

Cultural Resources Management in Historic Community in Bangkok: The Tha Tian Case

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Abstract

The top-down approach in the conservation of urban cultural heritage in Bangkok by the central government has generated a number of cases of urban unrest. An idea of city beautification via excessive open space provision is an objective of such top-down policy, resulting in several clearance and relocation proposals. With the growing community pressure and local political support, such proposals have failed to achieve. Tha Tian community is a case among the affected relocation targets that has been resisting the policy. The community is situated in the most prime cultural site of the conservation area and according to the conservation master plan, most of the mixed-ownership 490 shophouse units have to be pulled down to give way to open space. A small number of existing beautifully decorated shophouses will be left vacant and turned into a museum. To date such proposal has not been implemented in spite of budget availability. The failure of executing the plan led the local government –Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, the BMA, to seek for alternative solutions in 1997. The alternative project for Tha Tian was conducted through a research team from a planning school, which changed the approach by running the community involvement program at the beginning. The project starts by both surveys of architectural value and living prospects of the inhabitants. A series of participatory techniques was applied to receive the community consent. The architectural survey proves that many more buildings should be preserved due to their intrinsic values. Results of the household survey shows that the community had very strong social tie and had already established an official organization as a body to negotiate with the government authority. Alternative physical development plan and shophouse development guidelines were proposed. In the participatory process, representatives of the BMA also took part to ensure that the proposal would not be a castle in the air. After the alternative plan was finalized, the residents started their community improvement activities with the BMA. The activities' fund was from mixed sources. Regarding the shophouses as a sort of cultural resources, residents of Tha Tian have proved to some degree that the improvement of the resources can be managed by the community if implementation opportunity is given by the local government. However, community's activity in cultural resource management is still limited due to the existence of top-down conservation policy from the central government. Under this central-local governments awkward condition, the community can not go further for more complicated improvement activities like building restoration and waterfront redevelopment because fear of eviction and policy uncertainty still exist.

Background

One of the expressions of urban cultural resources in Bangkok is her historic district called Koh (meaning an island) Rattanakosin. The area has its history dating back in the late 17th century but the significant remains nowadays are those built during the late 18th and early 20th centuries. There are many types of built heritage in Koh Rattanakosin ie, palaces, government buildings, city walls and forts, moats, temples, bridges, piers, statues, and

commercial shophouses. In the 1970s there was a call for preventive measures to keep the atmosphere and physical environment of Koh Rattanakosin by an NGO namely Society for the Conservation of National Treasures and Environment (SCONTE), which later led to the response of the government in the establishment of national conservation committee, called Rattanakosin Committee.¹ Koh Rattanakosin had the first development control in terms of building regulations in 1984 and almost a decade later the first BMA land use plan was launched in 1992, having designated Koh Rattanakosin the conservation area for the promotion of Thai art and culture. Rattanakosin Committee is a sort of top-down decision-maker being composed of high-rank government officials and elites. In 1994, the Committee approved Rattanakosin Conservation and Development Master Plan² where significant structures built in and before the reign of King Rama V (up to the first decade of the 20th century) will be restored or reconstructed and the rest will be demolished. Besides, a number of open spaces will also be provided after building demolition. However, such conservation policy proposals are hardly accomplished particularly those on the private lands and existing communities. Consequently, there have been actions of resistance of the relocation affected communities against the building demolition and open space proposals.

At almost the same time, there have been a series of paradigm change in the field of urban development and urban conservation. In the global context, in line with sustainable development and decentralization, the conservation of urban heritage has been recommended or advised to undertake along with the promotion of citizen participation. This is seen by the statements in the international agreements such as Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas or Washington Charter in 1987³, Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements and Habitat Agenda in 1996⁴, and recent U.S. Charter of the New Urbanism⁵ that promotes citizen-based participatory planning and design.

In Thailand, active citizen participation in urban areas was recognized by the government during the late 1990s when the importance of human resources became a crucial ingredient in the 8th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997-2001) as well as the launch of the 1997 Constitution. In the Constitution, there are at least 5 articles (articles 45, 56, 58, 59, and 79) that deal with the promotion of citizen participation and the right of citizen in the maintenance and conservation of natural and cultural environments. Furthermore, the 1999 Decentralization Act requires the central government to transfer public tasks including maintenance of heritage to local authorities.

The aforementioned changes led the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration – the BMA as local government to seek for alternative solution for the implementation of Rattanakosin conservation project. In 1996, the BMA selected two areas comprising four communities for the detailed study.⁶ One of the four communities is Tha Tian which was proposed in the master plan for waterfront open space development. As competent local authority having a chair in the conservation committee, the BMA was facing a dilemma of

¹ Rattanakosin Committee later extends its responsibility to any historic districts throughout Thailand. The committee was renamed “Rattanakosin and Old Town Conservation Committee”.

² See Synchron Co.Ltd., *Rattanakosin Conservation and Development Master Plan*. Final report submitted to Office of the Natural and Environmental Policy and Planning. Bangkok, 1994.

³ The Washington Charter is an international charter concerning the conservation of historic towns and urban areas, developed by International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)

⁴ Istanbul Declaration and Habitat Agenda were declared on the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in 1996 at Istanbul, Turkey.

⁵ www.thevillagenotl.com/Article/pdf/charter.pdf (accessed 15 September 2005)

⁶ One area is Tha Chang and Tha Phra Chan communities and the other one is Tha Tian and Pakklong Talad communities.

implementing the top-down policy under the prevailing citizen-based and decentralization movement. In doing so, the BMA hired a planning school to conduct an action research on the improvement program for Tha Tian community. In this study project,⁷ citizen involvement is a key to search for an alternative solution.

Cultural significance of Tha Tian

Tha Tian is an old community situated in the most significant spot of the Koh Rattanakosin since it is surrounded by major heritage and tourist sites which are, the Grand Palace, Temple of the Emerald Buddha (Wat Phra Kaew), Temple of the Reclining Buddha (Wat Pho), and the Temple of Dawn (Wat Arun).

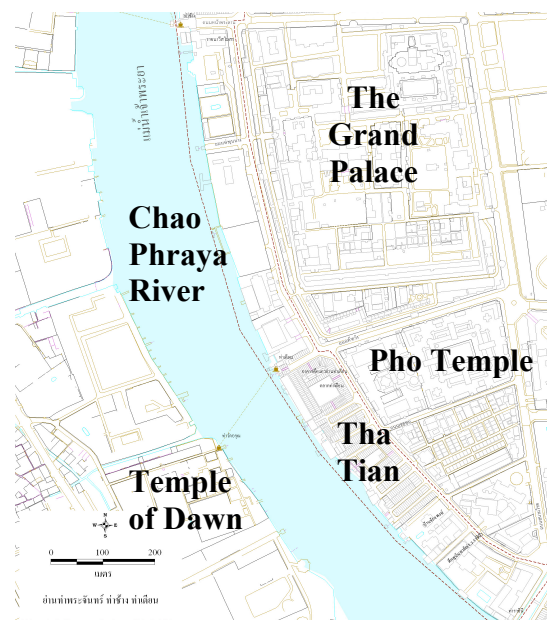


Fig. 1: Map of Tha Tian community and its surroundings

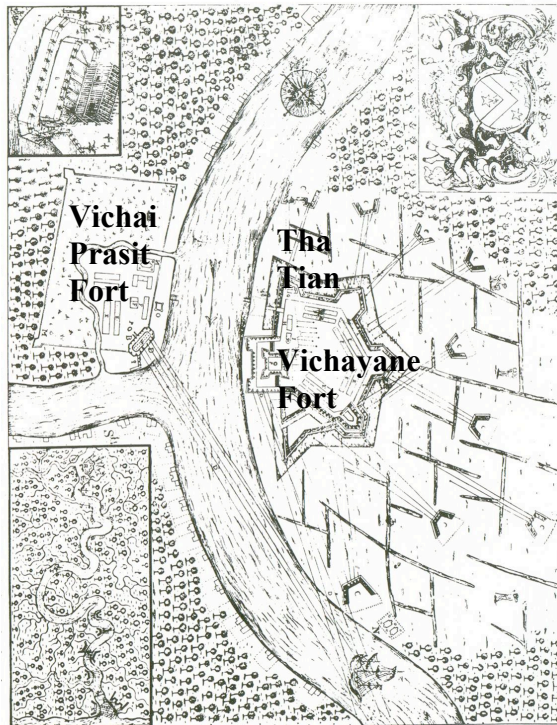
The evolution of Tha Tian can be flashed back in the 17th century. By comparing the two maps of Bangkok drawn differently in 1688 and 1931 (Fig. 2), the area of Tha Tian was a part of one of the two forts built by French garrison under the permission of a king of Ayutthaya in the 17th century.⁸ At present the fort on the western bank of the River, namely Vichai Prasit Fort, still exists and is well restored by the Royal Navy. The other fort, Vichayane Fort, where Tha Tian belongs to, was destroyed after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. To date, there has been no excavation to prove the archaeological evidence of the site. After the fall of Ayutthaya, Tha Tian was the site for a Royal Dock during Thon Buri period (1767-1782).⁹ Later in Rattankosin era (1782 onwards), the area was the site of palaces of the princes and princesses. In the reign of King Rama IV (1851 – 1868), Tha Tian had a big fire disaster and the Royal International Court was built. In the Fifth reign (1868 – 1910), markets and

⁷ Faculty of Architecture, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang (1996). *Planning for Specific Area in Historic District: Tha Tian-Pakklong Talad communities*. Final report submitted to Bureau of City Planning, Bangkok Metropolitan Administration.

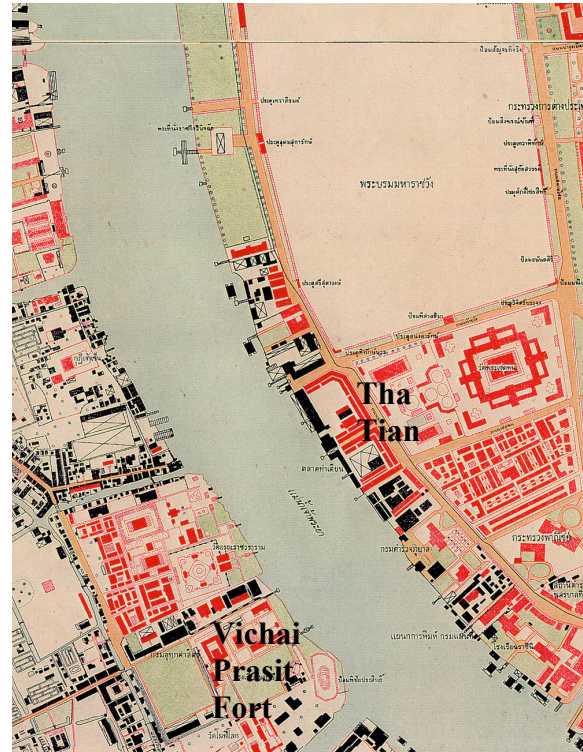
⁸ Larry Sternstein (1982). *Portrait of Bangkok*. Bangkok: Allied Printing, p. 6

⁹ Fine Arts Department (1982). *Rattanakosin Chronicles*. Bangkok: Saha Pracha Panitch, pp. 555-556. (in Thai)

western-influenced shophouses were constructed instead.¹⁰ Since then, Tha Tian has become a vibrant transportation node and wholesale market. Even until today the area is an active commercial community in the conservation district. Trade activities in Tha Tian are wholesale, retail and service sectors. The wholesale trade includes dried seafood and agricultural produces while retail trade ranges from Thai herbs to souvenirs and daily-use products. Service business like restaurant, Thai massage school and other tourist-oriented activities seem to be growing since there is an increasing number of tourists in the area.



Map of Tha Tian area in 1688
(source: Sternstein 1982:7)



Map of Tha Tian in 1931
(source: The Royal Survey Department)

Fig. 2: Location of Tha Tian on the old maps of Bangkok

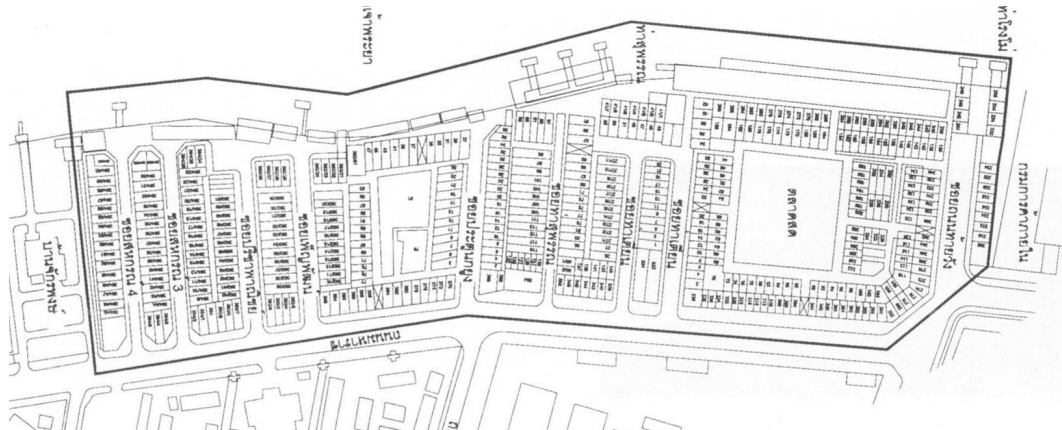
The long history and continuity of changes in Tha Tian has resulted in the diversification of land ownership pattern. In the past the land was owned by the Royal family and Pho temple. After the democratization movement in 1932, the Royal land was divided and transferred to private individuals and the Crown Property Bureau but the temple land remains unchanged.

In terms of physical appearance, some of the Fifth reign shophouses had been replaced with modern structures built in later periods. The postwar-styled market and a ferry jetty are also a part of the area. The waterfront area has a high quality value but there are a number of squatter houses along the river bank that provides difficult access to the public. The squatters are those who work as coolies in the wholesale market as well as those who produce dried fish products.

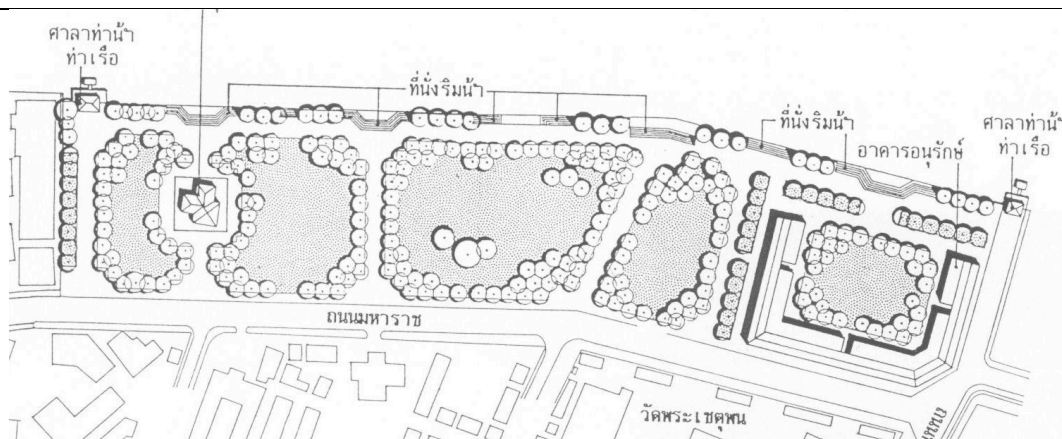
¹⁰ See Naengnoi Sakdisri, et al (1987). *Architecture of the Grand Palace*. Bangkok: The Royal Secretary. (in Thai).

Impact of the master plan

Due to its strategic location and significance, Tha Tian was subject to an ideal ‘beautification’ concept in Rattanakosin conservation and development master plan. According to the plan, only shophouses built in the Fifth reign (about 61 units) will be restored and reused for tourist service or retailing while the other buildings (more than 400 units) will be demolished to give way to open space and waterfront development. The Tha Tian project was put into the last phase of many development projects in the master plan, that is, to start in the 11th year after the cabinet approval. The development budget was estimated at 1.2 billion baht (equivalent to USD 3 million) which include costs of land expropriation and relocation compensation.



Existing condition of Tha Tian community with 490 shophouses



The master plan proposal with provision of open space via shophouse demolition
(source: Synchron Group 1994: 245)

Fig. 3 Comparison of existing condition and proposal for Tha Tian conservation

In the master plan, there are also some comments concerning project implementation. The interesting one is that the building demolition and residents’ relocation scheme will have an impact on the community’s socioeconomic benefits that would impede the success of the project. In this regard, the need to have public hearing and public relations is recommended.¹¹ Such comments are quite awkward because the hearing should be organized before the

¹¹ Synchron Co.Ltd., op. cit., p. 248.

decision is made. But in the case of Tha Tian, the decision was already made by the top-down committee before the hearing.

Moreover, the provision of open space after the building demolition will destroy the historic fabric of Rattanakosin because the long established community will no longer exist. The fear of eviction had brought about the strength and unity of the community. Coupled with the BMA policy on citizen-based development, in 1996- two years after the master plan approval, Tha Tian became one of the BMA' registered community that has official community organization as a residents' representative body to work with the BMA in various development matters.

The study approach

It can be said that Tha Tian master plan is not realistic because it is based on city beautification without taking ownership pattern, economic viability, social aspect and cultural diversity into account. Strength of the community and the policy of local government have made it even more difficult to implement. Therefore, the study under the BMA project has an alternative approach which is based on the needs and obstacles of the community but without compromising the loss of cultural value of Rattanakosin Island. In fact, the alternative approach does not come only from the resistance of the community and local government support, but also the global conservation trend via international agreements that promote citizen participation in the decision-making process for the conservation of historic community in urban areas.

The study of Tha Tian alternative proposal which commenced in 1998, has seven steps as follows:

Step 1: Scan the environment

This initial step includes collection of relevant data such as existing conservation policy, land ownerships, history of the community, architectural value, and economic activities. Such data are analyzed so as to assess the cultural significance of Tha Tian and identify strengths and weaknesses of the area. Strategy in running the project was formulated at the end of this step.

Step 2: Household survey

The survey of household was initially on census basis but it appeared that there were only 130 out of the total 300 households that responded the questionnaires. From the survey, it is found that most of the respondents have been living and running business in Tha tian for more than two generations with strong social tie. Towards relocation, most of the respondents do not want to move out since they do not want to change their living and working premises. On the future prospect on trade opportunity, the residents are optimistic due to the increasing number of tourists in the area. On the matter of historic buildings, most of the respondents agree to follow the design guidelines if they have the opportunity to stay.

Step 3: Architectural survey and documentation

Along with household survey, detailed architectural documentation was conducted. Result of the survey shows that there are 65 per cent of all shophouses being worth preserving while the master plan intended to preserve only 15 per cent. The significant shophouses include those built during King Rama V reign and those built later with the outstanding postwar, modern movement style. Table 1 summarizes the number of shophouses with

different styles in Tha Tian .and compares the number of valuable shophouses defined in the master plan and the survey.

Table 1: Comparison of significant buildings in Tha Tian from different sources

Shophouse Category	Sources				Remarks
	1994 master plan		1997 survey		
	no.	%	no.	%	
Shophouse built in or before King Rama V	61	13*	73	15*	Additional 12 units are found on the property of Pho Temple
Post-war shophouse	329	87	246	50*	The Post-war style shophouse
Non-conforming shophouses			171	35	
Total	490	100	490	100	

(Source: the 1997 survey)

(Note * percentage of shophouse that is worth preservation)

Step 4: Integrative analysis

Works derived from steps 1 to 3 are initially analyzed in this step. The purpose of this task is to figure out what are cultural values of Tha Tian that would be used as basis for defining conservation treatments. In this regards, the cultural value assessment recommended by UNESCO¹² can be applied. According to the value assessment, Tha Tian has cultural value in terms of identity, artistic and rarity aspects. The area also has contemporary socio-economic value clearly seen by the shophouses' function as economic source and strong social tie in the community. Although the demolition of non-conforming shophouse gives beauty to the site, it destroys the contemporary socio-economic value since it departs social tie within the community.

Step 5: The hearings and meetings

The value assessment in the previous step is the internal analysis conducted by the study team and experts. But in this step, all the findings from the analysis have been presented to the community members and the BMA officials. The presentation and discussion were organized in many forms to facilitate the different profiles of the beneficiary groups such as government officials, affected residents, community development committee as well as local politicians. After a series of presentation, discussion and consultation, an alternative conservation plan for Tha Tian was formulated and presented in a community hearing. The hearing was organized within the community office having the beneficiary groups attended.

¹² See details in Fielden, Bernard, M., & Jokilehto, Jukka (1998). *Management Guidelines for World Cultural Heritage Sites*, 2nd edition, Rome: ICCROM/UNESCO/ICOMOS. pp. 11-13.



Fig. 4: Community meetings in Tha Tian

Step 6: Alternative proposal

A series of hearings, discussions and consultations have made it possible to propose an alternative conservation plan (Fig. 5) which has four features as follows:

- the restoration of 319 units of shophouse instead of keeping only 61 units as defined in master plan;
- the provision of 'vista channel' by enhancing the existing alleys that lead to the waterfront area instead of building demolition to give way to vast open space. The vista channel option reduces the risk of residents' rejection against building demolition and relocation. It also gives the feeling of openness without creation of huge open space;
- the formulation of design guidelines for non-conforming buildings and infill development. Development of non-conforming buildings will be regulated to help keep good physical environment. The guidelines focuses on the harmony of building facade and design but which may not falsify the authenticity of the existing significant buildings;
- the partnership as means for implementation. Due to complex tenure conditions and different beneficiary groups, the implementation of the alternative proposal could not be done only by the government but that to be done in the form of partnership comprising the local government (i.e., the BMA), land owners, renters, and the community. The implementation is possible when different resources are shared among the partners.

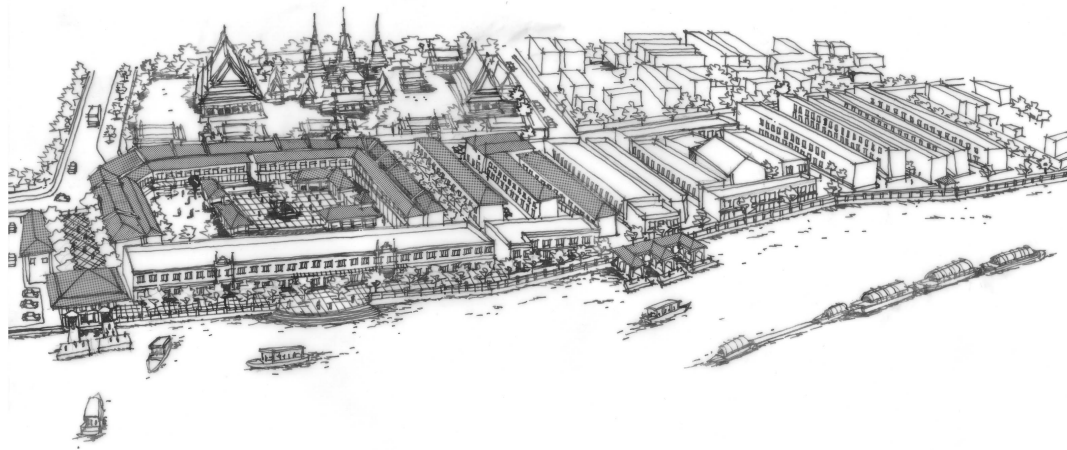


Fig. 5: Alternative proposal for Tha Tian conservation

Step 7: public presentation

After the alternative proposal received the consent of the beneficiary groups, a final public presentation was organized. The presentation venue was a conference room of a vocational school located close to the community. Such venue arrangement is to provide easy accessibility to community members because if the presentation is organized in the hotel or luxury conference room, fewer residents will come. During the public presentation the alternative proposal is introduced to the BMA representatives, local politicians, residents, and academicians. Main purposes of the public presentation are to receive feedbacks from wider range of society toward the alternative plan, and to inform the public about the more realistic plan that include community's prospect into conservation consideration.

Implementation and conclusion remarks

The result of public presentation has built a trust between the BMA and the community to a certain degree. In order to express the effort in participating in conservation, the community and the BMA had the historic shophouses repaired, repainted, and refurbished in 1999. In the following years, the BMA allocated budget for the improvement of pavement in the alleys. Recently the community extended its effort on the investment of light presentation on shophouse facade, and the postwar shophouse repair with harmonious facade and awning design. All the activities need consecutive consultation among the BMA, research team from school, residents, and community leader.

Although the alternative plan is agreed among the local groups, the national conservation committee maintains its decision on the master plan. Relocation and building destruction are still the concern of the community. Further improvement actions like detailed building restoration, market and waterfront revitalization that can be done in the form of partnership are withheld by the conservation committee. In the case of Tha Tian, community and local bodies are ready to take part in the conservation of urban heritage activities, but the biggest hurdle to work on this is the national conservation committee that has different perception of urban heritage values.

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