INVESTMENT

Local investors forced out of London market

British property players focus attention to avoid tough conditions

UK has moved to the sidelines of the global property market as a result of the referendum

The result of the referendum has led to a reduction in investment from UK investors

A Hong Kong-based urban planner is working to show communities that preserving authentic culture is not just about more economic viability

The Value of Keeping Asia's Cultural Legacies Alive

A Hong Kong-based urban planner is working to show communities that preserving authentic culture is not just about more economic viability.

Peta Towlson

Asian cities may favor the bright lights and bling of vertical urban development, but Ester van Steekelenburg, a Dutch urban planner living in Hong Kong, is less impressed.

In her view, based on 20 years of professional experience in the region, the race to build "the tallest and the grandest" has resulted in homogeneous-looking cities, benefit of the character that once made them wonderful.

"Many Asians travel thousands of miles to experience Europe's cobbled streets and historic town centres, while seeming to place little value on their own cultural heritage," she laments.

Van Steekelenburg started wondering: what makes a city feel good? For her, it has a lot to do with human scale — a healthy mix of culture and commerce, a sense of community and common identity," she decided. Historical neighbourhoods "often contain all these elements": street pavements made for walking, and communal spaces "used to perfection", where residents, businesses and shops coexist. Within them, she says, "there's a vibrancy difficult to replicate and so often lost in skyscraper cities".

This led Van Steekelenburg to establish Urban Discovery, a social enterprise set up in 2010 with the aim of keeping heritage alive in Asian cities for a vibrant and viable urban future.

"We provide advisory services, train people and design creative and enjoyable learning tools to increase awareness of the economic value of heritage," she explains.

Late last year, Urban Discovery won the 2014 Cathay Pacific Shooting Star Award, part of the Cathay Pacific China Business Awards — a prize awarded annually to a promising, innovative and creative company operating in Hong Kong.

Projects the company is involved in are wide-ranging, including a pre-feasibility study on heritage revitalisation and urban upgrading in Yangon, Myanmar — Asia's "last city centre with historic architecture intact" — and a heritage management plan for Hue, Vietnam — a city in danger of losing its UNESCO World Heritage listing.

In Sri Lanka, van Steekelenburg is part of a team currently re-purposing historic Fort Frederick in Trincomalee on the island's east coast.

Her China projects include a cultural heritage strategy for Guizhou, a collaboration between the World Bank and the Guizhou government in a region of minority communities and uniquely parochial architecture.

Van Steekelenburg has also penned a children’s book on "forgotten places" in Hong Kong, re-researching traditional neighbourhoods, and has developed the Discover City Walks smartphone app allowing locals and visitors alike to discover city secrets and explore hidden cultural gems in Hong Kong and other Asian cities.

Van Steekelenburg says that her homeland stands as a testament to why authentic culture should be preserved. "In Amsterdam during the 1960s, there was talk of filling in the canals and destroying the canal houses — thank God, that proposal was lost by one vote," she says. "Now, it's ironic how much money is being spent not only for tourists, but by current residents and local companies to preserve their cultural heritages."

For therein lies the challenge: everything has to be economically viable. Van Steekelenburg sees this as a key part of her mission: to demonstrate how re- stored buildings and neighbourhoods can pay their way. "We work on the economics of heritage — creating spaces that are worthwhile to visit so that people will go out and enjoy them," she says.

Hong Kong has some recent examples in the Blue House, Wan Chai, and PMQ in Central, along with the revitalisation of Lai Chi Kok Hospital (now the Lao Tsung I Academy) and Mei Ho House (now a youth hostel).

The mindset is changing across Asia, with more of a will to preserve cultural heritage, especially in cities where so much has been lost.

But it is not easy, van Steekelenburg concedes. For in addition to finding a pathway to commercial viability, operators find it difficult to meet regulatory requirements. In Hong Kong at least, dealing with the Buildings Ordinance is "literally the biggest headache" of any "respectable" heritage upgrade.

"We may need to come up with architectural solutions that are not standard, and that's very difficult to fit into the standard boxes of the governance," she says.

We also need to move away from the tendency to view existing old buildings in isolation, and take a broader view encompassing whole buildings and neighbourhoods, and the stories behind them — the traditional foods, and trades, and festivals, for example, van Steekelenburg adds.

When taking such an approach, "you see the dots connecting — not just the buildings, but the fabric, the community, which made them," she says.

INVESTMENT

Sigul Guff fund targets distressed assets in Europe

The fund started making deals as it won capital commitments starting in August 2013, and is about 70 per cent invested, Gott said.

In Spain, the firm is investing in a water utility office and for commercial buildings in urban areas, Gott said.

British investors have been making their move into the European market in recent months, with some of the funds investing in distressed assets and others focusing on residential properties.

The fund is also targeting opportunities in Italy, Germany and France, Gott added.

"We are looking for opportunities to invest in distressed assets in Europe, particularly in countries where there is a strong demand for capital," Gott said.