

Multicultural City Development: A Study of connection between Banglumphu diversity and Bangkok urban development

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Abstract

This paper is focused on the cultural mix of people in Banglumphu area located in the old part of Bangkok and its relationship to the urban development. Banglumphu is historically rich and is one of the most culturally diverse areas in Bangkok. Located within walking distance from many historical sites, Banglumphu is a famous spot for both Thai and visitors from all over the world. The area has local communities with specialties in Thai arts and crafts who have settled since when the city was founded.

As a historic site, time stand still as Banglumphu is architecturally preserved. At the same time, the area has gone through many periods of development. With the changing times, new user groups and requirements, the evident of confliction is shown in the layers of cityscape. The research explores the idea of preserving architecture as a shell and the maintaining the life of the city which is the people who are occupying the space both permanently and temporary. How can architecture encourage the exchange between these diverse groups and try to identify possibilities of network which could reinvent the urban connectivity.

ASEAN economic community is to be established in late 2015, people within this region will be able to travel and relocate freely. Bangkok will become more culturally diverse. This study can offer a view for a bottom-up and sustainable city development which merging historical values of existing architectural conditions, the exchange between different groups of occupants and possibility of future growth.

Keywords and Concise Description

Community, Identity, Urban development

Introduction

Bangkok is the capital city of Thailand. Known to the Thais as “Krungthep” which means city of angels, Bangkok is not the oldest city in the country. The city was re-established in 1782 with the goal to build a city that celebrates Thai cultural and heritage. The city is meant to be built with royal palaces and temples suitable for angels, as a heaven on earth. The first buildings in Bangkok were built according to those idealistic concepts with golden and delicate elaborate decorative details. These buildings have become heritage sites which represent Thai culture and are now considered the image of Thai architecture and Thailand as a country.

In the present time, however, the city has been massively expanded from when it started and went through series of transformations to accommodate the growth. Throughout the history, the city welcomes new groups of occupants from many cultures. They brought in new technology and knowledge which changed how Thai buildings were constructed. While the ancient buildings still remained untouched and in the same time, untouchable, the new local architecture was being transformed from the very idea it was conceived with different types of materials, new method of construction techniques and additional users’ requirements. The gaps of the development leaves hole to the continuation of the development of Thai culture.

The physical attributes of Bangkok now is similar to any modern cities in the world with city scape occupied by skyscrapers and modern building complexes. As a metropolitan city with over 11 millions of population, it is trying to move forward and struggling to keep up with what was required of from a city in the modern world, its Architecture, both old and new, is built separately without the consideration of its impact to its community and people. Unlike the old architecture of the city, the modern development brought buildings with no architectural identity and has no relationship to its sites. The one of the area that this development and preservation conflicts were clearly evident is in Banglumphu which situated at the heart of Rattanakosin Island where the city was established. Unlike most area in Rattanakosin Island where development is prohibited and the city remains as if frozen in time, this area is allowed to go through transformations. Therefore, this is the area where old is the neighbour of new. As the local and the city tries to preserves its identity, they also struggling to keep up with the world with no clear strategies. The urban fabric becomes clustered with post-modernist shop house units spreading all over the city streets. The connection between city and its architecture to its occupants, time, locality, history and connectivity of a community are disappearing. When the building has the ability to shape its occupants, directing their behaviours, therefore, architecture can play a big role in changing or preserving a uniqueness of a community and a city. With no sense of belonging and ownership from the people who occupies it, the city is in danger of losing its cultural identity and ancient allure. The very idea of architectural preservation and cultural development should come from the people.

Objective

The research questions the idea of architectural preservations and the notions and structure of urban development from the perspectives of its current occupants opposed to the city's approach and their possible active roles in participating with the way the neighbourhood and the city is being shaped and how this area could be an example case study for many other communities within the area that are facing similar issues.

History and development of Banglumphu area

Globalization is spreading all over the world. Bangkok is becoming an international city with foreigners occupying in many areas. In an area around Rattanakosin, especially in Banglumphu, where the city was formed with old Thai architecture mixing with post-modernist shop houses, but yet the area still evolve with today's society. Banglumphu is situated closely to heritage sites of Bangkok and therefore, is an attractive location for visitors and tourists. More and more visitors are coming to occupy the space but the exchange and interaction of the people to others are limited.

Banglumphu dated back to Ayutthaya period. The name Banglumphu came from the history of the area that used to be fully covered with Lumphu trees which is a local tree grows at the river banks. The community in Banglumphu area started as an agricultural community. When the city was built, Banglumphu was the area marked the north-western boundary of the city within city wall, forts and Banglumphu canals. With its proximity to the royal palace, Banglumphu become the area where services are provided to the royals and was where civil servants would live. Temples are the centre of community in Thai culture and these temples are the evident that this area was a residential area. The temples built in this area were for different cultural groups of citizen who specialised in different service.

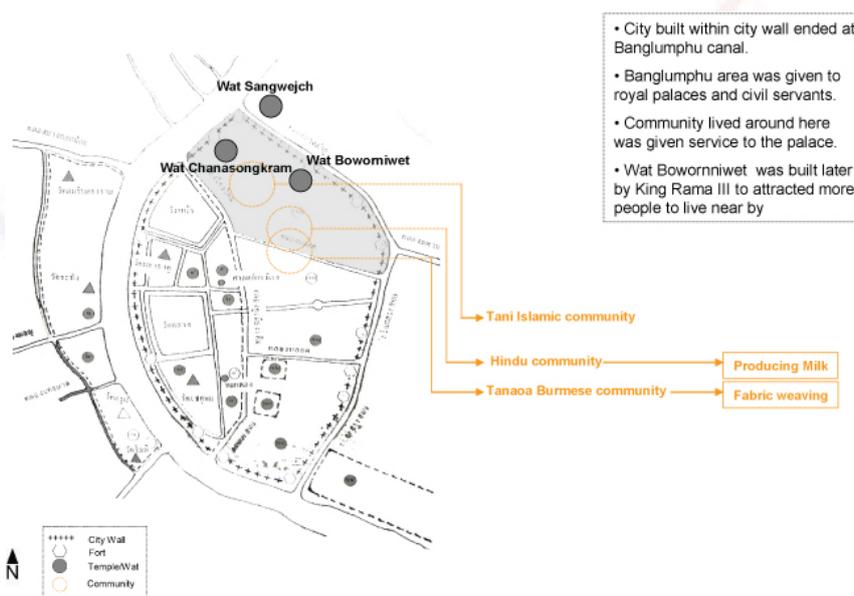


Figure 1 Map of early Rattanakosin city with marking of Banglumphu area and communities from 1782-1851

The population in this area was quite diverse with Thai, Chinese, Mon, Tanaoa Burmese, Hindu and Muslim people. A market was established near Wat Boworn called Talad Yod. The traces of these communities can still be found today. From 1851-1925, Banglumphu was being modernized by the order of the king. Many new official buildings were being built outside the old city wall because of the density of the city. Banglumphu area then became less official area and slowly turned into commercial area. Banglumphu canal was used to transporting goods from Chaopraya River into the city and roads were being built to connect Banglumphu to other royals and tradings zones. Chinese community established in the area and started new shops along Khaosan Road and near Wat Boworn¹



Figure 2 Map of early Rattanakosin city with marking of Banglumphu area and communities

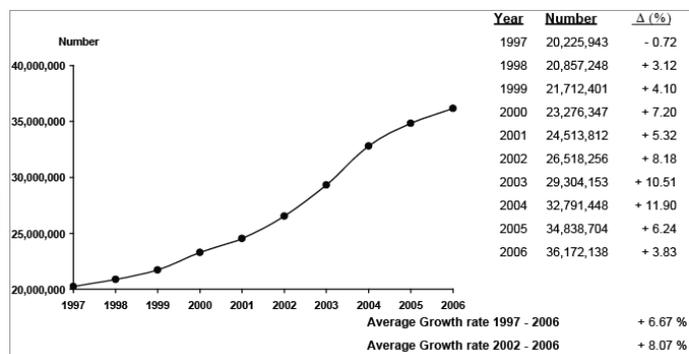
The city wall was tore down during King Rama VI and VII period and the idea of building palaces within the city wall area was no longer popular. The old palaces and official buildings were moved to Ratchadamnoen road. The communities in Banglumphu were actively in trades selling many types of goods. The new use for old official buildings and palaces around Banglumphu area changed to more arts and cultural related.

The area around Chaopraya River and Phra Athit road was more of a typical residential. While around Wat Chanasongkram, where old Talad Rod market and Rong-Mai market used to be, has become Banglumphu market today with malls and clothing goods for sale, still matching with the Tanaoa Burmese’s specialised skills.

Khaosand road, on the other hand, changed completely from rice selling market like its name to a traveller spot full with guesthouses and nightlife. The first hotel on Khaosan Road was a small hotel aimed at serving civil servants from other provinces that visiting Bangkok for business and the road was full of shops selling monks accessories. It used to be known as “religious road”. The shift started about 30 years ago where many western films were shooting in the area and required

¹ กรุงเทพมหานคร. 2539. บันทึกจดหมายเหตุเรื่อง การพัฒนาถนนราชดำเนินกลาง. สำนักงานกรุงเทพมหานคร. กรุงเทพฯ

accommodations for crew. The people started to rent some rooms out for foreigners and then around 25 years later guesthouses were starting to get built and Khaosand road has become Bangkok's central for backpackers.² With most of the major attractions within walking distance, Banglumphu can attract more than 700,000 visitors per year.³



Thai	23,800,757	22,570,492	+ 5.45
Foreigners	12,371,381	12,268,212	+ 0.84

Figure 3 Graph showing the growth static of visitors to Bangkok⁴

The reason Banglumphu is famous for tourists are because it's situated close within walking distance to majority of Bangkok's famous tourist attractions and its unique close compact neighbourhood feels; making it easy for tourists to observe the real life of local Thais living in the communities there and food and accommodation can be provided by the locals cheaply.

² จิตต์กุลสัมพันธ์, ญาณี. **2544.**

ผลกระทบของธุรกิจการท่องเที่ยวต่อการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางเศรษฐกิจสังคม และวัฒนธรรมของชุมชนถนนข้าวสาร . มหาวิทยาลัยรามคำแหง. กรุงเทพฯ

³ เอี่ยมเจริญ,ธวัช.**2536.** บทบาทที่พักแบบประหยัดสำหรับนักท่องเที่ยวที่มีต่อชุมชนเมือง : การศึกษาบริเวณถนนข้าวสาร . จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย. กรุงเทพฯ

⁴ Bangkok Tourism statistics 2006. Tourism Authority of Thailand.

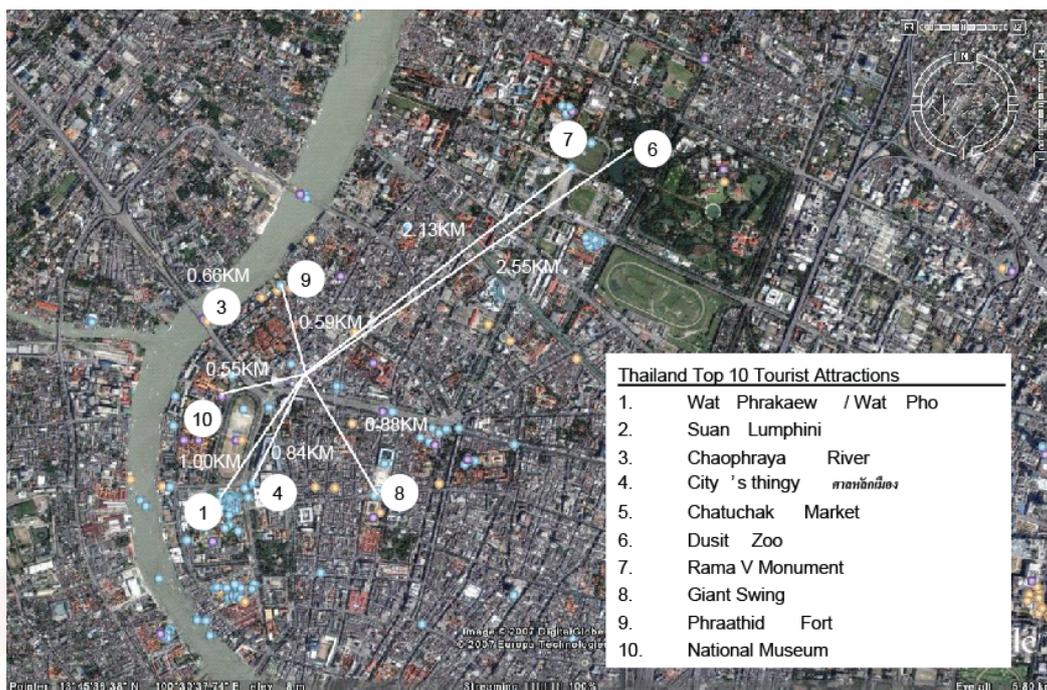


Figure 4 Estimating distance between Banglumphu and Bangkok's Attractions.

Bangkok's tourism business is constantly being boost by the government, Banglumphu, in consequence, is attracting more visitors each year. With a lot of money being spent by tourists and visitors, Banglumphu is transforming into a commercial area with tremendous opportunity for the locals.

Banglumphu today and its development



Figure 5 Existing facilities in Banglumphu

The buildings in Banglumphu reflect its long history and development that the neighbourhood underwent throughout the time. While the land use is now mostly commercial, it is still occupied by the old communities in their original areas. The

actual buildings are a collection of old building that has relationship with the Rattanakosin area that was built at the similar time and new also have architecture built by the local for new commercial uses.

What the shift from residential to commercial did to Banglumphu was the way the neighbourhood is being occupied. The area is now an area where users constantly changing and as more visitors come to stay, the stay is being extended and some of them have settled into the area working or opening businesses.

Another major shift for Banglumphu area is the arts and cultural usage. Many old official buildings in Banglumphu was moved to other locations and the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA) has assigned these buildings to be used as arts and cultural buildings because it's located in the historical part of the city and location close to Thailand most prestige arts university, BMA point of view of Banglumphu future is to be preserved for arts and cultural uses⁵. About 30% of contemporary art galleries and venues listed by office of contemporary arts, ministry of culture, are situated within walking distance from Banglumphu.⁶ Banglumphu is also a home of 3 major performance venues both indoor and outdoor, making this area not only a historical hub, but also a contemporary arts and cultural hub of Bangkok as well

Interviews of the user groups

The users in the site is divided into 4 major groups; local Thai, local foreigners, Thai visitors and foreigner visitors. The interview was conducted on site asking these target groups. The purpose is to ask how the users use the site existing facilities and what kind of activities they do in a different time in a day. The study of the area shows the specific locations where different cultural groups of users occupy. While the local Thai communities, which are old communities, Local foreigners and Thai visitors' remains close to the market. Foreign visitors mostly occupy in Khaosan road area.

The summary of the activities they do in a day tells the hours of interested for each group of users. The interview show that for local communities, they spent more time on the site but the activities they doing is not social activities which makes it harder propose a program for them. The interview indicates that for local communities, programs should be proposed in the evening on weekdays and afternoon on weekends.

Visitors, especially Thais, spent fewer hours on the site but when they are on the site, they're already using the site to do social activities. This makes the time that's open for programs proposing for visitors are longer and more flexible. Visitors spend almost all day on site on weekends and stay on site until very late on weekdays.

⁵ Department of City Planning, Bangkok Metropolitan Administration

⁶ Office of Contemporary art and culture, Ministry of Culture. [www] Available: <http://www.ocac.go.th>. Last Accessed : 31 AUG 07

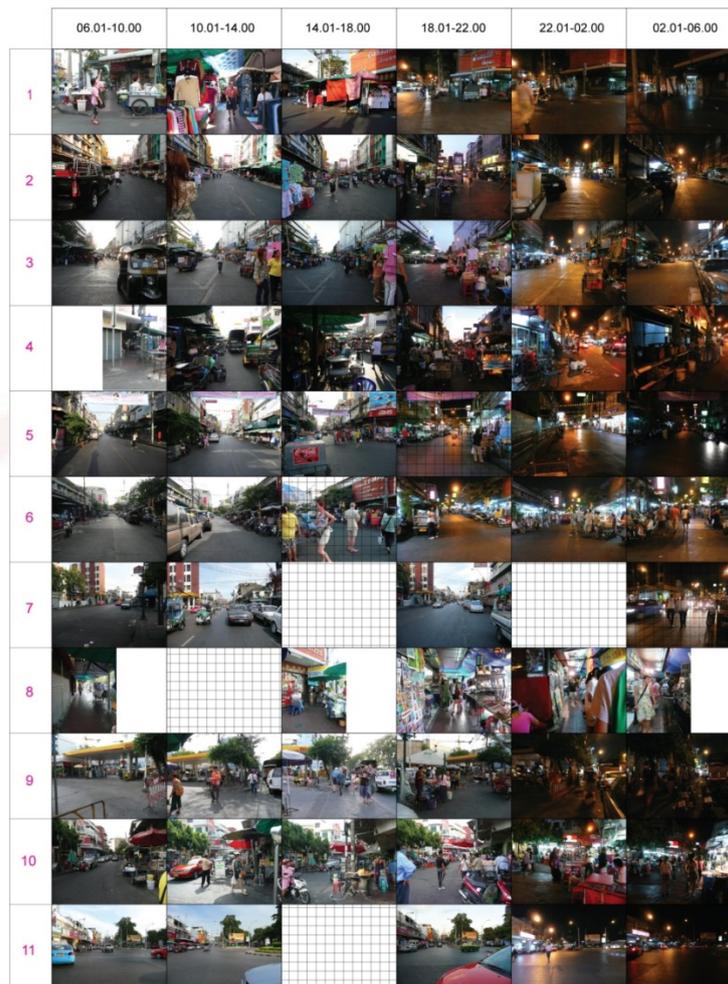


Figure 6 24 hours record of urban activities in Banglumphu area

By studying the area activities intensively, the pattern of activities of different user group was identified. The result shown that the Banglumphu is an intensively dynamic area with the shifting of activities between different groups of people that occupy different area within the site that occurs for the entire 24 hours of a day.

Local communities and development

There are 3 main local communities within Banglumphu area today. These communities are sharing the city scape and they are at the centre of the changes that occurs because of the development of the area and they have their own reservations about some of the changes. While their cultural heritages are as old as the city itself, their houses are transformed to accommodate the visitors because their livelihood is depending on tourism business. Local communities are starting to join together to preserve their identities with the encouragement of the local government. These activities starting as a small event such as a youth group getting together to have walking event to explore within their own neighbourhood and then creating local maps using local produced that the area is famous for which is fabric to promote the knowledge to other young members. This activity is aimed to pass on the history of their heritage to the new generations and sense of pride in their local community.

The local government organizes many arts event in the area such as art market and regular outdoor festival events. These events consequently promote tourism in the area and boost the local economics. Local communities in the area recognize the potential of their neighbourhood as well and started to participate and organize supporting activities to coincide with the official events such as private walk tours into alleys and guided bike tours. These activities started a new relationship between local community and local government and encourages further development within the area such as the way the city regulate traffic within the area to accommodates location activities throughout the day, when the city recognizes the potential of exploring the neighbourhood for tourism, they proposed a program to provide rental bikes in the area for tourists. The new ongoing dialog changes the way the area is being promoted and operated. The urban development that used to be top down turned into a more bottom up development with the feedback from the locals. The more locally identified opportunities are being recognized by the authority more and in return, the local comments are taken into considerations. when the recognition of the city become less fragmented, a more continuous cultural buildings and facilities network between different areas of Rattanakosin island was formed; making the exploration of the city as a whole more united and coherent. Any major events that will in any way affecting the physical features of the neighbourhood will have to pass local meetings with the communities before actions occurred. The communities get to have the right to identify what is crucial for preservation as well as the government.

Conclusion

Architecture is the most public form of art that reflects its context. It is the image of a city. A collection of buildings within a city scape can tell a story of what has happened and where it is going. Not one or the other is any less important than each other. The idea of architectural preservation is not a fully established concept in Thailand in comparison to most European cities. There are blurred definitions of what is necessary to be preserved and by whom. As Thailand and Southeast Asian countries are about to open borders as a single economic zone, cities are becoming more international. Thailand and, especially, Bangkok is expecting to receive more immigrants to come seek work and settled. The definition of “local” people will become more complex to identify. This could be looked at as an opportunity. In an old city where many building has interesting historical values, it is difficult for the governmental body to be acting as the only active agent in preserving one’s culture. When the only idea of architectural preservation is to remain constantly unchangeable and repelling anything that is not of the same era, it is difficult for the people and contemporary society to feel any sense of belonging enough to be actively involved in the keeping and its survival. Any building that is not allowed to participate with the surrounding becomes irrelevant to the society. Therefore, the idea of zoning regulation for architectural preservation in Thailand needs to be reevaluated according to today’s world where there are less boundaries between one places to another. The flow of information and people are constant. Instead of preserving a building, which is a shell, according to how old it is, it is also possible to preserve the culture through preservation of local communities which are the heart of the city by providing what it is necessary for them to strive on and recognizes their needs in the present time. In an international world, It is important for local authorities to realise any of the changes of the place and even allows rooms for people who are not of the area to be a part of the

area. It is a more difficult task for an urban developer than keeping old buildings but culture and heritage pass on through people and not just the building shells.

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