

Guidance Note

Asian Buddhist Heritage: Conserving the Sacred

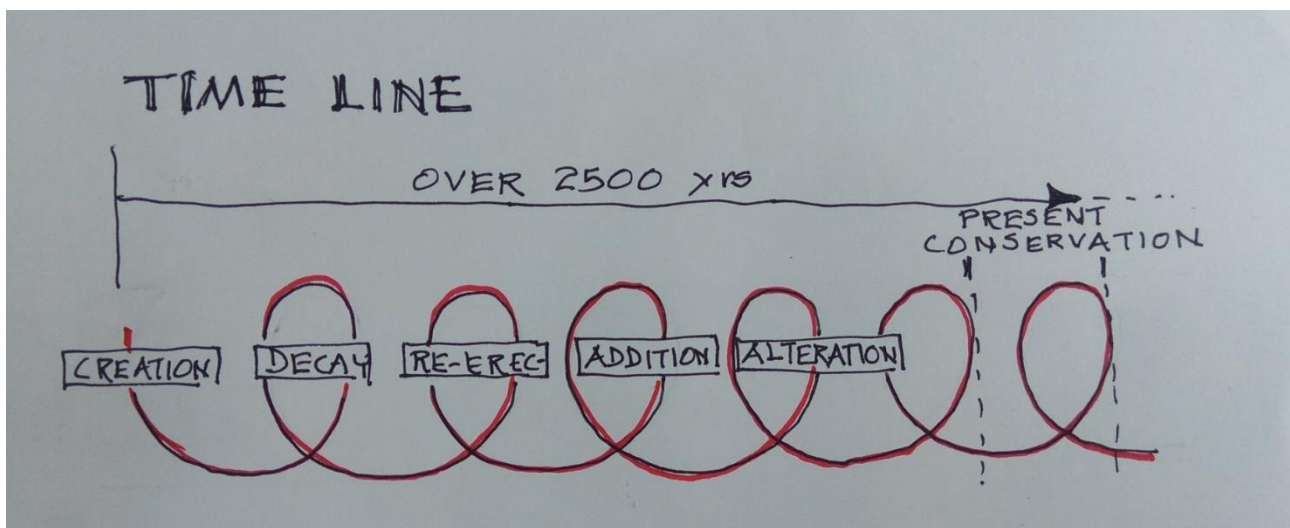
FORUM 2013: KOREA

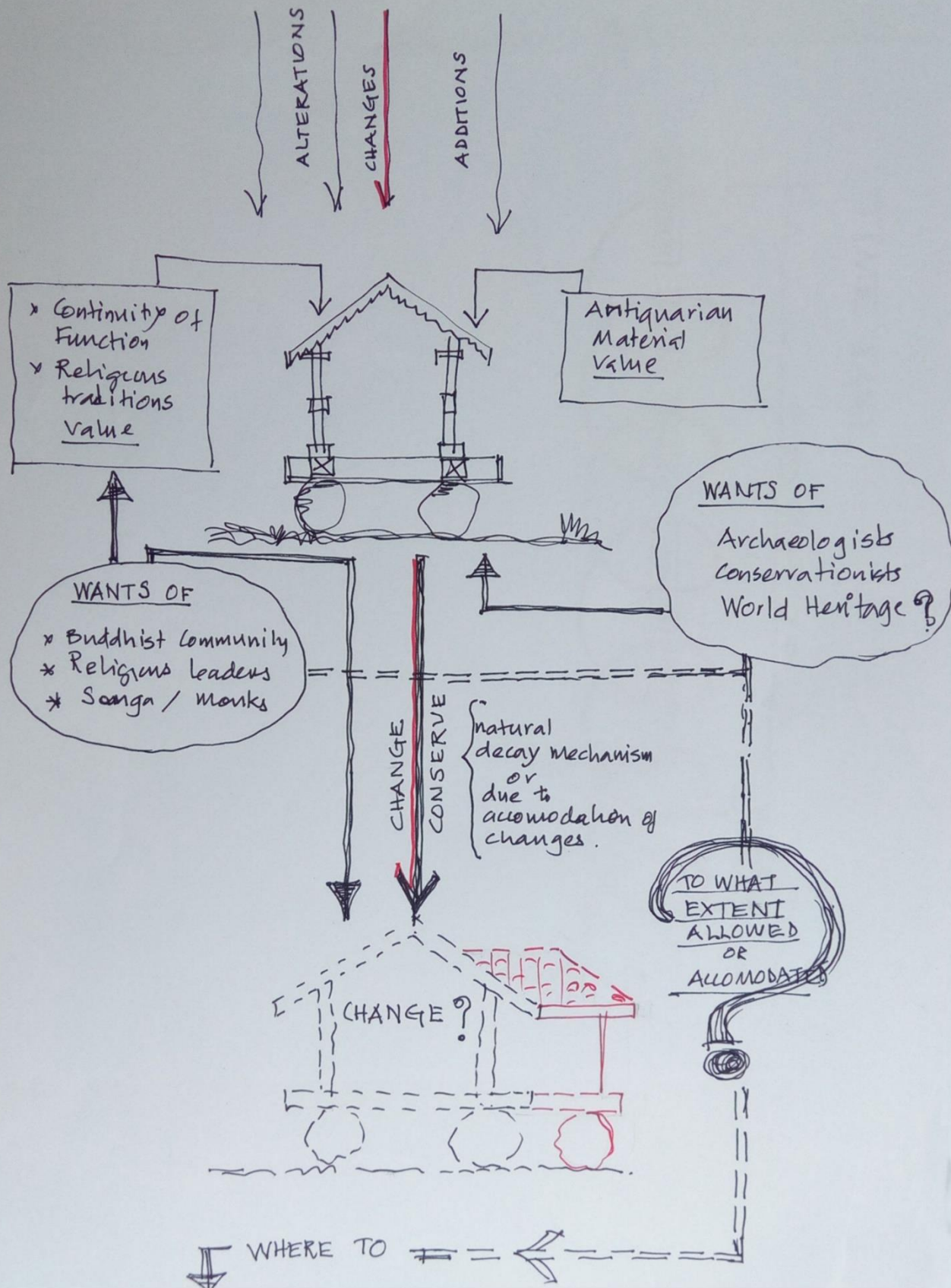
The objective of the 2013 Forum was to consider locally relevant approaches to the conservation and management of Buddhist heritage sites in Asia, rather than externally imposed international conservation policies. The focus was on those Buddhist sites (including some archaeological sites) that fall into the category of living heritage as defined by the continuity of religious practices and festivals by community groups.

Context

The specificity of Asian Buddhist heritage is embodied in spirituality and the cyclical nature of life guided by the Buddhist worldview that recognizes birth, death and rebirth within the overall concept of impermanence. This specificity challenges the prevalent notion of authenticity in conservation practice. Religious spaces and objects are valued for their spiritual function, which is manifested through the material, making the intangible inseparable from the tangible.

Originating in South Asia, Buddhism spread across Asia and beyond over a period of two and a half millennia. Buddhist traditions and practices are not static; they have evolved over time and continued to accommodate contemporary aspirations and needs of the community of believers. The act of merit making encouraged by the religion enables creation and renewal of religious buildings and objects, additions and modifications of religious spaces through the patronage of traditional crafts and other knowledge systems. These traditional systems led by the *Sangha* have managed the Buddhist heritage across Asia in their respective contexts over the centuries. Yet these traditional knowledge systems are often ignored in the conservation discourse. Only some Asian countries have formally recognized the management practice of the *Sangha* through their national legal frameworks. Therefore, current conservation theory and practice on Buddhist heritage needs to acknowledge these diverse values and systems in order to promote contextual and culturally sensitive approaches.





CONTEXTUALLY AND CULTURALLY ACCEPTABLE CONSERVATION

	KEY ISSUES ¹	CONCERNS	GUIDANCE	TARGET GROUPS
1	Buddhist religious practices largely focus on merit making through (i) offerings that may add to the existing physical fabric, (ii) the renewal of fabric giving new life to the structure and objects.	<p>Potential conflict between the World Heritage framework and the continuity of religious practices in World Heritage properties.</p> <p>Conventional conservation approaches would see these practices as problematic in terms of (i) authenticity, and (ii) preservation of original or historic fabric.</p>	<p>The scope of conservation should be expanded to include multidisciplinary understanding of heritage, accommodating specific worldviews applicable for such religious contexts and recognizing merit making through conservation.</p> <p>It should facilitate inclusive values assessment and decision-making process involving religious communities.</p> <p>Inclusion of contemporary crafts people should be promoted in the renewal process and they should be enabled to continue traditions through capacity building.</p>	Professionals Institutions Communities
2	Economic practices of the <i>Sangha</i> to meet contemporary needs, including pilgrimage and temple stays.	Some of these economic activities today may have changed significantly in response to the contemporary contexts, leading to issues of authenticity and integrity, and the compatibility of new interventions.	<p>Accept these needs and encourage productive interaction between the religious communities and professional communities to offer 'design solutions' for compatible interventions.</p> <p>Further explore whether integrity is more relevant in such contexts than the concept of authenticity.</p>	Communities Professionals Institutions
3	There are some Buddhist practices which accept decay of certain physical elements of high spiritual value as beyond the scope of human intervention, implying that their natural decay must be accepted.	Such scenarios fundamentally challenge the conventional conservation process, which aims at preserving elements of artistic and historic values.	Conservation should respect such values and practices, and embody them as guiding principles in decision-making processes, including policies and legal frameworks.	Professionals Institutions Communities
4	Certain religious spaces and objects may have restrictions on access or	Documentation and conservation of such restricted spaces and elements would not be	The conservation framework should acknowledge that there are some elements and practices which should not be documented and others which	Institutions Professionals

¹ This is based on the Forum discussion, which comprised mostly professionals and NOT the religious community. A need to extend this discussion to involve monks and other members of the religious community. Ideally, there should be a joint discussion process to account for the religious community's views and this should inform a revised version of this guidance document.

	visibility based on their spiritual values.	possible unless exceptions are made by the communities.	are appropriately documented by the communities and accept that (i) not everything may need to be documented and presented in the conventional way, instead they may be preserved through traditional practices, and (ii) not everything need to be preserved even though they may be documented.	
5	Some archaeological sites/artefacts are treated by associated religious communities as elements of veneration.	Such situations may contradict with the archaeological values of sites and artefacts, and may also clash with other communities if they have their own religious affiliations with the same heritage.	Conservation frameworks should respect such religious values ascribed to archaeological sites and artefacts, seeking acceptable ways of mutually appreciating multiple values. Further discussion may be needed to look into museum practices for the appropriate presentation of those relics that are important objects of veneration.	Communities Professionals Institutions
6	Buddhist institutions have always been a vehicle of education and a source of continuation of traditional knowledge systems.	There is often a gap between the traditional knowledge systems in Buddhist institutions and the heritage education process.	Create capacity-building programmes to bridge these gaps, for both the Buddhist institutions and the heritage education systems. In the case of Buddhist religious communities, capacity building could aim to upgrade their documentation and maintenance practices. In the case of conservation professionals, capacity building could aim to promote people-centred approaches.	
7	The Buddhist <i>Sangha</i> has its own traditional management system.	Except in a few countries, these traditional systems are not integrated into contemporary legal frameworks.	Ensure that conservation policies and legal frameworks recognize and integrate these traditional management systems.	Communities Institutions

For further discussion of these issues and illustrated examples, please see the publication of this Forum: <https://www.iccrom.org/publication/asian-buddhist-heritage-0>

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