

## Conference Report

# Reflections on IASTE at Twenty

DAVID MOFFAT

For twenty years the International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments has provided a point of contact for scholars interested in the broader social and political forces shaping the built environment. Formed at an international symposium at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1988, its original purpose was to pull together the many strands of inquiry about architecture and settlement form that have escaped the privileged lens of Western art-historical scholarship.

The association has relied on the notion of “tradition” to unify this diverse project. Early on, this implied examining the rich informal and vernacular practices of non-Western or preindustrial cultures. But in the last ten years the scope has expanded to include critical engagement with the notion of tradition, itself, and the way it is commonly deployed to value to certain modes of building over others.

Central to the work of IASTE have been its biennial conferences. Three of the first five were held in Berkeley, where the association is headquartered. But, beginning in 1998, they have been staged in locales (Bangkok, Dubai, Hong Kong, Trani, and Cairo) where attendees have also been invited to visit heritage sites and new developments which implicate discourses of tradition.

The 2008 conference, December 12–15 in Oxford, England, was no exception. Hosted by Oxford Brookes University, it featured some 140 presentations, several impressive keynote panels, bus tours of the London King’s Cross redevelopment and the towns and landscapes of the Cotswold region, and walking tours of classic and modern university buildings in Oxford itself.

The connection between Oxford Brookes and IASTE is longstanding. Students and faculty from the university, and particularly its International Vernacular Architecture Unit, headed by the 2008 local conference director Marcel Vellinga, have been regular contributors to past IASTE conferences. The Oxford Brookes’ professor Paul Oliver was also one of the founding members of the association, and has participated in nearly all of its gatherings.<sup>1</sup>

*David Moffat is the Managing Editor of Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review.*

## “INTERROGATING” TRADITION

The eleventh IASTE conference also marked something of a transition within the organization. Its principal co-founder and director, Nezar AlSayyad, a professor of architecture and city and regional planning at Berkeley, is stepping down in favor of an executive panel headed by Mark Gillem, a professor of architecture at the University of Oregon. The executive committee is also to include Mina Rajagopalan of New York University, Ipek Tureli of Brown University, Heba Farouk Ahmed of Cairo University, Montira Unakul of UNESCO Bangkok, Duanfang Lu of the University of Sydney, and Hesham Abdelfattah of Cairo University. All have been students of AlSayyad and are longtime IASTE members. The official transition will happen January 1, 2010.

For years, AlSayyad has been a driving force behind IASTE, and the themes of its various conferences have been inspired by his desire to push its investigations beyond the dichotomy of “traditional” and “modern” design. This first became explicit at the 1998 conference, “Manufacturing Heritage/Consuming Tradition,” which examined the popularization of heritage narratives as an element of a global tourism industry. It developed through the 2000 conference, “The End of Tradition?” which questioned the continuing value of authenticity as an attribute of tradition. More recently, the 2004 conference, “Post-Traditional Environments in a Post-Global World,” and the 2006 conference, “Hyper-Traditions,” have examined the appropriation of traditional forms to create deliberately fake environments that trade on symbolic associations with historic sites and building styles.<sup>2</sup>

The decision to include the word “interrogating” in the title of the 2008 conference (“Interrogating Tradition: Epistemologies, Fundamentalisms, Regeneration and Practices”) reflected AlSayyad’s interest in moving IASTE research in a deliberately political direction. The conference call for abstracts specifically invited respondents to question the motives behind discourses of tradition in the built environment. Since tradition “has become a keyword in modern global practices, . . . interrogation becomes essential in understanding the social and political contexts in which it is mobilized. Examining the intersecting discourses of tradition and the politics of its organization . . . [is] critical in identifying how socio-political identities and differences are pursued.”

In particular, “the invocation of tradition has . . . become instrumental in various nationalisms, regionalisms, and fundamentalisms.” To reveal these connections, interrogation involves “the epistemic exercise of understanding, framing and questioning the rationalities of tradition, their constructions of authoritative knowledges, and the contingent practices and politics through which spaces and subjectivities are constituted in the 21st century.”

In stressing the need to move beyond “orthodox” and “apolitical” views of tradition, the most provocative conference subtheme involved the link between traditionalism and various

forms of market and religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalist epistemologies frequently attempt to codify the ordinarily fluid processes of tradition to bolster economic self-interest, militant ideologies, or threatened cultural identities.

The conference call continued: “In examining the convergencies between fundamentalism and tradition in the context of globalization, papers can investigate how traditional knowledge is formulated and deployed in the political sphere, including the post-conflict reconstruction of society and space, the use of tradition by the ‘state’ as a means of co-optation or governance, or the manner in which fundamentalism is ‘framed’ and used by different interest and social groups.”

## A RANGE OF INTERESTS AND APPROACHES

As usual with IASTE conferences, the statement of theme yielded a range of responses — some tied directly to it, others to older concerns within the association. The conference also yielded work situated in a wide array of geographic locales, reflecting a spectrum of disciplinary perspectives. Since its founding, IASTE has been greatly aided by its cross-cultural stance. The view of one culture from another can be of great use in uncovering hidden and often unquestioned attitudes toward building. The interdisciplinary nature of the organization has also helped members deemphasize proprietary jargon and present their research in more accessible forms.

Two plenary panels at the 2008 conference gave a good sense of the current range of interests within the association. The first, “Fundamentalisms and Tradition,” sought to demonstrate how larger social and political currents effect the shape of built environments. Its first speaker, Derek Gregory, of the University of British Columbia, examined what he called a “reenchantment” with warfare in the West, based on an ideological and moral divide between “our” war — hypermodern, using smart weapons, and motivated by humanitarianism; and “their” war — practiced with improvised weapons against civilians in the interest of a identity politics. He argued that tropes of terror, tradition and tribalism related to these ideas — in particular, as articulated in the development of U.S. counterinsurgency strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan — have altered views of the built environment, to the point of creating a “counter-city,” a place of stark ethnic, religious and political division.

The second speaker, Brigitte Piquard, from Oxford Brookes, examined various ways that traditionalism has reemerged in urban contexts worldwide as a popular strategy for coping with natural disaster, social conflict, warfare, bad governance, or acts of terror. She outlined how fundamental traditionalism stresses social values; formal traditionalism stresses familiar modes of expression; and a traditionalism of resistance uses well-known symbols to oppose unpopular government policies. A fourth form, “pseudo-traditionalism,” may appear in heavily disrupted societies, Piquard said,

“where newly made expressions of perceived traditions are reinvented to constitute a foundation on which forms of social linkage may be built.” She presented examples of each as modes of resilience among refugees and other traumatized populations struggling to inhabit marginal or war-torn spaces.

The second plenary panel, featuring Howard Davis and Kingston Heath, both of the University of Oregon, concentrated on the “regeneration” of vernacular building processes, a longstanding concern of the association because of its ties to political self-determination and independent cultural identity. Davis argued that tradition needs to be rediscovered as a mode of practice, rather than a source of imagery. He claimed that new technologies such as global positioning systems and computer fabrication now make this possible, and offer ways to increase local control over building production — an essential characteristic of vernacular design. To capitalize on these opportunities, however, architects need to become more concerned with systems of production than final building form.

Heath argued that regional distinctiveness is the key attribute of vernacular design, rather than defined formal or historical characteristics. It emerges from a dynamic process of adaptation to situated climatic and cultural factors. In presenting examples at different scales, he showed how new ideas may be continually introduced to a given area, as technologies and populations shift, but that they must be tested against local conditions. In the end, strategies of accommodation based on substance rather than image collectively define the particularities of place.

The range of present concerns within the association was further evident in the five papers chosen as finalists for the Jeffrey Cook award, given in honor of the late University of Arizona professor and founding IASTE member.<sup>3</sup> These papers will be published in this and subsequent issues of *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*.

“The Future Tradition of Nature,” by Amy Murphy of the University of Southern California, investigated the relation between Japanese anime films and various discourses on ecology.

“The Legend of Brigadoon: Architecture, Identity and Choice in the Scottish Highlands,” by Daniel Maudlin of the University of Plymouth, examined the mismatch between image and reality in the stereotyping of highland house types.

“Bruce Grove Transferred: The Role of Diverse Traditions in Historic Conservation,” by Kate Jordan of the University of Portsmouth, documented the difficulties of heritage-redevelopment strategies in a culturally mixed area of London.

“From Sleeping Porch to Sleeping Machine: Inverting Traditions of Fresh Air in North America,” by Charlie Hailey of the University of Florida, traced changing notions of healthy sleeping in American domestic architecture.

And “Stealth Gentrification: Camouflage and Commerce on the Lower East Side,” by Lara Belkind of Harvard University, probed the deliberately obscure, hip-cultural transformation of a formerly low-income area of New York City.

## SHIFTS OF FOCUS

As an interdisciplinary organization, IASTE has long engaged in soul-searching as to its purpose. This has largely reflected shifts in the way the discourse of tradition has been organized in relation to the notion of modernism. One of IASTE’s original points of departure was that the handing down of traditions from one generation to the next was central to the development of a rich kaleidoscope of cultural symbolisms and the craft skills needed to execute them. This was interrupted by modernism, which proposed uniform standards of design to be developed and deployed across cultures.

As several speakers at the 2008 conference noted, however, scholars of the built environment only started talking about tradition as an alternative value system when modernity’s failures were becoming widely proclaimed. As understanding of modernity has changed and adapted, splintered and reformed, and as the dynamics of tradition have been reexamined, this concern has yielded to a more complex, nuanced view.

The formation of a built territory remains central to every culture. And, even in the modern era, this involves forces and practices that purport to be beyond question. Authoritative narratives based on “the way things have always been done” are usually created to maintain the predominance of certain social or perceptual constructs. In vernacular settings, this can be seen as relatively benign, a response to a basic need to create value and meaning through a common sense of artistry. But it can also be interpreted through a more political prism as a way to order the built world to reinforce the interests of certain groups over others.

Within IASTE, the latter emphasis has led to many studies of how design practice has been used to dominate and reorganize the territory of non-Western peoples. Over the years, papers have dealt with the formation of cities as instruments of European colonial domination. Others have targeted how “native” traditions have become integral to the ways of the colonizers. Still others have examined the struggle of postcolonial societies to reckon with their mixed heritages.

In this regard, IASTE research has also shown how — nativist and essentialist claims to the contrary — all cultures are to some extent hybrid. And it has revealed how traditions migrate and change over time and distance, as societies adapt building elements from one another, deal with shifting economies and environmental crises, and endure cultural and political conflict and restructuring.

The most recent evidence of these processes has been the rise of an integrated, worldwide consumer economy. “Traditional” design elements from hundreds of cultures are now freely deployed to add value and appeal to the developments of a global real estate industry. The way these meanings are constituted offers a rich vein of scholarship, exposing how “hyper” traditions now employ elements whose value as displaced signs may far exceed their original

function or cultural significance. Likewise, IASTE has become increasingly concerned with the dislocation of heritage value, exposing how invocations of traditional building practices may sometimes be used to displace the very people who devised and once practiced them.

## QUESTIONS OF PURPOSE

In a final plenary session at the 2008 conference, Greig Crysler of the University of California, Berkeley, Dianne Harris of the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, and Mark Jarzombek of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology were assigned to reflect on some of these issues, summarize the content of four days of presentations, and speculate on the future of the association.

Crysler noted how IASTE's focus on the value of tradition has migrated from what James Clifford called the "ethnographic pastoral" to critical engagement with the commodification of traditional forms and sites. He argued that the uneven development and seizure of emblematic heritage assets in a globalized economy may actually increase the marginalization of disadvantaged groups. By contrast, benign and emancipatory epistemologies of tradition are "conjugated in terms of community," and resist the branded notions of cultural authenticity needed to market traditions to a global audience. IASTE's job is to understand and communicate the difference.

Harris pointed out that children learn early how appeals to tradition can justify almost any desire, and that this can lead to outright fabrications of the sense of authenticity. On the other hand, the discovery and repetition of this narrative in every cultural context may constitute a conceptual and theoretical dead end because it narrows the scope of interpretation. She argued that what makes the interdisciplinary work of IASTE special is its fine-grained analysis of the built environment and its reflections on how building may be used to assert many kinds of identity.

Jarzombek began wryly by observing, "Tradition ain't what it used to be." The shift of views in the last two decades is nowhere more evident, he said, than in the fact the association is no longer championing tradition, supporting it, or even weeping over its loss — instead, it is interrogating it. Not everyone has arrived at the same point, however: some may still be lamenting tradition's loss; others may only be discovering the means of its fabrication. Nevertheless, as a mode of resistance, tradition can no longer be deployed against the evils of modernism and commodification because it has been subsumed within that world. As a result, scholars must interrogate their own motives at the same time they interrogate traditions themselves.

This theme of self-awareness came up repeatedly in subsequent comments from the floor and by panel members. Several speakers noted how one person's exercise of tradition

may be another's experience of oppression. They observed that researchers must always be aware of whose heritage is being privileged, for what purpose, and to whose benefit.

Others, however, pointed out that tradition provides a powerful tool of common understanding, especially when wielded in cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary manner. In this regard, Gillem noted that the interdisciplinary nature of the organization would remain central to its mission.

Marcel Vellinga also argued that there is a profound lack of direction in the shaping of contemporary built environments. While understanding of the processes of tradition may have moved beyond a dichotomy with modernity, many populations remain profoundly disconnected from the worlds in which they live. A regeneration of traditional building practices might also have the more immediate effect of helping to address global problems such as climate change.

It was left to Dell Upton of UCLA to challenge such relatively sanguine views. As a discussant in the first plenary session he had noted that formulations of tradition may be highly sophisticated but culturally naïve. Following Paul Bourdieu, he suggested it is perhaps better to understand culture as a set of constantly changing principles. Academic discourse tends to reify this diffuse and heterogeneous reality. This may be one reason for the continuing disappointment of those who view tradition as a form of enduring cultural capital that can be used to resist or assist economic development and political change.

As a group, he said, IASTE members are still in the habit of talking about tradition as if it were a coherent structure instead of a complex strategy in a complex world. The sense that much IASTE research is telling the same story over and over may derive from the fact that it is a fairly uniform group that has invested itself in only one interpretative paradigm. In reality, tradition is never the same thing.

## LOOKING AHEAD

As IASTE enters its third decade, it can only be strengthened by such questionings of purpose. Several members noted how they were originally attracted to the association because it embraced an "uncanon" of architectural scholarship. Others noted that IASTE has long tried to make room for the quirky and improvident as well as the normative and well-to-do. As Crysler also pointed out, the association has tried to upset categories and definitions and resist the development of a stable, bounded intellectual domain.

In this effort it has been remarkably successful. Much of this has been based on the flexible definition of tradition provided by AlSayyad: "Tradition is a dynamic project for the interpretation of a past in the service of a particular position in the present and for the purposes of a specific imagined future."

Based on this definition, IASTE now provides a platform for understanding the situated nature of building practices

— be they vernacular, modern or popular. And many of its criticisms have been absorbed within other organizations such as the Society of Architectural Historians and the Vernacular Architecture Forum.

But the time may have come to ask whether criticism is enough. If the association's principal concern is ethics, as Harris suggested, this may require new modes of engagement with a world in crisis. The link between criticism and practice is never direct. But perhaps now that IASTE has interpreted and interrogated the uses of tradition, it is time to ask what has been learned. What proposals can be made with respect to the production of new built environments for the twenty-first century?

## NOTES

1. IVAU also played a major role in coordinating work on the *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, edited by Oliver. Its complementary volume, *The Atlas of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, by Oliver, Vellinga, and cartographer Alexander Bridge, was published by Routledge in 2007.
  2. Three edited books have emerged from IASTE conferences. They are Nezar AlSayyad and Jean-Paul Bourdier, eds., *Dwellings, Settlements and Tradition: Cross Cultural Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988); Nezar AlSayyad, ed., *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage: Global Norms and Urban Forms in the Age of Tourism* (London: Routledge, 2001); and Nezar AlSayyad, ed., *The End of Tradition?* (London: Routledge, 2004).
  3. The award is given to the two best papers submitted in advance to the conference. This year's winners were Amy Murphy and Daniel Maudlin.
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