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HERITAGE CONSERVATION, SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES & TOURISM STRATEGIES: CASE STUDIES FROM TAIWAN

INTRODUCTION

Within the current climate of macroeconomic uncertainty, social unrest and global environmental risks, nation states have worked furiously but often with little consensus on the sustainable development agenda. Instead of relying solely on nation states and politicians, this paper argues for resilient local communities to drive this agenda from the local level by developing sustainable local economies, strong social networks and environmentally friendly ways of life. This bottom-up approach will complement any top-down Government or inter-Governmental agenda, but cannot be replaced by the latter.

We are guided by the American philosopher Lewis Mumford (1938) in our definition of resilient local communities: *“We must create in every region people who will be accustomed, from school onwards, to humanist attitudes, cooperative methods, rational controls. These people will know in detail where they live: they will be united by a common feeling for their landscape, their literature and language, their local ways, and out of their own self-respect they will have a sympathetic understanding with other regions and different local peculiarities. They will be actively interested in the form and culture of their locality, which means their community and their own personalities.”* This means that resilient local communities are made up of people steeped in the local heritage.

It is on the basis of local heritage that these communities are able to develop plans and strategies towards sustainable development. In this belief, we echo the planning approach advocated by the Scottish pioneering town planner, Sir Patrick Geddes (1947), who criticised *“sweeping clearances”* and plans which *“neglect the surrounding quarter and are constructed without reference to local needs or potentialities”*. Instead, he championed for the

“civic survey” to be the first step of any plan, to study the “*place as it stands, seeking out how it has grown to be what it is, and recognising alike its advantages, its difficulties and its defects.*”

However, the globalised era poses acute challenges for the creation of people actively interested in their locality. Especially for urbanites engrossed in the culture of consumption and the real-time of the digital age, their fast-paced life is experienced largely within the digital domains of Microsoft Office or Facebook, or spent within the ubiquitous and hardly distinguishable shopping malls and apartments popping up in cities worldwide, and not in the locality. As the global level grows in importance, the local one decreases in significance, both socially and economically. As fewer people are interested in the intricacies of their localities, the economic viability and therefore continued existence of local spaces – the corner grocer, the local pub - are called into serious question.

Rather than be disheartened by this, this paper persists in Mumford’s endeavour to get people to become actively interested in their localities, to create resilient local communities steeped in local heritage. We then go a step further to address the economic and environmental sustainability of this local heritage and spaces through heritage-based tourism strategies.

The paper begins with a framework of principles for our approach, before using case studies from Taiwan to illustrate (i) action strategies that actualise these principles and (ii) example outcomes for sustainable communities and tourism.

FRAMEWORK

The framework of principles is illustrated in **Figure 1** below.

The first principle relates directly to the **Philosophy** shared in the introduction. It is the pre-requisite for any development of heritage-based sustainable communities. The

awareness and appreciation of a common cultural and environmental heritage is the critical first step to forming community awareness or consciousness, without which there will not be any ‘community’ to speak of.

PRINCIPLES FOR HERITAGE-BASED SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES	
Philosophy	Develop local recognition and appreciation of cultural and environmental heritage
Governance	Develop local government-community partnerships, with civic NGOs serving as an intermediary platform
Planning	Generate sustainable tourism plans with the community that conserve this heritage
Implementation	All local development should be guided by these heritage development plans

The second principle relates to **Governance**. In the introduction, we argued for local communities to drive the sustainable development agenda. Local communities, being the main actors of their localities, are best placed to develop the narrative for their own heritage. However, we recognise that communities exist typically within the democratic forms of local governance – both land and funding resource resides with the local government, and plans developed by the local government guide the allocation of these resources. Partnerships between local government and the community are therefore essential to un-tap the resources that can be made available to the local communities.

As people have become increasingly detached from their localities as highlighted earlier, the role of civic activists has become more important to facilitate the process of communities re-discovering or re-developing their heritage. Hence, the first principle sees the need to develop local government-community partnerships, with civic NGOs serving as an intermediary platform.

1. Principles for Heritage-based Sustainable Communities.

source: author

The third principle relates to the **Planning** of local heritage for Economic and Environmental Sustainability. The key threat to heritage, besides a fundamental lack of awareness addressed in the first principle, is the lack of economic viability. Heritage and its spaces need to remain relevant for local communities, and develop sustainable sources of revenue – it will otherwise be hard to justify continual local government or NGO funding. More importantly, economic viability means greater local participation, which in turn helps to further generate local awareness and appreciation. The paper uses the example of heritage-based tourism strategies to illustrate a possible solution to develop this economic sustainability. It also safeguards against consumerist tourism, which will tilt the balance over and affect environmental sustainability.

The fourth principle relates to **Implementation**. It completes the cycle of philosophy, governance and planning, and ensures that the sustainable plans developed by communities appreciative of their cultural and environmental heritage, are implemented with the right allocation of resources.

CASE STUDY 1: URBAN REGENERATION STATIONS [URS44: DADAOCHENG STORY HOUSE]

The paper focuses on Taiwan as it fulfils the four principles of the proposed framework, as shown through the philosophy, plans and policies at the local government level. Many local governments in Taiwan are active in promoting awareness and appreciation of local heritage, and seek to work in partnership with civic NGOs to facilitate this. In particular, we highlight two case studies from Taiwan which best exemplify the principles and study the success of these strategies in tackling the two key challenges facing heritage conservation: (i) How do

we generate civic interest, awareness and appreciation in heritage conservation? (ii) How can heritage conservation be economically and ecologically sustainable?

The Urban Regeneration Stations (URS) programme is an initiative undertaken by the Taipei City Government's Urban Regeneration Office – with the intention to form a network of regenerated urban spaces across the city to serve as a forum for public participation. As stated in the Urban Regeneration Office's website, "the space can be used as an area for workshops, a common place for neighbourhood activities, a hot spot for information gathering, a public space for social interaction, a venue for exhibitions, a location for experimental actions, and a resting place for tourists of the city".

The URS initiative serves as a classic case study for this paper, as it is a strategy which reflects in particular the first two principles in our framework: (I) URSs dotted all over the city aim to serve as a focal node and space to develop a sense of local heritage and community and (II) URSs are the incubators for developing local government-community partnerships, with a critical role given to civic NGOs as facilitators of this process. The local government appoints civic NGOs as management entities for each URS, and these NGOs are given free rein to organise a whole suite of activities within the URS to develop appreciation and awareness of local heritage, and form resilient local communities.

The approach taken by the local government in appointing the management entities is critical in addressing how heritage conservation can be economically sustainable. The local government invites proposals from civic NGOs and other institutions interested to manage the identified URSs. Proposals are judged solely on how well they address the intent of the URS to serve as regenerated urban spaces

which celebrate local heritage. The successful management entities are not required to pay any fee to the local government – this is not a price-based bid, but a quality-based one. The management entities typically also do not charge visitor-ship fees into the URSs however. However, to support the financial sustainability of the appointed management entities, they can lease out the URS as event spaces for ad-hoc events to generate income.

This approach represents a unique allocations of cultural resources by the local government, which recognises the intrinsic value of heritage spaces beyond a commercial cost, for the local people. At the same time, it helps to develop civic NGOs take on a greater role in the urban regeneration and cultural conservation process, as they are given the space as well as flexibility to run programmes, without extensive funding.

Having highlighted the economic sustainability over the management of these heritage spaces, the paper uses the specific example of URS44: Dadaocheng Story House, managed by the Institute of Historical Resources Management (IHRM) since May 2011, to show how through the suite of activities organised in the URS space, civic interest, awareness and appreciation in cultural heritage have been successfully generated.

Built in 1924, the Dadaocheng Story House on Dihua Street has seen the transformation of the Dadaocheng (which means big rice drying field) district over the years and has many stories to tell. The area once served as an important port of Taiwan, famous for textile and tea trading in the early 1900s, and still is a tourist attraction today, housing many stores selling dried goods and snacks. Since taking over the management of Dadaocheng Story House in 2011, the IHRM has organised many exhibitions, lectures, seminars and activities that seek to research, tell and bring to life the cultural heritage of the

Dadaocheng district – for its residents and visitors alike. The paper highlights a few, and their impact on generating civic interest.

‘Old Taiwan’ Exhibition: Commoner Memories of Dadaocheng

Held over a period of two months in 2011, this exhibition organised within the Dadaocheng Story House displayed old photographs taken of Dadaocheng and the daily lives of its residents since the 1900s. The exhibition also showcased cultural artefacts from the Xia-Hai City God Temple – which still stands today and has been the religious and communal landmark of the area for many years where both religious and festive celebrations are held annually. This landmark exhibition attracted more than 3,000 local residents, researchers, teachers and students, as they took the opportunity to experience the history of the district through the photographs and artefacts. Through the exhibits and interaction, stories were exchanged, with the Dadaocheng Story House transformed into a civic node for the community.

‘New Life in Dadaocheng’ Series of Activities

These series of activities held across four months in 2011 sought to re-create the activities of yester-year, for modern day residents to experience them first-hand and be able to better appreciate the heritage of Dadaocheng as an important locality for food produce, prompting visitors to think deeper into the relationship between food and the city – how food is transported, processed and then sold in the city. The activities recreated included a traditional outdoor market, drying of rice in the open, site tours to the old buildings and spaces in Dadaocheng. These interactive activities were very popular with both elderly residents and young children, attracting more than 800 participants.

Taipei City Young Planner Training Course

The Dadaocheng Story House has also played host to a range of civic engagement and empowerment events. The local government in Taipei often consults the public on plans and policies, similar to many of their contemporaries worldwide. However, the Taipei local government goes one step further, to organise training programmes that equip local residents with basic town planning skills, expose them to planning ideas and methodologies, and let them interact with planning professionals. These courses not only allow residents to be better informed of the local plans, but most importantly, empower them with the knowledge to make meaningful contributions to the public consultation processes. The course in Dadaocheng Story House attracted more than 120 people – held within this heritage house, it also broadened their mind-sets as to the regeneration of heritage buildings.

CASE STUDY 2: HERITAGE-BASED TOURISM STRATEGIES (PINGXI DISTRICT, NEW TAIPEI CITY)

Developing and pursuing heritage-based tourism strategies have been a deliberate policy decision taken by local government planners in the New Taipei City Government Tourism & Travel Department since 2011. The agency has identified tourism as a key growth industry for the region – but consciously chose to develop tourism based upon local heritage and community participation so that they will be able to distinguish their city from common consumerist tourism strategies that many cities all over the world have adopted, at the same time recognizing the threats to local culture and the environment that consumerist strategies pose.

The approach taken by the local government closely models the four principles in our framework. The local government prepares

expression-of-interest briefs which outline their vision for the tourism strategy as heritage and community based. Civic NGOs and other groups are invited to make proposals that best fulfil the criteria in the brief, and the successful proposals are then provided with funding from the local government to be further developed as full strategies. This process to develop master-plans and strategies form one of the key sources of funding and work for many local NGOs that wish to promote local heritage. After the master-plans have been developed in collaboration with the community, the local agency then works with the NGOs to implement these plans – this can be in the form of ‘software’, e.g. new tourism websites, and ‘hardware’, e.g. infrastructure improvement to enhance heritage spaces.

While the pursuit of such strategies is relatively new (four years since 2011), the impact on visitor arrivals to the Pingxi District has been significant. Annual tourist visitors increased from 1 million in 2011 by 50% to 1.5 million in 2014. Even in this early stage of development, the heritage-based tourism strategies have shown their economic potential. The quantitative figures tell only one side of the story however, and the paper highlights some of the strategies suggested and developed, and show how they have further contributed to heritage conservation through greater community participation.

Heritage Themed Travel Itineraries

Any visitor to the New Taipei City Government Tourism & Travel Department’s website (<http://tour.ntpc.gov.tw/page.aspx?wtp=3&wnd=296>) will be welcomed by a full variety of suggested travel itineraries. The itineraries are categorised into different themes – e.g. (I) Rail, (II) Old Street, (III) Spa, (IV) Temple, and (V) Bike. Each of these themes represents a type of cultural or environmental heritage unique to

the area. Within each itinerary, recommendations are made to visit local heritage sites such as museums, old factories, spots of outstanding natural beauty and also local shops and food outlets – with enticing descriptions, often focusing on the importance of the site to local heritage and the quality of experience to visitors. We showcase a few examples:



2. Travel Itinerary for Pingxi Railway Area.

source: <http://tour.ntpc.gov.tw/>

Each of these itineraries was developed in collaboration with local communities, with civic NGOs acting as facilitators. The key objective is for the locals to share stories and spaces of the local heritage which they are proud of, with tourists and visitors. The planners in the civic NGOs facilitate this process through the use of various design methods, and put together these stories and spaces into a coherent, well-designed, easily understandable travel itinerary.

The promotion of local artisans and restaurant stalls seek to foster the development of a unique local food culture. It encourages local restaurants and local artisans to develop menus and dining ware from local products. Besides reducing the carbon impact from food transportation, local food offers visitors a bespoke dining experience.

The itineraries follow a decentralized approach, as recommended sites are scattered throughout the city. This is a reflection of the fact that different parts of the city all have their unique communities and heritage, but there are also economic and environmental considerations behind this deliberate strategy. Spreading the sites will mean spreading the benefits from tourism, and prevents over-crowding in hot key spots which can be detrimental to the environment.

Infrastructural Improvements

In addition to developing heritage-based strategies, the plans developed by the NGOs and citizens also translate into actual implementation of infrastructural improvements, to further enhance the sense of place and contribute towards the overall tourism strategy. This ranges from seemingly insignificant public toilet renovations to major new structures like the Pingxi Sky Lantern Delivery and Observation Base.

There has been a great transformation of public toilets on a local train station, which needed to be relocated to accommodate an increase in capacity. The planners did not simply plan a change in location, but incorporated a completely revamped design – to make the toilet, which could be one of the first facilities to welcome visitors upon arrival at the train station, visually pleasing and refreshing. Even though they are decentralised, the different sites are linked up by the railway network, serving as an environmentally-friendly public transport option.

The setting of sky lanterns into the night sky are a local tradition unique to the Pingxi area. The local belief is that the lanterns will convey the hopes and wishes people pen onto the lanterns to the heavens, upon which they will be fulfilled. The local planners have been able to turn this local tradition into a major tourist attraction, and many people come to Pingxi to set their lanterns into the sky. It is both an act of faith, as well as an aesthetically beautiful experience seeing the warmly-lit lanterns float into the night sky. To further develop this attraction, the local government constructed this Observation Base as a local landmark and visitor centre, but also from which visitors can set their lanterns.

Software Strategies for Commercial Viability of Traditional Grocery Stores

As part of the plans to conserve local heritage, an increasing focus has been placed on the traditional grocery store. Together with the local school and temple, the grocery store has traditionally been the key public space for the community. However, its survival has been placed under severe threat from supermarkets and shopping centres, and it was identified that there will be a need for regeneration if the traditional grocery store was to continue to serve its social function while remaining economically viable.

The heritage-based tourism plans have sought to develop strategies that can support the revival of these stores. These include: (a) integrating them into the tourist route and designating them as local tourist information hubs; (b) designing environmental shopping bags showcasing maps of all the traditional grocery stores in the town; (c) designing local retail products that can only be bought from the grocery stores. The local government is currently considering which of these ideas can be funded.

However, a more significant result of these plans came from the planning process. As the civic NGOs engaged the local community to develop ideas, awareness of the importance of conserving the local heritage has increased dramatically. More have begun to appreciate the importance of heritage, and have individually tried to redesign previously neglected local spaces to make them attractive. The local government has also received more enthusiasm from the public during public consultations, and had much feedback from local residents for more of such community-engagement planning projects.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown how heritage conservation can be a driver of sustainable local resilient communities. Through the framework, it has argued for the importance of principles of philosophy, governance, planning and implementation towards this aim. Commitment to these principles are an important first step towards the nurturing of sustainable heritage-based local communities. With this commitment, the paper has also used case studies from Taiwan to show how the principles can be translated into actual strategies. We hope that this paper serves as a reference for communities, local governments and planners worldwide as we pursue sustainable development. We believe the framework and case studies shown can be applicable to most, if not all, cities, towns, even villages – but the implementation of the framework and strategies will result in distinctly different local communities everywhere, each proud to share their cultural and environmental heritage with the rest of the world.

While the implementation of these strategies are also in an early stage in Taiwan, there are already encouraging signs of success in

creating local awareness and appreciation of cultural and environmental heritage, and even promising impact on economic potential through the heritage-based tourism strategies. There is scope for further in-depth research into the Taiwanese strategies as they mature, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in order to study the different methodologies undertaken in heritage conservation and to develop indicators that can measure (I) the level of appreciation and awareness for local heritage, (II) the level of collaboration between local government, civic NGOs and the communities, (III) the environmental and economic impact. We hope that this paper is the first step leading to this further research, not just in Taiwan but internationally, and exchanges and sharing of knowledge, as we all work towards a sustainable future.

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