

Harddonechan Island-That Khao Village

The Island Paradise

WHAT WE LEFT THE COMMUNITY

Our group approached the planning challenges by first constructing several timelines that outlined the island's history as well as three possible futures for the island: 1) Life could continue on the island as before, 2) The residents could be forced to resettle, or 3) The residents could attempt to build partnerships amongst themselves and with the government to come up with interesting alternatives. We then developed several strategies that would benefit the community no matter what the future brought. An agricultural cooperative: this would not only help farmers produce a better product, but would strengthen ties and teamwork within the community. Small business projects (such as one

• The Research Team



resident's small-scale homemade soap business): they could provide a livelihood that is not entirely dependent on the land. Finding a historic preservation partner (such as a French NGO): they could capitalize on the island's French Colonial structures while providing an alternative that would allow residents to stay on the island. Eco-tourism (such as a home-stay program that would allow people to learn about organic farming): is another way to satisfy the government's desire to boost tourism and the residents' desire to continue their agricultural way of life. In addition to these ideas, our goal was to build general awareness of the situation on the island, and to show it as an asset that the city cannot afford to lose. Through our meetings with public officials, presentations, and even informal discussions with residents, we aimed to get people thinking proactively about the future of Harddonechan.

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The Mekong River borders the island.

THE COMMUNITY

Harddonechan is an island located in the Mekong River near Vientiane's central business district. The island itself measures about 6 kilometers long and 2 kilometers wide. 82 households, or about 400 people, currently live on the island. That Khao Village includes Harddonechan as well as the community living on the riverbank across from the island. Though located very much in the center of the city, its slight separation allows for a more serene and less polluted atmosphere that the residents value.

Access to the island is via a narrow steel bridge, suitable for motorbikes and pedestrians. Harddonechan is supplied with both electricity and non-potable water through above ground lines which run alongside this bridge. The bridge and the original water system were constructed during the French Colonial Period, somewhere between 1905 and 1920. The piped water system was the first of its kind in Laos. A dirt path continues from the bridge along the length of the island. Many homes are accessed informally by crossing through

the yards of other neighbors. Washing and bathing take place in a few large concrete cisterns on the island and outdoor squat toilets are also used. Three telephones serve the 82 homes, with residents paying the owners of the phones for use.

Most of Harddonechan's residents maintain their livelihood by cultivating land on the island as well as the seasonal agricultural areas between the island and the bank that are available during the dry season when the Mekong recedes. Crops range from fruits such as papaya and bananas to corn, broccoli, and jicama, and are irrigated with water taken directly from the Mekong. A few small stores and a noodle shop are located on Harddonechan, serving people from the bank as well as island residents. Several Harddonechan residents are also employed as civil servants or professionals in Vientiane. The residents are primarily middle-class by Lao standards and live in well-constructed (and usually self-constructed) wood and bamboo homes, often utilizing recycled materials. The first story is usually elevated to protect against flooding. A few houses on the island were constructed by the French of brick

• *Below: The narrow bridge access.*

• *Middle: Productive fields provide a good livelihood and serenity.*

• *Right: A typical dwelling on stilts to protect against the occasional flooding.*



and stucco and continue to be used as the homes of Lao military officers and their families. Due to Harddonechan's location in the Mekong River between Laos and Thailand, a small military presence is necessary if a border control problem arises.

WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Our group conducted a series of interviews with Harddonechan residents, the village chief, and other parties with an interest in the island. The residents' priorities could be divided into two main groups: concerns about the present condition of the island, and concerns about the island's uncertain future. Erosion and flooding commonly emerged as the main concern about the current state. The island has suffered severe erosion problems, with long-time residents indicating a rapidly shrinking area of cultivatable land each year. Flooding has also been a major nuisance, especially for the last few years. In 2001 and 2002, most of the residents were forced to leave their homes to live on the bank for a few months. Stores and noodle shops were also forced to close. Residents lived on their savings or fished for their food. Other concerns included difficult access, occasional electricity shortages, and excessive dust from the road through the island. Despite these issues, Harddonechan residents perceive their island as a clean, healthy, and a desirable place to live. (Note: On January 14, 2004 Thatkao Village won a government Clean Village Award.) They consider their home special and unique – a rural enclave in the middle of the city – and want nothing more than to maintain their current lifestyle

The future of Harddonechan remains unclear, but new construction is already beginning on the northern end of the island. A Malaysian developer, in cooperation with the Lao national government, is building a five-star hotel to host the 2004 ASEAN summit meeting in October. At fourteen stories, this new hotel will be by far the tallest building in Laos. Presently, the tallest is seven stories. The Chinese company hired to construct the hotel is planning on bringing a labor force of 800 Chinese workers who will return home once the project is

completed, while fewer than 200 Lao workers will be hired. Although the hotel is already behind its very tight construction schedule, the developer has the opportunity to pursue the development of the rest of the island with the Lao government if they are successful with this first project. The preliminary master plan would displace everyone currently living on the island for a complex with tourist-oriented shopping, embassies, gas stations, upper-income housing, and



The proposed 5-Star Hotel

perhaps even a theme park. The Thatkhaio village chief is aware of this plan and has advised Harddonechan residents not to make any additions to or large investments in their homes. However, the time frame is very unclear, and the island's residents do not know exactly when they might have to move, where they would be sent to, or how much compensation they would receive. Continuation of their agricultural activities is a major concern for most of the inhabitants. We were astounded by the inaccuracy of information about the island that the developer and several governmental agencies held. For example, we were told that only between zero and ten people lived on the island, while our visits indicate more like 400. We were also amazed by how little attempt was made by the developer and the government to communicate information to the villagers. Clearly there is a major informational disconnect between the developers of this project, the government, and the residents of the island.



Leaflet designed in paper by Jeremy M. Gates:
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