

## Creative Class and Gentrification: The Case of Old Bangkok Foreigner Communities, Charoenkrung and Talad Noi Neighbourhood

### ชนชั้นสร้างสรรค์และการพัฒนาเมืองแบบเจนทริฟิเคชันในย่านเก่าเจริญกรุง

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#### Abstract

The redevelopment of old centre urban has been challenging in many countries where exploiting strong cultural awareness to its population expresses different angles and cultural approaches. Besides state-level advocacy, the creative class was raised as one of the economic forces to regenerate decaying districts. Thus, to accumulate creative people in the city, a proper urban environment should be installed to attract them. Nevertheless, the arrival of newcomers who have creative background sometimes intrudes on the everyday life of local people. The case of Talad Noi and Charoenkrung Road are well illustrated manifestation of both new and local people inscribing their own culture in the area. The question eventually arising with this gentrification phenomenon is newcomers who arrive with specific culture capital cooperate or intrude the existing cultural resources of the local community.

**Keywords:** Creative Class, Gentrification, Social Inclusion

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## 1. Introduction

The redevelopment of old decaying districts has been challenging in many countries where exploiting strong cultural awareness to its population expresses different angles and cultural approaches. The Centre George Pompidou in Paris was constructed by replacing the *Les Halles* food market in Beaubourg area. It was initiated as part of the Minister for Culture, Georges Pompidou's *Les Grands Projects* which have turned Paris into the hub of world culture and art in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The London Borough of Southwark, illustrates the idea of adapting aged industrial buildings and finding the new life of them, a found in Tate Modern Art Gallery, OXO Tower. The south bank of the Thames River later became another entertainment and hype spot of central London. The mid 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings in the former French Quarter of Xintiandi in the rapidly growing city of Shanghai has been renovated and gentrified to become the varnished affluent expatriate space of Shanghai.

Besides state-level advocacy, individual street artists are also another factor in creating art expression in the city. Berlin Wall graffiti art, the world's largest canvas, which was painted during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century by well-known as well as anonymous artists, was converted after the fall of Berlin to become an iconic tourist attraction. The 21<sup>st</sup> century mural painting by Ernest Zacharevic at Georgetown interpreted the story of community. The street art has elevated the small UNESCO inscribed city of Penang to phenomenal new heights for the young hipster generation as a must-do *instagraming* opportunity.

Recently, the Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC) planned to establish its new office in the modernist Thai General Post Office building on Charoenkrung Road in 2017. The plan was set further in changing the whole surroundings to become the new creative district of Bangkok. The urban projects like street art (Buk Ruk), dockland market, swing dancing festival, and gatherings in public recreation space have been introduced to this historical legacy district of Bangkok. The area is located in the longstanding Chinese immigrant community. It has also been the former European expatriate space of the city.

Newcomers versus local neighbourhoods is one of the major aspects often encountered in the gentrification process. As stated by R. Florida, creative class was raised as one of the economic forces (Florida, 2012). Thus, to accumulate creative people in the city, a proper urban environment should be installed to attract them. Nevertheless, the arrival of newcomers who have creative background sometimes intrudes on the everyday life of local

people. The case of Talad Noi and Charoenkrung Road are well illustrated manifestation of both new and local people inscribing their own culture in the area.

## **2. Defining the old Bangkok Foreigner Space**

For a long time during the Rama I - Rama III period, international trading focused on Chinese junk trading. Furthermore, it was exclusively monopolised by aristocrats and nobles. It was not until the 1840s that China lost the Opium War which led to the Treaty of Nanking and the change of Chinese international trading system. As for Thailand, the European influence on traditional trading policy was interrupted by the Bowring Treaty in 1855. After that, free trade was allowed to all social classes.

The Bowring Treaty had encouraged more westerners to do business as well as to live permanently in Thailand. However, the treaty stated that westerners were not permitted to settle in the 8 km area next to the city wall (Boonma, 2014). They were not allowed to own the land unless they had been living in Thailand for 10 years. Therefore, in the early Rattanakosin period, westerners had lived in the same area as the Chinese immigrants. However, different cultures and rituals caused some confrontation between them.

Simply for the reason of trading and facilitation of westerner shipping business between Bangna Pier to the central part of Bangkok, the first road was built in 1857 called Tanon Trong (Straight Road) which was later renamed Rama IV Road. Furthermore, in 1861, many expatriates claimed the sanitary issue of proper road for riding horses. The project of Charoenkrung Road (means Flourishing City) was set and planned by adopting Singapore town planning (Boonma, 2014). The first phase was the Charoenkrung Road outside the city wall. The road began from old Hua Lam Phong Train Station (original) to Bang Ko Lam district.

Along the road shophouses were built and occupied by many shops that displayed imported products. The consulate of Portugal and France were settled in the area. The British consulate used to be there but it later moved to Ploenchit Road, which was a suburban area in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Oriental Hotel, on the riverbank nearby, is recognised as the most exclusive and indulgent hotel in Bangkok. Moreover, Western-style real estate development in Thailand started in the area nearby. Sathon Road, Silom Road and Ploenchit Road, the CBD today, were once suburban areas of Bangkok. The land plots there were allocated and sold to westerners and nobles.

The Rama V period (1868-1910) is recognised as the civilisation period of Thailand. More than 100 roads were built around Bangkok. The old city wall was demolished in expanding the city. The grand avenue Ratchadamnoen was created as the pride of the country. Grand European design buildings (neo-classical, art deco, palladium style especially for the royal purpose) were constructed. Shophouses were introduced in some traditional trading. Roadside businesses replaced the floating market. Technology of massive buildings and transportation by car and train ushered Thai society to another level of urban development. Commercial banks were officially established in Thai society. Schools, which adopted the European missionary idea such as Bangkok Christian School, Assumption School and Mater Dei School opened opportunities in education to Thai commoners besides temples.

The settlement of European expatriates formed another social class in Siam. So-called '*Civilisation*' and '*Modernisation*' transformed the image of 'Venice of the East' into a roadside society. Floating houses along the riverside soon became brick shophouse buildings along new roads. The modernist technologies and knowledge, Western sanitation and well-being norms were introduced to Siam. During the reign of King Rama V to King Rama VII, many young elite as well as some young commoners were sent to study abroad in England, France, Germany and Austria. They returned with ambitions of improving the country in many ways. The rise of the middle class also emerged from the wealth in education and knowledge not economic wealth. The middle class later became one of the most important fragments in changing the perception of way of life of Bangkok as well as Siam.

Charoenkrung Road was marked as the new modern road, which represented the 'flourishing' image of Bangkok the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The road actually covered 2 phases of construction. First phase, outside the city wall, was built from the old Hua Lam Phong Train Station (original) to Bang Ko Lam district. The second phase inside the city wall was built from Wat Pho (Wat Phra Chetuphon), passing Chinatown to the Khlong Phadung Krung Kasem. Chinese immigrants and Westerners were not allowed to live inside the city wall. Long before the construction of Charoenkrung Road, it appears that both communities had lived in the same area until the westerners moved to Sathon, Silom and Ploenchit precincts.

The banks of the Chao Phraya River have represented the prominent terrain for maritime trading since the Ayuthaya period. Trekking down from the area inside the Bangkok old city wall through Samutprakarn (Pak Nam) province, old ports, aged riverside warehouses, and old western-looking buildings are still humbly undiscovered alongside river view hotels , office building and houses.

Between the riverbank side and Charoenkrung Road, there are different small communities - Chinese, Thai, Muslim, Christian - which might have settled since the beginning of Bangkok. Buildings and shophouses on Charoenkrung Road side, which were built after the construction of the road in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, have similar characteristics and style as in the Chinatown area: Early Period 1860s-1920s - two storey buildings with brick wall-baring structure; Transitional Period 1920s-1940s - steel and concrete technology; Postwar Period 1930s-1975 - composition of steel, glass and concrete, flat roof and minimal ornament; Starchitect Period 1970s-2000s - contemporary modern high rise buildings.

In the absence of a Building Control Act over the area now known to possess high heritage significance, high rise buildings have been built next to aged buildings. The waterfront area is mainly occupied by the private sector like hotels, condominiums, and the terrace restaurants and cafe. The Chao Phraya River boat pier seems to be the only passage that the public can really have access to the river view.

This old district possesses lots of different buildings, which represent a range of architectural distinctiveness values. Many of them have been recognised as heritage and have been renovated. Examples include the old first Siam Commercial Bank headquarter Italian style building at Talad Noi, Gothic revival Holy Rosary Church or Kalawar Church, the modernist Thai General Post Office building, and Authors Wing building at Oriental Hotel. Moreover, these buildings still run their everyday activity and business. However, many of them were abandoned. Even though two-story shophouses are still able to be discovered in the area, the architectural heritage is rarely mentioned.

Talad Noi has become well-known as the place where locals can find iron hardware and mechanical spare parts (new and secondhand). It is one of the enclaves of specialisation that exist in complex Asian cities such as Bangkok.

With the arrival of the MRT in the old district of Bangkok and the massive demolition of decayed buildings in Chinatown, economic potential value added to the old land plot has awakened awareness of cultural heritage in Bangkokian society. Academics started to be interested in other Bangkok districts besides Rattanakosin. Around the 2010s, the *Arsom Silp Institute of the Arts* in cooperation with *Thai Health Promotion* seem to be the official pioneer in studying architectural and community value in Talad Noi and the surrounding area known as the *Bangkok Chinatown World Heritage* project (Arsomsilp, no date). Small Chinese shrines, festivals, community value, and everyday life activities have been promoted as unique heritage cultural qualities beyond Rattanakosin area and Yaowaraj.

The area has been obscured by its neighbour CBD where all the modern entertainments and leisure attractions are omnipresent : restaurants, pubs, department stores and red light district Patpong. Along the riverbank side, beside the Orientel Hotel, many prestigious 5-star hotels continue to preserve their distinctiveness in welcoming upper-class western tourists.

As for cultural tourism, three aged buildings on the riverbank side : the first Siam Commercial Bank headquarter Italian style building at Talad Noi, Gothic revival Holy Rosary Church or Kalawar Church, and the modernist Thai General Post Office building have been officially promoted as heritage cultural sightseeing tourism in Charoenkrung and Talad Noi. However, because of the long trading history of the area, old warehouses and old shophouses which are scattered around fascinate Thai photographers and young hipsters who are fond of nostalgia and the romantic idea of aged and decay buildings. For example, the former fire station, which occupied the old custom warehouse, is where many amateur and professional photographers still stop by as the must-take photo place.

### **3. Creative Class in Bangkok**

After the Asian economic crisis in 1997, urban development and exploration of cultural capital promoted the economic development. The establishment of OKMD (Office of Knowledge Management and Development), TCDC (Thailand Creative and Design Center), and NDMI (National Discover Museum Institute) in 2004 marked as the “*innovative*” period of Thailand. A young generation of technocrats from creative western education background, both in art and science, have been assigned for developing and promoting Thai people’s

knowledge, creativity and skills. The interactive exhibitions, new trendy design exhibitions, and learning space in the prestigious shopping malls were introduced to the general public.

Thus, museum and exhibition concepts were later promoted to the wide public. The policy in readapting heritage buildings in the Rattanakosin area that were once government offices has been applied. To solve the problem of the over-crowded city centre, many government offices were relocated to the suburban area in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many cultural and educational project were launched, including:

- 2008 : Museum of Siam or Discovery Museum, readapted the heritage Ministry of Commerce building (Rama VI) into knowledge and learning space of Thai history
- 2010 : Nitasrattanakosin, readapted the modernist building on Ratchadamnoen Avenue into a contemporary exhibition of old Bangkok history
- 2012 : King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) Museum, readapted the John Sampson western luxury department store in the 1900s on the corner of Pan Fah Leelas Bridge into Rama VII and Constitution period exhibition
- 2013 : Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Center (RCAC), readapted the modernist building on Ratchadamnoen Avenue and turned it into industrial look decoration

However, the adaptive use of old buildings to a museum is not something new. The National Gallery Bangkok involved the conversion of the old Mint to an art museum in 1978. It holds a fine collection of traditional and modern Thai paintings.

As for the design sector, Thailand Creative & Design Centre (TCDC) which is located in the central district of Bangkok, Sukhumvit, has promoted creative space. It is the first design library where people are able to find the best and sometimes the most expensive design and innovative books. The exhibition space is where the rotation of trendy movement is showed. The shops are where young designers are able to share the creativity of their product to the public.

Bangkok itself has never been out of trend. The Bangkok Art and Culture Centre which focuses on contemporary artists and exhibition was establish in 2008. Mural graffiti culture in Thailand has become more recognised as '*contemporary urban art*'. The street art festival '*Buk Ruk*', meaning trespassing, was first organised in 2013 at Siam Square and the

surrounding area, a hip and fashionable area for students and young people. The cooperation between European and Thai street artists presented more than 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> mural paintings around the area. Besides the aesthetic value, the project later led to the transformation of a decay area of Ratchathewi MRT station to a small public park “Charlerm La” in the centre of Bangkok which has graffiti from ‘Buk Ruk’ as the background.

#### 4. Gentrification Driven Process

Providing an environment for attracting a ‘creative class’ of citizens is an international concept of city regeneration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The case of historic legacy area like Charoenkrung Road -European expatriated space and Chinese immigrant area- will illustrate the transformation of an area, which has been affected by newcomers. The question arising with this phenomenon is do newcomers who arrive with specific culture capital cooperate or intrude the existing cultural resources of the local community?

##### 4.1 Local Talad Noi community and the invasion of niche tourists and creative people

A serene Chinese immigrant neighbourhood compared to its main Chinatown Yaowaraj Road, Talad Noi (*means small market*) is rich in the diversity of its culture and society. The small Chinese community has been known by its signature businesses of steel and mechanical spare part markets. In terms of administration, it is the centre of Sampantawong district office. Historically, it was the original settlement of Chinese immigrants in Bangkok after being moved out from within the city walls in 1782. The area reflects the prosperity of Siam trading characteristics of riverine-led as well as roadside-led trading. Architecturally, the composition of different ages and styles of buildings — European, Chinese, Modernist — are spotted around the area. All local activities like home, school, food market, public administrative, private business, religious practise continue from the past.

The neighbourhood was a quite backwater, untouched by tourism. It served just as a passage from the hotels in Bangrak riverfront — River City, Sheraton, Oriental, Shangri-La- to Yaowaraj Road by foot. As the CBD changed, the thriving road market of Charoenkrung Road lost its significance and many old shophouses, which were the offices of international retailers and traders, were abandoned.



It was not until the late 2000s, the boom of rehabilitation or adaptive use in aged buildings, that people with creative background seemed to be fond of romantic ideas or nostalgia of the old and traditional infrastructures. Moreover, the community itself in cooperation with Bangkok Chinatown World Heritage Project started to actively promote its neighbourhood for tourism — social media promotion, marking tourist stops, installation of tourist signage, creating a cultural centre, and producing local tourist maps. Further to these, Arsorn Silp Institute of the Arts commenced working with the community (Bangkokchinatown, no date). Consequently, new people began to be attracted to this old and historical place.

The first wave tourists included organized cycle tourists. Bike tours, which have invaded small alleys of neighbourhoods for cultural immersion, are often seen. Sometimes locals may have heard murmuring about how the bike tour have interrupted their normal activities. Walking culture tours were also introduced by the Bangkok Chinatown World Heritage Project, becoming popular.

Many old houses have emerged from being previously hidden gems to must see tourist spots. In particular, So Heng Tai mansion, a rare surviving Chinese courtyard house, has served as private residences of an old Chinese junk trade merchant family for more than 200 years. The So Heng Tai was built in the traditional Hokkien architectural style. A main courtyard connects between the main buildings and the entrance hall. Two other buildings are aligned on the axis on both sides of the main building. As the city has been changed from river-centred to road-centred, the house no longer serves and functions like before. With creative and entrepreneurial outlook, Poosak Posayachinda, the latest generation decedent who inherited the property from the family, has installed a swimming pool in the middle of the courtyard. The private mansion has been best known as the scuba diving school with the typical scenic view and beagle dog farm since then. Moreover, it has also been fully promoted for tourist visit during the 2010s as another cultural heritage experience. Even though the visual mix landscape between modern and old infrastructure has attracted tourists, the nostalgia image of the Mansion's golden age has still been often illustrated to visitors by his mother, Dungtawan Posayajinda.

D. Posayachinda, the 7<sup>th</sup> generation former owner of Heng Tai mansion, whose *Sakoo Sai Moo* and *Kao Tom Pad* (food name) were recognised as the best in Talad Noi, stated that

My son likes scuba diving, so he came back (from Australia) and opened the school here... The courtyard used to be surrounded by trees. Everyone liked to visit our house. But after installing the swimming pool, everything has changed. In 1977, the Fine Arts Department wanted to register the mansion as a national heritage but we needed to move out. So I decided to renovate the house by myself. Without conservation knowledge, many historic objects like the roof and glass painting were destroyed. (Sarakadee Magazine, 2014)

Before the tourist boom period, asking for directions to the house by using the name *So Heng Tai* seemed to confuse the local people because they have called this dwelling Bann Patoo Dang, translation in Thai is '*House with the red door*'. It is a private property; however, its unique red door at the main entrance has usually been open to tourists for strolling in the house without charge.

On a visit in September 2015, the old lady owner D. Passyachinda, was very enthusiastic and kind to welcome the visitors and to tell the story of this mansion in the good old days. In my opinion, as the structure of the mansion now is falling apart, cultural newcomers like tourists might provide the solution to save it. However, it seems that the mansion was exploited and used as another case of architecture study, tourist product for the district, and just another photography spot.

P. Posayachinda expressed his attitude toward the property conservation issue.

People always come to visit us and tell us how beautiful and unique our house was. They often proposed ideas how to restore it. Last year, many architecture faculties from different universities and architecture firms came and made some research and promised us to come back with restoration plans. So far, I have never heard back from them. (Personal Communication, Posayachinda, 2015)

The Talad Noi district has been known locally as one of the best places to find good common Chinese food. Unsurprisingly, in order to attract new people to the area, a trendy new food concept has been brought up to the community. Talak Kia (Talad Noi in Chinese) organic market was launched by the community and Arsom Silp Institute of the Arts to learn how to manage the waste land in the way that that community are able promote their inner community economy. Local crafts and products, successful organic business products, panelist

discussions, and music have been introduced. Nevertheless, in my opinion, it comes across that after several market settings, the products turn to exclusively serve only organic product/food, healthy drink/snack and hand made product from outsider entrepreneurs by adapting the historic landscape of the community as the selling point.

A second wave of interest has resulted in the arrival of artists. In 2012, Anchalee Anantawat, a young Thai designer, and Thomas Menard, an artist with French financial background, founded a contemporary gallery called *Speedy Grandma* in Soi Charoenkrung 28 (Bangrak district). The gallery rehabilitated an old shophouse to a gallery and studio. Later, they opened Soy Sauce Factory, a European art gallery, which converted an old soy sauce factory warehouse in Soi Charoenkrung 24 (just next to Talad Noi) to a New York industrial look of creative space — gallery, music performance, studio, artist co-working and residence (Soy sauce factory, no date). Menard claimed his strong intention of being a pioneer in this area to turn Chinatown in Bangkok into what they did in Singapore: a really creative and interesting area (LILREDDOTFOLKS, 2014).

The installation of this typical space has drawn a new group of people to the community. However, in 2014, the encounter between newcomers and local people revealed tensions when illegal graffiti was sprayed on the wall of the longstanding local Chinese newspaper office and surrounding area.

The campaign of cleaning the wall was launched socially in July 2014 by the community. The cooperation between artists from Soy Sauce Factory, the community and volunteers made national news. The community claimed that they were not against street art but it would be more appreciated if artists had consulted with them before painting inappropriate graffiti. As stated by a member of the community, the community has held several meetings about what kind of art pieces we would like to be placed in our neighbourhood. The collaboration between artists and the local community must be considered (COZY news, 2014). The Georgetown mural painting experience appears to be an inspiring example for the community of Talad Noi.

Menard gave an interview on the graffiti removal on the day:

We're cleaning the spoiled paintings. What we want to do for the future is we would like to produce what we did in Penang. What happens in Penang is many painting everywhere. Many artists they come to Georgetown, they do like beautiful decoration, beautiful painting. So we wish we can do the same in Talad Noi. (COZY news, 2014)

In January 2016, the mural paintings were painted around Talad Noi neighbourhood, Charoenkrung Road, and Songwad Road by Thai and European artists under *Buk Ruk (trespassing)* festival. Art exhibitions, artist talks, animation night, music open-air festival, visual happenings, mapping projections and workshops were set up around the area for 10 days (Bukruk urban arts festival, 2013). It became the phenomenon in the community. Surely, it has drawn the attention of not only creative people but also the general public. Searching wall paintings and posting them on social media has turned to be some cliché cultural activity since then.

The third wave of change is gentrification. Unsurprisingly, the invasion of artistic spirit and niche tourists have started to transform this area little by little. Next to the *Aitch* mural painting on Songwad Road is a casks shop called Sangseng (Chinese name) run by an old Chinese couple. This business has been operating for many generations. However, it was not until 2016 that the shop added another node of its business - Sunset Cafe' & Woodworks - for serving tourists. As the owner Arkong (grandpa) Sirichai had witnessed the whole process of the painting, clients may sometimes have the opportunity to listen to the story of the painting with the energetic attitude from him.

“...the artist is a woman. She was working all day. As I remembered, she had paused only 2 times a day. Amazing young lady” (Personal Communication, Sirichai, 2016)

On the other hand, *So Heng Tai* has gained lot of attention from newcomers who were looking for something considered *hip* precisely after the mass publicity on *Buk Ruk Street Art* at Talad Noi and Charoenkrung in January 2016. P. Posayachinda stated that the local district officer asked for opening the house for public visiting. However, it seems that the arrival of numerous tourists and the cost for maintaining the mansion in proper status was beyond the owner's expectation. Furthermore, since it became popular, the Revenue Department requestd property tax, swimming pool tax, and income tax from selling beverages

to tourists. In December 2016, the owner posted on *So Heng Tai Facebook page* that the house would be closed for visitors.

Dear Tourist, We have to close our mansion to the public since the District is asking for TAX that we sell our beverages to the visitors. Fact is, "So Heng Tai" is a private property. We look after our house without any help from anyone. The district tourism asked us to open the house to help promote the district and it has now become very popular among the tourists, Thai and etc. We can't afford the maintenance of the house since people come to visit, we need to hire more workers to clean our house everyday and invest in some decoration. Not including that we loose our privacy. Our Mansion will be closed for visitors. Share this post please. (So Heng Tai, 2016)

On the positive side, the cultural awareness and aesthetic impression have been ingrained not only to the local community but also the public. However, also undeniable, the sign of gentrification process has been raised. Small boutique hotels are popping up secretly in different small alleys of the community. Abandoned buildings along Charoenkrung have been renovated and later occupied by restaurants and bars with the industrial look - glass, black steel, Béton brut walls and blackboards with English menus. By passing in front of these so-called adapted buildings no matter whether restaurant, coffee bar, or gallery space, the image of young different kind of hipster type as described ironically in how to spot a hipster by J. Cassar-the Art hipster, the Mountain man, the Music festival waif, the Mixologist, the Etsy entrepreneur, the Barista, the Tech creative, the Tortured- are not strange to be found (Cassar, 2016). Even though Talad Noi local community gave the impression of being well adjusted to new instalment culture in their neighbourhood, on the other hand, it is hard to find the young creatives wondering around the iconic annual Vegetarian Festival, architectural unique shrine, and signature local restaurant. The activities between the locals and newcomers have shown the sign of segregation. Does Talad Noi represent just another amphitheatre to be exploited by their creativity?

#### **4.2 Post Office Bangkok and the aim to create the new Bangkok creative district**

Charoenkrung Road was formerly one of the most vibrant business roads in Bangkok. As the urban sprawl of Bangkok during the mid twentieth century moved toward former suburban areas (Silom, Sathon, Sukhumvit), the decline of the area compelled many old retail shops to move out. According to the research of the Faculty of Architecture and Planning, Thammasat University in association with Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC), in 2015, 18% or 175 properties were unoccupied (Bangkok Post, 2016). Moreover, Charoenkrung Road, from Soi 20 to 60, is located in between MRT Hua Lum Pong and BTS Taksin, the area turned to be just a passage and then to be more quiet off the beaten track. Nevertheless, it still serves as the location of the embassies, hotels, upper middle-class Christian schools, old restaurants and Chinese communities.

Not too far from Talad Noi on Charoenkrung Road, a modernist grand building of the Thai Post Office which was just recently renovated, became in 2017 the new office building of TCDC. This avant-garde division under the Office of the Prime Minister founded in 2004 aims to create an opportunity for Thai people to access sources of knowledge for their new inspirations by learning from the success and achievement of all famous artists and designers worldwide (Thailand Creative & Design Center(TCDC), no date) .The plan is not only to re-occupy the historical legacy building, but also to upgrade the area to a creative ideas district and prototype of creative district, under Co-Create Charoenkrung Project in association with the Thai Health Promotion.

R. Florida believed that creative people could provide one of the major strategies for improving economic development and revitalising urban assets. He discussed how to build a creative communities to attract creative people – the community that is open to diversity and urban lifestyle amenities such as pedestrian-friendly town centres packed with coffee shops, sidewalk vegan cafes, designer stores, art galleries and modernised office lofts (Florida, 2002). Co-Create Charoenkrung Project aims to introduce the idea of creative economy. As stated by C. Leeyawanich, Policy and Development Manager at the Thailand Creative and Design Centre that

“We don't want to just move into the place. We want to involve local people to create a liveable space for everyone...the state and private sectors may not see the economic potential [of a creative district] now. But they will.” (Bangkok Post, 2016)

Therefore, to draw creative people to the area , TCDC has launched activities as follows (Co-create Charoenkrung, 2015) :

**Gathering Community’s Opinions Activity**

Seeking the guidelines in developing the creative district through Service Design, together with the community and other stakeholders.

**Community’s Creativity Stimulation Activity**

Designing and building a creative district through inspirational activities encouraging creativity in problem solving, in order to improve the quality of life of the community and people in the area.

**Creative Charoenkrung Activity**

Inviting the community, thinkers and creators to create an atmosphere of change and building a strong connection between people in the area and other organizations.

**Public Communication Activity**

Introducing the Charoenkrung Creative District through printed media, social media and videos broadcasting the concept of activities and creative thinking process.

Moreover, the result from the community activities, the creative district development concepts, were developed as follows (Co-create Charoenkrung, 2015) :

**Riverfront public area development project:** reviving old riverfront architecture to a new landmark of the district and connecting both main and minor transportation routes to the riverfront.

**Abandoned building renovation and development project:** using the area to its highest capacity as district’s new meeting space for hosting creative people incubation activity.

**Small green space development project:** developing underused space into district’s public green space for meeting and activity.

**Alleys connection project:** connecting main and minor transportation routes for accessibility in the area to stimulate economy in the alleys.

**Signage for a Walkable District project:** providing the information of travelling spots, business areas, restaurants and interesting spots with the signboard reflecting the identity of the area to draw people to the area.

It may be appropriate to question the real reasons underlying the revitalisation of the area. The historical outlook quality may be not the only aspect that draws new people or even real estate development. Charoenkrung Road presents strong urban quality and quantity of location on the riverbank side. From the road it takes less than 500 metres to be able to access the waterfront area. The successful example of waterfront development is on the southern part of Charoenkrung Road — Asiatique the Riverfront, readapted the former docks of the East Asiatic Company to a community mall.

Charoenkung Road has experienced the gentrification effect, which is caused by the temptation to develop the waterfront area. The epic case happened in 2007 with the Wanglee community, the neighbourhood located just next to Wat Yannawa and BTS Taksin station. Even though, the community could trace its history back to the Junk trade period and played the role as Chinese immigrant first boarding port, with the location presenting the vigorous economic potential, all of the community was evicted. In 2016, the area has become a wide open space for parking with the view of Chao Phraya River.

Yannawa Riverfront under the Urban Design & Development Centre, Chulalongkorn University, in cooperation with the Thai Health Promotion, has been aggressively projected to the public. The aim is to create an inclusive and universal design for walking and biking along the waterfront area (Yannawa River Front, 2014). In December 2014, an outdoor exhibition on the project was launched at the Bangkok Docklands Festival of Art and Food, which was set at the Fish Marketing Organization, Charoenkrung 58. The urban festival gathered a huge number of the young generation to enjoy upper-class western style food trucks selling hamburgers and sausages, European sensation outdoor picnic, pop-up design shops and music by the Chao Praya River.



In May 2016, Swing Dancing for Charoenkrung district, another groovy happening under the slogan ‘Let's dance and co-create Charoen Krung’, recently welcomed young college-educated workers to enjoy western 60's culture at the unique historical East Asiatic Company. The objectives were (TCDCCONNECT, 2016) ; 1) to promote the architectural value building as the future landmark; and 2) to explore the idea of ability to access waterfront public land.

### 5. First Impacts of Gentrification and Creative Class

This research was concluded before the actual arrival of TCDC in 2017. It seems certain that there will definitely be more “creative”, “hip” and “cool” events in the area. The urban developments including public space, park, walkability area, bike path, and riverfront recreation would be unquestionably implanted in the neighbourhood. The quality of life of the local community and the newcomer community might become better. However, many researches have reported good and bad effects of gentrification that have revealed from ‘creative classes’. For example, in 2013 in San Francisco, with the arrival of the creative tech of Silicon Valley even only, and by the simple act of installing Tech Company bus stops, has driven up the housing prices for local people and led to Google bus protests. Also, the story behind Centre George Pompidou, London Borough of Southwark, old Eastern Berlin, and Xintiandi hardly mentioned about the interruption, the segregation and the eviction of the old local neighbourhood and community.

As stated by J. Kotkin on the article “ *Richard Florida Concedes the Limits of the Creative Class*” by raising the US example that

The sad truth is that even in the more plausible “creative class” cities such as New York and San Francisco, the emphasis on “hip cool” and high-end service industries has corresponded with a decline in their middle class and a growing gap between rich and poor. Washington D.C. and San Francisco, perennial poster children for “cool cities,” also have among the highest percentages of poverty of any major urban center—roughly 20 percent—once cost of living is figured in. (Kotkin, 2013)

Undeniably, urban regeneration often causes the rise of land prices in general. Even though the area retains the quality historic legacy, without the Building Control Act as heritage area, all aged buildings may risk being demolished or transformed in response to incentives of higher profit from the rising values of land. As for private property like *So Heng Tai* mansion, the circumstance has pointed out to the lack of proper management of preservation urban historic fabric in the urban revitalisation context. Co-sharing between the state and private sector should be considered as a measure to conserve heritage buildings. So far it is not the case. Instead, the State has chosen to extract additional taxes from the overburdened owners of the attractive heritage asset.

Economically it has been exhibited that the rise of middle class globally, especially in Asian countries, has growth faster, because of access to existing know-how not innovation like in westerners (Yueh, 2013). It is appropriate to question the impact of ‘Creativity’ on the local community. Is it really innovation or is it just an adopted idea from European notions and successful cases elsewhere?

The rise of the creative class in Charoenkrung and Talad Noi neighbourhood has wisely brought up the perception of how creative knowledge could improve not only decayed urban infrastructure but also implant the aesthetic literacy to the society. However, without caution on keeping the momentum of introducing new culture and preserving local culture, the risk of segregation in society may take place. The situation that one side emphasises on the exploitation of local cultural gimmick while the other side tries to preserve its everyday, life long culture. The small sign of gentrification process today — rehabilitation old buildings to tourism products, promotion of funky culture in local traditional society, may accelerate to become more obvious and much more transformative. It is certain that in the next five years Talad Noi and surrounding area will be regenerated to become another area of change possibly like Kaosarn road. Traditional activities like Dragon dance, Chinese lantern festival may disappear like in the main Chinatown, where all festivals have been fabricated in response the tourists’ fascination. Of great concern, the development of all the already-limited public space, including riverfront park, recreation areas, friendly pedestrian, which was originally gathered from local community’s opinions, probably at the end will exclusively served only for newcomers who are here identified as tourists and the creative classes.

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