



SPEAKER 4: DR YEO KANG SHUA

BETWEEN POSITIVIST AND RELATIVIST APPROACH IN RECENT COMMUNITY-OWNED
ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVATION PROJECTS IN SINGAPORE

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Chairman of the Restoration Committee, Mr Jamie Teo, consecrating the beam under the direction of a Taoist Priest, in October 2012.

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ABSTRACT

Key Words: Venice Charter; Nara Document; Conservation; Singapore; Plurality; Context

In the last decade, architectural conservation projects have moved beyond the highly reduced “3R Principle” of ‘Maximum Retention, Sensitive Restoration and Careful Repair’ for conservation formulated in the 1980s by Singapore’s conservation authority, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, towards a more nuanced understanding of conservation. Undoubtedly, the 3R Principle is influenced by the positivist “truth” that is premised on the substantiation of the historic material fabric, as evidenced in conservation doctrines such as *Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) Manifesto*, the *Athens Charter* and the *Venice Charter*. However, there was a shift internationally towards post-modern relativism, which began with the 1979 *Burra Charter* and subsequently, the 1994 *Nara Document on Authenticity*. Such a shift, in Singapore, is evident in institutional projects, with religious buildings in particular. This paper will discuss the reasons for this shift, using recent community-owned architectural conservation projects as examples.

BIODATA

Yea Kang Shua obtained his BA (Architectural Studies), MArch and PhD (Architecture) from the National University of Singapore. He holds the inaugural Hokkien Foundation Career Professorship in Architectural Conservation at the Singapore University of Technology and Design.

He has worked on many projects involving conservation work and has collaborated in many archaeological projects in Singapore: Palmer Road (2006); Fort Serapong, Sentosa Island (2006-2007). He has published in both local and international journals on theory of architecture, conservation and history.

Kang Shua also had the privilege of being part of the team on three separate projects that won the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation: *Award of Merit* for Ngee Ann Kongsi's Wak Hai Cheng Bio (Yueh Hai Ching Temple) in 2014, *Award of Excellence* for Singapore Lam Ann Association's Hong San See Temple in 2010 and the inaugural *Jury Commendation for Innovation Award* for Yuhu Elementary School Project in Lijiang, China in 2005. He is formerly the inaugural head of the Monuments Inspectorate at the Preservation of Monuments Board, Singapore.

CONFERENCE PAPER

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Abstract

In the last decade, architectural conservation projects have moved beyond the highly reduced “3R Principle” of ‘Maximum Retention, Sensitive Restoration and Careful Repair’ for conservation formulated in the 1980s by Singapore’s conservation authority, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, towards a more nuanced understanding of conservation. Undoubtedly, the 3R Principle is influenced by the positivist “truth” that is premised on the substantiation of the historic material fabric, as evidenced in conservation doctrines such as *Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) Manifesto*, the *Athens Charter* and the *Venice Charter*. However, there was a shift internationally towards post-modern relativism, which began with the 1979 *Burra Charter* and subsequently, the 1994 *Nara Document on Authenticity*. Such a shift, in Singapore, is evident in institutional projects, with religious buildings in particular. This paper will discuss the reasons for this shift, using recent community-owned architectural conservation projects as examples.

Introduction

The positivist approach is premised on the substantiation of the historic material fabric and privileges the object. It holds an absolute idea of conservation from the Western perspective where the historic fabric or material is conserved as much as possible and utmost respect must be shown to that which you are conserving. This approach towards conservation has a long history, going as far back as is evidenced in conservation doctrines such as the *Society*

for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) Manifesto (1877)¹, and later, the Venice Charter (1964).²

“Positivist” Stance towards Conservation?

However, the adoption of such absolute ideas towards conservation is not without problems. While it may be applicable and suitable in the Western context, issues become apparent in a different cultural context. This is especially so in the Asian context where the historic material fabric is often organic and therefore, a challenge to maintain or keep. This raises the question of what is authentic, which is discussed, in the *Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994).³ The *Nara Document* puts forth the notion that what is authentic is not necessarily limited to historic material fabric as propounded by the positivist approach. It argues that there are other forms of authenticity, such as the preservation of form as opposed to the preservation of historic material fabric, and called for a broader understanding of conservation in relation to the diverse cultures that they belong to, affirming the importance of other aspects such as culture, social practices, the arts etc. This is taken a step further with the *Burra Charter* and its subsequent revisions in 1999 and 2013⁴, which takes into account developing understanding of conservation and more importantly, extending the applicability to a wider context beyond Asia as in this case, to Australia. In summation, the relativist approach is premised on the idea that considerations beyond that of the historic material fabric are equally important and should also be respected.

With regards to the conservation guidelines issued by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) of Singapore, it is important to note that it is primarily influenced by positivist “truths”. The highly reduced “3R Principle” of ‘Maximum Retention, Sensitive Restoration and Careful Repair’ for conservation was formulated in the 1980s and is targeted specifically at the conservation of shophouses which formed the bulk of conserved buildings in Singapore. While this set of conservation guidelines may have played its role for shophouses protected under

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¹ The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), "The Manifesto," <https://www.spab.org.uk/what-is-spab-/the-manifesto/>.(accessed February 10, 2016).

² ICOMOS, "International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (the Venice Charter- 1964)," <http://www.icomos.org/en/component/content/article/179-articles-en-francais/ressources/charters-and-standards/157-the-venice-charter>.(accessed February 10, 2016).

³ "The Nara Document on Authenticity," <http://www.icomos.org/charters/nara-e.pdf>.(accessed February 10, 2016).

⁴ Australia ICOMOS, "The Burra Charter - the Australia Icomos Charter for Places of Cultural Significance," <http://australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Burra-Charter-2013-Adopted-31.10.2013.pdf>.(accessed February 10, 2016).

the *Planning Act*, its applicability becomes problematic for buildings and structures other than shophouses, such as the National Monuments protected under the *Preservation of Monuments Act*, which include institutional and religious buildings among others. Furthermore, the construction methods and materials used in these buildings are varied, rendering the guidelines inadequate in addressing these issues.

On another note, one may also question the degree to which the conservation guidelines is truly positivist in nature, especially when the idea of flexibility, in terms of the need to achieve economic sustainability, comes into play. Even though buildings are listed as conserved, the buildings should remain in economically viable use and one of the ways to incentivize the owners of these conserved buildings to keep and maintain them in a state of use is to allow changes to the interior. Doing so however, runs contrary to the ideas of the positivist approach on which the conservation guidelines for these buildings are based upon. Apart from this, it is also important to note that the idea of flexibility is not applicable for buildings listed as National Monuments, which are required to adhere to more stringent preservation guidelines.

Within the context of Singapore, the discussion of theories, in this case of the positivist and relativist approaches on conservation, are largely limited at the level of academics and/or government authorities. On the ground, other than the architects and/or consultants involved in such conservation projects who need to deal with the relevant government authorities, these discussions, and the rationale or the thinking behind government regulations guided by the “3R Principle”, are perhaps rather removed from the understanding of the general public.

With an ever-greater number of buildings or structures protected under both the *Planning Act* and *Preservation of Monuments Act*, and the need for these protected buildings to undergo conservation works for various reasons, the result appears to be a growing sense of angst from the owners or custodians, as well as on the part of the authorities. It is often the case that owners or custodians of protected buildings, due to their limited understanding of the rationale, view the conservation guidelines and regulations as restrictive, with the authorities ‘dictating’ what can or cannot be done. This view is undoubtedly simplistic but it also illustrates how it is mainly due to the differences in philosophical approach towards conservation, one of positivist driven government policies versus relativist reality on the ground, as explained above.

To illustrate this difference further, the case of Tan Si Chong Su (陈氏宗祠) is considered. Tan Si Chong Su, or Po Chiak Keng (保赤宫) is a traditional Chinese temple located at No. 15 Magazine Road and constructed between 1876-1878. The custodian of the temple, Mr Tan Khuan Seng had carried out works to the temple from 1998-2001. From the perspective of Mr Tan, these works involving additional ornaments were part of merit making. From the perspective of the authorities however, these were deemed to be illegal alterations and Mr

Tan was subsequently prosecuted and fined \$500.⁵ Consequently, it also resulted in changes to the *Preservation of Monuments Act* in 2009, which imposes heavier penalties to such 'offences'.⁶ In this particular case, the idea of merit making needs to be better understood. For traditional Chinese buildings and especially religious ones, it is not uncommon or unusual for additions or alterations to be carried out. It is often regarded as an act of merit making and piety towards the deities, on the part of the devotee. In the broader context of Asian buildings, which are usually constructed of timber and/or other organic materials, it is also typical for the timber components or organic building materials to be replaced should they be damaged or degraded. Some even go through a set cycle of periodic reconstruction, such as the Grand Shrine of Ise in Japan. As such, the preservation of form is often considered more important than the preservation of material in the Asian context and it is therefore not incomprehensible for additions or alterations to be carried out in the course of the building's history, especially in instances where they are deemed necessary.

Community-led Relativist Conservation Approach

While there are tensions between owners or custodians of protected building and the authorities arising out of their differences in the understanding of philosophical approach towards conservation, gradual shifts and changes are also observed in recent years. One such instance that may perhaps be viewed as the start of this process of change is when Hong San See (凤山寺) embarked on its restoration project (2006 – 2009). Prior to this, there were other monuments of similar traditional Chinese architecture that had previously undergone restoration and/or conservation, and the angst felt by the owners or custodians of these monuments was not unknown to the Lam Ann Association, owner of Hong San See. For the Lam Ann Association, a restoration committee was set up. The committee and the project consultants (including the author) on board debated and formulated a set of objectives for the project. The objectives are as follows:

Objectives:

- (1) To preserve the temple as a living monument, together with its contents, which included among other things, artifacts and documents that are reflective of its history
- (2) To present, through the conservation effort, the temple as a fine example of Quanzhou architecture with Nanyang influences and the related traditions of ornamentation and artistry
- (3) To function for a diverse audience, both religious and non-religious as well as clansmen and the public at large, as a window to the broader context of Chinese art, architecture and culture.

⁵ "Charged over Temple Changes," *The Straits Times*, 14 November 2003.

"Temple Official Accused of Illegal Changes to Monument," *The Straits Times*, 13 November 2003.

⁶ "Heavier Penalties to Protect Monuments from Destruction," *The Business Times*, 14 April 2009.

"Stiffer Penalties to Protect Monuments," *The Straits Times*, 14 April 2009.

The primary impetus for formulating the objectives is to ensure a robust and logical decision-making process for the project and not subject to the whims-and-fancies of any stakeholders. And should there be any disagreement on any decisions, the objectives, which form the basis for consideration, is referred to.

With the objectives in place, conservation strategies or an action plan is drawn up. With international conservation best practices brought to the table by the project consultants, the relativist approach is discussed and debated, and finally put forth to support the objectives.

Actions:

- (1) To record/Documentation
- (2) Idea of Reversibility
- (3) To retain as much "original" materials as possible
- (4) Respecting "Patina-of-Age"
- (5) To remove/undo previous insensitive additions or interventions if possible
- (6) Harmony of New Insertions
- (7) To learn from the conservation experiences (better understand traditional approaches and methods)

It should also be pointed out that one of the roles of the consultants is also to assist the owners to rationalize the relativist approach they are to adopt, then approach the authorities, whose regulations are primarily positivist in nature, to convince them that the proposed works are necessary based on the relativist approach. When the objectives and strategies are clear and substantiated by international best practices, all decision making processes could be articulated with rigour and this has been extremely useful in persuading the authorities to be open to discussion and to "see" the reasoning of the committee's decisions and eventually, for both parties to come to a mutual understanding.

The outcome of the Hong San See restoration project was encouraging and it is honoured with the Award of Excellence in the 2010 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation, as well as the URA Architectural Heritage Awards in 2013. The citation by UNESCO reads: "The exceptional restoration of the Hong San See temple has revived an important icon of Minnan temple architecture of the late Qing dynasty which is a living heritage landmark for the Lam Ann settlers and the Singapore community as a whole. The project serves as an inspirational exemplar in the application of meticulous historical research to conservation decision making concerning appropriate techniques and materials. The project's rigorous conservation methodology has ensured that the authentic structure and fabric of the building are well-preserved, while additions are designed to be compatible and reversible. Moreover, by engaging the wider public through a variety of innovative fundraising and educational efforts, the project presents an innovative model for private-sector led conservation initiatives. The community-based approach to restoration at Hong San See Temple stands to have a major impact in shifting the paradigm of conservation

policy and practice in Singapore and around the region.”⁷ This not only affirms the approach adopted, it also points at the potential impact it may have on projects that follow.

The case of Hong San See is followed by the restoration project of Wak Hai Cheng Bio, or Yueh Hai Ching Temple, (粵海清廟) (2010 – 2014). The project follows a similar framework, working with consultants to advise on an approach substantiated by international best practices. Building on the achievements of Hong San See, the Wak Hai Cheng Bio is a winner of the Award of Merit in the 2014 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation and the URA Architectural Heritage Awards in 2014. The citation by UNESCO reads: “... the Wak Hai Cheng Bio Temple became the focus of a timely conservation and renewal effort due to the intervention of the Ngee Ann Kongsi, the temple’s traditional custodians. ... Guided by longstanding international restoration principles and sensitivity to retaining the building’s patina, the historic architectural ornamentation, including gold gilding and timber details, were methodically and meticulously conserved. An icon for Singapore’s Teochew community, the restored temple now continues its historic function as a place of worship and a symbol of community pride.”⁸

Pre-Conference Notes’ Conclusion

While the accomplishments by local conservation projects are encouraging, it should be noted that it is the result of much time and effort on the part of various parties involved, with the aim of achieving fruitful discussions and mutual understanding. It is also interesting to note that in the case of Singapore, it is the traditional Chinese buildings that have led this change, as opposed to other types of building. This is not incomprehensible because the positivist approach is developed in the West. It is therefore easier for it to be applied to Western (colonial) buildings that are constructed mainly of masonry, and which subscribe to a different set of construction and cultural practices compared to that of the East. The ‘flexibilities’ of change are also less in conflict with the authorities. In the Asian context, it is apparent that the positivist approach may be inappropriate and a challenge to be applied in its entirety. It is therefore important to strike a balance between the positivist and relativist approach in order to adequately address the issues pertaining to conservation projects from different cultural contexts.

⁷ UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation, "2010 Unesco Asia-Pacific Heritage Award Winners," <http://www.unescobkk.org/culture/heritage/awards/previous/2010/>.(accessed on 10 Feb 2016).

⁸ "2014 Unesco Asia-Pacific Heritage Award Winners," <http://www.unescobkk.org/culture/heritage/wh/heritageawards/previous/2014ha/>.(accessed on 10 Feb 2016).

Photographs



The Ngee Ann Kongsi's Committee of Management Members at Wak Hai Cheng Bio (Yueh Hai Ching Temple) Beam Raising Ceremony in October 2012.



Chairman of the Restoration Committee, Mr Jamie Teo, consecrating the beam under the direction of a Taoist Priest, in October 2012.

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