

Dynamic *Soi*: Neighborhoods and Urban Life¹

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Abstract

A system of land division known as “*soi*” has constituted the structure of Bangkok’s urban neighborhoods since the founding of the city. The long and narrow lanes – the *soi* – divide farmland into strips with a single corridor for servicing and circulation, sandwiched by resident areas. The intimate social quality of this lane-like structure is the cornerstone of Bangkok urban residents’ private life in relation to their occupational and social domains. Recent studies, however, have identified critical urban growth projections for 2030, with urban populations expected to double, and area expansion to triple. Bangkok is expected to follow this pattern and to grow rapidly. There is no agreement on an overall planning strategy, which opens an opportunity to explore and define tradeoffs with their implications on city form and growth. The *soi* system is both a hindrance and an opportunity for guiding development. A good understanding of this development process that could assist planners in developing growth strategies is lacking. Because Bangkok’s *soi* urbanism is too big a phenomenon to be understood from the perspectives of any single discipline, in this article, I present a research

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project that is trans-disciplinary, cross-cultural, and historical in design. This research draws from the data and methods of history, geography, and political science to analyze key urban issues. This project seeks to understand in what ways the *soi* neighborhoods are the resilient element of Bangkok's urban culture that many claim them to be. Only firsthand experience in the *soi* communities can answer such questions and shed light on this unlikely phenomenon, with ramifications for developing urban spaces and aging metropolises alike

Introduction

Bangkok's urban form is dominated by neighborhoods of long and narrow lanes known as *soi*, a system of dividing farmland into strips with a single corridor – Bangkok's very own version of the *cul-de-sac*. The intimate social quality of this system was conducive to the development of Bangkok, especially during the first hundred years of the city, when low-rise self-built houses were the prevailing dwelling domains.³

Residents consistently adapted the space inside the *soi* to meet their communal needs. This transformed the space from the dull and formal to one for daily use and socialization, which was not part of the original purpose.⁴ Urbanization, needless to say, brought about a number of adaptive usage strategies. The five meter width of a typical

³ It seems that the lanes (*soi*) probably contributed to a specific type of development, not development *per se*, as they are somehow the physical form of development. I am aware that this could be made more specific but will stay conceptual for the time being in order to comply with the specific purposes of this article.

⁴ Implicitly suggestive here is that the *soi* was at one time "dull and formal," whereas in reality, the *soi* existed from the inception of Bangkok urbanism. Perhaps, as many scholars might contend, it would be more precise to say that it transformed rural lifestyles/village lifestyles into urbanized ones, while retaining some features of village life in the microcosm of city called "*soi*."

soi was a considerably wide access corridor for individuals and the circulation of goods from the inner part of the farmland in the past.⁵ However, it is too small for automobile circulation. In addition, “*soi* urbanism” also constitutes conflicting conceptions of the city, as exemplified by the formal and informal economics of motorcycle taxis, which are the main mode of transportation for majority of Bangkok’s residents who live deep inside the *soi*.

That is, although the issue of public and private spaces adopted, sustained, or challenged by different forms of mobility is critical, the way in which the *soi* and their residents consistently adapt to fit the changing conditions of the modern city has made it, as claimed by many scholars, “the unique urban characteristic of Bangkok.”⁶

In the last few decades, Bangkok has been undergoing unprecedented urban development that tends to welcome more high-rise building types into its future planning due to skyrocketing land-values. Looking at the bigger picture, recent studies have identified critical urban growth projections for 2030 urban populations to double, and area expansion is expected to triple.⁷ The discussion about

⁵ “Thailand Rural Social Patterns” (The Library of Congress).

⁶ Probably the most well written account on the socio-urban characteristics of Bangkok is the recent publication by Dr. Peeradorn Kaewlai. See Peeradorn Kaewlai, “Modern Trade and Urbanism: The Reciprocity between Retail Business and Urban Form in Bangkok and Its Periphery” (D. Des Thesis, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2007). See also Non Arkaraprasertkul, “Foreward: Life in Urbanism, Understanding Singapore and Bangkok,” *Extreme Makeover: Third World Cities a Sigus-Mit Collaboration with Eba of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, and the Department of Architecture of the National University of Singapore* (Cambridge, MA: Department of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009); G. Byrne Bracken, *A Walking Tour: Bangkok* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2010); Claudio Sopranzetti, “Cars and Carts: Marketing, Circulation, and Fluidity in Bangkok’s Central Business District,” *Rian Thai, International Journal of Thai Studies*, Vol 2/2009 (2009): 71-93; Peeradorn; Thavanan Tanesdechundhara and Non Arkaraprasertkul, eds., *Redevelopment Strategy for a Sustainable Bangkok : 2005 International Workshop and Seminar* (Khlong Luang, Pathumthani [Thailand]: Faculty of Architecture and Planning, Thammasat University, 2005).

⁷ Scholars have conduct research to demonstrate that rapidly exploding cities share similar characteristics in their pattern of population growth. See “A Survey of Cities:

the development of third-world cities' urban fringes has become important.⁸ Moreover, expansion is expected to be largely in the form of low-rise housing typologies for relatively low-income sectors. Some say that this growth is equivalent to building all of the urban housing of the past 6,000 years within 30 years. Bangkok is expected to follow this pattern and to grow rapidly. There is no agreement on the overall planning strategy, which opens up opportunities to explore and define tradeoffs with their implications on city form and growth.



Figure 1: An aerial image showing the basic structure of the *soi* system.

Source: Bangkhen, Bangkok, November 23, 2010 < <http://maps.google.com/>>.

The unique structure of the *soi* system is both a hindrance and an opportunity for guiding development. The opportunity for the development of this, Douglas Webster suggests in his working paper, is the development of “peri-urban areas” to encourage and facilitate

The World Goes to Town.” The Economist Newspaper Limited <http://www.economist.com/node/9070726?story_id=9070726>.

⁸ John O. Browder, James R. Bohland, and Joseph L. Scarpaci, “Patterns of Development on the Metropolitan Fringe: Urban Fringe Expansion in Bangkok, Jakarta, and Santiago,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 61, No. 3 (1995).

the institutional development that makes such coordinated development possible.⁹ A good understanding of this development process is lacking that could assist planners in developing growth strategies. Bangkok's *soi* urbanism is too big of a phenomenon to be understood from the perspectives of any single discipline. This research is designed to be trans-disciplinary, cross-cultural, and historical in design.

This research draws from the data and methods of history, geography, and political science to analyze key urban issues. This research will lead to an enhanced understanding of modern Bangkok and of the urbanization processes that has unfolded over 227 years of its history. Understanding real-life processes through field surveys was a key input. Intellectual constructs developed in absence of on-the-ground awareness are very limited in their efficacy, and must be rigorously tested and adjusted with "real-life" experience.¹⁰

Unlike Beijing's *hutong* or Malaysia's *kampung*, a lane of the *soi* system does not constitute any particular form of dwelling unit, but the unique formation of housing along the lane.¹¹ There does not seem

⁹ Douglas Webster, "Supporting Sustainable Development in Thailand: A Geographic Clusters Approach," in *NESDB - World Bank Geographic Clusters Project* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2006); Douglas Webster, "On the Edge: Shaping the Future of Peri-Urban East Asia," *Asia/Pacific Research Center Paper* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Asia/Pacific Research Center, 2002); Douglas Webster, "Financing City-Building: The Bangkok Case," *Working Paper* (Stanford, CA: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University, 2000).

¹⁰ A previous draft of this article was presented at the Project of Empowering Network for International Thai Studies Symposium (ENITS), Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, on March 29, 2010 at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. This is a working paper that is still in the process of development using empirical data to be collected from fieldwork in Bangkok in 2010.

¹¹ Many scholars argue that Southeast Asian (or *Third World*) cities have distinctive elements. For more information see H.W. Dick and P.J. Rimmer, "Beyond the Third World City: The New Urban Geography of South-East Asia," *Urban Studies* 35, No. 12 (1998). In addition, this assertion is drawn from my previous research on other cities in East Asia. Please more details please see: Non Arkaraprasertkul, "Beyond Preservation: Rebuilding Old Shanghai," *Exposition Magazine of the University of Oxford* 3 (Hilary

to be a need for its preservation. On the contrary, many scholars see the structure of the *soi* system as impeding the city's growth given that the trend of development is high-rise and automobile oriented. Yet such assertions rely on theoretical analysis and literature review. To date, there has been no ethnographic investigation into the personal experience of *soi* residents to explore just how 'efficient' such dwellings are. This research accepts that the *soi* might no longer be the 'most efficient' form of urban growth, as it has not changed since it was naturally established two hundred years ago. However, simply accepting the property-led urban pattern without carefully acknowledging the very fact that it has indeed been dominating urban growth of Bangkok is shortsighted. This research concentrates on the human dynamism perspective. The empirical question being explored is: What is the growth process, historically, of the rural *soi* becoming the modern city?

Term) (2010); Non Arkaraprasertkul, "Beyond Preservation 'Rhetoric': The Reality of Urban Housing," *The 2nd Annual DSD-IIAS Workshop: The Postcolonial Global City in Asia*, ed. Gregory Bracken (Architecture Faculty, TU Delft: TU Delft, The Netherlands 2010); Non Arkaraprasertkul, "Crypto-Urbanism: Retrofitting Tokyo," *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* (2010); Non Arkaraprasertkul, "Power, Politics, and the Making of Shanghai," *Journal of Planning History* 9, No. 4 (2010); Non Arkaraprasertkul, "Resilient Lilong: An Ethnography of Shanghai's Urban Housing," *Working Papers Series: Harvard-Yenching Institute* (2009), <<http://hyi.scribo.harvard.edu/category/working-paper-series/>>; Non Arkaraprasertkul, "Towards Modern Urban Housing: Redefining Shanghai's *lilong*," *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* 2, No. 1 (2009); Non Arkaraprasertkul et al., eds., *Jan Wampler's Sukhothai Housing Studio* (Cambridge, MA: Department of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009); Non Arkaraprasertkul, "Politicisation and the Rhetoric of Shanghai Urbanism," *Footprint*, No. 2 (2008); Jan Wampler and Non Arkaraprasertkul, "Community-Oriented Urban Housing Design for Beijing: Strategies for Lmrhd and Urban Design," *The Seventh China Urban Housing Conference* (Chongqing, China: Center of Housing Innovations, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2008); Non Arkaraprasertkul, "Shanghai's Skylines: Politicized Images of the City," *106th American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting* (Washington DC: American Anthropological Association, 2007); Non Arkaraprasertkul, "Sketches from Informal Field Surveys in the Tondo Region of Metropolitan Manila," Massachusetts Institute of Technology, <<http://web.mit.edu/incrementalhousing/articles/Photographs/pdfs/MANILA-SKETCHES-Non.pdf>>.



Figure 2: An aerial image showing the basic morphology of the remaining historic urban neighborhoods *hutong* in the inner city of Beijing, whose structure is similar to Bangkok's *soi*.

Photograph: Courtesy of Viktoria Abolina.

Problematic: Outdated Scholarship

This research uses a *deductive model* of literature review to embrace existing scholarship on Bangkok. That is to say, I first determined the basic criteria for which academic texts are to be selected for review by using particular keywords. The main source of general information about the planning system and fundamental quantitative analysis comes from a chapter, "Bangkok," by Craig

Plumb in an edited volume by James Berry and Stanley McGreal.¹² In addition, the work of Professor Mike Jenks at Oxford Brookes University also provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for discussion of the future of urban expansion in Bangkok.¹³ Nevertheless, both Plumb and Jenks only emphasize the urbanization process of the inner-city area, with little regard to the development of its peripheries.

It is quite clear that the existing scholarship has not been updated for up to three decades, since the 1980s, especially on the study of the urban pattern and structure of Bangkok from the planning in relation to ethnographical perspective. Although Marc Askew has laid out a well-read foundation of 'discourse' on modern Bangkok through the lenses of history, cultural studies, and, to some degree, anthropology, he does not go deeply into the analysis of the structure of the *soi* system and the ways in which the informal and formal use of space interlace in the making of public and private realms in urban Bangkok.¹⁴ Another important secondary source is that of Erik Cohen, who has also given us a basic framework to understand the "*soi* structure"; however, this work is a study of *soi* irrigation in the 1980s, when market forces and urbanization had yet to complicate the urban situation of Bangkok.¹⁵ For a study of the urban fringe in particular, the research for this article and project relies on a few available sources, mostly written in English.¹⁶

¹² Craig Plumb, "Bangkok," *Cities in the Pacific Rim : Planning Systems and Property Markets*, eds. Jim Berry and Stanley McGreal (London: E & FN Spon, 1999).

¹³ Mike Jenks, "Above and Below the Line: Globalization and Urban Form in Bangkok," *Globalization and Urban Development*, eds. Harry W. Richardson and Chang-Hee Christine Bae, (Berlin: Springer, 2005) 311-321.

¹⁴ Marc Askew, *Bangkok: Place, Practice and Representation*, Asia's Transformations (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁵ Erik Cohen, "A Soi in Bangkok-the Dynamics of Lateral Urban Expansion," *Journal of the Siam Society* 73 (1985).

¹⁶ See details: Shlomo Angel, Stephen Mayo, and William Stephens, "The Housing Indicators Program: A Report on Progress and Plans for the Future," *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 8, No. 1 (1993); Browder; David E. Dowall, "A Second Look at the Bangkok Land and Housing Market," *Urban Studies* 29, No. 1

I believe that extending the study methodology outside of the historical realm is destined to fill in the gap. That is, I aim at being a few steps beyond Askew's and Cohen's work. This research is based on practicality, with the aim to synthesize the practical use of the structure and the process of policy-making process. In other words, there is a need to update critically the study of the *soi* structure. To reiterate and to set this research in the context of the present day, the growth of urban population we will be facing in the next 30 years is unprecedented, and as Bangkok is expected to follow this pattern and to grow rapidly, there is a need to re-examine the unique structure of the rural fringe which could be an opportunity for guiding development.

In addition, understanding the physical form through the lenses of architecture and urban planning is crucial. Moreover, it is something that Cohen, Askew, and other scholars in the field did not suggest in their work. There is also a very important essay by R. W. Archer, a long-time associate on the study of Bangkok through his teaching career at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), which established a basic framework for the analysis of urban development in Bangkok; yet, this work has not been updated since its publication in 1986.¹⁷

(1992); David E. Dowall, "Bangkok: A Profile of an Efficiently Performing Housing Market," *Urban Studies* 26, No. 3 (1989); Sopon Pornchokchai, "Global Report on Human Settlements 2003-City Report: Bangkok" (United Nations Human Settlements Programme 2003); Buntoon Chunnasit, Jacques Pages, and Onouma Duangngam, "Incidence of Bangkok City Development on Peri-Urban Agricultural Patterns and Cropping Systems Evolution" (paper presented at the International Conference on the Chao Praya Delta: Historical development, dynamics and challenges of Thailand's rice bowl Kasetsart University, Bangkok, 2000); Shomo Angel, Stephen C. Sheppard, and Daniel L. Civco, "The Dynamics of Global Urban Expansion" (Washington DC: Transportation and Urban Development Department, The World Bank, 2005); G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957).

¹⁷ R. W. Archer and Development Asian Institute of Technology, Division of Human Settlements, *The Use of Land Pooling/Readjustment Technique to Improve Land Development in Bangkok*, Vol. No. 10, Hsd Working Paper No. 10 (Bangkok, Thailand: Urban Land Program, Human Settlements Division, Asian Institute of Technology, 1983).

For a non-physical planning framework, this research has benefited immensely from the work of Professor Douglas Webster at Arizona State University (ASU), whose current research on “peri-urbanization” and urban management in East Asia region have contributed significant dialogue to the comparative study of first and third world countries’ socio-economic development.¹⁸ Recent study by the Laboratory of Landscape Ecology and Planning at the University of Tokyo demonstrates that “present urban land uses are linked with the past agricultural land-use patterns, or canal systems, size and shape of land parcels.”¹⁹ Landform transformation is intrinsic both in diversification of agricultural land, and in the structure of the assembly of urban dwellings. The change in land-use pattern has both horizontal and vertical components, which cannot be separated from each other. This finding resonates with my fundamental observation.

In this research, I will use approaches from a wide range of disciplines to explore effective coordinated guiding strategies. Let alone the fact that Bangkok has very little overall planning strategy, this study will not only open numerous opportunity to explore design strategies for Bangkok, but will also help to define trade-offs with their implications for city form and growth. The contribution of this research is to bring scholarship in geography, urban studies, developmental economics, and architecture a fresh perspective on the study of urban pattern and morphology from a practical perspective.

Ultimately, this project seeks to understand in what ways the *soi* is a resilient element of Bangkok’s urban culture that many claim it to be. Only firsthand experience in *soi* communities can answer such

¹⁸ See details: Douglas Webster, “Supporting Sustainable Development in Thailand: A Geographic Clusters Approach” (Washington DC: The World Bank 2006); Douglas Webster, “City Development Strategies: Driving Urban Performance” (United Nations and Cities Alliance, 2006); Douglas Webster and Patharaporn Theeratham, “Policy Coordination, Planning and Infrastructure Provision: A Case Study of Thailand. Connecting East Asia: A New Framework for Infrastructure” (Asia Development Bank, Japanese Bank of International Cooperation, and the World Bank 2005).

¹⁹ Yuji Hara, Kazuhiko Takeuchi, and Satoru Okubo, “Urbanization Linked with Past Agricultural Landuse Patterns in the Urban Fringe of a Deltaic Asian Mega-City: A Case Study in Bangkok,” *Landscape and Urban Planning* 73, No. 1 (2005).

questions and shed light on this unlikely phenomenon, with ramifications for developing urban spaces and aging metropolises alike.

Ethnography in Urban Settings as *Methodology*

The complexity of Bangkok's urban condition concerns not only the mode of inhabitation, but also gender, age, and class inequalities. For this project, this is the main argumentative tool that I first employ to distinguish this particular practice of ethnography from other disciplines, such as sociology, disproving the misunderstanding that ethnography is only suitable for the study of rural settings with limited scope of study and external influences, and, therefore, cannot be done in urban settings. I return to the work of Michael Herzfeld, James L. Watson, and Theodore C. Bestor in legitimating tactics for anthropologists – not sociologists, not urban planners – to delve deeply into urban settings to find out what matters to us in the practice of understanding the society through rigorous ethnography.²⁰

My assessment of the nature of *soi* neighborhoods is based on these three frameworks: the organization of public space in such communities, the casual formation of semi-private space, and the personal experience of inhabitants actively creating and/or maintaining both. The primary research methodology will be *ethnography*, including participant observation, semi-structured and in-depth interviews (both inside and outside communities), and geographical and historical mapping.

The pre-fieldwork study consists of a literature review and a “short story gathering survey” before starting to look at how others have interpreted them, which would prevent me from being influenced

²⁰ See Michael Herzfeld, “Spatial Clensing: Monumental Vacuity and the Idea of the West,” *Journal of Material Culture* 11, No. 1/2 (2006); Michael Herzfeld, *Evicted from Eternity: The Restructuring of Modern Rome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); James L. Watson, *Golden Arches East: Mcdonald's in East Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Theodore C. Bestor, *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004); Theodore C. Bestor, Patricia G. Steinhoff, and Victoria Lyon-Bestor, eds., *Doing Fieldwork in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

by the interpretation of other scholars.²¹ This story gathering is set in the context of a comparative study of Bangkok and Singapore in order to understand the discrepancies between the perceptions of present day Bangkok in conjunction with Singapore, the city that many scholars and residents of Bangkok themselves hope to compete with. This story gathering survey was conducted in the summer of 2008 with a professor and research students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Chulalongkorn University, and the National University of Singapore.²²

I have established access to *soi* neighborhoods through contacts developed throughout my life as I myself was born in Bangkok and have participated in collaborative research missions in 2005-2007 with the Special Interest Group of Urban Settlements (SIGUS) at MIT and Chulalongkorn University.²³ The access includes Bangkok residents who formerly lived in the *soi* and who voluntarily moved to high-rise apartments due to the inconvenience of living in the *soi*, community leaders, and academics from Chulalongkorn and Thammasat Universities working on documenting Bangkok's neighborhood situation. Research sites were selected to cover a range of varying factors, including: age, education, occupancy, community age, distance to city center, and commercial viability. From a large original sample, I chose a community that has both new residents (some of them driven to move into the *soi* through the process of

²¹ I employ the story gathering survey technique developed by Reinhard Goethert. See Reinhard Goethert, *Making Microplans: A Community-Based Process in Design and Development*, ed. Nabeel Hamdi (London: IT, 1988); Reinhard Goethert and Gabriel Arboleda, "Transformation of Irrigation Framework: The Urban Fringe of Bangkok with Comparison to Cairo," *A Working Paper (unpublished)* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Special Interest Group in Urban Settlements, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009); Reinhard Goethert, "More Than a Pattern: The Contributions of the Courtyard House in the Developing World" *The Courtyard House: From Cultural Reference to Universal Relevance*, ed. Nasser O. Rabbat (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010).

²² The outcome of this project will be a series of working papers in academic journals and professional publications to be disseminated throughout academia, both in Thailand and overseas.

²³ At both of the mentioned institutions I have served as a visiting lecturer.

gentrification), as well as families whose roots in Bangkok go back many generations.²⁴

This article serves as a preliminary review for the study, which is to be expanded through more extensive fieldwork in the next few years. I will work more intimately, gathering personal accounts and preparing detailed records of the use of space over time. I hope to contribute vital substance to the academic discourse on such housing typologies through an ethnographic view of dynamic communal life and the socio-spatial impacts of property led development in Bangkok's *soi* neighborhoods.

I conducted basic fieldwork with a team of scholars in June 2009.²⁵ We looked at Bangkok as a basic scenario to explore issues related to development grids. Information from a two-week student workshop in Bangkok in June 2009 provided the background to thinking about the irrigation grid, which dominates the fringe growth areas. In the workshop the students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Chulalongkorn University developed "five growth scenarios of Bangkok" to understand the impact on the fringe, along with rudimentary field surveys to provide a beginning insight on the development process.²⁶

²⁴ Certainly ethnography today is going to be the main research methodology, which is still considered "passive" as its main purpose is to get the enthusiastic ethnographer to be in the site to observe the activities of the participants. The use of technology, such as the cell phone, which is ubiquitous even in many remote areas, currently being developed by Ph.D. researchers at MIT, is definitely going to bring the level of scrutiny of ethnography to a different level. It would still be passive, but the quantitative information as an output of the study using the cell phone as an agent could shed light on the intensity of communication within the community, i.e. telling us the level of need of the residents to get access to information and social interaction outside their (usually gated) community and so on. The use of this method is still in the process of development but might not serve as a potential methodology for this research.

²⁵ The teams of scholars included the presence of the researcher himself, Professor Reinhard Goethert (MIT), Gabriel Arboleda (University of California Berkeley), Zackary Lamp (MIT), and students from MIT and Chulalongkorn University, to whom I owe my thanks. But all the mistakes and responsibilities for incorrect information lie with me alone.

²⁶ See details: Goethert .

Basic Story Gathering: *Bangkok and Singapore*²⁷

For some time, people have been comparing Singapore to Bangkok because they are the two major global South East Asian cities with a desire to possess the “salient quality” that the other has. Bangkok aspires to be as “modern” and convenient as Singapore. On the other hand, Singapore wants to have the cultural attractions and the “fun” which everyone expects from Bangkok.

The touristy images of Bangkok are always the temples or some crazy marketplaces, while those of Singapore are reflective high-rise buildings, which always gets me to thinking why Bangkok can not also have many tall buildings, and why Singapore can not have temples and lively marketplaces. It could be that, for some time, our perception of cities is influenced by certain mental images the cities have cultivated and were intended to be passed on by word of mouth. From a sociological perspective, rather than the top-down fabrication of the “postcard images” of the city, what makes Bangkok and Singapore the way they are is the culture of the people who have inhabited the space and created forms for dwellings.

Cities have memories. It is these memories that differentiate Singapore and Bangkok from each other. What came to my mind initially is that it would be useless to try to decide whether Bangkok is better than Singapore, or vice versa. The more interesting question is whether or not the two cities can learn from one another and together achieve a better quality of urban life.

Although Bangkok was urbanized much earlier, the politics and “do-whatever-I-please” culture has hampered the city from having the state-of-the-art urban infrastructure that Singapore possesses. Infrastructure is a long-standing criterion for deciding where the business and service sectors establish branches in any of these two cities. In the eyes of many tourists, and sometimes to Bangkokers’ themselves, Bangkok is appealing as a city with a long history, but this is a common misunderstanding. In fact, in terms of its modern history, Bangkok is a very young city compared to many metropolises

²⁷ The texts from this part come from my field notes. The use of a semi-formal language in the part is intentional to denote the actual responses from the study group.

in the region. Some two hundred years of history, dating back to the time when King Rama I, who masterminded the strategy to gain independence from the Burmese, decided that the other side of Chao Phaya River is a much better settlement for some eight million residents.

In reality, as a point of reference, Bangkok is only a few decades older than Singapore if we take into account the time when Sir Stanford Raffles established the first trading port on the banks of the Singapore River. In modern times, however, what is significant is the different levels of rigor and implementation of power in the administrative controls over the planning of cities: Bangkok's weak control gives birth to a culture of "laissez-faire," while Singapore's potent control of its Urban Development Authority (URA) leaves no space for anything ad hoc. In the 1960s, whereas Bangkok relied on its international economic advisors who encouraged Bangkok to build expressways instead of a mass transit system, causing irreconcilable problems within Bangkok's inner city, Singapore, in the 1960s, was a new country that recently gained independence from Britain but was ready to move, fast and firmly, to build an extensive mass transit network under its own plan to achieve the presence of a modern city.²⁸

Any sound comparison between Bangkok and Singapore has to take into account the serious question regarding the purpose of urban living. For example, if one prefers Bangkok, it would probably be because of the day-and-night cultural excitement and the "life." Hence, does this mean that Singapore has no life? What does cultural excitement mean anyway? Of course, Singapore is also lively, but from the perspective of a modern urban dweller who enjoys a sleek and a compact mode of living; everything is so much in place that residents have nowhere to be wild. On a cursory level, comparing the two cities comes down to the very subjective question of individual preference rather than anything else.

²⁸ For more details see Webster, "Financing".



Figure 3: Bangkok urbanism from my window. Living inside the ‘*soi*’, the lives of some 5-6 million Bangkokers are all about urban community in very local and traditional form of neighborhood life. I have noted that nothing has changed much physically in my neighborhood since I moved here some 25 years ago.

Photograph: Author.

To examine a bit deeper, we might first look at what physically makes Bangkok and Singapore the way they are. Originally, there were similarities in the urban morphology of the two cities: the “narrow lane” urban pattern that constitutes the physical foundation of their urban communities – called *soi* for Bangkok and *kampong* for Singapore – developed differently once high-rise urbanization took place. Bangkok did not really have a plan until the last two decades; whereas, on the other hand, the Singapore’s URA has taken control of the planning of the city from the get-go making sure that even the very micro level of the physical community is in place and urbanized.

Therefore, while Bangkok knows so well that a sustainable city needs a set of rules and guidelines to provide the residents with a common sense of shared responsibility, Singapore is dealing with a form of ‘resistance’ from its residents against the ‘template’ of Singaporean life.

From an anthropological perspective, it is the form of resistance that the residents express that characterizes the personality of the city. For many cities, the resistance is turned into energy – creative energy – for the residents to play by the rules and still get what they want; whereas, also in many cities, authorities have to create a ‘play place’ for the residents to blow their feelings of resistance so that they could come back to the real urban social world to play by the rules. At the URA in Singapore, they have hung a development motto, “to create a city to work, live, and play,” which succinctly describes the three most important conceptual features of how Singapore urbanism was conceived. One wonders if the same motto could be hung on the wall of the Planning Bureau of Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA). Probably not: For Bangkok, work, life, and play cannot be separated. “Work-live-play” is a made-up word and is Bangkok’s conceptual motto. Bangkok is not a very efficient city, usually exhaustingly hectic, and unreasonably chaotic; yet, because of its work-live-play city urbanism, it is always naturally fun and lively to the core.

To put all this in metaphorical prose to facilitate the discussion, we could simply think of a basic comparison between the digital and the non-digital tool. Many people, despite the change in technology, still prefer a paper dictionary to an electronic one. Although many who prefer paper dictionaries do not disagree that an “e-dict” is fast and easy to use, there is no match to the feeling of flipping through pages – hoping for some *serendipities* – you would get from a paper dictionary. What is fun is that you will never know what other words you will learn along the way by flipping through pages looking for words that are organized alphabetically. An e-dict gives you the most comfortable mode of being efficient, but isn’t there more in learning vocabulary than being efficient and technical about a particular word? Life in urbanism is like finding words in a dictionary: because we want to learn more about a variety of the operations of life – words – than we need to find them in the city – dictionary – yet usually you will not get to understand it until you make sense in relation to other form of urban life – a thesaurus.



Figure 4: A typical landscape showing clusters of high-density high-rise public housing in the city of Singapore in the foreground. In the background there are clusters of existing Singapore low-rise *kampung* neighborhoods (many of which are historical).

Photograph: Diana Jue and the Special Interest Group in Urban Settlements, MIT.

Singapore is to me an e-dict where people can get what they need at the touch of their finger tips, but it is also this efficiency that confines my creativity to a very small set of strict and rigid algorithms. That is, an electronic dictionary is predictable and allows so little customized, almost user-created, functions; its popularity relies completely on its users' love of snappiness, which is not universally shared. This underlines the importance of the 'play' part in their development motto. In a paper dictionary, sometimes I make notes, highlight words, put post-it bookmarks on pages where I found words I would likely to be using and so on. Bangkok is for me a place that, even when known, still offers endless unexpected introductions to deeper layers of feeling, a quality created by its fragmented urbanism. What more? An e-dict also needs battery that has to be refilled from time to time.



Figure 5: Guess where? Bangkok or Singapore? This is the interior of a typical Housing Developing Board (HDB) provided housing in Singapore. Despite the glittering 'sleek' image of the modern city of Singapore, the urban lives of the local people revolves around common everyday-life products and configurations, which might not be as modern as it should be, but is organically lively.

Photograph: Author

In the pursuit of understanding how we will live in the next three decades when the population of the world doubles, especially in urban areas, it is interesting to set aside the numbers and look also at the socio-cultural side of the city. Bangkok and Singapore are a perfect comparative case study because they are different while existing within a similar context. From the fieldwork, I heard many people say that it would be perfect if Bangkok has a little bit of Singapore's efficiency and Singapore had a bit of Bangkok's fun chaos, which is probably the most fundamental way to learn how the two cities can learn from each other.

We are interested in designing a city that is conducive for urban people to live, work, and play, of course, but also for the kind of

serendipities between them. We need them as much as we need efficiency. In short, to be serendipitous is to be human.²⁹

Methodology to Address the Missing Medium Ground

Research on the dynamic urban form of Bangkok should be based on the study of the relationship of space and people. This approach is necessary to define how space is utilized, justified and re-justified by the resident users, themselves the mediating agency between the physical form of their micro-communities and the ever-changing culture of Thailand's largest city (which is still in the process of constant expansion). Do Bangkokers accept the *soi* structure as their dominant dwelling culture, and the inevitability of the somewhat obsolete urban structure? Or is it just because of financial necessity that such houses and neighborhoods have become so important? Who are the Bangkokers who have "inhabited" these spaces and how do they understand all the changes they have witnessed?

In other words, we have to try to find ways to understand fully in what ways the *soi* system is the resilient element of Bangkok's urban culture that many claim them to be. Only firsthand experience in the *soi* communities can answer such questions and shed light on this unlikely phenomenon, with ramifications for developing urban spaces and aging metropolises alike. These questions are important and will change the way we think about the design and planning of a city to cope with the massive population growth in the next 30 years.

The suggested primary research methodology is ethnography. It is widely understood that anthropology is an established discipline. Employing its methodology requires the deep and comprehensive study of the "other cultures"; hence, the use of ethnography here in an urban research could be a "lighter version" of ethnography.

In "Community-Oriented Urban Housing Design for Beijing: Strategies for Low and Medium Rise High Density (LMRHD) and

²⁹ I have developed this idea about serendipity and urbanism based on the foundational thinking of Johan Huizinga. See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens : A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1950).

Urban Design,” Professor Jan Wampler and I have presented some basic study methods by which architects and urban designers can understand the dynamic of communities, such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews.³⁰ From the study of the community, we proposed an idea of a “community-oriented housing”: mixed-use, mixed-tenure and mixed-housing type development, humanized and walkable neighborhoods, high-density, integrated open space, and environmental morphology; all of which are represented through a series of experimental designs.³¹

The process of familiarization is extremely crucial to architecture. In other words, “the site visit” is a pathway to understanding preliminarily the quality of space alongside the requirements of the program. As Jan Wampler points out “[i]n fact, many architects contributed to the problem by designing buildings [and their space] that do not fit with the culture or the landscape and do not make places.” Without this first process of deep familiarization with the locality of the sites, architects will fail to derive a design that works.³² Yet, it would be uneconomical for a practitioner/designer/ planner commissioned to study and design a new housing project to be willing to spend a week or a month “deep-hanging out” in the community as an anthropologist to understand how things work in order to design the palpable built environment inside. Hence, the lighter version of ethnography for housing research requires architects to pay attention to what they observe and to be very keen to ask questions about the rationality behind certain activities that take place in the community, rather than to just look at the characteristic of the existing architecture and physical condition.³³

That is, it is possible – and feasible – to conduct an ethnographic

³⁰ Wampler, “Community-Oriented Urban Housing Design for Beijing: Strategies for Lmrhd and Urban Design”.

³¹ Wampler, “Community-Oriented Urban Housing Design for Beijing: Strategies for Lmrhd and Urban Design”.

³² Jan Wampler, “Caretakers of the Physical World: Building the Ordinary and the Extraordinary,” *Places* 12, No. 3 (1999).

³³ Wampler, “Community-Oriented Urban Housing Design for Beijing: Strategies for Lmrhd and Urban Design”.

study of an urban community in order to derive the true understanding of the community for design.³⁴ If we accept that ethnography is a viable method, there are three proposed stages of the study: Pre-fieldwork study, fieldwork, and analysis.

Central to the pre-fieldwork study is the use of integrated quantitative and qualitative data as background study as suggested by Michael Bamberger, which includes: the extensive review of existing literature of history, theory, and criticism of the *soi* urbanism; archival study (comparison of old photographs, historical artifacts); and the acquisition of quantitative data (i.e. demography, income/occupation, occupation, trend and affordability, and comparisons of population density of the community in typical *soi* structure urbanism and a typical high-rise apartment).³⁵

Conclusion

To reiterate, the aim of this article is to serve as a platform for intensive fieldwork in Bangkok, which I hope to conduct between 2010-2012. At the very fundamental level, the study of contemporary urban structure in a large and historically important city like Bangkok is an attempt to understand the residents' lives and their inevitable process of adaptation to the social and cultural realms controlled by a set of formal and informal rules and regulations that is different from other places in the world. The latest developmental stage of community-oriented urban housing design has sparked an important debate on the relationship between the people and the built environment in the recent study of spatiality. This is a place where the sole knowledge of physical space is simply 'useless' and where ethnography and anthropological work fill in the gap. What I have learned specifically from this study of urban neighborhoods in Asia is the "condition of resistance" in the environment of a community,

³⁴ See Michael Bamberger, ed., *Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Research in Development Projects* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2000).

³⁵ See Robert Chambers, *Participatory Workshops: A Sourcebook of 21 Sets of Ideas and Activities* (London: Earthscan Publications, 2002).

which should play a role in the design of social space. With the understanding of such a condition, the study of geography and urban planning could push the envelope, breaking through new ground for the design with – more than just psychological – anthropological realism.

Whereas previous studies from various angles prescribe two extreme paths toward the development of Bangkok's *soi* urbanism in order to cope with political change and economic reform, I only hope that the suggestions here can help to establish the long overdue missing medium ground between the two paths. I also want to suggest here in the conclusion of this article that we should look deeper into the actuality of the community; yet this goal is by no means to suggest any policy or advocate the preservation of *soi* urbanism or to otherwise support the idea of re-structuring urban planning policy, but to contribute to a useful argument on the benefit of a balance between the history and the contemporary condition of the city.

Indeed, the aim of this article is to contribute vital substance to academic discourse on such housing typologies through a “light ethnographic view” of dynamic communal life and the socio-spatial impacts of property led development in Bangkok's *soi* urbanism. The policy question, for example “if *soi* urbanism has a role, could it be replaced with other forms of urban structure?” and “if it does not have a role, where would the demand for this type of urban structure now be absorbed?” will not be directly answered through this kind of research – at least at this stage.

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