THE URBAN HAPPINESS APP

**Nang Loeng Edition
Project Report
December 2019**

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Can a Happy City be planned?

Or is rather the result of participative decision-making?

In the fast-growing Asian capitals citizens lost agency over the making of their cities.

The Urban Happiness App empowers residents to participate in planning decisions by leveraging their growing digital litteracy.

THE CONTEXT
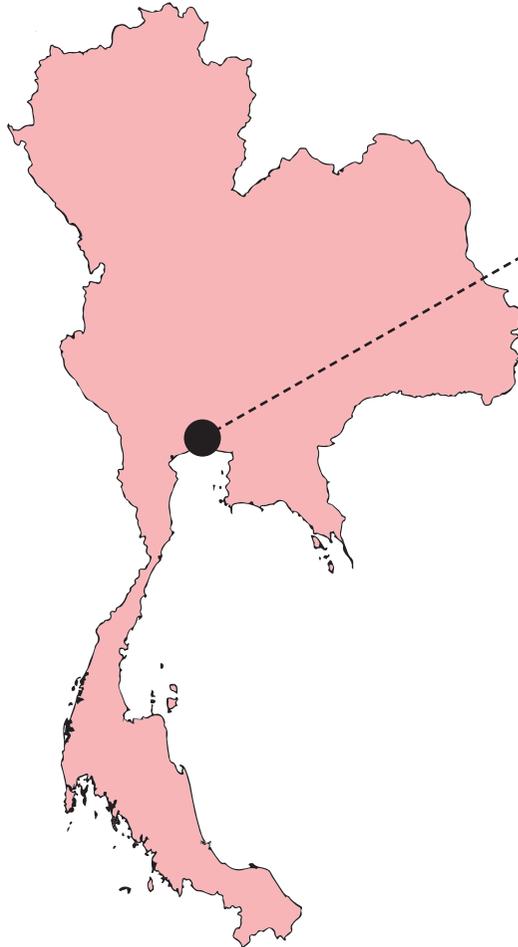
BANGKOK

>9 million population

2nd most liked city on Instagram in 2016, globally.

Thailand one of the fastest growing markets for social media.

Thailand 4.0 Governmental Action plan, heavy investments for digitalization.

Challenge of rapid urbanization.

INTRODUCTION

Nang Loeng is one of Bangkok's most prominent **historical neighbor-hoods**. It is famed for its market, which in present days has become the lone thing the area is known for. For an ordinary visitor, the main reason to go to Nang Loeng is to discover its vendors, sample the variety of dishes, see the historical stand-alone movie theater next to the market, and leave with memories of a quaint community. What most do not realize is that underneath the veneer of the lively market scene is a complex neighbor-hood with a **diverse and strong cultural richness** that is standing at a crossroads as it braces for future changes.

Nang Loeng is located right next to Rattanakosin Island, arguably the birthplace of Bangkok and the epicenter from which development radiat-ed out. This makes the neighborhood one of the oldest in the capital. The presence of Nang Loeng Market, Sala Chaloem Thani stand-alone mov-ie theater, old shophouses, and other hidden landmarks indicate a once illustrious and colorful past that most outsiders are unaware of. To know the neighborhood's history is to become emotionally invested in and appreciative of its evolution. Nang Loeng residents often speak proudly of a vibrancy that once filled its streets. It is partly due to these memories that the residents continue to fight for its longevity and harbor hopes of a return to days of vivacity and significance.

Today, however, Nang Loeng's population and economic activity is in decline. From 2007 to 2016, the population of the neighborhood fell by more than 17%, from 57,461 to 47,450. Many legacy businesses have been forced to close, as elderly residents and business owners have passed away, and younger residents look elsewhere for economic opportunity. With a median household income of less than half the Bangkok Metropol-itan Area's average, this mostly working class neighborhood is focused on generating income day-to-day.

Yet, contrary to what most believe, **Nang Loeng is not home to a single unified community**. It is many groups living together, working, and shar-ing a small congested area. Although conflicts are likely to arise in such scenario, the groups have managed to develop their own mechanisms to resolve them, and this point is not to be underestimated. The general resilience to both internally and externally induced pressures have earned Nang Loeng a reputation of being strong willed and self-determined amongst those who work with them.

However, with much anticipated future development in the area, this resilience will be tested. The arrival of a new subway station in the heart of Nang Loeng is likely to trigger land speculation, leading to a real **risk of displacement** of current residents and business owners. This is com-pounded by land security pressures, as approximately 70% of the land in Nang Loeng is operated under lease managed by the Crown Property Bureau (CPB). The lack of home ownership, as well as the **lack of trans-parency** in the future development plans of CPB, has led to day-to-day stresses related to housing and economic security.

While these new developments will likely reverse neighborhood popula-tion decline and bring renewed economic activity to Nang Loeng, there is a **high risk of gentrification**. Without a strong political and economical presence and fragmented leadership among the many community groups, it may be difficult for existing residents to capitalize on the benefits brought in by new investment.

Through their work with local community members in Nang Loeng, **Urban Studies Lab**, located within the Ford Resource and Engagement Center (FREC) in the heart of the neighborhood, has built a firm understanding of the current risks facing the area. It has been recognized that while Nang Loeng is in the midst of a decline, there is great potential to forge a **new identity** housed in its rich cultural past that is also appealing to newcom-ers. Out of this recognition was born the Urban Happiness project.

The Urban Happiness research and pilot project was initiated to ex-plore and understand how digital technologies may be a tool in ad-dressing the current situations in Nang Loeng and other similar neig-bhorhoods. The Urban Happiness App aims to utilize an online platform for community engagement and empowerment, hoping to collectively identify hotspots and existing assets within the neighborhood, and seek out opportunities for improving their physical condition through an evi-dence based approach. Through this process that involves and encourag-es the social activity of existing community members, it is intended that the Urban Happiness platform can serve as a central point for fostering a greater sense of ownership and identity in the area, helping to build the necessary coalitions and social capital needed to influence future develop-ment in Nang Loeng.

# RESEARCH

BACKGROUND STUDIES

Urban Studies Lab was established in Nang Loeng with the primary goal of developing site-specific research and fostering urban participation. The following information is our findings from the baseline study which we have adopted for shaping all of our research and workshop activities, including the analysis of the people of Nang Loeng, the physical condition of the area, and the coming transformations to the community.

There are 5 sub-communities within Nang Loeng area: Suppamit 1, Suppamit 2, Wat Sunthorn Thammatharn, Wat Sommanat, and Jakrapatdi-pong. These **communities are getting older and facing population decline.** As the elders pass away, adults are moving out for better career opportunities resulting in an increasing age gap. While most of the residents are still in their working age, they are mostly employed as low skilled labor and have scarce education. More than half of the population has a **lower income than Bangkok's average.**

The community is located on the edge of the old town and many plots still belong to the Crown Property Bureau - a governmental organisation managing the King's properties. These conditions keep the community from being developed into high-rise or commercial buildings despite its proximity to Bangkok's CBD. The characteristics of the urban infrastructure such as wide footpath and several trees, combined with the variety of human-scaled shop-houses make the community easy and pleasant to walk. However, the area is still lacking high quality public and green spaces.

Two major challenges impend on Nang Loeng in the near future: the relocation of government agencies and the implementation of the new MRT station. The community is well known for its typical food, found in the historical market. The fame mostly owes to the word of mouth of the civil servants working in the surrounding offices. These also represent the majority of customers for the restaurants in the area: **the relocation of government agencies will definitely have a significant impact on local food businesses.**

The other incoming major change is the construction of the new MRT station. **The Mass Rapid Transit** (MRT) system aims to distribute its service to the whole Bangkok metropolis. Located in the heart of Nang Loeng, the new station on Lan Luang road, is projected to commence operations in 2023. With all likelyhood the coming of **this new station will gentrify the area as happened in similar neighborhoods.** The opacity of devel-opement plans, centralized land-ownership, and lack of communicational skills, undermine any possibilities for the residents to influence this pro-cess.

A. Sommanat
B. Supamit 1
C. Supamit 2
D. Wat Sunthorn
   Thammatharn
E. Jakrapatdiphong

1. Nang Loeng Market
2. Chalerm Thani
   Theatre
3. Dancing House
4. Sommanat Temple
5. Sunthorn Tham-
   matharn Temple
MRT. Lang Loeng
   station
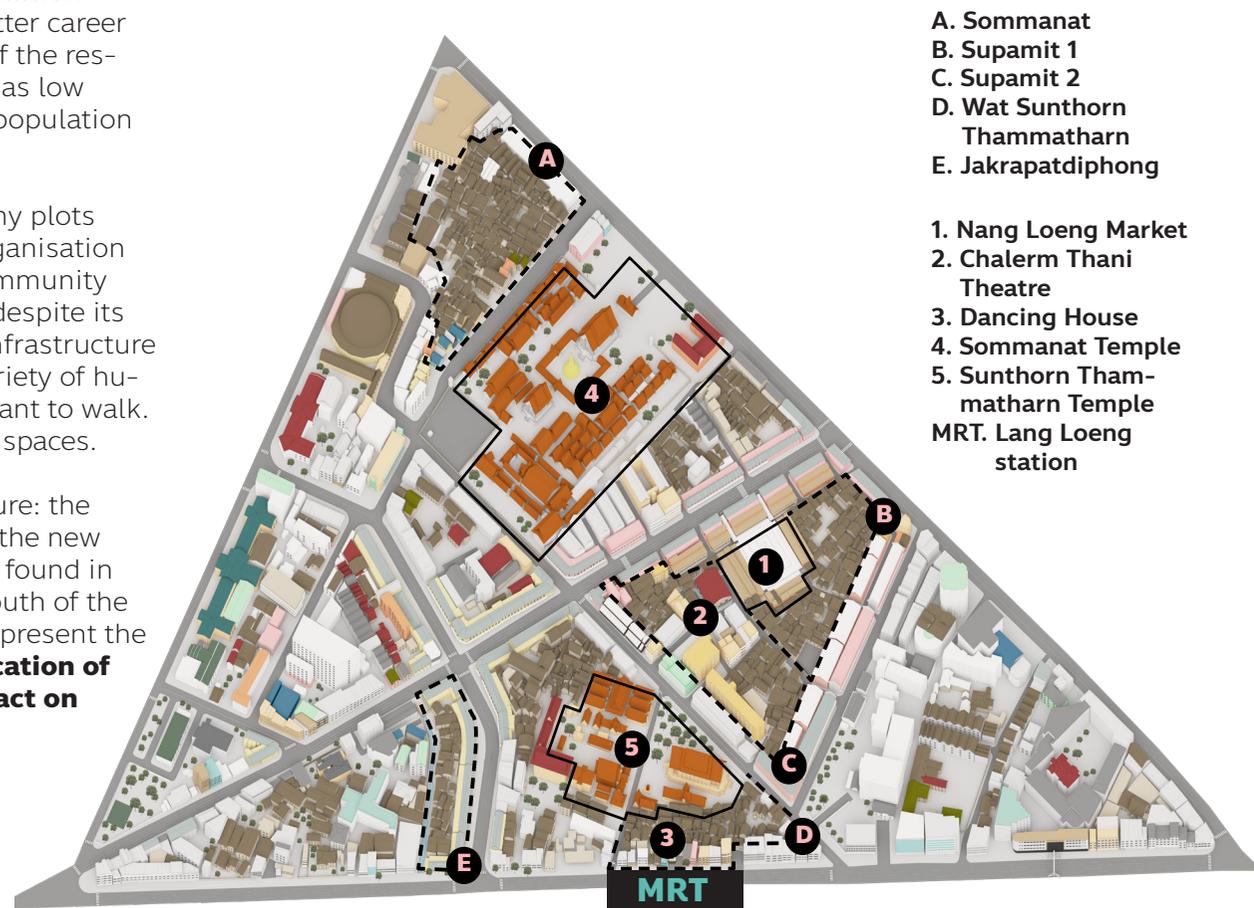
PRECEDENT USE CASES

First, we will show how one of our past projects could have been improved if the application was there during the development process, and how this innovaive digital tool could transform similar engagements in the future. **The Nang Loeng Community Park** project was a collaboration between USL Urban Classroom, INDA Chulalongkorn University and Space Saloon design practice. The implementation of the project and its activation was funded by INDA and sponsored by various corporations. The bureaucratic process was supported by District office and the Crown Property Bureau. **Within 3 months the neglected, underused concrete ground was turned into a community park** with trees, street furniture, and playground. Although a successful story, the park development forced the promoters to **cut short many of the community engagement processes due to time and communicational constraints.** This gave reason to several struggles during the construction and activation process, especially when some of the residents, including the community leaders, **felt they had not been fully engaged and involved.**

If the Urban Happiness application were in place during the project development, the communication process could have been more inclusive, transparent, and take significantly less management resources. The application could have been our main communication platform with the community, so that both developers and users of the park would have had the same understanding of the situation and the residents could easily be engaged in the design development. **The online engagement would have allowed the design team to communicate their design development processes to the locals and get feedback in a timely manner.** This would have avoided miscommunications typical of current official channels and word of mouth. By saving the time and effort invested in communication, the App would have allowed the team to focus more on the quality of design and construction. In this sense, the overall project would have truly reflected the expectation of the locals, and be worth of all the resources poured into it.

Nang Loeng Community Park

learning from the mistakes of precedent use cases

Recurring hurdles:

- Difficult communication between Designers, Community and Authorities
- Time-consuming process of community engagement
- Cultural restrains from expressing personal opinions

App Design Criteria

- Simple interface and 2-way feedback structure (top-down and bottom-up)
- Data collection as tool of streamlining development decisions
- Ease of access for people with different educational levels

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

The development of the Urban Happiness App has been a **multifaceted process** comprising the design of the final product as much as participatory user feedback and field research. Due to the specificity of the subject and user group, the app has been designed in reverse, starting from the desired outcomes. These have been specified to take into account the modes of social interactions that take place in the Nang Loeng community, as well as the its demographics and recent history.

A series of interviews, paper-based surveys, participatory workshops, and group lectures have been necessary for drafting the initial hypothesis, while the production of the digital interface has been developed in parallel to translate the findings of the live sessions onto the application platform. In this regard, the **Urban Happiness App has the aspiration of replicating certain patterns, values and communication strategies that we have observed in the community.**

Although necessarily imprecise, this translation of traditional practices into digital form seems to be the most urgent task of the project, as we believe that this will allow local communities to leverage the strength of their **communal logics** to face the incoming challenges of gentrification and top-down planning. Follows a description of all tasks that made the realization of the project possible.

The research focused on qualitative data with a mixed-method, largely based on action, that intend for community stakeholders to be actively engaged in all stages of development. As an action research, our work had the side benefit of community engagement as well as local participatory initiation. Importantly, qualitative data were triangulated with previously collected quantitative data as well.
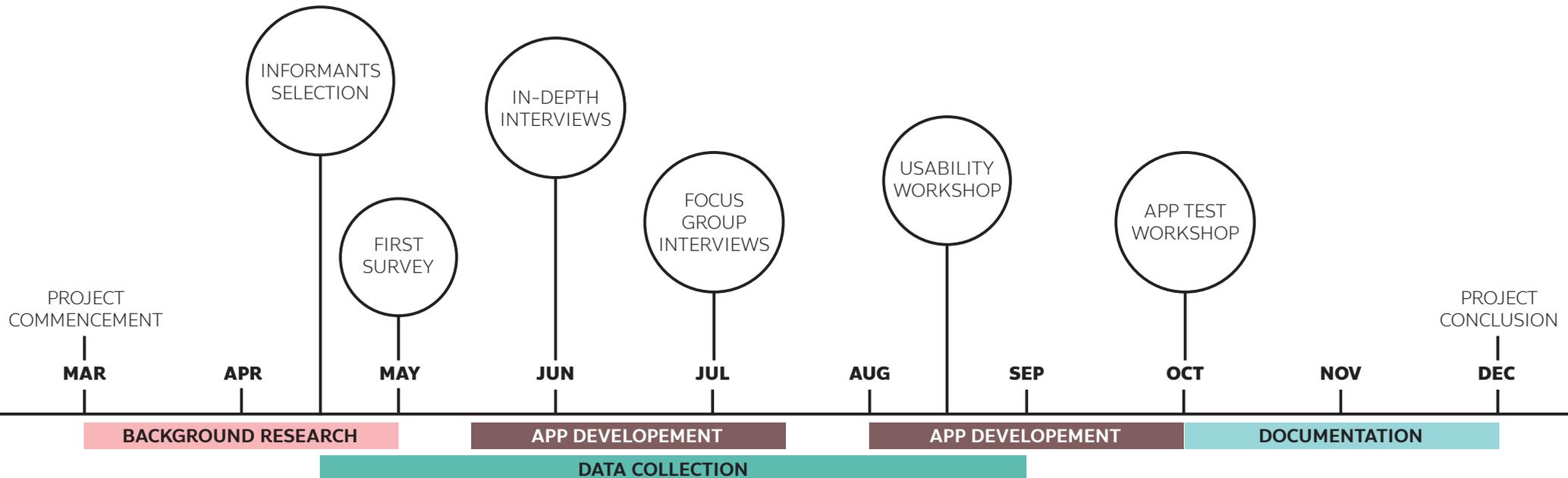
01. Informants Selection

There are **3 target groups** of research participants, the first group is the local community stakeholders which are generally elder populations, the second is the students and parents from the local schools and lastly the commuting office workers who spend their productive time as well as their breaks in the community.

Participant were approached and selected trough various phases of engagement. Firstly, we approached the **key stakeholders** through Purposive Sampling method, by drawing from our existing contact list to make the process faster and smoother. We conducted in-depth interviews with **5 community leaders** which represent Nang Loeng's sub-districts. Accordingly, we used Snow Ball Sampling Technique to follow up with the other informants that are recommended by the community leaders until reaching data saturation. Third, we organized workshops with the Satri Julanak school students and with FREC office workers and acquaintances.

02. Data collection

Researchers used various data collecting methods to match the samples and research site. The data collection can be divided in 5 methodologies:

1. **Site surveys**, to get a comprehensive picture of the area through the scopes of urban planner, urban designer and social scientist.
2. **In-depth interviews**, as the essential approach to communicate with key stakeholders. The interview is a semi-structured interview type, informal and intimate. This seemed the most appropriate for the main objective of the research and could be adapted according to the situation.
3. **Field notes** were drafted throughout the process to identify other related issue such as hurdles of the interview, solutions, recommendations.
4. **Focus group interviews** were utilized for their advantage in raising the interaction of the participants. Deeper and more concise data can be collected by this research tool. Researchers considered the personal, interpersonal and environmental factor while drafting questions regarding app interface, key attributes of the app and existing neighborhood data.
5. **Community workshops** aimed at verifying the initial data and elaborating summaries to further improve the prototype app. Workshop participants conducted mapping activities using the prototype App in first person, while the research team only operated as facilitator to assist and instruct them on its use.

Data from the interviews were transcribed in digital form. The research team used note taking in pair with the transcript to ensure accurate answers from respondents. Photographs and video recording complement site surveys. All information sources are subject to be triangulated across different respondents and forms of data collection and summarized by narrative analysis methods.

03. Surveys and Interviews

Our team started off by surveying the research area and distributed **80 questionnaires** to the local community, inquiring about their satisfaction in living in Nang Leong. The **keyword** we used in this set of questions was **"Happiness"**, classified into different categories related to public space, offering of activities, community life.

It emerged that **children and youths** (24 samples) were generally happy with the quality of public space in the community. Most of them used the school or the temple grounds for their leisure activities with friends. However, they thought that there was not sufficient space and this was not very well maintained, with concerns about cleanliness, trash management and pollution. This sample group was very happy with their social life, especially during public celebrations such as Children's Day and Songkran, but they thought there should be more activities on a weekly basis.

In the **working age group** (31 samples), most participants were moderately satisfied but lamented a general lack of public space and scarce accessibility of green spaces. They commented that even though the streets were clean, in the market area there often was accumulation of trash that caused a bad smell. This group was quite satisfied about their social life and infrastructure by the reason that the market was very vibrant with activities, the people there were very friendly and approachable and the infrastructure was sufficient.

Among the **elderly group** (25 samples) the vast majority were satisfied with the community. In particular they enjoyed the vivid social life where everybody is taking care of each other, children have space to exercise, there are plenty meeting spots and the public space has good natural ventilation. On the other hand, elderlies thought that accessibility could be improved – specially for those with limited mobility. These concerns arise from poor urban furniture, dilapidated pavings and poor lighting.

04. Usability Workshop

This workshop was conducted as a first assessment on the usability of the mobile application, trying to underline in particular the **connection between the schematic mechanics of the tools and the understanding of "happiness" from the perspective of the users.**

The activity took place in two sessions, one in the morning focused on the elderly population and one in the afternoon with young professionals and entrepreneurs. Both sessions moved through three stages: ice-breaking activity, open discussion on urban happiness, App beta testing. The older testers showed a high level of engagement and genuine interest in the potential of the application. The notion of urban happiness and the overall scope of the App is clear to the majority, although some concerns were raised about the usability with specific requests for a more user-friendly interface. The younger testers, on the other hand, were more active in suggesting an expansion of the purpose of the App, for instance by connecting it to other social apps or by implementing gamification strategies in order to foster collaboration and network building.
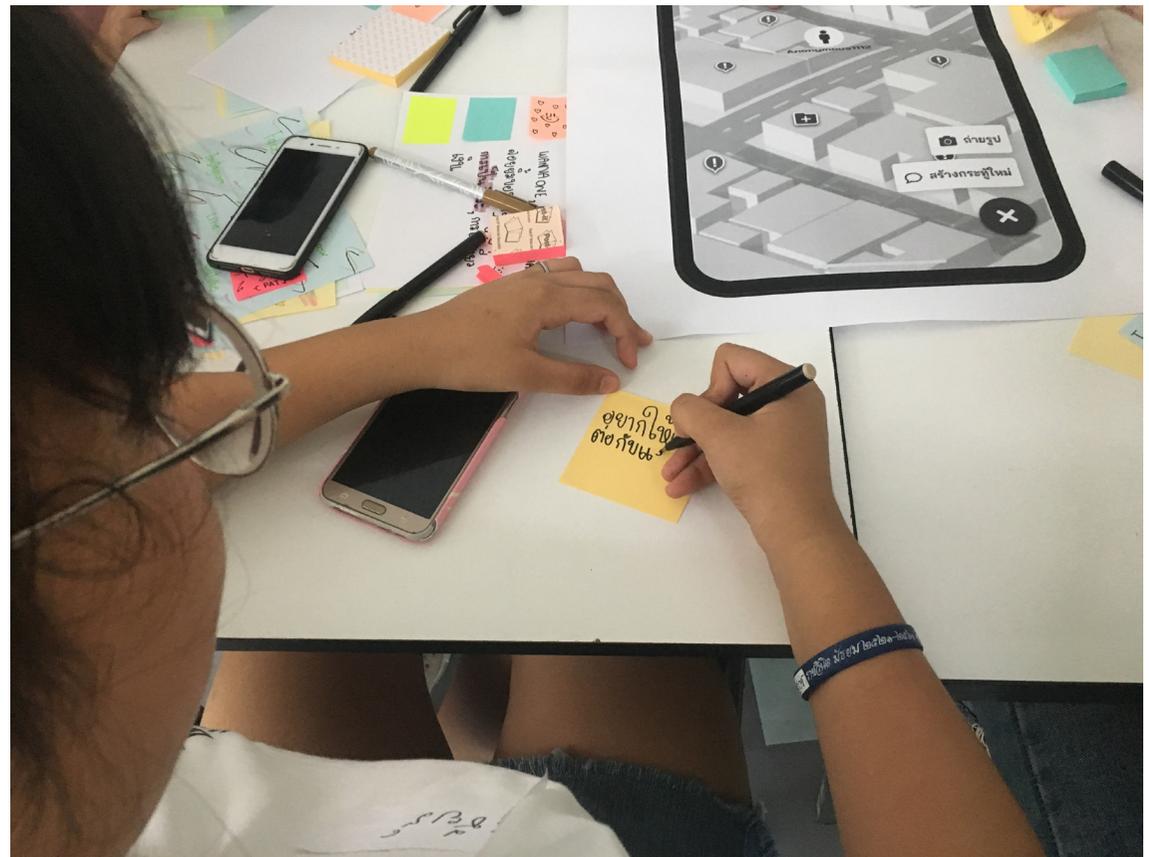
05. App Test Workshop

The second workshop was arranged with 30 elderlies and adults, to guide this particular target group through the use of the application. By dividing them into 3 teams, researchers followed the users while surveying problems and opportunities in the neighborhood **with the use of the beta App.**

The participants were particularly eager to use the App in the surroundings of their homes. It was observed that users had a general tendency to use the App to point out **problems more than opportunities** and make use of the camera tool more than text descriptions. As anticipated through the analog surveys, users shared similar opinions about several recurring issues, such as the bad conditions and misuse of the sidewalks.

In general, the process was very new for the residents, who normally restrain from commenting on urban conditions, but it was noted that older users found it difficult to benefit of its full potential without the help of someone younger. The App was perceived as a **useful, alternative tool to express opinions** on urban matters and it was understood that it could **bring positive change in the community**, while cutting the communication gap between final users and policy makers, which nowadays has to go through several levels of official and unofficial hierarchies.
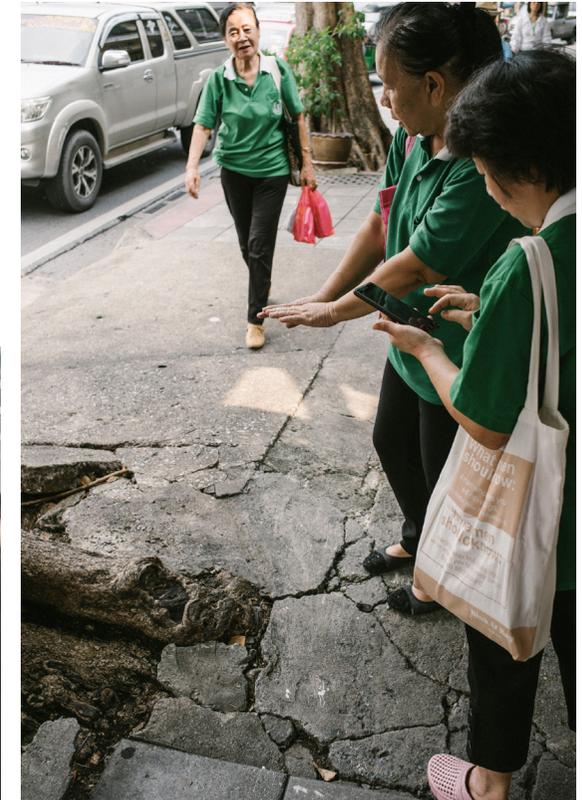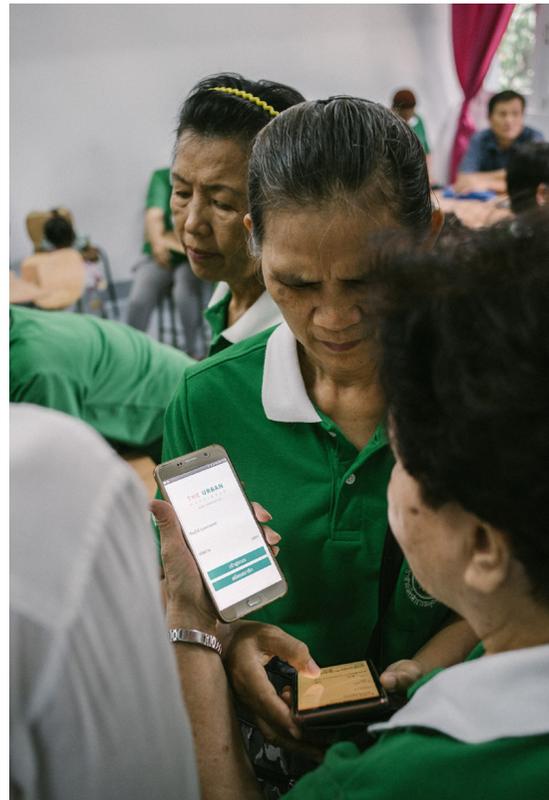
INITIAL RESULTS

What is your opinion about the neighborhood?

"The public space is not used at full potential as it should be"
Student A (female, 23 years old)

"It's hard to think of anything except food and drinks in Nang Loeng. There's almost nothing interesting for me except food and drinks that's interesting for me so far."
Mixologist Manager, (male, 23 years old)

"The quality of footpath is very bad, elder people tripped very often, bus stop has not enough lighting; very dangerous at night"
Local H (female, 70 years old)

What is your opinion about the Urban Happiness App?

"It would be good if these problems are solved and we have the right to express our like or dislike about public policy"
Local A (female, 54 years old)

"With further development this will be very useful for the local government"
FREC staff A (male, 30 years old)

"I want this application to be the voice of the people in the community, to send our opinion to the district or those who work related to the city"
Local F (female, 50 years old)

Our users (80):

GENDER
- Female — 59 %
- Male — 41 %

RESIDENCE
- Local — 39 %
- Non local — 61 %

PROFESSION
- Student — 37 %
- Sel-employed — 26 %
- Employee — 17 %
- Public sector — 8
- Unemployed — 8
- Other — 4
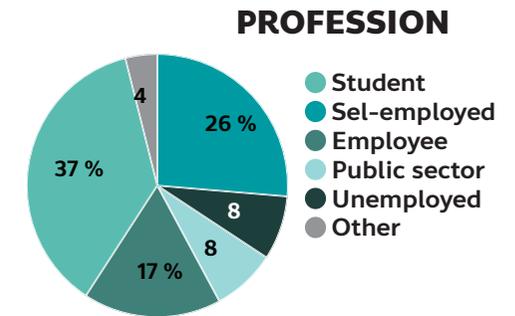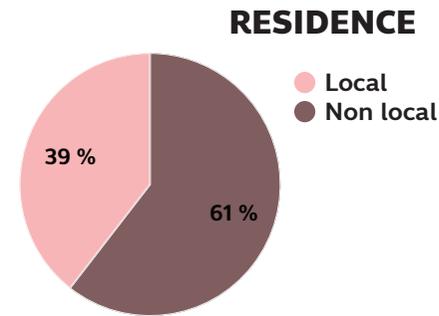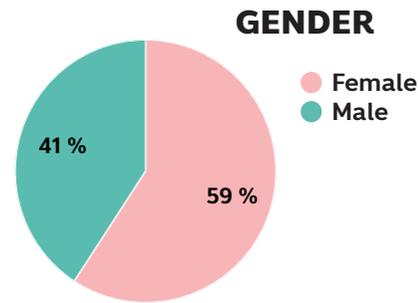
On a scale of 1 to 5, how happy are you about...

PUBLIC SPACE
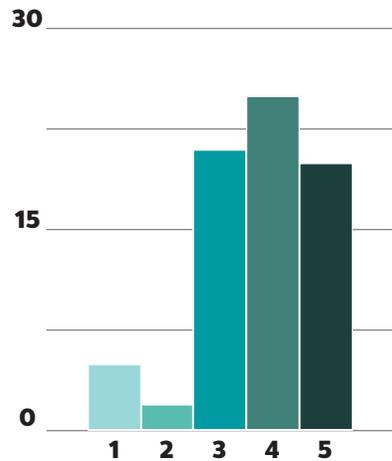
+ Sport, Enterteinment
+ Lively public atmosphere

- Difficult to access
- Limited surface

INFRASTRUCTURE
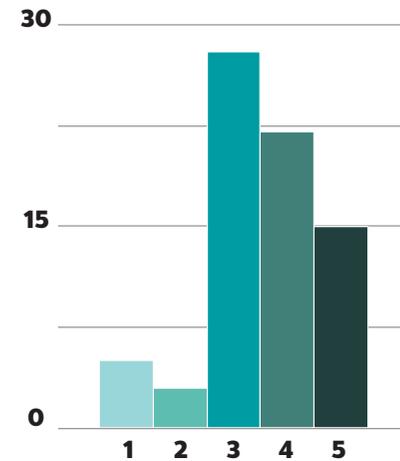
+ Good drainage
+ Good transport infrastructure

- Bad pedestrian infrastructure
- Public lighting could be improved

MAINTENANCE
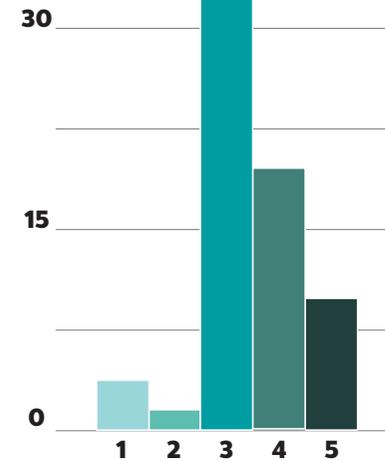
+ The community takes good care of public spaces

- Garbage collection and street cleaning could improve

SOCIAL LIFE
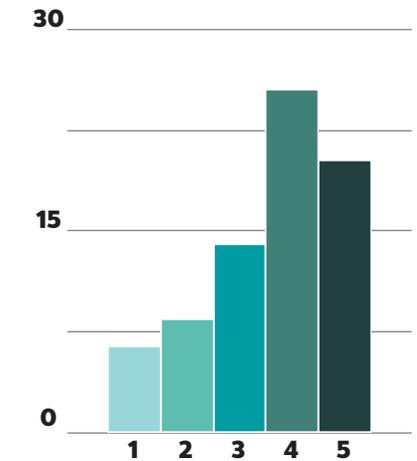
+ Everyday urban life
+ Market activities

- Scarce offering of activities
- Limited activities spaces

Which words would you use to describe a Happy City?

TURF CLUB

EXERCISE

OTHER

BEAUTY

TEMPLE

8

10 %

TRANSPORTATION

PEACEFUL

BUSINESS

HARMONY

19 %

SCHOOLS

FRIENDS

LIVEABLE

32 %

6

CONVENIENCE

FAMILY

LOVE

10 %

15 %

CHEAP

SAFETY

NOT EXPENSIVE

CLEAN

FOOD

NO DRUGS

MARKET

FRIED BANANAS

DELICIOUS
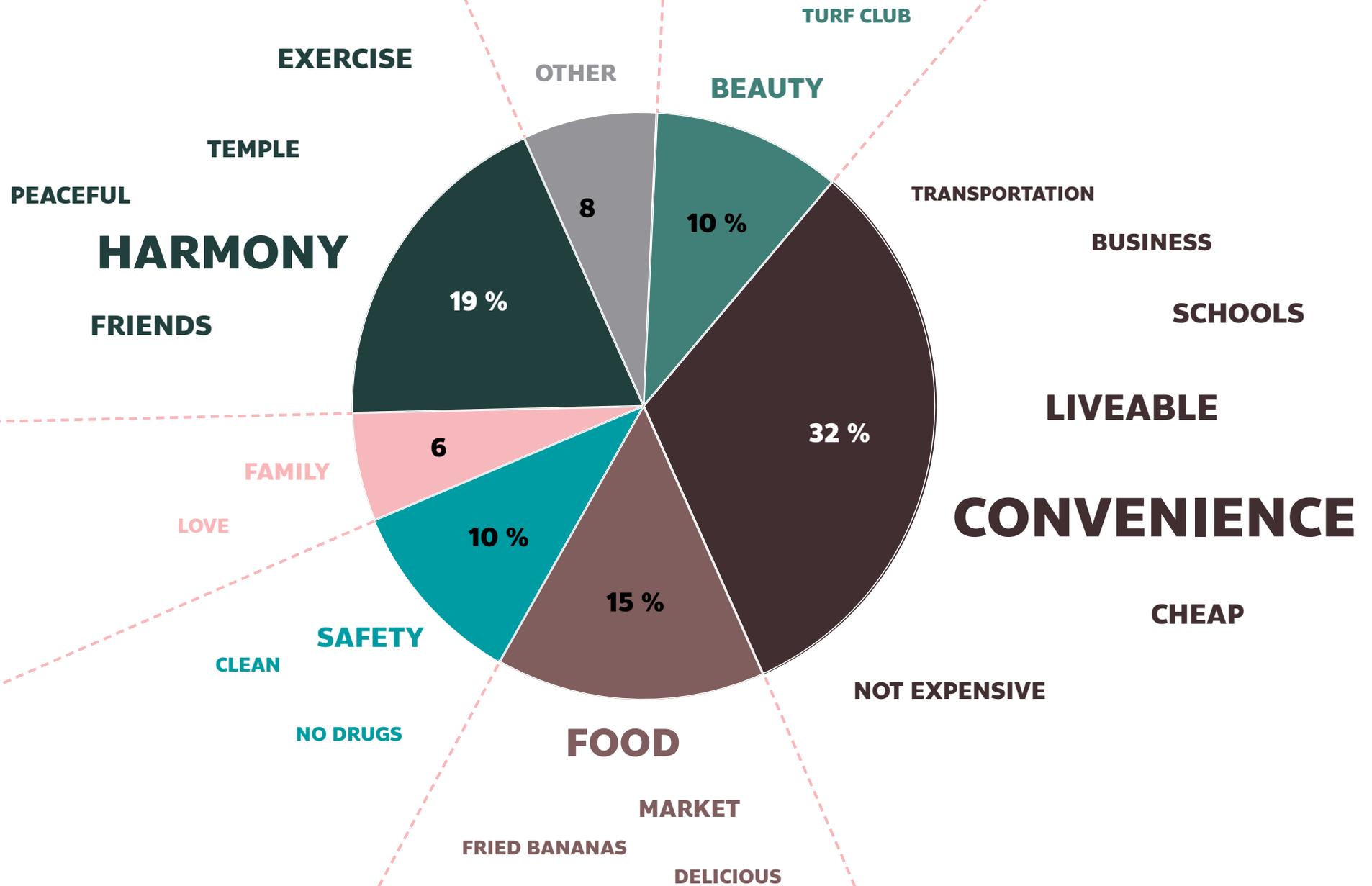
APP MECHANICS

01. LOG IN PAGE

USERNAME

PASSWORD

SHOW PASSWORD

LOG IN

SIGN UP

TERMS AND CONDITIONS

01.b. REGISTER PAGE
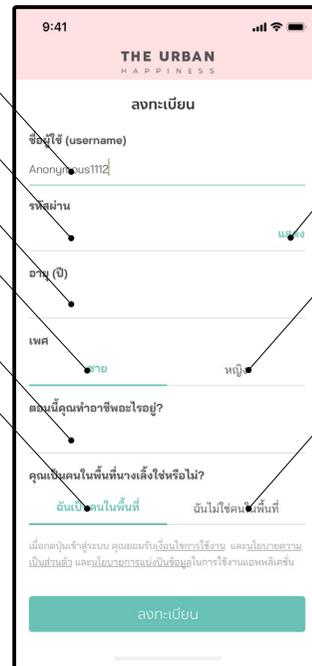
USERNAME

PASSWORD

AGE

MALE

OCCUPATION

LOCAL

SHOW PASSWORD

FEMALE

NON-LOCAL

02. LANDING PAGE

LIST VIEW

NOTIFICATIONS

MAP VIEW

ZOOM

YOUR LOCATION

EXISTING PIN

ADD PIN

03. NEW PIN
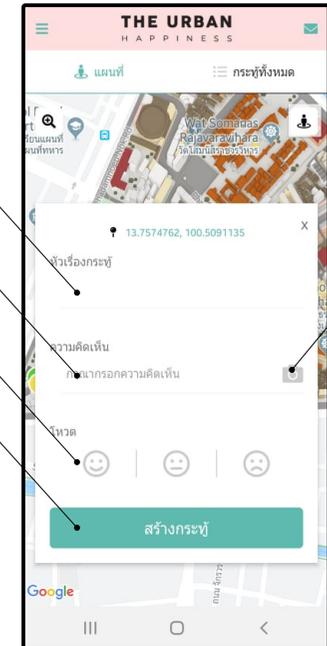
TITLE

DESCRIPTION

HAPPINESS

SUBMIT

ADD PHOTO

05. COMMENT ON PIN

TOGGLE MAP VIEW

TOGGLE LIST VIEW

04. EXISTING PIN

HAPPINESS COUNT

USERS AND GPS

LEVEL OF HAPPINESS

TITLE

USER AND DATE

CLOSE

GPS

LEVEL OF HAPPINESS

COMMENT

SEND

HAPPINESS COUNT

SHARE

04b. LIST VIEW

SETTINGS
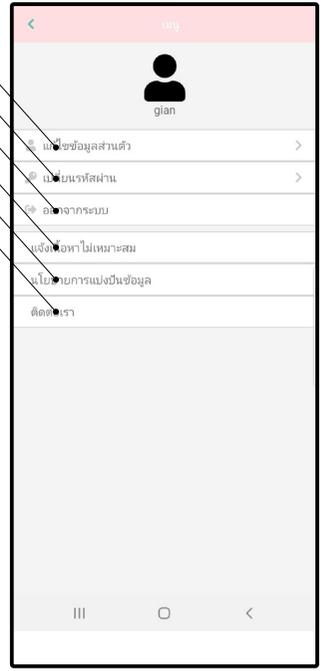
06. SETTINGS

ACCOUNT
PASSWORD
LOG OUT
REPORT
DATA POLICY
CONTACTS

SHARE

FUTURE SCENARIOS

IMPLEMENTATION POTENTIAL

The ultimate goal of the Urban Happiness App is to become an online platform for community engagement and empowerment by providing **tangible impacts on the physical environment**. To make this happen, the inputs and participation triggered by the application should suggest opportunities for upgrading and activating the physical conditions of the neighborhood. Local government, businesses seeking deep impact CSR, or concerned citizens, could all participate in transforming the suggested projects into reality. This section presents some cases where we envisioned the use of the application as a tool to foster communication between different sectors that rarely speak to each other, around the common goal of developing community projects.

For the future activities, the Urban Happiness application could be used for **reporting the maintenance services**, **promoting continual activation activities**, and **create a ritual for the use of public spaces.** In the particular case of Nang Loeng Community Park presented before, for instance, the issue of maintenance is paramount. Relying on maintenance works solely managed by the government is not a sustainable option. The application could aid the maintenance unit to come and take care of the park on a on-demand basis instead of on a fixed schedule, which will help them save time and resources. The Urban Happiness application could also be used as the community board promoting events in the park. These events will keep the park active while allowing newcomers to join without feeling uncomfortable. These series of events could become a recurring ritual for the community and they could help construct a stronger sense of belonging and identity.

The second case to be presented, is an upcoming project of canal revitalization, which exemplifies one of many ways in which the App could be used as a tool for our future placemaking projects. In a narrow canal close to FREC, we are proposing to integrate the space renovation with an international design workshop with the collaboration of FREC Bangkok and the District Office. However, due to the short time-frame of the workshop, we will not be able to keep a hold of offline communication with the community members. Thus, **the application will be our main communication tool before and after the workshop.**

Before the workshop, we could use the application to analyse the needs and expectations of the community towards the canal. These data could help us frame the narratives for the offline workshop, so that students and locals could develop a mutual understanding of the program in a short time. This will provide the team with extra and information, while allowing the students to more easily empathize with the community. After the workshop, the design and construction development will be communicated to the residents through the application. This will allow the design and construction team to get feedback in real time from the community and react promptly As FREC members constantly check the application, they will be able to aid the project through funding and consueling.

The implementation process will also be notified through the App to the students so they would feel that they are an on-going part of the project. In this sense, not only we will have improved the physical condition of a urban space, but we will also have **inspired a new generation of urban designers.**

One last case will be how the emerging community center (FREC) could use the application for **building stronger relationship to the community is a most respectful way.** As we keep on collecting data about happy and uhappy spots in the neighborhood, we could use the "what" data to re-orient the programming of the centre towards the most needed activities, while the "where"data will suggest possible opportunities for new placemaking projects that could really amplify the happiness in the neighborhood. In this way, FREC will be certain to invest in projects that really matter. The anonymity of the users will also allow the locals to communicate with us in a direct way which would not happen offline due to cultural reason and hierarchy structures.

As both developer and user of the application, USL envisioned the Urban Happiness application as a tool for engaging with the community and help integration with the locals. The physical impact of projects generating from the App will encourage the community engagement and empowerment, crucial factors for them to survive future transformations. We also hope for this application to bring together different actors who share an interest in community-based projects. These few cases are just some of the many ways in which data from the App could be extracted and implemented in the physical world. **The synergy between these two realms is our vision for bringing positive change.**

In the next phase the Urban Happiness App will be used to test participatory approval of Urban development.

WAY FORWARD

The Urban Happiness App achieves the goal of giving citizens a voice to articulate opportunities and problems in real time throughout planning processes. Giving the site location and the participant of the research, the findings are appropriate for historical neighborhoods and an aging society which include elderies and small children. We have to stress out that the perception of public space and public goods of Thai people may differ from the western context. It is uncommon for Thais to feel that public spaces belong to everyone and that they have any agency in directing public policies. The App thus becomes particularly relevant in this context. For its success, it is essential to push for its active use as well as to ascertain concrete impact in the real world.

Ultimately, we have learned that the Urban Happiness App is extremely useful as a communication tools and it can be a medium between different stakeholders involved in urban development. It can help bridge intergenerational and cutural gaps, be a tool to help manage public asset or even be an educational tool which design students can use for their urban intervention projects.

FUTURE POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENTS:

1. **Continue the App development**, from Beta version to Release candidate. Testing the App with different demographic groups to further refine its interface and ease-of-use.

2. **Integrating the use of the App with governmental actions**. There is currently in Thailand a Digital Economy Promotion Agency (DEPA) smart city initiation. Pomprap district can be promoted as testbed and Prove Of Concept (POC) before expanding to other areas. The assistant director of the district office already expressed his interest in working out a way to make it efficient for USL to work with them. The focus points are the pedestrian walkway, greenspace and public space.

3. **Exporting the App test to different contextes**, as a way of conductiong comparison studies about Hsppiness and making the App a more universal tool for placemaking.The research's principal concepts align with the framework of offering set by FREC community engagement agenda, other FREC sites arounf the world would provide interesting case studies.

ABOUT

Urban Studies Lab (USL) is an independent research institute focusing on the multidiscipline fields of urban studies. Our mission is to build and contribute to the culture and network of urban practitioners necessary to create a sustainable city we all desire. We do this by:
- Making urban data and knowledge more readily available and easily understood.
- Engaging and inspiring communities and other stakeholders in the creation and management of their urban environments.
- Seeking out and providing pioneering solutions to urban development challenges through a data-driven, trans-disciplinary approach.
- Educating the next generation of urban practitioners and leaders through learning and research opportunities.

We emerged from **Ford Resource and Engagement Center** in Nangloeng, a historical community in Bangkok, Thailand. We did a baseline study research for the center and found out that the bond between the locals is strong, yet fragile in some facets. While there seems to be a la majority of the population are seniors and children.

We use the "Urban Living Lab" as our framework towards all research and other activities, which means that we engage different stakeholders from different sectors and set up a collaborative platform for them to work together for the betterment of the city based on the community needs. Our past projects include various sessions of the Urban classroom, Forums, Lecture series, and the reactivation of a community park in Nang Loeng.