

## **ACHR Asian Heritage Project Visit to Luang Prabang, Laos**

Luang Prabang mission report by André Alexander with input from Maurice Leonhardt  
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### **I General Description**

**Luang Prabang** is a city located in north central Laos, on the Mekong River about 425 km north of Vientiane, and the capital of Luang Prabang Province. The current population of the city is about 22,000. In the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, the town, whose origins go back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century was given its present name in honor of a precious Buddha image (Prabang). The political capital was moved to Vientiane (Vien Chang) during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, because its location was more secure from raiding Burmese armies, but Luang Prabang remained the royal seat (partly because the country split into three for a time) until 1975, when the communist Pathet Lao took over the government.

Luang Prabang had almost 135,000 international tourist arrivals in 2005, with recent growth rates for foreign tourist arrivals at 27%.

In 1995 Luang Prabang was inscribed on the World Heritage List.  
The UNESCO's evaluation committee justifies the inscription as follows:

*Luang Prabang is an outstanding example of the fusion of traditional architecture and Lao urban structures with those built by the European colonial authorities in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Its unique, remarkably well-preserved townscape illustrates a key stage in the blending of these two distinct cultural traditions.*

#### **Physical description**

French colonial architecture undoubtedly has made an impact on the town, but Luang Prabang's unique charm has probably more to do with its blend of golden temples, wooden houses and shady trees, its long history and its relaxed atmosphere. The impact of French colonial architecture and city planning has merely added a layer of European flavouring to a Southeast-Asian city.

The old town of Luang Prabang (hereafter abbreviated L-P) fills a peninsula, situated between the confluence of the Mekong and the Namkhane (a tributary of the Mekong). Measuring one kilometer by 250 meter, with the sacred hill of Phoussi in the center, the historic town is home to about 12,000 people only. 34 temples and 443 vernacular structures in the historic town are part of the World Heritage listing

#### **Relevant management regulations and upgrading mechanism**

A management office for the old town was established in the form of the Maison de Patrimoine, the Heritage House. A team of French architects was responsible for the very detailed technical report and management plan for Luang Prabang, which includes an inventory of all Buddhist temples and a typology of historic vernacular architecture.

There are different mechanisms for restoration of protected buildings. The buildings themselves were chosen by the (mostly French) team that prepared the World Heritage application and are listed in the official documentation, part of the World Heritage application. Listed monuments are to be restored by the management office, which has expert teams for this. Listed vernacular buildings will only be given assistance if they are used of public purposes afterwards, like exhibition rooms etc. Then there is a help fund for listed residential buildings. If owners of such buildings apply for help, the management office will provide roofing materials and wood, but no money. During the repair work the owner must respect the heritage regulations. There is no assistance for buildings that are not listed.

## **Observations**

Despite the impact that growing tourist numbers have already had on L-P, the town still displays signs of the survival of local life and culture. For example there are several local markets, some of them consisting of sellers squatting on blankets by the roadside; and the stands where the *rikshaw* drivers gather in the evening to drink homebrew by the Mekong. But at every corner new guesthouses and café-s and restaurants seem to sprout. L-P is visibly experiencing an early stage of a far-reaching transformation.

## **II Our assessment according to the project criteria**

### ***1 People's participation in the heritage project***

*a) Have the residents (poor and other) participated early in the planning phase?*

NO, in accordance with Laos's political system, a relaxed version of the Vietnamese form of Southeast-Asian socialism, the preparation for World Heritage listing and the drafting of the management plan were done top down.

*b) Who are the main actors? Who initiated the conservation project and why? Who is the main driving force of the process – government, private sector, external agencies, universities or community groups?*

Here we seem to have the rare case where a small group of international (read French) experts did most of the planning. These experts were clearly devoted to preserving L-P's architectural treasures, but appear to have been less interested in the people that live in them. Given the peculiar political system of Laos, perhaps it was not possible for them to involve the local people.

*c) Participation in the implementation?*

THE local government departments that we spoke to said that no heritage related intervention in town happens without prior discussion with the affected residents. Because Laos has a low population, and L-P is comparatively small, there may be some truth to the claim that the local government is "close to the people", so for example local markets are encouraged and a night market was set up for hill tribes and other, poorer rural folk to come and sell their goods in town. But regarding the overall management of L-P, people generally have little idea in advance in which direction things are moving.

*d) Participation in maintenance?* According to the mechanism, the people that made the management plan also qualified which houses are eligible for which kind of assistance. Only the most beautiful and grand buildings were listed as part o the heritage, and only these can receive support, while shabby old houses inhabited by

low-income families can receive nothing. The support for listed residential houses comes in the form of construction material. But it appears to be a difficult process – one man said that after applying for help, he had to wait for four years and only succeeded because he never gave up going back to the same offices to ask.

*f) Existence of community-based organisation?* NO, only those set up by the government. But there are traditional networks, such as the traditional savings groups.

*g) Existence of savings groups?* YES, there are traditional local savings group. There is also a "modern" savings scheme with ACHR involvement, but not in the old town, though that may change in the near future. Vietnamese are also active as money lenders, locally they have a tough reputation.

**Rating: 2.5 out of 5**

## ***2 How are the urban poor / low-income residents affected?***

*a) To what extent do they depend on the historic area for cheap housing?*

L-P suffers little of the congestion of other Asian big cities (it is the second-biggest city in Laos), but there is evidence of rural migration. In the old town, there is still a fair amount of low-income residents. People that we spoke complained that they could receive no help from the government for upgrading their homes. They also stated that even though they wished to remain in the old town (where they are engaged mainly in tourism and other service industries), people have begun to sell their homes to outsiders who want to move to L-P to engage in the tourism sector (mainly by building guesthouses), or to simply enjoy the local quality of life. We have observed that guesthouses were being constructed all over town. This process is going to accelerate unless there will be some form of support for local housing upgrading.

*b) Have there been resettlements and relocations?* NO, only the local cloth market has been relocated to far out of town, to the detriment of the established sellers. They blame a local developer in league with someone in the local administration. The old market is going to be converted into a shopping mall for luxurious and tourism items.

*c) Population figures of low-income residents 10 years ago / before any heritage initiative started, and today?* NO figures were available, but according to information obtained locally, there has been only a modest shift in residential patterns during this time.

*d) Changes in economic patterns for the poor – has their traditional livelihood been affected adversely (closing of markets, workshops etc), unintentionally positively (fringe benefits) or intentionally positive (new jobs, new markets for local products)? Had the project design promised these things?*

ACCORDING to the people we spoke to, prices of staple foods have not been affected much by tourism. Most people were glad that the tourists brought money and jobs to the town. The government has relocated some local food stalls from the temple areas to the main tourist thoroughfare. Some low-income families operate such food stalls for tourists and seem to be doing well, but we do not know how or if the government regulates the setting up of informal businesses, and we also do not know if the government plans to relocate or limit such informal local businesses in the future, since they have already started to do so.

e) Have living conditions improved (infrastructure – access to safe drinking water, better waste management, better drainage etc.)? THEY have improved, with aid money many streets in the old town have been paved or re-paved, and drainage facilities built. This has happened not only at tourist destination points, but also in purely residential areas.

**Rating: 3.5 out of 5**

### **3 The impact of tourism**

a) Which impacts can be observed?

THERE is every indication that the impact of tourism is growing, and that L-P is merely at an early stage of a transformation (a typical cycle is discovery, take-off, maturity and decline, with L-P being in the take-off phase).

Stage	Features
Discovery	Visitor number increases, local economy improves slowly, service industry begins to form.
Take-off	Large increase in visitor numbers; local economy heats up, service industry sees large investments by major local and international players edging out small local players.
Maturity	Still slight increase in visitor number; tourism industry has edged out many parts of the local economy, costs begin to set in (environmental, social, infrastructure, rising local prices).
Decline	Visitor numbers decline but may remain stable on a much smaller level if there is no major disaster, economy, social structures and place are transformed, local culture replaced by sanitized "culture for visitors", traditional local jobs largely vanished, land prices too high for low-income communities. New competing destinations are discovered that are still "unspoilt".

People who have been coming to L-P for years say every time they come back, they are amazed to see more new restaurants, guesthouses and souvenir shops have opened. It is easy to imagine that this transformation will accelerate, and that the impact on such a small town will be very big even in the short to medium term. Laos is also one of the poorest countries in the world, and a substantial part of the population of L-P can no doubt be considered low-income. These low-income groups are very vulnerable to buy-outs from tourist industry investors. At present, they benefit from tourism. There is some regulation from the government, such as limiting the areas where people can open informal food and market stalls. The government is also in the process of converting the old cloth market into a high-end tourist market, which has hurt local business and threatens to compete with the sellers of locally-made souvenirs. So far, the local fresh markets have not been relocated, and they have even benefited from paving and drainage works.

*b) What gains / interests for the tourist industry have negative / neutral / positive impacts on communities? Which interests of the tourist industry might result in conflicts with community interests?*

THE house owners of listed buildings have benefited, many are selling or renting out large and beautiful old houses. Many people in the old town earn their living from tourist-related activities. These people offer their own services, sell their own home-cooked food and locally-made souvenirs. With the anticipated growth in tourist arrivals, it is likely that many local people and their services and products can be pushed out by large-scale operators, who buy up houses and open restaurants and who flood the local markets with mass-produced souvenirs. At present there are no protective measures against this. This would change the nature of L-P considerably, with the disappearance of the authentic local atmosphere, but many new tourists looking for just another exotic and cheap place to spend a few days might not even notice.

**Rating: 3 out of 5 – the impact is more positive than negative until now, but threatens to become more negative than positive in the medium term.**

#### **4 Physical Aspects of Heritage Conservation**

*a) Were the results of heritage work carried out positive (good quality work, authenticity of place preserved)?*

The work carried out so far has preserved the atmosphere of the town, and the infrastructure work carried out in several pedestrian lanes is of good quality. Restoration of some of the more opulent residences and important monasteries has been quite good. Overall though there is a mixed picture because many poor houses have seen no work at all, and the quality of the streets is very uneven since only piecemeal work has been carried out. The inventory that was compiled as part of the management plan is very exhaustive, with excellent survey drawings, typologies and details, probably some of the best heritage documentation around. This material is available on CD from the local heritage tourism information center.

**Rating: 3.5 out of 5**

#### **5 Finances**

*How much money for historic conservation work came from tourism? How much from external sources? How much from the private sector (or from public-private partnerships), how much from government, how much from the communities?*

THE conservation management so far was funded largely by European Union, French government and private funds, with fundraising facilitated by the UNESCO after the World Heritage listing. It appears so far only little money is collected locally (through tickets to individual monasteries, but not through overall tourist taxes).

*How much in relation to the overall was spent on low-income communities?*

For housing upgrading, restoration of first class monuments receives almost complete subsidy from the management office (which also implements the work), but second grade and sub-grade housing receives only some assistance in the form of materials, which means a lot of housing rehabilitation has been paid from private (mostly local) sources.

**Rating: 2.5 out 5**

### **6 The Image of the city**

*Has it changed / improved as a result of heritage conservation work? Is the heritage district a main factor for the image of the city or a lesser factor?*

The main image of the city is for many people associated with the relaxed atmosphere, the friendly local people and the exotic local culture, as well as the extreme cheapness compared to most other countries, even in Asia. And all this can be found with the backdrop of historic Buddhist monasteries and a sleepy old town without traffic. Unfortunately, almost all of these points are subject to change due to the impact of tourism.

### **7 Who were the conservationists and where had they received their training?**

Conservation

*The names of the schools and conservation courses that are available in the city / country and their nature and orientation.*

There is no education in conservation locally available. Much of the early work was a French-Laotian collaboration with French architects, since 2001 the management office has a Laotian chief manager. There may be too few local architects and conservation experts available.

*Conservation and relocation laws, zoning regulations and procedures in the city/country, building by-laws and zoning regulations and the manner in which they impinge on conservation-related development.*

The management regulations are available on Cd, it is a very impressive work, printed out it comes to six volumes with many maps. However, it is very technical, mainly focusing on monuments and landscape, singling out important buildings for conservation. But it deals too little with the local people and the local culture, and it seems this document alone cannot stop the ongoing transformation of the town under the impact of tourism.

**Rating: 3.5 out of 5**

### **Overall rating: 3 out of 5.**

From charm alone, the town would rate 5, but Luang Prabang and the town's low-income communities appear very vulnerable to the impacts of tourism. The rating is expressing this vulnerability, aggravated by the fact that Laos has been isolated from much of the rest of the world for a long time, so that the impact of fast globalization on this small town with its traditional culture not used to such exposure can be quite substantial.

### **III Recommendations:**

Luang Prabang is still a living historic town, where local culture and low-income communities exist. But they are threatened. The existing programs and management regulations are not designed to either help low-income families to upgrade their homes and so to stay in L-P, nor to limit the impacts of tourism. This means that the local planners are not even fully aware of the full impact that is going to come, which will

bring many dangers: low-income communities will leave the old town and the local culture will be replaced by a themepark façade atmosphere, unless some action is taken. We are proposing to set up a special fund, based partly on the local savings schemes, to help poor families to upgrade their homes in the old town. They should receive free architectural planning and design assistance, so that the houses can be upgraded by themselves but according to environmentally sound building principles and compatible to the historic surroundings.

The heritage task force will raise the issue with ACHR to develop a pilot project.

## **IV Sources**

### **Persons interviewed:**

- local food seller, whose family moved here 60 years ago from the countryside
- local guesthouse operator
- Mrs. Vandy Sisouphan, Deputy Director of the Lao Women's Union
- Mr. Oun, Director, Heritage House (Management Office)
- Mr. Ramy Sithirath, Chief Secretary, Heritage House
- Ms Noyna, proprietor of paper-making workshop in L-P
- Mr. Rik Ponne, Programme Specialist UNESCO Bangkok and expert on Laos
- Coffeeshop proprietor at local vegetable market
- Resident A (owner of old wooden house)
- Resident B (large traditional old house, relative of old royal family, now making bricks)
- 2 sellers of toiletries in the new market
- cloth seller in the new market

### **Sites visited:**

Old town, Phousi Hill, Wat Xieng Thong, National Museum, Wat Pak Khan, Wat Pa Huak, local vegetable market, relocated cloth market, most residential lanes in the old town, night market, food market.

### **Source materials**

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