Book Reviews
Architectural Conservation in Asia: National Experiences and Practice
1st Edition

Author: John H. Stubbs, Robert G. Thomson
Publisher: Routledge 2017
Review by Elizabeth Vines and Anita Smith

Architectural Conservation in Asia provides a comprehensive overview of architectural conservation practice throughout the Asian region and is a valuable reference for teachers, architectural conservation practitioners, site managers and students of architecture, planning, archaeology and heritage studies worldwide. The volume’s 598 pages provide an engaging and detailed overview of how built heritage conservation has evolved across the region. It is particularly relevant in illustrating how “Asian” approaches to conservation differ from the more fabric centred “Western” approach.

‘Architectural Conservation in Asia’ is the latest in a series of volumes authored or co-authored by Stubbs over more than a decade. The first of these, Time Honored: A Global View of Architectural Conservation was published by John Wiley and Sons in 2009. It presents a comprehensive survey of the practice, theory, and structure of architectural heritage conservation throughout the world. This was followed in 2011 by Architectural Conservation in Europe and the Americas; National Experiences and Practice co-authored by Emily G. Makas, also published by John Wiley and Sons Inc. In these volumes Stubbs and Makas ably demonstrate the value of large scale, detailed global and regional surveys in arguing for the indispensable role of architectural conservation in modern life.

This new book, Architectural Conservation in Asia (co-authored with Robert G. Thomson, and with the input of regional experts) provides a country-by-country analysis which draws out local insights, experiences, best practice and solutions for effective cultural heritage management that informs study and practice both in Asia and beyond. The lengthy introduction discusses the roles of many international institutions, national and non-government organisations involved in heritage conservation in Asia, noting in particular the importance of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in promoting conservation in the region and the relevance of initiatives such as the Historic Urban Landscapes approach for Asia’s many historic cities. The book is organised into five geographic regions, each having their own helpful introductions and conclusions. Part 1 includes the countries of East Asia; Part 2 looks at Southeast Asia Mainland Countries; Part 3, the Southeast Asia Island Countries; Part 4, the South Asian nations and Part 5, Central Asia. Although many architectural forms and issues in conservation are transnational, the country focus in this ambitious volume provides a comparative and systematic framework for looking at local histories and national approaches to conservation.
Of particular interest are the short essays by regional experts, scattered throughout the volume as sidebars in the text. These lighten and deepen the text by providing personal, anecdotal and informative ‘case studies’ of places and issues. The volume is well illustrated with photos although these are black and white.

For those of us who work in the region, the documentation of countries like Japan, China, Thailand and Vietnam provide excellent summaries of historical development and practice in these more well known regions. But the coverage of Central Asia, including Afghanistan, Kazakhstan and other countries, highlight the challenges of environmental, geopolitical and material conservation. The large scale ancient mud brick structures, which comprise the landmarks of “one of the worlds great regional civilizations remains daunting, and without simple solutions”.

While recognising that it is not possible to cover everything in a single volume, we would have liked the section on Hong Kong to include discussion of the very positive “Revitalising Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme” where—unlike Australia—the government does not sell off its assets, but provides the opportunity for non profit making organisations to submit applications for adaptive reuse of the many remaining colonial buildings still in government ownership. Substantial grants, covering most of the cost of adaptive reuse costs, are provided to successful recipients, and many places are being creatively repurposed for arts based and other community activities. Australia could well take note of this model.

The book provides a final two page discussion of the way forward—and highlights that all countries in the region are engaged in cultural heritage protection for a variety of reasons, including pride, protection of cultural identity, respect for the past, and opportunities for economic development in the way of jobs, local business interests, and competition with similar places. “Since cultural tourism is such a large and growing market in the region, the stakes have increased over time and are expected to continue to do so”.

John H. Stubbs and Robert G. Thomson are to be congratulated at the rigour and detail shown in this volume. The extensive bibliography demonstrates the depth of research that underpins the text. Whilst this is an excellent reference for academics, Stubbs brings to the work his extensive practical experience. From 1990 until 2011, he served as Vice President for Field Projects at the World Monuments Fund in New York where he directed scores of the organization’s projects across the world including many in the Asian region.

Architectural Conservation in Asia is the third in the series where Stubbs ambitiously attempts to document architectural conservation practice in different parts of the world—these are described on the project’s website at www.conservebuiltworld.com.

For Stubbs, there are still three more parts of the world to write about: West Asia & North Africa; Sub Saharan Africa; and Australia, Oceania & the Polar Regions. It would be a significant contribution if he was able to undertake a similar coverage for Australia, and we in the conservation arena should offer him every support in this endeavour which is understood to be under consideration.
Shack Life

The Survival Story of Three National Park Communities

Author: Ingeborg Van Teeseling – journalist, historian, author
Publisher: NewSouth Publishing Un1NSW 2017
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The Era Beach Settlement, the largest of the three cabin communities, was officially recognised as a heritage item in 1993 when The National Trust nominated the area as its first listing of a group of dwellings and a community. The National Trust described the area as a cultural landscape featuring a rare example of “depression-architecture” style community. Shortly after Era Beach and community was also listed on the National Estate as a “valuable cultural landscape”.

The three communities are located adjoining each other within the Royal National Park about 50km from the Sydney CBD. To the north of Era on a small beach is Little Garie and to the south, also on a beach, is Burning Palms. None of these communities have road access, electricity, water or other services and are walk in walk out. There are no shops.

In 2012 the three Cabin Communities were also listed on the NSW State Heritage Register.

David Hill, who wrote the forward for Shack Life, has noted “This wonderful and long overdue book, has captured the proud heritage of the shack communities and shown how their history has mirrored the greater Australian story.”

The book, of coffee table size, is beautifully illustrated with historic and recent photographs of beaches, shacks and escarpments. It tells the story from the time when the Dharawal people lived on the land to the cattle grazing and shared occupancy with Helensburgh locals, bush walkers, artists and early environmentalists. The building of the first shacks (cabins) prior to the 1920’s, the growth of the shacks after the depression with the permission of the farmer, to the threatened sale as a housing estate in 1940 and the subsequent rallying of the communities are all well documented. This led to the formation of The Protection League, one of the first community action groups in NSW. The League was successful in an appeal to the state to purchase the land and incorporate the lands into the Royal National Park in 1950.

The shacks are basic holiday accommodation, simple structures, usually small, often eccentric and have the common story of all materials carried “down the hill”. Many still use kerosene refrigeration; roof water is collected in tanks; solar power has become popular, and all are dearly loved.

The book details the struggle to convince the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) that the community should have a say in the management of the cabin areas. The cabin areas have been self managed and policed for many years and the benefits to the natural environment can be shown from ground and aerial photography and from evidence collected by the Land Care, Protection, and Fire Guard groups. Several environmental and heritage reports have been prepared by the community groups to enable negotiations to proceed to formulate a workable management plan.

The author picks up on the 23 year old deeply entrenched animosity of the NPWS towards the cabin communities. An internal memo to the Assistant Director of Policy and Wildlife revealed that the private occupation of the shacks was similar to the problem of feral pigs or an oil spill. Much of the antagonism has originated from the lobby group, the National Parks Association, who have historically been against the shack occupation of Royal National Park. Despite efforts by the shack owners they have been uncompromising in any attempts to find some common ground.

The 1994 bush fires, that burnt out 90% of Royal National Park, were controlled by the shack owners in their areas and these areas were basically the only refuge for the surviving wildlife.
A large part of the book is devoted to the oral histories, individual stories and photographs of some of the families involved. The three communities are extremely diverse. Even though the families using the shacks have had constant occupancy from the 1920’s their backgrounds are vastly different. Many of the original owners were out of work miners from Helensberg affected by the Great Depression, but now the communities are far more diverse and range from coal miners, builders, engineers, artist, public servants, lawyers, doctors, and politicians. The common bond is the community that works and socialises together, often based around the surf club or another common interest.

Geoff Ashley, who was involved in the preparing of the NPWS 1992 Huts Study for the NPWS and is now a private Heritage Architect, has written a section on Architecture in which he describes the vernacular architecture and the layout of the communities. Geoff likens the shacks to Dr Who’s Tardis, in that they store collections of generations of intangible memories. Possibly an item that great grandad picked up from the beach, which has been added to over the generations and is still there to touch.

He mentions the affordable recreation accommodation for working people, the link between the physical place and the intense personal and cultural meaning of place. He mentions innovation, making do, the use of old technology i.e. kerosene fridges and how things were done in the old days which comes back to the conservation of water, energy, food and the custodianship of place.

A section on art lists the famous Australian artists who have had long association with the cabin communities, either as shack owners or as frequent visitors. Names include Hal Missingham, Richard Hall, Gordon Andrews, Reg Mombasa, Margret Olley, Max Dupain and several others.

The book concludes with a section on Community Service, the gel that holds the communities together. The communities provide a community service by looking after the natural environment, the safety of the shack owners and the visitors to the beaches and, what is now the number two attraction to the park, the figure eight pool. The surf life saving clubs have patrolled the beaches since 1938, the Land Care Groups have undertaken projects including removal of exotic plants, building and maintaining of tracks, and conserving an Aboriginal midden. The Fire Guard is the first line of defence from bush fire.

In the words of the president of the Protection League, “the survival of the shack communities represents the story of people coming together and fighting to retain the things they hold dear.”

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