



From Observation to Creation: Exploring Multi-Layered Cultural Narratives in Bangkok Old Town through Participatory Artistic Practices

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Abstract

Background and Aim: This study explores the transformation of Bangkok's old town into a creative hub through participatory artistic practices. It examines the evolution of the creator's role from a passive observer to an active contributor, integrating personal experiences and cultural observations into multi-material textile artworks. The research aims to demonstrate how blending traditional and contemporary perspectives can revitalize overlooked cultural resources.

Materials and Methods: Using long-term ethnographic methods, the study employs a dual-scale framework that combines temporal timelines with geographical mapping based on the Chao Phraya River. It collects and translates personal social media posts into artistic elements, incorporating fabrics and recycled materials to connect personal memory with local cultural identity.

Results: The final assemblages reflect Bangkok's old town's unique heritage as a creative district, illustrating how participatory artistic practices can capture cultural and spatial dynamics. By adopting this approach, we can offer a replicable model for long-term residents and encourage sustained engagement to integrate more artistic practices into the local context, fostering deeper connections between art and place. The research demonstrates how traditional folk traditions and contemporary creative expressions can be merged to foster cultural revitalization.

Conclusion: By leveraging Thailand's soft power attributes—diversity, flexibility, and informality—the study highlights the potential for cultural and creative industries to foster sustainable development. It underscores the importance of combining cultural capital with individual creativity to enhance economic value and social cohesion. This research contributes to the discourse on cultural preservation, creative innovation, and their role in building resilient and vibrant communities.

Keywords: Participatory Art; Bangkok's Old Town; Soft Power; Sustainable Development; Urban Cultural Transformation

Introduction

Culture represents a shared way of life, encompassing a community's values, practices, and traditions. While ancient traditions are often regarded as more significant than contemporary folk cultures, the latter serve as a critical foundation for cultural transformation. Culture transcends temporal boundaries as a dynamic and evolving phenomenon, continuously adapting even amid modernization (World Commission on Culture and Development, 1995). The outcomes of cultural transformation—whether through fusion or reinterpretation—yield artistic expressions that celebrate creativity and diversity. However, the expansion of modern cultural creativity and its capitalization within the arts often goes unnoticed, highlighting the need for diverse perspectives to uncover new sources of inspiration.

This study examines a creative project led by a Bangkok-based foreign artist, exploring the daily experiences and lifestyles within Bangkok's old-town community. The project draws upon personal mythologies inspired by folk and popular culture, urban alleys, and optical illusions, weaving these elements into a conceptual and figurative narrative. These shifting components are represented through architectural forms and urban landscapes that oscillate between abstraction and photographic realism. The research investigates the interplay between daily folk practices and traditional culture, leveraging the creator's diverse background and experiences as sources of inspiration. The project emphasizes cultural convergence, meditative imagination, and lived experiences by integrating artistic creation with local research materials, bridging classical design principles with contemporary visual reinterpretations.

The project was first presented in the Bangkok Design Week 2022 academic program as Figure 1 in collaboration with the Doctoral and Master's Programs in Design Arts at Silpakorn University (Creative







Economy Agency, 2022). This collaboration underscores a shared commitment to exploring the creative potential of Bangkok's old city, a historical center of cultural and artistic innovation. The initiative invited Bangkok-based artists to contribute their perspectives, emphasizing the collective value of diverse insights. Bangkok Design Week aims to facilitate creative reinterpretations of local Thai districts while addressing critical issues of cultural transformation. The event raises pertinent questions, such as: How has the cultural cost of the past evolved alongside modern lifestyles? How can the identity of Bangkok's creative districts be preserved? Guided by the program's theme, "Co with Culture", the initiative seeks to transform static cultural elements into dynamic forms of expression. The project aims to revitalize overlooked local resources by leveraging design and creativity, reaffirming their economic and cultural significance. This emphasis on cultural preservation and innovation is intended to inspire audiences while underscoring the broader impact of the project (Creative Economy Agency, 2022).



Figure 1 Documentation of exhibited works at Bangkok Design Week, integrating local narratives and creative research.

Note: Collated from this current study

This study adopts ethnography as its core methodology, combining long-term fieldwork with social media documentation to investigate cultural dynamics and creative practices in Bangkok. Through participatory observation and analysis of community activities, the research explores how local creators interpret cultural transformation. Emphasizing personal experience and diverse materials, the project highlights artistic processes and fosters deeper engagement with cultural identity. By integrating historical and cultural references, it reconstructs fragmented cultural elements into renewed forms, using aesthetics and creativity to restore their relevance in contemporary contexts. The study offers a systematic, experience-driven approach to cultural interpretation and preservation.

In 2024, two years after its initial presentation, the creator organized the materials into an archival format for an international creative exhibition, as shown in Figure 2. Brief articles accompanied the archive, elucidating the concept and process for readers. Ultimately, this study seeks to document the artistic thought process and methodological framework underlying the project, preserving it as a reference for future creative endeavors rooted in daily and lived experiences.





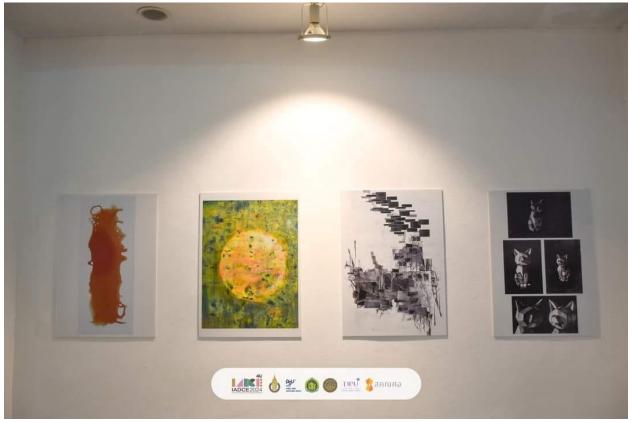


Figure 2 Exhibition documentation from IADCE 2024 reflecting the integration of research and creative practice

Note: Collated from IADCE2024

Objectives

This research aims to establish a practical framework for artistic creation through participatory observation and documentation, focusing on the contributions of international and interdisciplinary artists in a local Thai district. The study examines the cultural impact of participatory observation programs and explores the creative potential within community contexts. The ultimate goal is to recognize and elevate the cultural value of local communities through artistic expression while enhancing practical applications of aesthetics in community settings. By doing so, the research aspires to provide a methodological reference for subsequent practitioners, inspire the local cultural landscape, and benefit community residents.

- To establish a practical framework for artistic creation through participatory observation and documentation, which for a reference for future practitioners.
- To recognize and elevate the cultural value of local communities through artistic expression and to enhance the practical application of aesthetics in community settings.

Literature review

1. Creative and Cultural Perspectives

The English anthropologist Edward Tylor (1871) defined culture as a concept that "encompasses the social behavior, institutions, and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits of the individuals in these groups." Similarly, Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster., n.d.) defines culture as "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group, as well as the characteristic features of everyday existence shared by people in a specific time and place." Additionally, the Cambridge Dictionary (Cambridge-Dictionary, n.d.)







describes culture as "the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time; the attitudes, behaviors, and opinions of a specific group within society."

In summary, culture can be understood as a shared way of life. This dynamic and ever-changing phenomenon evolves as groups adapt their behaviors and characteristics in response to their environment. Historically, there has been a tendency to preserve ancient traditions while undervaluing contemporary folk culture, despite the latter serving as a critical foundation for cultural transformation. In Thailand, initiatives to protect cultural heritage often emerge organically within communities, supported by increasing academic interest in conserving heritage close to people's everyday lives (Kangwanpoom et al., 2014)

Cultural evolution, even amid modernization, can yield vibrant and dynamic outcomes. The transformation of cultural elements—whether through blending or reinterpreting—can result in artistic expressions that are both joyful and innovative. Modern culture, creativity, and the economic potential of art and culture as soft power cannot be overlooked. Exploring diverse perspectives is essential for uncovering new inspirations.

2. Soft Power and Thai Identity

The Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council in Thailand (Charungkiattikul & Joneurairatana, 2024) defines the Creative Economy as an approach to economic development based on "knowledge, education, creation, and the use of intellectual property linked to cultural foundations, knowledge, technology, and innovation." This framework combines cultural capital with individual creative identity to generate added value, strengthening the economy. It also emphasizes fostering innovation and design to sustainably advance economic, societal, and cultural development (Charungkiattikul & Joneurairatana, 2024).

The Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University studied 50 corporate executives who had interacted with Thai people and organizations. The study highlighted five key attributes of Thai soft power, known as the "5Fs": Fun, Flavoring, Fulfilling, Flexibility, and Friendliness (Rukpium, 2023). These attributes underscore Thailand's emphasis on diversity, adaptability, and hospitality, which remain intact even when integrated with other cultures. Dr. Pattaratanakun emphasized the importance of leveraging Thai soft power through research and innovation, advocating for a multidimensional perspective that avoids rigid frameworks. Thailand's cultural "melting pot" approach, blending diverse cultural influences, reflects its flexible and sociable nature (Rukpium, 2023).

In summary, research in Thailand consistently explores the intersections of culture and creativity, demonstrating their potential to enhance local communities and contribute to sustainable development. The integration of Thailand's creative economy has dramatically improved after official intervention and strategic planning, and specific results have been achieved. However, it has also caused controversy over Bangkok's excessive concentration of cultural and creative industry resources. Thai scholars question that official dominance has exacerbated the gap between the inside and outside of the city. Spatial beautification is only conducive to creating Bangkok's city brand under the design category, widening the urban inequality gap between Bangkok and other regions in Thailand (Chuangchai, 2021).

3. The Creative District of Bangkok Old Town

The banks of the Chao Phraya River have long served as a pivotal hub for maritime trade, dating back to the Ayutthaya period. The district east of the river represents Bangkok's historical and cultural prototype, showcasing its past prosperity. Since the construction of Bangkok's first road, Charoenkrung, which marked a transformation in land transportation, the area has vividly represented multicultural influence through its architecture, cuisine, and products (Bangkok Design Week, 2022). The river position in the map drawn in Figure 4 was post-produced from this current study and based on Google Maps.







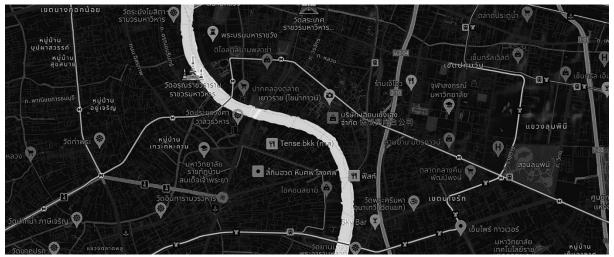


Figure 3 Geographic layout of Bangkok Old Town adjacent to the Chao Phraya River. **Note:** Collated from this current study and based on Google Maps.

Over time, urban expansion shifted Bangkok's growth toward former suburban areas. By the mid-20th century, this shift led to a decline in the old town district as many retail shops relocated (Huabcharoen & Ellsmore, 2017). Despite this, the area remains rich in architectural heritage, with many buildings recognized for their historical value and adapted for contemporary use. The district's ethnic diversity is reflected in its traditions, food, and architecture, creating a vibrant cultural mosaic (Wongsamakkee & Vichienpradit, 2021). Recent developments, such as the expansion of the subway system and the demolition of decayed buildings in Chinatown, have added economic value to the area. This has sparked renewed interest in preserving cultural heritage within the community (Huabcharoen & Ellsmore, 2017). The area's historical warehouses and shop houses, often characterized by their nostalgic charm, have attracted photographers and young creatives. These transformations have revitalized the community, introducing new activities and economic opportunities.

The establishment of the Thailand Creative and Design Center's new office in the modernist Thai General Post Office building on Charoenkrung Road in 2017 further catalyzed the area's evolution into a creative district (Huabcharoen & Ellsmore, 2017). This initiative has drawn creative professionals and businesses, fostering an environment where local heritage is blended with contemporary design practices.

Today, Bangkok's old town exemplifies a harmonious fusion of historical preservation and modern innovation. The district's rich cultural assets provide a fertile ground for creators to reimagine and add value to its unique heritage. The ongoing interplay between traditional elements and contemporary functions has solidified the area's reputation as a cultural and creative hub, making it an ideal site for artistic exploration (Bangkok Design Week, 2022).





Conceptual Framework

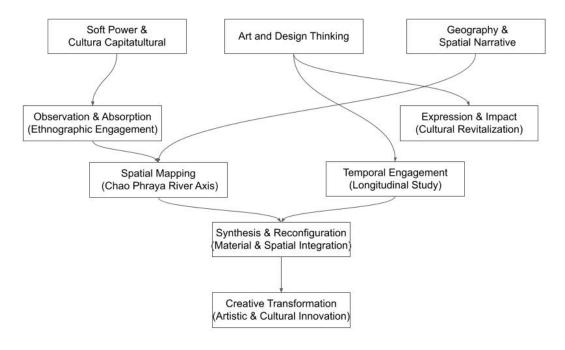


Figure 4 The Concept Framework. **Note:** Collated from this current study.

Methodology

This project employs ethnography as its foundational theoretical approach, involving in-depth participation and observation to understand a culture or community's internal dynamics and behaviors. While adhering to the core principles of ethnographic research, the methodology has been adapted to suit the practical demands of artistic creation. The key steps are as follows:

- 1. Identify the Study Area: Select Bangkok Old Town as the research site, defining the geographical and temporal scope of the study.
- 2. Literature Review: Collect and review relevant literature and theoretical background to understand Bangkok's old town's history and cultural context.
- 3. Participant Observation: As a long-term Bangkok-based foreigner, the researcher immersed themselves in the community, engaging in daily activities.
- 4. Documentation: Record observations, behaviors, conversations, and situational contexts meticulously, using social media and photography to capture reflections and emotions.
- 5. Data Organization: Organize and code field notes, photographs, and other materials chronologically.
- 6. Data Analysis: Repeatedly review and compare collected materials to comprehensively understand the community and its culture.
- 7. Creative Ethnographic Production: Create ethnographic artworks that vividly depict community life and culture, incorporating the researcher's reflections and interpretations.
- 8. Community Engagement: Present the creative works at the Bangkok Design Week exhibition and publish online articles to share findings with the local community.







The study leverages a unique long-term field investigation approach to explore empirical phenomena through social media documentation. By observing and analyzing layered community activities, the research captures the creative imagination of Bangkok-based creators and their interpretations of cultural transformations.

This project provides insights into the typical artistic practice process and emphasizes the importance of personal experience, making the findings more relatable to readers. The method incorporates diverse materials and elements, enriching the creative outcomes. By fostering a long-term relationship with the research objective, the study systematically collects, cross-compares, and synthesizes data to produce meaningful insights.

The researcher also reviewed historical and cultural references to understand the identity and lived realities of the area's residents. Through this process, the project reinterprets culture from a fragmented state, presenting it in novel and engaging ways. The study aims to utilize aesthetics and creativity to restore significance to overlooked cultural elements, ensuring their continued relevance and value in contemporary contexts.

Results

This study aims to establish a practical framework for creative perspectives by exploring the contributions of Bangkok-based foreign creators to the local Thai district. It adopts an interactive, action-research methodology incorporating participatory creation, enabling a multi-layered exploration of cultural impacts. Through this process, the study builds long-term relationships with its research objectives, documenting experiences, synthesizing insights, and analyzing connections and compositions in the creative process. Emphasis is placed on the creator's personal experiences, which serve as the foundation for the artistic practice. The method incorporates diverse materials and elements, profoundly shaping the development of the creative output.

1. Practice Setting

The study is grounded in a participatory approach, using social media to document historical posts, personal experiences, and interactions related to Bangkok's old town. These posts serve as a foundation for the creative process, as illustrated in Figure 5.

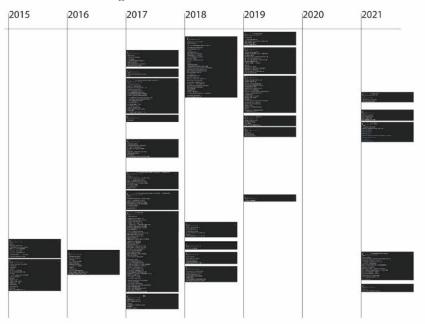


Figure 5 Archival social media posts chronological compilation in creative phase 1. **Note:** Collated from this current study







2. Practice Process

The practice process is divided into four phases:

Phase 1: Personal Subjective Element Data Collection

The artist, a foreign resident in Bangkok for seven years, frequently explored the old town area. The intricate alleys of the district often led to unintended discoveries—hidden gates, unique coffee shops, street art, and local cuisine. These serendipity moments were documented as social media posts, memorializing the artist's experiences.

The study systematically collected these historical posts, which included content, images, and social media interactions. As shown in Figure 2, these posts were treated as symbolic representations of memory and identity, forming the foundation for artistic creation. The materials drawn from personal social media were combined with fabrics to create textile pieces that encapsulate the essence of the old town's unique landscape. Integrating these personal subjective elements into the creative process reflects the significance of individual experience as a form of artistic expression.

Phase 2: Virtual Transformation of Materials

The collected data was scaled and printed onto tracing paper, chosen for its transparency, allowing light to pass through and enhancing the artwork's layering effect. Tracing paper is widely used by architects, design engineers, and artists for its unique properties (Olcott & Siegel, 2008).

The original social media content was translated into English and Thai to strengthen the connection between the local community and culture. Leveraging the artist's background in fashion design, the study also incorporated elements from Bangkok's textile markets. Recycled fabric pieces were combined with the printed tracing paper, creating multi-material textile artworks. This integration extended the narrative of the old town's cultural and aesthetic richness, as illustrated in Figure 6.



Figure 6 Archival social media posts categorized by associated locations in the area in creative phase 2 Note: Collated from this current study

Phase 3: Assembly and Arrangement

Each social media post inspired a textile artwork composed of layered materials and intricate details. While meaningful, these pieces were designed to be assembled into a larger, cohesive artwork representing the Chao Phraya River and the surrounding community. The assembly process required careful consideration of each textile piece's placement to ensure a harmonious representation of the landscape and cultural dynamics, as shown in Figure 7.









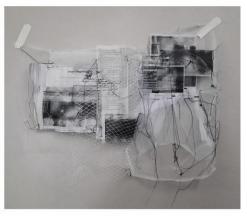


Figure 7 Archival representative examples of post-processing outcomes in the creative workflow in creative phase 3

Note: Collated from this current study.

Phase 4: Outcome

The outcome of this participatory creative process is a collection of textile artworks that encapsulate the multi-layered cultural narrative of Bangkok's old town. These works not only represent the artist's journey and exploration of the district but also highlight the evolving identity of the community. The final installation demonstrates how personal memories and collective cultural elements can be woven together to create a meaningful artistic expression that resonates with the local community and a broader audience, as shown in Figure 8.







Figure 8 Completed work synthesizing field observations and artistic interpretation in creative phase 4. **Note:** Collated from this current study.)

Discussion

The artworks are picked up and sorted out logically from a personal messy state and presented in a different light. This study uses a timeline to review the creator's long-term experience and emotions in the region to construct a multi-layered imagination. At the same time, the geographical axis is used to correspond to the arrangement of each unit. This study uses a timeline to review the creator's long-term experience and emotions in the region to construct a multi-imagination. At the same time, the geographical axis is used to correspond to the arrangement of each unit. The collective work is presented in a relative geographical location and is based on the fabric market in the region. Connected Extension proposes using various fabrics and threads to connect physical works.

Overall, the creator's role has also transformed from experiencer to creator, from unconscious sharing to conscious review and collection. The study focuses on the gaze from daily folk to traditional Culture within the creators' backgrounds and experiences to express inspiration. Moreover, it uniquely combines the creation and local research materials, focusing on cultural collision, an imagination for meditation, and a living experience. It is as much a projected, ever-changing hallucination as an expression of the perspectives of a multi-layered imagination.

2. Discussion of results

This study draws upon long-term, in-depth participation and ethnographic observation as its primary methodological approach. The creator's role evolved significantly throughout the process, transitioning from a passive experience to an active creator, from unconscious sharing to deliberate review and systematic collection. The layout of the final assembled work corresponds to a geographical map, with the Chao Phraya River serving as the central axis. The individual artworks arranged relative to this axis collectively represent the cultural and spatial dynamics of the Bangkok Old Town area. Each piece encapsulates multiple layers of personal experience, with details reflecting the creator's evolving emotions and insights over time.



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The project employs a timeline to review the creator's long-term interactions with the area, constructing a multi-layered imagination that interweaves temporal and geographical dimensions. The collective work connects to the fabric market of the region, integrating various fabrics and threads as a metaphorical extension of cultural and creative connectivity.

This study has produced a multi-layered composition inspired by daily Thai lifestyles and the cultural experiences of the Bangkok old town community. The creative process, centered around multi-material textile weaving, incorporates intricate details to reflect the richness of personal and collective experiences. The layout responds to the creator's engagement timeline and a geographical axis, aligning the artworks with the Chao Phraya River and surrounding neighborhoods.

The creative process involved organizing personal memories and observations from a seemingly chaotic state into a coherent artistic expression. The creator revisited their emotional and experiential journey using a timeline to construct a multi-dimensional narrative. The geographical axis further enhanced the structural arrangement, anchoring the individual artworks to their cultural and spatial origins.

The project illustrates the creator's role transformation from casual engagement to purposeful creation. The study examines how daily folk practices and traditional culture inspire creativity, drawing on the creator's background and experiences. Integrating local research materials and artistic imagination results in a work that reflects cultural collisions, meditative introspection, and lived experiences. The final artworks express a continuously evolving cultural narrative, encapsulating personal and communal perspectives.

Additionally, the study highlights the broader implications of adapting Bangkok's old town into a creative hub, demonstrating how Thailand's soft power, characterized by diversity, flexibility, and informality, can be leveraged to blend multiple cultural influences. This adaptability ensures that Thai culture remains vibrant and relevant when interacting with other traditions (Rukpium, 2023).

Conclusion

This study established a framework for exploring the creative perspectives of Bangkok-based foreign creators, focusing on the cultural and geographical nuances of the Bangkok Old Town district. By inducing dual-scale reflexive imagination—spanning temporal and spatial dimensions—the research emphasizes the cultural impact of daily experiences and lifestyles. The project's conceptual foundation is rooted in personal mythology, inspired by the interplay of folk and popular culture, urban environments, and optical illusions, all of which are in constant flux.

Using long-term field investigation methods, the study observed and documented patterns of overlapping activities to uncover the imaginative responses of creators engaging with the community. The creator's role evolved from an observer to a creator, transitioning from unconscious sharing to a deliberate review and artistic synthesis process. This evolution enabled the construction of multi-layered narratives, presented as interconnected textile artworks. These creations, arranged in alignment with the Chao Phraya River and reflecting the region's cultural identity, incorporate materials such as fabrics and threads to symbolize cultural connectivity.

The study's multi-layered textile artworks highlight the transformative potential of personal experiences and community-based research. By combining cultural capital with individual creative identity, the project demonstrates how artistic innovation can add value to local cultural resources, contributing to sustainable economic and social development.

This research and creative model is well-suited for local creators engaging in long-term, in-depth cultural exploration. It emphasizes the continuous documentation of personal experiences over an extended timeline, allowing creators to accumulate sensory and emotional insights gradually. These records can then be periodically reviewed and synthesized to form coherent reflections or creative outputs. Importantly, this model is not limited to local participants—outsiders or visiting researchers can also adopt the same approach to foster meaningful engagement with the community. By facilitating immersion and retrospection, the model supports a dialogical process between the self and the cultural environment, reinterpreting place-based identity through sustained interaction.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of embracing Thailand's soft power attributes—diversity, adaptability, and informality—in fostering creativity and cultural integration. The flexible blending of different cultural influences exemplifies Thailand's potential as a creative and cultural hub.

The study supports that creativity, rooted in cultural identity and informed by diverse perspectives, can drive sustainable development. By viewing soft power through a multidimensional lens and avoiding







rigid frameworks, this research offers insights into how cultural resources can inspire innovation, foster economic growth, and strengthen social cohesion.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the integration of participatory artistic practices with cultural revitalization and sustainable development in Bangkok's old town and similar urban cultural contexts:

Community participation should remain central to creative urban transformations. Encouraging local businesses, residents, and cultural organizations to maintain creative hubs actively can ensure long-term sustainability. This can be achieved through co-design initiatives, storytelling projects, and interactive art installations that reflect local heritage while embracing contemporary interpretations. Encouraging more participatory artistic initiatives that involve local communities, artists, and cultural practitioners can further enhance the creative transformation of Bangkok's old town. Establishing artist-in-residence programs, community-led exhibitions, and collaborative workshops can bridge traditional and contemporary artistic expressions, fostering deeper engagement and innovation.

On the other hand, as creators, future artistic projects should continue exploring the fusion of traditional craft techniques with contemporary materials and digital fabrication methods. By incorporating indigenous textiles, recycled materials, and technological elements, artists can create innovative works that reflect historical continuity and future-oriented creativity.

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