

Report on The Urban Research Plaza's 9th Urban Culture Forum

Thailand March 3 - 4, 2011

Alan Kinear International Editor

The 9th Urban Culture Forum is an annual international event sponsored by Japan's Osaka City University and Chulalongkorn University with the aim to encourage researchers, artists, and those involved in urban planning to seek cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural practices aimed at fostering the development of vibrant, livable cities and promoting cultural continuity. It is held during the first week of March in Bangkok, Thailand on the campus of Chulalongkorn University.

This setting provided the stage for presentations that address the following questions:

- What is the role of the arts in urban planning and community development?
- How can the arts contribute to the creative re-imagining and revitalization of the city?
- What are the good practices of sustainable city renewal?
- What role can artists play in shaping the landscape and soundscape of the city?
- How can the arts contribute to building social cohesion and bridging cultural divisions?
- How can the art communities contribute to cultural continuity?

- How can the arts stimulate participatory citizenship and social interaction?
- What role(s) can culture and the arts play in stimulating economic development?
- How can cities provide spaces for alternative and experimental art forms and activities?
- What are good practices in a city's administration of the arts?

This year's ninth urban research plaza's forum commenced a day earlier than usual with the addition of three per-forum workshops from a group of Norwegian presenters offering dynamic group interactions and discussion. The well-traveled



Figure 1. H.E.Ms. Katja Nordgaard, Ambassador of The Kingdom of Norway with Professor Pirom Kamolratanakul, MD President, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Saemund Fisvik from the Norcode organization highlighted issues related to copyrights and intellectual property for artists and performers. Whereas Stein Olav Henrichsen, the director of the Edvard Munch Museum in Oslo discussed the ever-expanding role modern museums can play in revitalizing the urban core through a close working relationship with its community.

Thirdly, the irrepressible Kjell Skyllstad ended the day with a spirited and thought provoking introduction to the intriguing field of soundscapes that would later be revisited through Benjamin Tausig's presentation on his soundwalk research in Bangkok.

The Forum itself began with a welcoming by the Dean of Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts Suppakorn Disatapundhu and Norway's ambassador H.E. Katja Nordgaard who symbolized a renewal of the cultural links

between Thailand's Bussakorn Binson and Kjell Skjellstad of Norway, which was initiated more than ten years ago.



Figure 2. Professor Dr. Suppakorn Disatapundhu, Dean, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Chulalongkorn University's President Pirom Kamolratanakul began the formal proceedings followed by a pair of keynote presentations by Japan's Osaka City University's Masayuki Sasaki entitled "Urban Regeneration through Cultural Creativity and Social Inclusion in Japan" and Bangkok Thailand's Vice Director of the Culture, Sports and Tourism Department discussing the city's mission to promote art and culture.

Throughout the first day, presenters from Japan, Norway, and Thailand explored the role of art in urban planning, cross-cultural workshops, collaborative networks, transnational political expression, and as a managerial tool for cooperative administration.

This Forum also provides an opportunity for younger researchers to present their thesis work or graduate students their projects. Two multimedia presentations of projects by Chulalongkorn University's reflected the integration of Thai traditional culture with modern technology. One was a blend of virtual reality and gaming to

produce an interactive virtual tourist and tour guide product. The second blended Western and Eastern beliefs into a controlled and multimedia-enhanced environmental space to alter the reality of urban dwellers with the objectives of reducing stress and increasing health.

From Japan Chisako Takashima brought to light the crucial and complex supply-demand issue of the survivability of supporting industries and craftsmen to traditional theatrical art forms and other traditional arts. While, Hilde Kvam of Norway examined the impacts of governmental policy on re-establishing cultural traditions and expression in Malaysia's Kota Bahru. Thailand's Suradech Chotudomphant delivered an very engaging discussion and reflection on the portrayal of modern urban Thai culture in contemporary literature. The psychological links of identity, creativity, and consumerism as well as posing the question of who influences whom – the city influences the inhabitants? or is it visa versa? Benjamin Tausig from the United States presented his initial findings and explained his methodology for his soundwalk and soundscape research along with some intriguing cultural distinctions.

Monvilai Rojanatanti of Thailand presented her novel museum outreach program for bringing art awareness to the public and thereby foster and educate a new



Figure 3. Professor Dr. Kjell Skjellstad, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

generation of museum patrons. While Bussakorn Binson also of Thailand, described another form of cultural outreach by expanding on her workshop model used for building cross-cultural bridges in the world's urban schools.

The German born Martin Venzky-Stalling discussed what defines a creative city and the collaborative challenges facing the community as they attempt to balance their cultural heritage, economic interests and the needs of its people. Then a few presenters later Atchara Tejapaibul, as the long-standing director of the Bangkok



Figure 4. Associate Professor Dr. Bussakorn Binson, Co-Director of Urban Research Plaza, Bangkok, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Symphony Orchestra Foundation, conferred her personal and practical perspectives on how she effectively navigated the dual tasks of providing cultural continuity within a viable business.

Brynjar Bjerkem a Norwegian cultural anthropologist, brought to fore the concept of transnational art with its multifaceted-dimensions of hybridization of local heritage through the eyes of a culturally diverse audience. Brynjar's topic was preceded by hundreds of years as Thailand's Pichai Thurongkinanon detailed the symbolism in Thai temple murals from a time where they served as a primary means of communication to those who were mostly illiterate.

Japan's Takeshi Ebine discussed the relationship between art and the renewal of urban communities while Tomonaga Honiguchi detailed a comparison between knowledge creation in the arts versus that in the Japanese automobile industry as both embody creative collaborative networks. Kjell Skyllstad imparted his views on musicians as managers and mediators ending with a query wondering if it is an accident that effective leaders such as the former American president Bill Clinton and Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej are musicians?

After the individual presentations two panel discussions were brought to life by Chulalongkorn University's dynamic Prapon Kumjim and Deputy Dean Pornprapit Phoasavadi.

On the second day two panel discussions were brought to life by Chulalongkorn University's dynamic Prapon Kumjim moderating the young researcher's panel and Deputy Dean Pornprapit Phoasavadi presiding over a discussion on cultural continuity considerations. These discussions lead into Shin Nakagawa's closing where he echoed comments by Masayuki Sasaki who expressed that "the most important thing for the promotion of creative cities is the establishment of re-research and educational programs for developing the necessary human resources." While Bussakorn Binson and Kjell Skyllstad reinforced the concept that the arts can serve as an engine for driving a creative society and international relations, Takeshi Ebine reminded the audience of the art-within-context view by cautioning against an art-centric focus.



Figure 5. Professor Dr. Shin Nakagawa, Co-Director of Urban Research Plaza, Bangkok, Urban Research Plaza Osaka City University, Japan

The Forum concluded with Shin Nakagawa putting forth a few foundation questions for building a creative city through utilizing the potential of art and artistic creativity to enhance social inclusion as well as community-based arts management. He asked, is the process a top-down or bottom-up undertaking and who are its decision makers?