

**PRESERVING THE SPIRIT OF THE HISTORIC CITY OF  
MACAO**  
*Complexity and Contradiction(s)*

SHARIF S. IMON

*Institute For Tourism Studies  
Colina de Mong-Ha, Macao, China  
imon@ift.edu.mo*

AND

LYNNE D. DISTEFANO and HO-YIN LEE

*The University of Hong Kong  
Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong  
ldistefa@arch.hku.hk, leehoyin@arch.hku.hk*

**Abstract.** The preservation of an historic urban area is always a complex problem for site managers who are very often concerned with only the tangible dimension of heritage; preserving the spirit of the place is seldom a priority for them. The process is particularly complex in a rapidly growing casino cum World Heritage city like Macao where competing development priorities coupled with constantly changing demographics are posing a unique challenge to those responsible for the protection of the city's cultural heritage. By drawing references from Macao, this paper argues that a 'preservation' approach to the protection of the spirit of a historic urban area is not only complex but also flawed as this defeats the real meaning of the Spirit of a Place and concludes that the Spirit of a Place is not something to be 'preserved', but rather to be guided through its own evolutionary path.

**1. Introduction**

During its 450 years history as a Portuguese settlement, Macao transformed itself from a fishing village to a modern city. Although the Portuguese had been coming to, and living in, Macao since as early as 1553, it was only in 1845 that the monarchy in Portugal claimed its sovereignty over the settlement (Lamas, 1999). However,

even under Portuguese control, the fate of Macao remained closely connected to the socio-political situation in Mainland China, producing, as a result, a unique blend of cultures.

In the justification for inscription on the World Heritage List, the World Heritage Committee agreed that the Historic Centre of Macao "...bears a unique testimony to the first and longest-lasting encounter between the West and China." (Cultural Affairs Bureau, 2006) However, neither the West nor China represents just one culture and the fusion of cultures that Macao represents is not homogenous. At the same time, there are areas in which the Portuguese and the Chinese have maintained their distinctiveness, and this is often subject to different interpretations by different groups.

Based on published materials and semi-structured interviews with representatives of various groups and government departments, the paper (1) explores 'Spirit of Place' as a concept; (2) considers Macao's Spirit of Place; (3) addresses complexity and contradiction(s) in Macao's current management of heritage resources; and (4) suggests how to protect the spirit of such a multi-layered and multi-dimensional city.

## 2. Spirit of Place

Spirit of Place is difficult to define. However, a combination of professional and literary references can collectively provide insight into its meaning. Laurence Loh, for example, in his essay in *Asia Conserved* (2007), compares the Spirit of Place with the soul that resides in the body of a person:

"The body is the fabric of the heritage site in its original state and setting. The soul, the spirit of place, is the sum of the site's history, traditions, memories, myths, associations and continuity of meanings connected with people and use over time." (p.9)

Knowledge, alone, may not be sufficient for discovering the soul of a place. As Jhumpa Lahiri, in her recent collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), reminds us, through the experience of one of her protagonists, Hema, it depends on being part of a place:

"Certain elements of Rome reminded her of Calcutta: the grand weathered buildings, the palm trees, the impossibility of crossing the main streets. Like Calcutta, which she'd visited throughout childhood, Rome was a city she knew on the one hand intimately and on the other hand not at all-a place that fully absorbed her and also kept her at bay. She

knew the ancient language of Rome, its rulers and writers, its history from beginning to collapse. But she was a tourist in everyday Italy, and... she did not have a single Roman friend.” (p.299)

This passage not only suggests that an insider and outsider may have a different understanding of a place, but that the spirit of a place may have links to other factors, including an understanding of its ordinary aspects (Lahiri’s “everyday”), which is usually dependent on the amount of time spent in a place.

Related to this discussion is what R.W.B. Lewis in *The City of Florence* (1995) calls the “all-of-it-together.” In his ode to Florence, Lewis recounts how he was drawn to the city as a knowledgeable tourist and, later, as a participant-observer. In trying to describe the city’s Spirit of Place, he observes that it is the city’s *insieme* – not necessarily its soul, but “all-of-it-together”:

“... several things began to edge their way into my consciousness...

One was this: if there is not much new cultural energy in the Florentine atmosphere – there is some, but not a lot – this only makes one alert to a different kind of energy, which I am tempted to call the energy of life itself. ... The life and look of Florence were composed of strikingly different elements-differing shapes and styles from historical periods over many centuries-that nonetheless fitted together, lived together, spoke to each other.

And it was this, so I found myself reasoning, that beckons us back: not any particular building or painting or statue or piazza or bridge; not even the whole unrivaled array of works of art. It is the city itself-the city understood *as a self*; as a whole, a miraculously developed design. It is the city as what Italians call an *insieme*, an all-of-it-together.” (pp. 16-17)

Turning to Macao, is there an “all-of-it-together,” especially when confronted by the glittering lights of the casinos and the well-publicized Historic Centre of Macao, arguably the most visible parts of Macao?

### **3. (Finding the) Spirit of Place of Macao**

#### **3.1. THE CONTEXT**

Archaeological findings in Macao reveal that people lived in Macao as early as 2000 BC. Before the 16<sup>th</sup> century, little else is known about

Macao's history, although it has been established that a temple dedicated to the sea goddess A-Ma predates the arrival of the Portuguese (1553). The existence of the temple confirms the presence of the Chinese, and in this case, Chinese fishing people. From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Portuguese administration in Macao regularly paid taxes to the Chinese government in return for permission to use Macao as a trading port and a place of residence.

Over some three centuries, the Portuguese arrived with slaves from Africa and wives from Goa (India) and Malacca (Malaysia). Later, they also married Chinese women and, even later, Portuguese women accompanied their spouses. The results of these relationships are reflected in the food, language, religious beliefs and various social traditions of those who have direct Portuguese connections.

Over the same period, Chinese people from various parts of China came to Macao to make a living. As different parts of China have their distinctive cultures, the people from these areas also brought various religious and cultural influences to Macao. Many of them also adopted Christianity, which was introduced by the missionaries.

European missionaries, mainly from Italy, Portugal and Spain came to Macao onboard Portuguese vessels to preach their religion in the East. As the only entry point to China, until Hong Kong was founded in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, Macao was the center of such missionary activities. It was the missionaries, for example, who established the first 'Western style' university in the Far East, which was in Macao.

Until recently, demographic changes have been gradual, spreading over several centuries. However, the recent boom in casino development<sup>1</sup> has caused a heavy influx of foreign workers from various parts of the world (close to 10% of the total population of Macao), which is upsetting the social balance of Macao faster than in any other period of Macao's history.

All of this is occurring in a very small place<sup>2</sup> with a very high population density.<sup>3</sup> The result is not a segregated city with easily distinguishable groups, but, rather, a place with multiple socio-cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Macao's economy has been heavily depended on casino industry since Hong Kong seized the role of a major trading port in the South China Sea region.

<sup>2</sup> Macao's total land area was 11.6 square kilometers in 1912. Due to land reclamations from the sea at various times, the area is now about 29.2 sq. km.

<sup>3</sup> The average population density of Macao is 18,595 per sq. km.

layers that overlap and create an even more complex spectrum of residents.

### 3.2. THE QUEST

In trying to understand Macao's Spirit of Place, six people, all knowledgeable about the city and its cultural heritage, were interviewed. Although they did not specifically mention "all-of-it-together," they talked about the interrelation between the tangible and intangible. According to Stephen Chan,<sup>4</sup> the Vice-President of the Cultural Affairs Bureau of the Macao Government,<sup>5</sup> Spirit of Place is actually a feeling one gets because of the intangible and physical qualities of a place. The importance of intangible qualities is also mentioned by Francisco Pinheiro,<sup>6</sup> President of the Architects Association of Macao (AAM). According to him, "spirit is something that gives life to something, and for a place it is the traditions that give life to it." A similar meaning of Spirit of Place is articulated by conservation architect Laurence Loh,<sup>7</sup> mentioned earlier, and who was the Technical Evaluator for ICOMOS for the Historic Centre of Macao:

"For me, it would be something that you feel, know and sense about the place after you have been immersed in the place for some time. It relates to both the tangible, which you can study, and the intangible, which you have to experience."

To Stephen Chan, the contradictory images of Macao, those of the casinos and the Historic Centre of Macao, do not reflect the true place. He believes, when looked at from the inside, Macao is a very harmonious place, and for outsiders, it takes "a while" before they start to have a better understanding of Macao's spirit and, in particular, the feeling of Macao that comes from everyday activities. Laurence Loh expresses the time factor like this:

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<sup>4</sup> Face-to-face interview with Mr. Stephen Chan, Vice-President of the Macao Government's Cultural Affairs Bureau, conducted on 15 July 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Cultural Affairs Bureau is the main government department responsible for the protection of cultural heritage in Macao.

<sup>6</sup> Face-to-face interview with Mr. Francisco Pinheiro, President of the Architects Association of Macao, conducted on 18 July 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Telephone interview with Mr. Laurence Loh, Principal, Laurence Loh Arkitek, Penang, Malaysia and Technical Evaluator for the Historic Centre of Macao World Heritage site. Written answers received on 21 July 2008.

“... [The Spirit of Place] is obviously understood better by the original people of a place, though in time outsiders can also get in ‘touch’ with it. The underlying difference is akin to reading two novels – one written by a local and the other by someone from, say, New York. I am reminded by a book written by Peter Carey which used Penang as a setting. He came several times to carry out research about the place and interviewed lots of people. You can tell it has been written by an outsider, although it was a very enjoyable book. With his book you have to suspend your perception of reality and give a lot of allowance for artistic license.”

The gap between the understanding of Spirit of Place by insiders and outsiders narrows as outsiders spend more time in the place. For example, when Stephen Chan first came to Macao as an immigrant child from the Mainland, he found the city different from the places he knew, but, over time, he fell in love with it. For this to happen, he said a city must have some historical references that can help newcomers connect the present-day city with its past.

In this context, Stephen Chan is talking about the elements that define the tangible character of Macao, such as its buildings, streets and squares and those that define the intangible character, such as the way of life. But, how do these come together to convey the spirit of Macao?

Cheang Kok Keong,<sup>8</sup> President of the Heritage Concern Group in Macao, and Chan Su Weng,<sup>9</sup> the President of Macao History Association, speak very specifically of the maritime spirit of Macao. They argue that as a place connected to the sea, and places with sea connections, the maritime spirit is the core of Macao’s Spirit of Place. Using an allegory, Chan Su Weng describes the spirit like this: “Rather than a mixture of Western and Eastern culture, Macao is more to the mixture of the salt water (the Portuguese) and fresh water (South Chinese) culture[s].... [And] this mixture of water is seasonal....”

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<sup>8</sup> Face-to-face interview with Mr. Cheang Kok Keong, President, Heritage Concern Group and radio talk show host, conducted on 21 July 2008 (with translation by William Wong, Institute For Tourism Studies).

<sup>9</sup> Face-to-face interview with Mr. Chan Su Weng, President, Macao History Society, conducted on 23 July 2008 (with translation by Ong Chin Ee, Institute For Tourism Studies).

Citing a specific example of the manifestation of this spirit, both Cheang Kok Keong and Chan Su Weng talk about the Guia Lighthouse, the first Western style lighthouse on the South China Sea. Although the lighthouse has gone through renovation work several times in the past and is not used for modern-day maritime activities, its location on the highest point of the Macao Peninsula and its beacon at night make it the strongest reference to Macao's maritime spirit.

To better understand Macao's Spirit of Place, and more specifically, its maritime spirit, a brief examination of Macao's history is useful.

#### **4. The Complexity and Contradiction(s) of Managing Change in Macao**

##### 4.1. PATTERN OF CHANGE

Understanding recent changes in Macao, requires a harder look at Macao's leading industry, the casinos, an even harder look at city planning decisions and a clearer understanding of community diversity.

The casinos have brought economic prosperity to countless residents, not only through employment opportunities, but also through enormous tax revenues. Currently, well over 70% (DICJ, 2008) of the government's revenue comes from the casinos. Stephen Chan, in his interview, makes it very clear that residents are concerned about their environment and that they do not like the gambling industry. "But they know... [it] is the main lifeline... So it is a compromise." Francisco Pinheiro feels that government is focusing too much on casino-related development and decries the widening gap between the rich and the poor.

As for city planning, infrastructure to support casino-related activities is sadly deficient. As David Lung,<sup>10</sup> UNESCO Chair Professor in Cultural Resource Management at The University of Hong Kong and an advisor for Macao's submission for World Heritage inscription, notes, there is infrastructure for about 550,000 people, but there are 28,000,000 visitors per year! This affects such basic Macao-wide services as transportation, security and medical

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<sup>10</sup> Telephone interview with David Lung, Professor, Faculty of Architecture, The University of Hong Kong, conducted on 20 July 2008.

care. In addition, more infrastructure is needed for servicing developments in land reclamation areas, such as the Cotai Strip, Macao's casino and tourism district. Building heights, especially those immediately outside the Historic Centre of Macao buffer zone and in the Inner Harbor, remain an issue.

Not surprisingly, adds David Lung, there is another critical lack, that of local labor, and the impact on the Spirit of Place, especially what we have called the everyday, is clear: "Shops [are] wiped out because [there is] not enough labor; restaurants [are] closed because [there is] not enough help." Wistfully, he queries: "How can things be slowed down?"

But before addressing the need to slow down, it is important to have a better sense of the different communities within Macao and whether or not such communities share a common understanding of Macao's spirit. David Lung suggests that overall "places... are valued" and that there is no need for a homogeneous response. He observes that on a day-to-day basis it is logical that "different places attract different communities." Laurence Loh agrees and simply states, "... given the Macao context, you would have to deal with the perceptions of many different communities." On the other hand, Francisco Pinheiro sees no differences between the Chinese, Macanese and Chinese in terms of understanding Spirit of Place and especially after the handover. Cheang Kok Keong, only sees group differences in terms of traditional groups versus the gaming industry! Chan Su Weng recalls the historical harmony of distinct groups, especially the Chinese and Portuguese, noting that the signboard of Lin Fung Miu Temple talks about the open civilization of Macao society, and Stephen Chan comments that "... from outside, Macao seems full of contradictions. However, when looked [at] from inside it is a very harmonious place."

#### 4.2. IMPACT OF CHANGE ON SPIRIT OF PLACE

As previously mentioned, the lack of local labor is a worrying indicator of loss of spirit, especially as it affects the operation of traditional shops and restaurants, which are very much part of the everyday. Several years ago, Stephen Chan's bureau, recognizing this problem, devised an imaginative way to support Long Wa Restaurant,



a traditional *yum cha* venue, which is not even part of the Historic Centre of Macao.<sup>11</sup>

Although the restaurant, itself, is of little architectural value, its dual function, a traditional *yum cha* venue and an exhibition space for local artists, made it possible for the government to provide MOP 1,100,000 for conservation, over one sixth of the bureau's yearly budget for such work. The major justification was that the place was no longer simply a restaurant, but, through its exhibition activities, it had become a local community asset.

In 2004, when this novel approach was first discussed, there was no formal policy on intangible heritage, and, today, some four years later, there remains no policy. Yet, as mentioned before, Stephen Chan is fully aware of the importance of intangible heritage and the need for its conservation.

On the other hand, Macao has long had protection for tangible heritage, and it is the buildings, streets and squares, many of which are part of the Historic Centre of Macao, that have become the focus for maintaining Macao's spirit. No one would disagree with the importance of conserving such sites, but the way to do so varies from professional to professional.

Stephen Chan queries: "How can we predict the consequences of change in historic places due to conservation? ... The way buildings are conserved can have impacts [sic] on people living in the building or around it." Laurence Loh observes: "If the heritage values are compromised by changing uses, especially the intangible ones, then surely the Spirit of Place is compromised." Continuing the discussion, he says: "...changes should therefore not conceal the heritage values where physical, or render the intangible values inaccessible or create discontinuity, e.g. the performance of a ritual embedded in a place or a dance out of context, like in a hotel." Francisco Pinheiro is very clear in what conservation means to him: "...it doesn't mean conservation of buildings, the rocks, but [it] is the traditions of the building."

Has Macao been successful in its approach to conserving buildings and their related spaces (streets and squares)? Interviewees have different "takes" on Macao's success in doing so. The conservation of the Mandarin's House is a case in point. Stephen Chan

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<sup>11</sup> Unpublished transcript of the face-to-face interview with Stephen Chan on Long Wa Restaurant, Macao, conducted on 16 March 2007, by Fredrick Lee and Lynne DiStefano.

maintains the importance of taking sufficient time to finish the project (although Cheang Kok Keong strongly disagrees with him). He says: "...if we finish the work in a very short time and allow tourists to come to the area, are the people living in the area ready for that? Our main aim is to preserve the value; the value will be there even if it is not exposed to others. But once exposed the value will start to change." More to the point, Laurence Loh comments that in "looking at Macao as a whole, I feel the concept of Integrity of setting will play a very big part in the retention of the Spirit of Place. Authenticity has suffered over the years, but the living culture and life of the place is still strong, given that Macao is such a small city."

## **5. Preserving the "Spirit" of Macao**

Given the current situation in Macao, what positive steps can be taken to ensure the care, and even nurturing, of Macao's Spirit of Place?

### **5.1. LOCAL PEOPLE: INSIDERS**

For local people, there needs to be more recognition of intangible heritage and especially the everyday, the ordinary. There have been attempts to address this by Stephen Chan's department, but, as discussed previously, his department's mandate is limited to tangible heritage, which misses so many other important elements in the spectrum that gives a soul to the city. The few attempts to address Spirit of Place, for example, Long Wa Restaurant, have been indirect and can be seen as circumventing the intent of conservation funding. However, the fact that several Assembly Members pushed support for the project, suggests that there is growing government awareness of the importance of supporting traditional, everyday events and not just the extraordinary traditions, such as the annual Dragon Boat Race, which, arguably, is as much for tourists as it is for local people.

Perhaps, even more important than the need for official acknowledgement of intangible heritage, is the need to move toward value-centered management, a concept that is well understood by Stephen Chan's department, but, again, hard to implement fully given the government's bias toward tangible heritage.

Also hampering the work of Stephen Chan's department is another restriction. His purview is confined to the Historic City of Macao and a carefully selected Macao-wide range of monuments, buildings of architectural interest, architectural ensembles and sites, which are protected under the law. The places of the ordinary

frequently fall outside such protection, and it is controlling the change in these areas that is the most daunting.

Most challenging, perhaps, is co-existing with Macao's 'parallel city', one created by recent developments, including casino development. Change is inevitably part of any living city, and Macao always has had people arriving, settling in, shaping and reshaping the place continuously. But the recent developments are not necessarily based on an understanding of Macao's Spirit of Place and this has created a second 'city', which is in complete contrast to everyday Macao and which has very little connection to the original city.

Are there solutions? Those interviewed talk about the need for integrated decision-making at government departmental level. Others decry the shortsightedness of the Macao Government's planning unit, in general, and, more specifically, its ill-considered approval of plans for a high-rise building that would effectively block views of Guia Lighthouse, the icon of Macao's maritime spirit and part of the Historic City of Macao. However, it is not just the government that needs to address the challenges. As David Lung says, there needs to be a "hand in glove" collaborative effort between the government and the community. "There needs to be recognition about where people want to go *and* go. It's about local people using local streets and parks, for example, the park where Chinese opera is performed. Essentially, it's about places that are still valued, still used by the community."

## 5.2. NEWCOMERS AND TOURISTS: OUTSIDERS

For the recently arrived, time and immersion become the keys to understanding Macao's Spirit of Place. For the tourists, whose average stay is 1.1 days, the level of understanding is generally rudimentary and heavily influenced by brochures produced by government, for example, those distributed by the Macao Government Tourist Office and information shared by well-trained and licensed tour guides.

For the purposes of maintaining Macao's Spirit of Place, the first group of people is the most important as many will become a permanent part of Macao. But how can they begin the process of understanding? It is here that the 'original' residents have a role to play for they are the bearers of local traditions, especially those of the everyday, the ordinary. Coupled with this, is the frequently mnemonic role played by buildings, streets and squares and especially those that have remained in continuous use or have a compatible new use.

### 5.3. CONCLUSION

Is it possible to preserve the Spirit of Place in a living city, where change and complexity are part of the nature of the place, not only recent change, but centuries of change?

The simple answer is a qualified “yes.” The proviso is that change is part of a natural process and ‘good’ decisions are made at all levels and in the context of respecting the Spirit of Place. Conservation in the ever-changing urban built-environment of a living city is, after all, not about preserving the status quo or recreating the past, but the management of change. It ought to be an evolutionary process rather than a revolutionary process, but the pressure of rapid development and re-development, usually carried out for economic and political reasons, makes it a highly challenging task.

As Stephen Chan says: “... we cannot freeze a place, but we want to control the pace of change. I think this is the way to develop sustainably.” David Lung talks about the importance of “piecemeal” change. The key to sustaining Macao’s Spirit of Place is economic strategizing integrated with long-term land-use policies, mid-term urban planning and shorter-term community management. The key ingredients to make this happen are political vision and societal will. Laurence Loh concludes: “The evolution of the heritage environment must be incremental, so that meaning is retained with minimal disruption. ... They [Macao] must look beyond the profit-centered development paradigm, and concentrate more on building up social and civic capital.”

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