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'Unesco-cide': does world heritage status do cities more harm than good?

The Guardian, Laignee Barron in George Town, Malaysia, Wednesday 30 August 2017 07.15 BST

The gambling-ridden clan jetties of Malaysia's George Town were saved from ruin by the award of Unesco world heritage status, but their new fame left locals overwhelmed by a tide of invasive tourism. Can we ever get the balance right?

Chew Jetty in Malaysia's George Town attracts tourists by the boatload. Historic homes are now commercial stalls branded with neon signs; one-time fishermen peddle T-shirts, magnets and postcards. Tour buses deposit vacationers from early in the morning until well after sunset.

The daily intrusion has clearly taken a toll: windows are boarded, "no photo" signs are pervasive, and tenants quickly vanish at the sight of a foreign face.

"I would like to remind people that we are not monkeys, and this is not a zoo," says Lee Kah Lei, who runs a souvenir stall outside her home on the Chew Jetty.

Although Kah Lei notes that "the more people who come here, the more the shopkeepers sell", she wishes camera-wielding tourists were respectful of her privacy – and especially not duck into her home uninvited.

Once, the "clan jetties" on the outskirts of George Town on Penang island, were a bustling seafront hub. A ramshackle collection of stilt houses and sheds, stretching along a line of wooden piers each bearing the surname of its Chinese clan, they are one of the last intact bastions of Malaysia's old Chinese settlements.

The seven remaining jetties survived two world wars and Japanese occupation, but as the decades wore on the piers deteriorated. And when the formidable threat of encroaching developers raised its head, the owners of the jetties had only one place to turn: they made an 11th-hour bid to Unesco for protection.

The effort succeeded. In 2008 the clan jetties were awarded Unesco world heritage status – though not before two of the clan enclaves were razed to make way for a housing complex.

Now, however, residents say the victory was not what they hoped for at all. Where fishermen, oyster harvesters and fortune tellers once plied their trade, souvenir vendors and snack bars have taken root. The locals say they were caught unawares by a tide of tourism that has washed over their stilt village. It's a similar complaint that has resounded across Europe this summer, as cities from Barcelona to Venice try to balance the positive effects of tourism with the inevitable downsides.

"We would be gone today if not for the Unesco listing," admits Chew Siew Pheng, a resident of the Chew Jetty. She recalled a constant spectre of evictions during her childhood, as the jetties fell into disrepair.

Unesco may have spared the last seven jetties from the wrecking ball, but Siew Pheng says it has also "affected our privacy. Our jetty has become commercialised. People are moving. During the December holidays like Chinese New Year and Malay Raya, it's not even a place to live."

Many of the 1,052 destinations across the world that have been stamped with United Nations world heritage status struggle to strike the balance between the economic benefits of catering to visitors and preserving the culture that drew the recognition.

The heritage designation began in 1972 to identify and protect places "of outstanding universal value". However, by raising the international profile of a location, the label also fuels a rush of visitors and opens the door to commercialisation that can dilute the site's authenticity.

“It is an inevitable destiny: the very reasons why a property is chosen for inscription on the world heritage list are also the reasons why millions of tourists flock to those sites year after year,” wrote Francesco Bandarin, the former world heritage director at Unesco, in a 2002 manual called *Managing Tourism at World Heritage Sites*.

The phenomenon has even been given a name by Italian writer Marco d'Eramo, who argues that Unesco preserves buildings but allows the communities around them to be destroyed, often by tourism. He calls it “Unesco-cide”.

Laos’ Luang Prabang, for example, a world heritage town of around 50,000 people, now expects to attract more than 700,000 tourists by 2018. Researcher Chloe Maurel has written about the adverse affects of the status on the historic Casco Viejo neighbourhood in Panama City, which relegated its poorest inhabitants to the city limits following its Unesco validation – while the central district was flooded with tourists.

National Geographic has collated examples such as Xian, China, site of the famous terracotta warriors, where a poorly situated new museum may have negatively impacted the precious site. Writers Lauri Hafvenstein and Brian Handwerk also pointed to the controversial activity close to the Belize’s Barrier Reef, where developers are closing in and exploiting the region’s world heritage status to sell swamp land to customers over the internet.

Jo Caust, an associate professor at the University of Melbourne, said the world heritage status can prove “a double-edged sword”. The status is often sought out as a potential “cash-cow” by governments eager to ring dollars out of architectural history, she argued earlier this year in the *Journal of Cultural Heritage*. And while reorientation toward tourism can help revitalise communities, without sufficient management plans the visitation can eventually destroy a site.

“Communities impacted by tourism in Europe are now trying to fight back against the destructive effect of uncontrolled tourism. The impact in a third world country is likely to be more extreme,” Caust said. “What is the motivation behind the development and the achievement of the status? Making more money or cultural heritage protection?”

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