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**Tasty Local Market vs Mega Store : Dilemma of Cultural Landscape Preservation in Thailand**

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## **Abstract**

In the past, local markets were the town center and gathering place where people came to trade their agricultural products and food. The markets become center of trading goods, the public space for neighboring communities, lined up with homemade and 'slow' food restaurants, coffee shops, gift shops, photo studios and drug stores, where offering locals a wide range of activities and renowned for their traditional way of life.

In the fast growing country like Thailand, mega trade has been introduced for convenient and faster urban life. International mega stores, super markets and convenient stores have moved to the cities threatening the local markets; some of them were demolished and replaced by mega stores and modern shopping malls. But "Market culture" is recently a new movement in some countries to tell the various tales of the past. It is also true that nowadays the visitors are looking for the taste and fragrance of coffee in classical style than Starbucks and want to stroll in the wooden architecture shop-house clusters with a bite of nostalgia rather than window-shop in a mega mall.

Especially UNESCO has given an Award of Merit (an Award of Merit UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation) to Sam Chuk community and old market; the 100-yr old market town along the Thajeen River in Suphan Buri province, honoring its outstanding preservation of the century-old wooden architecture and the revitalization of the historic commercial hub. The market was originally established as a trading post for the central region of Thailand in 1894.

This paper aims to explore the history of "market culture" and focus on the contradictions of 'the old markets' and 'the modern shopping stores' in Thailand. The author will review the successful cases of UNESCO award winning old market : Sam Chuk that the local people do not allow external pressures to damage their century-old heritage, the new design of Plearn Wan shopping complex with a dynamic and charming place to visit. In addition, the collapses of old canal-front markets when the coming of the highways. The cases of traditional groceries' extinction by the swallow of cross national convenient stores in every corner of the cities. Moreover, she will analyze the reasons behind the success is the effort to make a market as a living museum and a proudly presented cultural heritage site.

**Keywords:** cultural landscape; old market; market culture; mega stores; living museum; conservation; preservation; community; controversies; contradiction; Sam Chuk; Plearn Wan; Klong Suan; Thailand.

## 1. Introduction : Market culture

According to the author's survey, urban residents tend to spend their leisure time inside at home. The respondents spent their leisure time watching TV (87 %) and then stayed at home (68 %), reading books (60%), shopping was ranked in the fourth place (42%) but the first ranks among the outdoor activities (Aruninta, 2009). In North America, shopping is the second most important leisure activity, and the same as in Bangkok, watching TV is indisputably the first (Goss, 1993). Goss described the operation of the shopping center as a spatial system structuring opportunities and constraints for movement and social interaction, he also considered the retail built environment as a system of signification that gives symbolic expression to the cultural values of consumer capitalism. Consumer-oriented activities such as retailing are becoming the backbone in the land use of major urban areas worldwide (Guilbe, 2009).

Thailand is one of the fast growing countries. Like other developing countries, mega trade has been introduced for convenient and faster urban life. The development of retailing in Bangkok has principally followed the American and Australian pattern of superstores and hypermarkets, and retail decentralization in the form of out of town shopping centers (Mandhachitara, Blois, and Smith, 1999). These have created great impacts to local groceries (chow-huay) and traditional local markets. The cross national convenient stores in every corner of the cities expand tremendously and swallow the local groceries and markets, which less bargaining power in the globalize market, the local groceries and markets seem to be defeat to the mega-trade movement. In another hand, customers prefer to shop in a large shopping stores with air-condition, where they can find what they need on the well assorted shelves.

Some other efforts of "market culture" are the promotion of the most popular photos scenic place at the 60s yrs old Klong Suan Market. In Huahin, Prachubkirkhan Province, there are an old Chatchai Market and Plearn Wan newly built commercial complex with the old scent of old market as become a popular tourist destination for Hua Hin residents and visitors, at the same time, the local economy has been improving.

## 2. Blooming of mega store landscape : The declining of local retail shops

Controversies in land redevelopment are always the issues discussed among the physical planners. While the three legs of the sustainable development tripod, the "economic" direction is more emphasized by the land owner, and the "social" and "environmental" directions are neglected (ibid. Aruninta, 2009). In order to choose the right choice of land development schemes requires a comprehensive study and analysis. Virchez and Cachon (2004) identified the competitive advantages of small retailers trying to maintain and confront with mega-retailers in Canada including Wal-Mart, Costco, Home Depot, and other similar types of chain stores. In Thailand, the most popular chain stores are an English Tesco-Lotus, French Carrefour, Dutch whole sale Makro, and those by Thai : Big C (Central Retail group), and The Mall group.

- **Carrefour Thailand**<sup>1</sup> was firstly opened in 1996 with a capital investment of 10 Billion Baths. Today Carrefour has 30 stores nationwide and more than 7,000 employees in Thailand; 23 Carrefour stores are located in Bangkok area and 7 in upcountry. They work with more than 2,000 local suppliers and our partnership is based on a win-win relationship. Special relationships with suppliers are cultivated as part of sustainable, mutually beneficial programs. Using local suppliers also helps to integrate Carrefour into the local economic and social fabric. All suppliers are expected to comply with the Group's social responsibility guidelines.
- **Tesco-Lotus**<sup>2</sup> was firstly opened in 1996-1997, with cooperation with Thai company – CP, with more than 84 billion baht total investment. Tesco Lotus stores now occupy 2.4 million square meters with over 36,000 staff are currently employed. More than 8,400 franchisees provide indirect employment for more than 15,000 Thais throughout the Tesco Lotus store network. Almost 300,000 tons of vegetables and fruits were purchased directly from farmers and vendors in 2007 totaling over 1 billion baht. "Tesco for Thais" non profit charitable foundation formed in 2003, has donated more than 49 million baht to worthy

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<sup>1</sup> Carrefour Thailand website - <http://www.carrefour.co.th/eng/Default.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Tesco Lotus website - <http://www.tescolotus.com/en/>

projects and charities. Support for OTOP<sup>3</sup> programme generates 610 million baht in sales for OTOP producers, with free rental space for OTOP kiosks in stores totaling 70 million baht, with approximately 60-80 participating OTOP vendors, earning them a total of 92.9 million baht.

- **Big C Supercenter**<sup>4</sup> has operated business in the form of "Hypermarket" or "Supercenter" since 1993, a modern retail business which is managed under the umbrella of Big C Supercenter Public Company Limited and its subsidiaries. Today, Big C has a total of 67 branches, divided into 26 branches in Bangkok and the vicinity, 41 branches in the provinces. With more than 14,000 staff, Big C offers a clean, comfortable shopping environment with a wide assortment of goods available at reasonable prices including provide outstanding customer service in order to ensure the winning business strategy. Additionally, Big C provides a one-stop shopping experience to our customers with a wide range of useful services at all stores. The establishment of Big C Foundation on 10th May, 2002, a non-profit organization with an objective of providing educational opportunities for disadvantaged children, support sports to Thai children and Thai people to prevent them from drugs and bring better quality of lives for all Thai people, Thai society, and the nation, at last.

During the year 1990s, the international mega-trade found the way to establish the retail business in Thailand. The Asian recession in 1997 and the pressure from WTO and IMF even weakened Thai business sectors, but at the same time gave more business power to the international traders when Thai currency touch the lowest depreciation to 50 Baht / US\$ (1 US\$ = 32.4 Baht). These dilemmas threatened the local markets; and caused devastation of traditional retailers. The study of the existing strategies of the mega-trade, especially those international chains introduce the Corporate Social Responsibility – CSR, as the strategy to deal with the social problems and compensate the declining of the old market culture, while obviously some of these mega-store chains also open small store open 24 hours a day and emphasize on convenience services, such as Tesco-Lotus Express. In addition to the convenience stores chains, particularly around 1,200 7-Eleven and 600 am/pm (ibid. Mandhachitara, Blois, and Smith, 1999), these convenience stores have damaged the business of the general merchandise or "mom and pop" stores, which declined between 1 and 5 per cent annually over the past 3 years (Mandhachitara, 2000, Reuters Business Briefing, 1999).

### 3. What is the essence of the old markets?

In another hand, mega malls require very large piece of land with regular, unified architecture, harsh exterior modernism, automobile-focused landscape, and refuse any compromise with the rustic aesthetic (ibid Goss, 1993), then the concepts of modern shopping have been introduced. As described by Mandhachitara, Blois, and Smith (ibid, 1999), Bangkok also used to boast a wide array of very large shopping malls in the outer suburbs; Seacon Square, the largest mall in Asia (French & Crabbe, 1998) occupies 500,000 sq.m. and is home to two food halls, a fun park and 380 stores, but recently Bangkokians tend to shift to smaller shopping malls like Villa Market or one stop luxury shopping complexes in the heart of Bangkok like Siam Paragon (Siam Paragon is a joint venture between The Mall Group and BHIC (Bangkok Intercontinental Hotels Co.) and Central World : re-branded as the largest lifestyle shopping complex in Southeast Asia<sup>5</sup>. The area used to locate the only green spot and there have been some questions as to whether major developers should be forced to think also about the common good, that all major construction works have to provide for enough available parking space. Likewise it would be a good idea if major developments would be expected to provide the presence of parks, greenery, children's corners etc. at their premises<sup>6</sup>. The nearby Central World offers a large rectangular square in front of the shopping complex along the main street, where in the evening, huge crowds often gather here to have a drink in the open air bars.

<sup>3</sup> OTOP - One Tumbon (sub district) One Product

<sup>4</sup> Big C Website - <http://www.bigc.co.th/en/>

<sup>5</sup> Online article " CentralWorld : the Largest Shopping Complex in Bangkok"  
<http://www.thaiwebsites.com/centralworldplaza.asp>

<sup>6</sup> Online article "Siam Paragon - World Class Shopping in Bangkok" - <http://www.thaiwebsites.com/siamparagon.asp>

The developers start designing and/or renovating of mega-malls to be a civic space, imitated town-scape, metaphor of urban street, and even the “mall walking” campaign in order to utilize shopping mall as a pleasure and comfort recreation place in cold winter in western countries or in the hot humid climate in tropical countries.

Cotton & Cachon (2007) identified what competitive advantages of smaller retailers, as they were confronted with the entry of mega-malls, that they created five components of Berry's model (1999, 2002) as followings:

- Solve customers' problems,
- Treat customers with respect,
- Connect with customers' emotions through retail experience,
- Set of fairest (not lowest) price,
- Save customers' time.

Worldwide, there are some examples of successful traditional markets exist, provide the necessary infrastructure to urban life, such as ;

- urban Indian shoppers have not shifted totally to the new open mega stores because of the buying habits and brand royalties (Dholakia & Sinha, 2005),
- periodic open-air farmers' markets in western world ; thousand-year old market in Sefrou, and old caravan stop at the foot of the Atlas Mountains in Morocco (Geertz, 1978, cited by Cetina, 2006),
- Tsukiji market in Tokyo, the world's largest seafood market (Bestor, 2004, cited by Cetina, 2006 ibid),
- The Pike Place Market District in Seattle under the urban rehabilitation programs in 1971, to pursue urban renewal in a manner which emphasizes traditional market activities serving the needs of low income residents of the market district (Shakow, 1981).



Figure 1 – Small fish product shops in Tsukiji area

In Thailand, there has been a long fighting between communities and the mega-trade movement during the serious socio-economic decline. There are some examples of remaining local markets, they include “Nang Leang Market” in Bangkok, “Klong Suan Market, in Chasoengsao province, and “Samchuk community and old market district in Suphanburi province” (Figure 2). Samchuk has been successfully revitalized through the far-sighted vision

and cooperation of the local residents, and won an award of Merit in 2009 : UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation.

UNESCO recognizes private sector efforts that have successfully conserved buildings of heritage value, and the effort to restore and adapt historic structures. These will encourage other property owners to undertake conservation projects within the community, either independently or by seeking public-private partnership...

The conservation work has been undertaken in a holistic way, including not only the heritage architecture, but also the living heritage of this historic commercial hub, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the site's value as a cultural heritage resource for the community. The community has been the main driving force for the project at all levels, from setting policy to establishing urban design guideline. [Lee, 2009]

The 'sense of place' of the traditional markets are the public space for neighboring communities, center of trading goods lined up with homemade and 'slow' food restaurants, coffee shops, gift shops, photo studios and drug stores, where offering locals a wide range of activities and their traditional way of life. Thus, focusing on the concepts, these conservation works include the 'tangible' heritage structures of the market and also the 'intangible' living heritage. The full restoration of three major buildings into living museums and neighborhood centers, these provide a focal point for the urban district of wooden shop-houses. We could not deny the 'sense of community' that push forward the community in doing such a cooperation with NGOs, scholars, and private sectors and networks in all efforts to make their dream comes true.



Source : <http://www.samchuk.in.th/gallery/>

**Figure 2** - Samchuk community and old market district in Suphanburi province during the festival.

The idea of "knowing the history of the market and way of life of the people" has been evidenced in Samchuk and Klongsuan Market, many shop owners are willing to recount old stories and some even show visitors rare art objects they have collected. It can be said that the whole market is 'a living museum' (Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Center).



**Figure 3** - Internet and Game shop and drug store in Kongsuan Market



**Figure 4** - The 64 years old coffee shop in Kongsuan Market



**Figure 5 - Barber in Klongsuan Market**

In Huahin, Prachubkirikhan Province, Plearn Wan : Thailand's first Eco Vintage Village : newly built commercial complex with the old scent of old market under the business ideology of 'giving' more than 'taking' inspired from Yokohama Ramen Museum. It now becomes a popular tourist destination for Hua Hin residents and visitors, at the same time, the local economy has been improving. Ms. Tanchainan, Project Manager of PlearnWan Co. Ltd. was quoted<sup>7</sup> that "Plearn Wan was actually created under the concept of a live museum, but the company did not use characteristics of a museum as a selling point, to avoid being considered tiresome by tourists. Instead, Plearn Wan was perceived in visitor's eyes as a real community or a place allowing people to spend good times together".



**Figure 6 – Interior of Yokohama Ramen Museum**

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<sup>7</sup> Online article "Special Report: PlearnWan: First Eco Vintage Village of Thailand". Praj Kiatpongsan, 2009.  
<http://thainews.prd.go.th/en/news.php?id=255210260032>



Source : <http://www.plearnwan.com>

**Figure 7** - Newly built Plearnwan Shopping complex

#### 4. Conclusions

"Market culture" is recently a new movement in some countries to tell the various tales of the past. It is also true that nowadays the visitors are looking for the taste and fragrance of coffee in classical style than Starbucks and want to stroll in the wooden architecture shop-house clusters with a bite of nostalgia rather than window-shop in a mega mall. These new shopping experiences would give the visitors a cultural enrichment, education, and relaxation as in the effort to make a market as a living museum and in cultural heritage sites like traditional local markets or even the newly built shopping complexes. Landscape architects and planners are challenged by the phenomena of market culture and the space planning : *"Life" does matter! Not the "size" anymore.*

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### Biographical Sketch

Ariya Aruninta has a PhD in the Urban Environmental Management Field of Study, School of Environment, Resources, and Development at the Asian Institute of Technology - AIT, Thailand. She started her career after her graduation from University of Colorado at Denver as a landscape architect at Public Works Department, Thailand. During the economic bloom, she was transferred to a lecturer position at Department of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University and became an assistant professor in 2000, and then having been promoted to be an associate professor later in the end of 2006. She was also a deputy director, and an administrative committee of Chulalongkorn University, Social Research Institute – CUSRI. Her research interests are urban landscape and urban management. In 2007, Aruninta has been appointed by the Prime Minister of Thailand to be one of the five honorable board members of Architect Council of Thailand (2007-2009), advisory board of Cultural Heritage Board of House of Senate. She has represented TALA-Thai Association of Landscape Architects as IFLA (International Federation of Landscape Architects) delegate. She also was supported as a visiting scholar under several international fellowship programs included Fulbright, JICA, Science-Po, and the Royal Dutch Government – NFP.