Rural development: A strategy for urban heritage management in India

by

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Questioning the "urban century" paradigm in the Indian context

This twenty-first century is widely depicted as the "urban century". To generalise, however, is misleading. Urbanisation is conditioned by multiple variables in place, time and cultural context. At the scale and diversity of India, the potential exists to leap-frog the received wisdom and historical patterns of urbanism that have led to the destruction of so much urban heritage elsewhere (Figure 1).

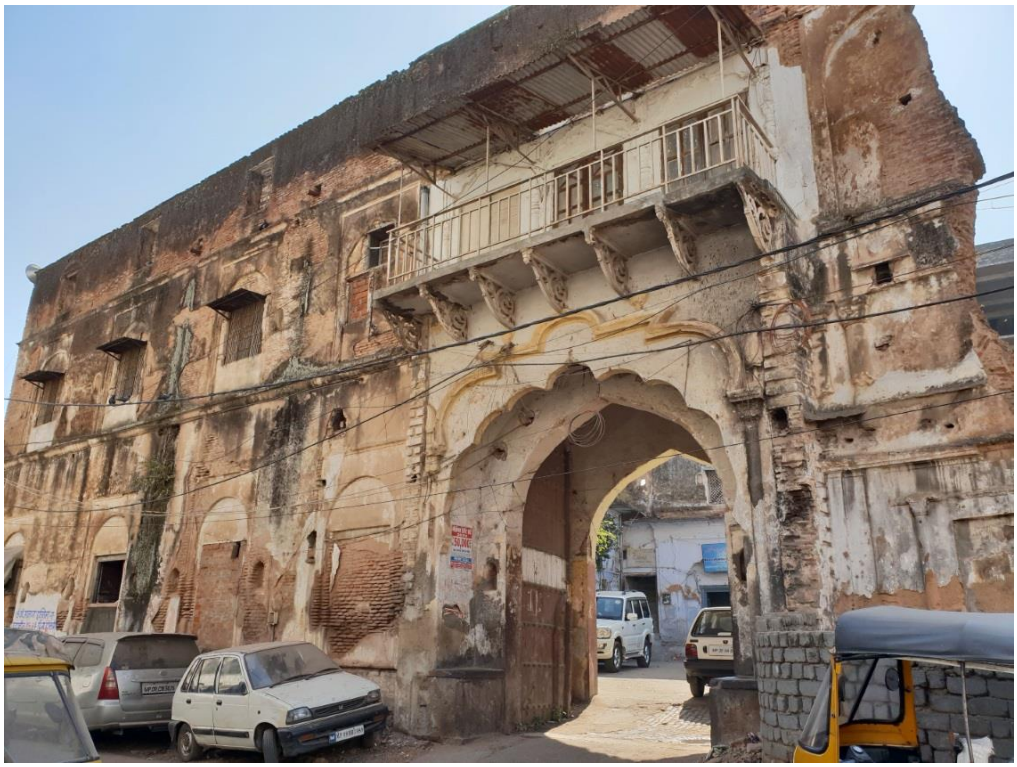

Figure 1. Bhopal, Peer Gate area. Mirroring destruction elsewhere, urban heritage is currently under serious threat in cities throughout India. Here, a Moghul influenced former courtyard house has lost its original inner complex and the right hand portion has been demolished pending redevelopment. (Source: Carsten Hermann)

Population statistics and forecasts

In May 2020, the population of India reached 1.38 billion, of which 35 per cent is urban and 65 per cent rural, the latter being distributed across upwards of 600,000 villages. An equivalent urban-rural proportionality applies to the Indian sub-Continent as a whole, as well

as other countries in the region including Myanmar and Vietnam. For China, also in May 2020, the overall population reached 1.44 billion, of which 61 per cent is urban and 39 per cent rural. The latest predictions are that the population of India will surpass that of China by 2022.

Discrepancies in urbanisation: India compared to China

The divergence in urbanisation between India and China is informative, reflecting as it does variables including in the modes of economic production.

The global urban revolution that advanced through the nineteenth century was intimately tied to widespread industrialisation. Cities became important centres of manufacture demanding large concentrations of labour and urbanisation mushroomed. The success of the Chinese economy today is firmly tied to manufacturing industry, providing some 100 million jobs. The current urban population bias in China conforms to a continuation of the historical model into the twenty-first century.

Today's variant of the urbanisation model, gathering momentum since the 1980s, is closely tied to the rise of the information economy and the processes of globalisation, including the mobility of capital and fluidity of means of exchange. India's urbanisation, especially in the southern States, has been driven in substantial measure by fast growth in the software industry. Labour-intensive industrialisation is low, providing some 10 million jobs – a tenth of the figure in China – with ongoing urban growth deriving primarily from natural increase rather than net migration from rural areas.

The substantial and continuing rural population bias in India manifests the potential for a new twenty-first century model of distributed urbanisation.

Contextualising urbanisation patterns to India

India's larger cities contain a seemingly bewildering spectrum of economically-connected activities that embrace pre-industrial-age technologies through to today's post-industrial and computer-driven era. This characteristic is allied to a hybrid social structure that sustains strong ancestral traditions, social ties and cultural identities including caste in the urban slums, allows extended families to flourish and remain connected to the myriad villages, and supports fluidity in patterns of rural-urban-rural migration.

As Jan Nijman writes (2012): "We are only just beginning to understand Indian cities in their entirety, this amalgam of human modes of survival and adaptation, of diverse modes of production, historical continuities and ruptures, disparate urban fabric, complex geographies, and vernacular representations of modernity. India seems to be writing its own script." Furthermore, the notion that accelerating urban transition in India would enable more citizens to live better quality, healthier and better-educated lives as well as lead to less resource-intensive development with lower environmental impacts, needs to be qualified.

India faces enormous challenges of housing and basic services, infrastructure including transportation systems, energy generation and distribution. These issues are magnified in the major cities where acute urban pollution and deficiencies in water supply and sanitation pose major risks to human health and ecosystems.

That “India is very much going its own way and old urban theories may have to be discarded”, concurs with the conclusions of a number of leading authorities, including:

- The India Institute for Human Settlements (2012): “We will need to understand and deepen the linkages that enable small urban centres to become catalysts for rural non-farm employment, sites of opportunities, and a foundation for eliminating rural poverty and exclusion.”
- Paul Polak (2014): “The only effective large-scale answer to extreme poverty is to stimulate rapid scalable growth centered specifically in the villages where most poor people live, not urban-centered growth that generates only a trivial trickle-down impact.”

This questioning of the orthodox urbanisation paradigm corresponds with today’s environmental awareness and with rapid advances across multiple supporting sectors including digital communications and renewable energies.

Concurrently, this questioning animates a re-evaluation of traditional academic and object-focused definitions of urban heritage, to embrace the broad socio-cultural reality of urban environments at all scales, and in concert with the evolving UNESCO historic urban landscape initiative.

Initiatives and technologies that support a de-centrist agenda

The challenges facing India’s majority rural population are legion. Much attention is focused on poverty-related issues linked to narratives framed on the premiss that rural poverty is inevitable and migration to conurbations is the solution. Today, local initiatives coupled with rapid technological advances challenge these assumptions.

The satisfaction of basic needs

Water

Initiatives to address the ongoing water crisis at the rural scale are numerous and include:

- The revival of ancient traditions of rainwater harvesting: collecting monsoon rainwater, settling out the silt and mud, and storage without evaporation.
- Major programmes of afforestation designed to increase India’s forest cover, supporting land water storage, enriching the soils as well as improving air quality and combating greenhouse gas emissions.

Food

Recent innovations in organic farming and sustainable land management are addressing historical issues and additionally opening up national and global marketing opportunities:

- Vandana Shiva, is a leading champion of indigenous knowledge and advocate of biodiversity in agriculture to increase productivity, nutrition and farmers’ incomes.

- Sikkim was pronounced India's fully organic farming state in January 2016, is additionally the first state to proclaim 100% sanitation coverage, and together these are boosting the Himalayan state's tourism industry.
- Permaculture, the eco-system-based science and practice of sustainable self-sufficiency that simultaneously addresses environmental degradation.

Shelter

Rural India has access to an abundance of sustainable, climatically adapted building materials whose usage dominates vernacular building across the country including in the older parts of cities. For example:

- Adobe: sun-dried load-bearing bricks composed of soil types mixed with water and plant fibres. Extremely durable, adobe can be made up on individual construction sites, and is mass-produced for an expanding national market (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Mudiya Kheda, near Chhola in Madhya Pradesh. Commercial adobe manufacture undertaken in a rural context seasonally. (Source: Carsten Hermann)

The digital and energy revolutions

Information and communications technologies (ICT)

Digital technologies alongside fast internet access provide unlimited opportunities for universal education, skills training and knowledge transfer, global connectivity, exchange, and marketing. Smartphones have the potential to empower all sections of communities and traverse gender and caste barriers.

Localised renewable energies

Today's energy revolution removes historical dependence on major power stations (including fossil-fuelled) and large-scale electrical grids, over-coming non-availability and supply shortages especially in physically remote rural areas. Depending on the region, micro-climate and other factors, solar power, wind generation, fast and slow continuous water flows, biomass and other harnessed natural resources, independently or in combination, and including with battery back-up, can serve both individual sites and micro-grids. Location is not a factor in this twenty-first century.

Local manufacture, global markets

Global to local

The Industrial Revolution commenced in small settlements, serving and served by local populations. Expanding industries together with their workforces thereafter concentrated in towns and cities, including for enhanced physical connectivity to their markets. Today, manufacturing and service industries in India are significantly less dependent on physical location than historically; also, compared to China.

The combination of the digital and energy revolutions provides unlimited opportunities for the establishment and development of enterprises across rural India, of all types and at all scales and levels: from the revival and expansion of manufacturing based on eco-friendly crops such as jute and hemp, including as increasingly favoured alternatives to plastics; through specialist fabrics and crafts marketed to high-end outlets in major world cities; to internet marketing of any product or service by anyone, to anyone anywhere throughout India and beyond.

Such represents industrialisation (together with manifold branches of the service sector) without urbanisation and challenges the mantra of the "urban century". A place-specific, territorially-balanced approach based on where populations and natural resources are rather than the prescription that people must migrate to often distant urban centres, anticipates new and more flexible ways of understanding urbanisation.

Questioning the paradigms of heritage

The pretext to reflect on the multiple opportunities that exist for planning and investment in rural development supports a parallel reflection on the parameters that condition established approaches to the definition and safeguarding of urban heritage and the opportunity to re-visit them.

The monumentalisation of heritage

Worldwide, orthodox academic, professional and institutional understanding and practices of cultural heritage are circumscribed by delimited definitions and categories of the tangible and the intangible: selected objects and manifestations. The apex of this discourse is signalled by the 1972 UNESCO *World Heritage Convention* and the 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*.

The heritage discourse across the major part of the Indian sub-continent has its origins in the primordially European-centered ethos and mores of the international heritage community, and is reinforced through norms and practices assimilated from the colonial period and ongoing associations in academia and practice with Europe, notably the United Kingdom (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Mumbai, Colaba district. Early twentieth-century colonial monumental heritage: the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel and Tower framing the Gateway of India. (Source: Carsten Hermann)

The 2013 Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS) position paper *Socio-Economics of Urban Heritage* encapsulates the orthodox position well:

> The official understanding of heritage in India is largely limited to historical monuments and archaeological artefacts which inevitably have led to a narrow institutional and policy framework that excludes a broad spectrum of urban heritage which exists today such as vernacular architecture, historic landscapes, customs, traditional livelihoods, rituals, belief systems.

One of the attendant limitations of the 1972 World Heritage Convention is that human habitat is not inherent to the tripartite division of cultural heritage into *monuments, groups of buildings* and *sites*, whose focus is on material objects. Urban heritage, comprehended generically as embracing a legion of globally diverse living historic cities and urban districts, in which citizens have and continue to conduct their daily lives in complex and dynamic relationships with a heterogeneity of physical environments, fits uneasily into this prescription. The human factor – the synergy between the miscellany of human activities and the myriad of physical places – is missing. Anthropologists and sociologists are not incorporated into the orthodox urban heritage discourse.

The traditional approach to urban conservation is manifest in *Urban Heritage in Indian Cities: Compendium of Good Practices* (2015), prepared by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH). Under definitions, *urban heritage* …

> Refers to the built legacy of the city's history and includes protected and unprotected monuments, individual and groups of buildings of archaeological, architectural,

historic and cultural significance, public spaces including landscapes, parks and gardens, street layout defining identifiable neighbourhoods or precincts, which together identify the visual, spatial and cultural character of the city.

Urban heritage in this usage does not encompass human habitat, generically or specifically.

The distinctiveness and inclusivity of urban heritage

Just as natural heritage sites cannot survive as ecosystems without wildlife, historic cities are contingent on human functionality. An integrated approach to the safeguarding of urban heritage is not simply a question of the restoration of buildings, ensembles and public spaces. It subsumes an understanding of the dynamics of everyday life and timelines of socio-economic continuity in communities that host and animate a quantum and diversity of urban districts and neighbourhoods that extends far beyond prescribed definitions of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. In established settlements and cities across India, urban heritage, holistically understood, it is the norm; *continuity* is at least as important as *conservation*, especially when the latter is interpreted as *preservation*; and *urban values* embrace *social values* alongside the totality of *cultural* values (Figure 4).

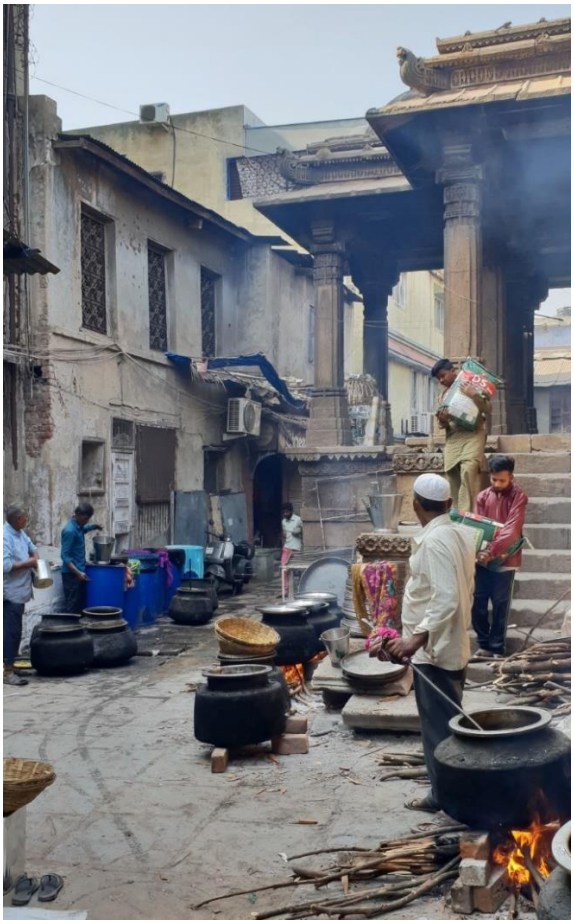

Figure 4. Ahmedabad, inside the historic walled city World Heritage Site. Cooking in public open space between the food market and the Rani no Hajiro queens' tombs; typical of the contradictions, complexity and chaos that are a quintessential characteristic of the living heritage of India's historic towns and cities. (Source: Carsten Hermann)

In India, the shoots of intellectual independence from the orthodox monumentalist approach to urban heritage are emerging.

The 2013 IIHS position paper quoted above continues:

> … urban heritage, as conceptualised today, includes not only these components [historical monuments and archaeological artefacts] but also their inter-linkages with other facets of the city as a whole; as has been articulated in UNESCO's 'Historic Urban Landscape' approach. Another important dimension of urban heritage in India is its living character, where the past is very much part of the present lives of the people as an evolving cultural resource in which continuity and change are deeply embedded.

One of the major global threats to urban heritage arises from its commodification as *heritage*. In the Indian context, the emphasis in the same IIHS paper on the economic valuation and exploitation of urban heritage is unfortunate – indicative of the ongoing insinuation of Western precepts in the field.

Counter-balancing both the object-and economic-focused narratives of urban heritage is the 2010 UNESCO/UN-Habitat toolkit *Historic Districts for all – India: A Social and Human Approach for Sustainable Revitalisation*. Adopting the generic term *historic districts*, signifying the oldest parts of cities, it provides an inclusive definition:

> [Indian historic districts] are typically characterised by traditional houses, streetscapes, water systems, living communities and their associated traditional livelihoods and social practices and so forth. These existing traditional resources are unique features of the historic districts, clearly differentiating them from the rest of the city. A historic district cannot and should not be defined on the basis of the age of its structures, typology of built form, administrative boundaries, or even the presence of heritage buildings, sites or monuments. Historic districts often act as the symbols of the city's image despite having undergone numerous social and cultural transformations. They create the identity and the image of the city and are key geographic factors for the local and regional economy. These are the places wherein the 'culture' has its greatest expression.

A longstanding champion of an inclusive approach to India's urban heritage is Professor A. G. Krishna Menon. Writing in 1989 and comparing the Western origins of concepts in conservation with the growing body of knowledge deriving from indigenous experience in India, Menon characterised the former as defensive, focused on preserving material authenticity in structures selected for survival, with the emphasis in the latter on the creative and dynamic continuity of community traditions and identity dating back millennia allied to improving the quality of life for citizens today. To re-focus from objects to people, Menon stressed the need for a metamorphosis in heritage orthodoxy:

> Conservation in India … needs to shift its priority to what is *becoming* of our historic cities rather than on what they were. This shift in values is predicated on an understanding of the current Indian reality and future prospects. There is also a need to understand that the true heritage of our country is in the traditional skills of our artisans and craftsmen and less in the objects they created which they knew would

> deteriorate in time. Thus, the specificity of the Indian situation is in the fact that *authenticity* [this author's emphasis] can be created.

Writing again in 2017, Menon argues that "the nascent field of urban conservation in India offers the potential to review the dominant paradigms of urban planning and develop more context-specific and appropriate strategies for tackling the problems of Indian urbanisation."

For this, Menon recommends re-visiting the pioneering approach demonstrated by Patrick Geddes in the reports he produced for Indian cities in the period 1915 to 1919. Regarding the city as an organic system, each a unique human artefact in its equally unique local and regional environment rather than simply an example of an abstract typology, Geddes insisted on the need for comprehensive historical, geographic, biological, climatic, sociological, economic, cultural and institutional insight and knowledge, and on nurturing the shoots of innovation and creativity rather than restraining the evolution of a city based on its roots at some historical moment in time.

Re-positioning the UNESCO historic urban landscape initiative

The UNESCO historic urban landscape initiative is an academic conceptualisation of the roles of tangible and intangible cultural heritage in pursuit of a binary objective "to preserve heritage and manage historic cities". Notwithstanding its provenance from within the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, the intent behind the formulation of the 2011 UNESCO Recommendation is that it should serve as a standard-setting instrument for urban settlements worldwide. It is however founded on two orthodoxies that severely limit this ambition.

First, unqualified adherence to an urbanisation paradigm that predates the digital age and ignores contemporary innovations across multiple sectors.

Second, a heritage discourse that ignores the larger narratives of history and culture and prioritises the survival of selected material objects and manifestations over the manifold complexity and specificity of people in their communities.

Attempts to normalise both the urbanisation paradigm and the heritage discourse in the 2011 Recommendation imply a misunderstanding of the varying timelines and dynamics of urban development across world regions as well as the realities of cultural diversity, and foreshadow major challenges in the context of the widely plural religious, temporal, cultural and economic complexity of twenty-first century India.

As such, the historic urban landscape initiative's potential is currently limited to addressing prescribed issues across a circumscribed sector, and lacks the strategic vision to position urban heritage mainstream in the geography of urban planning – including to systematise the cross-sectoral tools and hone the inter-disciplinary skills to inspire commonality of purpose in the management of historic cities and guide conflict avoidance (Figure 5).

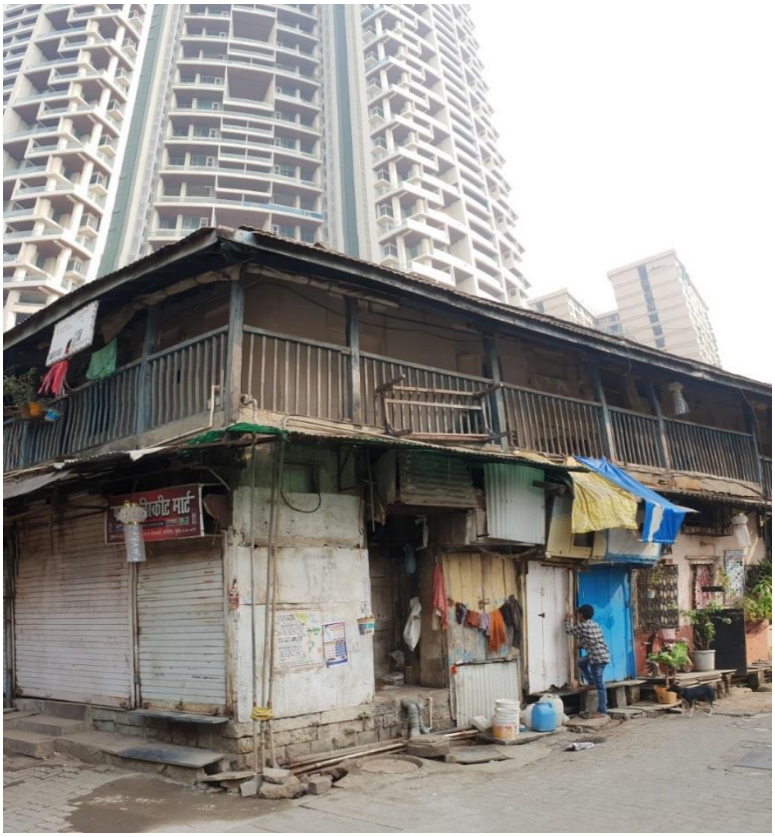

Figure 5. Mumbai, Lower Parel district near the Currey Road Station. Modern tower block dominating the low rise vernacular. Development conflicts pose a serious threat to India's urban heritage, and the UNESCO historic urban landscape approach is currently handicapped by a lack of coincidence with the geography of urban planning, including at a strategic level. (Source: Carsten Hermann)

Conclusion

The received urbanisation paradigm together with heritage orthodoxy both remain rooted in the perceptions and ethos of the third quarter of the twentieth century. Today, substantially advanced through the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the factors that conditioned the twin orthodoxies are challenged from many directions. These include: a raft of technological advances; maturing articulations of sustainable development subsuming mounting concerns surrounding the causes and impacts of climate change; and, especially in the context of India, a far broader conception of the multiple constituents of urban heritage.

Continuing attempts to universalise historical trends in urbanisation alongside mores in the heritage sector severely limit the ability to recognise that there is no inevitability in the notion that an evolving region such as the Indian sub-Continent will develop in this twenty-first century as a mirror of Europe and North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, or indeed China today. As Professor A. G. Krishna Menon has written, new and culturally-rooted processes must be developed to deal with the overwhelming urban and spatial challenges of developing countries, ones that do not repeat let alone aggravate the problems manifested in earlier processes of urbanisation.

This article argues that questioning key orthodoxies from first principles, both in the matter of rural-urban territorial balance and in the comprehension that urban heritage is first and foremost about life quality and creative continuity in established communities rather than the survival and conservation of individual monuments, provides vital indicators both to alleviate redevelopment pressures on surviving urban heritage in cities across India and to address wider societal and environmental issues coincidental with the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic additionally serves to question the orthodox urban agglomeration model and to reinforce the rationale for distributed urbanisation. It is not clear, for example, that the recent exodus from cities such as Mumbai to the rural heartland will be reversed; cities such as Delhi have witnessed a remarkable upturn in air quality; and serious upscaling of the de-centrist initiatives and technologies outlined in this article would support a swift transition from concentrated to distributed urbanisation.

Biography

Dennis Rodwell, independent researcher and consultant architect-planner, works internationally in the field of cultural heritage and sustainable urban development, focused on the promotion and achievement of best practice in the management of the broadly defined historic environment. Previously a principal in private architectural practice, he has also served in local government posts as architect, conservation officer, urban designer, principal planner and project manager. He writes and publishes widely on the theme of conservation and sustainability in historic cities. Further information including a bibliography of publications may be found on: www.dennisrodwell.co.uk.

Note: This article is a condensed version of the author's chapter 'Rural development: A strategy for urban heritage management in the Asia-Pacific region', published in *The Routledge Handbook on Historic Urban Landscapes in the Asia-Pacific*, ed. Kapila D. Silva, Routledge, 2020, pp. 406–423.