



above: Along the Chao Phraya, creativity ties the city's past to its future.

*Bangkok's Creative District, which surrounds the new **Four Seasons Hotel Bangkok at Chao Phraya River**, brings locals, visitors and visionaries together to shape the future of the city.*

Bangkok FLOW

By Rachna Sachasinh
Photography by Aaron Joel Santos

THE CHAO PHRAYA RIVER threads through my childhood memories, its broad silty waters curling through rice paddies in the countryside before drifting past the burgeoning skyline of Bangkok, where I grew up. From a young age, I cruised the river's ferry system with my grandfather, a cloth merchant who supplied bolts of cotton up and down the river. Shoulder to shoulder with other river commuters, we throttled past bulky barges and slender longtail boats to Ratchawongse Pier, where my grandfather looked in on clients in the city's Chinese and Indian garment districts.

That was in the 1970s, and the city was on the cusp of its modern era, with new hotels and condos breaking ground along the waterfront. Then Bangkok's growth changed direction and sprinted inland. By the beginning of the 21st century, it was an urban jungle piled high with glass box

skyscrapers, glitzy shopping malls and a celebrated culinary culture. However, the waterfront between the river and Charoen Krung, Bangkok's first paved road, retained a tight-knit village ambience. Each time I returned to my native city, I beelined here to revisit my childhood haunts and wander Charoen Krung's colourful alleys lined with teahouses, workshops, Chinese pagodas, glittering temples, mosques and churches, just as I had with my grandfather.

Then the waterfront began to change. In 2015, Thai architect Duangrit Bunnag launched The Jam Factory, renovating former battery and ice warehouses to hold architectural offices, restaurants, galleries and boutiques. In the market area of Khlong San, directly across the river from Charoen Krung, his deliberate mix of old and modern struck a chord. Bangkok hipsters, young families and



below: ATT 19 Gallery was created by womenswear designer Mook Attakanwong and her father. Their family has been working in the arts in this area for decades.



below and above: Duangrit Bunnag relaxes in his vintage camper at The Jam Factory.



tourists flocked here, and before long the area was informally dubbed the “Creative District.”

Today the district includes Khlong San, Charoen Krung from Taksin Bridge through Bang Rak, Talad Noi, and Soi Nana in Chinatown. On a recent return to my old stamping ground, I connected with Bunnag and others who are individually and collectively shaping this area that’s rooted in heritage yet open to experimentation and innovation.

BUILDING A FUTURE

On the grounds of The Jam Factory sits a vintage Airstream camper that doubles as a postmodern house for Bunnag’s chubby white cat named Warehouse. It fits Bunnag’s highly intellectual and whimsical design ethos. With his shoulder-grazing, wavy salt-and-pepper locks and black-rimmed spectacles, the renowned architect, whose award-winning commercial and residential projects are scattered around Asia, looks and plays the part of “Renaissance man” impeccably. When not gunning his Harley on transcontinental highways or pitching up at Burning Man, he’s designing jaw-dropping spaces, opening restaurants, fabricating furniture and issuing cheeky contemporary fashion collections. Bunnag is endlessly curious and not afraid of risk or change.

That willingness to step into risk has proved to be a solid foundation for this part of the city. “Many people build new structures and then try to make it look old,” Bunnag says as we stroll around The Jam Factory’s artful open spaces, bordered by hewn timber and anchored by a centuries-old banyan tree. “It takes less to renovate an old building, and the love you feel for it is much deeper.”

Bunnag and I take the cross-river ferry to explore another of his projects, Warehouse 30, a flank of World War II-era warehouses renovated to house snazzy eateries, vintage shops, a flower design studio, a shop selling handmade beauty products, even a screening room. The



left: Chef Napol “Joe” Jantraget shares his philosophy on the future of Thai food with writer Rachna Sachasinh over a feast of flavours at Muslim Restaurant.

teak floorboards creak as we make our way through the buildings, and I’m struck by the evocative, timeless mood.

Over lunch at Someday Everyday, a *khao kaeng* (traditional rice and curry) house launched by Bunnag and world-renowned chef David Thompson—whose Michelin-starred Nahm put Royal Thai cuisine on the map—Bunnag discusses the district’s future. “My role as an architect is to show the possibilities,” he says. “And there is not one way, but many ways to achieve the balance of old and new.”

I look out through the dining hall’s tall windows and catch a glimpse of the newly opened mega-mall Iconsiam looming over the river. “It has been respectful of local communities, and they’ve brought more people down to the river,” Bunnag says. “And that is a good thing.”

CHANGING TASTES

The *khao kaeng* at Someday Everyday blends Thompson’s fine-dining sensibility and what Bunnag calls “old-fashioned Thai comfort food.”

Menus here are evolving to bridge not just eras and levels of finesse, but also cuisines and cultures.

“If you want to understand our menu, let’s meet in the market,” suggests Chef Napol “Joe” Jantraget of buzzy restaurant 80/20. Though I’m looking forward to tucking into his much-discussed elevated, modern take on traditional Thai recipes, I agree to the detour—and shortly afterwards, I find myself opposite him at Muslim Restaurant, near Bang Rak’s fresh market, with a feast of chicken biryani, curried liver, dal makhani, flaky rotis and beef brain curry between us. Jantraget is eager for me to experience the local convergence of cuisines that’s inspiring him to explore the future of Thai food.

Since setting up 80/20 in early 2015, Jantraget and his wife, Saki Hoshino, a pastry chef, along with sous-chef Siripon “New” Suthichoti, have been mining Thailand’s regional distinctions and hyper-local food lore. “The lower side of Charoen Krung is primarily Muslim,” he says—as the fragrances of cumin, coriander and fenugreek swirl around us,



INTO THE MIX: A NEW FOUR SEASONS

The highly anticipated **Four Seasons Hotel Bangkok at Chao Phraya River** will soon begin welcoming guests in the heart of Bangkok’s dynamic Creative District, channelling the area’s contemporary take on tradition.

Architect Jean-Michel Gathy’s forward-thinking design echoes the energy of the river, with a cascading structure of indoor-outdoor spaces arranged around green courtyards, delicate gardens and water features.

“The inspiration was ‘urban resort,’” Gathy says, “bringing the soul of the landscape, the outdoors, into a sophisticated Four Seasons hotel.” Of the Hotel’s 299 rooms and suites, the majority have river views, and all have 4-metre (13-foot) ceilings for an expansive, airy aesthetic. Thai culture is referenced in the design details, materials and colours, and in artwork chosen by Gathy.

“I am very excited about the ongoing evolution of the Creative District and us becoming a part of this community,” says General Manager Lubosh Barta. “As a highlight, we are curating a designated space featuring young and upcoming Thai artists.”

The Hotel’s stylish social venues **invite visitors and locals to mix and mingle**, with the Buenos Aires-inspired Social Club sure to become the place to see and be seen. Renowned mixologist Philip Bischoff, coming

from Manhattan Bar in Singapore, takes the lead as the Hotel’s Beverage Manager. And Michelin-starred Executive Chef Andrea Accordi, previously of Four Seasons Hotel Hong Kong, heads the dining options: a



modern Italian eatery serving Neapolitan-style pizza (with Prosecco on tap), an intimate Chinese restaurant specializing in Cantonese dishes, and a French brasserie with hearty cuisine and an art-focused atmosphere.

right: Across the river from The Jam Factory, Warehouse 30 invites creative types to linger. **below:** Spice shopping at Suwan Kreung Tes.



left: Warehouse 30 is home to shops, eateries, a flower design studio and a screening room. **below:** The Creative District is alive with colour.



he talks about his mother's southern Thai curries, coastal Indian dishes and Peranakan recipes, all inspired by Muslim immigrants. "Now, when I taste these dishes, I think about how to reinterpret them on my menu," he says. "All food, even Thai food, has to keep evolving."

At the spice shop next door, Jantraget puts in an order for 10 pounds of fresh curry leaves "for our new summer menu." Strolling north to Talad Noi, part of the Chinese community in Charoen Krung, we peep into a time-worn shophouse known for its freshly fried "curry puffs," stuffed with chicken, mung bean or pineapple—the inspiration for 80/20's Chilli Roulette, bite-size pastries. "We always include one with a super-hot chilli hidden inside," he says, "because food should be filling and playful."

We wedge ourselves into Si Phraya Duck Noodle, a hopping shop that's been here nearly 60 years. "I eat here practically every day," Jantraget says. "It's real food for real people. And it feels good," he adds, tapping his chest. In Thai culture, cultivating heartwarming and lively gatherings is as important as any ingredient or technique.

He's now working on an idea for an "80/20 lab," researching new ways to use traditional Thai ingredients and exploring Thai fermentation products. "I want to work with residents here to make simple dishes,"

he says. "Thai food has been reduced to lemongrass, galangal and fish sauce, *som tum* and pad thai. But real Thai food is so much more. I want us, as Thai people, to value our ingredients and our heritage."

AN ARTFUL TURN

"Talad Noi hasn't changed much," says furniture designer Pieter Compnol. "Lively streets, packed mopeds shortcutting to and from Chinatown, little restaurants everywhere, vendors vending. *Sabaai sabaai*, the good life."

Compnol and his wife, Stephanie Grusenmeyer, were crafting the beginnings of Charoen Krung's revival long before the area was pegged as the Creative District. The duo's label, p. Tendercool, specializes in bespoke furniture featuring vintage woods sourced from Thailand and Vietnam, fitted with sleek sand-casted bronze or brass.

I catch up with them at p. Tendercool's main studio and gallery, housed in a 1940s Thai art deco building. "We've known about this building for over 25 years, and finally managed to move in a decade ago," Compnol says. Recognizing the appeal of the neighbourhood, the couple set about persuading the owners of nearby abandoned warehouses to lease them to Bunnag, who transformed them into



above and left: Chef Jantraget's 80/20 elevates traditional Thai street food, like fried curry puffs, into fine dining.



above: Pieter Compagnol and his wife, Stephanie Grusenmeyer, own p. Tendercool, which specializes in what Compagnol calls the “haute manufacture” of bespoke furniture. **left:** An artist shows his work at ATT 19 Gallery.

Warehouse 30. Soon after, the Thailand Cultural Design Centre (TCDC) moved into the former Grand Post Office Building around the corner. “Now we have a wonderful mix of creatives, designers and locals who bring energy back to this delightful part of Bangkok.”

A maze of back alleys leads from the gallery to PTLab, where welders fuse brass fittings and custom metalwork, and carpenters polish slabs of antique *jichi-mu*, or chicken-wing wood, a rare Chinese wood with rich browns and greys that is cut on the bias to look like bird feathers. In the last 15 years, Compagnol and Grusenmeyer have collected more than 200 slabs, making this one of the world’s largest private

collections of antique *jichi-mu*. Soft sunlight filters through banana fronds and plumeria trees framing the workshop’s floor-to-ceiling doorway, which looks right onto a *khlong*, or canal. “I am convinced great spaces have positive creative impact,” Compagnol says.

Artisan studios, particularly of blacksmiths, were once commonplace here, he says; the last of these metalsmiths still toil in Talad Noi shophouses filled with old machine parts, sparks and grease flying. Alongside them, the riverside renaissance is drawing craftsmanship back. Compagnol and Grusenmeyer champion regular gallery-hopping dates as well as events like Bangkok Design Week and Bangkok



“
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Pieter Compagnol

left: The iconic tuk-tuk is one of many ways to get around the city, though the best ways to explore the Creative District are by foot, by bike or by boat.



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below and right:
Yossapon
Boonsom and
Sachasinh
explore the river
by longtail boat.



Crafts Week, spotlighting the work of established as well as new neighbourhood artists.

Comperol insists I visit ATT 19 Gallery, the brainchild of father-daughter duo Pornthep “Lek” and Porntip “Mook” Attakanwong, whose family has been restoring and selling antiques for decades. Inside a former Chinese school, the airy, cavernous space is defined by century-old teak beams and filled with original and replicated artefacts; an upstairs gallery is dedicated to work by up-and-coming artists. “This was the original design district,” says Lek.

CHANNEL MARKERS

A longtail boat cruise with landscape architect and Chao Phraya activist Yossapon Boonsom gives me an opportunity to reflect further on the area’s heritage. Boonsom has been involved in several community revitalization projects along the river, working to add economic and social value for individual districts and the city as a whole through tangible improvements like footpaths, pocket parks and building refurbishments. He founded Friends of the River, which strives to balance riverside residents’ way of life with continued development: “The co-creation process and public participation is key.”

It’s a balancing act: The Chao Phraya’s laissez-faire amalgamation of buildings is a big part of its charm but, left unchecked, could also lead to trouble. In 2015, Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA), the city’s governing agency, announced plans to build a 14-kilometre promenade above the river; after protests from locals, the plans have been amended to include a 7-kilometre promenade on both banks. It will still limit

direct river access for communities like Talad Noi and Kudijeen—a tiny riverside hamlet known for its interwoven Thai, Portuguese and Chinese history. “It’s important to draw commercial attention to the river,” the soft-spoken Boonsom concedes, “but the approach hasn’t been inclusive. We want to see more dialogue and debate.”

From the Chao Phraya’s main channel, our boat glides along a small canal between quaint wooden bungalows with intricately carved balconies and thickets of tropical mangroves that press right up to the waterline. Mango trees, heavy with young fruit, frame time-worn temples and crumbling shacks. A century ago, villagers farmed rice and planted orchards along the canal, relying on the river for irrigation, fertile soil and transportation. Today, most farms exist well outside the city boundaries.

Still, “Thai people don’t see the river as a separate thing,” Boonsom says. “It’s part of us, part of our lives. The river generates not only a natural ecology but also a social ecology. It shapes our culture and shapes who we are. The Creative District and this renaissance we are seeing is helping bring Bangkok back to the river.”

Coasting along the waterway, I can’t help thinking about my grandfather. An immigrant who wholeheartedly adopted Thailand as his homeland, he owed his fate and fortune to the Chao Phraya. He would be thrilled to see the riverside renaissance create new opportunities for the next generation. ■

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below: Wat Traimit in Chinatown, which falls within the bounds of the Creative District, houses a solid gold, 5.5-ton Buddha statue.

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Yossapon Boonsom

