

The Future of Cultural Heritage Conservation amid Urbanization in Asia: Constraints and Prospects

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Abstract

Given the national commitments and the international criteria for nomination of cultural properties and cultural landscapes to be inscribed on the World Cultural Heritage List, and various threats from multiple external forces as well as intrinsic constraints among Asian countries, this study then attempts to investigate the significant variables, their applicabilities to and impacts on conservation implementation and potential performances. Through reviewing conservation experiences in Asian regions, critical constraints and prospects in terms of positive approaches are explored together with demonstrating distinctive examples of World Cultural Heritage and Asia-Pacific's best practices in conservation. The outputs of these investigations set up the conceptual framework of challenge for escalating the conservation movements in Thailand.

Keywords

Cultural Heritage

Historical/Architectural Value

Constraints

Prospects of Conservation

1. Introduction

Since Thailand adhered to the World Heritage Convention in 1987, there have been increasing national commitments toward “*ensuring the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of cultural and natural heritage* [1].” Aiming to be inscribed on the World Heritage List, each nation or autonomy is required to follow the international criteria for nomination as World Heritage. Detailed and vivid discussions would then be given to the definitions of cultural heritage, which were once defined by the **Convention Concerning Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage** as adopted by the General Conference at its 17th session in 1972, in the current context of built-environment; and to the major criteria for listing World Cultural Heritage, including the need to meet the test of authenticity and of having adequate and appropriate protection and management mechanisms [2]. To ensure the successful conservation implementation of cultural properties and cultural landscapes, further considerations should include the accessibility to the public and local community participation, which are essential to minimizing the vulnerability under the impacts of irreversible change due to expanding external threats and embedded internal weakness encroaching the sustainability of cultural heritage.

Given the conceptual frameworks of the multiple international charters, as appeared in “List of Documents for Inclusion in Asia Conserved,” together with the financial support of “World Heritage Fund” and the technical assistance under heritage conservation program, such a Member State of UNESCO like Thailand with its rich cultural heritage sources faces rather formidable problems in condition similar to many other developing countries in Asia, in sustaining the World Heritage with ‘*outstanding universal value*’ as well as in implementing conservation works according to the Convention [3].

The main focus of this study is to examine the potential performances of the four main approaches — namely conservation in conjunction with preservation, restoration, and adaptive reuse — while exploring the constraints and prospects of conservation as well as considering the specific conditions among various countries, with emphases on Thailand in particular. Comparatively, the multiple examples of World Cultural Heritage with outstanding universal value together with those best practices receiving UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation provide the basis of challenge for Thailand regarding escalating conservation and preservation rather than demolition, in giving way to economic development projects.

2. The Holistic Components of Culture Heritage: Redefinition

As the term ‘**built-environment**’ has been widely accepted in referring to any ‘man-made structure’ versus the ‘**natural environment**,’ collectively, it is justified to consider the built environment with historical and/or architectural value to be cultural heritage. Urban or rural communities, towns, human settlements, historic centers, vernacular architecture, built structures, artifacts, etc., as built environment can be considered as cultural heritage, or more precisely **built heritage**, provided that they meet the specified criteria, national or international.

To be living heritage, ‘**human beings**’ as the habitants of built environment nominated as cultural heritage must be considered as the living components of the cultural properties together with the influencing intangible socio-economic, cultural and behavioral factors.

Thus, human beings, built environment and the surrounding natural environment are coherent components of a cultural landscape or setting.

It should be noted that, according to the Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural heritage based on the 1972 General Conference, monuments, groups of buildings and sites are the three components considered as 'cultural heritage.' The term 'monuments' are referred to *"architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science [4]."* This definition is rather comprehensive but also awkward in its application to a wide range of cultural properties, especially in the Asian context, in which a monument itself can hardly be separated from its historic context and physical environment.

Similarly, the meaning of 'place' may carry an aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view more than 'sites' which are basically *"combined works of nature and man [5]."*

3. The Critical Criteria for Nomination

Considered to be of outstanding universal value, each cultural property should meet one or more of the following criteria: [2]

1. Representing a **masterpiece** of creative genius; or
2. Exhibiting a **major interchange of human values** on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design; or
3. Expressing a unique testimony to a **cultural tradition / civilization** which is living or has disappeared; or
4. Being an outstanding **example of a building type** or architectural or technological ensemble or landscapes in human history; or
5. Being an outstanding **example of a traditional human settlement** or land-use of a culture under vulnerable impact of irreversible change; or
6. Being associated with **events** or **living traditions**, with ideas or beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance; **and**
7. Meeting the **test of authenticity** in design, materials, workmanship, setting and cultural landscapes in their distinctive character and components; **and**
8. Having adequate legal / contractual / traditional **protection and management / planning control mechanisms**.

Developing countries in Asia, with their rich sources of cultural properties that meet the criteria 1 to 6, face serious problems in meeting the test of authenticity and having adequate protection and management mechanisms. With mostly wood and brick structures, the reconstruction works can hardly be acceptable, according to World Heritage Convention, because they are **not** *"carried out on the basis of complete and detailed documentation on the original [6]"* but rather on conjecture.

Though there may be well-established protective legislation at the national, provincial or municipal level and / or a contractual or traditional protection in Asian countries, the implementation of such protection can hardly be assured. Similarly, for management and / or planning control mechanisms, adequate and suitable administrative arrangements are far from effective in undertaking the management and conservation of properties as

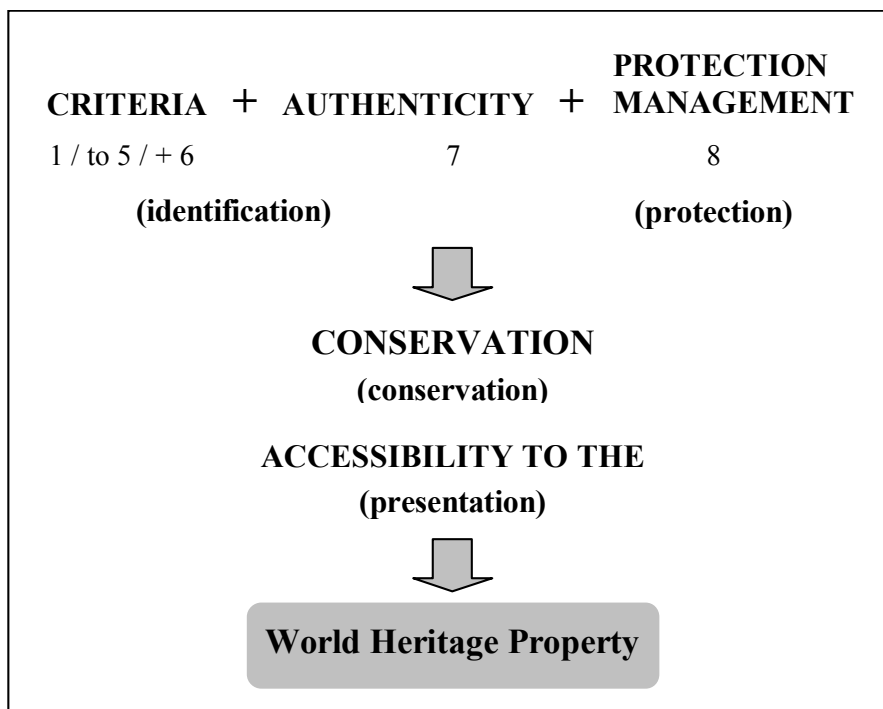


Figure 1 Toward the Nomination of World Heritage Property

well as in providing the appropriate **accessibility to the public**. Those protection and management mechanisms are essential to ensuring the preservation of the integrity of cultural properties and landscapes, especially those open to large numbers of visitors and tourists in particular. The Dubai Heritage Authority, for example, has long been reluctant to turn some buildings of the Bastakiya Heritage Area into hotels in making 'living heritage' because of the caution regarding the damage to the properties that might follow.

4. Vulnerability of Cultural Heritage

The requirements for the test of authenticity and for adequate and suitable protection and management mechanisms reflect the existence of external forces as threats toward the integrity of cultural heritage, especially those that cause vulnerability under the impact of irreversible

change. The negative transformations are mainly the outcomes of such interactive factors as modernization / globalization and post-globalization, ever increasing population, high speed economic growth, rapid urbanization and commercial development, gigantic construction projects, environmental pollution, noncultural-based and noneco-based tourism, cultural violation and abuse, etc.

In parallel to environmental impact assessment (EIA), cultural impact assessment, as proposed by current conservation authorities, should be a significant measure to evaluate the impacts of any gigantic construction projects, especially dam and expressway constructions which generally cause serious damages over vast regions of cultural landscapes, mostly embedded with Asia's rich historic properties.

The promotion of cultural-based tourism should also take into consideration the impacts of a large number of tourists that are beyond the carrying capacity of the cultural setting. Bangkok's

Grand Palace exhibits traces of deterioration along the crucial routes of visitors' movement. India's splendid Taj Mahal faces similar threats over the site of the masterpiece of Mogul Architecture.

It should be stressed that adequate and suitable management could only reduce, but not significantly minimize, the vulnerable impacts of all the external forces.

5. The Potential Performances of Conservation Approaches

Considering the four main interrelated approaches of conservation implementation — namely conservation, preservation, restoration, and adaptive reuse — it is essential to comprehend the performance standards that indicate the distinctive potentials of each approach.

Conservation: The conservation of cultural heritage must be continuously and permanently undertaken and maintained. The geo-cultural region of a site should be as clearly defined as possible, and preservation of the area surrounding the site should cover a certain limit. Such an approach is critical for those properties and landscapes under the direct impacts of rapid urbanization [7]. The conservation of distinct cultural elements should be coherent with the site; and no components could be removed from the site unless under special conditions which would provide better protection. More importantly, the conservation works should be able to serve specific social purposes of related communities such as in terms of education, being sources of income, etc.

Preservation: In conservation, preservation refers mainly to maintaining the existing state, while retarding further deterioration.

Restoration: It requires that reconstruction works should be in accordance with the original conditions. Thus, ones are expected to be able to identify the inputs other than the origins.

Adaptive Reuse: In being upgraded from pure restoration, old buildings are to be modified to serve proposed functions while their historical and / or architectural values are maintained. Economic values are accordingly added to the salvage structures.

6. Exploring the Constraints and Prospects of Conservation

The following analytical frameworks are intended to portray the phenomena of Asia's heritage conservation that represent the constraints as well as the prospects, reflecting positive approaches amid rapid urbanization.

Constraints and Prospects Concerning:

1. Authenticity: From Threats Toward Dynamic Conservation

The concern for 'authenticity' is obviously challenging the 'living tradition' of local people in keeping building up the cultural properties for the better in accordance with the ever-rising community spirit and individual faith. The case of living modification of Shwezigon [8] in Pagan reveals the tradition of continuous changes of the cultural properties in Burma, and consequently acquires not only 'second' but subsequent authenticities in due times.

For cultural heritage under current dynamic development — community, technology, etc. — conservation should reciprocally share such changing forces, leading toward **dynamic conservation** through careful master planning and management. Catalyzed conservation and restoration efforts in surrounding communities and neighborhoods are expected in parallel to urban development.

2. Responsibility: Toward Installing Conservation Function in the Community Life

As in most instances of developing countries in Asia, no 'real host' with primary responsibility in undertaking conservation works can be established, though according to the Thai Constitution, it is the local authorities that are designated with legal responsibilities to conserve and restore the properties and landscapes of cultural heritage, which belong to the people, and not the central government. Then, community management would become a paradigm shift in the essence of heritage conservation.

A general policy should then be adopted in installing the function of protection and management of cultural heritage in the community life and into the planning programs. Such community-based approaches would alleviate the negative impacts of the existing communities, overlaying the underground settlement of 'Wiang Kum Kam,' a precedent fabulous ancient city in the south of Chiang Mai [9].

3. Seeking Financial Resource: Toward Providing Income-Generating Activities

In developing countries, budgets for conservation and restoration projects are scarcely provided by either the central government or local authorities. Limited financial resources become major constraints in the effort to protect and maintain the national heritage. Appropriate approaches have to be planned in mobilizing funds and resources.

It is essential to significantly increase the roles of the private sector in sharing the responsibilities of protection and restoration of cultural heritage. The achievement and contribution to conservation and restoration of individuals and organizations within the private sector, and public-private partnerships initiatives could be found in those successful restoration and conservation efforts in UNESCO's Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation. Such collective



Figure 2 The image of Wiang Kum Kam



Figure 3 Shophouses in Phuket Town

private initiatives in successfully restoring and conserving shophouses of Sino-Portuguese architecture in Phuket — as initiated by Dr. Yongtanit Pimonsathean, 'Old Phuket Town' conservation project researcher — are economically rewarding in terms of becoming tourists' attraction [10]. Similarly, from George Town, Penang to Changkat Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur, both in Malaysia, restored colonial architecture has been the main feature of living heritage accommodating tourists' activities.

Local authorities and residents, upon appropriate guidance, can jointly promote tourism which will generate substantial income for the benefit of local communities in undertaking conservation works, especially for those properties with outstanding historical and / or architectural values. In some instances, site museums can also be established through the cooperation of public and private investment. The National Museum of Chiang Saen with an important collection of Buddha images and stone inscriptions, for example, could be upgraded to represent Lanna Regional Museum through such cooperative effort.

4. Gaining Identity: To Be Educated and to Educate

Given the impacts of commercialism, such negative phenomena as soaring vertical development in a predominantly horizontal neighborhood, juxtaposition of contrasting elements, visual pollution with the accumulation of billboards and wiring, including piecemeal flamboyant development projects, can be found throughout the tangible cultural landscapes in East Asian and Southeast Asian countries, holistically in rather chaotic conditions. It is not surprising to find a vertical tower, similar to the '*Chinese Diaolou*,' of a highrise building standing alone in Bangkok's China Town.

In coping with such an identity crisis, local authorities who are directly or indirectly in charge of community development projects are required to be educated concerning the concepts and appropriate tasks of conservation. Implicitly, more and more 'conservation professionals, architects and planners' should be produced with specific functions to educate local authorities, entrepreneurs and investors as well as the general public. The Asian Academy for Heritage Management under UNESCO-ICCROM with its network of institutes of higher learning throughout the Asia-Pacific region, being engaged in the research and teaching of heritage conservation and management, would strategically serve the professional objectives.

5. Scientific / Technical Concerns: Toward Providing More Technical Inputs

Obviously, in many instances of conservation and restoration tasks, insufficient awareness and inputs, regarding the scientific / technical-basis, inevitably result in more damage to the cultural properties and landscapes. Such evidence in Southeast Asian Region as flooding resulting from excavation, chemical reaction through moisturization, replacement with reactive materials, etc., are often the cases that cause damages to cultural properties faster and make them more vulnerable after restoration. Safeguarding of heritage properties can be provided through scientific and technical measures. It is the technological progress and knowhow that bring about the dynamism in conservation and conservation standards of technical excellence. Specific and serious dangers can be reduced or resolved by technical assistance. Under UNESCO, international assistance may be requested for solving scientific and technical problems under World Heritage Fund (Article 15 - 26) [11].

7. Conservation Enhancing Multi-Dimensional Developments

The various positive development and outcomes, which are gained through the four main interrelated conservation approaches, can be pointed out as follows:

1. **'Collective memories'** of dominant cultural properties and cultural landscapes with historical and / or architectural values can be maintained permanently through conservation and restoration.

2. The social and cultural values subsequently gained build up **'collective values'** such as **'Thainess'** in both tangible and intangible dimensions [12]. Furthermore, regional values should also be realized reflecting regionalism such as **'ASEAN-ness.'** Along with liberative tracts for a new Asia as proposed by such an Asia's leading intellectual as William Lim, **'Asian-ness'** is gradually accepted as a collective conceptual system, especially in the global context as reflected in the slogan "Think global and act local and vice versa [13]."

3. Through appropriate research and education activities and cultural tourism, **revitalization of community life** could not only sustain ecological and socio-cultural environments, but also promote further **tourists' attractions** along the balanced system of management and development.

4. Higher efficiency in space utilization gained through adaptive reuse of old buildings only adds up **more economic values to salvage structures.**

5. **More employment** in local communities is needed for conservation and restoration works.

6. More significantly, successful conservation and restoration projects would generate a catalytic process in the surrounding communities.

Through more interactive approaches, all these positive developments and outcomes encourage current conservation initiatives which would lead toward world recognition and awarding.



Classical Gardens of Suzhou, China



World Heritage Town, Luang Prabang, Laos



Borobudur, Central Java

Figure 4 Dominant World Cultural Heritage

8. Demonstrating the Values of World Cultural Heritage

It is noteworthy to point out some of the Masterpieces of World Cultural Heritage that have become permanent attractions for cultural tourism in Asia. For examples, The Classical Gardens of Suzhou in China, the World Heritage Town, Luang Prabang in Laos and the amazing Borobudur in Central Java are recognized of having '*outstanding universal value*.' Collectively, they exhibit '**Asian-ness**' in transcending national identities while constituting world heritage.

The UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation Programme has established milestones for escalating the efforts and contributions of individuals and organizations in launching private and public-private partnerships projects which successfully restore and conserve buildings and towns / settlements of heritage value in the Asia-Pacific region [14]. The Water Towns of Yangtze River in Jiangnan region, Jiangsu Province, and Cangqiao Historical Street in Shaoxing City, Zhejiang Province, both in China, are examples of best practices that demonstrate the viability of historic towns as living heritage and also stand as a valuable benchmark for future similar projects in China as well as elsewhere in the world.

For Thailand, both the Historic Town of Sukhothai and the Historic City of Ayutthaya, each together with Associated Towns represent only parts of the rich cultural heritage setting of the region. Sukhothai art reveals the unique architectural style, especially the distinguished character of a stupa in the form of a lotus bud or "*phum khao bin*" The outstanding Ayutthaya heritage reflects the creative genius of water-based culture as well as the strategic settlement regarding protection from enemy invasions. The remnants of monuments and art objects are evidence of the greatness of the Ayutthaya kingdom [15]. It remains to see how Thailand would be able to



Figure 5 Water Towns of the Yangtze River, Jiangnan Region, Jiangsu Province, China



Historic Town of Sukhothai



Historic City of Ayutthaya

Figure 6 The Historic Town of Sukhothai and the Historic City of Ayutthaya

overcome the protection and management problems so that more and more cultural properties and landscapes with outstanding universal value from rich cultural settings will meet the nomination criteria and being inscribed on the World Cultural Heritage List.

9. The Challenge of Conserving Cultural Heritage

Orchestrated operations are highly encouraged for the initiation and undertaking of conservation and restoration projects. In Thailand, cooperations must be formulated among various public authorities particularly The Fine Arts Department with local authorities as well as such major land owner organizations as Bureau of the Crown Property and Treasury Department (both own most of public land), and Planning Authority, Town Planning Office. It should be noted that conservation spirit is usually outside the sphere of interest among most urban planners. Thus, in many instances transportation networks are unconsciously overlaid on preserved regions of cultural, historical and architectural significance. In conservation undertakings, both the historic complex and the surrounding environment and urban community development should be holistically planned.

More importantly, private sectors should actively involve in restoring and conserving structures and buildings of heritage value. Furthermore, the public-private partnerships initiatives would strengthen the conservation of the urban environment. As in the case of conservation of the Ancient Quarter of Hanoi, it is noted that *"the traders and their families are among the most important actors affecting the development of the Ancient Quarter [16]."* Similarly, the successful implementation in

conserving Sino-Portuguese styled shophouses in the old Phuket town is mainly because the local people are aware of their own benefits in return.

On the encroachment of commercialism, one of the critical issues is the governmental proposal to demolish the building complexes along Ratchadamnoen Klang Boulevard. The group of buildings were completed in 1940 to give a 'new look' to Bangkok by portraying the image of Champs Elysees of Paris. This ambitious plan was initiated by the 'Revolutionary Party' under the military leader Pibul Songkram. Though these neo-plastic styled structures of Modern Architecture may not have strong 'architectural value,' they certainly exhibit the historical content of the urban tissue as well as reflecting the ideological motive of the 'Revolutionary Party' in their attitude toward modernization. To replace them with new complexes to accommodate more rewarding commercial activities may critically change the Rattanakosin's heritage, urban landscape and atmosphere. Thus, unlike the previous demolition of Chalermtai Theatre for the construction of Bangkok Metropolitan Authority's Pavilion, more protests against the decision to give way to new commercialism are expected.

A similar threat is underway over the Chinese Capital's old alleys or 'hutongs,' as Beijing is undergoing modernized developments for the 2008 Olympic Games [17], *Hutongs*, which are traditional residential alleys latticing China's capital in a dense network, are being razed rapidly. The challenges for Beijing planners are not only preserving the traditional urban fabric, but also facing the increasing threat from the rising number of bars and night life activities.



Chalermtai Theatre

To be dynamited soon

After Chalermtai Theatre

To give way to new commercialism



Figure 7 Building complexes on Ratchadamnoen Klang Boulevard (1940): Bangkok's Champs Elysees

10. Epilogue

Given the inherent management and technical problems in the conservation implementation process, the following awareness and measures should be advocated for promoting conservation of Asia's cultural heritage:

1. Formulating **culture of conservation** through education at all levels. Appropriate conservation concept, approaches and techniques are to be integrated into the fundamental education system.

2. Promoting **community-based development** of construction projects so that critical considerations regarding conservation would be significant inputs in making appropriate decisions, leading toward a more balanced approach to conservation and development.

3. Subsequently, encouraging the involvement of the **private sector** and **public-private partnerships** initiatives in safeguarding heritage and maintaining cultural diversity. A controversial issue should be noted here that in most instances of adaptive reuse for tourists' attraction, what have been conserved are merely the 'shell' and not the spirit or content of architecture and history. This has become a strong dispute of Chinese conservation professionals over the public with predominant consumerism culture [18].

4. Recognizing the efforts and contributions of private roles in conservation activities through fostering **best practice awards** for local, national and regional or international demonstration.

5. Setting **benchmark standards / criteria** of conservation regarding technical excellence, community involvement and use of heritage resources, especially in terms of local construction materials and skills.

With such directives, conservation projects in each Asian autonomy would be catalytically developed. However, in order to gain reasonable national and international supports and assistances — legal, financial, technical — local communities in close cooperation with the private sector may turn toward business' "insurgency model" as being put forward in **The Underdog Advantage** [19]. The insurgency tactics, encouraging faster change under different attitude for developing countries, would enhance conservation movements toward achieving the aforementioned approaches.

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