

# **Rethinking cultural heritage in its setting in changing townscapes and landscapes**

Why have we chosen the setting of monuments and sites as our topic for discussion during this International Scientific Symposium to be held on the occasion of the 15th General Assembly of ICOMOS in Xi'an, China? Because most monuments and sites in developing countries in general, and in Asia in particular, are surrounded by changing landscapes and we must share the nature of the problem and the possible solutions for safeguarding our common cultural heritage.

For example, Hanoi, oldest metropolis in South East Asia, founded in 1010 and capital of Viet Nam, is now witnessing vast changes in economic and social terms. The quiet and somehow sleepy Hang Dao Street, the main commercial road of the historic area of Hanoi has, since the early 1990s with the advent of the Doi Moi (Reform) policy, witnessed vast changes through major concentration of commercial and business premises and the construction of new buildings. Hang Dao Street is the backbone of the historic quarter of ancient Hanoi, comprising 36 streets, and the local government is aware of the need to conserve the special character of the locality. Hanoi is not an exceptional example. Many parts of urban Viet Nam and other Asian cities for example in China, India and in Indonesia, are also striving for economic transformation, which generates a series of conflicts between the old and the new.

According to its Chief Minister, the number of motorcars in Penang (Malaysia) increases by about 20% each year, a rate similar to most other Asian states. In effect, this means that the number of motorcars doubles every three years. The demand for motorways, as well as other modern land use, is always very high under such development pressure, and it is quite difficult to convince local government that not only the historic monuments and sites but also their surroundings are irreplaceably important and that protecting this environment is in the long term public interest.

The economy is booming in many parts of Asia, and this is causing a fundamental change in urban landscapes as well as in lifestyles in many Asian cities. Various types of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, for which Asia has become famous, are at risk due to changes in both the physical and psychological environment.

The townscapes and landscapes of the Asian region are irreversibly changing at such a rapid pace that even from one year to the next you may not recognize the same site. Just like in China, where, according to national statistics, real estate investment in urban areas increased by 27.4% to 4115 billion Chinese Yuan (508 billion US dollars) between January and August 2005 (among which 892 billion Chinese Yuan - 110 billion US dollars - spent on real estate development investment), many urban areas in the Asian region are facing such severe "modernization" pressure.

At the same time, Asia is characterized by its vast diversity. Major religious faiths, such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, were all born in Asian or Arab regions. Asia boasts the highest mountain, the Mount Everest, and the deepest sea, the Philippine Deep. It has the world's most and second most populous countries, China and India; the world's largest Muslim population in Indonesia; the world's second largest economy, Japan; and the first and the third largest English speaking countries in the world, India and the Philippines. The cultural heritage of most Asian countries is made up of several layers, including among other indigenous spiritual beliefs, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Western colonial culture and rapid modernization in these last two to three decades.

In particular, high population density is considered to be the single most influential feature in Asia. By 2025, there will be ten or more metropolises in Asia with a population exceeding 20 million. The population in the Tokyo Metropolitan Region today is around 3.3 million, the largest in the world. These figures suggest that many Asian megalopolises will eventually become unmanageable from an administrative viewpoint. High population density may lead to great difficulties in protecting cultural heritage in our modern times and discussing the current situations throughout Asia can provide a full overview of problems encountered and possible solutions, or at least the path towards these.

Protecting urban structure and conventional buildings is proving more difficult year after year. In parallel, much traditional folk cultural heritage is beginning to disappear in many parts of the region due to the prevailing modern lifestyles and social change in community activities.

For example, most of the urban settlements in the Katmandu Valley World Heritage Site are under heavy development pressure to replace traditional shop houses by multi-storey reinforced concrete buildings that are not sympathetic to the surrounding area. This problem may lead to the redefinition of the boundaries of the buffer zones and/or the protected World Heritage zone.

The proposed tunnel construction beneath the ancient Nara Palace site in Japan, also listed as World Heritage, could deteriorate the landscape of the site and possibly change the level of the water table which may cause the destruction of the archaeological remains at the site. The highway tunnel is seen as the sole solution for the traffic congestion in the Nara area, where the considerable number of archaeological sites already designated as protected zones prevent easy solutions for the provision of infrastructure.

Local tourism has begun to flourish in many parts of Asia. For example, the old town of Lijiang, a World Heritage site in the Yunnan Province of China, was in 2000 receiving some 2.4 million domestic tourists and a hundred thousand international tourists, with an annual increase of 30%. Again, this means that the total number of tourists doubles in less than three years. This sudden rise in mainly domestic tourism

resulted in a fundamental structural change to this tiny village which went from being a quiet minority settlement to becoming a bustling commercial center with a major influx of settlement by other major ethnic groups.

The building of high rise flats behind the Byodo-in Shrine in Kyoto, Japan, again a World Heritage Site, has raised much controversy with regards to protecting an authentic landscape as a whole, while the construction of a high rise office building in Lhasa, China, has lead to numerous strong appeals to safeguard the background scenery of the massive Potala Palace, also inscribed on the World Heritage List.

A gradual change of the landscape may be inevitable in our modern society. However, we have to keep a close watch on the speed and the direction of change. The changing landscapes in the rapidly growing Asia can provide us with a wide variety of discussion topics on how and for what reason we should conserve cultural heritage in this modern society. Proper understanding and management of the setting is the key issue for this region in terms of protecting our built heritage.

This concern leads us to propose the theme of this ICOMOS International Scientific Symposium taking place in Xi'an, China: "Monuments and sites in their setting – Conserving cultural heritage in changing townscapes and landscapes".

We sincerely hope that the discussions and deliberations that will take place here in Xi'an, China, may contribute to developing better solutions for the conservation of our cultural heritage and create momentum for a wide-ranging movement towards safeguarding our meaningful townscapes and landscapes for our future.

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