

A Paradox of Reusing Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of the Historic Centre of Macau

Teng Wai Lao | laotengwai@yahoo.com.hk
University of Macau

Abstract

After the WHS inscription of the Historic Centre of Macau in 2005, the relationship between citizens of Macau and their heritage is not distanced. Most of these monuments remain functional for religious and social purposes and are actively engaged in public commercial activities such as the annual Macau Light Festival. Several historic houses have been transformed into either a permanent library or a museum where people can experience various events. With such frequent interaction, these monuments are more than just heritage to locals; they are the venues where people's daily lives are attached. However, this familiarity will cause a paradox in preservation since losing the distance might mean being unable to deliver the message of protection. It would be difficult to find a balance between preservation and reuse of heritage. This paper will use the Historic Centre of Macau as a case study to discuss the types of adaptive reuse in Macau and propose potential risks of these approaches.

Keywords

Cultural Heritage; Adaptive reuse; Sustainability

Introduction

Within the last two decades, Macau was experiencing various changes within the city during its cultural, social and economic development which heavily altered the decisions on the utility of lands and buildings. After the success of World Heritage Site inscription in 2005, the monuments of the Historic Centre of Macau has become accessible to the public as attractions which means they were no longer private to their own communities such as religious groups and permit holders. Beside the ordinary services provided at site, additional characters and functions have been added to them and hence they have been turned into multipurpose venues. With these chances, people are able to build a close connection with these designated buildings when they exercise religious practices, see performances, participate in activities or workshops and relax at site. Nevertheless, sometimes the concept of cultural heritage is blurred by these kind of consumptions from daily usage and familiarity. The Historic Centre of Macau is overwhelmed with socioeconomic indications and being slacked the fact that they are World Heritage Sites which bear OUVs and require preservation. This essay is designed primarily to re-consider a paradox which often exists in managing adaptive reuse of heritage and is against the needs of preservation and conservation: to what extent should heritage sites be occupied for multifarious daily usages, as well as to stress the likelihood of impacts on the OUVs of those properties and the designation. In order to propose this

paradox clearly, I will first briefly introduce the concept of adaptive reuse of cultural heritage, review the cultural heritage in Macau and their current status of utility, finally discuss the potential risks of these adaptive reuses.

The adaptive reuse of cultural heritage

Cultural heritage are important public assets of a community. The government usually owns and decides what should be done to them in order to maximise the embedded values of heritage in terms of social, cultural, economic, political and religious. Reusing heritage building becomes inevitable when their original function can no longer be used.¹ Conejos, Langston and Smith consider adaptive reuse of cultural heritage is beneficial to the society because it allows heritage to be revitalised for the society.² Bullen, Love, Ikiz Kaya, Pintossi, and Dane hold similar point of view that reusing heritage can have contributions to environmental sustainability, urban regeneration and liveability.³ Undeniably, sometimes adaptive reuses of heritage successfully retrieve and continue the lives of these cultural remains from the past especially those have been abandoned and disused.

The appropriateness of appointing new function to heritage is the most concerned issue in decision making.⁴ It "should be economically, socially and physically sustainable" say Misirlisoy and Günçe.⁵ Yet, it is criticised that most strategies focus on environmental and functional purposes whereas the socio-cultural aspects are ignored. Among all, profitability is an incentive which remarkably attracts stakeholders to consider adaptive reuse of heritage.⁶ Thus, it is not surprise that one of the most common reuse strategies is heritage tourism by which transforming heritage sites into tourist attractions for better cultural and political promotion, as well as for economic gain vitally. Being environmental friendly is another incentive as adaptive reuse can help to reduce the material consumption and pollution caused during new constructions which has significant positive impacts on planetary health.⁷ However, if the decision is randomly made without researching in depth, the heritage will be destroyed by the adaptive reuse. Such destroy is not only on the architectural level, but also showing a disrespectfulness to the past and values attached.

The Historic Centre of Macau

In 2005, the Historic Centre of Macau has been successfully inscribed on the World Heritage List as showing a unique testimony of cultural harmony between the East and the West, which has been highlighted on its OUV.⁸ The site is composed of 22 buildings and 8 plazas, which can be divided into four main categories: Chinese Temples (3 buildings in total), Western Churches (7 buildings in total), Residences (3 buildings in total) and Others (9 buildings in total) (fig.1).⁹ Their surrounding areas are known as the buffer zones which share the same value as the designated buildings and are considered as an integral part of the Historic Centre of Macau. The entire site bears witness to the coexistence of Chinese and Portuguese cultures in Macau, revealing the true identity of Macau and showing the achievement of a 400-year-long Eastern and Western cultural exchange.¹⁰ More importantly, the Historic Centre of Macau is not 'heritage' in the general perception of old, grand and magnificent architecture built in the past.¹¹ It captures the past, bringing it into the present where it becomes a major part of the social life and cultural inheritance of the community in Macau today.¹² Moreover, the adaptation of Chinese designs in western architecture and vice versa are the remarkable evidence of the successful and important interchange of human values.



Fig. 1 The list of the Historic Centre of Macau (Macau World Heritage, 2005).

Heritage conservation and management in Macau

Zhan Guo, the former vice-president of ICOMOS, comments that the authenticity of the Historic Centre of Macau reflected from conservations and performances highlights the necessity and characteristics of cultural sustainability through rehabilitation, conservation and adaptive reuse.¹³ Regarding heritage conservation in Macau, inclusively six types of methodologies have been applied. They are: 'Amending layout for reuse', 'reusing for new functions without layout amendments', 'conserving as of original', 'bring the new building to the historic environment', 'excavating the site' and 'Co-operating with the community'.¹⁴

Impressively, over 70% of historic buildings in Macau retain actively in occupancy under considerations of these methodologies. Most of their usages and functions are highly related to people's everyday life, among which nearly half remain performing their ordinary services whereas some have been transformed and reused to support the needs of the local community or heritage tourism. In terms of decision making, interestingly, conservation related issues are made by Cultural Affairs Bureau (ICM) and its professional consultants while the management and implementation for individual monument are declaimed by numerous parties. For example, the Macao Diocese manages and exercises ritual practices in all the listed churches, each Chinese temple is managed by its own non-governmental charity, the residences are monitored by ICM and others are in charged by other governmental bureaus.¹⁵ The examples of adaptive reuse in Macau are planned and managed by the government. However, DisStefano criticized that the lacking concept about 'connotations regarding function and material change' in Chinese language can affect decision making of the government in the management plan.¹⁶

The paradox of reusing cultural heritage

One side, having an ultimate aim to endure the life of monuments for the sake of cultural continuity and heritage sustainable development via adaptive reuse is ideal. Cheong comments that conservation and adaptive reuse of heritage is not only vital, but also meaningful for Macau, the city with the densest population in the world.¹⁷ The

conservation work in Macau has been done alongside the development of the city and the uniqueness of Macau's historic buildings has also been preserved during the development. Apart from churches and temples which provide ordinary services at sites, others have been shifted to fulfil people's needs in other aspects. Several buildings are adaptively reused for better social and commercial utility. Two former residences Mandarin's House and Lou Kau Mansion have been transformed into historic house museums by applying 'conserving as of original' which is a usual conservation mean used within the sector whereas the residence of Sir Robert Ho Tung becomes a public library following the manner of 'bring the new building to the historic environment'.¹⁸

Conserving heritage building through engaging them with people's lives is the main strategy recommended in Macau. A close connection between the community, the building and the environment is thus being formed via the engagement. People will not be distanced and these heritage buildings are attached to their daily living. This feeling can be understood as a sense of belonging and familiarity which connects people, history and architecture. For instance, the Macao Diocese preserves the designated churches functional with their ordinary services for which to have religious practices everyday and a close connection between the Diocese, the buildings and the religious community is being held accordingly. The connection between people and the venues is mainly reflected from the feeling of responsibility to churches during practicing religious exercises, operating as well as maintaining.¹⁹ So do the charities, the designated temples and their religious followers have. People are also closely engaged with heritage via cultural activities and performances provided at sites. 'Night. Show. Mandarin's House' and 'Tang Pek Wan Visits Lou's Home at Night' were the environmental dance shows held at the historic house museums which were offered at night visiting opportunities to the public. Various tours, workshops and seminars are also opened for public registration each month.²⁰ Furthermore, familiarity will be generated through frequent visits to sites for habits and needs.

On the other hand, considering the impacts of using or reusing heritage buildings is indispensable. As mentioned above, the Historic Centre of Macau is a group of plazas and buildings which were constructed for various functions in different periods and styles. Everyone has its own uniqueness which makes it distinct from others. Therefore, it seems reasonable that such a diverse group of buildings needs to be managed and operated by specific management teams regarding to their categories in order to optimize the benefit of using or reusing. However, applying adaptive reuse to heritage might potentially risk this uniqueness since the ordinary function is part of the building's uniqueness and the reason of being inscribed as heritage. If the ordinary function of the building is lost and the layout is altered, there is a chance of losing its intrinsic uniqueness and recognised values. In order to take advantages from being WHS, the Historic Centre of Macau is used as a gimmick to attract tourists for economic gain. Businesses such as souvenir shops and restaurants opened near the site, or even at the site and the buffer zone was developed as a commercial area.²¹ Operating heritage buildings as commercial shops or offices is another kind of reuses which is not mentioned by Cheong. Several floor plans of the Holy House of Mercy and Leal Senado Building are redesigned interiorly to fit the setting of such adjustment. In my opinion, this is an inappropriate type of reuse which does not consider much from the perspective of conservation and reiteration of OUVs. It is a decision which only views the reuse part, ignores the intrinsic values and thus fails the aims of adaptive reuse. Concerning only the possibility of reusing building for development will erase the values that make heritage heritage. As a result, after losing its OUVs, the heritage property will be normalised

into a building with special design for commercial and functional purposes. Another famous heritage reuse for tourism is the Macao Light Festival, which has been launched by the government at sites of the Historic Centre of Macau since 2015 for attracting heritage tourism (fig.2-3). Every heritage building has been involved for the event 'to draw visitors to different districts of the city for an appreciation of Macao by night and to learn about the local culture and history from innovative angles shaped by light artistry'.²² Personally, I doubt the effectiveness of promoting local culture and history via this light festival. This is decorated more likely as carnival than for promotion and its appropriateness of reuse should be re-evaluated.



Fig. 2 St. Paul's Ruins during the Macao Light Festival 2017 (Au, 2017).²⁶



Fig. 3 St. Lawrence's Church during the Macao Light Festival 2017 (Vacations & Travel, 2017).²⁷

In addition, getting too familiar with heritage can be a disadvantage to the heritage themselves as well as blurring the concept of conservation in publics' minds. Having an intimate relationship with heritage in people's life is a success in the sense of community engagement. But, familiarity will cause a feeling of causality which leads to the lose of distance between people and heritage. To be reminded, heritage is 'our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration'.²³ Heritage requires preservation and conservation attentively. Adaptive reuse is one way of approaching cultural sustainability and yet the central idea of conversing and preserving should not be omitted during the time. When people are so familiar with the reused functions of the heritage that they may recognise it as somewhere rather than heritage site. It causes the concept of heritage and its protection unable to be delivered. In other words, when people appreciate Sir Robert Ho Tung Library as a library which is opened freely to the public almost 7 days a week, 12 hours a day rather than a former residence of an influential family in Macau, then this priority should be highlighted as a problem.²⁴ In such, people seem to be misled about the concept of heritage and conservation due to the shifted in the focus of the priority from heritage themselves to the reused functions. Promoting wrong impression especially about the functions and values of heritage will cause confusions to the public which may harm the heritage from the perspective of socio-cultural aspects unexpectedly. Personally, the government should recognise these serious implications on properties and their OUVs when applying such methodology. Further was criticized by UNESCO in the Decision 44 COM 7B.141 which asked to concern these adverse impacts on the OUVs and finalise its Master Plan for 2020-2040.²⁵

Conclusion

To conclude shortly, this paradox attempts to bring attention to the balance between adaptive reuse and conservation. This is not to be against the efforts paid to the works of conservation and adaptive reuse which considerably target to maximise the embedded values of heritage buildings. Yet, the main concern of this paradox is that overloading heritage in the name of conservation may not only destroy the physical architecture exclusively, but also their cultural and social meanings attached. The application of adaptive reuse in Macau should be reconsidered and be better adjusted to satisfy the needs of protection and development. Therefore, consulting the appropriateness of appointing new function to heritage, estimating the capacity and recognising the impacts to the community before the action are significant steps when concerning adaptive reuse. Cultural sustainability is one of the ultimate goals of applying adaptive reuse to heritage building and it can only be achieved when the balance is cautiously kept. Otherwise, it might cause irreversible damages to the heritage buildings inevitably.

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⁵ same as 1 p.92

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