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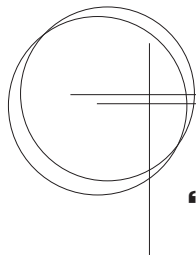
Ⅱ. Study Reports B

Intervention and Engagement with 'Public' in George Town World Heritage Site, Malaysia Study Report

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"The term 'the public' is useful in that it embraces all of us: we are all citizens and we all have an interest in public life and its expression through culture.

But 'the public' is obviously not a unified field. Everyone is now in a minority group, so we need to understand that the public has multiple identities and many voices, not just one".

Holden (2006)

1. Background: Issues and Challenges of the George Town World Heritage Site

On the 7th July 2008, the cities of George Town and Melaka in Malaysia were inscribed together as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The inscription validated their cultural heritage as historic port cities located along the Straits of Melaka, an ancient sea trade route. The outstanding universal values (OUVs) of both cities were described as:

· Exceptional examples of multicultural trading towns forged from exchanges of Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures and European colonial influence.

· Living testimony to multicultural tangible and intangible heritage expressed in buildings, ethnic quarters, religious practices, languages, art and music, food, costume etc.

· A unique architecture and townscape demonstrating an exceptional range of shophouses and townhouses.

Fig 1: Multi-cultural World Heritage Site of George Town (Photo collage courtesy of Arts-ED)

The application for inscription as a World Heritage Site (WHS) and the preparation of the dossier involved a small group of professionals, academics and the state party (which in this case, was the Central government) as well as local municipality as data providers. Local municipality and local government were consulted from time to time during the application process. Community living and working in the site were uninvolved in the application process. News of the inscription, reached the public through newspapers articles and simple leaflets produced by the local municipality.

This article describes the challenges encountered in engaging the public in the heritage site of George Town and the strategies undertaken by a third party (non-profit organization and individuals) to raise public awareness and to invite increased participation in planning and visualizing their roles in the George Town heritage site.

As the two port cities were the first urban sites to receive WHS inscription in Malaysia, the state party and local authorities were at a loss regarding how to manage the site. The local municipality had no training or experience or specialist resources for heritage management.

There was no special area plan and no programs or guidelines to aid public understanding following the inscription. These were drawn up much later after long negotiations with the State Party and are yet to be executed. The main legislative tool that has been used in the interim is the Town and Country Panning Act (TCPA) which was designed to address development rather than safeguard heritage.

In the absence of information and management policies and anticipating the introduction of new regulations, much haste was made by building owners to demolish or renovate their old properties. Faced with increasing unregulated development and pressure from heritage organizations and concerned professionals, the local authority resorted to stricter enforcement of the TCPA. However, this 'policing approach' served only to fuel enmity between community, heritage organizations and government authorities and resulted in owners resorting to clandestine renovation activities.

Poor information sharing and poor engagement of the public can be said to be the root cause for the indifference of property owners and residents towards conservation. Reluctance and resistance to conservation efforts was compounded by the fact that many property owners were commercial businessmen very different aspirations and ideas on how to develop their properties. A third factor contributing to uninterested public was the tenancy problem. Many properties in George Town are used for business operations and are partially tenanted by itinerant workers. Absentee ownership is the norm in the site. Fully residential properties are small in number and even long-term tenants face an uncertain future and are at the mercy of owners.

Approximately a year after inscription, investors from outside the state who were aware of the economic value of heritage properties moved to purchase properties from absentee owners, with an eye to setting up businesses such as restaurants and hotels. While this development helped to rejuvenate many derelict properties and boost the economy, many tenants who were long-time residents, were evicted or displaced in the process by building owners. The poorer among them could not afford to live in the city as property prices began to spiral upwards. Their departure began to bleed the site of memories, traditional knowledge, practices and skills related to the historical profile of the site.

In 2009, a skeletal management office was set up by the State authority and in 2010 the office was registered as a state-run company (George Town World Heritage Incorporated). While this position gave the management office locus standing within government, it faces some difficulties in functioning as an independent body, since the company is chaired by the Chief Minister of the State and administered by a Municipal Officer. Efforts to manage, monitor and promote the site are often tied down by bureaucratic

limitations and political authorities tend to promote the instrumental values of the site thus fuelling investment trends further. To their credit the GTWHI has tried to circumvent this problem by collaborating with NPOs and corporate partners to outsource projects that are beyond their resource capacity.

Due to the historical development of George Town as an international port, the town has a strong presence of multi cultures. These diverse cultural groups have shaped the profile of the site through both isolationist and intercultural practices and manifestations over time and space. The diversity of physical and social capital in Georgetown is both an asset and a challenge to management since WHS inscription. Some groups have begun to vie for exclusivity and competition, while others are reluctant to engage in planning a vision that goes beyond their group's concerns.

The town's assets have differing meaning and value to the diversity of public. Sense of citizenship is weak as it is affected by tenant's residential insecurity, absentee ownership and a high population of itinerant migrant workers. Sense of unity and cooperation is affected by isolationist cultural trends and competitive attitude of the predominant commercial population. In addition, the different stakeholders and the different cultural groups practice different governance systems. Considering the complexity of the demographics of the site, it is not surprising that heritage planning and management is one of the most challenging problems for the WHS of George Town.

2. Intervention Strategies and Lessons Learnt

In response to the chaotic situation after inscription, a group of concerned professionals, and non-profit organizations decided that some form of intervention was necessary to resolve urgent problems; the rapid degradation of heritage buildings and streetscape, eviction of long time tenants and the trend towards gentrification. The concerned parties formed a loose alliance called the Cultural Heritage Advisory Team (CHAT) in January 2009.

Fig 2: Meeting with property owners

Fig 3: Capacity building for municipality
(Photo collage courtesy of Arts-ED)

This voluntary team comprised of conservation architects, historians, heritage practitioners and educationists. CHAT's activities were coordinated by non-profit organization Arts-ED which specializes in community-based arts and culture education for young people and adult communities. The CHAT team also received the support of the Penang Heritage Trust, a heritage NPO dedicated to the conservation of Penang's built and living heritage through research, educational and public awareness programs.

Before a formal mechanism for managing the heritage site came into place, CHAT functioned as an informal agent to create platforms for public to dialogue and interact with professionals. Because CHAT members comprised a combination of professionals and grassroots activists who already had on-the-ground experience in heritage and culture programming, it chose to a use a bottom-up approach.

The CHAT team focused on 5 areas:

i) Helping the municipality monitor unregulated development

ii) Production and distribution of educational material for the public on built and living heritage.

iii) Knowledge and capacity building for local municipality staff and housing agencies

iv) Face-to-face dialogue sessions heritage gatekeepers e.g. cultural and business community.

CHAT used many different strategies to engage with the public. 'Chatting' was used as a first step to introduce the CHAT members and some of the rising concerns regarding heritage. Successful chat sessions would lead to further engagement e.g. agreement to participate in a site walk to discuss properties or a request for expert consultation.   Educational talks and workshops were planned and customized for specific groups such as general public, large and small property owners, municipal staff and housing agents.
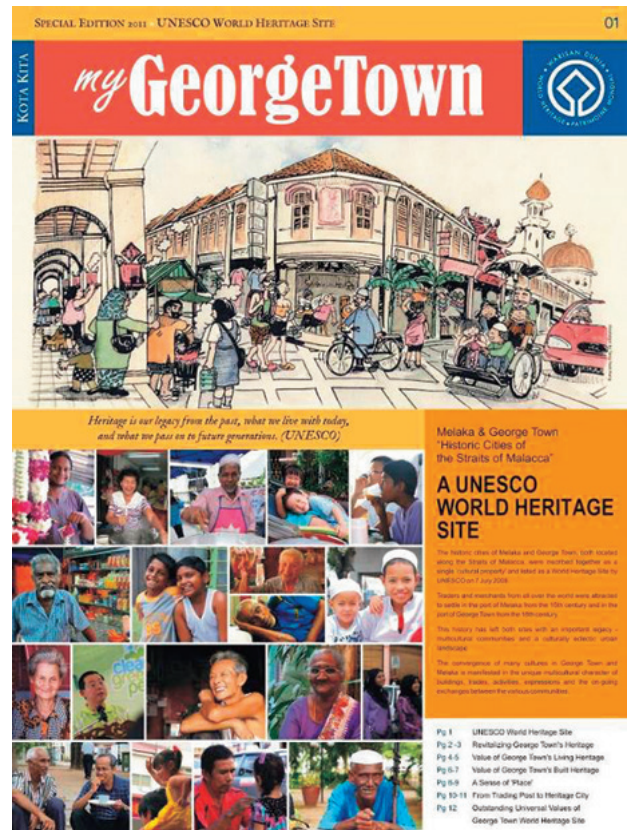

Fig 4: Community Newspaper
(Photo courtesy of Arts-ED)

Fig 5: Poster- Historical Development of Shophouse (Photo courtesy of Arts-ED)

Among the lessons learnt about dealing with the public was that it was important to use as many entry points as possible i.e. cognitive and affective, mind and body, reason and intuition.   We started off by trying to engage people intellectually, but many groups responded much better when we engaged with them emotionally. Often we had to use our intuition and be flexible to change our strategy when required.

Besides creating platforms for face-to-face interaction, CHAT was produced various educational materials for general public education. These included public exhibitions, community newspaper, posters, leaflets, technical booklets, blog-site etc. We learnt that just researching and delivering facts was not effective. We decided to employ artists to transform the facts and guidelines into visually accessible format as many residents did not have a reading habit. We also had to use a lot of imagination, metaphor and narrative or storytelling to transmit messages as that is what the public preferred.

As the town is composed of multi-cultural groups, talks and workshops were run in a various languages and publication were translated into multiple languages for easy comprehension. To reach out to the public, CHAT negotiated shop owners to allow information to be displayed in their public premises and hand delivered leaflets and town newspapers to every household. In terms of content, CHAT addressed issue-based themes and topics which were affecting the site. Content was also personalized and inclusive, highlighting experiences and stories from all cultural groups. CHAT also offered individual consultation services, directory services for reliable conservation architects and contractors and networking services.

CHAT was formally dissolved in 2010 when the GTWHI became functional as a full-fledged management office. Several members of CHAT were absorbed into the GTWHI committee and continue to contribute in accordance to their area of specialization.

In retrospect the weakness of CHAT's programs lay in the fact that we did not truly understand dialogical practice which requires collaborative rather than one sided interaction with the public. Simply listening to the views and sympathizing with the public's concerns and providing them with useful information did not engage the public raised their awareness and stirred their interest in the site and its values, but did not succeed in bringing them on board to work together with us towards the common good of the site.

3. Engagement with the Public

Since 2011 the NPO, Arts ED has attempted to conduct experiments in dialogical practice. From 2011-2013 Arts ED worked with an architect firm assigned to renovate and rejuvenate the biggest wet-market in the heritage site. This time Arts-ED incorporated a series of collaborative decision-making mechanisms involving the municipality who were owners of the site, the market traders and customers who

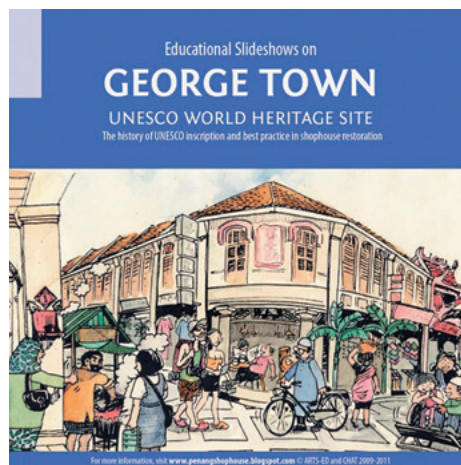Fig 6: Reaching out to public spaces (Photo courtesy of Arts-ED)

Fig 7: Six Educational slide-show CDs

Fig 8: Public Consultation

Fig 9: Consensus Building
(Photo collage courtesy of Arts-ED)

were users of the site and the architects who were responsible for design and renovation of the market building and surroundings.

The engagement process in the market project involved a series of collaborative consensus building exercises between the 3 parties with Arts ED playing the role of moderator or facilitator. Although the process took a longer time, new meanings and values were negotiated through shared knowledge and experiences of all parties. In this process we discovered that public engagement and consultation was critical to unlocking and understanding the 'institutional' value of culture (i.e. the role and value of cultural organizations in generating identity, social cohesion, etc.). We began to recognize the market vendors and traders as a historically practicing community who had developed a set of cultural knowledge, competencies and resources of their own.

In comparing the interventionist approach used by CHAT with the engaged approach used by Arts-ED in the market project we began to better understand engagement as defined by Wenger (1998) who described the process as an 'on-going negotiation of meaning'. We had gradually changed our style of thinking from "How can we get the public to understand the site's OUV's?" to "How can we understand what the site means to the public and what is its value to them?"

Negotiators and consensus builders must believe in the public's capacity for creative cultural adaptation and the vitality generated from cooperative experiences. This process progressively generates new knowledge, mutual understanding and wisdom needed to guide people towards collective action. It also requires time for participants to release their competitive thinking patterns, familiar relational structures and to adjust to new cultural agreements and commitments.

Professionals and administrators need to be conscious of the many types of knowledge, and competencies developed by communities living and practicing in a site. We need to integrate the knowledge and wisdom of many players to guide collective and inclusive action on the management of a cultural site. As the cultural commentator Holden (2006) suggests, the intrinsic, instrumental and institutional values held by various stakeholders are complementary values. Cultural Heritage Sites particularly, need to work with and involve the wider electorate in defining the cultural values of the site and find working models for collaborative interaction.

References

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