

# Cultural Production and Urban Regeneration: The Case Study of Amphawa District, Thailand

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**Abstract**—This research aims to study the role of cultural production in urban regeneration and argue that cultural production, if properly used, can play a vital role in reviving cities and create substantial positive impacts to the cities. The argument can be elucidated by the case study of Amphawa, a district in Samutsongkram province, Thailand, as an example of successful use of cultural productions. The conceptual framework is based on the model of culture contributions in regeneration to examine the impacts.

The research methodology is qualitative. This study found that cultural productions can revive cities into vibrant ones and exert considerable impacts: physical, social and economic.

It is suggested that, despite that there is not one-fit-all model, cultural production can be an important initiative for any city transformation if it is appropriately implemented. The city planners and authorities ought to consider the conditions and factors and design a specific plan to fit the city context and integrated with other planning.

**Keywords**—Cultural production, culture, cultural planning, impact, urban regeneration.

## I. INTRODUCTION

AFTER the boom of the industrial age, many industrial cities across the world, especially those in Europe and North America, suffered a dramatic decline. However, for the past 30 years, we have witnessed many city authorities and urban development agencies adopting a new trend by using a new approach, 'cultural planning,' to encourage urban regeneration. According to Mercer [1], 'cultural planning is the strategic and integral use of cultural resources to foster community development'. In other words, it can be using arts or cultural productions in relation to physical bases in accordance with economic distribution and resource utilization. This approach offers a chance for town planning to use an infrastructure system of cultural development. By using this approach, some regeneration projects enjoy a remarkable success, like those in Glasgow and Birmingham, while some were doomed to failure or experienced unsatisfactory outcomes, such as Sheffield's Cultural Industries Quarter and London's Millenium Dome [2]. This research shows that if properly used, cultural production does play a role in transforming a city into a vibrant place as it brings about physical/environmental change, generates activities, creates an area image (a brand) to promote the place, which will result in

broader economic and social benefits and even be a catalyst for further regeneration. Firstly, how cultural production is used in urban development, how it works, its impacts and its conditions will be discussed. Then, the argument will be illuminated in a more detailed way by analyzing a case study from Amphawa, a city in Samutsongkram province, Thailand, as it is a good example of successful use of cultural initiatives in transforming an almost unknown dull town into a nationally famous lively town that won the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation in 2008, to see what cultural production were used, how and why they worked.

## II. OBJECTIVES

- 1.) To study the role of cultural production in urban regeneration from the case study of Amphawa.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research is qualitative. The method used was literature review, document analysis, and interviews. The information used in this study was gathered from secondary sources - academic books, journals, reports, critical articles to get initial background of the topic, the framework of cultural production and how to measure its contributions and also to provide data for analysis. Moreover, the empirical data were collected from primary sources - interviews with the key informants: the local and the authorities in Amphawa. Following the review of the concepts and information gathering, the data were analyzed in accordance with the chosen framework to study the role of cultural production in urban regeneration by identifying its impacts.

This research's main conceptual framework used to study the role of cultural production was modified from the carefully constructed Culture's Contribution to Regeneration framework of Evans and Shaw's [3]. In the model, cultural production plays a role in creating 3 types of impacts: physical, social and economic.

## IV. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to study the role of cultural production, the categories of cultural production and urban development used in this paper needed to be defined. According to Williams [4], culture is 'a particular way of life which expresses certain meaning and value not only in art and learning but also institutions and ordinary behavior' in general and 'the body of

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intellectual and imaginative work in which, in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously recorded' in particular and according to Merriam-Webster dictionary [5], production can mean the act or process of producing' or 'total output especially of a commodity or an industry'. Thus, it can be described as a means in which both a whole way of life and artistic and intellectual work is produced and distributed and it can also be any kinds of products and activities coming out of them. So it can be in various forms, such as cultural buildings and amenity, festivals/events, public arts, market, creative and cultural clusters, public spaces as themselves and they can produce or distribute other cultures further. For urban development, according to Merriam-Webster dictionary, urban means city or town and development means a change that better products, plans, and ideas. When combined, it means making any built up area better, which is not limited to only from the physical but also social and economic aspects in longer term.

Culture planning has come to interest since the late 1970s when cities worldwide sought for a new approach to regenerate themselves in order to boost their economies and change their images as well as address social problems and improve quality of life in a sustainable way in response to the economic recession and globalization [6]. Urban planners and local and national authorities have acknowledged the importance of cultural resources and cultural productions more than before as they believed that, as Evans said, 'the places where collective and public cultural activity occurs have an important and lasting influence—aesthetic, social, economic and symbolic – on the forms and functions of towns and cities' [7]. In other words, culture and cultural production has potential to be a new source of income and 'humanize' the city. Therefore, many cities and organizations put investment in cultural resources and cultural productions as they believe that they are a driver of the regeneration. Cultural resources and cultural productions are planned and integrated with other plans, such as economic, social and infrastructure plans and come in a form of 'cultural regeneration'.

Cultural productions, which are an actor either as a starter or part of a broader regeneration, have various forms. This essay will focus only on three forms. The first one is buildings and open spaces which range from museums, galleries, art and media centres to cultural heritage. The second type is festivals/events which can be different in type and scale, from world expositions to local traditional art festivals. The third is marketplaces. Marketplaces in some context can be seen as cultural production as it comes from way of life and, in turn, generates goods and culture exchanges, activities, and experiences. Different forms of cultural productions play a role in developing a place in many ways, which include making physical/environmental changes, generating activities, branding and promoting a place. These roles, in turn, exert further social and economic impacts which fulfill the city's economic boosting and quality-of-life improvement schemes. To analyse the role, it is essential to identify the impacts of the cultural productions. The impacts can be examined by using

the model modified from Culture's Contribution to Regeneration framework of Evans and Shaw.

Firstly, bringing physical/ environmental changes is one of the most important roles of cultural productions. This strategy can be implemented by building and open spaces projects, public art schemes and festivals especially the big-scale ones like World's Fair, Olympic Games and European Cities of culture projects which infrastructures and facilities need to be upgraded. Buildings and open spaces are constructed, reused, renovated and turned to museums, galleries, public spaces, marketplaces and cultural quarters. The constructions and renovations will help reduce redundant places and provide space for working, living and doing activities. Ultimately, they will improve the ambience of the area, the quality of life, increase the public use of space and attract attentions to the areas and create sense of place. From this regard, it will lead to further social impacts which include forging individual and communal identity and promoting well-being as people have a chance to participate in communal activities and express themselves which will lead to social inclusion and cohesion. Additionally, from economic aspect, it will create employment, attract people/workforce, inward investments and visitors to the areas, encourage the development of new businesses, retail and leisure areas, and increase property prices which will foster wealth creation. For example, Tate Modern, London, a famous museum which is a former power plant, has become an iconic landmark of South Bank. It changed the sense of the area to a new lively one, encouraged employment, incomes, commercial development and rising property values and changed the perception of the local residents [8].

Secondly, generating activities is one of the roles that make cultural production special and an effective tool in regenerating the area. The most common forms of cultural strategies that create activities are festivals/events and markets. From the social aspect, activities can encourage participation, create experiences and meanings, provide a chance for people to express themselves both at planning and implementing stage, and even educate people. Despite requiring more substantial evidence, it can be said that the activities can, in turn, enhance people's creativity, develop individual confidence, communal identity, explore future visions, enhance organisational capacity, support independence, enhance social cohesion, reduce offending behaviors, and promote interests in the local environment. For example, carnivals in towns like Bradford and Leicester could enhance social cohesion by drawing mixed audiences to celebrate different cultures together. Moreover, from the economic aspect, activities in commercial festivals / events can attract visitors and investments which will increase employment and income and it also helps create networks and partnerships which will bring economic benefits to the areas in a long term. For example, events like Notting Hill Carnival 2002 generated direct income of 45 million pounds and 3000 employments in the year.

Thirdly, cultural production can be an effective tool for place branding as it has symbolic meaning. Place branding focuses on 'people's perceptions and images and puts them at the heart of orchestrated activities, designed to shape the place and its future' [9]. As culture has its own characteristics that make places different, various forms of cultural production, such as flagship buildings, festivals/events and public arts, can help create a brand for a place as they can shape and express the image to people. The brand, in turn, can act as a promotional object in advertising the area. From this regard, a successful brand can bring about social and economic benefits. The areas would gain competitive advantage to promote tourism, investment, and community development, strengthen local identity and identification of the people with the place and reduce social exclusion and troubles [10]. In addition, the brand can be a guide for authorities and private sector in setting strategies for any development. Bilbao's iconic building 'Guggenheim Museum' is a good example of city branding, even though it happened unintentionally. The building created a new image of the city as a modern place for investments and tourism and triggered 'Guggenheim effect' throughout Europe. Another good example is European City of Culture program which branded Glasgow the City of Culture in 1990. The program improved the city's overall image which proves to be 'renewed perceptions and the recovery of citizen confidence and satisfaction in the city as a place to live and work' [11].

All of these roles and impacts combined can foster broader impacts like stimulating the economy, solving social problems, promoting city expansion, increasing competitiveness of the city at national and international levels. The success of regeneration can spark further regeneration or even inspire other cities to launch such initiatives. For one thing to note, there is a weakness in impact measurement of the cultural initiatives, as it is difficult to distinguish their real contributions to the city, the society and the economy from other factors. Moreover, social impact is related to mental and personal issues which is challenging to measure due to its nature.

Even though there are many regenerations that prove to be successful, such as those mentioned previously, there are so many projects that failed or produced unsatisfactory outcome because they failed to meet some conditions which determine or affect the outcomes of the urban development through cultural initiatives. For example, Chiang Mai High Point projects aiming to be a hub of cultural handicrafts in Thailand failed to renew its city because its cultural planning was not integrated with other urban and economic plans. Additionally, its sub-projects were not compatible with each other. Secondly, the local context, consisting of local strength and distinctiveness is an important factor for regeneration planners [12]. Some cities like Ayutthaya, a former capital of Thailand that can be considered culturally rich, overlooked their cultural strengths and copied other cities' schemes; as a result, the project Ayutthaya floating market, which was derived from Amphawa floating market, doomed to failure. Moreover,

the scale of the projects does matter. A project should fit the scale of the area context. Some projects are too ambitious in their projection and targets (in terms of audiences and income generated). So, the projects failed or suffered from loss. Thirdly, local consultation and participation are necessary. The people in the area are very important in the regeneration. Through consultation, the local needs will be identified, while through participation, the projects would succeed more easily. The fourth condition is local needs; the projects should match the local needs. For example, 10 years ago, some cities like Bangkok and Pattaya focused on economic boosterish schemes so much that they ruined the quality of life of the citizens.

The research found out that despite some limitations, cultural productions can be an excellent driver in regenerating a city. Their contributions can be clarified by the case of Amphawa, which illustrating how its authorities implemented cultural regeneration, in which cultural approaches were adopted in transforming its city into one of the most famous attractions in Thailand and the most economically important area of the province.

Since 18th century, Amphawa city is the largest traditional water-based community in MaeKlong River. It is the birthplace of King Rama II who had talents for various kinds of Thai arts. The community is rich in cultural heritage both tangible (architecture, monuments, mural paintings, handicrafts, etc.) and intangible (performing arts, rituals, music, culinary arts and ways of life, etc.) reflecting its identity closely related to water. Consisting of traditional houses and shop houses stretching on both sides of the Amphawa canal, it was once the centre of the town's activities, not only for consumption or transportation, but also trade and social activities. However, it faced a big decline when the Mae Kong-Bang Pha and Rama II roads and side roads were constructed in 1975, causing a significant socio-economic shift in the area. The roads attracted market activities to the town centre and making this floating market remain quiet and young people moved to work in Bangkok. Consequently, the population dramatically decreased by 50% and Amphawa turned to somnolence [13].

In order to revive the city, a series of the culture-based regeneration projects has been introduced since 2001 by the cooperation of many organizations and the Municipality of Amphawa, the central government and many institutions. With a focus on conserving the river-based culture heritage, improving quality of life, and boosting the local economy through cultural tourism as its strength is cultural asset, various cultural approaches: improving the atmosphere of the area, generating activities, branding and promoting the place, were adopted and implemented in various forms of cultural production: buildings and amenity, marketplaces, festivals and events.

The first approach used is building and amenity projects. Firstly, "Thailand Cultural Environment Project" (TCEP) was launched by the Office of Natural Resources and Environment, DANIDA, the Municipality, the Faculty of

Architecture, Chulalongkorn University, the Chaipattana Foundation and the Province of Samut Songkhram to restore wooden traditional houses along the Amphawa canal and improve its landscape. The restoration significantly improved the community from the physical aspect. It has not only contributed to the old-building conservation but also has prepared the space for future marketplaces. Many other participating house owners in the conservation project refurbished their houses to serve as shops and to provide home-stay accommodations. The better atmosphere of the area improved the quality of life of the people and created a sense of place and a pride of the people.

Next, in 2005, under the Chaipattana Foundation's Amphawa regeneration project, wooden row houses and mixed orchards were restored and now used as exhibition venues for tourists, museums and shop houses. In addition, a souvenir bazaar, a pavilion and a venue for cultural activities were built while the mixed orchards were re-landscaped to provide space for tourism-related events and activities. The restoration has improved the ambience of the area. Physically, the old houses were reused and the pavilion and the venue increased public use of the space and provided a space for the local to express ideas and themselves through cultural activities, which, in turn, helped, strengthened the community.

Moreover, some museums were set up to be tourist attractions. The Municipality of Amphawa renovated the King Rama II Memorial Park, making it its iconic museum. It consists of 5 Thai style buildings, housing Amphawa history exhibition and exhibiting old art artifacts and an outdoor theatre, a recreational centre for children and a botanical garden with flowers mentioned in Thai literatures. The Amphawanjetiyaram Temple and the Phumarin Kudeethong Temple were also renovated and set as a museum housing ancient traditional handicrafts. The projects helped improve the atmosphere, provided space for public activities, educated people in history and Thai culture, created a sense of place and a communal identity, strengthened the root and the history of the area and built an image of a heritage town for the area and attracted visitors to Amphawa.

The second approach was marketplace projects. Actually, the marketplace project was the most important initiative for the overall regeneration. In 2004, the Municipality of Amphawa and several community groups set a floating market to be a focal point of the area which would reflect the canalside way of life, create a unique and lively brand for the area. They have launched a weekend evening floating market, in which merchants sell food and handicrafts in the boats. The market was unique from other floating markets in other places which are morning markets. Moreover, the houses and shophouses along the canal also run businesses producing and selling traditional food and desserts as well as handicrafts such as polychrome chinawares and handmade products from coconuts. The market provided a space for handicraft and food manufacturing, culture and goods exchanges, creativity expressions. From the economic aspect, the market generated incomes both directly, as a marketplace, and indirectly as

being a brand for the area. From the social aspect, the development of the market and activities and communications occurring at the market that have drawn people together helped foster partnerships among sectors and social cohesion among the local residents.

## V. DISCUSSION

Overall, the cultural initiatives had a huge contribution to the city's regeneration. Physically, the area ambience is more pleasant and lively as the buildings, facilities, the infrastructures and the landscape of the area are improved. The community has more cultural and mix-use facilities and public space for activities. All of these indicate a better quality of life. From the economic aspect, since the completion of the market, the city has become the most important attraction of the province. According to National Statistic Office [14], from 2006-2008, the popularity of Amphawa has increased the number of tourists both Thai and foreigners coming to Samutsongkram province by more than 100%, from 452,598 to 1,105,810 and 19,910 to 40,431 respectively. In the area of Amphawas, the number of tourists increased from 25,000 in 2005 to more than 500,000 in 2010. The local residents set up new small and medium businesses like home-stay accommodations, boat service for tourists, creative souvenirs shophouses. It is estimated that the tourism has increased incomes and jobs as the unemployment rate in Samusongkram province decreased from 0.8 to 0.4 in 2004-2006 according to a report from National Statistic Office [15]. Even though the statistics do not directly reflect the change within Amphawa, but as it is the most famous attraction of the province, the city seems to play a role as an economic booster more or less. Moreover, 'local residents of various age groups who once migrated to work outside the community in other provinces or Bangkok have returned home to start businesses, especially the younger generation and graduates' [16], that means the area has more diverse skilled workforce and can retent the graduate in the area. From the social aspect, the co-operations between the local residents and the authorities during the planning and implementing have foster stronger partnerships between the public, the private, and the voluntary sectors. The participation of the local through activities has created social cohesion. Moreover, as the local residents who once left Amphawa moved back to the area; many families have been reunited and it can be said that the family institution has been strengthened. As cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, were conserved, revived and promoted and more cultural facilities and institutions were founded or renovated, the people of Amphawa have become more aware of the cultural identity of the area and its values which would encourage them to conserve the heritage for future generation. The better quality of life and the awareness of the history and the community restored a sense of pride and an identity of the local residents. Additionally, the success of the first series of regeneration initiatives has sparked many further regeneration projects from various organizations or even the local

themselves which now are planned or underway, such as infrastructure and landscape improvements, and cultural heritage conservation. Its success becomes an inspiration for other cities throughout Thailand to regenerating cities through culture.

Superficially, the context of Amphawa seems to be different from large western cities as Amphawa is merely a small city, so it seemed that the city-regeneration –by-culture approaches might not be applicable; however, the strategies used were effective because they met some essential conditions determining the outcomes. First of all, the authorities put the culture of the area at the heart of the regeneration. In other words, cultural activities were 'fully integrated into an area strategy alongside other activities in the environmental and social and economic sphere' as Evans states. In the case of Amphawa, the Municipality set the culture heritage as a starting point and designed every scheme in accordance with it. Secondly, the Amphawa's authorities utilized the strengths of the city, which was an existing distinguished cultural asset, to regenerate the city. In this way, the authorities could implement the projects that matched the characteristics of the area, which were likely to work more effectively than putting an alien scheme in the area. Thirdly, the projects matched the local needs which were boosting the economy while helping conserving the environment and the culture heritage and not ignoring the local quality of life. Moreover, the scale of the regeneration program was suitable for the area. In the other words, the regeneration program was not too ambitious. So the growth of the Amphawa seems to be sustainable. Lastly, the projects have called for active participations from the local residents and co-operations from other sectors. Other parties, such as the government, universities, and companies sponsored the projects, while the local played an important part in help carrying the regeneration out as they gave cooperation to the authorities such as renewing their houses, preserving the environment and giving a warm welcome to tourists. As Amphawa could fulfill these conditions, cultural initiatives through cultural production could work effectively. Therefore, its successful regeneration is not beyond expectation.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as the phenomenon of cultural planning emerged throughout the world and cultural resources, cultural production has been seen as a new hope for cities to transform themselves. Despite having some criticism about the validity of evidence and requiring some essential conditions to be successful, cultural production does play a significant role in reviving a lifeless city into a vivacious place as it produces physical/environmental changes, originates activities, creates the area image (a brand) and promotes the place, which, in turn, will result in improving the physical condition of the area, boosting the economy and bringing social benefits, such as quality-of-life, a sense of identity and social cohesion. Moreover, it can even be a catalyst for further regenerations

and an inspiration for other cities. The contributions of cultural production to a city are evidenced in the case of Amphawa. The cultural initiatives did transform the city from an almost dead city to a lively place by improving the ambience, enhancing the economy, heightening livability and gluing people in the society in a sustainable way. Even though there is no one-fit-all plan and the outcome depends on a number of factors, it may not be too exaggeratory to say that cultural planning can be applied to any cities as long as the planners and the authorities adapt it to fit their city's context and fully integrated cultural approaches to other plannings. The success will be not impossibly attainable.

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