

Heritage, the unloved

What have the residents of Macau gained with the UNESCO classification, as well as the pride they can feel? More tourists on the streets. Thus, there are those who question the depth of the government's understanding of the importance of conservation for local residents apart from any economic considerations

Several times in recent years the Secretary for Social Affairs and Culture of Macau has answered the question: what if the historic centre of Macau loses the distinction of World Heritage? Alexis Tam contends that this is “impossible” - but the question nevertheless remains.

On the one hand, it refers us to the possibility of UNESCO deciding to de-list a site (as happened in Oman and Germany) following several warnings.

On the other - and more importantly - the question reflects the difficult relationship of classified heritage with local society.

World heritage is a kind of elephant in the room: it is there, but sometimes it would be better if it were not . . .

On the part of residents there is a bipolar feeling: they show some pride in the fact that Macau has this type of World Heritage but they know that it has contributed to the fact that some areas of the city are already inaccessible, given the burgeoning number of tourists.

“Who would think to go to Senado Square now on a weekend for some rest and recreation, to see and be seen socially? It was once one of the important beating hearts of the city for locals. Now it is a noisy and overcrowded tourist space for strangers, its heritage stripped of so much meaning and relevance and use value for Macau people,” says Peter Zabielskis, Associate Professor of Anthropology at UMAC.

Zabielskis goes further: “UNESCO designation as World Heritage has done nothing to help. If it now belongs to the world does that mean it no longer belongs to the people of Macau? Some of these problems with heritage development may be beyond the ability of any single government to solve; they are powerful socioeconomic trends that occur on a global scale as more and more people around the world are wealthy enough to travel.”

He concludes that “some of Macau’s public spaces and heritage sites have been radically transformed –



**“Who would think to go to Senado Square now on a weekend for some rest and recreation, to see and be seen socially?”
(Peter Zabielskis)**

in terms of meaning, use, and audience – by the uncontrolled and massive onslaught of tourists, many of whom only seek a ‘shallow’ cultural experience or engagement with history and heritage.”

The Associate Professor of UMAC’s Department of Sociology thinks the local government “takes heritage conservation seriously” but questions “the depth of the government’s understanding of the importance of conservation for local residents apart from any economic consideration of its role in the tourism industry.”



If Mainland and Macau authorities “are in agreement that heritage can be an important asset in diversifying Macau’s economy away from its current monolithic dependence upon casinos and gambling and more toward attracting visitors for other reasons, including cultural tourism,” the question raised by Peter Zabielskis is “where is the planning that benefits – apart from money – the people of Macau and their lives in the city?”

He points out that “there are things that money cannot buy, such as overall quality of life, a healthy natural and built environment, and easy access to comfortable open public space, preferably green.”

These and other issues are also addressed in the fresh research paper Challenges of Heritage Development Projects in Macau and Penang: Preservation and Anti-Preservation that Zabielskis recently presented in Macau.

“A beautifully restored but empty shell of a heritage building may serve visitors, many of whom only seek a shallow or temporary experience, but the long-term needs of the people who live here are bet-

ter met if those buildings remain alive with vibrantly local meaning and use. This is something I do not think the government fully understands or takes seriously,” he argues.

To realise that this is an important problem, we find in another recent study (2016), undertaken by a Hungarian author, the same line of concern.

“This unique architecture is now also under threat because massive modernisation, population growth, and urban renewal have led to the demolishing and crowding out of many old buildings and neighbourhoods,” writes Professor Ivan Zadori of the University of Pécs.

“The colonial heritage is not a living heritage any more. Churches, houses, fortifications are there but most of the present population has nothing to do with [them]. The remaining facade of Saint Paul’s Cathedral, one of the main emblems of the city, could be a perfect symbol of Macau’s past and this cultural change,” we can read in Cultural Aspects of Sustainability Challenges of Island-like Territories: A case study of Macau, China. ■

Not in 2015. Will it be in 2018?

The MSAR will have to present a report on the state of conservation of local heritage by December.

At a meeting held in July of last year, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee expressed concern about the delay in drawing up and submitting the plan for the safeguarding and management of the Historic Centre, without which it will not be possible to move forward with

Macau’s urban plan.

Required by UNESCO in 2013, the Historic Centre Safeguard and Management Plan should have been delivered by 1st February, 2015.

“For sure that before the end of 2018 there will be this report of the Historic Centre of Macau,” explained Alexis Tam, for whom the delays are due “to the complexity of Macau: it is full of business, it is full of people.”