A Living Museum Model for Small Heritage Towns

Mae Hong Son Town, Thailand
Mae Hong Son Town Municipality
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Culture & Heritage

Summary of Good Practice Story
Mae Hong Son, a small Thai heritage town near the Myanmar border shaped by Tai Yai, Karen, Lahu and Lisu communities, was steadily losing its traditional wooden houses and cultural continuity as elders aged and young people left for education and work. Beginning with the community-founded Old House Club around 2009-2010 and informal elder gatherings called Sapa Nam Miang, the town built a six-part "Living Museum" governance model — Remember, Map, Regulate, Activate, Educate, Guide — that documented over 40 tangible and intangible cultural assets into a municipal database and, crucially, backed them with the 2018 Old Town District Regulation controlling building height, façade and materials, which has already reshaped real developments like a 7-Eleven store and a post office design. Living traditions such as the Poy Sang Long ceremony remain community-led, five schools now teach intangible heritage in their curricula, and the model won Thailand's 2025 Culture for SDGs Award. The key lesson: heritage conservation must treat the whole town as a living cultural landscape rather than protecting individual buildings, and it requires institutions — clubs, regulations, databases, schools — working together, not one-off efforts.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Hidden among the mountains near the Myanmar border, Mae Hong Son is one of Thailand’s small heritage destinations where history and culture are still lived, not merely displayed. The

town reflects nearly 200 years of recorded history, evolving from an elephant training settlement established around 1831 into an officially recognized town in 1874.
Mae Hong Son's identity has been shaped by diverse ethnic communities, including Tai Yai (Shan), Karen, Lahu, Lisu, and others. Their traditions are expressed through temples, old wooden houses, local languages, food, rituals, festivals, performing arts, and community life. Culture remains part of everyday living, visible in markets, temple ceremonies, family traditions, and the rhythms of the old town.
At the heart of the town is Nong Chong Kham Lake, surrounded by temples, traditional neighbourhoods, public spaces, and historic streetscapes that continue to serve as active places for worship, learning, gathering, and passing knowledge from one generation to the next. This living heritage forms the foundation of Mae Hong Son's Living Museum—a town-wide model that protects cultural assets, community memory, and local traditions while welcoming tourism in a respectful and sustainable way.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
As traditional Tai Yai wooden houses gradually disappeared from the streets of Mae Hong Son, many local elders feared the town was losing more than historic buildings. These houses embodied memories, community relationships, religious life, and traditions that shaped the town's identity.
Around 2009–2010, local cultural advocates, old-house owners, and community wisdom keepers recognized the need for conservation. Their concerns led to the formation of the Mae Hong Son Old House Club, one of the first community efforts to protect local heritage. In addition, Mae Hong Son faced challenges common to small heritage towns. Young people were leaving for education and work, raising concerns about continuity of local wisdom and cultural practices. Tourism growth also brought opportunities and risks, including pressure to reshape traditions to meet visitor expectations.
Municipal leaders shared these concerns and engaged elders and community leaders through informal morning tea gatherings known as Sapa Nam Miang, where participants exchanged local knowledge and discussed community issues. This dialogue brought community perspectives into cultural conservation.
These concerns highlighted that heritage protection could not rely on individual buildings or organizations alone. Long-term sustainability required collaboration across the community. The question was no longer whether action was needed, but how. Mae Hong Son needed a model to protect its physical townscape and living culture.

The Vision: What you set out to do
Mae Hong Son's vision was to become a Living Museum town. This did not mean turning the town into a static display, but managing it as a living cultural landscape where heritage, community well-being, urban development, and tourism could support one another.
The vision was built through cooperation among communities, municipal leaders, the Old House Club, the Sapa Nam Miang, temples, schools, and cultural practitioners.

To put this vision into practice, Mae Hong Son developed a Living Museum Model based on six connected elements: Remember (community memory), Map (heritage identification), Regulate (planning and protection), Activate (living cultural practice), Educate (knowledge transmission), and Guide (respectful visitor learning). Together, these elements help safeguard both tangible and intangible heritage while keeping culture active in everyday life.
The model reflects a simple principle: sustainable tourism should begin not with attracting visitors, but with protecting what keeps the place alive.

The Journey: How change happened
Mae Hong Son's journey toward becoming a Living Museum gradually unfolded through community initiative, municipal support, cultural documentation, planning tools, education, and tourism interpretation.
The first step was community action. Around 2009–2010, the formation of the Mae Hong Son Old House Club created a platform for old-house owners, cultural advocates, and residents seeking to conserve the identity of the old town. This helped shift attention from individual buildings to the broader cultural value of the townscape.
The municipality expanded this effort by supporting the Old House Club and engaging the Sapa Nam Miang (morning tea gathering). The municipality adapted this practice into a consultation mechanism for heritage conservation.
The next step was cultural mapping. Local experts, municipal authorities, and community representatives documented tangible and intangible heritage. More than forty cultural assets were identified, including temples, wooden houses, ceremonial routes, markets, festivals, performing arts, and the Tai Yai 12-Month Traditions. The results formed the municipal Living Museum Database, supporting planning, heritage management, and tourism interpretation.
Urban planning became another important tool. The municipality introduced guidelines to maintain the scale and character of traditional architecture and strengthened them through the Mae Hong Son Old Town District Regulation in 2018. The regulation established controls on building height, façade design, materials, and land use within the historic district.
The regulation has been applied in practice. The Old House Club participated in discussions with a new 7-Eleven store, resulting in façade adaptations that better reflected the old town's character. The Old Town Conservation and Development Subcommittee also reviewed a post office design and requested revisions to comply with architectural guidelines. These examples show how planning controls guide development while respecting the historic townscape.
Landscape management also became part of the approach. Around Nong Chong Kham Lake, the municipality improved greenery, public spaces, and key viewpoints to maintain the town's visual identity.
Mae Hong Son also continued to support living traditions through festivals, rituals, and community participation. Poy Sang Long is one example. The ceremony involves families, temples, elders, monks, community groups, and the municipality, rotating among six communities and including processions through local streets and cultural sites. Such activities keep traditions alive as part of everyday community life.

Tourism is managed through respect and learning. Visitors are encouraged to dress appropriately, observe ceremonies respectfully, and understand local traditions before participating.
Another important mechanism is the Living Museum Coordination Center. It supports activities linked to the 12-month traditions, including music, dance, cultural events, and community performances. The center also provides visitor information grounded in local values and serves as a shared space for cultural activities and community exchange.
Education is a key mechanism for passing heritage knowledge to future generations. Five schools have integrated learning linked to intangible cultural heritage into the lower-secondary curriculum. By connecting local culture with formal education, Mae Hong Son helps younger generations understand and continue traditions that shape the town's identity.
Through these steps, Mae Hong Son's Living Museum developed into a practical system connecting community memory, cultural mapping, urban planning, living traditions, visitor learning, and youth education.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
Mae Hong Son's main achievement is that the Living Museum concept has evolved into a practical governance model for sustainable heritage management. The town has connected community memory, cultural documentation, urban planning, education, visitor learning, and community participation into one working system.
More than 40 tangible and intangible cultural assets have been documented in the municipal Living Museum Database, providing an evidence base for planning, heritage management, and tourism interpretation. Heritage protection has also been strengthened through the Mae Hong Son Old Town District Regulation, introduced in 2018, which guides building height, façade design, materials, and land use within the historic district.
The model has influenced real development decisions, including design adjustments to a 7-Eleven store and revisions to a post office building to better reflect the character of the old town.
At the same time, living traditions remain active and community-led. The Tai Yai 12-Month Traditions continue to follow the local cultural calendar, while Poy Sang Long remains rooted in cooperation among families, temples, elders, and local communities.
Cultural transmission has been strengthened through school-based learning on intangible cultural heritage, while the Living Museum Coordination Center supports cultural activities, community exchange, and respectful visitor learning.
Mae Hong Son's work has received national recognition in 2025, including the Thailand Culture for SDGs Award and the Sustainable Environment City Award at the local level. Together, these achievements demonstrate a measurable and replicable model for small heritage towns seeking to balance cultural conservation, community well-being, and sustainable tourism.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn
Mae Hong Son's experience offers important lessons for small heritage towns.

First, heritage protection should begin with people. The commitment of old-house owners, cultural advocates, elders, and residents laid the foundation for conservation and strengthened policy.
Second, heritage should be understood as a living landscape. In Mae Hong Son, culture exists not only in temples and old houses, but also in markets, ceremonial routes, public spaces, festivals, schools, community relationships, and daily life. Protecting monuments alone is not enough.
Third, urban planning can support cultural sustainability. Regulations, architectural guidelines, building controls, and landscape management help development while protecting the identity of the old town.
Fourth, cultural tourism requires visitor learning. Visitors are encouraged to understand and respect ceremonies such as Poy Sang Long, helping preserve their meaning and dignity.
Fifth, cultural continuity needs institutions. The Old House Club, Living Museum Database, planning regulations, Coordination Center, schools, temples, and community groups work together to sustain heritage.
For other destinations, Mae Hong Son's model can be summarized in six steps: remember community memory & knowledge, map cultural assets, protect the setting, keep culture active, teach the next generation, and guide visitors respectfully.
The key lesson is simple: a Living Museum is created by a community that continues to care for its place.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact
The lasting impact of Mae Hong Son's story is a replicable model for small heritage towns. Nearby subdistricts—Pa Bong, Pang Moo, Mok Champae, and Huai Pha—are showing strong interest in adopting the Mae Hong Son approach, reflecting its growing ripple effect.
It shows that heritage conservation can go beyond monuments and become part of everyday governance. Old houses, cultural routes, public spaces, festivals, schools, tourism interpretation, landscape management, and urban regulations are integrated through a Living Museum approach.
The model strengthens collaboration among communities, elders, cultural practitioners, schools, municipal authorities, temples, tourism stakeholders, and visitors, each with clearer roles in sustaining local identity.
The Living Museum Coordination Center supports cultural activities, learning, meetings, and community participation, keeping the system active in daily life.
For younger generations, cultural learning is embedded in school curricula linking heritage with sustainability. For visitors, tourism emphasizes respectful observation.
Mae Hong Son shows a Living Museum is not a single institution, but a town-wide system where culture is documented, protected, practiced, taught, and shared, while remaining a living home.

Awards or Certifications
- Thailand Culture for SDGs Award, Ministry of Culture (2025)

- Sustainable Environment City Award at the local level, Department of Climate Change and Environment (2025)

Web Articles
- Mae Hong Son Living Museum (https://museum.mmhs.go.th/data/)
- Cultural Heritage Mapping of Mae Hong Son Old Town and Architectural Design Guidelines (https://museum.mmhs.go.th/museum/city/)

Other Relevant Links
https://www.mmhs.go.th/news/detail/349/data.html
https://www.mmhs.go.th/success/detail/11
https://law.onep.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/law10.25.pdf
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QkbEPTvcpI

Quotes or Testimonials
1. Grandpa Lert (Boonlert Wirattanaporn), a folk wisdom teacher and president of the Old House Conservation Club, said:
“I have never thought of selling or demolishing this house, even though the maintenance cost of an old wooden house is very high, because I want to preserve it for future generations so they have the opportunity to see it.”

2. Assistant Professor Dr. Pun Thiangburanatham, Faculty of Engineering, Chiang Mai University, described Mae Hong Son as:
“Mae Hong Son represents one of the last strongholds of living cultural heritage.”

3. Puck Puck, a visitor to the Living Museum Coordination Center, wrote on Facebook (18 October 2025):
“If you want to get to know Mae Hong Son better, this is the place to visit. The Living Museum, located in the town center, is an excellent place to learn about the history, traditions, culture, and attractions of Mae Hong Son. The staff were friendly and informative, and I came away with a great deal of knowledge about the province.”

4. Kamonrat Pear, a visitor to Nong Chong Kham Lake, wrote on Google Maps:
“The atmosphere at Nong Chong Kham Lake during the transition into winter is lovely. The weather is pleasant, there are many activities to enjoy, and people gather by the lake to have coffee at the nearby cafés. It is a very relaxing experience, especially on weekends.”