



# Conserving Heritage In South East Asian Cities: Planning For Continuity and Change

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Tourism and Development

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## TECHNICAL NOTE

### INTRODUCTION

Across large parts of the world today, including Southeast Asia, tourism has become a major force of social, economic and cultural change. Indeed, throughout Southeast Asia it is highly likely that the role played by tourism in the region's development will continue to increase in the future. For those involved in conservation then, the difficult and complex challenges presented by tourism will only continue to grow. It is therefore vital that the conservation sector responds to this situation by developing successful strategies for managing both the challenges and opportunities posed by tourism and tourism related development.

Tourism invariably involves unfamiliar questions, various dilemmas, unpredictable futures, and the convergence of competing interests. One of the aims of this workshop is to help participants better understand these complexities and to see tourism development as a variable of the conservation equation. Two questions are implied by this: (1) how might increasing tourism affect the conservation of cultural heritage; and (2) what kinds of new approaches to, and ways of thinking about, conservation are suggested by the expansion of global tourism? To help answer these questions, the sessions focusing on tourism and development in this workshop will cover three key areas:

- Why tourism and development need to be considered important variables of heritage conservation.
- How tourism and development impact the conservation of cultural heritage and how they influence the decision making processes of conservation.
- How we need to think about, talk about and analyze tourism and tourism related development.
- The strategies that can help us better manage the complex challenges and opportunities presented by tourism.

Tourism and Development: The key Issues

Conventional wisdom concerning the relationship between heritage preservation and tourism development have shifted dramatically over the last four to five decades, however, the challenges facing planners, archaeologists, architects and conservators of decades past seem surprisingly similar to those of today. Competing agendas and disparate opinions, the regrets of loss and



missed opportunities, the lack of long-term thinking, along with a call for approaches that balance multiple values are enduring concerns.

Immediately after the Second World War, those involved in 'Development' invariably saw culture as an obstacle to modernisation and the betterment of society. At the international level, such ideas were driven in large part by the philosophies advanced by the international institutions set up at that time, such as the *International Monetary Fund* and the *International Bank for Reconstruction and Development* (later known as *The World Bank*). These organisations had very little overlap with the agendas of organisations concerned with the preservation and protection of culture like UNESCO.

Since the early 1990s, however, a major paradigm shift has occurred, primarily through the widespread adoption of ideas associated with a language of 'sustainable development'. Ideas of tourism, and most notably a new language of *cultural tourism*, have been central to this evolution in thinking. But as programs proclaiming a mantra of 'sustainability' have been implemented from Hanoi to Honolulu and from Malaysia to Morocco, the concept has become increasingly complex, unwieldy and ambiguous. Such shifts have also occurred in parallel with the global transition towards post-industrial economies, and a reduced reliance on industrial, manufacturing sectors, even within rapidly developing regions such as Southeast Asia.

Places like Hoi An, Luang Prabang and Angkor-Siem Reap offer tangible examples of how landscapes and communities have been radically transformed by these large scale, globally roaming processes. Some would argue that their renewal and revival has been utterly dependent upon sectors like tourism and its associated forms of development. These three locations are far from unique. A renewed concern for conserving cultural heritage has become a familiar story around the world. And yet despite such changes, the conservation and heritage sector often continues to approach the concept of 'Development', and those involved in it, with suspicion and unease.

In many cases such a position is well justified. Far too often schemes couched in a language of 'modernisation', 'regeneration', 'wealth creation' or 'real economic benefit' have paid little attention to the cultural and environmental destruction they cause. Proposals for tall buildings in and around historic districts – Seville in Spain, London in the UK, St. Petersburg in Russia, and Phnom Penh in Cambodia being recent notable cases – exemplify this ongoing problem. However, there have been numerous cases where the adoption of a defensive, negative position towards development has been counter-productive. As you will see from the recommended readings for this workshop, in certain instances industries like tourism provide the only realistic economic lifeline for the preservation of fragile and endangered heritage resources.

Tourism also affects heritage locations in multiple ways, some more obvious than others. For instance, the impact high rise buildings have on a landscape and the communities living within that landscape is usually self evident. However, it is often more difficult to understand the subtle and long-term cultural changes tourism development creates in a region. This is particularly the case when considering the ways in which it transforms the lives of local residents, in both economic and cultural terms. The wealth tourism brings enables people to build their houses with more 'modern' materials, designs and technologies. But far more than just affecting the built

environment of communities, the tourist encounter between 'host' and 'guest' is one of the most significant ways in which the cultural values of today's globalization are being transmitted across previously disconnected communities of people.

In response to such processes, the heritage conservation sector has primarily regarded tourism as a force of 'cultural homogenization', whereby globalization and development are seen as forces that make places increasingly similar and culturally standardized. Whilst these concerns remain as valid today as they did decades ago, it is also important to remember that tourism and globalization have played a very important role in the preservation and regeneration of localized cultural forms. In many cases, for instance, tourism has provided the economic revenues necessary for communities to uphold, perform and safeguard their cultural heritage. In the case of traditional dance forms, for example, the financial resources required for funding schools, teachers, costumes and performance venues has often come from hosting shows for fee paying tourists. Similarly, handicraft industries benefit from visitors wanting to take home traditional, locally made souvenirs. In countries like Indonesia, Laos and Cambodia, international non-governmental organizations have used tourism to link the socio-economic development of communities with the conservation of their traditional practices through the production of handicrafts.

If we look towards the future, most experts agree that tourism levels will continue to grow around the world. Most often governments and those involved in planning for tourism focus on the predicted growth in *international* tourism, (i.e. those forms of tourism that involve the crossing of national borders). However, as the World Tourism Organization points out, over the coming years there will also be major growth in the amount of people traveling within their own countries as domestic tourists<sup>1</sup>. For the various countries that make up Southeast Asia, the future will be defined by strong patterns of tourism growth, with the number of domestic and intraregional tourists increasing significantly. Asia's general trend towards economic development means that each year millions more can afford to travel. The vast populations of China and India (around 2.5 billion combined), will continue to provide ever growing source markets for Southeast Asia's tourism industry.

It is therefore important to see that a major shift is now occurring. While international tourism in the region has, to date, been dominated by the European and North American sectors, in the future the key growth markets will be from within Asia. For countries like Cambodia and Laos, over 70% of their international tourist arrivals already come from within the region, with the majority of visitors traveling from the Northeast Asian countries of China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan.

This long-term growth in tourism will have a profound impact on Southeast Asia, and will be a major driver of economic, social and cultural transformation. A number of readings in the bibliography provide a good overview of such developments. They illustrate how places like Macau, Siem Reap and Luang Prabang - since becoming World Heritage Sites - have witnessed major tourism related development. In fact we can clearly see that the listing of a site as World Heritage not only helps improve efforts in conservation, but also directly increases the threats and pressures of development. The World Heritage Site of Lijiang in southern China exemplifies this

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: <http://www.unwto.org/facts/menu.html>

issue, as greater attention given to conserving the historic quarter has been accompanied by extensive demolition of historically valuable buildings and the relocation of residents. Similarly, the two cities of Melaka and Penang in Malaysia, which became World Heritage Sites in 2008, are now facing increased levels of speculative development based around an anticipated surge in tourism over the coming years. It is vital that the heritage conservation sector responds to these ever growing challenges by addressing tourism more directly.

At this point it is worth reflecting upon some key distinctions in how heritage conservation can be approached. Throughout the world over the last hundred years or so, the vast majority of attention has been given to the materiality of heritage, the actual material 'fabric' of heritage. In other words, within the field of heritage, conservation has largely been seen as something that is done to physical objects, both big and small. As an area of expertise, conservation has developed an extensive set of techniques, methodologies and technologies, all of which have been tailored for monitoring, protecting, preserving and restoring a wide array of buildings, archaeological remains, artworks and so forth. Whilst recent decades have seen a growing concern for the preservation of 'intangible heritage' forms, this has not altered the basic approach to conservation and its use of object oriented forms of technical expertise. Of course the reasons and logics for this focus are self-evident. To assess the condition of a crumbling building, for example, requires the expert analysis of structural engineers, architects and material scientists. And to preserve it for future generations involves bringing together an array of experts capable of stabilizing and, where necessary, repairing the various materials of the building such as stone, wood, glass, paint and so forth.

This 'fabric' or physical object centered approach to conservation has also extended into dealing with issues like tourism or development. For example, concerns about inappropriate constructions or developments close to the heritage resource has meant much attention has been given to landscape planning, buffer zones and the idea of dividing a physical space into different zones. In dealing with tourism the conservation sector has largely concentrated on site or visitor management. This has meant much of the discussion invariably deals with issues like car-parking, tourist flows, and the provision of facilities like toilets and restaurants.

In summary, object or material centered conservation, whilst a critical aspect of the conservation profession, must expand its scope and approach if it is to effectively balance the equation of tourism, development and heritage conservation.

Tourism and tourism related development are social processes, and therefore need to be understood in such terms. Tourism involves individuals, government departments, private businesses, and other institutions. It is an industry where economics and culture are shaped by each other; where processes taking place at the global scale have a direct impact on local places; and where the development of a location as a tourist destination is almost always shaped by its connections with other tourist sites.

If the heritage conservation sector in Southeast Asia is going to address the multitude of challenges and issues posed by the ongoing expansion of tourism across the region, a more rigorous knowledge of how tourism and development work is required. **To do this means shifting our focus from thinking about tourism and development in purely physical terms, towards**

**understanding them as a series of economic, political, cultural and institutional interconnected relationships.** We need to address tourism as a 'social' issue, and in so doing develop a better understanding of how physical landscapes such as heritage sites are transformed through social processes.

**To help achieve this we need to expand our *scale* of analysis.** Rather than focusing merely on the physical space of a conservation area, it is important to examine the forces and factors driving tourism and development which operate at multiple scales. For example it is vital to have a good understanding of the role a heritage site plays within the development of its wider region. Are there other towns or cities nearby that are driving economic development? Or are there other major tourist destinations nearby that will increase the number of visitors to your conservation area?

When thinking of scale, one of the key points of analysis that should always be considered is the national level. Government plans for national development invariably have a profound impact on individual sites. It is therefore vital that we learn as much as possible about future and current programs of socio-economic development at the national level. This includes not only knowing about infrastructure developments such as roads, airports, electricity, etc, but also understanding what industries or sectors of the economy are being prioritized by government offices for different parts of the country.

In addition, it is vital to consider tourism at the trans-national scale. The development of a particular heritage landscape as tourist site is nearly always shaped by international factors and forces. The article by Stephen Page on the reading list explains the crucial role Southeast Asia's largest cities play in driving the region's tourism industry. Known as Extended Metropolitan Regions, or EMRs, cities like Bangkok, Singapore and Hong Kong - with their well developed infrastructures of airports, hotels, travel agents and leisure facilities - strongly influence the ways in which tourism develops in smaller places like Mandalay, Hoi An, Yogyakarta, or Chiang Mai.

But of course, we should always be considering how these broader developments create changes at the local level. Across Asia key heritage sites such as Angkor, Borobodur, Hampi, Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep and even Pagan are literally being eroded away by ever increasing numbers of pilgrims and tourists. Staircases, door-ways, and delicate carvings, made from wood and stone, are losing their structural and aesthetic integrity from the touch of countless hands and feet. We also need to be aware how the widespread development of tourism across Asia directly impacts individual community populations, or what we might call the 'social fabric'. In the case of Beijing, tens of thousands of the city's residents were relocated in preparation for the 2008 Olympics. Neighborhoods that had been continually inhabited for hundreds of years were emptied out and re-planned in an effort to make the city visually appropriate for tourists. With such 'beautification' programs becoming increasingly common in response to growing urban tourism, **there is a real risk we will lose the vital connections between people and place which sustain the cultural continuities of Asia's cities today.**

In considering tourism at these different scales – the local, regional, national and international - it is essential to understand how the tourism industry and related forms of development create a

series of connections *between* different places. One of the easiest ways to see this is by considering how tourists move around a country or region like Southeast Asia. In the case of Northern Thailand, it is helpful to understand how the tourism industries of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai are connected to other key destinations across the country, such as the hugely popular tourist islands in the south of the country. As an example, the introduction of direct flight connections between these two regions has dramatically increased the number of tourists traveling around the north of the country. By examining tourism as an interconnected national industry in this way, we can better predict how a region like Chiang Saen, the venue of our workshop, might develop as a tourist destination in the future. Discussions during the workshop will include many more examples to illustrate the points being made here.

Finally, in shifting the attention of conservation to 'social spaces' it is important we address *flows, movements* and *connections*. To help explain this, think of how maps represent spaces. Maps rarely tell us much about how and why people, objects or money move across a landscape. Instead, the vast majority of maps represent space in static terms. Given that tourism is all about *movement* - most obviously tourist bodies - we need to shift how we think about, and represent space to account for that. At the micro-scale this means analyzing how tourists move through a landscape by car, bus or foot. But it also means considering the broad patterns of movements of tourists through the different regions of a country. What role do airports, hotels and roads play in shaping this movement? And how does the tourism industry rely upon a series of *connections* to move its clients/guests across and between different destinations? The article by Winter (2007) in the reading list provides examples of these issues in the context of Angkor, Cambodia; analysis of tourism in this way can also help us understand, and therefore predict, the 'peaks' and 'troughs' of tourism which cause congestion in and around heritage sites.

**One of the key aims of these workshop sessions is to understand the importance of analytically approaching space (such as a site of conservation) from multiple-scales and in terms of movement and connections. By addressing tourism related development in such terms, we can better understand - and therefore predict and manage - the wider 'social' forces which are transforming and endangering Asia's heritage sites today.**

## READINGS

 = Essential reading material

 = Available online

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