

Revamping Old Asia



The past 50 years have seen Asia emerge from the ashes of war and colonialism to become one of the most dynamic regions in the world. Asia's emergence has meant not only a dramatic transformation of the world economy, but also a massive boom in urban development as more and more people leave the rural areas for the hope of a better life in big cities.

Today, as glass and steel skyscrapers reign over Asian skylines from Mumbai to Shanghai, many older neighborhoods and historic districts that connected people

urban planning and disaster risk reduction consultant. "What are people coming to look at? They're coming to look at the old traditional areas."

Losing the Charm

Progress in restoring historic areas has been piecemeal. Take Ha Noi, for example, says Paul Schuttenbelt, director of the Ha Noi office of Urban Solutions, a Netherlands-based company that advises the urban sector. "It's very much a matter of preserving individual buildings and monuments rather

were awarded World Heritage Site status by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

"Since Georgetown was listed as a World Heritage Site, many more people are now aware of the old city," says Khoo Salma Nasution, a Malaysian historian. "There are certainly more foreign tourists than before, but even Malaysians, who used to take this heritage for granted, are getting down from their cars to wander around the city on foot."

In some other parts of Asia, historic urban centers are being declared heritage

Many Asian nations are discovering that reviving historic areas in their cities not only preserves their cultural heritage but also boosts their economy

Text by Karl Wilson and Joe Cochrane

Illustration by Gerry Castro

to their past are either gone or fading into the urban landscape.

Across the region, officials are attempting to reverse this trend, recognizing historic city centers as vital cultural assets and potential catalysts for economic growth through tourism and related services.

What's more, many Asian governments are attempting to revitalize historic areas and equip them for the challenges of globalization and long-term environmental sustainability, according to a recent study by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). These areas are seen as presenting important opportunities for the financial power of private sector operators to influence the cultural preservation of cities.

"While cities in Asia and the Pacific have been concentrating on their conventional infrastructure requirements, many cities are still discovering how to deal with the challenge of urban renewal in a broader sense," says Florian Steinberg, senior urban development specialist of ADB's Southeast Asia Department. "Many cities in the region have historic inner city areas of considerable historic and cultural value. These city centers are opportunities for revitalization of local economic development and national cultural identity."

Tragically, many colonial buildings in places such as Singapore, Ha Noi, and Hong Kong, China, have been leveled to make room for skyscrapers and other modern structures. Yet the connection between historic restoration and economic revitalization is increasingly being made.

"This whole quest for modernization has been mitigated a bit by tourism," says Earl Kessler, a United States-based

than a townscape," he says. "You can preserve a building or temple, but if you build skyscrapers around it, you lose a lot of the charm."

"They're destroying it at a very rapid pace," he continues. "If you destroy a two-story building and build a 20-story building, you make a lot more money. And I think you and I would do the same thing."

Mr. Kessler is more optimistic about the patchwork of modernity and restoration in Ha Noi. "If you start to look at the revitalization in Ha Noi, it's absolutely phenomenal. If you really walk around and look at what's been done, it's been done tastefully. You enjoy the city for its newness, not just its oldness."

Countering the power of moneyed property developers remains a fairly new concept in much of Asia. Historic quarters of Asian cities have been in the rifle sights of development and real estate speculators for decades. But while historic landmarks and entire neighborhoods have been bulldozed, there has been and continues to be recognition from Beijing to Ahmedabad, India, that there are cultural and economic reasons to preserve a city's past.

Older areas that have been spared the wrecking ball and preserved are popular tourist spots. Sadly, however, many historic areas have already been lost as most major cities in the region spent their boom years tearing down historic buildings in favor of skyscrapers and shopping malls.

The Power of World Heritage

In 2008, Georgetown, the historic capital of Penang, Malaysia, and the city of Melaka

sites as well and protected from developers. Financial support is given to rebuild historic, dilapidated buildings, as awareness campaigns make people understand the value in preserving historic areas.

Singapore tore down much of its colonial past as the island state transformed itself from a poor backwater in Southeast Asia into one of the region's economic success stories. Despite the island's rapid expansion, the city has made a serious attempt to save what remains of its historic past. The city is preserving its historic neighborhoods while adapting older buildings for commercial uses, especially tourism.

Singapore has a colorful, multicultural past that is still evident in scattered pockets of older districts that escaped redevelopment. The government is working to ensure that history does not disappear altogether. Across the island, dilapidated shops and houses have been shored up, window frames repainted in bright yellows, reds, blues, and greens, and the interiors renovated for commercial use.

In Beijing, much of the old city has disappeared but the destruction of old Beijing started well before the People's Republic of China's (PRC) economic miracle began three decades ago. There are now efforts to preserve what is left, especially the *hutong*, the traditional courtyard residence. Since the mid-20th century, the number of *hutong* residences in Beijing has dropped dramatically as these are demolished to make way for roads and buildings. Recently, the government des-



Florian Steinberg

OLD VERSUS NEW Singapore has been a leader in Asia in revitalizing older districts, blending historic areas with modern commercial centers.

ignated a number of hutongs as protected areas in an attempt to preserve this aspect of PRC's cultural history.

In Hong Kong, China, very little remains of its historic commercial past. If you walk through Stanley Market on a Saturday morning and flick through the old black-and-white photographs, you will see just how much of the place has disappeared.

Some buildings have been preserved. One of the more recent was the former Hong Kong Marine Police Headquarters on the Kowloon side built in 1884. Standing on a small hill, it once commanded sweeping views of the harbor. Today, however, the views are obscured by buildings.

Wander around Hong Kong, China, and you will find that some links to the

Historic city centers are being recognized as not only vital cultural assets but also potential engines of economic growth through tourism and related services.

past remain, such as St. John's Cathedral, which was built in 1849, and the nearby Government House, which had been home to a succession of British governors from 1855 until 1997 when the region was returned to the PRC.

The French Mission building still stands as does the old court building that now houses the government of the Special Administrative Region until its new, ultra-modern offices are built on the waterfront overlooking the ever-shrinking harbor.

All that remains of the Kowloon–Canton railway station that once ran along the harbor, where Tsim Sha Tsui is today, is the clock tower next to the Star Ferry. Even the Star Ferry's terminal on the Hong Kong Island side has been relocated to make way for even more harbor reclamation.

Only recently has the move to preserve the past taken on a sense of urgency in Asia. Many countries today see the need to preserve what is left as a window to the past that will help future generations understand and appreciate their origins. Apart from that, historic buildings help define the history of a people; they reflect the values and a way of life that helped shape nations, whether they are Singapore-like city states or major economic powers such as the PRC. ●



RESTORED Diners gather at the De Yuan roast duck restaurant on the Dazhalan Xijie, known as the West Dashilan Street, in Beijing, in the PRC. The 500-year-old Dashilan Xijie commercial street in the city center reopened after a massive renovation.