This project investigates the impact of UNESCO’s “World Heritage Site” designation on local communities through the lens of Phimai, an ordinary town in northeast Thailand in the center of which is a major ancient Khmer temple. The architecturally stunning site awaits presentation to UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee by Thailand. I am interested in the “before” and “after.”

The World Heritage List (WHL) recognizes the “Outstanding Universal Value” of selected cultural (and natural) sites. Admission to the WHL is an arduous process requiring a significant outlay of time, professional talent, and financial resources by the nominating country. If the nomination is successful, that effort is well rewarded by the international prestige or “cultural capital” the nation gains and by the increase in tourism that usually follows inscription, for the site can then be competitively marketed as a World Heritage site, a destination brand guaranteeing its quality and distinguishing it from other sites.

Heritage scholars are increasingly concerned with the impact of WHL inscription on those communities near or embedded in World Heritage sites. Although the Master Site Management Plan required by UNESCO is supposed to recognize or anticipate and propose solutions for problems attendant to the nomination, in reality the national push for inscription on the WHL usually glosses over the negative impacts inscription might generate, particularly for local population as stakeholders.

The official sectors promoting a WHL nomination typically emphasize the potential benefits the WHL designation can bring through increased tourism and its related economic development: more local people will be employed in the tourism sector; national, regional and municipal governments will invest at least some tourism revenue in infrastructural improvements (such as communication, transportation, schools, water systems). However, tourism and economic development are not necessarily problem-free. Many case studies document a range of problems in communities following WHL inscription, particularly in less developed countries.

I conducted fieldwork in Phimai in Summer 2011. The town is an ideal case study for the investigation of the WHL process and its impacts. My project looked at the social/cultural sustainability of the living community of Phimai (the primary stakeholders) and considered the potential cultural, financial and environmental costs and benefits of the tourism development that will occur with the WHL inscription. Once the temple is listed I will return to Phimai for follow-up fieldwork to evaluate the impact of inscription on the built and social environment.