
Bangkok: Sustainable Sprawl?

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Abstract

Today, due to urban sprawl, it is difficult to determine the physical limits of Bangkok. As adjacent provinces are increasingly transformed into suburbs of Bangkok, the city's and Thailand's sustainability—social, economical, and ecological—become increasingly under threat. This paper will address the question of Bangkok's suburban sprawl on two levels:

The first focuses on the present—how did Bangkok cope so far especially with little formal planning? I will argue that it is through the tacit practical foundation of her culture, from the “water-based” indigenous phase through to the present. Although the physical manifestations of that early phase seemed erased by contemporary global “land-based” forms, the age-old attitudes remain. Although current urban forms are highly fragmented and diversified, they are assimilated through informal negotiations and compromises on the many physical and social scales, from the community to the individual.

The second suggests possibilities for the future with formal planning. After decades of *laissez faire* development, the city administrators and citizenry alike realize that sacrificing the urban environment in the name of economic growth is no longer viable or desirable and plans to remedy the situation are urgently required. While visions of Bangkok based on reminiscences of the ‘good old days’ and/or precedents from some well-planned foreign cities have been projected for the inner city, propositions for the suburbs and process of suburbanization have consistently been lacking. This paper will, in part, remedy that.

Keywords: Urban sprawl, Bangkok

1. Introduction

"...In Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe warn against two extremes that would undermine the attempt to construct a radical democratic politics. One is 'the totalitarian myth of the Ideal City'. The other is 'the positivist pragmatism of reformists without a project.' What might lie between these two? To reject the utopianism of the Ideal City is to reject a fantasy of pure space, not the need to imagine how we might live differently. To reject positivist pragmatism should not entail a disdainful withdrawal from an engagement with those activities and rationalities that led to changes in the fabric of the city: urban policy, planning, architecture, and so forth." (Donald, 1999, p.xi)

Should nothing be done to address it, urban sprawl would contribute to Bangkok's failure as a city. It already contributes to the increasingly worsening traffic and displacing prime productive agricultural land, generating associated pollution. The current developmental approach, which gives solving traffic disproportionate priority, by building more ring-roads, highways, expressways and roads exacerbates the situation, inducing more sprawl and encouraging more private car-ownership, while ignoring multiple developmental issues and scales inherent in cities and suburbs.

This paper will address the question of Bangkok's suburban sprawl on two dimensions—the first part focusing on its particular manifestations and patterns of expansion through "superblocks", the second on the potential of formal planning to "retrofit" these superblocks with the ingredients of sustainability.

2. Mechanisms¹ of the "Superblocks", the unit of Bangkok's lateral expansion

"...Road development accelerated rapidly in the

1950s. This marked the beginning of the "superblock" mode of road/land development, a pattern which continues to the present, extending 30 - 40 km from the original city center. "Superblocks" can be as large as 20 km². Superblocks are the product of the fact that most side roads (*soi*'s) dead end within large rectangular areas bounded by a few major roads... BMA has indicated that reducing the number of dead end *soi*'s to alleviate the superblock problem is a major priority." (Kaothien *et al*, 2000, p.29)

Bangkok's road network has consistently been insufficient and weak—typically, the further one travels from the urban core, the city becomes spatially fragmented, characterized by 'leapfrogging' whereby large tracts of unproductive land are left between developments (this happens both next to highways and within *soi*'s), "superblocks" with vast tracts of 'productive' (here I define as utilized land, whether for urban or agricultural purposes) and 'unproductive' (idle and empty land) patches enclosed within major roadways. Relatively inaccessible, empty tracts of land, low-density settlements are 'trapped' within the centers of these superblocks resulting in hollowed, doughnut-like effect. These urbanization/suburbanization patterns also render traditionally fundamental *khlong* (canals, both natural and dug) systems invisible. (See figure 1)

The case superblock was chosen in response to those issues that were identified in the literature as influencing urban sustainability¹. The superblock—bounded by Ramindra Rd. to the north, Nawamintr Rd. to the east, Kaset-Nawamintr highway to the south, and Artnarong-Ramindra expressway/highway to the west—is located between 10 to 20km northeast of Bangkok's urban core, an area designated as the "urban fringe" (BMA 1999,

¹ "mech·a·nism noun ...3. An instrument or a process, physical or mental, by which something is done or comes into being..." (Microsoft Bookshelf 2000)

² Putting environmental sustainability at the fore, Yencken *et al* provides a viable approach/framework towards urban circular metabolism by proposing the establishment of an inventory of *stocks* – urban land, urban infrastructure, biodiversity (stocks of inheritances of natural systems in urban areas), watercourses and water bodies – *flows*, and *external impacts*. The inventory needs to be developed, assessed, and constantly monitored for its conditions and quality. (1999, p.122-137)

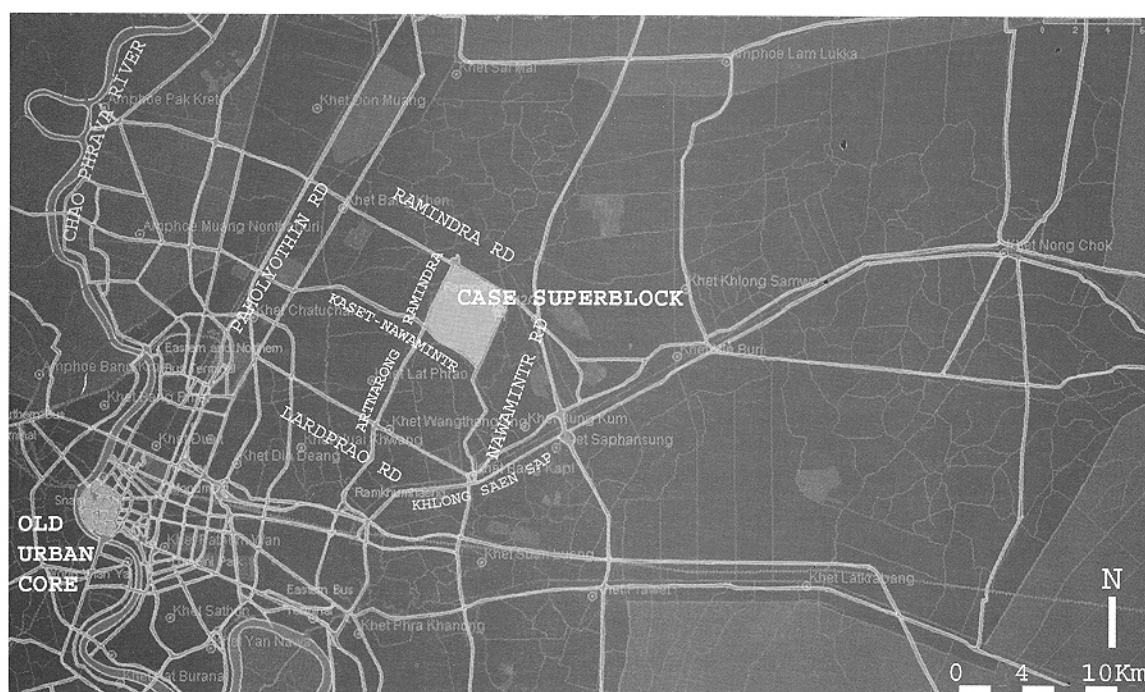


Figure 1: The 'superblock', unit of Bangkok's lateral expansion—the further away from the old urban core, the larger the blocks. The plan also shows the system of main roads, minus soi's, superimposed on to pre-existing khlong system.

p.2-3) characterized by plots of mature (preexisting and older developed estates) settlements interspersed with newer developments, mixed and diverse in both forms and functions, and significantly, contain both unbuilt-up productive and unproductive patches.

2.1 Superblock Edges: Publicly Planned Superstructures of main roads—Nawamintr and Ramindra

The construction of Ramindra road in 1946 marked the early centrally subsidized "land-based" imposition onto the rural "water-based"³ world that once characterized this whole region. Then, the roads were not primarily meant to serve these areas—as they were envisaged as faster land links from Bangkok to the eastern provinces, the roads cut arbitrarily against the grain of the paddies and *khlongs*. The totally transformative impacts on the local inhabitants by the wayside were unintended. The construction of Nawamintr (formerly Sukhapibal

1) road almost two decades later merely reinforced that transformation from water-based to land-based, from traditional rural to modern urban lifestyle.

Development along the main roads in the suburbs generally has a comprehensible pattern of progression resembling *laissez faire* precedents set by the inner-city⁴. The form evolves 'organically' to its commercial potential—predictably lined with shophouses on either side which flexibly cater for the residential areas in the various sois that branches out from the main roads and settlements deeper within the superblocks with various services such as groceries, market places, construction material/hardware shops, furniture/home decorations, restaurants etc. With the gradual densification and further sprawl of the suburbs, both further off from Bangkok's urban core and into the superblock interiors, these functions expand and increase correspondingly and are complemented

³ When settlements, whether urban or rural, were next to or floating on rivers and canals -relying on these waterways for most functions of everyday and cyclical life (see Jumsai 1997, and Somjai 2002)

⁴ See, for example, Cohen's (1985) study of Soi Sunlight's development.

with petrol stations (which now integrate mini-marts), wholesale/retail outlets, nighttime entertainment venues etc. catering to the increasingly private car-dependent lifestyles. As a result, the main road become clusters of linear 'town centers' providing services, private recreation and entertainment for the residents of the 'suburban' superblock interiors. The roads also act as a 'flow' conduit conveying goods and construction materials to feed the urban expansion into the empty patches of various sizes and shapes in the interior of the superblocks, as well as the accumulation of 'stocks' in the everyday life of the suburbanites.

2.2 New Edges, Old Patterns: Imposition of new superstructures—subdivision of superblocks

After over half a century since the first superstructural intervention of Ramindra road, two new highways/expressways were built—again, without any apparent planning consideration for the tracts of underdeveloped land it dissected. The main objective is to relieve vehicular traffic clogging the parallel routes running north-south of Paholyothin and Nawamintr, and east-west of Ramindra and Lardprao roads that connect—and at the same time perpetuate—far-flung suburbs, exurban settlements to city centers (see Figure 1).

The new highways/expressways arbitrarily cut through preexisting commuting patterns while ushering in new speculative and permanent business activities such as plant and garden supplies, themed restaurants etc. and the familiar petrol stations, wholesale stores—transforming the roadside into 'instant' centers. The new north-south highway is given traffic priority, disrupting former movement patterns. Once straightforward routes such as driving northwest in Nualchan Rd. towards Ramindra Rd. will now have to take a long detour south on the new highway to do a u-turn a few kilometers from the intersection. The east-west highway currently has traffic intersections where it cuts through major *sois* although this arrangement may change to facilitate the highway once the road is in full operation. Currently, there are no provisions for pedestrians to cross the multi-lane

north-south highway—while there are a few (clearly insufficient and disregarding preexisting movement patterns) bridge overpasses over the east-west route. Palm lined bike paths and pedestrian footpath are provided on either side of the north-south highway marking a slight modification in practice, however, no connecting links or network are apparent beyond the highway—a clear case of 'limited' (to the main road) planning. Conversely, this can be seen as 'incremental' planning that anticipates potential future additions.

Future extensions are planned for both highways/expressways. The north-south route is to extend northeast to join with Lumlukka-Ongkarak Highway. The west-east route is to extend southeast running parallel with the Eastern Outer-Ringroad. The planned highways will further subdivide outlying superblocks (or for the purpose of differentiation, 'hyper-blocks' into smaller superblocks) as well as shepherd corridors of urbanization/suburbanization along the length of its routes, continuing the hegemonic development pattern that reinforces sprawl's unruly dynamics.

2.3 Superblock intermediate interiors: Privately developed 'branching out' growth through *sois*

Hierarchical system of road surfaces, *sois*, branch out from highways and main roads into the superblock interiors—tracing, respecting the grain of the agricultural plots in contrast to the forced imposition of the main roads and highways. Earlier, these *sois* were built to access traditional settlements hugging the *khlongs* further off the main roads and ever since, to access and subdivide plots for the real estate market. What results is a hierarchical system of infilling, where *sois* seem to arbitrarily break into finer in-fills like expanding plant roots.

These 'branching out' (or 'grafting') of access is a common pattern of the unplanned, or locally/privately 'planned', superblock interiors. This development pattern can be discerned in older housing/land subdivisions where access routes branch out from the distribution *sois* to create new dead-end *sois* (cul-de-sacs) which may, in later time, branch out to access and develop

deeper inaccessible lands. Conflict of usage is minimal as older developments usually hand over jurisdiction of their *sois* to the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA)—turning them, in effect, into public routes. However, more affluent developments are usually gated, privately managing and maintaining their *soi* system.

It is important to note that the hierarchies of pathways are not fixed; through *sois* can be upgraded into main roads, as earth-beaten paths can be turned into paved walkways, which may then be widened to become laneways responding to changes in local land uses, market forces, public policies etc.

2.4 Public and privately organized movements and activities: From the 'formal' highways/town-centers to the 'informal' suburbs

The superstructures and infill pathways provide the configuration for various modes of movement with varying capability to access different parts of the site. Apart from private vehicles, many modes of transportation service the site—the public bus, privately operated vans and taxis running on the main roads link the site to other parts of the city; motorcycle-taxis and *songtaews*⁵ infiltrate deep into the *sois* and superblock—the highly dexterous motorcycles virtually going anywhere including 'informal' semi-public paths; localized transportation such as modified motorcycle-taxis with covered side-seating serving specific housing communities. The provision of purpose built bicycle path along the north-south highway mentioned earlier, introduce bicycles, although piecemeal, as another mean of traversing the site—probably in hope of the future creation and expansion of complementary networks.

As one moves off the main roads formal footpath networks cease to exist and all movements, from human to mechanical share the paved concrete surfaces. This is due to the fact that the *sois* and sub-*sois* were delivered by the profit oriented private sectors (real estate

developers, landowners). Consequently, off the major thoroughfares, the informal (private) mode of suburbanization takes over, a practice continued from the rural past, isolated from central physical planning.

These inadequacies/discrepancies of macro planning/design, lack of formal provisions for pedestrian access and recreation, are sometimes addressed informally at the micro scale. Pedestrian routes are carved out between adjacent housing estates either by knocking off parts of dividing walls or simply by climbing over, through etching beaten tracks onto idle land. Makeshift timber bridges are built to cross the canals connecting road dead-ends and informal routes. Empty unproductive patches and road surfaces are utilized for both passive and active recreation, usually for soccer and *sepak-takraw*⁶, as are the spaces sandwiched between the north-south highways under the raised expressway.

These sub-*sois* and empty land patches are also used for weekly markets by paying rent to landlords and/or the *thesakij* (official sidewalk caretaker) where they are sidewalks. Markets are held almost everyday of the week alternately shifting between various established housing estates throughout the superblock. These functions were traditionally centered at the temple or mosque grounds, and still are through a weekly rotation arrangement, but are now much more varied and diffused reflecting the scattered nature of suburban settlements. 'Mobile markets' in the form of roofed-over pick-up trucks venture far and wide to service these settlements.

The intersection of the two new highways is surrounded by vast empty tracts of land—the original 'hollow' interior of the larger hyperblock, now experiencing a 'space-time' condensation, as the highways suddenly makes it so accessible to the urban core. Once open, sparsely populated space collides with the city and becomes subjected to both its formal and informal modes of suburbanization.

2.5 Productive open spaces: political 'intervention' of 'Recreation slabs' and traces of the rural

Local politicians, functioning within the ambi-

⁵ Adapted trucks or pickups with roofed-over passenger seating at the back

⁶ A local sport where rattan (or plastic made to resemble rattan) balls are kept in the air with various parts of the body except the hands and arms.

guities of 'formal' and 'informal' planning, provide what can be best described as, for lack of better words, 'recreational concrete slabs'—continuing the pattern of paved road surfaces being utilized for both passive and active recreation. They often also erect signs to publicize their work, concrete-covered small empty plots by the wayside that are as popular as the street surfaces on every late afternoons when the ambient air temperature is lower. Young children, teenagers and adults alike come out to play football, *sepak-takraw*, jump-rope, hopscotch etc. Mothers (or fathers) accompany their young children to sit around and catch a gossip. Otherwise, the empty unproductive patches, some vast in size, are appropriated for the similar purposes.

Within the superblocks, although the residential forms more or less dominate, traces of past agrarian functions remain. There are only a few rice farmers left—although they only produce un-husked rice for amateur fighting-cock raisers whose households are characterized by the half-spheres of rattan cages peppering their yards⁷. These empty unproductive patches reveal discernable clues of that former use as rice fields where raised earth edges of paddies still persist. Fishponds abound, but most now serve for suburbanites' leisure fishing. There are old plantations by Bangkuad Canal, where the aging owners and their adult children, preferring the city lifestyle, no longer operate. The new highways also exposed former, still well-vegetated plantations which may eventually yield to commercial functions more fitting to its new location.

2.6 Deep superblock interior: *Khlongs*, drainage, socio-economic class, and the social role of unproductive patches.

"Land values began their steady soar... Ironically, the poorer high land along the road systems had appreciated considerably more than the better lower farmland, and those inheritors in the 1950's, who had complained to their parents of the inequities of division, had soon

become the envy of their once envied siblings." (Kaufman, 1976, p.219)

Geographically, the land drains south towards the major 'highway' *khlong* of Saen Sap (see Figure 1). However, surface drainage for the later imposed 'land-based' settlements is not comprehensively rationalized compared to the traditional system where runoff drain towards the lowest areas around the *khlongs*. Level differences can also give some indication of economic class and building chronology. A customary practice—since the conversion to the land-based practice of building on *terra firma*—if the owners can financially afford to, they will try to fill their land for building higher than adjacent areas to avoid being used as drainage and also to escape flooding (as traditionally, the central plains of the whole Chao Phraya River basin are prone to seasonal flooding, thus their suitability for rice paddies). The same logic applies to new roads which also serve as dikes so that the new highways are at some parts up to two meters higher than the adjacent pre-existing housing estates.

Today the once vibrant, culturally significant *khlongs* are undesirable real-estate—reduced to functioning as open sewerage, flood mitigation, and/or administrative boundaries. They are also often appropriated by squatter settlements, arguably a social mitigating role. In the suburbs, the areas most purposely planned and regulated are the main roads and land adjacent to it, beyond that those planning controls loosen or are non-existent. The *khlongs*, sometimes located in the deep interior of the superblocks, are treated like 'no-man's land' (think the former Wall City of Kowloon).

Corresponding with this 'modern' cultural bias for roads, land nearest the main roads is the priciest and subjected to higher tax rates—both the land price and tax rate decreasing in relation to certain distances from the road. This practice further reinforces the preferences and biases for roads while subordinating, reducing the value of outlying 'hinterlands'—usually occupied by *khlongs* and associated unproductive patches.

⁷ This is an example of the blurred line between the so defined economic formal and informal sectors as fighting-cock rings and the associated gambling is illegal.

Despite the adverse characteristics of the superblock, the hierarchical road, pathway networks and the amplified movements, in conjunction with the unproductive patches, provide the tacit framework for fluid, informal suburbanization. They sustain, mediate and provide the stage for the flowing everyday life of the suburbs.

3. Planning and Designing the Bangkok superblock

On the strategic level, Bangkok is expected to grow physically and also in terms of population. If current patterns persist, the growth will continue to be lateral—spreading further into agricultural lands and surrounding provinces. The argument here is that this existing “urban fringe”, along with the inner city could and should ‘efficiently’ absorb most of that growth as a measure to counter sprawl. In the urban fringe, more diversity of land uses should be encouraged—whether it be in the form of rural conservation or the introduction of urban farming. Natural processes/patterns should be reintroduced and made explicit and systemic. Should lateral spread be still necessary, this proposal should also be able to serve as the “sustainable” alternative form for urban growth—a ‘sprawl’ of ‘green and blue’ stocks. A key characteristic here is ‘maximum self-sufficiency’—socially, economically, environmentally within defined blocks or areas. Another is the notion of ‘seed-superblock’ characterized by open-endedness where adjacent sites can connect and continue various sustainable patterns/meshes instigated within the superblock. There is much potential here for the pre-existing interconnected *khlong* network to mediate the linkages (particularly ecological).

3.1 Superblock “elasticity”: potential to retrofit sustainability

“Think of a city as a map drawn on a rubber sheet. If there is a great deal of vacant land within existing city limits, that city’s population density is low. The city has room for new population growth by filling in undeveloped land. In effect, the rubber sheet map is slack. Facing growth opportunities, the city is still elastic within

its boundaries because of its low population density. It can stretch upward to accommodate new growth” (Rusk, 1995, p.9)

Seen from survey maps and aerial photographs, the uncoordinated geometries and collage-like layout of the superblock is apparent. This highly mixed form and functions prove to be a prevalent characteristic of Bangkok’s suburb at all scales from the superblock down to the housing project. Along with the unproductive patches, a clearly legible pattern of the assorted over-utilized and under-utilized patches attributable to both the preurban settlement patterns (which favored large plots of agricultural holdings) and the more recent highways and roads which ushered in market-driven fragmentation and incremental urbanization.

Although predominantly privately owned, the productive/unproductive patches, if planned/ designed with a view to sustainability, have potential to transform the suburbanization process for the better. The ratio between these patches and built-up areas could be as high as 50:50 if considering the whole block (surveyed in 2000)—but this ratio varies according to location in relation to and distance from the main roads (naturally, the nearer the road, the higher ratio of developed plots to unproductive patches).

As a result of these road projects, the site is now highly accessible from the city, the further off suburbs and provinces. Combined with what Rusk terms as its “elastic” characteristic due to the prevalence of unbuilt patches, capable of absorbing future growths, accessibility means the site can potentially play a crucial role in arresting Bangkok’s sprawl. Crucially, the ‘retrofitting’ of the empty patches should not be solely to accommodate to population growth as Rusk suggests, but to provide opportunities to integrate natural stocks (the ecological dimension) into the city’s and suburb’s fabric, addressing fundamental objectives of environmental sustainability.

3.2 Barriers towards sustainability

The major constraints are systemic and interdependent issues—currently subjected to painfully slow processes of ‘reform’ (a popular

buzzword since the economic meltdown of 1997). They are issues such as:

- Land ownership—the government has plans to expropriate unproductive land for agriculture and development but it is yet unclear if this applies to land within Bangkok's boundaries (Chang Noi, 2002)
- Land as social/cultural asset and the related/resultant legacy of land speculation
- Lack of political/civic will/leadership in matters concerning the sustainable development of the physical environment.
- Lack of 'knowledge' and lack of informed coordination—virtually anyone can effect changes on ground to varying degrees and capabilities. An anything goes, laissez faire scenario seemingly limited by only the preexisting land subdivision patterns.
- Misinformation—cultural frames, 'myths': "roads equate with development", "building more roads will solve the traffic problem", "ideal nature is controlled nature" etc.
- Insufficient urban design/planning infrastructure, glaringly lacking the critical mass of practitioners, professionals to plan, design, coordinate, mediate multiple-scales/issues change.

In other words, they are deep-rooted, culturally-embedded issues. The way this resistance to change and the urge to reform play out will determine the differing 'sustainable' trajectories taken. On the next section, I surmise three possible future scenarios.

3.3 Future Scenarios—the three possible socio/cultural/political processes

The projected 'scenarios' for the case superblock serve as possible avenues, processes to implementing sustainable designs, plans. They reflect the nature of the relationships/partnerships between the interdependent parallel systems of government/local government, local communities, 'informal' communities, and the

individual all of which will determine the forms future physical and social environments take. The scenarios here also engage with Donald's (p. xi) opening quote: "... One is 'the totalitarian myth of the Ideal City'. The other is 'the positivist pragmatism of reformists without a project.' What might lie between these two?" *As is*—the most likely scenario, predetermined by the 'main constraints', with little or no control and intervention. A fumbling along, solve the problems as it comes approach.

- Sprawl continues unchecked - new roads open new frontiers for urbanization in the aforementioned pattern.
- Suburban infill of empty plots mostly by the gated-'communities' form of development for higher socio-economic classes. A gentrification process that will lead to a more pronounced class differentiation as in the inner city. Although the manifestation of economic differentiation is not on whole sections of city or suburbs and the debate whether this mixture is beneficial or not (or for whom) is inconclusive. Manifestations of economic differentiation occur in pockets often juxtaposed next to each other. For example, fresh and weekly markets (often within middle-class neighbourhoods) are places where differences converge. These markets complement car-trips to modern supermarkets located on main roads.
- This process of further sprawl and densification/intensification within site contributes to further traffic deterioration. More roads and expressways built in response. Possible extensions of rail mass-transit systems from city *which then transforms* landuse and urban forms (rather than comprehensively conceived with other interrelated urban ingredients and issues).
- Urban infrastructure such as public parks, waste-water treatment facilities follow after suburban growth.

- Ecologically homogeneous, with khlongs eventually transformed into concrete channels as empty productive/unproductive patches eventually gets built up—reinforcing the khlongs ‘main’ role of flood mitigation and open sewerage.

The totalitarian myth of the ‘Ideal City’/Singapore—Western ‘best practices’ imposed, which apparently is compatible with the Thai penchant for “orderliness” as epitomized by the design and planning of palaces, temples, government institutions—planning through administrative/bureaucratic decrees (the way main roads are introduced) continuing in the tradition of “royal decrees”.

- Clear articulation of guidelines and rules/regulation for “best practice” for all scales of development
- Comprehensive planned frameworks provide for market and aesthetic considerations—scales/functions mutually exclusive, every built form has its ‘rightful’ place (zoning, conservation mentality)
- Centralized systematic planning—clear orientations and hierarchy of paths, edges, nodes, districts, and landmarks.
- Ecological and landuse diversity—although could be driven by the ‘formalization’ of ‘informal’ economies.
- Needs purposeful and powerful implementation, however, an Achilles heel to the Thai rule of law.

I observe that Bangkok’s urbanization practice reveal characteristics of these first two scenarios—the first, reflecting the everyday practices on ground, the second the formal approach of the political/bureaucratic elite, captivated by that ‘totalitarian myth’ set by the highly unique developmental trajectory of Singapore and totally ignoring the first scenario. From here, I deduce the third scenario, the ‘middle path’.

Positivist pragmatism of reformist with a project: the Siamese way—negotiation with Bangkok ‘eccentricities’; the Thai ‘chaotic’ marketplace; ‘democracy’ and the ideals of

public participation as espoused in the 1997 ‘people’s constitution’ (which has so far only been implemented half-heartedly)

- Provision of development guidelines, clear articulation of broad systemic issues but negotiations encouraged at finer scales.
- Mediated market, socially, and environmentally driven—scales/functions mutually inclusive as is currently practiced.
- ‘Diffused planning’—pseudo-systematic, unclear, unpredictable, subjected to ‘local rules/practices’—which is Bangkok, ‘modified-continuity’ in practice.
- Ecological diversity and ‘usefulness’, catering to ‘informal’ subsistence economy e.g. for as agriculturally productive spaces.
- However, will need a strong infrastructure of planners/mediators, which is clearly lacking—educating of local ‘urban self-organizers’ should form part of strategy.

4. Conclusion

This paper calls for multi-dimensional, multi-scale approaches to planning/designing the Bangkok superblock. On the one hand it has discussed urban sprawl, its specific manifestations in Bangkok, its adverse effects and potential opportunities; while at the same time, the paper attempts to address the dearth of nature in the urban environment, which could be attributed to universal urban culture and practices. In tackling sprawl, day-to-day ‘life improving’ measures are introduced, concurrently re-introducing ‘nature’ and natural process to address the broader ecological goals of sustainability.

At the same time, the alternative approach acknowledges past and current practices and the processes at work. Sprawl in the Thai context also has a cultural dimension that has to be addressed, especially pertaining to the perception of land as an asset and the resulting effect on its utilization. As many literatures have pointed out, some explicitly (Askew 2002), the

pre-urban socio-cultural context also contributed to the transformation of rural to urban land. These embedded cultural practices are complicated to address. It is argued, however, that change can be subtly encouraged within the local narrative of 'practical-continuity' (Mulder, 1992, p.147) (although this would probably also entail introduction and strict enforcement of/

adherence to planning regulations, viable economic alternatives and compensations for land stakeholders—issues with socio-cultural repercussions in themselves). These complexities and contradictions reflect the messiness that engaging with 'sustainability' involves, particularly the practical, incremental kind.

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