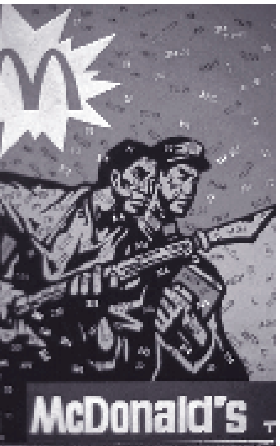
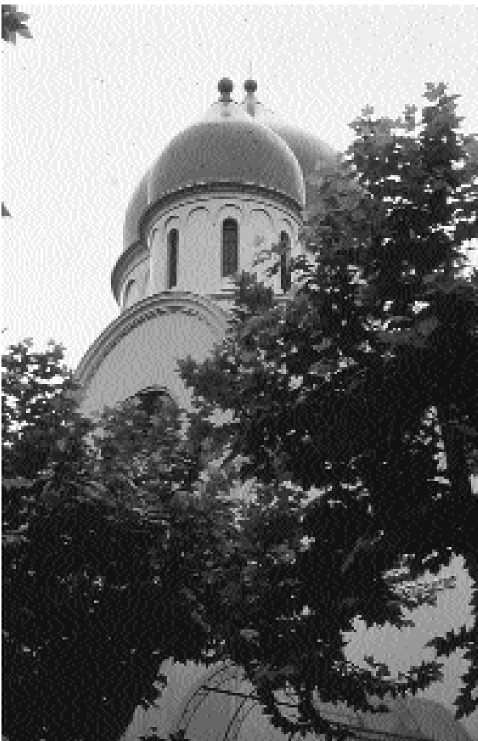
Jeff Cody

Heads or Tails? The Preservation of Western-style Buildings in China



Xiamen billboard.

There are two proverbial sides to the coin of preservation in today's China. What one might term the shiny "heads" side is exemplified by an ironic adaptive reuse project in Shanghai where, since 1993, one of the branches of the city's Stock Exchange has been lodged in a Russian Orthodox Church (c. 1920) located in a fashionable neighborhood of the old French Concession area. In the late-1980s the church was boarded up, garbage was often piled next to the entrance, the onion domes were crying for attention and when I used to ride my bicycle past the church I would wonder if that would be the last time I would see it intact. Now the domes are painted, the garbage is hidden elsewhere and the former nave is brimming with Chinese capitalists watching stock quotations on an electronic board under a dropped ceiling. To get rich is glorious (as the cliché goes), and perhaps to get rich in a historic, religious building might be even more fortuitous.



Former Russian Orthodox church, Shanghai.

If one looks optimistically at the future prospects for the preservation of particularly of Western-style buildings in China today, there are many "heads" you could point to. One of the most noteworthy cases is that of the former Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank, at the center of the Shanghai Bund (waterfront). The lavish commercial structure, designed in a Beaux-Arts-inspired style in 1923 by the Hong Kong firm of Palmer & Turner,[1] reverted to the People's Liberation Army after 1949. It has recently been sold back to the Bank and is being restored. Other Western-style banks on or near the Bund are enjoying equal favor, either being restored as banks or otherwise refitted so they can be auctioned off to the highest bidder and then adaptively reused. However, because of high rents and substantial interior renovation costs, investors are hesitant about setting up shop in many of the Bund's 37 Western-style buildings along the 1.5 km stretch of land.[2] These buildings, most dating from 1925–1930, are probably the most famous Western-style constructions in China because they epitomize the commercial power of the foreigners who controlled so much of China's destiny in the late-Qing and Republican period (from the late-19th century to 1937, at which point China was effectively ruled by Japan). The Bund remains a palpable symbol of Shanghai. Since at least the mid-1980s many city planning officials have been trying to market the Bund as a major draw for tourists. The facades of most of the Bund's structures were scrubbed about a decade ago, and in the past three years they have been designated as local landmarks and the space between the buildings and the Huangpu River (facing "Pudong," one of China's most important development areas) has been stripped of its trees and paved as a wide pedestrian promenade. These initiatives are based upon decisions made by those in higher echelons of the municipal government, and they demonstrate a conscious attempt to intervene unilaterally and positively in order to insure the retention of several significant historic buildings.

Elsewhere in Shanghai one can flip a coin and come up with other "heads." Department stores on China's "5th Avenue," Nanjing Road, are being upgraded, their facades cleaned, repointed and sometimes sadly marred with mirrored, obtrusive projecting bays. Smaller commercial structures throughout the city and a few of Shanghai's Art Deco movie palaces are likewise receiving facelifts. The urban villa of one of Shanghai's most notorious gangsters from the 1930s, Du Yuesheng, has been transformed into a hotel of international standards. Central Place, the former site of the Shanghai Museum and in the 1930s a commercial structure, was recently refurbished by Jones Lang Wootton (Hong Kong), the first instance that a

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In the Shadow of Skyscrapers— Hong Kong's Colonial Buildings Await New Custodians

A favorite expression these days in Hong Kong is "the run-up to 1997," when China regains control from Britain of the approximately 700 square miles comprising this dense metropolis (and often less-dense 236 islands) located at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta. Hong Kong's gleaming architectural trademarks—its chock-a-block skyscrapers—might mistakenly convey the impression that all construction is new here, and it is true that the pace of highrise building continues to be startling. However, those relatively few historic buildings that have survived blistering, free-market land speculation are testimonies to the fact that some of Hong Kong's colonial legacy is surviving (sometimes by a thread) the fierce pressure to demolish. How?

Two strategies have prevailed: either "landmark" the building in question, or find a new use that will sustain it in the territory's heady marketplace. Landmarking, or "declaring it a monument" as it is generally known in Hong Kong, at first seems to provide a thicker blanket of protection by virtue of the two major provisions that come with the declaration: no demolition and no major exterior modification without government permission. Those making the case for declaration struggle with the question of significance, and the procedures are time-consuming and therefore costly. (Given the hot market for land, however, the question of how to retain a proper context for low-scale historic structures in the midst of gargantuan neighbors is more difficult to answer.)[1] Only 58 buildings in Hong Kong have been "declared," the most recent three, the University of Hong Kong's oldest buildings, in mid-September 1995.[2] The Antiquities & Monuments Office, or AMO, which advises the Hong Kong Government about maintenance of its historic heritage, plays a key role in the declaration process. However, as in many jurisdictions, one arm of "the government" might wrestle with another over the issue of what should be saved in the full context of urban change. The AMO struggles to do so in the context of other powerful government offices such as Housing, Transportation, the Architectural Services Department (which has its own Antiquities Section), the Land Development Corporation and, most recently, the Hong Kong Police, which is considering selling one of its "declared" historic properties (c. 1884) to raise revenue for new facilities.[3] To minimize charges of being arbitrary, and to provide a solid base for managing and protecting cultural resources that come under its domain, the AMO in August 1995 began a comprehensive survey of historic buildings throughout the territory funded with a grant of US$500,000 from the Hong Kong Jockey Club to be completed in two years. This will be part of the "run-up" to July 1997 as it relates to landmarking monuments. What China will do with such a survey, with the "declaration" law (based upon British conservation experience), and the administrative procedures and offices now set in place remains to be seen.

A much more common tactic to preserve colonial buildings in Hong Kong is to pinpoint a more marketable use for them. One of the best examples of this strategy is Western Market (near the Sheung Wan area west of Central), a former meat market constructed in 1906 that was slated for demolition because of a road-widening plan until the AMO, in 1989, convinced city planners to consider renovating the exterior, gutting the interior, and remodeling it as a more upscale retail space (similar to several American and British precedents). In the four years since project completion, Western Market has become a commercial success and a preservation precedent. In 1993, for example, when the foundations of a small (c. 1913) post office substation in the downtown Wanchai area were damaged during the construction of a highrise neighbor, the government decided to change the function of the building and create Hong Kong's first environmental resource center there, in part because of the positive example of Western Market and in part perhaps to atone for the demolition a few years earlier of the Wanchai Methodist Church, which had not been declared a monument.

Another example of what might be termed the "history making money" strategy lies atop the old Bank of China (1949), across the street from the Hong Kong government's Legislative Council (Legco), itself housed in a "declared" colonial-style monument (1912). When I.M. Pei designed the new Bank of China building in the 1980s, one question was what would occur to the old headquarters, sandwiched in between Pei's tower and another new Hong Kong icon,

Norman Foster's Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank Building. On the top three floors of the 15-story, old Bank of China is the recently renovated "China Club," where bank officers from China used to dine lavishly when they transacted business in capitalistic Hong Kong, and where private entrepreneurs have re-created the historic interior (a distinctive "Chinese-Western Art Deco") and are marketing it very successfully as a swank restaurant.

The thirst for innovative marketing in Hong Kong is even bringing a historic building back from the dead. Murray House, a three-story military barracks (1843), stood on the site of Pei's Bank of China building until 1982 when it was dismantled and stored in a warehouse. Now there is a plan by the Hong Kong Housing Department to resurrect and re-assemble the Murray House carcass by 1998 as a mixed-use retailing structure (along the lines of Western Market) in Stanley, on the south side of Hong Kong Island.[4]

Can other historic, Western-style buildings avoid dismembering or demolition? Struggles continue on several fronts. In the Hong Kong Mid-Levels, Board members of the Ohel Leah Synagogue (1902) are unsure whether to renovate or demolish their place of worship, a structure that was nearly razed six years ago.[5] Trustees of St. John's Cathedral (1849) have been more fortunate with their site, which has also experienced intense development pressure. Hutchison Whampoa Company, owned by one of Hong Kong's richest tycoons, Li Ka-shing, recently received permission to build an 80-story skyscraper adjacent to St. John's. To mitigate some of the damage to the historic context of the site, however, Hutchison agreed to pay for the ongoing maintenance of the cathedral.[6] Another gnawing question centers around the issue of how to preserve "temporary housing units" constructed by the thousands throughout Hong Kong after a tragic 1953 fire decimated a squatter settlement in Shekkipmei (Kowloon). The Housing Authority wants to demolish all such "temporary housing," most of which is now substandard. However, the AMO is in favor of preserving some of the units as tangible reminders of how thousands of Hong Kong residents lived in the 1950s and 1960s. Therefore, Hong Kong is facing the question of how to preserve its more recent past, just as so many other societies are grappling with the same question (see *CRM*, Vol. 18, No. 8, 1995).[7]

In the "run-up" to 1997, "run-down" cultural resources of all styles and functions in Hong Kong await the attention they deserve. Those resources that relate directly to Chinese heritage now seem better situated for that attention, although the cases cited above suggest that Western-style resources are not being shunned. Two years ago, Hong Kong's first "Heritage Trail" was initiated, thanks to the efforts of the Lord Wilson Heritage Trust (established in 1992 to increase public awareness about Hong Kong's cultural legacy), the Hong Kong Jockey Club, and the Tang Family clan, whose nine historic buildings spread over one kilometer at Ping Shan in the New Territories form the basis for the trail. Other clan buildings, such as temples and ancestral halls in the New Territories, are currently being rehabilitated under the guidance of the Antiquities and Monuments Office. The "Chi Lin" Buddhist Nunnery at Diamond Hill on Kowloon is even creating its own historic monument from scratch, building a Tang Dynasty temple where none ever existed, according to architectural principles found in extant Chinese examples.

Tang-Revival temples and Gothic-Revival cathedrals, both in the shadow of skyscrapers—such is the reality of Hong Kong. When new political custodians take the helm after the run-up to July 1, 1997, they will inherit a host of cultural resources requiring attention. How they manage those resources will be one of the many as-yet-unanswerable questions associated with the switch from British colony to Chinese Special Administrative Region (SAR).

Notes

1. Two recent cases in the territory relating to the issue of how to permit the erection of tall buildings amid those of lower scale concern the Old High Street Hospital on Hong Kong Island and the 30-story extension of the Peninsula Hotel in Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon.
2. "Historic label for places of learning," *South China Morning Post,* 15 September 1995.
3. "Police review real estate stock," *South China Morning Post,* 11 October 1995.
4. "Building for historic comeback," *South China Morning Post,* 11 September 1995.
5. "Fury over fate of synagogue," *South China Morning Post,* 13 September 1995.
6. "Hilton plan wins final approval," *South China Morning Post,* 16 September 1995.
7. "Slum Homes Preserved for Posterity," *South China Morning Post,* 1 January 1996.

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rehabilitation of this magnitude was permitted by a foreign real estate consultancy.[3] These more privatized projects differ from those on the Bund because they effectively come under the purview of a less centralized series of "work units" *(danwei)* than those of the municipal government. The positive result for preservation of this more private marketplace is the flexibility about what kind of project materializes, but the more negative result is that there are no rigid standards being applied to those performing the work.[4] Hence, the results can range from the miraculous to the bizarre.

Warehouse being repainted, Shanghai.

This full range is similarly evident throughout several other Chinese cities. In Tianjin, near Beijing, and in Guangzhou (Canton), many buildings in the foreign concession areas are (like Shanghai) receiving the attention of municipal bureaucrats who see rehabilitation as a way to distinguish the city viscerally from other places and, thus, to be more attractive to outside investors.[5] Farther south, in Xiamen (Fujian), municipal officials have commissioned a local university's department of architecture to survey a unique area in the city, Gulangyu Island, where many overseas Chinese who had struck it rich in the 1920s and 1930s built mansions in eclectic Western-Chinese styles. The city's avowed intention is to use this information as a basis for more positive preservation practices. A Catholic church on the island, for example, has been sensitively restored by using local craftsmen to re-create destroyed architectural elements.

Zhapulu street, Shanghai streetscape.

If the Gulangyu church restoration exemplifies the miraculous, then the bizarre is perhaps best demonstrated by the struggle to restore 21 villas in Lushan (Shanxi). For centuries, Lushan was a popular resort area and a site of national significance where until the mid-1970s Chinese leaders had summer retreats and planned major political campaigns. Constructed in the late-19th century in eclectic, European styles, the villas were sold in 1993 to a Hong Kong developer, who hired the American architect Piero Patri to restore them or, in some cases, to reconstruct them almost in entirety.[6] A typhoon of controversy erupted in summer 1993 when it was announced that Villa 191, where Chiang Kai-shek stayed periodically from 1933 to 1937, and where Mao Zedong rested in 1961, was to be converted into a restaurant and karaoke lounge. The unsuitability of this reuse was so abject and the adverse publicity so widespread that the plans were scrapped,[7] but they nonetheless demonstrate how sometimes the historic preservation of Western-style buildings in post-Maoist China can approximate the theater of the absurd. Nonetheless, these cases exemplify the upbeat "heads" side of China's preservation coin.

The other, more tarnished "tails" side is unfortunately more the norm: widespread demolition of whole neighborhoods to make room for high-rise icons to progress.[8] In the context of the hottest economic growth on the planet, historic buildings in need of rehabilitation pale in comparison with multi-storied, chrome-plated new construction, especially perhaps if the style of those historic buildings connotes an imperialistic past. If one pedals today around almost any Chinese city, billboards trumpeting those soon-to-be-constructed icons are immediately evident. Very likely nearby one will also see the tattered complexion of those buildings to be replaced, some of which are structurally sound or culturally significant. Still-viable architectural details are often resold in a burgeoning market of recycled building materials. Typically, both residential and commercial buildings of the late-1890s to the late-1930s are coming down, too low-scale and ill-equipped to weather the speculative storm raging in most Chinese cities. A recent Chinese novel, *Metropolis* (1992) revolves around the social implications of this destruction.[9] Books by Chinese and foreigners that preserve the disappearing buildings in photographs have become very popular in the past decade.[10]

Throughout China the notion of "highest and best use" is taken for granted, while the planning mechanism of transferring development rights to offset lower profits is underemployed. A clean slate is assumed to be better by those who commission the new constructions.[11] To Americans familiar with urban renewal programs and preservation realities prior to the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act, Chinese cities in the 1990s reflect a much repeated story: historic buildings are razed while new buildings are raised.

Often this destruction is occurring before surveys (such as the one mentioned above in Xiamen) can be conducted. Such is the case, for instance, in Harbin (Heilongjiang), where the built environment was significantly affected by Russian

Selling building materials in Fuzhou.

planning and architectural paradigms of the early-20th century. Despite the pleas of local architectural educators, phenomenal Art Nouveau-style buildings are being leveled as the municipal government tries to keep pace with frenzied economic development further south in China. Some speculative real estate investment has been curtailed throughout China in the past year by heavier tax burdens; however, the effects of these measures on preservation projects is still unclear.[12]

Throughout the country one of the many races against the clock is that between those who are trying to dampen the pressure to build aimlessly, and those trying to have projects approved before political uncertainties intensify after Deng's death. However, politicians such as Zhu Rongji are in favor of holding back speculative investment, which has yielded projects such as golf courses and American-style fast food franchises throughout China at the expense of affordable residential property for lower and middle classes. Many architectural historians, preservationists, and urban experts are on Zhu's side, trying to organize architectural surveys as one means to assist policymakers in arriving at sensible decisions, as occurred in Xiamen. Organizations such as the Chinese Modern (meaning 1840–1949 in China) Architectural History Society, founded in 1986, or the multi-city survey of Chinese Modern Architecture begun subsequently with the help of this Society, are indications that these efforts might be paying off slightly.

What about citizens' groups? Although grassroots preservation organizations that oppose governmental (in)action are rare in China, occasionally there are minor victories. Three years ago in Shanghai, for instance, a few activists learned that an American fast-food company was about to construct a new facility abutting the city's former racecourse building (built c. 1927 and now the main branch of the Shanghai Library). They managed to convince politicians to divert the construction farther away from the main building. Given the right turn of events, preservation action from concerned Chinese citizens could occur in the future, but where, when, and how they will mobilize their efforts are questions whose answers lie unpredictably in the future.

When the coin stops flipping in China, then, for or against the preservation of Western-style architecture, which side will it be—heads or tails? Although the answer will probably be decided on a case-by-case basis, there are two recent trends concerning new construction that are relevant in understanding the tenacity of, and perhaps future survival of Western-style architecture in China. One trend concerns the popularity of so-called "villa architecture" by a growing class of Chinese nouveau-riches and by overseas Chinese desiring to acquire a new foothold in their *lao jia* (old fam-

Crafting architectural elements, Gulangyu Island, Xiamen.

ily home). Detached villas, many sprouted with Western stylistic features, are being marketed profitably by Asian developers on the outskirts of many Chinese cities. So far, developers have not turned their attention in any significant way to the preservation of existing Western-style building stock; however, the popularity of Western-style elements in the new suburban construction perhaps indicates a latent possibility for future preservation initiatives in central cities, similar to the Lushan case cited above.

The second trend relates to historic theme parks. In the wake of the widespread desecration of Chinese historic architecture during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), beginning in the early-

Xiamen villa.

1980s, some Chinese planners approved the construction of new complexes where historic environments were recreated for mass consumption. The two initial projects were in Beijing and Shanghai, where reconstructions were erected of the 18th-century gentry settings described in the most famous Chinese novel, *The Dream of the Red Chamber.* These proved so successful that other theme parks have followed, most notably "Splendid China" in Shenzhen (between Canton and Hong Kong) where since 1989 the "world's largest miniaturized scenic spot" and the Pearl River Delta's most popular tourist attraction contains 1:15 scale models of China's most famous monuments.[13] Shenzhen followed Splendid China in 1995 with "Window of the World," a 120-acre park where 1:3 scale models of the world's major historic sites have been erected, many from the Western tradition.[14] Therefore, as fast as China is bulldozing many of its own Western-style buildings, it is recreating for mass consumption other Western-style monuments from overseas. This irony, matched with the case of the Russian Orthodox Stock Exchange in Shanghai, or the Karaoke Mao/Chiang Kai-shek Villa in Lushan, demonstrates how difficult it is to predict the prospects for the preservation of Western-style architecture in contemporary China. The certainty, however, is that the issue of what, how, and by whom the preservation will occur is well worth monitoring.

Notes

1 Malcolm Purvis, *Tall Storeys* (Hong Kong: Palmer & Turner, Ltd., 1985), 59–61.

2 "High rents put damper on Bund revival," *South China Morning Post,* 24 December 1995.

3 "Revamp for museum in Shanghai," *South China Morning Post,* (Hong Kong), 17 November 1993.

4 Jeffrey W. Cody, "Preservation and Progress in China's Largest Port," *Places* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 72–79.

5 "Port city rides wave of growth," *South China Morning Post,* (Hong Kong), 3 November 1993.

6 David Peart, "The Lushan Villas: Pragmatic Design," *Asian Architect and Contractor* 23, no. 6 (June 1993): 16–20.

7 "KMT retreat saved from karaoke," *South China Morning Post,* (Hong Kong), 8 September 1993.

8 Thomas J. Campanella, "Visible City: Shanghai," *Metropolis* (March 1995): 33–38.

9 Sun Li and Yu Xiaohui, *Dushi Fengliu* (Beijing: Zhongguo wenxue chubanshe, 1992).

10 See, for example, Tess Johnston, *A Last Look: Western Architecture in Shanghai* (Shanghai: China Hand Publishing Co., 1993); Lynn Pan, Shanghai: A Century of Change in Photographs, 1843–1949 (Hong Kong: Hai Feng Publishing Co., 1993); and Shanghai Shi Mingyong Jianzhu Shijiyuan, Shanghai Jindai Jianzhu Shigao (Shanghai: n.p., 1988).

11 Philip Langdon, "Asia Bound," *Progressive Architecture* (March 1995): 46.

12 Elaine Chan, "Problems in construction still persist," *South China Morning Post,* (Hong Kong), 29 September 1995.

13 Thomas J. Campanella, "China's Gardens of Time and Space," *Places* 10, no. 1 (Summer 1995): 4–7.

14 Thomas J. Campanella, "They Might be Giants," *HotWired* (1995). Consult this article on the Worldwide Web at http://www.hotwired.com/planet/95/37/index5a.html.

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Photos by the author.