

5th OWHC Regional Meeting for Asia-Pacific

Hue | October 15-16, 2025

Discussions on the OWHC's New Urban Project

Report

INTRODUCTION

The Regional Meeting in Hue brought together representatives from the cities of Andong, Gimhae, Gochang, Gwangju, Gyeongju, and Hwasun in the Republic of Korea; Denpasar and Sawahlunto in Indonesia; Hue and Hoi An in Vietnam; Kandy in Sri Lanka; and Vigan in the Philippines. The presentation of their challenges relating to the conservation and development of historic centers highlighted both a diversity of problems and concerns widely shared among the cities. These findings bring Asian cities closer than ever to their counterparts in other regions of the world, frequently based on similar analyses. The cities have actively engaged in the collective reflection led by the OWHC to share their experiences and seek new solutions together.

The *New Urban Project* will be finalized for discussion and adoption at the 18th OWHC World Congress (Marrakech, October 26-29, 2026). It will offer member cities a program for the regeneration of historic centers through urban strategies targeting *habitability*. It will provide cities with a common frame of reference enabling them to act as a network, and an operational framework providing them with the tools and partnerships necessary to design their local strategies and implement the resulting projects.

OWHC member cities in the Asia-Pacific region can make a concrete contribution to the development of the *New Urban Project*. This report highlights the convergence between the actions or aspirations of cities and the orientations already identified by all OWHC cities. On the basis of this report, Asian cities, supported by the Asia-Pacific Regional Secretariat, can mobilize to bring their vast experience and unique initiatives to the ongoing process, which can help all cities in the Organization.

SHARED CHALLENGES

The historic centers of Asian cities face a range of structural challenges. Some cities are confronted with a set of interconnected factors, the effects of which are magnified and accelerated by climate change. These factors threaten the preservation, quality of life, and very sustainability of historic cities. The following observations can be made:

1. A fragile urban environment and inadequate infrastructure

Some historic centers have significant deficits in essential basic infrastructure and mobility problems exacerbated by the morphology of old neighborhoods. The degradation of the urban environment and vulnerability to natural disasters increase the risks to residents and heritage sites.

2. A vulnerable heritage that is difficult to maintain

The quantity of heritage assets to be preserved—tangible, intangible, and archaeological—often exceeds the financial and technical capacities of municipalities. Residents, who are responsible for maintaining everyday

buildings, rarely have the resources necessary to maintain costly traditional structures. The scarcity of suitable materials and the gradual loss of expertise further exacerbate the fragility of heritage.

3. Economic pressure ill-suited to heritage constraints

The current physical and regulatory constraints on historic centers discourage investors, limit economic activity, and slow down modernization. Problems with transportation and basic services remain recurrent. Low economic attractiveness is compounded by a framework of procedures that are difficult to apply, leading to illegal construction and difficulty in enforcing the rules.

4. A tourism sector generating significant tensions

The increase in visitor numbers is putting significant pressure on historic districts, leading to congestion, damage to sites, increased waste, squandering of resources, and higher land and service costs. In several cities, this growth in tourism is changing local customs and undermining residents' quality of life.

5. Marked social vulnerabilities

Historic centers are often home to aging, low-income populations, some of whom have been displaced by conflict or disaster. Rising living costs and restrictions related to protected areas limit the settlement of new generations. This demographic fragility puts pressure on residential functions and weakens community dynamics.

6. Fragmented governance

Heritage, urban planning, and administrative regulations overlap, creating contradictions and red tape that hinder decision-making. The lack of coordination between public authorities and insufficient dialogue with residents weaken planning and complicate the management of historic centers. The absence of structured maintenance policies accentuates the gradual deterioration of sites.

INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVES

The experiences presented by the cities, varied in their approaches and inspirations, show that heritage is not limited to the conservation of old buildings, but can become a driver of sustainable development, social cohesion, and well-being. When combined with citizen participation and a sustainable development strategy, heritage preservation can help build vibrant, inclusive, and resilient cities where history becomes a driver for the future.

Asian cities' approaches rely on methodical management and active citizen participation to leverage heritage in ways that stimulate the local economy and tourism and strengthen community identity and pride, while keeping the city vibrant and prosperous. Reinterpreting heritage and its values makes it possible to turn the page on a sometimes-painful past and look toward a green, inclusive, and livable future:

Andong focuses on preserving cultural heritage in conjunction with residents, seeking a balance between conservation and quality of life. The city uses walking as a central approach, allowing residents and visitors to discover and appreciate heritage while enjoying positive effects on health, community cohesion, and cultural appreciation. Initiatives include:

- Nakdong River and Moonlight Bridge: development of tourist sites combining heritage and natural landscapes, promoting relaxation, leisure, and cultural activities.
- Seonseong Susang Road: known as the road of loss and memory, it allows visitors to remember a vanished village and has become a place of healing and reflection.
- Public facilities: parks, sports fields, musical fountains, and recreational areas to improve the well-being of residents and visitors.

The city encourages the active participation of residents through village preservation meetings and the local management of heritage villages with financial contributions from residents.

Denpasar presents a sustainable development approach ("Denpasar Harmony") based on Balinese culture and the Tri Hita Karana philosophy (harmony with God, with others, and with the environment). The aim is to revitalize traditional markets (Badung, Kumbasari) and heritage areas, particularly after the recent floods, to integrate Balinese architecture into modern buildings, to expand green spaces and develop sustainable mobility (electric vehicles, cycle paths), and to reduce plastic waste and promote a clean city. The city presents itself as a living laboratory, where heritage, environment, and innovation complement each other.

Gochang, in the village of Maesan, is preparing to develop tourist activities through a joint venture between residents and heritage organizations.

Gyeongju: in Hwangnidan-gil, some heritage sites are being repaired by the residents themselves and transformed into tourist accommodation (services, cafes, and restaurants). Twenty traditional buildings have been renovated thanks to this special cooperation between the village and the community.

Hoi An has undergone significant development and a notable improvement in the living conditions of its population since its inscription on the World Heritage List 25 years ago. However, this success is now accompanied by major challenges. The first challenge is overtourism. The massive influx of visitors has led to temporary overcrowding in the historic center, causing traffic jams, saturation of public spaces, increased cost of living, and difficult waste and wastewater management. Residents must coexist with tourist flows on a daily basis, which affects their quality of life.

This tourist pressure has various consequences:

- On intangible heritage. Traditional lifestyles, cultural practices, and local identity tend to fade away in favor of standardized tourist activities, undermining the authenticity of the site.
- On the conservation of heritage buildings. Although protection regulations were put in place very early on and financial assistance is available to support owners, these measures no longer guarantee fair conditions, particularly for private properties. In addition, the resources needed for conservation—traditional materials and skilled labor—are becoming scarce and deteriorating.
- The architectural values of the site create tension between preservation objectives and economic imperatives, particularly in the context of a developing country where tourism remains an essential driver of growth.

Hue is relying on international cooperation to address climate issues to share experiences on heritage city planning, green tourism, smart management, heritage education for future generations, conservation, energy efficiency, and digital transformation, and to invite investors, researchers, and artists to create and develop together. Hue has demonstrated that a city can develop strongly while retaining its soul. Hue's value lies not only in its ancient buildings,

but also in the spirit of humanity, sincerity, and dignity of its inhabitants. Hue will preserve the past to nourish the future and develop the present to keep its heritage alive.

Kandy is a multi-religious city where Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, and Muslims live together in harmony, earning it the name City of Peace. It hosts many ancient cultural events, including the famous Asala Perahera festival. The City Council works closely with the Department of Archaeology to restore degraded buildings and protect cultural heritage from the pressures of modernization. These actions aim to preserve the city's World Heritage status while ensuring a safe, pleasant, and welcoming environment for residents and visitors.

Sawahlunto developed around an integrated system of exceptional mining infrastructure. The city proudly bears a unique identity shaped by its industrial past and multi-ethnic social fabric. However, there are many challenges: preserving the authenticity of the heritage while meeting contemporary needs, managing urban growth, improving public services and housing, and balancing tourism development with the quality of life of residents. The municipality's main areas of action to create a vibrant city where heritage supports the well-being of residents include:

- Integrating heritage into everyday life: transforming mining infrastructure into museums, cultural centers, schools, or creative spaces.
- Sustainable urban development: improving housing, sanitation, and public spaces while preserving the historic character.
- Community-based tourism: training local guides, artisans, and entrepreneurs so that tourism revenues benefit the community.
- Adaptive reuse: repurposing old railway and industrial infrastructure.
- Digitization and smart management: GIS systems, digital archives, visitor apps.

Vigan aspires to be a livable heritage city. After a period of decline in the 1950s to 1980s—marked by the abandonment of the historic center, a lack of investment, and the market fire in 1994—the city launched a comprehensive vision and planning program in 1995: the *Vigan Heritage Conservation Program* and the *Vigan Master Plan*. This plan aims to strengthen the identity of the inhabitants, promote sustainable tourism, and enhance tangible and intangible cultural resources, particularly traditional industries.

To protect the historic center, the city adopted several ordinances, including a Conservation Code governing restoration, rehabilitation, construction, and signage. Vigan put technical tools in place: a *Conservation- Council*, a working group of experts, a project approval process, and a conservation manual for property owners. Conservation is accompanied by environmental initiatives, active mobility, the development of public spaces, and tourism promotion. Lessons learned from recent experiences confirm that conservation is successful when it is inclusive, transparent, and generates economic and social benefits.

COMMON ASPIRATIONS

The cities of the OWHC Regional Secretariat in Asia-Pacific aspire to make their historic centers exemplary territories where tradition nourishes innovation, where heritage supports collective well-being, and where urban development, culture, environment, and spirituality are balanced to build a sustainable, harmonious, and shared future. Their common aspirations are based on the following values and principles:

Shared values

1. **Cultural continuity:** Cities affirm the essential value of the link between past and present. Tradition, far from being nostalgia, nourishes creativity and guides innovation. Preserving cultural and spiritual identity allows us to build a future that is rooted and coherent.
2. **Harmony and balance:** The balance between culture, environment, spirituality, technology, and economy is a core value. Cities seek harmony between preservation and transformation, between the needs of residents and tourism dynamics, between urban development and respect for the place.
3. **Revitalization and regeneration:** Revitalization is seen as a positive action that restores energy, meaning, and vitality to historic centers. Cities value the ability to reinterpret heritage, regenerate cultural landscapes, and renew urban functions in a spirit of innovation.
4. **Primacy of communities:** The population is at the heart of the urban project. Cities promote solidarity, participation, well-being, and inclusion. Communities are recognized as guardians of heritage, but also as actors in its future. Welcoming new residents and strengthening the sense of belonging are priorities.
5. **Transmission and collective pride:** Heritage is seen as a shared asset to be passed on. Its value lies in its ability to create a shared mental space, strengthen collective memory, and inspire pride. Education, awareness, and citizen engagement are at the heart of this transmission.
6. **Responsibility for the future:** Cities want to develop a long-term vision based on sustainability, resource protection, and responsible development management. Heritage becomes the foundation for a sustainable and balanced future. Urban decisions are guided by the desire to meet the needs of present and future generations.
7. **Informed innovation:** Innovation, whether social, cultural, or technological, is valued when it strengthens the identity of the place and community practices. Digital tools, creativity, and new forms of cooperation are used to preserve, transmit, and develop the local community.

Strong principles

The values identified by Asian cities clarify the concept of *habitability* promoted by the OWHC. Their approach reinforces the *New Urban Project* by affirming strong principles from which clear operational objectives can emerge:

1. **Connecting the past and the future in a creative way:** maintaining a living link between tradition and modernity. It is not just a question of preserving, but of reinterpreting and updating heritage so that it inspires contemporary transformations. Heritage thus becomes a driver of innovation, a foundation for creativity, and a shared reference point for all generations.
2. **Making heritage a resource for balanced development:** historic centers aspire to become models of regenerative cities where ecology, culture, spirituality, and technology come together harmoniously. Heritage is no longer seen as a constraint or a relic of the past, but as the foundation for a sustainable future, capable of supporting a balance between preservation, responsible exploitation, and urban development.

3. **Revitalize rather than freeze:** revitalization aims to recreate the original energy of cities, reactivating their cultural landscapes and social fabrics to produce lively, attractive, and innovative spaces that respond to new lifestyles while respecting local identity. This involves promoting traditions (rituals, solidarity, community practices) while giving them contemporary meaning.
4. **Placing residents at the center of the urban project:** local communities are recognized as the guardians and creators of heritage values. The well-being, stability, and active participation of residents become priorities. Cities seek to attract new residents, promote the integration of newcomers, and strengthen pride and a sense of belonging to the place.
5. **Building a long-term, comprehensive, and shared vision:** developing a comprehensive and coherent strategy that links urban projects, heritage values, cultural identity, and sustainability objectives. This requires targeted investments, special strategies adapted to local characteristics, raising awareness among residents, and promoting heritage that is understood, experienced, and passed on by all. Heritage becomes a common mental space, a shared language that allows us to build the future collectively.
6. **Strengthening social, cultural, and tourist harmony:** Cities seek to preserve the balance between their deep-rooted identities and the expectations of tourism. They want to develop respectful tourism practices that primarily benefit residents, support local economies, and help strengthen harmony between visitors, residents, and heritage sites.
7. **Mobilizing technology and innovation to support preservation:** Digital tools—documentation, promotion, education—are being mobilized to strengthen knowledge, dissemination, and transmission of heritage. Technological innovation is seen as an ally in better managing, promoting, and sharing the city's historical riches.