

BOOK REVIEW

Review of John H. Stubbs and Robert G. Thomson, *Architectural Conservation in Asia: National Experiences and Practice*. 598 pp. Routledge, 2017.

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John Stubbs and Robert Thomson have co-authored what is perhaps the first comprehensive English language survey of architectural conservation practices in Asia. It follows the *Architectural Conservation in Europe and the Americas*, which Stubbs co-authored with Emily Makas in 2011 and his *Time Honored: A Global View of Architectural Conservation* in 2009 to form the third volume of the Time Honored Architectural Conservation Documentation Project on Understanding Cultural Heritage Conservation.¹ The present volume has employed the same approach as used in the previous two volumes.

In the earlier volumes, the study of the history of architectural conservation practice was shown to begin and end in Europe, with the assumption that “heritage conservation principles” flowed out from Europe to the rest of the world. The second volume dealing with Europe and the Americas concluded with an overview chapter briefly addressing architecture in “the rest of the world”—Africa, Western, Central, South, East, and Southeast Asia. This set the scene for the approach of this third volume in the series.

The main question with which the reader is likely to approach this third volume is: what contribution has Asia made to the long and complex history of architectural conservation? The conclusion the co-authors provide here is that, despite the region having “one of the longest histories of architecture, built settlements and architectural conservation, [it] is among the least known in terms of the conservation practices used to protect local heritage buildings” (xi). This may be so for an international readership, and it does suggest that, to some extent, the volume

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¹Stubbs 2009; Stubbs and Makas 2011.

expresses an outsider perspective. While the authors' credentials include professional involvement with Asian countries, and a number of contributions from well-known scholars in the field of Asian heritage such as William Chapman, William Logan, and Ken Taylor, are included, more effort could have been made to draw on Asian experts on the ground who could have provided added diversity of perspectives and expertise.

It is of course not possible to provide a detailed review of a folio-sized reference book covering 28 distinct nations in a work of 600 pages. Given the scope of the volume, entries are of necessity concise and tightly focused, and, as the authors emphasize in the preface, the volume is not intended to provide detailed histories of countries and cultures or of their architectural histories. Even so, the scope and the breadth of scholarship that guides the reader through the heterogeneity of the cultures, histories, ethnicities, languages, and national polities that inevitably impinge upon questions of heritage and architectural conservation is impressive. What we have is a scholarly and very readable overview of the Asian built environment from the co-authors, assisted sporadically by separately boxed, invited contributions by named and some unnamed experts that provide further specialist commentary.

The volume divides Asia into five distinct geographical zones: "East Asia," "Southeast Asia mainland countries," "Southeast Asia island countries," "South Asia," and "Central Asia." West Asia, otherwise known as the Middle East, awaits both another volume and perhaps more peaceful times. Before embarking on this journey across Asia, a "General Introduction" offers commentary on a number of key architectural conservation issues in Asia, which largely echoes the themes set out in the previous volumes in this series. Each geographically defined section is provided with an "Introduction" and ends with a brief "Conclusion" of one or two pages summarizing what the authors see as the prominent features of architectural conservation in the region.

Within these geographical regions, as the reader delves into the separate architectural histories of individual countries, the richness of Asia's architectural traditions soon reveals itself. This is certainly the case with the chapters on India and China, which constitute the two longest chapters. For India, we are presented with extended sections on colonial and postcolonial architectural conservation practice, although not until the end do we get a separate "boxed" section providing a summary of its architectural history. Here, we read that, "[f]or millennia, Hindu architectural traditions have been governed by detailed treatises, many of which also describe the intricate web of social structures that are intertwined with the practices of building" (388).

Across these separate country studies, broader general issues emerge. Attention is given, for instance, to the vexed and universal question in postcolonial Asia as to the conservation of the "architectural vestiges of the colonial period 'which stand as physical embodiments of' this 'painful' period" (384). Another crucial question that is also extensively dealt with by the authors is that of managing architectural

conservation in the face of rapid urbanization and economic development. In the chapter on China, for example, this is detailed in an overview of “Development and Characteristics of Chinese Architecture” featured in a separately boxed section. In the case of Japan, the subject of another long chapter, the persistence of national traditions in architecture and architectural conservation are shown to be particularly important in this regard. They have “maintained a continuity of traditional building skills and methods” over centuries that have enabled Japan to develop its own long tradition of “rebuilding and preservation,” which has “set it apart from the larger global architectural conservation community” (42). The persistence of these traditions has also enabled Japan to make major contributions to global heritage practice. It was this unique tradition that led Japan, working through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, being instrumental in reshaping global heritage policy.²

By contrast, it might seem that a study of the Central Asian republics has less to offer, due to the fact that the Soviet century was marked by “severe suppression of regional cultural expression” (525). However, this is not the case: Kazakhstan, for instance, has an “extensive heritage inventory that began during the Soviet period with the preparation of a National List of Monuments of History and Culture” (526). The issue here is not that there is no history of architectural conservation but, rather, that, in the authors’ words, it has “remained largely hidden from the Western world during the Soviet era” (524).

Delving into the individual chapters, the reader begins, then, to get a glimpse of the significant and wide variety of historical approaches to “Asian” architectural conservation. Conservation, it becomes clear, forms an integral aspect of, and cannot be separated from, broader cultural traditions in Asia, including those of architectural, environmental, and religious practice. Here, the skill of the authors in succinctly summarizing key architectural features of major national monuments, and current conservation challenges and achievements in their conservation, comes to the fore. The focus is further sharpened by the expertise of invited contributors, although, as suggested above, perhaps more Asian local experts able to go beyond the “Western world perspective” could have been invited to share their in-depth knowledge and access to local conditions on the ground.

There is little room in these chapters to investigate in detail the work of colonial antiquities departments in uncovering traditional architectural practices, although, in many cases, these have played a role in “rediscovering” what later became national “heritage monuments.” In particular, in relation to Southeast Asia, this colonial intervention often contributed to laying the basis of later postcolonial heritage practices. In an insightful discussion alluding to this question, William Chapman discusses how much of the vitality of contemporary architecture in Asia comes from the continuing emphasis on employing “traditional design” and the “reuse and

²See also Akagawa 2015.

restoration” of historical buildings. One popular contemporary approach to local architecture is what he refers to as “scenography,” the conscious imitation or reuse of historic buildings to create architectural precincts to reflect “contrived versions of the past” (148). This contemporary use of “tradition,” Chapman suggests, poses significant questions for Asian architects today in drawing up long-term plans for preserving their country’s architectural heritage and decisions about its conservation.

A related issue impinging on the question of contemporary architectural conservation in Asia today is the role of World Heritage Committees and other international bodies in influencing methods and approaches to conservation. More analysis could have been provided on how these international interventions and conventions correspond to, integrate with, or interrupt traditional architectural and architectural conservation practices.³

In summary, this is an accessible, valuable reference and also an ambitious project as the paradigm on heritage conservation has shifted dramatically in the past few decades. It provides the student and interested reader with an extensive overview of architectural practice in the region as a whole as well as a snapshot of developments in each country. Extended chapter/country references provided at the end of each section offer useful guides for follow-up reading. The three volumes together provide an excellent, if somewhat Euro- or Western centric, birds-eye view of world architecture. In the future, one might hope, now that two-thirds of the world has been covered, that at least one further volume will address Western Asia (Middle East), Africa, the Pacific, and Australia/New Zealand, as was indeed hinted at in this volume’s preface.

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³See also Akagawa 2015.