

SHARED COLONIAL HERITAGE

Introduction

This brief report has been prepared on behalf of the ICOMOS International Committee on Shared Colonial Heritage. It discusses the nature of the Shared Colonial Heritage resource and then briefly examines the risks posed to that heritage. It concludes that many of the risks facing the shared heritage from a variety of Colonial experiences are similar to those identified elsewhere in the ICOMOS Heritage at Risk research.

The Shared Colonial Heritage Committee is a relatively recent addition to the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee network, being formed in 1998. It held its first formal meeting during the ICOMOS General Assembly in Mexico in 1999. Much of the early work of the Committee has been undertaking the necessary background research for a publication to coincide with the ICOMOS General Assembly in 2002.

The Nature of the Resource

The nature of the Shared Colonial Heritage is represented by the architecture, urban planning and infrastructure introduced by various European Colonial regimes throughout the world, during the period between the late-15th century and World War II. There are many other examples throughout history where a nation State, or another political or economic entity, has imposed its economic and military might on an area beyond its traditional borders, not only in Europe but throughout Asia and elsewhere; however, the Committee has determined that it shall concentrate on the influence of the various European powers in the nominated period. Generally the Committee as part of its focus has not adopted the other main cultural influence throughout history, that of religion in forms such as Islam or Buddhism.

Colonial regimes were established by Portugal, Spain, Britain, France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Italy, the Scandinavian nations and, in the early decades of the 20th century, the United States. Their colonies were located in Africa, the Americas, across south, east and north Asia and in the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

In essence, the significance and primary characteristics of the Shared Colonial Heritage are the responses made to the local situation and conditions that are reflected in the architectural and planning influences imported from the home country. In many cases, the architectural and planning themes across many different Colonies remain recognisably associated with the governing Colonial regime, but typically there is a degree of difference that expresses and responds to the individual local context.

Colonial regimes typically erected buildings and other infrastructure that enabled them to control and manage the Indigenous populations and to exploit the resources of the Colony to the benefit of the homeland. Buildings typically included churches, administrative, judicial and education buildings, defensive works, housing, prisons, communications infrastructure such as roads and railways, trading facilities such as ports and warehouses and agricultural, manufacturing or extractive industrial facilities.

The planning and architectural responses can be summarised as follows:

- The planning approach for a new town or urban area often over

layered the cultural landscape of a pre-existing Indigenous settlement. One of the clearest examples was the imposition, in the early 17th century, of a typical Dutch water town layout on the existing settlement at Jayakarta, in what became Batavia, the capital of the Dutch East Indies (now Jakarta in Indonesia). The mid-16th century Spanish settlement that became Manila in the Philippines is another example.

- The planning approach for a new town or urban area was often set-out adjacent to a pre-existing Indigenous settlement, such as the late-19th century French quarter in Hanoi, Vietnam.
- The planning approach for a new town or urban area often overlaid the pre-existing urban settlement from a previous Colonial occupation, such as in Melaka, Malaysia or Colombo in Sri Lanka.
- The nature of the topography and the characteristics of the particular site, for example a river crossing, coastal port or natural defensive position, often dictated amendments to the theoretical planning layout for a typical new settlement.
- The local building materials and construction techniques were often absorbed into the architectural expressions imported by the Colonial settlers.
- The climate and prevailing weather conditions often generated responses that altered the specific architectural expression of Colonial buildings.
- Local craftsmen and women were often employed in the construction and decoration of buildings erected by Colonial regimes. Local artistic and craft traditions and expressions were often added to the buildings or intertwined into the decoration.
- Economic conditions in the Colonial outposts and the difficulties in transportation and communication often meant that the architectural influences from the Colonial power took longer to reach the remote Colonies or lasted longer there than at home. Many key people in the Colonial societies or regimes often embraced or preserved stylistic influences from home as a nostalgic response to their isolation.
- Many individual architects, engineers and planners established themselves in Colonial outposts and developed bodies of work that became particular to the locality and the time, by extending the architectural, planning or design traditions from the homeland.

Depending on the length of time that a Colonial regime remained in power, the influences summarised above were absorbed into the visual and physical character of the settlements and cultural landscapes of the colonies. Often the influences from the overseas colonial experience were absorbed or adopted in buildings and landscapes of the mainland cities and towns.

Many of the people who managed and defended the colonies or who traded with them would move from colony to colony or be aware of the nature of nearby colonies of other powers. The influences are therefore notable for their dynamic nature and cross-fertilisation.

Major Threats to the Shared Colonial Heritage

There is no doubt that the period since the end of World War II has seen the break-up of most of the established Colonial regimes. This period has also seen both considerable economic progress in some former colonies and severe economic and social or ethnic

problems in others. In many cases the former Colonial power was driven out and was reluctant to return in any formal manner for some decades, in others the links remained and other cultural influences such as language, administrative or trading patterns remained to enrich the Indigenous societies.

While many of the threats to the Shared Colonial Heritage are similar to those faced by other aspects of the historic built environment, some influences are specific to this form of heritage. They can be summarised as follows:

- Emerging nationalism and the need to establish an independent identity has often encouraged former Colonies to reach back to their Indigenous traditions at the expense of the remaining Colonial-period architecture and infrastructure.
- Deliberate destruction of the remnant expressions of Colonial regimes can occur in the search for a new identity. At times this destruction has been caused by armed conflict, civil war or invasion as post-colonial societies establish control over their geographic locality.
- Some places, such as Central Manila, were heavily damaged during World War II or during liberation struggles and were not repaired or rebuilt.
- Neglect and decay caused by economic difficulties in the post-colonial period often leads to the gradual destruction of Colonial-period buildings.
- The departure of Colonial regimes often meant that some buildings – such as churches – fell into disuse.
- Economic pressures for social and urban development often lead to the destruction of colonial period buildings that are not of sufficient scale to match the demands of an emerging urban conglomeration. The development of high-rise urban buildings often causes the destruction of traditional urban settlements.
- Rural migration to urban areas and huge population increases in urban areas often place enormous pressure on traditional towns or Colonial settlements.
- Changing agricultural practices that replace Colonial regimes can lead to a change in the cultural landscape of whole regions.
- Adverse weather conditions, earthquakes, drought, cyclones and floods are often a feature of former Colonies, and can result in the destruction of Colonial-period buildings and other works.
- International aid and development programmes, especially those in urban areas or the provision of large-scale infrastructure can destroy Colonial-period buildings and other structures, as well as Indigenous settlements and cultural landscapes.
- Urban improvement programmes or responses to increasing levels of traffic in towns, can lead to the demolition of Colonial-period buildings to ease development pressures.
- The smaller-scale features of modern life, such as electrical wiring, plumbing, air-conditioners, satellite dishes and TV aerials, security screens, in addition to commercial advertising signs can disfigure or obscure the architectural expression of colonial buildings.
- The typical pressures of modernisation, slum clearance and the desire to match western urban development or architectural imagery can generate redevelopment pressures on older buildings.

The ICOMOS International Committee on Shared Colonial Heritage shares the concerns of other ICOMOS Committees and individuals in the need to recognise the risks to cultural heritage and to develop an awareness of the need to respond to those risks in an appropriate manner.

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Heritage

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