

Modernity and the Avenue: Transformation of the Urban Landscape of Bangkok, 1851-1902

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In 1902, Rajdamnoen Avenue was inaugurated in Bangkok with a grand ceremony. Only fifty years earlier the city was practically aquatic; its major thoroughfares were the numerous canals and the Chaophraya River. The avenue was a crucial component in King Rama V's remaking of Bangkok, an effort to create a modern nation-state out of the ancient Kingdom of Siam.

As the profound social, economic, cultural and political transformations occurred within half a century, the urban landscape of Bangkok became a highly contested terrain. This paper examines the transformation of the city of Bangkok during the latter half of the nineteenth century, with the appropriation of Western culture into that non-Western, non-colonized realm. The hypothesis is that, by being connected to the intra-Asian flow of trade and culture in the first half of the nineteenth century, Siam had produced its own kind of modernity, as seen in the landscapes of Bangkok. Bangkok's urban armatures, such as the river, canals, streets, and an avenue, provide a framework through which one looks at non-Western modernity.¹ By the latter half of the century, however, that modernity became more Western, due to the prevailing forces of colonialism, among other factors.

The study argues that the unique phenomenon was simultaneously shaped not only by the complex heritage of Siamese culture, but also by the eclectic forms of foreign cultures to which Siam was exposed to, Western and otherwise. The absence of colonial rule in Bangkok, together with the self-imposed socio-cultural reorganization, led to the urban forms that can and cannot be found in other nineteenth-century cities. A framework of analysis that reclaims the spatiality of historical actions will be constructed, as a critical alternative to the usual architectural historiography of Bangkok's architecture, which generally equates modernization with Westernization.²

EARLY BANGKOK (1782-1850)

The first settlements appeared on the site of present Bangkok as early as fifteenth century. After Ayutthaya, the former capital, was sacked and burnt to the ground by Burmese troops in 1767, the town of Bangkok became the new capital in 1782. In the beginning, the underpinning urban design rationale was reconstruction through homology between the landscapes of Bangkok and Ayutthaya.

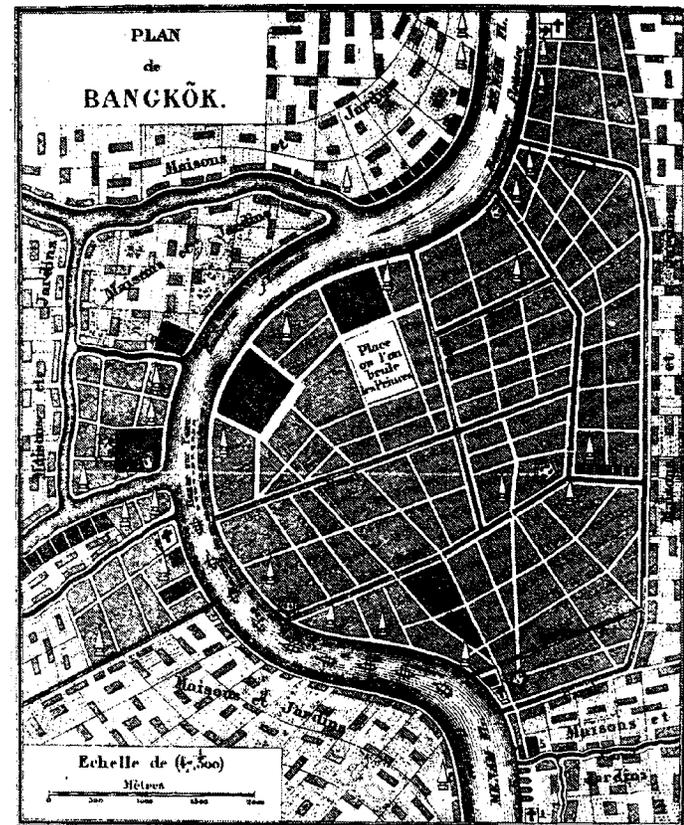


Fig.1: Map of Bangkok, 1854

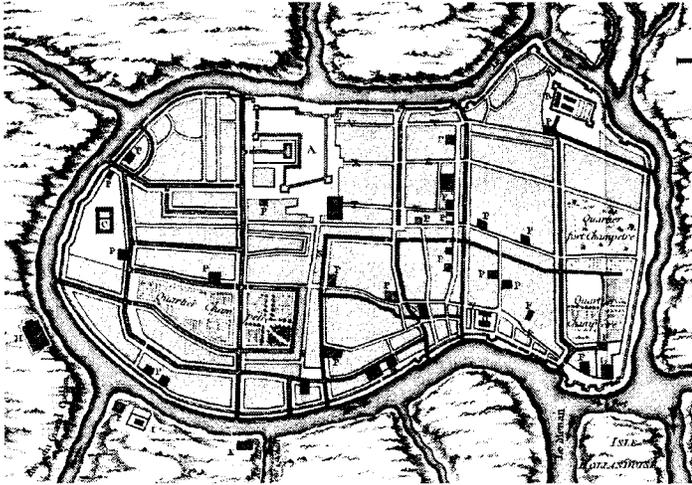


Fig. 2: Map of Ayutthaya, 17th century

Ayutthaya's land use pattern, defense system, place names, and architecture were recreated in Bangkok. A Buddhist model of the universe provided a conception of time and space which shaped the major public structures like palaces and temples. According to the text called *Trai phum*, the universe consists of Mount Meru at its center, surrounded by a series of other celestial mountains and rings of cosmic rivers.³ These were reflected in the urban landscapes of both Bangkok and Ayutthaya, in the sheer magnificence and axial geometries of the king's palaces and the major temples. In addition, through naming practice, the river, canals, moats, city walls and forts also came to represent the geography of the cosmos.

Waterways were the major sites of the public realm, not only for everyday life, but also for state ceremonies and public spectacles. The king, the city, the kingdom, and the universe were all connected together symbolically and physically. The aquatic impressions of urban landscape gave Bangkok its nickname, 'Venice of the East.'⁴ It was one of the Western myths about the city; that it existed solely on water; that its children learnt to swim before they could walk. In fact, Bangkok's land transportation, although secondary, was in existence as long as the water system. The major roads radiated from the king's palace to the city gates, linking it with major temples, markets, and other sites. The roads were dirt paths by Western standard; they were useless during Bangkok's annual flood, except for the major ones which were paved with bricks.⁵ The importance of the roads, although lesser than that of the canals, must not be overlooked. For example, after coronation ceremony in the palace, Siamese kings would circumbulate the city twice: once by water, once by land. The tradition originated in the ancient Khmer empire and passed on to Bangkok via Ayutthaya.⁶

In any case, Bangkok's urban landscape was not only a mirror of the ancient cosmology or the bygone Ayutthaya. The river, canals, and city moats all had practical purposes, providing transportation, water supply and defense for the inhabitants. Bangkok's canal system was much more extensive than any other Siamese city, linking Bangkok with other cities around the Gulf of Siam for trade and military purposes. Moreover, expansion in early Bangkok's trade with China resulted in numerous new canals, bringing with them the flows of goods, manpower, and ideas to and from the hinterland. Although trade was still limited to a regional level, the canals guaranteed Bangkok economic primacy as a contact zone⁷, a gateway between Siam and the world outside.

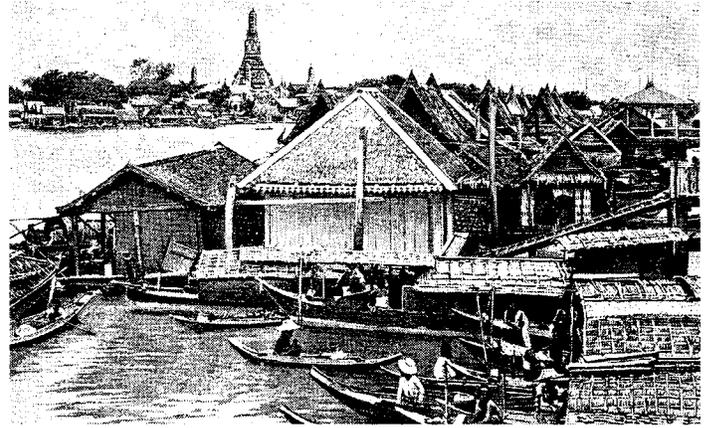


Fig. 3: River scene, Bangkok, 19th century

Junk trade with China gradually led to the beginning of export-oriented economy, albeit at a limited scale, especially during the reign of Rama III (1824-1851). A new bourgeoisie class emerged between the traditional ruling class and the peasant class. At the same time, new modes of production, new kinds of internal trade, new interest in education, knowledge, and travel, made their presence felt in the urban landscape.⁸ It was most visible in the increased density in the inner city and along the river, which was the main commercial area bustling with boats and ships of all descriptions. The city's architectural output during the period was numerous and creatively varied, not unlike the parallel creativity in contemporary literature, visual arts, and music. Palaces, temples, and residences of the elite of this period were marked with the coexistence of Chinese forms and building materials, and to a lesser extent, creolized European building decorative details.



Fig. 4: City scene, early 19th century mural painting showing the coexistence of styles

Relative stability, growing regional trade, and swiftly evolving demography of early nineteenth century Bangkok made the city an incubator of transculturations which set up the stage for the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century modernization. For a few decades, the Siamese freely entertained various cultural experimentation, in order to find their foothold in the changing world. This was an instance of non-Western modernity in its initial stage.

REMAKING BANGKOK, 1850-1902

As the contact zone between Siam and the outside world, by the mid-nineteenth century Bangkok was subjected to the growing pressure to accommodate itself to the rapidly changing world. The Anglo-Siamese Treaty was signed at the court of Bangkok in 1850.⁹ In effect, the treaty opened up the kingdom to trade, ideologies and technology from the world far wider than Southeast Asia. The society went through a large-scale upheaval, with the pre-existing system of power and patronage intersected with new forms of urban sociality brought in by the purveyors of the new capitalist economy: the new bourgeoisie class, the Chinese immigrant-merchants, the European missionary-merchant-advisors, and the Siamese elites. Siamese history, traditional urban forms, foreign ideas, and Western forms of modernity alike were examined, appropriated, translated, discarded or exchanged, according to the needs of the moment. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, Western culture prevailed. Europe became a benchmark of civilization for the Siamese. With the ever-stronger forces of colonialism, finally Siam failed to keep up with the naturalization of Western forms of culture. Transculturation gave way to direct cultural import.

One of its first signs of this change as reflected in the urban landscape was King Rama IV's 1861 project for Charoenkrung Road.



Fig. 5: City scene, Charoenkrung Road in 1894

Running from the city wall out downriver to the port area and the foreign quarters south of the city, the road was meant mainly for the use of foreigners. Thipakorawongmahakosathibodi, the court chronicler, wrote of its genesis:

*In the third month the foreign consuls all signed their names to a petition which they presented to the King. It is said that the Europeans were used to going out in the open air, riding carriages or riding horsebacks for pleasure. These activities had been good for their health and they had thus not suffered from illnesses. Since their coming to live in Bangkok, they had found that there were no roads to go riding in carriages or on horseback for pleasure and they had all been sick very often*¹⁰

As riding carriages or horsebacks were not part of Siamese lifestyle yet, the street became underutilized in the early years. As traffic was light, one side of the street began to crumble and was overgrown with weeds. Rama IV had to issue a royal decree on the maintenance of the street, together with other streets and canals in the city. With the growth in trade, however, the street soon became bustling, lined with Chinese-style shophouses, European factories, consulates, and residences. The transformation of the city followed suit, with the demolition of most of the century-old city walls, while moats and canals gave way to new roads and avenues. Throughout the following decades, waterways began to lose their importance as the city's arteries, as land-based transportation was greatly developed in the name of modernization. Automobiles, trains and streetcars had brought new configurations to

the city, driven by their unprecedented speed and scale. At the same time, the city's byzantine administration system was thoroughly reformed by Rama V during the last decades of nineteenth century. The new, highly centralized system made Bangkok the showcase of modernity for the modern régime. In Bangkok, new buildings in various European styles were constructed, occupied by the various governmental offices which came into existence with the reformed government. While wide straight streets and boulevards were cut through the city, new spatial practices also gradually developed, using the streets and avenues as the setting for the new public culture.

After his return from a visit to Europe in 1897, Rama V decided to build a summer palace on the outskirts of Bangkok, four kilometers to the north of the old palace on the river. In 1900, rice fields outside the city wall were purchased and transformed into a palace compound. Streets, bridges, canals, and other infrastructures were also constructed, accommodating the subsequent development in the area. The results of this building program still resonate to this day in the configuration of Bangkok. The palace compound itself was in fact a showcase of the newly-acquired, eclectic collection of Western architecture. The main throne hall of the new palace, for example, was built '...in the style of Italian Renaissance, and was generally considered to be the finest piece of this style east of Suez.'¹¹ As the court had the mandatory design power, the results became models for subsequent architectural and urban developments around the country.

In order to link the old palace with the new one, Rajdamnoen ('Royal Promenade') Avenue was constructed in 1900. The avenue was cut as three continuous parts, in order to cause the least disruption to the existing urban fabric. The first part, which ran north from the old palace to a bend of an old moat, was 28 meters wide, a standard width for the new streets of nineteenth century Bangkok. The second part ran eastward, from the old moat to the city wall, and another moat. The third part ran northward into the fields outside the city wall until its termination at the grand plaza in front of the new palace. The second and third parts of the avenue were 58 meters wide, a record for the entire kingdom for many years. The avenue was divided into one main artery and two parallel streets, with wide grassy median strips lined with imported mahogany and local tamarind trees. Three elaborate marble-and-cast-iron bridges in Neo-Classical style marked the points where the avenue crosses the moats. The avenue was also furnished with all sorts of neo-Classical style street furniture: fountains, cast-iron streetlights. An anonymous contemporary poet wrote:

*...And the King proclaimed
In the new palace that he built
That the dilapidated roads of old
Together with the antiquated city forts and walls
Should be cleared away...
The new avenue is lined with smooth turf and electric lights
A pride of the city, which becomes a thousand times more civilized...*¹²

The centerpiece of the entire avenue was the grand plaza at its north end. At the center was an equestrian statue of Rama V, set on a high pedestal against the background of the new Renaissance-style throne hall. The effect of the entire ensemble might be compared to Louis XIV's equestrian statue at Versailles, or the Victoria Monument in front of Buckingham Palace in London. The monument was built during the king's lifetime as a gift from the entire nation, at the initiation of the royal family. It was the first public monument built by the monarchical régime, who gradually learnt to use public monuments as a means to internalize patriotic ideologies to the public. Having no apparent economic or transportation function for the public, the avenue and the plaza was designed and used largely for symbolic purposes. Here, the image of the meandering canals of pre-modern Bangkok was replaced with the imported streetscape.

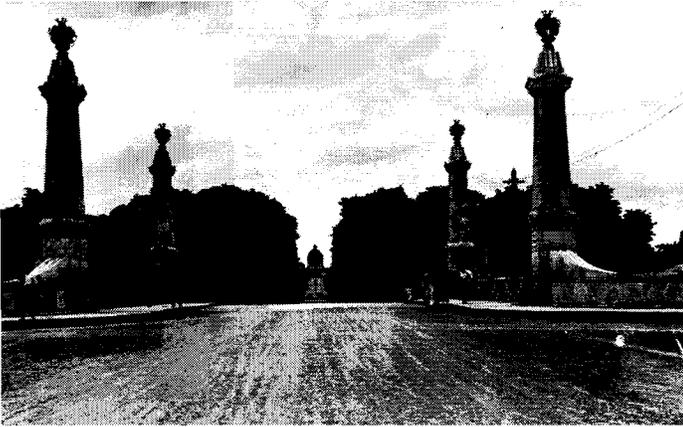


Fig. 6: Rajdamnoen Avenue, 3rd part. Marble bridge at foreground, the alley of tamarind trees and the new throne hall beyond



Fig. 7: Ancient state procession along the new avenue, Bangkok 1894

A state-sponsored guidebook stated:

*A certain foreign prince who has visited Siam several times likened this fine avenue to the Champs Elysées of Paris and it certainly vies in beauty with that famous thoroughfare—only so far for it lacks the fine buildings which flank the latter, but these will undoubtedly appear in time.*¹³

However, unlike the similar style of urban developments in Europe and America, the imported Neo-Classical streetscape of Bangkok was very much alien to the city's cultural roots. In addition, there was no time to gradually naturalize these urban forms into the existing Siamese structure. Here the replacement of the 'cosmogonic' canals by the 'rational' avenue created the ambivalence of transition, of denial and affirmation. The import of Neo-Classical style of architecture was a successful counterpoint to the forces of Colonialism. But it also created a considerable amount of ambivalence and confusions in the local spatial practices, as the indigenous Buddhist model of thought was replaced by a secular, Westernized one, in spite of their common monarchical, vertical structure.

CONCLUSION

Rajdamnoen Avenue was a dramatic episode in the Siamese formation of modernity. The formative process involved both internal and external factors and left its marks on the city's urban space. Internal

factors include different social formations, changes in world views, and the continual search for identity. External factors include regional and international trade, technology and industrialization, and colonialism.

As in other countries, modernization and nation-building in Siam/Thailand remain unfinished. In the process there were reverses and delays. Successive generations of Siamese tried their best to cope with changes within and without through various tactics but these tactics took on an autonomy which could not always be anticipated.¹⁴ There were surprises and borrowings, negotiations and renegotiations, in order to be at home in the world.

NOTES

¹Timothy Mitchell (ed.), *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

²The methodology used in this research is inspired by James Duncan, *The City As Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). See also Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London: Croom Helm, 1984). For standard narrative of Siamese architectural historiography, see Clarence Aasen, *Architecture of Siam: A Cultural History Interpretation* (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1998).

³Phya Lithai, Frank E Reynolds, and Mani B. Reynolds, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist Cosmology* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982).

⁴The term was first used by Nicolas Gervaise, a seventeenth-century French traveler, to describe the city of Ayutthaya.

⁵B. J. Terwiel, *Through Travellers' Eyes: An Approach to Early Nineteenth-Century Thai History* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1989)

⁶H. G. Q. Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies: Their History and Function* (London: B. Quaritch, 1931).

⁷Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁸For a brilliant study of early Bangkok bourgeoisie, see Nithi Iausiwong, *Pakkai lae bairua* [The Quill and the Sail] (Bangkok: Amarin, 1984).

⁹David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

¹⁰Thipakorawongmahakosathibodi, *The Dynastic Chronicles, Bangkok Era, the Fourth Reign* (Tokyo: Center for East Asian Cultural Studies, 1965).

¹¹Eric Seidenfaden, *Guide to Bangkok, with Notes on Siam* (Bangkok: Siamese State Railways, 1928).

¹²Anonymous, quoted in Nit Hinchiranan et al., *Thanon Nai Krungthep* [Streets of Bangkok] (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1982).

¹³Eric Seidenfaden, *ibid.*

¹⁴It should be noted that thirty years after the inauguration of the avenue, the monarchical nation-state came to its end with the near-peaceful 1932 coup. The dramatic event occurred at the grand plaza with an equestrian statue of Rama V. Soon after the coup, Rajdamnoen Avenue became instrumental in the effort to create another modern nation-state, this time a democratic one. The avenue became a site of intense symbolic negotiation between the two nation-states. The Democracy Monument was constructed in the middle of the avenue, together with various buildings along the avenue, summarizing the shape of the things to come.