



THE REVITALI- SATION OF SAM CHUK MARKET

Chawanad Lansing (Community Architects Network)

The Sam Chuk market consists of 200 timber shophouses oriented towards the Suphan Buri River. When rivers were the main channel of transport in Thailand, it was a lively market and a rest-stop for those going to or from Bangkok by water. As time passed, the market fell into decline. Many working-aged residents moved out to pursue their studies and careers in other big cities. Only the elders and children remained in the community.

At the same time, residents were facing a land tenure issue, since their land belonged to the Treasury Department, who only offered a one-year contract to be renewed every year. This land insecurity meant a lack of incentive for residents to upgrade or revive the market. In 2003, there was even a plan to evict the locals and renovate the buildings in a bid to raise the area's property values.

Chawanad and his team (on behalf of ChumChon Thai Foundation at the time) saw how interesting the Sam Chuk community was and started a participatory process with residents to explore and identify relevant issues, shared values, and a shared vision. In the three years since, the market has become vibrant again under the complete self-management of its community.



PROCESS AND MAIN ACTIVITIES

Food festival: The first attempt by local residents to promote the old market was a food festival called 'Aroi Tee Sam Chuk' or 'Delicious at Sam Chuk.' The aim of this annual event is to tell local stories and histories of the traditional market to visitors. The festival is also a way to communicate indirectly to the landlord about the possibilities of redeveloping the area with the locals rather than without them.

Big cleaning day: It had been over 60 years since the place had last been cleaned up. Mops, scrubs and brushes were handed out on market cleaning days held by the residents and the municipality. After cleaning, they ended the day with a huge collective home-cooked dinner. Who would have thought that such an activity would bring a renewed sense of togetherness to the group? This good momentum eventually led to the establishment of several working committees in the community.

Living museums: From an initial idea by the locals who wanted to showcase their town's history, a decision was made to refurbish the three-story wooden house of Khun Chamnong Chinarak, a former Sam Chuk's nobleman, and turn it into the community museum. This site would be filled with photos, history panels, maps, models of the community and antiques. As of today, a further 22 houses in the market have become living museums, including a traditional Thai herbal medicine shop, a blacksmith's, and an ancient coffee shop.

At first, the community's intention was only to revive the market for the use of the next generation. However, the tourism aspect has started to gain attention.

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Now the market has become quite popular, thanks to its 100-year history, well-preserved wooden houses, the great riverside landscape and its unique local products. It is not an overstatement to say that the recent trend of vintage markets in Thailand was initiated by Sam Chuk Market.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Storytelling: Telling the community's stories is something the local residents and merchants never get bored of. They're very proud of their unique history and love to share tales from their good old days again and again with the visitors.

Active ageing: These community projects would never have succeeded without this group of passionate and active ageing residents. As many of them are retired, they have plenty of time to contribute, decades of working experience, and powerful connections to promote each event.

Rebranding by the new generation: Many local businesses are inherited by the young generation, who also played a significant role in the transition of the market. They have rebranded many old-fashioned local products, creating a new vibe in the market.





IMPACTS

In the third year of the revitalisation project, many young-generation local residents quit their jobs in big cities and returned home to do business in the community market. They discovered that in this way they can earn a lot, with much lower living costs, and more quality time with their families.

The market also drives economic growth in the surrounding areas. Farmers and merchants from nearby rural communities could now bring their products to sell at the market instead of transporting them to Bangkok. As the landlords realised the value of the community's history and the economic potential of the market, they even-
tually extended the land tenure to a 15-year lease instead of a one-year lease.

From the sale of souvenirs and donations made to the living museums, the committee now earns enough money to run a community revolving fund. This fund is mainly used for lending to local residents at low interest, improving public infrastructure, and supporting business startups for new blood local entrepreneurs.

In 2009, the Sam Chuk community received the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for the outstanding restoration and conservation of the community, which has a major impact in raising awareness for grassroots heritage conservation and being a role model for other historic communities in Thailand. Now, the Sam Chuk community market is a well-known case study of a great market and a learning centre that welcomes visiting study groups from around the world.

DO'S

- Connect the people who **share the**

community's values and work with them.

- **Encourage the community to make their own decisions as much as they can.** Collective decisions are powerful ways to bond people.
- Better to use **soft power when it comes to problem-solving.**

DON'TS

- Don't look through the lens of any principles or frameworks, **rather look for people's interests, values, and concerns by observing and talking to them.** The best ideas usually come from them. Go with the flow.
- Don't talk too much. Long meetings and discussions might lead to conflict. **Get your hands dirty, make it happen and learn from it.**
- Don't create too many strict common rules, **make it more flexible.** Fewer conflicts will occur.

TODAY'S CHALLENGES

The community market has already done a great job in promoting its values to the outside world. Now, it is time to get back to the core community and reconnect the people in the neighbourhood. The new challenge is to maintain and to re-focus on the sense of community from collaborative actions and pass on this spirit to the new generations.

A more practical problem we are facing is that of management. The community never expected to become as famous as they did, and the fast-growing market is now experiencing issues such as insufficient public facilities, and waste management.

Lastly, even though locals are prioritised to run the shops in the market, more and more outsiders are coming in. Often, they rent the shophouses and sub-rent them out at a higher price, while neglecting to follow the community's long-held rules and traditions. These are among the recent issues that the market committee has been working on.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chawanad Lansing is a community architect and co-founder of CAN (Community Architects Network in Asia). Since 2001, he has been working with urban poor communities in Thailand and searching for a way to empower and uncover people's potential. Ultimately, he aims to solve and build better cities and urban communities using co-creation processes.

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