

CREATIVITY AND THE SETTINGS OF MONUMENTS AND SITES IN THAILAND : CONFLICTS & RESOLUTION

KLINKAJORN Karin / Thailand

Lecturer, Department of Urban and Regional Planning at King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang

Introduction

On the 5th September 2004, one day before Apirak Kosayodhin took office as the sixth elected governor of Bangkok, the Nation newspaper published an open letter to him on the need to capitalize on cultural assets of the old inner city of Bangkok—Krung Rattanakosin. The writer challenged the new governor to revive Krung Rattanakosin to reflect “its grand spiritual heritage, which is unmatched anywhere else in this world” so that he would be recorded as the city’s greatest governor in history (*The Nation*, 5 September 2004).

The writer states that Apirak would have to build a number of world-class museums and renovate the city’s landmark buildings, monuments, statues and temples so that the city will become the “centre for the highest religious, royal, state and public ceremonies” and re-emerge as the “cultural center of Southeast Asia and beyond.” There should be cultural and research centers for all aspects of Thai culture as well as Buddhism. More facilities should be built for the performing arts. The ministries or agencies should make a sacrifice by moving out of Krung Rattankosin so that their buildings could be turned into museums and other cultural centers. All the temples, monuments and statues should be renovated so that they are clean and pleasant to visit. An aquarium should be built to enhance a network of attractions. This might help attract tourists to spend time longer in Krung Rattanakosin (instead of an only one day tour). Then Thai parents could bring their children to the museums and other cultural or musical events in Old Bangkok so that they would grow up knowing about their roots and history, and find inspiration from their heritage. This is, the writer claimed, the best way to improve the quality of life in Bangkok.

These ideas were not originated from the writer’s own daydreaming fantasy. Actually, many of them were derived from “The Master Plan for Land Development: Ratchadamnoen Road and Surrounding Area” of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB). On the front page of the newspaper, accompanied with the “Call for **Renaissance**” headline, there was a colorful image illustrating some creative ideas based on the

master plan such as developing Ratchadamnoen Klang Avenue into a “Thai-style Champs Ellysees” and transforming Khlong Lod into “a Thai-style Li Jiang,” a unique Chinese town nurtured by water from the mountains. On the 25th December 2004, the Cabinet has approved this 10 billion baht program and assigned the NESDB to carry out the plan as a part of the economic growth stimulation plan. The Crown Property Bureau, which owns most of the land and buildings on both sides of Ratchadamnoen Klang Avenue, has also agreed with the plan. Thus these buildings will be preserved and developed into cultural centers, museums, art galleries, theaters, shopping malls, international trade exhibition centers, IT business centers, luxury hotels, restaurants, duty free shops, luxury offices, service apartments, and tourist centers. Underground metro-lines will be provided. It was estimated that this program could attract one million tourists, who come visit the Grand Palace annually, to the area.

The master plan represents not only the latest attempt of Thai authorities to commodify monuments, sites and their settings in Rattanakosin precinct into prime tourist attraction, but also the crisis of heritage conservation in Thailand. The most destructive part of the plan, however, is not the attempt to develop buildings along both sides of Ratchadamnoen Avenue; but it is the attempt to remove and/or redevelop the so-called “surrounding area” and its residents into something that they have never been. The plan paid least attention, appreciation and respect to the value and authenticity of the settings of monuments and sites.

The master plan has provoked strong opposition from the universities, concerned scholars, local residents and the press; and led to further rounds of public trial and repression. Many have argued that the plan would rapidly “turn an old living city into a dead one” and “turn the sacred capitol into a Disney style historical theme park.” Moreover, Bangkok is the role model of development of Thailand. What had been done in Bangkok would be copied to do so in many parts of the country. This will bring greater threats to cultural heritage and its settings nationwide.

How have heritage conservation practices transformed to be destructively innocent like this? How have we gone this

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far? How are we going to be? Taking a look back at the evolution of cultural heritage conservation in Thailand might help understand the situation as a whole, of where things are moving and how they will evolve. Then a resolution might be possible to emerge.

The Early Stage of Heritage Conservation in Siam

After the reign of King Taksin of Krung Thonburi (1767-1782), King Rama I (reigned: 1782-1809) founded Krung Rattanakosin as a rebirth of Krung Sri Ayutthaya—which had prospered for over four centuries—on the east bank of Chao Phraya river. From its establishment as the capital of Siam, Krung Rattanakosin had been the pre-eminent focus of Chakri dynasty's legitimizing symbols and rituals. In the mid-nineteenth century, however, the threats of imperial powers of Europe to Siamese sovereignty had urged the monarchs to seek ways to identify their states and societies as distinct territorial and historical entities more explicitly (Askew 1996: 187). The early efforts to construct "Siamese cultural identity" seems to be of King Rama IV (reigned: 1851-1868), who rediscovered the ancient city-state of Sukhothai, along with the stone throne and the famous pillar of Ramkhamhaeng—the key artifact which inscribes a story of his dynasty and the paternalism of Sukhothai. His first steps were to initiate a task of listing, collecting and describing prime cultural objects and monuments, and to create a small museum of Siamese "ancient artifacts" for visiting European dignitaries "in order to authenticate the culture, unity, continuity, and legitimacy of the Siamese state and its rulers" (Askew 1996: 188). Through his attempts to reinforce religious identity and the legitimacy of Chakri dynasty, he also sponsored the conservation of some early religious monuments, such as the reconstruction of Phra Phathom Chedi in Nakhon Pathom in 1853.

During the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), the appearance of Krung Rattanakosin began to change as the king embraced the new icons of modern European architecture, urbanism and monarchical rituals, which added modernity to the royal dispensation (Askew 2002a: 286). In 1897, after his return from Europe for an observation tour, Rama V decided to build a grand scale royal residence, known as Dusit palace, in Western fashion. In order to prevent incongruous clashes with the Grand Palace and its setting, the new palace was constructed outside the city (1.5 kilometers to the north at Thung Som Poi). Then he proceeded to connect the two distinctive palaces by constructing a wide thoroughfare, Ratchadamnoen Avenue

(Kingswalk Avenue), which was constructed in three phases respectively: Ratchadamnoen Nok (the outer part), Ratchadamnoen Klang (the middle part) and Ratchadamnoen Nai (the inner part). The king had assimilated two contrasting forms of urbanism, indigenous and western, into the symbolic capital represented by Krung Rattankosin (Shiranan 1989: 384).

New roads expanded the urban precinct far beyond its fortified walls and moats. The centers of urban life had transformed into European style administrative headquarters and commercial centers, housed in European style buildings. The Grand Palace and the Emerald Buddha Temple became all that remained of the faded image of Ayutthaya. The construction of railroads and highways led to the development of new villages and urban centers, and facilitated contact with urban centers. Only traditional village settlement and towns in remote localities still retained their traditional form and structure. Urban centers and rural settlements were brought closer under the control of the central government (Valibhotama 1989: 363).

The king's efforts to reshape Krung Rattanakosin as the modern capital of a royal absolutist state "was paralleled by initiatives towards defining Siam as a territorial nation state with a discernible and continuous history" (Askew 2002a: p.286). In 1874 Rama V opened the first public museum mainly to exhibit the royal collection of King Rama IV, and other objects of general interest, at the Concordia Pavilion of the Grand Palace.¹ In 1907 provincial officials of Siam were to search for old inscriptions and artifacts by the king's order.

King Rama VI (reigned: 1910-1925) continued to modernize Siam through cultural identification with past achievements of the Siamese. In 1912 Rama VI founded the Fine Arts Department, a key institution for conservation and interpretation of ancient artifacts, monuments and sites in later time. In 1916 the king appointed Prince Damrong Rajanuphab to head the National Library. Prince Damrong wrote extensively on the history of the ancient towns and cities, especially Sukhothai. In 1924 the Archeological Service was established and placed under the control of the National library. Its early efforts were to excavate and study the ancient sites of Lopburi and Ayutthaya. The Archeological Service also produced a definitive edition of

¹ In 1907, The museum was relocated to its present site, the "Palace to the Front". Then it was developed into the National Museum Bangkok under the direction of the Department of Fine Arts in 1934.

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Sukhothai inscriptions under George Coedes, an eminent French epigraphist. To Rama VI, “Phra Ruang, the founder of Sukhothai in the thirteenth century, was the founder of the Siamese nation. From this time on, national heroes, usually connected with defense and victories of the *muang* [towns/cities] of the Siamese, were an essential element in the new national narrative (Askew 1996: 189). The king also attempted to develop national consciousness along the European line by introducing the official definition of Siam identity as “nation, religion, king” (represented by red, white, and blue colors, respectively, in Thailand’s flag created by him).

During his reign, Rama VI had observed the declining trend of traditional arts and culture in Siam. In 1914, he wrote an article in an English language newspaper—the Siam Observer—expressing his deep concern about the future of “Siamese Art” as follows:

When “Young Siam” became obsessed with the idea of “civilization-at-any-price”, it was but natural for them to think that in order to become effectually civilized we would have to turn our backs upon everything that belong to the old order of things. It appeared that the most effective way to become civilized was to start with a clean slate. (Asavabahu)

Unfortunate, in the years to come, this would prove to be prophetically true not only to the future of traditional arts and culture, but also to the future of the nation. Siamese modern politics did begin with a clean slate in 1932.

Starting with a Clean Slate

Since the reign of Rama V, the kings’ policy of modernization and nation-building along western line had led to the absolute monarchy. However, on the 24th June 1932, a small group of European-educated civilians and discontented military officers staged a coup d’état which toppled the absolute monarchy and introduced the democratic form of government with the king as a constitutional monarch. After Prime Minister Colonel Phraya Phaholpolpayahasena resigned, Colonel Plaek Phibunsongkhram was appointed prime minister in 1938. During the first and the second periods of Phibun as nationalist prime minister and military dictator (1938-44, 1948-57), the status of the Siam monarchy and its sacred representation were suppressed. Mark Askew noted, “Royal spectacles such as the ploughing ceremony and royal barge procession (customary during *Kathin* celebrations) disappeared from the public calendar of the state (Askew

2002a: 287). On the other hand, Phibun chose to enhance the symbolic efficacy of the “nation” by emphasizing on the achievements of commoners, military men and non-Chakri kings, in building the nation through war and maintaining its independence.

Phibun and Luang Wichitwathakan, the most prolific and ardent popularizer of Phibun’s regime, had dominated cultural policy-making of the state and the representation of the Thai history more than ten years. In 1939 Phibun renamed the country from Siam to Thailand as an effort to popularize Thai identity through the idea of uniting all Tai ethnicity and to exclude the economically dominant Chinese minority in the country.

Modernization was an important theme in Phibun’s “New Thai” nationalism. The government turned their back to the traditional forms of Siamese culture and embraced western culture. Phibun and Luang Wichit invented new (western based) rituals for the new Thai nationalism which had deteriorated intangible heritage of the Thais tremendously. Moreover, to commemorate the fall of the absolute monarchy, the Democracy Monument was constructed right in the middle of Ratchadamnoen Klang Avenue (Kingswalk Avenue) in 1940. Despite the name of the monument, full democracy still was not introduced.

The connection between nation-building and built heritage was strongly emphasized. In 1935 the first legislation dealing with the protection of ancient monuments/sites and ancient artifacts was enacted. Succeeding legislations gave the Fine Arts Department (FAD) authority to designate monuments for conservation. The excavation and renovation efforts were initiated at Sukhothai and Ayutthaya under FAD. Phibun stressed on the importance of Sukhothai as “treasure of national value,” a reminder of the glorious past of the Thais (Askew 1996: 190). During Phibun hegemony, however, little was achieved in terms of archeology and conservation. Mark Askew noted, “the symbolic interlacing of national unity, *muang* [town/city] history, and heroism achieved through Luang Wichit’s literary and dramatic output in the period provided a nationalistic foundation for the valuing of built heritage” (Askew 1996: 190).

The Age of National Development

In 1957 the army staged another coup, ending Phibun’s career for good. Thanom Kittikhachon became Prime Minister until 1958. Then he yielded his position to Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, the real head and dictator of the regime. In 1961, with a new generation of economically

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liberal technocrats, Sarit government launched the first World Bank-sponsored National Economic and Social Development Plan, which caused accelerating changes to the entire nation. In order to promote industrial development, the government implemented large-scale construction of highways, roads, and dams in various regions of the country; encouraged private and foreign investment; launched major rural development programs; and rapidly expanded educational facilities. However, the infrastructure did not lead immediately to the growth of industry, instead, it made rural localities more economically and culturally dependent on urban centers and widened the generation gap among the old and the young as young people migrated in search of jobs in urban and industrial areas than ever before (Srisakra 1989: 363-364). In parallel, much traditional cultural heritage and its vulnerable setting were disappearing due to the prevailing modern lifestyles and social change.

In the drive towards economic modernization, roadways had replaced rivers and canals as major transportation means. Modern Thais made no attempt to appreciate and make use of “the abundance of rivers and canals prevailing in and around the city as a major environmental amenity or for practical purposes” (Shiranan 1989: 379). In Bangkok, numbers of canals were filled up to serve as roads. A long sustained network of rivers and canals was transferred into drainage and sewerage channels, clogged by water gates.

With his obsession in modern development and misunderstanding in Buddhist principles, Sarit asked Buddhist monks nationwide not to teach Thai citizens the principle of “contentment,” a key principle which sustained the spiritual and aesthetic values of Thai people and their traditional cultural landscape. He believed that the principle might oppose to his “national development” policy (Payutto 1996: 24). This not only made Thai people started the age of national development badly, but also led to the deterioration of cultural heritage and its settings all over the country. For example, there was a Buddhist temple in Thonburi, enclosed by magnificent trees. Many of the trees were the same kind of trees appeared in the history of the Buddha. The abbot wanted his temple to be “developed.” He envisioned that trees were the symbol of wilderness. And the meaning of “wilderness” was closely linked with the terms “savage” and “uncivilized,” which would lead further to “underdevelopment” status. Therefore, he decided to cut the trees down until there was no tree left in the temple. He also thought that ancient scriptures long preserved in the temple were of no use and made the temple look not-well-organized. As a result, he burnt all the scriptures into ashes (Payutto 1996: 27). This true story was told by Venerable P. A. Payutto, a renowned Buddhist monk. He also noted that Thai

people generally feels that trees and forests are the symbols of “being barbaric,” “being uncivilized” or “being undeveloped.” Therefore they cut down trees and forests nationwide. This is true even in Buddhist temples. Throughout the country, trees in temples have been cut down and replaced by new buildings, which are not very sympathetic to their settings. This is a good reflection for what have been done since the beginning of the “development” era.

Traditional spiritual and aesthetic values were uprooted from Thai society. Thai people become obsessed with materialism (such as modern buildings and roadways). “Development” becomes the word that no one could deny. To the Thais, “development” means “creative action.” Most Thais feel that they must develop and civilize their nation along the line of industrialized countries. This causes them to look over (and sometime even feel ashamed of) their own cultural roots and traditional ways of life. They “generally admire the technological progress of developed countries and tend to distrust whatever is Thai-made, placing those countries on a superior level in the Thai mind” (Sagarik 1989: 5). The sayings like “we must develop,” “not being developed means lagging behind” and “development at any cost” have become the clichés of development paradigm, which have deep rooted in the mind of the Thais since then.

In contrary, being less influenced by European political ideologies, Sarit sought to restore the prestige of the monarchy and to forge national unity through order, hierarchy and religion. He revived the motto “Nation, Religion, King” of Rama VI as a fighting political slogan for his regime. The monarchy, which had been repressed by the nationalist-ruled stated for two decades, was revitalized. Royal spectacles such as the traditional royal barge procession and the ploughing ceremony were revived, “focusing attention once again on Rattanakosin Island and the old palace/temple complex as a ceremonial site” (Askew 2002: 287). King Rama IX attended public ceremonies. Krung Rattanakosin “was to become one element in a program to assert the centrality of the monarchy as a defining characteristic of Thai identity, a program introduced by Sarit in support of the [re]introduction of royal ceremony” (Askew 2002b: 233).

Sarit held power until his death in 1963. Then Thanom again took the lead. He maintained goals of development, political stability, and anticommunism while allowing some democratization. Thanom’s regime—like Sarit’s—was notable for massive corruption, dictatorship, violence, and close ties to the United States because of their shared drive against communism.

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World Cultural Heritage Conservation in Thailand

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, world conservation trends were moving towards the idea of significant “places” as opposed to individual monuments. In 1972 UNESCO adopted the World Heritage Convention to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity. Scholars in the Fine Arts Department began to respond to the trends and move towards concepts of historical park. Much attention was given to the interpretation and planning of ancient sites throughout the country. UNESCO had lent support to the excavation and the interpretation of the ancient site of Sukhothai from the late 1970s.

However, while the Venice Charter 1964 stressed the significance of “setting,” the Fine Arts Department (FAD), with its major focus on the so-called *Silapagam* (artistic work/work of art), still obsessed with individual monuments. The idea of significant “places” has never been seriously applied. Moreover, the “Regulation on Ancient Monument/Site Conservation 1994” of FAD, which was adapted from the Venice Charter, also took a different standpoint on the “setting” issue. For example, in article 6, the Venice Charter states that “The conservation of a monument implies preserving a setting which is not out of scale. Wherever the traditional setting exists, it must be kept. No new construction, demolition or modification which would alter the relations of mass and color must be allowed.” On the other hand, in article 5, the regulation of FAD states that “The Conservation of an ancient monument/site must concern its surrounded landscape and environment. Anything that might destroy the value of the ancient monument/site is to be adjusted properly.” The regulation overlooked the value of the monument/site and their setting, either natural or cultural, as a whole. Thus the settings of monuments and sites nationwide have been manipulated or even destroyed as conservation authorities please.

In 1991 the “Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns” and the “Historic City of Ayutthaya and Associated Historic Towns” were granted listing as World Cultural Heritage Sites by UNESCO. A year later, the Natural and Cultural Environment Conservation Division (NCEC) was founded under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment in order to deal with the conservation of natural and cultural environment, including the World Heritage Sites. Unfortunately, NCEC used the

term *Singwaddom Silapagam* (which literally means “work-of-art environment” or “artistic environment”) as its official translation for the term “cultural environment;” and defined *Singwaddom Silapagam* as comprises the *Silapagam* itself and its “surrounded environment.” This means that if there was no *Silapagam*, there would be no “cultural environment” as well. To NCEC, the term “cultural heritage” generally refers to individual monuments and group of buildings. Even worse, NCEC does not recognize “cultural landscapes” and “cultural environments” (such as a sacred mountain, a community forest, an ancient orchard) as its “cultural heritage” because they are not of *Silapakam* value. This led to confusions, conflicts and failures in the conservation of cultural heritage and its setting throughout the country.

To conservation authorities, their blamed victims for the deterioration of monuments and sites are generally plant roots, animal activities, high temperature, high relative humidity, extreme weathers, plentiful microorganisms and local communities. However, many of the most destructive actions in World Cultural Heritage Sites in Thailand seem to be of the government authorities themselves. Some decades ago, “the Department of Highways directed a highway right through the ancient ruins of Sukhothai, causing inestimable damage to the monuments and sites of the first national capital” (Shiranan 1989: 376). Moreover, numbers of new structures and landscape architecture elements have been designed and constructed unsympathetic to the monuments and their settings, representing a failure in adapting new elements to the World Heritage Sites. For example, “Chao Sam Phaya National Museum in Ayutthaya is large and distinctive in color, and is built high on a mound from which it casts its image into a reflecting pool” (Shiranan 1989: 376).

The World Cultural Heritage Sites and many other historical parks throughout the country are suffering from anthropogenic factors with spectacle tourism promotion—the light and sound presentations. A study conducted during the Loi Krathong and Candle Festival at Sukhothai Historical Park reported that sulfur dioxide and hydrogen sulfide content in the air increased significantly during the light and sound presentation, where a number of fireworks, lanterns and candles are used. Moreover, carbon residues from oil in lanterns and candles were deposited onto the monuments. With high temperature and high humidity, the deterioration of material of cultural properties was accelerated. The exhaust gases from tour buses may accelerate deterioration as well (Chotimongkol 2003).

Krung Rattanakosin Conservation and

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Development Plan

The first coordinated efforts to develop a conservation policy for Krung Rattanakosin precinct were initiated among professional architects and other professionals in the 1970s. They suggested that Krung Rattanakosin should be protected from unsympathetic building developments (Askew 2002b: 234). In 1978 the Cabinet recognized their suggestion and appointed a formal committee, called Rattanakosin Project Committee, to develop area conservation and development plan. The early achievements of the committee were the relocation of Sanam Luang Weekend Market from Krung Rattankosin to Chattuchak Park in 1981; the demolition of Chalermthai Theater for a scenic vista of Rachanadda Temple in 1990; and the preparation of the “Krung Rattanakosin Conservation and Development Plan” in 1992.

In 1984 and 1987, the Interior Ministry issued a decree on land-use regulation of the “Inner Rattanakosin” and “Outer Rattanakosin” imposed land-use and height restrictions there respectively. In 1992, a third district call “Krung Thonburi” was gazetted for conservation zoning on the opposite bank of the Chao Phraya River, mainly because private developers were constructing a high-rise building (the Rattanakosin View Mansion) which interrupted the vista of the Grand Palace and the “Inner Rattanakosin.” Years later, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration constructed the Rama XIII Bridge a little bit further from “Krung Thonburi” conservation area. The high-rise structure of the bridge also interrupted the vista of the “Inner Rattanakosin” no less than what the Rattanakosin View Mansion did.

In 1993 the Committee decided to ban hawkers from vending in Tha Chang, Tha Tian, and Tha Prachan areas. The clearance of over 1,000 hawkers took place at the end of February 1995. Although the move provoked a storm of vocal protest from academics of neighboring universities and local people, the plan went ahead. Criticisms of the plan were brought out into the public, “the key question being whether efforts to preserve Rattanakosin and inner Bangkok were in fact preserving sites and vistas at the expense of the true nature of Thai urban life—its variety and the juxtaposition of different lifestyles” (Askew 2002b: 237).

In 1995 the “Krung Rattanakosin Conservation and Development Plan” was released. In summary, the plan was heavily influenced by an evocation of traditional Thai royal urbanism and the principle of creating visual vistas and new recreational open spaces at the expense of contextual landscapes and activities deemed unsympathetic to the aesthetic value (framed by architects, art historians and city

planners) of the committee. The details of the plan “involved clearing shophouses and other business from the Chao Phraya waterfront, establishing parks and paths along the precinct’s canals to allow for local and foreign tourists to circulate through the zone, and restoring those structures deemed to be architecturally of note” (Askew 2002a: 292). Numbers of fantastic “landscape improvement/readjustment” projects introduced in the plan would also destroy the traditional cultural settings of monuments and sites in the city once and forever. Critics argue that the overall concept of the plan appeared to remove the “liveliness and soul” from Krung Rattanakosin and turn this old living city into a dead historical park.

Fortunately, the economic crisis of Thailand in 1997 had delayed the implementation of such plan.

Destructive Creativity Integrated

Promptly after the financial crisis of 1997, the World Bank published a report which systematically examined the comparative advantage and future prospects of Thailand. It concluded the only hope for the country lays in services, especially in tourism. In the 2001 election, Thaksin Shinawatra, a multi-millionaire telecoms tycoon and head of the *Thai Rak Thai* (Thai Loves Thai) party, won a landslide victory. It was the first time a single party gained a majority of seats; “the first time the victor celebrated—not in the usual way of paying respects at a *wat* [a Buddhist temple]—but by driving his wife in the Porsche to have coffee at Starbucks” (Phongpaichit and Baker 2001: 1). With the “New thinking, New Implementation” campaign of the new government, a lot of new and surprising things had happened. The government’s striving after economic recovery is giving rise to the notion that the only way to be truly creative was to be different—making things new, original, and unexpected. Novelty has become the new aesthetic and the yardstick of creativity, even in historic conservation practices. New development strategies and programs are introduced and implemented continually in order to promote economic growth. In February 2001, the government laid plans to boost tourism quickly. There is nothing inherently wrong in celebrating the new or the unexpected. The problem arises when things get out of balance. Tourism not only generates employment and has strong internal linkages, but it wrecks great cultural and environmental damage as well.

Settlements in Krung Rattanakosin are now under heavy development pressure from both “The Master Plan for Land Development: Ratchadamnoen Road and Surrounding Area”

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of NESDB and “Krung Rattanakosin Conservation and Development Plan” of the Rattankosin committee. Both plans have aimed to replace traditional buildings, landscapes, and communities, by new construction projects and tourism developments which are not very sympathetic to its cultural and social settings. For example, the landscape readjustment projects of the master plan of NESDB attempt to replace the settings of monuments and sites in Krung Rattanakosin by multi-national urban design elements copied from many parts of the world. Such attempts are moving forward to create an artificial whole, racked with tensions and contradictions. The situation comes close to what Neil Smith writes: “Public policy and the private market are conspiring against minorities, working people, the poor, and homeless people as never before” (Smith 1996: back cover). What is very frightening is that they are becoming more creative in promoting such destruction than ever.

“Destructive Creativity” extols speed, force, and violence. In cultural heritage conservation practices, it can be a blind, amoral, and destructive force, which pushes us forward to an artificial whole, racked with tensions and contradictions. Like *Songkran* festival, a festival of blessing which “has been remade as a real-world version of a splashfest video-game for the tourist market” (Phongpaichit and Baker 2001: 4). What the World Bank essentially said was “Thailand should turn itself into a theme park” (Phongpaichit and Baker 2001: 4). And Thai authorities have agreed to do so.

Tempering Destructive Creativity: Creativity as Healing

“Destructive creativity” in cultural heritage conservation must be tempered with another form of creativity—a clear perception of the situation as a whole, of where things are moving and how they will evolve: “the creativity of healing and making things whole.” Thai cultural heritage, its settings, and local communities in some conservation areas have been wounded from destructive conservation and development efforts for years. They need to be healed. F. David Peat writes:

One of the functions of healing is to restore and make whole. This wholeness involves our minds and bodies, our family and friends, the society in which we live, and, ultimately, our planet Earth and our connections to the entire cosmos and the transcendent.

...Just as making whole requires the removal of arbitrary divisions and the forging of new links, sometimes an act of healing means that things should be

taken apart and given their own autonomy.

(Peat 2000: 30-31)

Some overall heritage conservation policy might be necessary. However, without a deep understanding of local realities and a real public participatory process, it will impose destructive values of and be administered from the top down administration. So, instead of proposing a specific new policy, I would like to ask Thai authorities to come back to the basic principles of heritage conservation and to appreciate the value of our cultural heritage and its settings as “our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration” (UNESCO). A high level of public participation in heritage conservation is needed as well.

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Abstract

The impact of Thailand's striving after economic transformation is giving rise to the notion that the only way to be truly creative was to be different—making things new, original, and unexpected. Novelty has become the new aesthetic and the yardstick of creativity, even in historic conservation practices. New development strategies and programs are introduced and implemented continually in order to promote economic growth. In parallel, much traditional cultural heritage and its vulnerable setting are disappearing rapidly due to the prevailing modern lifestyles and social change. Settlements in World Heritage Sites and the old city of Rattanakosin are now under heavy development pressure to replace traditional buildings, landscapes, and communities, by new construction projects and tourism developments which are not very sympathetic to the surrounding area, as well.

'Destructive Creativity' extols speed, force, and violence. In cultural heritage conservation practices, it can be a blind, amoral, and destructive force, which pushes us forward to an artificial whole, racked with tensions and contradictions. This must be tempered with another form of creativity—a clear perception of the situation as a whole, of where things are moving and how they will evolve—the creativity of healing and making things whole.'

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