

Diversity, Place and Identity Hoi An, An Ancient Town *Beyond 'Limits of Acceptable Change'?*

Jaturong Pokharatsiri reports on the Re-WATCH* Hoi An international academic collaboration, and a cultural heritage research-workshop, which used the place-and-identity process to analyse the impact of tourism on the socio-cultural values of the Hoi An heritage site.

Diversity, place and identity values are crucial in identifying the impact of cultural tourism and heritage conservation, as shown in the case study of the Ancient Town of Hoi An. Here, multi-disciplinary and community-based approaches were introduced to strengthen the significance of the social values and cultural diversity of a heritage site, recognized in the ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Charter as an important basis of intangible cultural heritage. Several research methods were applied, including observation and interviews. Analyses showed that the threats from changed natural and cultural



*Hoi An
Illustration by Pichet
Kanoksutthiwongse*

environment, especially caused by tourism, affect the local people's perceptions of place and identity. Changes in the cultural landscape and Chinese clan-based society were identified as significant factors to consider in terms of conservation of cultural diversity. Eventually, policies were drawn to reduce the identified impact, promote authenticity,

and delineate the limits of acceptable change in the living cultural heritage.

Beyond 'limits of acceptable change'? A research question for Hoi An

The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) stated in its International Cultural Tourism Charter (ICOMOS, 1999: 23) the importance of 'limits of acceptable change' which refer to:

“...a process of establishing the key values and characteristics of a place and the maximum extent to which they may change before the core of their importance is degraded to an unacceptable extent. Tourism and other activities can then be monitored or evaluated to determine the rate at which these values are threatened.”

Tourism development is often mentioned as one of the many causes of the devaluation of heritage sites (UNESCO-WHC, 2007), with threats having an impact on both the tangible and intangible values of the place. Cultural landscapes are not just buildings and traditions, but they also involve the local community which perpetuate the cultural values of the space. However, current practices in heritage management do not completely recognize the significance of the local people.



The cultural environment should be given as much importance as the physical, social, and economic environments

A key question raised at the onset of the Re-WATCH collaboration was: “what exactly does tourism do to the cultural value of a living historic town?” This question takes into account the fact that the tourism industry is important to developing countries that want to maximize their opportunities in the competitive global economic system. Places and sites are thus marketed for this purpose. Selling their identity means inviting visitors to spend on site (Hall, 2000), although the benefits mostly go to everyone but the locals. A prime example is cultural heritage, which is a valuable resource for the tourism industry. Unfortunately, proper care and management of these sites are not always given priority, and identifying how these places are

affected by tourism is given even less attention. It is even more complicated to establish the cultural value of a place itself, including that of the local community. Ultimately, protection and conservation cannot be effectively carried out without clarifying these issues.

If one borrows from the perspective of urban development and planning, it underscores that the cultural environment should be given as much importance as the physical, social, and economic environments. For heritage sites, their cultural value should be taken into account in the development of properties, facilities, transportation, and employment.

Re-WATCH started by reviewing the current tourism development in the Ancient Town of Hoi An, a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Re-WATCH project particularly questioned the appropriateness of urban conservation and heritage management of the said town. To find facts mainly from the supply side (the local community) rather than the demand side (the needs and satisfaction of the visitors), the community-based approach in tourism (Hall, 2000) was adopted as a framework.

The research used a bilingual (English and Vietnamese) questionnaire with semi-structured interview questions. Enquiries were connected to the following: (1) social characteristics of the sampled households, (2) location and economic diversity of the place (Pokharatsiri, 2006), and (3) psychological environment relating to their needs and threats to their identity and/or efficiency of living in the place. The latter part applied the theory associated with "place and identity processes" (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996), specially designed to identify the impact of tourism. Observation on land use and building use, as well as on methods in gathering information on circulation, utilities, and facilities, was also obtained during the workshop (after the participants were provided a brief introduction and lectures, they were engaged in site observation).

The workshop participants assigned to analyse Hoi An were divided into four sub-groups, namely: living tradition, circulation, facilities and utilities, and socio-cultural value and impact. The sub-groups used various methods to study the different aspects of the site. The circulation sub-group observed 'the gates' through video-recording and

Cultural landscapes are not just buildings and traditions, but they also involve the local community
Photo: Panita Sarawasee



by hand-counting the frequent mode of transport. The living tradition sub-group conducted open and in-depth interviews. Meanwhile, the facilities and utilities sub-group used photographs for mapping. The writer was one of the key researchers to lead the sub-group studying the socio-cultural values and the impact on the Hoi An living heritage site. Respondents in different street zones were selected at random for the research, which utilized the questionnaire and semi-structured interview forms, and based its quantitative and qualitative analysis on the interviews. The response of the 130 sampled households and other data gathered during the workshop (about 4 days) were shared by the four sub-groups.

During the on-site data gathering phase, time constraints were encountered; despite these, the key researchers were confident that their final analyses were systematically processed, and that their conclusions were well accepted by the representatives of the Hoi An Centre for Monuments Management and Preservation (HCMMP) with the expectation that the analyses would influence development policies. For the planning and management of the Hoi An Ancient Town and its vicinity, the workshop provided policy suggestions stressing on cultural tourism, urban conservation, and heritage management (the recommendations are presented at the end of this article). The researchers and participants were also encouraged to further use the valuable data for their own future projects in Hoi An as well as other heritage places.

Diversity, Proximity, and Identity

Both the physical and the social elements of a historic town are important in urban conservation (Appleyard, 1976; Orbasli, 2000). The socio-cultural values in urban conservation cover the following: (1) the diversity of the social and economic aspects of the place; (2) the proximity of people in the neighbourhood; and (3) the identity perceived by the local people in

*The socio-cultural values in urban conservation cover the proximity of people in the neighbourhood
Photo: Panita Sarawasee*



association with the place (Pokharatsiri, 2006; Sanoff, 2000). These values are constantly threatened by various forces. However, with tourism as a significant catalyst, changes may occur faster than expected.

The Ancient Town of Hoi An is located in the central region of Vietnam (Quang Nam Province) along the Thu Bon River, which flows four kilometres farther into the sea. It was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999 as an example of an exceptionally well-preserved Southeast Asian international trading port between the 15th and the 19th centuries (UNESCO-WHC, 1999). Although the inscription only stated the importance of its buildings and its street plan that blend both indigenous and foreign influences to produce a unique space, its social life is also significant in reflecting a living heritage site. Unlike many historic towns throughout the world, the Ancient Town of Hoi An was never abandoned; its social elements have thus been sustained through the centuries.

The diversity in the Ancient Town of Hoi An – or Ancient Quarter (AQ); to refer to the research area – shows typical economic activities that repeat every two or three property units on the same street. This set-up did not aim to facilitate visitors but is an effect of the local people's everyday life, social behaviour, and culture (Rapoport, 2000). The observation and mapping of building use in the Ancient Quarter are shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Observation and mapping of building use in AQ during the workshop of Re-WATCH Hoi An, April 2007



Figure 2 Economic activities for tourists (left) and for the locals (right)

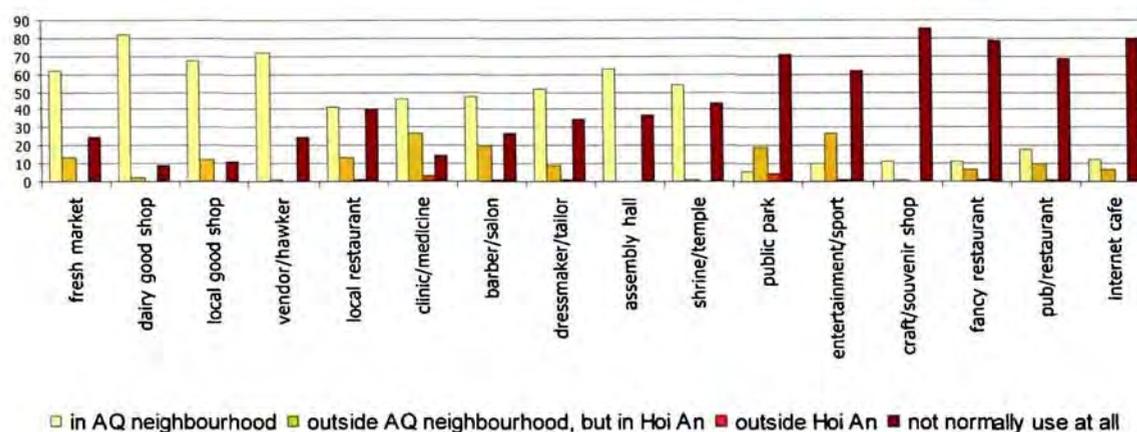


Figure 3a Diversity of economic services and shopping patterns of the locals

Most locals do not use the facilities that cater to tourists (see Figure 2, for examples); this was the first hypothesis of the research and was partially proven true as shown in Figure 3a. Still, the data analysis showed that tailor shops are frequently patronised by the local people, especially if one compares it with other services intended mainly for tourists, such as restaurants and craft shops. However, particular tailor shops within the Ancient Quarter (Figure 3b) are least likely to have a clientele among the local people because these shops do not produce traditional styles and their prices are unaffordable.



Figure 3b An example of building use on a street in AQ, April 2007, showing commercial use for tourists and locals

What are the perception and concerns of the locals regarding the prominent changes in the heritage site? At the top of their concerns are the changes and threats in the cultural landscape, followed by changes in occupation, and then the changes in knowledge and handicraft skill (as shown in Figure 4). In consideration of the changes and threats to the cultural landscape and the priority of the community, the urban planners of Hoi An should seriously look into the changes in living conditions, including the ecological and environmental aspects. Many development activities have noticeably inappropriate or insufficient environmental consideration, particularly those projects along the riverbanks and around the farmlands.

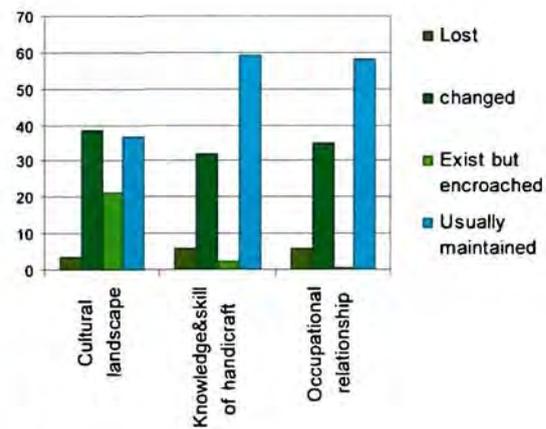


Figure 4 Changed cultural landscape and other values as perceived by the locals

The concept of place and identity was applied to assess the social value and impact of the cultural environment in a living heritage place (Pokharatsiri, 2006). Taken into consideration were the issues of place distinctiveness, place continuity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). A high percentage of families currently living in the Ancient Quarter regard themselves as “people of Hoi An”, and they are proud of being a part of the community. However, more than half of the responses agree with the fact that such feelings are associated with tourism. It is disconcerting that their sense of self-esteem and belonging are pegged to a fragile economic activity, such as tourism, which has recently become more excessive and intensely competitive within the Ancient Quarter. While half of the respondents have a positive sense of place-reference to the Ancient Quarter’s history, the same percentage also has a positive feeling towards their neighbourhood (place-congruent), noting that such feeling is related to clan associations, traditions, and norms, and closely to tourism. Figure 5 illustrates such details from the survey.

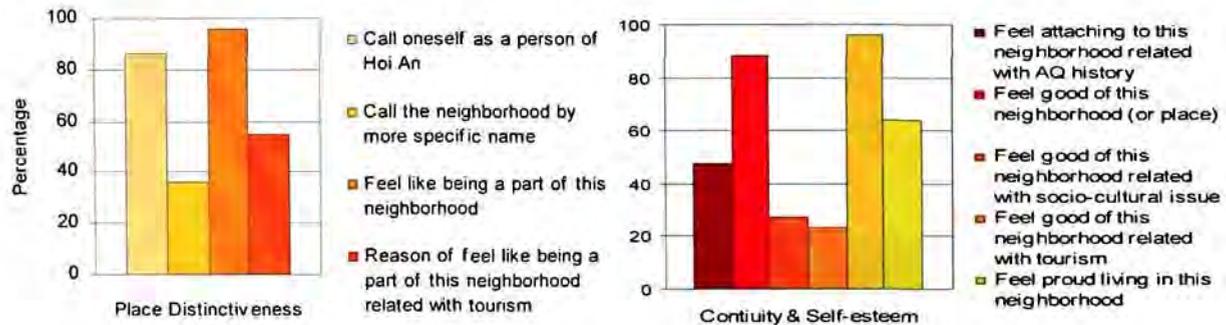


Figure 5 Place identity as defined by the relationships of the place and the locals

Both the clan-based associations and commercial activities of the place are major reasons for the locals to continue living in the site. Whether the locals decide to stay longer in the Ancient Quarter or move somewhere else is the most crucial question. Although less than 20% of the responses mentioned that consideration was given to moving out, those who have considered so were the ones who felt the brunt of

the policies and regulations related to the conservation of buildings and facilities, as well as the increased tourism-related activities in the area. If the local residents continue to feel the need to move out, the future identity of the place would suffer as the social values will be possibly lost. Nonetheless, the locals also strongly desired conservation management through government intervention (financial and technical support), with community participation and support from academic institutions. They have less preference for putting conservation in the hands of the private sector or through the intervention of international NGOs (as shown in Figure 6).

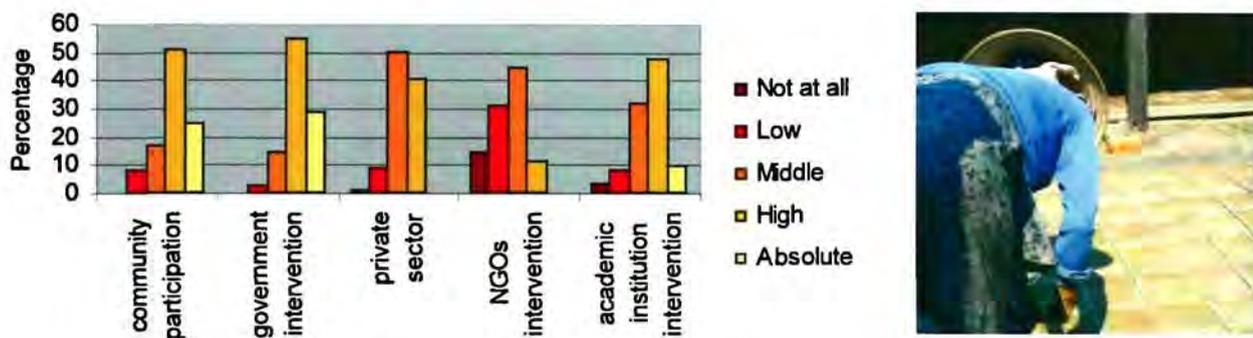


Figure 6 Desirable conservation management as identified by the locals

The problems faced by people in their everyday life were analysed in the self-efficacy perspective. It had been predicted that flooding would have a tremendous impact on the self-efficacy of the people in the Ancient Quarter, as shown in Figure 7. Flood occurs annually, and although the locals are familiar and well-prepared for it, accumulated

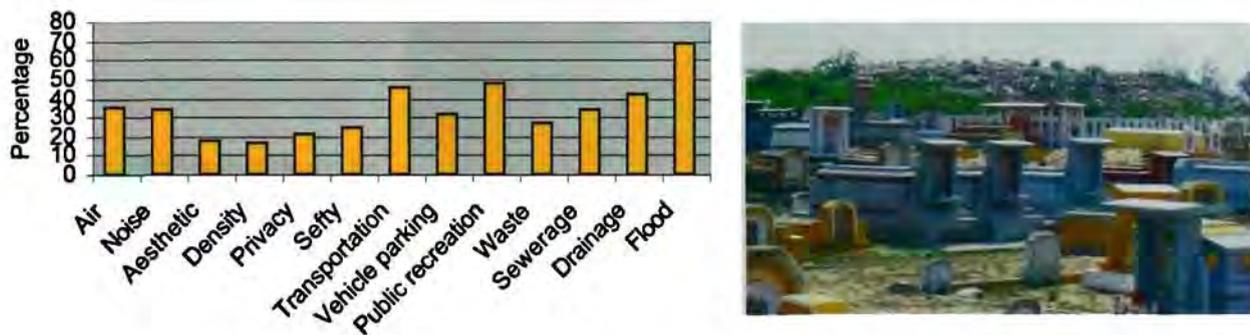


Figure 7 Self-efficacy: problems encountered in everyday life, a photograph showing a large dumping area in a cemetery in Hoi An

damage left on the properties are not easy to cope with, especially when strict conservation regulations are enforced on a particular heritage building. This is exacerbated by problems in drainage and sewerage facilities. Also, while the garbage problem was not regarded as one of the serious threats to the Ancient Quarter, the locals complained of a lack of public garbage bins as the amount of waste in the major tourism destination increased. A large dumping area for Hoi An's garbage is located inside a traditional cemetery, a few kilometres away from the Ancient Quarter. Whether the use of the cemetery as a garbage dumping site is a serious affront to ancestor worship still practised in modern-day Hoi An remains a question that needs to be addressed.

Surprisingly, public recreation was more frequently mentioned as a problem than traffic congestion and transportation issues. In Figure 8, a sizeable waterfront promenade was constructed on the opposite side of the Ancient Quarter in 2006. The public spaces were not used primarily by the locals, yet congestion became a problem. Souvenir kiosks on sidewalks, and tourists congregating on the streets, have invaded spaces for social interaction among the locals, with parents often lamenting the loss of playground space near their homes.

A quarter of the population in Hoi An has access to public water supply. However, because of inadequate water distribution facilities, many households in the Ancient Quarter still use wells located inside



Figure 8 Waterfront promenade and tourist pedestrians may not serve the needs of the locals

their homes. Few public wells, such as those near the marketplace, are accessible. Quality water supply for domestic purposes and use by the restaurants is costly. During the research, the issue of water supply was not mentioned as a problem; however, it is clear that there is a need to plan and manage access to quality water in the near future.

While the locals in the Ancient Town of Hoi An were not directly asked about what they perceive would be the acceptable and tolerable limit to the changes in the town, it is clear that mitigating the threats to the heritage town would preserve its integrity, and this requires more than restoration or repair.

In the perspective of social science and urban planning, a multi-disciplinary approach was used to assess what the local people perceived as the negative impact of tourism on the Ancient Town of Hoi An. Tourism, although benefiting the town economically, has inevitable negative effects on the local community's diversity, spaces, and identity. For instance, local needs to have spaces for social interaction, and the practice of their traditions have been encroached upon by tourism-related activities. Nonetheless, the income of tourism may facilitate the revitalization of the heritage value of the place if resources are allocated to proper maintenance and sustainable development initiatives. From the survey, it is apparent that the local community appreciate the positive role of the government in leading and supporting urban conservation and heritage management, and are also keen on community participation but less so the intervention of outsiders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy suggestions recommended by the Re-WATCH Hoi An workshop

Impact 1: Tourism activities create negative impact on the socio-cultural value of Hoi An

Tourism creates activities that do not harmonise with the social behaviour of people in AQ, as well as many facilities that do not suit the everyday life of local people. The local authority should be more aware of the negative impact, and put more attention on the integration between tourism activities and the local people's social behaviour and the cultural foundation of the AQ community. Awareness of social and cultural changes should be raised through the empowerment of local community associations. In particular, appropriate tourism activities and sustainable cultural tourism development should be emphasised.

Impact 2: Tourism does not generate diversity of economic activities

Currently, tourism in Hoi An does not generate sustainable economic activities because of the lack of diversity in tourism businesses. The goals of sustainable development in AQ must be the generation of more diverse economic activities that do not heavily depend on tourism, which is fragile and sensitive to external factors. The local authority should investigate the real benefits of tourism to the local community, and prioritize the preservation of the cultural resources – both physical and social – of Hoi An.

Impact 3: Local people are losing self-sufficiency due to tourism-oriented facility development

The locals are inconvenienced by public recreation facilities, traffic and transportation, and drainage, and living conditions in AQ are affected. Local authorities should be aware of these problems, and address them by creating a more holistic and effective plan on the management of facilities that meet the satisfaction of both the local community and tourists.

Impact 4: The authentic cultural value of AQ has been threatened by change in the perception of the local people and inadequate interpretation for tourists

The locals are affected by the major changes in tangible culture in Hoi An as well as changes in traditional and commercial culture (intangible culture). Regulations should thus focus on preserving the agricultural landscape and the ecology of the environment. There should also be a concrete policy on safeguarding local traditions, and cultural interpretation on the social complexity of the cultural site for tourists.

Impact 5: Relatively inadequate community participation in conservation and development planning and policy

The community has strong social networks, and the will for participation. However, it is suggested that government intervention incorporates both regulations and the financial support of the local



*Japanese Bridge in Hoi An
Illustration by Pichet
Kanoksutthiwongse*

property owners. The community council should be empowered to propose the conditions for successfully implementing regulations, and to meet the real needs of local communities in conserving their heritage.

Impact 6: Tourism causes discontinuity

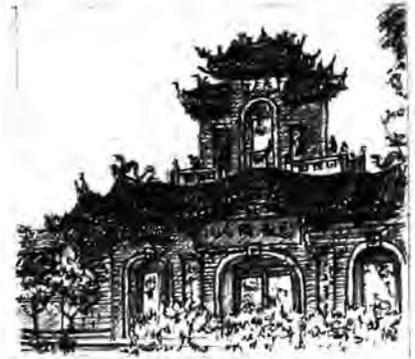
Activities in the neighbourhood, possibly related to tourism, caused discontinuity by accelerating changes in places and people. State policies and regulations on conservation are as much to blame. The local authorities should promote participation of stakeholders in the planning and implementation processes to cope with these issues.

Impact 7: Lack of appropriate planning and management on natural resources and mass tourism

As the local people are not concerned with the environmental impact of tourism, local authorities should consider long-term planning for sustainable environmental management of Hoi An. There should be regulations controlling consumption and waste disposal in the tourism industry. Cultural landscape and natural resource preservation should be integrated within development planning and policy to achieve environmental sustainability goals as well as maximise social and economic benefits.

The above policy suggestions were made to encourage the local authorities to thoroughly examine the impact of tourism on both tangible and intangible cultural resources. They also highlight the importance of integrating tourism-related goals with that of the social and cultural requirements of the local community. Through such a balance, the people are empowered and motivated to participate in cultural tourism management of the Ancient Quarter. These suggestions aim to promote sustainable development – on social, economic, and environmental pursuits – centred on the cultural values of the living heritage site.

*'Re-WATCH' is a group of organisations collaborating in Research-Workshop in Asian Town Cultural Heritage (Re-WATCH). The 'Re-WATCH Hoi An' project is mainly based on the research-workshop entitled 'Towards Community Based Cultural Tourism and Socio-cultural Value Impact of Historic Town: A Case Study of World Cultural Heritage in Hoi An' (28 March – 5 April 2007), in Hoi An, Vietnam. It was



*Chu Thanh Pagoda, Hoi An
Illustration by Pichet Kanoksutthiwongse*

organised by the writer, Ta Quynh Hoa (Architecture and Planning Faculty, National University of Civil Engineering, Vietnam), Soukanh Chithpanya (Faculty of Architecture, National University of Laos, Laos) and He Junping (Department of Architecture, Kunming University of Science and Technology, China). The local co-organiser was Vo Dang Phong (Hoi An Centre for Monuments Management and Preservation or HCMMP). Additional advisors and supporters included Graham Brooks (ICOMOS ICTC), Pisit Charoenwongsa (SEAMEO-SPAFA), Richard Engelhardt (UNESCO Bangkok), Yongtanit Pimonsathean (Thammasat University, Thailand), Pham Dinh Viet (National University of Civil Engineering, Vietnam), Manorot Phinith (National University of Laos, Laos), Joseph Aranha (Texas Tech University, USA) and Aylin Orbasli (Oxford Brookes University, UK). Participants (56 in total) included students and professors from four institutions of Thailand (24), Vietnam (12), Laos (13) and China (2), students from Oxford Brookes University, UK (2), researchers from Gadjadara University, Indonesia (1) and UNESCO Bangkok (1), and a professor from Texas Tech University, USA. Five local officers from HCMMP assisted as part of the questionnaire/interview survey group during the event.

Acknowledgement

The writer sincerely appreciates the support of the advisers of Re-WATCH Hoi An, especially Dr. Pisit Charoenwongsa, Director of SEAMEO-SPAFA, who shares the objectives of the project. The writer is also grateful to Joseph Aranha and Dr. Aylin Orbasli for their assistance, and especially to Vo Dang Phong of HCMMP who was most helpful as the local co-organiser. Participants who were self-financed and who, despite budgetary and time limitations, still carried out their tasks with passion, deserve special mention. Gratitude is also extended to UP students in Thammasat University, as well as to the dean, Dr. Vimolsiddhi Horayangura, for the freedom he gave the writer to pursue his interest in heritage places.

Key references

- Appleyard, D., ed. (1979) *The Conservation of European Cities*. Massachusetts: MIT press.
- Hall, C. M. (2000) *Tourism Planning: Policy, Processes and Relationships*. London: Pearson Education Limited.
- ICOMOS (1999) *International Cultural Tourism Charter*. ICOMOS.

- Orbasli, A. (2000) *Tourists in Historic Towns: urban conservation and heritage management*. London: E & FN Spon.
- Pokharatsiri, J. (2006) *Diversity, Proximity and Identity Lost: Losing Yourself over*
- Rapoport, A. (2000) Science, Explanatory Theory, and Environment-Behavior Studies. In: *Wapner, S. et.al., eds. Theoretical Perspectives in Environment-Behavior Research*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
- Sanoff, H. (2000) *Community participation methods in design and planning*. New York; Chichester: Wiley.
- Tourism. In: *Proceedings of ICOMOS Asia-Pacific Regional Meeting and ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Committee Workshop, Impact of Mass Tourism on Historic Villages: Identifying Key Indicators of Tourism Impact, Seoul and Andong, Republic of Korea 10-13 June 2006*. Centre du Documentation UNESCO-ICOMOS.
- Twigger-Ross, C. L. and Uzzell, D. L. (1996) Place and Identity Process. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 16, 205-220.
- UNESCO-WHC (1999) Report of the 23rd session of the World Heritage Committee
- UNESCO-WHC (2007) Report on the development of a revised recommendation on the conservation of historic urban landscape. In: *16th Session of the General Assembly of State Parties to the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, Paris, UNESCO Headquarters 24-25 October 2007*.

Jaturong Pokharatsiri was an expert member of ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Committee (ICTC) in 2007. He is also an active member of ICOMOS Thailand, and full-time instructor at the Faculty of Architecture and Planning, Thammasat University in Thailand. He was chairperson of Re-WATCH, and currently resides in the UK, where he has been awarded a scholarship from the Royal Thai Government in the Ph.D. research programme at the Department of Architecture, Oxford Brookes University.