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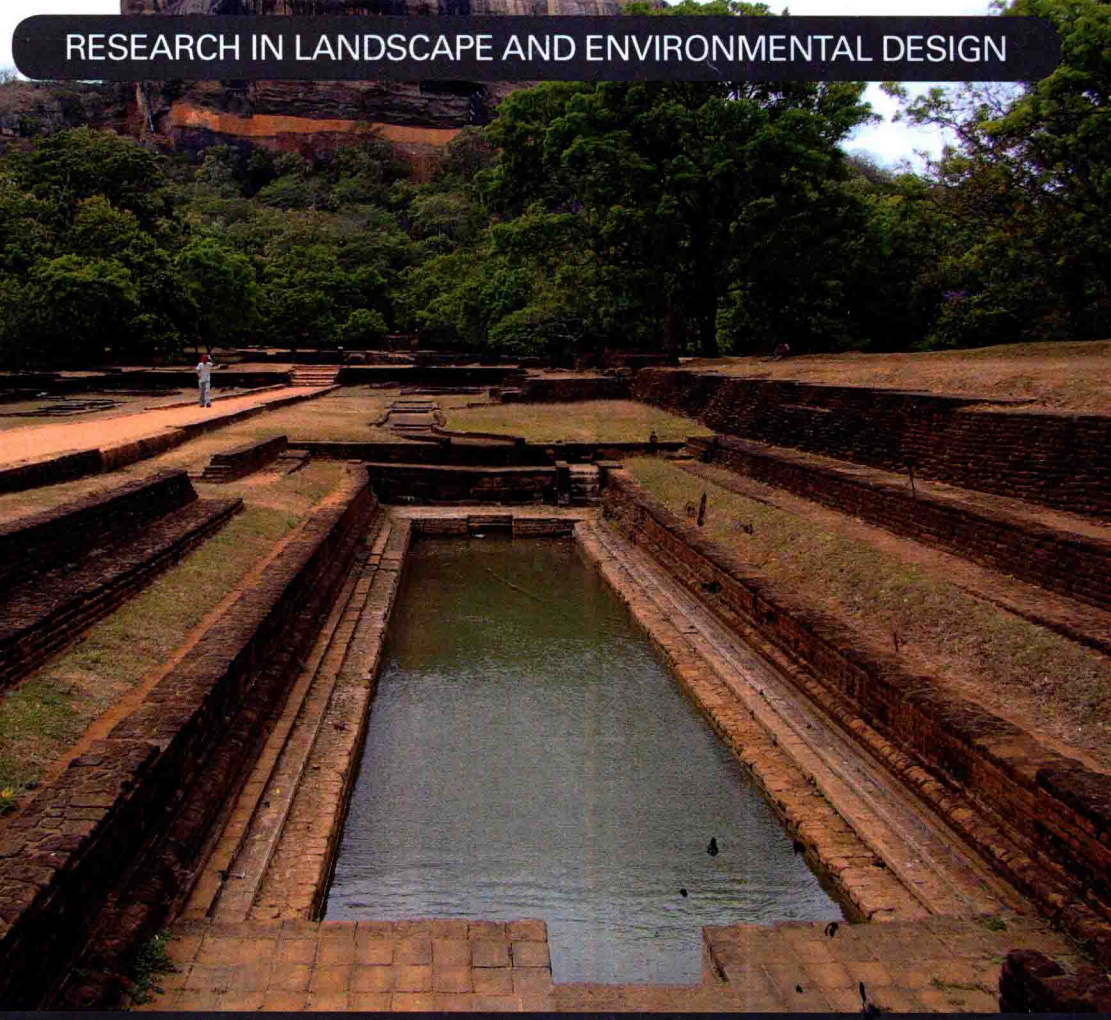

# CULTURAL LANDSCAPES OF SOUTH ASIA

## STUDIES IN HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT

EDITED BY
KAPILA D. SILVA AND AMITA SINHA

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# Cultural Landscapes of South Asia

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Edited by
Kapila D. Silva and Amita Sinha

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# Cultural Landscapes of South Asia

The pluralism of South Asia belies any singular reading of its heritage. In spite of this diversity, its cultural traditions retain certain attributes that are, at their core, South Asian – not only in their capacity to self-organize and enact, but in their ability to reinvent cultural memories and retain an intimate connection with nature and landscape.

This volume focuses on the notion of cultural landscape as a medium integrating multiple forms of heritage, and points to a new paradigm for conservation practices in the South Asian context. Even though the construct of cultural landscape has been accepted as a category of heritage, its potent use in heritage management in general and within the South Asian context in particular has not been widely studied. The volume challenges the prevalent views of heritage management in South Asia that are entrenched in colonial legacies and contemporary global policy frameworks.

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# Prologue

## Imagining the future of conservation in South Asia

*Rahul Mehrotra*

The roots and norms of architectural conservation practices in South Asia generally lie in the Western canons of conservation practice. However, in South Asia in the practice of building, it is not easy to distinguish between conservation, preservation, restoration, reconstruction and contemporary formulations. The obvious reason is that the living craft traditions in South Asia facilitate repair, preservation and reconstruction as easily and perhaps as authentically as norms might demand. In fact the coexistence of many times – where skills, practices, approaches and values from different centuries are simultaneously alive – is an aspect that a conservation practitioner in South Asia cannot escape.

Thus the continuous nature of use and the notion of cultural traditions evolving into each other over time most often blur the distinctions that are otherwise made in Western traditions defined by specific time periods. In this respect, the South Asian examples relate much more relevantly to situations implied by the *Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994), where conservation professionals from around the world questioned some of the assumptions about authenticity found in earlier international charters. Its follow-up discussions emphasized developing greater understanding of the values represented by the cultural properties themselves, as well as respecting the role such monuments and sites play in contemporary society – suggesting that significance evolves.

This idea of 'evolving significance' takes on a critical dimension when contemplating the preservation of the built environment in South Asia or the creation of new artefacts. The question then becomes, how does the designer or conservationist grapple with significance or meaning? In fact, this notion of 'cultural significance' is something that emerged clearly in the conservation debate in the 1980s – in the *Burra Charter*, to be specific. But it is a definition that is 'object' centric (devoid of life) with its roots perhaps in the debate propagated by the antiquarians of the Renaissance. The interesting question is how one deals with this idea or notion in a highly pluralistic society where hybridity is on the move and where cultural memory is often an enacted process, or where meanings are not stable and in fact fluid.

It is here, that accepting that 'cultural significance' *evolves*, it is something fluid and ever changing, will truly clarify the role of the architect and

the conservationist as also an advocate of change (versus one who opposes change) – one who can engage with both these conditions on equal terms and blur the obvious binaries to perhaps create hybrid options that encompass the simultaneous validity of both. The architect as conservationist would then slip back and forth between the role of a planner, the role of a conservationist in the pure sense and of a designer who can see the possibilities in the way spaces can be used and therefore reinterpreted. This is critical for a grounded engagement with the practice of conservation in South Asia as well as societies and regions in flux across the globe.

Instead, unfortunately, most conservation debates discuss change in terms of the loss of something as opposed to new possibilities, because people (especially the propagators and patrons of conservation effort) will easily react to any sort of new condition as worse than some 'magic moment' in the past. Conservation professionals then easily develop a rationale to describe that sense of loss. However, in the context of our contemporary urban state, the issue is how to actually simultaneously identify new typologies and work with them rather than to dwell too dominantly in the 'postcard city' – a condition that only flights of nostalgia momentarily recreate! It is this shift that is crucial for both the practice of conservation as well in the education of practitioners for South Asia.

In the former case, a conservation practitioner or activist would be seen as an advocate not only of retention of what survives from the past, but also as one who gives expression to contemporary aspirations. Naturally, this crucial shift must occur first in the education of the conservation practitioner. If this shift occurs – where the disciplines of architecture, landscape architecture and urban design once again blur – then new conservation architects would work more positively with wonderful, kaleidoscopic, constantly evolving conditions, where new futures are imagined and the past informs these futures. It is perhaps the only way to evolve a sustainable conservation strategy in the world today.

It is in this context that this book, *Cultural Landscapes of South Asia: Studies in Heritage Conservation and Management*, will be a timely and seminal addition to the literature on conservation not only globally but more crucially for education and practice in South Asia. The collection of chapters that broadens this discussion in terms of the question of cultural landscapes and the conservation of historic urban centres by default sets the extreme condition to test the business as usual norms of conservation. Furthermore, to be situated in South Asia takes these complexities to another extreme. It is from these extremes that often the most robust theoretical frames are established. This is the potential of this book for the conservation debate more generally.

The critical concern for conservation theory is that when we don't have a vision for the locality on which we are operating, we are restricted to operating in the sphere of nostalgia. Or put another way, in 'reclaiming the past' our theories are constructed around the assumption that our city and cultural

landscapes are static and stable entities, and that architecture is the only mechanism by which memory is codified. Of course there are discussions about intangible heritage and so forth, but how these ideas intersect with our ability to spatially imagine the preservation of these environments is critical.

This volume addresses this question in the most direct terms and will serve as a robust framework for future directions in engaging with the new emerging landscapes of South Asia – in our cities and historic sites and also the larger hinterlands of heritage landscapes. It is in this broad frame of imagination that the conservation professional in South Asia will be able to engage strategically. That is, constructively intervening and facilitating the creation and preservation of urban and cultural landscapes where new futures will evolve gently from the legacy of the omnipresent past in South Asia.

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