Visual Culture : The Interpretation of Bangkok's Historic Streetscapes[1]

Tippawan Tangpoonsupsiri[2]

Abstract

The impact of globalization and changes in our contemporary world has brought about conformity to everyday environment and triggered identity loss that affects the spirit of place. With regards to this issue, this article explores the means of visual communication for interpreting "living" environments in everyday context that stimulates perceptions and experiences of place identity in historic townscapes. Based on semiological approach and mapping technique, findings from the study indicate that visual appearances and cultural products of three selected Bangkok historic streetscapes, namely Phra Chan and Maharaj Roads, Phra Athit and Phra Sumen Roads, and Yaowaraj Road, reflect a "living" atmosphere. This is due to not only the existing physical fabrics but also new developments which promote social activities of everyday life. In so doing, they fill the gap between historical and existing contexts and exhibit good visual stimuli that evoke experiential existences of the past, in turn, lead to better understanding of the whole context of Bangkok Old Town. Results of the investigation confirm that architectural design and urban planning are significant factors in the enhancement of the visual culture of Bangkok Old Town. Thus it is anticipated that the model in this study will be useful for the purpose of conservation of living heritage places with non-Western contexts so as to enhance their visual culture in the twenty-first century.

Key words: Visual culture, Experiential Existence, Place, Identity, Streetscapes

Introduction

Overview history of Bangkok Old Town: At the beginning of the founding of Krung Rattanakosin as the capital city in 1782, Bangkok's land area was mainly utilized as

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paddy fields and orchards.   In the early Rattanakosin Period, before there were paved roads, transportation and way of life relied mainly on waterways along the Chao Phraya River while roads were minor routes in everyday life.   Most people in Bangkok lived by the water in wooden houses on stilts, and streets were used by people on foot.   The modernization of Bangkok since the reign of King Rama IV has turned Bangkok Old Town into a considerably developed physical environment along with Westernized social way of life.   To this day, Westernization has also become a part of the symbol of Bangkok Old Town.   According to the Committee for Conservation and Development of Krung Rattanakosin and the Old Towns, Krung Rattanakosin's continually developed urban landscape (see also figure 1 and 2) has been divided into four periods as follows:
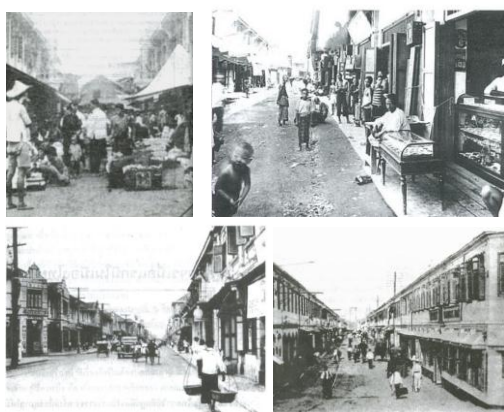

Figure 1. Street scenes in the reign of King Rama V lined with two-storeyed shophouses
 Source: Thubthong, T. (B.E. 2545) *A-nutin Krungthep.* Bangkok: Pyramid.
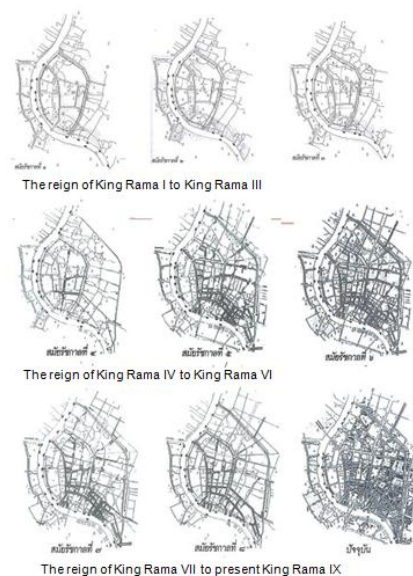

The reign of King Rama I to King Rama III

The reign of King Rama IV to King Rama VI

The reign of King Rama VII to present King Rama IX

Figure 2. Map of the growth of Bangkok Old Town
Source: Conservation and Development of Krung Rattanakosin

        1. The establishment of Krung Rattanakosin: from King Rama I to King Rama III (1782-1851).   During this period, city life depended on waterways along the Chao Phraya River, old canals and city moats.

        2. Period of Western influence: from King Rama IV to King RamaVI (1851-1925). The change in political policy of King Rama IV (1851-1868) towards accepting foreign influences from developed countries, especially European, had a great impact on the urban development of Bangkok.   The most crucial of all was the shift from water to land transportation.   At the same time, residential buildings were constructed in Western

styles following the modernization policy to embrace international urban development trends.

3. Political Reform Period: from King Rama VII to King Rama VIII (1925-1946). Political reform towards democracy occurred during the reign of King Rama VII. Many Royal Palaces and Royal Residences were converted into government offices. In the brief period of King Rama VIII (1934-1946) the country's development inclined more towards Western modernization. Government offices at the time were built in Western and Applied Thai styles.

4. Age of New Technology: current period of King Rama IX. This has been a period of greatest development in all aspects - political, economical, social, and cultural. Krung Rattanakosin, or Bangkok, has experienced rapid transformations which in turn brought about physical and environmental problems such as slums, traffic congestions, infringement and destruction of ancient monuments, preserved buildings, and historical and cultural sites.

Problem statement: Place changes over time, this is common environmental phenomenon that requires interpreting signs of the "living" environment. However, transformations and changes to physical and social contexts in everyday environment of most historic towns subjected to the process of globalization provide little indication of any linkage between the old and the new or the past and present ways of life. This can lead to deprivation of significant values of everyday environment. Although the ICOMOS "Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites" was laid down in 2008, this guideline is not enough to evoke self-experiential existence in everyday environment of historic townscapes. It is evident that the townscape of Bangkok Old Town had undergone considerable changes over the past centuries. Known for being the historic center and tourist attraction, the development of Bangkok's townscape needs to take into consideration concerns for safeguarding the spirit of place. Therefore it requires various means of communication to evoke a sense of experiencing the uniqueness of environmental images and cultural identity.

Significance and scope of study: The purpose of this investigation is to propose new conceptual ideas for the enhancement of visual culture by raising three case studies of street environment in Bangkok Old Town (see figure 3) that have retained their "living" environment and historical interpretation that is reflected in the

architecture and urban landscape for study. The study focuses on street environment of old commercial neighborhoods in Bangkok Old Town which are historical heritage waiting to be experienced with their variety of distinctive cultures and commercial activities as well as diversity of living conditions serving as tourist magnets highly recommended for visiting. The three specific streetscapes chosen as case studies are:

1. Phra Chan and Maharaj Roads in Phra Ratchawang area

2. Phra Athit and Phra Sumen Roads in Banglampu area
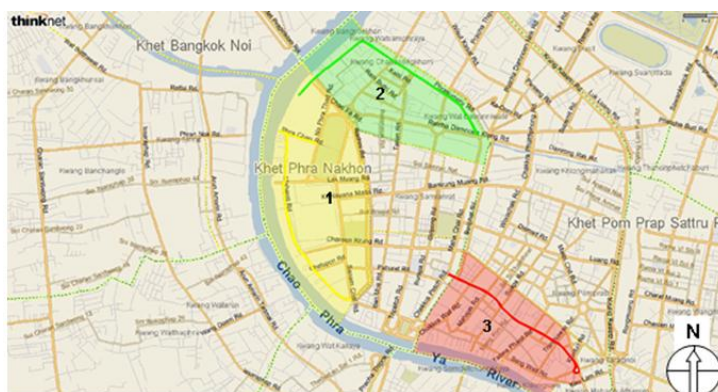
3. Yaowaraj Road in Yaowaraj area

Figure 3. Map of three historic areas of Bangkok Old Town and their main streets
1.Phra Ratchawang area, 2.Banglampu area, and 3.Yaowaraj area
Source: Thinknet. Presentation by author.

Hypothesis: Environmental characters of historic street environments in Bangkok Old Town reflect vivid atmosphere that have continued to exist over a long period of time despite the impact of globalization and modern changes. Presumably this is due to the diversity of social activities and interesting way of life as well as the distinctive architectural fabrics that still remain virtually intact. Such attributes can perhaps be said to evoke the sense of place and social identity. From this assumption, two questions have been raised:

1. What are the visual clues or elements that serve as symbols in the everyday environment that help provoke experiential existence of the historic townscapes of Bangkok Old Town while maintaining the balance between the old and the new?

2. How do new developments in the urban environment respond to historical existence and provide the linkage between modern context of everyday environment and historical context of Bangkok Old Town?

Theories: concerning perception of the "living" environment

Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980: 10) pointed out that 'In general, nature forms an extended comprehensive totality, a "place", which according to local circumstances has a particular identity. This identity, or "spirit", may be described by means of the kind of concrete, "qualitative" terms ...' He further elaborated that:

A first step is taken with the distinction of nature and man-made phenomena, or in concrete terms between "landscape" and the "settlement". A second step is represented by the categories of earth-sky (horizontal-vertical) and outside-inside. These categories have spatial implications, and "space" is hence re-introduced, not primarily as a mathematical concept, but as en existential dimension. A final and particularly important step is taken with the concept of "character". Character is determined by how things are, and gives our investigation a basis in the concrete phenomena of our everyday life-world. Only in this way may we fully grasp the genius loci; "the spirit of place" . . . .

(Norberg-Schulz 1980: 10)

According to Lynch (1972: 1), 'Change and recurrence are the sense of being alive.' Since globalization practically blurs or conforms different environmental cues or signs of place and produces recurring universal pattern of everyday images regardless of contexts, then, we cannot recognize where we are. By this reason, the loss of sense of place is common in everyday environments. 'There are many signs (indicating) that ... "placelessness" — the weakening of distinct and diverse experiences and identities of places — is now a dominant force' (Relph 1976: 6). This study however, does not intend to impede forces of change on historic town or heritage place, but rather to accept new developments in everyday contexts along with the many concepts of management of place changes and design guidelines that advocate safeguarding and sustaining authenticity of the environmental character or the essence of place to enhance experiential existences. As Lynch (1972: 1) argued, 'a desirable image is one that celebrates and enlarges the present while making connections with past and future'. By means of balancing tradition and modernity, heritage place can survive on the basis of continuity.

According to Malcolm Bernard (2001: 1-2) assembles the ideas of visual culture that purposed by many authors. He indicates that it is slightly different definition of visual culture and suggests that 'it might help if some clarifications were made of the range of meanings pertaining to the phase 'visual culture'. Then in this study, the visual culture is divided into two phases as follows:

- Visual phase or visual sense infers to all visual images including words and sounds in everyday environments or phenomena in visual field we perceive and/or experience. It is comprised of two factors. One is physical setting and environments, and the other is social activity.

- Cultural phase or cultural sense infers to meaning of socio-cultural identity.

The phenomena of place changes affect the interpretation of heritage place as David Uzzell (1998: 14-5) explained about "the problem of place and time" that: '...place change over time. The meaning of places also changes over time. . . . Places, processes and events are invariably subject to multiple or competing interpretations; yet rarely do interpretive sites present alternative versions of the past or of process.' And according to Wallace (1987 cited in Uzzell 1998: 15), 'Past, present and future are often treated in interpretation as disconnected periods and not part of a continuum subject to ongoing processes, causes and consequences.'

To achieve an interpretation so as to provoke visitors' experience, Freeman Tilden (1957: 4-11) suggested that for effective interpretation of heritage, it needs an interpreter as 'middleman' or 'interlocutor' engaging in interpretation to reveal knowledge and spiritual meaning. While Canter (1977: 8) said that the process of experience depends on 'environmental perception and cognition'. However, perception and cognition have different meanings, as Canter (1977: 8) explained: perception refers to the 'process of becoming aware of the stimuli in our surroundings', while cognition means 'the process of categorizing them, distinguishing between them or recognizing them'. Thus, for effective interpretation of heritage place in our modern world in terms of experiences provoking both perception and cognition, new enhancements for interpretation should be involved.

Urban design recommendations:

1. The diversity of living conditions: On the notion of city planning for a successful neighborhood that sustains historical existence and historical contents to promote lively and delightful environments, Jane Jacobs (1993: 168) remarked that effective neighborhood physical planning for cities should aim at the following purposes:

- First, to foster lively and interesting streets.

- Second, to make the fabric of these streets as continuous a network as possible throughout a district of potential subcity size and power.

- Third, to use parks and squares and public buildings as part of this street fabric; use them to intensify and knit together the fabric's complexity and multiple uses.

- Fourth, to emphasize the functional identity of areas large enough to work as districts.

Jane Jacobs (1993: 168)

2. Visual elements on main streets in the "living" environments: Jane Jacobs (1993: 484-526) commented that city street designs need visual orders; it is as an important and interesting functional order for visual accents, visual impression of street character and experience of place identity. In addition, she further suggested that:

Designers do not need to be in literal control of an entire field of vision to incorporate visual order in cities. . . . Streets provide the principal visual scenes in cities. . . . They make a visual announcement...to us not only because we may see considerable activity itself, but because we see, in different types of buildings, signs, store fronts or other enterprises or institutions, and so on, the inanimate evidences of activity and diversity. . . . Therefore a good many city streets (not all) need visual interruptions, cutting off the indefinite distant view and at the same time visually heightening and celebrating intense street use by giving it a hint of enclosure and entity. . . . Landmarks, as their name says, are prime orientation clues. But good landmarks in cities also perform two other services in clarifying the order of cities. First, they emphasize (and also dignify) the diversity of cities; they do this by calling attention to the fact that they are different from neighbors, and important because they are different. . . . Second,

in certain instances landmarks can make important to our eyes city areas which are important in functional fact but need to have that fact visually acknowledged and dignified.

3. Preferences and quality of environmental images: In discussing preferential performance and good quality image of everyday environment, Lynch (1960: 9) stated that:

> If an image is to have value for orientation in the living space, it must have several qualities. It must be sufficient, true in a pragmatic sense, allowing the individual to operate within his environment to the extent desired. . . . The image should preferably be open-ended, adaptable to change, allowing the individual to continue to investigate and organize reality . . . . Finally, it should in some measure be communicable to other individuals. The relative importance of these criteria for a "good" image will vary with different persons in different situations; one will prize an economical and sufficient system, another, an open-ended and communicable one.

(Lynch 1960: 9)

Method of Study

Data collection and analysis process: Data were collected by means of the triangulation method of literature reviews, observation surveys and in-depth interviews. Street environments in existing conditions were compared with historical conditions. With a structural model of visual culture (figure 4), all data pertaining to visual events and cultural products were collected in order to examine coding processes that help stimulate experiences.   Analyses and assessments were carried out by mapping technique; fact-findings of all related visual events occurring in these three cases were analyzed and quality of visual performances of the three streetscapes assessed. As a result of the undertaking, the overall image of Bangkok Old Town in terms of interpretation of visual culture could then be summarized.
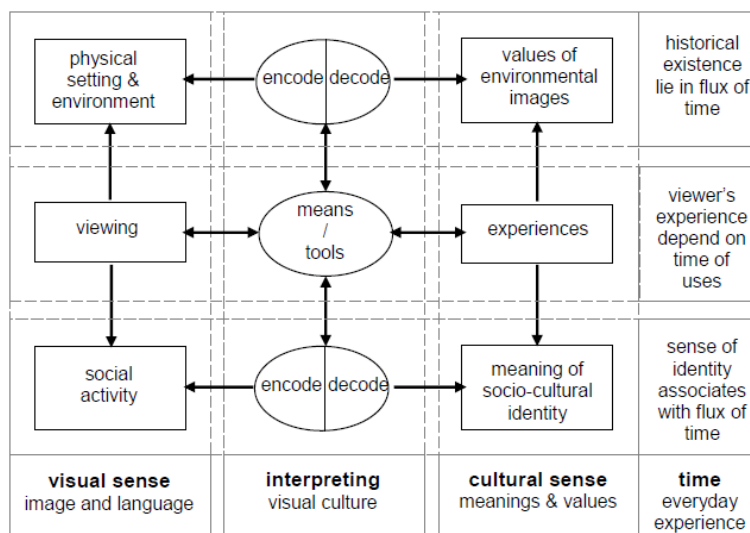
Figure 4. The structural model for interpretation of image of environments
Graphic diagram designed and drawn by author

Results

From the study, the outstanding characters of both physical fabrics and social activities that produce vivid and pleasant atmosphere of everyday environmental context of the three streetscapes were assessed as follows:

Phra Chan and Maharaj Roads have beautiful streetscape with natural edge and scenic waterfront. Dramatic atmosphere created by important buildings and old temples in traditional Thai style architecture gives visual accents and visual clues recalling memories that connect the past and the present while distinctive commercial activity makes this area a popular place for shopping. The oldest settlement of Rattanakosin Period, buildings of various architectural styles contribute to visual complexity. The Grand Palace area with its distinctive classical Thai style architecture and European style shophouses produces a unique image and rich environment as the City of Angels. At the same time, this visual appearance gives rise to interpretation of the urban development as exhibiting continuity and temporal connection between the old and the new. At present, new development of cultural space and newly developed Nagaraphirom Park located on the former land of the Department of Commerce not only open up the view of Wat Arun Pagoda across the river but also provide waterfront recreation space for the public. Thus, apart from visually linking this area on the Bangkok side of the river with Thonburi on the other, it also links past experiences with the present.

Phra Athit and Phra Sumen Roads possess pleasant streetscape with many vernacular buildings. Residences and shophouses of modest scale provide inspiration for learning the Thai way of life. Being a part of the entertainment and tourist spots in Bangkok, many old houses and shophouses have been converted into accommodations for tourists and other related uses. Comprising of modest scale buildings, this area projects the humble and friendly character of its environment. The adaptation and reuse of buildings has an impact on the dynamics of living condition in terms of environmental development and as signs of the "living" phenomenon. The new development of Phra Sumen Park energizes dead space around Phra Sumen Fort and brings it to life. New spaces developed with the aim of being cultural spaces serve not only for social integration but also to safeguard intangible heritage. Such development provides public space for local festivals and setting for performing traditional Thai music and dance.

Yaowaraj Road is a business and entertainment node not only for the Chinese people from abroad, but also for other foreign visitors. It is the center of Chinatown with commercial activities operating around the clock. This exciting street is embellished with Chinese calligraphy signs and Chinese ornaments in red and gold. The distinctive cultural and commercial activities dominate place identity in deciphering this Chinese neighborhood. Social relationship, local inhabitant attachments and new developments have impact on retaining the unique character of its environment and producing "living" space. Continuity of commercial activities indicates social relationship that is inherent in its environment. Redevelopment of the Odeon Circle by introducing a Chinese Gate as cultural venue identifying Chinese settlement and neighborhood has turned this node that was once the local entertainment area which became dead space after the old Odeon Theater was demolished, into "living" memory that adds cultural value and identity to the image of the place.

Image of the three historic streetscapes: By means of semiological approach and mapping techniques (see also table1, figures 5, and 6), all means of communication for interpreting visual culture are reflected in the whole context of historic town's everyday physical environment combined with local associations. The amalgamation of all visual aspects in daily environment makes these three historic streetscapes "living

streetscapes.   In brief, the visual events of all three cases of study illustrate the followings:

● Visual quality of the three streetscapes: Visual accents, landmarks and attention-catchers produce continuity, linkage, and openness

● The essence of place and social identity: In terms of physical and social contexts, the overall images of these three streetscapes are that of a neighborhood center where not only cultural festivals take place but it also a shopping street with distinctive commercial activities that draw visitation.

● Urban design agenda: The urban design of these three streetscapes concerns both urban form and architectural form.   This passive agenda of place development as means of conveying message of space and time gives rise to "living" phenomenon.

It is due to the visual events of all three cases which illustrate the process of image development producing the same pattern in the way of interpreting visual culture, and also to the limited space of this article, then, the only example of Phra Chan and Maharaj Roads is as shown by following:
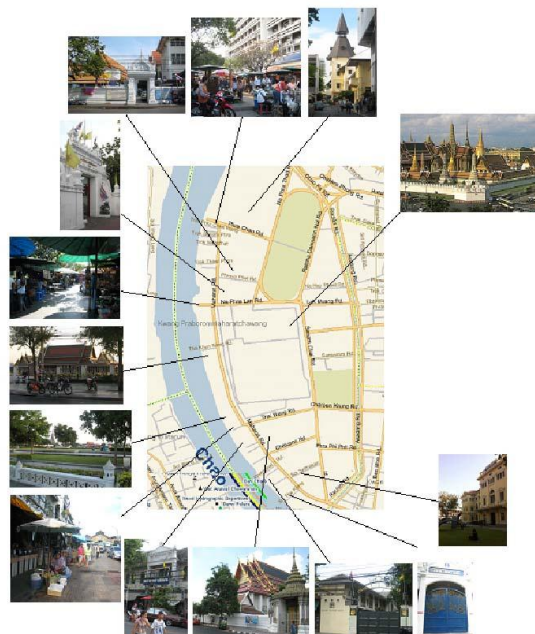

Figure 5. visual survey and map of Phra Chan & Maharaj Roads. Counter-clockwise from top-right: The Grand Palace, Thammasat University, Tha Phra Chan, Wat Mahathat, Silpakorn University, Tha Chang, Tha Ratchaworadit, Nagaraphirom Park, Tha Tian, Tha Tian Market, Wat Pho, Chakrabongse Palace, Rajini School, Siam Museum.

Table 1.   The relation of physical and social aspects of Phra Chan and Maharaj Roads that generate "living" environments
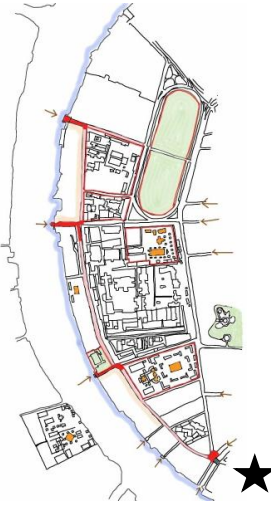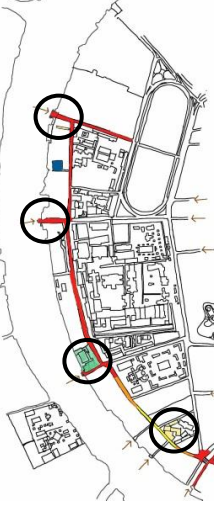
Vitality and diversity of living conditions	Environmental character	Urban design developments
Distinctive commercial activity: (trades) - amulets - institute gowns - traditional Thai medicines & herbal - Dried sea foods **Living standard: Local shops:** - food and drinks service shop - grocery retail shop - drugstore - salon & barber - laundry - stationery & bookstore - pawnshop - bank branch - gold & jewelry shop - tailor & dress making - shoe shop - clothing shop - photo service shop - watch & eyeglass shop **Local tradition and cultural activities** - Royal Ceremonies: Royal Barge Procession,Ploughing Ceremony - King and Queen's Birthday celebrations - Religious ceremonies	★ **Environmental images:** - Path: commercial strip bounded by significant historical fabric and architecture - Edge: natural and building edges - Node: busy commercial activity and commuting place - Landmark: historic architecture - District: fine grain and uniform texture **Linkage network:** - Access by public & private transportation and ferry - Flower Night-Market (Pak Klong Talad)	 **New development of land use:** - Open space (Nagaraphirom Park) - Node (Ferry Pier) - Backyard parking hidden from view **New Functions:** - Museum (Museum of Siam at former Ministry of Commerce) - Tourist accommodations ★

Figure 6. All communication means of "living" environmental images of Phra Chan and Maharaj Roads. Visual order: landmarks are shown in Row 1 Wat Phra Kwao and Arun Pagoda, these landmarks are not only relevant to the Royal Ceremonies but also stimuli the past experience. Row 2 shows physical fabrics as visual accents and the way-findings. Row 3 shows eye-catcher—street vendors—as a magnificent street life which draws visiting. Row 4 shows the distinctive commercial activities along this road which make this area a popular place for shopping. Row 5 shows three old nodes: Tha Phra Chan, Tha Chang, and Tha Tian; all of them are renovated to fit into modern lives. The last row shows new developments: Nagaraphirom Park, Siam museum, Trok Phra Chan Klang, and hotel & restaurant; all of them are old physical setting and fabrics that are revitalized for new functions leading to balance between preservations and changes and to generate social integration in this neighborhood area.

Conclusions

Interpretation of cultural landscapes of Bangkok Old Town: The "living" environment generated in all three case studies provides people with an understanding of the overall image of Bangkok Old Town. Moreover, urban development under the supervision of Rattanakosin Committee and Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, the

evidences of visual accents, landmarks and nodes in these three historic streets with different characters produced by social activities, emphasize the essence of place that help interpret distinctive urban landscape of Bangkok Old Town as a whole in attracting visitors. Such "living" environment phenomenon can be attributed to three factors:

● **Vitality and Diversity of Living Conditions**: Changes and transformations result in complexity and contrast which lead to "living" environment in everyday context while the variety of local shops help to make it convenient for local people and stabilize socio-economic situation.

● **Balance between Preservation and Changes**: New additions and infill buildings have been designed in similar manner to old ones and have related scales. Although some may appear to be in contrast with others, they however, constitute the complexity of environmental phenomena. Rehabilitation of building functions serves not only as indication of safeguarding old fabrics and maintaining historical sense and values of images of the place, but also as signs of "living" space. Hence, adaptive reuse of old buildings can convey a sense of continuity.

● **Accessibility and Linkage Network**: As shopping streets and street centers are connected to big markets nearby, this linkage produces a network of commercial strips for the whole Bangkok Old Town. Moreover, by providing car parking buildings, it becomes more convenient and people tend to spend more time for shopping and eating or leisure in the historic area. Open parks and museums also invite visitors to learn more about history and social identity.

To answer the questions raised at the beginning of this article, findings indicate that in terms of prolonging place identity and enhancing sense of place for experiencing historical existence, the following factors are involved:

1. The visual clues interpret the uniqueness of Thai ways of life indicating adaptation to changes and vividness that lead to the continuing social activities of everyday life in the neighborhood areas. This is the intangible phenomena that not only make local people feel belong to their place but also visitors can feel the sense of identity and the sense of place, because visual clues produce symbolic message which illustrates strong image performance quality that brings about better insights concerning experiential historical existence.

2. New developments such as parks, inconspicuous car parking lots, and museums, engaged in architectural designs and urban planning are significant factors in enhancing the visual culture of everyday environment of historical centers. For example, the concurring concept of new developments such as public parks in these three streetscapes with different characters gives them a lively and vibrant atmosphere (see figure 7).
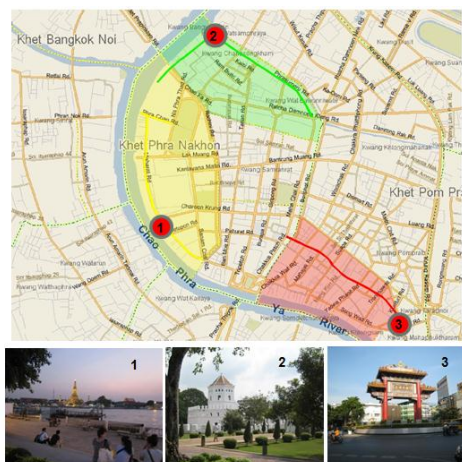

Figure 7. New open space on three streets within each community:
1 Nagaraphirom Park, 2 Phra Sumen Park and 3 Chinese Gate

Though the new developments are visible tools to help interpret visual culture and to stimulate experiential existences in historic towns, there are two sides to consider when they are involved the image development:

Advantages: the new architectural and urban design developments trigger the enhancement of visual culture that not only fills the gap between the old and the new but also produce a balance between preservation and changes. This in turn reveals "living" memories of the past experiences through new developments that link with old architecture whereby visual cues motivate learning interest of history through visual events and generate social relationships.

Therefore, architectural designs and urban planning are significant factors in enhancing the visual culture of everyday environment of historical centers. This strategy of enhancing the quality of environmental images of these three streetscapes in Bangkok Old Town can be a model for sustainable conservation of cultural heritage in non-Western context in terms of providing more functions and open spaces to produce effective means for interpretation of historical contents. It is anticipated that this model

will produce effective results for the enhancement of visual culture in the twenty-first century (see figure 8). However, the new developments need to take into consideration concerns for safeguarding the spirit of place, because

Disadvantages: For instance, the new developments served as tourist accommodations make conflicting impact on social life. Concerning meanings and values of heritage place, the new developments must carefully be designed in order not to dilute the value of environmental images and the sense of place in many ways.
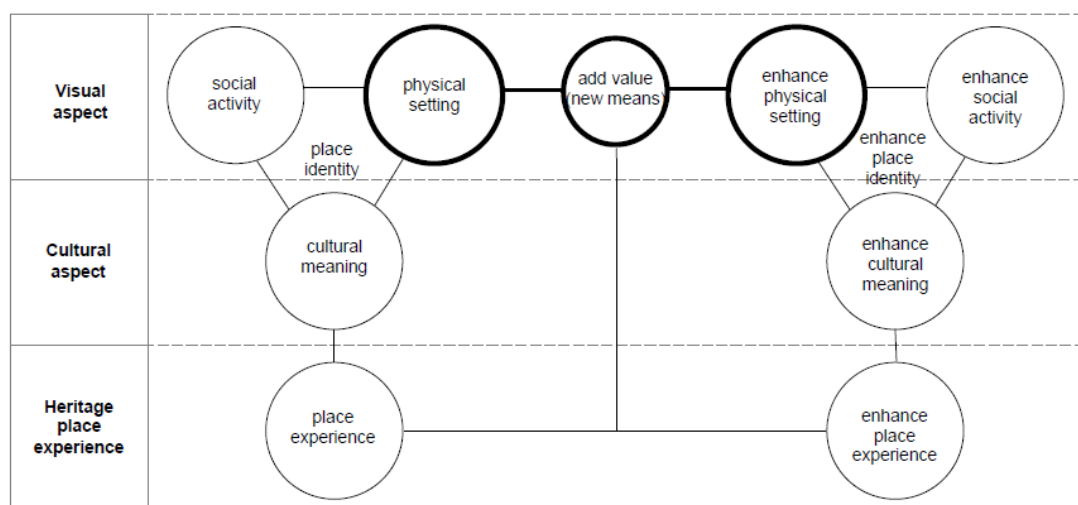

Figure 8. Schematic model for heritage place interpretation by means of visual cultural syntax model Graphic diagram created and drawn by author.

Recommendations:

To improve good visual performance of commercial streets in historic towns and to interpret values of environmental image by means of design management can be summed as follows:

1. Urban design and development should concern visual elements or components to stimulate perception and experiences.

2. Renovation of old facade designs for promoting historical values should consider using new materials but designed to be in harmony with the context.

3. Design public spaces and amenities for effective utilization by choosing locations for open spaces or public parks that people can easily access.

4. Design to generate lively street environment by making use of old fabrics and abandoned places as well as introduce new functions that generate safe and lively atmosphere.

5. Design communication signs with quality interpretation such as directory boards and easily understood graphic images.

Future possibilities:

Innovative technology and computer network applications offer new media for communication, such as QR code (figure 9) for example, whereby visitors can experience "place" freely and directly by connecting with historical heritage information via smart-phones anywhere at anytime.

Figure 9. QR code
Source: www.dw.de/dw/episode/9798/0,,16078324,00.html

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