

# 8

## Urban Heritage Planning and Management in Asia: An integrated and responsible approach

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The framework for this chapter is presented in Figure 8.1.



**Figure 8.1:** The framework of Chapter 8

### The Asian urban heritage context

The current situation in many urban heritage areas of Asia is one of economic gridlock and social stalemate, as a result of various factors, including weak governance, profit-driven investment, lack of technical knowledge and skills among those responsible for guiding urban development, lack of community engagement,

unwillingness to invest in long-term asset augmentation, clashes in planning and management ideologies, numbers-driven mass tourism, lack of effective management mechanisms, the inability of key stakeholders to work together to reach common goals, and inadequate access to financial and human resources.

## Urban heritage issues and challenges

As examined in detail in Chapter 2, Asian cities face significant challenges, which stem in large part from the rapid rate of population growth in recent decades. In the past few decades Asian cities have seen remarkable achievements in modern city-building, creating urban magnets that have lured significant numbers of immigrants from the agricultural hinterlands. The consequent urban redevelopment and expansion to provide living and work spaces for this influx of new inhabitants has, however, put at risk the established economic and social equilibrium and stressed the original infrastructure, which was not built to support such large populations or meet modern demands for services such as water, electricity and transport. Furthermore, the attendant economic development, while delivering a measure of profit to select beneficiaries, has intensified inequities between social groups and has led to significant negative environmental impacts.

Those concerned with protecting the legacy of urban cultural heritage in Asia, and the uniquely defining values and traditions embedded in this heritage, have documented, with increasing alarm, in city after city across Asia, an extensive deterioration and loss of physical historic fabric of structures and space, as well as the disappearance of long-established cultural occupations and community practices. Historic urban areas in Asian cities have suffered loss of structural fabric due to not only urban redevelopment but also decay and lack of maintenance, which stems from inadequate knowledge and interest on the part of those responsible, and inadequate financial investment. Investment should – in any reasonably well-managed system of governance – be in sustainable resource management, but has instead been siphoned off into high-cost property development schemes.

Such development has brought with it a dramatic change in the urban environment. As a result of profit-driven investment, residents from long-standing historic communities have been displaced, not only by newer residents, but also by the impersonal infrastructure built to accommodate these new residents. Car-focused urban design has led to extensive road construction and has allowed heavy, uncontrolled traffic and polluting vehicles within and around historic urban areas, posing a serious and immediate threat to the integrity of heritage buildings and neighbourhood spaces. Western-style building design and materials have led to the depletion of artisan skills associated with traditional construction, the disappearance of traditional occupations and the transformation of the traditional economic/residential mix of the community, which once gave urban areas their authentic flavour. Together these factors have resulted in the loss of the 'spirit of place' of many of Asian historic urban areas – a loss that renders the heritage values of these communities unviable as vectors of future development.

The nature of the urban property market presents another significant challenge, which is compounded by the fact that many heritage areas have been designated for higher densities through urban plans and policies, and many of the public officials (i.e. policy makers and planners) who are responsible for conservation do not have the required skills and knowledge to manage heritage conservation sustainably. The responsibility for ensuring that urban plans and land use regulations support conservation rests with heritage interests and the affected communities. Furthermore, the dominant urban planning and design models, zoning systems and land-use regulations in Asia derive from outdated Western models that encourage redevelopment rather than retention of a city's heritage. This serves as a formidable obstacle to a responsible approach to city development and, in particular, heritage conservation.

Land-use planning designations and development controls are often not designed to provide for fine-grained zoning that would encourage visitor heritage-appropriate related activities within a heritage area. When zoning and land use policies – which are in most cases legal documents that require regulatory changes to amend them – allow for increased densities or a particular type of land-use, investment decisions are understandably made on the basis of these policies. Land and property owners (including those that own one or two buildings in an historic area – most often their home or business) having purchased land and/or property that has been valued for a high floor area ratio (FAR)<sup>1</sup> are unable or unwilling to justify retention over redevelopment on economic grounds. The likelihood of authorities reducing allowable development is very low given the significant economic loss that property owners would incur if such reductions took place (unless policies and plans offer compensation or the ability to transfer development rights to another site).

With the property market becoming increasingly international, it is often very difficult to convince investors, who have no attachment to a heritage area, that a responsible approach to development must take into consideration the value of traditional uses, which have economic, social, religious, symbolic and political importance. In many situations, policies and plans that could help to compensate the landowner when retention does take place do not exist. Additionally, many design and planning professionals do not have the knowledge and skills to design redevelopment schemes that allow retention to take place while still achieving part, if not all, of the economic value of a property.

Property development and investment stakeholders have had a considerable impact on the nature of Asian cities because the political influence of these property development interests has not been effectively countered by an equally authoritative voice on the behalf of traditional residents and their established interests. A very different outcome would be seen if the interests of local residents

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1 The floor area ratio is the relationship between the total amount of usable floor area that a building has, or has been permitted to have, and the total area of the lot on which the building stands. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/f/floor-area-ratio.asp#ixzz5OMOGhcBi>