Towards a Sustainable Play-Ground: Performance Ecosystems

for a Livable Bangkok Neighborhood[1]

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Abstract

This article examines an effort to turn urban research into creative placemaking by using performances to make a livable Bangkok neighborhood more vibrant. Research explored diverse stakeholders of Samyan-Banthat Thong in central Bangkok during COVID-19. This exploration found opportunities to link the neighborhood's entrepreneurs, students, visitors and property managers, and discovered key characteristics of the complex and changing neighborhood. We used this knowledge to design a small festival bringing performing artists into the area's main park and to important sites surrounding it for a weekend of live performances, workshops and demonstrations. By using performance to attract diverse publics to the neighborhood, the festival marked a re-opening of the neighborhood and was a gateway to post-pandemic participatory cultural life. The results enhanced the livelihood of a complex Bangkok neighborhood, showing the viability of this work. It also developed flexible tools for use in other urban spaces, and nurtured cultural entrepreneurs able to use this community-centered performing arts approach to enhance other Thai urban settings.

Keywords: *Performing Arts, Placemaking, Cultural Ecosystem, Theatre Festival, Sustainability, Livable City, Bangkok*

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Introduction

Live performances can help to enhance the value and vitality of a city. Organizing, supporting, and celebrating live cultural offerings through local events and festivals can invigorate urban communities. This idea has been tied to a spectrum of views on how to assess the value and vitality of urban artistic and cultural activity. On one end, urban spaces are seen as empty areas that can be filled with commodifiable activities and sites, including heritage spaces and cultural practices, which can provide sources of revenue through tourism, along with other forms of consumption. This view sees the value of urban areas as so many *"experiencescapes"* that can be filled with various cultural commodities (O'Dell & Billing, 2005). These commodities can be tied to city branding, tourism, urban regeneration, and effective marketing. At the other end of the spectrum, urban spaces are seen as sites for creatively negotiating forms of value that emerge from designing new ways to imagine and produce attempts to order, sanitize, or market city spaces. This *relational view* is based on values tied to spatially productive processes in particular locations. This latter view sees open-ended urban spaces working by their "throwntogetherness," meaning that there is "the chance of space [which] may set us down next to the unexpected neighbour" (Massey, 2005:149). The latter relational view of spatial value shows how urban spaces are parts of ongoing processes of cultural circulation, configuration, and reconfiguration. Here, urban space is less an empty location waiting to be filled with culture, and more of a productive, active site where culture is already happening, encouraging cultural ineraction and enhancement. In this relational view, the performing arts may add to processes of cultural placemaking through lively forms of "community engagement."[2] An urban festival with live performances may enhance urban value and vitality, as it is an agent of urban identity formation and community encounters, and as a force that draws visitors and generates income.

Live performance events can help to enhance the productive potential of an urban space in multiple ways. Performance activities in cities work in complex ways and involve aspects of both income generation and cultural participation. Jen Harvie's 2009 book *Theatre & the City* looks beyond cultural materialist analyses. She sees urban performances as more than just money-makers or attracting visitors, and not merely in a performative relation to creating spaces of hope by urban performances that free opportunities for social and political agency. Beyond this apparent dichotomy, she avoids either a pessimistic neoliberal interpretation or a purely utopian liberatory interpretation of the place of performances in cities.

This article uses a relational approach to examine a Bangkok urban cultural space in relation to creative placemaking project that made a small festival near the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. This experimental festival in central Bangkok helped to plant the seeds of urban cultural placemaking, by embedding performance events into a changing urban neighborhood. It draws on grounded research, which sought to consider how the performing arts could help the Samyan-Banthat Thong neighborhood around Chulalongkorn University become a new cultural area and how local visitors and businesses and to add to its cultural value via community engagement.

The research first sought to identify key features of the Samyan-Banthat Thong community, located between Rama I Road and Rama IV Road in central Bangkok, and then to explore how the performing arts could help to enliven the area as a new urban tourist spot.

The process identified and developed a network of stakeholders in this space, ranging from those in government to those in university to those in the private sector who are committed to developing the area into a sustainable and creative neighborhood and performing artists. Research also aimed to investigate the area's visitors, customers and stakeholders to learn how live performances could help to enhance engagement in the area for the future. The research project had three main results. First, it made a small performing arts festival as *an example of creative place-making* grounded in and enlivening Samyan-Banthat Thong that served as its gateway into a post-COVID "new normal" world where live public performances mattered to its thriving. It secondly generated *a toolbox for creative place-making* that could be used in other parts of Thailand. Thirdly, *it nurtured a group of talented place-makers* who were able to design locally-grounded and locally-relevant performance festivals in other places.

A Framework for Designing Urban Performance Festivals as Cultural Placemaking

Performance festivals can help enhance city life by turning urban spaces into cultural places. While urban festivals are often framed as part of contemporary market-based principles shaping urban identities and places, culturally productive aspects of performance-centered festivals are also key parts of creative placemaking processes.[3] This view builds on Henri Lefebvre (1974 [1991]) who sees space as socially produced. Doreen Massey further notes how space is a "product of interrelations… constituted through interactions" (Massey, 2005:9). As part of a dynamic social process, space is always "in-the-making," as an ongoing development being generated through interactions that are never finished and never closed. In this view, a city is always *becoming* "through circulation, combination and recombination of people and things" (Crang, 2001:190). The circulations, combinations and remixes co-produce space as a place, showing that "identities/entities, the relations 'between' them, and the spatiality which is part of them, are all co-constitutive" (Massey, 2005:10). Identities are integral to that space, both rising within and shaping the space as a *place* that people care about. Still, space is often contested and open to negotiation, marked by an active diversity of conduct. In short, far from being an empty and neutral frame filled with people, things and events, space forms a dynamic performative force that contributes to producing people, things, events and identities, as well as meanings and values, and to generating creative places that people come to care about. Performance festivals can help to enhance the forces of urban space and to shape the identities tied to that *space-becoming-place* as one way to do "creative placemaking."

Highlighting some distinctive features of recent urban festivals as potential solutions to city problems, Davies (2015:533) noted that "[m]any contemporary attempts to resolve the problems of the modernist city has been the relatively limited attention paid by most urban scholars to features of the city that relate to sensory not material attributes, to consumption not production, pleasure not work, and to episodic rather than permanent characteristics. Festive events in cities combine these four traits. These are activities consciously planned to last a limited time to mark special occasions, or to promote specific events, often using spectacles and parades designed to create excitement and joy, as well as achieving cultural, social and economic goals." What is more, Chalcraft and Magaudda (2011:174) remarks how "festivals can be seen and analysed as terrains where different cultural, aesthetic and political patterns and values temporarily converge and clash, constantly creating, stabilizing and redefining the setting of festival interaction." This metaphor of

a festival as a vital contact zone sees festival spaces as marked by negotiations between converging and diverging interests and values; it draws attention to the nondeterministic and dynamic quality of festivals, and able to create nuanced and enduring meanings. In a Thai context, an urban festival resonates with the energy local placemaking force of a traditional "ngan wat" (Buddhist temple fair) that are still commonplace in rural Thailand.

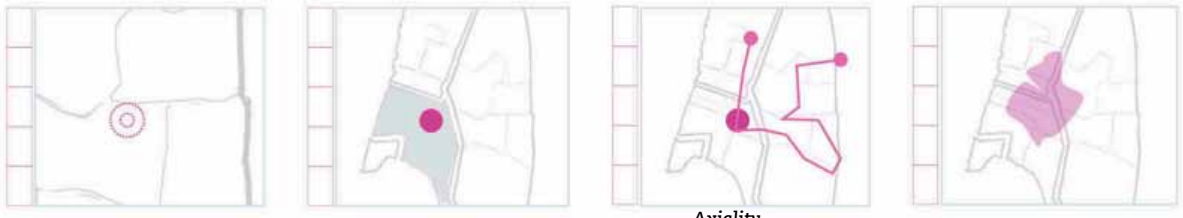
Urban festivals can create distinctive and innovative ways for connecting urban spaces to cultural activities and performance events as part of placemaking processes. Based on negotiations between converging and diverging interests and values of participants underscores how festivals are open-ended and dynamic processes. The focused cultural intensity and spontaneous "throwntogetherness" offered by festivals in urban spaces enables heightened aesthetic and emotional experiences which are fundamentally multi-sensory, depending on diverse ways of engaging the body, including "the impact rhythm has on the flesh" (Duffy, et al., 2011:17). By helping to produce new types of bodily sensation, movement and emotion with other bodies engaged in similar things, the festival space can contribute to making the participatory process and site extraordinary. Urban festival spaces can also provide new types of identity construction and play which is based on more participatory experience that differs from walking through a mall, going to a large mainstream event, by becoming a site for constructing and performing social identities and differences. As a site for potential new forms of participation and inclusion – in its design and openness to diversity – a festival enables new active modes of participation and cultural consumption and the creation of sensory and embodied value. Urban festivals can thus help to produce new forms of value and new places based on a relational view of space that reworks standard experiences and identities.

This article will show how field research discovered the urban structure of a Bangkok neighborhood that became the basis of a small performance festival held after the worst of the COVID pandemic. Performances in urban neighborhoods are a kind of city activity that may be differentiated. At least four types of urban aesthetic activity can be tied to performances: a) a performance festival as a flagship event; b) performance spaces related to urban monuments like theatres; c) performances as locations of subversive art; and d) performances as sites of education and therapy media (Yavo-Ayalon, Alon-Mozes & Aharon-Gutman, 2020). The small Bangkok festival discussed here has features of type a) and b) – a flagship cultural event and also a type of living urban focal point, forming a site to underscore involvement in lively cultural activities, and as a site for embody and engaging forms of post-pandemic cultural capital.

The research that led to a small experimental festival for Samyan-Banthat Thong in 2022 led to a type of flagship event which highlights vitality and creativity of its practices (Florida, 2005). It aims to create an attractive urban image for the neighborhood as a living and creative location (Quinn & Wilks, 2017). The festival was designed around a spatial arrangement and adaptation of central city space, and this contributed to the marketing and branding of the neighborhood and its unique features. The concentration of festival activities in time and space also contributes to shaping local cultural identities and communal values. The social perspective emphasizes that in festival times and places, city spaces are reshaped in a manner that privileges festival audiences and contains them within parts of the city that are appropriated for cultural consumption and at the same time excludes and

marginalizes local residents (Jamieson 2004; Willems-Braun 1994).

This article links an experimental post-pandemic urban performance festival to an embedding of performance activities into an urban neighborhood space over a two-day period. Designing a performance festival in a neighborhood of sites and activities helps to visualize situated performances in a concrete way. The relation of urban space and the performance festival are examined based on various spatial types found in the city neighborhood: *enclosure, centrality, axiality, and permeability.*[4] The performance activities of a given festival depend on the urban physical and social structure and are tied to their immediate urban surroundings. The festival considered here used aspects of all four types of this socio-spatiality as visualized below.



Enclosure
The event, space or place based on physical features and the means by which the area is contained

Centrality
Location of the space in the urban context including the neighborhood features and performance form

Axiality
The movement of users (management, major figures, performers, artists, admin) to and from the performances

Permeability
The range of impact of event pedestrian movement audience distribution

Figure 1. Spatial-social categories for analysis (from Yavo-Ayalon, Alon-Mozes & Aharon-Gutman, 2020).

Case Study: The Experimental Performance Festival in Samyan-Banthat Thong

The Samyan-Banthat Thong neighborhood includes several socio-spatial areas that can be identified through the distinct modes of *enclosure, centrality, axiality,* and *permeability* which were used in the design of the performance activities for an experimental community-centered festival.[5] These modes point to how people kept in, repeated, passed through, or contest structures of this urban neighborhood during the festival. We wanted to use performance activities to expand beyond the enclosed boundaries of the performance spaces or events and to expand their socio-spatial impact to the larger urban structures. The design of the festival drew on these diverse ways of engaging performances in this neighborhood by involving both local stakeholders and outside visitors in this process. This helped to promote urban vitality and the post-pandemic lively image of the changed neighborhood. We saw the effects in the results of ur experimental festival, which helped to connect relationships between performance activities and the surrounding urban space. We found that the various neighborhood's performance activities had positive effects and few negative effects on the immediate urban surroundings of the neighborhood. We also discovered how performance activities relate to other urban spaces.

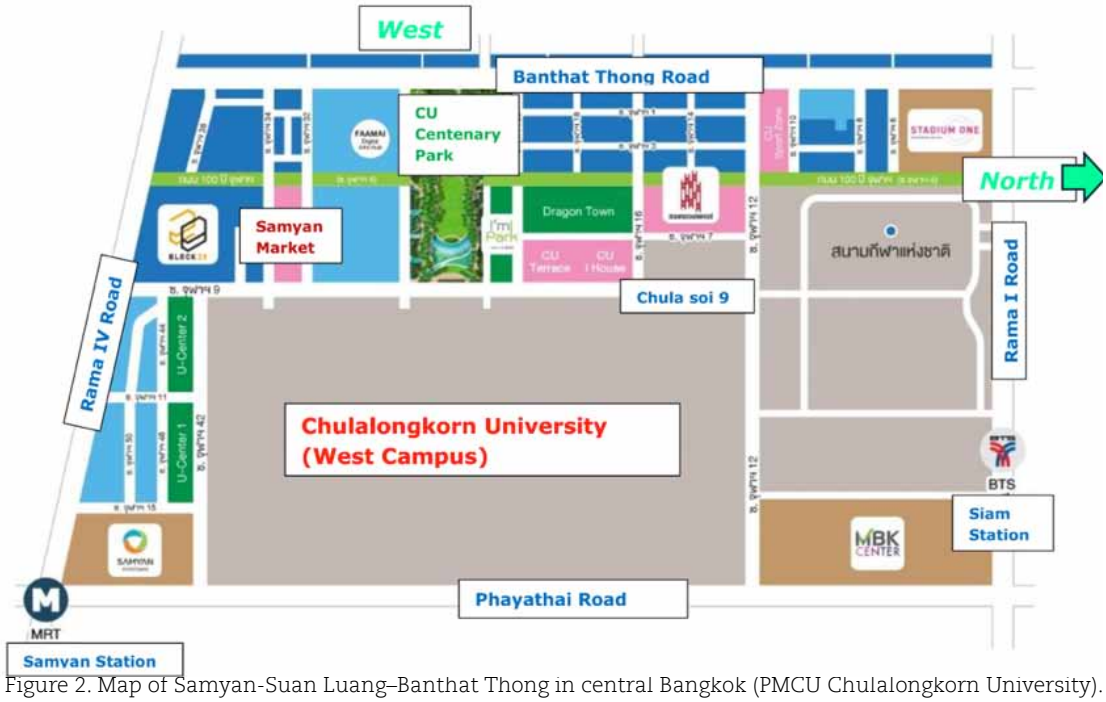


Figure 2. Map of Samyan-Suan Luang–Banthat Thong in central Bangkok (PMCU Chulalongkorn University).



Figure 3. Map of Samyan - Suan Luang – Banthat Thong (PMCU Chulalongkorn University). Samyan - Banthat Thong: From a Livable City to a Living Community.

The project researched the Samyan-Banthat Thong neighborhood in central Bangkok amid the third wave of COVID-19 in 2021 as a possible place-making site. Research results were used to design a small performance festival called *Samyan La-Lan Jai* that aimed to make a more sustainable and interactive cultural zone for a more vibrant neighborhood held April 2-3, 2022.[6] The goal of our research was to look for how a performance festival could turn Samyan from a liveable city neighborhood into a more vital, living community after the COVID pandemic.

Samyan-Banthat Thong is a culturally diverse and rapidly changing community in the Pathumwan district of central Bangkok. For decades, it consisted of an old Teochew (Chaozhou) Chinese community who had moved southwest from the larger nearby Yaowarat Chinese community, which lay outside the old city of Bangkok but was near the Chao Phraya River. Settlers in Samyan built a shophouse area west of Chulalongkorn University. It is bordered on the north by the National Sport Stadium complex, and on the west by Hua Lampong, Bangkok's old state railway station. The area is easy to access via public transportation and private cars, and close to both the modern business center in the Silom area and to Wireless and Sathorn business districts to the southeast. It is also near the modern shopping district in Siam Square to the northeast and to residences and shopping centers on Sukhumvit Road further east.

Diverse ethnic and cultural groups have lived in this area and made it a vital community since the mid-20th century. It is home to many Chinese Thai families, large numbers of young university students, university workers, along with working Bangkokians and laborers from rural Thailand and nearby ASEAN countries. For decades its large Samyan fresh market and diverse inexpensive restaurants and food stalls attracted many, along with an old community-run Mazu temple and a Chinese tutelary god shrine, and a recently built Mazu shrine by Chulalongkorn University. Since the land of this area is owned by Chulalongkorn University, most of its residents live in small leased shophouses and run many types of businesses – from food to dressmaking to repair shops and from car equipment to sport equipment – with shop owners often living in the second or third floors of their leased spaces. Since 2000, the Samyan-Banthat Thong area has come to be surrounded by big modern shopping malls, hotels, residents and businesses leasing high buildings. The area has been one of the last to undergo a drastic urban transformation, so much of it remains an old traditional neighborhood.

Samyan-Banthat Thong has changed markedly since 2010. It is now conveniently connected to the metropolitan transportation system through links to the BTS Sky Train on the north and to the MRT subway system to the south. From around 2015, the university expanded west, building larger and taller buildings to accommodate new university functions, including large dormitories and faculty housing, a large public park, a large and a small mall. Refurbished shop areas along with new shop areas also opened to a range of shops and restaurants.

The diverse groups in the area include those who have lived there and moved around by leasing shophouses. As a vibrant area in the heart of Bangkok, it is home to many university students, who have lived with and been fed by shop owners for more than a century. The nearby area has become a new cultural and lifestyle center, close to the Bangkok Arts

and Cultural Center (BACC) on the north, a major hub for contemporary arts and home to the Bangkok Theatre Festival since 2011.

Recently, Property Management of Chulalongkorn University (PMCU) has begun developing a street from Banthat Thong to Suan Luang Square into a shopping and food district, open for new residents, a sports complex, medical business and a public park made for the Centenary celebration of Chulalongkorn University (officially opened on March 26, 2017). This area was designed to be greener, with small streets parallel with Banthat Thong street and limited vehicle access, designed for electric buses, bicycles and e-scooters run by the university. It is also increasingly becoming popular among students from Chulalongkorn university, as well as a green space for health and sports enthusiasts, regular and occasional customers who travel to find spaces that differ from more modern condo- and mall-centered areas. Using this more open and natural environment is also something common to the area's diverse residents, who enjoy the space for jogging, walking, and playing sports at the parks and the National Stadium.

The PMCU has been developing this area according to a "Samyan: A Smart Livable City" vision which aims for to be complete by 2037. It seeks to develop a high-tech with a mixed used urban space with high-rise buildings and green spaces.[7]

As part of these developments, since 2018 various art works and artists have also created works in this area. This includes the "Concert in the Park" performances by the Bangkok Metropolitan Orchestra (BMO) in the CU Centenary Park since 2019, the Life | Performance festival's live dance and traditional performances like Norah and Chinese opera in the Centenary Park, and Likay performances in the community near the Hualampong train station (October to December 2019), the FAAMAI (Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts Multidisciplinary Art Innovation Center) digital arts hub and showcase space next to the park which (built in early 2020 and removed in mid-2023).

Since early 2020, most projects and developments in the arts were shelved, postponed or put online due to the COVID-19 pandemic that shutdown Bangkok several times since March 2020 and required social distancing practices that made live interactive performances impossible.

From early 2022, after a large percentage of people were vaccinated for COVID-19, some public arts events have begun to be held or to open again. In mid-February 2022, a set of sculptures and installations, many lit at night, were distributed from Suan Luang Square through the Dragon Towns complex and Centenary Park, as the heart of the new Chula Art Park.[8] Other art and lifestyle events and exhibitions have started up again, such as street fairs and CU Centenary Park. The project we designed contributed to this post-pandemic re-opening of the neighborhood when we held it in early April 2022.

To explore the creative possibilities of these developments in Samyan-Banthat Thong, we developed a research project that focused on it as an area with high potential to become a creative urban tourism destination that the live performing arts could enhance and enliven after the pandemic. This area's growing recognition as a place for relaxation, comfort, and enjoyment, and its emerging place in the Bangkok development plan provides us a chance

to relate it to national policies on the creative economy, focusing on how to improve the urban economy by developing opportunities for live, public and participatory forms of creativity.

The Samyan-Banthat Thong Research Project

Our research project in Samyan-Banthat Thong began in the third COVID-19 wave in April 2021 and ran to June 2022 (see Figure 4 below). It sought to find out how the performing arts could help enliven the neighborhood and enhance its image as a new center of creative urban tourism. We first investigated the backgrounds, interests and aims of residents, workers and business owners in the community, along with researching frequent visitors to the area. Using data from our research with these diverse groups as stakeholders, we designed a small festival to suit the diverse communities' interests. Since the research project began during a new wave of the pandemic in Bangkok, much of Samyan-Banthat Thong was closed, and many stores could not survive. So it was a time of pandemic-driven change.

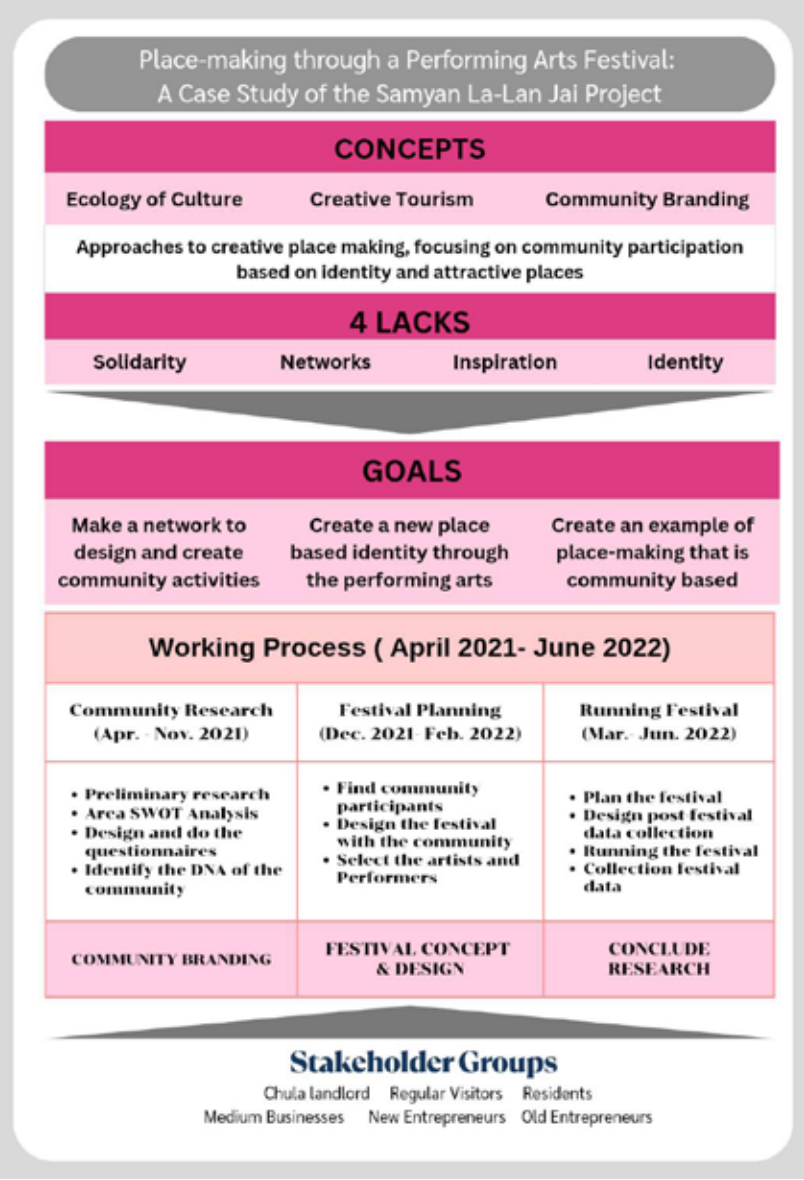


Figure 4. Research plan for the Sam Yan La-Lan Jai project and ts research process (April 2021-June 2022).

This research had four main aims:

1. To explore the main cultural features of Samyan-Banthat Thong communities as the basis of designing and creating a performance festival to make it a new urban tourist destination.
2. To develop a long-term destination development committee, including local administration stakeholders and the private sector.
3. To generate visitor feedback on the Samyan-Banthat Thong district from various stakeholders and potential festival audiences. This data would shape the festival's design and look to its long-term potential for curating suitable performing art festival activities.
4. To develop the Samyan-Banthat Thong district into a new Bangkok tourist destination.

We sought to listen and learn from the needs and interests of various stakeholders in the Samyan-Banthat Thong around the campus, so we could see what they felt could make the neighborhood a better space for their lives and work.

The research process consisted of community research (April-November 2021), festival planning (December 2021-Feburary 2022), and running the festival (March-June 2022).

Community Research: On the Values and Visions of Samyan-Banthat Thong People

We began the research in April to July 2021 by observing the neighborhood, its people and activities. After the government partly re-opened Bangkok in August 2021, and after people had better access to vaccines later that year, more visitors returned to Samyan-Banthat Thong. More restaurants opened, with more open-air eating, non-airconditioned eating places put tables in front of their air-conditioned rooms became normal. Take-home food and food delivery were still important parts of the university and community residents' lives, even as life started to become a bit more normal again.

From August to November 2021 we gathered quantitative and qualitative data from people who lived in, worked, and visited Samyan-Banthat Thong. We wanted to discover what kind of live performance festival to design that will be suitable for the area and those who live, work and visit there, and to engage local entrepreneurs. We surveyed 466 responses from people who live in and who visited the Samyan-Banthat Thong business area.[9] Due to COVID-19, we made an online survey for residents in the area but made paper surveys and did informal interviews with visitors. From the survey, we discovered that Samyan-Banthat Thong is a good alternative choice for visitors, since it has a wide variety of food choices that people can enjoy with friends in an open-air, inviting, and friendly environment. The variety of eating choices in a real homemade style of food makes people feel at ease. Many informants see it as a good place to relax with friends while not being so expensive. We also found that the most popular businesses in the area for half of the respondents, were local shops for food and desserts, while 23% liked the food stalls and 17% enjoyed the coffee shops. With all the modern shops in the area, 20% would come to Samyan-Banthat Thong for food and eating because of its prices and because it is also not too crowded and has open air seating.

The 466 people surveyed said that the activities and arts program they would be interested in are the following: music performance (32%), play performances and arts activities (30%), flea market and handmade arts (25%), and a few others. The performing arts that they

would be interested would be contemporary music performance, theatre for young people, traditional performances like Khon (classical masked dance) or a modern puppet show and a northeastern music concert in Morlam style.

Beside our surveys, we also did focus groups and interviews with 30 stakeholder businesses in the neighborhood which helped us to create small network of those interested in our work and to develop bonds of trust. We found that 20 business owners wanted to have more performing arts activities in the area, and three of them would like to try working with us in an experimental immersive play that will share and create stories and walking tour to three of their restaurants.

The focus groups helped us realize that most of the business owners are young and willing to be a part of planning to make the area become known and get attention of more Bangkokians. They also use and depend on social media advertising and access food online. Shops on Banthat Thong Road include many new startup food businesses that see a potential that we could learn about their expectations. This committed attitude make this area a better space for their lives as food business. The food street has many different food styles and eating concepts. It reflects not only different background and culture but young and new generations, ethnic groups who live and work hard on this street.

The businesses saw opportunities and their zone-grouping to keep their business strong and living through all the struggles. By interviewing the focus groups we could learn also about their concerns. The Property Management department of Chulalongkorn University (PMCU) has worked to promote the connecting area on the CU Centenary Road, which is a small street with trees connected to the CU Centenary Park.

Spaces and Offerings of the Samyan-Bangthat Thong Neighborhood
Aside from offering a variety of delicious food, what else Samyan-Banthat Thong can offer, and what can it offer to people in Bangkok? How can these values be enhanced?

CU Centenary Road, a quiet tree-lined street parallel street running from the National Stadium to the CU Centenary Park and beyond it to Rama IV runs through the Samyan-Banthat Thong area. This quiet street provides workers with spaces for urbanites to enjoy and meet with friends who spend time exercising and practice good health. The street provides a good way to link up with the BTS Sky Train system and link up with the rest of Bangkok.

The green CU Centenary Park offers the public a good opportunity for many different groups to use an unfamiliar ecosystem of green trees, wild plants, flowing water and an open space. The park attracts many from nearby university residences. Young people come to take pictures for their graduation, pre-wedding photos, for Cos play, and for a taste of the “wilderness.” Common people join in, including workers and business owners from the area, including at a small playground for children. It is a friendly space for dogs to run and for young people to play football each evening.

The Samyan-Banthat Thong area is also a district full of various businesses and places to relax. Evening exercise in the city center. We would like to shift the focus to support the lifestyle of urban people who seek more outdoor activities and to design a performance festival that is suitable for the area and the service users, as well as to create engagement with local entrepreneurs.

Cultural Features of the Samyan-Banthat Thong Neighborhood
Our surveys, interviews and focus groups found four distinct features of the neighborhood:

1. *Ease of access in a relaxed, easy-going area:* The neighborhood is well-connected to public transportation systems, road systems, and to local electric vehicles within the neighborhood. The laid-back and relaxed atmosphere accommodates participation by diverse groups of different backgrounds.

2. *Varied foodscape:* The Samyan-Banthat Thong local food shops offer many kinds of food. While some are well-established stores with a long histories, most are start-up businesses by young entrepreneurs, many with a Thai-Chinese identity. This gives many parts of the neighborhood a shared set of cuisine features in the area. It is supplemented by many new restaurants and foods – from Korean and Japanese to Isan food, roti, Western burgers and salads – which helps make the place a vibrant set of eating opportunities. Among the Chinese foods are Cantonese dim sum, Hainan chicken rice, Teochew duck and goose soup, rice soup, soymilk and many sweets. Different generations, food backgrounds and businesses help create an attractive foodscape for many in and out of the community.

3. *Authenticity:* The "realness" or genuine quality of foods made by cooks and chefs often includes family members and their helpers, which appeals to many eaters. Although professional, they often lack formal accreditation. Many stores run by old uncle or aunt chefs and their family members. Some old Chinese noodle shops and Isan cooks made food for half a century and have kept their prices low.

4. *Diverse ethnic and social groups:* People who live and work in this neighborhood at the level ground include foreign rural Thai laborers, as well as young people interested in football or hip hop and skateboard culture. Students living in university dormitories and chefs and tech startup entrepreneurs. This socio-cultural diversity provides many ways of relaxing and enjoying time with friends and family. People interact with each other over food and in the green and walking areas.

These four characteristics of Samyan–Banthat Thong became the basis of our plans to design a small performance festival that used live interactive performance events and activities to produce a new identity for the area. This lively identity could be the start of an urban culture for the future. How could we make this green space and food haven better known and could attract more Bangkok people and foreigners to enjoy it by means of the intensive time of a festival?

Festival Planning: Designing a Festival for the Samyan-Banthat Thong Neighborhood
Using the above research results, we designed a small festival that included a diverse set of interactive performance activities for diverse audiences. They aimed to encourage residents and visitors to participate while attending different types of performance events in the area. We wanted the new performance festival to involve new guests and visitors while they refreshed their lives after COVID, and to do so in a public space that could generate new understandings of open-minded experience and trust. We focused on this new playground in CU Centenary Park – with a bit of nature in the middle of the city, green grass, trees, and small ponds, good air and beautiful sky. The park was friendly for dogs, kids playing football and skateboarders. We wanted to offer activities to engage the past and history

of the neighborhood, emphasizing places and people who had made it over decades. The established living spaces of Samyan-Banthat Thong embody older lifestyles with family and loved ones. The neighborhood is becoming a new lively wellness space that can generate multisensory enjoyment and an outdoor fulfillment with wonderful food shared with family and friends amid lots of laughter.

The experimental festival aimed to become a proto-platform for including the performing arts into the lives of those living, working and visiting Samyan-Banthat Thong. It sought to connect live performance with well-established artists of the Bangkok Theatre Festival and with Chulalongkorn University and the wider performing arts community and space management group, along with the Culture Ministry and a national research organization.

Running The Samyan La-Lan Jai (Samyan Amazes the Heart) Festival
The resulting festival was called *Samyan La-Lan Jai* meaning "Samyan amazes the heart." Unable to make clear plans until late due to the uncertainty of university policies about COVID, we designed it as a small performance festival. It was based on data and information collected from customers, residents, business owners, visitors, and other stakeholders in the Samyan-Banthat Thong area. It aimed to discover how including performing arts activities and events in the CU Centenary Park could add vitality to the area and help to reimagine the identity of Samyan-Banthat Thong as a lively space of well-being after COVID.

After the university approved public events, our festival coincided with a street fair on CU Centenary Road, which included both food stalls and stalls for a flea market. The university also held its freshman games at the time. All were the first time for university events after the urgency of the COVID-19 pandemic had waned.

The experimental festival aimed to show how a set of open-air participatory performance events and activities centered in a green urban space which is surrounded by a widely varied foodscape of eating places and food shops. This will project the multisensory and diverse life of an urban community in a modern Thai-Chinese area grounded in the diverse culture of the Samyan-Banthat Thong neighborhood in Bangkok. The main venues for the festival were CU Centenary Park, three small restaurants in the area and the Dragon Town space.
The festival was held on April 2 and 3, 2022, 2-9 PM and consisted of several different types of performance and activity. Each day began with mobile multi-site performances in the Samyan-Banthat Thong neighborhood in several supporting dessert shops where actors performed original scenes based on local stories with small audience groups moving from shop to shop under the title *"The Circle Play: A Dessert Tour."* Simultaneously, on each afternoon, *"Performances in the Park"* included puppet theatre and public creative activities on the *"Joy Route"* throughout CU Centenary Park. These afternoon events were followed by major contemporary music and theatre performances held in CU Centenary Park from the late afternoon to early evening as *"The Amazing Time: Golden Hour Celebrations"* and ended with an original site-specific play called *"Coming Home"* in shops near an old Samyan Chinese shrine, ending each day's performances.



Figures 5. Top-left, Promotional poster; top right, map of the "Sam Yan La-Lan Jai" experimental festival on April 2-3, 2022 at CU Centenary Park and in the adjacent Samyan-Banthat Thong neighborhood of Bangkok. Lower-left registration booth and lower-right people gathering for the April 2 opening of the festival. Photos by Lowell Skar.

The Circle Play: A Dessert Tour: Hopping around Suan Luang and Banthat Thong, 2:00-4:30 PM, April 2 and April 3 (extended for two more weekends)

The festival started with a walking site-specific Circle Play: Dessert Tour to dessert shops from 2:00 PM to 4:30 PM, since the shops had fewer customers at that time. This allowed all participants to enjoy the original performances, storytelling, and food-tasting at three different shops. This was the only ticketed part of the festival, charging a small fee for four rounds each day of up to 25 people. Because other parts of the festival began after 4 PM, these rotating performances activities stopped. Interest in this piece led to its extension to April 9 and 10 and April 16 and 17.

For this wandering performance, audiences walked with actors between three dessert shops, were treated to local stories, scenes and desserts at those shops in a multi-sited mobile performance. They visited Thuay Thanng, a creative ice cream place, then on to Chu Fan, a small dim sum stall, before ending at Sam Rap Yai, a Thai dessert store. Each place offered people a performance that blended a story with an entrepreneur, and included the shop owners' special food offerings, their memories and hopes for the future. It offered multisensorial enjoyment with food tastings by those attracted by different food and lively people who made them, matching the original stories of the sites and their owners.



Figure 6. Episodes from "The Circle Play" as a mobile or walking performance with scenes done in several cafes, shops and shrines around the Samyan-Banthat Thong neighborhood. Photos by Lowell Skar.

Performances in the Park (April 2 and 3, 2:00-4:30 PM, CU Centenary Park)
Each afternoon of the festival included a puppet show suitable for all ages on the green lawns of CU Centenary Park. At multiple other sites in the park, various engaging activities for groups of friends, family, and couples were offered to all for a relaxing time.



Figure 7. Children's puppet plays performed on April 2 (by the Jao Khun Thong troupe, figure 22) and April 3 (by the Dek Thevada-Morlum Puppet Troupe, figure 23) as part of Performances in the Park. Photos by Lowell Skar.

Jao Khun Thong: April 2 afternoon included a well-known Thai puppet troupe founded 30 years ago by *khru Kiatsuda Phirom*, and *Khun Thong*, which was a Thai puppet on a morning educational TV program. Puppeteers brought back the Thai puppet stars: brother buffalo, a crocodile, and a talkative mynah bird.

On the afternoon of April 3, a famous puppet troupe from Mahasarkam in northeastern Thailand – the *Dek Thevada-Morlum Puppet Troupes* led by Nai Xiang or *khru Preecha Karun*, showed his unique puppets made of sticky rice baskets performing old folk tales form Isan with Morlam music.

The *Joy Route* was a series of public activities for all participants and guests to try out as they wandered through various paths of CU Centenary Park. These included:
There was a workshop of *Cut-out Art* for doing paper cutting art that helped participants

see nature differently and the *Giant Jenka* game allowed friends to enjoy themselves while challenging their collective balancing talents. Some people even brought their own *hacky sacks* to start pick-up group games.



Figure 8. *Joy Route* with miscellaneous activities – *Giant Jenka*, *Cutout Art*, and *Hacky Sack*. Photos by Lowell Skar.



Figure 9. Relaxing with friends before the festival starts (April 2, 2022). Photos by Lowell Skar.

The Amazing Time: Major Contemporary Music and Theatre Performances: Golden Hour Celebration (5:00-7:45 PM, April 2 and 3, CU Centenary Park)



Figure 10. CU Centenary Park in the Samyan-Banthat Thong neighborhood of central Bangkok for the "Sam Yan La-Lan Jai" experimental festival. Photo from the "Golden Hour" events at twilight as audiences prepare for the main shows of the festival on April 2, 2022. Photo by Lowell Skar.

Celebrate the Sunset with a Musical Performance

Each evening on April 2 and 3 had a performance of a contemporary Thai music ensemble in the courtyard of CU Centenary Park at twilight to highlight the area's beauty at sunset.

- *See Yod* ("Drop of Color") was a band that performed Thai and ASEAN music, sharing the same roots performed on April 2.
- *Aphiwat* was an ensemble of classical musicians who play traditional Thai music performed on April 3.



Figure 11. Left, performance by the contemporary classical group "See Yod" on April 2, 2022 and their audience. Photos by Lowell Skar.

New Traditional Theatre Lakhon Chatri

After the music, a new traditional theatre performance by Pradit Prasartthong's Anatta Theatre Group. This Silapthon-award recipient and National Artist used the traditional form of *Lakhon Chatri* in the piece "Ching Chap – Slap Rang," which focused on Thai intergenerational conflicts.



Figure 12. Performance of "Ching Chap - Slap Rang" by the Anatta Theatre Group on April 2, 2022. Photos by Lowell Skar.

Coming Home (8:00-9:00 PM on April 2 and April 3):
After the main events, a site-specific performance consisted of memoir dialogues between two wonderful Thai-Chinese artists, Nikorn SaeTang of the 8X8 Theatre Company and Chuen Hui Ching (Kheng), a Thai Teochew Chinese opera performer who would interact and create a short piece of memory and time together at the local Pun Thao Kong shrine.[10] The original performance explored how someone's memories form part of their present life. The original creation shows about how Chinese life exists in Bangkok and was told through a real Chinese opera actress and a stage actor – both of whom are Chinese descendants – using locations in the Dragon Town neighborhood.



Figure 13. Images from "Coming Home," a mobile site-specific intercultural performance in an old Chinese community, Dragon Town. Photos by Lowell Skar.

The Samyan La-Lan Jai Festival was held in the first weekend of April 2022 to emphasize live performances amid the park's natural beauty, and to add live art to the park and its surroundings, underscoring how these are related to the wider community they are part of. By avoiding waste, it followed the smart, green and clean Sam Yan city concept or sustainability promoted PMCU.

This small experimental project made a *play-ground for CU Centenary Park* as a first step in creative placemaking that involved various stakeholders of Samyan-Banthat Thong—entrepreneurs, residents, guests, students and tourists, older and young people, along with artists—in seeing the power of a vibrant cultural ecosystem with live artistic activities for

friends and families. The festival introduced new ways to reimagine and develop meanings for this complex urban space by using different kinds of performing artists. They created working opportunities and memories of the area to create, share and pass on cultural life in new ways, thereby bolstering the living identity of the neighborhood.

One way that this was done involved established performing artists with existing fan bases and to have them do new work that was connected to the neighborhood space. Two Silpathorn-awarded artists—Pradit Prasartthong and Nikorn SaeTang, and the Teochew-Thai Chinese opera performers Chuen Hui Ching (Kheng)—made pieces that linked the performing arts to ordinary residents in the neighborhood and offered an opportunity for PMCU to host events that were connected to both community residents and to visitors, so they could interact in an open and democratic atmosphere. The performances, music, activities, and play consisted of various cultural traditions and ethnic groups, highlighting Samyan-Banthat Thong's diversity as an enjoyable way to play around in this area surrounded by so many opportunities for food and fun with friends.

The performing arts of this small *Samyan La-Lan Jai* festival showed the valuable potential of offering live interactive activities for the communities that engaged this green space. Its varied staged and site-specific performances for the neighborhood and other stakeholders included people of various ages and backgrounds in the live events and involved participants in online platforms. The mass and social media sites help call out for greater interest, and to bring out participants to create and share their own social media work with the screen-scanning public. Through both live activities and online sharing, this pilot festival called for urban people to open their mind to take part in the Samyan-Banthat Thong neighborhood. These linkages are being coordinated with the neighborhood's restaurants and food sellers in light of the interests of the young people who go there to ensure the participation of diverse stakeholders and the sustainability of their efforts. The results aim to produce a creative interactive green space which can help to enliven Bangkok's Samyan-Banthat Thong neighborhood and the city it is part of.

Conclusion

This article examined the *Samyan La-Lan Jai* pilot festival project, which was designed for the vibrant neighborhood of Samyan-Banthat Thong in central Bangkok for April 2-3, 2022. Although disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the festival introduced a series of experimental *live performance events,* artists and arts practices into this diverse and changing Bangkok area. These performances were rooted in the experiences and activities of the people who worked, lived, and visited in Samyan-Banthat Thong and helped to rebrand the area as a more livable space. As a gateway festival for the area in post-pandemic era, it aligned with the vision of the property managers of the area and suited the interests of various groups living in this diverse Bangkok neighborhood and has been followed by many other performance events afterward. By engaging various performing artists in an open green space and its surroundings for a weekend of live performances, workshops and demonstrations for diverse publics, the *Samyan La-Lan Jai* play-ground created a festival space to enhance the livelihoods of a diverse Bangkok neighborhood, improve the image of the neighborhood, and to become an inaugural performance platform for later performance events that enlivened that urban space. By coordinating Chulalongkorn University, the performing arts community, the space management team, and a national research organi-

zation, this project created a living flagship event to help vitalize the community. More importantly, this project created a flexible set of tools and a model for placemaking through performance festival design that has been used elsewhere in Thailand and also created a team of committed festival- and place-makers who could design site-specific festivals tied to the local identity of a place and the people living there.

Samyan-Banthat Thong is an area of Bangkok being redesigned as a green and livable smart urban space. Containing much art, the sculptures, installations and murals punctuate occasional events held there. *Samyan La-Lan Jai* added a new dimension to this emerging area a set of live participatory performance activities. They turned its green spaces, diverse communities, eating environments and installed works of art into a "play-ground" that marked the area as open and alive again for the post-COVID era. The festival's interactive fun connected artists and attendees to the local community, its visitors, and the performing arts community. By working with the changing area's diverse stakeholders, the experimental project sought to use live performances and activities based in the area into a livable city space that was more vibrant, interactive, and human-centered space that is full of life for both residents and visitors. By designing and scheduling performance events and activities that are participatory and inclusive, the festival and related events will help this developing area into a vibrant space for people to enjoy and involve themselves in the many offerings of Samyan-Banthat Thong and to ensure its sustainability as a vital participatory cultural zone for diverse communities in Bangkok. The success of this experimental project may be seen in the many subsequent live performance events that have been held in CU Centenary Park and the surrounding Samyan-Banthat Thong area.

Beyond the successes of the festival itself as a re-opening and gateway of the area to live public performances after COVID-19, there were two other important achievements. First, the project made a set create flexible practices and tools for making sustainable interactive cultural zones for performance activities based in other Thai lively and vibrant city spaces. Second, it also trained creative people to use these tools and to continue work in other creative placemaking projects afterwards. By developing both a toolbox for creative place-making via performance festivals grounded in diverse stakeholders and developing people able to use these tools in new urban environments, the project was more than just a one-time performance event to underscore the importance of live performances for a post-pandemic Samyan-Banthat Thong. It also created linkages among the neighborhood's restaurants and food sellers, visitors, and local artists that enhanced the participation of diverse stakeholders and the sustainability of live performances later. The results included a creative interactive green space which enlivened Bangkok's Samyan-Banthat Thong neighborhood, as well as new tools and a dedicated team with the skills and knowledge for creative placemaking elsewhere.

The success of the *Sam Yan La Lan Jai* festival of April 2022, while experimental, showed the viability of the idea of creative placemaking through live performance events, and developed a set of knowledge, skills and experiences of creative place-makers interested in and able to do creative placemaking elsewhere. Two examples show this. First, we worked on a small placemaking project in late 2022 in two urban sites in Chiangrai Province (Chiangsaen and Chiangrai City).[11] Second, from October 2023 to March 2025, we used the tools

developed in Bangkok to enhance the urban vitality of the beach city Bangsaen in a series of community-based performances designed in a collaborative project by Chulalongkorn University and Burapha University.[12]

Endnotes

1 The "Samyan La-Lan Jai Performing Arts Festival" was designed and run by a research team consisting of Chanut Pongpanich, Kuntara Chaicharn, Peangdao Jariyapun, and Chakorn Chamai, and led by the author. It was one result of the research project "Empowering Urban Communities for Tourism Using the Performing Arts: A Case Study of Bangkok's Samyan–Banthat Thong Area," funded by the PMU of Thailand. It sought to connect to community well-being and equality of people while linking performance culture to economic activity as part of a lively and creative urban ecosystem, and as an example of creative placemaking.

2 For some key policy work in this area of creative placemaking, see Jenna Moran, et. al., *Beyond the Building* (2015) from the National Endowment of the Arts in the US and *Where We Live Now* (2017) from The British Academy.

3 For more than a decade "creative placemaking" has been used by the NEA and ArtPlace projects in the USA for arts projects where "partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighbourhood, town, tribe, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired." (Markusen and Gadwa 2010, 3) Placemaking is a dynamic and active process that engages the power of arts, culture, and creativity to turn a space into a more vibrant place. Live performance events, including performance festivals, have been key parts of these developments, helping to provide new forms of diversity, spontaneity, and vitality to urban spaces that are inviting, inclusive and reflective of various identities.

4 The relationships between festival performances in an urban neighborhood may be tied to a spatial and structural analysis of the neighborhood by combining urban spatial research with social research in relation to four spatial-social categories tied to performance used by Stevens and Shin (2014): *enclosure, centrality, axiality, permeability.*

5 The festival coincided with a street fair held on CU Centenary Road that included the selling of food, clothing and other items each evening. Because the festival occurred during COVID-19, there was limited access to CU Centenary Park, through a main front gate and through an entrance from the parking lot in the back.

6 This initial perspective helped us design an open-air performance festival surrounded by food shops to highlight, enhance, and project the life of the urban community. The community formed as a hybrid kind of life centered on a modern Thai-Chinese neighborhood tied to a university community in the diverse area of Samyan-Banthat Thong. To indicate the range of meaning for the project, we called it *Samyan La-Lan–Jai [Samyan: The Dazzling Heart]*.

7 An English article on the area can be seen here https://www.genie-property.com/blog/chulalongkorn-demolished-4-000-commercial-buildings-at-suan-luang-sam-yan-to-create-a-mix-use-kingdom.-93 while the PMCU's website from 2021 (in Thai) discusses its plans "Samyan: A Smart Livable City" (in Thai): https://pmcu.co.th/?page_id=21275.

8 The Chula Art Park website can be seen here: https://www.chulaartpark.art/Home.

9 The survey for visitors asked basic questions like age, gender, educational level, but focused on the frequency of visiting Samyan-Banthat Thong, main reasons and activities done during their visits, who they came with (family, friends, or alone), and the amounts of time and money spent during visits. We also asked about what kind of entertainment they would like to see or take part in, what other kinds of public activities would attract them to the area.

10 Nikorn has had long ties to Samyan. In the 1990s and early 2000s he ran a coffee and massage shop in old Samyan, near the corner of Phayathai Road and Rama IV Road, and started his 8X8 Theatre on the second floor of his shop (named for its small 8 m X 8 m size). When there were plans to make a new mall in Samyan, he and his neighbors could not renew their leases and so were forced out, with many shopkeepers moving north and east near Banthat Thong Road. Today the old Samyan area has become the Siam Mitr Town complex. This site-specfic production *"Coming Home"* was created by Nikorn to help find out where to include memories of old places and people who have changed in contemporary culture.

11 Some results of this project were in in my paper "Enriching Urban Contact Zones for Living Lanna Cultures: A Case Study of Chiangrai, Northern Thailand," presented at the 20th URRC Forum, March 8-9, 2023, Chulalongkorn University.

12 This joint Creative Bangsaen project began in October 2023 and concluded with the "Enjoy Bangsaen *(Bansaen Plearn)*" festival, February 14 to March 1, 2025, using the results and experiences of the *Samyan La-Lan–Jai* project discussed in this article for its community-based design and organization.

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