

*Characteristics of Environment Encouraging Elder-Teenager Cooperation  
in Rural Community*

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**Abstract**

Nowadays, local wisdom plays an important role in community development. One month of participant observation in Na-Ngoi – Phonplaloh, a rural community which is 650 kilometers from Bangkok, Thailand, shows that elders are full of passion in contributing craft wisdom to teenagers; however, teenagers have no willingness to learn. Making everyday products at semi-outdoor space around the house is in contrast with chilling out with friends and using smart phone at the town's café. The mapping of the elders' and teenagers' daily lives reveals that the teenagers are inclined in virtual activities. The teenagers are full of passion to connect to the world and extremely different from elders who prefer being in their comfort zone. Also, the mapping shows evidence of probable cross-generational cooperation. Craft is necessary although we are surrounded by technologies, and online activities cause addiction among teenagers. These reasons underscore the idea of startup project to value craft for tomorrow. Hence, the environment encouraging teenager-elder cooperation must be carefully identified. The study suggests four keys to develop the environment successfully: 1) flexible space, 2) visible craft, 3) leisure activities, and 4) connection. With emphasis on personal context, the space should not be limited by location. Elders could stay in their place for crafting while teenagers could travel around and connect to elders, craft products and world. Crafts would be visible in some places where everyone could explore them easily, and daily leisure could be flexible according to lifestyles. These make the space more dynamic and highly adaptable for changes.

Keywords: Community development, cross-generation cooperation, local wisdom, knowledge transfer

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## **Introduction**

Thailand is now an aging society. Thai government is currently encouraging studies of this issue including social and economic aspects. The National Elderly Plan Issue 2 emphasizes social participation and self-actualization with surrounding people and participation in public activities. This conforms to The Eleventh National Economic and Social Development Plan (2012 - 2016) emphasizing preservation of local wisdom, which is a valuable social capital to encourage stability of national economy and society. The School of Architecture and Design (SoA+D) of King Mongkut's University of Technology (KMUTT) has been involved in community development project in Na-Ngoi – Phonplaloh for four years. Na-Ngoi – Phonplaloh could be considered as a rural community in Sakol Nakorn province, 650 kilometers from Bangkok, Thailand. People in the community basically do farming. In the past, Na-Ngoi – Phonplaloh was recognized as the famous community producing high quality of blooms. However, producing blooms is no longer the community's main economic activity.

From the 4-year experience in the community, it has been found that elders are the key persons to keep local wisdom and knowledge. However, there is just a limited knowledge transferred to young people and teenagers, according to the global trend that focuses on the unique experience including product or service which is applied from local wisdom. So, the idea to develop environment for knowledge transfer between elder and teenagers could possibly be a community's brand-new program. Thai government has encouraged communities to express themselves internationally. They encourage people to go back to their hometown and develop local business from what they actually are and what they actually have. That is why local wisdom plays an important role for today.

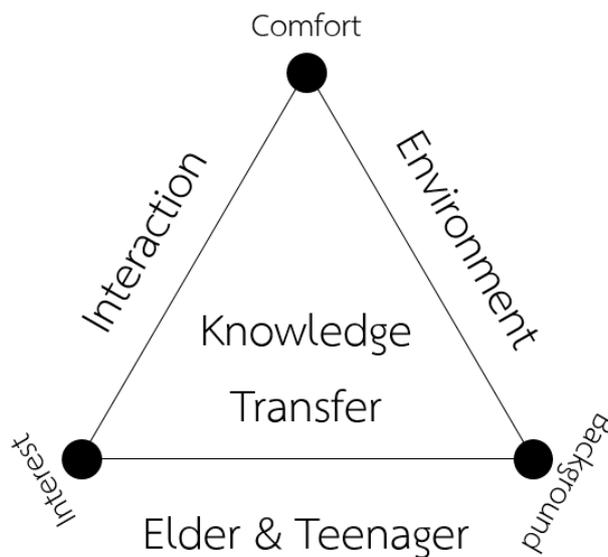
Na-Ngoi – Phonplaloh is like other communities in developing countries that have been attracted by globalization. Teenagers in the community would like to spend their time in the urban city. They love to meet their friends in restaurants and coffee shops downtown. When they have leisure time in the community, they always spend time on social media. Face to face interaction has significantly decreased.

From the primary observation, there is not much interaction between three generations, elders, adult, and teenagers because each generation has its own interests and activities. This is why there is limited knowledge transferred between generations. As the values of local wisdoms today, it would be much beneficial if they can collaborate by using elders' local wisdom to generate future opportunities. Since adults have been taking care of family financial status, elders and teenagers would be fit to start taking benefits from applying local wisdom.

On the other hand, local wisdom is very important in terms of social and cultural development. Local wisdom needs to be developed to properly fit to today's culture. Na-Ngoi – Phonplaloh might be in this situation. Local wisdom such as craft has not been much developed while it is interesting for others including the teenagers in the community. Transferring valuable knowledge of elders is one development opportunity that is consistent with The Eleventh National Economic and Social Development Plan (2012 - 2016). It refers to human development for the sustainability of lifelong learning strategy. There are many kinds of community's

local wisdoms including agriculture, Thai traditional medicine, craft and culture, and food. The methodology of local wisdom transfer widely used is ‘demonstration method’ by self-practice from real experience (Seni Wong Na Ayutthaya & Teerayuth, 2013). However, teenagers actually know that local wisdom could be applied to benefit their lives. They do not know how to get such kind of wisdom and translate it into business opportunities.

Considering why elders would like to spend time on the basement of their houses, why adult would love to sit and chit-chat in local coffee shop or restaurant, and why teenagers love to kill time in the coffee shop, these spaces are their comfort zones. Each space would have its own characters to invite each generation to involve. It would be possible to design or create the space or place that people can join and interact. However, adults get less potential to join due to the responsibility on family finance. Elders and teenagers are considered to be a good match. It would be much beneficial to teenagers to utilize local wisdom transferred from elders. The environment encouraging elders and teenagers to collaborate would be approached. This study aims to understand 1) people’s lifestyles and existing collaboration between elders and teenagers, 2) the existing characteristic of space encouraging elders to collaborate with teenagers, and 3) the relationship of human factors affecting knowledge transfer.



*Figure 1. The Conceptual Framework*

Thammasatien, Sortakul, Leksombul, and Panichkul (2012) presented the case study in Finland, Helsinki Design Lab which starts with the simple questions such as how to create a recreational space for elder people and children in snow town. This is a very simple question but it is a relevant question. Therefore, the study was conducted to understand lifestyles of elders and teenagers and also the reason of their existing collaboration. This study focused on the criteria of social and cultural context of community. Participatory observation was selected to be the key data collection tool. It was to ensure that the solution proposed in this study would be potentially developed in the community. The hypothesis was developed and tested in the real context.

Barker and Schoggen (1973) mentioned that ecological psychologists also give priority to specify the behavioral boundary of participating place, object, and time. The study focused on social interactions of “elders and teenagers” and “environment and object”. Interview and participatory observations were selected as data collection tools. However, the solution developed during the data analysis was built and tested in the real context in the community.

**Getting to know.** At the first phase of participatory observation, researcher spent two weeks in the community to understand the reality of existing collaboration of elders and teenagers. The purposes of this collection are 1) current situation analysis, 2) general interaction between generations, and 3) onsite study of favorite places of elders and teenagers. A researcher was assigned to select the place that elders and teenagers normally love to be. The behaviors and the frequency of use of the elders and teenagers in those places were recorded. Elders and teenagers were interviewed on their reasons to be in those places, such as atmosphere, activities, conversations, people, and special purposes. The general characteristics of places and special characters creating special purposes were recorded as well.

**Getting deeper.** The second phase of data collection was scheduled two months after the first phase. Two researchers were assigned to interview and observe elders and teenagers doing their favorite activities in the community. Eight elders and six teenagers were interviewed in depth at their places for better understanding on their 1) motivation to be in the places, and 2) human-environment interactions. During interviews, elders and teenagers were requested to explain their activities, objects, and environment related to activities. Researchers also focused on their perception of their activities and the places.

**Getting real.** The suggestion from the analysis was applied to be the solution such as prototypes and processes. The solution was explained to selected elders and teenagers in the community. Those elders and teenagers were invited to try the solution at the prepared environment and situation. All activities and interactions were systematically recorded. In-depth interview played an important role to understand their perception to the solution. Elders and teenagers were encouraged to give their feedback, opinions, and recommendations to develop the solution.

## **Conclusion**

At the first phase of data collection, researchers spent two weeks in the community. Site survey and stakeholders’ demonstration were used in order to interact with people, especially elders and teenagers. A group of teenagers mentioned that there is a new small coffee shop located in a kilometer from the community. They are very excited. It is good a sign because this coffee shop is a small branch of the one in a big city. In fact, this coffee shop is very small, and coffee is not the main product of this branch. However, this situation confirmed that teenagers do not only want to go outside the community. Leksomboon (2012) also gives value to question the community development project such as “how to make students know the temple and school in the community”. If the community has enough proper space for them, they can also spend time in the community. At the same time, elders still prefer to have coffee at the local coffee shop in the community and go back to do leisure at the basement of their houses.

Convenience store could be considered as the most popular place in the community. It is not only popular for teenagers but also for adults. However, there are not many elders at this convenience store. This is a 24-hour store. The interesting point is that teenagers and some adults spend their time in front of the store. One teenager said that being here is easily recognized by the people passing by. Many of them meet and interact with their friends here.

On the contrary, elders in this community do not like to go outside their community. They would love to do something in the community, especially at the basement of their houses. Basement could be considered as semi-public space for rural communities in Thailand. In this community, many leisures, everyday crafting, chitchatting, resting, and working were done at the basement. Elders group and do the same activities in one place. For example, A's house basement is for weaving. Elders who weave can enjoy weaving together. In some activities, they can share their tools and equipment. For the group that does crafts together as business , they can share cost of materials.

In-depth interview showed that elders in this community normally do crafting during the day. What they craft are everyday products such as textile products, woven products, and wood products. Sometimes, they make new ones and sometimes they fix old or broken ones. The participants of this study revealed that crafts they produce are not valuable enough to sell to others. They also mentioned that teenagers have not been interested in crafts much because it is too difficult for this generation. However, most of them try to teach their family members but the members are not interested to continue. A teenager pointed out that many times she has tried to start learning crafting. However, after two days, she was very bored. Her opinion is that elders can easily sit and do crafting with their friends because they do it together. She thought that it would be easier if her friends can sit and learn crafting together with her.

Both elders and teenagers mentioned that people in the community do not pay attention to this local wisdom much because they do not see much value in such everyday traditional products. Comparing to textile, the craft that is always saleable, everyday product is much cheaper than textile products. Therefore, some teenagers think that instead of weaving baskets used at home, for a day, buying a 50 baht plastic basket is much easier. Teenagers did not recognize other reasons such as the value and aesthetics of local wisdom. These groups of teenagers consider the potential of functional benefit more than emotional benefit.

In teenagers' opinion, most of them do not think that they can sit with elders the whole day. They do not love to work in the community. They have not seen any benefit to sit in one place although it is a nice place. At the same time, elders do not want to teach teenagers as teachers teaching in the class. The ultimate goal of elders is that what they do is beneficial to teenagers in some ways. It is acceptable for them if teenagers do not craft but they can sell craft products. The benefit of crafting for elders is to create, and the benefit for teenagers is to sell. Teenagers mentioned the potential to do online shop for their community's crafts. They observed that their parents always take the crafts to sell in craft fair in Bangkok and big cities in Thailand. They thought that online shop should be open 24 hours. They said that they have found a lot of online shops on social media. One of them helped a friend to promote her products on her social media. It is good to know how a teenager gets

clients into her list and how to do online marketing. Craft is the most common local wisdom in the community but it is not interesting for teenagers. However, it is very interesting when the values of crafts of elders and teenagers are considered. They value it differently. Elders focus on making but teenagers focus on selling. In terms of business, they are a good match. The idea of a start-up project was raised during the data analysis.

The start-up idea was explained to one of the teachers who is almost 60 years old in a local school. She agreed with the start-up concept. She also mentioned that students nowadays have been invited by others to promote their products on social media. In her opinion, it is very dangerous because students have not studied the products they are promoting. Some products are not really good and many products do not reach the standard of the Ministry of Industry. However, she has seen this interest in her students.

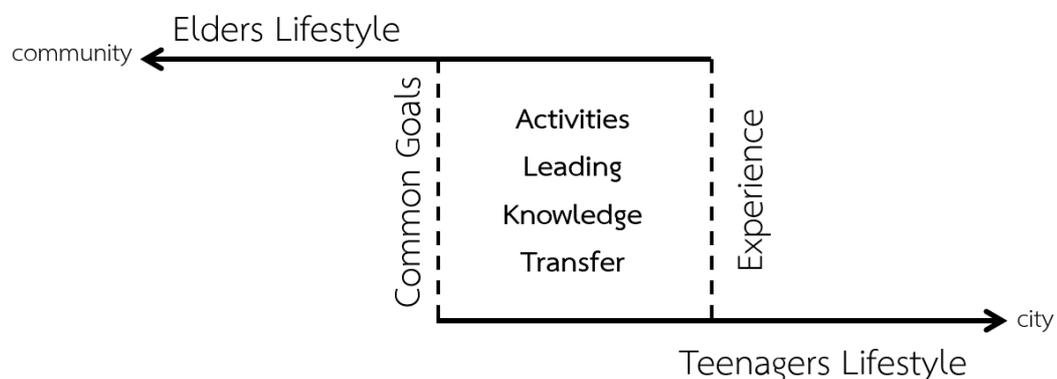


Figure 2. The Framework of Space Design Concept

The trial project called “craft for tomorrow” was presented to a local school. The purpose of this process is to use the case study as a tool to let people in the community identify the kind of space they want. Whyte (as cited in Project for Public Space, 2015) stated that it is very hard to design the right space; it seems that almost all current public spaces were designed for aesthetic approach but not for functional approach. With this project, students need to collaborate with elders and they have to carefully plan for elders also. Students were given the basic knowledge of start-up project and the big picture of online business. Students were encouraged to set the team and contact the elders by themselves. It is very interesting that students have not occupied any specific space or area. They identified that the proper environment for elders to craft is their homes or their friends’ homes. They presented the idea that (if it is possible) they need to know all crafts that elders have done. Finally, they requested data signal for their communication. In this case, the environment encouraging teenager-elder cooperation must be carefully identified. The study suggested four key success indicators to develop an environment: 1) flexible space, 2) visible craft, 3) leisure activities, and 4) connection. With emphasis on the personal context, the space should not be limited by location. This may make the space more dynamic and highly adaptable for changes.

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