

# Integrating Participatory Conservation into a Learning Street and Local Market: A Case Study of Surat Thani Old Town

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## Abstract

The Historic urban districts are increasingly challenged by urban expansion, cultural fragmentation and the underuse of local heritage assets. This study examined Surat Thani Old Town, Thailand, to develop and evaluate a participatory conservation model integrating heritage regeneration, learning street development and local market revitalization. The study employed Participatory Action Research, Cultural Mapping, stakeholder meetings, field surveys, interviews, questionnaires and ROI/SROI assessment. A total of 276 participants from academic, government, private and public sectors were purposively selected to represent key stakeholders involved in urban heritage development. The findings revealed concrete regeneration outcomes in both physical and socio-cultural dimensions. Cultural Mapping across six Old Town communities documented historical narratives, community calendars, intangible cultural practices, cultural landscapes and 551 architecturally significant buildings. Participatory planning led to the selection of Ban Lang and Ban Nok Daan communities as pilot areas for learning streets and local markets. These areas were developed through mural art, living museum concepts, cultural tourism routes, local product prototypes and a web application for presenting cultural tourism and learning routes. The project also strengthened community capacity by training local leaders as urban learning managers. ROI and SROI assessments indicated that cultural and environmental capital could be transformed into social and economic value through increased heritage awareness, community participation, cultural tourism potential and local product development. The study concludes that participatory conservation can serve as an effective area-based mechanism for revitalizing historic urban districts and advancing sustainable learning city development in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Community-based Heritage Conservation, Historic Urban Landscape Regeneration, Old Town District Revitalization, Participatory Urban Regeneration, Social Return on Investment.

## Introduction

Urbanization has accelerated worldwide as populations move from rural to urban areas in search of better livelihoods, public services and economic opportunities. Cities have therefore become central to national development and socio-economic transformation (1, 2). However, when urban growth occurs without careful planning, it may intensify environmental degradation, increase vulnerability to hazards and weaken social cohesion. Development that overlooks cultural heritage and traditional knowledge can also erode collective memory, community identity and local ways of life. Contemporary urban development therefore requires context-sensitive, resource-conscious and community-centered approaches that recognize citizens as active participants in shaping sustainable urban futures (3). Within this context, the concept of "Local Study" offers a useful methodological foundation

for participatory urban development. It emphasizes systematic investigation, contextual analysis and integrative synthesis to identify a city's distinctive characteristics, historical development, cultural resources and future potential (4). By linking individual learning with collective action, this approach strengthens collaboration among residents, institutions and local authorities. In historic districts, local knowledge helps reveal not only tangible heritage such as buildings and landscapes, but also everyday practices, social relationships, cultural memories and community narratives that are often overlooked in conventional planning (5).

Thailand possesses rich cultural capital, including traditions, arts, local wisdom, religious practices, historic buildings and community-based activities. These assets, together with natural and environmental resources, can support creative

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production, cultural tourism, local entrepreneurship and socio-economic resilience (6, 7). To transform such assets into sustainable outcomes, inclusive participation from academia, government, the private sector and civil society is essential. This ensures that urban regeneration responds to local needs, protects cultural identity and distributes benefits more equitably (8, 9).

Surat Thani Province is a relevant case because of its historical role as a maritime and commercial center and its connection with the Srivijaya cultural sphere. These influences have shaped a distinctive urban identity through religious traditions, multicultural interaction, local commerce and architectural heritage (10, 11). Surat Thani Old Town functions both as an economic center and as a repository of collective memory, local identity and cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the integration of heritage conservation, community-based learning, local market development and urban design remains fragmented. Previous initiatives have mainly emphasized physical and economic improvement, while mechanisms for lifelong learning, participatory governance and cultural sustainability remain limited.

This study addresses this gap by developing an integrated participatory model for Surat Thani Old Town through cultural mapping, learning street development, local market revitalization, community-based heritage conservation and ROI/SROI assessment. It demonstrates how heritage conservation can move beyond preservation to support lifelong learning, community empowerment, social cohesion and local economic vitality. The case also offers wider relevance for historic districts facing rapid urbanization, fragmented heritage management and declining community participation.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Urbanization and Sustainable Development**

Urbanization, driven by rural–urban migration and the pursuit of better living standards and economic opportunities, has become a major global trend. However, rapid urban growth can cause environmental degradation and social challenges, requiring sustainable strategies that balance ecological, economic and social dimensions while integrating cultural heritage into urban planning (12, 13).

### **Learning Cities and Lifelong Learning**

Learning cities promote social inclusion, lifelong learning and sustainable development by integrating education, culture and community participation into urban development (14). They provide learning opportunities across all life stages and social contexts, fostering inclusive ecosystems where individuals, communities and institutions collaborate for mutual growth (15). Lifelong learning is essential for building resilient communities (16).

### **Local Collaboration Mechanisms in Urban Development**

Integrating local collaboration mechanisms is essential for sustainable urban development. Understanding the roles of collaboration, coordination and cooperation among sectors, alongside public participation, is critical (17). Participatory action research (PAR) and cultural mapping engage communities in decision-making, fostering ownership, social cohesion and alignment with cultural and historical identity (18).

### **Cultural Capital and Creative Economy**

Cultural capital is increasingly recognized as an asset for economic and social development in urban planning and development strategies. It is acknowledged that cultural resources embedded in local traditions, art forms and community practices are utilized as a strategic asset for economic growth and creativity (19). By leveraging cultural capital, economic development can be driven through cultural tourism and the creation of unique products. The potential of cultural capital in fostering creativity and innovation is emphasized, as these elements are crucial for building a "creative economy" that supports sustainable development (20).

### **Heritage Conservation and Urban Regeneration**

Heritage conservation is recognized as an essential component of sustainable urban development. It is argued that integrating heritage preservation into urban regeneration strategies is crucial for maintaining a city's identity while fostering economic and social vitality (21). Surat Thani, with its rich historical legacy, exemplifies how the preservation of cultural heritage can serve as a driving force for sustainable development. The concept of integrating cultural heritage with urban

design highlights how heritage conservation can support lifelong learning and community development (22).

**Social Return on Investment (SROI) and Sustainable Urban Development**

Social Return on Investment (SROI) assesses the social and environmental impacts of urban development by measuring outcomes such as quality of life, community well-being and environmental sustainability (23, 24). It helps planners understand non-financial benefits and ensure projects contribute to city sustainability. In Surat Thani, applying SROI to learning streets and local markets highlights the social and economic value of these initiatives (25, 26).

This review emphasizes sustainable urban development through environmental, economic and social integration. Urbanization offers opportunities and challenges, highlighting the role of learning cities and community participation in promoting sustainable growth. Incorporating cultural heritage supports a creative economy and strengthens urban identity. Tools like Social Return on Investment (SROI) enable evaluation of social and economic impacts of development projects. Collectively, these strategies foster sustainable urban societies and enhance residents’ quality of life, forming the conceptual framework for this study, as shown in Figure 1.

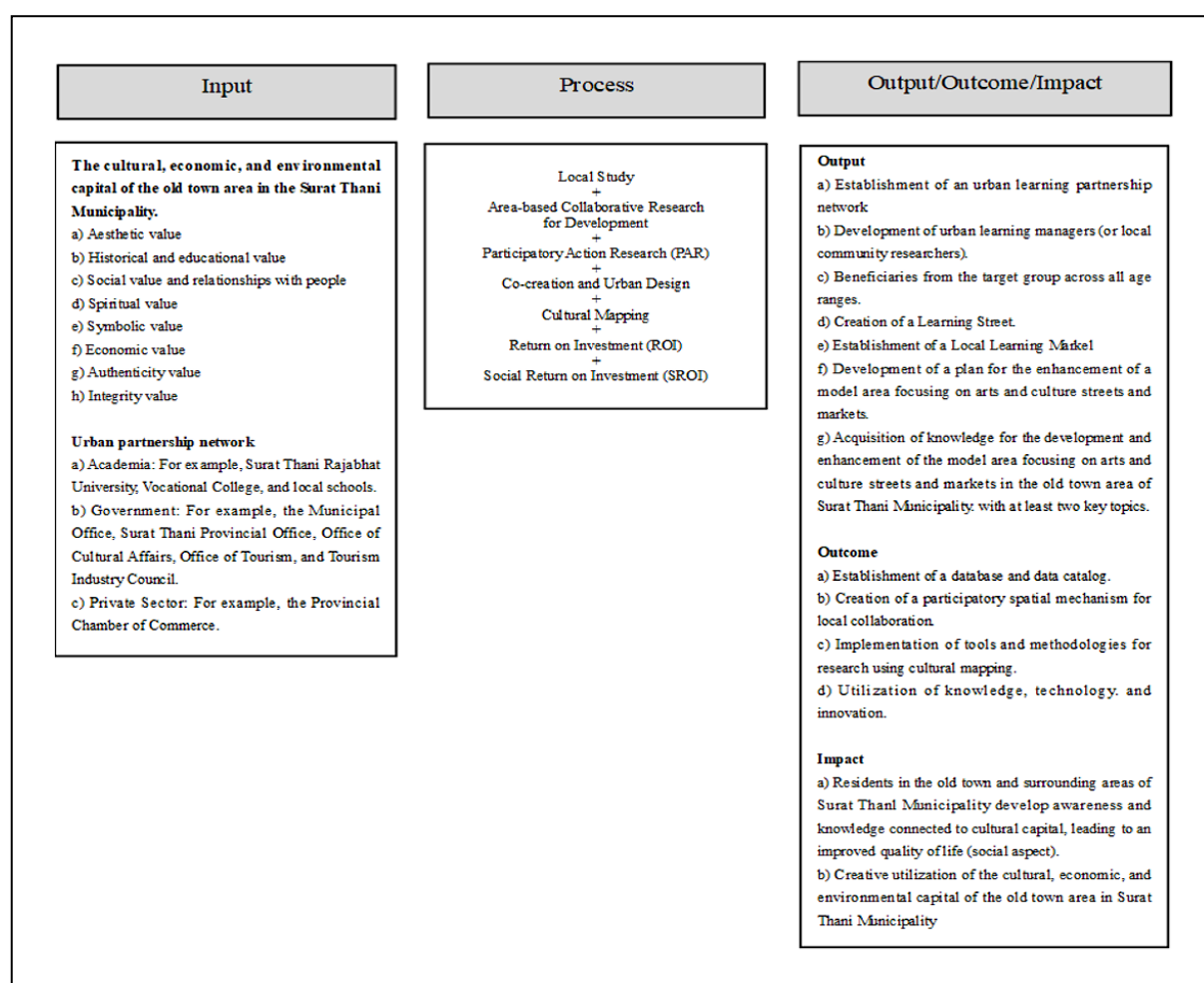


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

**Methodology**

**Study Area**

The study was conducted in the Old City District of Surat Thani Municipality, Surat Thani Province, southern Thailand (approximate GPS coordinates: 9.14011° N, 99.33310° E). The study area is located

within the municipal urban core near the Tapi River and includes historic communities, commercial areas, cultural heritage sites and local market spaces that reflect the historical and socio-cultural identity of Surat Thani Old Town. The selected study area covered six Old Town

communities, with particular emphasis on Ban Lang and Ban Nok Daan communities as pilot areas for learning street and local market development.

### **Sample Population**

The population of this study comprised individuals who lived, studied, worked, or had institutional, professional, or community responsibilities within Surat Thani Municipality, particularly those connected with the Old Town area, cultural heritage, urban development, local economy, tourism, education and community activities. Since this study employed Participatory Action Research and Cultural Mapping, purposive and criterion-based sampling was used to recruit information-rich participants who could provide relevant knowledge, practical experience and stakeholder perspectives on the development of learning streets and local markets.

The total sample size of 276 participants was determined based on stakeholder mapping and the need to ensure multi-sectoral representation in the participatory urban regeneration process. This number was considered appropriate because the study aimed not to generalize statistically to the whole municipal population, but to obtain comprehensive perspectives from key sectors directly involved in or affected by the development of Surat Thani Old Town. The sample therefore included both institutional stakeholders, who could provide policy, planning, technical and administrative perspectives and community stakeholders, who could provide local knowledge, lived experiences, cultural memory and practical insights into the use of urban and heritage spaces. The inclusion criteria were as follows: participants had to be living, studying, working, or performing relevant duties in Surat Thani Municipality; have direct or indirect involvement in cultural heritage, urban development, education, tourism, local business, environmental conservation, community leadership, youth activities, or public-sector/community-based development; be able to provide information related to the study objectives; and be willing to participate in interviews, questionnaires, meetings, workshops, or field-based participatory activities. Individuals who had no connection with Surat Thani Municipality or were unable to provide relevant information on the Old Town area were excluded from the study.

The final sample consisted of 276 participants from four main stakeholder groups. These included 140 participants from the academic sector, such as Surat Thani Rajabhat University, Silpakorn University, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang Surat Thani Campus, Surat Thani Vocational College and schools within Surat Thani Municipality; 14 participants from the government sector, including Surat Thani Municipality Office, Surat Thani Provincial Office and Surat Thani Provincial Office of Tourism and Sports; 14 participants from the private sector, including Surat Thani Chamber of Commerce, Surat Thani Industrial Council, Surat Thani Tourism Industry Association and cultural business operators related to tourism; and 108 participants from the public sector, including community leaders, youth volunteers, local residents and environmental conservation groups in the study area. This composition ensured that the study reflected the perspectives of all major sectors involved in the participatory conservation and regeneration of Surat Thani Old Town.

### **Research Instruments**

The tools used in this study were designed to align with the study's objectives and involve all relevant sectors, including academia, government, private industry and the public. Qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were employed, including community maps (cultural maps), timelines, community calendars, in-depth interview guides and questionnaires. The research team developed these tools, namely the in-depth interview guides and questionnaires and sought consultation from three experts to ensure content validity and reliability. These tools were then piloted and refined before the actual data collection phase.

### **Data Collection**

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research context. Qualitative data were gathered through community maps, timelines, community calendars, field observations, observational walks, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, while quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires. Participatory methods were used to engage local communities and stakeholders throughout the research process, including local citizens, community leaders, youth volunteers and

representatives from government, private and academic sectors.

The collected data were systematically documented and organized according to physical, cultural, environmental and social dimensions. A GIS-based digital mapping system was applied to record, visualize and analyze spatial and cultural data in the Old Town area. The system was used to identify and display significant heritage buildings, cultural assets, community boundaries, historical sites, learning routes, local market areas and environmental resources. It also supported the analysis of spatial relationships among cultural heritage resources, community activities and potential areas for learning street and local market development. This digital mapping process enabled the research team and stakeholders to interpret the study area more interactively and to use spatial evidence in participatory planning and decision-making.

### **Data Analysis**

In this study, both qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research context and to strengthen the validity of the findings. Qualitative data obtained from community maps, timelines, community calendars, field observations, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The data were coded, categorized and interpreted to identify recurring themes related to cultural heritage assets, local identity, community participation, environmental resources, urban learning spaces and local market development.

Quantitative data collected from questionnaires were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation, were used to summarize participants' demographic information, levels of participation, perceptions of cultural and environmental capital, satisfaction with project activities and opinions toward the development of learning streets and local markets. No inferential statistical analysis was applied because the study employed purposive sampling and aimed to understand stakeholder perceptions and participatory processes rather than to generalize statistically to the entire municipal population. To enhance the reliability and depth of the analysis, qualitative and quantitative findings were compared through data triangulation. The

results from interviews, field observations, cultural mapping, questionnaires and stakeholder workshops were cross-checked to confirm the consistency of key findings. In addition, ROI and SROI assessments were used to examine the economic and social value generated from the regeneration activities, particularly in relation to cultural tourism potential, local product development, heritage awareness, community participation and quality-of-life improvement.

Spatial and cultural data were visualized using a GIS-based mapping system to analyze the distribution and relationships of physical, environmental, cultural and social assets within the study area. This process supported the identification of significant heritage buildings, cultural routes, community learning spaces and potential areas for learning street and local market development.

## **Results**

### **Activity Outcome 1: Building Participatory Community Cooperation Mechanisms Involving All Sectors**

The research highlights the crucial role of establishing participatory community cooperation mechanisms in creating a sustainable City Learning Ecology. The study engaged multiple sectors, including government, private, academic and civil society, through collaborative discussions to formulate action plans for the sustainable development of Surat Thani's Old Town area. A series of meetings were organized to explain the project's background and significance, emphasizing the importance of creating learning spaces integrated with urban design. These collaborative efforts led to the alignment of existing working groups with the development of the Old Town area under Surat Thani Municipality. The collaborative mechanism incorporated spatial development, participatory action research (PAR) and urban design principles. Notably, the working groups helped to determine the pilot areas for development Ban Lang and Nang Dan communities by utilizing the community database from the Old Town Communities Policy and Natural Resources and Environmental Planning Office. These areas were selected for the development of learning streets and local markets, which are key components of the City Learning Ecology. This

collaborative process facilitated knowledge exchange and promoted community-driven development, ensuring that all stakeholders

contributed to the city's educational, cultural and sustainable development goals, as shown in Figure 2.

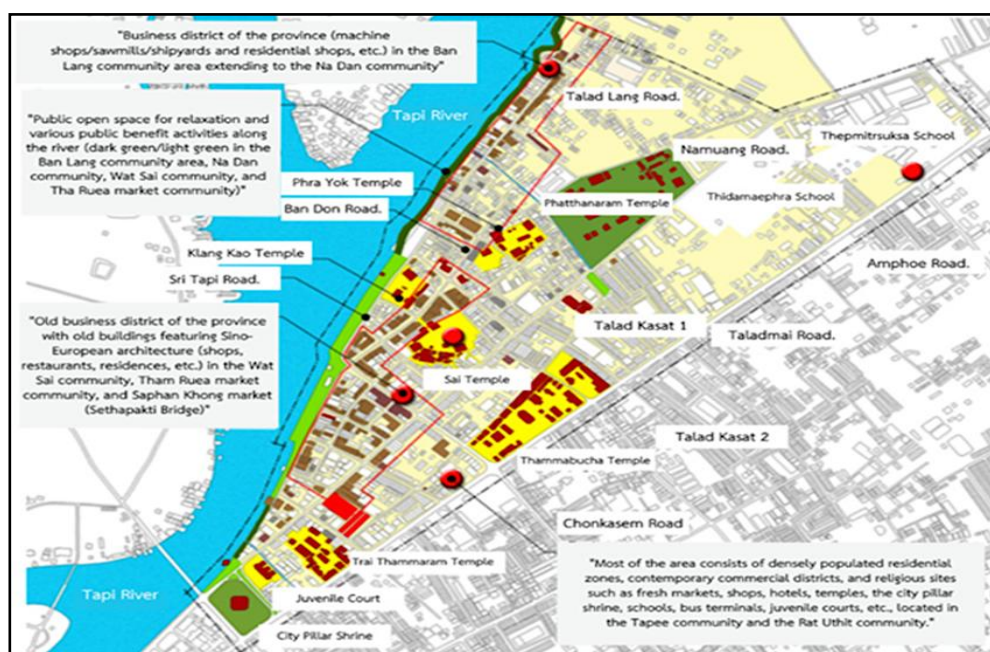


**Figure 2:** Meeting Activities and Data Analysis

### **Activity Outcome 2: Qualitative and Quantitative Data Collection**

The research team systematically conducted both meetings and field surveys to gather initial qualitative data, which was essential for understanding the contextual and historical dynamics of the study area. This data collection facilitated the creation of key tools, including a cultural map, a timeline and a community calendar, all of which served as foundational instruments for analyzing the community's cultural heritage and development. In addition, a participatory questionnaire was developed, integrating insights from all relevant sectors, to obtain quantitative data. The "community map" generated from the

study and collaborative efforts with leaders from all six communities was central to the data collection process. This map, which was cross-referenced with the old community district maps of Surat Thani Municipality, managed by the Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy, highlights significant cultural and archaeological sites in the area. Notably, 551 buildings were identified as architecturally significant, underscoring the area's rich historical value. These findings not only deepen our understanding of the area's cultural landscape but also inform future urban development and heritage preservation strategies, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3:** Map of the Community in the Old Town Area, Surat Thani Municipality

The study identifies key historical periods and cultural dynamics in Surat Thani Municipality, highlighting the area's multicultural heritage and diverse ethnic groups, including Southern Thai, Central Thai, Chinese descendants and Vietnamese. These groups have preserved and adapted their cultural customs, contributing to the unique identity of the Ban Don community. Key cultural practices include festivals like the Vegetarian Festival, Chinese New Year and others, which play an essential role in the local community's social and cultural life. The research also collected data through a questionnaire, gathering information on respondents' demographics and cultural, economic and environmental capital. This data revealed the significance of cultural values, social relationships and the economic impact of local traditions. Surat Thani Municipality, with a population of 127,753, is a low-density area with 70 communities, six of which were selected for this project, including Talad Lang and Na Dan communities.

### Activity Outcome 3: Data Analysis

The analysis of Return on Investment (ROI) indicates that the cultural and environmental assets of the Old Town area of Surat Thani Municipality have been strategically leveraged for creative initiatives. In parallel, the Social Return on Investment (SROI) assessment highlights that the

residents of the Old Town and adjacent areas have significantly increased their awareness and understanding of cultural capital. This enhanced knowledge has contributed to an overall improvement in the quality of life for these residents. The findings suggest that approximately 127,753 individuals in Surat Thani Municipality have benefitted from these socio-cultural initiatives, underscoring the positive impact of integrating cultural heritage into urban development strategies.

### Activity Outcome 4: Design and Proposal for Development

The research team organized a focus group discussion to select pilot areas for the development of learning streets and local markets in Surat Thani Municipality. This involved collaboration from various sectors, including the government, private sector, academia and civil society, to jointly design and plan for the sustainable development of the Old Town area. The Ban Lang and Ban Nok Daan communities were selected as the pilot areas for the development of learning streets and local markets, with a focus on using mural art to reflect cultural significance, lifestyle and local wisdom. This initiative, called the "Talad Lang Street Art & Learning Space," aims to promote cultural tourism and community engagement, as shown in Figures 4 and 5.



**Figure 4:** Paintings Depicting the Community Lifestyle in Ban Lang



**Figure 5:** A painting Depicting the Slogan of Surat Thani Province

In this study, the research team developed a community map that reflects cultural assets and the historical importance of the Old Town area. The map highlights significant historical sites,

particularly architectural ones and includes a timeline and community calendar to reflect local wisdom and the traditions passed down by the communities in the area, as shown in Figures 6 and 7.



**Figure 6:** Representative Image Showing Surveying Buildings, Compiling Historical Artefact Inventories, Designing Living Museum and Local Market



**Figure 7:** Representative Image Showing a Conference Meeting Held on Living Museums and Local Markets

A survey of the residents in the target area showed the level of satisfaction with the Talad Lang Street Art & Learning Space. The survey results indicated

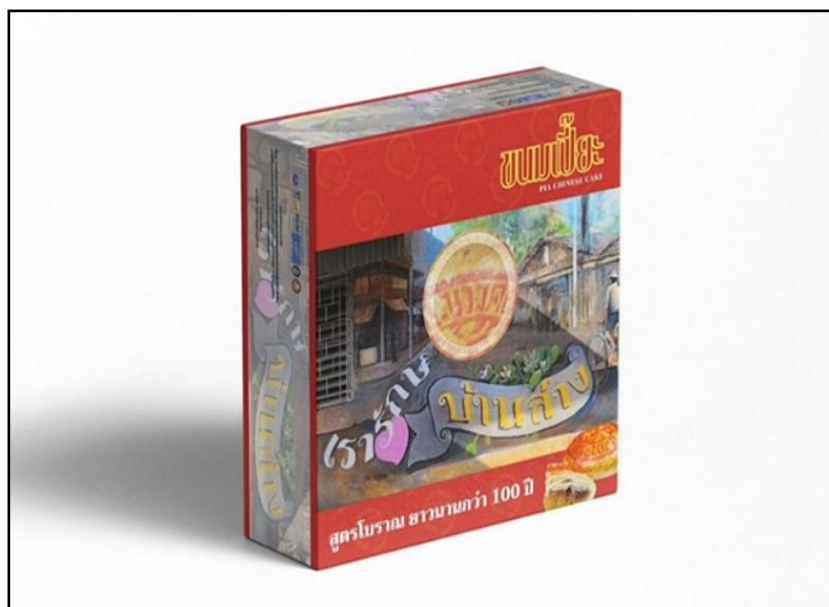
high satisfaction, particularly with the murals that represent the community's lifestyle and identity, as shown in Figure 8.



**Figure 8:** Representative Image Showing a Press Conference and Public Relations for the Street Art Painting of Ban Lang People

Additionally, the research team designed and developed a living museum and local market in collaboration with the community, focusing on promoting community-based tourism and local product sales. This integration of art and community economic development was further supported by a press conference to raise awareness about the project and promote cultural tourism. A web application was developed to

showcase the cultural tourism routes and learning spaces and training was provided to community leaders to become urban learning managers. These efforts aim to foster innovation, create community products and promote the region's cultural identity, attracting more visitors and contributing to the creative economy in the region, as shown in Figures 9 and 10.



**Figure 9:** Representative Image Showing an Example of a Community Product Prototype of Chinese Pastry

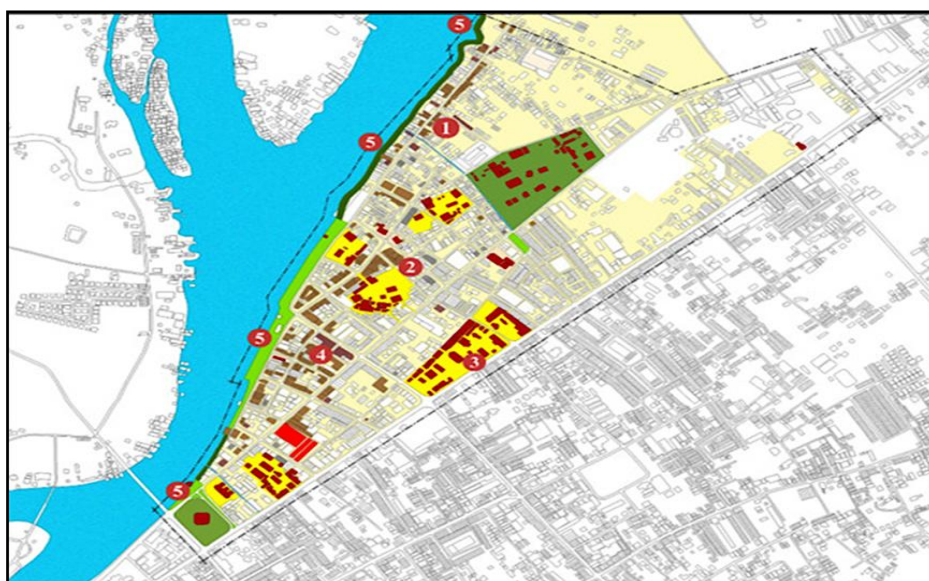


**Figure 10:** Representative Image Showing an Example of a Community Product Prototype of Bag

### Activity Outcome 5: Development and Presentation Plan

A collaborative meeting was held to develop a comprehensive plan for the Learning Street and Local Market in Surat Thani's Old City area. The initiative involved various stakeholders, including government agencies, academic institutions, the private sector and community innovators, who were developed to serve as urban learning managers. The plan includes short-term, medium-term and long-term strategies that aim to address challenges and promote city development through the collective expertise and resources of all parties. Additionally, efforts are being made to connect Surat Thani with other learning cities in the region,

like Hat Yai, while promoting cultural tourism and Thai-Chinese festivals within the Old City. To enhance the development of the Learning Street and Local Market, several processes were outlined, including data integration from community engagement activities, goal setting and the creation of a development framework. Detailed project specifications were established, including timelines, responsible units and budget allocations. The plan emphasizes the integration of urban design, cultural heritage and local market development, incorporating artworks, museums and web applications to transform the Old City area into a sustainable and vibrant learning space, as shown in Figure 11.



**Figure 11:** Studying the Design of the Master Development Plan to Drive the Development Plan of the Learning Street and Local Market in Surat Thani City, Surat Thani Province

### Activity Outcome 6: Knowledge Summation and Lessons Learned

The research and promotion of a learning street and local market in Nakhon Si Thammarat Municipality successfully integrated historical knowledge and local wisdom into art and media to highlight the community's cultural, economic and environmental assets. The project gained attention on the "Here at Mochit - Good News with Todd Tong Dee" program, where community pride and

educational value were emphasized. Additionally, a community enterprise, "Community Tourism Enterprise in the Old Town Lower Village Area," was established to promote the area as a learning city. The project benefitted community artists and leaders, particularly in Ban Lang and the checkpoint community, who actively participated and saw positive impacts. The project was chosen as a model for local development by Nakhon Si Thammarat Rajabhat University, as shown in Figure 12.



**Figure 12:** Reflection and Lesson-learning Meeting at Tessaban 3 School (Talad Lang)

The objective of developing a participatory local cooperation mechanism to drive Surat Thani's Old Town towards becoming a learning city aligns with the concept of a "learning city." This includes empowering citizens in decision-making, fostering economic and cultural prosperity and ensuring sustainable development. Key characteristics for such a city involve promoting lifelong learning, enhancing learning in families, communities and workplaces, encouraging the use of technology and supporting a culture of lifelong learning. The approach emphasizes leadership, stakeholder involvement and resource utilization from all sectors, ensuring that the learning city is driven collaboratively. The creation of learning streets and local markets using participatory cooperation across cultural, economic and environmental foundations aligns with concepts of learning environments and cultural tourism. These initiatives encourage the study of local cultural practices, like blacksmithing and weaving, thus integrating cultural capital. Additionally, the

objective aligns with economic and cultural capital assessment, including Social Return on Investment (SROI) to evaluate the social and economic benefits of these projects. This holistic approach promotes both cultural enrichment and sustainable city development.

### Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that cultural capital can function as a practical driver of heritage-led urban regeneration when it is systematically connected with community participation, spatial planning and local economic development. Unlike conventional heritage conservation approaches that often emphasize the preservation of physical assets alone, this study shows that the cultural resources of Surat Thani Old Town can be transformed into learning spaces, tourism routes, community products and local market activities. The Cultural Mapping process provided empirical evidence of the area's heritage value by identifying 551 architecturally significant

buildings, together with historical narratives, community calendars, local traditions and cultural landscapes. These findings confirm that Surat Thani Old Town contains substantial tangible and intangible heritage assets that can support both conservation and sustainable urban revitalization (27, 28).

The participatory process also produced concrete planning outcomes. Through meetings, field surveys, focus group discussions and stakeholder workshops, Ban Lang and Ban Nok Daan communities were selected as pilot areas for the development of learning streets and local markets. This outcome indicates that participatory planning was not limited to consultation but led to specific spatial decisions and development proposals. The creation of the Talad Lang Street Art & Learning Space further demonstrates how mural art can operate as both a cultural interpretation tool and a public learning medium. This finding is consistent with the view that public art can preserve cultural heritage while functioning as an educational tool (29). Survey responses from residents in the target area indicated a high level of satisfaction with this initiative, particularly because the murals represented local lifestyles, cultural identity and community memory. This evidence suggests that public art can strengthen residents' sense of ownership and pride while making heritage more accessible to visitors and younger generations.

The findings also support the concept of a learning city, in which education, culture and community participation are integrated into urban development processes (30). In Surat Thani Old Town, learning was not confined to formal educational institutions but was embedded in public spaces, cultural routes, murals, local markets and community activities. This approach reflects lifelong learning in daily urban life, where residents and visitors can learn from local history, cultural practices, traditional knowledge and community narratives. The involvement of government agencies, academic institutions, private organizations and civil society also confirms the importance of collaboration among multiple sectors in participatory urban development (31).

The ROI and SROI assessments provide additional evidence that the regeneration activities generated value beyond physical improvement. The ROI analysis indicated that cultural and environmental

assets in Surat Thani Old Town were strategically mobilized for creative initiatives, while the SROI assessment showed increased awareness and understanding of cultural capital among residents in the Old Town and adjacent areas. These outcomes contributed to improved quality of life and broader socio-cultural benefits for the municipality. Although the study did not report a numerical SROI ratio, the findings indicate that approximately 127,753 people in Surat Thani Municipality could benefit from the socio-cultural initiatives associated with heritage-based regeneration. This supports previous arguments that SROI is useful for capturing non-financial impacts and social value, including community well-being, cultural awareness and quality-of-life improvement (32, 33).

The development of living museum concepts, local market planning, community-based product prototypes and cultural tourism routes further supports the role of heritage conservation in local economic revitalization. In this study, cultural assets were translated into practical development outputs, including community product prototypes such as Chinese pastry and local bags, as well as a web application for presenting cultural tourism routes and learning spaces. These outputs show that participatory conservation can create links between cultural memory, local entrepreneurship and visitor experience. This finding is consistent with previous studies suggesting that cultural tourism and community-driven heritage projects can support economic development while preserving cultural identity (34).

Another important finding is the capacity-building effect of the project. The training of community leaders and local stakeholders as urban learning managers helped extend the impact of the project beyond the research period. These actors can support the management of learning spaces, cultural tourism activities, community products and local interpretation processes. This finding indicates that sustainable learning city development requires not only physical design or cultural documentation but also local human capacity. In this sense, the project strengthened community agency by enabling local people to participate in the interpretation, management and future development of their own heritage spaces. This is consistent with the broader view that improving residents' quality of life and

strengthening local capacity are important elements of sustainable urban development (35).

## Conclusion

The research highlights the critical role of cultural capital and community-driven mechanisms in creating a sustainable and vibrant learning city in Surat Thani's Old Town. By integrating mural art into urban design, the project preserves cultural heritage while serving as an educational tool, embodying the concept of lifelong learning. The collaborative approach involving government, academia, private sectors and civil society has created public learning spaces that contribute to cultural preservation, economic revitalization and environmental sustainability. The study also demonstrates the economic value of cultural capital, as seen in local traditions, festivals and crafts, which drive cultural tourism and improve residents' quality of life. Furthermore, the Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis shows significant social and economic benefits, including increased community engagement and awareness. The creation of living museums and local markets, alongside training community leaders as urban learning managers, fosters sustainable development and supports both economic and cultural growth. This model contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable urban development, ensuring that cultural heritage, economic vitality and community engagement are integral to the success of a learning city.

## Strengths of the Study

The research on the Surat Thani Old Town initiative stands out for its integrated, participatory approach involving government, private sectors, academia and local communities. This collaboration fosters sustainable development that aligns with local needs while preserving cultural heritage through urban design, such as mural art and initiatives like living museums and local markets. The use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Cultural Mapping enables community involvement in heritage conservation, promoting ownership and pride. Additionally, the application of the Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework highlights the broader social and economic benefits of these initiatives, demonstrating their value beyond financial gains.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations, such as its focus on a single case in Surat Thani Old Town, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other areas with different contexts. The level of community engagement may vary depending on local capacities and the study does not address potential conflicts between urban development and cultural heritage conservation. Additionally, the long-term sustainability of the project remains uncertain and measuring social and cultural impacts is challenging and somewhat subjective. Relying on cultural tourism as a primary source of economic development may also pose risks in the face of global crises, such as pandemics or economic downturns.

## Abbreviations

IT: Information Technology, PAR: Participatory Action Research, ROI: Return on Investment, SROI: Social Return on Investment, UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

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## Author Contributions

Nara Phongphanich: Conceptualization, Conducted the Study, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Interpretation of the Results, Manuscript Draft, Dolluck Phongphanich: Conceptualization, Data Analysis, Interpretation of the Results. Both authors critically reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Data Availability

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

The authors used ChatGPT during preparation of this work to improve the abstract, references formatting and English language clarity. The authors reviewed and edited the work as necessary and take full responsibility for the final version.

## Ethics Approval

Research ethics approval was obtained by the Ethical approval to report this case was obtained from Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Surat Thani Rajabhat University (Certificate No. SRU-EC2022/120).

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