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CHIANG MAI'S DESIGN SCENE UNCOVERED





WORKING WONDERS

Subtle refinements of existing products – not drastic reinventions – are propelling CHIANG MAI's design scene into the future, writes MAX CROSBIE-JONES

Within the halls of academia, it is sometimes said that Chiang Mai's name – which translates as 'New City' – hints at its eternally recurring destiny. Contrary to the sense of nostalgia that its ancient Lanna ruins, temples, carved trinkets and hanging paper lanterns conjure, it is, goes this notion, a place that has always self-consciously reveled in change... and always will.

This drive towards newness manifests in many corners of Chiang Mai, from restaurants to universities, co-working spaces to art galleries, but finds a particularly intriguing tension within the city's craft-based design scene. In one corner sit the hungry young designers whose global mindsets, out-of-the-box ideas and eagerness to make their mark – as well as an honest living – is fueling a flurry of startups. In another sit the artisans whose ancestral skills at weaving, dyeing, carving or sewing are in real and present danger of being lost to the vicissitudes of time. And in another still are the unsentimental yet shrewd manufacturers, with their scalability and resources, not to mention all-important links to global supply chains and markets.

Historically, Chiang Mai's changemakers have often veered towards radical or even anarchic gestures (Chiang Mai Social Installation, an artist-led festival that saw provocative contemporary art being displayed in temples and public spaces during the 1990s, is a prime example). However, judging by all the polished crafts and wise words emanating from the fourth Chiang Mai Design Week, held last December, the city's



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design community are an altogether more restrained bunch. Newness for them is all about evolution, not revolution.

“For the first three editions we tried to encourage people to look at their existing assets and to create something brand new,” explains Inthaphan Buakeow, director of Thailand Creative & Design Centre Chiang Mai (TCDC), the government-funded body trying to turn the city into a creative hub, and help reconcile the skills and needs of its various stakeholders. Speaking on a stool inside one of the festival’s many installations – a modular, open-air structure built by aluminium company SUS in the grounds of the Lanna Folklife Museum – he adds, “But good design is not only about the new. It’s also about using processes or techniques to improve what you have – that’s what we’re trying to encourage now.”

Design festival themes can often appear aloof, dislocated from the on-the-ground reality, but that was not the case during this sprawling nine-day event comprised of public installations, exhibitions, talks and workshops. Whether you were checking out a surreal collaboration between a jewellery and textile designer, or watching weavers at work,

most of the work was a striking embodiment of the design week’s ‘Keep Refining’ theme. There were exhibitions of hand-woven fabrics that are more durable than before, bamboo structures featuring metal joints, and many more such showcases of thoughtfully-tweaked design. Almost everything appeared to be, to paraphrase the factsheet spiel, “Sharp, refined, up-to-date and corresponding to needs in our daily lives, as well as paving the way for the future.”

This impression arguably peaked at the festival’s Pop Market, a relaxed, open-air affair that took place on the closing weekend and presented a compendium of past and present Chiang Mai Design Awards winners. Filling the grand square of One Nimman, the latest retail enclave in the Nimmanhaemin neighbourhood, were wares worthy of some aspirational concept store, albeit often with a rootsy Chiang Mai twist. At the Bope Shop booth, Chinese tourists rummaged for tiles and coasters made of injection-moulded plastic waste, each one a futuristic-looking explosion of abstract colour that Jackson Pollock would be justly proud of. Nearby, a couple browsed the offerings at Huh, a young accessory brand that recycles locally-sourced cement bags. Elsewhere, other market goers were snapping up cotton shirts with bohemian silhouettes, pieces of avant garde jewellery, or richly-glazed pottery, all of it handmade.

“To think about refinement is to think about fundamental human nature,” explains Sergey Tishkin while rearranging shirts at the Slowstitch Studio booth. “There’s something special about taking that



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which is already in existence and moulding, improving, shaping it further in a way that hopefully brings it closer to perfection.” At this textile brand’s Chiang Mai workshop, he and his partner, Kanchalee Ngamdarnonk, use traditional *shibori* techniques and natural botanical dyes to create pillows, scarves and bags with indigo tones that veer between deep midnight blues and crisp whites. A sense of serendipity – and refinement – is apparent in every abstract, grid-like pattern. “Refinement is central to our work – there’s little point continually repeating something as it has always been done if you’re not learning or improving something,” he said.

Like many emerging designers across Chiang Mai, and the country at large, Slowstitch Studio see themselves as part of an ongoing multi-generation process and credit the many generations of craftsmen that came before them. And yet, they point out that many of their fellow designers

find bridging the gap between traditional crafts and contemporary design a day-to-day challenge. “There is no shortage of craftsmen in Chiang Mai with extraordinary amounts of expertise and experience,” added Tishkin, as shoppers drifted by, “but persuading them to break out of traditional norms and try unconventional methods is quite a hurdle.”

Across town, on a lush green stretch of the Mae Ping river, the general manager of the recently opened – and Chiang Mai Design Awards 2018-winning – Raya Heritage resort expresses a similar sentiment. “The process is not easy,” replies Naphat Nutsatir when asked what it’s like working closely with local artisans, as the inhouse design team has done from the project’s inception. “When we presented the designs we wanted to them, they initially refused, as they have their own way of doing things. But bit by bit, by expanding their vision, we got there.”



Here, amid the terracotta tiles, hard wood columns and monastic vibe, the benefits of this long, iterative process are self-evident. Scattered throughout this 33-suite resort, designed and landscaped by Boon Design, are natty contemporary crafts and furnishings galore, from *yang* (wetland shrub) mats to *saa* (mulberry paper) screens. Nothing looks out of place; everything begs to be photographed or touched. So proud is Raya Heritage of its unique crafts, and the stories behind them, that an exhibition about the craftsmen and women they collaborated with, *Tracing the Fading Legacy*, will hang in its breezy lobby building until the end of March.

Back in the villages where these items are made, the benefits of collaborative refinement are also being felt. "Overly adhering to old designs means we can help a small number of people, but if we do more, develop more, we will gain a lot of attention and sell more products so even more villagers can sustain themselves," says Mae Somsri, a textile master from the Karen village of Baan Mae Mink, in Chiang Mai's Changkeung district, in a short film accompanying the exhibition. For her, the creator of Raya Heritage's bold pillow covers, moving incrementally forwards – creating designs that she calls "connected but revamped" – is a way of safeguarding craft traditions that may vanish otherwise.

Chiang Mai Design Week, too, is undergoing its own process of refinement, as is the organisation driving it. While past editions pivoted around materials, the latest one was arranged around the local industry's four main groups: manufacturers, designers/creators, craftsmen, and

institutions. "Based on our profiling, their needs are different," explains Inthaphat.

As well as fostering connections and cross-pollinations between these disparate groups, not to mention the use of sustainable materials ("In the future there will be fewer wood crafts in Chiang Mai; we have to use wood wisely," Inthaphan warns), TCDC Chiang Mai is also trying to forge closer industry links, especially with other design centres around the world. "In Hong Kong, someone said to me, 'We like you, we love you, but we don't know how to work with you – you're too small!' So I'm trying to connect Chiang Mai with other small cities and bring them together, and to connect us all with a big centre."

Another pressing issue – one that may prove key to Chiang Mai, now one of 180 UNESCO Creative Cities scattered around the world, and its quest for newness – is the skills shortage: Chiang Mai artisans and manufacturers vastly outnumber Chiang Mai designers. "We're trying to do a homegrown programme to create more local designers that understand local materials and local craftsmen, with their limitations and often inherited skills," Inthaphan adds. "Right now, if you're a Bangkok designer coming to work with craftsmen here there's still a big gap."

This is a mindset commonly encountered when exploring Chiang Mai's design community. Whilst new initiatives, new ideas, new products and new approaches are emerging fast, most are doing so sensitively. None of the city's ateliers or designers want to completely sever their ties with the past, but all of them, it seems, are on a mission to redefine them. **2**