

Century-old shop houses, twisting alleyways and temples scented with incense still pulsate with the pursuit of old trades and time-honored rituals of families who have lived in Bangkok's Chinatown for generations. But probably not for much longer.

Jackhammers and cranes are closing in on one of the last historic quarters of Thailand's capital as developers and city authorities aim to carry out plans to modernize the area by building subway lines and high-rises - with little thought to preserving local cultural heritage.

The story is a common one across much of Asia amid the region's rapid economic development that has raised incomes and living standards for millions. But the relentless drive to build, modernize and emulate the West - combined with a mindset that equates the old with backwardness - has already consigned vast expanses of traditional communities to rubble, and with them a way of life.

"There is more than just the architecture to preserve in the community. If these old buildings are demolished, the people will go. So will the lifestyle and culture. And that is irreplaceable," says Tiamsoon Siririsak, a researcher on culture at Bangkok's Mahidol University.

Authorities often say that clearing of old city quarters is justified because living conditions among the often decrepit structures are unsanitary. And indeed those who move are usually pleased with the more modern housing, running water, proper toilets and cleaner surroundings, while also often regretting the loss of their old neighborhoods.

Rapid urbanization, weak legislation, and city planning laced with corruption have all contributed to the trend. Most Asian cities have not heeded recommendations to leave their traditional cores intact and bring modern development to outer areas as many European cities such as Prague and Paris have done. Even some religious beliefs contribute to the destruction.

-- Old Phnom Penh survived war and the Khmer Rouge terror but more than 40 percent of some 300 French colonial buildings that gave the Cambodian capital its unique character have been destroyed over the past two decades. In 2004, Prime Minister Hun Sen abruptly tore up a zoning law that had kept the city low and green, giving the go-ahead to erect high-rises anywhere in the capital. He criticized conservationists for trying to stop modern development, and one of his ministers commented that tall buildings would attract tourists.

-- In neighboring Vietnam, demolition of Rue Catinat, a street in the historic heart of Ho Chi Minh City, is proceeding, block by block, driven as elsewhere by skyrocketing land prices. A Vietnamese-French urban research agency has found that at least 207 heritage buildings have been destroyed or defaced in the last decade. The city's last colonial-era department store is to be replaced by a 40-story complex this year.

-- Only slivers of an earlier Hong Kong remain, hemmed in by a dense cityscape. In a model that China itself has followed, Hong Kong's transformation was propelled by the former British government selling off land to developers who rooted out both the traditional Chinese quarters and the legacies of Imperial Britain.

Experts generally agree that China, which boasts the longest continuous architectural lineage in history, ranks first when it comes to wholesale eradication of material heritage. Raging against the feudal past, the Red Guards destroyed thousands of historic sites during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s. In the economic boom that followed, the destruction continued if not intensified.

The flattening of the historic cores of cities across China, from Kunming in the south to Kashgar in the far west, is Asia's greatest "cultural atrocity," said James Stent, an American involved in

heritage preservation in China and Thailand.

The bulldozing of old Kashgar, a fabled way station along the Silk Road and regarded as one of the world's finest examples of a traditional Islamic city, began in 2009 and is all but complete. City authorities said the clearance was necessary because earthquakes could topple the old houses.

A 2011 survey revealed that 44,000 - or a fifth - of some 225,000 important cultural sites in China have fallen victim to construction. And a broader definition of cultural heritage that includes ordinary communities is new for many Asians.

"In China, they will preserve a temple but raze everything around it," Stent said. "You don't want little islands of culture, you need to protect larger areas and the whole fabric within them but make them vibrant so people can make a living there."

In Beijing, modern structures and roads have now replaced some 60 percent of the inner core of the city, with its narrow alleyways and traditional courtyard residences, says Matthew Hu, a leading Chinese conservationist who heads The Prince's Charity Foundation China.

"Modernity is really defined by modern Western culture, so when people consider modernity they want to get rid of things from the past," said Hu.

Although the scale and speed of this destruction appears greater than in Western countries, in many respects Asians are "simply mirroring similar dynamics from the West," says Erica Avrami, director of research and education at the New York-based World Monuments Fund. "It's just that the periods of rapid urban development in the U.S. and Europe happened much earlier."

In New York, elegant homes and public buildings in mid-town Manhattan were razed in the early 20th century. And while many European cities have preserved historic city centers, German researchers in 1975 found that bulldozers had leveled more historic buildings on the continent in the 30 years since World War II than were lost to bombs during the conflict.

Asia's younger generation in particular seems far more interested in moving forward than preserving the past.

In tropical Thailand, only palaces and religious structures were constructed of substantial materials and deemed worth of preservation, while domestic architecture, mostly of wood, deteriorated rapidly and is rarely renovated, then and now.

"The idea that you preserve the old wooden house of your grandfather or grand-grandfather is not in the Thai psyche," said Euayporn Kerdchouay of the Siam Society.

Scholars note that a basic Buddhist tenet views the world as a place of constant change, and thus the faithful tend to downgrade the notion of permanence. Many Buddhists also believe donating to build a new pagoda or shrine, rather than renovating old ones, will earn greater merit for the giver.

In Bangkok's Chinatown, 40 old shop houses have been torn down to make room for a subway station. City authorities, who say the subway will lighten Chinatown's traffic congestion, have designated the area a commercial zone, allowing for structures of up to 12 stories.

Sirinee Urunanont, a third-generation Chinatown resident and community leader, says that the Chinese media have come to film and report on traditions and lifestyles that don't exist in their country anymore. Her quarter, Charoen Chai, is famed for handcrafted joss paper products used in festivals and funerals. These include replicas of gold bars, limousines and other creature comforts to accompany the dead into the next world.

"The culture, traditions, you don't see them anymore. They have been lost. So the Chinese media comes here to see them," said Sirinee.

Some excellent examples of preservation do exist, often driven by tourism. These include the 17th century "machiya" townhouses in Japan's ancient capital of Kyoto, Beijing's The Temple Hotel, an award-winning, four-year restoration effort, and the campaign to save the British colonial buildings of Yangon, Myanmar.

But even some success stories have their downsides. Malaysia's George Town was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008 for its blend of Asian and colonial architecture, and tourists flocked in and probably saved it from demolition. But longtime tenants were also replaced by boutique hotels, cafes and restaurants, and the population dropped from 50,000 to less than 10,000.

"People don't understand that the inner city residents have kept our traditions alive," says Khoo Salma, a leading Malaysian conservationist. "This has happened to many world heritage sites, where they have become a playground for others and no longer the people's city. We don't want the soul of (our) city to die."