

From Belief to Design: Design Considerations and Prototype Development of Contemporary Amulets

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Abstract

This study has two aims—to synthesize design considerations for contemporary amulets from expert perspectives, and to develop and evaluate prototypes that draw on those considerations. Using qualitative inquiry alongside practice-based research, the researchers gathered data from twelve experts through focus groups and in-depth interviews, and analyzed the materials with content and thematic analysis. The results suggest that contemporary amulet design is better understood through flexible, context-dependent considerations than through any fixed framework. Five dimensions emerged: meaning rooted in the user, material as a tool of interpretation, form simplification, narrative as value, and the user as core driver. To validate these considerations, three prototypes were developed and reviewed by three experts. The reviewers agreed that the works convey both traditional meaning and contemporary relevance well, and that they hold practical potential for real use. The study not only offers a body of knowledge for design considerations linking belief, material, and user together but also shows how belief becomes design through practice rather than through theoretical framing alone.

keywords: *Contemporary Amulets, Design Considerations, Practice-Based Design, Material in Design, User-Centered Design*

Introduction

Amulets have occupied an important place in Thai belief systems, mediating the relationship between people and the supernatural world through layers of religious, folk, and social meanings — symbolic, emotional, and practical ones all at once (Lenzerini, 2011). In contemporary life, particularly among younger Thais, the belief in amulets has shifted away from objects of ritual and of sacredness to statement of personal identity and lifestyle, repositioning the amulets as the cultural products that can be designed, reinterpreted, and re-presented within the creative economy (UNESCO, 2013). Nowadays designers and small entrepreneurs translate belief into wearable amulets, accessories, and everyday objects — moving from the "traditional amulets" toward contemporary ones oriented around meanings and user experiences. In practice, materials, production, and design languages mutually shape how users read an object's value.

Existing scholarship has approached amulets either as cultural phenomena or as a basis for product development, but most accounts keep "belief" and "design" in separate compartments, offering designers little practical guidance for working with belief in contemporary contexts (Naepimai & Chaisingkananont, 2023). Bridging that gap requires holding two tensions simultaneously: the specific forms and symbols that traditional belief favors, and the flexibility that contemporary design demands to fit how users live at present.

Against this background, the study examines contemporary amulet design as a set of flexible design considerations—synthesized from expert perspectives and tested through practice-based prototype development—by connecting beliefs, materials, and users within a single design process (Naepimai & Chaisingkananont, 2023; UNESCO, 2013). The research asks: What design considerations for contemporary amulets emerge from experts in belief and design fields, and how do these considerations influence prototype development in terms of meaning, form, material, and use? Its objectives are: 1) to synthesize design considerations derived from experts in belief and design, and 2) to develop and evaluate prototypes shaped by these considerations through practice-based research.

Literature Review

Studies of amulets as cultural objects show that belief-related artifacts transmit symbolic meanings and reflect social identities in some ways that shift with user context and changing social conditions (Lenzerini, 2011). Recent work has further showed that amulet belief has migrated from being part of the ritual into one in the cultural marketplace where amulets are produced, communicated, and consumed through what is often called cultural commodification. Therefore, users today seek some meanings connected with their identities and lived context rather than traditional sacredness alone (Naepimai & Chaisingkananont, 2023). From a design standpoint, the literature treats reinterpretation, not preservation of original form, as the core task: local knowledge must be translated into contemporary terms through meaning-driven design so that products carry cultural value while speaking to today's market, with designers acting as makers of new meanings for cultural objects (Dell'Era et al., 2020; Heskett, 2002; Verganti, 2009).

The view of materials has likewise broadened beyond physical attributes toward what McDonnell (2023) terms material meaning where vernacular materials are understood as vehicles of cultural identity and memory can be reread to produce contemporary experiences, making them meaningful variables instead of merely

technical ones. On the user side, product choice depends less on belief alone than on the symbolic value, image, experience into which consumers read an object, qualities shaped through design, and also brand communication (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Norman, 2013; Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2014); contemporary users — younger consumers especially — seek meaning tied to identity and lived experience rather than traditional sacredness alone, engaging with symbolic products through experiential rather than prescriptive frameworks (Naepimai & Chaisingkananont, 2023).

In the creative-economy literature, integrating cultural knowledge into design adds value to vernacular materials when done with care (Li, 2024; UNESCO, 2013). Across this body of work, however, belief, design, material, and user are seldom brought together as actionable design considerations, and few studies verify such ideas through real design work. This study addresses that gap by proposing considerations that link all four dimensions and examining them through practice-based research.

Thai amulets carry a dense visual culture tied to specific temple traditions (Tambiah, 1984), though scholars note a shift toward commercial and collector networks where aesthetic and narrative qualities carry weight alongside sacred efficacy (Kitiarsa, 2012; McDaniel, 2011). This is the part of broader regional pattern in which sacred objects are repositioned as lifestyle artifacts and spiritual meanings are held alongside consumer identity (Sullivan, 2015). The present study treats contemporary amulet design as interpretation operating within, not outside, this existing cultural field.

Research Methodology

The study uses a qualitative approach in combination with practice-based research, generating knowledge through design, experiment, and reflection in real settings, and treating practice itself as a source of knowing (Candy & Edmonds, 2018; Smith & Dean, 2009). Work was carried out in two phases: a synthesis phase in which qualitative data were used to develop design considerations, and an application phase in which those considerations guided prototype development and evaluation in context. The conceptual framework links beliefs, materials, and users across the whole process.

Twelve experts were recruited through purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) and grouped into two cohorts. The first comprised the experts in belief and culture fields: local sages, ritual specialists, and practitioners working within belief systems. The second comprised experts in design and creative practice: designers, entrepreneurs, and contemporary craft practitioners. Data were gathered through focus group discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2015) and in-depth interviews covering topics of belief, material use, and contemporary approaches to design.

Analysis combined content analysis with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to surface patterns, relationships, and salient issues, which were then synthesized into design considerations. These considerations guided the development of three contemporary amulet prototypes, each work with a different material, through a practice-based design process. The prototypes were then assessed by three experts using Lynn's (1986) content-validity approach, in which experts rate appropriateness on four dimensions : meaning, material, form, and use context on a 1–4 scale (1 = inappropriate, 4 = highly appropriate). Results were summarized as the Item-Content Validity Index (I-CVI) and Scale-Content Validity Index (S-CVI). The research followed standard ethical guidelines. Objectives were explained to every participant, consent was obtained before each data-collection event, and

sources were cited as appropriate. The project was reviewed and approved by the Khon Kaen University Human Research Ethics Committee (project number HE683359).

Narrative was integrated at two stages of the process: during concept articulation, where it translated belief into design intent, and during user interpretation, where it framed how meaning was made available. Thematic synthesis from the qualitative phase directly determined design decisions at each stage, making the relationship between expert insights and prototype development iterative rather than linear.

Results

Design Considerations for Contemporary Amulets

Across the qualitative data from twelve experts, one finding stood out: contemporary amulet design cannot begin from traditional form or symbols alone. It calls for systematic thinking that ties belief, material, and user together as design considerations which are therefore flexible and context-dependent. Five dimensions emerged from the synthesis. None operates in isolation; each works as an interdependent condition shaping design decisions at every stage.

Meaning as Starting Point

Both expert groups treated meaning as the starting point of contemporary amulet design. Design experts argued that beginning with traditional form or symbols too often produces reproduction rather than new value. Belief experts noted that today's users are no longer tied to ritual or specific consecration lineages and instead look for meanings tied to life in terms of success, love, stability or protection.

The meaning of amulets, they observed, has shifted from "something a belief system prescribes" to "something users choose and read themselves." As one participant put it, young people no longer ask what ritual an object has been through; they ask whether it speaks to their life. Design, therefore, needs to leave room for open interpretation rather than lock meaning down.

Material as Interpretive Tool

Materials, the experts emphasized, are not merely physical components. They act as media of meaning, central to how users read an object. Craft practitioners and designers spoke of distinct material languages: wood signals nature, calmness, and warmth; metal represents weight, strength, and stability; glass conveys lightness, transparency, and a contemporary feel. Hybridization—airing vernacular with contemporary materials, such as wood with stone or metal with modern composites—was seen as a promising way to layer meaning, allowing products to connect with users across both cultural and experiential registers.

Form Simplification

Both groups agreed that contemporary amulet design should lean toward simplicity and reduction rather than strict preservation of traditional forms. Design experts pointed out that heavily symbolic, detailed forms often leave users feeling distant from the object or reluctant to use it in daily life, whereas simpler forms are easier to read and adopt. Belief experts added that simplification does not weaken belief; it changes how meaning is communicated — from forms decoded through a fixed belief framework to forms with which users can fill meaning themselves. As one expert added, an amulet need not show

clearly what it is, only that it carries meaning. This points toward a more abstract idiom that fits contemporary users.

Narrative as Value Creation

Storytelling emerged as the most powerful means of creating value for contemporary amulets, because users now interpret meaning through narrative rather than through ritual or sacredness alone. Story, in this sense, is not just communication after the fact; it is a belief-translation mechanism that links object and user at the level of meaning. Within the design process, it operates on three levels: from object to user, helping users grasp the object's value in their own context; from belief to experience, turning belief into something felt as much as held; and from product to emotional value, allowing an amulet to live as a contemporary product carrying meaning and feeling at once. Narrative, on this view, belongs inside the design process — not appended to it once production is finished.

User as Core Driver

The contemporary user was identified as the central variable shaping amulet design. Whereas traditional choices rested on faith, ritual, or socially given belief, today's users select amulets through identity and lived experience. The user's role has shifted from being receiver of belief to definer of meaning. Design, therefore, needs to begin with a deeper reading of users on account of behaviour, lifestyle, symbolic needs or social context. This is especially required among younger users whose thinking is diverse and not bound by traditional belief systems. Such design does not aim to produce an amulet for everyone, but to leave space for users to interpret and choose in accordance with their own identities. The result is an identity-driven product, not a purely religious one.

Development of Contemporary Amulet Prototypes

Drawing on the five considerations synthesized above—meaning, material, form, narrative, and user—the researcher used them as design conditions to steer prototype development through practice-based research, and to see whether they could actually work inside the design process. The process unfolded iteratively in four main steps: concept formulation, form exploration, material selection and production, and narrative articulation. At each step, the work returned to the considerations to assure alignment.

Concept formulation began by reading focus-group data for the life-oriented needs of contemporary users namely success, love and stability and using them as the conceptual core of each prototype rather than starting from religious symbolism. Form exploration then simplified traditional symbols into minimal, abstract shapes suiting daily use and leaving room for users to interpret them on their own terms. In material selection and production, materials were chosen as media of meaning, picked to fit the emotional and cultural register of each concept — wood for nature, glass for transparency, metal for strength—and they were refined by local artisans employing some techniques appropriate for each material and form.

Narrative articulation rounded out the process, building stories that linked belief with user experience as well as foregrounding emotional and identity-based meaning rather than ritual sacredness. The resulting amulets are made for daily use and read as meaning-driven products.

Wearable formats were selected to maintain continuity with everyday amulet use while allowing reinterpretation within contemporary lifestyle contexts; materials were intentionally limited to three types to

explore differing symbolic and experiential qualities associated with contemporary interpretations of belief and material meaning.

Table 1 Mapping Design Considerations to the Design Process

Process	Design Action	Design Consideration	User Role	Outcome
Meaning	Analyze expert data	Meaning	Identify life needs	Concept
Form	Sketch and simplify	Form	Perceive and interpret	Contemporary form
Material	Select material & technique	Material	Perceive sensory input	Sensory Perception
Narrative	Develop story	Narrative	Connect experience	Emotional value
User Integration	Test & refine with users	User	Define meaning	Real-use experience

Source: Author

Table 1 lays out how the considerations map onto prototype development. Although the process has four primary steps to develop meaning, form, material and narrative respectively, the user runs through all of them: shaping the concept, conditioning how form is read and anchoring value. The process is relational rather than linear, with all components throughout the conversation

Three contemporary amulet prototypes were produced through this process, each applying the considerations differently in line with its meaning, material, and user context.

Prototype 1 — "Phikanet" (Ganesha) was built around the meaning of success. The concept reread the Ganesha symbol for contemporary users instead of holding to traditional iconography. The form pared Ganesha down to abstract elements and recast them into a wearable amulet fit for everyday use. The materials combined auspicious wood with stone for layers of meaning and feel; users could also choose the scent of the wood, reflecting the user-centered approach. The narrative tied the idea of success to personal experience, making this prototype a clear case of belief translated into experience.



Figure 1 Sketches and final prototype: "Phikanet"

Source: Authors, 2026

Prototype 2 — "Salika Bird" took love and communication as its meaning, drawn from the traditional belief in paired Salika birds and read as a metaphor of emotional exchange. The form was designed organically and pared back to flowing curves that suggest softness and fluidity. The material was blown glass chosen for its transparency and lightness, signifying a way of bringing the work into dialogue with contemporary local craft. Narratively, the piece was framed as both votive and decorative amulet, moving belief into the territory of an aesthetic object and, beyond that, a lifestyle product.

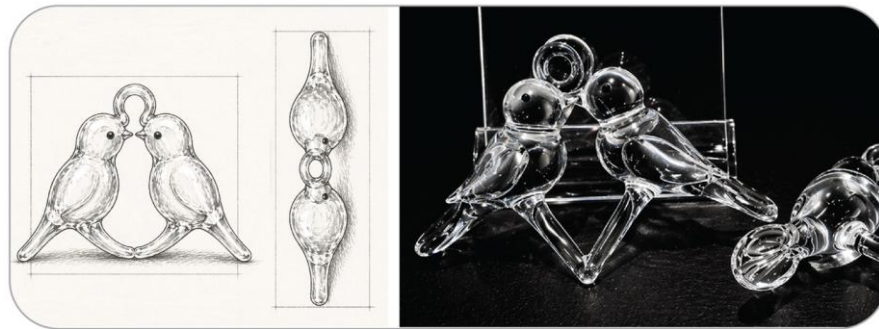


Figure 2 Sketches and final prototype: "Salika Bird"

Source: Authors, 2026

Prototype 3 — "Phaya Krut" (Garuda) took power and prosperity as its meaning, recasting the symbol around energy and motion. The form took the shape of a coin which is geometrically clean, easy to use, and stripped of ornamental details. Metal carried the sense of strength, and a rotating mechanism made the piece usable on both sides, adding a layer of interaction between user and object. The narrative tied "transformation and motion" to the user's daily life, so the work is regarded less as a fixed symbol and more as a dynamic interaction.



Figure 3 Sketches and final prototype: "Phaya Krut"

Source: Authors, 2026

Taken together, the three prototypes show that the design considerations can function as practical tools at every stage, holding belief, material, and user in deliberate relation. This is what contemporary amulet design ultimately turns on

Results of Expert Evaluation

Once the three prototypes were complete, three experts, each from belief, culture, and design fields, assessed how well they fit the contemporary amulet context. The review focused on four dimensions central to the design considerations: meaning, material, form, and use context.

Content-validity scores returned I-CVI = 1.00 for meaning, material, and form, obviously above the 0.80 threshold. Use context came in at I-CVI = 0.67, just below standard, suggesting room to develop how the works are used in practice. Across the instrument, S-CVI had an average of 0.92 — well above the 0.80 threshold — placing overall validity in the high range and confirming that the prototypes line up with the study's design intent.

These results echo the qualitative material. Meaning and material drew the strongest assessments; use context, while workable, was seen to require more narrative support to pass on to users clearly.

As for meaning, the panel agreed that all three prototypes communicate well even without ritual or consecration. As for Phikanet and Phaya Krut in particular, the combination of simplified form and emphasis on experience let meaning be sensed rather than imposed, which was in tune with contemporary user-driven reading.

In terms of material, each prototype's choice was judged in consistency with its concept: auspicious wood in Phikanet for natural and personal connection; blown glass in Salika Bird for transparency and lightness; and metal in Phaya Krut for strength and stability. The panel noted that the materials are practical to produce and viable for commercial development.

Regarding form, the experts identified simplification as a clear strength — what gives the prototypes their contemporary feel and sets them apart from the visual stock of traditional amulets. Spare and abstract forms allow everyday use without friction in modern settings, and leave more room for varied user readings.

With respect to use context, the prototypes were seen as workable as both wearable amulets and decorative pieces, but the panel suggested deeper narrative scaffolding to help users hold onto the meaning — especially in pieces with a high degree of formal abstraction, where the meaning can drift without supporting context.

Overall, the prototypes responded well to the considerations on meaning, material, and form; use context still benefits from communication and story. This point holds clearly: contemporary amulet design does not stop only at the object and value is built when object and communication come together.

Table 2 Content Validity Evaluation Results

Dimension	Expert 1	Expert 2	Expert 3	I-CVI	Level	Synthesized Finding
Meaning	4	4	3	1.00	High	Meaning was clearly perceived even without ritual through experience
Material	4	3	4	1.00	High	Concept-driven material was producible and reinforced meaning
Form	3	4	3	1.00	High	Simple contemporary form reduced traditional amulet image
Use Context	3	3	2	0.67	Med-High	Usability was required and narrative helped deepen understanding

Note: Table 2 reports expert ratings across the four dimensions, with I-CVI values. Meaning, material, and form each scored I-CVI = 1.00, exceeding the 0.80 threshold and signaling strong agreement among experts. Use context scored I-CVI = 0.67, slightly under the threshold, pointing to room for improvement — chiefly through narrative work that helps users place the prototype in real use.

Source: Author

Table 3 Scale-Level Content Validity (S-CVI)

Indicator	Value
S-CVI (Average)	0.92
Acceptance threshold	≥ 0.80
Result	High

Note: Table 3 reports an overall S-CVI of 0.92, comfortably above the 0.80 threshold, which places both the instrument and the prototypes within the high-validity range. Although use context scored lower on I-CVI than the other dimensions, the S-CVI confirms that the prototypes hold their ground on meaning, material, and form, with room to strengthen use context through narrative design in future iterations.

Source: Author

Synthesis of Design Knowledge

Taking the synthesized design considerations, the practice-based prototypes, and the expert evaluation into account, the study brings forward a body of design knowledge: a set of design considerations for contemporary amulets. The role of the amulet has shifted from a sacred object embedded in ritual and traditional belief to a meaning-driven product centered on user perception, experience, and identity.

Sacredness in the contemporary amulet, on this reading, is not made by ritual alone; it is also constructed through design, which threads belief into the user's everyday life. The amulet then operates as a medium for emotional and identity-based meaning rather than as a strictly religious object.

Examining the three prototypes shows that the move from belief to design can be set out as a process of continuous translation: Belief > Interpretation > Material > Form > Narrative > User

Belief opens the meaning whereas interpretation is the pivotal step that brings belief into contemporary terms. Material and form give physical presence to meaning. Narrative creates value and ties meaning back to experience. The user closes the loop by reading and using the object. These six elements do not run in a straight line. They form a relational system whose steps can loop back and forth and can adapt when the design context demands, with the user acting as a steady force shaping decisions throughout the loop.

That is to say, contemporary amulet design is not the production of new shapes; it is the translation of belief into experience, drawing cultural knowledge, design practice, and user behavior into a single deliberate process. The knowledge developed here can guide cultural-product work within the creative economy more broadly.

Table 4 Synthesis of Design Knowledge

Component	Role	Translation into Design
Belief	Origin of meaning	Defining the concept
Interpretation	Translation of belief	Adapting to contemporary context
Material	Medium of meaning	Building perception
Form	Materialization	Simplifying and crafting
Narrative	Value creation	Connecting with experience
User	Success determinant	Perceiving and interpreting

Source: Author

Table 4 sets out the structure of belief-to-design translation as six core components running in a relational system. The user is central to closing the loop of meaning through perception and use, which is why contemporary amulet design has to focus on object and experience at the same time.

Conclusion and Discussion

The findings show that contemporary amulet design is best understood as a set of flexible design considerations organized around user, material, and meaning rather than through traditional formal or symbolic frameworks. This is consistent with the view that cultural objects carry mutable rather than fixed meaning (Lenzerini, 2011). While earlier work on cultural commodification read changes in amulets through economic and market factors (Naepimai & Chaisingkananont, 2023), this study extends the conversation into the design process itself: belief passes through interpretation and translation to fit the contemporary user, resonating with cultural translation theory (Bhabha, 1994; Krippendorff, 2006). Moreover, the practice-based research adds a practical layer that theoretical accounts alone cannot supply.

In terms of material, form, and user, the results are aligned with existing scholarship while extending it in specific ways. Materials function as mediators that build meaning and carry cultural agency (McDonnell, 2023). Form simplification releases amulets from inherited iconography to open space for interpretation (Krippendorff, 2006) and contemporary users define meaning rather than receive belief. Therefore, design must answer identity and lived experience rather than a fixed belief system (Norman, 2013). The contribution of this study is to foreground narrative as the connective mechanism linking material and form with the user, and to surface a practical limit: when narrative is thin, even usable objects fail to communicate meaning fully, making object and communication inseparable concerns in contemporary amulet design.

Regarding these dimensions, the study proposes a belief-to-design translation structure — belief, interpretation, material, form, narrative, and user — working as a relational system rather than a linear pipeline, and giving concrete and applicable resources for cultural-product practice within the creative economy. The findings are however bounded by the experts and contexts examined in this study: they may reflect designer-oriented perspectives rather than ones of broader users, and evaluation remained at the expert level, not capturing everyday use. Future work should reach wider user populations and test prototypes in real-world settings to verify the considerations from the user-experience side.

The findings also demonstrate that the developed prototypes functioned as practical explorations of the synthesized design considerations, allowing belief, material, narrative, and user interpretation to be translated into contemporary design outcomes. The study also reflects a tension between symbolic meaning and aesthetic interpretation, in which highly simplified forms may increasingly be perceived primarily as wearable aesthetic objects rather than belief-related artifacts. These findings should therefore be interpreted as preliminary insights derived from expert evaluation, rather than as conclusions fully representing broader contemporary user behavior.

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