



Fig. 1: Photo of Sala Chalerm Thani. (Photo by Manop Sritulyachot, 2017).

Nang Loeng, Bangkok

Precarity of Heritage, Precarity as Heritage

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Over the past decades, due to its charms as a bastion of quickly disappearing Thai cultures, Nang Loeng has been subject to multiple technocratic interventions by various actors (e.g., universities, government agencies, and advocacy groups), all under the same benevolent banner of heritage preservation. In parallel, as Bangkok expands its underground railway into the inner city, Nang Loeng is designated as one of the new stations. The construction project raises the alarm among the current tenants who, having learned of eviction cases elsewhere, fear for their own future. To this end, they turn to their cultural assets and experiences gained from their interactions with technical experts, weaponizing heritage as a claim towards housing security.

This essay explores the complex relationship between heritage and housing

precarity in Nang Loeng. First, we review the unintended impact of underground construction. While the official goal was to alleviate automobile traffic and promote densification through transit-oriented development (TOD), landlords seized the opportunity to evict tenants and redevelop their properties. Bangkok's Chinatown is a

In this essay, we recount a story of Nang Loeng, a 'living' historic neighbourhood in central Bangkok, as it struggles to chart its own future in the midst of inner-city redevelopment. Located close to a once-suburban royal palace, Nang Loeng is home to families of former servants who worked in the palace in the early 20th century. Their land belongs to the Crown Property Bureau (CPB) and a handful of landed elites. As Bangkok began to urbanize, the landlords constructed shophouses upon their land, later renting them to Chinese merchants. As such, today's Nang Loeng is known for its rich cultural heritage, tangible and intangible, from food to artisan crafts, from traditional dance to vernacular shophouse architecture.

case in point. Perceiving the looming threat, the residents of Nang Loeng came together to make their voices heard. To do so, they have relied on art activism as a tactic to bring attention to their cause. Equipped with knowledge from the experts, the residents mobilize their cultural heritage as resources to negotiate within the climate of precarity. The seemingly harmless appearance of art allows the tenants to communicate their plight. While the tenants argue that their cultural heritage is being endangered by redevelopment pressures, it is their housing tenure that is, in fact, equally under threat.

welcomed a few lines of urban rail, the Green, Blue, and Purple lines, with a few more to come. Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), the city government, has responded enthusiastically to the vision of a denser Bangkok, stipulating – perhaps prematurely – upzoning around all transit stations, in the hope of growing a larger residential population in the city and therefore reducing automobile trips. The language of TOD has entered Thai planners' discourse as a cure for the city's infamous traffic.

In addition to the downtown core, three stations were constructed in Bangkok's historic district and its adjacent areas in 2017-2018, with a few more underway. While the general public celebrates their newfound mobility, the megaproject has spawned unintended consequences, particularly in the abrupt transformation of the old town's fabric. Much of the historic district is owned by the government and a handful of landed elites. The government sees this as an opportunity to promote beautification projects towards the larger goal of urban tourism. Similarly, private landlords seize the opportunity to evict tenants and redevelop their properties. Stories of eviction abound. For example, the Ong Ang canal, one of

Fig. 2: Live chorus show in front of Sala Chalerm Thani in 2018. (Photo by Manop Sritulyachot).



Bangkok's three historic moats, was long known for its toy markets. Over the decades, merchants encroached the canal, setting up their semi-permanent stalls. However, in 2016, with too short a notice, the occupiers were forcibly removed, literally overnight, to pave way for the Ong Ang Canal Revitalization Scheme, a recreational waterfront project inspired by Cheonggyecheon in Seoul. A short distance from Ong Ang was Prom Mahakan, a low-income community that inhabited one of Bangkok's last remaining historic forts. After decades of bitter battles with the city government, the residents were finally removed, again quite forcibly, under BMA's pretext of constructing a public park.¹ Far from isolated incidents, these cases were part of BMA's conscious attempts at touristifying Bangkok's historic core into a clean, tourist-friendly urban landscape.

Similarly, landlords with properties within the radius of transit stations exploit the opportunity to evict their tenants in hopes of more lucrative redevelopment. Chinatown is a case in point. Luen Rit, a textile shopping area of well-to-do Chinese and Indian merchants, managed to negotiate their tenure with their landlord, the CPB, a major landowner in Bangkok and Thailand. By contrast, the smaller and more humble Charoenchai saw their housing contracts terminated overnight. Against the romantic tableau of Bangkok as a "city of neighborhoods" as depicted in various tourism media, the city is equally a city of elite landlords, each of whom owns large pieces of land and has different landlord-tenant relationships. As the mass-transit masterplan is now in full swing, inner-city residents view their fate with great apprehension. Nang Loeng is one such example.

The changing face of Nang Loeng

As a neighborhood in the larger transit masterplan, Nang Loeng will be home to a new transit station, and is thus seen as a possible medium-sized TOD. While the construction project has yet to start, many residents have begun to feel the impact. The most obvious is from the most unprivileged residents staying near the Buddhist temple, Wat Soonthorn Dhammathan. A considerable number of small timber shacks located in the areas around the temple have squatted in the land of the CPB, the neighborhood's major landowner. Many of the tenants have been forced to relocate, thus offering new development opportunities. Another case was the renovation project of Sala Chalerm Thani in Nang Loeng, an iconic timber cinema, erected in 1918 [Fig. 1]. When the lease contract of the cinema was terminated, the landlord came to renovate the theater. The renovation is now complete, waiting for a new investor and a new lease of life. Before the renovation, the front court of the theater was used as a venue for local cultural activities.



Fig. 3 (above): A day-time intervention workshop, 2019 and fig. 4 (right): a night-time dance performance, Wat Soonthorn Dhammathan area, 2019. (Both photos courtesy of the authors).



Today, the locals have to move their events to either the market or the temple.

As mentioned above, various actors have been involved in organizing cultural events and activities in Nang Loeng, including state officials, local authorities, local educational institutions, and the residents themselves. All aim to promote local tourism and to conserve local culture. Civil Society Tourism Network (CSTN), a non-profit, local tourism alliance, is a good example. CSTN has helped the residents organize tourist activities, such as walking tours and bike tours. These are to generate incomes directly for the locals. As an entertainment district in the 1960s, Nang Loeng's historical heritage has also attracted local and international artists. Such artists come to organize a variety of artistic events. These events recognize both the tangible and intangible assets of Nang Loeng, including architectural heritage, local authentic cuisine, traditional dance performance (Chatree play), and cultural spots such as the Dance House, the Nang Loeng Artist House, and the Narasilp House (a 70 year-old local workshop making Khon² costumes). A series of local cultural events are driven by both the locals themselves and also by the other key outside actors [Fig. 2]. Some are genuinely collaborative and some are claimed to be participatory.

Apart from the self-organized cultural events, a group of community architects and their networks have come to energize the local cultural practices in Nang Loeng with their professional creativity, knowledge, and expertise. The ad hoc collaboration uses different tactics and resources to convey local concerns, anxieties, and struggles through various kinds of artistic performances. At this point, social, cultural, and human

capital stand at the forefront to encourage community activism. The Buffalo Field Dance Festival (BFDF) was a good example, demonstrating how local tactics were carried out to express local attitudes, hopes, and concerns towards their livelihood through creative cultural events. From 2017-2019, the BFDF was organized at the end of each year, inviting both Thai and international artists to stay at the neighbourhood for a week and prepare their dance performance at various important spots around Nang Loeng. From time to time, the BFDF became more complicated and organized with wider networks of artists, academics, and residents, both within and outside Nang Loeng. The latest BFDF was in December 2019, where local workshops were organized during the daytime to engage ordinary residents [Fig. 3]. These workshops investigated local assets and emotions of the locals towards their livelihoods. Dance performances by Thai and international artists, along with some interventions co-created between invited artists and local people, were shown at night as a highlight of the festival [Fig. 4].

The COVID-19 pandemic has also opened up new spaces for local initiatives. The community leaders and the community architects have organized small initiatives to help vulnerable residents cope with the impact of the pandemic. For example, community kitchens were founded to feed the unemployed and patients [Fig. 5]. Moreover, a testing station was set up to help all Nang Loeng residents who have received minimal support from the government. Networking to obtain immediate help and support are crucial in the present critical moment. A couple of outside organizations including NGOs, civil society

groups, and educational institutions have given assistance to Nang Loeng. A Facebook page, *Community x Covid-19*, has additionally been set up by community leaders to reach out and communicate with their wider networks. Practices have evolved from being passive recipients to becoming active doers, organizing local COVID-19 patients' information and managing foods and medicine to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic.

Situated in the old Bangkok areas where economic activities, living environments, and public infrastructure and services are inadequate, Nang Loeng has limited financial and environmental resources. However, it still has plenty of local resources, including architectural heritage as well as social, cultural, and human capital. These community capitals are collective assets that can attract the public's attention. Most cultural events funded by the local authority and state officials are always full of participants from both local and outside areas. In this sense, the local residents, now savvy, seem to know exactly how to keep their neighbourhood lives in the spotlight by participating in the state's promotion of old Bangkok tourism. On the other hand, local-initiated cultural events are not always full of participants. This may be due to the specific purposes of such events, which are likely to be activism. The BFDF is a clear example in which the community architect group with active Nang Loeng residents works collaboratively towards the presentation of the local pressures, thoughts, and aspirations.

Urban precarity will continue to put Nang Loeng residents to the test, as they will have to face various kinds of urban intervention and redevelopment plans and projects. However, with local resources, which the locals know best from learnt tactics and input from their network, Nang Loeng can continue to maintain its cultural activities as local weapons. The residents are able to fight for their right to the city in Nang Loeng, the neighbourhood where they were born, live, and struggle to endure.

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Notes

- 1 Herzfeld, M (2017), The blight of beautification: Bangkok and the pursuit of class-based urban purity, *Journal of Urban Design*, 22:3, 291-307, DOI: 10.1080/13574809.2017.1294976
- 2 One of the oldest folk dance-dramas originated in the Southern Siam, which gained popularity later in the Central plain of Thailand since the late Ayutthaya era.
- 3 A classical Thai masked performance playing a series of Ramayana epics.



Fig. 5: Community kitchen. (Photo courtesy of the Community x Covid-19 Facebook page).