

CONSERVING GENIUS LOCI

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The Making and The Challenges in Conserving Genius Loci

Significance of a place is formed by human habitation and articulation along historical time line. A place is a collective artifact constructed through time and rooted in a dwelling and building culture, a manifestation of social life, aspiration, theme, and event. Every individual may add his or her own valuable contribution to a place, and every new contribution is an enrichment, continuation, and addition to the collectivity. This collective unconsciousness forms the layers of memory of the place. The place may grow with time during the course of its realization; some original themes persisted or modified, some destroyed or disappeared. Durable material keeps the traces of the previous conditions and changes in tangible way, keeping the rich archives of a complex settlement history. This is how the Genius Loci is formed and taking root on a place.

Rapid economic growth in Asia within the last few decades has dramatically changed the cities and places in the region. The acceleration of the cultural and physical transformation process has led to the fragmentation and destruction of old urban fabrics and resulted in a loss of identity and loss of the memory of place. Communities in old neighborhoods and towns have been displaced, authentic culture has been commoditized, urban and natural environment have been undergoing tremendous pressures by unchecked development.

To date the dilemma is about managing the change in the context of conservation and urban development. We need economic and physical developments, but on the other hand, we cannot afford to lose our authentic identity and memory of our places (genius loci). In this situation, the issue became whether it is still possible to conserve our tangible and intangible memories and identities, and at the same time to allow economic growth and to accommodate contemporary necessities and modern lifestyles.

Managing Change

UNESCO General Council, after witnessing worldwide problems on the management of many World Heritage sites, has recommended the adoption of Heritage Urban Landscape (HUL) instrument by all member states (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/hul/>) to manage conservation and development in a comprehensive and sustainable manner in 2011. This recommendation is to integrate practices and policies of conservation and urban planning into the wider goals of urban development with consideration of the inherited traditions and values of diverse cultures. This tool is a kind of “soft law”, whereas the Member

States shall implement it on a voluntary basis.¹

These are the steps:

1. to undertake comprehensive surveys and mapping of the city's natural, cultural and human resources,
2. to reach consensus using participatory planning and stakeholder consultations on what values to protect for transmission to future generations and to determine the attributes that carry these values,
3. to assess vulnerability of these attributes to socio-economic stresses and impacts of climate change;
4. to integrate urban heritage values and their vulnerability status into a wider framework of city development, which shall provide indications of areas of heritage sensitivity that require careful attention to planning, design and implementation of development projects;
5. to prioritize actions for conservation and development; and
6. to establish the appropriate partnerships and local management frameworks for each of the identified projects for conservation and development, as well as to develop mechanisms for the coordination of the various activities between different actors, both public and private.

The above steps is a comprehensive mapping process of the significance of place (or the “genius loci”) from the perspective of all stakeholders, both bottom-up and top-down, to establish a “middle platform” or “middle ground” for assisting the decision making process.

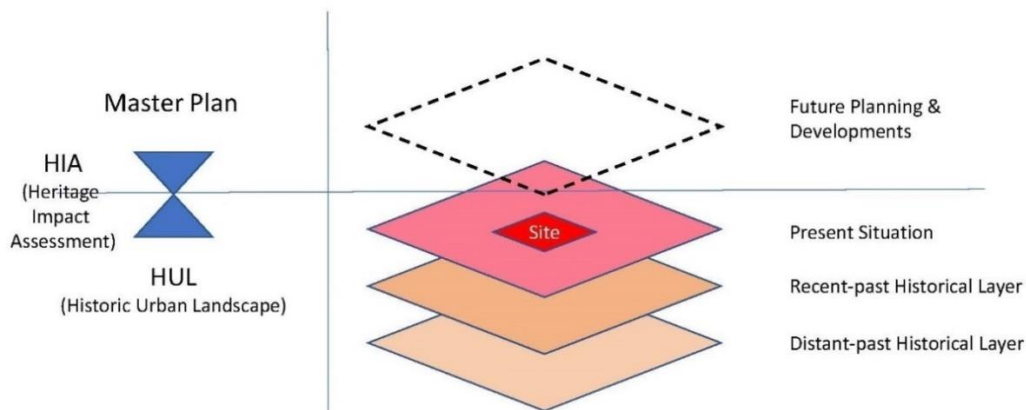


Figure 1: Holistic layering model

Complimentary to the HUL, another important instrument in managing development and conservation is the Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA), which is recommended by ICOMOS², ICCROM, and UNESCO. HIA is a tool to assess threats from several types of large-scale development activities to the heritage and significant sites, such as infrastructure development, new buildings, urban renewal, change in land use, mass tourism activities, etc.

¹ See UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape – <http://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/638> (accessed on 29/09/2017)

² See http://www.icomos.org/world_heritage/HIA_20110201.pdf (accessed on 29/09/2017)

The bottom line is that conservation of a place is not about commodification or branding, but about commitment, responsibility, empathy, advocacy, empowerment, respect, humility, and care, to protect our inheritance and significant places for the sake of the next generations.

Progressing Into The Future, Generating Future Design

We are in an urgent need to find resolutions to address not only conservation issues and the preservation of genius loci, but also serious problems posed by the climate change, ideological conflicts, economic greed, depletion of resources, and the threat to social justice. These challenges are not only becoming the concern of our generation, but seriously affecting our future generations as well. Without radical change in our attitude towards other human being, built environment, and natural environment, the future of human civilization and the survival of the planet earth are very discouraging.

Reform in the education of the young generation and of the community in general became imperative. Ethics becomes fundamentally important as the focus in education of the next generation, to change our behavior and perspective in saving and caring of our common planet and living habitat. At present the main concern is the widening gaps between academic learning and the reality outside the school, between theory and practice, between global and local, between specialization and broad-based education, between the old-ways and the new-ways of seeing and doing things. Pedagogical reform is desperately needed at this moment of crisis. The biggest need today is to restore the original ideals of holistic education, so the new generation of students will be able to become a problem-solver and “vanguard” of our civilization and common planet.

According to Vitruvius³, the architect should be equipped with multi-disciplinary knowledge, as the ground for practice and theory. Practice is learned through continuous exercise of manual work based on the design drawings. Theory is the ability to demonstrate and explain the design productions. He stressed the complementarity of theory and practice to gain credibility as an architect. He further explained that a good Architect is made of two inseparable factors: natural ability or talent plus training. An architect shall be educated and knowledgeable in drawing and sketches to show the appearance of the work that he proposes. For this, he must master geometry, optics, shadow, perspective, and building costing. He must learn history to understand the ideas and concepts behind forms and decorations. Philosophy is needed to make an architect high-minded and not self-assuming, but rather renders him courteous, just, and honest without avariciousness. Vitruvius further stressed: “This is very important, for no work can be rightly done without honesty and incorruptibility. Let him not be grasping nor have his mind preoccupied with the idea of receiving perquisites, but let him with dignity keep up his position by cherishing a good reputation.”

Programs that applies hands-on on-site cultural mapping that includes community engagement and collaboration with multiple stakeholders is a good way to train

³ Pollio, Marcus Vitruvius, “Ten Books of Architecture”, Chapter I, “The Education of the Architect”.

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students to widen their knowledge, to sharpen their skill, and to sensitise their ethics. At the same time the program contributes to the formation of HUL in a particular city. By participating in the program, students shall gain a comprehensive and holistic understanding on issues concerning genius loci, conservation of tangible and intangible heritage in real context, and building up their capacity as generator of future planning policy and future design.

References

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