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## Place attachment in an old commercial district: A case study in Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand

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### ABSTRACT

This article explored place attachment for historical places in an old commercial district in Ubon Ratchathani where a variety of groups of people (both insiders and outsiders) are connected with places in the district. The research methodology was an integration of quantitative and qualitative research including the measurement of people's experience using structured questionnaires and interview forms and the interpretation of the quantitative method results. The results indicated that people are attached to historical places socially and physically as a result of cultural, memories, experiences, and physical factors. The study area appeared to have cultural prominence, a variety of living spaces that people can experience, including a physical environment that reflects the past of the district, a memorable symbol, and contributes to social activities.

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### Introduction

The old commercial district in Ubon Ratchathani in Northeast Thailand is known as an original community in Thailand where people who have settled down from the past are still carrying on with their traditional ways. This not only meet the needs of a lot of people, but also is considered a cultural capital and has become an identity of the province. Moreover, it is the center of local economic development, trade, and tourism as well as a learning center in terms of history, architecture, and ways of life (Faculty of Architecture, Thammasat University, 2010). Dating back over 200 years, Ubon Ratchathani's old commercial district was founded by a group of Lao people migrating to the province in 1777. Its religion, spoken language, traditions, and culture are similar to those of Laos

(Committee of Ubon Ratchathani History, 1992). In 1857, after the Bowring Treaty was signed, a group of Chinese people migrated to Thailand and earned a living by selling things until they were rich and gathered together to undertake business activities, resulting in the neighborhood where they lived becoming a commercial district (Wanlipodom, 1987). In 1891, the development of Isan resulted in Ubon Ratchathani becoming a regional hub of administration and commerce in Thailand (Thusriwan, 2002). Later, in 1954, land transport development at the regional level resulted in the opening of the Democratic Freedom Bridge to connect both sides of the Mun River. As a result, a new commercial district was formed and spanned the main road while the economic value of the old commercial district decreased. At present, historical places from different eras still exist and the people's lives continue to be connected with these historical traces.

Previous studies on the concept of place attachment have revealed that historical places have gained the interest of the architectural and planning academic community. Apart from their physical components that reflect an identity of a community, there are stories and meaningful

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built environments which create a sense of community, remembrance, and experience for those people who come into contact (Ja'afar, Sulaiman, & Shamsuddin, 2012). Moreover, historical places can mostly lead to a positive sense of connection with the past, which further leads to a bond resulting from continuous contact with a place (Low, 1992). This is in accordance with a concept of Lewicka (2005) who noted that a sense of historical place has an impact on human attachment, which is a foundation of memory and pride obtained from having a part in creating that place (Tuan, 1980). These are the community's processes to sustain and carry on culture handed down from the previous generation (Fried, 1963). However, from the literature review, it was found that in Thailand there is a limited number of research processes aiming to understand the relationship in historical places that have outstanding physical components with significant stories and meanings, which should be taken into consideration.

The purpose of this study was to discover place attachment in the old commercial district of Ubon Ratchathani. This process will be a part of an investigation of the main factors of historical places that affect human attachment and may be applied as guidelines for conserving and developing historical places to maintain both physical and social dimensions that are in conformity with people's attachment to the district.

## Literature Review

### *Place Attachment*

Attachment is a dimension in the relationship between people and places, a special feeling with a special place (Low, 1992; Shuhan & Norsidah, 2008). Attachment thus is a reflection of function and feeling connection (Altman & Low, 1992). The feelings are based on experience factors in the physical, perceptual and psychological processes, and in social-cultural dimensions (Najafi & Kamal, 2011) which Altman and Low (1992) indicated connected with emotions and feelings, knowledge and belief, and behaviors in a place. Place attachment represents emotional connection that arises from the accumulation of memories, experiences, knowledge, and beliefs, leading to special feelings for the place. In addition, attachment is a behavioral expression of intimacy and care which are positive feelings that connect people and places (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). In this sense, the concept of place attachment is incorporated to examine, evaluate, and understand the feelings that are connected to the place, as well as to reflect its value.

### *Factors Contributing to Form Place Attachment*

Factors contributing to form place attachment can be both from people and places. In this study, concepts of place attachment factors from the past studies were used as guidelines for establishing a place attachment survey. Hashem, Abbas, Akbar, and Nazgol (2013) indicated that factors of attachment are related to physical factors, social factors, cultural factors, personal factors, memories and experiences, place satisfaction, interaction and activity

factors, and the time factor. Lewicka (2011) indicated that socio demographic, social, and physical predictors play a key role in attachment. The study by Najafi and Kamal (2011) revealed factors that influence attachment as socio demographic characteristics, environmental experience, culture, place satisfaction, preference and attachment, activity, and place itself. Those three concepts reflect elements in the person dimension, place dimension, and process dimension. Each dimension has details of factors described in the following points.

1) Person dimension, based on socio-demographic factors, is specific to an individual which affects place attachment directly and indirectly.

2) Place dimension, based on predictions of social and physical factors, which includes a social factor, culture factor, activity and interaction factor, memories and experience factor, preference and satisfaction factor, and physical factor.

3) Process dimension, based on the length of time that a person spends to get involved in a place. It can be predicted from superficial to deeper levels.

## Research Methodology

### *Sampling and Data Collection*

Place attachment uses a map showing the positions of attachment as indicated by the sticker dots coded technique (Black & Liljeblad, 2006; Brown, 2005). A black-and-white map of the old commercial district in Ubon Ratchathani was used, scaled at 1:1500, with pictures of landmarks, directions, and street names, along with the use of the open-ended verbal technique to survey the interviewees, who were asked to explain the reasons why they felt attached to each of the places, to represent the value and importance of places based on social, cultural, activities and interaction, memories and experiences, preference and satisfaction, and physical aspects.

Samples consisted of 63 people chosen from people associated with the district during the data collection from interviews held between September 2014 and September 2015. The type of population was applied based on Hay's study (1998) which categorizes the population by attachment time and the purposes of arriving in the places which could be described as follows:

1) The insiders (people living inside the district); population classification was based on the historical time line of the district marked by the opening year of the Free Democracy Bridge (1954). By this approach, those who lived or had an ancestral presence in the district prior to 1954 (1st Group), resulted in 17 samples, and those who lived in the district after 1954 (2nd Group), resulted in 12 samples, and who had retained residence status in the district, which included owners of buildings, or had a relationship with the owners, residents, and tenants.

2) The outsiders (people living outside the district); population classification was based on the purposes of attachment with the district, such as people coming to work (3rd Group; 14 samples), those who came to buy goods and services (4th Group; 11 samples), and tourists who came to visit (5th Group; 9 samples).

Study Area

The development of transportation in Northeast Thailand was used as a determinant playing a key role in the economic, social, and physical changes in the district. The opening of the Bangkok-Nakhon Ratchasima railway in 1900 brought the economy of Ubon Ratchathani from being agriculturally based to one based on the economy of trade. Later in 1954, the opening of the Democratic Freedom Bridge was a major turning point for the old commercial district. The history of formation and expansion in the old commercial district before 1954 could be analyzed into three major development periods which were used to determine the scope of study area.

Analysis

The analysis of place attachment information was divided into two parts.

1) Historical places to which people were attached: quantitative data showing place attachment in the three historical periods from the five groups of respondents were analyzed as percentages to compare the historical place attachment in the development of each district in each period.

With respect to identification of historical places in the old commercial district, a survey was conducted with a sample group of 63 people regarding their attachment to places built before 1954. The results of the study are shown in Table 1.

Historical places that people were attached to could be categorized into three periods along the timeline of development in the study area:

- 1) Historical places in 1st period (1777–1899), including Luang Temple, Sri Ubon Temple, Klang Temple, and Phutta Kong Chinese Shrine.
- 2) Historical places in 2nd period (1900–1929), including Old City Hall, Old Buildings along Luang Rd., Luang Market, and Chiokee Hotel.
- 3) Historical places in 3rd period (1930–1954), including Old Buildings along Phrommarat Rd., Chalermsin Theatre, Fountain Circle, Buakaw Building, and Thai Charoen Building.

2) Factors contributing to place attachment consisting of two categories: Human factors (using the general data of the participants together with data from the open-ended questions); and Place-related factors. The literature review identified six factors: society, culture, activities and interaction, memories and experiences, preference and satisfaction, and physical aspects. The criteria for classifying data into each factor are shown in Table 2.

The six factors of place attachment mentioned above revealed two aspects of people's attachment to places: 1) social aspects, consisting of social, cultural, activities and interaction, memories and satisfaction, and preference and

**Table 1**  
Attachment to historical places in Ubon Ratchathani old commercial district

	Participant Historical place													
	Luang Temple	Sri Ubon Temple	Klang Temple	Phutta Kong Chinese Shrine	Old City Hall	Old Buildings along Luang Rd.	Luang Market	Chiokee Hotel	Old Buildings along Phrommarat Rd.	Chalermsin Theatre	Fountain Circle	Buakaw Building	Thai Charoen Building	
1st Group	10	8	8	8	12	6	5	4	3	3	6	5	2	1
2nd Group	4	6	2	2	2	7	4	4	4	–	3	5	2	3
3rd Group	8	8	3	1	1	9	1	2	3	–	6	8	1	–
4th Group	4	2	2	2	1	2	3	–	1	–	3	4	–	1
5th Group	1	1	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	1	1	–	–
Total	27	25	15	15	16	25	13	10	11	3	19	23	5	4

n = No. of people with attachment in historical places

**Table 2**  
Criteria for classification of data into the six factors

Place-related factor	Classification criteria
1) Social (Social aspect)	- Resulting from connection with people within the district
2) Cultural (Social aspect)	- Resulting from connection with traditions, culture, and beliefs most of which are related at a collective level
3) Activities and Interaction (Social aspect)	- Resulting from general activities organized within the place where people participate, in addition to cultural and traditional activities
4) Memories and Experiences (Social and Physical aspect)	- Resulting from having experience within the place most of which are at individual level
5) Preference and Satisfaction (Social and Physical aspect)	- Resulting from the feelings of preference and satisfaction with the place
6) Physical (Physical aspect)	- Resulting from physical aspects of the place

satisfaction; and 2) physical aspects, consisting of memories and satisfaction, preference and satisfaction, and physical factors. The reasons for historical place attachment being linked to each factor are shown in [Table 3](#).

## Results and Discussion

[Figure 2](#) and [Table 4](#) are the results of the study on attachment to the old commercial district Ubon Ratchathani showed the value and significance of historical places in the area, with the main factors contributing to the attachment being listed below.

### *Historical Places Attachment in 1st Period (1777–1899)*

The four historical places in the 1st Period were sacred places or places of rituals which Ubon Ratchathani people living in and outside the district have had faith in since the old days. The finding showed that the research participants were the most attached to the historical places in this period (42.13%), especially in the social aspects from the main factors discussed below.

1) Cultural factors: a total of 43 participants were attached to historical places via cultural factors, which was the largest number compared with the other factors. The

participants were socially attached to the historical places where they attended annual festivals held at the temples and shrines. Luang Temple and Klang Temple, located on the bank of Mun River, as these are areas where religious activities are organized in connection with traditional festivals, including Loy Krathong, Traditional Flow Streamer, and Traditional Boat Racing organized at the end Buddhist Lent. These festivals have been passed down from generation to generation. The Sri Ubon Temple, located in the north of the district, is where Ubon Ratchathani's Songkran Festival is officially opened and also the starting point of the Candle Festival Parade, which gains a lot of attention from the local people of Ubon Ratchathani and tourists. The Phutta Kong Shrine is a sacred place for people of Chinese descent where there is Chinese Opera, which is a Chinese ceremony to pay respect to gods and is held twice a year. Chinese people of all ages and genders from inside and outside the district gather to enjoy the festival and meet each other. In addition, the participants are attached to temples and shrines because of cultural activities occurring occasionally, such as merit-making, paying homage to Buddha images and sacred spirits, going into the monkhood, and listening to sermons. Culture brings people closer to temples and shrines continually, resulting in a high level of attachment, which is in line with previous studies. People's feeling for a place may not be very strong, unless such a place belongs to an important person or has historical significance. Ceremonies and activities organized on a regular basis at a place are essential for creating place attachment. Continuation of cultural activities makes the place meaningful and leads to a festival that is organized on a regular basis. Furthermore, an intention to participate in or have interactions with an activity are behavioral expressions showing a high level of attachment and disclosing how important the place is, as culture reflects the linkages among a group of people sharing the same culture. The linkage between people and society formed by a feeling of being a member and an interest in having interactions with or taking part in an activity clearly shows social relationship, which is a deep relationship of a feeling of being a member or a person of that place. Moreover, common activity of a group of people in the form of ritual, legend, or symbolism contributes to a stronger attachment to a place. Thus, culture is what makes a place meaningful and valuable and contributes to place attachment ([Relph, 1976](#); [Scannell & Gifford, 2010](#)).

**Table 3**  
Examples of the reasons for historical place attachment varying from one factor to another

Factor of place dimension	Reason for historical place attachment	
Social aspect	Social	Know someone in the district; it's where ancestor's relics are kept; relatives are living in the district
	Cultural	Make merits, pay worship, join the Chinese opera
	Activities and Interaction	Trade in the pedestrian street, come and visit on children's day at the Old City Hall, used to visit the temples as a student
Physical aspect	Memories and Experiences	Come to contact the governmental offices, used to eat with family
	Preference and Satisfaction	Not too busy around here, people are courteous, take good care of each other
	Memories and Experiences	Come to visit the temples, come by the neighborhood regularly
	Preference and Satisfaction	Nice environment here, classic and beautiful buildings
	Physical	Places are nice to look, highly unique environment, outstanding from other districts



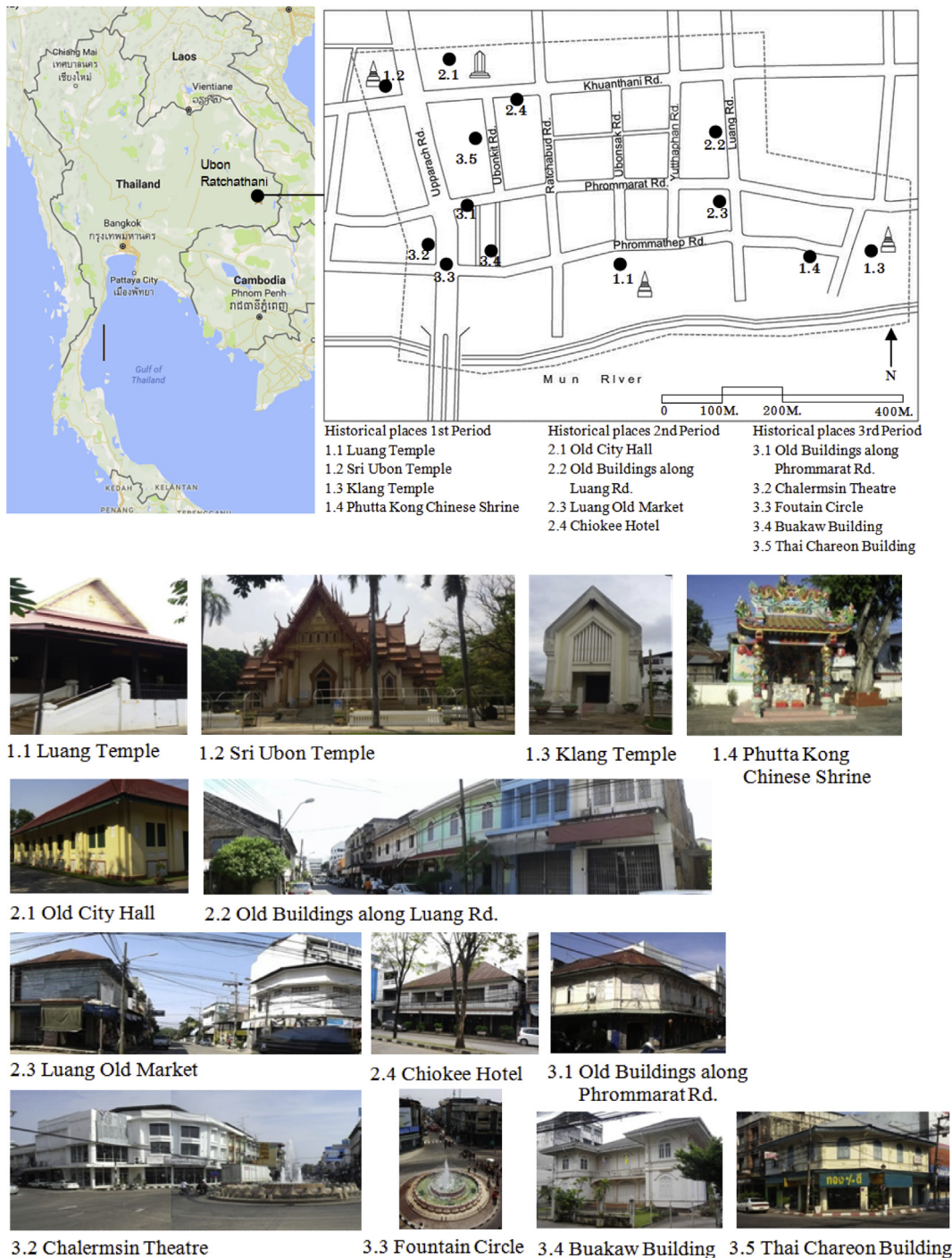
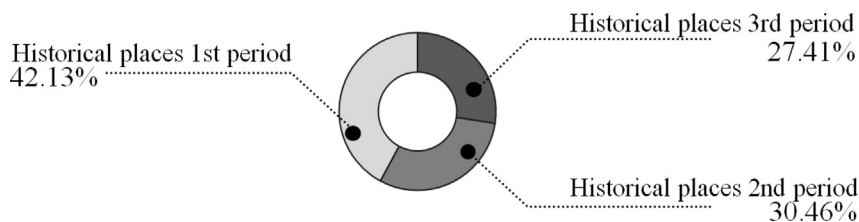


Figure 1 Scope of study area and location of historical places in the three periods

Attachment via cultural factors shows that the old commercial district in Ubon Ratchathani is the source of historical stories, traditions, and culture passed down from generation to generation, which can be seen in the form of annual festivals and occasional events. It can be said that culture makes people feel that they are a part of a group of

people sharing the same culture. Thus, their attachment to historical places, namely temples and shrines, is stronger than other factors.

2) Memories/experiences: there were 23 respondents, the second largest group of respondents, whose place attachment occurred due to these factors, either in the



**Figure 2** Comparison of place attachment and the factors contributing to form historical places attachment in the three periods based on the 63 participants in the study

**Table 4**  
Factors contributing to form place attachment

Historical places 1st period (1777–1899)	Historical places 2nd period (1900–1929)	Historical places 3rd period (1930–1954)
<p>Main factors: -Culture (Social) (n = 43) -Memories/Experience (Social/Physical) (n = 23)</p>	<p>Main factors: -Memories/Experience (Social/Physical) (n = 36) -Physical (Physical) (n = 13)</p>	<p>Main factors: -Memories/Experience (Social/Physical) (n = 33) -Physical (Physical) (n = 21)</p>

n = No. of people with attachment in each aspect

social or physical dimension, as a result of their visits to historical places in the 1st period for any reasons, such as studying at the temples, using the temples as their playgrounds in their childhood, drawing or taking photographs, and sightseeing at the temples and shrines. This reflects that temples and shrines, apart from being sacred areas and faith-based places for rituals, are also places for educational and leisure activities. This leads to creating experiences and memories with the place. The results of this study indicated that experience is an important element in perception. The experiences of each person with places can create meaning for the person. Experience is necessary both at the individual and the collective level, as it creates a sense of place attachment and meanings.

There were 12 respondents whose place attachment involved physical factors whereas 81 respondents attributed their place attachment to social dimensions. Most of the current physical environment was built in the last 60 years so it cannot clearly reflect the past of the district. Physical appearance may not directly affect place attachment but can be a venue for various activities in both educational and leisure activities that encourage people to experience the place and lead to attachment. As a result, people have less physical attachment to places in the 1st period than the social one. This finding reflected that physical characteristics influence place attachment and that they directly affect satisfaction and indirectly affect the attachment.

*Historical Places Attachment in 2nd and 3rd Periods (1900–1954)*

Historical places in the 2nd and 3rd periods had similar applications and consisted of commercial buildings for

business and residential purposes, government office buildings, and public places. These places were built during the time of the economic transformation into capitalism of Ubon Ratchathani from production to merely make a living. The buildings reflect a modern way of urban life. The results of the survey on attachment to historical places in both periods revealed a similar degree of attachment (30.46% for the 2nd period and 27.41% for the 3rd period) and similar factors contributing to attachment as follows:

1)Memories and experiences: these were the outstanding factors influencing attachment (36 respondents for the 2nd period and 33 respondents for the 3rd period), both in social and physical aspects. Due to a wide variety of purposes of usage, the individual respondents had different experiences with the places, such as buying goods or services, working, contacting government offices, and recreational activities. Additionally, the physical characteristics of the places in this period were unique in a way that represents the state of being a very first urban community, which can be seen from the western, Chinese, and modern architectural styles. The respondents' place attachment occurred because they were familiar with the places, used to buy goods and services there, and continued to experience the places in their daily life, leading to specific memories based on individual experiences. This finding suggests that memories and experiences create familiarity, enabling people to see the difference between this place and places elsewhere. Place attachment happens when someone has a lot of experience or has been in the place for a long time, contributing to the occurrence of meanings. Experience was important to make it easier to create physical, social, cultural, and incidental relationships. Therefore, diversity in the use of an

old commercial district is an important part of bringing people to experience and lead to attachment.

2) Physical factors: there were 13 respondents attached to historical places in the 2nd period and 21 respondents attached to historical places in the 3rd period. The respondents had physical attachment into two manners: (1) original physical characteristics of the places, which were unique and reflected the past of the district. The respondents felt attached to the Old City Hall, Chiokee Hotel, Buakaw Building, and Thai Chareon Building because they are exquisite old buildings with a nice, shady environment. The old and unique buildings that reflect the past of the district do not only have architectural value, but also affect attachment. This finding indicates that the unique physical characteristics of a place influence attachment and satisfaction. Physical characteristics constructed place identity and reflected a meaning of that place; and (2) physical characteristics that have changed from the original state, including the Fountain Circle and Chalermsin Theatre. In the past, these places had a new and outstanding architectural style, representing modernity. They are located at the foot of Mun River Bridge, which is the route to access and leave the city of Ubon Ratchathani. Although the physical characteristics of both places have changed, the respondents still felt attached to them since they are the symbols of entering the city of Ubon Ratchathani and can be identified as a city landmark to other areas. The landmark had a significant effect on the recognition and symbolism of the area. This finding shows that a physical presence that still represents symbolism can affect attachment, although physically different from the original one.

## Conclusion

A survey of the relationship between people and the old commercial district in Ubon Ratchathani through the concept of place attachment, which involves emotions and feelings, confirmed the value and significance of historical places in social and physical dimensions from major factors, including 1) *culture* that makes people feel that they are members of a group and brings people closer to a place; 2) *memories and experience*, which reflect various applications of the place and play an important role in the existence of people living in and outside the district; and 3) *physical characteristics* that exhibit the significance of existing historical places. The old commercial district maintains its original appearance and reflects local history, making it an environmentally unique site. Some places, however, have transformed from what they were in the past, but people still remember them, and such places continue to support and promote social connection and can contribute to attachment.

A study of the relationship between the people and places in an old city district according to the concept of environmental psychology is considered to create a new body of knowledge in the field of built environment in Thailand, which is a multidisciplinary field involving the use of physical characteristics to explain the phenomena of

an area. The findings from the study reflect significant issues that should not be neglected in the process of old district planning development and conservation in order that the relationship between people, the district, and the locality can be reinforced in a prosperous way.

## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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