



2013 Semester 1 Built Environment Research Seminars

Never Stand Still

Faculty of Built Environment

City Futures Research Centre



Tuesday
16 April
4.30-5.30pm

Old Main Building G31
UNSW Kensington Campus
(enter via Gate 14 Barker Street, Kingsford)

Please RSVP to
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by Friday
12 April



A/Professor Laurence Loh Kwong Yu University of Hong Kong, China

Spirit of Place

I have examined the concept of Spirit of Place for many years. In my search for a universal idea to drive and develop my own path in architecture and sustainability, I keep coming back to this elusive notion. The more I try to distil the essence of its meaning, the more I am left with profound impressions of what it is not. Lao Tze once said:-

“The Way is without form or quality,
But expresses all forms and qualities

Over time, I nonetheless felt convinced that it had a legitimate and empowering position within all systems of expression embodied within the world of built forms. I formalized my analysis and understanding in an essay I wrote for UNESCO in their book “Asia Conserved: Lessons learnt from the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation (2000-2004)”.

Spirit of Place conveys the cultural essence of a site. In historic sites it encompasses the meanings of a place accrued through time and through its past and present uses. Expressed through the tangible, built heritage, these intangible values give the place its distinctive character, an aura that draws people to the place, that speaks to them, engages their emotions and, often, gives them a sublime experience of their surroundings.

The concept may be better understood if one alludes to the notion of ‘body and soul’. The body is the physical fabric of the heritage site in its original state and setting. The soul, the spirit of place, is the sum of the site’s history, traditions, memories, myths, associations and continuity of meanings connected with people and use over time. Collectively these tell the story of a place, generate its identity and give it emotional impact.

How does conservation of a physical structure articulate its spirit of place? Primarily, the place has to be true to its history. This truth must be conveyed in the very process of conservation itself, in a heritage site’s physical form, in its contemporary use, and in its interpretation and presentation.

My imagination is activated by this underlying notion each time I study a site. The strength and success of projects I am involved in are carried and measured by how well the solution understands, retains, recovers and transmits the Spirit of Place. It has helped me add value to every idea that I have tried to give form to.

Laurence is recognised as a leading conservation architect and cultural heritage expert in Malaysia and the Asia-Pacific region. His architectural practice of 35 years consistently delivers highly commended projects related to both new-built designs and as well as building conservation and planning. Best practice exemplars include the restoration and adaptive reuse of the world-renowned Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion, Penang (2000 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Award of Excellence) and the restoration of Merdeka Stadium in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s Stadium of Independence (2008 UNESCO Award of Excellence).

He teaches annually at Hong Kong University and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property in Rome. He is a UNESCO World Heritage Site evaluator, Heritage Awards judge and technical consultant. A recent project involved the creation of an Urban Conservation Planning course with the Getty Conservation Institute.