

The Disappearing Asian City: Protecting Asia's Urban Heritage in a Globalizing World

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Those who have been charmed by the ambience of life in an Asian city probably felt its evocative and at times palpable connection with past traditions and history and enjoyed the sociability of its street life. They might wonder how one could sustain and even replicate the sense of place and the quality of life one experiences in such a city. *The Disappearing Asian City* shows that such cities face severe challenges as the global economy affects traditional life and relationships in the far corners of the world.

Through case studies describing attempts to protect Asia's urban heritage in 13 cities, this book demonstrates that there is no single model of the "Asian" city. The cases illustrate the conflicts between the mandates of the global economy, the colonial past, and the contested ideas of what is "indigenous." The book demonstrates that political ideology must bend to allow economic development and that the Western notion of preservation—which emphasizes the built form—may need to become more inclusive so as to protect the very elements of culture that give a city its meaning.

This edited volume of case studies of primarily Southeast Asian cities discusses various governmental efforts to preserve urban heritage. Reviewing these cases reveals the difficult process of defining what is to be preserved; selecting an approach in the face of pressures from political ideology and economic and cultural globalization; establishing regulatory frameworks in contexts involving disparate social and economic capital for such efforts; and implementing regulation and policies in contexts where preservation must compete with economic development.

The book is organized into three parts. Part I, "Embracing the Global," consists of four chapters on Manila (Philippines), Shanghai (China), Phnom Penh (Cambodia), and Vientiane (Laos), cities in which the respective authorities support economic globalization. Manila and Shanghai, mega-cities well entrenched in the capitalist world, face the challenge of sustaining their colonial heritage, particularly its built form, as the "international style" rapidly expands in the wake of economic globalization.

Preservation of Phnom Penh's historic areas, which are largely a French colonial creation, offers little to policymakers vested in reviving the intangible heritage of the indigenous Khmer. In socialist Laos, which is in the early stages of economic liberalization, there is concern that preservation policy might commodify the historic royal capital city of Luang Prabang for international tourism. But even in the absence of tourist attractions, in the capital Vientiane the favoring of economic development projects will allow the de-culturing and destruction of that city's heritage townscape.

Part II, "Reacting to the Colonial," has four chapters on Seoul (South Korea), Nagasaki (Japan), Calcutta (India), and Semarang (Indonesia). These discuss the now-familiar story of current nationalist governments and their relationship to the colonial built form. The form, obviously, symbolized external aggression and was historically pivotal to the imperial aspirations of the colonizer. In Seoul, the Korean antipathy to the colonial period under Japan is manifest in the eradication of the built form associated with this period. Nagasaki's western, Christian heritage is appreciated and well protected, but sanitized and arrayed as in Disneyland. In Japan the traditional construction material is wood, and the climate is such that preservation entails renewal and replication of the built form, using the traditional skills of a community. This challenges the dominant western notions of "authenticity" as based on the existing built fabric.

In Calcutta, the authorities—for economic, political, and cultural reasons—have largely ignored the colonial heritage of the British Raj. In this and other cities of India, the built form of the colonial period is adapted and reused to serve the pressing needs of current populations and government functions. As the Mumbai (the old name for Bombay, the commercial center of India) example cited in the chapter on Calcutta illustrates, and as Rahul Mehrotra has noted in his preservation work ("Bazaars in Victorian Arcades: Conserving Bombay's Historic Core" in Hemalata Dandekar, ed., *City Space and Globalization: An International Perspective*, CAUP The University of Michigan, 1998, pp. 46–53), this continued use of historic built environments might serve democratic regimes that look to internal as much as external growth and consumption as the primary wellspring of development. Democratizing the concept of cultural

heritage is a theme echoed by Joost Coté, in the case study of Semarang, located on the Indonesian island of Java. The author argues for embracing modern Indonesia as a multicultural society, while reconciling its complex and difficult past by placing sites in the context of local history, not the colonialist or narrowly nationalist one.

Part III, “Stressing the Local,” presents five city cases: Yangon (formerly Rangoon in Myanmar, formerly Burma), Hanoi (Vietnam), Hong Kong (after its re-incorporation into China), George Town (Malaysia), and Bangkok (Thailand). All cases pose the importance of stressing the local cultural heritage in official policy at both national and municipal levels. In Yangon, conserving selected components of the cultural heritage supports the forging of a nationalistic ideology. Similarly in Vietnam, official policy sees projection of an official Vietnamese cultural heritage as critical to holding the nation together. In the case study of Hong Kong, Jeffrey W. Cody illustrates the stress involved in defining cultural heritage as monolithic and universal. He describes two contrasting motives, one focusing on traditional Hong Kong heritage, particularly of the British period, and another re-inventing local heritage to assert that Hong Kong is now Chinese.

In George Town’s historic core, which is on UNESCO’s World Heritage list, gentrification threatens the very communities that make the city significant. Conservationists are concerned that cultural tourism undermines “authenticity,” as commercial projects seek to capitalize on the increased number of visitors. Finally, in Bangkok, local groups of professionals and public figures are moving the government to view the city as a shared space whose heritage is essential for the quality of life, and where cultural globalization works hand-in-hand with the preservation of local heritage.

Although the themes addressed in the book are not new, the case studies provide a state-of-the-art snapshot of the evolving dilemmas of cities facing loss of cultural heritage and shared memory. The book makes a useful contribution to the growing literature on heritage preservation, with the 13 case studies adding to our understanding of the roles and diverse mandates of government and international

institutions. The primary audience is preservation planners and scholars of South and Southeast Asian cities.

Reviewed by Hemalata C. Dandekar

Dandekar is the director of and a professor in the School of Planning and Landscape Architecture, Arizona State University. Her publications include *City, Space and Globalization* (CAUP, University of Michigan, 1998), a scrutiny of the impacts of globalization on city space; *Shelter, Women and Development* (George Wahr Publishing, 1993); and the extensively revised second edition of *The Planner's Use of Information* (APA Press, 2003).