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Livable Cities

What makes a city livable? Transport, housing, health. Open space, mobility and the environment. Matters of culture, entrepreneurship, crime and safety. Affordability and access to education. Depending on whose 'livability index' you look at, it may include design quality, sustainability and the digital infrastructures of the smart city. Other criteria applied may encompass food access, job opportunities or walkability. Inclusivity and the politics of participation also come into play. Discrimination in all its forms impacts

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INTRODUCTION

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The past two decades have seen an exponential rise of livability measures. Reflecting increased urbanity globally, they risk making the notion of the city ever more contested. The two cities that host this event are cases in point. The Mercer Livability Ranking takes New York as the datum by which all other cities globally are graded – as better or worse. London, by contrast, measures itself: the London Assembly scoring everything from air quality to indices of deprivation. When we consider the livability of cities then, it is clear we are dealing with a plethora of issues – both isolated and, inevitably, interconnected.

Responding to this scenario, the papers in this publication tackle these issues above from various angles. They examine how we live in cities, and how every issue we encounter morphs with considerations of others, whether housing, architecture, urban planning, health, IT, crime and safety, city management, economics or the environment.

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MUSEUM OF OUR CITY: HOW MUSEUM DESIGN MAKES OUR EVERYDAY LIFE BETTER

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INTRODUCTION

It has long been understood that a museum is a building in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited. However, the museum has developed beyond its collections. The role of a museum has shifted from an institutional-like space into a civic space. The museum has become a place where human interaction, social discourse, and engagement are established. Museums are civic society institutions that support both informal learning, akin to a “school for living,” and citizenship.¹ The focus of this paper is the national museum. It is commonly understood that national museums are established to celebrate national pride and identity.² Each country naturally takes pride in its nationhood and is keen to project this to its citizens and the world. One way to present the story of the country is to communicate it via museums, so a national museum seems to be an appropriate means.³ In Europe, especially the Netherlands, nationalism through national museums has been a force of progress and political development. In contrast, the return of nationalism in contemporary Europe is a sign of conservatism fighting against the new political institutions.⁴

In Thailand, a hundred years ago, royalty put significant effort into the country’s development, and a museum was considered to be a tool for making the nation as civilized as those in the West. The establishment of a national museum in Thailand during the 1900s, specifically the National Museum Bangkok, was also considered to be part of nationalism. It represented an attempt to construct Thailand as a modern “civilized” state equating to Western civilization at that time. Despite resistance within the empire, and with assistance from Western curators and case studies on national museums in Europe and America, the National Museum Bangkok was formed. In contrast to other museums in Thailand, the museums are “national” in the sense that almost all the objects come from royal collections, state-owned historical and cultural artifacts, or made or found in Thailand. There are also some mutual, transnational heritage objects on display. To this day, national museums in Thailand continue to help people understand the past, cherish culture, and celebrate national identity.

This paper starts with the idea that culture improves the quality of life, and national museums embrace culture as an intrinsic quality. National museums not only play an important role in unfolding unique stories of diverse cultures but also strengthen the shared story that unites members of society. People make sense of their lives by learning and telling stories about who they are, where they come from, and where they are going. By providing the means to preserve memory, sustain culture, and create identity, national museums help equip people to understand each other and themselves.⁵

HOW TO LIVE BETTER THROUGH CULTURE: A DAY OUT IN THE CITY

A museum is a place that cultivates cultural well-being, potentially contributing to livability. According to the New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage 2003, the Local Government Act 2002 defines “cultural well-being” as the expectations that members of society will encompass shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and identity reflected through language, stories, experiences, visual and performing arts ceremonies, and heritage.⁶ Consequently, cultural well-being has become the main objective of designing a museum and curating an exhibition. National museums in Thailand play an important role by providing a connection between culture, the state, and citizenship—especially in the contemporary context—where collective identity is represented by having a culture. In the same way, national museums recognize cultural diversity. In addition to cultural well-being, museums must be at one with the third place. According to the idea of the third place, it is where “*community is most alive, and people are most themselves.*”⁷ Museums can respond to developing individuality and the need for sociability.

Museums exist to collect, preserve, interpret, and display objects of artistic, cultural, or scientific significance for the education of the public. However, in recent years, people have tended to consider a museum visit in the social and recreational context. A museum visit is considered a social outing where people attend in groups—mostly family and friends.⁸ Museum audience segmentation, especially in the psychographic context, including lifestyles, opinions, and attitudes, is becoming more common as museums increasingly take leisure trends into account.

Although educational trips, such as organized school visits to museums, remain a traditional form of learning outside of school, it is noteworthy that more than half of museum visitors come with family groups, partners, or friends to enjoy the day out together.⁹ In the UK, research suggests most visitors prefer to travel no more than one hour to a museum and visit other attractions nearby.¹⁰ These day-trippers choose to visit attractions within the broader spectrum, including other cultural attractions in addition to the museum, as part of their trip. Nowadays, national museums can be considered part of a wider leisure trend. In Thailand, most national museums are located near major tourist attractions, while some heritage sites can be found in the old town area. On the other hand, archaeological sites may be situated far away from tourist attractions but along the route to other places of interest. These attractions depend on local residents, day-trippers, schools, and visitors staying with friends and relatives. A trip to a local history museum or city art museum can be an entertaining and enlightening way to spend the day. To city leaders, a thriving museum community is viewed as a measure of the economic health of a city and a means to increase the cultural sophistication of its residents.

MUSEUM OF OUR CITY: EXAMPLES OF NATIONAL MUSEUMS IN THAILAND

In Thailand, there are 46 national museums located in different regions (Figure 1). The core idea of a national museum established by the Office of National Museums under the Ministry of Culture is to be a place of historical knowledge where the past can be understood and national identity cherished.¹¹ Thailand’s first national museum was established in 1860 as a royal collection, subsequently becoming a public museum in 1926 and known as the National Museum Bangkok. From 1960 onwards, the Office of National Museums established 46 national museums, which were either newly constructed or occupied existing historical buildings. This paper elucidates four selected examples of how national museums in Thailand, maintained and funded by the national government, can contribute to the idea of livable cities. Not only are the wisdom and pride of the nation cultivated through museum visits, but the examples also show how national museums create neighborhood bonds, support both formal schooling and family learning and inspire individuals while providing a place for leisure and an oasis for city dwellers.

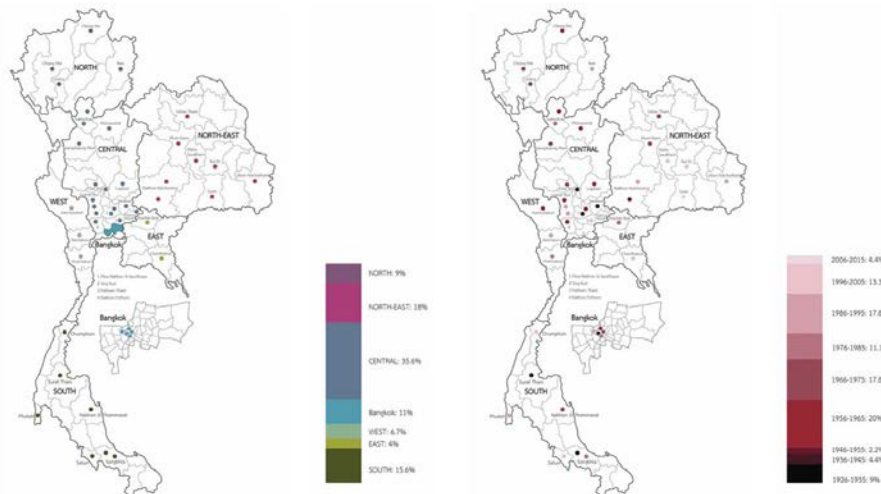


Figure 1. Location map of 46 national museums in Thailand mapped by region (left) and year built (right).

The National Museum Bangkok (Central Region)

The National Museum Bangkok was Thailand’s first national museum, established in 1926. The museum is on Rattanakosin Island, a place rich in history and culture. The museum is surrounded by the National Theater, Grand Palace, Royal Plaza, temples, amulet market, and other museums (Figure 2). Before being a national museum, it was the palace of the vice king and later the royal museum.¹² Since the museum inhabits the existing historical shell, visitors can experience the grandiosity of the place together with the collections. The National Museum Bangkok holds significant royal treasures, from puppets, amulets, buddha images, thrones, to chariots of the royal cremation.

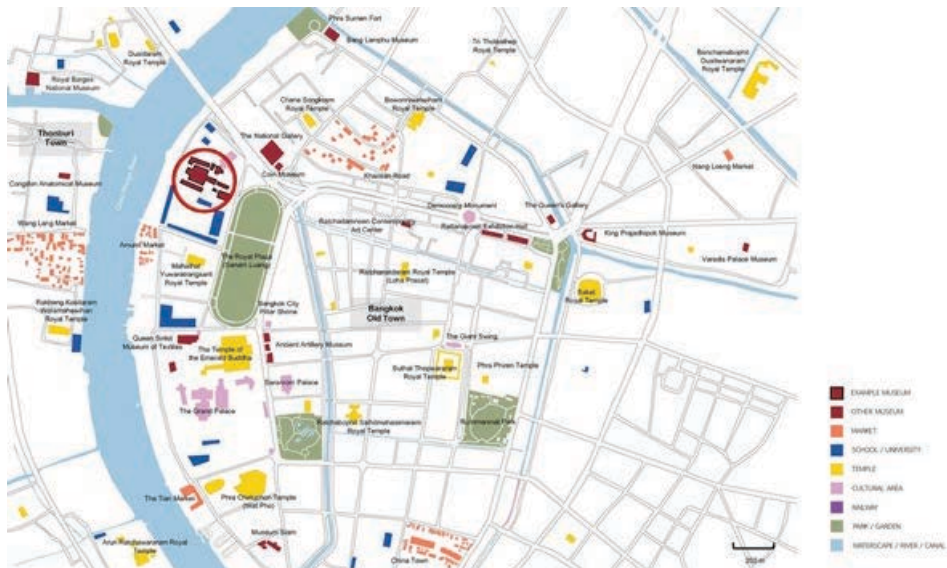


Figure 2. Cultural neighborhood map of National Museum Bangkok.

Two major renovations took place in 1967, involving the addition of new buildings and from 2012 to 2018 for new exhibition displays. With the most recent renovation, the National Museum Bangkok has upgraded its supporting facilities in all aspects to become a renovation model for other national museums. The renovation has not only enhanced the quality of exhibition content, display system,

interior space, lighting design, and supporting facilities but various activities have also been added for civic engagement (Figure 3). The new and renovated supporting facilities include an auditorium, workshop space, museum shop and café, special exhibition hall, and the reopening of historical pavilions.



Figure 3. National Museum Bangkok after the recent renovation.

This makeover has changed the perception of how Thai people engage with national museums. It has transformed the dull, storage-like space into a vibrant atmosphere for celebrating and learning about national pride. The National Museum Bangkok is part of the Bangkok Old Town’s cultural neighborhood (Figure 4). It has now become one of the must-visit places in the old town area.



Figure 4. A family day out in a Bangkok cultural neighborhood.

The Nan National Museum (Northern Region)

The Nan National Museum is in the Nan Old Town area, established in 1985. Nan’s culture is a mixture of Thai, Laos, and Myanmar influences. More than ten temples surround the museum, including the Phumin Royal Temple, which is renowned for its mural painting. Due to this, many locals and Thai and foreign tourists often gather around the neighborhood and museum (Figure 5).

The museum building previously served as the governor’s residence and later a town hall before being converted into a national museum. The majority of the collections in Nan National Museum are related to religious, everyday life objects and artifacts of the northern region (Figure 6). The most prominent artifact is the Black Elephant Tusk, a sacred object of the city. The famous tusk is placed in the main hall on the second floor of the museum, where different activities take place. It acts as a magnet for visitors who come to worship, learn, and take photographs with the tusk. The ground floor of the museum building connects to the plaza that hosts various civic activities. The plaza acts as a public space for tourists, a leisure space for locals, and a cultural ground for city dwellers. Nan Tourist Center is located opposite the museum, and there are several cultural activities, such as the national park route, a route to visit remaining noble houses and local museums, and an old town cycling route. In this regard, the Nan National Museum is a part of the cultural neighborhood.

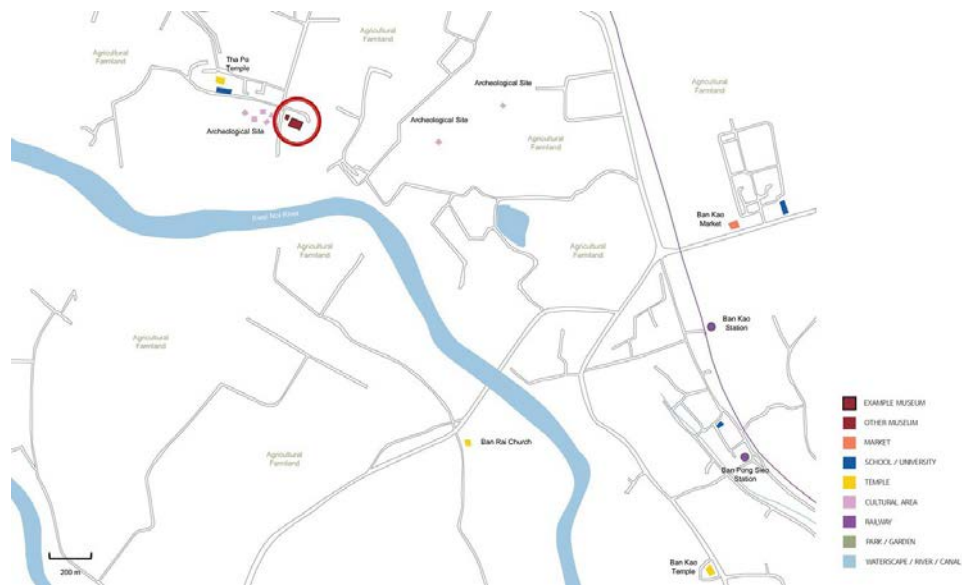


Figure 7. Historical neighborhood map of Ban Kao National Museum.



Figure 8. Ban Kao National Museum.

Nowadays, Ban Kao National Museum serves not only museum visitors but also local children. Students from Ban Kao area can learn about their roots and transfer their inherited knowledge to others. There are new supporting facilities such as a multi-purpose hall, canteen, viewpoint, assembly point, and interactive exhibitions. Kanchanaburi’s diverse cultural neighborhood includes a cemetery in remembrance of wars, the railway as a monument to tragedy, along with museums and wartime architecture as memorials of past events. This unique cultural combination makes Kanchanaburi a popular travel destination.

The Songkhla National Museum (Southern Region)

The Songkhla National Museum is a historical site. The building is a mix of Chinese and Western architectural styles. The building used to serve as the governor’s residence, town hall, and courthouse. After being registered as a historical building in 1973, it was converted into a national museum in 1982. The building complex has front and back courtyards, which are used as green spaces, and an inner courtyard for organizing various activities. The museum boundary is demarcated with a curved Chinese-style wall. The building has been planned as a group of four houses connected by a corridor and a grand staircase. Decorative elements such as a folding door and partition carved with dragon patterns and the roof rafters in a floral pattern represent the strong influence of Chinese culture in Songkhla, dating back more than one hundred years. The exhibition contents of Songkhla National Museum encompass the history of Songkhla from the Songkhla Peninsula, the prehistoric to the early history of Songkhla, foreign relations, arts and cultures, and the way of life of people in the lower southern region.

Songkhla is well-known for its unique Chinese and Thai cultural influence and a place where different

religions and cultures pleasantly unite. People visit Songkhla for food, art, architecture, and nature (Figure 9). In 2022, the Creative Economy Agency (CEA) organized the “Songkhla Old Town Creative District” event to encourage Songkhla citizens to preserve and revive their cultural inheritance and economy. People perceive the museum building as a landmark because of its distinct architecture. This makes the museum an attractive cultural destination for visitors and tourists.



Figure 9. Cultural neighborhood map of Songkhla National Museum.

From the four examples, it can be clearly seen that visitors of all ages are able to spend quality time both inside and outside the national museums. They can enjoy learning when attending as a school group, appreciate the collections with family and friends, spend leisure time on their own, take photographs to maintain their impressions or join in the special activities organized by the national museums. These new engagements can soften the boundary between the national museum institution and its visitors. In terms of the bigger picture, national museums can become part of the cultural neighborhood where people are part of the museum, and the museum is part of people’s everyday lives.

CONCLUSION: HOW MUSEUM DESIGN MAKES OUR EVERYDAY LIFE BETTER

Museums are, above all, storehouses of knowledge. As for public perception, museums are not as public as libraries. However, in terms of the public dimension, museums should strive to be accessible, fostering personal associations, creating a sense of ownership and identity, ensuring safety, building trustworthiness, providing rewarding experiences, offering substantive content, promoting reciprocity, and presenting multiple perspectives.¹³ Since the museum concept was established in 1926, Thailand has experienced changes in every aspect of life, including shifts in living patterns from rural to urban and employment from agricultural to industrial as well as a wave of immigration. The fear of rapid urbanization is seen as potentially threatening people’s lives with overcrowding and congestion, social segregation, and inequality. Changes in education and the opportunity to learn are imbued with the impact of social media on young and old city dwellers. National museums face the dilemma of how to remain relevant to today’s society.

Presented with the challenge of developing museum support facilities, learning activities, and public programs, the Office of National Museum Thailand has redefined its position and attempted to create a social connection by expanding the boundaries of national museum spaces to become part of people’s everyday lives. Since 2010, several national museums in Thailand have undergone

renovations. Museum support facilities must have the necessary design quality for the museum to adopt the role of civic space. The spatial design of both the interior and architecture should be able to provide museum visitors with facilities to support before/in between/after exhibitions, civic engagement, education and learning, and public activities. National museums are re-examining the role they play in encouraging civic engagement and building better communities (Figure 10).

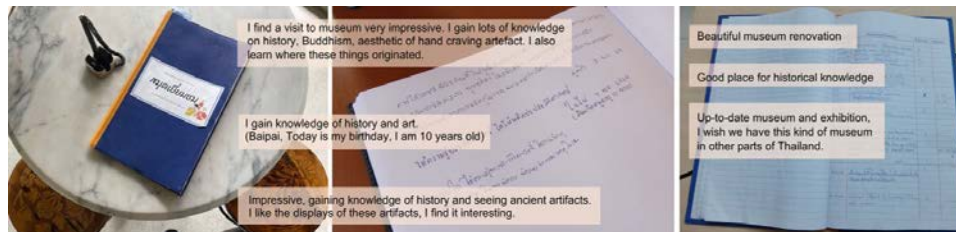


Figure 10. Examples of visitor books of national museums in Thailand.

Furthermore, when national museums aim for civic engagement, they develop in twofold. Firstly, through a program-based relationship, and secondly, through audience development. The program-based relationship introduces diverse voices into exhibition and program development. Audience development helps museums to cultivate prospective segments, identify underserved groups, focus resources, and undertake targeted programming. In the aftermath of COVID-19 and three years of social distancing, National museums in Thailand have become less formal and more public-friendly. Taking part in the leisure trend, national museums have developed public entertainment to engage with city dwellers. As can be seen, by the four examples in this study, national museums, as well as other cultural attractions, are expected to play a role in how city dwellers choose to spend their free time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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NOTES

- ¹ Brad King, “Museums and Their Exhibitions,” in *Manual of Museum Exhibitions*, 3rd ed., ed. Maria Piacente (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 10.
- ² Davide Banis, “The Role of National Museums in a Time of Nationalism,” *Forbes*, February 19, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidebanis/2019/02/19/the-role-of-national-museums-in-a-time-of-nationalism/>
- ³ Nuntamon Kutalad, “The Role of National Museums in the Making of Nations,” *Dmu*, October 20, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/8863110/The_role_of_national_museums_in_the_making_of_nations
- ⁴ Davide Banis, “The Role of National Museums in a Time of Nationalism.” *Forbes*, February 19, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidebanis/2019/02/19/the-role-of-national-museums-in-a-time-of-nationalism/>
- ⁵ Christopher T. Gates, “The Civic Landscape,” in *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums* (Washington DC: American Association of Museums, 2002), 27–28.
- ⁶ Kylie Message, *New Museums and the Making of Culture* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), 176.
- ⁷ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of Community* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1999), 20.
- ⁸ Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2005), 30.
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- ¹¹ The Office of National Museums, *Manual for Local Museums*, Thai Text (Bangkok: The Office of National Museums, 2007), 7.
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