

announced plans that called for the demolition of the Scala, its less-ornate sister theatre, Lido, and the surrounding three-story shop-house community that comprises the Siam Square neighbourhood. The cleared land would be used to build a series of shopping malls, aimed at driving up revenue for the university. Immediately following the announcement, a chorus of opposition erupted across Thai media, citing Scala's unique architectural merits and its distinction as one of

the last operating standalone movie theatres in a city once packed with them. Sustained public pressure combined with less-than-ideal economic circumstances led officials at the university to respond with a series of lease extensions to the Apex Company, which runs the theatres. As of this writing, there is a movement from within the university to come up with a viable plan for maintaining the Scala as a working movie theatre.



THE YELLOW JACKETS

The Scala is full of elements that easily sear into one's memory. Most of them are to do with the lavish architecture, such as the modernist imperial staircase that conveys movie-goers from atrium to lobby in high style, passing beneath the five-tiered frosted glass chandelier. More design splendour awaits on the second level. But it's not an architectural element that is the most endearing part of this landmark cinema; that compliment goes to the famed "Yellow Jackets", the pineapple-hued ushers who let in one and all.

Since the company's founding in 1949, the Apex chain – parent company of the Scala – has been dressing its ushers and ticket takers in bright yellow blazers. The signature attire, donned with understated pride by those who tear tickets and point out seats, is nearly as iconic as the building itself.

When Apex was the largest movie theatre chain in the country, responsible for the management of most of Bangkok's first-class cinemas, the Yellow Jackets were a common sight among movie-

goers at cinemas across the city. With the Scala now the last remaining branch of a once formidable theatre empire, the beloved Yellow Jackets are the last vestige of the golden age of Bangkok movie palaces. Most of those who remain have been working at the company for decades. For many a regular at the Scala, the faces of the staff are equally as familiar as their flashy outerwear, or the flashy chandelier.

For 50 years, 73-year-old Ubon Klarythong (pictured below), a native of Nakhon Ratchasima province, has been sporting the bright yellow jacket at Scala, having served as cinematic gatekeeper to literally hundreds of thousands of people. "The crowds aren't what they used to be," said Ubon as a screening got underway. "But we have a lot of regulars coming through. I see familiar faces just about everyday. It's almost like having an extended family – Apex is like my family." It's these details, seemingly minor, that are in fact central to solidifying the Scala as a living cultural heritage for Bangkok.

