

MR LAURENCE LOH:

Thank you, Andrew. I would also like to thank the Home Affairs Bureau for inviting me here, the Hong Kong Institute of Architects and the affiliated professional bodies.

It's always a pleasure come back to Hong Kong and every time I come back to Hong Kong I tend to start to automatically walk faster. So I think I'm also going to speed up my talk because I have limited time in the great tradition of Hong Kong.

Conserving for change. My idea of conserving for change starts with the question: why conserve your heritage?

I have my own definition: conservation is the act of protecting the authentic values and cultural rights of a segment of society, or buying it time to modify itself and its cultural prospectus and assets, progressively and incrementally without excessive disruption and marginalisation in order to create a sustainable and equitable life environment for its present and future generations. It must be seen as a dynamic process, one that's to be used as an instrument of change to create understanding proactively and progressively, embedding within it the idea of sustainability as its core mission.

A mouthful, but I'll go on. The statement recognises that change and a loss of some of our heritage and assets over time is inevitable. We can only slow down the negative consequences so that the modifications of cultural processes are organic and take place over a longer period of time, preferably over several generations. National development programmes and master plans are often not tailored to respond to local sub cultures and subgroups. In the race to modernise, these parties are always marginalised and suffer proportionally greater loss. Their cultural rights are not recognised and often eradicated totally.

Because this is a facet of culture that is rarely understood or enshrined in any law. In trying to establish a position for

sustainability of our cultural heritage, I created this table. The equation of conservation and sustainability can be encapsulated with this list of similarities between cultural and natural sites. As you can see, there's a strong correlation between the two, especially about diversity and integrity, about systems being self-sustaining.

So if you buy into the global concept of sustainability, then you're buying into the logic of culture heritage conservation.

In trying to understand the dynamics of conservation and to use it as an instrument to create a change in mindsets, one could perhaps start to examine the politics of social change. Kim Dovey's reflection about a build environment is a useful reminder here.

"The built environment reflects the identities differences and struggles of gender, class, race, culture and age. It shows the interest of the people in empowerment and freedom, the interest of the state in social order and the private corporate interest in stimulating consumption. Because architecture and urban design involve transformations in the way we frame life, because design is the imagination and production of the future, the field cannot claim autonomy from the politics of social change."

Our cultural heritage in particular, our built heritage, is in part a story about the politics of social change, tempered by the celebration of architecture through continuity and through the development of systems of expression which inform on our way of life and the choices communities have made over time.

The idea of conserving of change grows out of conscious need to moderate the philosophy of conservation with clear objectives for production of the future. To recognise that architects and planners would want to have a say in how they can direct change in concrete ways through their work as opposed to being subservient to the economic objectives of their clients alone and to a particular cultural hegemony. They can make conscious choices in a selection of the psychological and socio-political battles

they have to fight and that will impact on the way their communities start to view the future.

In the context of heritage and the retention of cultural values the idea of this paper is embedded in understanding power and architecture, the architect's role in cultural agency and the opportunities it offers. Lisa Findley in her book, "Building Change" defines agency as "the power to act on behalf of someone else or on one's own behalf and that it is a prerogative of certain kinds of freedom. It assumes that one has the right to pursue what can be imagined, what can be undertaken." But why culture?

Culture is defined by Yi-Fu Tuan as "the totality of means by which I escape from my animal state of being." A bit cynical but you juxtapose this with the Le Corbusier statement that:

"Taking possession of space is the first gesture of living things, of man and animals, of plants and clouds, a fundamental manifestation of equilibrium and duration. The occupation of space is the first proof of existence."

In the assembly of these two thoughts, I'm struck by why culture is clearly associated with the idea of roots and routes. Is about searching for the good place and how it is an integral and inherent component of our existence. It cannot be seen as a thing apart. So if the making of culture is human action arising out of core needs and is a representation of human values, then it's well worth our time to consider how the idea of conserving for change can be useful in our discussion of Hong Kong's living urban heritage.

I won't talk too much about Hong Kong context, but I think that the Queens Pier project has been at the centre of the ongoing heritage debate in Hong Kong since the first part of 2007. I do not think it will go away. Hopefully, it's actually the turning point in the change that will take place in a milieu that treasures economic growth and consumption above all else. But due to the pressure of time, I won't go into the details here.

These are just some comments I picked up in the Sunday Morning Post on May 13th.

Who will emerge the winners in this contest? The heritage advocates or the traffic planners? I would like now to share with you two live projects that I've had the privilege to be a major player in, but first let me preface them with a short preamble.

Cultural production. Every project starts with a single big idea, some beginnings are not obvious. The idea of conserving for change was in part inspired by paintings I own of early Penang. Alan Flux, a friend, and a water colourist, held two exhibitions of his paintings of heritage buildings in Penang in the 1990s, three of which you can see up on the screen.

His mission was to record in his hand as many of Penang's buildings as possible before they disappear. Many have. His prophecy, unfortunately, has come true.

As you can see, the three paintings up on screen have now suffered terrible losses in less than 10 years.

It started me thinking about change and the loss of heritage. His paintings help reinforce in my mind the need for protection and the creation of awareness. Although he succeeded in his mission to paint them, did he inspire the owners to become advocates of heritage conservation? In many cases he failed, but then development and the business of consumption have never been in the hands of artists. So these silent watchers are the paintings which hang in my office as reminders of the work that still needs to be done. They galvanise me into action every time the spirit and energy wanes.

If sustainability is about giving a segment of humanity a future, then the vision must be inculcated in the minds of those who are destined to inherit it.

The Lunas story, the rubber story, is one such project that attempts to do this. It is about a small town with a big heart and big story.

DIGI, a Malaysian telecommunications company annually promotes a heritage awareness programme as part of its social corporate responsibility, called "DIGI'S Amazing Malaysians". In 2006 I was nominated and given funds amounting to US\$125,000 to design and conduct a built heritage educational programme -- with the proviso that I work with 60 to 80 school children. So I chose a condition that met my criteria for conserving for change.

In relation to sustaining heritage, there are several glaring omissions. First, the understanding and promotion of cultural mapping in Malaysia. The recording of local and personal histories in small towns, the existence of a viable built heritage programme for children in schools that can be replicated in other centres.

So I designed a programme to showcase how this could be done. With a highly dedicated team of facilitators from the Heritage of Malaysia Trust in Kuala Lumpur, we travelled every week to a small one-house town called Lunas in the northern state of Kedah and stayed for three days a week. Lunas was the town where my grandfather, a migrant from China in the late 19th century set down his roots and helped to build. There we worked with 80 schoolchildren, between the ages of 12 to 15, from three local schools and equipped them with the knowledge and skills to understand the language of buildings, to interview and record oral history of the local inhabitants, to make observations and features of the town digitally, to draw, to prepare presentations on the computer, to prepare mind maps, to design heritage trails and ultimately to learn how to guide. As the town made its fortune from rubber, they learned about the rubber process as well.

The results of the project were showcased in a defunct rubber smoke house at the edge of the town which I restored closely observed by the children. The two rubber smoking chambers of the brick and timber buildings were converted into museums, one to house what

was to be called The Lunas Story and the other The Rubber Story. In the Lunas story, enlarged photo images of the traditional trades and the architecture and the people were hung up together with interpretation boards.

In the rubber story, the actual patina and crust of history was retained. Actual rubber sheets were hung up on the original bamboo poles to simulate the environment of the internal space of a smoke house -- black walls full of soot and dust, accumulated over 40 years, complete with the rich pungent smell of raw rubber, totally unforgettable and distinct.

This is the only private museum in the country that actually tells the story of rubber and its role in the growth and development of agriculture and commerce in Malaysia, complete with appropriate smells and the local histories of a town bypassed and forgotten, the creation of motorways.

I can see that the project has changed the lives of the children and townsfolk. They have now taken ownership of their own heritage and they will protect it and love it and understand the meanings that are embedded in place. The spirit of place is strong and the overt appreciation of their history is evident. The smoke house is now a focal point where visitors come to be told the story of the town. The local economy benefits. A heritage club will be set up in one of the schools and there is a plan to convince them to adopt the smoke house to run heritage-related programmes, they are to be the keepers of stories. It's now a place on the map known by many Malaysians. Other towns have asked for this programme to be replicated and knock-on effects have started.

A member of the public that took part in the heritage work design and guided by children responded to reporter's query as follows:
"What is the best part of this programme?"

His answer: "It is remarkable in this day and age that a young Malay girl guided me, a Malay man, around a Chinese temple and

explained the architecture and the religion to me without a hint of prejudice, reservation or nervousness."

The role of cultural agency has shown its hand here, how many hands join together demonstrates how a minority group can work in the realm of architecture to educate and reverse negative impacts of development and religious constraints and offer a community a chance to direct part of its future. It reinforces the fact that children are open, receptive and all embracing until tainted by the prejudice of adults. The challenge is, can they be our agents of change in a mission to sustain their own local cultural heritage?

The discipline of architecture for most of its history has been at the service of those in power. The built environment in Malaysia is a distinct reflection of power, first of 500 years of colonial rule by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British, then of 50 years of post-colonial political domination by the majority race. However, in this world of shifting power dynamics, there are now opportunities for fringe groups and the marginalised to avail themselves of various means of physical expressions to build change. To avail themselves in a search for a strategy to involve architecture as cultural and spatial production in social change, an opportunity was presented in 2003. Stadium Merdeka, the key icon of independence was slated for demolition. The open oval shape in the image on the screen is Stadium Merdeka. This structure should be rightly called Malaysian heritage building number one, but what is the story? It was purpose-built to stage the declaration of Malaysia's independence from the British. The birth of the nation was officially proclaimed on 31st August 1957 by Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, in the stadium he commissioned to kick-start his vision. 36 years later, in 1993 the site was sold to UEM Bhd, a public listed company, to be redeveloped. This move was sanctioned by the political masters of the day. Despite strong outcries of the public, the deal went ahead. To me this is one of the biggest unforgivable transgressions committed by the politicians in power in the name of progress and development.

It's akin to the unimaginable voluntary demolition of the Statue of Liberty or the Eiffel Tower.

But ironically, the Minister of Youth and Sports said this, translated: "We are not tied to sentiment. This is a question of dollars and cents."

Unfortunately, UEM was hit by a currency crisis of 1997 and the market crash that followed. The loans that the company took from the banks with the stadium as collateral pledged became non-performing. Consequently a special vehicle was set up by the government to reduce the high volume of non-performing loans or NPLs that ran into the billions. Danaharta, that vehicle bought up NPLs from the various banks and set about rehabilitating the destitute companies. One method they used was to sell incumbent land in open market.

In 2003, Permodalan Nasional Bhd, a public equity trust created and controlled by the government stepped in and bought the site with a view to preserving the stadium and redevelop the residual land around it. Coincidentally, Tan Sri Ahmad Sarji, the chairman of PNB happened also to be the president of the trust, of which I am the deputy president. So, hand in hand, we worked together to plan and create a heritage project that would have the potential to moderate the future, to recover the cultural power of the site and to reclaim the cultural rights of Malaysia's children. But you'll ask, "Why the children?"

For me the idea of the project started with one fairly mundane and simple observation which then became the motivating force. When I asked my three grown children the question: are you aware of what and where Stadium Merdeka is, they all answered in the negative.

I followed with the question: what is the proclamation of independence and have you ever seen it or read it? The reply was equally appalling. The burning question that stuck in my head was: how could it be even remotely possible or conceivable that the present generation of children and young adults in the country of

their birth are not even taught these basic facts? In other words, they do not know where the independence of the nation was officially declared and what words were spoken when it happened. Needless to say, there's even less hope that they'll be in possession of the finer historical details. The context is as insidious as it sounds.

The mission is to use the power of architecture, the architect's tools, especially the possession of effective techniques for envisioning alternative futures, and the conservation process to represent and fight for the rights of half the population of the country, the children, who are unable to and will never be allowed to speak for themselves, the same children who worked to the Lunas project with me. To reclaim the roots that they have lost, which is totally missing from the make up of the collective psyche of several generations in Malaysia. Here the conservator starts to think about how he can be the translator and transmitter of once treasured ideals.

The Merdeka Vision starts with the idea of restoring Stadium Merdeka back to its original 1957 form in time for the 50th anniversary of independence, which is next month. In the post-construction period of almost 50 years, the stadium has undergone several radical changes, the most significant of which were the creation of three sections of upper tiers to increase the seating capacity from 25,000 to 45,000.

High concrete walls with steel spikes at the top, designed to keep football crowds under control, replace a see-through fence. The open, tropically sensitive grandstand was enclosed and more VIP areas were created by increasing the width and height of the middle section of the grandstand's terrace.

This is just a statement of the cultural significance of the site.

Scenes of the declaration of Merdeka are repeated every year over the television. The original form of the stadium is always in the background, a subliminal reminder of 1957. The restored form would serve as a powerful heritage icon and as a demonstration project

to showcase historic and building conservation practice on a national platform. It would make visible the idea of conserving for change.

It will also create a new museum within it to carry the story of independence and the road to nationhood.

In parallel with the aforementioned ideas it was also proposed that the historical site be vested in a public trust whose sole object is to restore and safeguard the stadium in perpetuity for the nation, never to allow it to fall into the hands of developers again. Both ideas have now become reality. The stadium is undergoing restoration, starting with the dismantling of the upper tiers and a public trust has been formed.

The strategy would be to start a nationwide campaign to raise funds to restore the stadium back to its original glory. A dollar from every citizen would amount to 20 million. The intention is to ensure that the full story is told and that everyone in Malaysia would take ownership of the site to remind them that their legacy and history could have so easily been lost.

For the Heritage Trust of Malaysia the opportunity here is to win hearts and minds. It's a secular, national icon, a giant to anchor heritage vision that cuts across class, creed, culture, gender, age and race, to allow the idea of cultural sustainability to take the high ground without having to cope with the backlash from political partisanship, or to be encumbered with religious and racial connotations.

In conclusion, cultural heritage conservation as an architectural activity promotes cultural sustainability which Ken Taylor suggests is to do with "connecting people with their environment and their heritage -- their cultural landscape -- and to be part of looking after it, conserving, planning and developing its sustainability in ways that add social and economic value for the community."

It's about cultural continuity of built legacies, of them being permanent physical references and repositories of universal knowledge. About the ability to create cultural consciousness and a sense of humility about the past and to work for the collective.

Conserving for change takes into account our concerns for cultural sustainability, cultural rights and the need to manage the rate of change in the transformation of all our diverse communities - it recognises the logic of embedding our cultural building conservation and reinterpretation within the idea of cultural agency, which we should remind ourselves is a prerogative of a certain kind of freedom.

It offers the view that with the shift in power dynamics, heritage conservation has a unique role to play in society and politics. The heritage conservationist as its agent who has a certain centrality and positionality in all discussions of the processes of constructing and organising spaces can take charge of the buildings that others have created and through cultural agency, reprogramme them to create vehicles for social change.

He applies his deep understanding of the local cultures, he says. To be true to authenticity he works within the tenets and frameworks of international charters and local best practice standards. To project the past in the future, he revives the spirit of place and expands the range of meanings that can be acquired by the place to promote sustainability and social change, using wisely with clear intention the process of conservation as a catalyst for change.

So I hope I have shown that heritage advocacy is not just about the language of oppression or conflict. It can and should be the language of invitation. Thank you.