

EAST AND SOUTH EAST ASIA – HERITAGE @ RISK!

Background

When one deals with monuments and urban conservation in East and South East Asia, one has to understand the specific features of the regional communities: large populations, higher population density, constant urban migration, rapid urban sprawl, changing urban lifestyle, severe traffic congestion, as well as diverse economic conditions from country to country. On top of these problems, most of these Asian cities have witnessed a vast diversity of culture, religion, ethnicity, and colonial tradition, which make them unique.

Cultural heritage may be regarded as one of the efficient vehicles to sustain their national identity.

However, it is difficult to conserve cultural heritage in good condition in modern society. There are a series of challenges to be seriously considered such as the lack of proper maintenance due to religious, social, economic and/or political reasons, the excessive influx of tourists, overall changes to land use and building use because of urbanisation and modernisation and devastating natural disasters such as earthquakes, typhoons, and floods. At the same time, hostile natural conditions for heritage sites, such as humidity, soft soil and tropical weather, cause rapid deterioration to the structure.

Regional trends and challenges

Poor or improper maintenance is universal in developing countries in the region. Wooden temples in the Pagan area, Myanmar, are one of the typical cases of a lack of both resources and expertise (see p. 135). Improper maintenance of excavated archaeological sites is another challenge. On the other hand, it is also a serious threat to heritage buildings that ecclesiastical buildings have undergone over-restoration or sometimes over-rebuilding because of religious reasons.

The strong economy of East and South East Asia sometimes

causes considerable difficulty in safeguarding historic sites and monuments. In particular, historic buildings in urban settings, such as Suzhou, China, and Hanoi, Vietnam, undergo great pressure to be replaced by modern high-rise buildings. Moreover, weak planning controls in the whole region make the situation even more difficult. Conservation management plans need to be reinforced by extending their legal force and proper implementation. Careful monitoring of the condition of historic sites and monuments must be carried out regularly. Large-scale development projects, such as dam and highway construction, sometimes cause major destruction of the historic environment as a whole.

Vernacular houses and villages are vulnerable to tourism development. The lovely local historic settlement of Lijiang, China, is one of these cases (see p. 85). Since its inscription on the World Heritage List in 1997, Lijiang has witnessed a considerable transformation of the town, ranging from ethnic gentrification of the downtown area to a diminishing vernacular lifestyle. A strong influence of tourism is obvious not only in Lijiang but also in other World Heritage sites like the Shirakawago/Gokayama historic villages in Japan.

Earthquakes are one of the most immediate threats to the heritage of this region. For example, an earthquake severely damaged many pagodas in Pagan, Myanmar, in 1975. Major earthquakes, such as in central Japan in 1997 and central Taiwan in 1999, reveal that it is necessary to reconsider seismic design even for vernacular buildings, which used to be largely free from any evaluation of their seismic capacity. This may affect the structural design of all traditional buildings, let alone the immediate restoration of traditional houses.

With the rapid modernisation of the region, traditional technology and materials are disappearing rapidly, so that authentic conservation becomes more difficult and expensive. Legal requirements such as earthquake resistance and fire prevention regulations also affect vernacular buildings.

Yukio Nishimura, ICOMOS Japan