

WORLD CITIES CULTURE FORUM

BRITISH COUNCIL

A REGION ON THE RISE

CULTURE AND CREATIVITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN CITIES

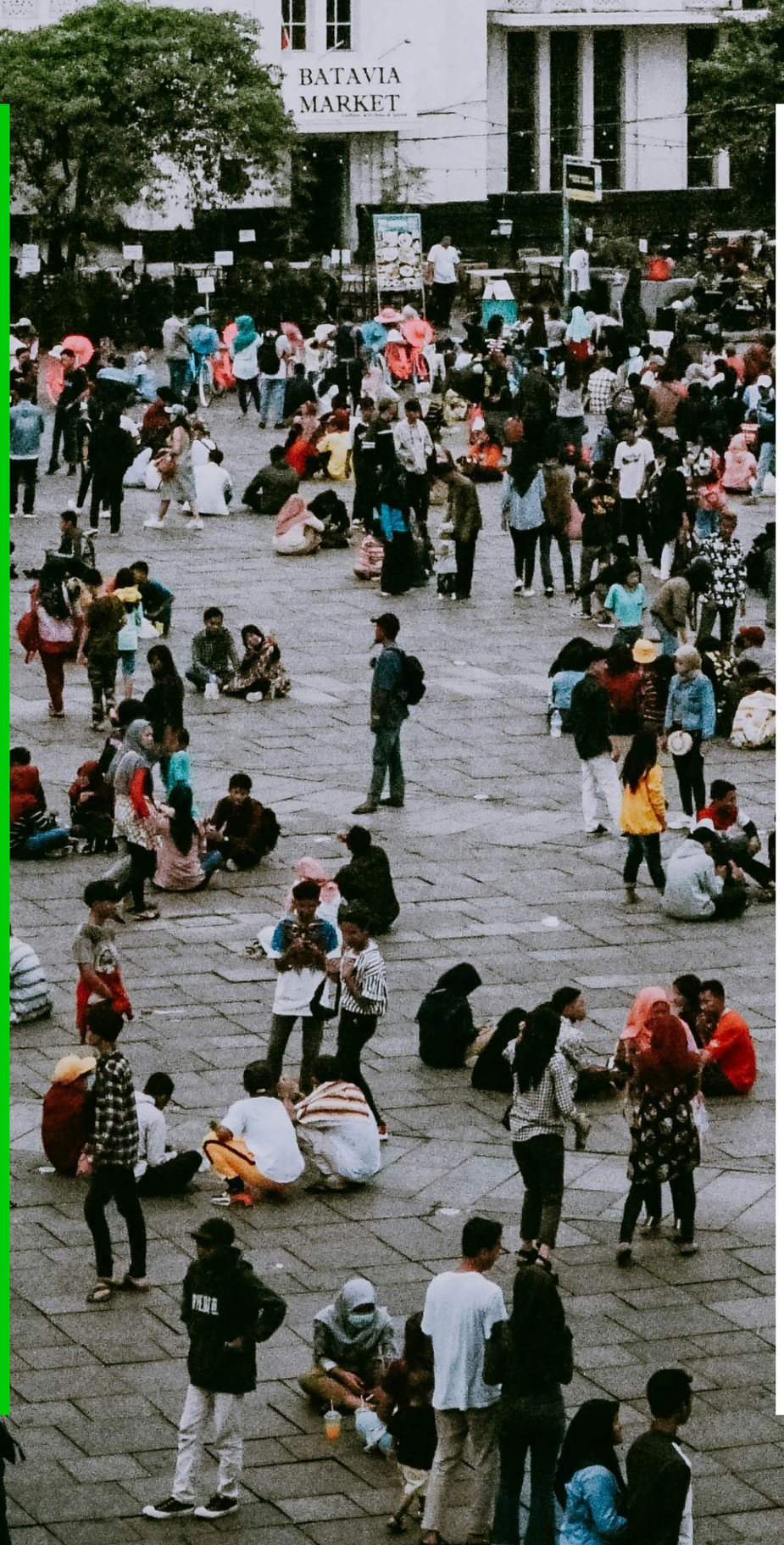
BANGKOK | HANOI | JAKARTA | KUALA LUMPUR | METRO MANILA

WORLD CITIES CULTURE FORUM

World Cities Culture Forum is the leading global network of civic leaders from over 50 creative cities from across six continents representing 260 million people. Our leaders share ideas and solutions to build a world where culture is at the heart of thriving cities. We have established the principle that culture is a golden thread in cities: supporting communities, improving health and wellbeing, attracting tourists and boosting economies.

BRITISH COUNCIL

The **British Council** builds international connections between the United Kingdom (UK) and countries worldwide, with the aim of promoting peace, prosperity and trust. It uses the UK's cultural expertise to build relationships and grow networks that explore creative ideas across 100 countries. This work continually reflects culture's need to be at the heart of making policy, as well as the benefits of collaborative approaches to culture.



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FOREWORDS

JUSTINE SIMONS OBE



Founder, World Cities Culture Forum and Deputy Mayor for Culture and the Creative Industries, London

Over the past 15 years, the World Cities Culture Forum has championed culture as an essential ingredient in cities. We describe culture as the golden thread supporting every aspect of city life - from tourism and economic growth to health and wellbeing. We know cities achieve more by working together and sharing our best ideas, helping us to rapidly improve life for our citizens. We were delighted to welcome Jakarta as our first Southeast Asian city in 2024, and its Leadership Exchange with Milan has already shown what this kind of city to city collaboration can achieve.

This research, commissioned in partnership with the British Council, is a natural next step, extending our engagement across this region. Southeast Asia is one of the most dynamic urban regions in the world with rapidly growing populations and economies and culture is at the centre of this growth. From Bangkok's creative districts to Kuala Lumpur's heritage-led regeneration, from Hanoi's creative city agenda to Jakarta's cultural infrastructure, and Metro Manila's diverse cultural ecosystems – culture is defining city identities across the region.

Our research shows there are three ingredients that turn creative energy into lasting change. The combination of strong leadership and governance; people coming together in partnership and policy backed up by data. Together, this combination enables culture to flourish.

The cities featured in this research are defining a distinctly Southeast Asian approach to culture-led urban development. Their experiences offer valuable lessons not only for the region, but for cities around the world seeking to build more inclusive, creative and sustainable futures.

I would like to thank our partners at British Council, the research team across Bangkok, Hanoi, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Metro Manila, and all the cultural leaders, policymakers and organisations who contributed their expertise to this research. Their insights demonstrate the extraordinary role of Southeast Asian cities in leading conversations about culture-led urban development.

We look forward to deepening these partnerships and working together to unlock the power of culture in cities everywhere.

© Photo by Rohim Ari Iz

FOREWORDS

SUMMER XIA

Country Director Indonesia and Director for ASEAN,
British Council



Southeast Asia is emerging as one of the world's most dynamic cultural regions. Its cities are growing rapidly, its creative economies are expanding, and its young, connected populations are reshaping how culture is created, shared and experienced.

I am delighted to introduce this report on the cultural landscapes of five vibrant cities: Jakarta, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Hanoi and Metro Manila.

Home to more than 680 million people, Southeast Asia combines extraordinary cultural diversity with growing creative ambition. Across the region, culture is embedded in everyday life, expressed through heritage, contemporary arts, festivals, public spaces and thriving creative sectors such as film, music, design, architecture, fashion and digital media. Increasingly, these cultural assets are also recognised as drivers of innovation, economic opportunity and social cohesion.

The cities featured in this report demonstrate how culture can contribute to more resilient, inclusive and people-centred urban development. Through creative entrepreneurship, cultural placemaking, heritage preservation and digital innovation, they are addressing complex challenges while strengthening community identity and opportunity.

At the British Council, we believe culture plays a vital role in building more peaceful, prosperous and connected societies. Across Southeast Asia, we work with artists, cultural organisations, creative entrepreneurs and policymakers to support collaboration, skills development, research and policy exchange. Our partnership with the World Cities Culture Forum reflects a shared commitment to strengthening evidence, fostering international networks and championing the role of culture in shaping the cities of the future.

The experiences captured in this report show that Southeast Asia is not simply participating in global conversations on culture and urban development. It is helping to lead them. As cities continue to evolve, culture will remain essential to ensuring that growth is inclusive, sustainable and human-centred.

I hope this report inspires new partnerships, fresh thinking and deeper collaboration across Southeast Asia and beyond.

SOUTHEAST ASIA:
A REGION ON THE RISE

"Southeast Asia's cities are not merely recipients of global cultural trends. They are active producers, building the institutions, policies, and creative ecosystems that will shape how culture is governed in the 21st century."

The eleven nations that make up the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have a combined population of 684 million[1], making Southeast Asia the world's third biggest market and its fifth biggest economy[2], growing at a rate of nearly 5 per cent a year.[3] It is a region of great cultural diversity with an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage and a dynamic contemporary culture that encompasses traditional crafts and performance, food, music, visual arts and highly innovative digital content.

Creativity is woven into daily life across the region: in **Bangkok's** temple murals, street-food stalls, and riverside markets; **Hanoi's** silk-weaving and water-puppet craft villages; **Jakarta's** batik ateliers, gamelan ensembles, and kampung mural streets; **Kuala Lumpur's** overlapping Malay, Chinese, and Tamil festival calendars; and **Metro Manila's** fiesta processions, jeepney art, and street food. Such vibrant culture helps drive a tourist economy which, although badly hit by the pandemic of 2020, has already recovered to represent almost 10 per cent of the region's GDP.[4]

In common with every region of the world, the pace of urbanisation in Southeast Asia is relentless. More than half the population live in cities, expected to grow to 66 per cent by 2050[5], with all the associated pressures on housing, services and opportunities. As the region moves away from agriculture and the export of commodities towards labour intensive manufacturing and service industries, its creative and cultural resources are essential in the drive towards an ideas-based economy. This was recognised through the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework, launched in 2025, with the aim of making the region a global leader by 2045.[6] With its underlying rationale that economic ambition must work in balance with social, cultural and environmental factors, the Framework makes clear that economic growth and cultural dynamism are inextricably linked, and the implementation must address the everyday lives of individuals and the community if it is to be sustainable.

In this fast-changing environment the **British Council** and **World Cities Culture Forum** have come together to study the cultural and creative economy landscape in five of the region's major cities - Bangkok, Hanoi, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Metro Manila. Between them, these five cities account for around 48 million people and are the principal drivers of the region's prosperity and future prospects.[7] They are all members of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, across the fields of design, film and literature.[8]

Research was conducted between February and April 2026, combining in-depth interviews, stakeholder roundtables and consultations with ASEAN political leaders, national cultural agencies, city governments, UNESCO Creative Cities representatives, researchers, practitioners and independent cultural organisations across all five cities.[9] The purpose of the research was to identify the priorities, challenges, and opportunities for culture in the region, with the aim of developing recommendations for city governments, national agencies, regional bodies, and international partners.

BANGKOK | HANOI | JAKARTA | KUALA LUMPUR | METRO MANILA



THE CULTURAL POLICY LANDSCAPE TODAY

The relationship between national and local government is complex and impacts directly on cultural policy

While all five cities have their own cultural institutions and governance models, they operate within very different national policy frameworks:

- Philippines: *Philippine Development Plan for Culture and the Arts 2024–2029* and *Creative Industries Development Act* (2022)
- Thailand: *20-Year National Strategy* (2018)
- Malaysia: *National Cultural Policy* (DAKEN 2021) and *National Creative Industry Policy* (DIKN 2009)
- Viet Nam: *Politburo Resolution No. 02-NQ/TW* (2026) on building and developing the capital, Hanoi, and the *Capital Law* (2026)
- Indonesia: *Law on Advancement of Culture* (2017)

The relationship between national policy and city-level implementation is uneven and often challenging. For example, cultural governance is distributed across seventeen different local administrations in Metro Manila, and across three organisations in Bangkok making joint coordination with national policy difficult to implement.[11]

Cities with dedicated institutional structures that can complement or augment national policy, have a clear advantage; Hanoi's *Resolution No. 09-NQ/TU* positions culture as a key economic sector; Kuala Lumpur's *Warisan KL* is a nationally endorsed regeneration framework; and Jakarta's *Regional Long Term Development Plan 2025–2045* integrates culture into long-term spatial planning.[12]


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THE FIVE CITIES : A DATA SNAPSHOT



BANGKOK
THAILAND

50 creative districts
100 community book houses
47 million tourists in 2026



KUALA LUMPUR
MALAYSIA

80 music venues
40% of national creative economy employment in design
46% contribution national creative industry GDP



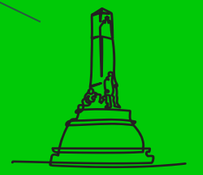
JAKARTA
INDONESIA

715 libraries and reading centres
28% jobs in creative economy
79 museums



HANOI
VIET NAM

2,098 intangible cultural heritage assets
4,850 creative businesses
1,350 craft villages



METRO MANILA
PHILIPPINES

65 museums
400 structures, parks and public spaces
940,000 creative employment

5 **Southeast Asian cities** studied across Thailand, Viet Nam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines

48M+ **POPULATION**
across the metropolitan areas of the five cities

4-8% **SHARE OF NATIONAL GDP**
generated by the creative economy across countries with available data



All five cities recognise the need for equal access to culture but some have been more successful than others in addressing it

Across all five cities, cultural production and cultural infrastructure are often concentrated in city centres, designated heritage districts, and established creative clusters, marking a common trend across global cities. This raises the challenge of geographic equity and associated problems of gentrification and displacement.

Some cities have existing practical strategies to address this:[13]

- Bangkok's 50-district creative place-making strategy, (part of its 20-Year Development Plan) addresses this by developing creative hubs across all districts in response to local needs;
- Jakarta's adaptive reuse strategy at M Bloc Space combines spatial planning, digital transformation, and inclusive economic policies;
- Kuala Lumpur's KL Festival 2026, with 90 per cent of its programmes offered free to the public, prioritises broad civic participation;
- Metro Manila's ambitious Pasig River revitalisation programme is framed explicitly as a potential unifying cultural infrastructure for the entire metropolitan region.

Although differing in implementation, these spatial strategies reflect a shared regional recognition that effective cultural policy must distribute access to culture equitably across dense, socially diverse urban populations.

All five cities lack good data and the capacity to use it effectively

A recurring structural challenge across all five cities is limited availability of comprehensive, publicly accessible, city-level creative and cultural data. Nationally collected data is often not disaggregated to city level in ways that enable rigorous comparison or local policy design.

Malaysia's *Cultural and Creative Satellite Account* 2024 is the region's most advanced measurement effort, adopting the UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics 2025 methodology.[14] The Philippines' 2025 *Philippine Creative Economy Satellite Account* provides systematic national measurement, although Metro Manila specific figures require estimation. Similarly, Bangkok currently relies primarily on national figures and UNESCO monitoring.[15]

Cities that have invested in measurement and mapping, such as Makati City in Metro Manila, through its comprehensive creative industries mapping and Hanoi through its creative hub mapping, demonstrate the advocacy and planning value that data systems can generate. [16] Momentum is continuing to grow as Hanoi is developing a city-level statistical indicator framework, and Jakarta will hold a national creative economy census in 2026.[17]

Another leading example is the *Creative City Index*, developed by the Indonesia Creative Cities Network since 2017 to measure creative economy implementation and impact at city and provincial level. The latest Index, piloted in Southeast Sulawesi Province in 2025, mapped leading sub-sectors, policy support, and strategic recommendations, and continues to develop via a shared data platform and dashboard.[18]

Without city-level measurement, cultural advocates cannot construct the economic argument for investment, and policymakers cannot target interventions where they would do most good. Data is not an administrative by-product of cultural policy in Southeast Asia. It is the precondition for having cultural policy. It is the point at which the region's governance gap becomes most visible, and most fixable.



© *Photo courtesy of Provinsi DKI Jakarta*

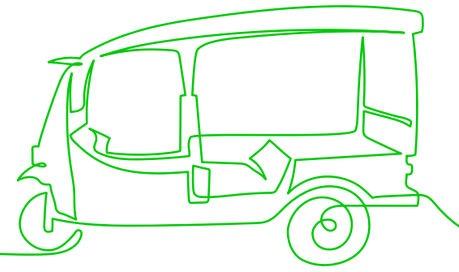
Each of the five cities has major cultural assets[19]

- Bangkok has 233 museums, 24 creative clusters and 50 creative districts.
- Metro Manila has 400 structures, parks and public spaces for public and cultural use
- Jakarta has 715 libraries and reading centres, and 300 mobile library units that circulate through schools and residential areas.
- Malaysia's design sector contributes 46 per cent of national creative industry GDP and 40 per cent of creative economy employment, with Kuala Lumpur at the centre of that ecosystem.
- Hanoi has a concentrated cultural landscape with 6,489 historical and cultural heritage sites, 2,098 intangible cultural heritage elements, and 1,350 craft villages.

These are mature, globally connected megacities in which cultural production is already central to economic life. Each one has policies and initiatives that could be of benefit to others. The question is no longer whether culture matters, but how governance, data systems, and investment structures can be organised and shared to realise culture's full potential.

The central finding of this study is that Southeast Asia's cities are not constrained by a lack of cultural assets or creative talent. They are constrained by governance systems, institutional structures, and the quality of the cultural data available to them.

Across all five cities, creative activity consistently outpaces the policy frameworks tasked with supporting it - frameworks that in most cases were not originally designed for culture at all. The binding constraint on the region's creative economy is therefore institutional rather than creative: who decides policy, how it is implemented and whether it remains consistent across the electoral cycle.



THE ASEAN CREATIVE ECONOMY SUSTAINABILITY FRAMEWORK

Southeast Asia has a significant advantage: a regional creative economy framework formally endorsed by heads of government. The ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework (ACE Sustainability Framework), is among the first of its kind to establish a shared direction across a multi-national region.[20]

It is built around Four Strategic Outcomes (Social, Cultural, Economic, Environmental), 10 Guiding Principles, and 13 Strategic Priorities and operates at three levels:[21]

- **Regionally**: shared language and accountability enabling peer comparison, joint advocacy, and collective positioning.
- **Nationally**: government mandate to elevate creative economy policy within planning, making the case for budget, data, and institutional infrastructure.
- **Locally (city level)**: an enabling environment to position cultural strategies as contributions to a regionally significant agenda.

A Holistic Framework Beyond Economic Growth

Rather than cataloguing industries or debating definitions, it is organised around sustainability outcomes. Jonathan G T Tan, Head of the Culture and Information Division of the Sustainable Development Directorate at the ASEAN Secretariat explains it was *"an intentional move to shift the conversation from taxonomy to purpose, not just what counts as creative economy, but what outcomes we want to achieve."* [22]

The ten guiding principles make clear the creative economy is a whole-of-government responsibility, grounded in evidence, and designed to be activated from the ground up- with cities at the key activation point.

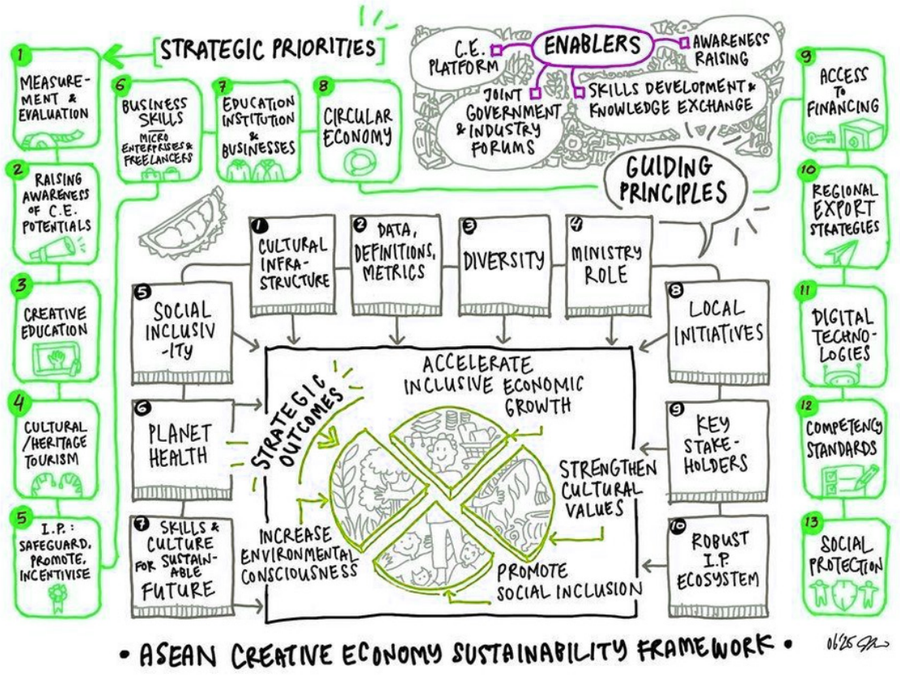
Closing the Gap Between Adoption and Action

Translating regional ambition into city-level policy and practice is still at an early stage. A current priority is to raise awareness of the framework and develop companion implementation guides.[23] At the city level, this research found engagement is primarily through the tourism and income generation lens, reflecting the need to justify public spending. This leaves the framework's social and environmental dimensions underused, demonstrating a gap between regional policy and local practice.

Intermediaries, Hubs, and the Infrastructure That Actually Matters

Asked what cities should prioritise, Tan points not to a programme or a funding instrument but to the *"relationship architecture between policymakers and the creative ecosystem"* as the key *"to unlock more meaningful interventions."*

Figure A. ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework, 2025. Illustration by Dwinita Larasati.[24]



City programming is largely festival and event focused, visible, but temporary. What's needed is durable, embedded infrastructure like creative hubs and intermediary organisations that translate community, market, and technology needs into evidence policymakers can act on. Cities like Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok are pioneering year-round, community-rooted, and sustainable business models, which could potentially include Creative Land Trusts, that survive political and funding cycles.

Building the Evidence Base

Strategic Priority 1 commits to evidence-based measurement and evaluation, including a regional platform to analyse shared indicators and encourage member states to commit to regular data collection - helping cities build stronger policy cases, particularly where capacity is limited.[25] Key obstacles include incompatible classification frameworks, market-sensitive data that's difficult to share, and the ongoing need to justify data collection as valuable. Regional data capability is a long-term project, but cities building data infrastructure now will be better positioned to integrate with it, and make the case for investment with evidence.



KEY FINDINGS

1 GOVERNANCE

ONE CITY, TOO MANY RULEBOOKS

All five cities are constrained by overlapping and often conflicting policies. Those with dedicated local cultural governance structures (including ring fenced budgets and long term planning authority) can more effectively integrate cultural and creative policies with wider economic and spatial planning needs, demonstrating stronger cultural policy development than those with distributed governance.

2 EVIDENCE

RICH IN CULTURE, POOR IN DATA

All five cities have a diversity of cultural strengths, ranging from culinary arts and traditional crafts to digital content creation, but lack the data and data systems necessary to enable the fully informed strategic planning and investment that could benefit the sector.

3 URBAN DEVELOPMENT

OLD ROOTS, NEW GROWTH

All five cities see cultural and creative activity as key assets in urban regeneration, restoring and protecting heritage, stimulating local neighbourhood economies and supporting city identity.

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KEY FINDINGS

4 THE CREATIVE WORKFORCE

THE SYSTEM WASN'T BUILT FOR SMALL BUSINESSES AND FREELANCERS

All five cities' cultural and creative work is dominated by small enterprises, freelancers, and informal workers, yet governance, grants, regulations, and data frameworks are largely designed for formal enterprises.

5 UNESCO DESIGNATION

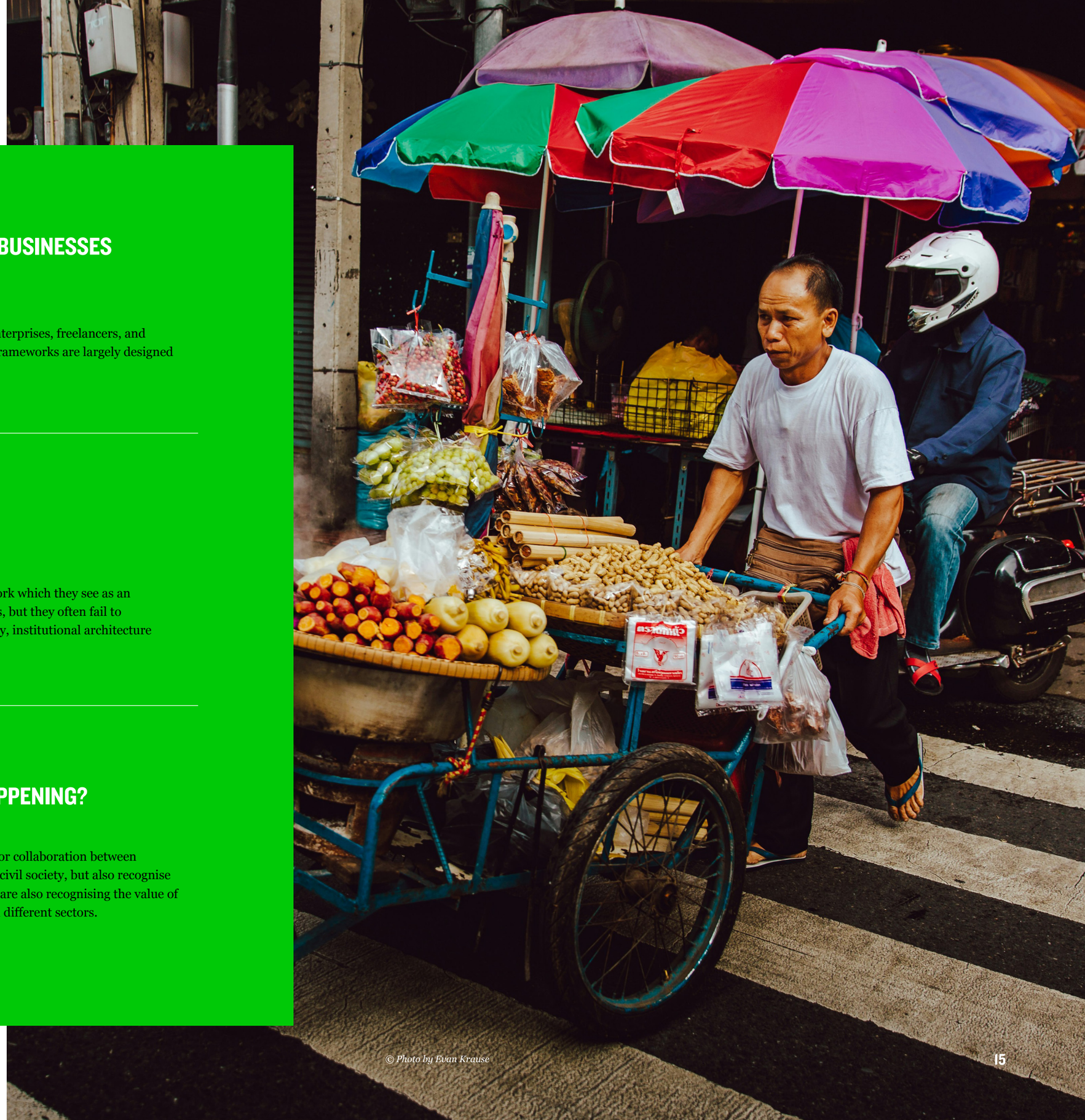
GREAT BADGE, UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

All five cities are represented in the UNESCO Creative City Network which they see as an asset in articulating a strategic vision and convening stakeholders, but they often fail to leverage the value of this designation as a driver of practical policy, institutional architecture or mutual learning.

6 AWARENESS

EVERYONE AGREES, SO WHY ISN'T IT HAPPENING?

All five cities recognise the need for and the benefits of cross-sector collaboration between cultural agencies, urban planning, ministries, private sector, and civil society, but also recognise that to achieve such a level of collaboration is challenging. Some are also recognising the value of intermediary organisations as agents in building bridges between different sectors.



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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the six key findings, the evidence of the five city chapters and the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework, policy recommendations have been developed addressed to city governments, national agencies, regional bodies, and international partners, including the World Cities Culture Forum.

1 GOVERNANCE

Develop stronger, dedicated governance structures with long-term strategies

Cities benefit from dedicated cultural governance structures, with independent mandates, long-term planning authority, and budgets separated from tourism portfolios. This can be facilitated by collaboration and partnership with departments and agencies responsible for economic and planning issues at national as well as city level.

2 EVIDENCE

Develop better data collection and the skills to use data effectively

Build shared city-level and regional data systems to support evidence and advocacy, with support from organisations such as World Cities Culture Forum and the British Council. Four measures should be pursued together:

- Establish **city cultural observatories** with a standing mandate, budget and publication cycle, beginning in cities that already hold mapping capacity;
- Adopt a common set of **standardised city-level cultural indicators**, so that figures become comparable between cities rather than merely available within them;
- Develop an ASEAN-wide cultural statistics framework under ACE Sustainability Framework Strategic Priority 1, which commits member states to evidence-based methods of measurement;[26]
- **Align all of the above with the UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics 2025**, so that national satellite accounts and city observatories remain interoperable as both develop.[27]

3 URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Develop durable, inclusive models for culture-led development and collaboration

Cities should invest in cross-sector collaboration and place-based regeneration strategies built for the long term, not the election cycle. Two measures should be pursued together:

- **Invest in intermediary organisations that foster cross-sector collaboration and hold long-term mandates and funding security** across political cycles - Think City in Kuala Lumpur, BAPPEDA in Jakarta, and the NCCA in Metro Manila offer useful models, alongside the need for regular dialogue between creative communities and policymakers to support ACE Sustainability Framework implementation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Embed **cultural value, community benefit, equitable returns, and awareness of displacement risk into culture-led regeneration strategies** from day one. Jakarta's M Bloc Space and Kuala Lumpur's Warisan KL design principles offer transferable frameworks, and the World Cities Culture Forum should support a regional inclusive heritage activation toolkit drawn from these models.

4 THE CREATIVE WORKFORCE

Develop policy frameworks that address the realities of informal workers and micro-businesses

Access to **workspace, access to finance, skills and marketing** are all essential tools for raising the quality and commerciality of a workforce that is largely informal. Low-barrier initiatives such as **zone-based business integration, peer networks** and **IP guidance** are more practical and realistic than requiring formalisation. ASEAN should pilot voluntary codes of practice with cities like Metro Manila, Jakarta, and Kuala Lumpur (ACE Sustainability Framework Strategic Priority 13).[28]

5 UNESCO DESIGNATION

Use UNESCO Creative City designation as a platform for institutional development, not an endpoint

Designation should be the **beginning of a sustained development programme**, such as Kuala Lumpur's development of Warisan KL. World Cities Culture Forum, in partnership with ASEAN, should support **regional peer-learning**, generating **cross-city comparative insights.**

6 AWARENESS

Develop a regional programme for cities to explore and share models of governance, policy-making and finance

The real gap isn't creativity, it's **institutional infrastructure** and **evidence**. A Southeast Asia cities programme exploring the structural conditions for policy development, governance, data, spatial strategy, financing, and peer learning under the ACE Sustainability Framework mandate, linked to World Cities Culture Forum's global network, would enable South to South learning. It would help all five cities develop culture as a key element of future growth and would contribute to the success of the ACE Sustainability Framework.



© Photo by Ryan Le

BANGKOK

Thailand

CITY DATA

Geographical Area [29] 1,568.74 km²

Total Population [30] 11,544,000 (estimate)

GDP per Capita [31] USD 21,000 (estimate)

Main Industries

Manufacturing, Banking and Financial Services, Trade and Tourism.

UNESCO Connections [32]

UNESCO Creative City of Design (2019)

Annual Number of Tourists [33]

32.40 million (International); 14.80 (Domestic)

Number of Museums [36] 233

Number of Creative Clusters [35] 24

Number of Creative Districts [37]

13 Creative event parks, 50 Creative Districts

Unique Indicator [34]

Over 100 community-level "Book Houses" offering library and cultural activity services.



© Photo by Mos Sukjaroenkraisri

"Bangkok's diverse neighbourhoods have become urban creative living laboratories, each with its own distinctive cultural identity and creative potential for achieving sustainable urban solutions"

Dr. Sanon Wangsrangboon:

Deputy Governor of Bangkok Metropolitan Administration

CITY OVERVIEW

Bangkok, known in Thai as "*Krung Thep*" or the "*City of Angels*", is a city of extraordinary contrasts: a dynamic metropolis where historic temples, bustling markets and skyscrapers coexist, and deep-rooted cultural traditions are constantly being remixed amidst rapid modernisation. As Thailand's capital and political, economic, and cultural centre, Bangkok serves as both a municipality and a province within the broader Bangkok Metropolitan Region. The city has abundant creative talent and institutional will yet currently lacks the connected governance to align these strengths into a clear strategy. Understanding Bangkok as a creative city means examining not only what the city does, but how these challenges have evolved, and what other cities can learn from both the problem and the emerging solutions.



© Photo by Supitcha Tovivich

CULTURAL POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

Bangkok's creative development is guided by the city's Development Strategy: *9 Dimensions for Better Bangkok* (2023-2026), which embed creativity and culture within a wider vision of urban quality of life spanning safety, mobility, sustainability, health, and inclusive education.[38] This medium-term action plan also reinforces these policies, highlighting Bangkok's commitment to creativity as a driver of sustainable development, quality of life, and public participation[39].

The institutional landscape supporting this work is multi-layered with three bodies:

- The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration manages public cultural spaces, festivals, libraries, and urban heritage.
- The Creative Economy Agency drives the transformation of creativity into economic value through design, innovation, and support for creative clusters.
- The Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration frames culture as a tourism and sustainability asset, managing destination development.

Each institution is competent within its own remit, but none is positioned to coordinate across the others. Thailand is transitioning toward a more integrated, multisectoral approach to cultural development, but institutional fragmentation, uneven participation, and limited strategic coordination continue to constrain policy effectiveness. Closing this gap will strengthen Bangkok's ability to convert its culture and creativity into consistent, city-wide outcomes and a more coherent governance framework should be a central policy priority.

This is supported by Governor Chadchart Sittipunt who noted that *"The heart of our work is building mutual trust between the government sector, the private sector, and the public sector."*[40]

CULTURE AND CREATIVITY ECONOMY

Bangkok's diverse creative economy includes fashion, design, advertising, architecture, cultural production, and a rapidly expanding digital content sector. In 2019, Bangkok became a UNESCO Creative City of Design, strengthening its international position and commitment to using design and creativity for urban transformation, innovation, cultural exchange, and sustainable development aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. The COVID-19 pandemic caused the sector to adapt to new forms of collaboration, innovation, and digital engagement to strengthen creatives resilience through a period of acute disruption.

Today, Thailand's creative industries generate an estimated USD 42.4 billion, contributing 8.01 per cent of national GDP and supporting nearly one million jobs, with Bangkok accounting for 60–70 per cent of that output.[41] However, its creative economy is too large and dispersed for any single actor to coordinate alone and with most of the country's creative capacity concentrated in one city, coordination challenges in Bangkok are not just a local issue but a national one.

CULTURAL PLACEMAKING

Creative placemaking is a key shared policy priority, with the development of new creative hubs across Bangkok's 50 districts supported by the *20-Year Development Plan for Bangkok*.[42] The Creative Economy Agency has promoted creative districts as catalysts for social and economic transformation,[43] and placemaking functions as a coordination mechanism by anchoring multiple agencies' work to a shared geography, overcoming many of the existing collaboration challenges. The *Creative District Development projec*t 2025,[44] managed by Bangkok Metropolitan Administration's Division of Culture and Tourism, is actively building creative hubs and long-term community partnerships across Bangkok's districts, strengthening local identity, stimulating community tourism, and connecting neighbourhood-level creative activity to the city's global profile. Projects such as the Phra Pokklao Bridge creative space, where an underused urban space became transformed into a vibrant hub for culture, learning, and community engagement, show how this approach is having tangible impact across the city.

"Bangkok has turned to the power of creativity and design to forge a path towards resilience and sustainability."

Chadchart Sittipunt

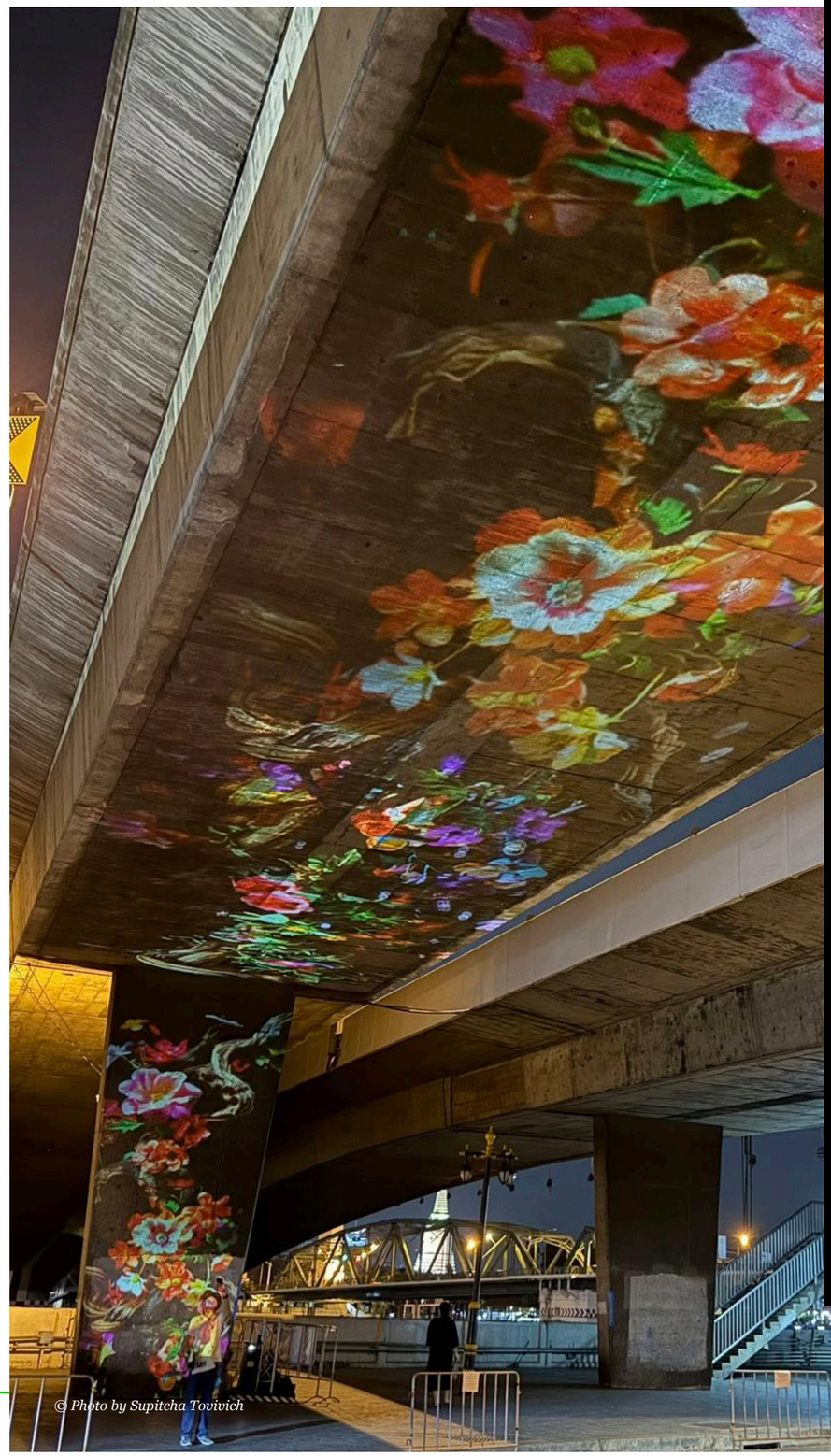
Governor of Bangkok


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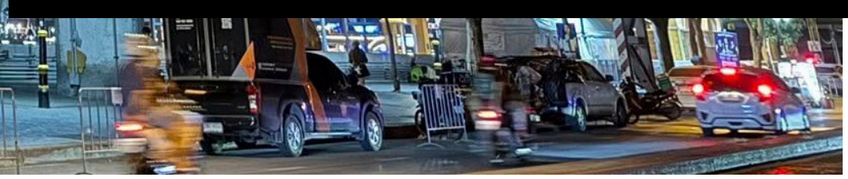
SOFT POWER

Cultural policy is also strengthening Bangkok's global position. In 2022, Thailand ranked 35th in the *Global Soft Power Index*, reflecting international recognition of its cultural and creative industries.[45] This was influenced by Bangkok's major events programme including *Bangkok Design Week*, which attracted approximately 465,000 visitors in 2026.[46] This achievement is connected to Thailand's national soft power strategy, anchored by the Ministry of Culture's *5Fs Framework: Food, Fight, Film, Fashion, and Festival.*[47] Each pillar is championed by different agencies, reinforcing the pattern of strong individual initiatives, with weaker connective tissue between them.

What makes Bangkok distinctive among its peer cities is the sheer density of its creative potential, concentrated within a single metropolitan region. With continued investment in creative hubs, place-making, and cross-sector collaboration, Bangkok can become a regional and global model for resilient, people-centred, and culturally driven urban development. To translate cultural policy into meaningful practice, future strategies should cultivate a holistic learning ecosystem, that uses culture to co-create places, foster belonging, and ensure shared benefits for all residents in an increasingly multicultural society.



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CASE STUDY:

THE RUNFLOWER RIVERSIDE AREA DURING BANGKOK DESIGN WEEK 2026

Beneath the Phra Pokklao Bridge, where the Chao Phraya River meets Bangkok's historic flower market district of Pak Khlong Talad, a decade-long creative placemaking initiative has quietly transformed a neglected space into one of its most beloved public destinations, the **Runflower Riverside Area**, through immersive floral light mapping and artistic installations.

Pak Khlong Talad, was once a thriving market hub in Bangkok but faced a decline in business from growing competition from online flower sales and new wholesale channels. The area held as a public space but lacked a clear identity or reason for people to visit outside market hours. In 2016, as part of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration's city beautification project, Associate Professor Supitcha Tovivich from Silpakorn University introduced a design thinking approach to the area. The project evolved into a key component of the *Bangkok Creative District* programme and was incorporated into *Bangkok Design Week* in 2023. By 2026, it involved academics, design students, professional designers, and local communities, with financial support from Creative Economy Agency and Silpakorn University and contributions from numerous partners, achieving the kind of collaboration that has struggled elsewhere.

Over the 11-day 2026 event, 21,591 visitors attended at the riverside area and 60,946 (for all venues), spending an average of 309 Baht per person and generating approximately 6.67 million Baht in economic activity for local businesses.[48] The results went beyond the event itself as 98.5 per cent of surveyed participants expressed an intention to return and 72.5 per cent said they would revisit even without a special event.[49] This points to a genuine shift in how residents relate to a space that was previously overlooked.

The Runflower Riverside Area is proof of concept that Bangkok's abundant creative resources can be deliberately coordinated around a shared site and timeline, leading to meaningful impact. The Pak Khlong initiative illustrates Bangkok's broader design philosophy: that the most effective urban transformations are not top-down master plans but cumulative, community-embedded processes, where public agencies, universities, local businesses, and residents co-create places that belong to everyone.

HANOI

Viet Nam

"Hanoi is the first city in Viet Nam which has a specific resolution on the development of cultural industries"

Nguyen Van Phong,

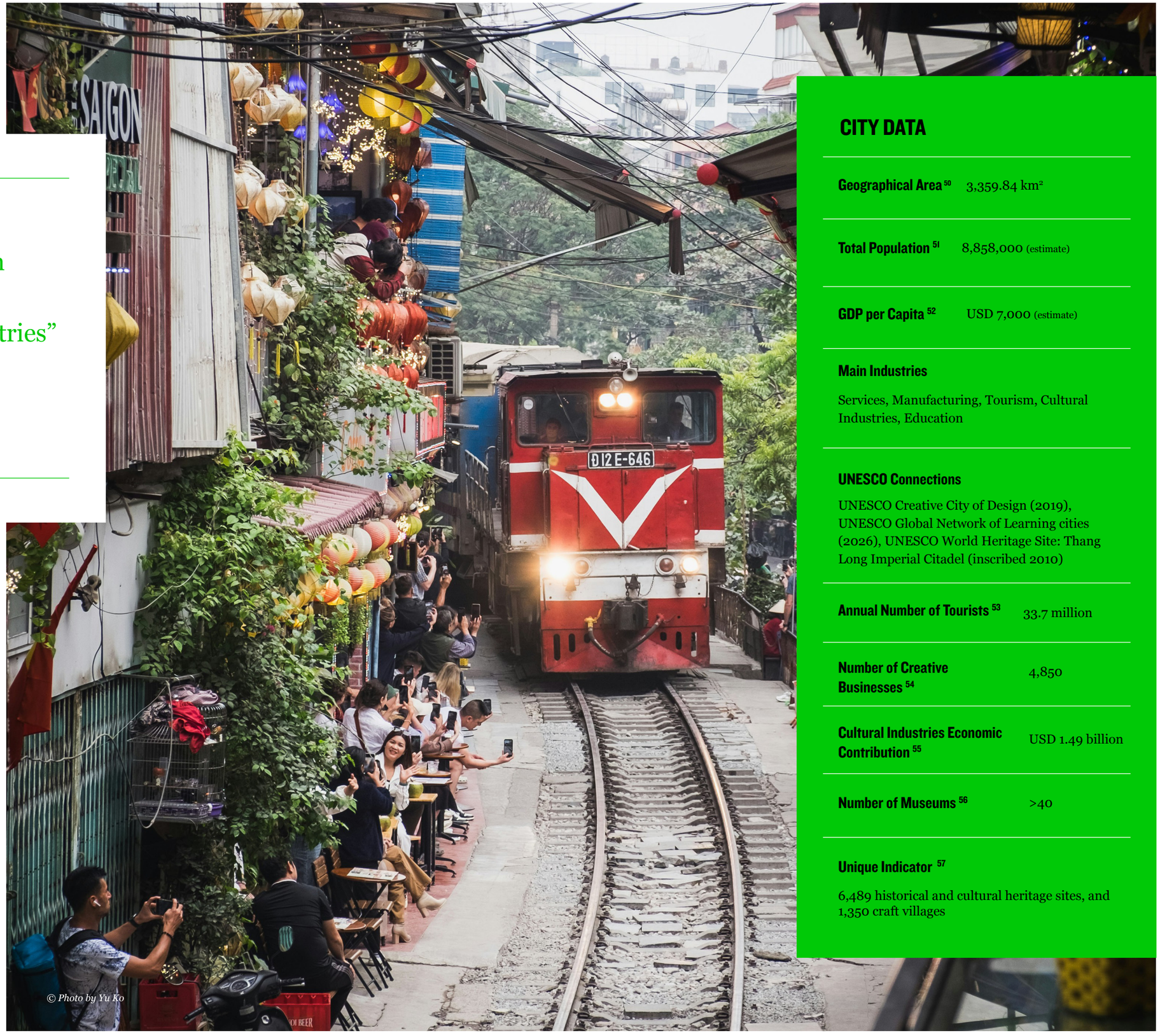
Permanent Deputy Secretary of the Hanoi Party Committee

CITY OVERVIEW

Hanoi is the capital of Viet Nam, with a history spanning more than a millennium. As a centrally governed municipality, the city benefits from an integrated approach to cultural governance, aligning closely with national policy and advancing its cultural development strategies in harmony with national priorities. Hanoi represents one of the most concentrated cultural landscapes in Southeast Asia, and its cultural vibrancy is not only isolated in designated districts; it is woven into the fabric of everyday life, in neighbourhood markets, living craft traditions, and public spaces shaped by centuries of memory.

CULTURE AND CREATIVE ECONOMY

Hanoi's culture and creative economy combines tradition with emerging creative industries including crafts, performing arts, design, gastronomy, media, and digital content, which are supported by human capital, heritage, and infrastructure.



© Photo by Yu Ko

CITY DATA

Geographical Area [50]	3,359.84 km²
Total Population [51]	8,858,000 (estimate)
GDP per Capita [52]	USD 7,000 (estimate)
Main Industries	Services, Manufacturing, Tourism, Cultural Industries, Education
UNESCO Connections	UNESCO Creative City of Design (2019), UNESCO Global Network of Learning cities (2026), UNESCO World Heritage Site: Thang Long Imperial Citadel (inscribed 2010)
Annual Number of Tourists [53]	33.7 million
Number of Creative Businesses [54]	4,850
Cultural Industries Economic Contribution [55]	USD 1.49 billion
Number of Museums [56]	>40
Unique Indicator [57]	6,489 historical and cultural heritage sites, and 1,350 craft villages



The sector's growth reflects this. In 2025, arts, entertainment and recreation generated around VND 9,245 billion, growing 12.76 per cent year on year – the second-fastest rate among Hanoi's service sectors.[58] The city's professional arts companies staged 3,266 performances that year to a combined audience of 1.4 million.[59] Tourism is another major pillar, in 2025 it generated more than USD 5.1 billion in revenue, up 21.5 per cent on the previous year.[60]

The city also remains a leader in handicraft production and export, such as ceramics, silk, lacquerware, bamboo, and embroidery, contributing to Viet Nam's USD 3.5 billion national handicraft export turnover.[61] Much of this is anchored in the city's extensive craft village system. Craft villages such as Bat Trang, Van Phuc Silk Village, and Quat Dong Embroidery Village have evolved into destinations blending cultural heritage, design innovation, and experiential creative economy models. Gastronomy has also emerged as a key creative sector with streets like Ta Hien, Tong Duy Tan and Ngu Xa, blending food, festivals, and nightlife into the city's creative identity. However, structural challenges remain, as most of Hanoi's creative enterprises are micro or small businesses with limited capacity to scale, and a significant informal creative sector particularly in craft production.

CULTURAL POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

Hanoi's cultural policy is mainly administered through the city's Department of Culture and Sports (from August, 2026, Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism) and is defined by long-term vision and cross sector integration, with culture understood as foundational in shaping governance, education, and economic planning. In 2022, Hanoi was the first locality in Viet Nam to issue a dedicated resolution on cultural industries positioning them as a driver of sustainable development, and advocating for the balance between heritage preservation and innovation, alongside market-orientation and professional development, community access, ecosystem building, and international integration.[62] Priority areas include cultural tourism, crafts, gastronomy, design, and digital creativity, and promoting public-private partnerships across government, business, universities, and creative communities.

A 2026 Politburo Resolution has since established a hundred-year vision for Hanoi as a "*civilized, modern, creative, and happy"* global city, with cultural industries targeted to contribute more than 10 per cent of GRDP by 2035.[63] The 2026 *Capital Law* grants Hanoi expanded autonomy to pilot smart city models, innovation ecosystems, and transit-oriented development, with culture embedded throughout.[64]

Hanoi has also begun developing a statistical indicator framework to better measure culture's economic contribution, supporting more targeted, evidence-based policy.[65]

CONNECTING HERITAGE AND INNOVATION

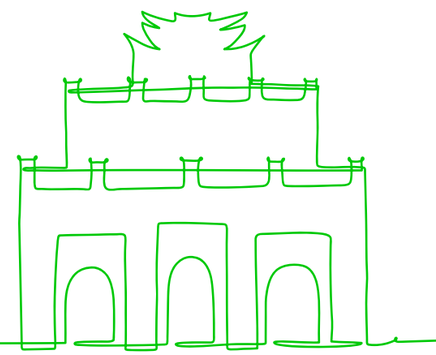
Since it's UNESCO City of Design designation in 2019, Hanoi has treated design as a cross-sector tool linking heritage, urban regeneration, tourism, and youth. The city is shifting from heritage preservation towards ecosystem-building[66] through strengthening the *Hanoi Center for Coordination of Creative Activities,* and expanding the *Cultural and Creative Hubs Network*, connecting creators, businesses, and young entrepreneurs, alongside continued investment in creative infrastructure, with cross-agency coordination from Culture and Sports, Finance, and Tourism departments. This is reinforced by committing over VND 14 trillion (~USD 560 million) to 579 heritage projects alongside increasing support for emerging creative communities.[67]

Hanoi exemplifies a model shaped by strong state leadership, abundant cultural resources, and growing international engagement, positioning creativity as a dynamic system where culture is actively produced and embedded in everyday city life. The integration of heritage and contemporary creativity offers a distinctive model, though one still requiring further institutional development to fully capture and retain value.

"Hanoi puts culture at the center of the city's socio-economic development strategies. The interconnected values of culture, identity, and creativity serve as a foundation for the city's development."

Dr. Pham Thi Lan Anh,

Head of the Heritage Management Division,
Hanoi Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism





© Photo courtesy of Hanoi Creative City Website

CASE STUDY:

HANOI FESTIVAL OF CREATIVE DESIGN

Launched following the 2019 UNESCO Creative City of Design designation, the **Hanoi Festival of Creative Design** activates underused heritage and industrial spaces, including the Gia Lam Train Factory and Hang Dau Water Tower, repurposing them for exhibitions, performances, workshops, and design competitions.

From around 30,000 visitors in its first edition in 2022 across 50 creative spaces, to approximately 200,000 visitors at its main venue in 2023, it's growth reflects strong public appetite.[68] Recognising that a single annual event would limit momentum, policy makers and festival organisers expanded the festival to a year-round presence within Hanoi's cultural industries ecosystem. Extending the festival's reach across the whole city, not just its historic core, remains a defining ambition, with a focus on social inclusion, designing accessible public spaces for different ages, backgrounds, and abilities. It also aims to build a creative community capable of sustaining a cultural economy. Hanoi Festival of Creative Design has become both a platform for experimentation across performing arts, digital creativity, and craft, and a knowledge hub connecting policymakers, researchers, and practitioners across Southeast Asia.

A mixed financial model, combining free public programming with paid experiences products and services reduced reliance on public funding while opening market opportunities for creative enterprises. The governance model was deliberately multi-layered, bringing together the Hanoi People's Committee and the Department of Culture and Sports with the Viet Nam Association of Architects, international partners like UNESCO, universities including Viet Nam National University, and private enterprises such as Hanoi Grapevine.

Hanoi Festival of Creative Design has created new visibility and market access for creative industries, while widening access to culture especially for young people. It embodies Hanoi's wider cultural strategy: moving from event-based promotion toward genuine ecosystem-building, where heritage is not merely conserved but actively reactivated as a platform for contemporary creativity, economic opportunity, and inclusive urban life.

CITY DATA

Geographical Area [69] 7,076.31 km² (Metropolitan Area)

Total Population [70] 11,100,929

GDP per Capita [71] USD 21,166

Main Industries

Manufacturing and Service Sectors, Electronics, Automotive, Chemicals, Mechanical Engineering, Biomedical Sciences

UNESCO Connections

UNESCO City of Literature (2021)

Annual Number of Tourists [72]

2.54 million (International); 87.2 million (Domestic)

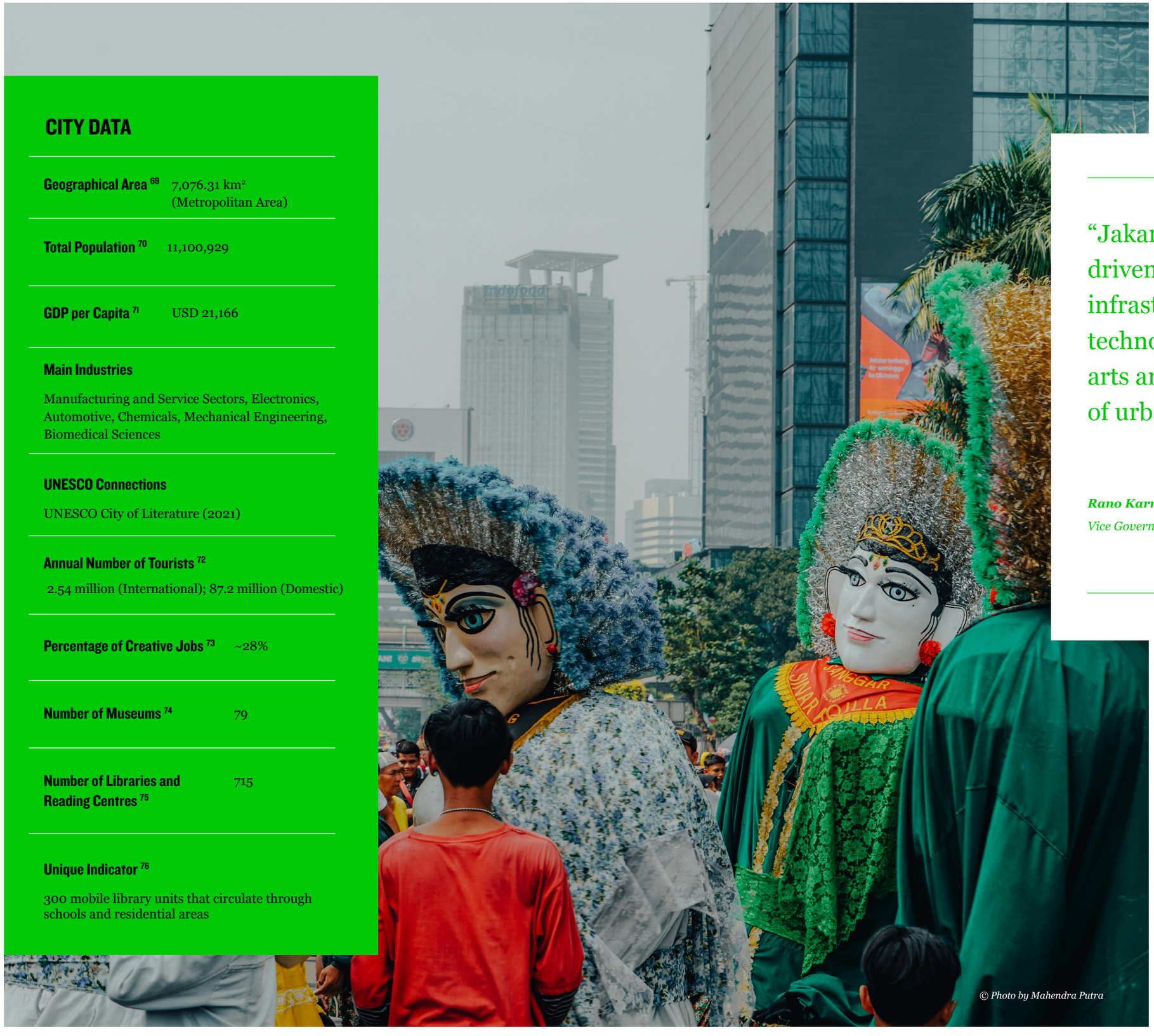
Percentage of Creative Jobs [73] ~28%

Number of Museums [74] 79

Number of Libraries and Reading Centres [75] 715

Unique Indicator [76]

300 mobile library units that circulate through schools and residential areas



© Photo by Mahendra Putra

JAKARTA

Indonesia

"Jakarta is transforming into a culture-driven global city, not merely through infrastructural advancements or technology adoption, but by embedding arts and culture as the ultimate soul of urban development"

Rano Karno,
Vice Governor of Jakarta (2025-2030)



CITY OVERVIEW

Jakarta is the melting pot of three uniquely distinct identities: its indigenous Betawi roots, its legacy as a multicultural global trading port, and its modern status as a high-tech megapolitan.[77] Located on the island of Java, the city is growing rapidly and in 2026 Greater Jakarta became the world's most populous urban area. In 2027 Jakarta will celebrate its 500th anniversary, having grown to become the hub of Indonesia's financial and commercial activity, and one of the largest urban economies in Southeast Asia. Jakarta is Indonesia's current capital, although there are future plans to move the administrative capital to Nusantara, a new city under construction on the island of Borneo. In May 2026 the Constitutional Court reaffirmed Jakarta's current status as the official capital, clearing the way for the city to pursue its long-term ambitions with renewed confidence.

CULTURAL POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

Cultural governance is led jointly by the Jakarta Regional Development Planning Agency and the Jakarta Cultural Office, whose coordinated mandate explicitly shifts culture from a preservation-only focus to a primary driver of economic growth and city identity. This is reflected in Jakarta's *"Three-Culture Model"* which balances traditional heritage, contemporary creative culture, and technology-driven arts as complementary forces. The ambition to become a *"prominent cultural and creative centre"* is codified across several long-term frameworks, including

- *The Long-Term Regional Development Plan 2025–2045*
- *JAKARTA RISE #20 Strategy*
- *The Master Plan for the Advancement of Culture*

Performance measurements against the *Global City Index,* the *National Creative Economy Census,* and the *Creative City Index by the Indonesia Creative Cities Network* serve as critical strategic benchmarks shaping the city's policy-making process.

Cross-sectoral coordination is executed through *"inclusive ecosystems"* that unify institutional bodies to manage strategic areas.[78] For instance, the *Spatial Plan 2024-2044* identifies districts for specialised cultural development, such as Menteng for international arts, Setu Babakan for Betawi heritage preservation, and Kota Tua for heritage-led urban regeneration.

The *"Jakarta 500"* initiative - built around the city's fifth centenary - provides an overarching civic narrative that ties heritage, creativity, and urban ambition into a unified city identity, for both residents and international audiences.

CULTURE AND CREATIVE ECONOMY

Jakarta's creative ecosystem is concentrated across three interconnected sectors: culinary arts, fashion, and digital media. To support this momentum, the government developed specialised hubs and strategic zones to bring together inclusive communities. For example, the city is home to Taman Ismail Marzuki cultural hub, a central node for performing arts from dances to shadow puppets and much more, while Kota Tua, the Old Town, which anchors the city's heritage led regeneration agenda with a wide range of museums and preserved architecture.

But perhaps no initiative better captures Jakarta's creative direction than M Bloc Space: a former state money-printing factory and housing complex transformed into a thriving public hub for music, food and creative enterprise. M Bloc has become a model for adaptive reuse, bridging grassroots creative culture and commercial viability in ways that more institutional venues rarely achieve. These physical revitalisations directly enhance Jakarta's Cultural Experience index, turning underutilised urban infrastructure into active platforms where historic trading legacy and high-tech megapolitan lifestyles meet.

The city's approach to its informal creative economy is notably pragmatic. Rather than marginalising the significant number of creative workers and micro-enterprises operating outside formal systems, zone-based management strategies are designed to draw informal actors into structured value chains — connecting street-level creativity directly to Jakarta's global city branding

Jakarta's creative ecosystem is underpinned by a significant informal economy. Through platforms like the *"Jakpreneur"* initiative, zone-based management strategies actively pull informal creative workers and Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises into formal value chains. By connecting local vendors to the city's global branding, Jakarta works to ensure that grassroots creativity is both protected and empowered, strengthening regional leadership in the global creative economy.



© Photo courtesy of M Bloc Space



© Photo courtesy of M Bloc Space

CASE STUDY:

M BLOC SPACE

As a flagship project of Jakarta's adaptive reuse strategy, **M Bloc Space** successfully transformed an abandoned state money-printing factory and housing complex into a thriving public hub for creative communities. Created through a public-private partnership between the state-owned printing company Perum Peruri and PT Ruang Riang Milenial, a collective of creative visionaries who transformed the abandoned 1950s industrial compound into a thriving independent hub. Today, it is used by local artisans, musicians, and independent creative collectives for live showcases, exhibitions, and community events. This collaboration revitalised South Jakarta's pedestrian culture and established a successful blueprint for preserving historical architectural heritage while fostering growth across the local creative sector. M Bloc Space demonstrates what culture-led urban regeneration can achieve when adaptive reuse, community programming, and creative enterprise align.

However, M Bloc Space faces a critical scaling challenge: it operates primarily as a localised cultural oasis rather than a structurally integrated economic engine. To maintain relevance in a high-tech megapolitan landscape, sites like M Bloc Space need support to bridge the gap between grassroots creative clusters and formal global value chains, otherwise smaller decentralised projects across the city will struggle to survive. This requires a coordinated approach combining spatial planning, digital transformation, and inclusive economic policies. This could include:

- Physically and digitally linking M Bloc Space directly to adjacent Mass-Rapid Transport and Transjakarta networks, transforming it into transit-oriented cultural zone, driven by high capacity foot traffic.
- Operationalising the *"Three-Culture Model"* through micro-grants and technical literacy programmes to strengthen technology-driven arts, ensuring contemporary creative output remains deeply anchored in local identity.
- Supporting the informal sector through zone-based management protocols that can transition independent street-level creators and micro-entrepreneurs into formal, protected creative value chains, scaling up local IP generation and boosting commercial revenue.

Implementing these policies could bring measurable results. Turning the precinct into an accessible, data-backed ecosystem optimises Jakarta's regional competitiveness, solidifying its reputation as a world-class, renowned cultural and creative destination. Jakarta's ambition to lead as a global creative city will be supported by a creative ecosystem that can be sustained, replicated, and made genuinely inclusive across the full metropolitan area.

KUALA LUMPUR

Malaysia

CITY DATA

Geographical Area [80] 243 km²

Total Population [81] 1,982,112

GDP per Capita [82] USD 27,000 (estimate)

Main Industries [83]

Books and Press, Design and Creative Services, Visual Arts

UNESCO Connections [84]

UNESCO Creative City of Design (2025)

Annual Number of Tourists [85]

27 million (Domestic); 17.3 million (International)

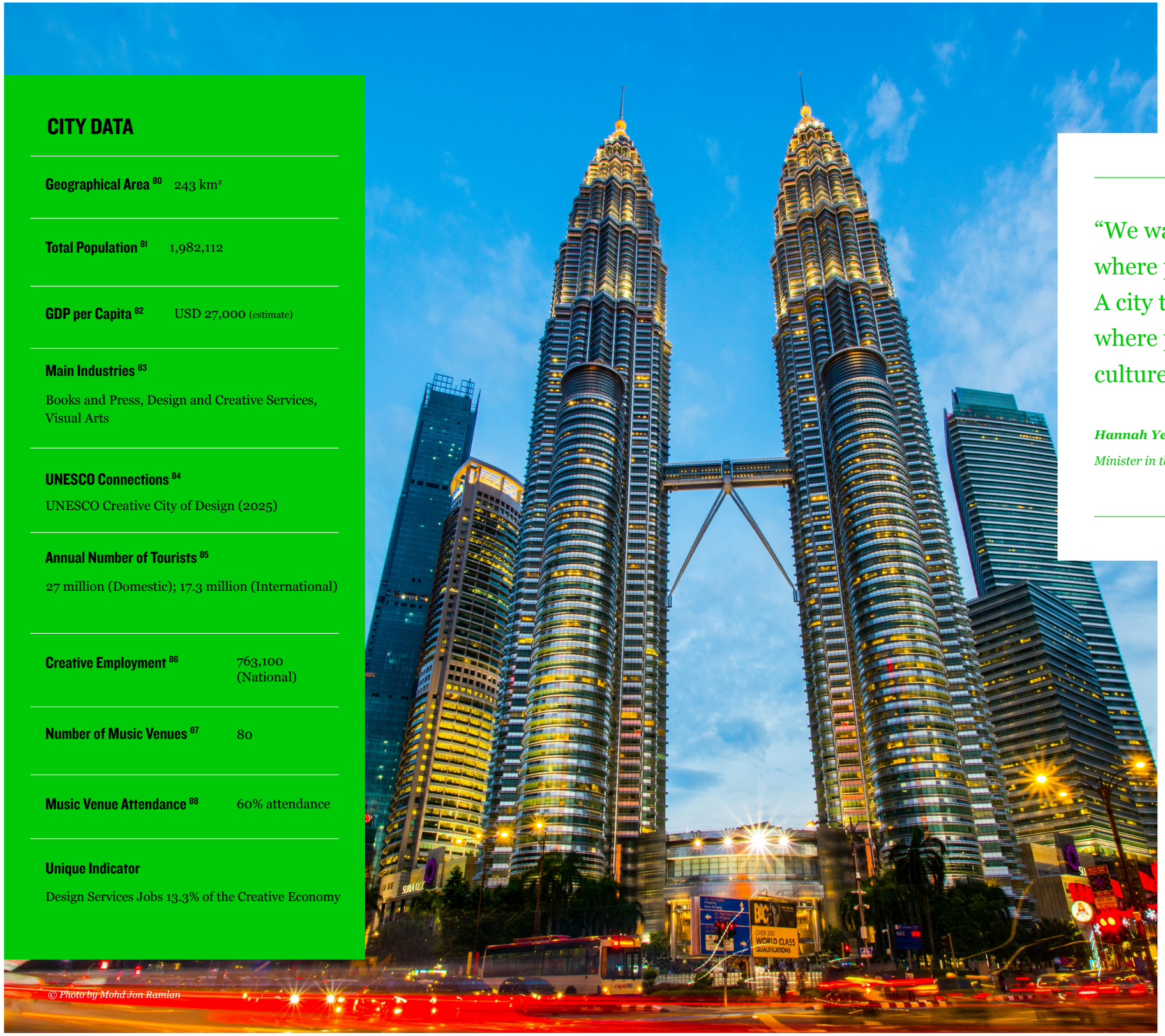
Creative Employment [86] 763,100 (National)

Number of Music Venues [87] 80

Music Venue Attendance [88] 60% attendance

Unique Indicator

Design Services Jobs 13.3% of the Creative Economy



© Photo by Mohd Jon Ramlan

> "We want Kuala Lumpur to be a city where people slow down to enjoy life. A city that feels alive beyond office hours, where public spaces are activated with culture, creativity and community"[79]
>
> ***Hannah Yeoh,***
>
> *Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Federal Territories)*

CITY OVERVIEW

Kuala Lumpur began as a 19th century river settlement, its name in Bahasa Melayu meaning *"muddy confluence"*, reflecting its position at the meeting point of the Klang and Gombak rivers. It sits at the heart of the Greater Klang Valley, home to around one third of Malaysia's population.[89] As the national capital, Kuala Lumpur contributes approximately 16 per cent of Malaysia's GDP[90] and hosts a dense concentration of federal ministries, agencies, government linked companies and major public education institutions.

Kuala Lumpur is not only a political and economic hub, but a place where cross cultural exchanges and cultural heritage are key to the city's identity - shaped by its multicultural population, layered histories, reflected in the heritage districts, religious landmarks, street markets and contemporary cultural institutions.[91] This positioning as a multicultural city for trade and international partnerships was reinforced by Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship and Kuala Lumpur's designation as a UNESCO City of Design in the same year.[92]

CULTURAL POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

Kuala Lumpur's cultural policy sits within a national framework that has evolved significantly over the past two decades. The *National Cultural Policy*[93] prioritises identity, cultural heritage, and social cohesion, building on earlier policies such as *National Creative Industry Policy*,[94] and leaning towards digital transformation and creative economy development. A culture led regeneration agenda is outlined in the priorities of the *Thirteenth Malaysia Plan*[95] and *Malaysia MADANI*. [96]

On a city level, planning instruments such as *Kuala Lumpur Creative and Cultural District Strategic Master Plan* translate the urban-cultural approach in developing urban infrastructures in Kuala Lumpur.[97] Policy initiatives are co-developed and implemented by public and private partnerships, including city hall, urban and cultural agencies, heritage bodies, public and private investors.

The most significant recent development is *Warisan KL* (meaning "Heritage KL") a nationally endorsed, coalition-led urban regeneration initiative launched in 2025. Built on the foundations of the *Kuala Lumpur Creative and Cultural District Strategic Master Plan, Warisan KL* positions culture as an integrated system for renewing urban vitality [98] and inclusive growth, linking conservation with placemaking, cultural programming with community building, and tourism with local economic development. It encompasses more than 500 heritage buildings across key precincts including Dataran Merdeka, Masjid Jamek, Medan Pasar, and the Old Railway Station, designed as interconnected, walkable cultural environments rather than isolated sites.

Despite these efforts, cultural governance remains complex and fragmented. Overlapping responsibilities are distributed across ministries and agencies, often creating coordination challenges, particularly in aligning cultural objectives with economic and urban development priorities.

CULTURE AND CREATIVE ECONOMY

Malaysia's creative economy has been highlighted through the launch of the *Cultural and Creative Industries Sector Satellite Account,* which provides the first comprehensive national measure of creative output across design and creative services, publications and print media, visual arts, and film.[99] In 2024, Malaysia's creative economy was responsible for 6.8 per cent of the national GDP, a substantial increase from the previous 2 per cent estimate.[100] Kuala Lumpur plays a central role in the ecosystem, as the design sector alone accounts for nearly half of the national creative industry's economic contribution, reflecting Kuala Lumpur's role as the country's design capital.[101]

Yet the creative economy remains difficult to govern and measure. Across the sector, informal and gig-based working conditions are the norm, and many practitioners operate outside formal regulation systems. As a result, there are data gaps that limit the ability to fully capture the sector's economic and social value.[102]

Nevertheless, Kuala Lumpur benefits from a dense network of creative hubs and community led spaces that act as platforms for collaboration, experimentation, and cultural production. Many collectives operate in adaptive reuse buildings like Zhongshan Building or underutilised industrial spaces such as KongsiKL supported by public-private partnerships driven by strong community leadership.[103] Arts collectives utilise these spaces to navigate between both formal and informal sectors and local and international cultural networks. Most importantly, these collectives are shaped by lived experiences, storytelling and community-led initiatives that contribute to building the city's social cohesion. The challenge for policymakers now is to build frameworks to support this informal energy without formalising it out of existence.



© Photo by Ravin Rau

CASE STUDY:

THE REEMERGENCE OF KL FESTIVAL

The most visible expression of the Warisan KL strategy is **KL Festival 2026,** running over 26 days with 150 multidisciplinary programmes[104] across 25 heritage buildings, streets and public spaces.[105] The festival combines curated and community led programming with 90 per cent of the festival events free for the public, reinforcing a strong emphasis on accessibility and public engagement. Built on the first festival in 2024 which tested how creative programming and targeted interventions could activate downtown Kuala Lumpur, these lessons laid the foundation for 2026, with a clearer shared narrative, broader partnerships and stronger integration with the life of the city.

"We've woven three artistic threads for different audiences, as part of the festival's theme of 'Memory and Tomorrow' ... it asks how a festival can be designed for a city, especially one that runs for a full month... how can it meaningfully integrate with the life of the city?"

- June Tan, KL Festival Artistic Director

Aligned with the *Visit Malaysia 2026* campaign, and Kuala Lumpur's designation as a UNESCO Creative City of Design, KL Festival was not conceived as an endpoint, but an instrument to broader longer term regeneration with future editions planned to continue supporting local economic vitality and reinforce national cultural objectives whilst embracing community life. It demonstrates how culture can connect places, communities and economic activity while strengthening belonging and bringing renewed vitality to the historic core.



© Photo courtesy of Think City

METRO MANILA

Philippines

CITY DATA

Geographical Area [107] 619.54 km² (National Capital Region)

Total Population 15,000,000 (estimate)

GDP per Capita [108] USD 10,400

Main Industries

Finance, Business Process Outsourcing, Marketing, Advertising, Media

UNESCO Connections

Quezon City – UNESCO Creative City of Film (2025)[109]

San Agustin Church – World Heritage Site (1993)[110]

Annual Number of Tourists [111]

6.48 million (International)

Creative Employment [112] 940,000 creative jobs (estimate)

Number of Museums [113] 65

Number of Performing Arts Theatres and Stages [114] 50

Unique Indicator [115]

Metro Manila Film Festival box office peaked above one billion pesos (USD 17 million) in 2023



© Photo by Paolo Alcazaren

"We believe that Culture is a primer for city development, including economic development. But how can we make Metro Manila (a region of 16 cities) ONE in terms of preservation efforts, for the environment, for art, for culture, for development?"[106]

Bernan Corpuz,

Deputy Executive Director National Commission for Culture and The Arts

CITY OVERVIEW

Metro Manila is not a single city. It is a region of sixteen autonomous city governments and one municipality, each with its own cultural institutions, creative industries, and civic identity that are compressed into one of Southeast Asia's most densely populated and culturally dynamic metropolitan areas. The capital accounts for nearly a third of national GDP and it is the political, economic, and cultural engine of the Philippines. It is home to 15 million people, and a place where Filipinos have come together for generations, bringing their languages, festivals, crafts, and creative ambitions with them. The result is a hybrid metropolis, where new art forms, industries, and cultural identities are constantly forged.

Each of Metro Manila's cities have unique strengths. For example, the City of Manila holds the Spanish colonial walled city of Intramuros and many of the country's national cultural institutions. Quezon City, newly designated as a UNESCO Creative City of Film in 2025,[116] is the home of the country's film and television industries, top universities, and a thriving arts scene. Makati anchors the country's advertising, digital media, design, and visual arts economies. Together they form a metropolitan creative force with few equivalents in the region.



© Photo by Michael Buillerey

CULTURE AND CREATIVE ECONOMY

Metro Manila is one of Southeast Asia's most competitive creative services hubs, and the creative sector, spanning advertising, animation, gaming, music, fashion, media, film production, and design, is deeply concentrated here. The sector is conservatively estimated at USD 11.5 billion, supporting at least 940,000 creative workers and freelancers.[117]

Yet the creative economy faces two structural vulnerabilities that policy must urgently address. The first, is an oversupply dynamic: the region's extraordinary talent pool, combined with a high density of micro-businesses and individual freelancers, is collectively driving down the value of creative work, while small operators struggle to access financing and protect their workers from exploitative practices. In every field, artists and cultural workers find it difficult to get paid fairly for their work as clients see artistic work as a commodity to procure at the lowest price. The second vulnerability is that while Metro Manila excels in human creative services talent and production, it is weak in developing globally valuable intellectual property made even more urgent by the pressures of generative AI across animation, game development, and digital content outsourcing.

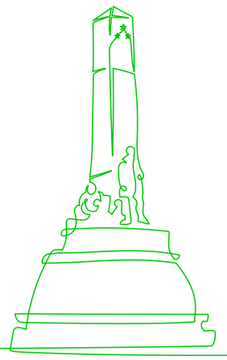
CULTURAL POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

Metro Manila's cultural governance reflects its character: decentralised, locally driven, and rich in city-level initiative, but without the metropolitan-wide cultural framework that would allow it to act as a coherent whole. The Metropolitan Manila Development Authority coordinates services across the component governments but holds no mandate over culture, heritage, or the creative economy. All cultural planning, heritage management, and creative industries development fall to national agencies and individual city governments, reducing collaboration and shared strategy.

The Metropolitan Manila Development Authority's main cultural activity is the *Metro Manila Film Festival*, the Philippines' biggest and most commercially significant film event, with box office revenues of one billion pesos (USD 17 million) in 2023.[118] However, the Development Authority has no provision in its charter to organise film festivals, making its stewardship of the Metro Manila Film Festival a historical anomaly rather than a legitimate mandate.

The National Commission for Culture and the Arts works with local governments to implement national cultural policies such as the *Philippine Development Plan for Culture and the Arts 2024–2029*,[119] cascading it to city governments, offering technical assistance, and helping cities build cultural mapping and development plans. Yet, the National Commission for Culture and the Arts acknowledged that implementation and monitoring across Metro Manila's seventeen component governments remains uneven.[120]

For example, no standardised, publicly available registry consolidates cultural infrastructure information across the region, isolated to specific private sector member directories. Some cities are changing this, Quezon City comprehensively mapped their film industry for their UNESCO Creative City of Film application, while Makati conducts creative and cultural business registry mapping, as well as tangible and intangible heritage mapping to formulate their local culture development plan.[121]



CASE STUDY:

PASIG RIVER REVITALISATION PROJECT

The **Pasig River** is a 27-kilometre waterway connecting Laguna de Bay to Manila Bay. For more than 1,000 years it was the primary transportation, communication, and trade route of the region. The word *"Tagalog"*, the language and cultural identity that unifies the region, derives from *"taga-ilog"* meaning people of the river. This speaks to how deeply the Pasig is woven into Filipino identity.

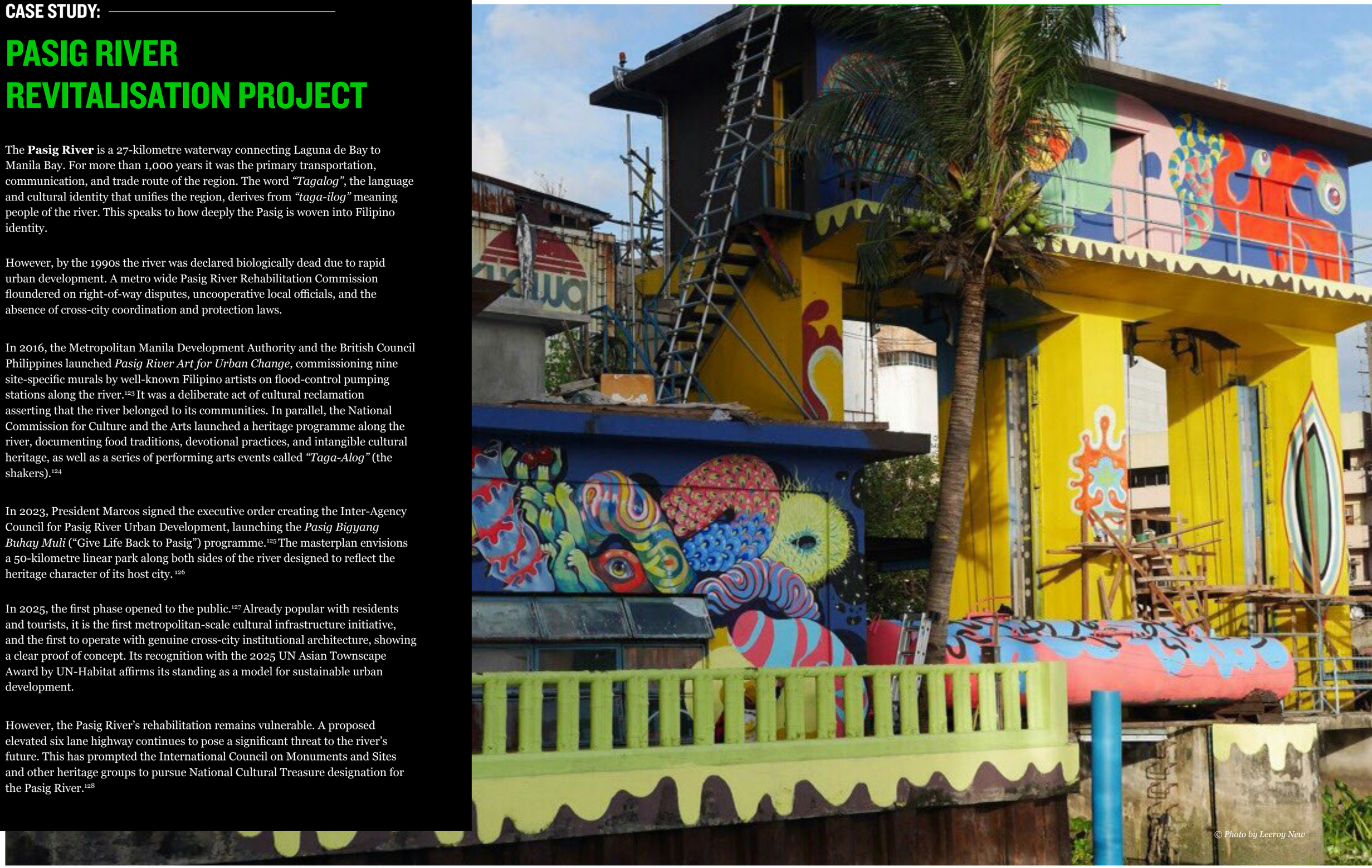
However, by the 1990s the river was declared biologically dead due to rapid urban development. A metro wide Pasig River Rehabilitation Commission floundered on right-of-way disputes, uncooperative local officials, and the absence of cross-city coordination and protection laws.

In 2016, the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority and the British Council Philippines launched *Pasig River Art for Urban Change,* commissioning nine site-specific murals by well-known Filipino artists on flood-control pumping stations along the river.[123] It was a deliberate act of cultural reclamation asserting that the river belonged to its communities. In parallel, the National Commission for Culture and the Arts launched a heritage programme along the river, documenting food traditions, devotional practices, and intangible cultural heritage, as well as a series of performing arts events called *"Taga-Alog"* (the shakers).[124]

In 2023, President Marcos signed the executive order creating the Inter-Agency Council for Pasig River Urban Development, launching the *Pasig Bigyang Buhay Muli* ("Give Life Back to Pasig") programme.[125] The masterplan envisions a 50-kilometre linear park along both sides of the river designed to reflect the heritage character of its host city. [126]

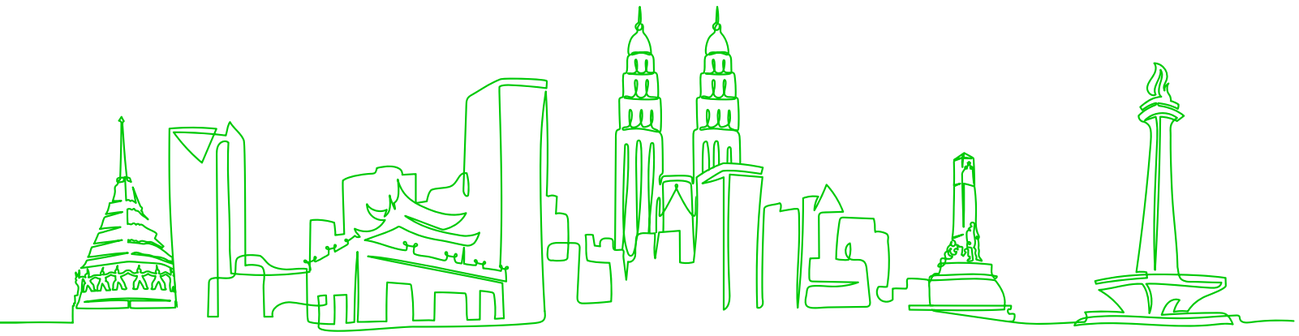
In 2025, the first phase opened to the public.[127] Already popular with residents and tourists, it is the first metropolitan-scale cultural infrastructure initiative, and the first to operate with genuine cross-city institutional architecture, showing a clear proof of concept. Its recognition with the 2025 UN Asian Townscape Award by UN-Habitat affirms its standing as a model for sustainable urban development.

However, the Pasig River's rehabilitation remains vulnerable. A proposed elevated six lane highway continues to pose a significant threat to the river's future. This has prompted the International Council on Monuments and Sites and other heritage groups to pursue National Cultural Treasure designation for the Pasig River.[128]



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METHODOLOGY & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



METHODOLOGY

The research methodology combined quantitative data collection using the World Cities Culture Forum CREATIVE Data Framework with qualitative research, interviews, focus groups, and institutional analysis. Where possible, city-level data has been gathered from national statistics agencies, official government sources, and UNESCO monitoring reports. Where city-level data is unavailable, estimates are derived from national figures using documented methodologies.

The five participating cities were selected to represent the geographic, institutional, and developmental diversity of Southeast Asia: a decentralised metropolitan region (Metro Manila), a UNESCO City of Design in transition (Bangkok), a heritage-led regeneration model (Kuala Lumpur), a state-led creative city programme (Hanoi), and a megacity repositioning toward a global city framework (Jakarta).

Fieldwork was conducted between February and April 2026. Key institutions consulted include the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (Philippines), Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, Creative Economy Agency (Thailand), Think City and Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Hanoi Department of Culture and Sports, and Jakarta Provincial Planning Agency (BAPPEDA DKI Jakarta).

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	GVA Estimate	Employment Estimate
National Economy Total (A)	US$ 485 Billion	49.0 million persons
National Creative Economy (B)	US$ 36.9 Billion	8.71 million persons
National Creative Economy Share (C)	7.6%	17.8%
Metro Manila Total (D)	US$ 151.4 Billion (31.2% of National)	5.28 million persons (~10.8% of national)
Metro Manila Creative Economy Estimate (C x D)	**Approx. US$ 11.5 Billion**	**Approx. 940,000 persons**

Exchange rate used: PHP 57.51 = US$ 1.00 (2025 annual average)

This approach assumes the creative economy’s intensity relative to overall economic activity is equally distributed across regions. Metro Manila’s creative intensity is likely higher than the national average.

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