

Space as a Place for Social Interaction:

A Case Study of Tai-Lao Communities

ที่ว่างในบทบาทของสถานที่เพื่อการปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางสังคม:

กรณีศึกษา ชุมชนชาติพันธุ์ไท-ลาว

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Abstract

Regarding the social aspects of sustainable community design, the consideration of public space should aim to support collaboration and social cohesion. As the Tai-Lao ethnic group in central Thailand have been able to maintain their cultural identity and strong neighbourhood relationships, a lesson can be learned from traditional communities about the adaptability of public space concerning social activities. This study investigates the interrelationships between physical space and social interaction within Tai-Lao communities in the central regions of Thailand and Luang Prabang, Laos, using qualitative field research. Adaptation to the dominant culture and local development have brought changes to the physical features and utilization of space, as well as changes in terms of its roles, values, and meanings which respond to different forms and levels of social activity. Among a number of factors, social interaction is closely interconnected with the physical settings of space, though the psychological meaning often plays a more important role. The interpretation of adaptability in the physical structure of “Laan Klang Baan”, a public area within Lao Krang villages that still maintains its meaning and spirit as a shared place, can be reconciled to maintain values of social contact and to improve communal social cohesion by emphasizing a notion of place that represents psychological meaning and belief.

บทคัดย่อ

ในการออกแบบชุมชนเพื่อความยั่งยืน องค์ประกอบเชิงสังคมของที่ว่างสาธารณะนับว่ามีส่วนสำคัญในการเสริมสร้างปฏิสัมพันธ์และความเชื่อมั่นในชุมชน แม้ว่าจะโยกย้ายถิ่นฐานมาอาศัยอยู่ในประเทศไทยและมีการปรับตัวทางวัฒนธรรมอย่างต่อเนื่องมาจนปัจจุบัน กลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ไท-ลาวในประเทศไทยยังคงสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงเอกลักษณ์ทางความเป็นอยู่และรักษาความสัมพันธ์ในชุมชนอย่างแน่นแฟ้น บทเรียนจากหมู่บ้านพื้นถิ่นนี้สามารถนำไปสู่ความกระจ่างในการปรับใช้ที่ว่างสาธารณะเพื่อสนับสนุนกิจกรรมเชิงสังคม บทความนี้มุ่งเน้นศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ของที่ว่างทางกายภาพและความหมายของที่ว่างสาธารณะที่เชื่อมโยงกับปฏิสัมพันธ์ของคนในชุมชนลาวครั้งในพื้นที่ลุ่มแม่น้ำภาคกลางของประเทศไทย กับชุมชนพื้นถิ่นแขวงหลวงพระบาง สาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาว โดยใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ เน้นการเก็บข้อมูล

ภาคสนามเป็นหลัก จากการศึกษา พบว่า การพัฒนาทางเศรษฐกิจและสังคมในบริบทใหญ่ของประเทศไทยทำให้เกิดการเปลี่ยนแปลงวิถีปฏิบัติในการทำมาหากินและรูปแบบประเพณีของชาวลาวครึ่งหลายส่วน อันส่งผลต่อการปรับเปลี่ยนของที่ว่างสาธารณะในหลากหลายมิติ ซึ่งเป็นการเปลี่ยนแปลงทั้งในแง่รูปแบบองค์ประกอบทางกายภาพและการใช้ประโยชน์ที่ว่าง รวมไปถึงการเปลี่ยนแปลงในแง่บทบาทหน้าที่ คุณค่าและความหมายในเชิงสัญลักษณ์ของที่ว่างอันสนองตอบต่อกิจกรรมทางสังคมในหลายระดับ แม้ว่ารูปแบบทางกายภาพของที่ว่างจะมีอิทธิพลต่อปฏิสัมพันธ์ของคนในชุมชนเป็นอย่างยิ่ง แต่ความหมายและคุณค่าทางจิตวิญญาณของพื้นที่ยังคงบทบาทสำคัญที่สุด การคงอยู่ของแนวคิด “ลานกลางบ้าน” อันนับเป็นภูมิปัญญาอันแยกขาดในการสร้างสรรค์พื้นที่ศูนย์รวมยึดเหนี่ยวจิตใจของคนในชุมชนนั้น สะท้อนให้เห็นความหมายในเชิงความเชื่อและคุณค่าทางจิตวิญญาณของพื้นที่ผ่านลักษณะทางกายภาพที่หลากหลาย ซึ่งมีบทบาทสำคัญในการส่งเสริมกิจกรรมเพื่อสร้างความเชื่อมั่นทางสังคมและสร้างสรรค์ชุมชนยั่งยืน

Keywords

Physical Space (ที่ว่างทางกายภาพ)

Place (สถานที่)

Social Interaction (ปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางสังคม)

Adaptability (การปรับตัว)

Tai-Lao Ethnic (กลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ไท-ลาว)

Vernacular Architecture (สถาปัตยกรรมพื้นถิ่น)

1. Introduction

As the sustainable development debate has progressed, it has been argued by many that apart from environmental sustainability, other strands of sustainability—that is, social and economic—should also be recognized as key dimensions. These three strands of sustainability are in fact inter-linked and should not be isolated (Khan, 1995, pp. 63-69; Thorns, 2004; Lewis, 2005). Emphasis is also placed on social interaction as another vital element of the sustainable community. Increasingly, the development of more sustainable housing communities is widely supported internationally. For example, in England, national policy requires that livable communities are created and that new neighborhoods are designed to encourage social interaction (Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions [DETR], 2000). Thus, it is important that communities designed within a sustainable framework should as far as possible consider the influences on social interaction.

Vernacular architecture, in fact, integrates the concept of sustainability into every aspect of its design. Not only do the dwellings use local materials and techniques, but the village's layout also reflects environmental concerns and creates a socially oriented atmosphere at the same time. The study of adaptability in physical space according to vernacular design may help maintain values of social contact and traditional lifestyles in future sustainable community design.

This paper is part of the research on "Holistic Study for the Adaptability in the Different Context of Tai-Lao Ethnic in Central Region Basin of Thailand." The research is funded by Kasetsart University, Thailand Research Fund and Office of the Higher Education Commission, under Prof. Ornsiri Panin. Three years of major research is being conducted on the adaptability in different contexts of four sub-groups of Tai-Lao ethnicity, including Lao Puan, Lao Vieng, Lao Krang, and Lao Song, that have migrated from their original location in the Lao People's

Democratic Republic to the Central Region Basin of Thailand.

The ethnic Tai-Lao in Central Thailand have been able to continue their traditional lifestyle and culture, though they have had to adapt their way of life to conform with the new context of Thailand. The original settlement of the Tai-Lao ethnic group was in the cold areas of the highlands and mountain ranges, a totally different context to that of the flood plains in the central basin of Thailand. This leads to the main research question, about the adaptability of space utilisation to retain traditional ways of socialisation and the extent to which people adjust their physical space for interaction in different contexts. The question of which key factors influence the adaptability of physical space and places for people interaction was also explored in this paper.

2. Research Objectives

This study has three main research objectives. The first is to explore the patterns of social interaction within physical spaces and places in the different contexts of ethnic Tai-Lao communities in the Central Region Basin of Thailand. The second is to investigate the interrelations between and adaptability of physical space and social interaction in Tai-Lao communities. The third is to identify factors that influence adaptability in physical space and places for social interaction in the Tai-Lao context.

3. Research Methods

This research involved qualitative field research. Mainly, the methods for data collection included detailed observation to gather visual information and evidence about patterns of social interaction, physical characteristics of space and place within the communities, and the utilization of space. In this study, several daytime visits and overnight stays were made. The researcher acted as a participant observer, staying with local homestays for at least

four days in the case study areas. Observations were recorded as field notes, maps, and sketches. Non-structured, in-depth interviews were used to obtain more intangible information on beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour in relation to their social interaction patterns within space and place. Participants were randomly selected from residents living in each case study area. Using an average of five interviewees from the case study in the central region basin of Thailand and another five from traditional villages in Luang Prabang, the total number of primary interviewees was ten. They were invited to take part in this research and asked about the relationships with their neighbours, their social interaction, their use of communal and semi-public space, and their satisfaction with the physical and social environment of their neighbourhood.

Information concerning the tradition, culture, lifestyle, history and settlement of ethnic Tai-Lao communities in central region basin of Thailand were obtained from reviewing secondary data. Then, all the collected data will be analyzed using content analysis. A visual analysis is used for visual data collected from field observation to interpret the patterns of social interaction. The complex findings will then be triangulated to investigate adaptability in physical space and places for social interaction within Tai-Lao community and to identify the influential factors.

The forms of social contact examined in this research range from lower intensity passive contacts at the individual level to higher intensity special activities or events at the community level. This research includes different patterns of social interaction occurring in many places: in a private space under the house; in a transitional space between dwellings; and in communal buildings and public spaces.

Case Study Selection

In order to investigate the adaptability of space for social interaction of Lao Krang community

in the central region of Thailand, the main criteria for the selection of the case study communities were the traditional lifestyle and customs of ethnic Tai-Lao. Baan Kudjok community at Chainat province was selected as a case study for this research using the purposive sampling method. The focus was on particular characteristics of the Lao Krang population speaking the Lao language in everyday life. The majority of community residents are of Tai-Lao ethnicity, Lao Krang in particular. The clustered settlement of Baan Kudjok community is more than 100 years old. Furthermore, traditional lifestyles, vernacular houses, and a fertile natural environment can still be found in this village. In 2010, Baan Kudjok also received cultural funding from the Tourism Authority of Thailand for the preservation of their local Lao Krang culture.

According to the historical evidence, the Lao Krang are descendants of Lao people from Luang Prabang, in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Luang Prabang was therefore selected as another area for a comparative study. Preliminary observations were conducted in traditional villages in Luang Prabang, including Baan Xiang Man, Baan Pak Au, Baan Xang Hai, Baan Pak Xe, and Baan Muang Keaw. In terms of physical characteristics, traditional villages in Luang Prabang reflected a range of community patterns and spaces, each one belonging to a traditional sub-group of the Lao Krang. Knowledge of the original context of Luang Prabang could lead to a better understanding of the adaptability of Lao Krang in Baan Kudjok in the new context of Thailand.

4. Physical Space and Place for Social Interaction

Physical environment affects people in countless ways, particularly in terms of social interaction. Besides the structural quality of a physical environment, space and places also involve interrelationships between form and social dynamics (Thorns, 2004; Lewis, 2005). The relationship between physical space and social behaviour is

described in different ways by various disciplines. Research based on environmental psychology and sociology identifies social activities as a type of outdoor activity, which is influenced by a number of physical conditions, with different levels and types of activity having very different demands on the physical environment. Social activities are all the activities that depend on the presence of others in public space (Gehl, 2001).

However, it can be argued that the relationship between these two is mutual. While an environmental setting or architectural space affects the pattern of social interaction (Fleming, Baum & Singer, 1985), at the same time social dimensions also define physical space. This idea is in harmony with the view of human sciences that social space and architectural space overlap. Since physical space and social interaction have a mutually interactive relationship, a study concerned with architectural space and place should not exclude their social dimensions.

5. Physical Space and Place of Tai-Lao Community in Central Thailand

Regarding historical data, there are six sub-groups of ethnic Tai-Lao in Thailand, including the Lao Krang (Piyapan, 1998). This research studied four sub-groups of ethnic Tai-Lao, all found in Central Thailand: the Lao Puan, Lao Vieng, Lao Krang, and Lao Song. These groups migrated to the central basin of Thailand mainly because of political issues and wars. A brief review of their origins, based on anthropological research, reveals that the Lao Puan are from Muang Puan and Xiang Kwang, the Lao Vieng from Vientiane, the Lao Song from Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam, and the Lao Krang from Phu Kang.

In the different context of central Thailand, Tai-Lao settlements have undergone adaptations and changes to their traditional lifestyle and social

patterns. However, Tai-Lao ethnic groups still maintain their cultural identity, especially through their belief in an afterlife. Their cultural traits concerning animism highly influence their way of life. Every aspect of life, ranging from special occasions to daily activities, is coloured by a strong belief in the afterworld. Thus, the study about space and place in Tai-Lao community cannot overlook the formative influences that such beliefs would have on physical space and places for socializing.

Data obtained from preliminary studies of Tai-Lao communities in the central region of Thailand suggests that the dominant Thai culture has a strong influence on the sub-culture of ethnic Tai-Lao. Changes in lifestyle and social patterns have been observed in Lao Puan and Lao Vieng communities, resulting in their increasing integration with Thai culture (Panin, 2010; Pinibjvarasin, 2010). New lifestyles lead to the modification of traditional house and their surroundings, as well as changes to the character of the landscape. Moreover, some significant values of living culture, such as the traditional wedding ceremony and funeral, have vanished.

Unlike the Lao Krang and Lao Song, the changing patterns of social and everyday life in the community may correspond to the different context, but the quality of traditional values and cultural identity still remain in their new living environment. The Lao Song strongly maintain their way of living in the arrangement and utilization of interior space (Inpung, Kasemsook, Panin & Chaturawong, 2006; Punpairoj, 2011, pp. 21-34), whereas the utilisation of space by the Lao Krang within their village and dwellings expresses a deeper cultural meaning, influenced by their belief in the afterlife. This study thus focuses on the adaptability of physical space and places for social interaction within the Lao Krang community.

6. Morphological Structure of Tai-Lao Villages

6.1 Lao Krang Baan Kudjok, Chainat, Thailand

Baan Kudjok in Chainat province is located in rich farmland in the central basin of Thailand, by Huay-Khun-Keaw canal and a pond known as “Kudjok”. This village is more than 120 years old and comprises a multi-racial population, with the Lao Krang as the majority. The Chinese-Thai and Lao-Tai communities are smaller and live separately. There is one temple (*Wat Sri-samosorn*), one school, one public health center and a communal area where the village facilities are located. All buildings in the village are connected via concrete roads, in place of the old untrustworthy cart tracks.

Baan Kudjok village is surrounded by rice field and regularly floods. Most dwellings are traditional Thai and Lao wooden houses, built on stilts. However, many houses are modified and there are some new houses made entirely of concrete materials. The houses are sited both individually and in groups.

6.2 Traditional Villages of Luang Prabang, Lao People’s Democratic Republic

The topography of the case study area in Luang Prabang is largely mountainous, with steep terrain and a narrow plain in the river valley. Access to the villages is mainly by water transportation. Despite the fact that the natural environment has low agricultural potential, many people have located by the river and grow rice. The traditional way of living is closely tied to the Mae-Khong River and farming patterns are dependent on the water level in different seasons. Many of them make handicrafts and weave for their household after the farming season ends.

Baan Xiang Man, Baan Pak Au, Baan Xang Hai, Baan Pak Xe, and Baan Muang Keaw are small villages located by the Mae-Khong River and its connector, far away from Luang Prabang. Every village

includes a temple, located at the highest possible level on a large area of flat land, as well as a pier. The dwellings are arranged in clusters along the roads that connect the pier to the local temple. Apart from the residential areas, the villages are basically separated into five zones: arable land, pasture, cemetery, temple, and forest.

7. Patterns of Social Interaction within Physical Spaces and Places in the Different Context of Ethnic Tai-Lao

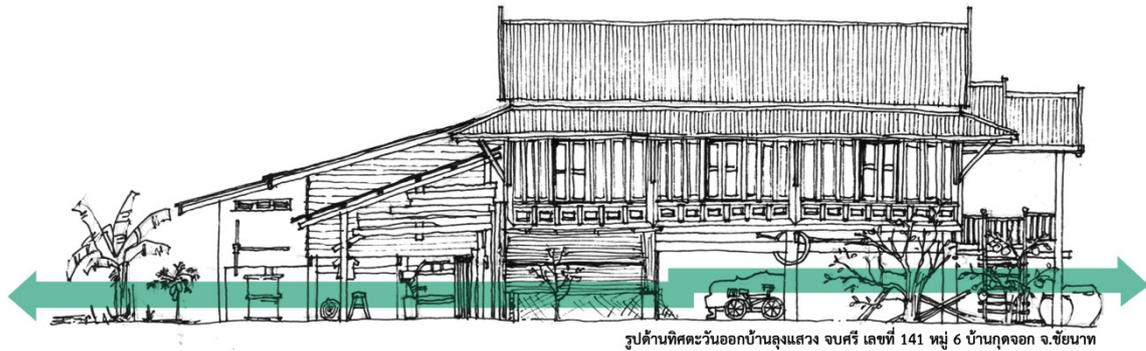
Different patterns of social activities within the physical space and places of Tai-Lao communities can be categorised into three different types of public space: private space under the house; transitional space between dwellings; and communal buildings and public spaces.

7.1 Tai-Thun: Space under Tai-Lao House

In the past, the traditional houses of Lao Krang in Thailand were elevated on stilts to avoid flooding. This characteristic is also found in traditional Thai houses and the houses of other Tai-Lao ethnic groups in Thailand, as well as vernacular houses in Luang Prabang. The area underneath the house, known in Thai as the “*Tai-Thun*”, usually serves as a private space for the dwelling. Many residents normally spend the day in the “*Tai-Thun*” (Figure 1). The area is also used as a place for activities such as handcrafting, weaving, and private recreation.



Figure 1. Daily activities in the space under the house.



Tai-Thun: Open characteristic of private space under Lao Krang house

Figure 2. Tai-Thun, a space under Lao Krang houses, with its physical characteristic of openness providing high possibilities for passive social contact.

The characteristics of “*Tai-Thun*” offers a better chance of contact among residents because there are only columns at the ground level, as illustrated in Figure 2. The residents of Baan Kudjok explained that this space allowed them to observe the rest of the community from their house. This highlights how the physical characteristics of this space, with its perception of openness, has been a significant feature of social interaction within Tai-Lao community.

At present, “*Tai-Thun*” has been losing its role as a place for socializing. Some residents of Tai-Lao villages, both in Luang Prabang and Baan Kudjok, modified the area underneath their house into a room by enclosing the open space with brick walls. These physical changes have relocated daily social activities to the semi-public and public spaces in the community. A more private level of contact can only be found in the houses that still retain “*Tai-Thun*”.

Nevertheless, the role of “*Tai-Thun*” in Lao Krang communities has helped foster higher levels of public interaction. As part of its economic development policy, the local government encourages residents to take up livelihoods that reflect their local wisdoms and identities. In Baan Kudjok, the local livelihoods include traditional fabric weaving; bamboo basketry and crafting; coarse rice; organic vegetable; wooden furniture; local performance and music; Kanom-Chean Plarah and other local

dishes; folk dance; local herbs and traditional medicine (Chinat Cultural Office, 2011). The establishment of these income generating activities has led to a change in the utilization of physical space within the village. For reasons of efficient management, some residents have turned their “*Tai-Thun*” and the area around their dwellings into a multi-purpose area and a meeting place for their career groups.

7.2 Space between Dwellings

In general, the relationships within a Tai-Lao village are normally built up like a family. Many houses normally extend in a compact cluster. Therefore, the space between houses plays a crucial role in social interaction, both at an individual (private) and community (public) level. In many cases, high intensity social contacts were found in residents’ private and semi-private spaces because their extended families were living nearby. However, a transitional space between dwellings also served as shared space and responded well to residents’ social interactions.

Data obtained from the detailed observation conducted in Baan Kudjok in Chainat Province, Thailand and Baan Xiang Man, Baan Pak Au, Baan Xang Hai, and Baan Muang Keaw in Luang Prabang, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, shows that there is no clear physical boundary for each dwelling. It is difficult to define space in terms of physical



Figure 3. Space between dwelling compounds of Lao Krang Baan Kudjok, Thailand.

structures. As shown in the village's site plan, for example, the spaces between dwellings are well integrated and connected (Figure 3). In other words, most traditional Tai-Lao villages, especially the villages of Lao Krang, have been able to maintain their original sense of shared place.

By contrast, the space between dwellings in Baan Pak Xe appears to be more separated because of the village topology. As a result of the settlement being located on steep terrain, the land gradient has meant that each house has a physically defined boundary. Yet the Tai-Lao community in the context of Central Thailand is now also much less connected, with physical structures such as wooden or concrete fences used to mark boundaries, as shown in Figure 4.

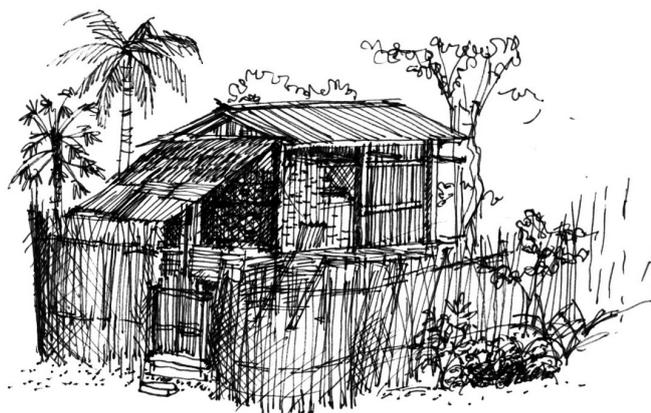


Figure 4. Utilization of wooden fences to create a clear boundary between dwellings.

The results from the fieldwork also highlighted that the different characteristics of space between the dwellings respond to different levels of social interaction. Residents of Baan Xiang Man, where space between buildings is not clearly defined, normally use the space around their house as a place for ceremonies related to living culture, such as weddings and funerals. On the other hand, residents of Baan Kudjok only use space between dwellings for daily social activities. According to the interview with Nikorn Sripromma, the village headman of Ban Kudjok, most community activities and traditional ceremonies have moved to the local temple or public area for more convenience.

7.3 Public space in Tai-Lao Village

Before the ascendancy of Buddhism, a strong belief in the afterworld and animism highly influenced Tai-Lao ways of living, reflected in the space arrangements within the villages of Luang Prabang. There is a place for spirits, called “Hor Phee”, in a community public area or “Lan Klang Baan”, which means a flat plain in the village’s center. This spiritual area was usually placed in the middle of the village, using for spiritual ceremonies and special events. “Hor Phee” have vanished from vernacular communities in Luang Prabang today. Although the space in the village’s center was replaced by a Buddhist temple, the place still remains its meaning of “Lan Klang Baan”.

Data from the fieldwork reveals that “Lan Klang Baan” in Tai-Lao communities still perform their role as a public area of the community, reflected in various features. Baan Muang Keaw in Luang Prabang is the only village that retains the traditional characteristics of “Lan Klang Baan” as shown in Figure 5, while other villages use a space within the temple as a substitute. On the other hand, in Lao Krang community at Baan Kudjok, Thailand, “Lan Klang Baan” has been separated from a local temple. With local government support, “Lan Klang Baan” is not the usual plot of flattened earth, but comprises

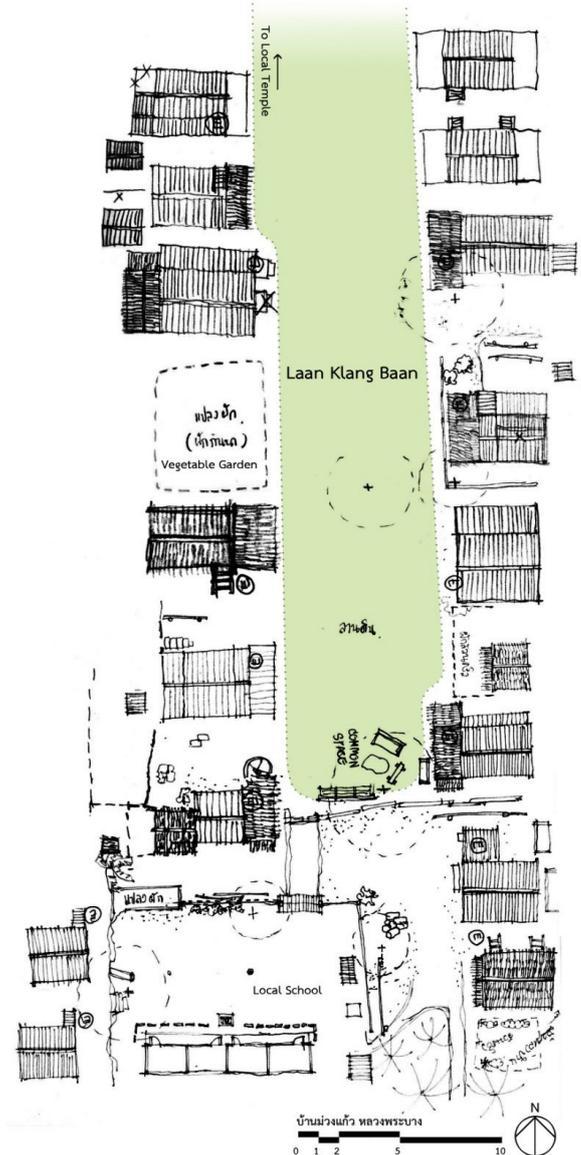


Figure 5. An plot of flattened earth in the middle of Baan Muang Keaw village, Luang Prabang, serving as a public area for community activities.

communal buildings and various architectural features that provide local amenities for villagers, as illustrated in Figures 6 and 7.

The adaptability of public spaces in Tai-Lao villages affects the pattern of social interaction to some extent. At the community level, the local temple has long been a public space within every Lao Krang village. While the more imposing, formal community buildings provided by the local authorities are used less frequently, the temple is the site for special events and festivals (Figure 8). The village headman of Ban Kudjok, Nikorn Sripromma, reported that all villagers



Figure 6. Layout of Lao Krang community at Baan Kudjok, Thailand.

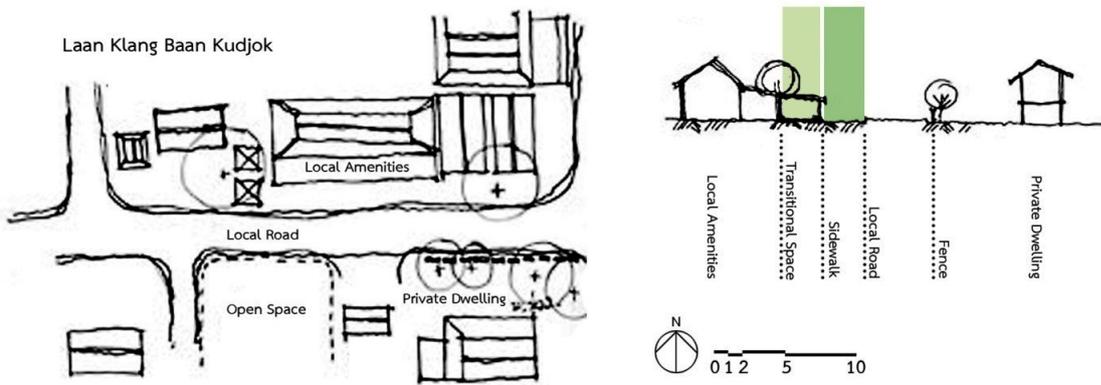


Figure 7. Laan Klang Baan, Baan Kudjok, comprising communal buildings that provide local amenities for villagers.



Figure 8. Local temple as a public community space for social activities at public and private levels.

pay their respects to his or her ancestors by having a spiritual ceremony once a year at *Laan Klang Baan*. The area is formally used as a center of community only for these events.

In addition, many interviewees from Baan Kudjok stated that daily social activities occurred with greater frequency in the more informal, human friendly spaces. Residents usually gather around the temple or sometimes “*Lan Klang Baan*”, in shaded areas under the trees where they can escape from direct sunlight as shown in Figure 9.



Figure 9. Informal gathering in *Laan Klang Baan*, Baan Muang Keaw village, Luang Prabang.

8. Discussion

8.1 Adaptability of Physical Space and Social Interaction in Tai-Lao Villages

Focusing on changes to the physical space and place in Tai-Lao communities, the physical patterns of Lao Krang village have continuously developed through adaptations to their living culture. The adaptation of people’s lifestyles is a result of their new settlement context and involves many factors.

During the past decades, one of the major factors affecting Tai-Lao people is the complex progress of modernisation and globalisation in Thailand. The development policy issued by the government and other local authorities has not only brought new infrastructure to the villages, but also new lifestyles. For example, the advent of new

farming technology, the establishment of career groups and the growth of tourism activity in response to economic development policy has played a crucial role in establishing popularity and social value. This accounts for the dynamic physical and cultural changes in the community.

Whereas development in Baan Kudjok has accelerated the change in physical space of the Tai-Lao community in the Thai context, Luang Prabang seems to be slower in terms of the modifications to the structures and landscape of its Tai-Lao settlements. Despite the fact that the growth of global tourism has had a dramatic impact on the traditional villages around Luang Prabang, the changed living patterns of the community have only involved its physical characteristics to a limited extent.

Major changes in the characteristics of space and place in Tai-Lao communities not only include physical modifications, but also a change in term of values and the meaning of space. All together, the adaptability of living culture in Tai-Lao villages, which may absorb new lifestyles at the expense of traditional culture, has notably enhanced new patterns of social conversation and activity.

8.2 Interrelation of Physical Space and Places for Social Interaction in the Tai-Lao Context

From the statements above, it can be learned that the social interaction of the Tai-Lao has resulted in the adaptation of physical space and places. The socializing areas - ranging in character from small and private, such as “*Tai-Thun*”, to large and public like the village’s communal area—provide the primary settings for conducting these interactions. This is achieved by providing opportunity for contact, proximity to others, and appropriate space to interact in.

On the other hand, the adaptability of physical space in response to the new context also influences the social interaction of Tai-Lao people. The physical characteristics of space and place

have been adjusted and adapted to fit people's needs. Physical changes in the size, arrangement, boundaries, and connectivity of space can create more or less social contact, as well as affect the pattern of social activities.

However, the social interaction of Tai-Lao is also influenced by multivariate factors, including the physical settings of houses and communities, psychological needs for security and livelihood, cultural factors such as daily life patterns and economic characteristics such as occupation. Reflecting the many variables that together contribute to social interaction, the psychological, sociological, cultural and symbolic dimensions of space can often play a more important role than the physical structure. Although some Tai-Lao communities may have lost aspects of their traditional culture, the involvement of a strong animism and other cultural values of space is one of the keys to continuing their indigenous social values. It seems that the improvement of social contact is underpinned by merging socio-cultural behaviour within the physical features of space.

9. Conclusions

As part of the Thai community, Tai-Lao people have adapted their ways of living to create new patterns of physical space within the community. Among the four Tai-Lao ethnic groups in this study, Lao Krang has not lost many significant values of their traditional culture, though certain elements may have been reinterpreted. A strong belief in the afterlife and animism greatly benefits and maintains their indigenous living culture.

Like other ethnic groups in the context of today's globalized world, the process of modernization and rapid development has led to dynamic physical and cultural changes among the Tai-Lao. There are notable changes in the physical characteristics of space and place in Tai-Lao villages that have resulted in new patterns of social interaction. Local

developments have brought changes to the physical elements and utilization of space, as well as a change in its values and meaning.

The changing physical characteristics of space responds to different patterns of social activities in the Tai-Lao community. While the private space under the house (or "Tai-Thun") has been losing its role as a place for private level socializing, "Tai-Thun" in some cases engages with public activities. Daily social activities have been relocated to semi-public and public areas. In contrast, while the physical characteristics of the transitional space between dwellings and public spaces has changed, its psychological meaning as shared space remains. The appearance of housing clusters and the location of local temple and "Lan Klang Baan" reflect the strong relationships among people within the community.

The patterns of social interaction identified in this research show that the adaptability of ethnic Tai-Lao has led to changes in the physical features of space. The physical setting of space and place are closely interconnected with social interaction. However, there are also a number of factors that influence social activities. The psychological, sociological, cultural and symbolic features of space can often play a more important role than the physical structure.

Since Tai-Lao people continue to develop, it can be imagined that traditional ways of living may eventually disappear. Although the emerging living culture could open up new forms of social conversation and activity, the future direction of the local community could develop more individually. As a result, the integration of new development and traditional culture should be appropriately balanced in order to maintain the Tai-Lao's unique value.

Finally, the study and interpretation of adaptability in physical space and the influence of vernacular architecture on social interaction may then be used to maintain the values of social contact. The main recommendation derived from this study is that

the sustainable development of communities should focus on the co-existence of both new lifestyles and indigenous traditions. In addition, the emphasis should be on a notion of place that represents psychological meaning and belief.

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