

APSIG lunchtime seminar: Preserving Asia's cultural heritage

20 March 2003, National Library

Two speakers addressed this well-attended seminar organised by the ALIA Asia-Pacific Special Interest Group on the topic of the preservation of cultural heritage in our region.

Colin Webb, who is the director of Preservation Services at the National Library of Australia, spoke about his recent work on a high level UNESCO project to develop a UNESCO Charter and technical guidelines on digital preservation. Colin's role in this task was to write the technical guidelines and to convene and lead an Asia-Pacific group of experts in drafting a charter document.

Colin noted that while it may be increasingly well-understood in advanced countries that digital media and digital objects are even more short-lived than paper, this is much less so in developing countries. The so-called 'digital divide' is often defined as unequal access to information technology, but it also encompasses the developing world's knowledge and understanding of how to organise and preserve digital output. UNESCO has undertaken to address this gap in a world-wide project aimed at preserving digital heritage.

Colin and his staff invited senior colleagues with the desired expertise and knowledge from the region to attend a seminar in Canberra in November 2002. Participants came from research institutes, libraries and archives. Their backgrounds in these fields, together with their clear motivation and interest led to a very successful seminar at which a draft

Charter document was developed, and input provided to the technical guidelines created by Colin.

Three other regional meetings were held, in Managua, Nicaragua; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; and Riga, Latvia. Colin attended the Managua meeting held for the Latin America and Caribbean region. He reported that while there was a high level of interest, the participants were less experienced and knowledgeable than the Asia-Pacific group.

While UNESCO charters and declarations are not binding, they can and do play an important role in influencing governments in developing countries to lend support to activities. Colin's project is an important example of 'top-down' planning led by UNESCO, and backed up in this case by comprehensive technical guidelines written from a clear and practical standpoint for those who are ready to undertake projects.

Moving from the virtual to the physical, Anya Dettman of the National Library's Indonesian Unit then gave a fascinating account of efforts to preserve Malaysia's architectural heritage in the historic city of Georgetown on the island of Penang. Anya spoke of the alarming pace of development which was obliterating the traditional nineteenth century domestic architecture of inner city Georgetown.

The history of Georgetown is fraught with ironies: originally a crossroads for peninsular trade and commerce, it was eclipsed by the development of Singapore, and like Melaka to the south remained a kind of time capsule of the multi-ethnic



Asia-Pacific participants in the UNESCO seminar on Digital Preservation held at the National Library, Canberra, November 2002



Burmese temple, Georgetown

communities which settled there in the nineteenth century, reflected in its community institutions, street names and customs. A tradition of rent control in Georgetown virtually ensured that the old shop houses and residential quarters of Georgetown remained unmaintained and undeveloped, even though the rest of the island landscape of Penang was being transformed by industrial parks, luxury resorts and condominiums, reflecting Malaysia's rapid pace of development and growing standard of living in the 1980s and 1990s.

When the state government recently removed Georgetown's rent controls in an effort to address the problem of the decaying inner city environment, there was an immediate push by local landlords to re-develop their property: in some cases entire rows of shophouses were demolished to build retail plazas, hotels and car parks. This resulted in an inevitable conflict between the demands of economic development and the desire to preserve a pristine example of traditional living heritage.

Anya spoke of the efforts of the Penang Heritage Trust to stop the wholesale demolition of sections of Georgetown, and the nomination of Georgetown for inclusion as a cultural site on UNESCO's World Heritage list. If successful, it would be one of the first sites in Asia representing living heritage, as compared to natural or 'monumental' heritage, like the Great Barrier Reef, India's Taj Mahal or Indonesia's Borobudur — all listed. Inclusion on the list gives sites access to UNESCO grants and assistance for preservation tasks: one can imagine that it would considerably influence the future development of Georgetown.

In making its case, the Penang Heritage Trust has been at pains to argue that preserving heritage can also be economically beneficial, in that it will attract tourists and visitors to an area; something well understood all over the world, and especially in Penang, a favourite holiday spot for the region.

As Anya noted, this leads to perhaps the final irony of Georgetown's story: it is that the local residents are as opposed to a World Heritage listing as they are to the commercial development of their traditional environment. As they see it, neither purpose prevents them as traditional occupiers from being evicted for 'higher-value' uses, whether car parks or eco-tourism.

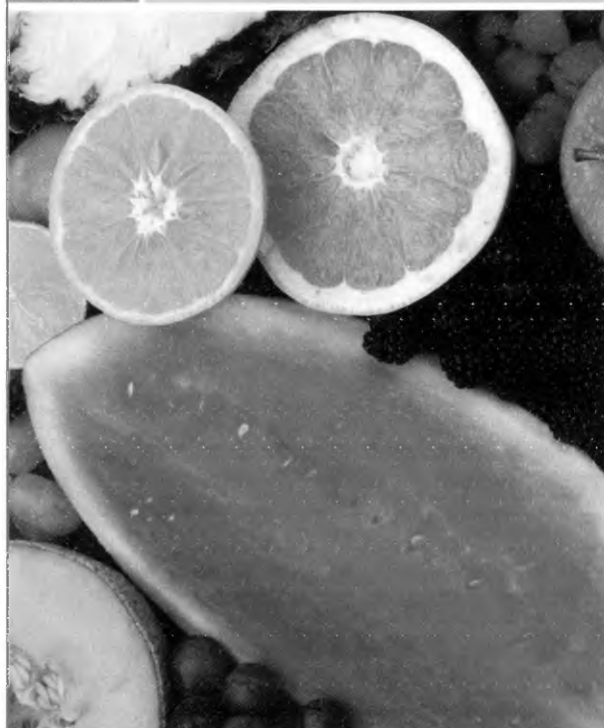
The result of Georgetown's nomination for inclusion on the World Heritage list will be decided in June 2003 following the meeting of the World Heritage Committee.

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