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Paper Submission: Thailand's neglected urban heritage: Challenges for preserving the cultural landscape of provincial towns of Thailand

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Introduction

Thank you everyone for joining this session and thank you for Michelle and Gabriel, our moderator to give me an opportunity to present my paper today. My paper today is a part of my research on historic urban communities in provincial towns Thailand.

Historic urban communities in provincial towns across Thailand are facing rapid demolition as a result of urban development. Comprised of simple wood structure, the shop houses reflecting humble architectural craftsmanship, the character of these historic provincial towns depicts unique patterns of early settlement, knowledge of light wood frame structure, urban livelihood and culture in the Chao Phraya River Valley. And yet, this provincial urban cultural landscape does not figure into the official Thai conception of "architectural heritage." According to the report of National Housing Authority of Thailand¹, there are 140 historic communities, which can be classified into 5 categories as followed; floating house, waterfront house, shop house, urban village and market communities.

In this research, the area of Thonburi, which is a waterfront community and the city of Phetchaburi, which is shop house community, was selected as comparative case studies. These two case studies have unique identity and highlight the 4 major problems causing the decline of the urban districts in provincial towns Thailand and local urban communities struggle for maintaining and preserving their local identity of urban settlements.

First, according to official documents, which articulate Thailand's "authorized heritage discourse" (Smith 2006), the preservation authorities focus primarily on two categories of Thai architectural heritage. The first is Buddhist religious and royal related architecture (no matter how much western influences and details are used in the structure), which is widely deemed as symbols of the nation and thus the main focus for conservation in urban areas.

¹ Research Section of National Housing Authority of Thailand and Faculty of Architecture, Thammasat University, Final Report: Study of Housing and Community Standard for Conservation of Identity and Value of Historic Towns September 2010, p21-22.

The second is the traditional stilt house in Central Thailand, which is considered the nation's identity for vernacular architecture without any relationship to its natural setting.

According to the mission of the Department of Fine Arts, the state agency responsible for historic conservation in Thailand, the main focus of the department is to safeguard the objects of art, architecture, performance and rituals relating to royal rulers, Buddhist religion and the nation's identity. Since, the Department of Fine Arts was found by King Vajiravudh in 1911 by transferring the unit of art and crafts from the Ministry of Public Works and the office of Museum from Minister of Moral Affairs.

In contrast, there is no document indicating cultural landscape as Thailand's national heritage. Since Thailand was not colonized by the western power but its rulers adopted colonial policies and European preference to modernize the kingdom, Thailand's monarchs in 3 generations, King Mongkut, King Chulalongkorn and King Vajiravudh became the symbols of the nation's progress, modernization, nationalism and success. Therefore, royal heritage gradually represents the majority part of the nation's heritage and identity.

Synchronously, Thai ruling class also romanticized rice farmer house in the central valley of Thailand since rice was the major export product of Thailand. As a result, the colonial and royal architecture symbolizes the success of Thai royal rulers and progress of the nation at the center while typical Thai traditional farmer house represents the economic wealth of the nation. The early settlement of urban communities representing cultural landscape that formulated both early Bangkok establishment and during modernization was left out from these two categories.

Second is the problem in facility management by government agencies both in national and local levels. The urban communities in the heart of the town have small narrow road and canal networks, old utilities and facilities without sufficient maintenance. Therefore, these communities bear traffic congestion, air, water and noise pollution. The utilities such as electric power, telephone line and underground tap water belong to the national agencies while pedestrian walkway, road and lighting system are under the maintenance of local municipality.

As mentioned previously that Thailand was not colonized by European colonial rules but its royal rulers led the modernization, the internal social organization in the government agencies in Thailand still possess hierarchical order and feudal character not the teamwork unit. The planning decision and agreement among government agencies are difficult to produce since the representatives cannot decide on behalf of the agencies. The heads of different agencies still act as feudal master with petty bureaucrats circulating around them. So any decision of representatives must get approval from the heads of the agencies.

Finally, the pattern of market-driven real estate development influenced by government's mega infrastructure projects is the major threat for the communities. The new highway junction or station of mass transit system could become new center competing affectively with old urban center. Moreover, the owners and local communities tend to favor the larger and more permanent structure than historic wood house replicating Bangkok elite's taste of modern and classical architecture as stated previously. In general, local community and

owners of wood house lack technical knowledge in preserving wood structure and adaptation of new but wood-compatible materials for modern functions and comfort.

Khlong Bang Luang: Saving the last Bangkok's Canal Community

The water base communities along Khlong Bang Luang or Bang Luang Canal contain original settlement of Bangkok that began around 1767 when King Taksin established Thonburi as his capital city. When his successor, Rama I moved capital cross the river to the East side of the river which today is Rattanakosin Historic District, most of petty bureaucrats continue to live in Thonburi side concentrating in the area of Khlong Bang Luang. The origin of Bang Luang Canal could be traced back to the reign of King Chairacha of Ayutthaya around 400 years ago when he ordered the excavation of shortcut route to reduce the travel time to the Gulf of Thailand. Therefore the shortcut later became bigger by the direct flow of the river and is recognized by most Bangkok residents as a part of Chao Phraya River. The real Chao Phraya River's oxbow part became small channel and is acknowledged as canal embracing communities of bureaucrats who served the palace duties since the beginning of Bangkok through the end of Absolute Monarchy. For almost 50 years since 1950s, the West part of Chao Phraya River, Thonburi has not faced the rapid development and urbanization as the East thus still maintains old urban fabric of early canal community since the establishment of Bangkok as the kindom's capital. However, these wood houses and canal communities are now dilapidating.

The population in the community is declined because the young generation is moving out for living near the workplace. Senior residents are left and find difficulty to maintain historic wood houses. Vacant lots near major street were transformed into new suburban housing development and factories alienating the old community. The new development of road network was not planned to connect to the old canal network thus creating difficulty for traveling from canal community to Bangkok. Moreover, the roads to community are narrow pedestrian walk and in some area, not wide enough for full service of basic public infrastructure such as garbage collection, sewage system, and tap water. Therefore, refuse and garbage was illegally disposed into the canal causing water pollution and blocking transportation. Moreover, in some areas, utility ducts are installed along the edge of canal creating visual affect to communities. The long tail boats carrying tourists for sightseeing activities also generate loud noise disturbing neighborhood. These physical problems are partly driving indigenious residents out to live in other parts of Bangkok, which offer complete public facilities.

Most of historic conservation plans and reports consider only the Rattanakosin Historic District on the East bank of Chao Phraya River and later on, the old King Taksin's palace district on Thonburi area. There is neither study supported by the government or academic institution on the history of the bureaucrats who serve the royal rulers in Rattanakosin Historic District the past nor the conservation of these historic wood houses. In contrast, the boat tour for Khlong Bang Luang is very popular among foreign visitors at the luxury hotels along Chao Phraya River. The transportation in the canal which generating noise is also subjected to overlapping control of both national and local level agencies, the Water Department, and Bangkok Municipality Authority's Traffic and Transportation Department.

The new development of mass transit system in Thonburi is now in construction stage on Charansanitwong, the major roads adjacent to the canal network of Khlong Bang Luang. The station of underground train would become the new neighborhood centers in Thonburi and the land value of the area would increase exponentially. The owners of historic wood house could earn more from selling their property for new high-rise towers and leave the community. The construction of public facilities such as flood protection concrete wall and utility ducts that Bangkok Metropolitan Authority must provide for new development soon will create more visual chaos and block the view to the canal. The historic canal community of Bangkok soon will be disappeared and the history of petty bureaucrats who actually were the real life and soul of Rattanakosin Historic District will soon be vanished.

Phetchaburi Damnoenkasem Road: Saving the first Royal Resort Town

Damnoenkasem Road is the old neighborhood area of the town of Phetchaburi, the first resort town in Thai history. Phetchaburi is one of the ancient towns in Thailand but the Thais know it as the town King Mongkut ordered to build his summer palace on top of the mountain near the city and Phetchaburi River called PhranakhonKhiri. His 2 successors also built another two royal residences in the area, Ramratchaniwet and Maruekhathaiyawan by King Chulalongkorn and Vajiravudh respectively. Damnoenkasem Road was one of the major arteries that royal bureaucrats who followed the king to construct the palaces settle down. The wood shop houses and detachment houses in this area also portray some unique features of shutter windows, Mansard roofs and wood carving transom or entablature similar to some houses in Khlong Bang Luang canal communities that echo the influence of Victorian architecture in Thailand.

The town and province of Phetchaburi gain high attention for historic conservation and tourism business on the three royal villas of Phranakhonkhiri, Ramratchaniwet and Maruekhathaiyawan. These three are located at the edge of the town of Phetchaburi and in Cha-Am beach. Phranakhonkhiri was design with mix Greek classical and Thai traditional architecture while Ramratchaniwet was a Baroque hunting mansion designed by German architect. Maruekhathaiyawan villa reflects Victorian Architecture at the beach area. Buddhist temples inside the town also gain full support as the fine example of late Ayutthaya kingdom art that survive the Burmese invasion in 1770s.

In contrast, the cluster of historic wood shop houses in downtown of Phetchaburi was left out from conservation and tourism authorities. The majority of residents are descendants of bureaucrats who constructed and served in these royal summer villas. Several owners of historic wood houses also have stories of their ancestors who serve as royal servants and guards providing more narrative of local history and perspective of commoners to the royal rulers. Some of them could trace the connection to canal communities in Khlong Bang Luang of Thonburi district since they were both bureaucrats serving the royal households.

The population of the town of Phetchaburi is also decline. The new generation of residents moved to the new housing development in the West and South suburb of the town near bypass highway of Phetchakasem Road to the beach or lived in Bangkok. Some owners of these wood houses no longer live in the house and rent them out which soon to be deteriorated because the renters cannot decide for regular maintenance. Therefore, wood

shop houses in this area were vacant, gradually deteriorated, demolished and replaced by new modern concrete structures that alienate themselves from the neighborhood. The municipal government of Phetchaburi is responsible for assisting communities to develop quality of life but it is run by elected officials who are inclined to support only communities that vote for them. With the mindset of feudal context, it is difficult to reach agreement with other national agencies such as regional electricity, tap water, telecommunication authorities and provincial cultural council. The regional and provincial agencies also caution in opening talk with municipality since a local political group has long dominated the town for more than 3 decades while officials of the national agencies are subjected to rotate every 3-5 years.

Measure drawing as a tool to draw Community's sense of ownership as solution

Consequently, the story of members in communities, pattern of everyday life activities, local events and festivals that are considered intangible heritage to local communities and integral part of local wisdom will soon be vanished by the new development of mega projects for public infrastructure. Since the concept of cultural landscape is not widely known by Thai state authorities, both the tangible heritage of wooden shop houses and intangible heritage of unique traditional ways of life in provincial towns may soon be lost.

However, there is still an opportunity to safeguard these historic urban districts in provincial towns due to the rise of ecotourism and participatory cultural heritage conservation principles which recognize the uniqueness of local cultural landscapes and the rights of local communities to have a say in the future of their heritage. Academic institutions and state agencies, for instance, the Provincial Cultural Council, Tourism Authority of Thailand, Housing Authority and Community Development Office have started to conduct more research on how to work with communities to manage and maintain their character and urban livelihoods.

As long as the government agencies still neglect these historic urban communities as nation's heritage and cultural landscape, the only hope is to help communities understand and acknowledge the value of their historic wood houses and local history by conservation architects and academic sectors. The process of recording their houses by surveying and sketching at the site also makes them proud of their properties and consequently stimulates them to share more information. Students, conservation architects and community members exchange story and learn from each other while conducting survey at the site. Soon, cultural experts will follow by conducting "Cultural Mapping" process with local youth and elderly in the community to record intangible heritage and explore opportunity to use it. These documenting processes also have tangible products such as maps of local historic architecture, neighborhood tour map, postcard from sketch drawings and etc. for community to start the activities that can safeguard their historic cultural landscape and maintain their everyday life culture.