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

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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 operators, industrial developers, archaeological experts, and the interested public...designed to stimulate awareness of the impact of increased 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, scientific 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 management, and policy in Asia-*Cultural Heritage in Asia and the Pacific: Conservation and Policy* (Honolulu, 1991 and Sri Lanka, 1993) and *Conservation of Ancient Sites on the Silk Road* (Dunhuang, 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 unquestionably now "at the centre of the global stage".

The Chiang Mai conference was arguably the most ambitious such undertaking in Asia[1]. 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 desirablity 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

Prambanan Cental Java, Indonesia Huge Hindu temple complex, 9th century AD. Original over 200 temples on the site

complete discontinuity in the Cambodian tradition of temple reconstruction and maintenance.

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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.

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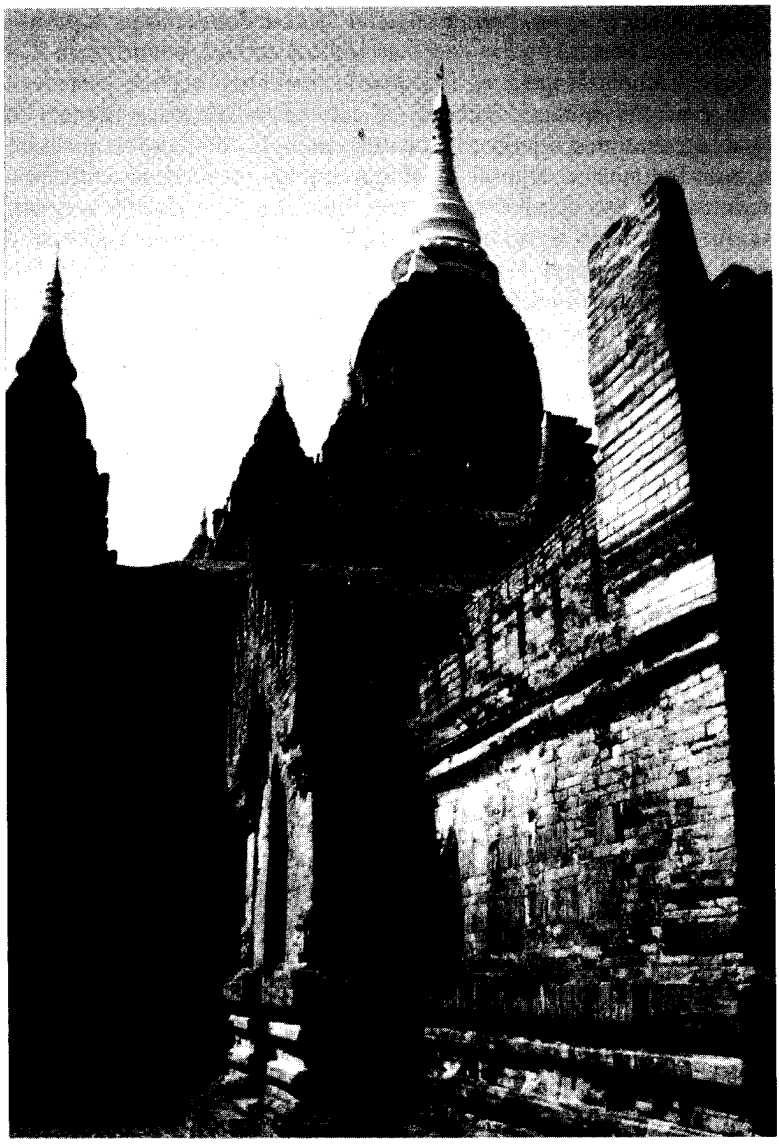
Themes in this session included the necessity of involving the local populace in tourism policy as well as its benefits, the value of tourism as a stimulus to the revival of ancient or traditional building techniques and crafts, and even the harmful effects of the grotesque misinformation of some tour 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 Phillipines' 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



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

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[2] 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 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, 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 (Afganistan), 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.

2 The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. Refer to Etienne Clement, "Some Recent Practical Experience in the Implementation of the 1954 Hague Convention", (1994) 3 International Journal of Cultural Property 11; Keith W. Eirinberg, "The United States Reconsiders the 1954 Hague Convention" (1994) 3 International Journal of Cultural Property 27; David A. Meyer, "The 1954 Hague Cultural Property Convention and Its Emergence into Customary International Law", (1993) 11 Boston University Journal of International Law 349; Patrick J. Boylan, *Review of the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* UNESCO 1993; and Karen J. Detling, "Eternal Silence: The Destruction of Cultural Property in Yugoslavia", (1993) 17 Maryland Journal of International Law & Trade 41.