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Can Cultural Capital and the Right to the City Explain Class-Based Alienation in Thailand's Art Museums?

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary art museums in Thailand often fail to engage working-class communities, revealing a disconnect between institutional narratives and the lived realities of marginalized urban citizens. This study investigates how cultural exclusion reflects broader socio-economic inequality, contributing to the journal's focus on the economic ramifications of urbanization. Through qualitative fieldwork and interviews at four institutions—BACC and MOCA (Thailand), Tate Modern (UK), and Pirelli HangarBicocca (Italy)—it identifies four key dimensions of alienation: psychological, spatial, socio-cultural, and economic. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Lefebvre's Right to the City, the research introduces a typology of alienation that functions as both a theoretical contribution and a practical tool. It demonstrates that exclusion stems not only from cost but also from curatorial tone, spatial design, and symbolic inaccessibility. By centering the perspectives of lower-income participants, this study contributes an interdisciplinary framework that bridges museology, urban studies, and critical ethnography. By situating cultural alienation within the socio-economic transformations of contemporary urbanization, the study demonstrates how exclusion from museums parallels broader patterns of economic inequality and urban segregation in Thailand. Ultimately, it argues that inclusive cultural infrastructure is essential for fostering urban resilience and democratic participation.

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Highlights:	Contribution to the field statement:
- Investigates how Thai contemporary art museums reinforce class-based exclusion through spatial and curatorial practices. - Applies Lefebvre's "right to the city" and Bourdieu's cultural capital to cultural infrastructure. - Proposes a new typology of museum-based alienation based on ethnographic evidence. - Challenges dominant Western museological frameworks by cantering Southeast Asian cultural dynamics. - Offers design and policy recommendations for promoting spatial justice and cultural equity in urban settings.	This study contributes to urban inequality and cultural infrastructure discourse by examining how Thai contemporary art museums reinforce class-based exclusion through spatial, curatorial, and institutional practices. Drawing from Lefebvre's Right to the City and Bourdieu's cultural capital, it introduces a new typology of alienation grounded in ethnographic evidence. The paper challenges Western museological models and offers a diagnostic framework for inclusive design and cultural policy. By bridging theory and practice, it provides actionable strategies for museums and urban planners to foster spatial justice, cultural equity, and civic participation in Southeast Asia.

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1. Introduction

As intangible cultural assets, contemporary art museums serve as vital institutions for societal expression, cultural continuity, and civic dialogue (UN-Habitat, 2020; Lefebvre, 1996). They embody the living essence of a city's cultural fabric by offering platforms to interpret evolving social narratives through artistic expression (Duncan, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Far from being mere repositories of aesthetic value, they are dynamic communicative spaces that reflect and shape collective consciousness (Macdonald, 2006; Bourdieu, 1984). Their significance lies in their ability to foster intercultural understanding, promote creative diversity, and enable communities to participate in public life through cultural engagement (UN-Habitat, 2020; Sandell & Nightingale, 2022).

Denying access to these spaces not only excludes marginalised populations from the symbolic life of the city but also undermines the democratic principle of cultural participation (Falk & Dierking, 2013; Lefebvre, 1996). Cultural exclusion—whether spatial, symbolic, or psychological—thus reflects deeper urban fractures and contributes to the reproduction of social inequality (Bourdieu, 1984; Fraser, 2006). Within the framework of sustainable urbanism, art museums are increasingly recognised as agents of regeneration and social inclusion (UN-Habitat, 2020; Bennett, 1995). Their presence can enhance urban identity, stimulate local economies, and nurture social cohesion—particularly when community voices are included in cultural policy formation (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Macdonald, 2006). Aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 11.4, safeguarding cultural heritage—both tangible and intangible—through inclusive infrastructure is essential to building equitable, resilient cities (UNESCO, 2022; Galluccio & Giambona, 2024).

Thus, the contemporary art museum is not merely a cultural venue but a civic instrument that can either reinforce or dismantle the invisible boundaries of class-based alienation in urban Thailand (Bourdieu, 1984; Lefebvre, 1996). Despite this transformative potential, cultural institutions often remain structurally inaccessible to working-class publics due to linguistic, architectural, curatorial, and emotional barriers (Fraser, 2006; Iervolino, 2023). To clarify the central concept of this study, alienation refers to the emotional, spatial, and socio-economic distancing experienced by individuals who perceive themselves as outsiders within institutions designed for public benefit. In the context of contemporary art museums, this manifests not only in physical inaccessibility but also in symbolic and psychological forms—such as feeling unwelcome, underrepresented, or culturally disconnected. These forms of alienation resonate with Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and Lefebvre's notion of spatial rights, positioning museum inaccessibility as a class-coded experience embedded in the urban economy and symbolic order.

Contemporary art museums in Thailand, while often branding themselves as inclusive cultural institutions, remain largely disengaged from the everyday realities of working-class communities. Despite the working class comprising approximately 64% of Thailand's population (World Bank, 2021), these populations are strikingly underrepresented in institutional spaces such as the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA). Field observations conducted over two weeks revealed that fewer than 2% of visitors at these museums appeared to come from working-class backgrounds—underscoring a gap between institutional narratives of accessibility and lived socio-cultural participation.

This exclusion cannot be reduced to physical or economic barriers alone. Rather, it is sustained by multidimensional alienation—psychological, spatial, and social—produced through curatorial language, spatial design, institutional tone, and the broader symbolic order that frames contemporary museums as elite cultural spaces. The prevalence of modernist architecture, "white cube" aesthetics, and esoteric curatorial discourse reinforces class-coded expectations of cultural literacy, often rendering working-class individuals as outsiders within these institutions (Bourdieu, 1984; Le Mare & Holden, 2021). Such mechanisms of exclusion are not incidental but structurally embedded in how these museums are spatially and symbolically produced (Lefebvre, 1996).

Although international literature has extensively theorised these dynamics—drawing on concepts such as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), spatial justice (Lefebvre, 1996), and museum engagement (Falk & Dierking, 2013)—there remains a notable gap in empirical research within the Thai context. Existing

Thai studies tend to focus on preservation, tourism, or institutional development, with limited interrogation into how design and discourse contribute to exclusionary experiences for lower-income publics. Furthermore, few studies address how museums might adopt inclusive frameworks that respond to socio-cultural alienation through spatial, psychological, and civic dimensions. By critically examining these issues, this study seeks to theorise museum-based alienation in Thailand and contribute a conceptual and methodological framework for inclusive, socially responsive cultural engagement. It positions exclusion from contemporary museums not merely as a failure of access, but as a failure of institutional imagination—one that must be addressed through intentional design, reflexive curatorial practice, and a commitment to democratising urban cultural life.

In Southeast Asia, urban cultural policies frequently prioritise national identity, tourism, or economic development, while questions of class, participatory equity, and cultural justice remain largely sidelined (Sasitharan, 2023). Despite being centrally located and offering free admission, institutions such as the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) remain strikingly disconnected from the working-class communities situated in their immediate urban vicinity. This disconnect extends far beyond material access or financial cost. Participants in this study frequently articulated a deeper, more symbolic form of exclusion, often remarking that museums "aren't for people like me"—underscoring how cultural institutions reproduce social distance through subtle forms of class-based boundary-making.

While international scholarship has extensively examined how cultural capital, institutional habitus, and spatial design reinforce inequality (Bourdieu, 1984; Lefebvre, 1996; Falk & Dierking, 2013), Thai academic discourse has yet to critically interrogate how contemporary art spaces themselves participate in this socio-cultural reproduction. The present study responds directly to this gap by posing the following central research question: Why do public contemporary art spaces in Thailand contribute to social exclusion, and how might art's connection to society be redefined as a cultural value? This question drives the inquiry into how spatial configurations, institutional tone, and curatorial narratives shape patterns of exclusion—both physical and symbolic—for lower-income publics.

Building on this central question, the study aims to reposition contemporary art museums as inclusive and socially sustainable institutions. It investigates the nature and causes of alienation experienced by lower-income communities, focusing on four key dimensions: psychological, spatial, social, and economic. The research is guided by the premise that design, location, institutional narratives, and affordability collectively shape exclusionary experiences within museum spaces. Through comparative analysis of Thai institutions (BACC and MOCA) and international case studies (Tate Modern and Pirelli HangarBicocca), the study seeks to identify curatorial and spatial practices that promote inclusion. A key objective is to develop a diagnostic framework that categorises and maps these four types of alienation, thereby revealing which forms most significantly impact engagement. This framework provides actionable insights for more equitable and accessible museum practices.

The study employs a qualitative research design grounded in critical ethnography, integrating in-depth interviews, observational fieldwork, and thematic analysis. Drawing from a conceptual framework informed by Lefebvre's Right to the City, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, and critical museology, the study explores mechanisms and dimensions of alienation in contemporary art spaces. A total of 16 participants from lower-income backgrounds—both visitors and non-visitors—were interviewed across four sites: Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC), the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Tate Modern (London), and Pirelli HangarBicocca (Milan). Data were triangulated through on-site observation, focusing on spatial design, user behaviour, and institutional atmosphere. Thematic analysis was then used to identify patterns of exclusion across psychological, spatial, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions, guided by a framework that maps these experiences against four mechanisms of exclusion: curation, design, cost, and cultural norms.

This research contributes to urban cultural studies, critical museology, and spatial theory by examining how class influences cultural access in Thailand's contemporary art museums. It proposes practical guidelines for enhancing inclusivity through institutional design, programming, and policy. Grounded in Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and Lefebvre's Right to the City, the research reconceptualises

art museums as civic infrastructures that both reflect and reproduce social hierarchies. By centring the lived experiences of lower-income communities, it challenges dominant assumptions of cultural neutrality and accessibility. Aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 11.4, the findings support the development of inclusive cultural infrastructure that fosters community participation and protects intangible heritage. Moreover, this study offers a unique contribution to academic discourse by bridging theoretical critique and applied research. Its four-part typology of alienation not only expands current frameworks in urban sociology and museology but also introduces a replicable tool for comparative cultural policy studies. Through this interdisciplinary framework, the study enriches the scholarly understanding of how cultural institutions can either reinforce or dismantle socio-economic barriers in contemporary urban settings. The paper is structured into five sections: Introduction, Materials and Methods, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion. The overall structure of this research, from problem statement to synthesis, is summarized in Figure 1.
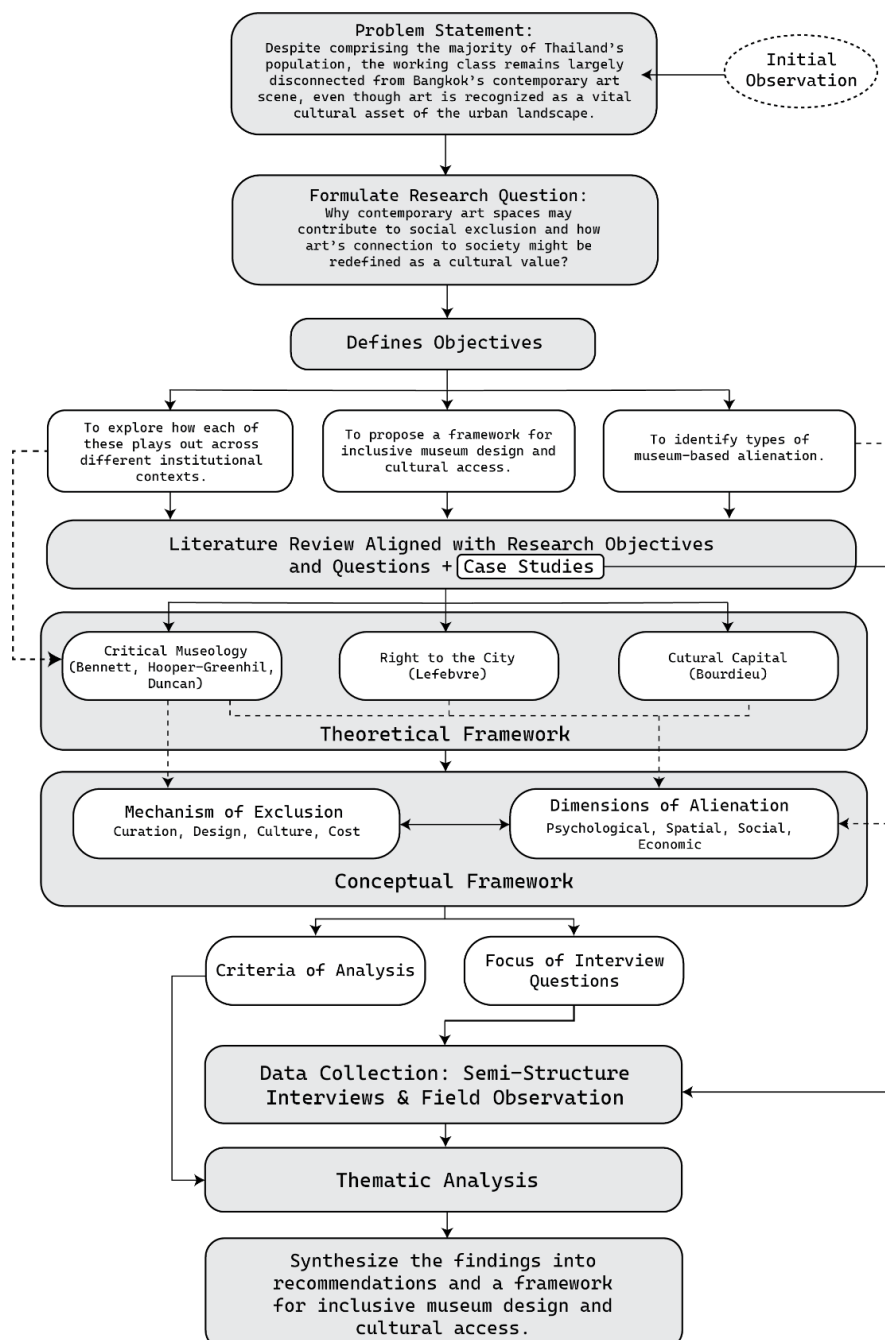

Figure 1. Structure of the study.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Art and the Right to the City: Cultural Expressions of Urban Claim-Making

Art has long served as a powerful medium through which communities articulate identity, preserve memory, and express collective experience. Far from being mere decoration, artistic expression carries symbolic and political weight—reflecting societal values, hierarchies, and ideologies. As such, art is not only a cultural asset but a form of social communication and historical continuity.

Henri Lefebvre's concept of the Right to the City positions art and culture as central to urban life—not as luxuries but as fundamental to the city's democratic and symbolic production. For Lefebvre, the city is an œuvre—a living artwork shaped by its inhabitants through everyday practices, rituals, and expressions (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 4). In this view, public spaces, monuments, and cultural institutions are never neutral; rather, they carry deep political significance, encoding narratives of inclusion and exclusion that reflect and reproduce urban power relations.

Lefebvre critiques the commodification of the city under capitalism, arguing that space is socially produced and ideologically shaped. "The building is not innocent," he writes, "nor is the void" (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 10). Cultural institutions—including museums—become part of this spatial regime, serving as instruments of ideological power that uphold dominant narratives and reinforce spatial hierarchies (Lefebvre, 1996, pp. 9–10, 15). Although often framed as public spaces, museums are frequently constructed and curated through elite strategies that determine who feels they belong—and who remains invisible.

Lefebvre's famous claim that "the right to the city is like a cry and a demand" (1996, p. 57) underscores the urgency of reclaiming access to symbolic and civic life as a spatial and cultural right. When art is sequestered in formal, alienating institutions, it loses its democratic potential. Museums must therefore be reimagined as civic infrastructures—not repositories of institutional authority, but inclusive public spaces where marginalized voices can assert cultural and spatial agency. In this sense, art becomes not merely a reflection of the city, but a right to claim and reshape it.

This section contributes to the broader literature review by emphasizing the spatial and symbolic dimensions of exclusion in cultural institutions, offering a theoretical foundation for understanding how access to art is intertwined with broader claims to urban rights and social justice.

2.2 Art as Social Classification: The Role of Art as a Marker of Social Stratification

Contemporary museums do not merely exhibit art; they function as institutions of classification that reflect and reproduce social hierarchies. Through a complex interplay of spatial, psychological, economic, and social factors, museums often exclude those without the cultural capital to decode their norms.

2.2.1 Cultural Capital and Production of Alienation in Contemporary Art Museums

A. Cultural Capital and Institutional Legitimacy

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital illustrates how familiarity with particular aesthetic codes—especially the ability to interpret abstract or conceptual art—is shaped by access to education and cultural exposure. Contemporary art museums often function as institutional gatekeepers, legitimizing elite tastes while marginalizing alternative modes of interpretation. Those who lack this cultural capital may experience feelings of exclusion or illegitimacy, as the museum space affirms the knowledge and aesthetic preferences of dominant social classes. Consequently, museums operate as symbolic spaces of power, validating those who possess the "right" forms of cultural literacy while rendering others invisible or peripheral (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990). Current scholarship notes that museums continue to privilege elite cultural norms, often marginalizing working-class identities (Iervolino, 2023). Recent sociological work emphasizes how class inequality is embedded in everyday practices, shaping not only access to economic resources but also to cultural spaces (Evans & Whiting, 2024)

B. Taste as a Social Classifier

Aesthetic taste, rather than being a matter of personal preference, operates as a marker of social identity and class distinction. Bourdieu (1984) argues that preferences in art are shaped by one's social upbringing and educational background. Within contemporary art institutions, these preferences demarcate who belongs and who does not. Through curatorial choices, exhibition language, and spatial design, museums construct symbolic boundaries that exclude individuals who do not share or understand the dominant cultural codes (Bourdieu, 1984; Prior, 2005).

C. Economic-Spatial Exclusion

Economic-spatial factors also mediate access to museums. Museums often exist in gentrified or affluent neighborhoods, requiring visitors to invest time and effort in transportation. Entry fees, even when moderate, may serve as significant deterrents for lower-income individuals (Wolf, 2024). Even in free institutions, indirect costs—such as transportation, food, and leisure expenses in the area— create barriers. These spatial and economic limitations reinforce broader socio-economic hierarchies and mirror urban patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Fainstein, 2010; Medaković, D. 2024).

D. Epistemological Control

Beyond physical access, museums exercise epistemological control by defining what constitutes "legitimate" art and whose stories are told. By prioritizing specific narratives, media, and artists, they effectively silence alternative cultural perspectives (Lind, 2004). The privileging of Eurocentric, conceptual, or elite-curated work marginalizes forms of expression rooted in local or non-institutional traditions (Fraser, 2006; Raicovich, 2021). Museums thus act not only as physical spaces of display but also as ideological instruments of cultural authority.

These overlapping mechanisms of exclusion create a sense of alienation for many visitors. The following framework categorizes four distinct but interconnected forms of alienation experienced by museum-goers, offering a means to analyze how these institutions contribute to cultural stratification.

2.2.2 Mapping the Four Types of Alienation onto the Cultural Capital Framework

The novelty of this research lies in how it maps Bourdieu's cultural capital theory onto a four-part model of museum alienation: psychological, spatial, economic, and social. This framework helps operationalize how exclusion is experienced in everyday museum interactions.

Psychological Alienation

Psychological alienation closely aligns with Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence, where individuals internalize feelings of inferiority due to their unfamiliarity with dominant aesthetic codes. Museum visitors without prior exposure to contemporary art may find themselves emotionally or intellectually disconnected from works that appear abstract, elitist, or irrelevant to their lived experiences. The architecture and curation may lack emotional resonance or contextual grounding, amplifying feelings of alienation. According to Falk and Dierking (2013), personal context—including prior experiences and motivations—is central to museum learning. Visitors without such grounding may struggle to find meaning, reinforcing their sense of exclusion.

Spatial/Physical Alienation

Modernist museum architecture—characterized by "white cube" aesthetics and minimalist layouts— may appear neutral but often conveys implicit codes of elitism. These design choices, while intended to focus attention on the art, can instead feel intimidating or disorienting to infrequent or first-time visitors. Research in museum studies emphasizes how poor signage, unclear navigation, and rigid spatial hierarchies reinforce psychological distance and limit ease of movement, especially for those unfamiliar with institutional cultural cues (Medaković, 2024). Recent spatial analysis further confirms that the configuration of movement pathways and visual access fields significantly influences whether visitors perceive a space as open and inclusive—or alienating and exclusive (Wang, 2025).

Economic Alienation

Financial barriers significantly limit access to museums. Even when entry is free, indirect costs such as transportation, parking, or proximity to high-cost areas can deter attendance. Museums located in commercial or gentrified zones are often out of reach for those relying on low-wage jobs or public transportation. Wolf (2024) highlights how perceived elitism and logistical inconvenience contribute to feelings of exclusion, even when direct economic barriers are low. These realities turn "public" institutions into spaces primarily frequented by those who can afford the experience.

Social Alienation

Museums that fail to reflect the diversity of the populations they serve risk socially alienating their audiences. This form of alienation occurs when visitors do not see their languages, cultures, or experiences represented in the exhibitions or among museum staff. Medaković notes that a lack of inclusive programming and staff representation deepens the gap between institutions and marginalized communities. Without intentional engagement strategies, museums become echo chambers of elite narratives, alienating those who may already feel socially distant from the world of contemporary art. (Medaković, 2024)

This framework demonstrates how contemporary art museums, particularly in urban centers like Bangkok, sustain symbolic and material hierarchies. By analyzing alienation through four dimensions—psychological, spatial, economic, and social—we reveal how museums, though nominally public, often function as exclusive spaces shaped by cultural capital. These forms of exclusion underscore the need for inclusive, community-based strategies in institutional design and programming.

While theories of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), spatial politics (Lefebvre, 1996), and critical museology offer valuable insights, few studies have addressed their intersection within the Thai museum context. In particular, the ways in which spatial design, curatorial language, and institutional aesthetics perpetuate class-based exclusion remain underexplored. This study addresses that gap by integrating spatial-cultural theory to investigate how contemporary Thai art institutions reinforce subtle, yet persistent, forms of alienation among lower-income communities.

2.3 Critical Museology and Mechanisms of Exclusion

Critical museology offers a vital framework for understanding how museums function not merely as cultural repositories, but as institutions embedded within broader socio-political systems that sustain social hierarchies through spatial, curatorial, and discursive practices (Bennett, 1995; Duncan, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Fraser, 2006; Lind, 2004; Raicovich, 2021). It challenges the notion of museums as neutral, democratic spaces by highlighting how institutional norms, aesthetics, and governance structures often privilege dominant cultural groups. Bennett (1995) conceptualizes museums as part of the "exhibitionary complex," where visibility, discipline, and order uphold elite cultural narratives through curatorial framing. Duncan (1995) further describes museums as "civilizing rituals," where spatial design subtly dictates visitor behavior, reinforcing class-coded legitimacy and social expectations. Hooper-Greenhill (2000) critiques how institutional pedagogy assumes a culturally literate, middle-class visitor, marginalizing alternative forms of knowing.

Expanding on these foundations, contemporary scholars like Fraser (2006) and Lind (2004) foreground the role of institutional critique in exposing the ideological underpinnings of museum practices. Fraser (2006) encourages critical engagement with museum governance, sponsorship, and representational politics, while Lind (2004) interrogates how the notion of the "public" in public institutions often reflects institutional aspirations more than actual community needs. Raicovich (2021) urges museums to rethink their operational logics, warning that participatory strategies risk becoming tokenistic if they fail to confront structural inequality.

Drawing from Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural and economic capital, exclusion is also understood to operate through both visible and invisible costs—including admission fees, transportation barriers,

time poverty, and the emotional labor required to navigate unfamiliar or intimidating cultural spaces. These four mechanisms—curation, design, culture, and cost—constitute the operational core of this study's conceptual framework. Together, they demonstrate that exclusion is not the result of individual disinterest or deficiency, but the outcome of systemic institutional practices. In this context, critical museology becomes the theoretical scaffolding through which to decode how contemporary art museums reinforce, challenge, or reimagine their relationship to class, identity, and access.

2.4 The Meaning of Art in Thai Culture: A Review of Paradigm Shifts in Cultural Interpretation

Historically, Thai art has functioned as a deeply integrated element of religious, moral, and communal life. Temple murals, sculptures, and handicrafts conveyed Buddhist teachings and moral narratives in ways that were accessible to all social classes, fostering cultural continuity and collective memory (Chirapravati, 2005; Ko-Udomvit, 2003). Art was not created for elite contemplation but served as a spiritual and public medium—produced by local artisans and shared in inclusive, everyday spaces. This longstanding tradition situated art as an act of devotion, moral instruction, and shared cultural meaning.

However, this democratic and spiritual role of art shifted dramatically during the modernization campaigns of the 19th century, particularly under the reigns of King Rama IV and Rama V. Western artistic paradigms—such as realism and portraiture—were introduced into Thai visual culture, gradually aligning artistic production with elite patronage and individualized expression (Clarke, 2013). This transformation was institutionalized with the founding of Silpakorn University in 1943 by Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci (Silpa Bhirasri), which formalized art education and professionalized Thai art along Western lines (Clark & Kitiarsa, 2010).

The impact of this transformation continues to shape Thailand's contemporary art institutions. Thai museums and galleries increasingly emulate international norms in exhibition design, curatorial language, and spatial aesthetics. The widespread adoption of the "white cube" model, for example, reflects a global museological standard that privileges minimalist neutrality. Yet critics argue that this model fosters psychological detachment, formal rigidity, and cultural alienation—especially for audiences unfamiliar with conceptually abstract or institutionally coded artistic forms (O'Doherty, 1999).

Unlike Buddhist temples—which remain embedded in urban life and accessible across class lines—contemporary museums often feel spatially detached, behaviorally formal, and cognitively inaccessible. This shift marks a cultural and epistemological rupture: the transition from narrative-driven, inclusive art forms to institutionalized, elite-centered practices. The result is a cultural double bind. Thai institutions seek global validation through Western museological frameworks, yet risk marginalizing the local publics they were intended to serve (Chirapravati, 2005).

This tension underscores the need to critically reassess how museums in non-Western contexts define and communicate cultural value. Bridging global and local paradigms requires more than curatorial translation—it demands a structural reorientation toward inclusivity, cultural plurality, and epistemic justice. Inclusive design strategies, such as "slow museum" experiences, have been proposed to foster greater accessibility, emotional comfort, and cultural resonance for a wider range of visitors (Hall, 2023). Understanding this historical trajectory is essential for reimagining how Thai cultural institutions can re-engage with their inclusive origins while developing context-specific museological frameworks that reflect the region's unique cultural-political dynamics (Cai, 2025).

2.5 Comparative Case Studies: Institutional Forms of Alienation in Bangkok and Beyond

This study draws on case studies of contemporary art museums in Bangkok, particularly the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), to illustrate how spatial design, curatorial language, and institutional culture can contribute to alienation. Despite offering free entry or affordable pricing, these museums often exhibit forms of exclusion through modernist architecture, abstract curation, and limited representation of local or marginalized communities.

For comparative context, the study also considers Western examples such as the Tate Modern in London and the Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan. These institutions, while operating in different socio-cultural contexts, similarly grapple with questions of accessibility, inclusion, and institutional critique. The comparative analysis helps to illuminate which forms of alienation are culturally specific and which are structurally embedded in the global museum model.

This cross-cultural approach strengthens the argument that alienation is not merely a byproduct of poor outreach or isolated curatorial decisions but is symptomatic of deeper institutional patterns. By situating Bangkok's art institutions within a global discourse of exclusion and reform, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how contemporary museums can either reproduce or challenge cultural stratification.

2.5.1 Case Study: Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC)

Situated in central Bangkok and accessible by public transit, BACC serves as a public cultural venue offering exhibitions and educational programs. Despite its centrality and free admission, spatial and economic alienation persist. Transport costs, confusing architecture inspired by the Guggenheim, and white-cube aesthetics contribute to feelings of exclusivity. Limited Thai cultural references, multilingual signage, and staff engagement further reinforce the perception that BACC caters more to elite audiences than to local working-class communities. Figure 2 illustrates the central location of BACC, highlighting its accessibility yet paradoxical alienation through design and signage.
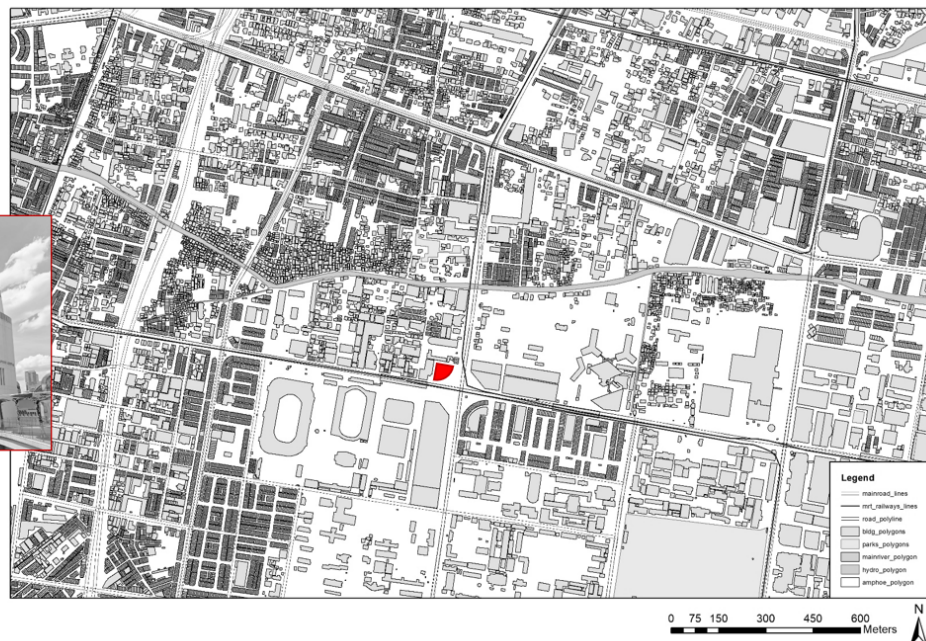

Figure 2. Location of the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) within the central city area.

2.5.2 Case Study: Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA)

Located on the outskirts of Bangkok, MOCA is a privately funded institution that charges standard admission and offers few discounted events, making it less accessible to working-class visitors. Its formal architecture—with high ceilings, polished interiors, and subdued lighting—creates a sense of exclusivity that can alienate those unfamiliar with institutional art spaces. Interviews revealed low awareness and minimal visitation among nearby residents, with many unsure if entry was open to the public. Cost, distance, and a lack of interactive or multilingual programming further reinforce psychological, spatial, and economic barriers to engagement. As shown in Figure 3, MOCA is situated peripherally, reinforcing barriers of cost and formality in its spatial positioning.

**SITE 2:
MOCA**

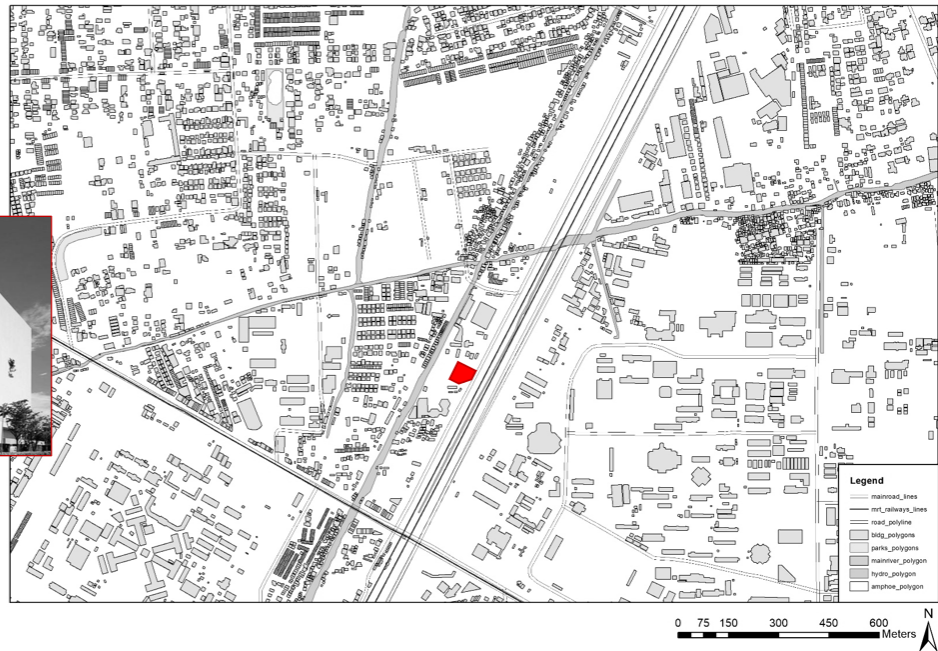*MOCA: Peripherally located, fee-based, formal tone discourages lower-class visitors.*

Figure 3. Location of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Bangkok's peripheral urban area.

2.5.3 Comparative Reflections: Tate Modern and Pirelli HangarBicocca

Tate Modern (UK) and Pirelli HangarBicocca (Italy) demonstrate inclusive, community-focused approaches to contemporary museology. Both offer free general admission and use repurposed industrial spaces to foster openness and accessibility. Tate's Turbine Hall functions as a public forum, while Pirelli's immersive design and community partnerships reduce symbolic exclusion. With multilingual signage, participatory programming, and non-hierarchical atmospheres, these institutions actively lower barriers for diverse audiences. Their models show how spatial design, outreach, and cultural inclusion can enhance public engagement—offering valuable insights for Thai museums seeking to address class-based alienation and fulfil their civic role in urban society.

TATE MODERN

Pirelli HangarBicocca

Figure 4. Exterior views of international case studies: Tate Modern (London) and Pirelli HangarBicocca (Milan).

While international scholarship has extensively explored the role of art museums in cultural reproduction and symbolic exclusion—particularly through the lenses of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), spatial production (Lefebvre, 1996), and critical museology (Bennett, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000)—there is a notable lack of empirical literature that addresses how these dynamics operate in Southeast Asian urban contexts. Studies often focus on Western institutions or national heritage sites, rather than contemporary art spaces and their socio-political functions within rapidly urbanizing, class-stratified societies like Thailand (Sasitharan, 2023; Le Mare & Holden, 2021). Systematic reviews confirm persistent barriers in accessibility and inclusive learning across museum settings worldwide (González-Herrera, 2023) Moreover, research on Thai museums tends to emphasize preservation,

tourism, or institutional growth, without interrogating how spatial design, curatorial language, and institutional tone shape exclusion for lower-income publics. The comparative international sites are represented in Figure 4, showing the exterior architectural character of Tate Modern and Pirelli HangarBicocca.

2.6 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that integrates urban theory, cultural sociology, and critical museology. Henri Lefebvre's Right to the City positions urban space as a lived, symbolic, and political construct rather than a neutral backdrop (Lefebvre, 1996). Within this view, art is a civic right—integral to urban democracy—and museums are not merely sites of preservation but contested spaces that reflect and reproduce spatial and social hierarchies.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital further illuminates how art appreciation is socially conditioned, privileging those with prior exposure to elite cultural forms. Contemporary museums often encode these preferences in their curatorial language, spatial design, and institutional tone, resulting in subtle but persistent exclusion of working-class audiences.

Building on this, critical museology interrogates the ideological functions of museums. Scholars such as Duncan (1995), Hooper-Greenhill (2000), and Fraser (2006) argue that museums construct narratives of legitimacy and authority, often omitting marginalized voices. This lens encourages scrutiny of whose stories are prioritized, how exhibitions are framed, and whether institutional norms foster or hinder inclusivity. Museums emerge as spaces that can both reproduce and challenge inequality (Fraser, 2006; Bourdieu, 1984), with accessibility strategies central to reshaping these dynamics (Wolf, 2024) and heritage practices increasingly evaluated not only for cultural but also for socio-economic outcomes (Galluccio & Giambona, 2024). Empirical indicators of urban socio-economic disparity, such as nighttime lighting intensity, offer tangible evidence of uneven urban development (Yu et al., 2024). Private museums, as shown by Kolbe (2024), contribute not just culturally but also economically by promoting urban legitimacy and prosperity in competitive city networks. (Kolbe, 2024). Finally, the framework reflects on the paradigm shift in Thai visual culture. Once rooted in communal, religious, and craft-based traditions (Chirapravati, 2005), art in Thailand has increasingly adopted Western models of abstraction, professionalism, and spatial formality (Clark & Kitiarsa, 2010). This shift mirrors global institutional norms but also risks alienating local publics, reinforcing class-based cultural exclusion. The theoretical foundations informing this study are outlined in Figure 5.
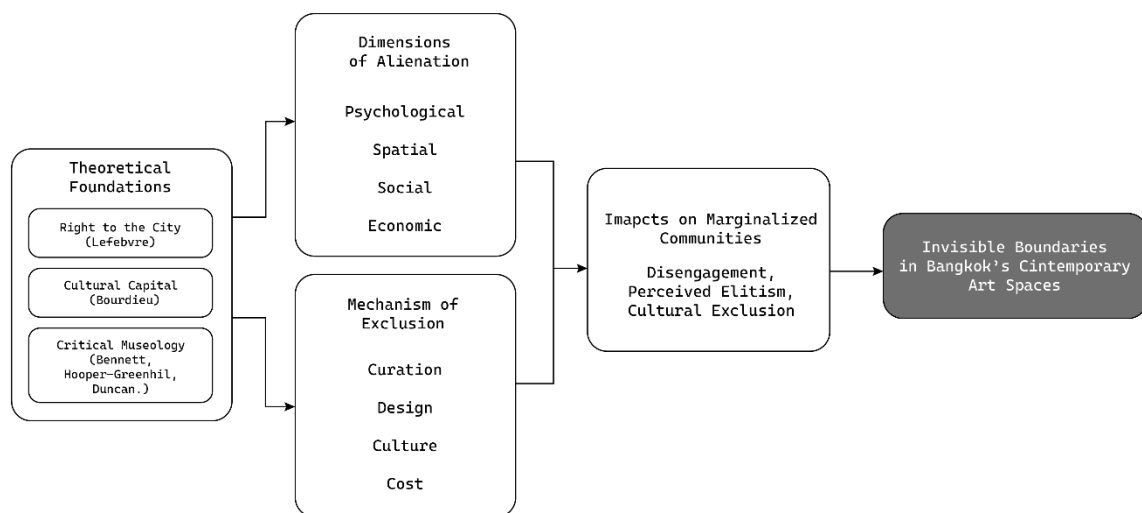

Figure 5. Theoretical framework diagram linking Lefebvre's Right to the City, Bourdieu's Cultural Capital, and Critical Museology to the analysis of Bangkok's contemporary art spaces.

This theoretical grounding, informed by grounded theory methodology, allows the study to identify two overarching forces that drive alienation in museum settings: dimensions and mechanisms. These two categories serve as the analytical pillars of the research. The dimensions of alienation describe the types of disconnection individuals feel—whether emotional, spatial, economic, or social. The mechanisms, however, refer to the operational forces within institutions that reinforce exclusion, such as design, curation, cost, and cultural norms. By focusing on these dual layers, the study is able to explain not only what kinds of alienation exist, but also how they are produced and maintained. Figure 6 maps the conceptual framework, linking mechanisms of exclusion with dimensions of alienation.
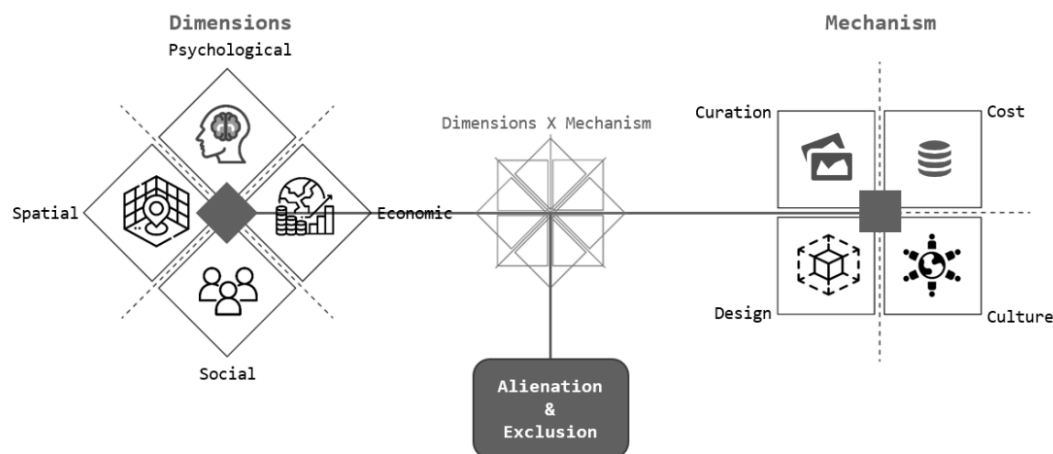

Figure 6. Conceptual framework diagram illustrating the intersection of mechanisms (curation, design, culture, cost) and dimensions (psychological, spatial, social, economic) that shape processes of alienation and exclusion in museum contexts.

By conceptualizing alienation in contemporary art museums through the intersection of two analytical axes—dimensions and mechanisms of exclusion—this study establishes a diagnostic matrix that shapes its research design, including interview construction, field observations, and thematic analysis. Informed by grounded theory and drawing on insights from critical museology, spatial theory, and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, the framework identifies four key dimensions of alienation: Psychological (feelings of non-belonging, internalized inadequacy, fear of judgment); Spatial (disorientation from formal design, layout, signage); Economic (barriers from entry fees, transport, and time); and Social (lack of cultural representation or perceived class-based exclusion).

These dimensions are not experienced in isolation but are continually reproduced through four institutional mechanisms: Curation (art selection and framing that privilege dominant cultural narratives); Design (architectural language and spatial organization that signal accessibility or distance); Cost (both visible and hidden financial burdens); and Culture (norms, language, and behaviors aligned with elite expectations). Together, this conceptual framework provides a critical tool for understanding how contemporary museums may inadvertently reinforce class-based exclusion and limit cultural participation.

3. Methods

This study adopts a critical ethnographic methodology as its overarching framework, allowing for an in-depth exploration of class-based alienation in contemporary art museums through lived experience and spatial-symbolic analysis. Under this umbrella, the research integrates two primary qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews and field observations, both of which are aligned with grounded theory and spatial ethnography traditions. At the analytical level, the study applies a hybrid thematic analysis approach—combining deductive (theory-informed) and inductive (data-driven) coding—to extract patterns across four key dimensions of alienation: psychological, spatial, economic, and socio-cultural. These findings are then examined through comparative case analysis to uncover contrasts

between Thai and Western institutions. As a final tactic, the study employs a diagnostic dimensions-mechanisms matrix, which maps exclusionary experiences against institutional forces such as curation, design, cost, and culture. This layered methodology—visualized in the accompanying diagram (Figure X)—ensures coherence between theoretical framing, empirical inquiry, and analytical interpretation, offering a robust and transferable model for cultural research in urban contexts.

This This study employs a qualitative comparative design, drawing on 16 in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the primary dataset. While the sample size is modest, it is not intended as a pilot; rather, it reflects the methodological orientation of qualitative inquiry that prioritizes depth over breadth (Baker & Edwards, 2012). The research investigates class-based alienation in contemporary art museums through the intersecting lenses of Right to the City, Cultural Capital, and Critical Museology. Four key dimensions of alienation—psychological, spatial, economic, and social—were identified as the conceptual criteria guiding both data collection and analysis.

Using a critical spatial ethnographic approach, interviews were conducted with 16 working-class participants (both visitors and non-visitors) across Bangkok, London, and Milan. Field observations at four case study sites—BACC, MOCA, Tate Modern, and Pirelli HangarBicocca—were undertaken to triangulate findings and contextualize narratives. Thematic analysis was then applied to synthesize the data and uncover patterns of exclusion and engagement across institutional settings.

Given the cross-cultural nature of the study, interviews were conducted in participants' native languages and translated into English by the author, a bilingual researcher familiar with all four cultural contexts. While this facilitated nuanced engagement, it also required critical awareness of potential cultural and linguistic bias. Researcher positionality—as an insider-outsider to different sites—was continuously reflected upon to mitigate interpretive distortion and uphold ethical sensitivity (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; England, 1994). The methodological design of this research, from data collection to analysis, is visualized in Figure 7.

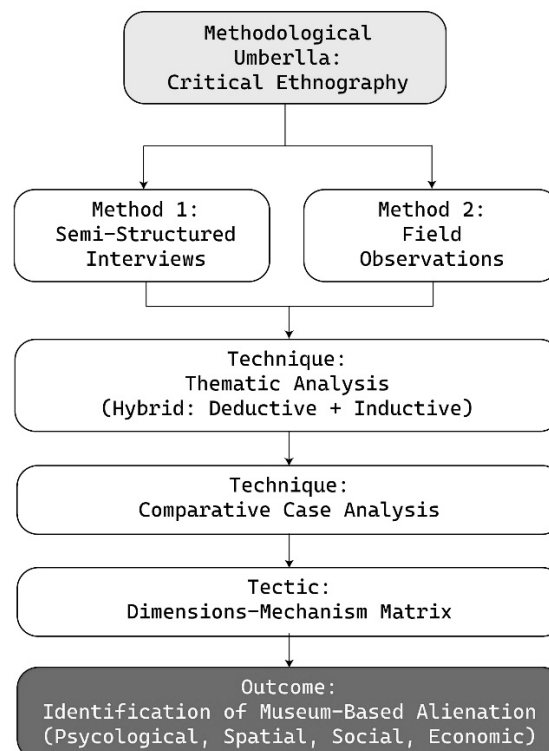**Figure 7.** Research methodology diagram showing the sequence from data collection (semi-structured interviews and field observations) to analysis (thematic analysis, comparative case analysis, and dimensions–mechanism matrix) and final outcome.

3.1 Semi-Structure Interview

Semi-structured interview guides were developed in alignment with the four dimensions of alienation—psychological, spatial, economic, and social—to elicit open-ended responses while maintaining thematic consistency across all participant groups. Questions were tailored to reflect each museum's context and whether the participant had previously visited. With participant consent, audio recording equipment was used to ensure accurate capture of responses; recordings were subsequently transcribed and anonymized for analysis.

3.1.1 Guiding Criteria and Interview Design

This study employs qualitative methods, particularly semi-structured interviews, guided by four dimensions of museum-based alienation: psychological, spatial/physical, economic, and social. These dimensions were informed by literature from Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, Lefebvre's right to the city, and visitor studies such as Falk & Dierking's contextual model of learning. The interview questions were developed to capture perceptions, experiences, and emotional responses of lower-income and working-class individuals interacting with contemporary art museums in Bangkok.

The table below maps sample interview questions to the four types of alienation and the relevant theoretical sources:

Table 1: Sample Interview Questions based on Alienation Types.

Alienation Types	Sample Interviews Question	Theoretical Source
Psychological	How do you feel when you are inside the museum?	Falk & Dierking (2013), Bourdieu (1984)
	Do you understand the art being shown? Why or why not?	
Spatial/Physical	Can you describe how easy or difficult it was to navigate the museum?	Knox (2010), O'Doherty (1999)
	What do you think about the design or layout of the museum space?	
Economic	Have you ever decided not to visit a museum because of cost or transportation?	Wolf (2024), Bourdieu (1984)
	How much do you think a museum visit cost (ticket, food, travel)?	
Social	Did you feel like you belonged in the museum space? Why or why not?	Knox (2010), Bourdieu (1984), Cultural Capital Theory
	Do you see yourself or your community represented in the exhibitions or the program there?	

3.1.2 Ethnographic Methodology and In-Depth Interviews

A critical ethnographic approach was adopted, integrating two primary methods: (1) in-depth interviews and (2) on-site observational studies. These methods enable a multidimensional analysis of how contemporary art institutions include or exclude specific social groups. Interviews provided insight into participants' lived experiences and perceptions of museum space, design, and institutional culture. Through questions focused on their interaction with these environments, the research critically explores how architectural form, economic structures, and curatorial narratives contribute to either the reinforcement or disruption of social stratification in urban settings.

3.1.3 Participants or Subjects

As an exploratory project, this study also serves as a pilot to evaluate the clarity and effectiveness of its interview framework. Pilot studies in qualitative research are essential for refining methodology, identifying obstacles, and validating data collection tools. Existing literature suggests that a sample of 3 to 6 participants is typically adequate for pilot studies (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001; Baker & Edwards, 2012). This research expands that range to include 16 participants across four distinct groups, allowing for both methodological refinement and comparative insight.

Although some pilot studies typically involve 3–6 participants (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001), this research was not intended as a pilot but as a full comparative qualitative investigation. The sample size of 16 participants was deliberately selected to ensure a breadth of perspectives across three international case contexts—Bangkok, London, and Milan—while still allowing for the depth of analysis required in thematic inquiry. As Baker and Edwards (2012) argue, qualitative research values the richness of narrative over numerical scale, particularly when exploring complex, situated

experiences like cultural exclusion and spatial alienation. Therefore, the sample size was methodologically appropriate for the research aim and theoretical framework.

Participant Selection:

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on occupation, income level, and proximity to contemporary art museums. The focus was on individuals whose socio-economic status placed them within marginalized or underserved urban communities.

1. The first group comprises Bangkok-based participants who have visited BACC or MOCA. They work in service or blue-collar sectors, earning around 15,000THB/month. MOCA visitors accessed the museum through group facilitation, while BACC visitors attended independently.

2. The second group includes Bangkok residents earning below 10,000THB/month, primarily employed in informal labor. Despite living within 5 km of either museum, none had previously visited.

3. The third group consists of low-income individuals in London and Milan who have visited Tate Modern or Pirelli HangarBicocca. Employed in part-time or entry-level roles, they live in working-class neighborhoods with accessible public transport.

4. The fourth group includes socio-economically similar individuals from London and Milan who, despite living nearby, have never visited these museums.

Each group consists of two participants, totalling 16 interviewees across all groups. Participants were chosen for their relevance to the study's core question: why do individuals living in close proximity to contemporary art institutions often remain disengaged from them?

3.1.4 Participants or Subjects

A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure coverage of both visitor and non-visitor experiences within the same socio-economic category. This allowed for meaningful contrasts and a more holistic view of museum engagement and alienation across different cultural contexts.

3.1.5 Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent and were made aware of their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Names and identifying details have been anonymized, and all data have been securely stored in accordance with ethical research guidelines.

3.2 Field observation on interview site

Field observations were conducted during site visits to the BACC, MOCA, Tate Modern, and Pirelli HangarBicocca. These notes captured spatial dynamics, visitor behavior, institutional messaging, and the overall atmosphere of each location, providing essential contextual support to the interview data. Observational studies focused on behavioral patterns and the perceived socio-economic status of visitors, as reflected in their movement and interactions within the museum spaces. In addition, spatial mapping was employed to document physical access routes, urban connectivity, and the broader socio-spatial environment surrounding each institution.

3.2.1 Sites Selection Criteria

Four case study sites were selected to investigate how spatial, economic, and cultural dynamics shape inclusion and exclusion in contemporary art institutions. In Bangkok, the BACC is centrally located and offers free admission, yet its formal design, limited signage, and institutional tone contribute to psychological and socio-cultural alienation. In contrast, the MOCA, situated on the city's periphery and operating under a fee-based model, reinforces exclusion through both financial barriers and symbolic distancing.

These two Thai institutions represent contrasting models—public and private—within the same urban setting, allowing for a grounded comparison of accessibility and alienation. Differences in location, governance, architectural language, and audience engagement provide a rich foundation for exploring class-based exclusion in Bangkok's art scene.

For international comparison, the study includes Tate Modern in London and Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan. Both institutions are known for their inclusive programming, free admission, and use of post-industrial spaces to promote openness and community integration. Tate Modern engages diverse

audiences through educational outreach and civic programming, while Pirelli HangarBicocca fosters accessibility through immersive installations and local partnerships.

Together, these four institutions offer a cross-cultural framework for examining how design, policy, and institutional ethos either reinforce or mitigate alienation. Their selection enables a meaningful comparative analysis of how class-based exclusion is experienced and addressed across different cultural and spatial contexts.

3.3 From Conceptual Framework to Analytical Matrix

The conceptual framework shaped both the interview design and analytical approach, forming a matrix that intersects four dimensions of alienation—psychological, spatial, social, and economic—with four institutional mechanisms—curation, design, culture, and cost. These axes structured the interview guide and served as the coding framework for thematic analysis. By aligning field data with this matrix, the study systematically examined how exclusion is produced within contemporary art museums. This framework also enabled triangulation across interviews, spatial observations, and institutional practices, providing a coherent method for identifying recurring patterns of alienation and assessing institutional accessibility across all case study sites. The integration of the conceptual framework into the methodological matrix is presented in Figure 8.
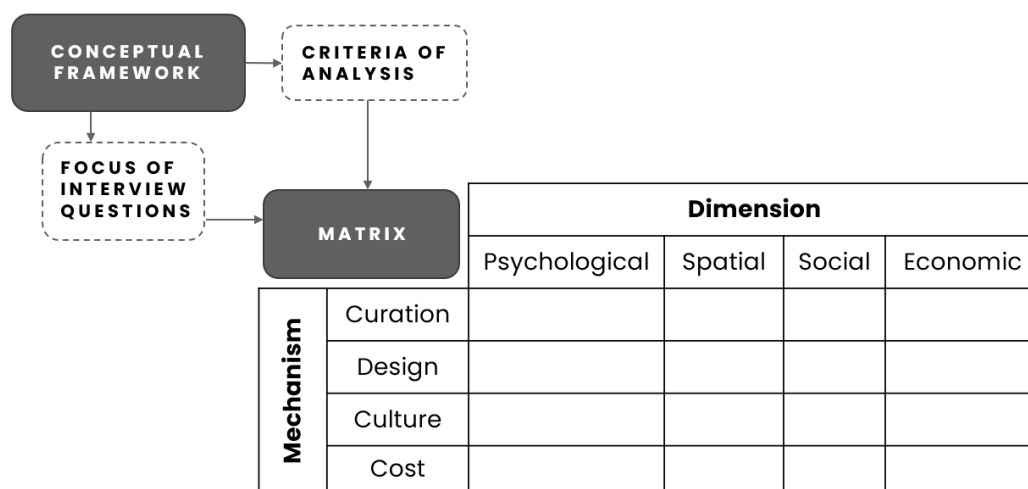

Figure 8. Framework-to-methodology matrix linking mechanisms (curation, design, culture, cost) with dimensions (psychological, spatial, social, economic) of exclusion.

3.4 Thematic Analysis

Interview data were thematically coded based on four dimensions of alienation: psychological, spatial, social, and economic. This process was supported by comparative discourse and spatial analysis to identify symbolic and material exclusion embedded in institutional design and narratives. Findings were triangulated across interview transcripts, field observations, and institutional documents to enhance validity. A hierarchy map was developed to assess the intensity and impact of each alienation type, resulting from comparing case studies that revealed cross-cultural differences in museum accessibility and class-based exclusion.

3.4.1 Thematic Coding Framework

A hybrid inductive-deductive approach was used in coding, allowing pre-existing theoretical categories to guide the process while also remaining responsive to participant-specific language and local nuances. Each main theme—aligned with one form of alienation—was broken down into recurring sub-themes and codes drawn directly from the data.

A. Psychological Alienation included themes such as spatial disorientation, intimidation by institutional architecture, emotional disconnect, and fear of being judged.

B. Socio-Cultural Alienation emerged as the most complex and multi-layered category. Sub-themes encompassed perceptions of elitism, lack of cultural representation, preference for traditional art, absence of relatable visitors or staff, and unfamiliarity with contemporary art.

C. Spatial Alienation focused on the physical design and placement of museums as sources of discomfort or exclusion. Common codes highlighted confusion with layout, architectural intimidation, or lack of visibility in community life.

D. Economic Alienation concerned both direct costs and opportunity. Sub-themes included perceived unaffordability, transport complexity, and class-based associations of museums as "luxury" destinations.

These codes were organized into detailed thematic analysis tables (Tables 2–5), each corresponding to one of the four participant groups. Responses were categorized by theme, sub-theme, and direct quotations from participants, allowing for an unfiltered presentation of lived experience. A visual summary (Figure 1) follows, showing the relative distribution of alienation types across all interviews.

4. Results

4.1 Presentation of Key Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews conducted at BACC and MOCA revealed clear patterns of exclusion among working-class participants. Socio-Cultural Alienation emerged as the most dominant theme, comprising nearly 50% of all coded responses. Participants consistently viewed contemporary art museums as elitist and culturally disconnected, often expressing that "I didn't see people like me" in these spaces. While Psychological, Spatial, and Economic forms of alienation were also evident, they frequently intersected with or were reinforced by broader socio-cultural exclusion. Overall, the findings suggest that the primary barriers to engagement in Bangkok's contemporary art institutions are symbolic rather than logistical—rooted in issues of class representation, cultural relevance, and institutional tone.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis: Visitors to BACC & MOCA.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Code	Excerpt	Interpretation
Psychological Alienation	Disorientation and fatigue in museum layout	Feeling lost in spatial layout	I don't even know what floor I am on at one point.	Complex interior design induces spatial confusion and discomfort, discouraging return visits.
	Intimidation by architecture	Overwhelmed by formal design	Too elite... intimidating... formal layout.	Museum scale and design language create a symbolic and emotional distance from visitors.
	Inability to understand contemporary art	Judging art by appearance only	I just know if it's pretty or not pretty.	Art appreciation is based on surface aesthetics, revealing lack of cultural capital to decode meaning.
Socio-Cultural Alienation	Preference for traditional Thai art	Familiarity with traditional forms	Understood traditional crafts, not contemporary works.	Familiar forms are more accessible, highlighting a disconnect between contemporary curation and local cultural knowledge.
	Perception that museums are not for 'people like them'	Perceived elitism	It's for trendy people / younger people.	Museums are perceived as spaces reserved for elites, reinforcing class-based symbolic boundaries.
	Lack of visible representation	Not seeing similar people	Didn't see anyone who looked like them.	Absence of demographic diversity contributes to discomfort and perceived exclusion.
	Attendance driven by others	Visiting due to social context	Went with friends or during a school trip.	Social and institutional contexts are key enablers; individuals rarely self-initiate visits.
	Willingness to engage with guidance	Desire for staff interaction	Would love for staff to explain things.	There is openness to engagement, but staff outreach is absent, reinforcing passive experience.
	Visiting as a 'luxury date'	Museums as prestige symbols	I want to take her somewhere nice.	Museums hold symbolic prestige, but are treated as occasional, not habitual, destinations.
Economic Alienation	Entrance fee as a deterrent	Cost barrier	Wouldn't go in if it cost 100 baht.	Even modest fees prevent attendance, especially without financial or social support.
	Transport and distance barriers	No confidence in navigating to museum.	Wouldn't go without someone taking them.	Lack of personal transportation and confidence in public travel limits access.
Spatial Alienation	Art judged by visual appeal	Surface-level engagement	A good place to take Instagram photos.	Engagement is surface-level, driven by aesthetics rather than conceptual understanding or cultural meaning.

Table 3: Thematic Analysis: Non-Visitors to BACC & MOCA.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Code	Excerpt	Interpretation
Psychological Alienation	Emotional disconnection and intimidation	Museums feel unwelcoming or irrelevant	It's not a place for people like me.	Participants feel intellectually and emotionally excluded, associating museums with elitism and discomfort.
	Fear of being judged or out of place	Anxiety about dress, language, and norms	Concerned they'd be silently judged.	Cultural codes and norms within museums contribute to a fear of being visibly 'othered'.
Socio-Cultural Alienation	Limited understanding or exposure to art	Confusion around purpose and content	Described museums as confusing or for art students.	Museums are perceived as intellectually distant and not aligned with everyday cultural experiences.
	Absence of cultural representation	No relatable role models or themes	Expected to see something fun, not abstract.	Lack of cultural alignment reinforces the perception that museums are not for their social group.
	Perceived class exclusivity	Only for the educated or upper class	People from my background don't go to museums.	Museums are seen as spaces for elite social classes, creating symbolic exclusion.
	No social facilitator	Need someone to accompany them	Would go if someone they trust invited them.	Social networks are essential for bridging symbolic and psychological distance to cultural institutions.
	Mismatch with expectations	Want fun or relatable exhibitions	Expected to see crafts or something interactive.	Audience expectations reflect a desire for tangible, entertaining, or culturally rooted content.
Economic Alienation	Associated costs and economic priorities	Time is money	Spend your time making a living	Even free museums are perceived as costly when factoring time, food, transport, and opportunity cost.
	Inaccessible locations and transport	Difficult to reach without private transport	Reaching locations is difficult without private transport.	Public transport is seen as too confusing or expensive, creating structural access barriers.
Spatial Alienation	Lack of outreach or community presence	No visibility in their communities	Suggested museums do outreach in their neighbourhoods.	Absence of visible engagement reinforces their perception of museums as distant or exclusive.

In contrast to the Thai case, participants in London and Milan—both visitors and non-visitors—reported a more balanced distribution of alienation across psychological, socio-cultural, spatial, and economic dimensions. These barriers were largely mitigated by inclusive spatial design, friendly staff, accessible curatorial language, and free entry. Among non-visitors, obstacles were described as soft—rooted in unfamiliarity or lack of habit rather than structural exclusion. Economic alienation was the least prominent theme, suggesting that cost barriers were effectively addressed through policy and infrastructure. Although contemporary art museums were not fully embedded in participants' daily routines, they were perceived as open and approachable rather than elitist or exclusionary.

Table 4: Thematic Analysis: Tate Modern & Pirelli HangarBicocca Visitors.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Code	Excerpt	Interpretation
Psychological Alienation	Emotional comfort and inclusivity	Art hits you regardless of background	Art is emotional, and it doesn't matter where you come from. If it hits you, it hits you.	Participants felt emotionally safe and welcomed, showing how inclusive design fosters psychological ease.
	Non-judgmental environment	No shame in not understanding	She never feels judged for not understanding.	Lack of intellectual gatekeeping encourages visitors of all backgrounds to engage without fear.
Socio-Cultural Alienation	Representation and diversity	Seeing people like oneself	Acknowledges seeing people from different age ranges, races, and social backgrounds.	Visibility of diverse audiences reduces social distance and affirms inclusion.
	Interactive and accessible content	Enjoyment without prior knowledge	You don't need to know anything to enjoy it.	Museums welcomed untrained viewers through experiential and accessible curation.
Spatial Alienation	Welcoming spatial design	Museum feels open and intuitive	Designed in a way that makes you feel like you're just allowed to be there.	Intentional spatial design fosters comfort and belonging rather than distance.
	Industrial reuse as familiar space	No 'temple of art' feeling	It doesn't feel elite. More like a warehouse that became a public place.	Industrial architecture evokes everyday familiarity, breaking the formality of traditional museums.
Economic Alienation	Free entry enables access	Wouldn't go if not free	She wouldn't have gone if she had to pay.	Free admission remains critical for lower-income participation.
	Centrally located and easy to reach	Proximity matters	Appreciates that it's free and centrally located.	Physical accessibility—via central locations—reduces barriers for economically disadvantaged visitors.

Table 5. Thematic Analysis: Tate Modern & HangarBicocca Non-Visitors.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Code	Excerpt	Interpretation
Psychological Alienation	Overwhelm and disorientation	Fear of getting bored or overwhelmed	Risk of getting bored if there's too much to see without clear guidance.	Lack of clear orientation and cognitive overload deter deeper engagement.
	Need for emotional connection	Wants someone to explain the art	Would feel more comfortable with someone explaining things to her.	Social learning and emotional reassurance are key to building comfort.
Socio-Cultural Alienation	Limited routine exposure	Not part of daily life	It's not my thing or not part of my routine.	Cultural institutions are seen as disconnected from everyday experience.
	Ambiguity about relevance	Doesn't know what to expect	Knows of the museum by name but has no idea where it is or what it's like.	Lack of familiarity prevents initiative and cultural connection.
	Desire for informal interpretation	Wants simple explanation of relevance	Just tell me what I'm looking at and why it matters.	Participants crave relatable storytelling over abstract or academic interpretation.
Spatial Alienation	Uncertainty about access	Poor transport links may deter visits	Poor public transport links could be discouraging.	Physical accessibility through public transit remains a concern.
	Design perceived as intimidating	Modern installations may feel overwhelming.	Modern buildings and large installations are interesting but potentially overwhelming.	Scale and unfamiliar architecture can produce discomfort despite curiosity.
Economic Alienation	Free entry as essential	Wouldn't pay to enter	Wouldn't pay to enter but would definitely go if it's free.	Cost remains a barrier, even if not prohibitive in theory.

4.2 Interpretation of Findings
4.2.1 BACC & MOCA
The percentage diagram below shows the distribution of the four main alienation themes across both BACC/MOCA's visitor and non-visitor interviews. Socio-cultural alienation dominates, highlighting how deeply class, representation, and social norms shape the museum experience. The thematic distribution of interview findings at BACC and MOCA is summarized in Figure 9.
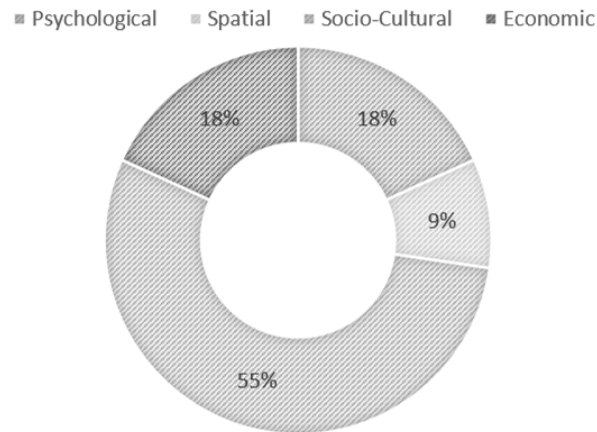
Figure 9. Distribution of thematic occurrences across interviews at BACC and MOCA, categorized by psychological, spatial, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions.

Psychological Alienation
Participants frequently reported emotional discomfort when navigating museum spaces. MOCA's imposing architecture and BACC's formal tone contributed to a sense of intimidation and disorientation. Many felt out of place or feared judgment, especially first-time or non-visiting participants. Visiting alone was rarely considered; instead, attendees often relied on accompaniment from someone more culturally familiar to reduce anxiety.

Socio-Cultural Alienation
Contemporary art was often perceived as confusing or irrelevant. Participants related more to traditional Thai art and crafts, evaluating works by visual appeal rather than meaning. Museums were seen as elite spaces, geared toward students or trend-conscious audiences. The lack of social representation—few visitors dressed or behaved like them—intensified feelings of exclusion. Attendance was generally facilitated by structured invitations (e.g., school trips), rather than individual motivation.

Spatial Alienation
Despite proximity to home or work, many were reluctant to visit BACC or MOCA independently. Wayfinding inside was confusing, and spatial layouts felt impersonal. Participants noted minimal community outreach, rarely encountering museum promotion in their neighbourhoods. Interior signage and design lacked accessibility, reinforcing the impression that these spaces were not intended for them.

Economic Alienation
Financial barriers—both actual and perceived—discouraged attendance. Even modest entry fees were seen as prohibitive, especially when combined with transport, food, or time away from work. For many, time itself was a financial resource, making museum visits feel impractical or indulgent. Cultural engagement was thus deprioritized in favour of economic necessity.

4.2.2 Tate Modern & Pirelli HangarBicocca
The percentage diagram below shows the distribution of thematic occurrences across Western case studies (Tate Modern & Pirelli HangarBicocca). As visualized, Socio-Cultural Alienation remains the most frequently referenced theme, reflecting the importance of familiarity, routine, and interpretation even in inclusive institutions. Figure 10 illustrates the distribution of thematic occurrences across interviews in the Western comparative cases.
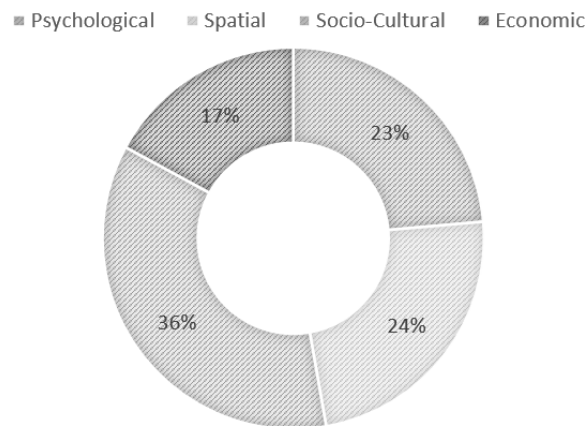
Figure 10. Distribution of thematic occurrences across interviews at Tate Modern and Pirelli HangarBicocca, categorized by psychological, spatial, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions.

Psychological Alienation

Visitors frequently described feeling emotionally at ease within both institutions. Even without fully understanding the art, they felt free to explore without fear of judgment. Non-visitors expressed hesitancy, largely due to unfamiliarity or lack of guidance, but this rarely translated into resistance. Their concerns reflected uncertainty rather than exclusion, and most were open to visiting with support or invitation.

Socio-Cultural Alienation

Inclusive spatial design, informal atmospheres, and visibly diverse audiences helped reduce socio-cultural alienation. Participants noted that these factors softened the museum's institutional tone and made them feel welcome. Non-visitors did not view the institutions as elitist but rather as disconnected from their routines. This suggests alienation stemmed more from cultural distance than perceived exclusion.

Spatial Alienation

The use of repurposed industrial architecture and intuitive layouts contributed to a sense of familiarity and spatial openness. These environments were seen as accessible and community-oriented. However, for non-visitors, unclear transport routes and the scale of the buildings remained obstacles, especially without prior exposure or contextual information.

Economic Alienation

Free entry and central or well-connected locations enhanced accessibility and carried symbolic importance. While cost was rarely a decisive barrier, participants noted that free admission signalled public openness. The absence of a financial threshold made museums feel more inviting and attainable, even for those who had not yet visited.

4.3 Contrasts and Convergences

While socio-cultural alienation emerged as a dominant theme in the Thai context, responses from participants in London and Milan revealed a more complex and varied landscape of exclusion. In these European settings, alienation was often articulated in terms of economic barriers, institutional elitism, or curatorial disengagement—rather than cultural illiteracy alone. Although spatial and psychological discomfort still played a role, many participants demonstrated higher baseline familiarity with museum environments, likely reflecting broader access to arts education and public cultural infrastructure. This section explores these patterns, drawing attention to the ways in which class-based exclusion manifests differently across urban and cultural regimes.

The predominance of socio-cultural alienation in Thai participants' responses can be read through Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which frames cultural literacy and symbolic competence as class-mediated assets (Bourdieu, 1984). Lacking these, working-class individuals often experience disorientation or unworthiness in cultural institutions. Simultaneously, this alienation reveals the failure of Thai urban cultural infrastructure to realize Lefebvre's "right to the city", where access to symbolic spaces like museums should be a shared, lived right—not a privilege reserved for the socio-culturally fluent (Lefebvre, 1996). In this context, exclusion from museums reflects deeper structural inequality embedded in the spatial and cultural logic of the city itself.

5. Comparative Analysis: Thai vs. Western Art Museums

Drawing on four key dimensions of exclusion—socio-cultural, psychological, spatial, and economic—the findings illustrate how alienation is experienced differently in the Bangkok-based institutions (BACC and MOCA) compared to their Western counterparts (Tate Modern in London and Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan). While all four forms of alienation were identified in both contexts, their distribution, intensity, and institutional responses varied significantly. A comparative synthesis between Thai and Western cases is provided in Figure 11, showing differences across psychological, spatial, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions.
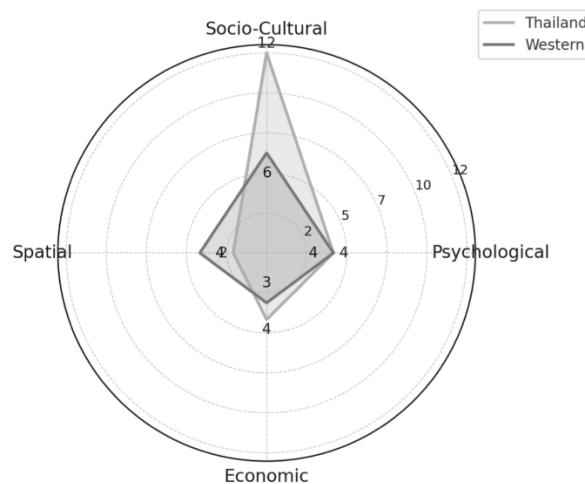

Figure 11. Comparative distribution of thematic occurrences across interviews in Thailand (BACC, MOCA) and Western cases (Tate Modern, Pirelli HangarBicocca), categorized by psychological, spatial, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions.

To summarize the chart data:
1. In the Thai case, there were 4 occurrences of psychological alienation, 12 of socio-cultural, 2 of spatial, and 4 of economic.
2. In the Western case, there were 4 psychological, 6 socio-cultural, 4 spatial, and 3 economic.

The data indicates that socio-cultural alienation is the most dominant exclusionary factor in the Thai context. Thai participants frequently described museums as elitist, disconnected from everyday life, and lacking in cultural relatability. In contrast, Western participants also acknowledged a cultural distance, but often mitigated by inclusive programming, participatory events, and diverse audience representation.

Psychological alienation was reported equally across both contexts. In Thailand, it was closely tied to the formal tone of institutions, intimidating architecture, and participants' fear of judgment or "being a burden" when asking for help. Western participants, in contrast, associated psychological discomfort more with uncertainty or unfamiliarity rather than exclusion. Friendly staff, informal design, and

welcoming atmospheres in Tate Modern and Pirelli HangarBicocca fostered emotional ease and reduced barriers to engagement.

Spatial alienation was more frequently mentioned in the West than in Thailand, though its character varied. Thai participants reported confusion due to BACC's spiraling design and MOCA's imposing architecture, both of which symbolized exclusivity. In contrast, Western institutions mitigated spatial alienation through adaptive reuse of industrial buildings and intuitive layouts. Although some non-visitors still cited difficulty navigating unfamiliar areas, the interior experience was largely seen as accessible and open, underlining how architectural form and signage shape spatial belonging.

Economic alienation was more deeply felt in Thailand compared to Western cases. Thai participants expressed high concerns about both direct and indirect costs. Even free-entry spaces like BACC were seen as financially inaccessible when considering opportunity costs. Western participants, while still acknowledging cost, framed free admission more as a symbolic gesture of openness than a financial necessity, revealing a class-based disparity, where financial access remains structurally constrained in Thailand.

Overall, the findings underscore a sharper divide in Thailand, where socio-cultural alienation is the most frequently cited and deeply felt form of exclusion. Psychological-spatial-economic barriers were also present but compounded by class-coded norms and limited institutional outreach. In contrast, Western institutions demonstrated greater success in softening alienation through thoughtful design, inclusive tone, and symbolic gestures of accessibility. While non-visitors in the West cited unfamiliarity or habit as reasons for non-attendance, these were not framed as structural barriers.

While this study draws from a relatively small and context-specific dataset, it aims for analytical generalizability rather than statistical representativeness. The choice of case study sites—BACC and MOCA in Bangkok, and Tate Modern and Pirelli HangarBicocca in Europe—was designed to reflect contrasting institutional models (public vs private, Southeast Asian vs Western), offering comparative insight into how exclusion mechanisms operate across spatial and cultural contexts. The triangulated qualitative data, grounded in thematic saturation across four alienation dimensions and four institutional mechanisms, supports a conceptual model that is transferable to other museum contexts with similar urban conditions. Rather than claiming universal application, the findings offer a diagnostic framework that can be adapted by cultural institutions, planners, and policy makers concerned with equity and inclusion in urban cultural infrastructure.

In conclusion, this comparative analysis highlights that while exclusionary dynamics exist globally, their intensity and form vary. Thai institutions reinforce class-based alienation through spatial formalism, curatorial language, and symbolic codes, whereas Western counterparts actively mitigate such barriers through cultural signalling and inclusive engagement. Addressing exclusion in museums thus requires more than physical access—it demands institutional reflexivity in shaping narratives, spaces, and expectations that affirm cultural legitimacy for all.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates how contemporary art museums can serve both as sites of civic engagement and symbolic exclusion, depending on how their spatial, curatorial, and cultural codes align—or misalign—with the lived realities of working-class publics. Across all case studies, socio-cultural alienation emerged as a pervasive force, particularly in Thailand, where spatial discomfort and symbolic dissonance were most pronounced. By contrast, participants in London and Milan framed exclusion in more institutional and economic terms, underscoring how class-based alienation takes context-specific forms.

These findings suggest that inclusive museology must extend beyond physical accessibility to include emotional, linguistic, and curatorial dimensions. Museums can foster greater cultural equity by adopting more participatory design processes, co-curation models, and "slow" spatial strategies that reduce psychological and symbolic barriers (Hall, 2023; Wolf, 2024). Institutions should also reconsider the semiotic weight of their design choices, from layout to language, to ensure that cultural capital is not a prerequisite for participation. By linking museum exclusion to socio-economic

inequality, this study reveals how cultural participation must be understood as integral to the economic dimensions of urbanization. Inclusive cultural policies are therefore not only symbolic but materially significant for reducing urban socio-economic divides.

While the study offers comparative insight across three global cities, its qualitative scope and modest sample size limit the generalizability of its findings. Translation and researcher positionality, though reflexively addressed, remain interpretive filters that shape the data. Future studies could expand the dataset across more cities, incorporate institutional perspectives, or adopt longitudinal approaches to examine how inclusion efforts evolve over time.

6.1 Implications of Findings: Guidelines for Inclusive Art Museums

Creating truly inclusive art museums requires more than just removing entry fees—it demands a rethinking of how emotional, cultural, spatial, and economic barriers shape access for working-class communities. Based on findings from this research, the following guidelines offer practical strategies for institutions aiming to dismantle invisible boundaries and cultivate belonging.

1. **Embrace Emotional-Psychological Accessibility**
   Art museums should prioritize emotional-psychological comfort, especially for first-time/working-class visitors who may feel intimidated by formal institutional settings. Rather than adopting monumental or sterile aesthetics, design strategies can incorporate culturally familiar elements—such as warm materials or traditional Thai architectural motifs—to promote a sense of belonging. Staff should receive training to proactively offer approachable, non-intrusive support, while curatorial language and signage should emphasize that personal, intuitive responses to art are valid.

2. **Bridge Socio-Cultural Divides**
   To reduce socio-cultural alienation, museums should reflect the lived experiences of communities by including exhibitions on labor, migration, and vernacular aesthetics. Collaborative curatorial practices—such as community advisory panels or co-curated exhibitions—can democratize institutional narratives and elevate underrepresented voices. Additionally, using multilingual, informal language in labels, guides, and programs can dismantle barriers created by academic or elite discourse, fostering a more inclusive and culturally resonant museum experience.

3. **Democratize Spatial Design**
   Inclusive spatial design enhances comfort and orientation for all visitors. Museums should prioritize intuitive layouts, clear signage, and accessible entry points. Repurposing familiar structures—like markets or warehouses—can reduce the formality often associated with traditional museum spaces. Incorporating resting areas and communal zones further supports informal exploration, especially for visitors unfamiliar with conventional gallery environments.

4. **Eliminate Economic Barriers**
   Economic exclusion extends beyond admission fees to include transport, food, and lost time. Museums should adopt free or sliding-scale entry models—especially during weekends and holidays—and collaborate with transit providers to reduce logistical costs.

5. **Build Trust Through Presence and Outreach**
   True inclusive access begins with proactive engagement. Museums should extend their presence into working-class neighborhoods through mobile programs, pop-up exhibitions, and sustained community events. Partnerships with schools, unions, and local groups ensure programming remains relevant and grounded. Employing staff from diverse socio-economic backgrounds further enhances relatability and long-term trust.

6. **Rethink What Counts as Cultural Participation**
   Museums must broaden their cultural definitions to recognize everyday practices—such as cooking, crafts, street art, and storytelling—as legitimate forms of creative expression. Hybrid programming that blends exhibitions with food fairs, performances, or casual gatherings fosters inclusivity. This reframes the museum as a public space for daily life, not an elite venue reserved for the culturally initiated.

6.2 Summary of Research

This discussion returns to the central aim of the study: to investigate how contemporary art museums in Thailand contribute to class-based exclusion and to propose a framework for inclusive cultural infrastructure. Grounded in the hypothesis that institutional design, curatorial language, and socio-cultural codes function as mechanisms of exclusion, the findings confirm that psychological, spatial, economic, and socio-cultural alienation are systematically produced—even in ostensibly public spaces. The study's critical ethnographic methodology proved highly effective in revealing these dynamics. By triangulating semi-structured interviews with field observation and thematic analysis, and mapping insights through the dimensions-mechanisms matrix, the research was able to move beyond surface-level barriers and uncover the symbolic and relational forces that define museum accessibility. This methodological approach not only captured lived experiences but also exposed the institutional logics behind exclusion—thereby validating the conceptual model and supporting the study's original hypothesis.

While this study does not employ statistical testing in the conventional quantitative sense, the research design ensures internal validity through qualitative rigor. By triangulating semi-structured interviews, critical field observation, and a dimension-mechanism coding matrix, the study systematically identifies recurring patterns of exclusion across contexts. The use of thematic analysis, supported by a clear coding framework and comparative case analysis, enhances the trustworthiness of the findings. This approach is appropriate for the study's exploratory and interpretive goals, which seek to understand lived experiences of cultural alienation rather than measure causal relationships.

This research examined how contemporary art museums in Bangkok—namely the BACC and the MOCA—can inadvertently perpetuate exclusion among working-class communities. Using grounded theory and an interdisciplinary framework that integrates Lefebvre's Right to the City, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, and insights from critical museology, the study identified four dimensions of alienation: socio-cultural, psychological, spatial, and economic.

Findings from interviews and comparative case studies with Tate Modern and Pirelli HangarBicocca revealed that exclusion in Thai institutions stems less from cost or location and more from institutional tone, formal spatial design, and limited cultural representation. While similar barriers exist globally, Western museums have adopted more inclusive approaches—such as community programming, informal spatial design, and accessible curatorial practices—that help mitigate alienation.

As museums across the world reckon with calls for inclusion, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that foregrounds the voices of those most often excluded—and reminds us that the right to culture, like the right to the city, must be actively designed for and defended. Museums must do more than open their doors—they must dismantle the invisible boundaries that signal who belongs. This study offers a conceptual framework for diagnosing exclusion and proposes actionable strategies for fostering inclusive, civic-centered cultural spaces. Rather than placing blame, it calls for a reimagining of public culture that affirms the rights of all citizens to access and contribute to urban cultural life.

6.3 Significance of Findings

Class-based alienation remains a largely overlooked factor in Thai museology, particularly in relation to working-class access to contemporary art institutions. Instead of solely focusing on geographic or educational limitations, this research foregrounds symbolic and structural exclusions that inhibit participation in cultural life.

Echoing Duncan's (1995) and Bourdieu's (1984) critiques, the findings reveal how spatial design, institutional tone, and curatorial practices can reinforce social hierarchies. Evidence from BACC and MOCA illustrates that even centrally located, nominally public spaces can feel exclusionary due to formal aesthetics, minimal staff interaction, and culturally unrelatable content.

Grounded in Lefebvre's (1996) Right to the City and Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital, the research connects theory to lived experience, showing how class habitus and spatial access shape

cultural participation. Comparative insights from Tate Modern and Pirelli HangarBicocca offer practical models for fostering psychological ease, spatial familiarity, and symbolic openness.

By contextualizing global discussions on inclusion within Thailand's urban reality, the research contributes to critical museology and spatial justice. It affirms that museum accessibility involves more than removing physical barriers—it is a matter of civic equity and cultural democracy (Fraser, 2006; Fainstein, 2010; UNESCO, 2018; UN-Habitat, 2020).

The paper contributes to socio-economic analyses of urbanization by framing cultural exclusion as both a product and a driver of class inequality, thereby linking cultural policy to broader debates on economic justice in cities. Ultimately, the study positions museums as critical arenas in which struggles over cultural capital and access to the city are negotiated. By foregrounding these dynamics, the paper directly contributes to scholarly and policy debates on the socio-economic dimensions of contemporary urbanization.

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research
While this study offers a grounded, comparative exploration of class-based exclusion in contemporary art museums, it is limited by its qualitative scope and small sample size. Future research could expand the dataset across multiple cities or include quantitative visitor analytics to complement lived-experience narratives. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the impact of inclusive spatial or curatorial interventions would help validate the diagnostic framework proposed here. There is also a need for further inquiry into how intersectional identities—such as gender, ethnicity, or neurodivergence—interact with spatial and symbolic exclusion in cultural institutions across Southeast Asia. By addressing these dimensions, future studies can deepen our understanding of cultural participation as a multifaceted right to the city.

Conflicts of Interest
The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement
The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

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