

## **The Evolution, Tangible and Intangible Remains of Ancient Spirituality and Spatial Concept in Traditional Oriental Architecture**

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**Abstract.** The spatial configuration is strictly connected with the ancient traditions and knowledge about the natural world with common roots in many Oriental countries. The preservation interventions and the management of the site in most cases respect the spirit of the place and its social use. Even if the tourism and the connected economical reasons can be quite aggressive and can transform the site and forever destroy its tangible and intangible values.

### **1. Introduction**

Architecture reflects the social, cultural, historical and economical changes in society with religious buildings more so than other architectural structures. Religious monuments are often integral witnesses of ancient cultures because of their uniqueness and the durable materials which were used to realize them. They are associated with ancient symbols and are a document of a society's intangible heritage.

“The architectural traditional shape as in the town, temple, house and palaces etc... is an *imago mundi* that imitates the structure of the universe and incorporates a cosmology” (Snodgrass 2004, 54). Buildings are a reflection of the macro-cosmos and at the same time they are grounded in the micro-cosmos inhabited by man. Space has a geometric centre from which it develops itself. The relationship between the universe, man and structures are fundamental as the centre of architectural shapes are the homologous of the unitary centre of the universe and the intimate side of every human being; thus the body of the temple is identified with the body of the cosmos and with the body of man. This homology between building, man and cosmos is the diagram of man's spiritual journey (Snodgrass 2004).

In the religious architecture of many cultures the word temple suggests a circumscribed space that separates sacred space from the profane. This space is often expressed a square shape aptly subdivided. The ritual to delineate the plan of the building is described

by the “the squaring of the circle”, where the circle generates the square thanking to the cross directions (Snodgrass 2004, 59).

## **2. The Borobudur case-study**

### 2.1 THE SYMBOLISM OF THE STUPA

One of the most important and distinctive building in Oriental culture is the *stupa* that, according to many of the Buddhist chronicles, was built for the first time in 543 BC in India to hold and protect the Buddha’s earthly remains. Of the described eight *stupas*, no effective traces have ever been discovered. The first visible traces of *stupa* belong to the reign of King Ashoka (269-232 BC, India’s Maurya dynasty). The pillar was surmounted by a sculpture with four lions positioned on a stone carved relief depicting a lion, an elephant, a horse and a bull as well as the wheel *dharmachakra* (hold in the Sarnath Archaeological Museum). The India’s emblem that encouraged the building of many *stupas*.

During the following centuries the diffusion of the *stupa* has continued to contain the remains of holy and revered individuals. The *stupa* represents a hill that is a symbol of Mount Meru, the sacred mountain at the centre of the Buddhist Universe which virtually connects Earth and Heaven. Furthermore, the *stupa* is also the representation of the cosmos with its acknowledged five characteristic elements: the square symbolizing matter; the circle symbolizing knowledge; the triangle symbolizing spirit and the semi-circle as a symbol of Buddhist Law culminating in the flaming jewel as the supreme principle. The strict connection is visible as well between the shape of the *stupa* and the Buddha figure; in fact each part of the structure corresponds to one of the deity. In architecture, the classical tripartite realization with the base, the body and the crown has remained unaltered over the centuries.

These principles, albeit expressed differently, are shared by many Asian countries and have formed a strong connection bond among them. So the tangible and intangible patrimony reflects this millenary tradition.

From XI c. AD in Indonesia, and more specifically in Java and Sumatra, as well as in Malesia, we witness unique examples of insular areas untouched by the *therevada* Buddhism circuit, which was spreading and flourishing in Sri Lanka and other south-eastern Asian countries. Based on the opinion of certain historians, the *therevada*’s cohesion strengthened the common political and social models in

many of the south-eastern Asian countries. In these countries Buddhism stopped the Islamic expansion, when it started to disappear in India (Celli 2006, 82). Viceversa, the isolation of Java, Sumatra and Malesia and the presence of *mahayana*, *vajrayana* Buddhism with Hindu elements represented a weaker factor for the survival of Buddhism (Robinson, Johnson 1997). The affirmation of *mahayana* with tantric elements dates back to the VIIIc. AD, when many Buddhist monuments were erected.

## 2.2 THE BOROBUDUR

The monument, situated close to the volcanic hill of Gunung Tidar (or Gunung Paki) in the middle of the ancient town of Shailendra, was built in the VIII century when Java was the crossroads of Indian and Chinese cultures. The area is rich with many religious monuments: the Hindu temples of Dieng (VIII c. AD), the Prambanan with Hindu and Buddhist temples (VIII-X c. AD) and the Buddhist temple of Ngoven (VII c. AD), Pawon and Mendut (VIII c. AD). Gunung Tidar, Dieng, Prambanan represented the three important centres for the ancestral cults, Hinduism and Buddhism. Borobudur (*Fig. 1*), Mendut and Pawon have most likely had a strict connection because of being located on the same straight line.



*Fig. 1* Borobudur



*Fig. 2* Upper part of the monument

The Borobudur is an immense *stupa* in elevation and an architectural *mandala* as the plan. The name Borobudur or Barabudur is the simplification of *Bhumisambharabudhara*, place for the ancestors that indicate the “mountain of virtues” with the ten Bodhisattva’s phases. The local tradition suggests Gunadharma as the Buddhist religious that wanted the monument. Another hypothesis is that the powerful sovereigns Shailendra (Kings of the mountains) ordered the construction to symbolize their passage from the Hindu to the Buddhist faith. They may have decided to convert the monument from the Hindu credo to the Buddhist one during construction.

The pyramid has a square base, five lower square terraces and three upper round terraces with a single large *stupa* at the top (*Fig. 2*). According to the Hindu tradition, the monument is conceived as the

mythical Mount Meru. For the Buddhist cosmogony, the Borobudur is the cosmic mountain of the Universe subdivided in three levels: the square base with carved walls, *Kamadhatu* (earthly realm, passion and world of desires), the five terraces with niches containing 108 seated Buddha figures facing the four main directions, *Rupadhatu* (material form world, celestial realm) and three round terraces with 72 *stupas* with a single seated Buddha, *Arupadhatu* (realm of formlessness and ultimate enlightenment) with a single *stupa* at the top. The worshipper begins a spiritual journey from the earthly world through the different consciousness levels to raise the karma. So the ritual, called "*pradaksina*" in India by Hindus, Jains and Buddhists prescribes the visit by turning clockwise and gradually upward around a *stupa*, until the top is reached. In the case of Borobudur, the Buddhist journey is very long and sophisticated and passes through different levels of awareness before reaching the summit.

The site was inscribed in the World Heritage List in 1991 after some important restoration' interventions. The first works, respecting the principles of anastylosis, date back to the beginning of XX century but did not solve some problems concerning the drainage system; in the 70's-80's followed a colossal restoration project supervised by the local government and the UNESCO. During the last thirty years the increase of tourism (ten times) has completely subverted the management of the site, even if the unstable political situation has negatively influenced the image of the country.

The place requires new preservation measures, new planning of the site (especially the entry area) and the update of the 1983's general management plan with a visitor management plan. The objective is "*to mitigate the effects of high visitor pressure on the property's long-term sustainability*" and prepares a "*medium and long-term strategy for the sustainable development of the property, including consultations with the local communities and commercial activities on-site*" (*WHC Document 28 COM 15B.59-Borobudur T.*, art. 7b, 7c). According to the periodical reports, especially from 2003, local authorities have constantly monitored the established five areas of competence at the site. The 2005 visitor management plan has focused on raising public awareness for the protection of the World Heritage property, mitigating the negative impact of mass tourism. The plan has involved the local community in the heritage conservation and management performing different activities (*WHC Document 29 COM 7B.53-Borobudur T.*, art. 7 a, 8).

The planning of Borobudur has been conceived sensitively, respecting the nature, cosmogony, and religion symbolism derived from such

ancient knowledge. These relations are not immediately perceptible through a superficial approach but require a deeply unconscious perception of the place. This is part of the spirit of the place. The concern is about how to maintain the ancient spirituality and mysticism of the place while accepting and considering the evolution of the monument.

The most common risk of the WHS is mass tourism invasion and the potential negative effect on the surroundings that call for social, economical and cultural changes. Each situation deserves a specific and sensitive treatment.

The attention is addressed to the restoration works and the permanence of the integrity in the place even if adapted to the new needs. Any restoration intervention needs to be sensitive to the integrity and history of the place so that its identity remains intact. To assure long life to the site and the whole context means to save the spirit of the place, and keep it as a key point of spiritual reference to all and particularly to devotees. The preservation of the structure is strictly connected with the cultural traditions of the site and its existence, and each aspect depends on the other one.

The appointments, the festivities and all traditions of the place constitute an intrinsic part of the monument even if the regulations need to avoid negative consequences.

Thus the safeguard of the monument implies the combined action of the intangible and tangible distinctive features.

### **3. The Sakyamuni tower case-study**

In China, the *stupa* evolved into the *pagoda*, which was built for the same purpose. Buddhism became popular in China during the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 AD) and particularly with the Emperor Ming. The name *ta* (*pagoda*), for this type of construction of seven/nine storeys partially opened with balustrades around, was attributed the first time in the text *Zi Yuan (Essay on the Chinese Calligraphy)* written by Ge Hong (284-364 AD).

The pagoda, like the *stupa*, is composed by three main parts with a raised base, round, square or octagonal shape to hold the relics, the central body and the pinnacle similar to a small Indian *stupa*. In history, the first pagodas were generally positioned in the middle of a religious complex as the catalyst structure of the temple, and thus becoming the most ancient structure in the complex. Until the Tang dynasty (618-906 AD) this was a typical layout until the main hall occupied the central place and the pagoda was displaced to a corner.

The pagoda with its vertical development has become a distinctive typology in the typical classical horizontal architecture.

One of the most famous structures in China is the pagoda Sakyamuni (*Fig. 3*), an emblematic example of timber structure, a sort of living treatise of Chinese ancient architecture. From 1961, the Tower is inscribed in the list of the most important historical relics under the protection of the State but until now it is not in the UNESCO's World Heritage list (in the Tentative List from 1996).



The Fogong temple was situated in the central powerful area of the ancient regularly squared Yingxian's plan (Shanxi province); now it is positioned in the north-west corner of the new plan. The structure dominated the temple and also the small town and surroundings just like now.

The general plan of the temple can be schematised as a *mandala* model with nine quadrants associated to the millenary astral knowledge, typical in the ancient Chinese

*Fig.3* south elevation, architecture. In fact the *mandala*, synthesis of the Pagoda Sakyamuni temporal and spatial conception, was the scheme for the architectural composition and the instrument to place the buildings on the land. This concept is well explained in this sentence: “All the things and all the events are in reciprocal relation in the space and in the time. The differences are composed inside a general scheme, inside a spatial-temporal model of the universe” (Cassirer 1955, 87-88; Snodgrass 2004, 354).

The pagoda is placed in the middle of the rectangular plan of the temple, perfectly visible from the *paifang* (the entrance gate) and from the main hall in the rear of the complex. Its strategic position is on the north-south axis with the main entrance to the south side (for the Chinese, the light and life side) (Messeri, Tampone 2005, I v.176-192). The ancient proportions are remarkably a perfect balance of the bigger dimensions with solid masses and empty spaces. The pagoda was built during the Liao dynasty (1056 AD) and was commissioned by Emperor Daozong after the death of his father. The monument presents a stone quadrangular podium, a body made of larch wood with an iron spire that reaches a considerable height (about 67 m); the octagonal plan with the diameter of about 30 m at the ground-floor decreases to the top. The pagoda has represented a fundamental Buddhist monument for a long time with its Buddha statue on each floor, reference symbols of the tridimensional *mandala* for the worshippers.

The Tower for its configuration without a central mast, composed by five main stories and four self-bearing mezzanine stories that give

stability to the structure, can be considered a prototype. One of its main peculiarities is the numerous combinations of *pingzuo* (structure composed of a column network and a *puzuo* unit as substructure); the *puzuo* (bracketing unit on the top of the columns) are 416 totally and they are combined in 54 different ways to be adapted to different dimensions and structural positions. Some works of consolidation were periodically carried on to reinforce the tower in the centuries (Messeri 2005, 11-20). The works of the last century together with the replacement of the external earthen walls have compromised the stability of the structure. For this reason the tower is under constant monitoring to evaluate the preventive measures that need to be taken. According to the studies so far made, the pagoda shows some structural problems to solve in order to stop or postpone the degradation process in act (Messeri 2005, 11-20; Messeri, Tampone, Tempesta, 2006, I v. I, 429-436).

Considerable transformations have occurred in the Fogong temple, but the Pagoda has conserved its authenticity over time. However, the tower should not be considered as an isolated monument but inserted in the context (temple first and town after). In recent years the tower has lost its prevalent function as religious monument, and has become a national monument and the main tourist attraction in the area despite its remote location. Commercial activities have flourished in the surroundings of the Tower, imposing economical and urban planning changes in the town. However, any new developments in the town plans should take in consideration not only the Pagoda's area but the other remarkable architectural example such as the Jingtū temple (1124 AD).

In general, Yingxian town is changing its physiognomy and the preoccupation is that the ancient identity of the area will be completely destroyed. The tower may remain an isolated monument in a soulless place.

#### **4. The Hindu architecture**

The Hindu temple architecture is based on "sacred mathematics, punctiliously following precise measurements while permitting a symbolic realization of the underlying cosmic ideas. The various structural parts have each a significant symbolic role in the architectural scheme" (Sahai 2006, 18).

The Hindu temple is a representation of the *imago mundi* with the finite and the infinite space and the similitude of the time generation from the eternity (Snodgrass 2004, 117). The *axis mundi* passes

through the symbolization of the Meru Mountain, surrounded by four castes or colours or according to a different theory by seven continents.

The building of a Hindu temple is a sacred ritual that starts with the location of the gnomon in the middle of the area, firstly the draw of the circle and then of the square, to define the exact border of the temple. The location of the axis depends on the sun's position and the temple reproduces a diagram of the sun's movements. The spatial and the temporal concept are summarized in this configuration (circle, square and oriented cross) that is common in many oriental countries. The temple is the representation of the universe, conceived in plan and elevation with the aid of the *Vastushastras*.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the plan of the building is obtained through the sacred geometric diagram of the universe, a specific kind of *mandala*, the *vastu-purusha-mandala*<sup>2</sup>, a square of sixty-four sections or eighty-one the most used<sup>3</sup> (represented with the divinity inside). The orientation and proportions of the temple are accurately calculated and connected ritually to the temporal cycles.

Many of the Hindu temples in India and in other countries have employed this configuration, for example in Cambodia and in Laos, and in particular at some temples in Angkor and Vat Phou (Fig. 4). In



particular, the Angkor Vat area is configured like an extended *vastu-purusha-mandala* (Snodgrass 2004, 208).

Cambodia and Laos have an ancient common history, distinguished by the Khmer Empire (IX-XIII c. AD). During this domination, precisely around the XIII c. AD

or later an important event occurred. Buddhism and specifically the *theravada* arrived in the area, replacing Hinduism and becoming the most diffused religion (Celli 2006, 77). Most of the Hindu monuments were converted into Buddhist ones thus incorporating characteristics of both religions. The symbolism represented in Hindu architecture became patrimony for the Buddhist monument.

In 1993, an *International Coordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of the Historic Site of Angkor* (ICC) as representation of more than twenty countries was born at the first *Intergovernmental Conference on the Safeguarding and Development*

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<sup>1</sup>System of rules or canons, a compendium of architectural guidelines

<sup>2</sup>*V\_stupurusha* OR *V\_stunara* is the archetype, the ideal model of a building personified by a divinity.

<sup>3</sup>They are submultiple of the number 25920, the years contained in the whole precession of the equinoxes.

*of the Historic Site of Angkor* in Tokyo. Successively the *Technical Committee* was established to make technical decisions regarding all projects concerning the area and to be submitted to ICC.

At the national level, in 1995 with a Presidential Decree was created *APSARA*. *APSARA* together with other governmental agencies is responsible for the protection, the safeguarding, the increasing of the patrimony evaluation, the evolution of the master plan, the tourist management, fund raising and cooperation projects with local and international institutions.

In Laos the Vat Phou site and the Champasak cultural landscape are directly controlled by the local government with *The Provincial Committee for the Protection and Development of Champasak Heritage* in addition to an office at the site.

The date of inscription in the World Heritage List for Angkor, 1992 and for Vat Phou, 2001 are significant. When we compare statistical data, it is clear that after being inscribed in the WHL, the number of tourists visiting the registered sites increase considerably fast. The phenomenon already verified in Cambodia is slowly in action in Laos too. Tourism is changing from a more religious interest to a more cultural one. Often this phenomenon finds the country unprepared on many different levels. The inscription in the WHL is a real revolution not only for the site but for the people who live in the area in that the “tourist” phenomenon happens over a very short period. The appearance of the place can drastically change to satisfy the needs of mass tourism and without careful planning the identity and sacred spirit of the place will be gone just as quickly.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Many of the ancient traditions and knowledge about the cosmology, philosophies and religion were common patrimony of some Oriental countries. The analysed cases show the same cultural roots, diversified because of specific historical events, economical and social reasons. What we need to safeguard is the identity of the place with its unique differences, those differences that contributed to make the place

special. The management for these sites is complicated because of the climbing growth of mass tourism whether or not the sites are inscribed in the WHL. Even if the UNESCO brand attracts even larger crowds, it is important not to distort the perception of the place and satisfy the different users. The cut with the past is never the right choice; it is best to integrate the past and the new through the sensitive involvement of the local community. A series of legislative and economical measures, appropriately studied, should be taken to improve the protection for the conservation of the sites inserted in their specific context. A good planning of the works of preservation and the infrastructure system, besides the training of local experts are essential, with the interchange of international contributions.

The risk is that the atmosphere of the site continues to be fascinating even if falsified by unnatural conditions. To maintain “the real spirit of place” the safeguard and revitalisation of the intangible heritage are fundamental.

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