

Penang International Conference on Sustainable Cultural Development
The Economics of Heritage Revitalisation
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Making the Most of World Heritage:
Promoting Economic Growth and Heritage Conservation

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Ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

It is my great pleasure to address this conference, which provides an important forum to address some of the most pressing challenges facing World Heritage site in Asia, particularly sites which are historic towns that have been recognized not only for their unique built heritage, but also for their vibrant living culture.

Indeed, this conference is extremely timely, as we have just recently celebrated the one-year anniversary of the inscription of Georgetown and Melaka, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca, onto the World Heritage List, which is the first cultural property to be recognized from Malaysia.

We are grateful to the Government of Penang and to the organizers for convening this event to allow heritage professionals not only in Malaysia but also from other World Heritage towns around the region to share views and exchange ideas with

colleagues in the private sector and from other fields, who all play an important role in sustaining World Heritage.

With our collective experiences and our varied roles in all of these different sites across Asia, the one question that is paramount in our all our minds is: How do we make the most of World Heritage? How can we ensure both economic growth as well as heritage conservation at World Heritage sites?

Making the Most of World Heritage

In the Asia-Pacific region alone, there are now 186 World Heritage sites comprising cultural, natural and mixed sites. Most of these are cultural sites, numbering 129 in all – ranging from iconic monuments, such as the Taj Mahal and the Great Wall, to cultural landscapes and, of course, historic towns. Gathered here today, we have representatives from World Heritage towns in Viet Nam, China and the Philippines, to name just a few. Some have been inscribed as World Heritage sites for over a decade, while others have just recently joined the List. So we have a valuable opportunity to learn from each other's experiences, both negative as well as positive.

Over the years, we have seen that inscription on the World Heritage List leads to a boom effect. For sure, being recognized as being the collective heritage of humanity always leads to renewed pride in one's heritage – particularly among local residents, young and old alike.

From a policy standpoint, the safeguarding of the site often receives the highest priority through national and local legislation, which are often accompanied by increased budgetary allocations. In many cases, such legislation may translate directly into support for local homeowners or local residents. For instance, in the Kathmandu

Valley in Nepal, residents of historic homes are eligible for technical and in-kind support from the municipal government in undertaking conservation on their own homes, as part of maintaining the authenticity of the site as a whole.

At the same time, World Heritage can be seen as being “good for business”, and local entrepreneurs and outside investors may begin to seek commercial opportunities after the inscription. Public-private partnerships or private investment in restoring heritage buildings can become an attractive proposition once the sites are protected under World Heritage designation. Evidence has shown that a well-restored heritage property will see increases in property value and rentals. Adapting buildings for a contemporary reuse which is compatible with the heritage setting brings a renewed life to them, allowing them to be sustained in the best possible manner – by continuing to be used and to function as a vital part of the built landscape and the local society.

We don't have to look far to see outstanding models for viable heritage conservation projects. R

Right here in Georgetown, one such example is Suffolk House, the former governor's mansion which has been restored through support from the Government of Penang, Badan Warisan Malaysia and HSBC. This project received an Award of Distinction in the 2008 UNESCO Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation for its outstanding achievement. Indeed, I understand we will have a chance to all visit the site in person during this conference, to see for ourselves this remarkable success story for public-private cooperation in restoring a major heritage building which will now be opened to serve both local residents and visitors as a cultural center. By making heritage sites accessible in this way, it allows them to help raise public awareness about the unique

history and legacy of heritage sites, and encourages people to help in their safeguarding.

Visitation to heritage sites, particularly to World Heritage sites, has been on the rise in the past two decades. Indeed, the Synthesis Periodic Report concerning UNESCO World Heritage sites in the Asia-Pacific Region issued in 2003 pointed out that tourism has been the key impetus for the current boom in heritage promotion in the region. At the same time, it noted with concern that “tourism is a powerful force which must be harnessed and managed in order to safeguard the authenticity and integrity of the properties of outstanding universal value inscribed on the World Heritage List”.

The impact of becoming a World Heritage site on tourism is clear. For instance, in the town of Hoi An in central Viet Nam, there was a significant increase in tourist arrivals after the site was inscribed on the World Heritage List in December 1999. Tourism arrivals immediately jumped by 24 percent in 2000 and by then again by 82 percent in 2001. After the first five years, tourism arrivals had tripled, from 160,000 visitors in 1999 to almost 600,000 in 2004. This included gains in both domestic as well as international visitors.

Concomitantly, the revenue attributable to tourism in Hoi An also increased in the same period, from about US\$2 million in 1999 to over US\$15 million in 2004, both in terms of tourism services and production and sales of related goods. The biggest gainers were those involved in running hotels and guesthouses, as accommodations accounted for over half of the revenue from tourism services, followed by food and beverages and by tours.

The case study of Hoi An is not unique. Indeed, tourism has been used as the preferred strategy for leveraging cultural heritage for local and national development

in most countries in Asia. If properly managed, tourism can be an important force for development, job creation and poverty alleviation – particularly through cultural tourism, eco-tourism and community-based tourism.

Yet, at the same time, we have also seen enough cautionary tales about the potential dangers of overly-enthusiastic development after World Heritage inscription, particularly through tourism, which should make us pause and reflect.

World Heritage: A Double-Edged Sword

Too often, the very cultural resources that have been recognized as being of Outstanding Universal Value through World Heritage designation are precisely the ones that are threatened by the rapid social transformation and roller-coaster economic growth that ensue after inscription.

As a consequence, heritage buildings may be gussied up inappropriately in the name of restoration. New real estate behemoths might be inserted into heritage districts to get the most out of rising land prices. Long-time local businesses might get squeezed out by tourist services or big-name chains that descend upon the new boomtown. Residents who are at the very heart of the heritage towns may get crowded out with the influx of new migrants in search of economic opportunity as rents soar and new faces move in. As a consequence, both the physical and social fabric of such historic towns may be strained, in some cases, to the point of irreparable damage. Oftentimes, the changes are creeping and accumulate over the years, until one day one wakes up to discover that the very spirit of place that was once so characteristic and so unique have, in fact, been lost.

So, how can we forestall such nightmare scenarios? How can we ensure that we do not become the unwitting agents for creating such heritage has-been's? In short, how do we avoid killing the goose that lays the golden egg?

What is needed is a strategy for both preserving these invaluable cultural heritage resources, and at the same time, mobilizing them towards the goal of sustainable development. This is a matter of urgent concern for all those who are involved with managing and developing such sites. It requires prescient visioning and planning at the outset, a mechanism for open feedback and continuous improvement over time, and, most fundamentally, a strong commitment by all parties to sustaining our World Heritage sites.

The World Heritage Convention

Let us not forget that World Heritage is in fact an international treaty process and not a mere label. That is to say, countries that have signed the 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage, or the World Heritage Convention, have pledged their commitment to the international community to cooperate in safeguarding World Heritage. By signing the Convention, each country pledges to conserve not only the World Heritage sites situated on its territory, but also to protect other heritage sites that are a source of international pride.

The World Heritage Convention recognizes sites which have outstanding natural and historic value as belonging to all of humanity, and mobilizes international support to protect them for present and future generations. You may recall that the Convention grew out of a need after World War II for international cooperation in protecting the cultural and natural heritage of the world. In 1960, when Egypt was building the Aswan

High Dam, the monuments of Abu Simbel were in danger of being submerged.

UNESCO launched an international campaign to save the monuments, raising US\$ 80 million, half of which was donated by 50 UNESCO Member states.

Since 1972, 186 countries have joined the Convention, making it the one of the most widely-adopted international treaties in the whole world. This international legal commitment translates in each country into operational mechanisms governed by national legislation and implemented by state agencies and other parties. Upon adopting the Convention, member countries, known as States Parties, are responsible not only for identifying potential sites but also for protecting them. The Convention says that States Parties should agree to refrain from "deliberate measures which might damage directly or indirectly the cultural or natural heritage" and should take "the appropriate legal, scientific, technical, administrative and financial measures" necessary to identify and protect their own sites.

Increasingly, there has been growing recognition of non-monumental sites. Particularly in Asia, this has given rise to an increasing number of historic towns that have been protected for the value of their entire urban setting and for their living human traditions. It is within this context that we are seeing a paradigm shift in the approach of managing these cultural resources, moving it beyond the responsibility of a small elite and making it a matter of general concern to the population at large and an important tool for sustainable socio-economic development.

Preservation of heritage can thus be seen as a development activity that brings economic opportunities, helps to alleviate poverty, creates jobs, and generates income based on traditional technologies and know-how. Doing so successfully entails empowering local communities. Local communities must be in able to understand and

advocate the long-term conservation of monuments, sites and the environment. They should be encouraged to play a leading role in the conservation, monitoring, maintenance, and presentation of their heritage. Ways should be developed through which they can benefit from their heritage while maintaining their social and spiritual traditions intact.

When we take, for instance, the case of heritage tourism, one lesson we have learned from well-managed World Heritage sites is that tourism can become an effective and sustainable vehicle for linking culture and development by adopting a community-based approach. The success of this approach is predicated upon mobilizing local stakeholders to pro-actively seek to improve social and economic well-being through tourism development. This allows the vast potential of tourism to catalyze growth at World Heritage sites through wise management that acknowledges the need to safeguard the sites in tandem with the need to meet development aspirations.

For instance, returning to the example of Hoi An. Hoi An successfully instituted a very progressive form of community-based heritage tourism, which has been able to contribute to both the safeguarding of heritage as well as the management of sustainable tourism in the ancient town. Through extensive collaboration, the local government, tourism industry and community members were able to develop cultural tourism management measures aimed at generating local benefits. For instance, distributing the proceeds from the entry ticket has become a straightforward and effective technique in capturing and sharing tourism revenue, allowing local homeowners to reinvest tourism dollars in conserving their heritage homes and improve their well-being.

We should note that the right policy and support framework must be in place. This includes for instance, developing tourism management measures as part of the site's management plan, bearing in mind the site's carrying capacity. Furthermore, training and other forms of capacity building are also integral components to allow such benefits to be reaped by ensuring that the local stakeholders and the line officials have the requisite knowledge and skills to take part fully in the World Heritage process. For instance, the World Heritage Committee has stressed that those involved in heritage tourism, in particular those operating at the frontlines, such as "tour operators and guides of World Cultural Heritage, should be required to have training in both the historical information and conservation requirements of the property concerned". This is precisely the kind of investment in human capital that Malaysia is already making, with the Ministry of Tourism supporting the development of such heritage tourism training programmes, such as the Cultural Heritage Specialist Guides Programme.

In the broader context, in addition to tourism, development using cultural resources can be instigated through supporting other cultural industries. These cultural industries can include a wide array of economic activities, ranging from crafts to music and film to publishing and the flourishing multimedia industry. In Asia and the Pacific, the creative sector is increasingly being targeted as a key economic sector. Nowhere is this potential more apparent than in the cities and towns that already enjoy a diversity of cultural resources, in particular, World Heritage towns. Penang, for instance, has been able to capitalize on its unique heritage townscape to attract movie production, while other heritage towns are already renown for their rich performing arts traditions or crafts production, which can become the robust foundation for an expanded cultural industries sector.

It is through such innovative, productive and forward-reaching initiatives that we can be assured that the cultural resources recognized as World Heritage can become engines for socio-economic development, while at the same time ensuring that the diverse traditions, histories and cultures that they represent are safeguarded. This is especially important and challenging in the Asia-Pacific region which contains two-thirds of the world's surface area, population and cultural diversity. It is our collective responsibility, therefore, to put such measures in place at World Heritage sites, in order to preserve their authenticity, ensure their long-term sustainability and at the same time, enrich and strengthen local communities.