

Mental Images and the Shaping of Place Identity: How Creative Professionals Perceive a Revitalized Creative District in Bangkok

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Received 12/5/2025 Revised 6/7/2025 Accepted 24/10/2025

Abstract

Creative districts increasingly are promoted as engines of urban revitalization and cultural production, yet little is known about how such spaces are perceived by the creative professionals who inhabit and shape them. This study explores the mental images of creative professionals in Bangkok's Charoen Krung Creative District, aiming to understand how they cognitively construct the district's identity through everyday spatial experiences. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks in environmental psychology and creative city concepts, the research employed a qualitative approach using an open-ended listing task. A total of 418 participants who had engaged with the district through creative work and activities were asked to generate mental images based on their perceptions of the area. Thematic analysis of the data yielded ten distinct image clusters, which were synthesized into four overarching themes: historical urban context and cultural knowledge; collective meaning of place; local life; and urban life. The findings revealed that creative professionals interpret the district not only through its physical attributes but also through symbolic, social, and emotional associations. Differences in perception emerged across occupational subgroups, suggesting that creative identity significantly shapes spatial interpretation. The study reveals the merit of mental imagery as an interpretive tool for understanding how place meaning is constructed in urban spaces. The findings have implications for urban design and planning, highlighting the need for inclusive strategies in creating place identity that correspond to diverse perceptual experiences.

Keywords

Creative district; Mental image; Urban perception; Place identity; Spatial cognition; Urban meaning-making

1. Introduction

Urban environments are more than just their physical configurations; they are lived spaces imbued with personal experiences, cultural memory, and symbolic meaning. As such, the design of cities must engage not only with spatial form but also with experiential perception. Relph (1976) emphasized that without understanding the relationship between people and place, urban designers cannot create environments that are truly meaningful. Similarly, Spence (2020) noted that psycho-perceptual dimensions are fundamental to effective spatial design. These insights underscore a growing recognition that urban planning and design must incorporate how individuals perceive, interpret, and form cognitive images of their environment.

Since the 1960s, the perceptual and cognitive dimensions of urban experience have gained prominence among theorists and practitioners. The city now is widely understood as both a physical and mental construct. Iconic scholars in urban design such as Lynch (1960), Cullen (1961), Jacobs (1961), and Gehl (2010) have demonstrated how visual coherence, spatial memory, vitality, and human-centered design collectively shape people's urban experiences. Individuals continually process sensory information, such as visual, auditory, and tactile stimuli, which are filtered through memory, temperament, and sociocultural background to form mental images of place. These images represent accumulated meanings that reflect the individual–environment relationship and inform spatial behavior, identity, and place attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2017).

This perceptual framework is particularly relevant within the context of the creative city. Creative professionals, as members of what Florida (2002) describes as the “creative class,” are drawn to environments rich in diversity, openness, and cultural vibrancy. Their mental representations of urban space are shaped not only by physical attributes but also by intangible elements such as identity, reputation, memory, and symbolism (Ferru et al., 2022; Janjamlah & Kaewlai, 2020; Zenker, 2009). For them, the city is not merely a setting for production but also a stimulus and partner in the creative process.

Recent urban development strategies increasingly have emphasized the creative city concept as a catalyst for economic revitalization and spatial transformation. Creative cities are viewed as local ecologies of knowledge, where creativity flourishes through dense networks and socially embedded practices (Grandadam et al., 2013; Scott, 2010a, 2010b). Often situated in repurposed inner-city or post-industrial districts, these areas serve as dynamic nodes for cultural production and innovation (He & Gebhardt, 2013; Landry, 2008). Such districts are not merely the result of top-down branding or visual enhancement; rather, they emerge through complex interactions among cultural capital, everyday use, and the meanings attributed to place by creative professionals.

Despite the centrality of creative districts in urban policy and planning, most existing studies rely heavily on macro-level interpretations from the perspective of providers such as city administrators and policymakers. There is a relative lack of research exploring the mental images and spatial interpretations of creative professionals themselves. Yet understanding how these individuals perceive and cognitively engage with urban environments is essential to advancing both theory and practice in urban design, planning, and environmental behavior. Therefore, this study addresses a critical gap by examining the mental images of creative professionals working in a revitalized historic district that has been rebranded as a creative area. It investigates how creative individuals interpret and describe their environment and what constitutes a meaningful and creativity-conducive urban space from their perspective. By foregrounding these bottom-up perceptions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the communicative relationship between people and place and offers insight into how creative districts can be more effectively planned, designed, and sustained through experiential and perceptual dimensions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Creative Districts as Lived Spaces: Urban Image and the Role of the Creative Workforce

Creative cities increasingly have been envisioned as platforms for creative activities, fostering the generation of new ideas and promoting experiential value for both residents and visitors. Creative districts often are formed within inner-city areas or former industrial zones, where the layering of cultural memory, architectural heritage, and economic renewal converge to establish conditions conducive to creative expression (Birir & Adem, 2022; He et al., 2018; Scott, 2010b). The presence of institutions, galleries, shared workspaces, and everyday life activities within these spaces contributes to their role as cultural and cognitive hubs (Pratt, 2011; Richards, 2014). As nodes of cultural production, these areas are shaped not only by policy and planning interventions but also by the lived experiences and interpretations of creative individuals.

The creative workforce is a key actor in this transformation. Professionals such as designers, artists, photographers, and digital content creators contribute to both the material and symbolic value of creative districts. Their preferences for urban vibrancy, cultural diversity, and openness influence the evolution of urban spaces (Florida, 2002; Janjamlah & Kaewlai, 2020; Zenker, 2009). The creative sector's interaction with the urban environment not only is functional but also perceptual and emotional, involving a dynamic interplay between creativity and urban form.

The relationship between people and place is a core concept that describes how individuals emotionally and cognitively connect with specific locations (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Cheng & Kuo, 2015; Droseltis & Vignoles, 2010; Lewicka, 2011; Tuan, 1977). These concepts are particularly salient in creative districts, where creative professionals often establish bonds that are both personal and professional. The urban environment becomes a source of inspiration, social interaction, and cultural meaning. Creative professionals are especially sensitive to these perceptual qualities. Their cognitive and emotional engagement with space extends beyond visual recognition to include symbolic associations and personal interpretations that influence their attachment to place. Mental images, as perceptual and cognitive constructs, serve as a window into how creative individuals understand and engage with their environment. These internal images reflect their interpretations of the city's identity, values, and atmosphere. They are essential for understanding how creative professionals conceptualize creative districts, viewing them not simply as designed spaces but as meaningful places that support their lifestyle and work.

2.2 Urban Image Dimensions

Mental images which are formed through sensory experiences, memory, and symbolic interpretation shape how people perceive, navigate, and attach meaning to place (Cullen, 1961; Lynch, 1960; Scannell & Gifford, 2017). In urban design, the mental image is central to the legibility and identity of urban space. Lynch (1960) proposed five elements of the urban image that provide a structure through which people navigate and comprehend the city. Cullen (1961) described the perceptual phenomenon of the townscape, where urban sequences evoke sensory and emotional responses. These perspectives collectively emphasize the need to understand the city not only as a physical artifact but as a lived and perceived space shaped through personal interaction, cultural values, and emotional connections. Knox & Pinch (2010) distinguish between two aspects of the urban image: the designative and the appraisive. The designative aspect refers to physical characteristics and spatial legibility that enable wayfinding, orientation, and recognition. This image dimension is widely

referenced in urban design, as seen in Kevin Lynch's (1960) framework of five image elements: paths; edges; districts; nodes; and landmarks. Similarly, Montgomery (1998) identified six factors associated with urbanity: legibility; imageability; symbolism and memory; psychological access; receptivity; and knowledgeability. Ewing & Handy (2009) further developed this view, highlighting physical features, such as plazas, courtyards, outdoor dining, historic architecture, and major landscape elements, as contributors to imageability and walkability. The appraisive aspect, in contrast, captures emotional responses and value judgments. It reflects how people feel about the city, its attractiveness, comfort, friendliness, or vibrancy, and influences decisions related to staying, working, or investing. This image dimension increasingly has been recognized in urban assessment and development practices, particularly in understanding inhabitants' needs. This study applies the first-dimension image framework to understand the urban space of a creative district.

Previous studies on urban images have highlighted the mental imagery through shaping perceptions of cities across different user groups, including residents, tourists, and investors. These studies often emphasize the significance of urban image in reinforcing quality of life, infrastructure performance, and local identity. For example, Gilboa et al. (2015) examined perceptions among European residents and found that their urban images encompassed key elements such as public services, safety, leisure opportunities, and municipal management. Similarly, Luque-Martínez et al. (2007) investigated the tourist city of Granada, Spain, identifying image components related to architectural and environmental quality, social concerns, heritage conservation, and residents' self-perception. In the context of Thailand, Harachai & Bejrananda (2019) explored the case of Buriram Province and found that urban image included both traditional symbolic identities, such as ancient artifacts, cultural groups, ethnic diversity, arts and crafts, and local cuisine, as well as newer identities, including the city's positioning as a sports and recreation destination. Stylidis et al. (2016) further contributed to the understanding of city image through their study of Kavala, Greece. They categorized urban image into four dimensions: physical appearance (e.g., pleasant weather, historical sites, and natural scenery); community services (e.g., transportation and governance); entertainment (e.g., restaurants and nightlife); and social environment (e.g., safety and cleanliness). These findings illustrate how urban image encompasses both functional and emotional dimensions, reflecting how residents and users interact with and feel about their urban spaces.

Another body of literature addresses the perspectives of tourists and visitors, often in relation to place marketing and destination development. Zaman & Aktan (2021), in their study of Cappadocia, Turkey, identified four dimensions that shaped tourists' mental images: physical appearance; social environment; entertainment; and community services. Likewise, Gilboa et al. (2015) found that tourists formed urban images based on leisure offerings, public services, tourism infrastructure, and the overall upkeep of the city. Such research underscores the importance of perceptual evaluations in guiding tourism strategies and branding efforts.

Urban image also plays a critical role in economic development and city branding, serving as a strategic tool for attracting investment, professionals, and visitors. Dastgerdi & De Luca (2019) emphasized that a positive urban image fosters investor confidence and civic participation. Clouse et al. (2020) examined how mental images, specifically those related to reputation, visual identity, and sense of place, shape business site selection decisions. In this regard, the city is framed not only as a place to live or visit but also as an economic asset in global competition. A notable example of creative city image is Vanolo's (2008) study of Turin, Italy, which examined how creative city imagery was strategically constructed through marketing representations. The promoted mental images included themes of artistic vitality (e.g., public art and creative installations), cultural

diversity (e.g., international communities), nightlife (e.g., bars and clubs), public space use (e.g., plazas and parks), educational presence (e.g., universities), and lifestyle-related elements (e.g., food and wine). These constructed images collectively positioned Turin as a vibrant, dynamic, and culturally rich creative city.

Together, these studies demonstrate that mental image dimensions, whether rooted in physical characteristics, cultural assets, or emotional connections, play a vital role in shaping how individuals perceive and connect with urban space. Urban image plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals cognitively and emotionally engage with cities. It encompasses both physical elements, such as buildings, streets, and public spaces, and intangible qualities like atmosphere, cultural meaning, and social life. For creative professionals in creative districts, these mental images are especially rich and layered. Their perceptions emphasize aesthetic quality, cultural vibrancy, and experiential depth, reflecting how the urban environment inspires creativity and supports both personal and professional identity. Unlike general users, creative professionals often view the city as a medium of expression and collaboration. Understanding these nuanced perceptions allows urban planners and designers to shape environments that not only function well but also resonate emotionally with those who drive cultural production and innovation.

3. Study Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, perception-based methodology to explore the mental images of creative professionals within a revitalized urban district. The focus was on understanding how individuals involved in creative industries interpret, describe, and assign meaning to their environment through spontaneous cognitive representation. Grounded in the traditions of environmental psychology and urban perception research, the methodology draws on established cognitive elicitation techniques that focus on participants' spontaneous associations with place (Droseltis & Vignoles, 2010; Ferru et al., 2022; Lynch, 1960).

3.1 Participant Selection and Study Setting

Participants were recruited at the Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC), a nationally recognized design and creative hub located in the Grand Postal Building within Bangkok's Charoen Krung Creative District. Data collection was carried out with permission from TCDC. Only individuals who were actively using the services or space of TCDC were invited to participate. The sample consisted of creative professionals representing a broad spectrum of fields including design, architecture, advertising, content creation, visual art, and other creative industry sectors. While some participants were university students in design and creative fields, their inclusion criteria required that they be formally enrolled in programs explicitly focused on creative fields (e.g., design, visual arts, architecture) at the undergraduate level or higher. Passersby or casual visitors not engaged with TCDC were excluded from participation.

The final sample consisted of 418 valid participants, following the exclusion of 21 responses by individuals who reported no meaningful engagement with the space. This inclusion reflects precedents in creativity research, where students in creative disciplines are considered emerging members of the creative class (Droseltis & Vignoles, 2010; Zenker, 2009).

3.2 Data Collection and Survey Instrument

Data were collected from March to July 2022. Following precedents in place perception studies, especially the *listing of self-relevant places* used by Droseltis & Vignoles (2010), this study utilized a single open-ended question to prompt unstructured cognitive responses. This method was chosen to allow participants to generate their own mental representations of the district freely and spontaneously, minimizing researcher-imposed frameworks. Participants were asked: “Think about the Charoen Krung Creative District. What are the first three words or images that come to mind when you think of this area?” Participants wrote their responses in a self-administered format, with five minutes provided for completion. The use of one open-ended question conceptually is supported by prior research, including Droseltis & Vignoles (2010), who also employed an open listing format to elicit meaningful places without predefined spatial boundaries. The decision to focus on spontaneous responses reflects the cognitive immediacy of place meaning and avoids the bias associated with forced-choice survey items. Moreover, the restricted sampling within TCDC ensured that only individuals with active engagement in that creative district were included. This approach strengthens validity by ensuring that perceptions emerged from direct use of the space, rather than abstract or generalized impressions. Demographic data also were collected, including gender, age, education, occupation, and details about their work and activities in the area. Moreover, the respondents were asked about the main purpose of visiting the creative district.

3.3 Data Cleaning and Preparation

To ensure validity, responses were screened to confirm participant relevance. Twenty-one responses were excluded because participants reported minimal engagement with the district, limited only to passing through without involvement in creative use. This left a final dataset of 418 valid responses. Each participant provided up to three mental image terms, generating 1,254 individual units. For consistency and comparative analysis, only the first image provided by each participant was used, following common practice in first-association research where primary responses are deemed the most cognitively salient (Droseltis & Vignoles, 2010). Responses were cleaned to ensure linguistic clarity and thematic coherence through a systematic and iterative coding process involving two researchers. During this process, ambiguous terms were clarified based on contextual meaning and consistency across responses, and a standardized coding protocol was applied to group similar expressions under unified categories while preserving the original semantic intent of participants’ responses. Synonyms and alternate expressions (e.g., “TCDC,” “Design Center,” “Post Office”) were standardized. Responses containing typographical inconsistencies or redundant phrases were corrected without altering meaning.

3.4 Clustering of Mental Images

The analytical process followed a grounded thematic approach. Textual data were categorized into semantically coherent image clusters through expert consultation. To ensure reliability, intersubjective agreement was established through iterative discussions among the research team and experts. A two-day workshop was conducted with five specialists in urban design, environmental behavior, and creative district planning. The classification framework was reviewed until consensus was reached. The process involved:

1. Grouping image responses into tangible (e.g., buildings, streets, rivers) and intangible (e.g., creativity, diversity, emotion) elements.
2. Consolidating semantically related responses into core image clusters.
3. Finalizing ten primary image clusters reflecting distinct spatial, cultural, and symbolic associations.

This participatory classification followed methods used in mental map research and perception studies, such as those by Lynch (1960), Ferru et al. (2022), Droseltis & Vignoles (2010), and Punson & Pokharatsiri (2023) where meaning is derived from grouping self-generated spatial associations.

3.5 Statistical and Thematic Analysis

A Chi-square test was employed to examine the association between professional subgroups (creative workers, designers, and artists) and the identified image clusters. This analysis was conducted to assess whether variations in mental image distribution were statistically associated with differences in professional orientation.

Subsequently, a thematic interpretation was undertaken to synthesize the image clusters into broader perceptual dimensions. This process aimed to identify overarching themes that capture shared patterns of meaning across clusters, guided by theoretical frameworks of place attachment and place identity, which emphasize the integration of spatial cognition, memory, values, and emotional bonds (Relph, 1976; Scannell & Gifford, 2017; Tuan, 1977).

4. The Setting of the Study: Chareon Krung Creative District

This study is conducted in the context of the Chareon Krung district in Bangkok, Thailand. (Figure 1). It is an historical district with an ethnic and cultural diversity. Chareon Krung is situated adjacent to the Chao Phraya River and the location for many countries' embassies. It also is the location of the first road in Thailand in 1864. Moreover, this was a deteriorating economic area that has now been revitalized under the concept of the creative district. This transformation began by changing the function of the Bang Rak Grand Postal Building, a historic building, to become the permanent office of the Thailand Creative and Design Center that relocated from its temporary location in 2017 together with the plan to develop the district with cooperation from both the public and private sectors in the area, including creating engagement with entrepreneurs and communities that live in the area (Figure 2). The goal is to make Chareon Krung a creative district that attracts investment from the business sector and the creative industries, as well as attracting more than 4,000 creatives that are members of the Creative and Design Center and creatives from outside the district to work in the area. Creating awareness of the Chareon Krung creative district not only is achieved using visual symbols from a group of buildings and the old town environment that have been improved, but there also are new forms of spaces to service and facilitate groups of creatives that enter the district, including the Bangkok Design Week Festival and other campaigns that continuously create activities relating to the creative industries within the district.

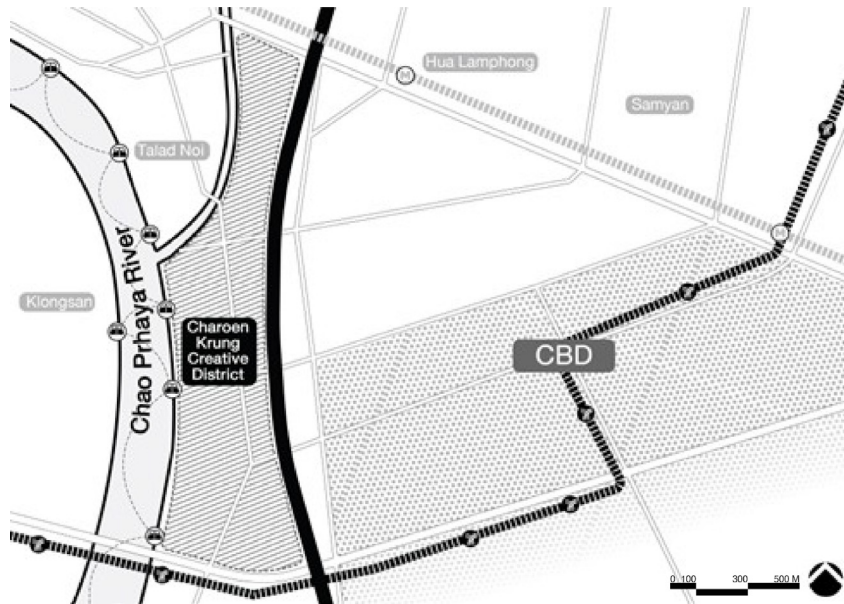


Figure 1. Map of Chareon Krung Creative District

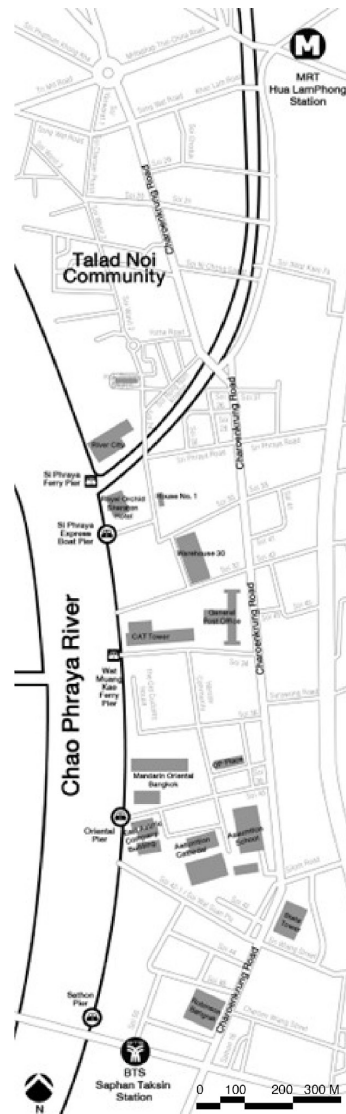


Figure 2. Chareon Krung's attractions map

5. Results

5.1 Participant Profile

A total of 418 creative professionals participated in the study, ranging in age from 23 to 69 years (mean age = 30.62). Of these, 42% identified as male and 58% as female. The sample consisted of three main groups of creative professionals, categorized by the nature of their work: (1) Creative Workers (n = 141), individuals engaged in occupations that involve design-related or creative thinking processes; (2) Designers (n = 171), professionals whose work directly involves design tasks or who apply design and creative processes as a core component of their practice; and (3) Artists (n = 106), participants whose primary professional focus centers on artistic expression.

Participants reported diverse motivations for visiting the Charoen Krung Creative District. Based on a content analysis, their objectives were classified into two primary categories: creative work and related activities (59.33%); and creative lifestyles (40.67%). The former included activities such as working, attending exhibitions, participating in workshops, and engaging in professional meetings, while the latter involved leisure-oriented behaviors such as relaxing, exploring the area, photography, and dining. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of visiting purposes.

Table 1. Content analysis results on the objectives of visiting (n=418).

The objectives of visiting	n	percentage
Creative Works and Related Activities		
To sit and work, read books, search information	70	16.75
To join activities, do workshops, join seminars	55	13.16
To see exhibitions, design works, art, find inspiration and new ideas	55	13.16
To have meetings, discuss about work	47	11.24
To meet friends, socialize	21	5.02
Creative Lifestyles		
To relax, walk around, take pictures, find food, linger	170	40.67

5.2 Ten Clusters of District Images.

The analysis of district images by grouping wordings, texts, and sentences that are similar and different could be divided into 10 groups in order of frequency as follows in Table 2.

Table 2. Classifying mental images by grouping words, texts, and sentences (n=418).

Clusters of district images	Examples of Word, Text, and Sentence from creative professionals	n (percent)	Theme of image clusters
1 Cluster of old buildings	"Cluster of old buildings", "Buildings' beauty and classic appearances", "Building density", "Beautiful and unique building architecture", "Buildings' distinctiveness", etc.	127 (30.38)	Historic urban landscape
2 Cafe/coffee/food	"Many restaurants", "Café", "Food can be generally found", "Many varieties of food to choose from", "Tasty food", "Original recipes of food", "Quality coffee", "Can always find food", etc.	50 (11.96)	Urban life
3 Design center (TCDC)*	"Thailand Creative and Design Center", "TCDC", "Design Center"	41 (9.81)	Collective meaning of place
4 History of district	"The first road of Bangkok", "Bangkok's modernity", "International trading district", "The prosperity of the Capital city in the past", "One of the first internationalisations of Bangkok", etc.	39 (9.33)	Historic and cultural knowledge
5 Local place of community)	"Local's market", "Department store", "Temples", "Schools", "Old community", etc.	34 (8.13)	Local life
6 Post office building	"The Grand Postal Building", "The building that has been renovated and redesigned to be the office for TCDC", etc.	32 (7.66)	Historic urban landscape
7 Creative/art spaces	"Graffiti", "Art exhibitions", "Galleries", "Collection of antiques", "Painting studio", "Crafts", etc.	32 (7.66)	Collective meaning of place
8 Traffic/Pollution	"Traffic", "Bad air quality", "Air pollution", "Congestions", etc.	28 (6.70)	Urban life
9 River/ River side	"Chao Phraya River", "Riverside area", "Port", etc.	21 (5.02)	Historic urban landscape
10 People/Culture	"Foreigners", "Chinese", "Westerners", "Co-living among diverse ethnicities", "Diversity in beliefs", "Religious diversity (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam)", etc.	14 (3.35)	Local life
* It is Thailand's design center that is located in the old building (Grand postal building)			

(1) "*Cluster of old buildings*" is the group of words with the highest frequency. The mental images that are related to buildings and clusters of buildings within the district are the group of words that convey physical appearance in the forms of a group of old buildings and architecture style that are unique, providing a distinctive character. (Figure 3)

(2) "*Food/Beverages/Coffee*" is the group of words that conveys the mental images of activities of leisure, gathering, or informal sitting down conversation. There are many restaurants and cafes, both old and new, situated within the district. (Figure 4)

(3) "*Thailand Creative and Design Center: TCDC*" is the group of words that is related to the governmental design agency located at the Grand Postal building, which is an old building in the district that has been renovated and adjusted its usage to have facilities for the creative professionals (e.g., library, working space, meeting/seminar room, and exhibition room. (Figure 5)

(4) "*History of the district*" is the group of words that conveys well-known stories and history of the district. For example, it was an international trading district in the past and it is the location of the first road of the capital city, all of which are intangible assets of this district.

(5) “*Local places of the community*” is the group of words related to places that serve as the community services for the locals within the district. For example, markets, shops, schools, temples, and the community’s residential areas. (Figure 6)

(6) “*Grand Postal Building*” is the group of words that conveys the physical appearance of the Grand Postal Building, a well-known historic building in the district, which has been renovated and adjusted its usage to be the working office for Thailand Creative and Design Center. (Figure 5)

(7) “*Creative and Art Spaces*” is the group of words that conveys creative activities and art in the area, including physical appearances that are considered creative and art works. (Figure 7)

(8) “*Traffic and Pollution*” is the group of words that conveys current issues of the district. (Figure 8)

(9) “*River/Riverside Area*” is the group of words that is related to the natural environment within the district. The district is situated next to and along the main river of Bangkok. However, there are very few accessible riverside public areas. Most of them are accessible through governmental agencies’ spaces and ports.

(10) “*People and Culture*” is the group of words that conveys meanings about the people in the area. It refers to the ethnic, social, and cultural diversity of the district.



Figure 3. Cluster of old buildings
Source: Author.



Figure 4. Food/Beverages/Coffee
Source: Author.



Figure 5. Thailand Creative and Design Center
Source: Author.



Figure 6. Local place of community
Source: Wachira Pintong, used with permission.



Figure 7. Street art

Source: Author.



Figure 8. Traffic in the area

Source: Wachira Pintong, used with permission.

5.3 Thematic analyses of district image cluster.

The thematic analysis of district image clusters holds critical significance, as the perception of a district's image is shaped through a complex cognitive process involving the collection, filtering, and assimilation of spatial and cultural information. This process integrates both comprehension and perceptual frameworks, as described by Montgomery (1998, p. 100). Accordingly, the district image perceived by creative professionals is largely influenced by their intrinsic values, deeply held beliefs, and the conceptual orientations they adopt as members of the creative community.

From this perspective, the ten identified groups of mental images reflect the values, ideologies, and symbolic meanings associated with creative professionals who identify with and operate within the creative district. To advance an in-depth understanding of these individuals' conceptual frameworks and their connections to the urban environment, this section presents a detailed interpretation of the ten image clusters. These findings are situated within the broader context of district development and enhancement. The four overarching thematic categories emerging from the district image clusters are systematically illustrated in Table 2, which visually maps the intricate relationships between the themes and the perceptions held by creative professionals.

Thematic Image 1: Historical Urban Context and Cultural Knowledge

The understanding of ancient structures and the architectural essence of clustered, renovated edifices and communal spaces, such as Thailand's first thoroughfare linked to the river and its riverbanks, serves as a set of cognitive representations prominently recognized by creative professionals. This collection constitutes tangible history manifested through urban landscapes that are readily perceived and understood through visual means. Creative professionals, who often refine their practice through visualization, naturally develop an affinity with these built environments. However, beyond their tangible qualities, these cognitive representations also relate to abstract dimensions of history, encompassing significant district narratives and symbolic knowledge embedded within the urban fabric. As such, historical urban landscapes function as visual and spatial archives of historical knowledge, enhancing community memory and identity. They reinforce the distinctiveness of the historical context as a vital urban element that continues to be reinterpreted and utilized for contemporary purposes, particularly as a medium for identity expression. Therefore, both tangible and intangible histories are deeply embedded in the urban milieu, constituting a fundamental component of the district and enabling a seamless development of place awareness among its users.

Thematic Image 2: Collective Meaning of Place.

This mental image represents a cognitive association between creative practitioners and the locality such as employment at a design center, engagement in innovative and artistic activities, and interactions within communal spaces. The image cluster reflects the practitioners' creative engagements and outputs, encompassing organizational structures, surrounding environments, and the facilitation of creative work, production, and initiatives. This interpretation captures the inventive character that defines the locality, highlighting its collective significance and the interconnection among creative practitioners. The creative district embodies a process of revitalization, aiming to attract and retain a community of creative professionals. The establishment of a service agency, symbolically and functionally anchored in the area, further reinforces this identity by supporting and fostering connections between the locality and its target creative cohort.

Thematic Image 3: Local Life

This thematic image conveys a mental representation of community and cultural life within the district. It encompasses perceptions related to local places and the people who inhabit the area, reflecting the social dynamics and everyday experiences of the community. These mental images highlight the value attributed to key communal institutions and service-oriented spaces, such as temples, schools, markets, as well as individuals who embody the essence of local life through their activities and livelihoods. Moreover, these representations contribute to the historical narrative of the district, portraying everyday life as a living heritage. In this way, the mental image of local life serves not only as a reflection of community values but also as a dynamic and embodied expression of the district's history, conveyed through both physical settings and routine practices.

Thematic Image 4: Urban Life

This thematic image reflects mental representations of urban life that support and enhance the district's creative activities. It includes images of restaurants, café, and social spaces related to eating and drinking, as well as representations of urban infrastructure and environmental conditions, such as traffic and pollution. These elements are indicative of secondary activities that contribute to the district's diversity. As noted by Montgomery (1998, p. 104), such secondary uses, consisting of enterprises and services, emerge in response to primary uses, functioning to accommodate and serve the individuals attracted by those primary functions. In this context, the mental image of urban life captures the interplay between creative engagement and the broader urban environment that sustains it.

Table 3. Relations between clusters of district images and the types of creative professionals.

	Types of Creative Professionals			Total
	Creative workers	Designers	Artists	
1 Cluster of old buildings	28 19.86%	63 36.84%	36 33.96%	127 30.38%
2 Food/coffee	35 24.82%	11 6.43%	4 3.77%	50 11.96%
3 Design Center	8 5.67%	26 15.20%	7 6.60%	41 9.81%
4 History of district	19 13.48%	16 9.36%	4 3.77%	39 9.33%
5 Local place of community	9 6.38%	11 6.43%	14 13.21%	34 8.13%
6 Grand postal building	12 8.51%	13 7.60%	7 6.60%	32 7.66%
7 Creative/art spaces	4 2.84%	11 6.43%	17 16.04%	32 7.66%
8 Traffic/pollution	22 15.60%	5 2.92%	1 0.94%	28 6.70%
9 River/ river side	3 2.13%	9 5.26%	9 8.49%	21 5.02%
10 People/culture	1 0.71%	6 3.51%	7 6.60%	14 3.35%
Total	141 100.00%	171 100.00%	106 100.00%	418 100.00%
Chi-square value 108.391, df 18, p<0.000				

5.4 Analysis of Creative Professional Types and Clusters of District Images

Given the diversity among creative professionals, we classified participants into three distinct groups based on the nature of their professions and creative practices: (1) Creative Workers (n=141) – This group includes individuals whose work involves design-related or creative thinking processes, even if not directly involved in design production. Examples include university professors, researchers, consultants in design or architecture projects, real estate developers, engineers, software developers, and librarians, (2) Designers (n=171)– These individuals engage directly in design work or apply creative/design processes as a core aspect of their profession. Examples include architects, fashion designers, jewelry designers, and designers from other creative sectors, and (3) Artists (n=106) – This group consists of individuals whose work centers on artistic expression. Examples include painters, photographers, writers, gallery owners, and art collectors.

To examine how different groups of creative professionals perceive the district, we conducted a comparative analysis of their mental image clusters. Table 3 presents the distribution of mental images according to each professional group.

A Chi-square test was performed to analyze the relationship between the classification of creative professionals and the ten mental image clusters associated with the district. The results revealed a statistically significant association between the two variables at the 0.05 level ($\chi^2 = 108.391$, df = 18, p < 0.000), indicating that the distribution of mental images varies by professional group.

Interestingly, all three groups, Creative Workers, Designers, and Artists, identified the same primary mental image: Cluster of Old Buildings. This cluster reflects the district's historic architectural character and represents physical and visible attributes that carry historical meaning. The shared emphasis on this image across groups suggests that the tangible, historic urban fabric serves as a unifying element in the district's identity for creative professionals, regardless of their occupational specialization.

However, differences emerged in the subsequent mental images prioritized by each group:

- **Creative Workers** identified *Food/Coffee Culture and Traffic/Pollution* as their next most important mental images. These reflect a strong awareness of contemporary urban life and its conditions; highlighting both the lifestyle aspects (e.g., dining and café culture) and urban challenges (e.g., traffic congestion and environmental issues). These elements fall under the thematic category of Urban Life.
- **Designers**, in contrast, emphasized the *Design Center and the Historical Significance of the First Road*. These images reflect institutional and infrastructural elements that relate directly to their professional activities and values. This cluster aligns with the theme of Collective Meaning of Place, as it includes representations of places that serve both symbolic and functional purposes in the district's creative ecosystem.
- **Artists** identified *Local Community Places and Creative/Art Spaces* as the most meaningful after the Cluster of Old Buildings. These images reflect social connections, cultural spaces, and grassroots artistic environments, all of which align with the theme of Local Life. This group demonstrates a strong affinity toward the social and community-oriented dimensions of the district.

In summary, while all creative professionals share a common appreciation for the district's historical urban character, the differences in their subsequent mental images highlight how professional orientation shapes perceptions of place. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of the creative district and the importance of recognizing diverse user perspectives when planning for urban development and cultural policy.

6. Discussion

This study contributes to the understanding of how creative professionals perceive and construct mental images of a revitalized creative district by revealing the spatial, symbolic, and social elements embedded in their cognitive representations. Drawing upon the conceptual framework established in environmental psychology and urban design, the findings affirm that mental images are not random or superficial but are structured around meaningful associations that reflect both personal and professional engagement with place (Lynch, 1960; Relph, 1976; Scannell & Gifford, 2017).

The image clusters identified in this study provide tangible evidence of the district's perceived identity. The most frequently cited cluster, "Old Buildings", demonstrates the strong symbolic value of historic architecture in creative place-making. These structures are not merely remnants of the past; they serve as spatial anchors that sustain memory, continuity, and identity across generations. This finding supports theories of place attachment and place identity, which argue that built environments act as repositories of collective memory and contribute to the emotional and symbolic coherence of place (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Droseltis & Vignoles, 2010; Janjamlah & Kaewlai, 2020; Lewicka, 2011; Tuan, 1977).

In addition to this shared recognition of historical form, the diversity of mental images across different types of creative professionals reveals the multi-dimensional nature of the district's identity. The variation in cognitive emphasis among creative workers, designers, and artists underscores the theoretical proposition that spatial experience is mediated by occupational identity, cultural values, and cognitive framing (Montgomery, 1998; Scott, 2010a, 2010b; Zenker, 2009). For instance, while creative workers emphasized urban functions such as food venues and environmental conditions, designers identified more with structured institutions like the Thailand Creative and Design Center and historical landmarks. Artists, in contrast, prioritized informal creative and community spaces, reflecting a grassroots orientation and deep sensitivity to local life.

The results clearly indicate that creative professionals interpret the district through four main perceptual themes: historical urban context and cultural knowledge, collective meaning of place, local life, and urban life. Each theme synthesizes a unique aspect of the urban environment, combining tangible forms with intangible meanings. This categorization aligns with prior studies on spatial cognition and creative behavior, such as those by Ferru et al. (2022) and Droseltis & Vignoles (2010), who emphasized that perceptual associations are deeply tied to symbolic interpretation and value attribution.

The presence of creative infrastructure, such as TCDC, and the strong recall of urban qualities related to food, culture, and community demonstrate that the district has achieved more than visual rebranding. It has become internalized by users through their daily routines, emotional associations, and creative engagements. The image clusters thus offer credible and nuanced evidence of how the creative district is perceived not as a monolithic construct but as a layered and lived environment. These cognitive outcomes confirm the efficacy of bottom-up perception-based evaluation in understanding the social and experiential success of creative district development.

Furthermore, the use of open-ended mental imagery as a methodological approach proved valuable in capturing authentic perceptions without the limitations imposed by pre-coded survey items. The findings reinforce that mental image analysis can serve as a powerful tool for interpreting how spatial and symbolic values converge in creative districts. Unlike top-down branding strategies that often neglect lived experience, mental images reveal how individuals engage with the district through affective and symbolic dimensions. These insights contribute to a more grounded and user-oriented approach to place making, urban design and planning, and policy.

The study also highlights the need for urban design and planning practices that are responsive to diverse creative profiles. Planning and design strategies should acknowledge that different types of creative professionals prioritize different aspects of the district. Designers may seek spaces of collaboration and institutional support, while artists may value cultural narratives and local authenticity. A successful creative district, therefore, should provide both formal and informal platforms that accommodate a spectrum of creative identities and spatial expectations.

In sum, the findings confirm that district image outcomes are not only present but are deeply embedded in the mental associations of users. These images serve as cognitive evidence of the district's identity, function, and symbolic relevance. The perceptual richness demonstrated across the ten image clusters and four thematic categories supports the study's claim that the creative district is not only a physical entity but also a perceptual and symbolic space actively co-constructed by its creative users.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how creative professionals perceive and interpret the image of a revitalized creative district through their spontaneous mental associations. Drawing upon theories of place image and the creative city, the research addressed a key gap in the literature by focusing on bottom-up perceptual insights rather than top-down narratives of urban branding or policy. The study demonstrated that mental images generated by creative professionals are neither arbitrary nor superficial. Instead, they reflect a deep engagement with the district's historical, symbolic, social, and functional dimensions.

The results offer substantive evidence of the district's perceived identity. The most prominent image cluster, centered on the built heritage and architectural character of old buildings, illustrates how tangible urban form anchors memory, cultural meaning, and a sense of continuity. In addition, the other image clusters, related to food culture, community spaces, creative institutions, local life, and infrastructure, revealed a rich and multi-faceted set of perceptions that correspond to four overarching themes: historical urban context and cultural knowledge; collective meaning of place; local life; and urban life. These thematic outcomes affirm that creative districts are cognitively understood not only through their physical features but also through symbolic meanings and lived experiences.

The study also found meaningful variation across different creative professional subgroups. Creative workers emphasized contemporary urban amenities and environmental conditions, designers focused on institutional and formal spatial structures, and artists showed stronger associations with local culture and informal creative spaces. These differences underscore that mental images are shaped by professional identity, experience, and spatial interaction, confirming the relevance of perception-based analysis for understanding creative district dynamics.

From an applied perspective, these findings have clear implications for urban planning and design. First, they suggest that revitalized districts should be designed with attention to how physical form communicates historical continuity and place identity. Architectural conservation, adaptive reuse, and culturally anchored landmarks not only are aesthetic assets but also symbolic elements that support cognitive and emotional bonds to place.

Second, planners and urban designers should engage with the perceptual experiences of different creative groups to develop spaces that are inclusive, diverse, and functionally responsive. For instance, the needs of designers for collaborative infrastructure may differ from those of artists who prioritize authenticity and grassroots expression. Supporting both types of spatial experience can help foster a more resilient and inclusive creative ecosystem.

Third, mental image analysis can serve as a diagnostic and participatory tool in urban development. It can be used to evaluate how target user groups perceive a district's character, identify gaps between planned identity and user experience, and guide design interventions that are more contextually grounded.

Future research can build on this study in several directions. Longitudinal studies could explore how mental images of a district evolve over time, particularly in response to urban interventions, events, or policy changes. Comparative studies across different creative districts, both within and beyond the local context, could further illuminate how creative identities shape spatial perception in varying cultural and urban settings. Additionally, integrating mental image elicitation with visual methods such as cognitive mapping or photo-elicitation could enrich the analysis of spatial representation and memory.

In conclusion, this study affirms that creative professionals are not passive observers of the urban environment but active interpreters who construct place meaning through perceptual, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Understanding their mental images provides a valuable lens for urban design and planning that prioritizes lived experience, supports identity expression, and fosters meaningful connections between people and place.

Human Subjects

This study involved voluntary participation in a questionnaire survey and did not include any sensitive personal data or interventions. At the time of data collection, this type of research was considered minimal risk according to institutional guidelines. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Participation was anonymous and data were treated confidentially.

Funding Statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data Availability Statement

Data may be obtained from the corresponding author upon written request.

Use of AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this manuscript, ChatGPT was used solely to assist in improving the clarity and readability of the language. The tool was not used to generate original scientific content or interpret results. All outputs were critically reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

Author Contributions

Tipsuda Janjamlah: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Data Analysis, Writing – Original Draft;
Peeradorn Kaewlai: Conceptualisation, Investigation (data collection / field work), Visualization, Writing – Review & Editing.

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