

# Participatory Design with Local Community Network: Challenges Experienced in a Housing Rehabilitation Project

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**Abstract:** Reflecting on a case study of a housing conservation and rehabilitation project in Uthai Thani province, this paper aims to present how participatory technique can be a creative approach to sustain a built environment and change the way in which the local people experience their built environment. It attempts to clarify the role of the locals who dealing with participatory activities in conservation and rehabilitation processes. As a means of engaging people, participation involves creative thinking and the invention of new tools for architectural and urban conservation. It allows us to explore how we can use more adaptable techniques in dealing with those people who involved with the process of constructing built environment. Based on the case study, this paper delineates participatory practice as socio- political activities; it found that the locals play their crucial roles in both conservation planning and rehabilitation activities. Through participatory approach, a group of the locals from different backgrounds informally formed the community network to manage the project called “*Uthai Thani Old Quarter Revitalizing Program*”. They attempted to promote an adaptive reuse of traditional buildings and old market through rehabilitation and tourism activities. As a result, the old quarter has recently become a famous tourist attraction in the province and dramatically changes from decaying to being alive and flourish.

In conclusion, this paper argues that design professionals need to reform their structures critically, by encouraging more in the way of collaboration and multi-disciplinary approach as well as inevitably having to engage in socio-political production of the built environment.

**Key words:** *Participatory Design, Local Community Network, Built Environment*

## 1. Introduction

Influenced by the Brundtland Commission stating the need of effective citizen's participation as main factor of sustainable development, many countries around the world have institutionalized participation as a crucial part when developing the new solutions for economically or socially marginalized people. In design process, it is argued that participatory practice can better serve the understanding among the people who have involved. Yet, few studies address the real- life of doing participatory design projects or how participatory design methods have to be adapted to local conditions. It is interesting to question that what possibilities

designers will face when trying to organize participatory projects and how do they have to mediate different requirements of the people who involved in the process.

Participatory design bases on the idea that people who are affected by any circumstances in the process should have their opportunities to engage with it. It is an alternative design approach in which designers and other stakeholders working together in the design process; it cuts across traditional boundaries and cultures and design ideas might be aroused from collaboration with the participants from different backgrounds. However, practical investigate in foregoing projects are rarely discussed, thus it is necessary to find appropriate ways of engaging people in participatory design activities.

In early 1960s, participatory design was firstly introduced in Europe when computer professionals and union leaders attempted to enable workers to have more influence on computer systems in the workplace. Several tactics have been conducted with the aim at finding effective ways to encourage the people working together in order to develop the quality of work life. Following this idea, participatory design was being used in broaden perspectives, including product design, urban design, architecture, organization development and etc. However, participatory practice in architecture is considered as marginal activity, compared to the mainstream architectural culture [1].

In “*Architecture and Participation*” [2], several questions about the practice of participation have been provoked within the context of architectural culture. It suggests that participation could become as a means of stimulating architectural culture. By bringing benefits to all stakeholders in participatory process, this approach could effort architectural practice more relevant to the people’s everyday life. Following this line of thought, architectural design processes should include and explore participatory approach as a creative tool in their practices. Furthermore, architectural practice should transform its working culture to become more collaborative- oriented and engage in the social and political aspect of crating the built environment in order to achieve sustainability.

In recent years, participatory practice in the design of built environment has a marked increase globally. According to Hamdi, the 1976 U.N. Vancouver conference encouraged policies and programs in developing countries to emphasis the poor as the main agency of development and governments as enablers rather than providers [3]. As a result, community participation in planning, building, and management was emerged, various participatory projects have been examined; they included the people involving in building in their own shelters. While some manage budgets for upgrading the people’s living conditions, building communities that communities that increased employment opportunities, and ensuring self-financing projects or initiating local organizations capable of sustaining both social and physical development.

Influenced by a World Bank mission that visited rural Thailand in 1980s, Thailand has accepted the participatory practice as it first highlights in the Fifth National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP 1982–1986) and it became recognized widely in Thai society since the Eighth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997–2001). In 1997, a new Thai Constitution allows the decentralization of

decision-making to the local people. This new political structure enables and empowers the local people to develop their own communities through decentralized government functions and resources by enlarging public participation, and increasing transparency and the improved system of governance. With this political reform, the local people have their own rights to engage with the local development activities and have a power to monitor, control and oversee the results and performance of the local administration [4]. Since then, many groups of local and urban activists have attempted to run the forums where their demands and local authorities could meet for exchanging information on various issues affecting their lives. A public involvement was suggested towards several collective actions, including community gatherings, brainstorming problems, organizing workshops, and seminars to information dissemination [5].

Even though, participation has been widely practiced in the country by both Thai and international Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), it was limited to specific issues such as human rights, health or education, while very little is said about the built environment [6]. By the end of the 2000's, public participation became a compulsory process in urban planning laws; it was initially made at the national level and there has been increasing in the application of participatory methods among the local people when implementing urban design projects. In recent years, an interest in engaging people has been remarkably propagating throughout the country, especially in the process of creating the built environment.

This approach provides importance to the development potentialities of the local communities. Historically, the idea of *“community participation”* emerged from criticism of the *“community development”* approach in the 1970s. It adopts some of the principle inherent in this approach but tried to avoid its *“bureaucratic administration”* and its *“superimposed direction”*. The basic assumption underlying the community participation approach is that:

*“participation..., strengthens the capacities of individuals and communities to mobilize and help themselves. In this way, dependence on the state is minimized and ordinary people rediscover their potential from cooperation and mutual endeavor”* [7]

Community Participation reveals the way in which a *“grouping of two or more people for a specific activity of its own group to serve their community”*. The group may have its own rules and regulations either written or unwritten as a frame- work for the group's activities. Moreover, they may be registered according to the provisions of law to retain formal status or exists as an informal group. In other words, organization refers to the rational coordination of activities by a group of individuals with the aim of achieving some common purposes. In Thailand recently, one of design practice engaging the community participation is a housing rehabilitation program initiated by Thai National Housing Authority in 2009. The purpose of this program is to upgrade living conditions of local settlements by affording subsidization from the government to collective groups of local communities. It acts as a catalyst in allowing local communities to get involved and encourage them as a part of doers in participatory process. By reviewing a case study employing participatory processes as a means to create the built environment, this paper selects *“Uthai Thani old quarter revitalizing project”*,

one of the case studies in this program to reveal the idea that participatory design can be creative tools to challenges traditional perception in architectural and urban design practices.

## 2. Uthai Thani Old Quarter Revitalizing Project

### 2.1 Overview of Uthai Thani Old Quarter

Located about 300 kilometers away from Bangkok, “*Uthai Thani old quarter*” is located in the heart of “*Uthai Thani*”; one of the lower northern provinces of Thailand. Due to a geographical location, this old quarter was found on the west bank of “*Sakaeklang*” river and became a community of a mixture of Thais and Chinese diaspora. As rice and ore market, this community have long been played its crucial role in conveyance and trade between “*Pak nam Pho*” a former name of “*Nakornsawan*” province, a port town of northern mountain ranges and “*Chao Phraya*” river plain. Many commercial and trade- related business have developed and became to be a merchant district for around three centuries, however it began to decline after a development of the northern railroad in 1921 and “*Phaholyothin*” road from the capital city to “*Nakornsawan*” province in 1940.



Figure 1. Aerial View of “*Uthai Thani*” Merchant District in the Past (Photo’s Courtesy of the Locals).



Figure 2. The Location of “Uthai Thani” Old Quarter, (2010).

In the midst of this quarter, there is the small alley named “*Trok Rong Ya*” where its physical environment was defined by wooden row- shop houses. Most of Chinese ancestries have initially found their houses on this drive and expanded to its adjacent areas where to become a merchant district. As its given name, this place was used to be an opium parlor, and then has developed to be a gambling den and a shelter for Chinese secret society. In the period of field marshal “*Sarit Thanarat*”, a former Thai prime minister, this area has been closed down by law enforcement and became a decadent place for the poor by the end of 1960s.



Figure 3. Opium Parlor in the Past and Landscape of “*Trok Rong Ya*” in 2010, (Photo’s Courtesy of the Locals).



Figure 4. A Wooden Row House and the Local Shop in “*Trok Rong Ya*” before Upgrading, (2010).



Not far from this area, it is a place of two historical buildings which have left behind from the great fire in 1939; there are a two storey wooden house “*Hok Sae Tung*”, a Chinese medicine shop and a masonry building, “*Xech Kia Kang*” a former Chinese community house. With its physical and cultural landscape, the local municipalities intended to promote “*Uthai Thani A Peasant City*” as a program to create a cultural and ecological tourist destination.



Figure 5. The Front Gate and Interior of a Chinese Medicine Shop House, “*Hok Sae Tung*”  
(Photo’s Courtesy of the Locals).



Figure 6. Exterior and Interior of “*Xech Kia Kang*” Building, (2010).

### Public Participation in the Old Quarter Conservation and Rehabilitation

The urban regeneration plan was first discussed in “*Uthai Thani, A Peasant City*” project, proposed by the local municipality in 2008. With the aim to promote a rich cultural and attractive ecological city, this plan identified the old quarter as one of tourist attractions. The main focus of this plan is to redevelop infrastructure and creates new physical environment for this area in respond to tourism activities. Following the proposed plan, many of traditional buildings were suggested to renovate while some of them were plausibly to be demolished. Facing with this urban regeneration plan, a group of the locals from fifth teen communities who opposed this development plan informally founded a committee name “*Rauw Rak Uthai*” or “*We Love Uthai*” to promote townscape conservation of the old quarter as a voluntary group. In 2010 by working in partnership with academics of Faculty of Architecture, Naresuan University, the local committee decided to participate in

the program called “A Lively Uthai Thani”, a housing rehabilitation program supported by Thai National Housing Authority. In order to facilitate the conservation and rehabilitation program, various activities have been conducted to instigate the participatory process, for instance public meeting, a storytelling and video-making and etc. The main purpose of these activities is to establish a better relationship between the locals and to inform a history of the place to the people. With an academic support from the scholars, the locals started studying and researching their neighborhood. They have organized a public meeting, telling the stories of place through many artifacts that they had collected. This meeting enables people from different generations to share their memories of the place and allows the elders to embed the knowledge of the place to their descendants. The event reaffirms the significance of the place with the rich history to the locals, as one of the participant stresses:

*“... it can remind us about the stories which we have almost forgotten, we then know our place better”.*



Figure 7. Various Activities Organized by the Project Committee, (2010).

Participatory mapping is another technique in learning about the place and its people. The working group created a community map while walking with the locals who were divided into teams. They have found that this old quarter consists of interesting local entrepreneurs, such as an antique shop house, a photography shop, a Chinese medicine shop, a Chinese shrine, a traditional style tea house, a noodle shop, an old café and etc. Together with these activities, information of townscape conservations and revitalization techniques were imparted to the locals through educational workshops led by the specialists. Moreover, the project committee organized site visits to other communities where ecological and conservation efforts are in progress.



Figure 8. Workshops and Study Trips to “Baan Mae Kham Pong”, Chiangmai province, (2010).



Figure 9. Study Trips to “Wat Ket Ka Ram” Community, Chiangmai province and “Kard Kong Ta” Walking Street, Lampang province, (2010).

This activity allows the locals to share some experiences from the others. Some of the locals revealed that it lets them to know about the value of what they have and visualizes them how to manage their resources. By running the theme of townscape rehabilitation and cultural tourism in the old quarter, the locals have led to discuss on the issues *“how to rehabilitate and sustain the old quarter?”*. After a high level of discussion, the committee decided to propose a plan to revitalize the old market in the first place. With the aim to reuse some of traditional shop houses and create a public space by promoting a weekend walking street, *“A Lively Trok Rong Ya”* was named to be a campaign of townscape rehabilitation and cultural tourism activities. Following this purpose, the local committee formed a walking street by drawing a community route indicating traditional shop houses and some interesting tourist spots.

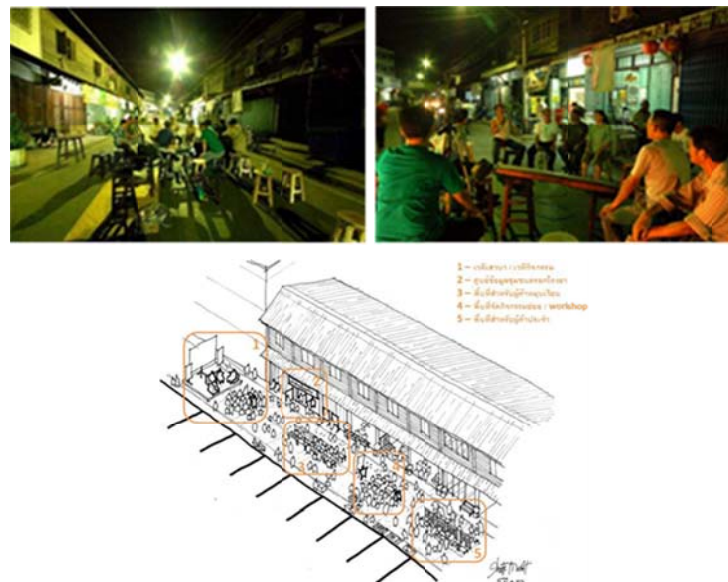


Figure 10. Public Meeting and a Sketch of Walking Street, (2010).





Figure 11. Activities Held on “*Trok Rong Ya*” Walking Street, (2010).

With a helping hand of academics from Faculty of Architecture, Naresuan University and financial support from Thai National Housing Authority, many traditional houses for instance traditional style coffee and tea houses and noodle houses have been renovated by the community craftsman and labors under the promise to preserve their physical environment and history.



Figure 12. Local Shop Houses under Renovation, (2010).



Figure 13. Local Shop Houses after Renovation, (2010).



Figure 14. Idea Sharing between Academics and the Locals during Renovation Process, (2010).

In the same vein, the committee proposed a plan to create a community museum and cultural center, they have rent, about hundred year masonry building “*Xech Kia Kang*” and “*New Chalerm Uthai Theater*”, a sixty years old abandoned playhouse which has been closed for ages and transformed them into a community museum and cultural center, exhibited with photos, maps, models of the community and some antiques that can explain a chronological development of this old quarter.



Figure 15. “*Xech Kia Kang*” Building before and after Renovation, (2010).

With these participatory activities, the committee succeeded in negotiates with the local municipality; the local municipality has recognized its historical and cultural values. The urban regeneration plan was dismissed. The local municipality recently tends to register this old quarter as local heritage and support the locals to preserve their community. “*Trok Rong Ya*” and the old quarter are now become one of famous tourist destinations in the province. In addition, they have changed from decaying to being alive and flourish place. As a result, the locals realize that this rehabilitation project can bring some benefits to them and it also provides a

good chance to exchange a cross learning between communities, municipal government officials, NGOs, academics and the others.

### **3. Participatory Design in Architectural Practice**

From the success of “*A Lively Uthai Thani*” program, it might be concluded that design participation is a creative and collaborative practices, sharing between different disciplines. It involves generating ideas and methods to engage with the people. In architectural and urban practice, this technique can be able to bring the locals to share their desires in making a possible to their community. It can serve architects and planners to create a dialogic space in which the knowledge of the professionals, the place, and the locals are shared, disputed, negotiated, and considered [8]. Participation allows all parties to think out of their own perspectives; it permits them to explore unseen possibilities and alternative solutions. In participatory design, architects can discover alternative possibilities from other participants’ creative ideas, from the collective creativity rather than from that of the architect solely. As Landry and Bianchini describe:

*“...creativity involves opening ourselves to ideas, influences, and resources around us that we are unable to control but can be harnessed to make our lives more sustainable” [9].*

The most advantage of participatory design is that every stakeholder has an opportunity to meet, to share, to discuss, to disagree, to build consensus, to plan and decide together on the subjects concerning their lives. It enables the participants to express their voice and to understand better their own problems and experiences, not just those of others. From this point, the role of architects should be more dynamic and flexible. They need to change their role from the sole master controlling the project to become a part of the project, participating with others and mediating amongst other parties. Once engaging the participation, architects need to design the processes strategically, beyond designing the built environment; they may become a catalyst to trigger the process from one step to another. From this point, the role of architects and planners should be more dynamic and flexible. It is necessary for them to change their roles from the sole master controlling the activities to become a member of participants. Following this approach, it means that control and desire of the participants are negotiated [10]. The architects have to accept “*losing control*” [11], while the locals must be empowered and become an active agent in the process. Once engaging the participatory projects, architects and planners need to design the processes strategically, beyond designing with their expertise as Schneekloth and Shibley (2000, p. 130) suggest:

*“...architects and planners need to extend their knowledge beyond the culture of expertise and professional knowledge, which should not be privileged in the process” [12].*

### **4. Conclusions**

Participatory design is a process in which control and desire of all participants are negotiated. It allows all

stakeholders to think and act differently, critically, and collaboratively to discover unseen possibilities. It is a collaborative and creative process in which all participants need to open themselves to complex and uncontrollable situations while working with people from different parties. The accelerating development activities need opportunities to the local people to manage their own affairs to influence public decisions and to participate in activities that affect their quality of life. People's involvement is essential for conducting broad-based local development. For sustaining such involvement requires some configuration of local organizations that are accountable and responsive to their members. With the view of practitioners, this paper suggests that architects and planners should transform their working culture. By dealing with different and possibly conflicting interests and desires, the design professionals must engage in the social and political production. In order to achieve the goal, architects and planners have to accept “*losing control*”, while the locals must be empowered and become an active agent in the process. All participants need to develop their capacity, and critically change their ways of working. Urban policy, therefore, should encourage more capacity building programs to institutions, local communities and professionals that involved. Following this suggestion, it may assist us to discover alternative solutions and create sustainability built environment.

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