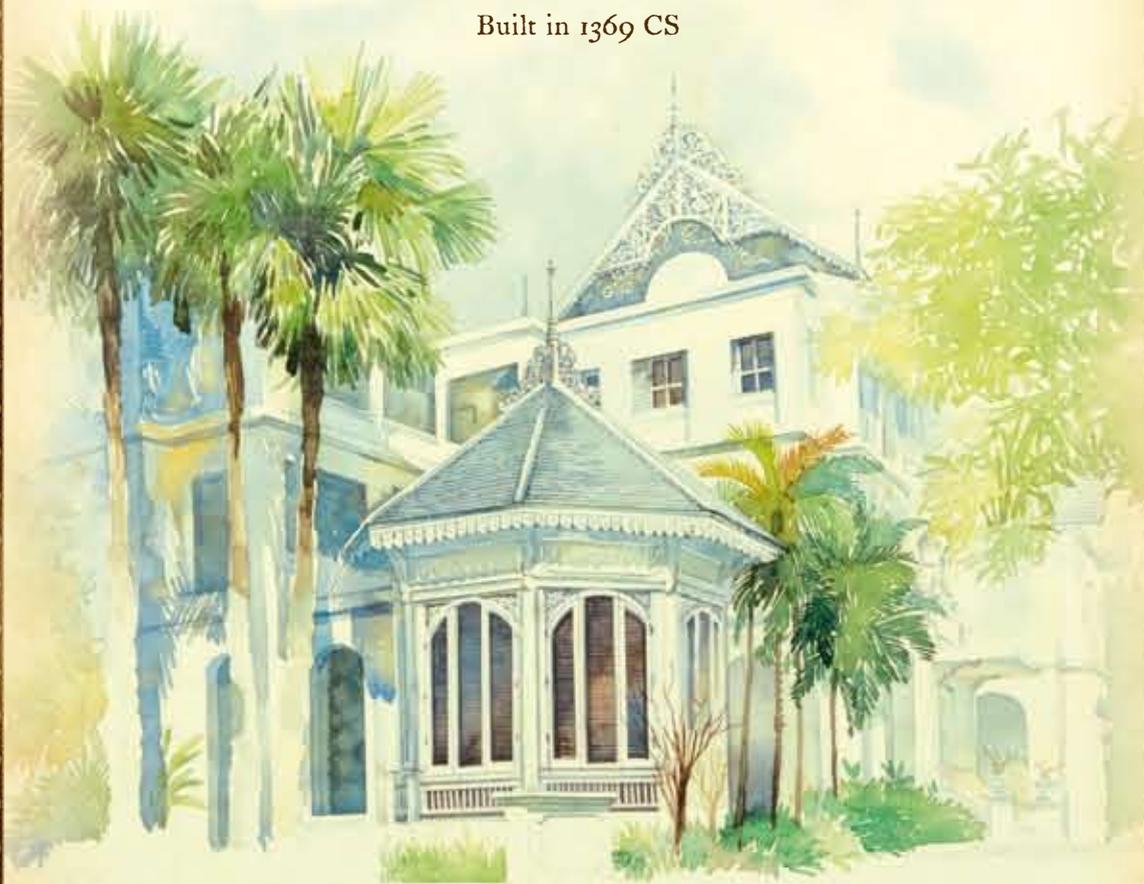


# Lanna Colonial

## A Return to Elegance

By  
Chairat Usavangkul

Built in 1369 CS



Within  Books

## Lanna Colonial: A Return to Elegance

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## Introduction

In days gone by, the Lanna Kingdom (the northern region of present-day Thailand) was blessed not only with a wealth of natural resources, but also with prosperity in trade, and a diversity of cultures, languages and religions, all of which were centered in the city of Chiang Mai.

The beauty of this land was its rich blend of different peoples and cultures. The mixture of their beliefs and values together with the local traditional way of life created a wholly unique identity.

During the era when European nations colonized our neighbors, the style of architecture we knew was influenced, and new designs fused our traditional art with new Western styles. This cross-cultural innovation helped produce some of the most beautiful art of that time. One of the greatest examples of this adaption is the colonial-style “gingerbread house”—a unique feature in Lanna’s colonial architecture.

These buildings not only stand attractively along the roadside, but they help tell the story of how things were in the past and of how times change. Although the folk tales live on, some of these old buildings inevitably get swallowed up by time, while some gradually become unpractical, their utilities unsuited to this modern world.

That’s why we appreciate buildings such as the Ping Nakara boutique hotel located on Charoenprathet Road, which was a teak wood trading area. This magnificent building inspires many people to remember the past—reminding them of the way things used to be. It is our duty, and a matter of pride, that we retain the exquisite architecture and unique culture of Old Lanna, and pass it on to a new generation.





# Contents

Thai Houses, Western Influence

Page 1

The Golden Teak Era

Page 15

“Huan Samai” in Times Past

Page 33

Colonial Style in Chiang Mai

Page 45

Lanna Colonial Buildings

Page 57

A Return to Elegance

Page 85





# 6

## A Return to Elegance



“Nothing lasts forever but the certainty of change”

In Chiang Mai, all the 100-year-old-plus houses clearly demonstrate many changes in both architectural style and house-building techniques. From simple local wooden houses, integrated with Western designs and decorative art, came our contemporary style of architecture. The combination of Western art and traditional Lanna craftwork helped create this contemporary architecture which was continuously adapted to the requirements and lifestyles of the day. This development applies to traditional wooden houses on stilts, to the elegant half-wood, half-concrete colonial style residences, and to the beautiful gingerbread houses that were meticulously designed by skillful Lanna craftsmen.

These architectural creations are portrayals of our local identity, and serve as potent reminders when we look back at the history and knowledge of our ancestors.



Times have changed. Even though several precious buildings still remain standing, many have been torn down in order to accommodate the demand for commercial enterprises. Others have simply become too run down over time. The accurate renovation of an old building is a difficult and expensive task. In the case of many aging structures, it just isn't worth the effort to conserve them, and they are swallowed up by time.

However, the duty of maintaining our art and traditional culture has not completely disappeared. There are still craftsmen and architects who are fond of classic architecture, and they apply their modern skills to create buildings that are elegant and that stimulate our fascination with yesteryear.



A white building on Charoen Prathet Road, Ping Nakara Boutique Hotel and Spa, is an outstanding example of the will to keep alive old traditions. It is in many ways the epitome of fusion architecture—the combination of a beautiful Lanna colonial-style structure with modern facilities and convenience.

It manages to retain the atmosphere of Chiang Mai past. Its décor is reminiscent of the teakwood trade era, a time when people from many cultures—Westerners, Burmese, Chinese, and ethnic Tai merchants—introduced their lifestyles, their art and décor and blended it with the Lanna style. The theme of the building retells the story of how the first Forestry Office of Siam was founded nearby.

**Chinese Store Design Fused with Lanna Architecture**  
Decorated with the Ping Nakara fretwork design pattern, it houses Nakara Spa.

**Ruan Pan Yah**

This building is decorated with sunflower patterns, while the interior is painted purple.

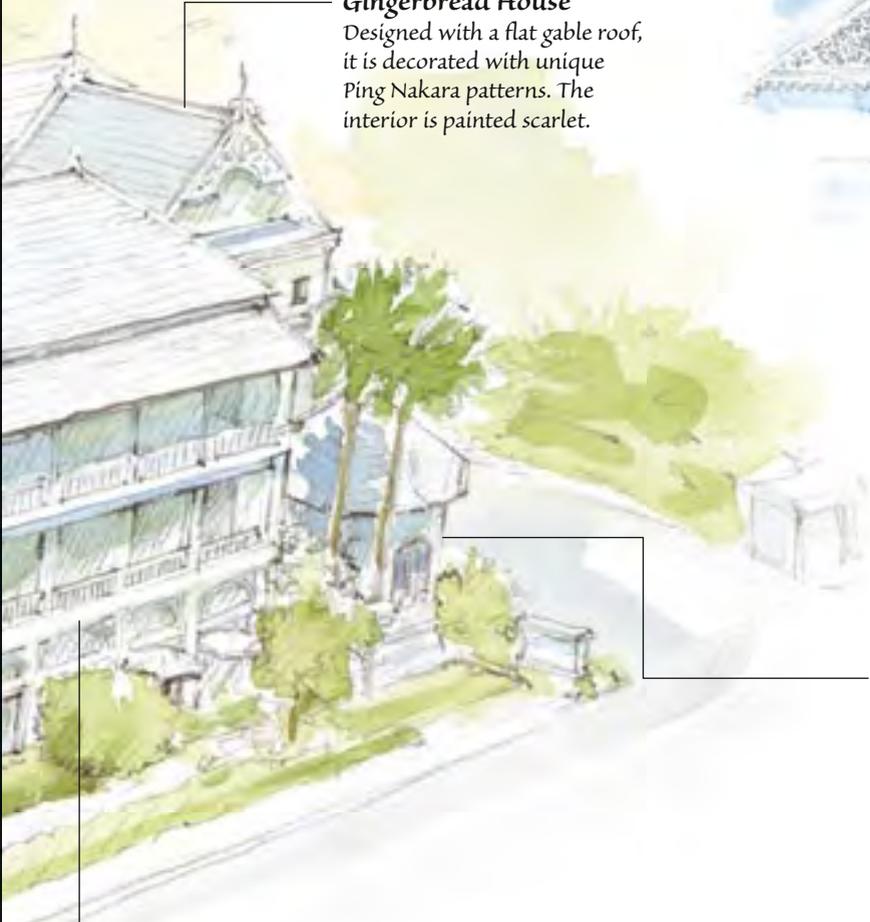
**Chinese-Lanna Style Store Side View**

Decorated with patterns of cork tree flowers, its interior is painted yellow.



### Adapted Ruan Manila House

The wall beneath its flat gable roof is decorated with a motif of a peacock spreading his tail-feathers. The interior is painted orange.



### Gingerbread House

Designed with a flat gable roof, it is decorated with unique Ping Nakara patterns. The interior is painted scarlet.

### The Pediment

The neat intricate wooden carvings are based on the gingerbread-house style, using the model of the Baan Wong Buri design. This is an ideal example of the beautiful combination of Western and Lanna architecture.

### An Octagonal Hall

With **pan yah** roof, the Rotunda has angled windows in the Ping Nakara pattern design, while the building is painted white.

### Terraced Shops

Following in the style of terraced shops with a **pan yah** roof, this building is decorated with Ping Nakara unique patterns. The interior is painted green.

Ping Nakara comprises seven colonial buildings which are based on the homes of local noblemen and the merchants of the old days, but adapted into a unique design. The clear difference between the new and the original is that the buildings are now three storeys in height. The different buildings are designed at staggered heights to create the impression that the building is not too tall. Besides utilizing space efficiently, this design also reflects the variety of colonial houses that existed in Lanna 100 years ago.



### **Exquisite Fretwork**

*Above the high-arched window, the eaves are decorated with beautiful fretwork in the Lanna style, some in traditional Thai patterns and others in specifically new designs.*



The concept when designing Ping Nakara began with the study of gingerbread house architecture during Lanna's colonial era in order to understand its practical use, as well as building methods and aesthetics. Other aspects were taken from that period, such as the laying of terracotta tiles on the roofs, the use of fretwork above the windows and door panels to allow fresh air to circulate, the construction of long balconies for use as shaded walkways, and the addition of awnings in the rainy season.

The fusion of modern techniques with traditional knowledge resulted in a building that is as beautiful as its prototype, but still satisfies the need for convenience in a contemporary age.



**The Archway at the Entrance to the Hotel**

*This is a clear indication that Lanna's beautiful colonial architecture involved a combination of Western architecture and Lanna craftsmanship. The doorway is decorated with the Ping Nakara logo—a potted flower—and offers a blessing to guests written in Pali.*

### **Reception Hall (Rotunda)**

An octagonal hall was built at the front of the hotel as the main landmark, but only to a height that would not block the view of structures behind it. This hall is used as a relaxing lounge area.



The Ping Nakara is painted white, a similar color to the structures of the past which employed a recipe of limestone fermented with Lauraceae tree bark mixed with water buffalo skin paste, sugar cane and sand. The mixture was glazed over the building, forming an ivory color without the need of paint.



**Ping Nakara Fretwork**

This beautiful fretwork was inspired by the **Poorana Kata**, which is an ancient flower pot used as an offering to Buddha. It is now the logo for the hotel.

The interior and exterior of all seven buildings were built to a new design but still follow the beauty of architecture past. Proportions, building style, fretwork patterns and classic materials were carefully studied before the interior and the décor were adapted to utilize space favorably and assimilate modern construction methods.

There are various bas-relief sculptures on the building, with the redesign of five different fretwork patterns following in the traditional style. Accessories in each room, such as the doorknobs, bolts, cabinets, tables, chairs and beds, were all newly designed in the style of the colonial period.

**Cork Tree Flower Fretwork**

Decorating the high arches above the windows, this fretwork was inspired by traditional patterns and they portray the revolution in artwork between then and now.



**Manila House with Triple-layered Gable Roof**

The additional gables on the upper floor not only make the exterior look beautiful, but create the impression that the building is less high.





**Arched Vents above the  
Windows and Doors**

These are decorated in the pattern of a peacock spreading his tail-feathers set among beautiful flowers and vines. This modern design was adapted from a traditional Lanna pattern.



The Ping Nakara has many styles of roofing, including rooftops set at varying heights or stepped back in stages. The design on the eaves is taken from an old piece of fretwork. The eaves in Siamese language are called *lookmai plai chaika* (lace-tipped eaves) or, in Lanna dialect, *paen nam yoi* (waterdrop board).

The architrave above the windows can support either an arched or a rectangular ventilator. Most of the windows run vertically to the ground, as was the favored style in nobles' houses in order to let in as much light and wind as possible. These windows are suitable for all three seasons in the north of Thailand—summer, rainy season and winter.

## Veranda

Running parallel to the swimming pool, this spectacular area is decorated with traditional tiles, old wooden cabinets and brass lamps. At the end of the walkway stands an old map of Chiang Mai, which was re-drawn from information in ancient documents.





### **View from the Poolside**

*This view is made all the more outstanding by the 80-year-old white Meranti tree in the foreground.*

### **Balcony Walkway outside Suites**

*Decorated all along the corridor with lathed pillars and wooden fretwork, this balcony protects the walkway from the sun and rain but allows it ventilation, a suitable innovation for the Thai climate.*

The colonial-style veranda runs parallel to the swimming pool. The colonnaded archways are linked to purlins to support the wooden design of the second floor, a method often used in old Thai houses. The balcony in front, which has traditional ceiling fans, serves as the walkway to the guest rooms.

All the suites are decorated in colonial style with different colors, and the walls have been painted many times to create the impression of shadows and light. There are oil paintings of flowers by Lanna artists on the walls of each room which are named after their particular flower. All the furniture is white, to contrast with the dark teakwood décor. The vents above the windows and the doors are decorated with gingerbread house fretwork, which allows the right amount of light to pass through, creating the impression that one is looking through thin white lace.





### **An Elegant Reception Hall**

*This area is very spacious under a double ceiling, and is illuminated by an old chandelier from India. On one of the walls hangs a seven-meter-high canvas oil painting. In the center, the canvas is decorated with pure gold leaf and depictions of the 12 signs of the zodiac, plus each sign's pagoda corresponding to one's year of birth. On the side, a hand-woven pattern alludes to the location of each pagoda.*



### **Elevator Framework**

This is decorated with a wooden relief sculpture that was exquisitely carved in a Western style by a Lanna craftsman.

The interior was designed to conform to the appearance of the building's exterior, with an archway in front of the elevator and a beautiful Victorian stairway which was built by local carpenters using only local tools.

The hotel décor reflects a colonial atmosphere—its rattan chairs are designed with Spanish cherry patterns, the sofas are decorated in hand-woven textiles, and the Burmese wooden beds with fretwork. Everything combines to create a unique, warm Lanna colonial style.



### **Wooden Victorian Staircase**

The handrails with spirals at the foot of the staircase were lathed by hand by Lanna craftsmen.





The hotel was landscaped with an emphasis on shade provided by some 50 indigenous trees—a neat attractive look that does not block out views of the hotel. This ambiance is consistent with the history of the area: a center for logging, for feeding, training and mahouting elephants to haul logs from the river, and for documenting the traffic in timber at the nearby Forestry Office of Siam, which was situated just south of the hotel. Not too far were the offices of the loggers and traders—many of them European, Burmese and Chinese—who counted, weighed and charted all details of their transactions in large bound ledgers.



**The Swimming Pool**

Surrounded by a horseshoe of buildings, the poolside is private and convenient. At the back is the main restaurant, and on the left are archways decorated in bas-relief sculptures which recount the history of local logging.

### 16 Bas-relief Sculptures

These decorate the arches along both sides of the hotel's balcony walkways. The carvings depict the work of the elephants and the loggers in the old days.

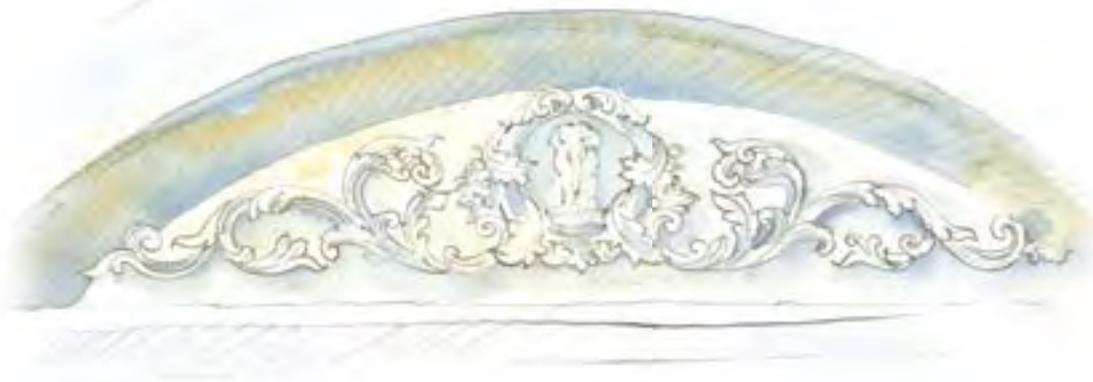


In the past, loggers had very interesting livelihoods, much of which depended on the forest and the interaction between man and elephant. In the beginning, loggers used traditional methods and local tools; they did not own labor-saving devices, and communications were difficult. Added to the inconvenience was the fact that sites were far away, and much time was consumed using the elephant and cart method of transporting logs from the jungle. The most convenient system was to float the logs along the river.

### Door and Window Bolts

These were newly designed and hand-cast especially for Ping Nakara.





### **Elephant and Vine Arch**

*This stucco sculpture sits above the door to the main restaurant. In this motif, the artist has tried to stress the importance of elephants and their role as respected creatures which were believed to bring prosperity and peace to Siam.*

The first thing loggers did was to find an open spot on the riverbank onto which they could haul the timber. They had to clear this area and remove any stumbling blocks or obstacles. When the rains began in May-June all the logs were hauled into the marshes by the elephants and floated downstream. When the river was high the elephants would push all the logs into the current. Sometimes when the current was strong at night, the workers had to carry lanterns and walk onto the logs to push the logs into the river. Loggers needed to work against the clock because nobody knew when the flow would come again.



### **Brace**

*This was carved in a beautiful vine pattern by a local craftsman.*



### **Nakara Spa Building**

This architectural design is adapted from the side view of an original Chinese-Lanna shop house. The front of Nakara Spa looks like the side of an old building. With the addition of arched windows and colonial-style door frames, it altogether captures the look of diverse architecture.





### Emblem in Front of the Nakara Spa

The emblem shows the year of the building's construction—1369 Chula Sakarat (2550 BE or 2007 CE). The Chula Sakarat or Thai minor era was widely used in the old Lanna and Sukhothai Kingdoms. The elephant (pig in Chinese zodiac) in the circle represents the year of construction in the Lanna zodiac. Because the last digit is 9, a number that Thai people believe is auspicious, the Ping Nakara Boutique Hotel and Spa celebrated its grand opening on 9th of September 2009 CE, or 09-09-09.



### Reception Area in the Spa

Exquisitely set under a chandelier, the interior décor here is Indian in origin, as is the Ayurvedic therapy on offer.

**A Suite Balcony**

The braces and banisters were carved  
in beautiful fretwork by local craftsmen.  
This balcony has ample space to relax  
and enjoy the view.



Logs would often get stuck in the bends of the river, a situation known in northern dialect as *tid kaek* (log jam). Elephants had to solve the problem by pushing and pulling the logs free.

The act of pushing logs into the river was called *ploy kwai* (let the buffaloes out!). It was a common activity along four major rivers: the Ping, the Wang, the Yom and the Nan. The Ping River originates just north of Chiang Dao District and flows through the city of Chiang Mai to Tak and then Nakorn Sawan Province.

Elephant logging was a proud piece of local knowledge (one that is quickly fading away) because few countries were as experienced in training elephants to haul logs as Thailand. Compared to other cultures, the Thai method was clearly more successful in terms of efficiency and the elephants' safety. In some places, the pachyderms were forced to use their tusks to lift the logs, which damaged their legs and disturbed their balance. Others bound chains between the elephants' mouths and the logs.

As a memorial to the importance of elephants, Ping Nakara spent two years designing and making 16 bas-relief sculptures to tell the life story of loggers and their elephants in conjunction with the history of the Charoen Prathet area.



### Dining Room

The harmony between the architecture and the décor in this dining room is one of most elegant aspects of Lanna's colonial style.

### Rows of Shops

This architecture is a mix of Chinese and Lanna influences. Beautiful Ping Nakara fretwork has been installed within the ventilators above the windows. The balcony banisters were lathed until smooth and rounded, and also have the same pattern of screen fretwork, which prevents sunlight and rainwater penetration. Looking at this building, one feels a sense of going back in time to the Chiang Mai of yesteryear.





Lanna's colonial style is still as charming as ever, and these stories will live forever as long as future generations continue to appreciate our architectural heritage ...





## Epilogue

*“Lanna Colonial: A Return to Elegance”* is part of a project aimed at conserving the priceless beauty of Chiang Mai’s colonial-era buildings and the gingerbread houses of the past. It is intended as a chronicle to tell the story of how ancient architecture changes over time, and to preserve our ancestors’ heritage.

The first step of this book started a long time ago when I began admiring the elegance of these buildings. My memory of this past era is as clear as if it were yesterday. The attachment I felt toward my homeland inspired me to research this period and examine the old stories that were passed down to me. My desire to maintain the past became the foundation of what has become the Ping Nakara Building on Charoen Prathet Road. This book evolved later, the product of years of local knowledge and collecting stories from the past.

Before this book came to fruition, many people helped and gave me the inner strength and faith in what I was doing. Without these people this mission would not have succeeded, so I thank all of you who have been involved with this project.

My gratitude extends to our ancestors who created and collected all the art that has evolved into such classical and valued heritage today. Thank you to the team who have played such a big part in researching and designing this building—they have helped create the Ping Nakara, which stands as a testimony against the ravages of time. I would especially like to thank the architecture team from Idealist studio: Suthisak Lertriluck and Ing-orn Prajannuan, and the construction team led by Ampon Chaiyanam who showed great determination in completing this job.

Thank you to those who worked in managing and publishing *“Lanna Colonial: A Return to Elegance”*: the writer Vicom Kittirattanachai; illustrator Sumit Temdee; translator Kannikar Kumtun; proofreaders Colin Hinshelwood and Andrew Forbes; and book design by Within Design Co., Ltd.





### **Passing Down Heritage to the Next Generation**

On the reverse side of the pediment in front of the hotel is an inscription which records this information for future generations. It reads:

“Built by Sumana-Chairat Usavangkul; pillar placed at the auspicious time on Wednesday 24 October, 2550 BE. Designed by Idealist Studio. Constructed by Ampon Chaiyanam. Completed and opened on 9 September 2552 BE.”



Thank you to everyone who has corrected the data, and offered advice and other useful information: Joseph Keeler, Simon Robson, Pimrapee Thungkasemvathana, Ariel Oreta, and several other people whose names I have not mentioned. A big thank you to everyone in my family, especially Sumana Usavangkul (Daengthongdee) and Rhana Usavangkul who advised and supported me throughout this project, and without whom it would not have succeeded.

We hope that our combined effort will inspire everyone to conserve our ancestors' heritage, and to help it prosper in the Lanna Kingdom forever.

Chairat Usavangkul  
Editor





**“Sotatee Hontu Nirantarang”**

May happiness spread to everyone for eternity



**“Lanna Colonial”** is an architectural combination of colonial buildings or *Teuk Farang* introduced to Thailand during the era of Kings Rama IV and V, and the local arts, crafts and building techniques of the time. Together they form one of the most elegant and distinctive styles of architecture.

Although Siam and Lanna were never colonized by the West, they were always open to external influences and readily absorbed and adapted those they found amenable. This open-mindedness towards foreign arts and cultures led to a fortuitous architectural mingling in the Lanna Colonial style, creating a beauty which will last forever.

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