

Flying High

Text / Simon Ostheimer Images / Courtesy of ChangChui



Nothing about open-air creative mall ChangChui is what you might expect. First, there's the out-of-the-way location — an 11-*rai* plot of land (roughly 1.7 hectares) sandwiched between an elevated expressway and a busy road on what many Bangkokians consider the wrong side of the river. Then there's the architecture: a mismatched collection of outbuildings built from corrugated metal and discarded doors and windows that were found lying about. Perched in its heart, however, is the true *pièce de résistance* — a decommissioned 1970s-era Lockheed TriStar, with its distinctive engine in the tail, transported here from nearby Don Mueang Airport.

At the centre of this maelstrom of madness is Somchai 'Lim' Songwattana, the 58-year-old CEO and art director of Flynow, the contemporary Thai fashion brand he established more than three decades ago. Songwattana's onsite office, however, reveals that his day job isn't his only passion; housed in a collection of early 20th-century vintage teak furnishings is a menagerie of mounted taxidermy among which rank a cheetah, zebra, monkeys and entire flocks of birds. It's a startling setting, especially in its contrast to Songwattana's signature head-to-toe black clothing, accessorised only by his tiny circular spectacles.

Born into an ethnic Chinese family, the designer grew up in a large house some distance from the centre of Bangkok. 'Before I came up with the idea for this creative mall, I was planning to make

this site a private museum for my collection of antiques and animals,' he explains. 'I've spent more than thirty years of my life collecting, which, as well as inspiring my designs, is also a way of helping me remember my childhood. You could say I long for the past but at the same time I'm discovering the future.' As he describes it, ChangChui is a grand experiment to see how Thai society reacts to his hybrid way of thinking, an ever-evolving organic exploration of tastes and desires.

ChangChui roughly translates to 'careless artisan', but a more accurate construction might be 'nothing is useless' — an ethos that explains all the recycled materials used in the structures. These outbuildings variously house restaurants such as *Insects in the Backyard* — a gourmet twist on the working-class street snacks — a skull-shaped gardening centre, drone flight school, a branch of highbrow design bookshop *Booksmith* and the *Hoay* bar, where drinkers sip craft beer under a vintage Bell 47 helicopter. The best example of upcycling, however, has to be the headlining TriStar, which has been stripped bare and converted into a museum dubbed *Na-Oh*. The space is inhabited by a taxidermy polar bear alongside a veritable zoo of stuffed animals.

'The name *Na-Oh* is really a play on Noah's Ark,' explains Songwattana. 'Through this plane and all ChangChui my goal is to teach Thailand's new generation about the importance of the past, and how discarded objects can again be beautiful. It's a journey for us all.'

Thai fashion icon Somchai 'Lim' Songwattana is the mastermind behind ChangChui, a new creative park on the outskirts of Bangkok



Facing page: A decommissioned 1970s-era Lockheed TriStar is the park's indisputable pièce de résistance

This page: A skull-shaped gardening centre and casual dining space Yon Yaan are among the establishments that make up this 'creative mall'