

The City - Local Tradition and Global Destiny.
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The former Royal Palace, Luang Prabang - a SIDA cultural heritage project in Laos.
(paper presented by Flemming Aalund, architect MAA, Ph.D.)

Outline history of the Palace and its national importance.

The Royal Palace of Luang Prabang is the most important historical building of the early 20th century in Laos. Containing the regalia, symbols and memories of the country's ancient sovereignty, and some of its most sacred treasures, the edifice represents a unique and remarkable art historical entity, both as a building and as a museum.

Commissioned by the French colonial administration to enhance the loyalty of the king, the building was constructed between 1904 and 1909 in substitute of an older palace to ensure the continued French influence in the region. The eclectic design represents French colonial style based upon the tradition of '*beaux arts*' incorporating basic features of vernacular Lao architecture. Most conspicuously, the gilded spire takes the form of a *mandala* representing an hierarchy of an ideal kingdom (see illustration).

Situated between the sacred mount Phusi and the banks of the Mekong River with the throne room positioned in the very centre under the mandala form of the spire, tutelary authority radiate from this very place as a framework for royal etiquette, combining political, religious and spiritual power.

With a population of about only 25.000 inhabitants Luang Prabang is small in scale but large in spiritual meaning. The scale and proportions of the built environment has been retained due to its isolated geographic location and for decades the town has been outside the mainstream of development. To day some 30 monasteries still maintain considerable impact upon the life of the town, which have preserved a tangible feeling of authenticity. Indeed, to a tourist this unique place radiates a feeling of a lost paradise.

After completion of a new road connection from Vientianne continuing further on to the Chinese border, rapid transformation has been initiated, further triggered off by the transitional economies in the South East Asia. Under such circumstances traditional heritage values are under heavy pressure and may be easily obliterated in the quest of new aspirations.

Culture and development.

History is often formed through sudden changes with the result that existing heritage values become weak and fragile. They take centuries to mature and yet irreversible disruption can easily result from disregard or ignorance. Inevitably, demand for social- and economic progress also question cultural and political values of the past and for example is former feudal relationships within the society no longer compatible with democratic development and respect of human rights. In the turmoil following the 1975 revolution the Royal Palace was destined as a museum in a wise act of cultural policy, and the building was preserved during a difficult transitional period of Lao history. But with scarce resources the building was for a long time concealed and left with no upkeep and maintenance.

During negotiations in 1988 of the new development cooperation between Laos and Sweden a minor support in the cultural field was incorporated in the agreement. A mission was organised to evaluate and report on projects, which could contribute to safeguard and develop the cultural heritage in Laos (1). The report is providing a very thorough evaluation of the cultural conditions in Laos, emphasizing the poly-ethnic configuration of the Lao society with some seventy ethnic groups speaking about a hundred different languages. It goes without saying that support to the cultural sector is a complicated issue under such circumstances. Respect for ethnic identity, religious variations and cultural differences as well as promotion of traditional crafts and folklore are important cornerstones in such development. Also the close connection between cultural and democratic development is being stressed through assistance to popular participation in cultural life, particular the traditional culture of the various ethnic communities as a means of strengthening the national unity in the society.

These arguments are corroborated by the recent report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, *Our Creative Diversity* (2), stressing the close interrelationship between culture and development. Respect of cultural diversity is now being reckoned as a precondition of peace and stability, which again are constituents of social- and economic progress and considered an irreplaceable resource in line with bio-diversity in nature.

A number of proposals for immediate and long-term cooperation in the field of culture were outlined in the SIDA cultural assessment report. The major cultural heritage initiative was directed towards the preservation of the building and the museum collections of the former Royal Palace. The report further recommends that Swedish financial support to culture in Laos be based on cooperation between institutions and scholars with similar interests and on this background the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm was chosen as the executing institution on behalf of SIDA.

Efforts of preservation.

As a consultant architect-restorer I was commissioned by the Museum of Ethnography to assist

with the restoration of the former Royal Palace in close cooperation with the Laotian counterparts, the museum conservators and curators. On this occasion, discussing *The city- local traditions and global destiny*, I feel privileged to contribute with my personal experiences. The project has accomplished a number of important achievements. I shall outline especially three issues, which I find of particular importance for a wider implication on integrated cultural heritage preservation.

(i) Public awareness and consideration for authentic qualities in the environment.

Without cultural and political consensus on basic heritage issues any effort of safeguarding the heritage is circumscribed by rapid development changes:

In Europe, ethics and practices related to preservation of historic and architectural qualities in the environment have matured through a long process of about one hundred years. During this time consideration has gradually developed towards a more and more integrated approach to preservation, not least as a consequence of the changes, which occurred in the 1960- and 70-ties, when traditional urban qualities were under pressure due to rapid urbanisation, private motor traffic and development of industrial building techniques.

The single most important development towards a broader and more comprehensive view on the preservation of architectural heritage was promoted through the Granada Convention of 1985 by which the member states of the Council of Europe are committed to make proper provision for the protection of monuments, groups of building and sites as stipulated in the convention (3). The extensive program of duties and obligations also includes the protection of architectural heritage as an essential town and country planning objective. Similar measures has been adopted by international institutions and there is a whole set of international charters and conventions that provide basic ethics and practical guidelines in cultural heritage preservation (4).

Without public debate and awareness about heritage values, international principles remain an academic exercise with very little consequence in every day life. During a transitional period of rapid technological changes and shifts in traditional values, this becomes a critical issue in particular to new nations such as Laos having limited tradition of heritage preservation and very few professional people to sustain this discussion and disseminate knowledge about cultural heritage. Cutting the matter short it is a question of lime versus cement, plastic paint versus traditional paint, real gold versus spray bronze and similar basic choices in restoration. Without maintaining such criteria of quality in the historic environment also other issues in the society are at stake.

It is my impression that assistance to the restoration of the former Royal Palace was successful by initiating such debate and setting a precedent for future restoration practise. Firstly the work was

organised at the site by hiring local craftsmen and workers under direct responsibility of the museum instead of engaging a construction firm, as it was first intended. Building conservation requires examinations at the site during the work followed by documentation, and this type of specialized work can only be carried out by direct labour under competent guidance.

In terms of material quality, use of lime for mortars and wall wash as well as reintroduction of traditional 'Namman Yang' paint was essential decisions for a restoration proper. The single most important achievement was perhaps resuming production of unglazed tiles for repair of the roof instead of using imported glazed tiles from Thailand. In terms of training, both craftsmen and Lao architects had the opportunity of getting through a basic training in restoration, which no doubt will prove useful for subsequent work elsewhere in Luang Prabang and Laos at large (5). But appreciation of subtle material qualities and sustaining authenticity in the historic environment is not a matter of course and will always give reason for debate. I find a marked difference between western and eastern attitudes to this issue (6). The difference can best be exemplified by the new Prabang Temple, which have recently been completed within the precious historic setting of the museum compound. Constructed in reinforced concrete, the qualities can be disputed according to international standards and in my view this new structure may best be described as a pastiche.

(ii) Enhancement of cultural tourism.

With open borders, Laos will attract international tourism at an unprecedented scale creating both benefits and pitfalls due to the ambiguous nature of tourism. The international tourism can contribute to socio-economic and cultural development, but it may result in degradation of the environment and loss of local identity. Both possibilities are likely to happen.

Tourist development require modernisation of the airport and other infrastructure improvements, which generate work and improve the economy both at a local and at a national scale. Before the 1975 revolution a new international hotel was constructed at the outskirt of the city and it now starts to function according to original intentions, creating new job opportunities and so forth.

The former Royal palace is the major tourist destination of Luang Prabang attracting about 10.000 visitors annually at the moment and the numbers are likely to increase dramatically. Management of the impact of tourism will be a major obligation, not only within the museum, but for the whole of the Luang Prabang region.

Inventories of the museum collection, adequate tourist information and educational material is not completed according to international standards. With only few professional museum people, this cannot be expected within a five year programme unless the job is carried out by foreign experts. Another inherent conflicts in development cooperation relate to deciding on work priorities in education and development of human resources or on achieving tangible physical

results. Perhaps the question of defining the pace of change and progress is really the heart of the matter.

In terms of economy, the museum has its intrinsic existence value as one of the country's main museums, which cannot be estimated in cash. But considered a direct investment in culture, the SIDA cooperation project pays well off, justifying the old saying, that 'restoration pays'. The total investment amount to some 5 mill Swedish Kroner, but implemented in Europe a similar undertaking would cost about 8 to 10 times as much. The Swedish government has thus contributed with a comparatively small contribution to the restoration of a historic monument at a World Heritage Site and assisted in the creation of the most lucrative cultural venues of Northern Laos (7). The present entrance fee of only 1000 kip paid by foreign tourists, slightly more than one US Dollar, are adding considerably to the revenues of the Provincial Government. But long term planning for maintenance, upkeep and subsequent developments are in abeyance.

During implementation of the museum project, several discussions about security, tourist facilities and amenities took place. Some of these new requirements were solved, including the establishment of basic security measures in the museum, but the implications of mass tourism was not yet fully realized and still need to be addressed along with promotion of tourism (8).

Considering the tutelary authority originally emanating from the Royal Palace, a logical redefinition of the role of the museum could include development of heritage interpretation and educational programmes, which take their point of departure in this unique historic situation and the museum could play an active part in developing more comprehensive cultural heritage management planning as a precondition for developing the tourist potential.

(iii) Integrated approach and capacity building in cultural heritage management.

The research, exhibition and educational initiative of nearly forty national, regional and local museums across Sweden called '*Towards a Swedish history*', inaugurated in 1993, showed how museums can lead in a stimulating debate on fundamental questions of history and identity.

The Luang Prabang Museum has already an important role to play as the major tourist destination in northern Laos and acting as a pivot of cultural life in Luang Prabang. The building is a museum in its own right putting an important part of the country's history at display and providing a historic reference of national identity as a sovereign kingdom. Traditional dance and performances are taught at the premises of the former palace; masks and other properties for the processions at the Pi-May celebrations are stored in the museum, and yet the museum remains basically a static place. Somehow the shift of name from the Royal Palace Museum to the Luang Prabang Museum signals a certain review of policy, but this intention still need a clear formulation. SIDA, the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm and the SIDA Lao office in Vientianne could all contribute to this transformation.

One such possibility would include the development of what has been termed 'ecomuseum', which has been defined as an institution conceived, fashioned and operated jointly by the museum authority and the local population. It aims to reflect the interrelationship between communities and the natural as well as the human ecology of their territory to also reflect the heritage of other ethnic groupings in the Lao society. The large museum compound with auxiliary buildings give ample space for such a change of museum policy creating a much more dynamic force of cultural development and integrating the museum with a social dimension.

One such activity could be to restore the former royal boat house presently occupied by the harbour authority and make use of this place for reviving the boat raising contest on the Mekong river as a major social event of the city. Another initiative could be to have the Hmong hill tribes exhibit examples of their rich material culture, thereby enhancing self esteem and help them rethink their cultural identity within the Lao society.

There are many such aspects to follow up, perfectly in tune with the objectives set out in the initial appraisal report by SIDA, *Laos and her culture*. Perhaps the time was not yet ripe, however, without a sufficient number of educated museum staff members to initiate such creative energies, or the SIDA Country Office in Vientiane did not estimate the potential forces of an active museum development. Anyhow, I feel that a continued involvement over a longer period of time would have created great influence on a number of such important issues. One important initiative would include setting up a local branch office of the Department of Archaeology and Museums to assist drawing up and implement a coherent preservation planning for Luang Prabang and the region.

Conclusion.

The relative modest budget of about 5 mill Swedish Kroner spend on culture during a five year period from 1991 to 1995, shall be measured against a total budget of 270 mill Swedish Kroner on general development assistance to Laos, mainly spent on road construction and forestry, during the same period.

The Swedish assistance to culture was initiated at a very crucial moment of transition from a closed, introvert society to a much more open country striving towards democracy. The museum project brought more awareness of the country's heritage values, acting as a catalyst for other cultural heritage initiatives. This process of enhancing the cultural values of the town is only a beginning and it takes a long time to consolidate. Restoration of the building, reorganisation and emergency conservation of the museum collection was a very important first step. But education, public awareness and formation of adequate professional heritage management is a long process - and in relation to development cooperation, immediate results is not so easy to evaluate in the field of personal resource development as to measure physical accomplishments in road

construction and forestry.

Unfortunately SIDA did not continue the involvement beyond the initial concept. The cooperation could advantageously have been extended to include other heritage issues in Luang Prabang as already outlined in the initial appraisal report and in my view, the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm has not yet fully exploited the possibility of institutional cooperation, which may continue without direct support of SIDA.

Fortunately, the SIDA involvement has acted as a catalyst attracting other actors at the scene. Also the inclusion of Luang Prabang on the World Heritage List has further generated international attention and prompted the Lao Ministry of Culture and Information to take regard of the conditions and principles for protection of heritage sites set out in the World Heritage Convention (9).

On a global scale importance of sustaining cultural values and quality in the environment have earned new recognition as a means of improving living conditions. Environmental impact assessment has been introduced as a requirement in public planning in Sweden and elsewhere, and cultural heritage aspects are being considered in line with other development issues. On this background investment has proved rewarding as a means of enhancing life quality in a deeper and wider perspective, and I will advocate, that heritage values receive a much higher priority in all future international development cooperation.

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References:

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2. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar *et al.*, *Our creative diversity, report of the World Commission on Culture and Development*, Unesco, 1996.
3. *The Granada Convention*, The Council of Europe, 1985. This convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe sets out a framework for the promotion of the architectural heritage in socio-cultural life and as a factor in the quality of life. Furthermore it promotes international and multi-disciplinary exchange in these fields.
4. *The Venice Charter* (1966) contains fundamental principles and ethics of protection and conservation of cultural heritage. *Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas*, UNESCO, 1976, provide special guidelines to

preserving historic cities and several other charters address specific regional situations, as for example the Burra Charter of Australia and the Lahore Charter.

5. Documentation of the building restoration in the Project Description and three Progress Reports by Flemming Aalund, Sounantha Kalangna (married Kattiyasack) and Surapee Muan-Add-Asa, 1992-1994.
6. Problems related to authenticity is especially treated in: *Nara Conference on Authenticity*, proceedings, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 1995.
7. Elisabet Lind and Götz Haggmüller, *The Luang Prabang Museum Project 1991-1996, final report*, SIDA 1996.
8. The ICOMOS *Cultural Tourism Charter* from 1976 is currently being revised by the International Committee on Cultural Tourism. The new draft is due by autumn 1999. It sets out basic principles for enhancing a sustainable cultural tourism with respect of the irreplaceable cultural values.
9. *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, Unesco, 1972. The *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* helps informing the State Parties of the underlying principles. Further assistance can be drawn from: Bernard Feilden and Jukka Jokilehto, *Management guidelines for world cultural heritage sites*, ICCROM, 1993.