture was
 indigenous inhabitants. He
s preservation does not
es for Western conservation
on without preservation. The
ration in India are Eurocen-
 international conservation.
Because such international
charters 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.
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 Kamakhiya Temple in Assam. Giora 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 Van 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 looting, 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; second, that such a change in position to political policy, brings speed and agility. The relevance to existing organizations was sufficiently explained.

The highlight of the conference was the Management Sessions. The session presented is apparent from these sessions: Luang Prabang (Laos), Borobudur (Indonesia), Ayutthaya (Thailand), Mohenjodaro and Lothal (India), Dunhuang (China), Herat (Afghanistan), and Kyongju (Korea), — all sites of site experiences — an innovation for the Asian.

Typically each session was represented by a national representative, an art historian, an archaeologist or an art scholar, each could tell stories and anecdotes, or even perform spectacular travelogues — as we — as we travelled in site management, conservation. The sessions ranged from earthquake damage, looters, site fragments (including the bronzes), issues included urban renewal, site matters, vehicle bans, tourism. The site experience was impossible in this short space to accommodate, but emerged in presentations and papers of the conference themes, the topics addressed.

The normally politically fraught and lying tension in Asian culture, was brought to light by the Deputy Director of the Department of Antiquities, who assured the panel, **they** were the only part of the project, despaired of the cooperation of local tourist authorities.

The panel on Borobudur was chaired by the Head of the Restoration Department of the Development of Archaeological Heritage and the Peon, and contentious issues in common. In the controversy involved the control of the monument. The issue for the Indonesian government is the “cosmic mountain”.

For many participants, the meeting was a valuable forum to discuss the interplay of the “macro...
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 up 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.