

Public History: Hong Kong and Macao

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Brown University's public humanities program recently took advantage of a new relationship between Brown and the Chinese University of Hong Kong to investigate the possibilities of comparative, international public history. A group of five students spent a week in Hong Kong, visiting cultural heritage institutions and meeting with professors and students, and professionals and activists, to explore the meanings of cultural heritage in Hong Kong. We came away with new insights into the field, and, perhaps, a sense of how politics and political debates shape cultural heritage.

CUHK has two M.A. programs that together are a very close match for Brown's public humanities program. The Cultural Heritage program, mostly out of the anthropology department, trains students interested in historic preservation, public anthropology and archaeology. Many of these students have gone to work in Hong Kong's large government history and heritage museums, or in other branches of the delightfully-named Department of Leisure and Cultural Services. The Cultural Management program, centered more on art and art history, trains museum professionals, most of them interested in work in art museums and galleries. Together, the two programs produce about several dozen MA students each year.

Our trip to Hong Kong was supported in part by Brown's new internationalization program, and we had to make a case for the value of this kind of work. We made two kinds of arguments. Some kinds of cultural work has become global: art museum curators and programmers in the world of dance, theater and music can rack up as many international frequent flyer miles as any business executive. Students who want to join that world will need international contacts and need to be comfortable in a global world. Asia is booming now; contacts there will pay off.

The other argument, for students who will look for jobs in the more parochial world of American historic preservation and history museums, is that by going abroad we gain a comparative perspective. The US, with its odd mix of private charitable institutions

supported by government tax breaks and grants, and a parallel system of local, state and federal museums and sites, is unique internationally. Our tax-credit support for historic preservation is odd, too. Much of the world, including Hong Kong, has more government support, and less private. But in Hong Kong and elsewhere, that balance is in flux, just as it is in the United States. A broader perspective—how might things be otherwise?—will help students survive changing times.

Our visit to Hong Kong coincided with a surge in interest in “collective memory” there. It’s a term in wide popular use: quite new, and quite the rage. Perhaps “collective nostalgia” would be a more accurate term; it’s a popular preservation movement to save everyday structures that evoke personal memories. It is tied, in complicated ways, to the handover of Hong Kong to China, a decade ago; the democracy movement; and perhaps most directly, to the incessant pace of development in Hong Kong. It’s a popular movement, supported by community activists and grass-roots preservationists; the preservation bureaucracy casts a dubious eye on it.

It’s too early to tell whether it will be a success—so far, most of its crusades have been lost causes—but it has rallied a diverse group of activists, artists, and community organizers to a new, broader definition of cultural heritage. Everything from trees (a newspaper article reported a contest for “the banyan tree...that best carries the collective memory of Hongkongers”) to, most notoriously, the recently-demolished Star Ferry terminal, have been cited as important to the community’s collective memory. A new group, Heritage Hong Kong, has pushed the official heritage bureaucracy beyond its comfort zone. It has attracted government attention, with Hong Kong’s Chief Executive finding it a sign of Hong Kong’s awakening as a community and pledging an on-line collective memory site for the city. It’s also a movement that might serve as a model for American local organizations trying to find new support for their preservation and history work—a preservation based not on architecture or newsworthy events, but the most common of experiences, and almost entirely focused on the last fifty years or so.

One feature of heritage preservation in Hong Kong that we found especially interesting is the inclusion of artists and community activists in the work. Artists worked with the

community organizing group SOCO (Society for Community Organizing) to create an exhibit urging preservation of the Sham Shu Po neighborhood (mostly buildings from the 1960s threatened by high-rise towers) that included not only the display of the homes and lives of Hong Kong's poorest residents, including the "street sleepers," but also installation art. The combination brought over 10,000 visitors to the exhibit. Imagine a Lower East Side Tenement Museum focused on the present day, working with the Museum of Contemporary Art and community organizers to preserve recent tenements through exhibitions and art... It's all part of collective memory: SOCO fights, according to their web site, to preserve "the unique spirit of the local community," urging Hong Kong residents "to embrace our feelings, harmony, culture and traditions to give the next generation a taste of our precious 'Hong Kong spirit'."

The Community Museum Project, another social-action NGO, combines designers and activists to showcase vernacular—disappearing—technologies and the lives of neighborhoods about to be redeveloped. They argue that "a museum can be a means to represent everyday living and values. Through the collection and interpretation of artifacts and visual evidence, indigenous creativity, visual culture and public culture can be explored." They work in community settings, publications on indigenous creativity ("In Search of Marginalized Wisdom: Sham Shui Po Craftspeople"), exhibits on protest rallies ("Objects of Demonstration"), and tours of streets soon to be demolished by urban renewal. There's no equivalent I know of in the US, but many of the issues they raise would certainly be relevant in most American cities.

A recent symposium on public space at Hong Kong's Fringe Club (again, the close relation of preservation and the arts!) suggested some of the challenges these activists face. Hong Kong is run to make money, and zoning encourages large-scale redevelopment. Balancing "collective memory," the actual preservation of sites, and social welfare work in an era of hyper-development will clearly be a challenge. It's a challenge that Americans should watch, and try to understand, for while there is much that is unique about Hong Kong, there are also new ways of working and thinking about heritage that we can learn from.

In Macao—a day trip from Hong Kong, where the Brown group met with Prof. Sharif Shams Imon of the Macao Institute for Tourism Studies—heritage preservation works in a way that seems closer to the usual international model. Huge casinos attract record numbers of tourists (22 million in 2006, double the number just five years earlier), and many of the tourists stay to see the many World Heritage Sites in the city, and world-class history and art museums. Height restrictions and other zoning in the historic downtown have preserved many older buildings.

Still, Macao faces significant challenges, from the Disneyfication of the city (the first thing a visitor coming in on the ferry sees is a casino’s imaginative recreation of what the city’s waterfront might have looked like), the pressures of poor immigrants from mainland China, the city’s increasing wealth, the press of tourists as eager for Starbucks as for traditional fare. Here too, there have been community protests, so far more successful than in Hong Kong. A rally kept an office building from being built near the old lighthouse. A social welfare office—a government building—was reserved as a symbol of the importance of social welfare in society—more akin to Hong Kong’s “collective memory” than our architectural or historical “significance.”

Americans take for granted a very thorough—and idiosyncratic—system of heritage preservation. We’ve internalized our rules for what makes a building “historic,” what heritage is “significant.” In Hong Kong and Macao, there are very different rules. There’s a shock of unrecognition that is bracing; there are fundamentally different ways to consider heritage, and preservation. It makes us reconsider our principles, to think about what we might learn from others, to consider what we might do differently.

For further information:

Society for Community Organization: <http://www.soco.org.hk/living/index.htm>

Collection of recent newspaper articles on Hong Kong heritage:

<http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=356904>

Hong Kong Community Museum: <http://www.hkcmp.org/cmp/>

Chinese University of Hong Kong Cultural Management Program:
<http://www2.cuhk.edu.hk/crs/crs0708/en/programme.php?p=macm>