



DESIGNING AWARENESS: Putting Harddonechan Island on the Map



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INTRODUCTION:

The island of Harddonechan in Vientiane, Laos is in many ways a tropical paradise. It has rich, fertile land for growing a variety of crops. It is located conveniently near the center of the city, yet is isolated enough to enjoy a slower, quieter, and healthier quality of life. The air is cleaner than in the city, there is virtually no crime. The villagers live well-constructed houses and enjoy a middle class lifestyle. The bonds between them are close. The inhabitants of this island value this lifestyle, and maintaining it is more important to them than any changes they would make. Unfortunately, this is exactly the problem they face.

The Lao government has also discovered the value of this site, and has recently chosen it for a development project. The first phase, a fourteen-story five-star hotel (twice as tall as any building in the country), is already underway on a fast-track construction schedule, and will host the 2004 ASEAN Summit in October. Following this, the Malaysian developer of the project will likely be given rights to develop the rest of the island, with other tourist-oriented facilities and high-end housing, completely displacing the existing village. An initial masterplan has already been completed. Because of the land rights laws in Lao, the villagers are basically powerless. They pay for the right to inhabit the land, but the government owns it, and can reclaim it with only three months notice.

The aim of the government is of course not to simply displace its people at will. An important opportunity for the development of the city arose, and they felt that it could not be passed up. The major problems are 1) the level of knowledge that the government officials and Malaysian developers possess about what actually exists on the island, 2) the communication between the government and the approximately 400 villagers about the future of the island, and 3) The 'low profile' of the village, while adding to the serene nature of the place, lowers the perceived value within the city. In conversations with both the developers and government officials, it was clear that decisions about the development project thus far have been made without even a visit to the village. The project manager for the Malaysian developer took a shot-in-the-dark guess that there were 20 houses on the island, while there are in fact 82. A government official told us quite confidently that *no one* lives on the island.



PROJECT:

Building on our group work while in Laos, I have formulated a plan to 'market' the island as an asset to the city, and to show the potential for a future quite different from the current plan that is beneficial to both the villagers, and the city of Vientiane. The first part of this plan involves the design of brochures showing the inherent qualities of the island, which will attract the attention of incoming tourists, therefore adding instant value to the village. At the same time these brochures can be distributed to Vientiane residents and government officials, to educate them on what is there.

Second, a design for the adaptive reuse of three abandoned concrete water towers on the site is a focus of the plan, showing them as opportunities for creating an unobtrusive tourism infrastructure (i.e. a restaurant, information kiosks, etc.). A supplemental photo montage will show how the government's relatively small investment in the improvement of the existing island (such as paving the road) can make the island a tourist-friendly destination, while at the same time greatly improving the lives of the inhabitants of Harddonechan.

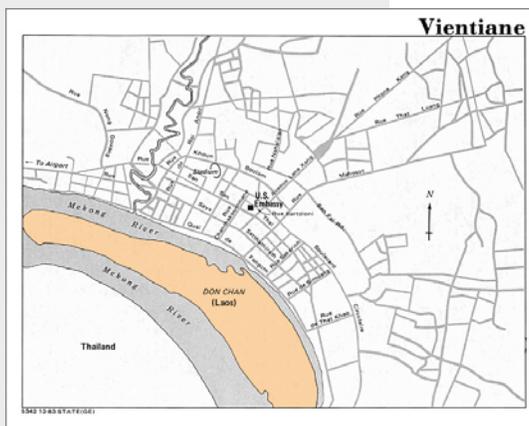
Lastly, I will briefly discuss other marketing methods which would work well in conjunction with my plan to increase Harddonechan's perceived value to the city.

Located near the center of Vientiane, Harddonechan Island provides an opportunity for a **complete experience** of Lao culture.

Cross the footbridge to experience the beauty and tranquility of the island in the Mekong...

It's just minutes from your guesthouse! Don't miss it!

Harddonechan Island



Paradise in the heart of Vientiane

Be greeted by the **welcoming** and **hospitable** residents of the island.



Learn about traditional and new organic **farming techniques**.



See traditional Lao **architecture** and local construction methods.



Learn about the French Colonial **history** of the country and island.



Sample authentic Lao **cuisine** made right before your eyes.



Witness the making of and purchase authentic Lao **products**.





Be greeted by the **friendly** and **warm** residents of the island.

Learn about traditional and new **organic** **agriculture**.

See traditional Lao **architecture** and local construction methods.

Learn about the French Colonial **history** of the country and island.

Witness the making of and purchase authentic Lao **products**.

Sample authentic Lao **culinary** made right before your eyes.

It's just minutes from the guesthouse! Don Chan



PHOTO MONTAGE NOTES:

The following photo montages illustrate possibilities for the future development of the island, which does not displace any residents, and in fact benefits the residents as well as the government.

Tower 1 The main tower at the entry to the site (on the city side) soars over a city which has no more than 7 stories. The montage shows this tower transformed into what could become the premiere dining establishment in Vientiane, with rooftop seating and magnificent views over the agricultural fields, the island, the Mekong River, and the city. When painted the colors of the Lao flag, it is impossible to miss.

Tower 2 On the other side of the bridge is a smaller tower which is also abandoned. For this I envision a tourist information kiosk, a welcome center as tourists enter the site that distributes materials of various types to interested visitors. This can also act as a rendezvous point for visitors.

Tower 3 The third tower, deeper into the center of the Village, is directly across from one of the best panoramic views of the Mekong on the island. This is a logical stopping point along the path for visitors, who would be served refreshments and given the opportunity to buy local vegetables from a vendor in the tower.

Road Paving This montage intends to show what a huge effect a relatively small upgrade by the government can have on the island. Paving the road not only solves the dust problem that residents complain of, but it also gives the island a more tourist-friendly mode of circulation.



BEFORE

AFTER



BEFORE



AFTER



BEFORE

AFTER

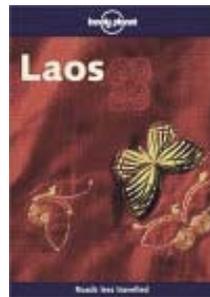


BEFORE

AFTER



OTHER MARKETING TECHNIQUES:



POSTERS: Can be used in prominent areas of the city to gain the attention of both residents and tourists.

PACKAGE DESIGN: By professionally packaging handmade products from the island (i.e. soap), the product becomes marketable to a much wider customer base, and can be an excellent alternative source of income that is not dependent on the land.

GUIDEBOOKS: Almost every tourist visiting a new place carries a guidebook. Being featured in one of these is almost a guarantee of an instant influx of tourists. The key is to keep the passage obscure enough that the island does not become trampled by backpackers...



CONCLUSION:

Communication of this type could be an important step in creating a future that is more desirable than the current plan, which calls for the villagers to be relocated to an undisclosed location where their agricultural livelihood will most likely disappear and their neighborly bonds will be broken. Increased awareness by all parties involved would both influence future decision making about the development project, and be a catalyst for better lines of communication between the government and the people. This must be carried out sensitively, however. It is important to avoid turning the island into a theme park, which is basically what the current proposal does. Though some changes are unavoidable, interventions should try to improve rather than disrupt the current lifestyle on the island. At the same time, the proposals such as the ones I have made should provide incentive for the government and/or the developer to change their current plans.

