

Heritage: a way of life or a daydream?

As an architectural historian my first visit to Indonesia in 1992 opened my eyes to the incredible amount, variety and wealth of buildings and city lay-outs throughout Java, Sumatra and Bali of Indonesia's former, pre- and post colonial period. I was particularly fascinated by the architecture and town plans that were realised during the first half of the twentieth century: the large measurements and prominent setting of public buildings, the sheer endless rows of villas, shops and offices with or without red or brown roofs, the systematic housing projects in kampungs and other areas, and grand extension plans for various cities. While struck with amazement it also immediately hit me that so many objects had already disappeared or were threatened by either neglect or speculation. This largely seemed due to the economic prosperity that fostered new developments. In the early 1990's building was booming, anonymous and characterless buildings and town plans were designed and realised at high speed and often without apparent consideration of the social and cultural dimension and consequences. I was obvious to me that, unless Indonesia wanted to erasing every memory of the last period of colonial rule, action was inevitable if Indonesia wanted to hang on to its unique heritage.

I was then introduced to various Indonesian as well as foreign professionals who already for a number of years acknowledged the importance of these artefacts, pleaded for maintenance and preservation of heritage objects and the necessity to create public awareness to understand the meaning and importance of heritage. They told me they were more or less successful in doing so after a rather unexpected and very unpleasant event made headlines in the 1980's. It was the demolition in 1985 of 'De Harmonie', a club built for the Dutch during the early nineteenth century in Batavia, in order to widen a street, that united both professionals and a general public in the struggle for heritage. The fact that the building originated from colonial times seemed irrelevant to the general bewilderment that struck the inhabitants of Jakarta. What did matter was the act as such: it emphasized the vulnerability of heritage and made one wonder what, if solid, visual, tangible and prominent objects are so easily to be removed from the surface of the earth, what was then to be expected for more fragile, invisible, intangible and less prominent artefacts?

It was not long after this historic event that a wide variety of local, regional and national organisations, and guidelines were established. Among the first were the National Heritage Trust (Jakarta, 1989), the Bandung Heritage Society (1987), and the Jogja Heritage Society (1989). Of more recent date are the Sumatra Heritage Society in Medan, the West Sumatra Heritage Society in Padang and the Heritage Society in Makassar. The main objective of these heritage groups is to create awareness, involvement, and support for various kinds of heritage and heritage issues, ranging from architecture and town planning to oral history, traditional costumes, stories, and songs.

Almost always run by volunteers who fervently support the heritage cause, all individual groups over the years have received encouragement and in some cases funds or expertise from international bodies (foreign missions, embassies) in Jakarta. Notwithstanding the groups' enthusiasm and relentless efforts, their objectives however have often turned out to be hard to realise. The combination of apparent economic insignificance of many heritage objects and a reluctant political climate continues the atmosphere where neglect rather than involvement dominates. The recent illegal demolition of the Siliwangi Mess in Ciumbuleuit in Bandung, the Mega Eltra building in Medan, and the uncertainty future of the Sobokartti theatre in Semarang are just a few examples that illustrate the threats that lurk for twentieth century architecture.

While frequently fighting a losing battle and realising that joined efforts would contribute to their cause, the heritage groups and sympathizers established the Indonesian Network for Heritage Conservation (INHC) in 2000. Accommodated at the Centre for Heritage Conservation of the Department of Architecture of Gadjah Mada University in Jogjakarta, the INHC brings together all heritage organisations and enthusiasts in Indonesia. To put the

issue of heritage even more in the limelight and given the 90th anniversary of antiquity activities in Indonesia, INHC declared 2003 to be Indonesia's Heritage Year. The intention being to celebrate a heritage year every ten years.

For 2003, besides the obvious participation of the various local heritage groups, organisations such as the National Archive Building Foundation, the Indonesian Association of Architects, the Bali Foundation, the Centre for Documentation of Architecture, various universities, and Aspac Mitra Konsultindo participate in this year's programme.

Using the banner IHY2003 four group activities will be presented: an international seminar and workshop on managing heritage environment in Asia, the execution of the Indonesian charter on conservation, a travelling exhibition, and a publication accompanying the latter. Aside from the joint activities, each and every organisation will continue their own, regular activities: heritage week, tours, lectures, publications, newsletters, etc.

Without nullifying the importance and necessity of creating awareness among a general and professional audience, underlining the importance of conservation, legal and institutional aspects and enhancing expertise, it needs to be stressed that these aspects are inevitable conditions but do themselves not guarantee the formulation, implementation and continuation of purposive policies. As such, they contribute but do not materialize active heritage conservation. Given the weak implementation of heritage conservation policies and the on-going demolition of heritage throughout the archipelago, loads of work still remain and heritage and its supporters still face many challenges. I pray the Indonesian Heritage Year 2003 will indeed be able to beat enough drums loud enough to prevent anybody from pretending to not have heard the resonance and to make the necessary moves forward.

Contact Indonesian Network for Heritage Conservation for information on their activities or data on collaborating organisations/individuals during the Indonesia Heritage Year 2003: www.indonesiapusaka.org.

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