VIABILITY CONCEPT FOR ENHANCING HISTORIC TOWN CENTRES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Asst. Prof. Dr. Doosadee THAITAKOO
Department of Urban and Regional Planning,
Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University
doosadee@gmail.com, tdoosadee@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

In the UK, historic town centres have been successfully planned and implemented to avoid a conflict between conservation and development. Preventive measures were developed to protect the built heritage from threatening forms of development. As a result, they can keep on evolving properly to supply quality goods/services and a pleasant environment.

Rebuilding this balanced mix of conservation and development has been made through the use of the viability concept. The term viability is used to determine whether a town centre has a capacity for living or not. Viability includes the ability of the centre to attract continuing investment to maintain the environment. This concept was constructed for investigating the town centres's health in order to maintain their position in a changing environment. The evaluation framework for town centres' health focused on four essential characteristics supporting the viability of town centres: attraction, accessibility, amenity, and action. These four basic qualities of 4 A's refer to what draws customers to town centres, how easy it is to reach town centres, how pleasant town centres should be, and what brings success to the improvement of town centres.

The main factors affecting viability are also discussed: the loss of consumer diversity reduces commercial opportunity; the loss of trade and business reduces the attraction, activities and consumer choice; the loss of investment makes non-viability; and the loss of image causes low confidence in the centres - the sign of high risk. This leads to the implications for sustaining the centre's unique mix of functions, which would be possible if reconstructing the ability of town centres is made through reversing those circumstances.

These successful experiences in regenerating a large number of historic town centres in Britain may contribute to a search for enhancing viability of historic town centres in Thailand and elsewhere.

Keywords : *historic town centres, viability, United Kingdom*

1 INTRODUCTION

Historic town centres have been a public concern in the UK because of their extraordinary qualities. Each centre has a distinct history, built up through a variety of functions - commercial, administrative, social and cultural - and plays a specialized role, through its unique urban environment, in meeting the needs of its hinterland. A town centre's value as a place to work, rest, play and visit is widely recognized (DoE/URBED, 1994; Evans, 1997; Sparks, 1998). Further, many centres in the UK have a very highly valued built environment heritage; they possess irreplaceable cultural assets: city walls, monuments, structures, buildings, and groups of buildings, which contribute to their unique character (DoE/URBED, 1994; Drummond and Swain, 1996; Pickard, 1996), and offer a cultured environment (fig.1). This creates a sense of community and pride of place. At the same time they provide a strong tax base, and serve local needs through offering a diversity of goods, services and employment (Smith, et al., 1996; Sparks, 1998).

Possessing recognized cultural qualities, they have been managed to avoid a conflict between conservation and development. Development in them could be seen by different interest groups as threatening the built heritage or as frozen by conservation restrictions. Generally, the former attitude appeared when new commercial development tried to take place, with large-scale buildings and a new transport system, displacing social groups. So there were attempts to protect the heritage and town character from these forms of development

Figure 1: A cultured environment of Oxford city centre

(Drummond and Swain, 1996; Larkham, 1996; Pickard, 1996). The latter happened when some interests perceived conservation as a policy that led to business uncertainty about development; consequently, the town centres could become less appealing to new investment, compared to out-of-town (Pickard, 1996; Markham, 1998; Tiesdell, 1998). This could cause both heritage damage and deficiencies in the local economy, and the social and living environment. Hence preventive measures were developed (DoE/URBED, 1994; Drummond and Swain, 1996; Mason, 1997). As a result, the city/town centres of historic cities in the UK can keep on evolving properly to supply quality goods/services and a pleasant environment, because a balanced mix of conservation and development has generally been successfully planned and implemented.

2 CONCEPTS OF HISTORIC TOWN CENTRES

2.1 Definitions of town centres:

Knowing 'what town centres are' is a first step in conceptualizing town centres. However, there is no standard definition of town centres. They are defined differently from the standpoints of researchers; this is not unusual, because a definition appropriate for the purpose of stating the rules or conditions for a particular use might not be suitable for another (Conway, 2000).

This discussion starts from a definition of town centres as places which 'perform an organic mix of functions, including a shopping centre and market place, an arts, cultural and entertainment venue, a business centre, a transport hub, and increasingly a place to live and visit, as well as potentially a place for educational and health services' (DoE/URBED, 1994: 10). This clearly covers the essential functions and features of town centres, which may differ from place to place.

Other definitions from different academic standpoints have supported and extended the thinking about town centres: 'Traditionally, town centres have been the heart where a multitude of commercial, retail, cultural and governmental activities and functions are uniquely concentrated' (Evans, 1997: 1). The definitions provided by economists and geographers have indicated some other essential features of a town's ability to function as a commercial centre: location, accessibility and the agglomeration of a range of suppliers (Evans, 1997: 4). Yet they do not cover the social merits of a town; behavioural psychologists term them 'places of collective consciousness' (Evans, 1997: 5) because they have features that engender a sense of belonging amongst local inhabitants, and therefore become symbols of civic identity. Some social scientists define the centres as 'a key part of the public domain because they contain a concentration of public cultural assets, library, museum, art galleries, public buildings and open spaces which significantly promote social interaction and raise personal awareness of civic society'(Evans, 1997: 5). These social meanings emphasize the public realm in which people associate themselves with the centres through social interaction, a sense of belonging fostered by public cultural assets, symbols of local identity and awareness of civic society.

Political scientists see a centre as 'a physical outcome of its evolution which reflected the interrelations between the main agents of change, such as property owners, investors, developers, interest groups, governmental organizations, especially local authority politicians, planning and estate professionals' (Evans, 1997: 6).

Among descriptions that broadly help to understand how a town centre can be defined, the DETR[1] (1998: 14) has provided a short but precise meaning, including the most evident characteristics of this public place: 'a town centre [functions] both as economic and commercial heart of historic cities and towns and as a place for public functions'. Town centres are seen as places made by and used for public purposes, so the way people think about them cannot be ignored because it reflects both their attitudes towards them and what they want from them. They are also described as 'places that enable a wide range of needs for the [purpose of] commodities and socialization to be met through one trip; town centres are places that provide a broad range of facilities and serve as a focus for the community and public transport' (DoE/URBED, 1994: 11).

Sifting through the literature, the reader realizes that there is no standard definition of *town centres*. However, the literature contributes information about both their essential qualities, such as providing a focal place, central area, key part or heart or essential arena, centre of activity, and other distinguishing features e.g. providing for a multitude of activities and functions, commercial, retail, transport and public, offering a wide range of supplies and a broad range of facilities. They have been developed over time by individual and public involvement to accommodate various activities which perform distinctive roles and functions, commercial, business, transport, social, cultural, and administrative. These demand development to continue to supply needs for goods, services, employment and investment, while many wish to conserve the built heritage. Consequently, town centres and the environment might face some sorts of conflict between conservation and development. Historic town centres have historic assets and unique environments that not all other centres have. The reason for their uniqueness is that: they are products of their development in the past. Their evolution is a dynamic explanation of how they have come into being, and produced the heritage which needs to be conserved, while their functions of supplying needs and wants need to continue, indicating a degree of development.

2.2 Town centre evolution:

The evolution of town centres in Britain, outlined in the literature explains why and how people have produced and used them, and suggests a general process of change. Most town centres of today are the products of their

---

[1] *Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), now Department of Transport (DFT, www.dft.gov.uk)*

development in the past. Their evolution provides a dynamic explanation of how they have come into being, and produced the heritage in need of conservation, while their functions in supplying peoples' needs and wants may continue, with a degree of development. Moreover, a study of their evolution would show why some town centres possessed signs of decline after successfully serving peoples' needs for many generations, while others maintain their distinctive characters and roles through acceptable economic and social changes. Research supports the idea that a better understanding of town centres comes through an analysis of their evolution (DoE/URBED, 1994; Evans, 1997; Markham, 1998). A summary of those studies of the evolution of town centres is presented next.

Generally, town centres throughout Europe and Asia are seen to originate from the site of markets and fairs at a crossroads or near a river crossing, suiting their functions of selling and buying, and other attractions. In Britain, many were established within fortified towns by the Anglo-Saxons or even the Romans before them (fig. 2). They began as places where people assembled to exchange goods and attend social events or religious ceremonies. In the 14th century colleges began to appear (fig. 3). Then to serve the growing populations, civic and social facilities, such as the town hall - seat of local government and administration - libraries, theatres, parks and art galleries were provided, and, as a result, community spirit increased. This means that apart from the needs of commerce and socialization, psychological and spiritual needs could be responded to in town centres. However, the fundamental activity of the centres was retailing through stalls and shops, which had developed from the closed society of the guilds, through wider mercantilism, to reach the capitalism of globalised free trade today.

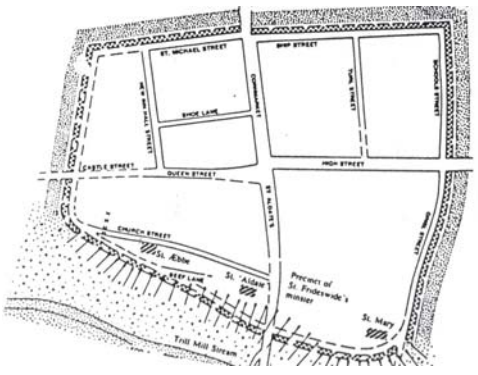

Figure 2: Anglo-Saxons Oxford

Figure 3: 14th Century Oxford

Fixed shops, often simply the front of craft workshops, in the later Middle Ages replaced wandering pedlars, offering a limited range of dry goods, and developed into new types of retail business for the consumption goods of fashion, interior decorating, and luxury goods by the middle of the eighteenth century, while market stalls offered fresh produce and food. The shops are viewed as the origins of the department store, which emerged in the late nineteenth century, but their customers were not a mass market as nowadays; instead they served a privileged class. In the twentieth century, retail and commercial services grew through the establishment of a number of banks and insurance companies along the prime locations of the High Street, where solid brick or stone frontages were replaced with glazed facades from the late 1960s. The physical forms of the older parts of town centres could be seen in the main street in the multi-nodal characters of castle, churches, guild house or town hall, built in identifiable architectural styles. Food retailing changed from temporary trading stands, carts, and booths, and covered markets into shops with advertisements and glass windows to attract people. The combination of signs, frontage displays and the uses of architecture contributed a special character to the street scene.

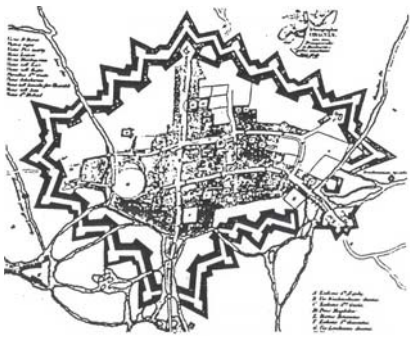

Figure 4: 18th Century Oxford

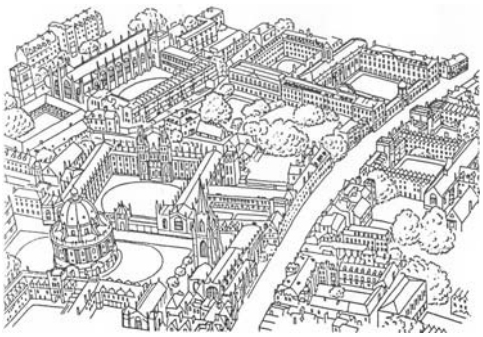

Figure 5: 18th Century Oxford City Centre

Figure 6: 19th Century Carfax, Oxford

Figure 7: Carfax, Oxford in A.D. 2004

Many British town centres during the Industrial Revolution and Victorian times became fast-growing and prosperous cities (fig. 6). That is why these town centres have Victorian architecture, recognisable today. From the 1930s, movements out to the suburbs to avoid pollution and congestion left crowded housing in inner areas to the poorer. Thus implementation of slum clearance was encouraged, particularly after 1945, and public policies for restructuring retailing and office uses in town centres were activated in the 1960s and 1970s. The growth of business increased demand for commercial space and also the expansion of the shopping areas. This and the spread of car ownership paved the way for edge and out-of-town shopping centres in the 1980s, which became functionally competitive to the town centres, though town centres kept all key functions of civic, religious, cultural, social, commercial and some residential use, because they were able to offer convenience and safety for people to perform their transactions, combined with ease of contact. Crucial changes in the technology of transport and telecommunications, particularly the motorway network and electronic commerce, and the spread of car ownership made inner locations inadequate for new patterns of shopping. However, town centres in Britain have gained mastery over some negative trends in a large number of cities and towns, e.g. Oxford (fig. 7) (DoE/URBED, 1994).

Such evolution, as researches into town centres have shown (DoE/URBED, 1994; Evans, 1997; Markham, 1998), may include:

- At the beginning: many town centres originated from the locational advantage of a transport junction, either road or river crossings. This encouraged people to gather to exchange their products, as still seen in many retail stalls in open bazaars.
- At the growing stage: having locational advantage as its base, a centre's growth may depend upon its internal ability to attract more people. Attractions in the towns drew additional people to come in, and generated many more demands and supplies for goods, services, and other transactions. Therefore, buildings and facilities which provided convenience were developed.
- At peak: this stage may be seen when the centres fully perform business and financial functions. This prosperous time always supports the centres' ability to put up buildings and facilities in the full richness which a high culture could create.
- At the declining stage: when the centres can not maintain their advantages against new centres, due to lifestyle and technological changes, people, traders, business, and investment shift from them to

competing ones. Town centres then are left quiet, with less financial support to sustain their environment.

- At recovery stage: heritage conservation and viability improvement through appropriate investment are together seen as most important. Research, policy and extensive practice in a large number of town centres in the UK have demonstrated how town centres can maintain their best features, while safeguarding the heritage.

3 STAKEHOLDERS' INTERESTS IN TOWN CENTRES

The probable stages of evolution outlined in the previous section contribute a further important point. This is that people involved with town centres are key to that evolution, because they have influenced the changes, either the success or failure, of the centres. These changes occurred due to their purposeful thoughts, their interests, and their abilities to produce effects. They may be individuals, groups or institutions in a society. Interest groups have their views, needs, and visions. Their outcomes in terms of activity and space arrangement in town centres could cause disagreement between conservation and development. In general, activity and space arrangement are governed by the interests of the state, the market, voluntary groups, and citizens (Ambrose, 1994; Healey, 1997; Evans, 1997).

From standpoints of the state, the private sector, citizens, and voluntary groups, their interests are able to produce effects on or to be affected by either conservation or development in the towns. The stakeholders' interests, influence conservation and development in town centres. Their different interests produce agreement and disagreement about conservation and development in town centres. It is seen generally that, in seeking to create desirable places, the environmental outcomes people want have varied, due to their diverse interests. These often result in conflict if mismanaged (Healey, 1997). They may have extensive effects, causing economic viability to be seen as conflicting with environmental sustainability not only of the town centres but also of their cultural heritage. Hence it is essential to identify stakeholders' interests to clarify their standpoints, purposes, interests or concerns. These influence their views, needs, and visions, which have had impacts on town centres. In addition, the relationships of stakeholders in town centres may be seen through the combination of competing and collaborating activities: 'town centres can be places of competition or collaboration' (Evans, 1997: 109). Therefore their roles and relationships are necessary to study, to classify key interests. The major interests in town centres have been broadly put into three

categories, according to their roles: 'the producers, the users, and the intermediaries' (Evans, 1997: 8; Sparks, 1998: 18). Their power relations, hardly ever equal, may show that some sets of interests, particularly of producers and intermediaries, have dominated those of others - users (Evans, 1997; Sparks, 1998).

Major interests in town centres: the government and private sectors, the voluntary groups, and the citizens, have been put into three broad categories, according to how their roles/interests create effects on the towns: as producers, users, and intermediaries (Evans, 1997; Sparks, 1998). Full explanations are presented below.

3.1 Producers' interests

Development in town centres has usually been led by producers' interests: government and private sectors who aim to manage their assets for many reasons. Land and property owners manage their assets for economic returns, while maintaining their images and social status through schemes for, say, a shopping mall, a leisure centre, a cultural centre or a heritage town's trail. They look to safeguard their investment, and seek ways to maintain the value of their property, but the complexity of fragmented land ownership may create difficulties for coordinated action in achieving either conservation or development (Evans, 1997; Markham, 1998; Sparks, 1998). Investors are interested in safe, prime areas to produce steady long-term income. At present, they target their investment at well-established locations which have good long-term occupancy by reliable tenants. These target properties can be in town centres which have important assets, i.e. historical buildings, tourist attractions, prestigious educational institutions, and financial facilities, or large out-of-town shopping centres (Evans, 1997). Landowners generally are dominant over other producers and users, because they have full rights over their property. They have managed their assets through their major interest of economic gain with support from investors, design professionals and developers within the legislative framework and pressure created by conservationists and users. Developments are acceptable if they achieve a blend between fostering heritage quality and meeting user demands for activity and built environmental changes (Evans, 1997). Investors and landowners have often gained the most advantage because they possess the needed resources - money and land, though they may have difficulty in land pooling when land ownerships are fragmented. They can draw their investment away from credit worthy developers if the rate of return in a project falls relatively to other forms of investment (Evans, 1997; Sparks, 1998).

Developers, whose interests are mainly those of making profit from constructing buildings for investment, look for certainty, scarcity value of sites and short-term and medium term economic gain from property development. They may form alliances with investment institution or local authorities to deal with the town centres where land costs are high. A deal will be possible when the institution can give immediate finance to the developer, and the development can give a steady long-term income to the institution. Speculative developers wish for short-term returns. They need to shorten construction time to minimise interest payments and secure early occupation of buildings, maximising the rental floor area. This might result in damage to the town centre's character. If there are no public policies and guarantees in towns or other sites, they will aim only at (prominent) locations with no uncertainty attached: town centres may be considered less attractive than out-of-town (Evans, 1997; Markham, 1998; Sparks, 1998). In contrast, the interests of public developers like local authorities are to provide very important services which make town centres attractive: for example, car parks, areas for pedestrians and public space. This good quality may be achievable if they could get sufficient resources for providing and maintaining the services (Evans, 1997). Local authorities, which own properties in the towns, may keep regeneration alternatives in mind (Sparks, 1998).

Other private producers, such as major retailers or hoteliers, may be interested in making profit from sites with trading potential for distributing goods and services for high margin sales, or expanding their retail and accommodation chains in growing areas (Markham, 1998), but their demands may not be easily accommodated in town centres (Sparks, 1998). The interests of design and construction professionals, such as architects, engineers, interior designers and construction firms are the visual impact on the environment of their commissioned work in producing designs to meet specified requirements of their clients (Evans, 1997; Markham, 1998). So the quality of the built environment varies according to the quality of clients, programmes, designers, developers and contractors. Another group of producers includes buskers, pavement artists, street market sellers and participants in street events and festivals; they can be viewed as informal producers. Their presence has significant effects on creating a sense of place for the town centre. Their interests are in making some income and/or maintaining and enhancing the unique atmosphere of a particular town (Evans, 1997). However, they are perceived also as a problem by some creating annoyance.

3.2 User interests

This group covers a wide range of people including citizens: residents, occupants of buildings, and shoppers, public or private employees, visitors and informal users. Their interests are diverse, while their spending of time and money together support businesses in town centres. Factors affecting interests and needs may include cultural values, age, social and ethnic group and preferences. This diversity of interests can result in either conflicts of interest or an opportunity to offer choice, depending on how it is managed. Residents may be strongly concerned with a quality of life arising from a safe, clean, accessible, convenient living environment, and civic pride, while shop-owners aim at sales volume, highly accessible location, good facilities, and low rent. Customers may need value for money, but some may be influenced by the good image of certain centres, brand names, choices, services, good parking facilities, style and comfort in an attractive built or cultured environment. Employees' main concerns are probably their wages, a positive image of the work place and a quality environment, while tourists usually look for very individual places, welcoming atmosphere, ample space for pedestrians, variety of activity, good facilities, and an accessible, pleasant or striking environment (Evans, 1997; Markham, 1998; Sparks, 1998).

Contributions of users to towns are significant. Besides their spending ability, their presence can lead to a liveable environment (Sparks, 1998). Their variety of activities, if they are well managed, can help form a positive image of place. This builds up confidence in a town's ability to draw more potential buyers and investment.

Residents also play a crucial role when using town centres. Either rich or poor, they affect total spending in the centres because their needs and wants are very frequent and regular; they impact on sales volume, seen in active trading, effective servicing and lively leisure. The lack of residents in town centres has resulted in decreases of regular spending and of the viability of existing businesses (Sparks, 1998). Moreover, having people living in buildings and using space in a town centre encourages good maintenance of the urban environment and increased perceptions of safety.

Other users who have much effect on town centres are employees. Town centres are the foci of employment in various sectors of the urban economy. A reduction of employees has caused both loss of spending power and deterioration of the public realm in town centres (Sparks, 1998). Therefore town centre employment should be regenerated, since it can draw back both employees and customers into the centre. As a consequence, employees should be

considered as another group whose contribution of spending regular time and money helps produce economic viability and social livebility in towns.

Tourists are also considered important because of their great effects on the local economy, culture and character of the built environment. The ability of a town centre to be a unique tourist attraction depends very much on its heritage assets, cultural resources and tourist facilities. Tourist spending has succeeded in supporting town businesses, such as hotels, leisure, entertaining, banking and trading facilities in towns where heritage and facility have properly enhanced (DoE/URBED, 1994). Tourist businesses have stimulated investment in towns by both private companies and public infrastructure projects (Sparks, 1998) from which local people can share advantages. Yet it is necessary to be very careful in handling tourist businesses, because their numbers, which have direct effects on the economic, cultural and built environment, may suddenly change, both positively and negatively. Their short visits in large numbers may be above the environment's capacity to absorb; thus deterioration of both culture and heritage resources might unintentionally happen (Evans, 1997; Sparks, 1998).

3.2 The intermediary interests

The intermediaries are between producers and users, and include local and national government, and amenity groups; they mostly influence the control and management of town centre space. For example, local authorities act to enable development through their mechanisms of infrastructure support, incentives, guarantees and controls. Their concerns should be to create greater certainty or scarcity value of place through land use and design regulations, as well as promotion of town centre attractiveness. The police department provides safety from crime and accident as well as traffic management, persuading more visitors to come. Its presence engenders a feeling of safety in the centres (Sparks, 1998). These intermediary interests thus play very important roles, having a stake in directing and controlling the economic factors sustaining a town centre's life (Evans, 1997; Sparks, 1998).

Government bodies, both national and local, are always in very key positions for integrating conservation and development. There may be several national government departments to be coordinated, i.e. ones which formulate conservation policy for monuments and built heritage, like the Department of National Heritage, while another generates general policy, considering conservation against land use and transport planning, and directing the future of town centres through decentralisation and revitalization policies, i.e. the

Department of the Environment (Ross, 1996). Local authorities that stand between development and conservation in historic town centres always have strong impacts on town centre environment through their multiple roles but limited capacity. The responsibilities of British local authorities provide and maintain facilities, consider development applications for project approvals to meet conservation guidelines, and some local authorities have owned property to be managed. Their capacity to manage those activities may be limited by legislation and resources, manpower and financial support from national government. However, the British local authorities have powers of designating conservation areas and listed buildings, granting financial aid and improving the quality of their localities (Ross, 1996; Evans, 1997; Sparks, 1998).

Voluntary organizations have been established to protect the heritage and promote user interests in the decision-making process in conservation. Interest groups e.g. the Civic Trust, Victorian Society and other amenity societies, local newspapers, community leaders, or local experts also play a part (ATCM, 1997; TCMD, 1998). They can act as catalytic agents of change, whose views might be in opposition to producers' environmental effects. This strain between voluntary organisations and producers, or other pressures, has encouraged Chambers of Commerce to interpose their role between those who manage conflicts about development and conservation. They can also act as catalysts for governmental planning bodies who direct the development trends (ATCM, 1997).

4. THE CONCEPTS OF VIABILITY

4.1 Viability concept

Based on their interests, stakeholders put their best efforts in involvement with town centres, though over time the success or failure of maintaining a significant role and functions in town centres depends largely upon town centres' ability to recognise and adapt to social, economic and technological changes (DoE/ URBED, 1994). The town centres' capacity for continued prosperity is termed 'viability' (DoE/URBED, 1994: 55). If viability is lacking, this damages town centres in several ways. Without it they cannot sustain their distinctive role created by a functional mix, likely to be seen in survival of traditional independent shops and businesses, as well as investment in new ones. If they cannot keep up private investment and local employment, this leads to environmental decay, due to a lack of an adequate tax basis for a local authority. A viable town centre is crucial to heritage conservation and economic health

and pride of place because of its ability to offer quality commercial options, business stability and employment regeneration, resulting in sufficient tax surpluses to conserve heritage and maintain a quality environment (DoE/ URBED, 1994; Pickard, 1996; Smith et al., 1996).

The concept of viability has become firmly associated with town centres and incorporated into many British local authority strategies and development plans since 1980s (DoE/URBED, 1994: 55, Pickard; 1996: 285). A study by the Urban and Economic Development Group (URBED) for the Department of the Environment (DoE) in 1994 defined the term viability, together with vitality, as terms concerned with life. They were used to determine whether a town centre feels lively - vital - and has a capacity for living - viable - or not. Vitality is expressed in how busy a centre is, while viability includes the ability of the centre to attract continuing investment to maintain the environment and to encourage improvement in coping with changing needs (DoE/URBED, 1994: 55).

However, the word 'viable' has also the meaning of workable, practicable, possible, and feasible, especially economically or financially (Brown, 1993: 3572; Crowther et. al., 1995: 1326). In this sense viability can be used to cover commercial and economic possibilities as well as wealth; commercial refers to trade, economic means relating to trade and the development of wealth, and financial refers to money (Crowther et al., 1995: 367, 435). Therefore the term 'economic viability' could be seen as describing a town centre's economic goal - commercial prosperity - which needs to be ensured through keeping it in a good combination of services and attractions, together with high accessibility. This economic goal, according to town centre's regeneration principles, should be balanced with social and environmental goals: social cohesion, cultural distinctiveness, and environmental sustainability (Evans, 1997). In addition, it has been emphasised that economic viability exists in town centres if investment can be maintained within them. Investment will be made in the centres only if confidence in them is maintained and they are seen as favourable places to be in for transactions, shopping, working, visiting and living at present and in the future (DoE/URBED, 1994; Sparks, 1998; Bentley, 1999).

It is necessary to know that the viability concept has developed from observing town centres' prosperity and decline. Hence, this discussion aims to research for what creates the healthy or attractive town centres, in order to strengthen and improve them, maintaining their significant role as the environment changes and as the social reality that some interests often dominate others in town centre conservation and development (DoE/URBED, 1994; Evans, 1997; Sparks, 1998; Collins et al., 1991; Smith et. al. 1996; Frieden and Sagalyn,

1997). Studying more about the origins of town centres' cycle of decline should build an in-depth understanding of the viability concept.

4.2 Town centres' cycle of decline

This research has explained town centres' cycle of decline and elaborated the major factors affecting it in the past experiences in the UK. These might generally be found elsewhere, including in Thailand. Apart from recessions, others major factors influencing on the centres' decline were the dispersal of population and employment, greater personal mobility by car-use and transport networks, self-service economy and lifestyle change, retail revolution and leisure change, and private investment shift from private local into national and international institutions. These factors offered more opportunity for peripheral centres to meet modern demands, but damaged the capability of town centres to maintain their distinctive roles and mixed functions, economic, social and cultural (DoE/URBED, 1994; Smith et al., 1996; Sparks, 1998). Therefore, the town centres' cycle of decline appeared step by step and expressed the shortcoming of viability, evidenced in a considerable number of case studies. Based on the researches (DoE and URBED, 1994; Arup Economics and Planning, 1995; Tiesdell et al., 1996), local surveys (Sparks, 1998), documentary researches (Evans, 1997; Markham, 1998) and expert discussion (RICS, 1994; ATCM, 1997; DETR, 1998), the cycle of decline observed in town centres could be recorded. It began with a sharp drop in the number of people using public transport into the centre, making the centres lose their main source of customers. An increase of new travel behaviour, private car use, made modern out-of-town shopping much more attractive. This loss of affluent mobile consumers to peripheral centres had left town centres with limited catchments. Then some shops or businesses closed or relocated for greater commercial opportunity in the periphery. This reduction of commercial and business opportunities, including sales, employment and their functional relations, had effects in the reduction of consumer choice. This caused deterioration of the balanced trade mix in town centres. This loss of variety of attractions, choices and activities in the centres meant more fall in the number of visitors and potential buyers. Therefore, business investment was discouraged. Potential reduction in property and rental values followed, pushing private investment away. The lack of finance from both private sector profit and tax to conserve heritage as well as to maintain the centres' environment and infrastructure brought about the deterioration of environment. Then the most vulnerable stage of viability damage took place, the loss of the centres' image; this pushed people to leave the buildings where they used to live or work. The buildings and environment became vacant,

unclean and unsafe. This dereliction of buildings and deterioration of environment caused low confidence and high risks for investment in such centres (URBED, 1994; Rypkema, 1995; Smith et al., 1996; Frieden and Sagalyn, 1997; Sharpe, 1997; Sparks, 1998).

In short, a negative image of a town centre has a significant effect. When a town centre can not provide a safe place for urban living, people abandon it, and consequently it suffers from a decline of business, loss of jobs and the lack of investment. Relative lack of finance to maintain the physical environment can bring environmental degradation to the centre also, causing a loss of 'pride of place' (Sharpe, 1997: 7). A cycle of decline in town centres (DoE/URBED, 1994; Sparks, 1998) shows the unfavourable effects on town centres of economic recession, dispersal trends, life style change, retail revolution, and private investment shifts.

Knowledge of the common areas of problems which possibly occur in other town centres within historic cities where similar causes exist, and drawn from the cycle of decline concept in town centres, can generally be summarised in a set of basic characteristics:

- Loss of consumer diversity: Centres that are less attractive to some social groups have their commercial opportunity reduced. This is the first sign of decline - less vitality.
- Loss of trade mix: This can be seen in the number of closed shops and relocated businesses, which reduces the variety of attraction, activity and consumer choice and, as a result, the number of visitors and potential buyers drops greatly. This shows a lack of economic confidence - low viability.
- Loss of investment and jobs: Centres that have no economic confidence, see investment torn away; in turn local jobs decline and the environment decay. This shows increasing non-viability.
- Loss of image: Abandoned buildings, unclean, unsafe and deteriorated environment are the most discouraging qualities for investment, because very high risks are perceived. They also cause the low quality of life persisting in communities, and discourage long-term economic development in the centres. This increases signs of high risk, because the negative image of insecure environment and social stress usually tends to lead to political conflict, the hardest situation to de-fuse.

4.3 Economic problems in town centres

The particular economic problems in town centres are focused on obsolescence - the reduction in the useful life of a capital good to function as a consequence of change in the built fabric and its location compared with competitive ones (Tiesdell, 1998: 17). The initial reduction in continuing investment is likely caused by functional obsolescence because old buildings and areas are regarded that they cannot functionally fit with the new purposes arising from modern demands of business requirements. Hence some developers may see buildings and spaces used in the centres relatively obsolete, less attractive, less efficient and less competitive for investment, comparing to the new centres out-of-town (Pickard, 1996; Tiesdell, 1998), while some others may realize that the town centres' unique composition of forms and spaces derived from historical evolution would well offer arts, culture, entertainment and shopping functions to serve people's leisure times (DoE/URBED, 1994; Markham, 1998). However, the increasing reduction of economic value of buildings and locations may be perceived by those producers in other dimensions of obsolescence (Tiesdell, 1998; Pickard, 1996; Lichfield, 1988; Rypkema, 1992):

- Location obsolescence: When planning policies create bureaucratic restrictions that make town centre location becomes obsolete, hence giving economic advantages go to the periphery.
- Physical or structural obsolescence: When weather and poor maintenance deteriorate building fabric.
- Financial obsolescence: When the remaining economic life in utilisation for economic gain is considered to be limited or obsolete, then they will be demolished. As a result, continuity of the town's character will be destroyed.
- Economic obsolescence: When the restrictions may create time-consuming procedures in obtaining consent for a refurbishment project in town centres. This is potentially resulted in higher cost and uncertainty for the project, therefore developers may prefer allocating investment to alternative sites in the suburb, and in turn bring town centres about cumulative loss of investment.

This analysis implies that the perceived problems of obsolescence can possibly lessen viability - ability of town centres to attract investment - which may lead to conservation to be at risk. The loss of investment may result in insufficient public funds for conserving heritage and maintaining the centre's environment, and demolition of buildings might damage the centre's character.

Thus the success of conservation may depend very much upon the health of town centres. This is the critical reason why viability is necessary for conservation.

5. ENHANCING TOWN CENTRES' VIABILITY

The cycle of decline in town centres shows the unfavourable effects on town centres' health in general, where economic recession, dispersal trends, life style change, retail revolution, and private investment shift are found as major factors. The literature confirms strongly that the concept of viability may start from the same initial step of observing town centre prosperity and decline. A use of viability is in reference to the ability of town centres to live, and then the concept covered the ability of the centres to attract sufficient continuing investment to maintain the environment. This viability concept was constructed for the research aim of establishing the health of town centres in order to improve their attractiveness, to maintain their position in a changing environment (DoE/URBED, 1994: 55). Based on the same purpose, but given different emphasis in other sources, when some interests dominate others the use of the phrase - economic viability - became apparent. It is focused on the economic goal of commercial prosperity, that has to be balanced with social and environmental goals in a town centre's regeneration principle (Evans, 1997: 139-40).

The attitudes that development and growth in a town centre of a historic city is very limited (Dobby: 1978), which deter investment in town centres should be replaced because they weaken the town centres' health. If the centres were allowed to decline further the loss of economic, social, cultural and environmental gains would be 'unacceptable' (DoE/URBED, 1994: 28). Therefore town centres' survival and success depends largely upon the care that people have for the centres to strengthen towns' ability to anticipate change (DoE/URBED, 1994; Smith et al, 1996; Evans, 1997). The success in enhancing viability of historic city/town centres in Britain (fig. 8 and 9) has its ground mainly on the use of the 4 A's principle and the concept of rebuilding economic value.

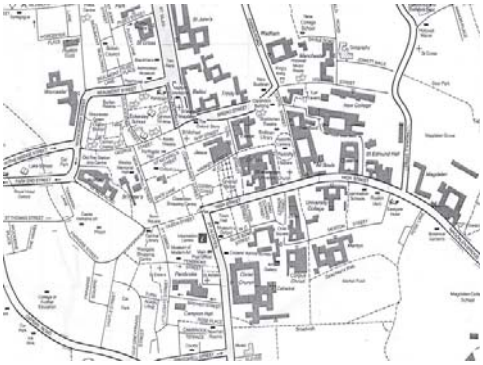

Figure 8: 21st Century Oxford City Centre

Figure 9: Viable City Centre, Oxford

5.1 The 4 A's principle

The major factor for enhancing viability should be based on the effectiveness of efforts made to prevent town centres from the cycle of decline, though there may be different views on what constitutes a healthy or successful town centre because its health involves various aspects of economic, socio-cultural physical, and management (DoE/URBED 1994, Evans 1997, Sparks 1998). The most useful inquiry was how to enhance their attractiveness in order to bring back visitors, consumers, and investment that the centres needed (DoE/URBED, 1994: 26). Therefore, among possible measures, the practical evaluation framework for town centres' health focused on the four basic qualities of attraction, accessibility, amenity, and action, because these 4 A's were the essential characteristics supporting the viability of town centres (DoE/URBED, 1994; Evans, 1997; Sparks, 1998):

- Attractions: Attractions refer to what draws customers to town centres. They include the diversity of shops and services, as well as the composition of retailing and other socio-cultural functions. They should offer all customers visible choice at different times. They can be measured by, e.g. the number of multiple retailers, specialist shops, entertainment venues, arts and cultural facilities, educational, health, transport and other services, as well as living or working space in the centre. Their spatial clusters may be analysed, to distinguish where the viable areas are.
- Accessibility: Accessibility refers to how easy it is to reach town centres. It covers two aspects, mobility and linkage. Mobility relates to time and cost of getting to the centre that different modes of transport can efficiently provide. Linkage relates to ease of passage and ease of navigation without barriers for people, including the

disabled. Linkages of car parking and public transport stations need to be easily found and well integrated with the centres. Therefore, high accessibility provided by a mix, is an effective means to encourage people to come into and spend time in the centres.

- Amenity: Amenity refers to how pleasant town centres should be. Clean, safe, unique, and well-maintained environments make centres more welcoming. Image and identity, emphasised by heritage and street quality, have an advantage in drawing people in. Amenity can be created by refurbishment of buildings and urban spaces, promotion of events with respect to the local cultural context, making the centres very individual and lively, and quality public facilities, e.g. toilets, sitting areas, and bus stops.
- Action: Management, based on collaboration between stakeholders could bring success to the improvement of town centres, because it could strengthen the capacity to make things happen. It makes the centres work by coordinating the ability and actions of local authority, major retailers, small businesses, and voluntary associations to promote the centres' pride of place.

5.2 Rebuilding economic value

Resolving economic problems in town centres might be done by a theory that states 'to attract investment, town centres must have greater economic value than the next best alternative' (Pickard, 1996: 275, Tiesdell, 1998: 17-8). Economic value can be probably assessed and rebuilt based on the understanding of four characteristics: scarcity, purchasing power, desire and utility (Tiesdell, 1998: 17):

- Scarcity: Town centres must supply something unique and rare. This is possible when the centres have ability to maintain their attractiveness, since they have possessed a unique combination of cultural heritage and mixed functions, if they can maintain both heritage and functions, they would present an economic opportunity. Moreover the unique character of historic buildings and cultural venues can be viewed as opportunities for direct economic gain from tourism if their capacity to absorb visitors is recognized to avoid over concentration that will reduce the quality of visitor's experience (Tiesdell, 1998; DoE/URBED, 1994).
- Purchasing power: This is not confined to a particular group of people (DoE/URBED, 1994); the more diversity within manageability, the more economic and social gain potential. This potential to bring

economic gain to the centres is related to the 'desire' (Tiesdell, 1998: 17) for goods and services of the users in their catchment areas. This could be possibly achieved through the centres' ability to maintain diversity of population and attractions.

- Desire: The success of the town centre should not be limited only to economic goods; rather expand the concept of town centres' success to include high responsibility for social and environmental concerns. On that basis, the desire for conservation combined with economic development should come from a broad section of the community, which may help avoid social pressure and fights (Evans, 1997; Tiesdell, 1998; Sparks, 1998) through shared views on needs and visions in the process of achieving this balance.
- Utility - the ability to provide a useful commodity: It covers the useful life of the capital goods of buildings and spaces; in town centres the economic value of buildings and spaces is perceived to reduce over time, in the several dimensions of obsolescence mentioned (4.3). This reduction in the quality of attractiveness in town centres brought about the stages of obsolescence should also be evaluated, and reversed, and enhancing their usefulness through management of built environment and planning policies. Weaknesses i.e. delay and uncertainty from bureaucracy restrictions for conservation may need to be reversed into town centres' strengths, to restore their attractiveness for investment, and demands for new uses and development should be managed to conform to the capacity of the heritage environment to accept change without damaging its character (Tiesdell, 1998; Pickard, 1996).

6. CONCLUSION

The questions may be raised here whether the UK experience has any lessons for Thailand and whether any of it is transferable in principle. Cultural heritage and town centres in Britain and Thailand have been developed through their distinctive history and different cultures, yet their common feature is: they are the outcome of a social process. The major difference is that in the UK, their multiple functions, economic, social, cultural and environmental, have been integrated as a central concern of local authorities (DoE/URBED, 1994; Evans, 1997) by which the UK Government provides planning policy guidance (PPG) to local authorities on their operation of conserving the heritage and developing the towns, e.g. PPG 6 and PPG 15 (DoE, 1994; DoE

and DNH, 1994). In Thailand, maintaining town centres' environment is a responsibility of the local authorities, but it always competes with other responsibilities to gain financial, personnel, and technical support to create a quality environment. Plans for development have been made by several central government agencies through economic planning and land use planning, particularly in the service sector, seen as the primary economic function of a city (ESCAP, 1991; TDRI, 1999). The implementation of sector plans is done by each separate regional office in a Provincial Administration, i.e. the Internal Trade Office, the Treasury Office, the Public Health Office, and the Town & Country Planning Office. Heritage conservation also has its position in national government, with its own budget for its regional office - the Archaeology and National Museum Office. The attempt to conserve a historic city may shift development opportunity to the city's periphery through planning policies and road network improvement. These dispersal trends of infrastructure, housing, retailing, leisure business and office locations mean that investment goes to the suburbs, while development in the town centres may be less attractive because it is likely confined by conservation policy and its controls. Though investors, property owners, and developers may have a high regard for conserving the cultural heritage, they may weigh up that creating new development in the periphery would be more beneficial, because it can absorb modern demands arising from lifestyle changes, and, at the same time, they may think that investing in the centre was harder because of conservation restrictions. Due to this, producers' perception of conservation policy and restrictions is likely to result in the continuing loss of investment in town centres, which will make them non-viable.

The British knowledge and experiences in revitalising a large number of viable town centres, therefore, should contribute to finding a way to enhance the town centres' ability to develop in Thailand, where antagonism between city conservation and development seem to have had unfavourable effects on people's attitudes, the town centre's health, and the historic environment. The main factors affecting viability are underlined: the loss of consumer diversity reduces commercial opportunity; the loss of trade and business reduces the attraction, activity and consumer choice; the loss of investment makes non-viability; and the loss of image causes low confidence in the centres - the sign of high risk. This leads to the implications for sustaining the centre's unique mix of functions, which would be possible if re-building the ability of town centres is made through reversing those circumstances.

- Firstly, by having positive image, variety of activity, diversity of attraction and choice, and quality of space and facilities, town centres would be unique, attractive and welcoming to people.

- Secondly, by providing links for capability of moving they would offer high accessibility to people to get to.
- Thirdly, by anticipating people's requirements and expectations as well as offering pleasure or excitement to people, town centres would keep people to spend more time and money in or come back to the centre again.
- Fourthly, by retaining those qualities to keep people in, town centres would have high potentiality for making profit which entrepreneurs would continue their businesses there.
- Fifthly, if economic gain can foresee and development cost can be reduced through collaboration, rental pricing can be set attractive, therefore the amount of loans needed and the subsequent interest would be low.

That is: the town centres of such qualities would be beneficial and feasible to invest. This should give momentum to a search for enhancing viability of historic town centres in Thailand.

REFERENCES

Ambrose, P. (1994) Urban Process and Power, Rouledge, London.

Arup Economics and Planning and Building Design Partnership with Breheny, M. (1995) Environmental Capacity: A Methodology for Historic Cities, Final Report, for Cheshire County Council, Chester City Council, Department of the Environment and English Heritage, Chester.

Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) (1997) Developing Structures to Deliver Town Centre Management, ATCM, London.

Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) (1998) Practice Notes, Establishing and Maintaining Successful Town Centre Management, ATCM, London.

Bentley, I. (1999) Urban Transformation: Power, People and Urban Design, Routledge, London.

Collins, R.G., Walters, E. B. and Dotson, A.B. (1991) America's Downtowns: Growth, Politics and Preservation, the Preservation Press, Washington, D.C.

Conway, D. A. and Munson, R. (2000) The Elements of Reasoning, Third Edition. Thompson Learning, London.

Crowther, J. Kavanagh, K. and Ashby, M. (eds.) (1995) Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), now Department of Transport (DFT, www.dft.gov.uk) (1998a) Town Centres: Defining Boundaries for Statistical Monitoring Feasibility Study, the Stationary Office, London.

Department of the Environment (DoE), now Department for Communities / Local Government (DCLG, www.communities.gov.uk) (1990) Inner City Research Programme Tourism and the Inner City, HMSO, London.

Department of the Environment (DoE now DCLG) (1994) Planning Policy Guidance 6 (revised), Town Centres and Retail Developments, HMSO, London.

Department of the Environment (DoE) and Department of National Heritage (DNH) (1994) Planning Policy Guidance 15, Planning and the Historic Environment, HMSO, London.

Department of the Environment (DoE now DCLG) and Urban / Economic Development Group (URBED, www.urbed.co.uk) (1994) Vital and Viable Town Centres: Meeting the Challenge, a study carried out by the Urban Economic Development Group for Department of the Environment. HMSO, London.

Dobby, A. (1978) Conservation and Planning, Hutchinson, London.

Drummond, P. and Swain, C. (1996) Environmental capacity of a historic city: the Chester experience, in the Compact City: A Sustainable Urban Form? (eds. M. Jenks, K. Williams and E. Burton), F&N Spon, London.

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) (1991) The Role of Services in the Economy of Selected Developing Countries in the ESCAP Region. United Nations, New York.

Larkham, P. J. (1996) Conservation and the City, Routledge, London.

Markham, J. E. (1998) The Future of Shopping; Traditional Patterns and Net Effect, Macmillan, London.

Mason, D. (1997) Managing development at cultural heritage sites: conservation practice and sustainability, in Evaluation of the Built Environment for Sustainability (eds. P. S. Brandon, P. L. Lombardi and V. Bentivegna), E &FN SPON, London.

Opher, P. (1997) Oxford Town Trail: A Brief History of Oxford from 900 A.D. to 2000 A.D. Heritage Tour Publications in association with Oxford School of Architecture, Oxford.

Pickard, R. D. (1996) Conservation in the Built Environment, Addison Wesley Longman, Singapore.

Ross, M. (1996, first printing 1991) Planning and the Heritage: Policy, and Procedures Second Edition, E & FN Spon, London.

Sharpe, I. (ed.) (1997) Priorities for reviving urban Britain, in Urban Focus, News from Civic Trust, (22), Autumn, p. 7.

Smith, K. Joncas, K. and Parrish, B. (1996) Revitalizing Downtown, National Main Street Center, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Washington D.C.

Sparks, L. (1998) Town Centre Uses in Scotland, The Scottish Central Research Unit, Edinburgh.

Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) (1999) Wholesale and Retail Trade in Thailand. A Report on the Direction of Thai Economy and Trading: Domestic Trading Sector (in Thai), for the Ministry of Commerce. Bangkok.

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) (1994) Town Centre Management Guidance Note, RICS, London.

Tiesdell, S. Oc, T. and Heath, T. (reprinted 1998) (first published 1996) Revitalizing Historic Urban Quarters. Architectural Press, Oxford.