

## The 'Southeast Asia Movie Theater Project'

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The 'Southeast Asia Movie Theater Project' is a one-person initiative to document the stand-alone movie theatres of the Mekong region. I began the project in 2008 in response to the demolition of the last two operating stand-alone theatres in Chiang Mai, Thailand – my home from 2006 to 2010. This event seemed to signify a sea change in the city's social life, inspiring me to deepen my understanding of the civic role that these venues played. Through photography I have tried to build a visual archive of the architecture, spatial typology, and cultural life that the stand-alone movie theatres embody. They constitute physical representations of distinct eras in the region's social and cultural past, while increasing the value of urban landscapes.

In addition to photography, I compile oral histories from area residents, former and current owners, employees, and patrons of the theatres I document, as a means of creating a multimedia ethnographic narrative specific to each theatre. Moreover, the regional scope of the project serves as a platform to compare and contrast the historical experiences unique to these venues in both cross-border and centre-periphery contexts. With an emphasis on breadth of research, I have conducted fieldwork in more than half of Thailand's provincial capitals, most of Laos, and half a dozen cities in Myanmar.

The images exhibited here are just a sample of the many hundreds of theatres already archived by the 'Southeast Asia Movie Theater Project'. Their varied states, from derelict and abandoned, to converted and still operating, speak to the wide political-cultural differences found throughout the Mekong countries. In Thailand there were once more than 700 stand-alone movie theatres nationwide. Today there

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*Waziya Cinema. YANGON, MYANMAR: The Waziya was built while Burma was still a British colony. Its ornate beaux-arts architecture signifies the country's economic clout of Burma in the roaring 1920s.*



*Toan Thang Cinema. HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM: This is one of the last pre-communist theatres still in operation in Ho Chi Minh City. During my visit, however, I was informed it would soon be closing.*



*Thahan Bok (Army) Theater.* LOPBURI, THAILAND: The *Thahan Bok* was a gift of the fascist government of Field Marshall Phibunsonkram in 1941. Bauhaus-inspired architecture had made its way over to Thailand during the Second World War and many public works projects employed the style as a symbol of modernity.



*Movie in the open.* CHAIYAPHUM, THAILAND: The projectionist at an open-air movie screening gives the peace sign. Photo was taken during a town fair in Chaiyaphum in 2010.



*Soe San Cinema football den.* THAZI, MYANMAR: Football dens like this one have become widespread in Myanmar. They serve as places where local crowds can meet to watch football broadcasts from overseas. The *Soe San* employs this smaller side room as one.

are fewer than 30 still in operation, mostly found in district capitals in the Eastern and North-Eastern provinces.

Across the Eastern border in Laos, with its fewer urban areas, there is only one currently operating stand-alone theatre, used mostly for government functions. As of May 2010, the bulk of movie theatres in Myanmar cities between Yangon and Mandalay have been found to be in working order, though frequently with low customer turnout. For the next phase of the project, I will cover the delta cities and ethnic states of Myanmar, before turning my attention over to Vietnam.

As many of Southeast Asia's cities are in the midst of or approaching sweeping changes in their social and physical structures, the time to document is immediately. In the rush to keep pace with change, policy makers frequently demolish a city's out-moded buildings, overlooking the permanence of such decisions and the fact that the buildings can represent a city's competitive advantage. In carrying out this project, I hope to cultivate an appreciation for stand-alone movie theatres in the Mekong region, before perceived redevelopment imperatives lead to their destruction.



*Shwe Hintha Cinema*. BAGO, MYANMAR: Interior of the *Shwe Hintha*, an art deco gem dating to 1928, still in operation. Movies are projected using an LCD projector.



*Scala Theatre*. BANGKOK, THAILAND: The concessions seller scoops a bag of popcorn at the *Scala*. Dating to 1969, the *Scala* is the last of Thailand's world-class movie palaces still in operation.



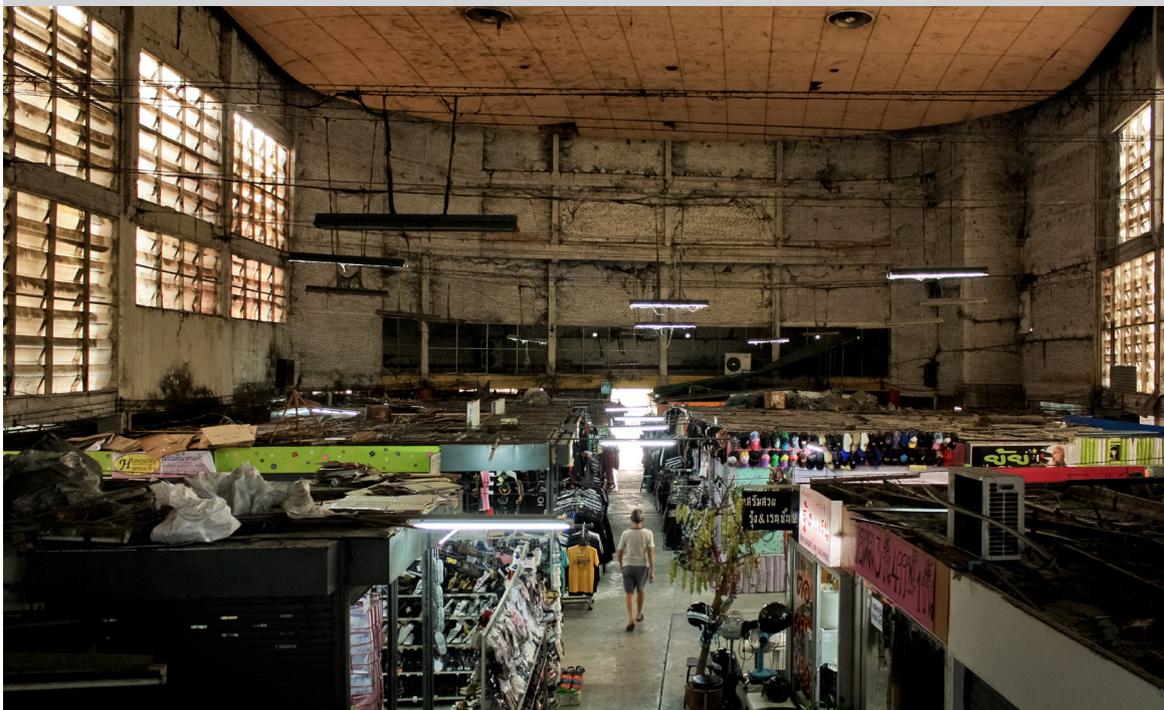
Waziya Cinema. YANGON, MYANMAR: Ticket taker at the Waziya.



Chinatown Rama. BANGKOK, THAILAND: The lobby of the Bangkok's *Chinatown Rama*. Once a staple of Chinese entertainment, starting out as a live venue for Peking Opera in the 1930s. In later years it developed into a 'cruising ground' for gay men, though current films are still screened daily.



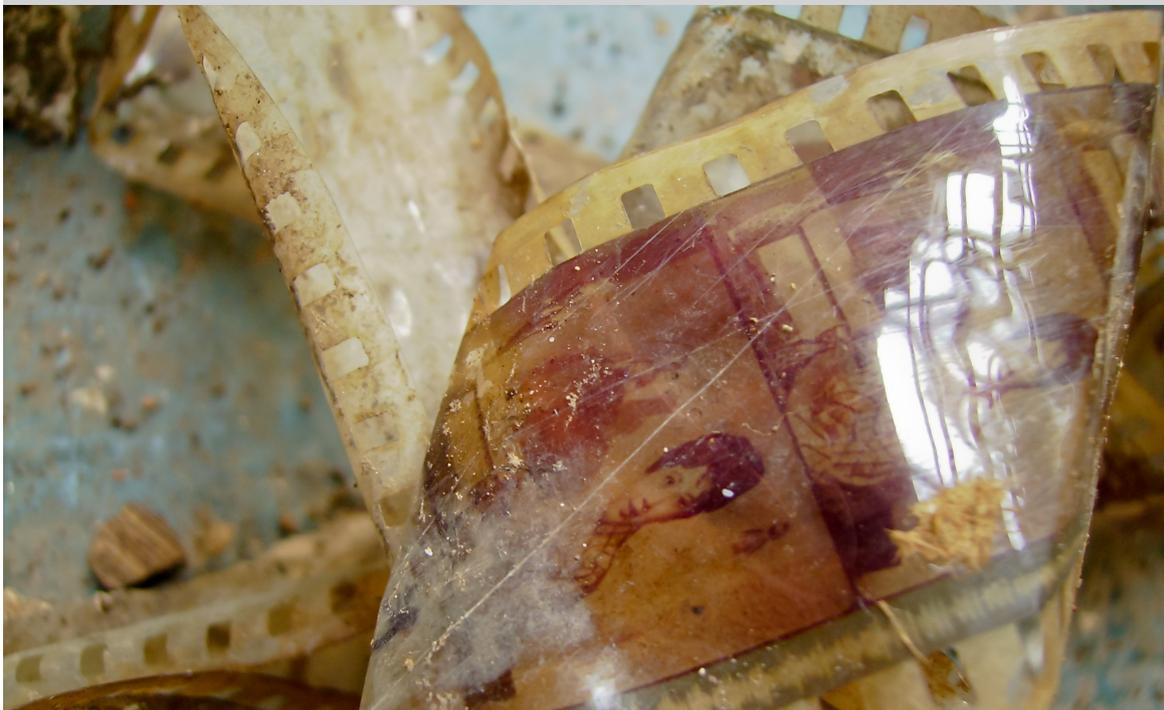
*Saengcharoen Theatre. MAHASARAKHAM, THAILAND: Since closing its doors as a movie theatre in the early 2000s, the Saengcharoen has become the Church of Hope Mahasarakham.*



*Las Vegas Theatre. KORAT, THAILAND: Since ceasing to operate as a movie theatre, the Las Vegas has been converted into a retail shopping centre. Numerous vending stalls can be seen occupying the floor of the once vast Las Vegas.*



*Meuang Thong Rama. SINGBURI, THAILAND: Detritus lays strewn across the lobby of the retired theatre. The trademark pyramid of Apex, along with the word 'scala' still hangs over the lower lobby.*



*Lao Jaleun Theater. SAVANAKET, LAO: Remnants of a prolific movie past. Discarded film litters the floor of the abandoned and rapidly decaying theatre.*



*Chiang Kong Rama.* CHIANG KHONG, THAILAND: The owner of the defunct *Chiang Kong Rama* displays a poster honoring the death of Mitr Chaibancha, Thailand's most beloved actor of the 1960s. Mitr fell from a helicopter while performing a stunt for the film *Insee Daeng*. The poster used to hang inside the *Chiang Kong Rama*, now it is a keepsake in the family home.



*Taphan Hin Rama.* TAPHAN HIN, THAILAND: Mr Chalerm Praditsuwan, owner of the defunct *Taphan Hin Rama*, holds an old photo depicting a well-dressed audience at his theatre while explaining the social importance that his theatre held for the Taphan Hin community, before it was economically undermined by the dubious business practices of a larger film exhibition company.