

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Background

As a result of a globalizing economy, and the exposure of Thai people to a global culture via the media, flourishing modern shopping environments are now threatening the existence of traditional Thai shopping environments. Many Thais enjoy spending time in the comfortable atmospheres of modern shopping environments. As a consequence, traditional shopping environments are taken for granted and are beginning to disappear.

Traditional shopping environments have long been with the Thai people, meeting economic, social, and psychological needs. These environments are important parts of the local communities where most of the sellers and buyers live. Traditional shopping environments are places where people in the past have spent their time shopping and talking to each other and the sellers. Since Thais shop on an almost daily basis, these environments are parts of their everyday life. Thai people have established a relationship with these traditional shopping environments, with which they are familiar and where feel like they belong. This relationship has provided Thai people with a sense of community and “connectedness” to their physical environments. The way that Thai people have established identities and meanings creates a “sense of place” in Thai traditional markets.

A sense of place is evident in traditional style shopping environments. Hough (1990) describes the unique characteristics of traditional shopping environments such as commercial streets in Turkey and Hong Kong. These environments take on a certain sense of place by possessing identifiable characteristics related to their cultures and traditions (Hough, 1990). Similarly, the unique characteristics of traditional Thai shopping environments have become a part of the cultural identity of the Thai people.

During the past half century, modern-style shopping environments have become more common in Thailand as a result of the process of a globalizing economy. Although these modern-style shopping environments do not relate to the physical and cultural contexts of Thailand, these new shopping environments have attracted many customers. They have become common and are doing well economically. What is attracting Thai people to these new environments? Is it their fashionable images, convenience, and air-conditioned environments? The popularity of modern shopping environments poses a problem for traditional shopping environments. They may be

viewed as inferior places, and become neglected. If these modern-style environments become increasingly popular, while the traditional environments become less used, traditional environments may eventually become extinct. If that happens, Thai people will lose part of their cultural heritage. Moreover, they will lose the relationships among customers and sellers that prior generations used to have in traditional environments.

The Problem

Traditional shopping environments are losing their viability and connection with Thai people. As a result of globalization, new modern shopping environments are flourishing in Thailand and Thai people are exposed to new lifestyles. Thai people now are provided with many choices for shopping places, which were carefully planned and designed to attract customers. Traditional shopping environments, on the contrary, have not adjusted well to the rapid changes resulted from globalizing economy.

Globalization has affected cultures and physical environments. This is a big issue in developing countries (Dandekar, 1998). These countries are prone to the new “global cultures”, and a newly developing global archetype brought about by the power of mass media. Globalization is changing the way that people perceive and appreciate their own traditional cultures and environments. This is also the case in Bangkok, Thailand, where a variety of imported tastes, fashions, and environments are present. These imported material cultures seem to be welcomed by Thai people, especially built environments, which are present everywhere in the city. Contemporary buildings, especially commercial ones, are built in modern, western styles, expressing the adopted values of the current generation. The presence of these style environments poses a threat to traditional ones. When the new modern-style developments are familiar and appreciated for their progressive looks, traditional environments may be viewed as inferior, a part of the past, which is not suitable in the new business, context.

Traditional environments, such as vernacular architecture and cultural landscapes, are vulnerable to these changes. They are not well protected against change from new developments by current preservation techniques. Moreover, they are yet to be perceived as important environments, which need to be preserved, by environmental designers, preservationists, and the public. They are not environments designed by designer professionals and appreciated by the public. Preservationists mainly deal with monuments, and historically and aesthetically significant architecture and landscapes, leaving out everyday, ordinary, and vernacular environments.

Ordinary vernacular environments do not meet conventional preservation criteria such as age, aesthetic value, architectural style, or a relationship to historically significant figures or events. The only criteria that they seem to meet are that they can tell a story about people and their past. They are the result of certain continued cultural activities. They are the reflections of a past life that are still visible in the present. Recognized or not, they still possess the same qualities as they used to. However, what has changed seems to be the way that people look at them.

The traditional Thai market is one type of vernacular environment common in Thailand. Thai markets are really related to the people's sense of local community. People have been shopping and socializing in traditional markets from the distant past until today. Traditional markets provide people with their everyday needs not only economically, but also socially in terms of face-to-face interaction with sellers and other customers. However, they are ordinary and everyday environments that people often take for granted.

The Significance of the Problem

Now these traditional markets are being threatened by the new global archetype, the modern shopping center. Although shopping centers or malls provide a variety of products, services, and entertainments in climate-controlled environments, they also create problems. An important but not very obvious problem is that they evolved in situations that are not very sustainable. The problems include environmental degradation, increased traffic, and placelessness. The repetition of the new global archetype in new developments of shopping environments can replace the existing cultural fabric of traditional environments, leading to a loss of cultural identity. If modern shopping malls successfully replace the traditional markets, the connection to the past will be lost. The relationships of people with their traditional environments will be changed. One of the important aspects of culture will disappear. People will not be able to recover their past in relation to the traditional markets. Moreover, the environments will look like nowhere, or everywhere else, in the world.

It is, therefore, important to preserve the traditional cultural environments, which, in the case of this study, is the Thai market. However, preservation of this type of environment is not a straightforward procedure, particularly when such environments do not meet the preservation criteria. Moreover, these traditional environments cannot be frozen as they are, since they are dynamic and ever-changing. Their physical structures, the bricks and mortar, are not as significant to preserve as their status of being the "traditional market," with their meanings and relationships to local people.

Since traditional environments are shaped by people's needs and behaviors over time, studying these environments can provide insight into the past life of people. Similarly, studying people's current needs and behaviors can also provide insight into what these environments should be. After all, people are able to indicate what is important to them and what they need. Therefore, input from people is essential to the preservation of these environments, especially in areas where people's perceptions of the environments seem to be changing.

Preference Approach to the Environment-Behavior Problem

The environmental behavior field deals with the problem of people's behavior and the environment. Specifically, environmental perception and assessment research can provide insight into how people view traditional markets, the meanings conveyed by these environments, and how people relate to these environments and each other. Environmental preference research has been widely used in various types and scales of environmental design and planning. It has provided valuable information about people's attitudes toward the environment, including their reactions to contents and configurations of the environment in question. Unanimous or different preferences provide valuable information for addressing the subgroups of the population. It is also important to know the perception of developers and designers about the important aspects of shopping environments, including information that they used in the process of developing and designing shopping environments. Whether their perceptions are compatible with shoppers' preferences is useful for providing implications.

The Need for Empirical Research

To understand people's preferences, perceptions, and attitudes toward shopping environments, empirical research is required. Most of the research to date on shopping environments primarily addresses people's behavior from a marketing perspective. Very little research deals with the physical environments, and there has been very little attempt to deal specifically with people's preferences and perceptions of the physical characteristics of shopping environments. In the Thai context, no empirical research has been done on these variables. Therefore, there is a need for a research study of the preferences and perceptions of Thai people with regard to different shopping environments. The current study is a pioneer work that can establish a basis for practical implications, as well as future research needs.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

1. To identify important factors that influence preferences of Thai shoppers for shopping environments.
2. To provide implications for future developments and improvements of existing traditional shopping environments.

The derived information can help those who are involved in developing, designing, and managing shopping environments to preserve and enhance traditional shopping environments, enabling these environments to continue to exist in the new global economy. The results are expected to contribute to the practice of environmental designer professionals, and the cumulative knowledge in environment-behavior field, while the application of research approaches and methodology should help to expand the traditional boundaries in the environmental perception and assessment field.

Dissertation Contents

This dissertation adopts the specific preference study approach called Content Identifying Methodology (CIM) to fulfill its objectives. The first objective—to identify Thai shoppers' important perceived aspects of shopping environments—is fulfilled by a preference survey of Thai shoppers for existing shopping environments in Bangkok, Thailand. The survey procedures include a preference rating survey, a survey of perceived importance of shopping attributes, and a background survey. The second objective—to provide implications for future developments and improvements shopping environments—is fulfilled by using the information from the first objective along with results from an interview with developers, designers, and managers of existing shopping environments.

Three major factors—environmental, shopping, and respondent's background—were identified as influencing preferences for shopping environments. The environmental factor was identified as perception of types, spatial configurations, physical contents, and conditions of environments. People perceive traditional markets as an environmental type. However, negative perception of environmental characteristics associated with traditional environments makes them less preferred. Spatial configurations, specific contents, maintenance level, and opportunities for exploration, recreation, and socialization were found to influence preferences for shopping environments.

Shopping and respondent's background factors influence preferences for different shopping purposes, recreational and value shopping. Recreational shopping was favored by young, single, and large group shoppers, who tended to prefer modern shopping malls. On the contrary, value shopping was favored by older, married, and parents with large family shoppers, who tended to prefer traditional markets.

Developers and designers of shopping environments were found to provide shoppers' preferred characteristics via decorative purposes rather than by providing opportunities for exploring, recreating, and socializing. Traditional environments normally lacked designer and tenants involvement in creating attractive places, due to restricted budget and management rules.

The results of this dissertation indicate that by identifying the preferences and perceptions of Thai shoppers, it is possible to preserve important aspects of the traditional Thai marketplace, which is an important part of Thai culture and heritage. This can be done by incorporating aspects of traditional Thai markets in new shopping environments and by enhancing existing traditional markets to give them broader appeal and make them more viable in today's economy.

This dissertation also contributes to the overall practice of environmental design and planning as well as the field of environmental perception and assessment research by generalization of approach, methods, and results to other similar settings and populations. The findings are consistent with previous studies on both natural and urban settings. The results also support theoretical explanations in the environmental perception and assessment field. Based on the findings of this dissertation, future research can focus on: 1) Specific environmental sample to adequately cover a variety of characteristics and details. 2) Qualitative research inquiring about shoppers' intensive information. 3) Experimental design on specific characteristics. 4) Implementation and evaluation of the strategies provided by this dissertation.

Organization of Dissertation

The rest of this dissertation is organized in the following way:

Chapter Two—Context—discusses the background and context of the problem and setting. It contains a background of the problem, an historical overview of the setting, and relevant studies and issues related to preservation of traditional shopping environments. This chapter is divided into 3 sections. Section 1 deals with the problems of globalization. These problems include the effects on local economy, retail business, physical environment, and place. Section 2 describes the context of shopping environments, including historical overview of shopping environments in

Thailand and current design thinking on shopping environments, historical backgrounds of traditional and modern shopping environments in Thailand, and studies related to shopping environments. Section 3 discusses the approach to preserving and assessing ordinary vernacular environments and the significance of the research.

Chapter Three—Literature Review—discusses the previous research in the field. This chapter has two sections. Section 1 describes different paradigms of environmental perception and assessment research. Section 2 addresses environmental perception and preference research. This section describes previous studies in terms of research components, study models, cumulative results, and theoretical explanations.

Chapter Four—Methodology—describes specific methodologies and procedures applied in this research. This chapter includes a description of research objectives, research questions, and the methods used to collect and analyze data. The data collection methods include preference surveys of shoppers and interviews with developers and designers. Preference survey procedures consist of a scene rating survey, a scene description survey, and a survey of shopping behaviors and socio-economic backgrounds of the respondents. Interview procedures include interviewees' information and interview process.

Chapter Five—Results—describes all of the results from data analyses. It describes the results from each analysis including analysis of the most and least preferred scenes, analysis of preference dimension, content analysis of shoppers' verbal descriptions of the scenes, analysis of variance, canonical correlation analysis, multivariate analysis of variance, and interview analysis. This chapter also concludes the results in response to the research questions.

Chapter Six—Discussions and Implications—discusses research findings in the context of previous research and theoretical explanations and provides research and practical implications. The findings are discussed in terms of emerging patterns and topics derived from the results, and their contribution to the stream of previous research and related theoretical issues. Practical implications of the findings are provided for future development and improvement of existing environments. Recommendations are made for design, management, development, and improvement of shopping environments. Finally, for research implications, contribution to the environmental perception and assessment research and limitation of this dissertation and the possibilities for future research are discussed.