

7

Creative District Bangkok: Changes at the Fringe

Introduction

The George Town case study provided insights into the planning, design and management process for a World Heritage site, which carries with it a series of requirements for authentic development and management. The case study also provided an example of a situation in which significant resources were devoted to the conservation process using what was, at least initially, a top-down approach. In contrast, the Creative District Bangkok case study is a bottom-up approach that drew on scarce financial and human resources. Chapter 7 is organized around a number of topics illustrated in Figure 7.1.

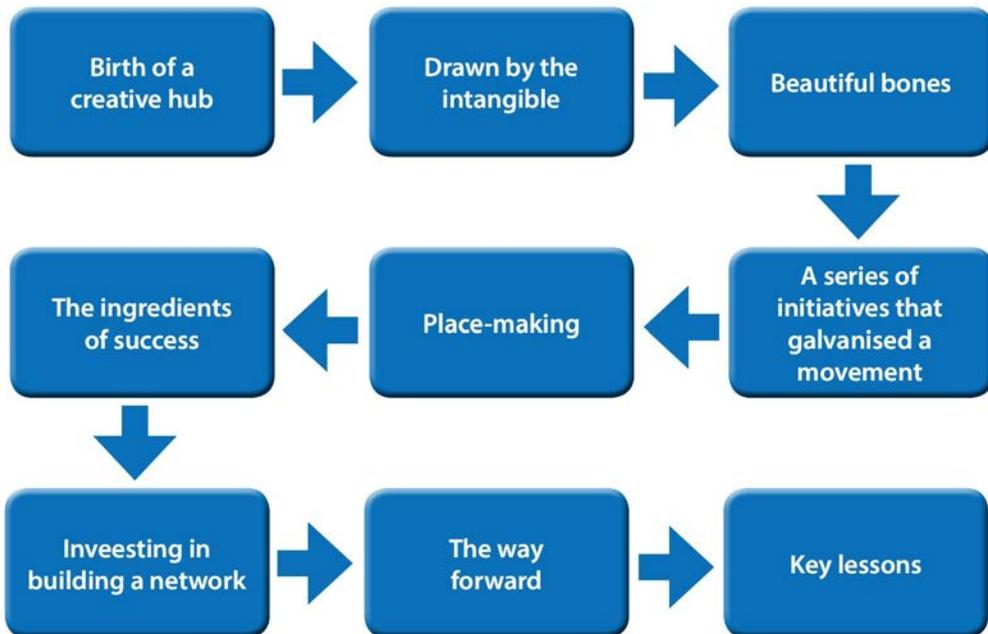


Figure 7.1: Chapter 7 topics

Background

West Bang Rak is a neighbourhood of Bangkok with an area of around 153 acres. It has three main segments. The southern segment is arguably the most vibrant, with two distinct communities creating one of Bangkok's better-known street food hubs. The middle segment, which is much calmer, is a legacy silver and jewellery district that is frequented by contemporary designers, artists and their patrons. The northern segment borders Chinatown and many of its old shop houses are being reclaimed for personal projects. Different as these segments may seem, each has an entrepreneurial spirit that pervades the area and the residents.

Together with many other tangible and intangible elements, the small businesses of West Bang Rak are what make it a diverse and creative district. 'Mom and pop' stores and boutiques dominate the area, with few chain stores. Restaurant owners and street food vendors serve their signature dishes to regular customers throughout the day. Gallery owners showcase exhibits and serve niche clients interested in certain styles and types of artwork. Deeper in the side streets, design shops sell specialised products and services that complement each other. In the evenings, bars with unique themes and characteristics receive guests, both from within the area and elsewhere.



Figure 7.2: Chao Phraya River

Only five years ago, one would have never imagined the vibrancy felt in West Bang Rak today. The area has many things working against it. One of those is its location; it is cut off from the rest of Bangkok by Sri Rat Expressway on its east side, while its southern border is essentially the entire length of the Saphan

Taksin Bridge ramp. Its west side is bounded by the Chao Phraya River, which is considered by Bangkok residents as being on the fringe of the city, while its northern border is far from the main roads leading to the centre of the city. For anyone living in car-reliant Bangkok, West Bang Rak seems an undesirable location for both homes and businesses.

The neighbourhood's layout and state of its street network does not encourage mobility. West Bang Rak has just one arterial road, Charoenkrung Road, and the small street offshoots are not linked with one another. This is a legacy of the city's early ribbon development, which has led to poor traffic flow, encouraged sprawl and created isolated blocks. Charoenkrung Road is considered narrow for a main road and is often congested during rush hour.



Figure 7.3: Traffic conditions in the district

Birth of a creative hub

Despite these challenges, West Bang Rak gradually attracted various new businesses. These did not displace existing enterprises but, in almost all cases, occupied empty properties, and they regularly organized events that brought new people and attention to the area. Seeing this, some older establishments in the area, spurred by this new energy and competition, began to do the same. Several businesses and organizations began to collaborate on activities that promoted places and events, including on social media and in lifestyle publications. Within a few short years, the area was officially dubbed 'the heart of a new creative district'. Against all odds, West Bang Rak overcame its shortcomings and generated its own urban revival.