

# PANEL 8 :

## Poor communities in historic cities : Heritage for people (Part 2)

The following report is a lightly edited transcript of the eighth panel discussion which took place during the Regional Gathering of Community Architects, which was organized by ACHR in Chiang Mai, June 12-16, 2010. This session was moderated by Mr. Andre Alexander (from the Tibet Heritage Fund) and Mr. Supawut Boonmahathanakorn ("Tee", a young Thai architect who now works with ACHR), and included presentations from the following places :

- **KOCHI CITY, JAPAN** : Mr. Yoko Hatakenaka is the Executive Director of Kochi Citizen's Council, in the town of Kochi, on the island of Shikoku, in southern Japan. Yoko has been a practicing community architect in Kochi for many years, but has also been involved in some of the country's pioneering "machi-zukuri" (participatory community planning) projects in poor Buraku settlements in other cities.
- **GEORGETOWN in PENANG, MALAYSIA** : Mr. Ooi Bok Kim is a Malaysian architect who specialized on the restoration of historic buildings. His office is in Penang.
- **CHINATOWN in BANGKOK, THAILAND** : Mr. Sakkarin Sapu ("Seng") is a practicing community architect and a lecturer in the Faculty of Architecture at Mahasarakarm University, in Northeastern Thailand.
- **BANGKOK, THAILAND** : Ms. Niramon Kulsrisombat is a lecturer in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.
- **SONGKHLA, THAILAND** : Mr. Thip Srisakulchairak is a lecturer in the Faculty of Architecture, in the Arsom Silp Institute, in Bangkok. His presentation describes the work of restoring the Wat Kutao - an ancient Buddhist temple in Songkhla, in southern Thailand.

The discussions in panels 7 and 8 looked at ways by which groups in Asia are working to ensure that local communities - especially the poor and vulnerable ones - are involved in the preservation and conservation of the historic neighborhoods which still exist in their cities. The discussions looked at how to preserve not only the physical heritage of buildings and monuments, but also the traditions and cultures which go hand in hand with these buildings, such as the knowledge of local craftsmen and the persistence of traditional merchant and artisan cultures. While it is impossible to prevent new developments which pay little heed to vernacular building styles or local building materials, it is possible to combine conservation of historic city neighborhoods with development, making use of existing local assets.

The discussion on Panel 8 looked at heritage conservation projects in Thailand, Malaysia and Japan - all projects which seek to engage local communities in reviving their heritage - both physical and cultural - to ensure that conservation can be combined with development, by making the best use of existing assets and combining the old with the new. (This transcription by Diane Archer)



# 1. Using restoration to revive the community spirit in Akaoka, Japan

Mr. Yoko Hatakenaka



Mr. Yoko Hatakenaka is the Executive Director of Kochi Citizen's Council, in the town of Kochi, on the island of Shikoku, in southern Japan. Yoko has been a practicing community architect in Kochi for many years, but has also been involved in some of the country's pioneering "machi-zukuri" (participatory community planning) projects in poor Buraku settlements in other cities.

**Yoko :** Akaoka is a small town located near Kochi City, where I live and practice architecture. Akaoka has an area of only 1.64 square kilometers, making it the smallest town in Japan. It was a commercial trading area from the Edo period, and there are many buildings over 100 years old here. Around 1973, many of the town's shopping arcades began to decline. In 1977 we started this project, first by establishing a group to try to wake the community people up, to become more interested in issues. Akaoka has many elderly persons with good ideas for the community. This project aimed to help the town to make the best use of local resources, for example its buildings and culture, to maintain them for the next generation by keeping them alive. My role in the project is to be the

coordinator between outsiders, professionals, locals, and also take part in design.

The community development committee involves students, architects, artists, government officials, academics and community people. The community meetings were held in the disused public bath. The meeting leader was able to sit in the seat of the public bath's owner -this is a seat everyone in Japan dreams of sitting in! The committee started many activities after this first meeting: such as acting as Akaoka "detectives" to find the community's treasures, an activity which also involved parent-and-children teams. We wanted to reuse local buildings, the existing facilities, rather than building new ones. After these activities, the team was able to come up with its concept: *to revitalize local resources and find value in them.*

Some of the different buildings we focused on were:

- **A public bath:** We tried to change this into a more public space - an Indonesian shadow puppet show was performed there. The funds for conserving this building came from publishing a book for sale. This book contained photos taking by the locals with their own commentary.
- **A rice warehouse:** We decided to try to use this hundred-year old storage warehouse, owned by Japanese Agriculture, as a cultural stage. In the beginning it hosted small live concerts. After these events, the local government realized that this building was an important part of the town's heritage so started contributing local funds, including a planning workshop in 2003. In 2005 the warehouse was open as a concert hall, and it also displays the 23 famous kabuki paintings indoors as panels. After this project, many people from all over Japan came to visit this hall and Akaoka.
- **Vacant ancient houses:** These empty ancient houses are used as living-culture houses. Many local residents thought about how to use the vacant houses - for example, one lady opened a small bar/restaurant inside one old house.
- **A kabuki theatre:** This playhouse is where the kabuki drama is played, so this theatre was used for kabuki performances.



Eventually, however, the public bath building had to be dismantled. The committee had wanted to buy it, but the sales of the book did not raise enough funds, so the building was sold. However, the committee was able to retain many parts of the building, such as the windows and wooden panels, and two years later, they rebuilt part of the public bath, namely its facade, at the rice warehouse, as well as reusing some furniture from the baths inside the warehouse. Now this place has become a meeting point, and a place where people can remember their public bath and its history.

In the process, everyone discussed together - the local authorities and the community - about their goals and their future. They decided that it was important not to just preserve buildings, but to think about their goal, such as retaining old parts while continuing with new development.



**Above:** the rice warehouse before renovation (left) and after renovation, being used for performances and meetings

**Comment from Andre :** This presentation showed us the complete process of the true community process, and this community found that conservation is also transformation, using the spirit of heritage.

## 2. Saving Penang's historic town of Georgetown

**Mr. Ooi Bok Kim**

*Mr. Ooi Bok Kim is a Malaysian architect who specialized on the restoration of historic buildings. His office is in Penang, and he is part of a group called "Penang Heritage Trust", which is trying to revive the physical buildings and the local culture in the historic district of Georgetown, in Penang (Malaysia) - an area which has been declared a "World Heritage Site", but which is in serious decline.*



**Ooi Bok Kim :** Penang, in Malaysia, became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2008. However, we still have many issues and problems in protecting the buildings. Many of the local people have been moving out of the heritage site, because the World Heritage status is attracting a lot of investors from Singapore, and overseas, who buy over rows of shophouses and kick out the local tenants. So we need to try and find a way to stop that and attract the local community back to their shophouses.

**There are over 5,000 heritage shophouses in Georgetown.** Their conservation so far was possible not just because we want to preserve these buildings, but because of the Rent Control

Act, which was abolished in 2000. From that year onward, many community people were forced out by the owners, and they had to move out to the outskirts to live in public housing, with the result that many of the buildings were left vacant and became dilapidated.

**Our current project is around the Prangin Canal,** which forms the boundary of the World Heritage Site. The map from 1798 shows how when Georgetown was formed, the British colonials chose a grid layout for the new town, for the new migrants from China, India, and the Europeans. The Prangin canal was originally a river, and the old maps of the city were used to define the boundaries of the World Heritage site. The canal was an important meeting point and also used to travel into the city center, and until the 1950s small ships could still travel up it to transport goods. The water of the canal is very polluted.

A chunk of land has been bought by the state government from the Penang Development Corporation, and the



government kicked out all the tenants here and started to build the high-rise tower and shopping mall. Now, some plots of land are still vacant along the canal, and we intend to turn them into a green lung, to revitalize the market and restore the shophouses. There are many old trees in this area, growing together with the old houses, and they are a part of the heritage and landscape. Some old houses were demolished, because the state government said they were too dilapidated and therefore dangerous, they didn't see that they could be restored back to the original state. People had to move out as the government was unwilling to restore the houses, so we are still fighting for this.

We wanted to address a few issues with the local authorities, but we couldn't get details of what they wanted to do. The lack of transparency is a big problem in Penang - and in Malaysia in general. They cut the water and electricity supply to some houses to force the tenants to move out.

Our next step is a *Heritage Impact Assessment*, a site analysis and survey, and a historical architecture and social analysis, to know the condition and how to restore it. Most important is community participation, as we want the original tenants to move back into this area, and this is only possible with an action plan. We have been looking at some case studies, in Japan, and in Singapore, and we can learn a lot from the projects presented in this workshop.



### 3. Saving Bangkok's historic Chinatown District from the wreckers ball

**Mr. Sakkarin Sapu ("Seng")**

*Mr. Sakkarin Sapu ("Seng") is a practicing community architect and a lecturer in the Faculty of Architecture at Mahasarakarm University, in Northeastern Thailand. In his presentation, he describes a project to regenerate Bangkok's historic Chinatown district (the area is also referred to as "Yaowarat" and "Sampeng" in Bangkok, named for two of the main shopping thoroughfares which goes through the district), which is being threatened by plans which call for the demolition of huge swathes of the district, to construct a new subway station.*

**Seng** : I'd like to discuss the way we tried to re-approach the concept of conservation and development, and to overcome the distrust situation between each other, to create trust between community members and researchers.

Chinatown in Bangkok is a transportation hub, near the Chao Phraya River and Hualampong train station. This area has played an important role in the past for the distribution of agricultural products all around Thailand. Sampeng is now an area for wholesale and retail shops, such as souvenirs.

**A Chinatown which still belongs to its residents : Chinatowns in many cities around the world are now more like Disneylands - like fake versions of what they once were, with Chinese restaurants. Most of them no longer meet the needs of the people who actually live in those areas. But our Chinatown in Bangkok still functions for the local people.**



There is a big problem now, because the area is in the expansion plan for the subway system, and the government is in the process of removing the people for this. This land belongs to the Crown Property Bureau. This area has historic buildings, not at the national scale but locally, and there is also an area of buildings in deteriorating condition. Thirty years ago a private company rented a piece of land here to build cheap housing, and while the lease expired many years ago, the people are still living there without paying any rent or with any formal agreement.

With regard our approach to conservation and development - if you think about development, it is not the total destruction of the area - they can still conserve some areas in the site. Conservation and development can have the same meaning, but coming from different points of view. And the role of the architect or planner or urban designer is to transcend or translate this abstract view into something physical. The Arsomsilp Institute was involved and they tried to translate this conservation into images, showing the scale of conservation/development. Conservation need not be

keeping everything, but can mean developing some things to be better. Also, the compensation costs according to Thai law only pays for the physical loss, not the social, economic, historical and environmental costs - this should be the new way.

***We found that there was no local residents' organization or forum for discussion about the issues arising from the new development plans.***

The team also found that we faced much distrust from the local residents, who represent a mixture of social groups, and who feared that the team would use the community for their own benefit. How can architects transcend the situation of distrust into trust with the people? In Thailand, we have many people working with the urban poor, like Lek Sompop (*a senior community organizer who works with CODI*). But here, it is not only the urban poor. The first time we went to this community they asked us what our power was - were we just studying, would we just then leave the people and go away? Therefore, the team sought approval from the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, to have the institutional status required to gain the trust of the local, mostly middle class, residents. Therefore, our tactic was to "*Look formal, but act informal*", because the middle class people have a different attitude when talking about the participatory process, they need us to have status.



In order to create the space for people to get involved in the process of development, we got people to talk about their own family history - not about the community history, the big picture, but only the household history, to give them pride, and give them trust to join us in this community process.



***We also used an indirect way to run this process:*** If we only talked about problems, problem, problem, problem, we create an atmosphere of negativity. So we tried to think of fun activities, such as a children's participatory process. We sent the children to look for old shop signs, which also provided us with information not only but the shops, but also about relationships - which shops don't get on, who is respected in the community and so on. Another thing we learnt is that we need to learn about the different types of relationship of the people, because in this area there are many groups, with many dynamics: commercial, social, religious, neighborhood, and problem-based relationships.

With regard to our methods, we don't have any master plan, comprehensive plan. We move step-by-step. When we work in this area, we feel like we are walking into a dark room. We do

only small activities, and observe the movements of the people, and then design the next step. Maybe we fail - sometimes we don't know what we are doing, but that is a characteristic of this project. So our first step was to suggest a short term rent contract, to secure the sense of belonging of the people, for five years - if they fail, then probably they will all fail together, so this our challenge for our next years. We also plan to open a small community museum, and do some small scale upgrading of infrastructure. The architects have drawn up diagrams illustrating how the area could be revitalized. In one example of their schematic ideas, they have proposed turning a Chinese Opera building into a boutique hotel and opening up a walking street beside it, giving the locals ownership over the development of their area, without destroying the cultural and physical heritage.



**Above:** The government's idea for redeveloping Chinatown (left), and an alternative plan by architects (right)

**Comment from Somsook (who has also been involved in the Chinatown project) :** in Chinatown, with the construction of the new subway station, investors are seeing an opportunity to build apartment buildings, shopping complexes and other such commercial developments. So we need to negotiate a solution. We need to identify the subgroups within the larger Chinatown community. And part of doing this is *building trust*, since many of the local people might think that we are being sent in by contractors to persuade them not to oppose the project! The architects then draft a concept plan to show all parties the new possible directions for development. For example, a Chinese Opera building can become a boutique hotel, we can have a walking street - so that all parties start looking at a new possible direction for development. In order to help build the relationship between the local people and the other parties, they held a field trip to Shanghai and Beijing, to have a dialogue in a different setting and build their relationship of trust, whilst exploring projects there.

## 4. Participation and regeneration in the Kudeecheen Neighborhood in Bangkok

**Ms. Niramon Kulsrisombat**

*Ms. Niramon Kulsrisombat is a lecturer in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. In her presentation, she describes a running project she has been involved with to use community participation in different ways to revive a historic riverside neighborhood, in Kudeecheen, in Bangkok.*

**Niramon :** We all believe that community participation is one of the prerequisites of successful community upgrading. But there are some limitations, for example in a big city like Bangkok, the decreasing social capital makes it difficult to get participation. Also, the nature of participation is often quite problem-oriented, and pessimistic, and may involve only the people affected by the problem, so the proposals may not reflect the aspirations or needs of the overall community. We believe that art can be used to nurture the social capital, by encouraging friendship, and to allow exchange, so that we can understand the community's heritage. Also, the enjoyable nature of art makes people enjoy the activities, so that it is not really a political thing, so we can use art to start the community participation project.



**Above :** *The riverside Kudeecheen neighborhood in the 19th Century (left) and today (right)*

Our team decided to use the arts to expand community participation in Kudeecheen neighborhood, which is near the Chao Phraya river, opposite Rattanakosin Island. This neighborhood is very interesting, as it consists of 6 sub-communities, with three religions, dating from the Ayutthaya period. It has a traditional Thai urban structure, still centered around religious institutions, and still has high social cohesion, so we were lucky to be able to work with them.

**Starting with mapping the area :** Our project started in 2008, and we wanted to map the cultural heritage of the area, and to use this map as a learning platform for exchange and understanding of the area. We divided into two processes: mapping the cultural heritage, then using the map. This project was part of the Bangkok Waterway Cultural Mapping project, carried out under the Association of Siamese Architects. To map the heritage, we invited many people to join: the government's Fine Arts Department, architects, urbanists, and the local youth, to map not only the tangible but also the intangible, such as the area's history. Then we opened a public forum for data verification. In 2009 we made a cultural heritage map, and from this map we drew up conservation guidelines and plans. According to the map, religious places were ranked as having the highest cultural heritage value, and they are well maintained by the



local communities and the government. But in contrast, alleys are identified as less valuable, and they are in vulnerable condition. Also other problems emerged, like lack of good public space.

While we had quite good participation from the community, it was still mostly focused on the community leaders, so we decided to expand the participants from all strata of community, through two strategies:

- **We organized a design competition for the public space** which was identified as having high value in the cultural map. Anyone from the community could participate, but the team had to consist of a community member and one of our students. We got 11 design schemes from this activity. The winner was the "memories corridor" which we will be implementing soon.
- **We tried to make participation more fun by using art**, through the "Art in the alley" exhibition. We consulted the 6 communities about where to put the art, as we would be using their open space, so we needed their cooperation. Volunteers involved included artists, professionals and local amateurs, and community members. We lit up all the religious sites, and the alleys and the panels. On the first day, some people didn't really know what they were going to do, but on the second day, more people participated. For example, one boy is very good at drawing fish so he hung up his paintings on the wall of his house. Another group joined in by taking photos.



The end result was beautiful and very enjoyable. We found, by talking to people, that they got a better understanding of their cultural heritage, and they talked about making this a more permanent event to make their neighborhood more beautiful. The community decided to make this part of their local festival, so this will be revived in November with the Loy Krathong festival. Our next step is to materialize the results of the design contest, so now we are fund raising, with the temple and community at the core.

## 5. The conservation and revitalization of Wat Kutao, in Songkhla, Thailand

**Mr. Thip Srichakulchairrak**

*Mr. Thip Srisakulchairak is a lecturer in the Faculty of Architecture, in the Arsom Silp Institute, in Bangkok. His presentation describes the work of restoring the Wat Kutao - an ancient Buddhist temple in Songkhla, in southern Thailand.*

**Thip :** This project started in May 2008, when the Arsomsilp institute went for a sightseeing trip in Songkhla, in Southern Thailand. We found this very beautiful temple, Wat Kutao, which is in decline. The abbot said he wanted to restore the temple, so we had a meeting with the abbot and the temple community about this. The community was not strong, as they lack ownership over the temple. So I felt a community participatory process should be applied, and Arsomsilp decided to start the conservation and revitalization project of Wat Kutao, starting by restoring one pavilion. We thought this would also be a good learning opportunity for our masters students, and over the year we went over ten times to the community. There were many steps:



1. **To investigate the possibility of a participatory process for conservation**, we went for five days to just be in the community, to live and learn from them. We talked and listened to their problems, their opinion of the project, and we did a family tree to find out about the old families. Then we shared our knowledge with the community. The conclusion was that the pavilion used to be a school, very popular in the provincial level, but the problem was that the community was not strong.

2. **To encourage and increase awareness of the local people**, we started with a photography project, displaying photos in the market. We also had children's art activities, and cleaning the pavilion, and an exhibition of our plans. We did people mapping, to share information and expose the good things about people. But in some things, the community were not interested.
3. **We shared with the community the issues of what to do with the pavilion once it was restored.** The community tried to raise funds by selling t-shirts. While it looked that the community people were increasingly participating, it turned out that people needed time to do their jobs and did not have time for meetings. There was also a very violent election campaign happening at that time, so we decided to pause the community process.
4. **We moved onto the building process, measuring and drafting the site plans**, then drawing up plans in the studio, with the help of a local architecture school to participate. We displayed the plans and some people were interested and wanted to join in the restoration process. When the local election finished, we resumed our work in the area, and made a brochure of the four options for the pavilion conservation. The temple made an appointment with the local community to attend a meeting, but no one turned out, which was very frustrating.
5. **Finally, we were able to have a group meeting**, but it was different to the past meetings - it was a dialogue, with direct sharing of problems and many issues. Here, they asked me to estimate the cost of repairing the pavilion, which I thought would be 500,000B, and then the local people donated in excess of that, totaling 600,000B.
6. **So we began the restoration, beginning with spiritual worship**, then repair works, cleaning and repairing the pavilion, sculptures, with the participation of the local community in all steps.
7. **In the end, the temple won a provincial level award for best temple**, and we also got financial support for this local level project. This is just a starting point now - the local people want to conserve another pavilion next.



**QUESTION : How are sites selected for preservation?**

- (Andre responds) In the Tibet Heritage Fund, we don't select heritage sites. Communities propose which buildings we should restore. It is quite convenient for us, because when a place is declared a heritage site, we face many government obstacles and regulations.
- (Surya responds) The local leaders and experts document the important sites of historical and cultural heritage. We visit the communities and prioritize the sites according to the willingness to participate of the community.

**QUESTION : Does the government inspect your restoration work, to ensure you are within regulations, and whether your buildings are sustainable, earthquake resistant and so on?**

- (Andre responds) One part of the process is that we have to do constant lobbying with the government. If they only come in once we're done, it's much too late. Also, in the countries where we work, there is much less of a regulatory framework than in Europe, for example.
- (Surya responds) In Pathan, we have archeological norms: anything over 100 years old cannot be changed or altered or destroyed. Sometimes, the communities want to replace old buildings with new structures, and our job is to convince them otherwise. For example, if they do this, they will not get government or municipal support, like improvement to infrastructure and drainage. So conservation is tied up with neighborhood improvement, and if you follow the rules, you get the government's participation.

**COMMENT from Kirtee: The reality of the situation is that we can't fight markets and development.**

- (Veronica Liew from Penang responds) Since the World Heritage Site status, Georgetown has become a goldmine. The word "heritage" is slapped on everything, from bike tours to maps, which means that the true heritage is diluted. In my job, we give grants to small time property owners, but even they are becoming gentrified, opening coffee shops and boutique hotels. So we try to raise awareness. It is a learning process, though we question whether the local government truly knows the meaning of heritage. They bring in experts to show how we should use what we have, but just because it worked in Edinburgh doesn't mean that it will work in Penang. The World Heritage Site application was very top down, there was no participation, and it was a 12 year process. So, many stakeholders need to first understand what heritage is - the marrying of the cultural, historical and commercial, but without destroying the soul of the city. All we see for now are boutique hotel plans.