

## THE CURRENT ISSUES ON URBAN CONSERVATION IN BANGKOK

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### Summary

The urban conservation in Thailand became the public interest since the last decade. In Bangkok, the capital of Thailand since 1782, the conservation of historic area called Rattanakosin Island is being the issue. This paper raises major issues on three dimensions. First is the conservation policy according to the master plan of historic town so-called '*Rattanakosin Conservation and Development Plan*' made by the national advisory board. This plan created disagreement on the evaluation of significance since a number of old communities were considered unimportant. Second is the issue on legislations, this paper strongly focuses on issues of registration system, as well as, the limitation, way of utilizing, and movement due to the Decentralization Act on legislations. Last is the issue on organizational framework. There are several main authorities in charge of the conservation works; unfortunately, these authorities are under different ministries, thus the method for effective collaboration need to be revisited.

### 1. Introduction

In terms of economy, Bangkok is one of the fastest growing cities in Asia. It has been known as a place blended with historic buildings, temples and modernized structures. Bangkok is the biggest city of Thailand with approximately one tenth of the country's population. The first evidence of Bangkok settlement could be traced back to fourteenth century as the commercial place on the bank of Chao Phraya River which was the rout to the former capital of Thailand, Ayutthaya. Since being the new capital in 1782, the development on urban structures in Bangkok can be divided to three stages<sup>1</sup>.

The first stage was the settlement during 1782 to 1851. The earliest urban area of Bangkok called Inner Rattanakosin Island was shaped by man-made canal during the reign of King Rama I. The remaining main structures in this area are Pho Temple, Emerald Buddha Temple, and the Grand Palace. The second stage was around from 1851 to 1925, which most structures and road development were the results of western influence. It is noted that the palaces of King's relatives and a number of shop houses built due to urbanization made a great change on the image of the city. The last stage is the development between 1925 to present. During this period, most palaces started to be used as government offices because of the political revolution. The rapid change occurred during the past few decades which a number of historic buildings were dilapidated and replaced by new constructions due to the development on urban infrastructure and the rise of population. Therefore, the environmental degradation became one of the most serious problems in Bangkok, which subsequently led to the movement on conservation especially in the inner area of old town. Nowadays, the concept of conservation is developed to fit the current situation, for example, from the preservation of monument to the revitalization of urban historic area. However, policy, legislation, and organizational framework are still the main issues in the urban conservation in Bangkok.

### 2. Urban Conservation

Urban conservation is relatively new compare to the idea of architectural conservation. The emergence of modern conservation of cultural heritage occurred in the nineteenth century. (Jokilehto, 1999) It initially focused on the works of arts, ancient monuments and single buildings associated with architectural and historical value sponsored by the elites in Italy and gradually expanded to the other parts of Europe and other regions. It was the Venice Charter in 1964, which could be considered as definite start point. However, this charter is mainly devoted to the protection of isolated architectural works, '*even if, the urban and rural sites are recognized as deserving preservation, they receive scarcely attention in the rest of document.*' (Dupagne and Teller, 2003) In fact, '*the definition of human heritage has been evolving since the 1931 Athens Charter, which indicates to cover historic towns and urban areas as well as natural landscape and community-valued natural and man-made artifacts.*' (Salah Ouf, 2001) Unfortunately, the conservation of historic urban setting stated in Athens Charter has been developing slowly.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Rattanakosin Island and Old towns Advisory Board, Office of Natural Resource and Environment Policy and Plan, 2004, *Conservation and Development of Rattanakosin Island*. Bangkok: Graphic Format Co.Ltd.

The concern on the urban historic area was more clearly seen in The Amsterdam Charter in 1975, considering that *'the architectural heritage conservation depends strongly upon its integration into the citizen living environment and therefore it has to be taken into consideration in urban planning policies.'* (Dupagne and Teller, 2003) In this perspective, integrated conservation is considered as a way to resolve the disagreement between the heritage conservation and the urban development. Listing and classifying of cultural heritage were used as tools to manage, protect, and utilize cultural properties at the same time.

The conservation movement also developed in other regions because of the difference on evaluation of cultural heritage value. The recognition of larger cultural diversity in the world was seriously taken into account in Nara Document on Authenticity in 1994 and the Australia Charter (Burra Charter) in 1979 (amendment 1996) as well. The Nara Document also fosters the *'respect for cultural heritage diversity that exists in time and space,...it implies to consider 'historic areas' as rich reservoirs of cultural values for humanity as a whole, rather than as ethnic identifiers.'* (Dupagne and Teller, 2003)

### 3. Conservation movement in Thailand

The establishment of 'Archaeological Club' in 1906 by King Rama V could be the starting point of cultural heritage conservation in Thailand. Later, the first government authority, The Fine Arts Department (FAD), was established by an amalgamation of Craftsman Work Unit, Ministry of Public Work and the Museum Department in 1911. Thus, the early work of FAD was more related on the craftsmen and museums, for example, the establishment of the first National Museum in 1926.

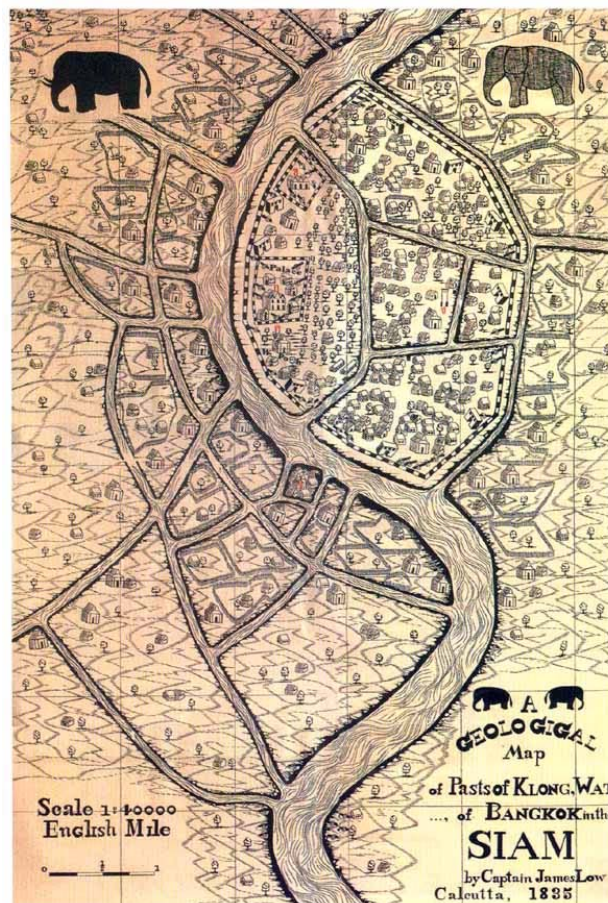


Figure 1 Geological Map of Parts of Klong, Wat of Bangkok in the Siam in 1835  
Source: Rattanakosin Island and Old towns Advisory Board, (2004)

The turning point of cultural heritage conservation is the launch of the *Ancient Sites and Objects, Artistic Objects and National Museum Act 1934*, so-called 'Monument Act' which was the starting point of the restoration work in Thailand. In the beginning, the principles of conservation were unclear and therefore, FAD faced a lot of problems. There were some cases which inadequate method and technique they used for protection made the condition worse. For example, during 1935-1962, FAD tried to stabilize the structures of the ruins and ancient buildings; however, some archaeological data were damaged because the previous conservation works were done without archaeological documentation. Later, for example, the restoration works during 1962-1967 for the temples in Sukhothai, some stabilized brick-monument using concrete work faced rapid decay and were not in a right structural engineering since the restoration works were done only from the view of the archaeologists. (The Fine Arts Department, 1992)

The conservation in Thailand became more scientific after FAD officers received training from ICCROM during 1963-1977 by the financial support from the Italian government. Since then, the restoration work in Thailand followed the Venice Charter in terms of authenticity. Meanwhile, FAD had an obligation to register the cultural heritage defined by the *Second Ancient Sites and Objects, Artistic Objects and National Museum Act 1961* (amended 1992). At the end of 2003, there were approximately 2,200 listed buildings<sup>2</sup>. The responsibility of FAD is not only on the single monument but also the area comprised with a number of monuments which can be designated as the 'National Historic Park', for example, Ayutthaya National Historic Park. However, not much FAD's involvement on the broader environment conservation has yet been seen. In 1992, the concept of safeguarding the cultural heritage became broader by the enactment of *Environment Act and Promotion and Conservation of National Environment Quality Act*. According to this law, the *Cultural Environment Area* designated by the Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning (ONEP) is usually used to create the buffer zone for monuments. Since the *Cultural Environment Area* has to be proposed by the local bodies, therefore, it is realized that the participation of the local government is essential.

Thailand adopted the international standards since being in the state party of ICCROM in 1967 and World Heritage Convention in 1987. Several years later, three cultural heritage sites were announced as the World Heritage, which are Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns (listed in 1991), Historic City of Ayutthaya and Associated Historic Towns (listed in 1991) and Ban Chiang Archaeological Site (listed in 1992). Nowadays, the new paradigms on conservation, such as, living heritage, sustainability, local participation, are becoming more influent. As a result, the concern on cultural heritage is expanding from monument to urban historic area and cultural landscape. The notion of urban heritage can now be defined as "including other legacies from the past that make a town or city distinctive, such as arts and crafts shared by the community, or the rituals, ceremonies and festivals shared by a community" (Logan, 2004)

#### 4. Current issues on urban conservation in Bangkok

Cultural heritage conservation in Thailand conventionally involves single monument, such as, temple, palace, etc. The concept of the urban conservation has become a hot issue since around a decade ago. In Bangkok, the major issues on the urban conservation are relative to at least three dimensions which are; conservation policy, legislations, and organizational framework.

##### 4.1 Conservation Policy

As developing countries, Thai government has implemented several mechanisms to support industrial activities, for instance, tax exemption or deduction. A number of industries, which produce more than three forth gross industrial output of the country, are located in Bangkok and vicinity provinces. (Wongsuphasawat, 1997) This industrial inducement is also used in the historic area; therefore it created threats to the cultural heritage.



Figure 2 Proposed Plan for the Open Spaces in 'Rattanakosin Conservation and Development Plan'  
Source: Rattanakosin Island and Old towns Advisory Board (2004)

<sup>2</sup> Compiled by the authors



As for the historic urban area in Bangkok, the major movement on conservation policy started from the establishment of *Rattanakosin Island Advisory Board* on July 4, 1978 appointed by the Cabinet. This board was initially responsible for the consideration of historic, archaeological, artistic, and architectural significance of the cultural properties in Bangkok old town so-called Rattanakosin Island. Conservation zones were designated in three areas which are; Inner Rattanakosin, Outer Rattanakosin, and Thonburi (the opposite area of Rattanakosin Island). The whole area is around 5.8 square kilometers (5,800 Hectares). The board also announced 133 items of '*Important Structures for Preservation*' in the inventory report made in 1982. (Rattanakosin Island and Old towns Advisory Board, 2004) Structures in this report are mostly palaces, city borders, ecclesiastic buildings, and some shop houses, but many private buildings were excluded from this list. The advisory also made the '*Rattanakosin Conservation and Development Plan*' which proposes the demolition of old shop houses to open the clear sceneries of the Grand Palace and temples in the area. (See Figure 2) The local people in these areas opposed the plan and tried to prove the value of their communities by adaptive reuse of the existing structures. New functions for tourist activity and restoration works have been done not only to make the place look more attractive but also to show the ability to maintain the place.

In summary, the visible issue on conservation policy in Bangkok is mostly about the disagreement between the local communities and the Rattanakosin Preservation and Development Plan made by national advisory board.

## 4.2 Legislation

Issues regarding the legislation could be divided in to issue on listing system and other related legislations.

### 4.2.1 Issue on Listing System

Registration is one of the tools for safeguarding of the cultural heritage in Thailand. Under the Monument Act, FAD is the national authority that has the mission on '*protection and conservation of monuments, artefacts, and art objects, the National Museums, research and promotion of the Thai intangible culture e.g. performing arts, craftsmanship and literature, educational services, funds and penalties*'. According to this act, FAD has to be in charge of every monument in the country for the registration, restoration, and daily maintenance including the financial aspect. Although there are FAD regional offices, other local authorities have no right to be involved in the treatment on listed buildings. Thus, the first issue on listing system is the scope and the scale of the responsibility of FDA. The idea of delegating the responsibility to local bodies was raised to be a way to tackle this problem.

According to the launch of Decentralization Act in 1999, listed buildings will be prioritized to four categories, which are, National Treasure, Important Cultural Heritage, Cultural Heritage, and Listed Building and Site. Each category will have different levels of treatment and support (See Table1). Nevertheless, the Decentralization Act was launched for nearly a decade but the categorization is still in the experiment stage. Moreover, because of the lack of understanding and knowledge on conservation, the readiness for the local bodies to handle cultural heritage in their hands could be premature.

Table1: Categorization of the Monuments proposed by FAD

Categories of monuments	Characters
National Treasure	Any change or alteration to the monuments in this category requires careful scrutiny. Permission for any change and alteration to the monument must be given and controlled by the central office of the Fine Arts Department.
Important Cultural Heritage	Works on this group of monuments shall be provided to maintain the significant value and characteristics of the structure. Similar to a first-grade monument, must consult the central FAD office and obtain approval for any change and/or alteration.
Cultural Heritage	Any work on the monuments in this category depends on local needs. The action can be taken directly by the local authority following the consultation and guidelines of the FAD, with permission given by the regional office of the department. However, these monuments must maintain their significant values and characteristics.
Conserved Building and Site	Any work and change can be made, if necessary, to both physical and functional features. In case of demolition, permission must be given by the regional office of the FAD. Documentation of the significance of the monuments, i.e. history, archaeology and physical features, is required.

Source: Ruktae-Ngan (2003), edited by authors

The second issue on listing system could be the influence of the head monks of the temples on the conservation of ecclesiastic building. Approximately, 95% of Thais are Buddhist and a number of historic buildings are relative to religion. (See Table2) In many cases, the alterations in ecclesiastic buildings are

decided by the head monks. This right is stated in *Monk Act* which ensures the head monks to have full right to make any decisions on their temple affairs. (Supatraradit, 1996) This indicates that even though FAD can control the quality of restoration work, however, the alteration of the buildings still depend on the head monk of each temple.

Table2: Listed buildings in Thailand

Types of listed buildings		Quantity
Objects		113
Religious buildings	Buddhism and Hinduism	1,218
	Other religion	2
Residences	Monastic	3
	Dynastic	42
	Manors	17
	Shop houses	4
Historic structures in natural sites		89
Ancient cities and archaeological sites		169
Public buildings		53
Military structures		4
Amenities : bridge, etc.		41
City border, landmark: Canals, castles, city pillars, city gates, light houses, etc.		71
Transport structure: historic garage and draught-animal house, etc.		6
Open spaces: parks, ponds, historic area, etc.		228
Historical sites		14
Statues		5
National museums		20
Unclassified		27
TOTAL		2,126

Source: Compiled by the authors, (2002)

The third issue could be the difficulty encountered by the adoption of international standards on restoration work, for example, the implication on authenticity in the Venice Charter 1964. During the past three decades, the concept of authenticity and integrity were used as the standards to understand the cultural heritage and to provide the appropriate management. However, some extent of international standards on authenticity and integrity do not fit the Thai context. *'Conservation charters, although international in name, are predominantly generated in Europe and by Europeans, and fully do not respond to cultural differences and social realities, nor can they be supported by the economies of many developing countries.'* (Orbash 2000: 26) *'Restoration still needs to follow the ICOMOS charters but some flexibility need to be practiced at the level of the site development and its allowed activities.'* (Salah Ouf, 2001) As for Thailand, the materials and the craftsmanship might make a difference on the evaluation of authenticity. Some parts of the monuments or monuments itself are made of wood, which decays faster than those of stones used for the structures in Europe. So the focus of the restoration work has to incorporate the design and craftsmanship rather than to keep the actual materials which need to be replaced.

#### 4.2.2 Issue on related legislations

In Thailand, there are six relevant types of laws which aim to conserve the cultural heritage and each of them is under different authority. (Pimonsathean, 2000) These legislations play different roles in the cultural heritage conservation system with different objectives and limitations explained as below:

A. *Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museums, 1961 (amendment 1992):* This act could be called 'Monument Act' as it provides definition of monument and empowers FAD to register the 'National Monument' including the archaeological site. All listed monuments will be restored, maintained, excavated, etc. by FAD, therefore, limited number of staff cannot handle every monuments. Moreover, since at this stage, there is only one level of significance, whether it is the Grand Palace or farmer's hut, theoretically, the management and maintenance of each monument will be the same. This situation brought up the issue of prioritization of listed buildings, which was supposed to be reflected to the Decentralization Act.

B. *City Planning Act, 1975 (amendment 1992):* Under this law, the planning authority is responsible for making five-year comprehensive plan which could categorize the conservation according to the type of land use. Comprehensive plan is normally with broad regulations, so it cannot control the building use in the conservation zone. For example, when a private house in conservation zone is used as a guesthouse, this will change the flow of people and the demand for the urban facilities. Therefore, the details of use, architectural control, and landscape design will be provided in 'Specific Plan'.

C. *Enhancement and Conservation of National Environmental Quality Act, 1992:* This act empowers the local bodies to apply for the consent for the 'Cultural Environment Area'. Since ONEP cannot designate the 'Cultural Environment Area' without the involvement of local bodies, therefore, some cultural environment areas which are not the local bodies' interest might not be controlled by this act.

D. *Building Control Act, 1975* (amendment 1992): This act aims to ensure the safety of building and hygiene condition of living. However, the standards that were stated in this act, for example, the dimension of building, can not be implied to the buildings in historic area since the structure was made before the implementation of the new standard. Therefore, some owners who could not adjust or alter their historic building abandoned their place or moved out.

E. *City's Cleanliness and Orderliness Act, 1992*: This act aims to empower the local government to control the physical change in conservation area, for example, over sized billboard on the building façade might not be allowed. Unfortunately, the evidence of the implementation is rarely seen.

F. *Local Act (BMA's regulations)*: As mentioned above, the local government is supposed to play a role on the permission of building use. In this regard, BMA launched the regulations to limit some types of building from being constructed, altered, or used. Rattanakosin Island is already under the control of this act, nevertheless, it is not implemented effectively and the control of building use and activities are not strict. Thus, some activities that are dangerous for the whole area, for example, selling goods or operating an industry which could harm the historic building still remain.

Table 3: Summary of Issues on legislations

Laws	Responsible Agency	Issues
Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museums, 1961 (amendment 1992)	FAD, Ministry of Culture	Need of categorization
City Planning Act, 1975 (amendment 1992)	Department of Town and Country Planning (DTCP), Ministry of Interior	Lack of use control Implementation of Specific Plan is not evident.
Enhancement and Conservation of National Environmental Quality Act	ONEP, Ministry of Natural Resource and Environment	Designation of the Cultural Environment Area has to be done by the local bodies as the first step.
Building Control Act	Local Government, Ministry of Interior	A number of historic buildings do not conform to this act.
City's Cleanliness and Orderliness Act	Local Government, Ministry of Interior	Implementation is not effective.
Local Act (BMA regulations)	Local Government, Ministry of Interior	Implementation is not effective.

#### 4.3 Organizational Framework

There are several authorities from different ministries related to the legislation on the cultural heritage, however, among them, three authorities are directly involved in the registration. Three authorities are: 1) The Fine Arts Department (FAD) that is usually responsible for registration of monument and archaeological site 2) the Office of Natural and Environmental Policy and Plan (ONEP) that is responsible for designation of 'Cultural Environment Area', and 3) Department of Town and Country Planning (DTCP) that is responsible for designation of conservation zone in planning.

So far, in the urban development works including conservation, the authorities under different ministries are working independently. It is noted that each conservation area is designated by different authorities without sharing information or knowledge, so some of cultural environment areas are not included in the Comprehensive Plan.

## 5 Conclusions & Recommendations

Though the first organization on cultural heritage conservation has established for nearly a century, which was not much later than movement in Europe and Northern America, urban conservation in Bangkok became the public interest during this recent decade. The current issues on urban conservation are involving at least three main aspects which are; policy, legislation, and organizational framework. The solution of urban conservation issues in Bangkok need to consider the issues in national level and need to shift the paradigm to the integrated conservation.

Conservation policy in Bangkok mainly followed the *Rattanakosin Conservation and Development Plan*. This top-down plan somehow brought a threat to the local communities in the urban historic area. Since the plan is based on different evaluation of cultural heritage value, there has been disagreement between the opinion of the local communities and National Advisory Board. In order to relief this situation, it is recommended to revisit the plan based on the concept of "integrated conservation", which suggests that the development and conservation should go hand in hand by incorporating the different stakeholders. The evaluation of significance might need to address various aspects instead of recreating the aesthetic scene like theme parks without much consent from the local community. The local lifestyle and the relationship

between the local community and heritage in urban context could be considered as an important asset for the future development. Over sanitization of the place could make the place artificial and lose the sense of place. In addition, toward sustainable development, the local communities and the competent authorities could work together and consider the local participation as a priority.

As for the second aspect on legislation, the issues are the capacity of existing organizations, uncontrolled change of listed buildings in temples, difficulty on adoption of the international standards, and the limitation from legislations. More effective way of utilizing the existing legislation system could be considered. Several legislations could be used to maximize the strength of each authority and delegate the works to the other authorities that can do more effectively. Further, the collaboration with local bodies and local communities could be the most important point in this issue. As this could raise conservation awareness to the local community, which eventually would lead to sustainable development of the place.

Since the conservation concept and public interest changed from the time when the legislation have enacted, there is a need to revisit the current legislations. In order to have appropriate management in various levels, prioritization of cultural heritage as well as the educational program and capacity building for local bodies and owners, such as monks are required. Moreover, the appropriate model for Thai is becoming important point, for example, the evaluation of significance of cultural heritage which reflect the local uniqueness. To support this, an investigation of discrepancy between policy and operational levels could help so that the conservation measure will conform to the local culture and be practical for operational bodies.

The last issue on organizational framework is a larger issue which need more concern on national level. The more effective collaboration among competent authorities is urgent. Since none of authorities are responsible for all of the conservation works, the collaboration among existing bodies and the use of relevant laws are important. In order to ensure that the conservation and development go together, it is very crucial that competent authorities to work hand in hand and use existing mechanisms as much effective as they can. Further, more effective measure for sharing and creating information channels can be considered. The main mechanism could be the Comprehensive Plan that can obtain more information on cultural heritage from other agencies. In this regard, the government could set working group from different authorities and stakeholders which could share different resources.

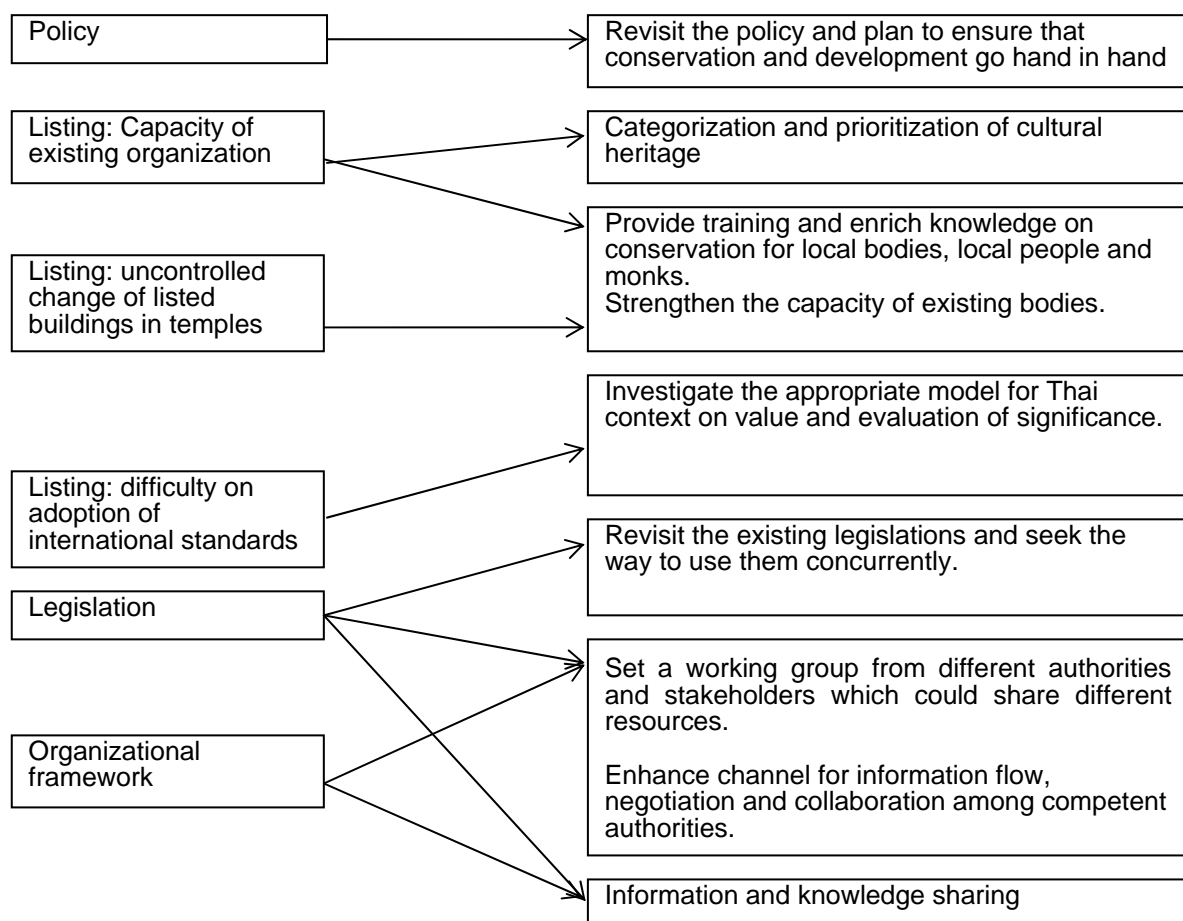


Figure 3 Summary of proposed solutions for urban conservation issues in Bangkok

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