

# Is it curtains for city's iconic cinemas?

**SPECIAL REPORT:** Chulalongkorn University needs cash and Siam Square is hot property, write Post reporters

## Screen gems under threat

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**N**ews that the Lido and Scala cinemas might be demolished and the sites redeveloped for more "lucrative" commercial purposes has created a huge uproar, especially among Chulalongkorn University alumni.

"As an educational institution, Chulalongkorn is expected to also take a role in promoting and preserving culture, apart from achieving academic excellence," said Vichitra Sapon, a corporate executive and a Chulalongkorn graduate.

Siam Theatre, Lido and Scala were built in 1967, 1968 and 1970 respectively by Pisit Tansacha, founder of the Apex theatre chain. Siam Theatre, however, was burned down on May 19, 2010, at the height of the red-shirt crisis.

The cinemas are situated in Siam

Square, one of the most valuable pieces of real estate in Thailand. The area is owned by Chulalongkorn University.

But according to Dr Permyot Kosolbhand, vice-president of Chulalongkorn's Property Management Office, there is no plan to demolish the Lido and the Scala.

He referred to a Chulalongkorn news conference three weeks back where reports of the possible demise of the two theatres originated, saying the university was only discussing plans to develop the area of Siam Square One, where the destroyed Siam Theatre was located.

"This has nothing to do



**ABOVE** The future of the Lido cinema as well as the nearby Scala in Siam Square hangs in the balance as Chulalongkorn University, the owner of the land where they are located, mulls plans to demolish them to develop a more modern shopping area. PATIPAT JANTHONG

**LEFT** Cinema owner Nanta Tansacha says there was a talk about a plan to change the area, but no specific details emerged. SANTIPHONG SUEBSANTIWONGSE

with the Lido, yet," he said.

But if the word "yet" is any indication, the future of the Lido and the Scala remains uncertain.

Dr Permyot insisted there is nothing untoward happening. He said the Apex Group was offered the chance to redevelop the land where the Siam Theatre stood, but turned it down.

"The competition was too high, that's why [Apex] turned down our offer."

But Nanta Tansacha, the current owner of Apex and daughter of Mr Pisit, said: "Before the Siam Theatre was burned down, there was a talk about a plan to transform the area that might affect our cinemas, but nothing was concrete." Ms Nanta said Chulalongkorn had not been in contact with her

regarding the future of the Lido and the Scala.

The lease for the Lido will expire next year. Dr Permyot insisted the university will first talk to Apex about future plans for the site.

Other historic movie theatres, the Hollywood, McKenna, President and Stella were all built during the 1960s and 1970s cinema boom. Eventually they were torn down for the sake of modernisation in general and office towers and condominiums in particular.

Why, then, should history stand in the way of economic progress in the case of the Lido and Scala theatres in Siam Square?

Philip Jablon, who runs the Southeast Asia Movie Theatre Project, wrote an editorial in *The Nation* newspaper, arguing the case for retaining the Scala, saying it has "high cultural and architectural import" and that it is the only single-screen movie house left in Thailand. "It was designed by famed architect Chira Silpakanok — also known for the Indra Hotel — and embodies a uniquely Thai aesthetic that blends elements of tropical art deco with 1960s Thai modern," he wrote.

As for the Lido, after a fire in 1993, it was divided into three smaller cinemas.

Preserving cultural heritage makes for a sound argument, but the fact is, Chulalongkorn doesn't see movie houses as a cultural heritage.

"The Lido is not a heritage site. I can't see any point in conserving this theatre," said Dr Permyot.

"I would like to ask the opposition group one question: do they really see movies there?"

However, the professor quipped: "On the positive side, at least now we know that so many people love Lido."

Over the past year, Chulalongkorn has embarked on a massive redevelopment project of its Siam Square real estate. The university has opened bidding for firms to develop the 6 billion baht commercial complex on 13 rai of land at Sam Yan intersection.

There are two bidders, comprising L&H Property, a subsidiary of the property giant Land & Houses, and TCC Land, a property arm of the liquor tycoon Charoen Sirivadhanabhakdi. Another project is the auction for developing a hotel facing Henri Dunant Road, on top of the Siamkit Building, which houses tutorial schools and a parking lot. According to Dr Permyot, Chulalongkorn has its sights set on becoming a premier international university. The ambition needs funding, and the university's property business is a main source of funds.

Perhaps it is understandable that Chulalongkorn needs more funding to develop academic excellence.

Chulalongkorn was once Thailand's top university, but in recent years has lost that spot to its rivals.

According to International Ranking Expert Group's observatory on academic ranking and excellence, both Kasetsart University and King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi topped Chulalongkorn in the ranking.

### World Ranking 2011

1. Kasetsart University (Rank #46)
2. King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (Rank #47)
3. Chulalongkorn University (Rank #70)
4. Mahasarakham University (Rank #126)
5. King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok (Rank #141)
6. Burapha University (Rank #151)

Source: IREG

Dharinee Namsirichai, a business executive who is also a Chulalongkorn alumni, said that though there are sentimental values connected to these cinemas, change cannot be resisted.

"That the universities need money to support their academic programmes

is understandable," she said.

However, the alumni argue that Chulalongkorn already has many sources of funding. It is also much richer than other universities, yet its international ranking is declining.

"We must ask where the Chula money goes to," she insisted. "Does it go to research and improving teaching as it should? Or is it going to more and more investment in real estate development?"

Ms Vichitra also questioned the relationship between raising funds and academic excellence.

"Despite Chulalongkorn's wealth, I heard some faculties have to pay for their utility bills and equipment on their own. When those faculties have to raise funds, we cannot expect them to focus on academic excellence," she said.