

Nestled in a mountain valley in Thailand's far north, Chiang Mai has long been a haven for artists and artisans who have taken inspiration from Burmese, Chinese, northern Thai, Shan, Thai Lü, hill-tribe and European sources, and fused them into a unique culture. Today, the city's history merges with postmodernism and functionalism to respond to contemporary urban needs while retaining a distinct identity. In *Chiang Mai Style*, Joe Cummings and Luca Invernizzi Tettoni take us on a journey through the tribal traditions of the houses of northern Thailand and give a sweeping view of the city's most contemporary homes, luxurious resorts and newest restaurants—all adorned with modern interiors yet retaining the essence of Chiang Mai's rich architectural heritage.



#### JOE CUMMINGS

Joe holds a master's degree in Southeast Asian art history and has designed and built a house on Mexico's Pacific coast. He is a prolific writer and has written and contributed to over 35 books on art, culture, design, food, language and travel. A full-time resident of Chiang Mai, Joe lives next to a 16th-century Lanna stupa.



#### LUCA INVERNIZZI TETTONI

Born in northern Italy, Luca lived in Asia from 1973 until his death in 2013. During the 1980s, his strong interest in Thailand resulted in the publication of a number of ground-breaking books on the country, including *The Arts of Thailand* and the first edition of this book. His ability to discover and record ancient traditions and immutable aspects of Asia created awareness of the traditional styles and values of these fast-changing societies.

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TEXT BY JOE CUMMINGS PHOTOGRAPHS BY LUCA INVERNIZZI TETTONI





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FRONT COVER Teak rosette panel from the ceiling of an abandoned temple.  
PAGE 2 Detail of candelabra, Anantara Resort & Spa Golden Triangle.  
THIS PAGE View of pool and deck area of Chulathat Kittibutr's house.  
PAGE 8 Detail of gold-leaf door, Lanna Spa.  
PAGE 216 Carved sculpture and vintage Chinese door, The Rachamankha.  
PAGE 217 Antique door, Chiang Mai Cultural Centre (tassel courtesy of Living Space).





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RIGHT The clean lines of this living room in Cindi Novcov's two-storey home, along with the liberal use of gauzy white cottons, yield an elegantly casual and relaxing atmosphere. Low-slung chairs, table and sofa preserve a northern Thai orientation.







ABOVE Detail of a *hawm yon* panel exquisitely carved into fanciful lotus flower shapes.

OPPOSITE Typical northern Thai crafts and a teak *yaeng* (elephant saddle) create a cosy corner in this interior verandah. Note the *hawm yon* panel over the door. The roof is tiled with baked terracotta.

The Thai Lü raised their houses on teak-tree pillars and oriented them so that the length of the structure ran parallel to the sun's path rather than across it. This simple method of exposing the greatest measure of window space to the least sun kept the house as cool as possible. Their verandahs were also more varied and complex than those of Lawa homes, extending at times to an L-shaped wrapping around the main body of the house. When an L-shaped verandah was planned, it would be oriented such that it scooped wind into the house from the south, avoiding the strongest tack of prevailing winds from the southwest while allowing some breeze to channel into the house. Lining the perimeter of the verandah are wooden rails that protect against falls.

The raising of the house on piles served multiple purposes for the Thai Lü, as it had for the Lawa. First, it protected the house and its contents from high water in times of flooding, an obvious risk for Thai communities, which







ABOVE Lotus ponds were once a common feature of Chiang Mai palaces and temples. Today, they lend the same cooling and restful atmosphere to country homes like this.

OPPOSITE The teak-slat verandah serves much the same purpose as the *chaan* of yore, providing a space for the owners to enjoy the northern evenings while waiting for the bedrooms to release the accumulated day's heat.

### Rice Fields and Lily Ponds

When a Bangkok physician and his wife decided to build a retirement idyll near Doi Saket, northeast of Chiang Mai, they wanted the look and feel of Chiang Mai a century ago. To achieve this goal, they collected four old rice barns, long abandoned by their original owners, from the area and set about assembling them to create a larger house.

Rice barns are simple, single-gabled structures. So to fashion a living space that functioned much like the traditional *heuan kaa-lae*, they joined two of the barns together at the eaves to create a *jua faet*, a twin-gabled structure. This serves as a spacious living room, which the owners have chosen to furnish with a blend of Chinese, Burmese and northern Thai antiques.

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ABOVE A shower and toilet, along with a dragon jar and antique wooden sink, creates an unusual outdoor bathroom.

OPPOSITE Locally salvaged rice barn walls combine with a northern Thai-style hipped roof and stepped entry to create a cosy country villa.

sitting cum dining area dominates the central floor space, flanked by a sleeping area at one end and two doors leading to a lavatory and storage area at the other.

Two additional rice barns in the compound have been converted into separate guest cottages. Between these two cottages stands yet another rice barn, which has had its walls removed so that it consists only of teak pillars, the roof and flooring. Fitted with a simple shower, toilet and wooden sink, the uniquely conceived structure serves as an outdoor bathroom. A waist-high, perforated wood railing along the perimeter affords some privacy and guards against falls.







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had since before the high-growth decades and began to create new design fusions based on Lanna elements.

They also looked to neighbouring countries— primarily Laos, Myanmar, China and Malaysia— but also farther afield to Japan, India and other parts of Asia. The West was still admired for certain functional aspects, particularly when it concerned kitchens and bathrooms, but the general aesthetic orientation shifted from Europe and America to Asia.

In 21st-century Chiang Mai, the trend is to borrow and blend elements from several traditions. Sometimes, the borrowings lean towards Chiang Mai's past, as in the houses of local architect Chulathat Kittibutr. In such cases, traditional design elements, adapted for contemporary living, will become an important and integral part of the house. In such neo-Lanna homes, stylised versions of *kaa-lae* roof peaks or temple bargeboards frame the front gables and make a 'Chiang Mai' statement from the outset. The liberal use of wooden or wood-and-brick verandahs—both the spacious, open *chaan* and the smaller, raised and roofed *toen*—mate well with the lifestyle of today's Chiang Mai residents, who enjoy entertaining outdoors almost as much as their predecessors did during the Lanna period.

What we see in general contemporary Chiang Mai house design is a maturation of regional architecture that reincorporates practical aspects of traditional Thai house design such as high ceilings, ample roof eaves and verandah roofing for protection from sun and rain.

Other homeowners, particularly those living in condominiums or apartments, have opted for Western on the outside and Thai and Asian on the inside. In either case what we see is an ongoing negotiation between international ideas and the local context, which includes lifestyle and culture, the tropical climate and the vocabulary of traditional architecture.

OPPOSITE A large painting, based on a mural from Wat Phumin, forms the centrepiece of a bathroom at this residence in the Four Seasons Resort.

BELOW Façade of this same penthouse residence; laterite bricks lead to the main entry.







## An Architect's Idyll

Ajahn Chulathat Kittibutr, one of Thailand's most celebrated architects, also happens to be a Chiang Mai native. Founder of the highly successful Chiang Mai Architects Collaborative, Ajahn Chulathat was named as National Artist in 2005 for his contributions to contemporary Thai architecture.

After donating an old historic city home—the Khum Chao Burirat—to Chiang Mai University, Ajahn Chulathat designed a private home on a quiet spot along the Ping River just north of town. Most of the design elements in this home, such as the multi-level rooflines and the perforated wood banisters along the verandahs and stairways, are obviously Lanna-related. Old teak recycled from abandoned houses and barns is used throughout, successfully preserving the look and feel of classic old Chiang Mai.

OPPOSITE Teak planks stay relatively cool underfoot when lounging by the pool. An old wooden bed is made comfortable with a mattress and traditional 'axe' pillow. Providing subtle lighting at night are lanterns along the pool; although Japanese-inspired, they display Lanna detailing.

TOP (both) Perforated wooden railings are a common feature in Shan and northern Thai houses.

BOTTOM Making full use of the space beneath one of the verandahs is this casual area.





### An Urban Getaway

A number of years ago, Richard Dixon of CDC Design Resource bought a corner unit high up in a condominium tower in one of Chiang Mai's more densely developed neighbourhoods. To make the most of the modest space, he first removed the windows that wrapped around the corner of the unit, opening up the apartment to an obstructed view of Doi Suthep and the city. This also brought the natural environment into the dining and living rooms, creating an outdoor living space that most condominium owners only dream of.

Richard's career began as a set and props designer in Hollywood film studios. When he moved to Thailand many years ago, he

OPPOSITE Primitive carved wood figures, a rustic footed pot and antique Chinese chests give this apartment an exotic but lived-in feel.

ABOVE A safari theme emerges in this apartment through the faux-tiger upholstery, tall painted drums, a carved elephant and a pair of antique binoculars.





OPPOSITE (clockwise from top right)  
A weaver at Studio Naenna creates *juree* twill on a traditional frame loom; These yarns have been carefully bound with plastic at specific intervals, then dyed in natural indigo. Once they dry, the plastic will be removed and the yarns will be woven into a *mat-mee* design; Some of the different hues of indigo can be clearly seen in these three cotton shawls.

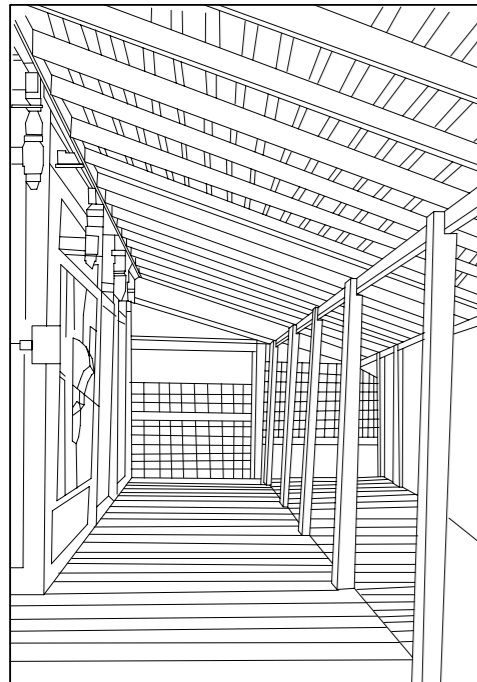
LEFT Skeins of cotton yarn that have been indigo-dyed are hung out to dry.



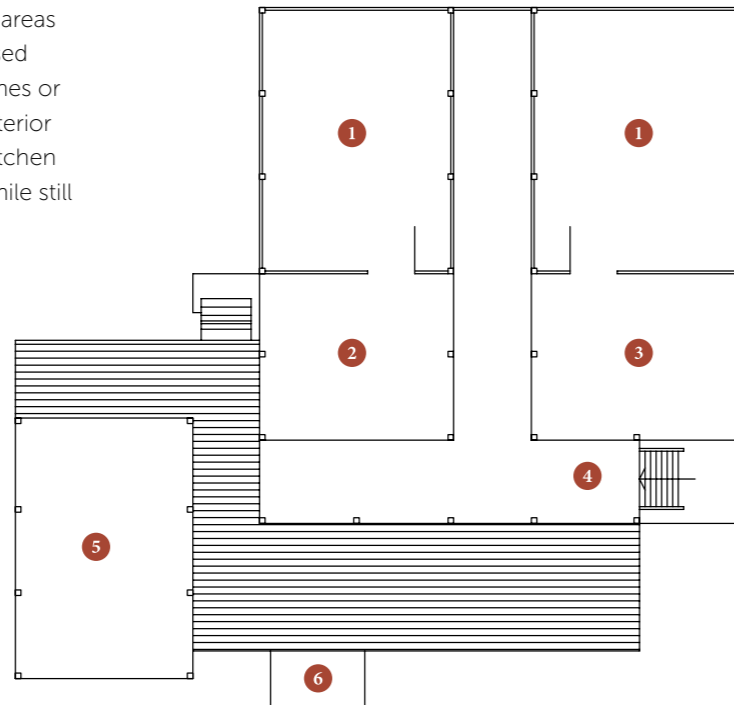


### Floor plan of a typical Lanna house

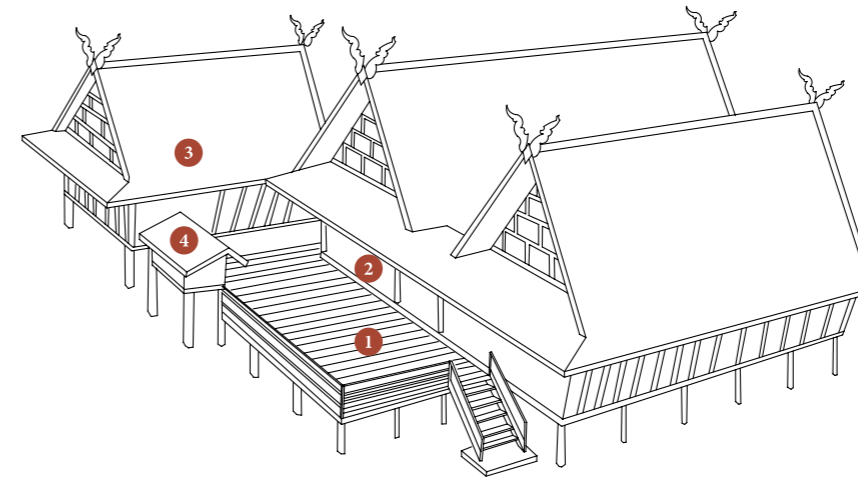
Between the linked bedrooms and detached *khrua fai* (kitchen), Lanna homes feature large *chaan*, open areas floored with wood planking. The *chaan* may be used for making handicrafts, repairing tools, drying clothes or simply relaxing in the evening air. Smaller *toen*—interior verandahs covered by roofs extending from the kitchen and bedrooms—offer shelter from sun and rain, while still being exposed to cooling breezes.



Toen, or interior verandah, of a Lanna home



- 1 Bedroom
- 2 Toen for dining
- 3 Toen for receiving guests
- 4 Chaan
- 5 Kitchen
- 6 Haan naam (water supply shelf)



- 1 Outer verandah
- 2 Inner verandah
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Water supply shelf



### The Chiang Mai house

This fully realised *heuan kaa-lae* or *kaa-lae* house (sometimes referred to as the 'Chiang Mai house') carries all the hallmarks of classic Chiang Mai home construction. Front and rear stairways climb to the large open verandah, where a small *haan naam* (water supply shelf) contains two terracotta jars filled with fresh drinking water. The bedroom and kitchen walls slant outwards from floor to ceiling, allowing warm air to flow away from sitting or sleeping areas. Finally, the roof gables are decorated with the *kaa-lae* crossbar.

