

RETHINKING THE NOTION OF SETTING IN CHANGING LANDSCAPES

Why have we chosen the setting of monuments and sites as our topic for discussion during the forthcoming 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 Vietnam, is now witnessing vast changes in economic and social terms. Figure 1. shows the quiet and somehow sleepy Hang Dao Street, the main commercial road of the historic area of Hanoi, in 1988, while Figure 2. illustrates the substantial change undergone by this street due to the concentration of commercial and business activity in 2003. Hang Dao Street is the backbone of the historic quarter of ancient Hanoi, comprising 36 streets, and 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 Vietnam, and other Asian cities for example in China and Indonesia, are also striving for economic transformation, which generates a series of conflicts between the old and the new.

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.

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 and the deepest sea. 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 world's second largest English speaking country, 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 during 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 Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Site are under heavy development pressure to replace traditional shop houses by multi-storey reinforced concrete buildings that are not very sympathetic to the surrounding area. This problem may lead to the redefinition of the boundaries of 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. This highway tunnel is seen as the sole solution to 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.

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 hundreds of thousands of international tourists, with an annual increase of 30 %. 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 centre 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.

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