

Hoi An (Vietnam)

No 948

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Hoi An Ancient Town
<i>Location</i>	Hoi An Town, Quang Nam Province
<i>State Party</i>	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
<i>Date</i>	28 July 1998

Justification by State Party

Hoi An ancient town is a special example of a traditional trading port in South-East Asia which has been completely and assiduously preserved: it is the only town in Vietnam that has survived intact in this way. Most of the buildings in Hoi An are in the traditional architectural style of the 18th to 20th centuries. They are aligned along narrow lanes of traditional type. They include many religious buildings, such as pagodas, temples, meeting houses, etc, which relate to the development of the development of a port community. The traditional life-style, religion, customs, and cooking have been preserved and many festivals still take place annually.

Criteria ii, iii, v, and vi

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *group of buildings*.

History and Description

History

Archaeological finds and excavations have shown that there was a port and trading centre of the local Sa Huynh people along the Thu Bon river as early as the 2nd century BC. This continued to expand, and by the 15th century Hoi An (known in Vietnam and abroad under various names - Fayfo, Haifo, Kaifo, Faifoo, Faicfo, Hoai Pho) was already the most important port of the powerful Champa Kingdom. It continued after the Vietnamese absorption of the Champa Kingdom in the same capacity, becoming one of the most important centres of mercantile, and hence cultural, exchange in South-East Asia, attracting ships and traders from elsewhere in Asia and from Europe, especially during its most flourishing period from the late 16th century to the early 18th century. It was through Hoi An that Christianity penetrated Vietnam in the 17th century.

It retained its role as the main port of the central region throughout the 19th century, when the Nguyen dynasty kings operated a "closed trade policy." By the end of the century, the rise of other ports on the coast of Vietnam, in particular Da Nang, and silting of its harbour, led to the final eclipse of Hoi An. As a result of this economic stagnation, it has preserved its early appearance in a remarkably intact state.

Description

The ancient town, nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List, is situated on the north bank of the Thu Bon river and covers an area of 0.3km² (300m by 1000m). There is a street running east-west along the river's edge and three further streets parallel to the river. They are intersected at right-angles by streets and alleys. Within this area there are houses (often combined with shops), religious monuments such as pagodas, temples, communal houses, and family cult houses, a ferry quay, and an open market.

The architecture of Hoi An, which is entirely of wood, is of considerable interest. It combines traditional Vietnamese designs and techniques with those from other countries, whose citizens settled there to trade and built houses and community centres to their own designs. These influences came principally from China, but Japanese styles can also be discerned in certain details.

The typical house conforms with a corridor plan, the following elements occurring in sequence: house, yard, house. They are of timber-framed construction with brick or wooden walls. There are several forms of roof timbering, showing influences from various regions. The houses are tiled and the wooden components are carved with traditional motifs.

Family cult houses, dedicated to the worship of ancestors, consist of two parts, one behind the other coming from the street. They are distinguished from one another by the roof support system adopted. Between them two small side buildings form a small courtyard.

The community houses, used for worship of ancient sages, founders of settlements, or the legendary founders of crafts, are single rectangular timber-framed structures. Those that survive are mostly from the 19th century.

Like the community houses, the pagodas are almost all from the 19th century, though inscriptions show them to have been founded in the 17th and 18th centuries. They conform with a square layout and decoration is largely confined to the elaborate roofs. In the case of the larger examples, they constituted nuclei of associated buildings with religious and secular functions. For example, some of the larger pagodas also served as meeting halls. These are located along the main street (Tran Phu). Small wooden buildings with structures similar to those of the cult houses were used as ancestral and community shrines. Two of them are associated with pagodas.

There is a fine wooden bridge, reminiscent of Japanese examples, with a pagoda on it. It has existed from at least the early 18th century, as an inscription indicates, but it has been reconstructed many times.

There is a number of ancient tombs within the buffer zone. These are in Vietnamese, Japanese, and Chinese style, reflecting the wide trading connections and ethnic origins of the inhabitants of Hoi An.

The survey of important historic buildings carried out in 1993-95 shows that there are eighteen community houses, fourteen pagodas and shrines, five meeting (or office) halls, nineteen cult houses, and fifteen large tombs. In their present form most of these date to the 19th century, but a considerable proportion have earlier features going back to the 17th and 18th centuries. In addition to these exceptional buildings, the majority of the domestic architecture is in traditional form - wooden structures with tiled roofs.

Management and Protection

Legal status

State Council Decree No 14 for "Protecting and using cultural-historical relics and landscapes" was promulgated in 1984. In the following year Hoi An ancient town was designated a National Cultural-Historical Site by Resolution 506/VH-QD of the Ministry of Culture and Information.. This was followed successively by Statute 1796/QD-UB of the People's Committee of Quang Nam-Da Nang Province (1987) and Statute 161/QD-UB of the People's Committee of Hoi An Town (1997).

These legislative instruments imposed strict controls over all actions that might have adverse impacts on the cultural and historical qualities of Hoi An.

Management

The entire town is State property. There is a succession of agencies with increasingly detailed responsibilities for the protection and preservation of the National Cultural-Historical Site of Hoi An - the Ministry of Culture and Information (Office of Conservation and Museology), the People's Committee of Quang Nam Province (Department of Culture, Information and Sport), and the People's Committee of Hoi An Town.

The 1997 Hoi An Town Statute defines regulations that are implemented by the Hoi An Monuments Conservation and Management Centre, which was established as the responsible agency of the People's Committee of the town. These are very detailed, relating, for example, to the materials approved for use in rehabilitation and restoration projects, permissible colours for facades, and tree planting. There are separate provisions for the ancient town proper, the subject of the nomination, the buffer zone, and the later town development beyond the buffer zone (in which there are constraints on the height of new constructions).

There is a Master Plan for the centre of Hoi An up to 2010, approved in 1994. Associated with this are separate plans for transportation, tourism, public lighting, water supply, new residential areas, and improvement of the environment. The promulgation of the 1997 Town Statute was associated with the approval of the management plan for "The investigation, conservation, restoration, and exploitation of the ancient town for the period 1997-2005," which is implemented by the Monuments Conservation and Management Centre.

The Centre has a permanent staff of 25 professional and support staff. It is intended to increase this level of manning progressively in the coming years. It works in collaboration with specialized technical agencies at state and central government level.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Survey, recording, conservation, and restoration of Hoi An began in 1982, when the initial survey was carried out by a Polish architect from PKZ. A conservation and research group was set up by the Town Council in the following year to continue this work, which continued over subsequent years. Scientific seminars were held in 1985 and 1990 to study the problems of Hoi An and the necessary solutions to be applied.

A series of research projects was set up, dealing with different periods of the archaeology and history of the town, resulting in the creation of three museums dealing with various aspects of its history.

Currently the management plan is being implemented, with phased and prioritized conservation and restoration projects on the most significant buildings and those in most urgent need of attention.

Authenticity

The aspect of authenticity that is most significant in the case of an historic town is that of the overall townscape rather than that of individual buildings. The historic street pattern which was formed as the commercial port developed survives intact.

The building plots on the streets are also for the most part preserved, and the buildings on them retain the traditional types of facade and roof line. Because most of the buildings were constructed in wood it was necessary for them to be renewed at intervals, and so many buildings with basic structures from the 17th and 18th centuries were reconstructed in the 19th century. The economic decline of the town in the later 19th century meant, however, that there has been no pressure to replace older buildings with new ones in modern materials such as concrete and corrugated iron.

As a result the traditional streetscape has been preserved to a remarkable degree, enhancing the overall authenticity of this historic town.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Hoi An in January 1999.

Qualities

Hoi An is an exceptionally well preserved example of a Far Eastern port which traded widely, both with the countries of South-East and East Asia and with the rest of the world. Its decline in the later 19th century ensured that it has retained its traditional urban tissue to a remarkable degree. It is very unusual for this region, since it is constructed almost entirely of wood.

Comparative analysis

Intensive trading activities between South-East Asia and other countries, first in East and South Asia and then with Europe from the 16th century onwards, led to the creation of many flourishing commercial ports, such as Malacca and Penang. However, almost all of these either decayed totally or became large modern international ports. In both cases the

original townscape was lost through neglect or demolition respectively.

The only South-East Asian trading port with which Hoi An can be compared is Vigan in The Philippines (which is by coincidence also nominated for the World Heritage List in 1999). It is difficult to differentiate between the two in terms of either architecture, which represent a blend of indigenous and imported styles, or level of intactness. There is, however, one significant difference between the two. The street plan of Vigan was laid down by the Spanish conquerors of The Philippines and is indistinguishable from that of the many Spanish colonial towns in the Americas. By contrast, the street plan of Hoi An is one that evolved organically as the town itself developed economically and socially. Hoi An is also exceptional in the predominance of wood as a building material.

Brief description

Hoi An is an exceptionally well preserved example of a South-East Asian trading port from the 15th to 19th centuries. Its buildings and its street pattern reflect the influences, both indigenous and foreign, that combined to produce this unique survival.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii and v*:

Criterion ii Hoi An is an outstanding material manifestation of the fusion of cultures over time in an international commercial port.

Criterion v Hoi An is an exceptionally well preserved example of a traditional Asian trading port.

ICOMOS, September 1999