

# Domesticating Suburban areas: The Densities of Signs

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*'Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts.'*

*City of Sign, p. 14, Invisible Cities, Italo Calvino*

## 0. Abstract

To what extent can the distribution, intensification, and the contents of the billboards and signs be a key measurable, and cultural, factor for urban intensification? This paper is a drafted research proposal to study the distribution, intensification, and the contents of the billboards and signs, particularly, the big ones, along some sections of the Bangkok's western ring road, which have been in a continuing construction process for the past 10 years. It aims to built another readability tool for the urban development, i.e., the identities or characteristics of the urban areas through a commonly found objects of everyday life -- the billboards.

This billboard study is the first of the three relating observation and research. The second study is a study of the changing of domestic architecture portray by the billboards along the ring roads, to critique the extent of existing lives. The third one is a study of the public spaces, sparsely distributed, organically or planned, and the extent to which they relate to the billboard distribution. The three observations and research are demarcated along the same sections of the western ring roads of Bangkok. Through these three observations and research, it is hope that a different tool to indicate urban intensification, particularly in the suburban areas can be established. Furthermore, the mechanisms with which the billboards, the domestic architecture and the public spaces influence each other, i.e., shaping and being shaped by each other can be discovered. Finally, if possible, a speculative view of a local creation or adaptation to the new type of space usage can be established.

## 1. Introduction to Bangkok

Similar to many developing cities, the urban transformation of Bangkok has occurred both in the city centre and the suburb. However, it is the suburb where the transformation is markedly intensified. In the past five years, this process has been accelerated by the extension of the mass transit construction, coupled with a series of ring roads completions. High-rise residential buildings have sprung up along the mass transit lines in the city centre, while the gated communities have been distributed along the ring roads and around the end station of the mass transits. Of all the ring roads, the outer ring road is where the urban intensification seem to be the highest. Of the outer ring road itself, the western section is a unique one.

Figure 1 displays the Bangkok greater area which includes most of the city administrative areas and the areas in the five immediate surrounding provinces. The figure also shows the locations of the historical area (Krung Rattanakosin), the central business district (Silom-Sathorn) and the expatriate-preferred area (Sukhumwit). It is quite clear from Figure 1 that the western section of

the outer ring road directly links the central business district (CBD) with the recently available, less developed and low density land to the west of Bangkok. It also sequentially links to the historical area, a must visiting place for majority of the Thai people and foreigners alike. The CBD and Sukhumwit almost connect to each other as well, which means that the residents along the western section of the outer ring road have an easy access for most of foreign products and services provided in the Sukhumwit area. Finally, an underground mass transit line going to the north-west of the city where the western section of the outer ring road ends in the north had been given a permission to be built by the government recently. Similarly, the extension of the elevated light rail (BTS) to cross the river to the south-west end of the western section of the outer ring road was just operated in the middle of 2011 by the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority.

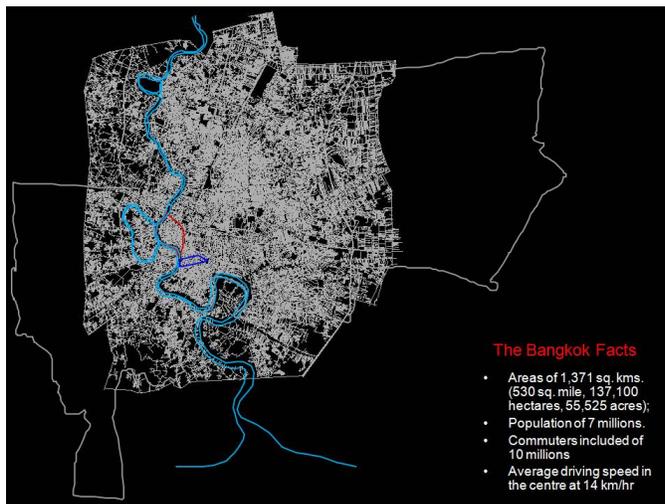


Figure 1: The Bangkok greater area (Source: Kasemsook, 2011)

For the western section of the outer ring road (Figure 2), it can be separated into three segments. The one closest to the CBD (the southern segment) is more likely to be occupied by the high to middle-rise residential buildings. The middle one, which is closed to the historical area, is mostly occupied with the expensive gated-community housing estates, many of those house in the gated communities can fetch to more than 1 millions USD, while the average income of the Thai people per year is at 9,727 USD. The northern segment is occupied with a number of housing estates, some of which are also the gated communities, and neighbourhood shopping malls.

Due to the size of the gated communities themselves and the vehicular speed within the ring road, it is difficult for visitors or passer-by to recognise their destination. Big billboards and the huge entrances to the gated communities have been seen as the tool to catch the attention of the visitors and passer-bys. In many cases they are highly elaborated for the advertising content being displayed. (Karnchanaporn & Kasemsook, 2008) Recently, the number and the distribution of the billboards and small sign posts have been more intense. A line of billboards was built to the catch the eyes of the drivers in a land with some distances from the road, while along the roadside area another line of sign posts was also constructed.



Figure 2: The western section of the outer ring road, outbound from the city center to Bangkok Western suburb area. (Source: Karnchanaporn, 2011)

## **2. The theoretical background: the city and the billboards**

### ***2.1 Understanding the city***

In the past 30 years there are many attempts to try to understand the city, urban areas and domestic architecture. Majority of them have developed a vast number of techniques and tools to study the city, urban areas and domestic architecture. These techniques and tools are based on three main approaches: observation, questionnaire and measuring. As a result, the past researches have generated quite a number of knowledge relating to the city, urban areas and domestic architecture. For example, the Space Syntax group, developed by Hillier and Hanson (1986) has developed a set of theories and analytical techniques to explain the socio-cultural aspects which have been embedded within the building and settlement spatial morphology. Through a series of behavioural observations and computerising accessibility of the spatial network, Space Syntax attempts to re-create the live back to the buildings and settlements from the spatial network re-arrangement.

With the complex of everyday life and the advance of technology available nowadays, there seems to be a drive as well as a reflection on how the city, urban areas and domestic architecture should be studied and understood, particularly the changing lives within them. Carlo Ratti et. al (2011) attempted to study the city based on the bottom-up approach by using the mobile phone as a device and measuring the signal frequency as the tool is an example in the recent trend in urban researches. If Ratti's study was of mobilisation and using advance technology, can a conventional everyday object be a measuring tool of the urban study, particularly the urban intensification?

### ***2.2 The sign***

Sign is something that implies a connection between itself and its object. Sign is commonly perceived as a signification of something, a meaning of something and/or an importance of the thing. We read signs on the everyday basis and we pass through many of them during our days and nights while dwelling in the city. As for many Asian cities, there is one element that can be widespread-ably found: the sign. In the city centres in Hong Kong, Japan, China or Thailand,

there are plenty of signage. (Figure 3) Originally, the signage displays the names and titles of the companies, shops, restaurants and etc. Nowadays, they are more elaborated. Bangkok, as a capital, has a role in shaping the material culture of the city. In Bangkok, icons and signs can be as revealing of the economy and material culture that structure urban life. In a sense that some urban areas in Bangkok can be viewed as sign-scapes that signify the spaces these signs represented, for example, *Khao San* road (the famous foreign backpacker's destination), *Patpong* area (internationally known as Bangkok's red light district), and *Yaowarat* road (the Bangkok's Chinatown area). In other areas, sign as advertisement billboard performs previews of urban cinema scenes days and nights on the streets, highways, expressways, and major ring roads.



Figure 3: Signage in Kao San Road, Bangkok (Source: Kasemsook, 2007)

The sign in this research is observed as an advertisement billboard with special interest on advertisement content of condominiums and housing estates commonly seen along the ring roads of Bangkok. The advertisement billboards, as they are placed, invite us to interpret and perceive signs through the practices of seeing and being seen: the anticipation for the new luxury living community and the sense of apprehending the real that continues through reading these billboards and their locations (figure 4). These billboards encourage attention to the surface of domestic culture that is not yet to come to life.



Figure 4: An advertisement billboard of one of the luxury housing estate and its actual estate. (Source: Karnchanaporn, 2011)

### 3. The Bangkok western suburban areas' billboards

Our investigation and observation moves on, observed by driving to work and to home everyday, there are plenty of big billboards and signs along the western section of the outer ring road (Figure 5). The elevated road links the historical area of Bangkok and the central segment of the western section of the outer ring road are also filled with a number of billboards (Figure 6). Bangkok is a road-oriented city enabling these billboards to command high-density consumer exposure mostly to car traffic. There are both a series of ten big billboards of the similar or different gated communities, two of which are of six to eight meters apart, and a series of small sign posts whose distance between two of them are of two or three meters. Similar to billboards on expressways, the billboards on ring roads present larger advertisement of luxurious living to passing drivers with distinct visuals and highly visible against the rural landscape along the ring roads. Interestingly, some of these billboards of the luxury housing estate are even breaching the Bangkok's city law of sign-posting which resulted in the destruction of these billboards.



Figure 5: Scene of the outbound road leading to the western section of the outer ring road. (Source: Karnchanaporn, 2011)



Figure 6: Scene of the elevated road, outbound, leading to the central segment of the western section of the outer ring road. (Source: Kasemsook, 2011)

The power beneath these advertisement billboards is the exposure to the will to pursue new mode of living in the luxury (secured and enclosed) housing estate in contrast to the local activities established before the extension of the ring road. Nonetheless, the consequence of this distribution is that the location where the billboards are clustered attracts the local residents to develop some kind of local public space and small retail and food outlet. The owners of these retail and food shops mostly use the back of their pick-up car as a shop. They would park their cars by the roadside and unfold their umbrellas which are extension of the pick-up cars to create shading area and also to display their goods. During the weekdays, cheap and inexpensive food outlets along the roadside are popular to drivers which includes taxi drivers. Weekends are more crowded as variety of retail goods are sold on the roadside, for example, fresh seafood, fruits (watermelon and sugarcane), used t-shirts and jeans, toys and car accessories (Figure 7, 8, 9 and 10). These local residents are often of middle to low income earners which is contrast to the residents of the gated communities that located along the ring road. This can be seen as an adjustment of the suburban local residents towards the urbanisation of the city re-locating residents. In the case of Bangkok, this local development is unique and cultural, particularly in

the suburban area along the western ring road. The billboards, the roadside retail and food shops and the luxury housing estates located along the section of this western ring road produce both symbolic and realistic differentiation of urban space. The visibility of class and social inequality is inevitable.



Figure 7: A retail activity around a billboard  
(Source: Karnchanaporn, 2011)



Figure 8: A retail activity around a billboard clustering  
(Source: Karnchanaporn, 2011)



Figure 9: A pick-up car selling fresh seafood along the roadside  
(Source: Karnchanaporn, 2011)



Figure 10: A pick-up car selling toys along the roadside  
(Source: Karnchanaporn, 2011)

#### 4. The observation and measuring tools

To use the billboard and sign as the tool for measuring urban intensification of the suburban areas, there are three observations and measurements proposed. As mentioned earlier, all the three observations and measurements will be carried out along the western section of the outer ring road. For this paper, the focus is on the southern, the central and some part of the northern segment. Details of the three observations and measurements are given as follow:

The first observation is for the distribution of billboards and signs. Their locations will be recorded. This is an attempt to investigate the clustering and densities of the billboards (Figure 11). It questions the extent to which the density of the billboards and signs can point to the urban intensification of the suburban areas. The higher the density of the billboards and signs is, the more the suburban areas will be urbanised, or otherwise. If possible, the activities around

the billboards and signs will also be recorded, particularly if they relate to the public space use.



Figure 11: Clustering of billboards with the collapsed ones being the illegal billboards (Source: Karnchanaporn, 2011)

The second is the size of the billboards and signs. However, this observation is carried out with a direct relation with the densities. It aims to investigate whether the size, the density and the distribution may interrelate. This means to establish the extent to which the sizes of the billboards and signs contribute to the urban intensification process.



Figure 12: Different sizes of billboards (Source: Karnchanaporn, 2011)

The last observation is the content of the billboards and signs. Unlike the first two observations which are measurable, this last one is of the non-measurable aspect. The content displays the social and cultural factor that is also another drive for the urban intensification. As discussed earlier, the contents of the billboards and signs can be highly elaborated and portrays the domesticating conditions as the existing or the ideal ones wish to live. (Karnchanaporn & Kasemsook, 2008) However, the one being focused here is the domesticating scenes of the urbanisation which transforms the suburban areas.



Figure 13: Contents of billboards (Source: Karnchanaporn, 2011)

## 5. The initial discussion

It is hope that billboards and signs can be used as the tool for measuring the urban intensification of the suburban areas, particularly, for this paper, the residential land-use type. They are of course an everyday object ones commonly find. Many of them are well made, well written and well arranged. They should be an indicator for the identity of the suburban areas where they locates. This also means that they are capable of being a different reading tool for understanding the city and a different measurement for urban intensification.

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