

Dream and reality

The survival of historic buildings and structures

by
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Introduction

The survival of historic buildings and structures is strongly related to their actual functional importance or their potentials in this. Even when a building is regarded as a valuable historic monument, it still needs a suitable function. Why should we preserve a building or structure and implement a conservation, if we don't know what to do with it after finishing? The theme 'Heritage conservation is Economic development' seems to me not only a statement, it is a 'must', because both are unbreakable related to each other.

In this lecture, I present a number of examples regarding: locations and buildings which are in decline or renewed, physical and functional both. Also I like to pay attention to the role of the government, the professionals, the investors and the citizens in this field. Challenges and opportunities are limited by the willingness to recognize and to solve a problem.

Economic potentials

There are several preconditions dealing with the potentials of the physical survival of historic buildings and structures; it seems interesting to pay attention to it because the survival of buildings and structures is not obvious a natural phenomenon on its self.

First: The safeguarding of architectural and urban heritage is principally based on cultural- historic motives.

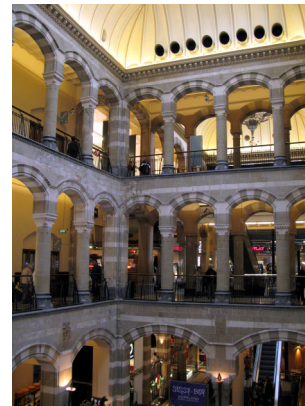
Secondly: It is the outcome of research and in this case connect to urban management, to create the environmental and commercial circumstances and to add economic challenges for preserved buildings and structures.

I like to pose a thesis:

The economic value and significance of older (historic) urban areas is anchored in the historical uniqueness of these areas; they do represent the historic and origin urban memory, which distinct them in an original sense. It makes the historical townships potentiality carriers of economic development.

The 'cover image' of my presentation is about the interior of the former Post office in the 19th century zone of historic centre of Amsterdam, it was built in 1895-99. In 1987, the Post company decided to leave the building. It was bought by a Swedish project developer, who start in 1991 to realize a shopping centre (mall) in this building.

In collaboration with the city of Amsterdam, the preservation and optimal use of the building were recognized as prior objectives. The building was cleaned from all kinds of alien interior elements and the internal structure maintained. A renovation/ conservation followed and the internal structure got filled up with new interior elements like escalators, shop windows and so on...



The Magna Plaza (as it called) is nowadays a successful shopping mall and a part of the economic urban system in this town area. The revitalization to a new

function in this building, with preservation of the characteristic architectural values is almost a demonstration on the topic of this gathering.

The 'contrary image' (in my presentation) is the collapse of the Samudra building at the Kali Besar in Jakarta; this happened in the beginning of February this year. The office building (1919), in the historic township and former business district of Jakarta (called Kota), hosted, during its history, several Shipping companies. In the Kota downtown area is the architectural- urban condition really disquieting. Apart from few buildings the entire Kota area is in decline, since years one is talking about urban rehabilitation plans and conservation of the street facades and the buildings behind; however nothing worked out yes. In such a 'forgotten area', it seems possible for a 'forgotten building' to collapse.

Comparing with the historic centre of Amsterdam, Kota Jakarta has to deal with the same kind of problems; its about the quality of the underground (soil) and the water hold. Water flooding in this town area is regular and the pumping of ground water (accompanied with the penetration of sea water) is really a serious problem. The fluctuation of ground water level in Kota, in combination with the (material) quality of the soil causes a permanent instability in the under layer on which the buildings in Kota stand. A number of buildings from the colonial era have a foundation of wooden pillars including added constructions of wood, wearing the brick walls of these buildings. Wooden constructions must be kept constantly under the (ground) water level; if this is not the case the pillars start to rotten soon and causes, on the long run, a constructive decline and creating risks for the existence of the building. What happened to the Samudra building, can happen with other buildings in Kota as well.

Why did I make the choice for this two examples? Because they stand for the differences between an active- and a passive attitude. Safeguard architectural- and urban heritage is a match between management and care for the environment (also in terms of civil-technical infrastructure- and planning), this combined with private initiatives- and investment.

In case the circumstances doesn't fit, it could happen that even a superb initiative might not succeed. For example: in the year 1996 a private investor (hotel owner specialized in heritage hotels) tried to realize a hotel, at the Kali Besar Jakarta, this as a re-use for the building of a former colonial commercial office (Crediet en Handelsvereniging Rotterdam), which was built in 1912. However, the miserable urban state of affairs, with no sign of any improvement and the upcoming financial crisis blocked this initiative.

Decisions concerning financial investment in the conservation of an older building- or structure are very much influenced by the quality of the surrounding environment. If the (urban) environment is find in a neglecting condition and there seems to be a lack on a governmental vision and willingness, it will not happen.

Function and use

What we consider nowadays as architectural heritage, are originally buildings- and structures developed and built in the past to fulfil certain functional needs as: housing, warehouses, offices cultural accommodations, military works, ...

The original function of these buildings- and structures is sometimes disappeared or in a lingering existence and disregard. In the change of time, town areas or regions could have lost their distinctive importance, like there are no needs anymore to the original provision of services and the governmental- commercial attention is moved to other newer developed areas. The buildings and urban environment were not proper maintained anymore and it all became in a bad physical condition, abandoned to decline. The environment suffers maybe on a bad access for traffic and there is a lack

on parking facilities etc...; in other words: these are urban infrastructures in a backward state.

In time, the actual economic activities in such older areas are brought down to a small importance and it seems they are left alone, to die slowly to fade away in history.

The decision to save a building from demolition and to preserve it is just one thing. The follow up regard questions about the original (and actual) use of the building and how can it be used after a conservation?

The re-use of an object of architectural heritage should be based on a mix of a new suitable function (in the particular building or structure), combined with an economic independence in exploitation- and maintaining; which seems the best guarantee for the survival in the future.

The choice concerning a new function for a building depends on the character- and construction of the building, but it might be an inventive one. Like for instance, older office buildings- or warehouses that become residential apartments, offices, shopping centres, a cultural function, etc... In Europe, is shown a great appreciation to this kind of a second life and re-use of historical buildings.

In my presentation I show you some examples, in Indonesia and the Netherlands. All these historic buildings have in common that they can be regard as unique monuments and landmarks in their own specific urban environment and as well they might be considered as carriers of the identity in their specific area or even the city.

The practicability of buildings and structures, to provide them with a new function differs of course. For instance, it is more difficult to provide a new function to a former electricity plant than a former school or office building. A building is principally a three dimensional entity; a structure is more like a honeycomb construction and is more easy to fill in with new architectural elements and some buildings have both qualities.

As an example take the curious old town hall of Palembang, which is combined with a water tower, this building is realized in 1928. A new function for this building will be more difficult than the building (for instance) of the former Daendels Palace 1808-28 in Jakarta (Dep. Kuangan), the latest is a building but is also a structure.

Professionals and citizens

Ask a citizen of a certain town to describe the town and he/she will probably use images of buildings, streets- squares and parks. The cities nowadays, borrow their identity for a great deal to buildings and structures which were built and developed in the past. In the development of revitalization (master) plans for the older town areas, one should count up with this qualities and integrate the historic legacy from the past in the present.

If the outcome of a revitalization plan is not carefully dealing with (or ignoring of) the presence of architectural heritage, then the term 'revitalization' could be a synonym for destroying and disrespect.

I consider the re-development of older town areas or former harbour locations as very promising. It is certainly not prohibited to plan and built new buildings in a modern architecture in an older town area; in the contrary, it is the mix (or tension) between 'old and new' that could made a rehabilitated area very attractive.

It seems some ridiculous, to think that we; architects, urban planners, historians (and with us investors and the government) can solve the problems regarding the use and preserving of architectural- urban heritage, only as technocrats- or professionals.

If we neglect issues as 'opinion and commitment' in the society, we will loose our contact with the reality in daily life. The same for the professionals working in the government in the several national-, regional- and municipality agencies. If there is a lack of awareness and no commitment in the society, the professionals will have no

backing in their intentions and might not succeed in the assets. Development of the peoples awareness is a 'main issue'; public discussions, newspapers, exhibitions, magazines, booklets are all important in this.

The national laws on Archaeology and Monuments (1992/5), the need for adequate bylaws on the lower governmental levels and the willingness to implement the legal framework, also by supplying financial funding to improve and upgrade the infra-structural networks is another mission to for fill. I am fully aware, that it is easy talking, but more difficult to implement.

Concerning the development of professionalism is another key activity. It seems important to pay attention to architectural-historic matters, as there are: conservation techniques, material knowledge; but also the education route of the labourers to improve their skill-men ship. The education institutes should deliver efforts to get teachers- and lectures able to teach the students in the particular stuff.

To teachers and students as well, to broaden their scope, it might be necessary to create possibilities for foreign scholar- or trainee ships, exchange programs etc... A good start, for instance, might be the organization of 'international summer courses' (in Indonesia) in the fields of architectural history, conservation techniques, legal framework, etc...

This concerns not only the government, or universities and schools; also the organizations of contractors, architects and engineers should take up their responsibility.

Indonesia shares, like other former colonized countries, the presence of an indigenous and colonial architectural- urban heritage both. One have to deal with questions regarding historical-cultural values and matters of preservation. Beside this historical-cultural importance, what is the significance of the architectural heritage nowadays? and is there actually a role for it to fulfil?

In the field of architecture, the colonial episode left a legacy of environmental qualities, structures and buildings. This legacy is perhaps a product of the past, but nevertheless, these architectural products do form a substantial part of the daily environment and décor of almost every Indonesian older township.

What about the attitude and perception in the present Indonesian society towards its architectural heritage? Do people appreciate it, do they use and manage it for their own comfort or progress? Or is it ignored and regard as something of the past, without any value or considered as relics of a former society, which no longer exists and faded away in the past.

Preserving monumental sites- buildings and structures is obviously, first of all, the result of a discussion and a matter of consensus in the society, based on commitment regarding the presence- and values of cultural heritage. In this perspective it is interesting to observe the awakens and rise of the civil heritage movements at the end of the eighties of the 20th century in Indonesia and don't forget the 'Badan Pelestarian Pusaka Indonesia' (BPPI), a national platform.

Conclusions

The topic of this gathering, here in west-Sumatra: 'Conservation is Economic development' is obviously a World wide issue. When we compare the circumstances and activities in the international scene, we will broaden our scope and it might bring us the inspiration and the approach to continue and sharpen our own tools. International cooperation and exchange of knowhow do improve the possibilities to connect financial investment to sustainable results.

Further on, it is evident that professionalism and commitment of the people have to go hand in hand, otherwise we won't succeed.