



New Use – Old Fit

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INTRODUCTION

When processing ideas and analysing the possible uses for a physical heritage legacy, consider this premise – that the most sustainable adaptive re-use of a structure or building is one which is closest to the original intention it was created for. Its design, at the point of conception, would have had as its parameters culture, context, construction, capacity and needs. Unless human beings have changed radically, certain points of reference, especially those which are more universal in nature, will remain almost the same. By evoking a sense of continuity there is a greater chance of success.

The issue being pursued here is that of sustainability, looking at something long-term, at a use that will be lasting and compatible. We are not looking at a short-term programme which can generally afford to ignore many factors. There will always be exceptions to the rule, and in this instance I am not articulating a rule but merely suggesting that this is a good starting point, a way to jumpstart the process of analysis.

DESIGN WITH CULTURE

As mentioned earlier, a building's design would have had a reference to the culture it served and the traditions embedded within it. A traditional religious building demonstrates this point succinctly, from its plan through to the form, the patterns of uses, the sequence of rituals and the structure's adornments. How would you undertake adaptive re-use of such a building? When it comes down to more secular structures, however, we start to be on safer ground.

DESIGN CONTEXT, CONSTRUCTION, CAPACITY

In historic areas, you can sense that the designers of buildings were always sensitive to the context. The structures were more well-mannered and blended



into the environment and their uses had a relationship to the neighbourhood that were very site specific e.g., a palace and the buildings around it.

The method and materials for construction would have set the constraints on layout, size, width, height and volume and would have had a strong correlation with the intended capacity and the nature of use.

Once you observe and understand the limitations of the building you will have an inkling of the new use that could be prescribed. How do you increase the capacity in a structure without rebuilding parts of it or adding to it until the original design intention is subverted and literally displaced? Which brings us to the corollary to the issue of adaptive re-use and the issues in support of conservation.

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By selecting a use that is closest to the original use you will find that Conservation issues become easier to handle. The promise of Maximum Retention with Minimal Intervention can be comfortably fulfilled/delivered. From the point of view of the building, with the memories embedded within its spaces and its walls, it would suffer only marginal architectural intervention. It would not have to experience massive contortions of its structure, but instead would be like one's favourite old shirt – offering a comfortable fit to the user. To push the idea of clothing further, a suit can be refitted but only to a precise extent, beyond which it is no longer itself. It is a question of whether the objective is to sustain the values which we recognise to be significant, or whether inappropriate uses have to be considered at any cost. The latter, fortunately, from a state's or country's heritage conservation view-point would largely not be negotiable.

BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLE – THE CHEONG FATT TZE MANSION

This approach can be illustrated by best practice examples. One such project that I have had the privilege to work on is the Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion in Penang, Malaysia. By taking you through this building I think I may be able to convey to you the conceptual dimensions offered by a simple idea.

A very comprehensive exposé of the building has been captured in a book entitled, "The Blue Mansion" and so I will not go into the history and background of the place except to say that it was built in 1888 by one of "Nanyang's first capitalists and last mandarins", Cheong Fatt Tze, as his residence and Vice-



Consulate in Penang. Erected in the tradition of a paradigm Chinese courtyard house to be vast enough to accommodate three generations, it doubled as Cheong Fatt Tze's business centre and official reception as the first Vice Consulate of the Chinese Government for Malaya and Singapore.

The building was acquired in 1990 by a group of concerned conservationists, and I was their so-called Conservation architect, except that I had at that time completely no knowledge and working experience of how to restore a historic structure. It was a question of learning from scratch and I can only conclude that with a lot of luck and a dose of common-sense the team managed to pull off a project that eventually won acclaim as the "Most Excellent Project" in UNESCO's Inaugural Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards programme for private Conservation in the year 2000.

We knew that we could not retain the house as a residence and that we would somehow have to introduce new uses. Although many possibilities and proposals were considered over a period of 11 years, eventually we arrived at the present programming of the spaces through sheer inertia and not through brilliance and foresight. In what was a process of the blind leading the blind, with the inputs of the occasional "experts" with one eye, the final touch was put into place in 2001. The journey has been a long and painful one but having arrived, we can bravely say that it was worth the traumas, mistakes, despair and tribulations. In the midst there were always moments of joy in discoveries, learning, teaching, sharing, coupled with a sense of achievement, for in the end we have managed to create for ourselves and for others a total Heritage Conservation Experience which now lives on through the life and soul of the building as it takes its position in Penang's market-place.

REINTRODUCING THE CYCLE OF LIFE

The lessons learnt can be summed up by the opening proposition in my introduction.

In the early years whilst we were restoring the building as close to its original fabric as possible, the only message that came to me that was crystal clear was "The cycle of life must be reintroduced into the place". I used this intuitively to guide decision-making. The end product speaks for itself. I cannot describe it adequately. You must see it and experience itself for yourselves. But I can describe how this belief led the team. The "cycle of life" became "what was the



prevailing cycle and how do we recreate it?” The questions “What were the spaces used for?” and “Why was the plan laid out this way [meaning the building and its construction]?” and “What new uses can it accommodate without authenticity being compromised?” kept being asked. The answers were self-revealing. Where architectural interventions were required to accommodate modern utilities and needs the solutions were sympathetic and harmonious. The new fitted into the old comfortably. And this is because the adaptive re-use concept was closest to the original intention.

EXPOUNDING ON THE CYCLE OF LIFE

If you extend the idea of the cycle of life to historic ensembles, streets or enclaves, you begin to want to do several things:

- a) You would want to maintain the existing uses and activities that have set the tradition for the area by retaining the original inhabitants and businesses as much as possible. The cultural map in your head should be clear.
- b) If new uses are introduced, you would want the process to be incremental and seamless, and the choices to be logical, complementary and strategic. [The approach would be similar to how a retail consultant designates areas and locations for specific business types within a shopping mall. The difference is that where in the case of the consultant he is trying to create from scratch new patterns that he hopes will sell, in the case of a historic street or area sustainable patterns have already evolved through the passage of time. The heritage planner would only need to fine-tune the social and economic mix that already exists, especially if the condition is culturally vibrant].
- c) If you are faced with the issue of a depressed environment that requires revitalisation, you would be wanting to re-invent or re-engineer the local traditional patterns that are endemic to the context. This again returns to the integral idea of the cycle of life.

Many “heritage developers” have made the mistake of turning whole precincts into commercial centres – a mono-use approach, equating real estate with monetary returns and nothing else. And then they have to work very hard to sustain the area through advertising and promotion, and after a while the efforts becoming very tiring and energy-sapping.



But if the area also has a strong residential population base the scenario starts to change. There are many successful strategies that work. Several that come to mind are

- (a) the introduction of social housing through adaptive re-use of historic structures;
- (b) the creation of local “market places” [temporary street-markets providing goods at affordable prices]; and
- (c) civic and recreational facilities to enhance the quality of life for inner-city residents.

OTHER PROJECTS

I have worked on many other Adaptive Re-use Conservation projects since, some of which are presented here, but whatever the results, the message that comes through has always been consistent – “New-Use, Old Fit”, the phrase that inspired the title of my presentation. So whether its converting a bank into an art gallery or a row of terrace houses into a food centre, the approach remains constant.

A MODEL FOR ADAPTIVE RE-USE

Through post-rationalisation, I have produced a model for adaptive re-use projects [see figure 1]. Many facets are the subjects for other discussions, which there will be opportunities for. I have introduced it here to emphasise that a historic structure is not a fail-safe formula for economic success. It is merely a beautiful environment which can act as a catalyst. A bad business idea is a bad business idea anywhere.

CONCLUSION

In planning for change and management of that change, build in a mechanism to control the rate of change. Architecture that is seamless, e.g., an intact historical enclave, grew incremental over time in relation to the method and speed of construction set within the local milieu. The accretions accumulated slowly to match the pace of a non-global culture. In Macao, the focus is not on single buildings but a whole collection. As much as a holistic approach would be required to ensure that Conservation achieves its goals, the process however should not be hurried to match the modern-day development paradigm. In-



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stead, if adaptive re-use is envisaged there should be a process of slow release of planning rights so as not to experience a wholesale change overnight. Time must be provided for the modification of policies, for the testing of ideas incrementally and for the industry to learn from its mistakes. Because a heritage building is not automatically a magic formula for success, modifications must always be reversible when a chosen use proves ineffectual or economically unviable.

REFERENCES

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