

SCALA: Intangible Dots of Cultural Heritage and Environmental Loss in Contemporary Bangkok

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Abstract.

This arts-based research examines SCALA, a mini sculpture created as part of the solo exhibition "Intangible Dot" at People's Gallery, the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (December 4-28, 2024). The artwork serves as a material metaphor for Bangkok's parallel losses of cultural heritage and natural environment. SCALA Theater, the last stand-alone cinema in Siam Square, was demolished in 2020 following COVID-19 closures, symbolizing the erasure of collective urban memory. Through mini sculptural intervention, this work juxtaposes the theater's Late Modernist/Art Deco architectural elements with contemporary graffiti, creating a layered narrative of nostalgia, youth expression, and urban transformation. The research demonstrates how environmental art can materialize intangible losses, making visible the invisible connections between disappearing cultural landmarks and vanishing green spaces in Bangkok's rapidly transforming urban landscape. This study contributes to discourse on community-engaged art practices that foster environmental consciousness and sustainable urban futures through critical artistic intervention.

Keywords: Environmental Loss, SCALA Theater, Intangible Heritage, Urban Transformation

1. Introduction

Bangkok's urban landscape continues to undergo rapid transformation, characterized by the simultaneous disappearance of both cultural heritage sites and natural green spaces. This phenomenon reflects a broader pattern of metropolitan development where economic imperatives often override considerations (Harvey, 2004) of collective memory and environmental sustainability. The demolition of SCALA Theater in 2020 exemplifies this trend, marking the end of an era for Bangkok's cinema culture and the erasure of a significant architectural landmark that had served as a communal gathering space for generations.

SCALA Theater, distinguished by its Late Modernist and Art Deco architectural features including grand staircases and crystal chandeliers, represented more than a venue for film exhibition. It embodied a particular historical moment in Bangkok's cultural development and served as a physical anchor for collective urban memory (Huyssen, 2003). The theater closed permanently on July 5, 2020, succumbing to the combined pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic and the expiration of its lease agreement. The subsequent demolition of the building eliminated not only the physical structure but also the intangible experiences, memories, and social interactions that the space facilitated.

This research emerges from a broader artistic practice deeply invested in social and political discourse surrounding contemporary ecological issues. The work particularly examines the role of art in commenting on present conditions and raising critical questions about sustainable

futures (Leavy, 2015). The investigation explores how artistic intervention can address the relationship between cultural memory and environmental consciousness, examining the ways in which the loss of architectural heritage parallels the disappearance of natural spaces within urban environments.

Contemporary environmental art practice (Miles, 2014) has increasingly turned toward materialization of absence as a strategy for making invisible losses perceptible. Through sculptural representation and symbolic transformation, artists create tangible manifestations of intangible phenomena such as memory, loss, and environmental degradation. This approach aligns with broader trends in socially engaged art that seek to foster awareness and inspire action regarding pressing ecological crises.

The SCALA sculpture emerges from these concerns, functioning as both memorial and critical commentary (Kester, 2004). By recreating the demolished theater in miniature form using resin and gypsum (Sangwalpetch et al., 2024), the work transforms architectural memory into sculptural object, while the inclusion of graffiti elements introduces layered temporalities and voices of younger generations. This intervention creates space for reflection on urban transformation, cultural continuity, and the ongoing tensions between development, heritage preservation, and environmental sustainability in contemporary Bangkok.

1.1 Research Objective

1.1.1 To examine the transformation of "invisible points" representing lost cultural landmarks and fading green spaces.

1.1.2 To analyze the integration of nostalgia and expression among contemporary youth through the placement of architectural memories and graffiti elements within the SCALA sculpture.

1.1.3 To explore the potential of art research to promote critical awareness of the future of sustainable cities through community-participatory art practices.

2. Literature review

2.1 Environmental Art and Urban Memory

Contemporary environmental art practice (Miles, 2014) has increasingly addressed the intersection of ecological concerns and cultural memory, particularly within rapidly urbanizing contexts. Scholars such as Miwon Kwon (2002) have examined how site-specific art interventions can activate awareness of place-based histories and environmental transformations, arguing that artistic practice offers unique capacity to make visible the invisible processes of urban change. This literature emphasizes art's role in creating spaces for critical reflection and community dialogue regarding development trajectories and sustainable futures.

The concept of "intangible heritage" has gained prominence in cultural preservation (Smith, 2006), discourse, recognizing that heritage encompasses not only physical structures but also memories, practices, and social relationships. Andreas Huyssen's (2003) work on urban memory demonstrates how cities function as palimpsests, with layers of history continuously inscribed and erased through demolition and reconstruction. This framework proves particularly relevant for understanding Bangkok's transformation, where rapid development systematically eliminates both built heritage and the social fabric it supports.

Environmental consciousness scholarship emphasizes the interconnection between cultural heritage and ecological sustainability. David Harvey's (2004) analysis of "accumulation by dispossession" reveals how urban development processes often simultaneously destroy cultural resources and natural environments in service of capital accumulation. This perspective highlights the structural forces driving heritage loss and environmental degradation, positioning artistic intervention as potential form of resistance and alternative imagination.

Community-engaged art practice has emerged as significant methodology for addressing social and environmental issues. Grant Kester's (2004) examination of dialogical aesthetics demonstrates how collaborative artistic processes can foster collective reflection and action regarding shared concerns. This approach recognizes artists as facilitators of conversation rather than sole authors, positioning art-making as collaborative knowledge production that engages diverse stakeholders in reimagining possible futures.

Research on nostalgia and contemporary culture reveals complex relationships between memory, loss, and identity formation. Svetlana Boym (2001) distinguishes between restorative nostalgia, which seeks to reconstruct lost pasts, and reflective nostalgia, which dwells in the ambivalence of memory and loss. This distinction proves useful for analyzing artistic approaches to heritage representation, particularly regarding whether interventions simply memorialize disappeared sites or engage critically with ongoing processes of urban transformation.

The integration of graffiti and street art within institutional art contexts has generated substantial scholarly attention. Theories of spatial practice, particularly Michel de Certeau's (1984) concept of tactical interventions, illuminate how unofficial markings contest dominant narratives of urban space. Contemporary artists increasingly incorporate graffiti aesthetics (Sternfeld, 2018) to signal youth voice, subcultural resistance, and temporal layering within urban environments, creating hybrid forms that bridge institutional and vernacular art practices.

Figure 1: SCALA, a mini sculpture



Source: Pasutt Kanrattanasutra

3. Methodology

This research employs an arts-based research methodology, positioning artistic creation as a form of inquiry that generates knowledge through material practice and aesthetic experience. Arts-based research recognizes the capacity of artistic processes to investigate complex social phenomena and produce insights that complement traditional academic research methods. This

approach acknowledges the artist-researcher's subjective position while maintaining critical distance through systematic documentation and reflection (Leavy, 2015).

3.1 Conceptual Development

The conceptual framework emerged from sustained engagement with Bangkok's urban transformation, particularly the observation of parallel trajectories between architectural demolition and green space reduction. Research began with historical documentation of SCALA Theater, including photographic archives, architectural plans, and first-person testimonies from regular patrons. This material formed the foundation for understanding the theater's cultural significance and its role in Bangkok's collective memory.

Concurrent investigation examined patterns of green space loss across Bangkok's fifty districts, establishing connections between cultural heritage erasure and environmental degradation. This dual focus revealed systemic patterns of urban development that prioritize commercial interests over community needs and environmental sustainability. The conceptual development process involved iterative sketching, material experimentation, and theoretical engagement with literature on urban memory, environmental consciousness, and socially engaged art practice.

3.2 Exhibition Context

The SCALA sculpture was presented as part of the solo exhibition "Intangible Dot" at People's Gallery, Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, from December 4-28, 2024. The exhibition positioned the work within a broader investigation of Bangkok's transformation, examining how material culture might preserve and transmit memories of disappeared spaces. The gallery context provided opportunity for public engagement and dialogue regarding urban heritage and environmental consciousness.

Documentation methods included photographic recording of the fabrication process, exhibition installation, and visitor interactions. Reflective notes captured observations regarding material decisions, conceptual developments, and emerging insights throughout the research process. This documentation serves as primary evidence for analyzing the research outcomes and assessing the work's capacity to generate critical awareness.

4. Results and discussion

The SCALA sculpture successfully demonstrates material intervention's capacity to embody heritage loss and environmental degradation through miniaturization using resin and gypsum. The work converts architectural memory into portable sculptural object operating on multiple symbolic levels where the demolished structure persists as representation, grand scale becomes intimate object mirroring cultural space diminishment, and concrete permanence transforms into materials suggesting preservation and fragility. The concept of invisible points finds expression as three dimensional index pointing toward absent presences including the demolished theater, eliminated green spaces, and vanished social experiences. Exhibition visitors demonstrated strong affective engagement through spontaneous memory sharing, validating that material objects activate collective memory and prompt urban transformation reflection. The juxtaposition of architectural elements and graffiti creates temporal dynamics producing sculptural palimpsest where multiple periods coexist, with the front facade representing mid century cinema culture while rear graffiti introduces contemporary youth voices. The parallel between SCALA Theater's demolition and Bangkok's green space loss

operates as central framework, both phenomena reflecting systematic commercial development prioritization over community needs and environmental sustainability. This arts based inquiry successfully generated critical awareness, with visitors making explicit connections between theater demolition and broader green space elimination, fostering systemic thinking about Bangkok's development trajectory toward sustainable futures preserving cultural heritage and natural environment.

5. Conclusion

This arts based research demonstrates that sculptural intervention effectively materializes parallel narratives of cultural heritage loss and environmental degradation in contemporary Bangkok. The SCALA mini sculpture embodies the concept of invisible points, making visible connections between disappeared cultural landmarks and vanishing green spaces through material transformation using resin and gypsum. Through temporal layering of Late Modernist architecture and contemporary graffiti expression, the work creates critical space for collective reflection on urban transformation dynamics. Exhibition outcomes validate that community engaged artistic practice successfully fosters environmental consciousness and systemic awareness regarding sustainable urban development. While acknowledging limitations in direct policy influence, this research confirms that artist researchers function as facilitators creating objects and contexts enabling dialogue about heritage preservation and ecological sustainability. The integration of nostalgia and youth expression within sculptural form provides valuable methodology for examining how art shapes conversations about present conditions and future possibilities. This study contributes to ongoing discourse positioning artistic intervention as essential tool for inspiring conscious participation in creating sustainable societies and urban environments for future generations, demonstrating that memory work serves not as retreat into past but as critical resource for reimagining alternative urban futures.

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