



Consumption and Creativity in Urban Transformation of Central Bangkok

Davisi BOONTHARM, Assistant Professor
National University of Singapore, the Department of Architecture, Singapore
davisi@nus.edu.sg

This paper presents an extract from an on-going research of creative precincts in East and South-East Asian metropolises, which focuses on Tokyo, Bangkok and Singapore. It explains continuity and change of several precincts of Bangkok which best expose the influence which evolving trends in consumption and creativity have on broader urban transformation and, in particular, on their dominant morphological and use- patterns. The capital of Thailand is well known for its mix of tradition and modernity. With loose urban planning since the 20th century, the city has gone through tremendous change, evolving from an aquatic and tropical green city into a megacity of artificial topographies and concrete. The emphasis is on transformation since the economic crisis in 1997, which brought a flux of foreigners (expat and tourists) to the Thai capital who, as one of the argument of this paper claims, provide contribution to the emerging local creative energies. Spatially, the focus is on patterns of urban transformation in central areas of Bangkok. Thematically, the paper deals with local innovation and creativities. Methodologically, it builds upon three main bodies of theory - the pioneering work of Jane Jacobs (and her axiom that “new requires old” [Jacobs 1961]), commodity and place of consumption (Baudrillard 1998), creative class and creative city (Florida, 2002; Landry, 2006) and broader body of cultural and urban studies, including urban semiotic (Barthes 1970). Information comes from three main sets of resources: local urban authorities, key academic institutions and practitioners in Bangkok and extensive fieldwork and site investigations. Three central areas in Bangkok covered in this paper are: 1) The Khaosarn and Banglamphu district: inner, traditional precincts which were radically transformed by budget, mass tourist industry. In those precincts, the traditional urban form was transformed to cater for the new industry. Buildings and urban spaces were refurbished, with respect for existing scale. Local urban elements were creatively used to accommodate emergent activities and new types of transient population. 2) The Patumwan junction to Rachaprasong junction, the “central shopping” district: where modern consumption is the most aggressive and where harsh shopping environment finds its expression in the form of megamalls. The focus is on Siam Square, a shophouse precinct, the center for local fashion and youth culture known as “Bangkok Harajuku”. The paper explains ways in which local urban form and practices of public and architectural spaces gets constantly reinvented to accommodate new creativities. 3) The Sukhumvit neighborhood: a former Thai middle class residential area, which was transformed into an “expat and wealthy” district, marked by profound changes of urban morphology and practices which come as direct responses to requirements imposed by globalisation. This investigation of three core areas of Bangkok focuses on contribution of consumption and creativity to their transformation. The investigation is conducted in the scales of architecture and urban precinct. The emphasis is on urban morphology, with a reference to corresponding problems, such as social and spatial segregation. The Conclusion opens discussion of many controversies associated with described patterns of transformations. The theme of contrast between new and old in those areas will be explored. The paper will highlight the challenge in which architect and urban designers can experience in these transformations.

KEY WORDS: Bangkok, creative precincts, urban morphology, urban transformation.