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***Rehabilitative Landscape in the Old Communities in Bangkok, Thailand***



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# Rehabilitative Landscape in the Old Communities in Bangkok, Thailand

## **Abstract**

Bangkok is the capital of Thailand, she will celebrate her 230 years anniversary in 2012. The location is on a flood plain delta of the Chao Phraya River. It was originally selected with the consideration of being a natural defense against enemies, while providing a water-based settlement for the citizens. Under the democratic government for more than 75 years, the old settled communities in Bangkok have been in the area where the formal planning can not prohibit them from growing. This study will examine the opportunities and threats of the old communities in the conservation area of Bangkok. The essence of the communities has performed its roles in several ways, included being life-long learning museums, a cozy home of the 'intangible cultural heritage', the un-seen tourist attractions, and the public nostalgia space for people to remind their origin.

Not always that the 'green' (park) is better than 'brown' (in this case is high-density housing). It demands talent from a diverse group of stakeholders that cuts across public, private and community sectors which entails delicate negotiations and pivotal compromises, social capital gains and creative tension. The root of the problem of re-development of the old communities requires compromise, negotiation, trade-off, win-winning, and all kinds of multi-actor involvement in the decision-making. Establishing public participation channels of from all potential stakeholders (both public and private agencies and citizens) may lag, especially those from 'the bottom of the pyramid' who have lived on the land for decades but have a very hoarse voices and difficult to be heard by the decision makers.

The author will describe the history of an old community in Bangkok, known as 'Pom Mahakan Fort community' and review the literatures on the projects. The charming old communities must be conserved, rehabilitated, and revitalized instead of being flushing away by the new developments. 'Gentrification' maybe in needed but in the best way with less controversies. Finally, she will suggest the win-win strategy to re-habilitate the area from the case studies.

**Keywords** : cultural heritage; cultural landscape; gentrification; historical park; Mahakan; old communities; rehabilitation; tourism; urban redevelopment.

## **1. Brief history of Bangkok old communities**

Bangkok was established in 1782 as the capital of Thailand by King Rama I of the Chakri Dynasty. She will celebrate her 230 years anniversary in 2012. The old Bangkok named Rattanakosin, has three rings of moats; inner wall around the Grand Palace, middle ring moat, and outer ring moat. Now the moats join the other canals and become water network of modern day Bangkok, the origin of the nick-name : '*Venice of the East*'. The purposes are for daily consumption, transportation, an agricultural irrigation system and a drainage channel. Therefore, the old communities of Bangkok are mostly in the Rattanasokin Island, which the area was surrounded with original defending moat/ditch and join part of the Chao Phraya River.

In 1978, Rattanakosin Island Conservation Committee was established. There have been a number of plans proposed to conserve and develop Rattanakosin Island as a historical park. The proposals aim to have Rattanakosin Island becomes tourists attraction by evict around 20 the old communities with some 10,000 residences, which are considered the eyes-sore objects, out of the conservation zones. The most outstanding case is a community situated behind the city wall of Pom Mahakan Fort. The fort with a citadel is one of the two remaining forts of the total 14 forts in Bangkok, it was originally built in the first reign (1782-1809). They were restored in 1959-1981.

Pom Mahakan Fort locates in the area of Wat Sraket and the Golden Mount, one of the unique landmarks of Bangkok. These integrations become the spectacular old monastery. The temple itself was first built before the rise of Rattanakosin. King Rama I redeveloped and improved the condition of the temple. The construction of the golden mount started in the third reign (1826-1851), continued to the fourth Reign (1851-1868), and completed in the fifth Reign (1868-1910). At the top of the Golden Mount situates a golden pagoda, the best point to observe the panoramic view of the entire Rattanakosin Island and expanded modern Bangkok area.

Pom Mahakan Fort community is the 287 residences from 65 houses, 92 families on the land of 4 rai, 3 ngan 59 square wa (7836 sq.m.), about 52 metres wide by 150 metres long. Most of them have lived there for 6 generations by pottery, making bamboo bird cages, local breed chickens, traditional massage, and recognized as the origin of traditional Thai dance called Likay (or Yike Khmer dance) named Prayapetch Pranee Likay<sup>1</sup>. The disputed area was described as a '*culturally-rich spot*' with '*a rare complex of vernacular architecture*' : a style that has already disappeared from other areas of Bangkok (Atthakor, 2009). Pom Mahakan Fort area also accommodated the home of Ungpakorn's family, father of Puey Ungpakorn : an extremely successful Thai bureaucrat and a Magsaysay Award winner in the field of public service in 1965.

There have been a long history of Pom Mahakan Fort community, I chronically arrange them as these followings in order to make the audient to understand the situation:

- Rama III (21 July 1824 - 2 April 1851) gave the land to his courtiers and monastery land of 2 temples (Racha Nadda and Thepthidaram), continued to Rama V (2 October 1868 - 23 October 1910) and Rama VI (23 October 1910 - 26 November 1925).
- The boat pier and a small building locates along the canal/moat had served as the Royal courtiers boat trip for long time; later in 2005 the pier was moved to another side of the canal and left the building declined.
- 1959 There was a renovation of Pom Mahakan Fort area, and half of the residences (11 plots) agreed to sell their land to government.
- 1960-1973 there were around 28 houses. Among those, 11 plots were completely sold to the government.
- 1988 There was a Rattanakosin Island Conservation Master Plan to clear the communities and stress on '*city beautification*', Pom Mahakan Fort community was proposed to be replaced with a park as part of tourism facility.
- 1999 – Santichaiprakarn Park was built at the Phra Sumane Fort (another one of the two fort left in Rattanakosin Island), as proposed in the 1988 Master Plan.
- 2002-2003, Michael Herzfeld, a Harvard anthropologist, researched intensively on the community and argued that the park would not work and that the community's design would not only work better for the tourists, it would be safer. He also mentioned about the benefit of having the community instead of a park that:  

"the city could lose a great opportunity to create a slice of Bangkok culture that would attract tourists. No western tourists would be interested in a plain park, but a community within a park would make for a real tourist attraction." (Herzfeld, 200x)
- Nov 2002 – February 2003, The Community Organizations Development Institute - CODI brought 7 students from the architecture program of King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi - KMUTT to the community to begin working with the community on an upgrading scheme and Master plan. The team submitted the proposal to the National Human Rights Commission - NHRC.
- January 2003, the Pom Mahakan Community was served with an eviction notice by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), that wanted to turn this small strip of land into a park for tourists and the community was offered relocation to a low cost housing project 45 kilometers away from their homes. Before 2003, the numbers of houses were increased to as many as 102 units, there

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<sup>1</sup> Surapol Virulak, Evolution of the Thai Classical Dancer in Rattanakosin B.E. 2325 – 2477

were 58 owners refused to accept any compensation from the city authorities and to be relocated to new location.

- 2003, The Master Plan for Land Development: Ratchadamnoen Road and Surrounding Area' of the National Economic and Social Development Board – NESDB proposed to attract more tourism income for the inner city of Bangkok by 'beautification' of the palace, temples, streets, and historical areas.
- April 2004, Bangkok celebrated the 222<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the capital. Mahakan Fort wall was decorated with illumination and used as a big screen for open-air slides presentation of the old photographs. There were the floating market at the old canals and defending moats.
- December 2004, The Supreme Administrative Court judged BMA has the right to implement the eviction.
- April 2005, Jean du Plessis wrote in Environment & Urbanization Vol 17 No 1 about the comparisons of 3 cases of forced evictions from Johannesburg, Bangkok and Accra in "The growing problem of forced evictions and the crucial importance of community-based, locally appropriate alternatives.", the paper argued that it is not clear that the evictions actually serve the 'public good' as was invoked to justify large-scale evictions.
- March 2005, Graeme Bristol, a lecturer and Architecture Students from School of Architecture & Design, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi working on a project "Pom Mahakan : Community Design and Human Rights." The report paper also discussed the role the university and architecture students can play through a rights-based architecture curriculum.
- December 2005, Governor Apirak Kosayothin claimed that the BMA respects the housing right of the residences and said in the letter to COHRE that:

"Realizing that Mahakan Fort Community preservation should serve as an example for other ancient communities, the residents are not deemed to eviction. They will be encouraged to work closely with the organization concerned in order to promote the area as a tourist attraction under the three-party agreement between Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, Silpakorn University and the community representative that was signed in early December 2005."
- December 2005 - October 2006, Governor Apirak Kosayothin consulted Silpakorn University and sign a declaration to develop and create treasured old wooden houses in Mahakan Fort community and discussed the new role of Mahakan Fort Park in "Research Project of a Model Scheme for the Preservation and Development of Ancient, Wooden Homes of the Mahakan Fortress Community."
- 2005, The community named their community to show its significance as a cultural heritage site that the city and the Fine Arts Department should protect as: 'Chumchon Banmai Boran Tonkamnerd Likay Siam' : or the community of old wooden houses, the origin of the Siamese Likay art form (Nation, 2005).
- November 2005, The soft opening of the Siamese Likay Live Museum was organized by the Culture Ministry and private sectors alliances.
- BMA Public Works Department director Banyat Ouyiamwong reported that 11 of the homeowners had collected the full amount and that the right to their blocks had been transferred to the BMA. Another six had received 75 per cent of the payments (Nation, 2005).
- April 2007, BMA decided not to follow the Silpakorn University's model by continuing the public park proposal.
- 'Re-engaging Urban Canal' : the Asian Coalition for Architecture and Urbanism - ACAU International Workshop assigned Pom Mahakan Fort community as one of the 4 sites of students design workshops by University of Seoul, National University of Singapore -NUS, and Assumption University – ABAC. This drew again an international arena for design professionals to the area.
- June 2009, MR Sukhumbhand Boribhat and his new BMA administration team with endorsement from the Council of State, announced that they have no power to revoke the land appropriation decree for Pom Mahakarn Fort area, and is therefore obliged to give dwellers the boot, as prior plan. BMA and the representative from involved organizations ; National Economic and Social Advisory Council-NESAC, Office of the Attorney General, Office of The National Counter Corruption Commission-NCCC, Office of the Ombudsman, Community Organizations Development

Institute (Public Organization)-CODI, and Office of the Council of State of Thailand; concluded that they have to follow the eviction notice Royal Decree and will negotiate to move the community to NHA social housing. The meeting members defined the conservation area according to Fine Art Department only the fort and wall, moat, and outskirts land of the old city. The wooden houses and communities and the intangible heritage are not covered as the national heritage by law.

At the time this paper abstract was accepted at IFLA-APR congress in Incheon, Korea (July 2009), I also participated in another activity at Pom Mahakan Fort community by attending an event by a group of artists both amateurs and professionals to create painting arts that can reflect the spirit of place. All paintings will be exhibited at Art Gallery during 12-31 August, 2009 in order to raised fund and respect the community efforts to fight against the forced evictions for more than decade.

## **2. Choices of urban renewal**

While the case of Cheonggye River Restoration Project in Seoul gave us a smart choice of innovation in urban redevelopment for a more prosperous future to make a more beautiful and sustainable city by removing the 5.8 km eye-sore elevated expressway down. Among urban planners and landscape architects professionals, there have been diverse concepts of urban renewal schemes. In opposite, '*city beautification*' may cause a force eviction. It results the cleaner and tidier city but the consequences of forced eviction for communities, is often damaged community heritage. It reminds me the demolition of Hutong in Beijing at the beginning of reform-era efforts of urban renewal and the winning of Summer Olympic 2008 bidding. With the reason that "demolition is really a celebration of modernity and modernization." and the municipality's motto "to build a new Beijing to welcome Olympic games", the 5 millions square meters of 300,000 households were cleaned (Chau, 2008, cited Tatlow 2004).

Thus, "conservation and development" plan should be integrated. This might not be easy to implemented, and requires intensive evaluation of the existing land-use and site potentials. The lesson learned from the decision-making process of public agencies in land management policy should include the public as much as possible and never shut any stakeholders out of the decision-making process. It is a fact that everyone has their own expectations, depending on their roles and past experiences. Controversies could, and should, lead to policy considerations. (Aruninta, 2009), therefore the participation should be encouraged in all stages to minimize the controversies. The case study also showed a 'Conflict between green and brown issues' - parks or housing as Bristol (2007) explained. The win-win decision depends on the matter on the degree of conservation and development during the transparent decision making.

Graeme Bristol (2007) also stated that it is a the fight for tenure and housing security which concern several issues include participation, self-determination, environment, history, culture, economic inclusion along with their more justiciable civil and political rights. Bristol also stressed that Pom Mahakan Fort community is the first victims of the 'gentrification' and 'beautification plan for Rattanakosin'.

There have been at least other 3 more scholars who 'pro' the conservation scheme by keeping the community there. Michael Herzfeld pointed out the various patterns of 'spatial cleansing' and historic conservation case of Pom Mahakan Fort community that it is noteworthy that the middle class has not yet succumbed to the global fashion for 'antique domestic spaces', it is the poor who seem more interested in calibrating their lives to official master narratives in the hope of being rewarded with continued rights to inhabit their existing lived environment (Herzfeld, 2006).

Jean du Plessis, COHRE Coordinator, at the UNESCO Round Table of experts on Social Sustainability in Historic Districts, World Urban Forum - September 2004 gave the example of a human right respectful scheme called 'Historic District for All : a social and human approach for sustainable revitalization'- The plan included the renovation of the older buildings and the integration of the houses into a historical park. Plessis raised this case study as a manual for city

professionals, by helping from an alliance of academics, NGOs and human rights activists to put forward a highly innovative land-sharing plan as an alternative to eviction and relocation. Plessis also joined Langford and stressed on the key legal challenge of Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions - COHRE that lies ahead is to ensure that international guarantees are reflected in national legislation and practice and whenever the forced evictions occur mean "It is people being demolished, not buildings" (Resident of Kibera settlement, Kenya, 2004).

The most important movement of Pom Mahakan Fort Community is the supporting of non-governmental organizations NGOs opposing forced evictions at international, national and local level<sup>2</sup>, especially COHRE is an international NGO which focuses on the right to adequate housing and protection against forced eviction has played an important role on this case. The experience of this community exemplifies how development can be achieved in a process incorporating both human rights and community design/development concerns (UN HABITAT, 2007). This case is also an example of Human Right education into practice and is what an individual and professional as a member of a society can help preventing social conflict violence in the process of development (National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, 2003).

The land-sharing scheme was introduced by Pom Mahakan Fort Community's proposal, which is another innovative and effective solution to the eviction problem in Bangkok, but it is not easy to implement. It requires an appropriate regulatory framework, a high degree of community organization, intervention of intermediaries (such as NGOs), involvement of local authorities, financial resources, administrative efficiency, effective negotiation procedures, and transparency (UN-HABITAT, 2006).

I agree with Chattri Prakitnontrakan (2006), from Silpakorn University Research team categorized the 4 distinct concepts to deal with Pom Mahakan Fort area as followings:

- Preserving and modifying Rattanakosin Island, turning it into what it was during the reign of Rama V. 2 At the same time, stress is also placed on adding as much greenery (public parks) as possible.
- Emphasizing the rights of the community places importance on the way of life of the people who reside in that area.
- Following a historian/preservationist background calls attention to the value of history and focusing on the significance of all the different aspects of arts and culture in a non-discriminatory way, not merely promoting the arts of nobility.
- A concept with an urban designer/planner background usually emphasizes the modifications made towards the actual physical structure of an area in order to boost its potential in functionality and public assistance.

In addition to having a planning background concept, I also would like to call for the essence of the intangible cultural landscape. Conservation a heritage site may not only keep the structure but also is the art of understanding the way of life and intangible values of people and their culture.

### ***3. Rehabilitative landscape : Why not 'a park'?***

Among the Landscape Architecture professionals, 'parks and green spaces' are recognized as the ultimate solution, but "are there any other movement(s) we should consider?". The case of Pom mahakan Fort community can give a good representation of that movement. It involves an intangible landscape of people and cultural landscape.

A cultural landscape is a geographic area that includes cultural and natural resources associated with an historic event, activity, person, or group of people (The Cultural Landscape Foundation, 1999-2009)<sup>3</sup>. According to UNESCO (1995-2007)<sup>4</sup>, Cultural heritage is not limited to material

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<sup>2</sup> The international NGOs like Asian Coalition for Housing Rights -ACHR, the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions – COHRE and the Habitat International Coalition – HIC

<sup>3</sup> The Cultural Landscape Foundation <http://www.tclf.org/whatis.htm>

manifestations, that have been preserved over time. This also includes living expressions and the traditions that countless groups and communities worldwide have inherited from their ancestors and transmit to their descendants. This living heritage, known as intangible, provides each bearer of such expressions a sense of identity and continuity.

Intangible cultural landscape is also the issue discussed as the significant reason to keep the community instead of building a park on this small disputed piece of land. Bristol (2009) also argued with the point that the city needs the living history and the vibrant community of Pom Mahakan Fort. In addition, as described earlier that in 2005, the community was named 'the community of old teak houses, the origin of the Siamese Likay art form' to show its significance as a cultural heritage site that the city and the Fine Arts Department should protect. They launched a Likay museum project to save both the dying likay tradition of performing arts as well as the land they have lived on for generations. The project proposal was approved by the Culture Ministry which has set aside a budget for the residents to kick start the project.

Annually, there have been 2 important cultural events at Pom Mahakan Fort Community. On the full moon day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month in the lunar calendar (November in western calendar), there is the Golden Mount carnival fair for a week, together with Loy Krathong festival along the canal. In Bangkok, Golden Mount carnival is the only traditional Thai temple fair in Tourism authority (TAT) calendar. And on the first weekend, after Songkran Day (Traditional Thai New Year Day called 'the Water-Splashing Festival', in April 13<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup>) the community will make merit by honoring the spirits of the ancestors residing in the Fortress area with various rites and ceremonies, the event called 'Grand pa Pom Mahakan Ceremony' (Whai Por Poo Pom Mahakan). These two main cultural events show the intangible cultural landscape essence of Pom Mahakan Fort community, which has inherited for many generations.

Prakitnonthakan (2006) and Herzfeld (2009) warned in several occasions that if the area is developed as a conventional park, aside from the dehumanizing effect of such a move we will face a space just asking to be taken over by criminals. Therefore, behind the thick old wall with the canal in back, there are chances that the walled-off area will end up becoming a crime spot.

According to the long fighting history of 'Pom Mahakan Fort community', there should NOT be doubted that the charming old communities must be conserved, rehabilitated, and revitalized instead of being replaced with a green lawn.

#### ***4. Conclusion – The further negotiation game : an intersection of decision making***

The unique landscape of the old communities is the combination of life and culture, which pertains the contexts of tangible and intangible heritage. We need no more alien generic structure and the sign of modern city if parts of our history are going to be demolished. The lessons learned from Pom Mahakan Fort community, Bangkok, Thailand and other spots in other countries have given us a new role of landscape architects to rehabilitate the community in both physical and sensible elements. The controversies are eventually occurred, which are the colorful nature of the democracy.

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<sup>4</sup> UNESCO <http://www.unesco.org/culture/intangible-heritage/masterpiece.php>

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