

Riverside Reinvention

Text / Simon N Ostheimer

‘When I first arrived in Bangkok, I met so many inspiring and creative people,’ recalls Thomas Menard, who in 2010 quit his high-stress job in France and moved to Asia in search of a different life. ‘When it came to house hunting, I was really interested in finding a local shophouse in a cultural or historical area, and Charoenkrung seemed the perfect spot.’ After scouting numerous laneways along the 150-year-old Charoenkrung Road, Menard eventually settled on an empty shophouse on Soi 28, lured by ‘no traffic, a local vibe, proximity to the river, and the lively Chinatown and Silom Road scene nearby’. He soon opened up alternative art space Speedy Grandma on the ground level of his shophouse, which he then followed up with a slew of other neighbourhood venues that have some now labelling this area ‘Thomastown’.

After Speedy Grandma came the Soy Sauce Factory — a photo studio, concert venue, and events and exhibition space. People from other areas began to take note and soon Menard found himself helping newcomers open up live music venue Soul Bar, the restaurant Saddle & Bun (now 80/20) and Little Market diner, and renting out various other shophouses to a clutch of creatives — all on Charoenkrung Soi 28.

It’s a rapid pace of change for one of Bangkok’s oldest neighbourhoods, but Menard is quick to reassure us that all the new developments aren’t adversely affecting the locals. ‘I only took spaces that were abandoned or being used for storage. Sure, the area has attracted more foreigners and tourists, but the lifestyle of local people is largely unchanged,’ he says.

‘Dynamics in this area are slow. People don’t want to sell their homes, and a lot of local, traditional businesses are still operating. A few more creative spaces might join in, but there are not that many buildings available.’

While this may be true, two major projects nearby are drawing international attention. The Thailand Creative & Design Center, or TCDC, was unveiled just down the road in May of this year in one wing of the imposing Grand Postal Building. Designed by local firm Department of Architecture and occupying 8,700 square metres, the TCDC is a key part of a much larger government-led initiative aiming to grow the country’s creative sectors. What began as a design resource library atop downtown Bangkok shopping mall Emporium, in its new incarnation has transformed into an all-out incubator for creative types, where designers can seek professional advice, attend classes, and test and make prototypes.

Meanwhile, just a stone’s throw away, seven Second World War-era wooden warehouses are also finding a new lease on life under the creative direction of leading Thai architect Duangrit Bunnag. Visually humbler than the grand edifice across the lane, Warehouse 30 — the name refers to its location on Charoenkrung Soi 30 — will see the cavernous buildings repurposed, laying the groundwork for a new creative lifestyle hub where, in addition to event space, you’ll find a clothing store (Bunnag’s own brand, Lonely Two-Legged Creature), cocktail bar, cafe, florist, design shop, organic market, bookshop, record store and raw juice bar.

Inside the library of the new Thailand Creative & Design Center designed by Department of Architecture. The TCDC is one of a number of projects centred on a new creative district in the Thai capital. Image by W Workspace





Rungsima Kasikranund is the Bangkok-born project director for Warehouse 30, though the former editor-in-chief of *Elle Decoration Thailand* prefers the title 'curator'. 'Duangrit told me he's always had his eye on this property, with its historical structures in very good shape,' she recalls. 'The beautiful buildings have such potential, and we want to breathe life back into the spaces.' In some ways, it's a continuation of the project Bunnag started just a few years ago across the river when, looking for larger office space, he similarly transformed a cluster of old warehouses into what is today an oasis of calm and creativity with his Jam Factory. 'While of course they will be sister properties, Warehouse 30 will be different to the Jam Factory,' counters Kasikranund. A main focus will be to support the city's young creative communities, providing exhibition and performance space at little or no cost. 'Artists can propose their idea, and if we like it we'll support it.'

The incubation of native design talent at both TCDC and Warehouse 30 points to why some are now referring to the area as the 'Creative District', a moniker being encouraged by Australian David Robinson. The long-term Bangkok expat wears two hats — one as director of Bangkok River Partners, a commercially driven organisation involving local hotels and businesses that aims to attract more people back to the riverfront, and one as a founding member of the Creative District Foundation, a collective of Thais and foreigners invested in fostering a new centre of creativity in Bangkok, in which Menard and Bunnag are vocal members.

'There are two communities in the "Creative District",' says Robinson. 'There are the people who already live there and the people who want to move there, and it's important to encourage appreciation of each other — the old and the new.' To do this, Robinson helps organise events that bring the groups together and looks to create opportunities to find common ground.

Robinson is excited by the district's developments so far and Bangkokians' return to the river. 'On a recent weekend, I was down here and there were seventy or so young people cycling around, snapping selfies with street art, which I've never seen before.' Yet Robinson is also cautious: 'We need momentum to make change, but if change happens too fast, it won't be sustainable.'

The organisation perhaps best placed to reflect on the impact outsiders can have on this historic heart of Bangkok is the nearby Portuguese Embassy, which next year celebrates 500 years since its first official trade and friendship treaty with Siam, as the country was then known. 'The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive in Siam, in 1511,' explains Maria Madureira, cultural attaché at the embassy and director of the Portuguese Cultural Centre.

In February this year, the embassy invited renowned Portuguese street artist Alexandre Farto, also known as Vhils, to produce one of his iconic jack-hammered murals on its exterior wall. 'For us, Vhils's piece symbolises the encounter of our two different cultures and how they've got along for so many centuries until now,' says Madureira. 'In a way, this is our gift to the city of Bangkok, and most especially to the local community.'

Madureira describes the district as buzzing with opportunities. 'It's no longer an old and quiet neighbourhood along the river. It's becoming an exciting and new destination with galleries, restaurants, live music and street art ... there's always something new to discover!'

Old meets new, East meets West. In many ways, this quiet corner of Bangkok is not so much modernising as it is simply reclaiming its historic identity. As for what the development of a 'Creative District' bodes for the future of Charoenkrung, well — let's just see where the road leads.



The brand-new Warehouse 30 project by Thai architect Duangrit Bunnag aims to support the city's young creative communities, providing exhibition and performance space at little or no cost. Images courtesy of DBALP