

## Preserving Urban Landscapes as Public History --- Asian Context

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**Abstract.** Are officially interpreted and designated memorials, historic districts, themed parks, and ethnic neighborhood dotted urban terrain truly save communities' history? Does historic preservation always protect what is significant about the past as it claims? Whose history and whose memory gets preserved or lost? How personal and community memories are connected with or disconnected from the built environment? How to network places with authentic history that reconnect the memory on an urban scale? This paper attempts to answer those questions in Asian context. It questions the fundamental assumption behind the "themed" urban landscape, i.e. officially interpreted and designed memorials, historic sites, parks, districts and neighborhood. I argue that places with collective memory demonstrate the authentic spirit, and they cannot be artificially themed. I also ask for a returned respect for the contested, inconvenient, and sometimes difficult past. Urban landscapes should be interpreted and preserved as community-based public history by incorporating multiple voices of local communities. A shared authority in historic preservation provides potentials for designing and implementing an inclusive and democratic planning process.

### History and Memory

*There is a twilight zone between history and memory; between the past as a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as part of, or background to, one's own life... The length of this zone may vary, and so will the obscurity and fuzziness that characterizes it. But there is always such a no-man's land of time. It is by far the hardest part of history for historians, or anyone else, to grasp.*

Eric Hobsbawm (1987), *Age of Empire*

If the past is a foreign country (Lowenthal 1985), three interrelated sources – memory, history, and sites – lead us into the past. History and memory turns facts and data into representations and interpretations; historic sites, the tangible result of this interaction, are socially produced and culturally specific.

The intricate relationship between history and memory remains perpetually nebulous, "Memory and history are processes of insight; each involves components of the other, and their boundaries are shadowy" (Lowenthal 1985), but the two are justifiably

distinguished: memory is inescapable and prima-facie indubitable; history is contingent and empirically testable (Lowenthal 1985). The distance, “an uneasy collaboration between history and memory” (White 1998) leads to the question of whether there is an absolute certainty of history. Pierre Nora pinpointed the irony in “the acceleration of history” lies in “a rupture of equilibrium” (Nora.P.1984), an increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good. The remnants of experience still lived in the warmth of tradition, in the silence of custom, in the repetition of the ancestral, have been displaced under the pressure of a fundamentally historical sensibility. Then the difference between real memory – social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies – and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern society, propelled by changing and organizing the past. He continued (Nora.P.1984),

*Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past.*

In his absorbing *La Memoire Collective*, Maurice Halbwachs summarized the “ultimate opposition between memory and history” in a contextual framework of promoting recollection (Halbwachs 1980). He contrasted history’s mission of establishing past and present, with memory’s function of confirming similarities between past and present: memory is emotional by nature and therefore fallible. The images retrieved by memory are “protean and elusive”, whereas the data of history are durable and verifiable. In light of this reasoning, Halbwachs thought history considers a past from which living memory has been distilled; one that may be reconstructed from its evidentiary leavings but whose mentality or subjective states of mind cannot be resurrected. “How could history ever be a memory, since there is a break in continuity between the society reading this history and the group in the past who acted in or witnessed the event?” (Halbwachs 1992) Despite his belief that we should keep memory *honest*, and remedy its distortions of the past by comparing its suspect claims to those based on documented historical evidence, his understanding of memory is an art, a skewed pattern of the past, clinging tenaciously to its invention in the face of changing realities. History, on the other hand, is a science, whose evidentiary record as it is aggregated over time embodies a more objective pattern of the past.

The conflictual and emotional dimension of memory questions the “science” rule of history: history cannot stand in no-man’s island basking in self-celebratory factual accuracy; it has to involve memory in meaningful ways. Michael Frisch rightly observed that memory is living history, the remembered past that exists in the present. (Frisch 1990) He further elaborated, “Memory is a deeply cultural artifact, manipulated in a host of direct and indirect ways... It can thus stand as a prop of cultural power and authority” (Frisch 1990). The authority in interpreting the past is shared, instead of being dominated by power hierarchy or mere professional expertise. A salutary respect for the conflicting

views of the past, based on the conflicting views of the present, should be recognized and analyzed.

When Halbwachs placed individual memory in the socially constructive framework of collective memory, the intimate remembrance to each other as a group, he stated that the various groups that compose society are capable at every moment of reconstructing their past (Halbwachs 1992). If history is a form of representation, a textual reconstruction of the past, and never a direct reflection of it (Borden, Rendall, and Thomas, 1998), it is subject to perpetual bias of both the narrators and audience. Struggling over pure authenticity, therefore, becomes an inapproachable goal in history inquiry. Nevertheless, do we need an officially recognized representation of the past? How accurate are those representations, and how accurate should they be? To what extent they contribute to a true version of history and shed light on understanding and preserving a city's social chemistry, its spiritual bonding, and its collective memory?

### **Contextualize History and Memory**

The public nature of history, memory, and sites, invites constant reconstructions and dialogues with living communities, and engage local residents to frame the ideas of their present and future. When the interaction between history and memory is translated into built environment, it is a sense of history embedded in collective memory that locates us in time and space, "connecting our personal experience and memories with those of a larger community, region, and nation", as David Glassberg explained powerfully in his *Sense of History*, "a perspective on the past at the core of who they are and the people and places they care about" (Glassberg 2001). But what is the tangible evidence of this sense of history? What constitutes the spirit of urban fabric?

To seek for answers to those questions, I have embarked on a journey to study different places in Asia, the part of the world where I was born and brought up. From the decayed historic core to the newly-developed urban fringe, from abandoned ancient ruins to dutifully managed theme parks and museums, from chance conversations with local residents sharing their everyday life to official guide to monumental events at critical historic junctures, I held my own misgivings that the past was truly preserved in what I saw. The ruins to Angkor, with its immense scale and ingenious solution of its complex architecture, epitomize the peak of Khmer culture and its eponymous style in Cambodia history. The biggest and most impressive of the temples, Angkor Wat, was built by the powerful Suryavarman II around 1100. It measures 1.5 kilometers by 1.3 kilometers, and is a microcosm of the Hindu universe, a representation of Mount Meru. The ruinous structures, with "a relaxed acceptance of time, the esthetic ability to take dramatic advantage of destruction" (Lynch 1972:42), are enjoyed for the emotional sensations and a heightened sense of time in the process of going back to the earth. In Japan and China, there also exists a religiously motivated preference for the decayed and the antiquated. The ruins echo what J.B. Jackson passionately advocated in *Necessity for Ruins*, a discontinuity of history: "there has to be that interval of neglect, there has to be discontinuity; it is religiously and artistically essential" (Jackson 1980:102).

Though sharing the same sympathy with Jackson, I realize something is missing in the meticulous preservation endeavors: how do we emotionally interact with and response to the built environment? The classic past is divorced from the vital concerns of

today's community, and the great moments of their country's history does not necessarily dovetail the private and vernacular past. Kevin Lynch differentiated "near continuity" from "distant past" in his classic *What Time is This Place*. He said that near continuity is emotionally more important than remote time, although the distant past may seem nobler, more mysterious, or intriguing to us (Lynch 1972:61). The past is not a fixed, maintained to be appreciated only by tourists; it entails personal connections and memories, and expands our capacity to engage the past. Based on what is chosen to be celebrated and remembered, we make and retain imprints selectively.

### *Milieux de Memoire vs. Lieux de Memoire*

Perceiving into the tangible past, Pierre Nora defined sites of memory in his pioneering work *Les Lieux de Memorie* (Nora, 1984-1992), as any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community (Nora 1996:XVII). The physical representations demonstrate where collective memory crystallizes and secretes itself at particular historical moments, like a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn – but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists (Nora 1984).

Memorialized sites become powerful places to analyze how collective memory is connected with or disconnected from authentic history, because they reveal the contested nature that characterizes the issue of *authenticity*. Collective memory in those places is deliberately suppressed or ignored by either the most powerful in social hierarchy or self-fulfilling professionals to create a national myth or imagined collectivity. The centralized government decides for its people what should or should not be remembered and preserved. When intentionally jettisoning the traumatic and problematic past while preserving a sanctified one, we often miss the core of what we should preserve in the first place. The memorialized landscape in Nanjing, China, for instance, illustrates how history and memory are being used and abused, shaped and reshaped, anesthetized and politicized to serve political and emotional ends but often confuses rather than enlighten the historic truth.

The Memorial Hall for Compatriots killed in the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Forces of Aggression was built upon Jiang Dong Men massacre and mass burial ground on August 15, 1985, a day that marked the total surrender of Japanese in World War II. At the first entry of the Memorial Hall, a stone wall with inscribed "Victims 300,000", showing the central important yet never settling number issues. The monument, with inscribed dates of the Massacre 1937.12.13-1938.1, shadows the ground with somber responsibility of reminding people of the important dates, even though the dates have been neglected for almost half a century of Chinese busy international image building endeavors.

The perennial pine trees stood around the wall reinforce the supposed perpetuity of the sites in history, and represent the living memory of those who directly experienced the Massacre will be with us today and forever. It seems harsh to establish the causal relationship between the war time Chinese government and Japanese atrocity, but after all, millions of residents in Nanjing were abandoned by its own government before the

city fell into Japanese hands. Heroism and patriotism ironically dilute what the site aims to preserve. Buruma rightly observed that the seriousness of death can be rendered slightly comical by an exaggerated air or reverence, of ceremony, of awe, we what ought to be moving becomes sentimental, and seems absurd (Buruma 2000). Aside from the limited exhibitions, selected narratives, and careful reminders of what should be remembered, what the site chooses *not* to deliver to the public represents the central government's political and economic agenda, and its ostentatious effort to build up friendly images in the international arena by generously cutting down the compensation from Japan. Many survivors have suffered poverty, shame, meager compensations, physical and psychological pains, and simply vanished from public landscape till 1980s.

Reconstruction of the massacre underlined a deeply political tone. The abstraction of the sand garden outside of the Hall was replaced for the overarching goal of *authenticity*: real artifacts, maps, and accounts are displayed with Chinese, Japanese, and English illustrations. What connects the pieces together was the official interpretation of the history and memory. It almost amounts to an irony that atrocity as such a scale is constructed and constantly re-constructed in a highly valorized fashion. December 13, 2007 saw the completion of another round of reconstruction of the Memorial Hall. The postmodern design elements find expressions in re-designing of the plaza, improved lightening, and expanded green space. The gesture is generous and message clear, but it is too early to generalize for whose memory this face lifting works.

Nevertheless, not all the massacre sites receive such heroic attention; some sites are still alive with people's fresh memories, and woven into their daily life. They represent what Nora defined as *Milieux de Memoire*, real environments of memory, as opposed to *lieux de memoire*, sites of memory (Nora 1984). If *lieux de memoire* transforms space as an art of implementation, which is selected, sanctified, designed and planned for different agenda, *milieux de Memoire*, are more evoking. Both the solitude in a limited space and monuments with simple designs solidly joint with inwardly experienced values and quotidian memories, where bonding with the past has integrated into living memory. The tendency to transform the tragic space with judicious alterations based on contemporary imagination, seems counter-effective – the vernacular sites for memory sometimes can be cathartic and powerfully re-write past with a strong perspective of history. Those unmarked sites – “places so woven into local residents' daily lives that their special qualities remain unarticulated until it is too late to protect them”(Glassberg 2001:158).



Above: Monument of the Swallow Rocks (Yanziji) Massacre. More than 30,000 disarmed Chinese soldiers and 20,000 civilians were blocked by Japanese gunboats on the Yangtze River and massacred by machine-gun fire in December, 1937. The site remains part of local residents' daily life, and the surroundings of the monuments, shown in the above right, are all too familiar to most Chinese. The spontaneity, the solitude, and the familiarity, continue to dominate and transform the space that is meant to be remembered. *Picture Source: Yin, J., & Young, 1996:27*

The primary challenge for preserving sites commemorating mass atrocities is that, the numbers of people who have directly experienced them, victims, survivors, and perpetrators are dwindling, and the physical residues are increasingly transformed for a variety of reasons. We will have to deal with different forms of representations. As Saul Friedlander, a Holocaust survivor himself, legitimately questioned that if all history is that of representation, what are the terms and limits of my attempts to represent my own experience? What representation can I make of the painful experiences of my past that is capable of being recollected by future generations (Friedlander 1993)? I was born 40 years after the Nanjing Massacre; the question that has perpetuated me is that how shall we, who have not directly experienced the trauma, represent the past in a way that the historical truth will be revealed, remembered, and meaningfully preserved.

Admittedly, mass atrocities demonstrate the contested nature of history in its extremity, but it helps to reveal the difficult and problematic elements in our quest for historic authenticity. Nanjing's memorialized landscape shows a definite gap between residents' interpretation and the officially recognized representation of the past; officially approved artifacts and sites are not always fully identified with authentic memories. What is deemed to contribute to the glorified interpretation of history, artificially pigeonholed into chronology, has been made even more visible; what is left out is the vernacular sites – sites saturated with local memory and genuine concern for the past, the power of which lies exactly in their unmarkedness. To search for true spirit in such places, we need to step beyond the dominate narrative of the past, and recognize the contested and vernacular elements of the past.

### **Whose memory, whose place?**

The ability to make intellectual and personal connection with urban landscape provides avenues of expanding the present and shaping the future. Planning and architectural historians have written extensively on how memory shapes the physical environment on the urban scale. "Memory locates us as part of a family history, as part of a tribe or community as a part of city-building and nation-making. Loss of memory is, basically, loss of identity" (Sandercock 1998). Dolores Hayden explored place memory and urban preservation in *The Power of Place*, advocating a full historic representation and a strong participatory community process (Hayden 1995). Christine Boyer also suggested in her *The City of Collective Memory* that urban landscapes should be active systemizers of collective memory, to evoke "a better reading of the history written across the surface and hidden in forgotten subterrains of the city" (Boyer 1994: 21). She quoted Halbwachs saying for every collective memory always is embedded in a spatial framework (Halbwachs 1992:23-24): "Now space is a reality that endures: since our impressions rush by, one after another, and leave nothing behind in our mind, we can understand how we can recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings. It is to space – the space we occupy, traverse, have continual

access to, or can at any time reconstruct in thought and imagination – that we must turn our attention. Our thought must focus on it if this or that category of remembrances is to reappear.” Central to the inquiry is the recurring theme: what constitute authentic or reconstructed history. Boyer lamented marks of memory were stripped out of lived experiences, and the official presentation of historic events created “an imagined totality” (Boyer 1994:131), so “experience became fragmented and the unity of community irretrievably lost” (Boyer 1994:135). To explain the clash between collective memory and development logic swamping most Asian countries, I choose to focus on the thematic redevelopment of ethnic neighborhood in Singapore.

The geographic position of Singapore, within islands, archipelagoes, seas, straits, oceans, gulfs, and bays made it strategically important as a commercial hub for global economy and trade. After a few years of chaotic urban development, Raffles, with his planning committee, laid out the plan for an enduring structure of Singapore in 1828. The river shores were zoned for mercantile activity and formed the central dividing line of the settlement. To the south was located a commercial quadrangle, an Indian district, a Chinese kampong (trading community). To the north stood a square for government buildings, a European town, an Arab kampong, and a Bugi Kampong.

Various immigration groups, open-minded British colonial officials, savvy Chinese businessmen, and leading Indian merchants, all brought in their own transplanted versions of architectural styles, to make the cityscape of Singapore plural from early on. “Victorian roofscapes were edged with Malayan fretting. European godowns were decorated with Chinese embellishments. Spectacles of intertwined sculptural figures crowned the roofs of Hindu temples. The minarets and domes of mosques punctured the skyline” (Tung 2001:171). Socioeconomic changes after the departure of British after World War II and the subsequent political autonomy in 1959 radically transformed Singapore’s unique colonial cityscape. Historic districts and properties were relegated to secondary by People’s Action Party’s strategy to build up an international commercial and financial center. The old central business district was zoned for commercial skyscrapers, and highway systems and mass transit were upgraded. Incorporation of “old” into “new” through comprehensible and financeable projects in revitalizing ethnic districts stands out.

Unlike other former colonial cities in Southeast Asia, such as Hong Kong, Singapore has tried to protect the symbols of its colonial years, and to revitalize the divergent ethnic groups who laid the foundations of this island city-state. Prior to the 'Thematic Development Strategic Business Unit' at STB was set up in April 1997, the tourism authority together with the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) have been practicing urban thematic redevelopment, or enhancement sometimes called, for many years. “The thematic approach, based on the urban design plan already laid out under the Urban Redevelopment Authority’s Guide Plans, will enable the visitors to fully appreciate the beauty and significance of what we have to offer not just aesthetically pleasing sights, interesting attractions or historic buildings, but more importantly, an idea of how and why the area came about, its cultural and historic significance and how it is part of the overall Singaporean psyche and way of life.” (STB 1996, 27) Chinatown stood as a pioneer in 1997. The first master development plan includes five major themes, i.e. Exotic East, Colonia Heritage, Tropical Island Resort, Clean Green Garden City, and International Sporting Events.

The early beginning of Little India, originally known as Serangoon road, was dominated by cattle industry and an Indian convict jail in the mid-19 century, and stayed as a Mecca for Indian immigrants. Raffles allocated this area for the settlement of early Indian immigrants in his 1822 Town Plan of Singapore. 1930s ushered the area's transition to a commercial and residential community, and shophouses appeared. 1980s started to see the adaptive reuse of those shophouses to conserve the dwindling ethnic heritage. In July 1989, an area of 13 hectares around Serangoon road, composing 900 shophouses was zoned as the Little India Historic District, to protect and revitalize Indian heritage. The predominantly pedestrian street patterns are preserved. Arcade, the main walking street, consists of two streets of 2.8 meters and 3.6 meters wide, intersecting each other at a T-junction, and is lined with street vendors. Both permanent canopy and smaller canopies by street vendors are erected, so people can shop without worrying about traffic and rain. Also, the surrounding streets have been converted to one-way streets to increase the street capacity for the pedestrians. The pedestrian theme extends further to nearby Dunlop Street and Campbell Lane.

Acting as repositories of community values, this area provides, not only a window for the outsiders to learn and appreciate the Indian culture, but more importantly, a sense of daily security and "sense of place" for the local residents. Do people living outside of the officially designated historic districts possess a different sense of history from those living within the districts? The inquiry is further broken into the following two interrelated questions. How much local authenticity remains, and does the "themes" override the actual cultural context? Tourists are not necessarily outsiders, while residents insiders, either. Multiple *senses of place* shape and reshape the community identity, and the interaction keep the spirit alive. Imposing artificial categories may lead to cultural parochialism. Though by name and historic association, Little India is a place for Indian community. In the 1990s, URA implemented a comprehensive Conservation Master Plan, Singapore's shophouse typology, which started about 170 years ago, came back. Due to the inevitable connection between the shophouse and ethnic Chinese-Singaporeans, as Lee Ho Yin explained in *The Singapore Shophouse: An Anglo-Chinese Urban Vernacular*, "The development of Singapore shophouse typology is directly related to the ethnic Chinese-Singaporeans, the vast majority of whom trace their ancestral toots in Fujian and Guangdong provinces, setting in Singapore in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries", many Indian merchants took issue with Chinese business owners in Little India, and distained them as profiteers. "Refurbishment has led to the loss of the old favors, Well arranged shops are not a reflection of Little India... *all* the shops must be India-owned, and the goods should have an Indian flavors. There are just too many Chinese goldsmiths – a taxi driver described as Little China instead. We must insist on having *only* Indians here. " Chinese-owned or Western style shophouses are viewed inappropriate land use "themed" landscapes. The result of this commercialization of ethnic culture and tradition is curiously double-edged: when multiple senses of places are arbitrarily simplified through officially imposed themes, authentic memories run the risk of getting irrevocably lost.

## **Future of the past – An inclusive and democratic historic preservation planning process**

John Bodnar identified three primary forces shaping public memory – elite manipulation, symbolic interaction, and contest discourse (Bodnar 1992). I further argue that, while respecting the broad consensual root of collective memory, we need to step beyond the dominant narratives of the past, and peel away contentious layers of interpretations and representations. Along with this more diverse and inclusive interpretation of history (Barthel 1996, Page and Manson 2004), I also argue for a new awareness of what is invisible in the official representation. Interpreting and preserving the past often takes more than one article of faith: the process involves negotiations and re-negotiations of meanings and values, through signs, symbols, artifacts, and landscapes, along with political and power struggles. In fact, those sites of collective memory extend the temporal and spatial range of communication. “In effect the physical durability of landscapes permits it to carry meaning into the future so as to help sustain memory and cultural traditions” (Foote 2003: 33).

We need to break the “themed” cultural landscapes, and establish alternatives to preserve the spirit of place, embedded in ruins, sites of memory, ethnic neighborhood, to name but a few – there exists a common thread that connects places with authentic history, and keep their spirit alive. Beneath the unspoiled built environment lies the complex, contested, and sometimes difficult history, which should receive legitimized voice. We should not avoid or hide or manipulate those inconvenience elements for purely political purposes. Nor should we temper with the past to make it more acceptable to the present, “more lengthy, honorable, and picturesque, and less violent, and dirty” (Lowenthal 1985). Why cannot we tolerate chaotic cityscape? Why cannot we face squarely with historic trauma? Why do we have to “theme”, or copy, forge, reconstruct historic landscapes to make them look “aged”? Why does feigned antiquity still receive applaud?

Collective memory has played an increasingly visible role in reevaluating and representing the past through saving, maintaining, and planning those sites; the public has, in turn, fostered a changing understanding of history. Whose past, whose memory are we trying to preserve? Which version of history do we choose to remember or to forget?

Extensive description of Jurgen Habermas’s communicative action steps outside of the scope of this paper, but it sets an interpretive framework, within which my suggestions for an inclusive and democratic historic preservation planning takes place. Jurgen Habermas grounded the critical theory in an analysis of language use (Habermas 1984), and his communicative action is linguistically based, with the ideal of genuine consensus achievable through rationality and equality (Habermas 1984). He advocated an ideal speech community, where all individuals have an equal right to enter the discussion, with no hidden motives or self-deceptions that might affect the process or outcome of these discussions. An ideal speech situation theoretically ensures authentic representation, freedom of voice, and the rational evaluation of options. Realizing the ahistorical and over-idealized nature of Habermas’s work (Forester 1999), Planning theorist John Forester advocated a fresh approach to subordinating Habermas’s more philosophical discourse ethics to the more sociological analysis of communicative action

– his concern with the precariousness, institutional contingencies, and political vulnerabilities of ordinary understanding and interaction, our ability to make sense and make sense together (Forester 1999).

Nevertheless, the psychological promise that undergirds the communicative rationality, i.e. consensus can be reached through authentic dialogues, does not always hold, and its application is culturally bound. In most Asian cultures, conformity to social norm and respect for the authority makes consensus relatively easy to achieve, but it does not logically lead to voices being equally heard and deliberated and incorporated into decision-making. False consensus prevails. Also, the contested nature of the past always implies various degrees of nonconsensuality, and preserving it needs to incorporate multiple voices so consensus may never be reached, nor should it be.

The fundamental premise for creating authentic dialogues lies in a genuine willingness to share the authority, rather than rationality. Even if the public is properly defined and authentic dialogues take place, the equitably distributed result does not necessarily follow. Publics are unevenly multivocal, and collective decision-making is to, as Briand warns, “expect chaos” (1999:199). Reasons to preserve or to demolish are subject to political wills, or sheer concentration of power, especially in the communist ruled cultures. Second, more inclusive public participation does not automatically translate into better democracy. LaCapra (1994) rightly questioned: does modern society have suitable public rituals that would help in coming to terms with melancholia and engage the possibly regenerative processes of mourning, even if in extremely traumatic cases an idealized notion of full recovery may be misleading? Who it is that one mourns and how can one specify the object of mourning in ways that are both ethically and politically desirable and effective in reducing anxiety to tolerable limits (LaCapra 1994)?

Preservation planners have a special role to play in answering those challenges. The public process of *working through* involves genuine respect for physical and social representations of the contested and sometimes inconvenient past. Oral history of local residents boasts a special potency for the often ignored or marginalized voices, and offers a potential avenue for quality dialogues. “By tracing one’s personal roots and grounding one’s identity in some collectivity with a shared past ... one acquires stability and the basis for community.” (Lerner 1997:118) Excluding those voices, on the other hand, leads to “an exclusionary past” (Shackel, Paul A. 2001:3)

Second, the spirit of urban fabric is unique in its locale, so cultural understanding and preservation expertise are not directly transferable. Yet as Lowenthal wrote a decade ago that “realizing our heritage problems are not unique makes them more bearable, even soluble, if see how time or effort resolved them elsewhere” (Lowenthal 1996:249), I have also learned that a global and sharing aspect of the tangible evidence of history and memory requires comparative insights, and cross-referencing preservation philosophies and practices in different Asian cultures becomes an incredibly humbling and valuable experience.

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