

CHAPTER TWO

COMMUNITY AT THE HEART OF CULTURAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT

*Nang Lerng, Bangkok
(Thailand)*

*Ploy Yamtree &
Nausica Castanas (Openspace)*



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During the reign of King Rama III (1788-1851), a group of people migrated from the south of Thailand to settle in what is presently known as Nang Lerng. They were called the Sanam Kwai community, which in Thai literally means 'the field of buffalos', reflecting the fact that the area had many buffalos.

The geography of the area was altered during the reign of King Rama V (1853-1910), when the Phadung Krung Kasem canal was built, transforming the rural fields into a vibrant trading area. E-Lerng were the traditional water jars that the Mon people used to sell water in the Phadung Krung Kasem canal area, and the entire area became known as E-Lerng. This name has a double meaning: 'Nang' means 'lady' in Thai, while 'E' is a lady of lesser virtue. In the 1950s, Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram, the then Prime Minister, changed the area's name from E-Lerng to Nang Lerng as he disapproved of the name's connection to female promiscuity.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Nang Lerng was already quite developed with western-style buildings, metalled roads, and public transport. As a result, the existing commercial activities only grew in importance, and the area became the ground of the first market on land in the country.

Nang Lerng has always had a lot of ties with the artistic scene, ever since the first settlers moved into the area. During the mid-nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Nang Lerng was the most happening place with famous musicians, music bands, actors and actresses all gathering in the area. The Sala Chalerm Thani Cinema was built in the early 1910s, and hundreds of people would come for the daily screenings. Mittr Chaibancha, one of the greatest Thai actors of all times, also lived in Nang Lerng with his mother until his untimely death. The popularity of Nang

Lerng with the younger generations and artists continued into the 1950s, attracting people who wished to indulge in Western dancing, a popular activity at the time.

Even today, Nang Lerng continues to have an artistic presence. E-Lerng is a community-based art collective from Nang Lerng. By using art and culture as a tool for community mobilization and development, E-Lerng raises awareness in the community on issues surrounding poverty and marginality to promote sustainable living.



Figure 2.1 Nang Lerng area and the boundary of Wat Kae Nang Lerng community.

Since 2012, Openspace, a community architects' collective based in Bangkok, has partnered with E-Lerng on a variety of projects including the renovation of the Dancing House, in collaboration with the house owner and funded by Kratingdaeng Spirit, the CSR program of Kratingdaeng, Red Bull Thailand. As for most of the land in the old town of Bangkok, the land in Nang Lerng belongs to the Crown Property Bureau (CPB). The families, who have lived in this neighbourhood for

generations are tenants of the CPB, renting the land on which the individual buildings are standing.

Nang Lerng is presently at a crossroads as a new metro (MRT) line will pass through this area, and a new station has been approved for construction at the edge of the community. This not only implies that some buildings will be demolished and families evicted, but also that land prices will soar, paving the way for intensive real estate speculation. In the masterplan drafted by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), the area of Nang Lerng has been marked for intensive commercial development. Openspace and the community, working with the Faculty of Architecture and Planning at Thammasat University, have proposed an alternative masterplan to the Crown Property Bureau (CPB), using participatory methods to include the local community in the planning process, and the project is currently being developed. This project has been made possible by the successful on-going renovation of the Dancing House, a historic building in Nang Lerng, using community participatory approaches.

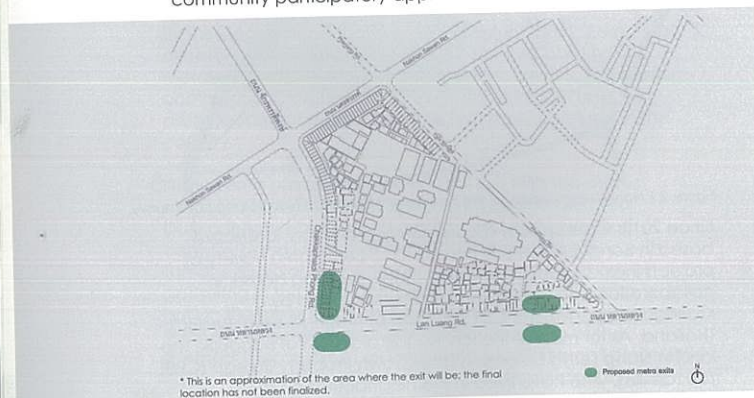


Figure 2.2 Proposed metro exits

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE 'DANCING HOUSE'

The 'Dancing House' or 'Ban Ten Rum' is located in the outskirts of Nang Lerng. The original house was built approximately eighty years ago. It was sold to the Tamornsuan family in the 1940s, after which it was remodeled into a two-storey wooden house.

Khun Jakkrit Tamornsuan, the first house owner after it was sold in the 1940s, was an avid ballroom dancer, who was greatly influenced by Western culture. He was a self-taught dancer who learned Western style dancing by reading English books. He often invited a group of his friends to his house to teach them dance. As his lessons grew increasingly popular, he started a dance school to teach ballroom dancing on the first floor of his house, while he continued to live on the second floor with his family. Ban Ten Rum was officially registered as a school in 1952 and offered daily lessons of ballroom dance, waltz, and rock-and-roll in the style of Cliff Richard, Elvis Presley and John Travolta. The house was transformed into a meeting place for artists and members of the high-society, stars, singers and music composers such as Khun Surapol Tonawanik, the famous national artist of Thailand who wrote his most celebrated song, Krai Nor, in that same house.

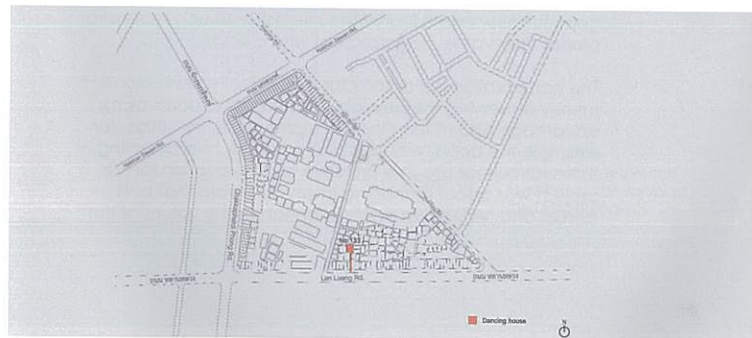


Figure 2.3 Location of the Dancing House.

The school was shut down in 1979 and the members of the Tamornsuan family gradually moved out. With no one to take care of the house, it fell into disrepair. In 2012, a conservation plan was hatched, aiming to revive it using community participation.

MANAGING CHANGE

The conservation of the Dancing House is an ideal example to highlight that by understanding the valuable elements in historic buildings, places can be managed to sustain their significance while also being relevant to present day requirements. Nang Lerg's historical significance comes from the fact that it is rich in values centered on its community, its history, its architecture, but also people's way of life. It proved essential to understand these values to ensure that all decisions about the changes to be made were well thought out and transparent. Historic buildings in the old town area are being demolished on a regular basis due to the lack of awareness and understanding of conservation principles among the local community. The selection of the Dancing House for community-led conservation served as a fitting example to illustrate that communities have a legitimate interest in what happens to places they value – regardless of who owns the land.

The conservation philosophy for this project goes beyond merely preserving the physical structure; it includes taking advantage and utilizing the old elements of the house, for example the doors, windows and columns, and adapting them for current use. The principle of conservation for this project was about managing change in ways that best sustain and, whenever possible, enhance the values of the Dancing House for the future.

CONSERVATION APPROACH

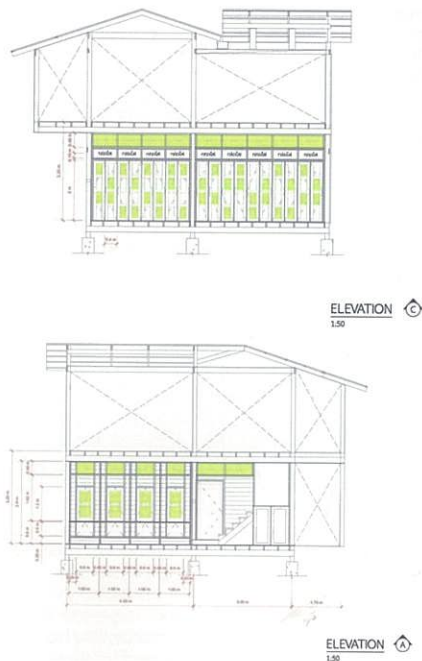


Figure 2.4 The conservation approach to enhance the values of the Dancing house.

The conservation approach for the project was broadly divided into two parts - Social and Physical.

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

The conservation of the Dancing House was more than a straightforward project to repair the physical structure. It was an experiment to "renovate" the underlying social makeup of the community, people's connections, relationships and engagement with one another, and their historic environment.

At the inception of the project, only Khun Tarinee Tamornsuan, the current house-owner, the E-Lerng collective and Openspace were involved. The main objective was to build sustainable communities by reinforcing local distinctiveness and the reuse of historic buildings. This further helped encourage pride within the community and inspired them to take ownership of the project. The entire project was divided into phases in order to allow time to raise awareness and engage more members of the community. The community became involved and contributed not only financially, but also by providing building materials and participating in the building process through a series of events and workshops. This was particularly important as the owner had agreed for the Ban Ten Rum to serve not just as a Dancing

House Museum, but also as a community centre. The decision to undertake only one phase of conservation per year was intentional in order to ascertain and boost the role of community participation.

At the end of phase two, a photo exhibition and a talk were organized at Ban Ten Rum. The local community, the house owner, representatives of the district office and the Crown Property Bureau were invited and the feedback was very positive. It was important to see different stakeholders come together and express their support and participate in discussions on the future of the project and, more significantly, the future of Nang Lerng. This event also served

as a platform to discuss the larger transformation that may occur in the Nang Lerng area due to the proposed metro line. The Dancing House conservation project helped the local community recognize the strength of small change and community cohesion in discussing the future plan of their own city.



Figure 2.5: Group photo taken after the exhibition.

Following the above-mentioned events, three design workshops were organized: first, with the elderly, second, with young children, and third, with the house-owner. These workshops dealt with the design of walls in the next phase of the project. From this point onwards, the local community got greatly involved in the design process, by joining in participatory design workshops, planting activities, recycled products activities, and by sharing their insight and ideas for the future phases of conservation. Creating various community events in between conservation phases was found to be a good tool to raise awareness and engage stakeholders to discuss the future possibilities together.



Figure 2.6 Photo taken during the design workshop.

CONSERVING THE PHYSICAL FABRIC

In the Dancing House project, the conservation ethos of 'minimum intervention, maximum retention' of the original fabric was used. As the original elements are embedded with varied layers of both tangible and intangible heritage acting as a constant reminder and a valuable source of social and cultural record of life in the past, they were salvaged, consolidated and repaired for reuse. The conservation team endeavoured to use traditional craftsmanship, materials and construction methods wherever possible. However, to allow for a comparison between original and new (yet compatible) materials, subtle variations in

the tone, texture and craftsmanship were indicated so that the users can appreciate the value of both old and new materials.

The rule was to first reclaim as many materials already on site for direct reuse or repair, thus minimizing waste, and only then source new materials from local markets. The entire conservation process used an 'honest repair' approach. The columns and windows were the most significant parts of the Dancing House. When the project commenced, one

column was completely decayed and had to be replaced, while the others were partly rotten and infested by termites. During the repairs, only the decayed parts were replaced by new compatible materials, thus, allowing the original pieces to survive, without altering the authentic appearance of the house.



Figure 2.7 Reclaimed materials on site for reuse or repair.

The timber windows were retained and repainted using the original colour and traditional painting technique. However, the location of the windows was changed, to make way for usable space for the community. This was in line with the participatory design exercises conducted with various stakeholders and users. The windows are a good representation of allowing for a new function and design, while keeping the past memories alive in the old materials, a marriage between the old and new.

SMALL IS POWERFUL

The outcome of the Dancing House project has been overwhelmingly positive. The project started with a small group of seven, and ended up with the involvement of a large number of people. The local community has embraced this project and Openspace, the collective of professionals involved with this project, has gained a great deal of trust in Nang Leng. The community also started believing in the power of place and community cohesion as a way of improving things in their own area.

The Dancing House has been transformed since 2012, both in terms of its physical fabric and as a catalyst of change in the area of Nang Leng. It has generated interest from people outside the local community, including artists, architects, and the Tourism Authority of Thailand to name a few. As mentioned earlier, the success of this relatively small project has also provided a chance for Openspace to work with the Crown Property Bureau on a large master planning project for the entire Nang Leng area, in response to the proposed new metro station.

THE WAY FORWARD

For the Dancing House, the community participatory approach of "do, think, do, think" has proven successful in bringing positive collaborations and results. This simple approach will hopefully continue to foster increasing participation from the locals, the local authorities, and the Crown Property Bureau to work on large scale projects as well, such as the master plan for Nang Leng, and other city planning and infrastructure projects.

The Dancing House renovation proved that it is important to have an open mind while working with communities as they are the best resource to understand the value of their historic environment. Building professionals and architects can easily be attracted to the architectural aspects of a historic building. However, it is vital to recognize the embedded layers of heritage which reflect the aspirations, ingenuity and investment of resources of previous generations. It is a duty of each generation to sustain and shape their historic environment in ways that allow people to enjoy and benefit from it, without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same.

The old town of Bangkok is rich in heritage and there is an urgent need to recognize and protect it from rapid development and gentrification. Several renovation projects carried out by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) only center on the stories of the privileged classes. The Dancing House conservation project highlights that historic buildings derive absolute historical importance not only by virtue of their origin in a particular period, or from their established aesthetic and stylistic style, but also from the social context in which they were used, the functions they fulfilled, and the experiences associated with them. Everyone can make a contribution in managing the historic environment.