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Connecting Asian Heritage Conservation to the Idea of Performative Regionalism: A Case of Community-Enhancing Design Interventions in the Historical Art District of Liulichang Beijing

Diana Thamrin¹

ABSTRACT

Witnessing the active modernisation in Asian cities, there is an urgent need to conserve their rich heritage and diverse regional identities. However, as in the case of China, there is a stark contrast between the Asian perspective of conservation and that of the West, in terms of the character of design interventions produced and its purposes, which has frequently invited negative criticisms from heritage conservation professionals. Hence, the objective of this paper is to explore the interventions done on Asian heritage sites, taking the Liulichang Art District in Beijing as the case study, and analyze the positive influence they have brought. The paper starts by distinguishing the Asian values of authenticity in conservation that differ from the West and how these principles have been applied in Liulichang, a famous ancient street known for the selling and practice of Chinese painting. The paper further elaborates on the importance of community building in the process of learning and appreciating the art of Chinese painting and analyses the positive impact made by the design interventions, particularly in terms of community engagement and accommodation of traditional cultural practices. Results reflect that the Asian perspective of conservation do not always follow the principle of minimum intervention but how contemporary interventions could be merged into the heritage site to revive regional communities and cultural activities, connecting Asian architectural conservation with the design approach coined by Barbara Allen (2007) as

¹ Lecturer, Department of Interior Design, Faculty of Art and Design, Petra Christian University, Indonesia, email: dianath@petra.ac.id.

Performative Regionalism, hence developing the idea and practice of this approach as a result of the discussion.

Keywords: Asian heritage conservation, design interventions, performative regionalism, Chinese painting.

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MIR Centre for Socio-Economic Research, USA.

1.0 Introduction

1.01 The importance of heritage conservation in Asian cities

The conservation of a region's heritage concerns the recognition, protection and promotion of items or places that play important roles in both the region's culture and history. Heritage defines a community's identity and is generally attributed to the past history and the historic built environment together with traditional cultural and social values as its collective memory and the way of life of a community. It supports a region's identity by forging values, establishing aspirations, encouraging creativity and maintaining a sense of belonging or connection to the respected community. Conserving a region's heritage promotes the social stability, civic pride and encourages a better quality of life by providing a foundation scheme upon which a community or region may be able to socially and economically develop. Loh (2007) explained that the protection of heritage objects and active awareness from the society supports the sustainability of the social activities together with the natural and built environments by observing not only the tangible but also the intangible values which he regards as the 'spirit' of a place, where people play important roles in promoting cultural traditions in the past and continuing them into the future.

Asia consists of a large number of diverse regions made of a civilization that is deeply rooted to a diversity of traditional cosmologies and cultural values since the ancient times. Thus, heritage conservation is a method that should always be considered in the development of cities in Asia for the protection of their unique cultural identity and the well-being of their people. The heritage conservation of historical neighbourhoods in Asia is a key domain for the conveyance of shared values and norms as these environments offer a variety of familiar and historical landmarks that can be useful in establishing and sustaining a strong sense of belonging and attachment to life. Witnessing the rapid modernization in Asian cities that are all feverishly moving towards globalisation, (Yuen, 2008) highlighted the importance of heritage conservation of the historic neighbourhoods as these familiar landscapes grants opportunities to enliven the local communities and help to promote a region's cultural heritage and unique competitive qualities.

1.02 Differing values in "Authenticity" between Asia and the West

In the West, the principles of architectural conservation developed from the Eurocentric conservation theory since the nineteenth century that regard that the value of an object exists separately from the people and ought to be protected from any change or modification. Their perception of authenticity, thus, most dominantly emphasises on the originality of the material form of the object. This notion concerning authenticity can be reflected in the long, painstaking procedures in the restoration of the Parthenon (Toganidis, 2007). On the other hand, in Asia, (Kwanda, 2010) argued that traditional architecture has often been regarded as firm agents and representation of values to express spiritual and intangible meanings rooted from the cultural history of the region. The importance of spiritual meanings in the tangible entities of the built environment is reflected in the various conservation projects done in historical neighbourhoods, which are centered on the people and their cultural values and activities. Buildings are often constructed, repaired, restored, rebuilt, and extended constantly by the local people with their culturally rooted skills, rituals and knowledge for satisfying their daily needs. This attitude of architectural conservation to lengthen the life of buildings supports the general practices of continuous renewal as opposed to the Western perception of material authenticity that believes on the idea of minimum intervention and reversibility. Thus, in the Asian context of

architectural conservation, the perception of authenticity should be re-interpreted such that the authenticity or the truth should be sought and developed from the community or the “living authenticity.” Similarly, (Byrne, 2014) also expressed in his recent paper on Counter-heritage that heritage conservation in the Asian perspective ought to consider heritage objects as vibrant, “agentic” objects, encompassed in social practices rather than hollow passive object surfaces to be simply conserved in the physical sense. Hence, while the Western principle of heritage conservation concentrates more on the material authenticity, the Asian perspective of heritage conservation focuses more on the cultural aspects, the intangible qualities or the contextual values of the material object. It is due to this reason why many tourists from Western countries have been amazed by the experience of being able to observe China’s Forbidden City still shining in vivid Chinese colours of red and gold; or the splendid hand-made decorations of the Grand Palace in Bangkok. Their amazement would often be followed by a feeling of being deceived by the local claims that the historical relics have stood unchanged and unaltered for many decades.

We can connect this phenomenon to the stark contrast between the cultural values of West, that through history have always sought to pursue rational truth and the East that emphasises more on the values or importance of community, philosophy and tradition (Yoo, 2012: 38-42). For example, the architectural conservation done in the Nanluoguxiang Hutong in Beijing and the Kampung Glam in Singapore had not truly obeyed Eurocentric conservation principles regarding material authenticity. Instead, the existing structures were reconstructed with modern architecture to revitalize the historical neighbourhoods. The objective of the interventions was, hence, not to capture the former conditions and structures merely for physical preservation, but more towards bringing back the cultural community, identity and social as well as economic conditions of the particular regions. The diversity of people and communities in Asian cities has produced a diversity of neighbourhood qualities and their cultural values which contribute to the unique identity of most Asian cities. Thus, architectural conservation projects of traditional neighbourhoods cannot solely be performed for a universal purpose from the national authorities, but should attempt to encourage the rebuilding of local communities and rekindle them with the cultural as well as social values of the past, sometimes abandoning Eurocentric rules of minimum intervention. The objective of architectural heritage conservation in Asian historical neighbourhoods ought to encourage the revival of local communities and to assist in continuing the practice of regional cultures and traditions as “community-based cultural issues” suggested by (Loh, 2007: 9-12) instead of merely protecting a historical artefact or monument. This requires participating in the community to identify the regional qualities of a place to be conserved. As the nature and multitude of interventions in many Asian conservation projects occasionally contradicts the Western opinion of minimum intervention, the projects have, from time to time, received negative criticisms from heritage professionals ranging from “disneyfication”, “styling”, and “fabrication of history.”

Under this background, the objective of this paper is to explore the interventions of conservation projects in Asia, taking the Liulichang Art District in Beijing as the case study, and analyse the positive influence they have brought, in terms of community engagement and accommodation of cultural practices. The paper will then attempt to connect the objective, nature and impact made by the design interventions in Liulichang to the idea of Performative Regionalism: a regionalist architectural design approach introduced by (Allen, 2007) that values people and their cultural practices as the main priority in a true regionalist design intervention. Hence the paper will attempt to expand the idea of this approach as a result of the discussion.

1.03 Methodology

Based on the ethnographic phenomenological method of analysis outlined by Moutakes (1994: 2-3), this paper analyses the positive impact made by the design interventions in Asian conservation sites in terms of community building and engagement of cultural practices by taking the Liulichang Art District as the case study. Ethnographic phenomenological method involves fieldwork in a social setting that allows for direct observations of the interaction and activities of a group being studied. This involves an

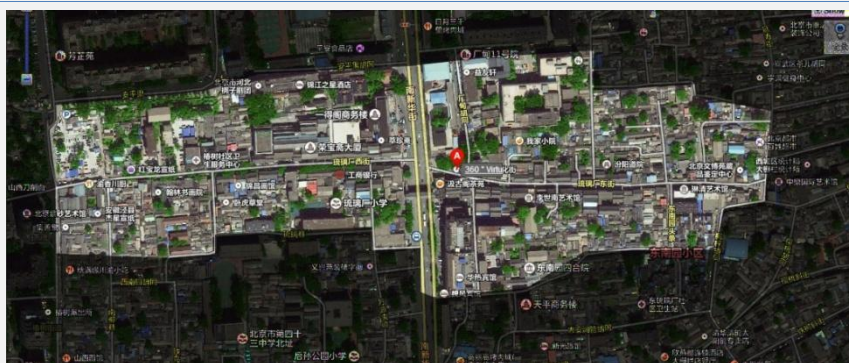
initial engagement of exploring, planning, asking permission for observation and participation, exploring the geography of the setting and constructing a plan for the scheduling of visits. In this research, the author first explores the essence of the practice of Chinese painting through literature studies and then visited the art communities in the Liulichang Art District daily in a period of ten days, building friendship and conducting interviews with the Chinese artists to obtain qualitative data regarding the new building elements or interventions that has been added to their shops and why they have been applied in regard to their painting activities and needs. The author was also given permission to participate in their art activities both in the painting process as well as a spectator, in order to experience being part of the community and judge how the new interventions had helped in accommodating the community's art activities and needs. Based on the objective, nature and impact of the interventions experienced the author then tried to include her own perception of what is essential in understanding the setting and then attempted to connect them to the idea of Performative Regionalism. This is done by drawing out the principles of this design approach that support the impact that has been experienced through the design interventions in Liulichang, thus expanding the idea and principles of this approach as a result of the discussion.

2.0 Design interventions in the conservation of Liulichang art district in Beijing, China

2.01 History of Liulichang

The Liulichang art district in Beijing is famous as a traditional art zone, focussing mainly on Chinese painting and calligraphy, with blocks of *hutongs* (traditional Chinese stone dwellings) as the main structures. The zone consists of two streets on the east and west that meet at a main intersection, located in the Old City area, on the south of the Forbidden City, the centre of the dynastical throne in the history of the China (Figure 1). Its name was derived from a famous factory that manufactured coloured glaze tiles in the same area during the Ming Dynasty, which are used for the imperial dwellings of kings and noble officials. Xu (2000: 176-177) mentioned that Liulichang was a favourite trading spot for art works, with a street that is 400m long and 8 meters wide, and was flanked by many antique classical Chinese art stores. During the Ming and Qing Dynasty, the place was a famous area where the literati, mostly Chinese painters and poets gathered to perform their literary works together and have literary discussions. It was the best place to buy classical Chinese tools for painting and calligraphy, literary books and poetry and a habitual space for of literary exhibitions, demonstrations and gatherings.

Figure 1: Map of Liulichang art district



Source: Modified from Baidu Maps, 2015

2.02 The essence of learning Chinese painting and the significance of community

Lin (2010) explained that in China, traditional painting and calligraphy evolved together and thus painting, poetry and literature became connected together in a manner they never did in the West. Calligraphy and poetry are often present in a Chinese painting, and all of these work together with the articulation of figures or landscapes to convey a spiritual message from the artist to the reader. Thus,

Chinese painting reflects the Chinese way of thought that is very different from the West. While objects in Western paintings are mostly drawn in the principle of a central perspective, Chinese paintings are drawn from memory, a personal experience of “space” from the artist’s spiritual encounters and reflections with nature. This is why in landscape paintings, observers can see a multitude of objects with variable view points, manipulating the eye level, as the “journeys” and encounters with nature are put in one to represent a whole idea or philosophy of what nature is. Nature is a subject which Chinese painters worshipped and harmonize with and not an object that they copy. It is the intangible aspects of the world that they are trying to capture, and not the merely the tangible. Li (2007) also explained that the spatial concept in Chinese painting is not a direct copy of a physical condition of an object, but an abstract experience between man and nature. A moral or spiritual value that inspires and nurtures the soul is gained from this abstract spatial experience, rather than a feeling of satisfaction from a visual feast. This is why Chinese people like to say that they “read” a painting rather than “look” at a painting. It is the same character as “study,” and so appreciating the value of a painting is done by studying the “spatial story” of the painting rather than solely admiring its visual compositions. For the contemporary society who are not accustomed to such thinking as in the past world of Chinese scholars, it is thus entirely a different experience from merely looking at the paintings in display than watching the “Master” at his transcendental work while also studying each part of a painting thoroughly together, as the act and talent of painting itself is considered a force of Nature that inspires and teaches. The vigour of life expressed in Chinese paintings is not only determined by the content or the material objects depicted, but more by the strokes and the swiftness of the brush (Lin, 2010). This is the reason why demonstrations are one of the most important parts of the learning process. Demonstrations allow learners to watch the speed, twist and turn of the bamboo brush that cannot be learnt merely by looking at the final product of a calligraphic work or painting. The strokes and washes determine different spatial qualities in painting, from far away mist to close viewed objects in which the strokes become more visible. The magnificent techniques produced only with ink and bamboo brush is truly a difficult and sophisticated skill and for early learners or the general society, watching the Masters at work is an important step in order to be able to understand and appreciate the art of Chinese painting (figure 2).

Figure 2: Watching the master at work is one of the most important elements in the learning process and a key to appreciate the art of Chinese painting



In relation to the above, watching the Masters at work is also a significant part of community and social gatherings, as has been observed during the visits to Liulichang. In the past, Chinese scholars often conducted literati gatherings where appreciating and sometimes producing an artwork or a piece of writing are done together, where artists, poets and writers share their views to enrich one other: an intellectual and social gathering such as one that has been finely articulated by Xie Huan’s painting “Elegant Gathering in the Apricot Garden” (figure 3). It is this cultural tradition that is unique in the practice and exhibition of traditional Chinese arts that should be continued and preserved. Even till today, there are many traditional Chinese painting associations and organisations all over China as well as in many Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia.

Figure 3: Painting of Xie Huan (1370-1450) entitled elegant gathering in the Apricot garden



Source: China Online Museum Website, <http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-xie-huan-apricot-garden.php>, accessed in 2015

Harvey in Pallasmaa (2012) attributed the loss of temporality and the hunt for instantaneous products in contemporary expression to the decline of experiential depth. In relation to this statement, in today's efforts to preserve heritage practices of Chinese painting, designing buildings that truly accommodate the unique cultural activities as mentioned previously requires a deep consideration to both the tangible and the intangible (social, cultural and spiritual) aspects of the practice of the art and the process of appreciating the art itself. These buildings should thus encourage artists to exhibit their skills to the community and allow the community to have an experience of watching the Masters at work, as the most important part in the learning process and appreciating the art of Chinese painting. The sophisticated skills and unique social and cultural activities of Chinese painting ought to be considered in rehabilitating places that accommodate the practice and display of the art, and the Liulichang Art District is truly one suitable example. In the following discussion, the paper will describe how the interventions done in the conservation of this historical site has been successful in supporting the traditional cultural activities and community in connection to the essence of the art of Chinese painting as discussed previously.

2.03 The impact of design interventions in Liulichang on community and cultural practice

Today, many of the traditional dwellings in Liulichang have deteriorated and attempts have been made to restore the area into its originally famed identity as a traditional art district. Some shops have also been refurbished and the district has been developed to become a pedestrian cultural street. While some stores have remained unchanged since the Qing dynasty in architectural style and business, others have been renewed. The renovations and restorations executed on this historical site range from minor furnishing and repainting to major ones, involving addition or attachment of new design elements or structures as well as spatial changes, particularly in the open spaces and the interior spaces. As shown in figure 4, new building elements could be seen attached to the former building structures. A few dwellings have also renovated the front area for art shops and walkways while the back areas are used for private living spaces.

Figure 4: Bird-eye view of Liulichang art district: the interventions are done directly on the former building structures



The former cultural streets on the east and west that meet at the main intersection on the urban road have been restored according to its former neighbourhood street atmosphere. Old willow trees were remained along the street and encased with concrete block on which people can sit and relax. The

arrangement creates an inviting entrance view and a welcoming pathway along the renovated art shops where the former traditional structures could be seen blending with the addition of new design elements, such as balconies, decorations on dougong, Chinese geometric window lattices and modified entrance walkways to encourage people to enter (figure 5). An atmosphere of a traditional Chinese market is successfully brought out, bringing a memory of the past into the place yet combined with contemporary ways to make the place attractive to the modern society. The success of the interventions could be sensed through the liveliness and activity of the art communities in the area even till today (figure 6).

Figure 5: Renewal and addition of new building elements on the facades of the art shops



Figure 6: View from the main intersection of the street showing the bustling community



At the entrance area of the West street, an existing traditional courtyard has been retained and enlarged to create an inviting space for people to enter from the intersection where the street crosses the main urban road. The courtyard is frequently packed with people for relaxing, chatting and more particularly, it is a favourite place for Chinese painting and calligraphy demonstrations as well as community gathering. Narrow alleys along the tightly packed dwellings have also been retained and refurbished to resemble the intimate neighbourhoods like those in ancient Chinese towns and these spaces have also been often utilised as intimate spaces for the community to gather. Along with the arrangement of spaces as mentioned above, new open spaces on the streets have also frequently been used for free public demonstrations making the place truly lively with the support of the bustling communal activities (figure 7-8). The traditional cultural activities that used to be practiced among scholars and the traditional society in Chinese painting and calligraphy has thus been successfully returned and enhanced through these new design interventions.

Figure 7: Art demonstrations encouraging community gathering on the open space of the streets



Figure 8: Extended courtyards and narrow alleys become intimate spaces for community-gathering



The spatial reconfigurations also extend into the interior spaces of most of the buildings. For example, the interior space of one of the largest building in the West Street has been renovated with corridors and rows of rooms for art galleries and workshops. Many of the interior spaces inside the traditional dwellings have also been renovated with new building programs and even undergrounds that lead to new art workshops and galleries to generate more intimate spaces for art activities. Thus, the interior spaces have been redeveloped with contemporary ways from existing programs and structures resulting in new spatial qualities. These have been appropriately used by the artists and owners as new exhibition spaces, galleries and art workshops such that art communities could demonstrate their skills to the public while visiting the galleries (figures 9-10).

Figure 9: Renovated interiors and addition of new interior spaces in the underground, generating novel spaces for art activities and exhibitions.



Figure 10: Development of Interior spaces from the existing buildings are used as art workshops, learning studios and demonstration spaces to encourage artists to demonstrate their art skills



From the description above, it is evident that the design interventions made in the historical art district of Liulichang did not wholly obeyed the Eurocentric conservation principle of minimum intervention. Instead, the interventions were blended with the existing structures according to the designers' perception of the actual needs of people and their cultural activities surrounding the practice and appreciation of the art of Chinese painting. The design interventions still retained memories of the past by maintaining existing structures without removing them but were adapted to contemporary schemes and concepts in terms of spatial form and quality. Drawing from the impact brought out towards community and cultural practice, these interventions have proved themselves successful in reviving the traditional art communities and expanding ways to encourage the learning and appreciation of Chinese painting, by granting opportunities for the artists to exhibit their skills and communicate their works to the public. Today, Liulichang holds a firm identity as a famous spot for locals and tourists to buy the best of classical art equipments and where many renowned Chinese traditional artists daily gather and demonstrate their skills.

3.0 Connecting Asian architectural conservation to the Idea of Performative regionalism

From the observation above, there is thus an evident difference in the practice of architectural conservation between Asia, that focuses more on the people and their regional activities, and the West that emphasises more on material authenticity. The interventions done on the historical site of Liulichang, as an example discussed above, emphasized on bringing back the memories of the past in order to encourage and support the “performance” of the people in their cultural activities of

traditional Chinese painting. The effort was to rebuild the traditional art communities, that would in turn encourage the unique social and cultural activities involved in Chinese painting, and improve their lives through utilizing their unique historical memories and cultural activities as sources of income. At many occasions, this involves more interventions than the original state in the course of the practice. In connection to this phenomenon, Allen (2007) argued that the protection of historical and heritage artefacts is certainly important for maintaining a region's identity but, more importantly, what architects and designers can bring to a place and people can "perform" much deeper through their intervention sought to be the main concern. This idea of "Performative Regionalism" is an architectural regionalist approach requiring a perceptive understanding of the interaction between people and a place that promotes architecture to be comprehended as an enabler and supporter of cultural practices and activities. Though a Western critic, Allen introduced a more Eastern perspective of the concept of regionalism compared to many architectural regionalists. Instead of being judgemental regarding the authenticity of a visual attribute and appearance of a place as many architectural regionalists had emphasized in the past, she argued that the biggest concern should be whether one's intervention privileges regional activities and their unique cultural practices. When the spatial dimensions of human activities can be successfully realised, the visual appearance of a place is an open domain, supporting the notion of "90% cultural practices and 10% style" as a true regionalist approach.

As an effort to explore this idea of Performative Regionalism deeper and expand the modes of its practice as a result, a connection between this approach and the impact of the design interventions made in Asian conservation projects has been drawn. There are three principles that could be drawn which could be utilised as a qualitative assessment for future practices of Asian architectural conservation in connection to the idea Performative Regionalism. The first principle involves the nature of interventions produced. Allen had argued that as long the spatial dimensions of cultural practices could be truly fulfilled in a design intervention, the aspect of style could be an open domain. In connection to this notion, heritage conservers and architects thus ought to understand the aspect of style or visual form in the "performative" perspective, such that as long as the historic habitual dimensions and cultural activities could be enhanced from an intervention, the style or visual form of intervention could also be an open domain.

In relation to the first, the second principle concerns the phenomenal output of these interventions. As Allen (2007: 422) had also argued that a region is a socially constructed concept where the community share an identity and involve themselves in a compatible social practice, the output of such interventions ought to revive local communities and enhance their cultural activities with a much deeper experience while adapting to the needs of the contemporary society. A Performative Regionalist architect, as she had explained, would empathise with the local community to acquire a truly deep perceptive comprehension of the cultures of everyday life as part of the design process, such that it expands opportunities for cultural insights. This approach, hence, need methods that are more participatory, experiential and humanistic in nature rather than merely scientific or textual ones.

Finally, the third principle concerns the regional identity of a place. As Allen referred the constituents of identity to people and their place of performance, a region is the context for cultural practices and gains its essential meaning through those activities. Thus, the regional identity of a place ought to prioritise and maintain people and things as the main agents in the formulation of its identity through the interventions made and not otherwise. In this sense, the regional identity of a place is a "living" identity that should not only be appreciated merely through the physical glory of the place or the built environment, but one where the cultural community and activities become the first objects of interest of a place which are enhanced through the interventions made. These three principles, in reference to the idea of Performative Regionalism, have been observed in the design interventions made in the historical art district of Liulichang, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Connecting design interventions in Liulichang to the idea of “Performative Regionalism”

	<i>Design interventions in Liulichang art district, Beijing</i>	<i>Performative regionalism principles</i>
Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Direct addition of new design elements on old building structures - Expansion of streets and courtyards for community gathering and demonstrations - Reconfiguration and renovation of interior spaces into underground alleys and new gallery spaces 	Visual style and form as an open domain
Phenomenal Output	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Daily demonstrations and workshops of Chinese painting and calligraphy - Daily community gathering, continuous interaction among artists and with the public - Formation of new traditional art communities in Liulichang 	Revival of local communities, enhancement and production of novel ways to encourage cultural practices while adapting to contemporary needs
Regional Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identity as the dwellings and workshops of famous artists in Beijing - Identity as the oldest and liveliest traditional art zone in Beijing 	Regionalism where people and things are the main agents in the formulation of the identity of the place

4.0 Conclusion and recommendations

The objective of a regionalist intervention through the Asian perspective of architectural conservation ought to be a humanistic approach where both the process and result would be more experiential and phenomenal rather than merely historical, scientific or textual. The design interventions in historical art district of Liulichang, for example, emphasized on preserving the “living authenticity,” reviving the cultural community of the traditional Chinese artists and enhancing their unique cultural practices associated with Chinese painting. In spite of the fact that the nature of the interventions at many occasions has contradicted the Western conservation concept of material authenticity and minimum intervention, the interventions have proved themselves successful in reviving the local community and preserving the cultural practices of Chinese painting. In reference to the idea of Performative Regionalism, three principles could be drawn in assessing interventions on Asian heritage sites, similar to the case of Liulichang. First, in terms of the nature of interventions made, heritage conservers and architects ought to understand the aspect of style or visual form in the “performative” perspective, such that as long as the historic habitual dimensions and cultural activities could be enhanced from an intervention, the style or visual form of the intervention could be an open domain. Second, the phenomenal output of such interventions ought to succeed in reviving local communities and enhancing their cultural practices with a much deeper experience while adapting to the needs of the contemporary society. Finally the regional identity of a place ought to prioritise and maintain people and things as the main agents in the formulation of its identity through the interventions made and not otherwise.

This implies a need of a truly deep reconsideration to the rules and regulations of architectural conservation today. While the principle of minimum intervention favoured by the West lack the intangible and social values needed in the conservation of Asian traditional neighbourhoods, the mode of interventions produced in today’s Asian conservation projects must, however, also be monitored to prevent the loss of historical character as well as uprising means of privatisation, as many heritage

critics have observed. There should, thus, be an in-between point where both the Western and Asian principles of conservation connect and complement each other, such that they may allow different policies for different heritage sites that ought to be determined beforehand through extensive levels of experiential participation in the unique cultures of the people and the life of local communities.

By implementing people-centred and community-enhancing interventions in today's historical neighbourhoods, the conservation of heritage and regional attributes would be a living one, in which the traditional cultures of the past could sustainably be continued and communicated to the contemporary society even in the face of globalisation.

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