

A CITY BUILT BY KINGS

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of cities is always governed by many complex factors. These may be geographical, historical, economic and social imperatives. East Asian cities developed in a particular kind of environment, where the demands of survival in a water-dominated environment as well as historical events, shaped the fabric of cities. Bangkok, or *Krung Thep*¹ is one such example. This paper studies the physical and historical evolution of Bangkok, the various factors which shaped the city, and the direction in which it is growing today.

1 - HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of Thailand is often referred to as the history of Bangkok and its Kings. Furthermore, the Kings of the Chakri Dynasty who ruled Siam for almost two centuries occupy a very special place in the collective memory of the Thai people. The kings, who were thought to be the incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, took the title of Rama. The present king, Bhumipol Adulyadej, is Rama IX. The Chakri Dynasty was responsible for developing much of what is today the historical fabric of the city of Bangkok (Map-1).

It was the destruction of Ayuthaya, the ancient seat of the Siamese empire, which led to the emergence of Bangkok as the new royal capital in the eighteenth century. Bangkok was supposed to resemble Ayuthaya as far as possible which was no small ambition since at the height of its power, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Ayuthaya had a population of one million inhabitants.

There were gilded stupas and temples at every turn of streets and the entire city was encircled by the Chao Phraya River [1]. The siting of Bangkok as the royal capital was a strategic decision.

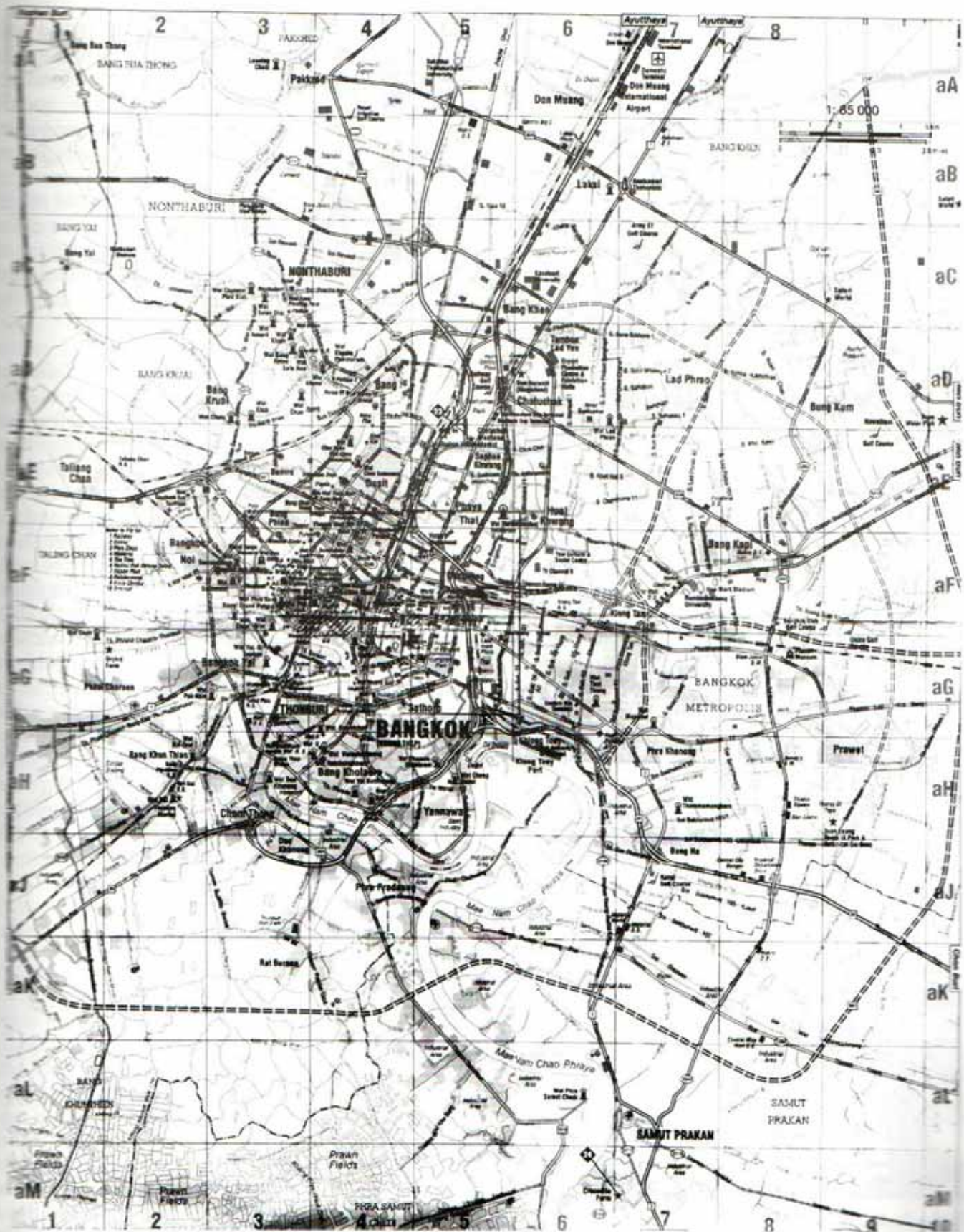
After the fall of Ayuthaya, Bangkok was chosen as the new capital by King Taksin in 1767. However, the area now known as Bangkok had been occupied for several hundred years by Chinese merchants and had been a trading stop for Europeans long before it became the royal capital.

It was King Rama-I who built Bangkok in the image of Ayuthaya. His wish was not to create a new city but to restore Ayuthaya as far as possible. The restoration embraced not merely the form but the whole Ayuthayan way of life, its ethics, its arts, its literature, its law and all the traditional institutions including its administrative system. After the destruction of Ayuthaya at the hands of the Burmese, building materials scavenged from the ruins were transported to Bangkok on barges through the Chao Phraya River and were used in the construction of the new city. Most of the monumental construction was carried out using the slave labour of war captives. The need to have a good defence dominated the way the new city was constructed, to avoid what had happened to Ayuthaya [2].

2 - THE CITY FABRIC

Bangkok was a city shaped by two factors; its geography and physical surroundings, and the strategic interests of its ruling monarchy.

¹ '*Krung Thep*' is the name of Bangkok in Thai Language meaning the 'City of Angels'. Unless talking to foreigners, the Thai people never call their capital city as Bangkok, in stead they would always refer to it as Krung-Thep pronounced as 'grung-tayp'.



Map - 1: Bangkok and its Environs.

In the course of time the city thus became a reflection of the changing waterways coursing through its heart and the whims and interests of successive kings, the incarnation of the God Rama, who sat upon its throne. Unlike other cities which were shaped by impending realities of economics, politics and population growth, Bangkok's physical fabric was shaped by defensive needs and royal decrees, at least until a certain point in time. In 1785, the King Rama-I decided that the site of construction of the new Grand Palace would be where the old Chinese merchant communities had been settled for the past several hundred years. The entire community was thus moved further west of the city to make way for the new construction. This area is what is presently known as Samphaeng or Chinatown [3] (Figure 1).



Figure 1: An Old Image of the China Town.
Source: Steve van Beek.

King Chulalongkorn (Rama-V) filled the waterways of *Krung Thep* to make wide boulevards which evoked images of European streets, where he had been educated for most of his life, and on which British diplomats could go for evening rides seated in horse carriages. This eventually led to the roads containing more traffic and becoming wider. Consequently, the trees lining the old streets were cut down and sewers were built on the sides. King Rama-V also planned the modern district of Dusit and a modern palace precinct outside the old town walls, linked to the old city by Ratchadamneon Avenue.

A picture of Bangkok begins to emerge from the accounts of a nineteenth century traveler; "...numerous temples of Buddha with tall spires attached... frequently glittering with gilding, were conspicuous among the mean huts and hovels of the natives, throughout which were interspersed a profusion of palms, ordinary fruit trees, and the Sacred Figure... On each side of the river there was a row of floating habitations, resting on rafts of bamboo, moored to the shore... close to these, were anchored the largest description of native vessels... the bazaar in which all the various products of China were exposed for sale in houses floating on the water, in rows of about 8, 10 or more... at either end the houses were bound to long bamboos driven into the river. They are thus enabled to move from place to place... almost all are occupied by merchants and trades people as shoe-makers and tailors... the latter occupations are followed almost exclusively by the Chinese..."[4].

3 - TRANSFORMATION

By the beginning of the nineteenth century Bangkok had become a multicultural city. Two factors contributed to this. First, its location at the mouth of the Chao Phraya River and secondly being an important trans-shipment point. Its reputation as a rising center of trade. The various wars with neighbouring Cambodia, Laos and Burma meant that hordes of captives and slaves were brought to the city and consequently housed there. Their families and later descendents formed neighbourhoods and communities reflecting a great ethnic diversity, including Cambodians,

Laotians, and Malays from the south.

In later years subsequent changes to the city can be attributed to the impact of an expanding capitalist market economy. Previously, Bangkok was defined by a collection of semi-independent communities focused around markets and institutional / religious nodal points. As the city's exposure to the fast modernizing world outside increased, its landscape began to reflect the influences of the western cultures which were residing there. By 1912, "... the streets of Bangkok were well-paved and metalled and kept fairly clean. Those nearest to the palace being in the best condition. Here and there a row of the older thatched dwellings persists and a few floating houses still cling to the banks of the river. The picturesque castellated fortifications of the city are going also, the gateways have nearly all been removed to facilitate traffic and whole sections of the walls have been demolished and utilised as road-metal" [5].

Today's Bangkok is defined by its many high-rise office and apartment buildings, an extensive network of elevated highways and expressways, and one of the densest vehicular traffic in East Asia. Upon first glance it is very difficult to find traces of the old Bangkok, but like the many and complex layers of its history, the city also has many hidden dimensions. The old and the new co-exist, albeit uneasily, in a city populated by six million people, but it is the new which dominates. Modern development in Bangkok is defined by a vertical growth of the city (Figure 2).

It is not merely the buildings which are growing upwards, but the public and circulation spaces as well. Highways, tollways and an elevated skytrain system have overshadowed a large part of the city. Some argue that there are good reasons to build these in Bangkok namely that the city has limited buildable land due to its location on the silty delta of the Chao Phraya River, it is already overcrowded and the public transportation system on the ground is choked with serious traffic problems.



Figure 2: Modern Development in Bangkok is defined by Vertical Growth of the City.

The above-mentioned unprecedented growth has destroyed most of the city's traditional transportation which operated earlier in an elaborate network of canals and small streets (Figure 3).

From a water city, Bangkok is now becoming a 'sky city'. The old network is today still very much in use by the city's poor i.e. those who can not afford the elaborate cost in tolls and tickets of the massive overhead concrete structures. The 'upper city'² thus also reinforces a class division already very stark in Thailand.

² The 'upper city' is a term referred to the newer and more developed areas of the city. Since the modern city has developed vertically these parts are called the upper city.



Figure 3: The City's Traditional Mode of Transportation Depended upon an Elaborate Network of Canals.

The creation of the *upper city*, defined by its massive re-inforced concrete pylons and overhangs, has fostered the growth of a new kind of city immediately below. In the shadows of the highways and tollways, informal settlements have sprouted abundantly. They house the growing migrant population of the city as well as the marginalized segments of society. Here, self-built housing abounds and pavements are used for setting up commercial enterprises. People use recycled materials for construction, whatever they can find in the leftover waste and refuse of the massive city overhead.

Another area where informal settlements abound, is along the old waterways and canals. Previously the thriving arteries of trade, these waterways are now increasingly becoming either waste dumps of the city or tourist attractions, wherever they can be salvaged that is.

Along the waterways, the old wooden houses are rotting away but are still somehow maintained for habitation and survival by a creative population.

The stark contrast between the have and the have-nots can be seen as a sign of the rapid inclusion of Bangkok with Thailand into the so-called global economy. The Asian financial crisis which plunged Thailand into a recession in 1997 is an indicator of the transient nature of 'free markets'. This disaster is also reflected in the built environment, where half-finished concrete pylons line the Northern Highway out of Bangkok, as remnants of a now abandoned multi-million dollar infrastructure project. Many other such examples are found all over Bangkok where buildings lie half-finished, a testimony to collapsed financial empires.

4 - THE PERSISTENCE OF TRADITIONAL INFLUENCES

Within all this, elements of Bangkok's traditional past still survive (Figure 4).

A significant part of Bangkok's history are more than 300 temples, called, 'wats', dating from the seventeenth century to the present day. Within their walls, these temples seem to have retained intact the ancient customs and rituals of Siam.

Today, they are also an integral part of the religious and social life of Bangkok's inhabitants. They almost appear to fill the lack of otherwise absent urban public spaces within the city, where tradition and modernity co-exist uneasily.

One of the most striking examples of this coexistence are the hundreds of 'spirit houses'³ and shrines located at the entrance of almost every commercial office tower in the city.



Figure 4: In Today's Modernized Bangkok the Contrasting Reminders of the Traditional Past Still Survive.

³ Many Thai believe that when a family builds a new house there is always a possibility that it has disturbed the spirits who lived on that property. Thus to protect their new home a little 'model' house is put up on a pole for the spirits to live in. 'Spirit house' must be located in such a way that the shadow of the human house never falls on it. Offerings of incense, fruit, flowers and rice are placed in these houses, from time to time, to keep the spirits happy. The theory behind it is that if the spirits who haunt the place are given a home they will not spitefully endanger the new inhabitants.

Even in their fast-paced, work driven, daily schedule, most Thais still find time to stop and pay homage to the ancestors and spirits who they believe guard and protect them. Bangkok's skyline, consisting mainly of high-rise office towers and reaching higher and higher everyday, dwarf and sometimes completely hide the temples and 'khlongs'⁴ of old *Krung Thep*. A new city above the old, but still ruled by a king and still worshipping the old gods.

CONCLUSION

Bangkok built through a response to merchant ventures geography, defensive needs, royal decrees and the demands of modern day global economy has emerged to become a city full of contradictions and dichotomies. In times it proves to be a representative of Thailand and a 'global city' in its own right where the past and the present, the history and the current intermingle to produce a city of the upwards and the downwards, both physically and socially■

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⁴ Traditionally one of the most important means of transportation in Thailand were canals and streams called 'Klong'. Bangkok was once a floating city. In 1840's almost 80 percent of its populace lived on *Khlongs*, in either rafts or stilt houses.