

Architectural Preservation Process in Japan: Theoretical discourse and its application

Tanya L. Park

1. Introduction

This thesis presents a technological and philosophical contribution related to the preservation of cultural properties.

Japan has been chosen for the focus of this study into wooden preservation due to its governance structure and its understanding of the systems required to preserve historic wooden structures. Since the late 1800's Japan has understood clearly the necessity of the need to establish systems which work towards protection of structures. Japan is important on the world stage in this regard due largely to its long history of successful protection of a significant number of important cultural properties. In any comparative time-span other countries have seen hundreds of structures lost due to lack of systems in place for protection. Contemporary preservation in Japan is clearly a world-leader, one from which other countries can learn. One significant question raised in this thesis is, are systems transportable? I have shown that many parts of the system are transportable, at least to certain countries.

A further reason why Japan was chosen is its contemporary understanding and contribution to the literature pertaining to preservation. The Nara Document on Authenticity was a defining moment in international understanding of the concept of value and significance being specific to cultures, rather than "one size fits all". However, discourse relating to preservation in Japan is incomplete. Drawing on the

Nara Document,¹ Japan is often referred to as holding little regard for material authenticity. In fact, literature in English about Japan's preservation is extremely limited to Westerners and there exists a concomitant incomplete understanding. This lack of clarity is hindering advancement in the entire field of heritage preservation.²

A second question posed within this thesis seeks to determine if current historical preservation within Japan is clearly understood by theorists and practitioners alike, outside of Japan. That is, is sufficient literature available in English text and is that which is available accurate? If there are inaccuracies, how have they been promulgated?

2. Background

This thesis consists of two sections. Chapter one is a comprehensive study of the discourses associated with the preservation of historic wooden structures globally. Chapters two onwards comprise both legal and training synopses of Japan as well as a detailed case study of Gekko-den Pavilion. The thesis provides a comprehensive summary of discourse relating to preservation and especially that contained within wooden preservation. It focuses on the actuality of preservation, without making assumptions based solely on western literature as it pertains to Japanese wooden preservation.

International doctrines are disseminated as either charters, recommendations, resolutions, declarations or statements. The guidelines are typically initiated under the authorities of UNESCO and ICOMOS and the advisory bodies contained within each. International guidelines are important as they provide the philosophy adhered to internationally and provide the ideology relative to the preservation of historic wooden structures. The Venice Charter [1964] outlines international standards of preservation practice in relation to architecture and sites. In the preamble it states “duty to hand them on in the full richness of their authenticity”. The document has often been discussed as being Eurocentric and incomplete in its international application. Authenticity, and its application, are important due to the incorporation within the World Heritage Operational guidelines. These guidelines state that a designated World Heritage Cultural property must meet the test of authenticity in design, materials, workmanship and setting. Discussion surrounding the test of authenticity in relation to Japanese wooden preservation methods and material authenticity is therefore of importance in contemporary discourse.

Frequently, discourses pertaining to Japanese wooden preservation practices portray Japan as holding minimal regard for material authenticity. Timber re-use and disassembly is not specific to Japan and I argue it is a matter of degree of replacement.

The process of architectural wooden preservation of cultural properties in Japan has been analysed, primarily through a case study involving the process of preservation at Gekko-den Pavilion, within Gokoku-ji confines in central Tokyo.³ Areas of study included carpentry methods, decisions made by architects, legal provisions in place for protection in governmental administration sectors, definitions of cultural properties, partial and full dismantlement theoretical

discourse. The practicalities of the dismantlement are seen from the categorising and detailed inspection of singular wooden members.

The practice of wooden preservation in Norway has also been reviewed via analyses of both the Stave Church Programme and the Uthusprojekt. These observations provided the opportunity to review the realities of preservation processes and current examples of management activities in a living historic town with a multi-faceted approach to protection, sustainable conservation and capacity building have been outlined. Standards and guidelines are attempted to be adhered to. There is however, a sense of unrealistic expectation and an increasing gap between heritage discourse and actualities of listed buildings and listed preservation sites, especially by those working on the ground.

Frequently, discourses pertaining to Japanese wooden preservation practices portray Japan as holding minimal regard for material authenticity. Timber re-use and disassembly is not specific to Japan and I argue it is a matter of degree of replacement. With regard administration and legal aspects, I emphasise the importance of historical overviews. The legal transformation is representative of societal changes and refinement of the training systems historically occurs continuously as each relate to the preservation of Important Cultural Properties.

Typically, original wooden members remain after a major preservation involving full dismantlement of Japanese wooden structures. The amount of replacement is a central question surrounding Japanese wooden preservation and associated discourse on material authenticity. Throughout this study a commonality between Japan and Norway became apparent, but equally so did the distance between the theory and the reality. Theoretical discourse in this context clearly

involves both written scholarly works and oral discourse.

Along with a case study of Gekko-den Pavilion, Part Two consists of a study of European wooden preservation processes, in particular Norway and the Uthusprojekt as well as The Stave Church programme, both of which are inscribed in the World Heritage list. Inclusion of Norway was important due to a large fraction of pertinent discourse studied being based in Europe. Additionally, Norway is considered one of the leading countries, along with Japan, to actively protect historic wooden structures of significance.

In my discussion of administration and legal aspects, I emphasise the importance of historical overviews. Both are important due to the legal transformation being representative of societal changes and the refinement of the training systems historically as they each relate to the preservation of Important Cultural Properties. Centralisation of knowledge and governance provides a constant authority from which Cultural Properties are protected and are a strength of the Japanese protection structure.

Gekko-den Pavilion provided information about the processes involved in modern day preservation of Important Cultural Properties in Japan. Material authenticity is of significance to Gekko-den pavilion since historic fabric is valued and protected. Japanese wooden structures typically involve replacement frequently around the exposed perimeter near the ground. It is not common to replace the structural framework members, resulting in the original members remaining after a major preservation involving full dismantlement. The amount of replacement is a central question surrounding Japanese wooden preservation and associated discourses surrounding authenticity.

The fundamental values surrounding preservation in the Stave Church Programme suggest that the structure is the 'manuscript' assigning high value to original materials. During preservation auxiliary components are replaced such as roofing tiles at Urnes Stave Church, in the same manner as we find at Gekko-den Pavilion. Similarly, structural retrofitting occurs in both countries, for example the use of steel beams across the base of the structure in Norway and base isolation on a significantly larger structure in Japan.

From my research it is evident that there is a widening gap between heritage discourse and actualities of listed preservation sites. Japan offers a case for 'best practice' although very little is available in English script.

3. Conclusions

Material authenticity as it relates to Japan is often misconstrued internationally as having Japan holding little regard for material authenticity.⁴ In reality, Japan's preservation processes are not dissimilar to other countries, in particular European. European countries are of importance in the study, given that the main body of literature expounding material authenticity originates from Europe.

Theoretical discourse pertaining to the preservation of important historical wooden structures is relative in the sense that it depends on the real ability of the country to enforce such principles. Nonetheless it is important in our endeavour for international co-operation and collaboration, the founding principal of UNESCO's constitutive act, Article One.⁵

I conclude that typically systems are non-exportable and cannot work without the comparative economic advantages enjoyed from the countries from where the discourse originated. Is it possible to provide a broad overarching ethos that is applicable to

preservation, in particular, historic wooden preservation?

Approval must be given at the ground level, i.e. consent from people working at the interface of the preservation. Such exchange of discourse and ideas were seen in Roros. Future directions for Japan and for worldwide dissemination must include realisation globally that material authenticity is a small component of a multifaceted approach to wooden preservation.

Notes:

1. Knut Einar Larsen, 1994. *Authenticity in the context of World Heritage: Japan and the Universal Conference on Authenticity in relation to the world heritage convention*. Preparatory Workshop, Bergen, Norway 31 January – 2 February.
2. Park, T. L., 2013, Process of architectural wooden preservation in Japan. *WIT Transactions on the Built Environment*, Vol. 131, p 491 – 502.
3. Park, T. L., 2014, Gekko-den Case Study: The process surrounding the preservation of historical wooden architecture in Japan. Chapter 23 in *Built Heritage: Monitoring Conservation Management*. DOI 10.1007/978-3-3319-08533-3_23, Springer
4. Park, T. L., 2013, The process surrounding the preservation of historical wooden architecture in Japan. *Proceedings of “Built Heritage 2013, Monitoring Heritage Conservation”*. (ISBN 978-88-908961-0-1)
5. Jukka Jokilehto, 2009. *ICCROM's first fifty years*. UNESCO is publishing and Blackwell Publishing Ltd. No 243 [Vol 61. No.3. 2009]