Eternal Ise

by Jarrik Ouburg

In the summer of 2010 the city-centre of Amsterdam with its famous canal district was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage list. The United Nations' organization praises the city as an 'outstanding example of a built urban ensemble, civil engineering, town planning, construction and architectural know-how'. As an architect I should be thrilled with such high recognition of my professional field in my hometown, but I am not.
I am not against preserving valuable things. My difficulty with the inscription is that because of the strong focus on the image of Amsterdam, the identity of the city, its true value, is in danger. The focus should be on the snake, not on it's skin it left behind.

Russian grave

The city of Amsterdam was not a construction of kings or emperors but a city built by civilians that reclaimed the land from the swamps and waters that surrounded them in, at that time, a remote part of Europe. Out of sight and interest of the reigning kings and other officials the city could develop itself without much interference from outside.
Since reclaiming land is not a task you can easily take up on your own, the citizens of city organized themselves and their governance efficiently and were used not to force an issue but instead created a tolerant culture. It is this spirit of tolerance and self-reliance that made this city one the most important port cities of the world in the 17th century and a free haven for thinking, religion, trade, science and philosophy.
The idea of the free haven that once made the city famous also makes it thrive today. A few years ago I moved to this city not because of its undisputed beautiful canal district. After all, there are only 17 thousand people living in this part of the city with a population of roughly 780 thousand inhabitants. I moved to this city because of this energy and spirit. The city centre and its canal district are merely a physical embodiment of this spirit, a skin it left behind hundreds of years ago.

The UNESCO enlisting comes with very stringent requirements the city must meet in order not to lose its status. For some cities and monuments such requirements can be a blessing, but for the city of Amsterdam it is a curse.
The new developments the city is planning, on the other side of the river IJ and miles away from the canal district, are in conflict with the UNESCO regulations. The city can lose its enlisted status because of 'the visual impact of tall buildings on the urban landscapes of the property'. The city of Amsterdam is praised by the UNESCO because of its town planning and engineering of the past but will be punished for the having the same ambitions for the future.
Another disturbing detail is the exclusion of the Rembrandt Square in the 'World Heritage Site' by the UNESCO. The square is natural part of the urban fabric of the canal district and one of the liveliest squares of Amsterdam. It is a beacon of neon light for the nightlife of the city. The city of Amsterdam included the square in the bid as part of the heritage site. Probably the neon light was seen as a stain on the picture perfect image of the city and the square was cut out of heritage site's map with surgeon's precision.
Amsterdam has a strong tradition in being a centre of not only working and living but also of entertainment, a natural result of being a port city for so many years. Excluding the Rembrandt Square is an obvious sign that it is the image of the city that is to be preserved, not the city itself. With the strict regulations of the UNESCO and the entire city centre appointed as an official 'buffer zone', the canal district will become an island of intolerance in the urban fabric of Amsterdam. Integrity and authenticity are the highest values the UNESCO wants to preserve, and it is exactly these values that it is hollowing out. The city that promotes itself with the slogan 'I AMsterdam' has to fear the slogan 'I WASterdam'.

In many aspects of Western culture we can see a difficulty with accepting death and decay as a part of life. We attempt to defy death by either building our monuments in stone, like the pyramids, or by trying

to preserve our buildings for eternity like the UNESCO does. The reason for this difficulty might be found in the Christian roots of the West. The fear of dying is an effect of the uncertainty that lies ahead of us after we die. The bible gives us only two options: heaven or hell. As a result we try to mock death during with an everlasting presence. It is as if we try to postpone the 'Day of Judgement'.

A clear example of this attempt to leave an everlasting image is the tradition to place a picture of the deceased on a grave. But what picture to choose? Do you take a picture of when the deceased was 25 and in his prime, 45 and a family man, 65 and retired or 90 on his deathbed? After all, he was and was not the same person.
The same goes fore the UNESCO listing, why would you reduce the life and spirit of a city to one single image, and who are you to decide? Preserving one part of the city while other part continues to develop and alter can create perverse effects. The same effect when a couple is buried in one grave, both with their pictures on it. The husband died at age 21 and the wife reached the age of 95. A woman that could have been the grandmother of the husband she is buried next to.

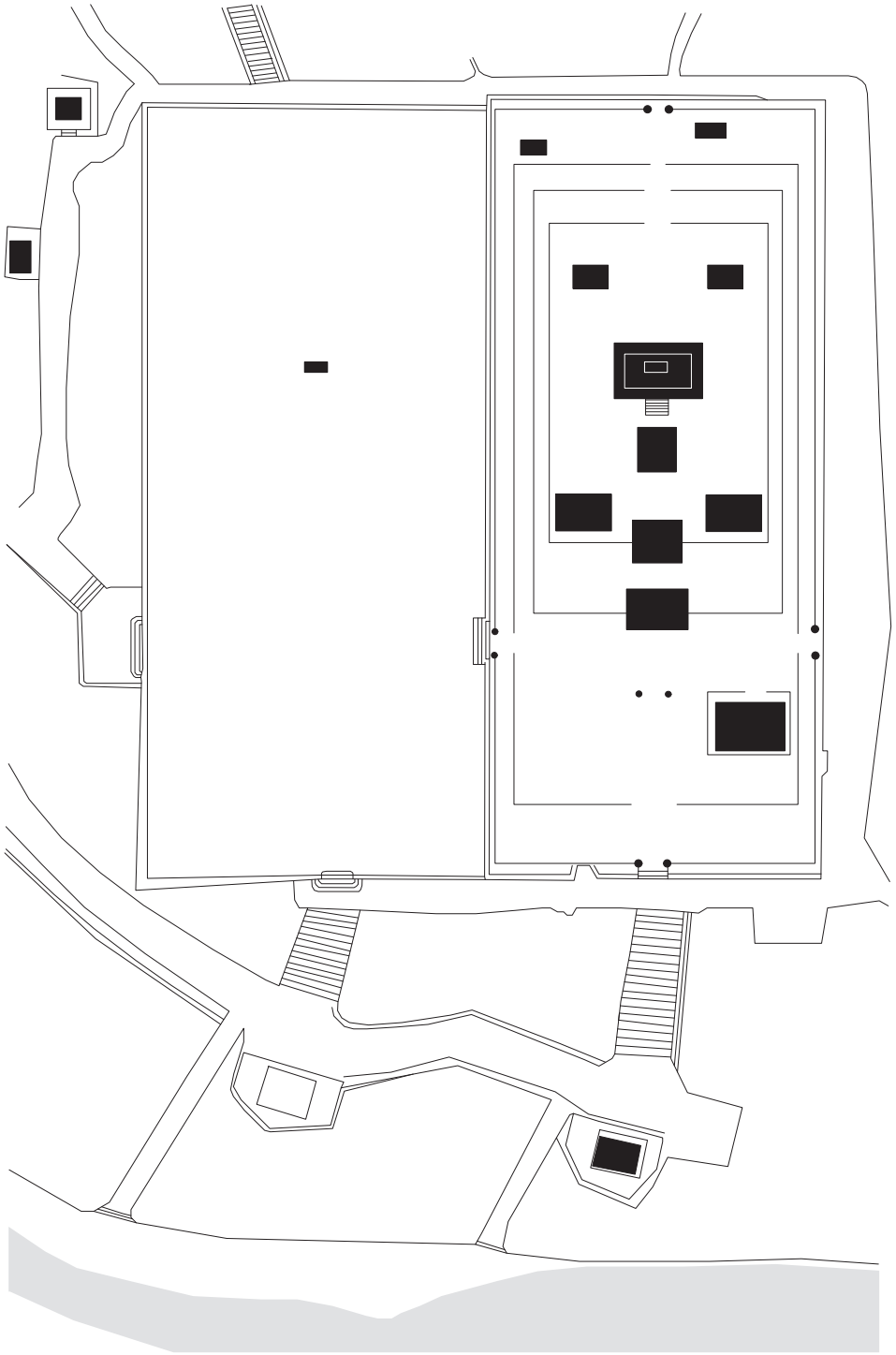
I am not a practicing Shintoist or Buddhist, but the way thoughts on continuity and impermanence influenced the view on preservation inspires. It illustrates the stark contrast between the building cultures in the West and in the East, not only on the topic of preservation but also on the culture of building in general.

The Ise Shrine in Japan is one of the most striking examples of preservation and the UNESCO's antidote. It's a complex of 123 Shinto shrines of which the two most important ones, the Naiku and Geku shrine, are rebuilt every twenty years since the year 690 A.D. In 1993 the shrines were rebuilt for the sixty-first time and the next rebuilding (Shikinen Sungu ceremony) is scheduled in 2013 with the preparations already well on its way.

In order to rebuild the shrine, its compound is divided into two sectors. One sector is in use by the current shrine, the other sector, called the kodenchi, is the empty site covered with white gravel. On this site the previous shrine was built and on it the next shrine will be build. Only one small wooden hut (oi-ya) remains on the kodenchi covering a small sacred post known as the shin-no-mihashira. The new shrine will be build over this post, in order to hide it at all times, making the posts the most sacred and mysterious objects of the entire complex.

When the time comes to rebuild, the old sanctuary will function as a model for the newly constructed shrine. The 'original' was naturally a 'copy' of a previous model. Copy-paste but then raised to the sixty-first power. Every twenty years a startling moment occurs when the new shrine is already built and the old shrine is not dismantled yet. At that moment two shrines exist, identical and at the same time not identical, two copies and two originals, revealing what is why desperately try to erase in the West: the passage of time.

The reason behind this periodic rebuilding every twenty years is the Shinto belief of renewal and death as a part of life and that this rebuilding is the only way to keep the vital beauty of the shrine preserved forever. Destruction is a natural part of its preservation. Twenty



Naiku Shrine at Ise

White U-house

years span a generation, the renewal of human life. The carpenter who witnessed the last rebuilding can now pass on his knowledge and skills of the ancient techniques to a younger generation. By copying and rebuilding not only the shrine is preserved but equally important also the techniques to build it. The act of building the shrine is as much a monument as the shrine itself.

Rebuilding a shrine is extremely expensive; the rebuilding of the Ise Shrine costs roughly 45 million euros. For this reason only the most influential and important shrines continue to be rebuild. This creates the interesting paradox that the physically newest shrines are in fact the oldest and important ones. UNESCO is not able to follow this philosophy and states that the buildings are simply not old enough to be world heritage.

Building for a specific period in life and not for eternity, acknowledging destruction as part of creation is still a driving force in contemporary Japanese architecture and urban planning. Yoshihura Tsukamoto of Atelier Bow-Wow pointed in this years' biennale in Venice to the fact that the average life span of a house in Tokyo is 26 years. This comes close to Ise's lifecycle, more or less a generation.

A beautiful example of this ephemeral attitude towards architecture and building is the White U-house, designed by Toyo Ito. The client of this house was Ito's sister who, after her husband died, asked him to design a house for her and her two small daughters. The architect built the house on an empty site next to his own house, which happened to be the same site the widow lived before she got married. The resemblance with the kodenchi at Ise Shrine is striking.

The house was made out of concrete and had a distinctive U-shape, enclosing an inner courtyard. The very shape and architecture of the house rejected the outside world and completely turned inward making it a place for reflection and healing. Twenty-one years after the construction of the house, the daughters were grown up and the family was ready to face a new phase in life. The house itself had also undergone a metamorphosis. It had lost its hard white concrete exterior and was completely covered with ivy. As if the growing of the ivy symbolized the healing process of the family. The White U-house and its plot of land were sold and the house was destroyed under the eyes of the architect. (IMAGE 3)

The site of the White U-house is just one tiny pixel in the huge picture of Tokyo, each with their own history, and more importantly, all of them with their own future. The constant periodic change on the level of a pixel, gives the city as a whole its energy.

To accept impermanence as in vital part of our life and culture is a lesson we can learn from Japan. In order to keep our cities and their identity alive, it's only natural to allow them to change. We should not degrade a building or a city to a witness of the past, but let it be a carrier of present day stories, dreams and memories to come. We should treat them as our favorite suit, not as our coffin.

Jarrik Ouburg runs the architectural practice Office Jarrik Ouburg in Amsterdam.