

BOOK REVIEW

THE DISAPPEARING 'ASIAN' CITY: PROTECTING ASIA'S URBAN HERITAGE IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD

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285 PAGES

This book examines assumptions concerning the impact of globalization upon urban heritage conservation in the Asian region, and in particular, the argument that the cultural heritage of Asian cities, the 'Asian-ness' of such cities, is threatened by the flow of global and regional capital into urban areas. At the same time, the emergence of a trend towards recognition and reinvention of the importance of local cultural heritage as manifested in built heritage is identified as an increasingly important component of the cultural heritage framework.

Striking a balance between these twin forces of globalization and localism is a challenge for heritage policy and regulatory decision-makers in all jurisdictions. However, the massive rural-urban migration in many Asian countries during the 1990s has exacerbated the pressure for the development of heritage conservation policies which address planning and heritage issues at both urban and regional levels. In this context, the book provides a timely assessment of the trends and issues impacting upon the development of urban cultural heritage policy and regulation in a wide range of jurisdictions throughout Asia.

The book comprises three parts, each of which contains a number of case studies of built heritage conservation policy and practices in Asian cities. The case studies (thirteen in total) have been prepared by heritage conservation management specialists, including academics, architects and urban planners in fourteen countries. The studies examine the broad range of factors, historical, social, economic and cultural, which have shaped approaches to urban heritage conservation in each city.

In so doing, these case studies also assess the differing responses of governments and urban decision makers in determining the balance to be struck between globalization and localism as manifested through the priorities accorded to modernization and development on the one hand and local cultural identity and community engagement in heritage identification and definition on the other.

The first part, 'Embracing the Global', outlines the approaches adopted in Manila, Shanghai, Phnom Penh and Vientiane. The common factor in the approach of these cities is a focus upon the implementation of planning and development policies which pursue economic development, often at the expense of urban cultural heritage.

The second part, 'Reacting to the Colonial' examines the impact of colonialism upon urban environments and the differing responses of decision-makers in four cities, Seoul, Nagasaki, Calcutta and Semarang to the conservation of colonial built heritage. This part of the book explores the ongoing impact of colonial cities as centres of wealth, power and prestige and an urban social hierarchy based upon the outside 'civilized' world which, in many cases undermined traditional local ways of life. The variety of approaches to colonial heritage emphasizes the need to locate concepts of heritage within the historical and political context of each jurisdiction.

In the third part of the book, 'Stressing the Local', the five case studies included, Yangon, Myanmar, Hanoi, Hong Kong and Bangkok, demonstrate an emphasis in policy upon the importance of local culture and cultural heritage at national, municipal and local policy levels. The authors of these case studies identify differing degrees of acceptance of globalization in the cultural heritage conservation policies adopted and the critical role played by the state and ideology in relation to decisions concerning heritage interpretation and reinterpretation. These studies also demonstrate varying degrees of state tolerance of public participation in the process of heritage identification.

In each case study, the development and status of heritage conservation regulation is assessed. The authors conclude that while there is varying capacity to enact heritage conservation and planning regulation, effective implementation is impaired through a general lack of planning controls to protect built heritage and/or a lack of political will to enforce such regulation.

Further, the extent to which Western based 'international' heritage charters provide workable models for Asian countries is questioned in a number of the case studies. The importance of philosophies and religious systems which focus upon the intangible are pivotal to the Asian concept of cultural heritage (and indeed, to the concept of heritage for many indigenous peoples) and the priority accorded to the built heritage in Western cultural heritage policy does not resonate in many Asian countries. The increasing recognition of the symbiotic relationship between the protection of the intangible cultural heritage and tangible cultural heritage is a theme which emerges from a number of the case studies. The emergence of intangible heritage as a focus of cultural heritage conservation is reflected at the international level through instruments such as the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003.

This book is an insightful collection of case studies which provides an excellent comparative analysis of the differing policy and regulatory approaches of a range of

Asian jurisdictions to the issue of urban cultural heritage conservation. The book provides a reference work for those seeking an understanding of the range of issues which impact upon the development of urban planning and sustainable heritage conservation regulatory regimes not only in Asia but also, it is suggested, in all jurisdictions seeking to balance the competing pressures relevant to the cultural heritage debate.

Susan Shearing
Associate Editor
Macquarie University Centre for Environmental Law