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BY DAVID FERNÁNDEZ
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This month, ASEF culture360 contributor David FERNÁNDEZ introduces Chiang Mai, Thailand's "second city", the largest and most culturally significant city of the country's upper north. In this article he describes the city's dynamic creative scene, focusing mainly on the cultural environment and especially in the generation of new platforms of creativity and innovation that are beginning to attract international recognition.

This is the second of a 2 part article. For part 1, please click [here](#).

Cultural Ecology

Chiang Mai is fortunate to have a balanced combination of preservation and innovation in our culture and art scene. For the last 5 years, contemporary arts in Chiang Mai have taken forms through different media, such as art performance, conceptual arts, art installation and the like. Due to physical feature of Chiang Mai city, being a small walled-city, theoretically it makes it easier for artists of different backgrounds to communicate and share their knowledge with one another, eventually leading to mutual art community.

Kitikong Tilokwattanotai – Printmaker - C.A.P. Studio

The constant transformation and rapid growth of Chiang Mai has not been easy for everyone, and challenges persist in efforts to better manage the city and its cultural environment. Still, the attractive lifestyle, slow path, and lower cost of living keep attracting more and more creative minds that help nurture the environment by adding new ideas to the **diverse mix of creative expression**.

However, there is still a shared opinion among local art activists about how the contemporary scene in **Chiang Mai is still very fragmented and its creative communities not well connected**. This reality finds an accurate reflection on the city's transportation system, perhaps one of the reasons for the loose nature of the scene, especially in the contemporary arts sector. It is an evident obstacle some platforms such as **Chiang Mai Art Conversation** are trying to overcome by encouraging local creative individuals and communities to communicate, interact and stay connected.

We need to start with people and body of knowledge that will reinforce art scene in Chiang Mai and neighboring provinces connecting and disseminating information on art which are art spaces, people, news, art activities, and any other related aspect to public via online platform. The next important objective is an offline collaboration of each sector in art circle, from networking art audiences, exchanging information, making an exhibition, or other creative activities. Ultimately, we hope that the relationship of our online platform and offline collaboration will function as value added, the strength of art career activity, and knowledge of art, economics, and society in Chiang Mai and neighbouring provinces. It may

extensively lead to a proper cooperation with the government.

Sutthirat Supaparinya – Co-Founder, Chiang Mai Art Conversation

In addition, there are also requests from the different sectors, especially from the contemporary arts community, that **public resources need to be shared among a more diverse range of creative practices** not just in commercial-oriented disciplines such as handcrafts and the product design industry, but also among practitioners who are developing knowledge, including the fine arts and performing arts.

Annual Events

In the recent years, many culture-related events have taken place in Chiang Mai, particularly during the cooler season (November-March). Some of these platforms aim to **drive local economy, and support value creation**, bringing the attention to not only professionals focused on Bangkok, but also other international creative entrepreneurs who have started looking at Chiang Mai's valuable assets and considering its great potential for arts & cultural development.

While some events were indeed created to publicise Chiang Mai's potential in the creative scene so as to be recognised domestically and internationally, others tried to inspire and stimulate young local audiences to get involved. A good sample of an annual cultural event is the **Chiang Mai Documentary Arts Festival** (CDAF), organised by Documentary Arts Asia (DAA), a non-profit entity that works throughout the year primarily in photography and film, as well as audio and narrative writing. Through its annual photography and film festival, DAA aims to promote the best of contemporary Asian documentary work by organizing photo exhibitions, outdoor showcases, film screenings, workshops and other mentor programs.

Another example is the **Nimmanhaemin Art and Design Promenade** (NAP) in the hip Nimmanhaemin district, an annual art & crafts fair showcasing original handmade work by young local Thai artisans and other Chiang Mai-based small enterprises, mixing traditional techniques and contemporary styles together through natural, and upcycled materials, presenting the richness of the area using natural and diverse biological resources such as ceramic, wood, textile and jewellery.

Other recent additions to the cultural calendar of Chiang Mai include **TEDx Chiang Mai**, an annual large creativity and idea forum that also organises smaller events & activities throughout the year; the **Chiang Mai Design Week**, a citywide exhibition linking architecture, product design, fashion, graphic design, and art, aimed at supporting and serving as a creative space for local entrepreneurs and creative industries to showcase their skills, design ideas and innovations; and the **Chiang Mai Photo Festival**, a new platform for emerging young ASEAN artists, a festival organized by Chiang Mai University, Faculty of Fine Arts in collaboration with other Thai and International photography-related Universities.

Maker Mountain

The Maker Movement in Chiang Mai is extremely new but growing rapidly. Within the last year we have seen rise of three different makerspaces / hackerspaces and the launch of the Maker Party event in Chiang Mai and now more and more of the city is hearing about us and are joining our community. I feel that the latent creativity of the city can be unlocked through things like Makerspace, and their inherent inclusive nature, I believe that these small pockets of creativity will start clumping together into a more cohesive force. In other words, this is where we will see Creative Chiang Mai as a city become reality.

Nati Sang – Makerspace Thailand

Apart from the thriving local creative community previously described, Chiang Mai is also home to an emerging creative class known as the ‘makers’. With the growing number of co-working and creative spaces opening up constantly, partnerships such as the **Chiang Mai Maker Club**, an open community of students, entrepreneurs and professionals interested in fusing engineering, art, design and technology in order to create innovative products and media, or the newly-opened **Makerspace**, ‘a place meant to breed creativity’, providing space for inventors and ordinary people to explore different production methods and manufacturing techniques, are building a new culture of innovation with an impact, not just from a economic but also a social perspective.

This is another reason – and probably the ultimate one – to believe in the latent potential of the local cultural diversity and the innovative spirit that

radiates within Chiang Mai these days. Indeed, Chiang Mai is a great urban example of how can-do creativity forces its way out of every crevice in every sector, not necessarily art-related and despite the lack of infrastructures and public-funding, and other specific challenges some of the local creative practitioners may be facing at this point of time.

Started in 2012, By people / In cities is a series of articles and interviews that aims to enhance the understanding of art and culture in Southeast and East Asia through individual stories and perspectives including artists, cultural practitioners, and policy makers.

Sources

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A photograph of a TEDx event in Chiang Mai, showing a large audience seated in a dark room, facing a stage with a large screen displaying the TEDx logo.

Thailand | TEDx Chiang Mai | inviting speaker applications and nominations

BY DAVID FERNÁNDEZ
04 AUG 2015

A collage of images representing Chiang Mai, including a modern interior space with a wooden wall and a white bench, and a close-up of a green and yellow patterned fabric.

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A large, bold, black text graphic reading 'DESIGN AWARDS EXHIBIT' with a green vertical bar in the 'I' of 'SIGN'. Below it, in smaller black text, is 'BY CHIANG MAI CREA'. To the right of the main text is a large, stylized 'MA' in black.

Chiang Mai Design Awards | exhibition

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