

Lessons from the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation: International Best Practices in Thailand

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The notion of cultural diversity as a resource for sustainable development is enshrined in the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*:

Cultural diversity widens the range of options open to everyone; it is one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence. (Article 3)

This recognition of the link between culture and development has a special relevance in Thailand, as it does throughout Asia, where the physical, human-made components of the built heritage serve as the setting for intangible expressions of cultural traditions. The importance of the preservation of the diverse heritage values represented in a multiplicity of heritage buildings and sites is therefore fundamental to the preservation of the diversity of the region's cultural identity.

To promote the conservation of the greatest diversity of the region's built heritage, in the year 2000 UNESCO inaugurated the annual Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation, a program designed to respond to the question: "Within the realities of contemporary, fast-track development, what of the built heritage do Asians value and want to preserve from the past to inform the region's place in the global future?"

The UNESCO Heritage Awards recognize excellent achievement in successfully conserving heritage buildings and properties in the region by the private sector or by public-private initiatives. Since 2000, UNESCO has received 469 entries from 24 countries. A total of 148 projects have received Awards for exemplary conservation efforts, while 8 projects have received the Jury Commendation for Innovation. UNESCO believes that commending such initiatives will encourage others to undertake conservation projects in the future.

Ten entries from Thailand have been recognized with UNESCO Heritage

Awards so far, contributing a specific and unique perspective to the conservation process due to the fact that the profession in Thailand has never been dictated to by a western colonial power and so has been able to express freely an endogenously developed conservation ethic.

The Thai Award-winning projects span the gamut from ornate royal complexes to humble vernacular buildings, from high Rattanakosin Era architecture to indigenous forms of buildings from various parts of the country. In terms of typology, they range from palaces (such as Phrarachawangderm in Thonburi and the Tamnak Yai at Devavesm Palace on the opposite side of the Chao Phraya River) to historic residential and commercial districts (such as Samchuk Community and Old Market District in Suphanburi and Amphawa Canal Community in Samut Songkhram) to monasteries (such as Wat Pongsanuk in Lampang and Wat Thepthidaram in Bangkok).

The winners reflect a number of key issues facing the conservation profession not only in Asia but globally which are addressed by the UNESCO Heritage Awards program, namely:

- Is it possible to adapt heritage buildings for contemporary needs and still retain their heritage significance?
- How do we insert contemporary architecture into the historic urban landscape?
- To what extent is change possible if historic districts are to maintain their character and identity? and crucially,
- Is historic conservation a mainstream action key to sustainability strategies, or only a minor diversion in the development process?

The solutions proposed by the winning entries offer proof that the answer to each of these questions is a resounding “yes” and demonstrate that while conservation is grounded in universal principles, it is expressed in specific cultural practices which vary from place to place because of the environment, politics, tradition, and most, importantly, the perception of the value of heritage in each community.

Strategically positioned at the center of the often heated debate between “western principles” and “Asian values” informing the practice of heritage conservation, the UNESCO Heritage Awards establish a means of identifying and showcasing the most successful of the “best practice” examples of built heritage conservation from the region.

First principles: international conservation standards, Asian specificities

Emerging from winning entries of the UNESCO Heritage Awards program can be seen a growing consensus around a set of “first principles” anchored by international standards of conservation while reflecting the specificities of Asian practices – practices which are as often based on socio-cultural values as they

are technical, demonstrating that technical achievement in conservation must be underpinned by a profound understanding of conservation as a social process.

These “first principles” are:

1. **Collective mapping of cultural space**, its hierarchies, symbolic language and associations is a pre-requisite for appropriate and successful conservation;
2. Tangible cultural expressions derive their origin, value and continuing **significance from intangible cultural practices**;
3. **Authenticity** is a culturally relative characteristic to be found in continuity, but not necessarily continuity of material;
4. The conservation process succeeds when histories are revealed, traditions revived and meanings recovered in **a palimpsest of knowledge**;
5. Appropriate use of heritage is negotiated, resulting in a life-enhancing space.

Together, the “first principles” affirm a set of professional norms which have arisen out of a uniquely Asian physical and socio-cultural space.

Below, the winners from Thailand are examined within the context of the principle which each exemplifies.

Principle 1: Collective mapping of cultural space, its hierarchies, symbolic language and associations is a pre-requisite for appropriate and successful conservation

Conservation professionals and students are well-trained that conservation work should begin with a thorough investigation of the building. By studying historical documentary evidence and in-situ physical evidence in the building fabric itself, it is possible to come to an understanding of the evolved significance of the place and to identify character-defining elements of the site which must be conserved in the ensuing work.

However, the winning projects go beyond the technical exercise of mapping the building, its key physical attributes and its state of dilapidation prior to planning and carrying out conservation work. They often take a well-rounded approach to understanding the building in its larger physical, cultural and social setting as well, in order to ensure that the conservation work does not only give new life to a building, but also to the cultural space to which it belongs as well as the community which animates it. Thus, the physical building surveys by architects are often accompanied by a wider study of its environmental surroundings as well detailed consultations with the community to identify the cultural heritage which they find significant through a process of cultural mapping. This allows for a better understanding of the local needs and aspirations, not only in practical terms (i.e., the need to pave a local square in front of the building being

conserved to avoid flooding) but also in spiritual and social terms as well (ie, community desires to also revive festivities formerly associated with the space).

Salarian Pavilion of Wat Kutao, Songkhla (2011 Honourable Mention)



Jury Citation: “The restoration of the Salarian Pavilion of Wat Kutao highlights the accomplishment of a participatory conservation approach involving the local community, educational institutes and technical specialists. After deteriorating to a complete ruin, the 18th-century wooden pavilion was restored in a technically competent manner, relying mainly on local builders using traditional materials and vernacular techniques. The project received an outpouring of support from the community and has inspired a greater awareness of local cultural heritage, leading to the subsequent restoration of other historic structures in the monastery.”

Na Phra Lan Historic Shophouses, Bangkok (2011 Honourable Mention)

Jury Citation: “The refurbishment of the Na Phra Lan Historic Shophouses has uplifted a historically significant urban complex in the heart of the historic core of Bangkok. Prominently located across from the Grand Palace, the project has restored not only this architectural landmark from the early 20th century, but also the surrounding historic streetscape as well. By removing inappropriate modern additions, using high-quality materials in repairs and upgrading services to meet modern building codes, the project has recovered the original, historically-accurate aesthetic while accommodating continued contemporary use. The project establishes a commendable model for participation by the long-term tenants, who contributed to the project costs and have committed to maintaining the buildings in the years to come.” (See picture on pp. 118–119)

Principle 2: Tangible cultural expressions derive their origin, value and continuing significance from intangible cultural practices

The tangible and intangible are inextricably intertwined in heritage spaces. Any conservation project which privileges tangible over the intangible values of a building risks stripping away the true significance of the place, leaving only an empty shell. The intangible cultural heritage, which includes oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, knowledge about nature, and traditional craftsmanship, provides the basis for vibrant and on-going cultural expression.

Many of the winning projects ensure that intangible cultural practices associated with a building are also strengthened as part of the conservation efforts. This holistic approach to safeguarding may have a quite direct link to the built heritage – for instance, in the revival of building traditions or skills such as carpentry or stucco work which are required in the conservation of the building. In other instances, the consolidation of the built heritage may shine a spotlight on the heritage of the community as a whole, leading to the revival of a way of life – encompassing social practices, traditions and art forms – which may have been on the brink of disappearance. In so doing, the conservation project ensures that the built heritage continues to be imbued with meaning that is constantly being reaffirmed and reinvented, and thus is of on-going relevance to the community.

Wat Sratong Temple, Khon Kaen (2002 Award of Merit)



Jury Citation: “The outstanding restoration of the 1832 ordination hall of Wat Sratong demonstrates the high standard of conservation work which can be achieved through a grassroots approach. With the guidance of the community conservation training programme at Khon Kaen University and the partial sponsorship of the Thai Fine Arts Department, the local villagers of Ban Bua undertook all aspects of restoring the historic building after in-situ technical training. In keeping with the Buddhist tradition of merit-making, villagers donated their labor and materials to return the abandoned ordination hall to its central role in the monastery and the community. Well-considered conservation decisions were made to retain as much of the original building fabric as possible. The cooperative approach taken by the project sets a model of local conservation initiative worthy of emulation throughout the region.”

Amphawa Canal Community, Samut Songkhram (2008 Honourable Mention)



Jury Citation: “The restoration of the traditional Amphawa Canal Community has successfully achieved public-private cooperation in the safeguarding of heritage structures in Thailand. With co-funding from the local government and Denmark, the project has benefited from the active support of the local residents and homeowners and the guidance of Chulalongkorn University. The project has conserved numerous historic buildings of local significance and retained the traditional canal-side urban morphology, which is under threat around the country. The project demonstrates a recognition of the cultural significance of Amphawa and an appreciation of both the architectural and living heritage of the historic canal community.”

Principle 3: Authenticity is a culturally relative characteristic to be found in continuity, but not necessarily continuity of material

The conservationist’s mantra of “do as much as necessary and as little as possible” is subject to interpretation within the framework of widely varying cultural norms throughout Asia. Anecdotal evidence illustrates fundamental clashes between standard bearers for the most catholic interpretation of seminal documents such as the Venice Charter, which hold material authenticity sacrosanct, and local stakeholders calling for renewal of the fabric to ensure the spiritual intactness of the place.

The 1994 *Nara Document on Authenticity* articulates a middle ground which reflects a way of balancing these diverse definitions of authenticity, reflecting different underlying values within an Asian sensibility in the conservation process and product. The Nara Documents states that “It is thus not possible to base judgements of value and authenticity on fixed criteria. On the contrary, the respect due to all cultures requires that cultural heritage must be considered and judged within the cultural contexts to which it belongs.”

The Nara Document does not provide a license for cultural relativity, but rather, reaffirms the validity of a rational system for evaluating and consequently safeguarding various heritage values, one that is consistent within its own socio-cultural system. In so doing, social, cultural and spiritual values may gain a foothold alongside artistic and historic values in the conservation process.

Tamnak Yai, Devavesm Palace, Bangkok (2005 Honourable Mention)



Jury Citation: “The restoration of the Neoclassical Tamnak Yai, the most prominent residence of Devavesm Palace, sets a standard for conservation of early 20th-century buildings in Thailand. The project demonstrates sophisticated research into the historic building fabric, deployment of appropriate building materials and techniques, and sensitive adaptations for modern use. By opening the building to the public and showcasing both architectural conservation and the building’s royal historical background, the palace takes on a significant social and educational role. Moreover, the future restoration of the surrounding landscape promises to re-establish the direct connection to the river, thus enabling the appreciation of the palace complex as one of Bangkok’s major riverside ensembles. The Bank of Thailand, the present owner of the estate, has set an important precedent for corporate investment in heritage conservation in Thailand which could serve as a model for similar initiatives in the region.”

Scriptures Hall of Wat Thepthidaram, Bangkok (2011 Award of Merit)



Jury Citation: “From a state of serious disrepair, the scriptures hall of Wat Thepthidaram has been restored with an outpouring of public support and a united effort from the Thai conservation community, the monastery and the local neighborhood. The scriptures hall has been refurbished with exemplary use of traditional craftsmanship and materials, worthy of its stature as a historically significant royal monastery. The methodology of restoration was also praiseworthy, demonstrating meticulous research, documentation and continual learning throughout the course of the project.”

Principle 4: The conservation process succeeds when histories are revealed, traditions revived and meanings recovered in a palimpsest of knowledge

In extreme, but increasingly not uncommon circumstances, the thread of continuity has been frayed to the point that it is barely distinguishable. Left to the course of economic renewal and the tides of social change, the heritage and the values it embodies is often vulnerable to being eradicated or subsumed into a newer narrative which may be non-self-reflexive. The judicious intervention in these cases through a conservation activity can result in revealing unique histories, reviving local traditions and recovering the meaning of the place.

The UNESCO Heritage Awards have recognized projects which have excelled not only in technical virtue but also in the dramatic impact that they have effected, especially upon traditions that are dying or have faded away. They often do so in a way which does not impose one solitary reading of the place by capturing a single snapshot of time, but rather by revealing a renewed understanding of the place in the context of other historical layers of meaning embodied in the building. In some projects, this remembrance of meanings past is accomplished in a quite literal yet effective manner – by physically juxtaposing the layers of the building history against each other. In other projects, this recovery is a social process, which reaches back into historical traditions and revives the living core of the community.

Prarachawangderm, Thonburi (2004 Award of Merit)



Jury Citation: “The restoration of this significant royal palace complex, Prarachawangderm, sets a new precedent for conservation in Thailand and demonstrates the enormous potential of private-sector-led efforts to save

important parts of the community's heritage. The project has successfully preserved this valuable ensemble of structures which represent over 300 years of transformation, including the main core of palace buildings which were the centre of royal political and military power during the Thonburi Era. This multi-faceted and ambitious project has effectively incorporated the use of traditional methods and craftsmanship and has conserved important examples of royal decorative fine arts. Attention to details of the original structures and to accuracy in colours has preserved the authenticity of individual buildings within the complex, which each represent a historic period. Exposure of earlier features through archaeological excavation and the use of landscape elements to interpret those features have successfully created a palimpsest of history at the site. With the development of a historical museum and a library on-site, the complex is a center of public outreach and education into the history of the nation. The restoration of the palace complex highlights the achievements of the Thonburi Era and raises awareness of an important period in the development of Siamese statehood and foreign relations.”

Samchuk Community and Old Market District, Suphanburi (2009 Award of Merit)



Jury Citation: “Once in serious socio-economic decline, the Samchuk Community and Old Market District has been successfully revitalized through the far-sighted vision and cooperation of the local residents. The conservation

work has been undertaken in a holistic way, including not only the heritage architecture, but also the living heritage of this historic commercial hub, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the site's value as a cultural heritage resource for the community. The community has been the main driving force for the project at all levels, from setting policy to establishing urban design guidelines. The full restoration of three major historic buildings into living museums and neighborhood centres provides a focal point for the urban district of wooden shophouses. The project will have a major impact in raising awareness about grassroots heritage conservation and is an important model for empowering other historic communities in Thailand.”

Principle 5: Appropriate use of heritage is negotiated, resulting in a life-enhancing space

With heritage conservation unfortunately being a relatively low priority on most political agendas in the Asian region, the experience of the winning projects has shown the importance of raising awareness among stakeholders of the multiple benefits of conserving heritage. The essential messages include: heritage as a fundamental cultural right, heritage as a building block for sustainable development and heritage as a shared resource for local stakeholders.

However, given that different stakeholders often have a different set of values associated with the same heritage building – some may find its economic value most compelling, while others may be more attuned to its historic or spiritual value – this complicates the process of coming to consensus on how to proceed with any conservation project. The collective cultural mapping referred to in Principle 1 may provide a way of eliciting multiple viewpoints, but these then need to be reconciled through a process of negotiation. By accommodating the various interpretations, aspirations, and demands of various parties in strategizing and designing the conservation work, this ensures that the results are meaningful and life-affirming to a broad range of stakeholders.

Crown Property Bureau Building, Chachoengsao (2008 Honourable Mention)

Jury Citation: “The restoration of the Chachaoengsao Old Provincial Hall to serve as the Crown Property Bureau Building in Chachoengsao Province has given new life to an important heritage building that had been extensively damaged by fire. The restoration has re-affirmed the role of the building as a key urban landmark. In the reconstruction and conservation works, careful attention has been paid to the historic character of the building, both in the interior and exterior. The project has bolstered local pride and led to the larger revitalization of the historic urban district of Chachoengsao and the Bangpakong waterfront. The high-visibility project demonstrates the notable

commitment of the Crown Property Bureau to conserve the historic structures in its portfolio that are a significant part of the country's heritage.”



Wat Pongsanuk, Lamphun (2008 Award of Merit)



Jury Citation: “The restoration of Wat Pongsanuk provides an inspirational model of community-led conservation in saving a unique Lanna temple. The project showcases the collective achievements of the monks and the local residents working in close cooperation with traditional craftspersons, local

authorities and academic advisors. The restoration works have been sensitively carried out, with the revival of traditional building and decorative techniques. The project has also achieved educational aims in teaching local history, as seen in the thoughtful on-site exhibits and the subtle notations of the earlier building footprint. By empowering the traditional caretakers of the temple, the restoration project ensures that Wat Pongsanuk can continue to be sustained as a vital part of the cultural heritage of Lamphun and northern Thailand for many years to come.”

Conservation lessons learned from Thailand

Embodying the various principles introduced above, the UNESCO Heritage Awards winners in Thailand are particularly notable for conservation which has a significant catalytic impact on the community at large. Beyond the act of repairing the physical fabric of the building as a kind of artefact, the conservation process used in these projects showcases a sensitivity to the larger socio-cultural and economic context of the built heritage. In the winning projects, the conservation of the buildings anchors a more fundamental process of renewal for the local residents who are directly affected and for the wider community which has affinities to the heritage buildings in some way. The renewal has taken on multiple forms – activating economic regeneration, strengthening social ties, especially when they have weakened, revitalizing knowledge which has been lost, renewing local identity.

A number of the winning projects showcase how conservation of buildings in the Thai context – as elsewhere in Asia – is often undertaken as part of established cyclical processes of renewal. These processes are fundamental not only to extending the life of the buildings *per se*, but also for extending the identity and sense of well-being of the communities as well. This is most clearly seen with the temple conservation projects such as Wat Sratong and Wat Thepthidaram. The yearly ceremonies of merit-making at Buddhist temples that offer requisites to the monks and contribute to the upkeep and expansion of the monastic buildings satisfy the obligations of Buddhist laity to support the institutions of Buddhism. The desire by lay supporters to ensure that the monastic buildings are in good condition is more an act of faith rather than a concern for conservation in its more technical sense as understood in the profession. This motivation then drives building work which tends to privilege aesthetic renewal as a demonstration of respect for the monastic buildings and artefacts – murals being repainted periodically, roof tiles being replaced and interiors being redone – rather than an attachment to historic materials and fabric. While the technicalities of these decisions can be debated from a conservation purist point of view, the resulting vitality of these heritage spaces and their on-going centrality in their communities sends a strong message about the need to consider new approaches to dealing with built heritage within a living heritage context. The fact that the temples are continuously maintained over generations as meaningful and ever-evolving spaces

of the highest symbolic import for the social and spiritual well-being of the local communities provides validation for these approaches to conservation.

Conservation can also serve as a mechanism for community revival using cultural resources as the driver for social and economic growth. The case study of Samchuk Community and Old Market District in Suphanburi showcases the potential of historic buildings and traditions as a basis for reversing the declining fortunes of old neighborhoods. Through the determination of local businessmen and civic leaders, Samchuk was transformed from an almost abandoned town on the verge of partial demolition. The town's strategy for revival was predicated upon



Community consultations during the renovation of the Salarian Pavilion of Wat Kutao, Songkhla

the mobilization of its most salient and yet once overlooked assets: an ensemble of historic wooden shops and homes dating from its days as a prominent trading hub. Cashing in on the surge in nostalgia-driven tourism among Thai families and youth, Samchuk's market – featuring local delicacies, old-fashioned toys and housewares, and old-time shops – became a prime destination for weekend visitors intent on experiencing days gone by. Young Samchuk people began to return home to help re-open and run family businesses which were almost defunct. Samchuk's success as a cultural tourism destination was singled out by then prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva as an exemplar for advancing the creative economy at the community level by making use of available resources, and has since been widely recognized as worthy of emulation by other towns around the country.

Another aspect of renewal that the Thai winning projects highlight is how the conservation projects can serve as a forum for sharing local knowledge, thus valorising and giving renewed meaning to bodies of knowledge which are central to the collective wisdom of each community. The involvement of local elders, “wise persons” and scholars in the awarded projects complements the role of conservation professionals in a seamless manner, with both groups enriching each other and passing along their respective skills and knowledge to the young generation. This method of working provides a locally-nuanced alternative to the pure technically driven approach which may ignore indigenous forms of knowledge and values.

The restoration of Wat Pongsanuk in Lampang provides a case in point. The temple's deputy abbot, community leaders and senior craftsmen worked alongside academics from Chiang Mai University, contributing local know-how and institutional memories about caretaking of the temple's collection of Buddhist artefacts and buildings. While certain knowledge had been lost – such as the production of ancient glass mosaics – other neglected skills such as traditional lime slaking and paper cutting for ritual objects was revived within the context of restoring the temple. The renewed interest in all things Lanna catalyzed by activities at the temple has turned Wat Pongsanuk into a learning hub for Lampang and nearby provinces. The documentation of such revived knowledge and its dissemination through networks of like-minded local communities and monks has led to a renaissance of northern Thai building arts.



Kom loi at Wat Pongsanuk to celebrate receiving the UNESCO Award (photo: Angela Srisomwongwattana)

From the point of view of larger-scale municipal renewal, the two winning projects undertaken by the Crown Property Bureau exemplify the hallmarks of the Bureau's approach to conservation: saving not only the historic building, but also contributing to the welfare of the local community and improving the overall quality of life and historic character of the city as a whole. In conserving its local office building in Chachoengsao Province, the Bureau made an effort to ensure that the newly conserved building would help to uplift the historic character of the overall townscape. This necessitated removing a row of townhouses in front of the historic building which had been constructed later for rental income. In so doing, the project

opened up not only the building's historic façade, but also a river-side vista which had long been obstructed, which in turn encouraged the municipal authorities to launch other activities to raise awareness about the city's heritage. As for the Na Phra Lan Shophouses project, the Bureau undertook a lengthy process of awareness-raising with its existing tenants to gain their support for the project. From a practical standpoint, in a bid to retain the existing tenants, the Bureau subsidized their housing during their temporary removal for the construction work and provided them the option to return to their original units once the work was complete. This process has ensured that proprietors of various historic establishments who have been fixtures in the neighbourhood for decades could come back to help sustain the life of the historic buildings as living landmarks. The intention to use this model to conserve two additional groups of shophouses in the same neighbourhood at the epicentre of historic Bangkok ensures that the wider urban context will be further enhanced.

Taken as a whole, the portfolio of projects which have been awarded the UNESCO Heritage Awards brings to light a body of standard-setting practices from Thailand that are worthy of attention not only in the country, but also within the region or even internationally. They showcase how the conservation of the physical form of tangible heritage is inextricably linked to the continuation of the intangible cultural practices which originally produced and continue to give meaning to the heritage. They demonstrate that good conservation practice needs to be grounded in an understanding of the locality of place and its many overlapping values. The values-based approach to conservation practice yields a richly-nuanced end result – where tangible and intangible heritage are conserved and historic layers of meaning are revealed. Through the application of these “first principles”, the long-term safeguarding of the diverse cultural heritage of Thailand can be ensured to form an essential part of the core resources for sustainable development with a recognizable Siamese face.

And yet, for all the achievements they exemplify, it should be noted that these projects, which represent the vanguard of Thai conservation practice, still hew closely to the well-accepted trifecta of mainstream Thai architectural heritage: palaces, temples and houses. The range and breadth of cases represented through the Awards does not constitute a true representation of the richness and variety of Thailand's cultural heritage. Heritage conservation in Thailand still does not reflect the strides taken by global conservation practice or by other countries in recent years, which now recognize the value of an ever-widening range of cultural heritage: from cultural landscapes to industrial heritage, from modern heritage to military heritage, from rural heritage to heritage of minority groups. Moreover, the ability to manage other forms of heritage, such as intangible heritage, is still nascent as well. As conservation discourse, awareness, policy and know-how in Thailand evolve and deepen, the future challenge will be to embrace and protect the country's cultural heritage resources in all its true diversity.