

# The Evolution and Development of Public Spaces in Mueang Chiang Mai, Thailand

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## Abstract

Chiang Mai is an old city with an important role as the center of the Lanna Kingdom. It has unique geographical and architectural features, especially the public space called “Khuang”, which serves as the center of politics, society, and culture. The changes in public spaces in Chiang Mai can be divided into major periods: 1884–1933, when the public spaces were mostly used for religious roles and community activities; 1933–1987, when the public spaces began to accommodate urban expansion, in addition to economic and social activities; and 1987–2024 (present), when public spaces were developed in line with the city growth in terms of economy, tourism, and modern culture. In particular, the Khuang Luang area remains an important gathering spot for both traditions and public activities at the city level. These changes reflect the relationship between power, culture, and the way of life of people in each era. This article aims to analyze the roles of public spaces and Khuang Luang in Chiang Mai and propose guidelines for the restoration and development of these historically and culturally valuable public spaces to allow sustainable use in the modern era, and meaning for the urban community in the future.

**Keywords:** Evolution, Empty Public Space, Development of Mueang Chiang Mai

## Introduction

Chiang Mai is an ancient city with a long history and plays an important role as the center of the Lanna Kingdom, which had political and cultural influence in the region (Kongtaweesak, 2020). Chiang Mai has unique geographical and architectural features, such as urban planning and the development of public spaces that reflect the way of life in the Lanna society. Major public spaces in Chiang Mai are called “Khuang”, which play an important role in politics (Sodabunnaru, 2003), and serve as a site for various rituals and social relationship building activities. The “Khuang Luang” (Royal Space), which was the center of the city in the past, had developed along with social and economic changes. The Khuangs are now used to meet modern needs.

Despite some works already mentioning the public spaces in the old Chiang Mai city, (Sangawong, 2009), there was still no in-depth analysis into the relationship between physical change and the changing role of the public place on the people over time, along with the contemporary trend. Thus, there is no clear understanding about the role of “Khuang Luang” that expressed the dynamism between power, culture, and everyday life. The questions were how changes of the public spaces in each period express the relationship between power and activities, and whether the public spaces could be restored or developed to fit the historical context and modern needs. This article therefore focuses on studying the historical, social, and cultural change of public spaces in Chiang Mai in each period, the role of Khuang Luang as the main public space of the city, and relationship with the activities, to present a guideline for restoration and development of such culturally and historically valuable spaces to meet contemporary needs.

## Materials and methods

This study used a mixed approach, integrating the study of history, culture and geoarchitecture to analyze changes to public spaces in Chiang Mai city, both in terms of physical properties and meaning through analysis of historical documents, the old city plan, land deeds, and local literature to examine the evolution in each period. This is done along with field surveys by recording images, making maps, and interviewing stakeholders to collect spatial data and current opinions, as well as data analysis from documents, fieldwork, and GIS programs for spatial analysis. In this case, the ancient map, city plan, and land use data are layered to keep track of the changes in location and role of public spaces in each period. The mapping process started with digitizing ancient map data

and adjusting the location to the current coordinates, then field data was analyzed, and an interview was conducted based on the historical timeline. The role of the public spaces was classified by the ritual, politics, economy, and culture to create a total picture about changes of the public spaces.

## Literature Review: Review Of the Relationship and History Between the Public Space and Human Activity

This study examined the evolution of the public spaces in Chiang Mai city, connecting the historical, cultural and political contexts through the public space concept to express the relationship between the public spaces, social role, and usage by the people in each period. The result could be summarized into four main points:

### 1. Public Spaces in the Traditional Rituals and Culture

The past public spaces such as the Khuang Luang served as the center of political activities and rituals. It was used for important ceremonies such as the army rallying point and ritual site of the Lanna State (Ongsakul, 1986), expressing the power relationship and sacredness in the traditional state structure.

### 2. Public Spaces and Sociocultural Changes

The Khuang Luang also had an economic role as parts of it were developed into “Kad” or market areas, the center of commerce and relationship building within the community (Charoenmuang, 1997) Changes of the public space utilization expressed dynamism of the space towards sociocultural changes.

### 3. Public Spaces in the Age of Tourism and Contemporary City

In the current context, public spaces in Chiang Mai city change with the trend of creative economy and tourism such as renovation of the city gate and Khuang into walking streets or activity plazas that both express the history and accommodate the local people and tourists, (Rakpan & Oranratmanee, 2014). These roles also promoted local identity and drove the culture-based economy.

### 4. Theoretical and State Ideal Framework

This study used the following theories for public space role analysis:

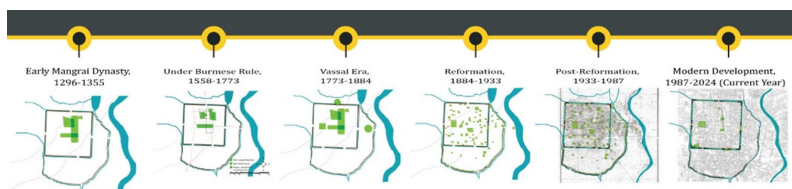
- Jürgen Habermas (1989): proposed the public spaces as the stage of reason and collective discussion.
- Nancy Fraser (1990): criticized of Habermas’ concept as overlooking the factors of power, gender and class, as seen in the state and capital groups’ influence over public spaces.
- Margaret Crawford (1995): saw that public spaces are for bargaining and nonformal expression, like walking streets.

- Henri Lefebvre (1996): proposed the concept of “Right to the City” in which the people can define the meaning of spaces.

- William Lim (2008): explained the public spaces in Asian context that were defined by capital, consumption, and control, especially in “Theme Park” cities.

In addition, Thai nationalism also influenced the management of public spaces, especially after state power centralization. Some spaces were transformed to reflect the ideology of the Thai state, such as the transformation of the Lanna royal court into a religious space or the organization of state activities in historical spaces. This idea concurs with Winichakul (1994) in *Siam Mapped*, who proposed that mapping and modern space management are tools for creating “Thainess” beyond local identities in terms of space and culture. These theoretical frameworks are therefore used to study and analyze the history of development and physical changes of public spaces in the old city of Chiang Mai, which can be divided into different periods (Sukkan, 2008), as follows (figure 1):

1. Development of Open space in Chiang Mai City between 1296-1558
2. The Change of Public Spaces during the Burmese Rule (1558-1773)
3. Development of Public Spaces in Chiang Mai City, 1773-1884
4. Development of Public Spaces in Chiang Mai during 1884–1933
5. Development of Public Spaces in Chiang Mai during 1933–1987
6. Development of Public Spaces in Chiang Mai during 1987–2024 (Current Year)



**Figure 1.** The history of development and physical changes of public spaces in the old city of Chiang Mai

## Changes and Evolutions of Public Spaces

### 1. Development of Public space in Chiang Mai City between 1296-1558

During the early establishment of Chiang Mai City (1296) until the end of the power of the Mangrai Dynasty (1558) (figure 2), Public Spaces in the city had ritual, political, and daily life significance. They can be classified into three main locations as follows:

#### 1. Wiang Kaew Area: Open space for Ritual and Power

Wiang Kaew was the most important area for Lanna state’s ritual and politics. It served as the center of “Khum Luang” or “Khum Wiang Kaew”, the king’s residence, and the venue for important ceremonies such as coronations and royal cremations (Boonprakom & Udphuay, 2023; Kraipakorn, 2014). This area served a symbolic function as the center of state and religious power as well as a gathering place for the elite like the nobility and monks, reflecting the traditional power structure where religion and governance were closely intertwined.

#### 2. Khuang Luang: Open space for Community and Public Activities

Khuang Luang is located between the Three Kings Monument and Wat Phra Sing. It served in various functions during times of war (an army assembly area) and during peacetime (an open-air market and public activity area) (Damrikul, 2006). This area is open to all classes and plays an important role in economic, social, and cultural interactions. Khuang Luang is also linked to religious activities because of close proximity to several major temples, reflecting the harmony between urban and religious life.

#### 3. Other Open Spaces: Community Spaces in Terms of Networks

Other open spaces, such as small Khuangs, city gates, and old markets, serve as the infrastructure of urban social networks in terms of security, trade, and community meetings (Kongtaweesak, 2020). City gates control entry and exit and serve as a center for social activities, while Khuangs and

markets serve as neighborhood activity venues. These spaces are often located near religious sites, such as temples or pagodas, reflecting the close relationship between physical spaces and the religious and cultural worldviews of the people at that time.

## 2. The Change of Public Spaces during the Burmese Rule (1558-1773) (figure 3)

After Chiang Mai fell under Burmese rule, public spaces in the city went through both physical and social changes, especially the former Khuang Luang (currently part of Yupparaj Wittayalai School), reflecting the new urban management approach that emphasized iron-fist control rather than opening up public spaces. During the Mangrai Dynasty, Khuang Luang served as the center of economic, social, and religious activities, open to people of all classes with equal access. However, under Burmese occupation, the original Khuang Luang was destroyed and replaced with an area that emphasized control and reflected the centralized grip (Damrikul, 2006; Ongsakul, 1986). Public spaces under the Burmese rule were restricted both physically and symbolically, smoldering the way of life and community activities. Public participation and gathering were replaced by strict state control. The Khuang's role was reduced from a community forum to a state-controlled area. City gates became checkpoints and symbols of strict power. The old market remained the economic center, but was organized to control the economic freedom of the community. Although religion still played a role in people's daily lives, the Burmese state used religion as a tool to create legitimacy in governance. Religious and cultural activities in public spaces were clearly reduced, and the area was changed from "community" to "state".

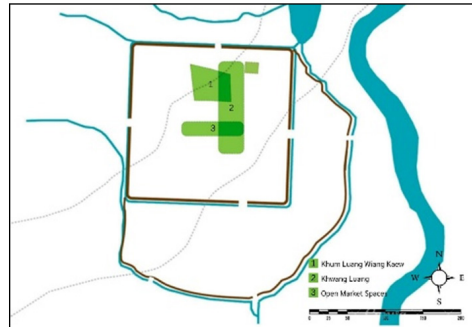


Figure 2. Development of Public space in Chiang Mai City between 1296-1558



Figure 3. Development of Public space in Chiang Mai City between 1558-1773

## 3. Development of Public Spaces in Chiang Mai City, 1773-1884 (figure 4)

After the end of Burmese rule in 1773, Chiang Mai City entered a period of restoration, with significant changes in the roles and uses of Public Spaces in the city. Public spaces that were once open, such as Khuang Luang, were reduced in role and transformed into "Khuang Sassanasathan" or areas around temples, which supported specific activities at the community level rather than city-wide gathering (Damrikul, 2006).



Figure 4. Development of Public space in Chiang Mai City between 1773-1884

At the same time, public activities at the city level, such as almsgiving or traditional events, were moved to important temples, such as Wat Phra Sing and Wat Chedi Luang, which became the gathering places of city residents and played religious, cultural, and social roles (Ongsakul, 1986), indicating that religion contributed to the city unity after the war.

On the other hand, markets that had been important economic areas, began to expand outside the city walls to support the growth of communities and trade, such as Kad Hua Wiang (outside Chang Phuak Gate), Kad Chiang Ruek (outside Tha Phae Gate), and Kad Klang Wiang, which remained within the city. (City map in the late 18th century). The distribution of markets reflected the city growth and the change in purposes of the Public Spaces to suit the new way of life of the people. Overall, Public Spaces in Chiang Mai during this period no longer served as the center of urban activities, but became a special area for religious and economic roles at the community level. This change reflected the more decentralized power structure and the adaptation of the city during the transition after Burmese rule.

#### 4. Development of Public Spaces in Chiang Mai during 1884–1933 (figure 5)

After Chiang Mai returned to the fold of the Bangkok Royal Court, Public Spaces in the city continued to play an important role in social, religious, and economic activities, especially the temple squares, which became the community center for religious activities and local traditions, such as candlelight processions, Buddhist Lent, and various ceremonies (Meechoobot, 2008). Major temples within the city walls, such as Wat Chedi Luang and Wat Phra Sing, were not only religious centers but also served as public spaces at the city level, allowing people to gather for important ceremonies, such as the Buddha image bathing ceremony, the city's destiny-extending ceremony, and the worship of the Inthakhin pillar, demonstrating the connection between religious structures and the city (Meechoobot, 2008). The area around Tha Phae Gate continued to play a role as a gathering spot, news hub, and travel hub connecting areas inside and outside the city walls, resulting in continuous social movements (Meechoobot, 2008). In terms of economy, there was a change from temporary open-air markets in the squares and along the roads to permanent market buildings. This again reflected the physical changes of the city to accommodate the growth of the economic system and urban organization (Rakpan & Oranratmanee, 2014a). Warorot Market (Kad Luang) is a major example located near the temple and the city gate, reflecting the close connection between religion, economy, and society.



**Figure 5.** Development of Public space in Chiang Mai City between 1884-1933



### 5. Development of Public Spaces in Chiang Mai during 1933–1987 (figure 6)

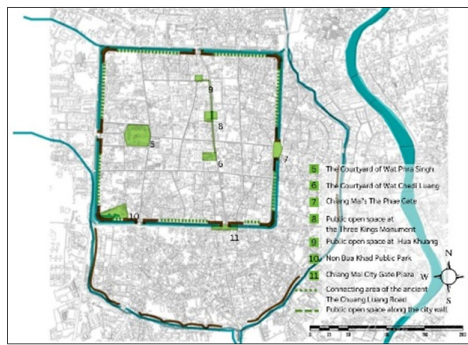
Between 1933 and 1987, Chiang Mai entered a rapid urban development trend, resulting in Public Spaces in the city having to change their roles to accommodate economic, social, and bureaucratic changes (Charoenmuang, 1997). Temple squares, which used to be the center of communities and religious activities, began to lose their role in many areas. Some were abandoned or transformed into government and private land plots along with the expansion of the city. However, important temple squares, such as Wat Chedi Luang, Wat Phra Sing, and Wat Phan On, still maintained their functions as areas for community and city-level traditional activities. The vacant areas around city gates, such as Tha Phae Gate and Chiang Mai Gate, remained as activity areas for traditional events and public festivals, connecting social relationships between communities in the city and surrounding areas. At the same time, partial demolition of the old city wall allowed the surrounding area to be repurposed as a park and outdoor activity area, which not only provided more public space for the urban community but also reflected an attempt to balance urban development with the preservation of the cultural and physical identity of the old city.

### 6. Development of Public Spaces in Chiang Mai during 1987–2024 (figure 7)

Between 1987 and 2024, Chiang Mai city underwent significant changes in the roles and patterns of utilizing open spaces, reflecting its adaptation to modern economic, social and cultural growth (Meechoobot, 2008). The role of the temple squares declined in line with changes in the urban way of life. However, important temples such as Wat Chedi Luang, Wat Phra Sing and Wat Hua Khuang continued to serve as centers of religious and cultural activities, such as candlelight processions, Buddhist Lent and the New Year Festival, reflecting the continuity of religious heritage in a modern urban context.



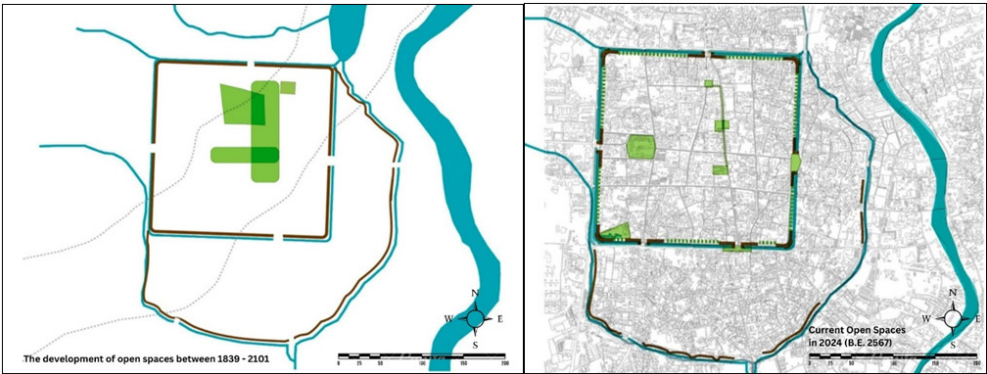
**Figure 6.** Development of Public space in Chiang Mai City between 1933–1987



**Figure 7.** Development of Public space in Chiang Mai City between 1987–2024

The Three Kings Monument Square, located along the ancient Khuang Luang, has become a center for social and cultural activities, such as local festivals, cultural performances and symbolic gatherings, reflecting the preservation of historical values alongside the contemporary use of public space. Tha Phae Gate and Chiang Mai Gate remain the centers of urban activities. In the evening, they are transformed into night markets to accommodate both tourists and locals, thus becoming an economic tourism area that combines with contemporary culture. Buak Hat Park and the Public Spaces along the moat have been rehabilitated and developed into public parks and recreation areas in the city center, helping to connect people with nature amidst the dense urban environment.

**Figure 8.** Shows the location of the public spaces during the reign of King Mangrai, called Khwang Luang (a ceremonial area) compared to the current city plan in 2024.



In addition, former government areas, such as the area of the Women’s Hospital and Chiang Mai Provincial Court, have been transformed into new public parks and government offices, along with the restoration of the former Sanam Luang area into a local museum, reflecting efforts to conserve cultural heritage alongside public use. The expansion of mass tourism has resulted in many Public Spaces being used for commercial purposes and contemporary cultural activities, leading to changes in the way of life of Chiang Mai residents and increase in the economic and social diversity of the city as a world-class destination.

From the 700-year history of Chiang Mai, Public Spaces in Chiang Mai have continuously developed and changed over the centuries, reflecting the power relations, culture, and social roles in each era (Table 1). The development of Public Spaces is divided into six major periods according to historical timeline, from the era before the major changes in the 19th century to the present era, in order to provide a clear overview of the role, function, and changes of Public Spaces in the context of Chiang Mai City.

**Table 1.** The development of Public Spaces is divided into six major periods according to historical timeline

| Period                           | Power Structure                                  | Development of Open Spaces  | Social roles and activities   |
|----------------------------------|--|---|---|
| 1. 1296-1558 (Mangrai Dynasty)   | Sacred power of the state and king.              | Khuang Luang served as the center for rituals, political, and economic activities.  | State rituals, outdoor activities, and army assembly point in times of war.           |
| 2. 1558-1773 (Burmese rule)      | Under foreign power with focus on tight control. | Original Khuang Luang was lost, and the new one had restrictions on activities.   | Focus on control and reduction of community gathering.                                |
| 3. 1773-1884 (Vassal and reform) | Power from Bangkok, and stronger bureaucracy     | Public Spaces were used for religious and community purposes. The markets became more permanent.  | Community activities and rituals, with markets being near city gates.                 |
| 4. 1884-1933                     | Power from the Bangkok Royal Court               | Temple Khuangs served as the centers for social, religious, and economic activities. Permanent indoor markets start to appear.                          | Traditional and religious activities, permanent markets, and social gathering points. |
| 5. 1933-1987                     | Bureaucracy and city development                 | Temple Khuangs gradually lost their prominence. Some were changed into public/private areas. City gates were used for activities, festivals, and parks. | Traditional activities, public festivals, and activity areas.                         |
| 6. 1987-2024 (Present)           | State with market and tourism power              | Some temple Khuangs still had a role. The city center became the center for social, cultural and tourism activities.                                    | Festivals, night markets, recreational areas, and cultural identity exhibition area.  |

In conclusion, Public Spaces in Chiang Mai reflect the power and cultural relations continuously from the past to the present and thus the design and development of these spaces in the future should be based on historical understanding, fluidity of identity, and participation of users at the community level.

## Discussion

The study found that Public Spaces in Chiang Mai have been continuously changing with high dynamism, and virtually inseparable from the power, cultural, and economic structures in each era.

### 1. Theoretical analysis

According to Habermas' concept, public spaces should be a forum for expressions in the society. However, the context of Chiang Mai indicates that the public sphere had been subject to state power in many periods, both in the past when it was used for ceremonies and in the present when public spaces are somewhat restricted. In addition, Lefebvre's concept of Right to the City emphasizes the rights of the people to define and use urban spaces, which reflects that the restoration of some areas is often oriented towards tourism rather than the original use.

### 2. Relationship with urban identity

Khuang Luang and the Public Spaces within the city walls clearly reflect the roots of Lanna culture and thus the loss or transformation of these spaces means a change in urban identity. Restoration efforts should be mindful of historical continuity alongside the physical dimensions.

### 3. Nationalism and cultural politics

The restoration of some areas, such as symbolic activities at Tha Pae Gate, was part of the Thai state-sponsored identity building project under the nationalist framework. Therefore, Public Spaces have become an ideological tool rather than a place for genuine public participation.

### 4. Impacts of capitalism and tourism

Development of open space in the old city area that cater to tourists, such as walking streets and commercial cultural areas, has led to the state of "Theme Park Urbanism", that diluted traditional culture and may lead to tension between communities and interest groups. 5. Trends in contemporary public space management The Mae Kha Canal restoration project, the creation of green spaces, and transformation of some roads into walking streets reflect efforts to create sustainable cities, but it is still necessary to consider equality of access and community participation to make sure that Public Spaces shall not belong to one group in particular.

## Conclusion

This research article suggests that Public Spaces in Chiang Mai are not merely physical elements of the city, but also spaces that reflect and create power relations, culture, and identity of the city through the periods, especially "Khuang Luang" which played an important role in rituals, politics, economy, and culture of the Lanna community in the past.

The analysis of historical documents, field surveys, interviews, and GIS analysis found that Public Spaces have evolved in terms of function, user roles, and symbolic meaning, from being religious and state ritual spaces → military and administrative spaces → community centers → and eventually to creative economic and tourism spaces at present. In consideration of the research questions, it was found that changes in public spaces are directly related to changes in power structures, urban management, and people's way of life. Thus, Public Spaces have become a negotiation stage between the state, communities, and capital, which clearly affects the creation and transformation of Chiang Mai's identity.

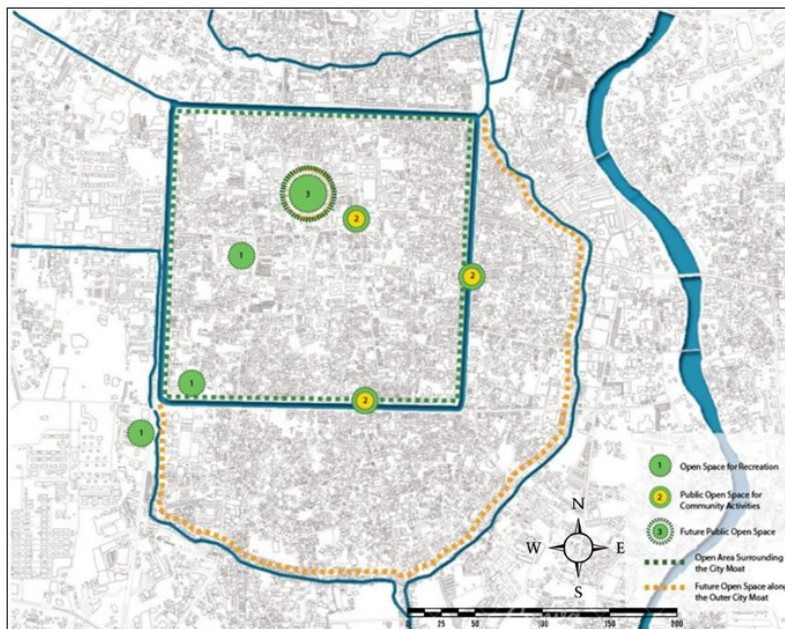
For the guidelines for the conservation and development of Public Spaces in the old city, they can be divided into two main types: recreational spaces such as public parks, recreational areas, and green spaces suitable for informal activities such as walking, running, and relaxing; and cultural and traditional activity spaces, which should be Public Spaces with the potential to host important city activities, such as Khwang Wat Chedi Luang, Three Kings Monument Plaza, and Ratchadamnoen Avenue, the latter of which is currently used as a Sunday walking street.

These areas not only serve contemporary uses but also serve as "collective memory areas" that reflect the continuity of the city's identity by linking current activities with the cultural heritage and historical structures. In order for the development of public vacant areas in Chiang Mai to maximize the benefits in terms of policy and design, the following important guidelines can be proposed:

1. Cultural area conservation: Areas with historical significance, such as Khuang Luang, city gates, and city walls, should be designated as cultural heritage areas. There should also be landscaping efforts that truly reflect Lanna identity.

2. Community participation: The development and restoration of open areas should involve community participation at every stage to ensure that the use of the area meets the needs of actual users and does not neglect the voices of vulnerable groups in the city.





**Figure 9.** shows the current location of free space for recreation and the area to be developed into free space in the future.

3. Green space network development: Promote the connection of open spaces, such as temple squares, community squares, public parks, and areas along Mae Kha Canal, into a continuous public space network to support a walkable, healthy city, and efforts to reduce the impact of climate change.

4. Contemporary space design guidelines: The design of Public Spaces in the old city should integrate historical dimensions with the needs of current users, such as outdoor activity areas, community markets, or cultural performance areas, without compromising the original value of the area.

Future public space policy planning in Chiang Mai Therefore, it should be based on an understanding of the dynamics of the past, the complexities of the current context, and the shared vision of the community as the true owners of the land.

#### CRediT with degree of contribution:

**Supiya Punyathong:** writing – review and editing, Conceptualization; writing – review and editing, Software; writing –writing – review and editing, Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review and editing; review and editing, Methodology. **Phithakphong Baengthid:** writing – original draft; formal analysis.



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