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Portugal in Asia

A View of Preservation in Macau

Today, in a world of fast travel and communication, one tends to be less than conscious of the isolated location of Macau in historical terms. First settled by the Portuguese in 1557, it was a crucial link in that country's trade in Asia, particularly in Japan and China. Stupendously lucrative before the Dutch and British became fierce trading competitors, this tiny 6.93 square kilometer sub-tropical colony on a peninsula at the mouth of the Pearl River delta was able to retain and develop the art of civilized living in the Iberian manner—grand houses, churches and forts proliferated around and above a fine bay. Already far from its heyday by the time nearby Hong Kong was established in 1841, Macau then had to fight to maintain its attraction. Desperate for new resources of local revenue, gambling was made legal in the 1860s, for example. Indeed, present gambling taxes represent more than half of the annual revenue of the government of Macau.

As post-World War II Hong Kong prospered to become the world's eighth largest trading entity, so did the volume of visitor traffic between Hong Kong and Macau. (Apart from horse racing, gambling is banned in Hong Kong.) A significant consequence since the beginning of the 1990s has been the raising of the stakes concerning architectural historic preservation in Macau!

The enclave will become a Special Administrative Region of China at the end of the millennium but, understandably, Portugal is anxious that a nearly 450-year connection should not be dismissed or just gradually disappear under only too evident modern development pressures. A primary drive for substantial historic preserva-

tion work came from a new charitable body—Fundação Oriente—funded by an annual 1.6% special tax on the profits of the gambling syndicate—Sociedade de Turismo e Diversões de Macau (STDM). With a significant capital fund protected in Lisbon, the broad aim is to support Portuguese-inspired communities anywhere in the world, but most particularly in Macau. In the Asian context, offices have been established in Goa and Macau within the past five years.

An early indication of Fundação Oriente intentions and resources was the purchase and preservation of the Casa Garden as their Macau headquarters. A 1770s house at one time leased as a residence for the chairman of the select committee of the British East India Company, the building is more widely remembered in recent times as the former Camoês Museum adjacent to



The stone facade of St. Paul's in Macau, built in 1620. Photo by William Chapman.

the Old Protestant Cemetery. Among the plethora of projects the mid-19th-century Dom Pedro V Theatre, completely faithful to western classical principles and an attraction launched with funding from both Macau and early Hong Kong, has also been purchased and restored; likewise, a terrace of turn-of-the century houses in the Tap Siac district.

While such purchases might need Macau government approval, they also created pressure

for greater preservation initiatives from both government and the church. Missionaries were never far behind colonial traders, and Macau—once described as seeming to have a church or seminary on every corner—became the center for Jesuit endeavors to convert China to Catholicism, as well as a haven for persecuted Japanese Christians.

Church and state—often at passionate odds in Macanese history—have recently drawn together to develop the ruins of St. Paul's Church into a site museum. Originally founded as a wooden structure in 1609 and, with the adjacent college a potent symbol of Jesuit ambition, it was destroyed by fire in 1845. The surviving 1620 stone facade has long been the most visited monument in Macau, but in May this year it became possible to enter the site itself to appreciate the size if not the long-lost golden interior. However, a small space beneath the altar area has been enclosed and reconsecrated to facilitate viewing the tomb of Fr. Alessandro Valignano, the priest largely responsible for establishing Christianity in Japan and founding the Jesuit college in Macau. Bones of 17th-century Japanese and Vietnamese martyrs are also displayed nearby in a series of tiered, glass-fronted boxes.

Adjacent to St. Paul's is the 17th-century Monte Fort, now under conversion into the Museum of Macau. The Cultural Institute of the Macau government has announced an estimated cost of US\$13 million, with technical responsibility held by the Portuguese architect Carlos Bonina Moreno. Two basements will be excavated to provide 15,000 square meters of space, and the 1920s ground floor building replaced.

Early Macau was contained within a defensive wall, but while St. Paul's, the Monte Fort, and the nearby Leal Senado Square may be the central focus linked by pedestrianized narrow streets, many other historic sites are interspersed among moderate quality modern buildings. As a result, older stucco and color-washed houses, "palaces" and churches stand out—provided the visitor is briefed where to look. Government headquarters and the governor's residence, both over-

looking the Bay of Macau, were formerly 19th-century "palaces" built by the prominent Cercal family.

Church funds are undoubtedly the most limited among the three main players of the "game" of historic preservation, but fashionable São Lourenço church was reopened in October 1995. Older churches are characterized by painted wooden ceilings and heavy Baroque altars, but projects to restore São Domingos and protect the roof of the domed church within the seminary of São José are both receiving government assistance.

Restoration has not been restricted to Western architecture alone. Among 44 temples in Macau, the important A-Ma temple now glows with walls of Chinese red at the original Portuguese landing point, and a newly painted Taoist temple snuggles beside St. Paul's. Even though the unrestored Mandarin's House may have a doubtful future, the Lou Lim Leoc Garden with a western-influenced pavilion—created by another wealthy 19th-century Chinese merchant—happily accommodates practice sessions by numerous traditional Chinese amateur orchestras amid its many visitors.

At the close of the colonial era, Macau is unusually united. With an international airport opened in December 1995, all agree that tourism revenue in the new century can be a mighty protection for the unique atmosphere of Macau. Historic preservation standards of workmanship may not be universally high; simplification is often evident to the trained eye, and maintaining stucco/color washed buildings is a never ending task. But finally Macau is benefitting culturally from being eclipsed by Hong Kong. With a longer history and many extant historic buildings, Macau has stepped away from the path of continual decline to one of positive action. Indeed, as well as being a "gateway to China," Macau now advertises itself as a City of Culture.

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