

Amphawa: Saving its Spirits of Place

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Abstract. The objective of this research work is to analyse the cultural heritage of Amphawa and its impact on saving the spirit of place. Amphawa is a rich cultural heritage community stretching along Amphawa canal with its reputation as the “Venice of the East” in this region. This wooden village was in the status of degradation due to the economic downturn, caused by the utilization of automobiles since 1980. After the restoration in 2004 involving 18 wooden buildings and a landscape project of the Thai Cultural Environment Project, giving an essential impact in physical, socio-economic and cultural aspects due to cultural tourism. As a result, more and more tourists come to visit Amphawa since it is famous for its heritage environment. This paper presents how the conservation of tangible heritage gave an essential impact to the transmission of intangible heritage in Amphawa. Keywords: Spirit of place, tangible heritage, intangible heritage, Amphawa

Definitions

The ICOMOS Quebec conference aims to explore and analyse intangible heritage and its relationship with tangible heritage in order to develop new concepts, identify new potential threats and transmission of the spirit of place. The ICOMOS defines the spirit of place as the tangible and intangible elements that give meaning, value and motions of place. It is mentioned that “...Tangible Heritage projects focus on the physical artifacts led by preceding cultures and civilizations, most commonly including works of architecture and art. (ICOMOS, 2008) In the parts of the South East Asia region, some of this tangible heritage is evident in natural geological formations that were adapted and/or decoration by earlier people...” (UNESCO, 2004). Cultural heritage is not limited to material manifestations, such as monuments and objects that have been preserved over time. This notion also encompasses living expressions and the traditions that countless groups and communities worldwide have inherited from their ancestors and transmit to their descendants, in most cases orally. Many years of research undertaken by UNESCO on the functions and

values of cultural expression and practices have opened the door to new approaches to the understanding, protection and respect of the cultural heritage of humanity. This living heritage, known as intangible, provides each bearer of such expressions a sense of identity and continuity, insofar as he or she takes ownership of them and constantly recreates them (UNESCO, 2005).

Background of the community

Amphawa is located in Amphawa district, Samut Songkhram province, Thailand, about 18 kilometers from the estuary, and 80 kilometers west of Bangkok. (Fig.1) Amphawa literally means a mango grove which denotes a location associated with the Lord Buddha's Life, formerly known as Bangchang (means a village of elephants) has a long history as a water-based settlement documented since the reign of King Prasat Thong in the late Ayutthaya period in the mid 17th century.

It was once a town of residence of King Rama I and the birthplace of King Rama II in the 18th century. In the 19th century Amphawa was once the largest community center in the Mae Klong basin. In the 20th century, with the advent of railways system and vehicles, its original social and economic importance was phasing out. In 2000, Amphawa was a small community with its housing mostly in a state of dilapidation, some of which was uninhabited. (Fig.2) Most of its residents are elderly and children. Young and active people have migrated. Nonetheless, Amphawa still retains its identity as a water-based community with beautiful temples, traditional wooden Thai houses and row houses, all reflecting the local architectural wisdom to live in harmony with the tide which rises and ebbs twice a day. (Fig.3) As a result, vegetation that thrives in brackish water such as cork trees and Nipa trees appear along the water way where live fire flies which produce splendid scenery at night. Coconut trees and mixed orchards with ditches and raised beds form the beautiful landscape where wooden houses on stilts line both sides with landing steps along the Amphawa canal. (Fig.4) Life of the locals continues to be associated with water; thus aptly lending Amphawa to be known as the "Venice of the East" with mixed orchards of tropical fruits, such as coconuts, lychees, pomelos, mangoes, water apples, oranges, areca nuts, breadfruit as well as rare varieties of tangerines and camias.

The communities along Amphawa canal and its vicinity boast typical architecture. They are wooden row houses, traditional floating houses, traditional Thai style houses, traditional local houses in the orchards, residences of wealthy people, schools and government buildings. Consequently, Amphawa communities were awarded "the

Best Conserved Community” in 2002 by the Association of Siamese Architects under the Royal Patronage.

Conservations of Tangible Heritage

Amphawa was selected as a case study in the research of “Master Plan and Implementation Plan for conservation of Rivers, Canals and Ditches in the Western Region of Thailand” by the Office of Natural Resources and Environment Policy and Planning (ONREP) and the Faculty of Architecture Chulalongkorn University (CU.) in 2001. This research was followed by the “Pilot Project for Environmental Conservation and Development of Amphawa Canal” undertaken by the Municipality of Tambon Amphawa and the Faculty of Achitecture, CU.

Later, the Thai Cultural Environment Project (TCEP) was launched by the Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning in partnership with the Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University and the Municipality of Tambon Amphawa, and financed by the Danish Government (DANIDA) from 2002-2005. The objectives are 1) To modify and apply The Danish Technique “SAVE” and “CHIP”, 2) To raise the awareness of local people and organization, 3) To organize demonstration projects for cultural environment conservation and 4) To be a case study for the setting up of a cultural environment conservation system for Thailand (ONREP, 2005).

Methodology and Framework

A wide area survey at a provincial level was conducted, followed by a detailed survey in Amphawa community in 2002-2003. Measure-works of the interior and exterior for selected prototypes of houses, focusing on the canal-side areas were undertaken, including row houses, shop houses, traditional Thai houses, former floating houses, local houses, schools, and the town hall. Architecture drawings, pictures and building use were formulated. The data on the orchard system, waterways, walkways, public space and road networks were also recorded. As a result, an inventory of cultural heritage was established. During this procedure, a monthly meeting with local people was organized to find out problems, needs, potential, and to set up vision for community conservation and regeneration.

In addition, a number of awareness raising activities were organized regularly in 2003-2004 targeting school children, administrators and local residents. This helped revive collective pride and build up a significant basis for the development and revitalization

of the community along with the conservation of its rare identity as a water-based community. The last phase of TCEP was followed by the demonstration projects financed by matching funds from DANIDA and building owners. There were 18 building restoration projects; the Town Hall, 4 units of Chaipattana Foundation's row houses, a former floating house, traditional Thai houses, row houses, contemporary houses and a landscape development project implemented between 2004 and 2005. (Fig.5) Most of the construction works concentrated on building foundations, roofs, ceilings, doors, front wooden panels and canopies. Deteriorated electric wires, water supply pipes, and drainage system of some buildings were also repaired.

Impact of the Conservation Project

After the complementation of TCEP restoration project along Amphawa canal, the quality of the wooden buildings improved; giving an essential impact in physical, socio-economics and cultural aspects. A number of building owners have readjusted their homes to accommodate home stays for tourists, to serve as restaurants, coffee shops, souvenir shops, etc. (Fig.6) As a result, the housing owners can recoup the cost of restoration in relation to the revitalization of the floating market by the Municipality and the local people, thus attesting a much more efficient use of what were once abandoned houses left in disrepair with practical use. Today in mid 2008, there are more than 45 additional buildings that have been restored by the owner's investment, including 25 units of Chaipattana Foundation's row houses.(Fig.7)

1) **Economic impact.** The Amphawa floating market is held on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. It generates additional income of 500 us\$ a month per household. As a result, locals are now financially better off. Consequently, part of their incomes is spent on the renovation of their houses. More and more vendors are able to repay their debts, while others can sell their products on weekdays outside their community and at the floating market during the weekend. (Fig.8)

2) **Social impact.** Since the completion of TCEP and the revival of the floating market, there has been an increase in the number of tourists from 25,000 in the 2005 to be more than 250,000 in 2008. Local residents of various age groups who once migrated to work outside the community in other provinces or Bangkok have returned home to help their family doing small-scale businesses such as food and dessert business, boat services for tourists, etc. Many families have been reunited. (Fig.9)

3) **Cultural impact.** There have been many revivals of old traditions related to water-based ways of life such as boat racing, food offering to monks traveling by boat, religious ceremonies and activities in temples, food and dessert festivals. Productions of handicrafts such as ceramics and souvenirs made of coconut shells have been created to serve cultural tourism business.

- Food offering to monks traveling by boat. The view of monks rowing to receive food from Buddhists in the morning can be found in Amphawa every day. Since a couple of years ago, local people organize water-borne processions by taking monks by boat to receive food donations on special occasions for example on the anniversaries of Their Majesty the King and the Queen (5 December and 12 August) and other special days. (Fig.10)

- Loy Krathong Festival. On the 15 waxing moon of the 12th lunar month (November) people float their tiny boats or baskets. The objectives are to pay homage to the footprint of the Lord Buddha on the riverside of the Nammatha River in India and to apologize for polluting the water during the whole year. In Amphawa, the Loy Krathong Sai has been revived since 2005. People float little boats made of banana trunks or banana leaves. These boats are floated in a long succession that makes a beautiful spectacle under a full moon. (Fig.11)

- Local Thai. There is an effort to revive the local Thai speech in Amphawa. Thai as spoken by old people is marked by a local accent similar to that of people in Rachaburi province but not as strong as that spoken in Suphanburi province. However this effort still has not been successful among the young generation.

- Thai music. Amphawa boasts its homegrown great master of traditional Thai music, *Luang Pradit-Phairuah* who promoted and encouraged Thai music, a tradition which is handed down by music teachers to the present generation. Primary and secondary schools often have their own traditional Thai orchestras, not to mention private Thai music lessons given at Thai music teachers' homes.(Fig.12)

- Classical masked dance. Thai performing arts had its heyday under King Rama II. New dancing movements and gestures were designed in the Court of King Rama II while accompanying music and recitatives reached a high degree of refinement, accompanies an exquisitely choreographed dance. Every year a classical masked play is held in commemoration of King Rama II in the King Rama II Park in February, an event presided over by *H.R.H Maha Chakri Sirindhorn*. Apart from this event, there is a training class of the classical masked dance and Thai music for local students every

weekend organized by the Foundation of *King Buddhalertla Napalai* Memorial under the Royal Patronage.

- Traditional singing. Traditional Thai-style singing is very much associated with the performing arts in Amphawa. It is indeed part of the local cultural legacy. Amphawa is the birth place of a number of well-known singers and musicians such as master singer composer and conductor *Ua Sunthornsanan* who has composed a rich repertoire, including a song called “Amphawa” which is quite popular among local residents and the general public, in which he depicts the beauty and the qualities of local women which is very much evident to all visitors.

- The offering of coconut pudding to monks. At *Kanjan* and *Thaihaad* Temples, people observe a local tradition of offering coconut pudding to monks. This is a Thai sweet often serves as a snack in central Thailand. It is made of ground rice mixed with coconut milk and cane sugar. This tradition takes place on the 8th day of the waning moon of the 10th month (September) of lunar calendar. (Fig.13)

- A water-borne procession to present yellow robes to monks at the end and after of the Buddhist Lent. This is a revival of the old tradition of this riverine community. Its on land version is much more common nowadays. (Fig.14)

- Revival of traditional water sports. Local wooden boats in different categories (not longer than 4 feet and over) run the boat racing during the yellow robe offering season. Also the boat races are organized more frequently to promote the conservation of wooden boats and cultural tourism. (Fig.15)

More stakeholders in Conservation

There are more and on-going projects from different organizations focusing on the conservation of tangible heritage in Amphawa that would give more positive impact to maintain its intangible heritage, as follows:

- 1) The Chaipattana Foundation has received a donation of traditional houses which was the venue of the fourth exhibition in 2005 on the “Ultimate Village: Amphawa”, organized by the Department of Industrial Promotion, Ministry of Industry. The construction of canalside facilities and attractions ranging from shops, rest pavilions, car parks, restrooms for passers-by and orchards has been completed to better cater to visitors. The project was named “Amphawa Chaipattana-nurak” which gave the meaning of the success of conservation of Amphawa. The project was inaugurated in

May 2008 and it gave an essential impact to improve the quality of cultural tourism. (Fig.16)

2) Renovation of the ordination hall, Phra Prang and the construction of the new crematorium of Amphawanjetiyaram Temple to improve its landscape in 2007-2008. (Fig.17)

3) The construction of 2 rest pavilions on Mae Klong River bank in 2008 by professors and students of Chulalongkorn University, Tianjin University and T.U.Berlin to promote the quality of life and the cultural built environment. (Fig.18)

4) King Rama II's Memorial Park Foundation has decided to build a local museum dedicated to the cultural heritage of the Amphawa Community and its vicinity which is planned to be inaugurated in February 2009. (Fig.19)

5) A renovation project of a former residence house of the Amphawa district officer where King Rama V made two visits during his trips to Samut Songkhram. This project is expected to start soon.

6) Two more pedestrian bridges are planned to build in the future in order to distribute tourists to the inner part of Amphawa canal and also reduce the congestion in the area of the mouth of the canal. This project will help tourists to discover more beautiful cultural landscape and way of life of the Amphawa communities.

Conclusion

The cultural heritage of Amphawa ranges from the architecture of the settlement, temples and traditional houses on stilts facing the canal with landing steps with the background of large trees; coconut, tamerine, Bodhi, etc. Local people also have their strength of arts and culture; performing arts, painting, music, handcraft making, etc. The impact of the TCEP on cultural tourism which has become a new source of income. As a result, more than 45 of wooden houses are conserved later by the building's owner to serve as home stays, shops and exhibition space. Moreover, the TCEP impact also brought back home different generation to their families. The people of Amphawa aware of their strength of cultural identity and its value and they wish to conserve their heritage for the future generation. Finally, it can be concluded that the conservations of tangible heritage of traditional buildings give an essential impact on saving the spirit of place and transmitting the intangible heritage or living heritage of Amphawa.

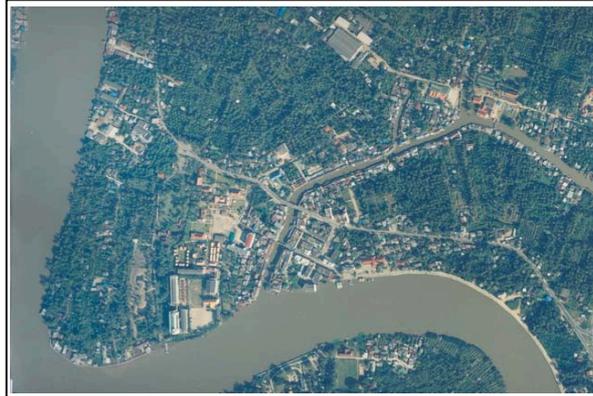


Figure 1. Amphawa Canal communities and Mae Klong river

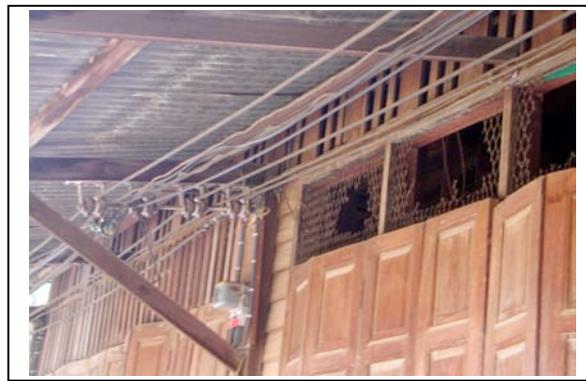


Figure 2. Unrepaired house along Amphawa canal in 2000

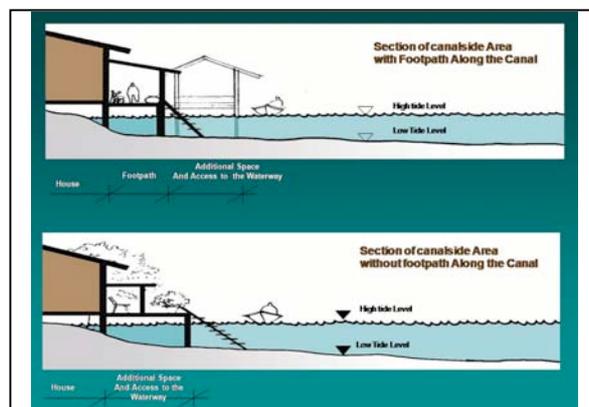


Figure 3. Architectural wisdom in harmony with tide which rises and ebbs



Figure 4. Raised-bed orchard in Amphawa

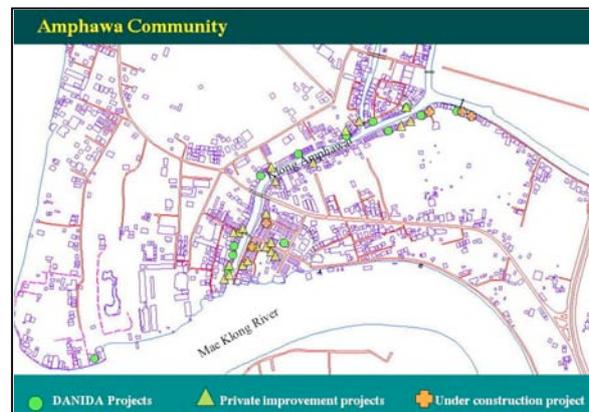


Figure 5. Map of Amphawa communities



Figure 6. Home stay after renovation



Figure 7. Restored row houses along Amphawa canal



Figure 8. Floating market during weekend at Amphawa

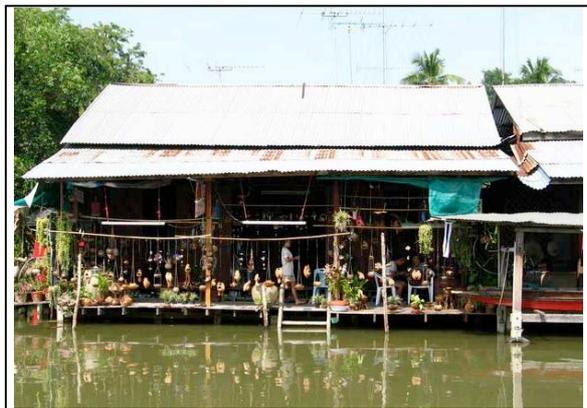


Figure 9. Small-scale business along the canal



Figure 10. Food offering to monks travelling by boat



Figure 11. Loy Krathong Sai in Amphawa



Figure 12. Thai music orchestra of Wat Amphawan school



Figure 13. Offering coconut pudding to monks



Figure 14. A water-borne procession to present yellow robes



Figure 15. Wooden boat racing in Amphawa



Figure 16. Amphawa-chaipattana-nurak project



Figure 17. Renovation in Amphawanjetiyaram temple



Figure 18. The construction of 2 rest pavillions



Figure 19. King Rama II's Memorial Park

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