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## Archiving as Creative Practice: Revitalizing Cultural Heritage in Bangkok's Nang Loeng

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้วิเคราะห์ถึงการสร้างและการพัฒนาคลังข้อมูลวัฒนธรรมของชุมชนนางเลิ้ง และการใช้คลังข้อมูลที่ร่วบรวมไว้เป็นแหล่งทรัพยากรสร้างสรรค์โครงการของกลุ่ม Community Lab ซึ่งตั้งอยู่ในย่านประวัติศาสตร์ของนางเลิ้ง กลุ่ม Community Lab ทุ่มเทให้กับการอนุรักษ์มรดกทางวัฒนธรรมของพื้นที่ ด้วยความกังวลเกี่ยวกับปัญหาความไม่มั่นคงในที่อยู่อาศัยและความยากจน Community Lab จึงจัดการกับความกังวลของผู้อยู่อาศัยด้วยวิธีการที่มุ่งเน้นการพื้นฟูชุมชน โดยการส่งเสริมการมีส่วนร่วมระหว่างศิลปินและชุมชน บทความนี้จะสำรวจคลังข้อมูลการแสดงละครชาติรีแบบดั้งเดิมและการร่วมมือกับศิลปินชาวอังกฤษ นิโคลัส คาร์น โดยการสำรวจการร่วมมือครั้งนี้ศึกษาผ่านมุมมองของทฤษฎีคลังข้อมูล บทความนี้จะช่วยเพิ่มความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับแนวทางสหวิทยาการกับคลังข้อมูล และแนวทางการสร้างสรรค์ศิลปะร่วมสมัย

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# Archiving as Creative Practice: Revitalizing Cultural Heritage in Bangkok's Nang Loeng

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## Abstract

This article analyzed the creation and development of a cultural archive for the Nang Loeng community and examined how this archive has been utilized as a resource for creative projects by the Community Lab, an organization based in the historic Nang Loeng neighborhood. Dedicated to preserving the area's cultural heritage, the Community Lab addressed concerns related to housing insecurity and poverty by promoting community revitalization through participatory engagement between artists and residents. The article focused on the documentation of traditional Lakhon Chatri performances and a collaborative project with British artist Nicholas Karn. This collaboration was examined through the lens of archival theory, offering insights into interdisciplinary approaches to archiving and the development of contemporary artistic practices.

**Keywords:** nang loeng community, cultural heritage preservation, interdisciplinary approaches, community participation, community archive, archive-based art

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## Introduction

“Researching, collecting, conserving, interpreting and exhibiting tangible and intangible heritage.” (International Council of Museums, 2023). These principles were defined by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and describe the guidelines of the museum as an institution. The preservation and archiving of cultural assets thus become an institutional mission that serves the public while at the same time ensuring their access to the archives. However, such efforts depend on institutional infrastructure, which is not equally accessible in all contexts. What options remain if the archiving of cultural heritage is not driven by institutions?

In rapidly changing urban contexts, preserving cultural heritage requires more than traditional archival institutions. Especially in historically rich but economically marginalized neighborhoods, community-led initiatives have emerged as alternative forms of safeguarding memory and identity. One such initiative is Bangkok-based collective *Community Lab {Nang Loeng}*, founded in 2020 by Nawarat Welployngam. The group is rooted in the historic neighborhood of Nang Loeng and aims to document and revitalize local cultural memory through community participation and artistic collaboration. As community members themselves, Community Lab views archiving as a process that begins within the community, evolving from lived experiences. Their work centers on the cultural memory of Nang Loeng, an economically marginalized inner-city district in the heart of Bangkok’s old town and combines the preservation of cultural heritage with a personal commitment to addressing social issues. Rather than treating archives as static repositories, Community Lab uses its materials as creative resources: platforms for reinterpretation, artistic exchange, wider accessibility, and engagement with new audiences.

This paper explores how community-driven archives, when activated through artistic collaboration, have the potential to offer a framework that can reimagine cultural heritage outside institutional settings. Based on a qualitative case study, the following focuses on the preservation of the traditional Thai *Lakhon Chatri* performance, examining the residency of British artist Nicholas Carn as a key example for understanding how the archive can function as both resource and conceptual tool.

This article is part of the Master's thesis *Curating Nang Loeng: Visibility and Community Engagement through Artistic Practices in Bangkok's Historical Neighborhood* in Curatorial Practice, which investigates new forms of community-driven initiatives by exploring the creative approach of Community Lab. The research grant funds have been provided by

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### Precedent Research: The Archive

Before examining Community Lab's practice, it is essential to contextualize this study within the broader archival discourse. This section provides an overview of archival practices in Thailand while highlighting key theoretical perspectives that shape contemporary discussions on community-driven archiving.

A useful starting point is to examine the role of institutionalized archives in Thailand, particularly the National Archives of Thailand (NAT), that was founded in 1916 and functions as a governmental agency within the Fine Arts Department of the Ministry of Culture. Its primary function is the archiving of historical records for the preservation of cultural heritage and ensuring public access. However, the definition and structure of the institution differs from other international archival bodies, as stated by Poolsatitiwat (2020). Poolsatitiwat identifies the absence of reference to archival theories and their integration into archival practice as the most significant deficiency. Furthermore, the profession of the archivist is not formally recognized as such by the agency; instead, the qualifications for employment focus largely on general skills and historical knowledge. Generally, Poolsatitiwat argues that the concept of *evidence*, a key paradigm of the archival discourse, is not fully captured in the Thai context.

Due to the limited engagement with archival discourse on the part of Thai institutions, research in this field has not yet been sufficiently explored. To develop a theoretical foundation for understanding Community Lab's operations, the following section will offer a brief overview of the international archival discourse.

While there is no singular definition of the archive and the field it covers, there is a common understanding of the archive as an entity that records and stores information. In 1994 Jacques Derrida contributed major thoughts on the archival discourse in *Archive Fever*, drawing on Freud's psychoanalysis. Derrida proposes that *archivization*—which he defines as the technical conditions and structure of the archive—plays a significant role in shaping archival practice. He argues that these mechanisms are shaped by power relations, influencing how the past is recorded and remembered. His thoughts in *Archive Fever* particularly illustrate the multi-layered dependence of the archive on social circumstances, politics or technical prerequisites in regard to its informative significance (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995, pp. 9-63).

In the late 90s the role of the archive in academia as well as its political implications have been discussed and researched across a wide range of disciplines, resulting in an accumulation of terms such as the *social archive*, the *raw archive*, the *postcolonial archive* or the *archival consciousness* (Manoff, 2004, p.11). This debate not only addressed the condition of the archive from different fields, but questioned the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge production, aiming towards an interdisciplinary approach.

Over time the definition of the term has become increasingly indistinct, making it difficult to differentiate the concept of archives from that of libraries and museums. As Manoff (2004, p.10) describes this in *Theory of the Archive from Across the Disciplines* the two main forces that dominate the discourse are the “conflation of libraries, museums and archives” and the resulting “inflation of the term ‘archive’” becoming a “loose signifier”.

Archives always represent a selection of data that is usually collected and stored in a specific discipline, which is why methods, perspectives, and criteria of what is to be archived can differ strongly. Beyond the question of what and how information is stored, the institutionalization of the archive also raises further questions of power relations, particularly about who creates and maintains archives and for whom they are accessible. In *The Politics of the Liberal Archive*, Joyce (1999, p. 19) emphasizes the importance of public libraries as the “cornerstone of a free and informed society” and thus of the formation of “the liberal citizen.” Given the limitations of institutional archives, the following will elaborate on how Community Lab is countering these structures and pursues an approach in which they take the initiative to preserve their cultural assets, rather than relying on institutional measures.

## Community Lab and the Nang Loeng Neighborhood

As Derrida emphasized in his concept of *archivization*, social circumstances significantly shape archival practices. To understand Community Lab and their decision of creating an independent archive, it is therefore useful to examine the historical and social context of Nang Loeng, which forms the basis for their community-led archives.

Located around Nakhon Sawan Road in the heart of Thailand’s capital, Nang Loeng marks a neighborhood with over 200 years of history. With the expansion of Bangkok during the reign of King Rama IV (1851 to 1868), the area was initially converted from rice fields to habitable land. As Bangkok continued to expand, Nang Loeng gradually became the center of the city and transformed into a vibrant district with the opening of its cinema,

gambling houses and opium dens. Over the years, the district has also become known for its performing arts; since Rama V, Khon, Lakhon, Nang Talung, Sikae and Piphat music groups have settled in the *Trok Lakhon* area (Nanglerng Community Lab, n.d.).

Once a cultural hub, the neighborhood now faces the consequences of urban transformation such as housing problems, limited access to education, drug use and poverty, which have a considerable impact on the daily lives of residents. With the current construction of a new subway station in the area, their insecurity regarding housing is also growing, as the majority of habitable land does not belong to them but to the Crown Property Bureau (Natakun & Rugkhan, 2022, pp. 350-363).

### E-Lerng and Community Lab

In response to the deteriorating situation in Nang Loeng, the E-Lerng collective was founded in 2007. The group comprises local artists and experts who have already successfully implemented various creative projects in the area to assist, educate, and raise awareness about the challenging conditions. E-Lerng adopts a problem-oriented approach that addresses the structural issues through artistic and participatory means, thereby drawing public attention to community concerns.

Historically, community initiatives in the area have long been driven by residents; Suwan Welployngam, also known as *Miss Dang* and mother of E-Lerng founder Nawarat (Nammon) Welployngam, was already deeply involved in local efforts. The family's deep roots in Nang Loeng have not only led to a long-standing commitment but have earned the trust of residents and shaped E-Lerng's relationship with the community. What initially started as Nawarat Welployngam's university project, has since developed into a collective that creatively addresses social issues. Today, E-Lerng regularly invites local and international artists to participate in their residency program, organizes festivals, and holds performances or workshops, allowing participants to directly engage with the local community. In addition to these initiatives, the group also works closely with schools, universities and organizations to raise awareness and foster dialogue between community residents and outside visitors.

Founded in 2020 as a sub-project of E-Lerng, Community Lab forms a group with a specific focus on archiving Nang Loeng's cultural heritage. Led by Nawarat Welployngam's and Tharinee (Palm) Ratanasatien, the collective functions as a mediating body between residents and external parties. Originating from within the community, the collective has taken on the responsibility of preserving local knowledge independently, without relying solely on governmental agencies.

In her article on identity-based community archives, Caswell (2014) points to *Strategic Essentialism* as the key to understanding this type of archive— a term coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial theory. It describes a process that “simultaneously acknowledges the social construction of identity categories and builds solidarity among individuals who identify with such categories” (Caswell, 2014, p. 40). Applied to archiving, this suggests an identity-driven approach that does not simply conform to existing categories but responds to the lived urgency and needs of the community (Caswell, 2014). These joint efforts also foster a shared sense of belonging and strengthen community building among members. The following analysis of Community Lab's practice illustrates how both the decisions-making process and the form of the archive are often shaped by the community's own sense of cultural urgency.

### The Archiving of the Lakhon Chatri

This section elaborates on the preservation-oriented approach developed by the members of Community Lab in their efforts to sustain the traditional Thai Lakhon Chatri performance.

The Lakhon Chatri is one of the oldest forms of traditional classical Thai theater, which follows a narrative through various elements of dance and music. In 1769 (2312 BE), the first Chatri troupes were settled in Bangkok. During the reign of Rama III (1824–1851), people from southern Thailand migrated to the city where they formed a performing arts community in the Nang Loeng neighborhood. Following its initial popularity as a form of entertainment, the Lakhon Chatri gradually lost recognition in Bangkok and the surrounding provinces. However, according to UNESCO (n.d.), the dance continues to play an important role in the lives of local residents, particularly in religious ritual contexts, as it “manifest[s] the very functions of cultural expressions that Thai people have passed on for generations.”

While founder Nawarat Welployngam still had the opportunity to learn from Kanya Tipyosot, one of the remaining Chatri dancers in Nang Loeng, this will likely no longer be possible in the near future. The absence of younger generations willing to learn and maintain this performance raised concerns about its future. In response, the Community Lab committed itself to archiving the dance and its last generation of dancers as part of their cultural heritage. With support from different organizations, the collective started gathering information on the history, characteristics, and elements of the performance and developed a preservation plan to sustain the areas cultural assets

(UNESCO, 2020). One outcome was the creation of a community center, where the collected information was displayed in an exhibition, providing a physical space for dialogue and exchange. In addition to sharing ongoing projects via their website and Facebook page, the collective is currently working on enhancing accessibility by digitizing the information and creating an online archive. Through the variety of possibilities of digital environments, Community Lab aims to create a network that not only provides data but enables connections that sustainably benefit the community. To ensure the long-term operation of this archive the collective is currently evaluating options that keep it economically viable yet independent.

### Contemporary Approaches to Archiving

The archiving of Lakhon Chatri demonstrates how Community Lab actively engages in heritage preservation, however, their approach goes beyond mere documentation. While following an *identity-based* archiving method, the collective also introduces a practice that explicitly engages with the current condition of the performance. In addition to reflecting on past traditions, they actively envision the future by creating spaces of exchange, offering their archive as a creative resource. A similar tendency is reflected in current archival discourse, where an increasing number of scholars call for archives that “not only react to the past but also [...] imagine the future as well as preserve the past” (Ward & Wisnicki, 2019, p. 202). In *The Archive after Theory* Ward and Wisnicki (2019) propose a future-oriented archive, one that acknowledges its partially imperial, colonial, and often complex past. They argue that this history must be critically reflected in the archives digital form, enabling new formats to emerge. In this context, the “multiple temporalities” of the digital archive open up a new dimension: allowing for a critical reappraisal of the past without reproducing a purely one-dimensional archiving of the object (Ward & Wisnicki, 2019, pp. 202-203).

In the context of digital archives, Caswell (2014, p. 45) introduces the idea of *memoriescape* and its influence on digital archives by enabling international connections and interactions. She identifies the way of archiving and the associated memory process as decisive factors for the formation of communities, as these are based on collective memories and can thus create identity-forming connections:

Our collective memories, like our communities, are now global in reach; we can no longer confine memory to the silos of locally embedded practice when so much of our society is based on interconnected networks of ethnicity, media,

technology, finance, and ideas. Memory becomes another crucial mode through which the global is negotiated.

In addition to digital connectivity, Caswell highlights the potential of archives to promote global and local exchanges that can transcend borders through participation. Community Lab adopts a similar approach, enabling interactions between external actors and the local community and its resources. The following case study analyzes the residency of British artist Nicholas Carn in Nang Loeng, reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of this exchange, which conceptualizes the archive as a resource for artistic expression.

### Case Study: Nicholas Carn *The River Cannot Contain the Graces of Dance*

As part of the Buffalo Field Residency, Community Lab has welcomed various international artists in recent years, offering them the opportunity to explore the neighborhood and engage with the local community. In April 2023, with the support of the British Council, multidisciplinary artist Nicholas Carn completed a four-week residency in Nang Loeng. During his stay, he connected with the district's last remaining Chatri group, documenting their music, dance, and traditional embroidery through sound and video recordings. This encounter led to a collaboration with dancer Kanya Tipyosot, whose performance became an integral part of Carn's final work.

Set in a vacant house the two-day multidisciplinary exhibition *The River Cannot Contain the Graces of Dance* showcased the defining characteristics of the traditional dance and marked the end of the artist's residency in Nang Loeng. The central room presented an 11-minute loop film featuring excerpts of Kanya Tipyosot performance, documented across various stages; from the rehearsal to the final act. In addition to the displayed video, the exhibition also presented hanging elements such as Chatri headwear containers, traditional Thai flower arrangements, and fresh flowers spread on the floor. As visitors moved through the installation, the trampling of the flowers gradually altered its spatial and visual composition, engaging the audience not only visually, but also through touch, and scent—creating a multisensory experience. Through the interplay of flowing fabric, fragmented visuals, traditional Chatri objects and the soundtrack of synthesized Chatri instruments, the installation evoked a sense of remembrance while simultaneously confronting the reality of the present. This tension between past and present resonates with core aspects of Nicholas Carn's practice, which centers on the accumulation of data, the diversity of processing systems, and their distinct characteristics. In his exploration of

emerging technologies, the artist often merges elements of traditional cinema with new media, allowing the boundaries between reality and fiction to blur (Carn, 2023).

In *Archival Art: Memory practices, interventions, and productions*, Carbone (2020, p. 257) describes “Archives, as spaces of and catalysts for memory” and examines their influence on contemporary art practices. She identifies three ways in which artists engage with the archive; as a *source, concept or object*. During his residency Nicholas Carn’s artistic practice reflected two of these approaches; he engaged with the archive both as a *source* and as a *concept*. By combining data previously collected by Community Lab with his own recordings, manipulating and blending them with new elements, Carn created his own narrative around the traditional dance, using the provided data as a resource. Drawing from multiple sources, the community archive enabled the artist to recall cultural memory and recontextualize it in the present. Carn’s interpretation of the Chatri performance also incorporates different cultural perspectives that the artist contributes through his personal background. Through this foreign lens, Thai traditions were reframed, adding another layer of meaning and transforming the unfamiliar into something experienceable.

As data processing forms a central theme to the artwork, it adopts an almost self-referential approach to the archiving practice, where the medium itself becomes part of the subject. In addition to the use and generation of data, the manipulation and juxtaposition through digital tools demonstrates his active engagement with the archive as a conceptual framework. By visualizing and distorting archived material, the exhibition transforms static data into a multisensory experience, while at the same time lowering the threshold for audience engagement. This approach enhances the accessibility by adding a tangible and immersive dimension, enabling viewers to connect through sound, space and movement. Rather than treating the archive as a repository, Carn’s project reactivates it into a living site of cultural memory. His engagement with both community resources and the Lakhon Chatri tradition demonstrates the potential of creative archival practices to revitalize both cultural memory and local identity. As seen in this case study, the artists’ work exemplifies how archives can serve as both; a historical record and a space for artistic intervention, where the past and the present intersect.

## Summary

This article has examined the role of community-driven archiving in preserving cultural heritage and fostering artistic engagement, focusing on the practice of

Community Lab in Nang Loeng. Committed to maintaining the local culture, the collective promotes contemporary engagement with the neighborhood's historical legacy.

When examining the implications of community-oriented practices, questions of accessibility and inclusion inevitably arise. While the collective's archiving efforts benefit the community, the interests of all members may not always align. Given that the well-being of the residents remains central, participation in such practices is ultimately voluntary. As community members themselves, Community Lab merely functions as a representative entity, that facilitates and prioritizes the local needs.

By applying an identity-based method, archiving becomes a form of self-preservation influenced by the urgency experienced by community, allowing them to define the archive's function and content. As Michelle Caswell (2014, p. 41) describes, the goal of community-based archiving is not merely greater representation or a simple reconstruction of the forgotten past, but rather a reappraisal that "mobilize[s] traces of the past—however painful, however unnerving – to build a more socially just future.".

In addition to documenting historical records, using the archive as a creative resource is a defining element of Community Lab's approach. In the context of Thailand's archival landscape, their practice must be understood as a conscious alternative. While institutional structures prioritize evidence production, the collective focuses on preserving cultural memory. By minimizing external regulation, Community Lab develops strategies that confront the limitations of conventional models and open space for problem-oriented and creative forms of archiving.

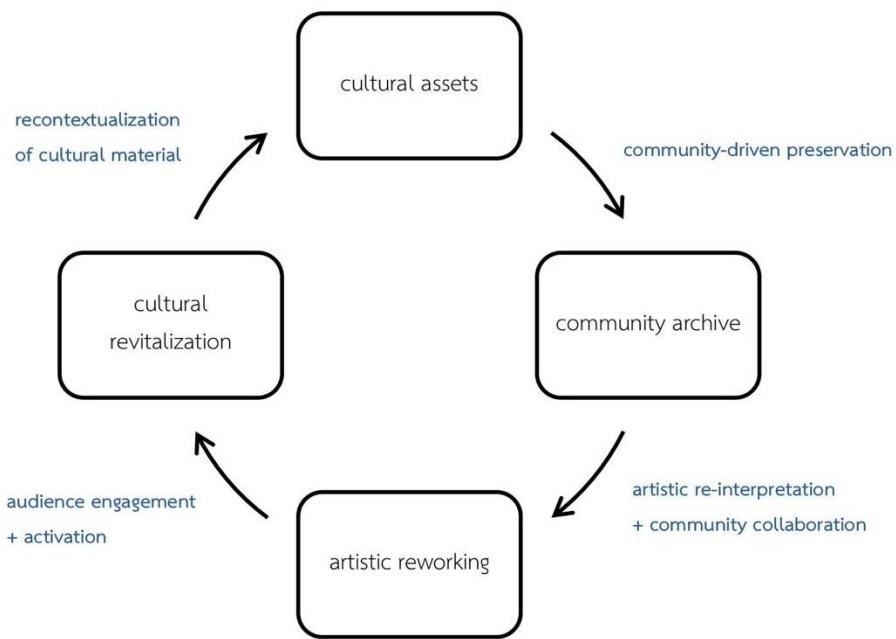
### **Role of Artists and the Archive as a Resource**

By hosting the Buffalo Field residency, Community Lab empowers international artists to explore and reflect narratives embedded in Nang Loeng. This initiative fosters dialogue and shifting perspectives, contributing to a diverse exchange of ideas. Accordingly, the reinterpretation and subsequent archiving of content is shaped by interaction—avoiding strict guidelines and encouraging direct interaction.

As Marlene Manoff (2004, p. 14) states, archives rarely offer "direct and unmediated access to the past.". Community Lab addresses these limitations with a creative approach. By inviting artists to engage with the archive, they facilitate the exploration of community-related themes, enabling a more direct exchange with residents and audiences. Rather than merely providing historical information, the artistic

engagement with the archived information becomes an integral part of their archiving practice, turning the mediation itself into an important aspect of knowledge transfer.

The residency of Nicholas Carn's and his collaboration with Chatri dancer Kanya Tipyosot exemplify how archived material can serve as a foundation for both artistic collaboration and cultural reinterpretation. The data collected by Community Lab, became essential to Carn's final artwork, complementing his own materials and shaping the conceptual direction of the exhibition. The process illustrates how the archive, in a community-based context, becomes more than a static repository. It functions as a creative interface—linking cultural heritage, collaborative practice, and social activation in a recurring cycle of transformation and reinterpretation (see *Figure 1*).



**Figure 1** Creative Archiving Model

Source: Author

As Carbone (2020) elaborates, the integration of historical traditions into contemporary settings can facilitate a deeper understanding and imagination of the present. Carn's act of re-situating historical elements within new environments represents an artistic intervention in the archiving process—one that reintroduces the past into the present. As Carbone notes, the artists' engagement with the archive can “disrupt the ordering and authenticity of the archive, articulate relations between official and personal memory, and make new

linkages between people, events, temporalities, and objects” (Carbone, 2020, p. 261). This underscores the archive's potential to function not only as a memory repository, but also as a catalyst for artistic experimentation and collective creation of meaning.

### **Sustainability and the Future of Community Lab's Work**

While preserving cultural assets remains central, the collective's motivation has been reinforced by the significant interest from external researchers and organizations. Growing interest in the history and development of Nang Loeng has encouraged the Community Lab to develop an online archive that simplifies the process of data provision. Rather than serving as a passive object of research, the community takes an active role in shaping the framework for information exchange, enabling a democratization of the process. Although the constant interest from researchers can impose a significant strain on the community, it also benefits from the resulting collaborations that are facilitated by the increased visibility. Since community-led projects often operate independently of state agencies, cooperations are essential for implementation. Despite the constant challenges posed by funding issues, Community Lab remains focused on identifying methods capable of sustaining the residents' lives through creative practices.

### **Closing Reflection on Community-Based Archives**

While institutional archives play a key role in preserving national heritage, community-driven initiatives often emerge in response to gaps left by these structures. Community archives can serve as tools, especially for marginalized groups, as they can open up new opportunities for independent preservation. This case study demonstrates that archives can serve as more than repositories of past records—they can act as catalysts for artistic engagement, cultural negotiation, and active participation. Even in the absence of institutional structures, independent archiving methods offer an additional dimension to historical engagement, expanding conventional approaches by embracing participatory, and community-driven reinterpretations of the past. While questions of power and representation remain significant, the structures adopt a more democratic form that allows for greater accessibility and participation.

Community Lab's approach highlights the archive as a continuously evolving space for artistic engagement—ensuring that cultural heritage remains active and creatively reinterpreted, challenging conventional structures. Their efforts exemplify autonomous forms of archiving; however, their impact is difficult to measure and heavily

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dependent on the participation and ownership of the local community. The development of similar independent, community-initiated projects in other urban contexts therefore requires further observation, particularly in light of prevailing socio-political structures. Examples such as Nang Loeng demonstrate that archiving does not necessarily need to be regulated by institutions or predetermined frameworks; instead, it reveals the archive's potential as a dynamic instrument of cultural continuity.

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