

The Hoi An Declaration on Conservation of Historic Districts of Asia

Meeting in Hoi An, Vietnam, from the 13th to the 15th of September 2003, to take part in the International Symposium on the Conservation of Cultural Heritage Sites and International Cooperation organized to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and Vietnam,

Benefiting from the particular context provided by the international recognition of the universal significance of Hoi An, an ancient port town inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1999 as an illustration of historical relations between countries in Asia and peaceful international cooperation,

Taking note of the efforts made by the authorities of the Government of Vietnam, of the Quang Nam Province and the City of Hoi An to improve the state of conservation of this site exposed to severe environmental conditions of heat and high humidity and termite infestation, particularly challenging for numerous historic wooden buildings in the town,

Thanking the organizers for their efforts in providing an opportunity for the fruitful sharing of knowledge and exchange amongst specialists, managers and researchers from Vietnam, Japan and other countries as well as representatives of International organizations,

The participants of this International Symposium adopt the following Declaration of principles and recommendations, addressing them to National and Local authorities as well as institutions and international organizations.

1. Conserving Asia's Historic Districts

Historic Districts, including historic villages and city quarters, constitute a major part of the living cultural heritage of Asian countries. These are often the expression of a rich and fruitful history of cultural exchange between the regions of Asia and their various peoples over centuries. Yet, many historic districts of Asia are facing irreparable damage or loss of identity and character for lack of adequate conservation measures, development or vehicular access controls and adequate financial support. Experiences such as Hoi An provide useful lessons and examples that should be shared amongst authorities and professionals of the various disciplines involved in the management of historic districts.

2. Involving Inhabitants in the Conservation of Historic Districts

Inhabitants and users of historic districts are key actors in conservation efforts. Their role should be recognized and welcomed in the planning, the implementation and the review phases of that process. Public awareness, information, consultation and participation help the inhabitants understand, share and care for both the heritage values of the historic district, and the necessary conservation measures including the restrictions they might impose on their daily life. Owners and users should be encouraged to use traditional knowledge and ingenuity to provide continuous care of historic buildings and neighborhoods. Voluntary and proactive participation of inhabitants and associations in cooperation of the government should be promoted and supported.

3 Integrating Tourism Development and Preservation of Cultural Heritage

The preservation of cultural heritage and tourism development are not fundamentally opposed and should be seen as activities that can be mutually supporting. Particularly in Asia, tourism is a fast growing economic activity that can provide a strong motivation for the preservation of historic districts. It also gives very important opportunities for people from different cultures to meet and understand and better respect the history, culture and arts of an area. Yet, as mentioned in the Cultural Tourism Charter adopted by ICOMOS in 1999, such economic activity has to be adequately managed, to avoid damage of cultural heritage sites that remain fragile in their material and intangible dimensions, and their surroundings. Tourism sector representatives must work with conservation authorities to establish ways to achieve sustainable tourism development without exhausting non-renewable cultural resources such as heritage.

4. Integrating Risk-Preparedness in Conservation Planning

The conservation measures for an historic district should include special consideration for risk preparedness to prevent damage or loss of cultural heritage in the event of natural or man-made disasters such as floods, fires or industrial accidents. The Kobe/Tokyo Declaration on Risk Preparedness for Cultural Heritage of 1997, drawing lessons from many disasters, should be adopted and used. These measures are complementary to those taken to protect human lives and property in case of disaster. Taking into account the specific nature of local hazards and risks, priority must be given to the creation and the maintenance of prevention and crisis management that include special consideration for cultural heritage. This must be done through the close collaboration between the inhabitants, government, specialists and non-governmental organizations at the local, national or international level; for instance in collaboration with the International Committee of the Blue Shield. It is necessary to maintain, through education, regular information or practice drills, a state of effective preparedness among all these players.

5. Preserving Wooden Architectural Heritage in Historic Districts

Particularly present in historic districts, the wooden architectural heritage of Asia is very important and constitutes a major expression of the cultural diversity and influences. Yet, it remains fragile and its preservation in often densely populated historical areas is a daunting task that requires great efforts and cooperation. The conservation of wooden architecture exposed to rain, high humidity and temperature as well as termites and other biological agents, is by nature a challenge that has led in the past to the development of valuable traditional knowledge on the use of wood for structure or ornament, and on methods for carrying maintenance and repair work. As stated in the Principles for the Preservation of Historic Timber Buildings adopted by ICOMOS in 1999, everyone involved in the maintenance and repair of wooden architectural heritage, from the owners to the construction workers and specialists must fully understand these principles and their meaning and benefit from the support and advice of public organizations and specialists.

6. Sustaining Local, Interdisciplinary and International Cooperation

The conservation of historic districts is a complex enterprise whose success requires the involvement and cooperation of a diversity of people, institutions, non-governmental organizations and specialists. Local cooperation is necessary to achieve the conservation goals and harmonize the actions of different stakeholders. Interdisciplinary cooperation amongst professionals and academic researchers brings scientific and professional knowledge to resolve issues related to the multiple needs of architectural, urban or archaeological heritage in historic districts. National and international cooperation also helps managers or specialists to share experiences and precious lessons.

The World Heritage Convention of UNESCO provides a very valuable framework for international cooperation in Asia between governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations like ICOMOS, on issues such as managing historic districts inscribed on the World Heritage List, risk preparedness, information management or training. Governments, international and regional organizations, universities, international development agencies, foundations and other partners should organize regular meetings and symposiums in the future to assess needs, measure progress and determine priority areas of cooperation.

In conclusion, participants in the Hoi An International Symposium on the Conservation of Cultural Heritage Sites and International Cooperation, wish to reaffirm the value of such meetings in developing better conservation practice and professional networks in Asia. They call for the wide dissemination of the Hoi An Declaration so that the principles it expresses can contribute to the improvement of the conservation of historic districts in Asia and to the development of regional networks, particularly of historic districts in Asia.

Hoi An, September 15, 2003