MEMORY, DEMOCRACY AND URBAN SPACE:

Bangkok's 'Path to Democracy'

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1960s a particular trajectory through central Bangkok has become appropriated by the democracy movement. This path extends from a sacred bo-tree at Thamassat University through the 'royal ground' of Sanam Luang and along the 'royal road' of Ratchadamnoenklang Avenue to the Democracy Monument-- a paradoxical relic of 1930s dictatorship which has been re-appropriated. This stretch of urban space has been (and remains) the site of complex practices of resistance and violence, liberation and repression. This paper is about struggles over meaning and memory in urban space in a cultural context where the meanings and names of public places are highly fluid and where such slippage becomes a political tactic; a struggle over which memories and whose meanings become memorialized in urban design.

Introduction

> "The city (consists)... of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past: the height of a lampost and the distance from the ground of a hanged usurper's swaying feet... As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks up like a sponge and expands... The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand..."
>
> (Calvino 1979: 13)

On my first visit to Bangkok in 1997 the taxi driver was entering the dense traffic choking the broad modern boulevard near the Democracy Monument. He spontaneously pointed out a traffic ridden expanse of roadway and said that was where they killed the students in 1992. In case I couldn't understand his English he took his hands off the wheel and enacted a short spray of automatic fire. Several visits later I was teaching an urban design studio at a nearby university and regularly traversing Sanam Luang, the vast open space ringed by Tamarind trees adjacent to the Grand Palace. Variously used for royal cremations, ploughing ceremonies, temporary buildings, sports, kite flying, markets, public sleeping and political rallies it is one of the world's great urban spaces. Later in class when a pencil line was drawn across the image of Sanam Luang to signify the possible cutting of a canal, one of the Thai students recoiled in horror as if a surgeon was at work on her body.

Yet the King presides over the annual Royal Ploughing ceremony wherein the soil is 'cut'. These are clearly urban spaces with rich veins of meaning and memory.

I am inspired in part by Boyer's notion of a 'city of collective memory', a city rendered rich by the play of meaning and memory, by struggles to excavate repressed and misrepresented stories (Boyer 1996: 68). She contrasts the 'city of collective memory' to the city where memory has been reduced to an official 'history'. For Boyer, urban form not only reflects history but constructs it as "the past we experience in the present" (Boyer 1996: 187).[i] The continuous construction and reconstruction of spatial meaning theorized by de Certeau is also useful in this regard: 'Like words, places are articulated by a thousand usages' (de Certeau 1985: 131). Meanings can be inverted as the most totalizing sites of oppression can be spaces of 'becoming'. The tactics of resistance in public space become struggles over meaning and much more than simple confrontation (Pile 1997). All of this resonates with Lefebvre's call for the 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 1996) and his celebration of moments and places of social transformation which are at once playful, aesthetic and political.

There is, however, no singular theory base here, urban space must be read at once with an eye for the nuances of place experience, for its representational narratives and for those practices which are enabled and constrained by the permeability of the urban spatial structure (Dovey 1999). The city is an intertextual field where the meanings of monuments, traffic jams, advertisements and parades interweave; where ideology and power relations are inscribed in urban iconography. The city creates and distributes social and symbolic capital; enables and constrains certains forms of action; constructs dreams and desires. My interest here is in how the urban field and its collective memories have framed and continue to frame the struggles for democracy in Thailand.

Urban History

Bangkok was established as the centre of power in Siam when the current Chakri dynasty was established in 1782. Within 15 days of this coup the city pillar of the new centre of Bangkok was inserted, marking the north-east corner of a new palace. The insertion of the City Pillar was also a symbolic re-enactment of a traditional north-eastern Thai ritual of planting the first housepost near the north-east corner of the house with offerings to earth spirits (Turton 1978). The predominance of the north-east was established through cosmological oppositions along cardinal axes. The east was regarded as sacred and pure --temples faced east as did one's head when sleeping; west is the direction of the head during cremation. The progression from south to north was one of increasing authority and power (Tambiah 1973; Turton 1978: 120). This socio-spatial hierarchy of the traditional household was reflected in the larger spatial order of the village and state where the King is seen as head of the community and 'father' of the people. *Sanam Luang* , an open field of about six hectares to the north of the palace, became the site of fertility and cremation rites. Here the King makes the first annual cut in the earth; it is the primary site linking the King to the Thai landscape as mediator of earth spirits and the cycles of birth and

death (Wilson 1962: 75). Sanam Luang has long been not just a 'royal ground', but also a symbolic 'ground' of royal authority.[ii]

The Royal Road

From the turn of the twentieth century under King Rama V (Chulalongkorn) a major modernization plan was implemented which shifted the political map of central Bangkok from one entirely centred on the Grand Palace to one which was stretched between the old centre and a new centre of symbolic power around the new Dusit Palace about four kilometres to the north-east, connected by the new boulevard of Ratchadamnoen Ave (Figure 1). This incorporated a radical transformation and enlargement of the 'royal ground' which doubled the size of the open space into a racetrack shape of 600 x 300 metres fringed with Tamarind trees at its edges. Sanam Luang became a giant rationalist geometric figure in the urban landscape but also an entirely new kind of urban space --at once a park and a plaza, an agricultural field and a building site (Figure 2). It has become framed over the years by a series of buildings and institutions which form a symbolic constellation--the Grand Palace with its temple of the Emerald Buddha, the City Pillar, the Supreme Court, a Buddhist wat compound, two universities, the National Theatre and the National Museum.

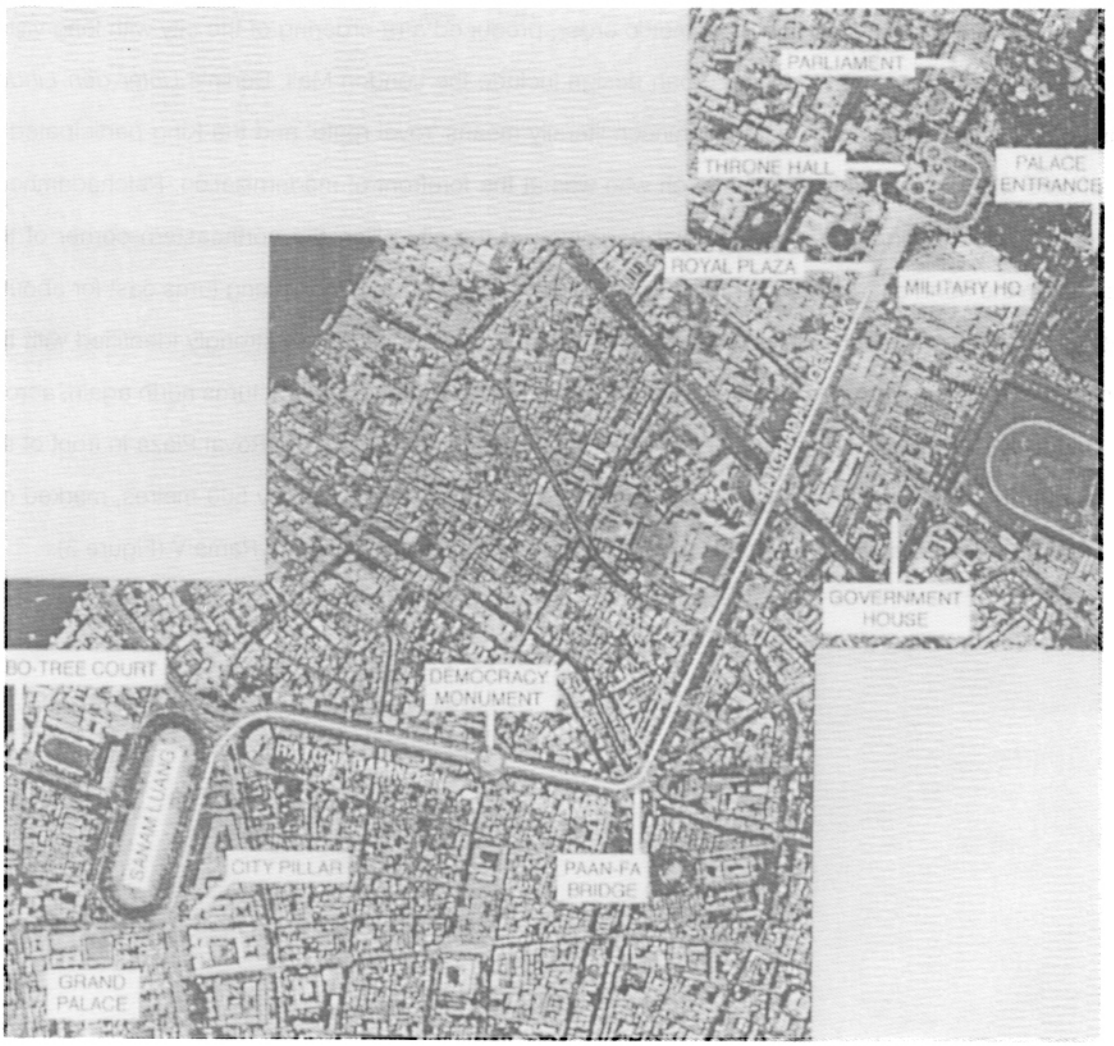

Figure 1: Ratchadamnoen Ave, Bangkok

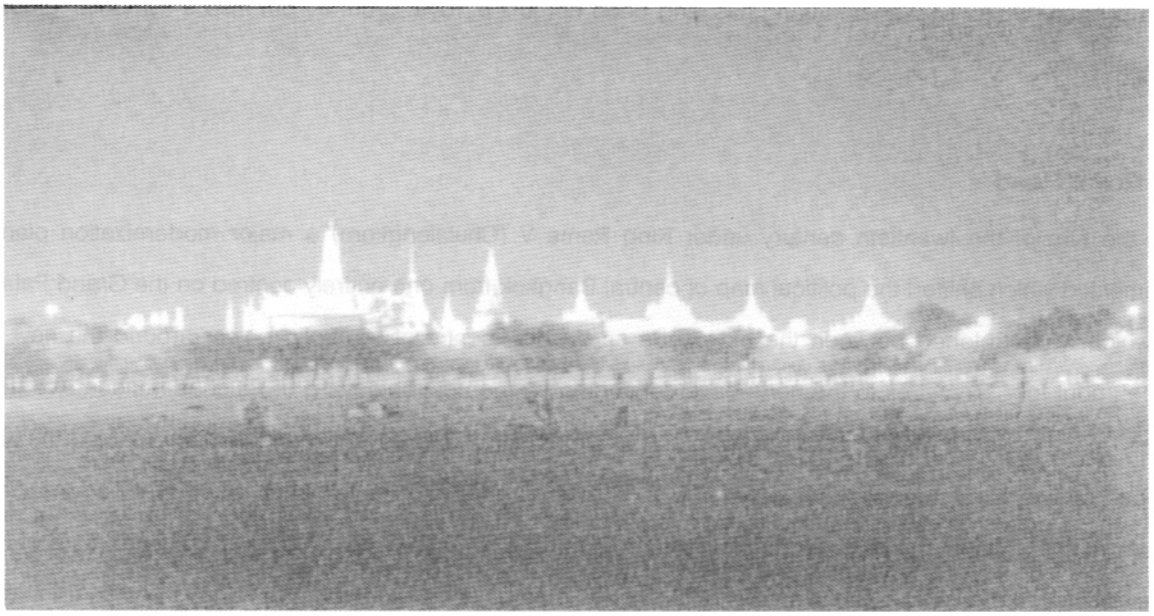

Figure 2: Grand Palace from Sanam Luang at night

The boulevard was inspired by a visit to Europe by Rama V in 1897 and fuelled by enlightenment thinking -- visions of modernity, visibility and large scale geometric order, produced a re-ordering of the city with long vistas to symbols of power.[iii] The antecedents of the urban design include the London Mall, Berlin's *Unter den Linden* and the Parisian boulevards. The name Ratchadamnoen literally means 'royal route' and the King participated in processions of cars which demonstrated a monarch who was at the forefront of modernization. Ratchadamnoen Avenue has three separate alignments with the first beginning at the city pillar, the northeastern corner of the Grand Palace. From the north of Sanam Luang the central section of Ratchadamnoen Klang turns east for about a kilometre until it meets the former city wall and canal. This is the stretch which is now strongly identified with the democracy movement. The northern section of Ratchadamnoen Nok commences after it turns north again, across the Paan Fa Bridge and enters a one and a half kilometre vista which terminates at the Royal Plaza in front of the Dusit Palace throne hall. The Royal Plaza is an open expanse of concrete about 150 by 500 metres, marked out with lines to organize the many military parades, centred on an equestrian statue of King Rama V (Figure 3).

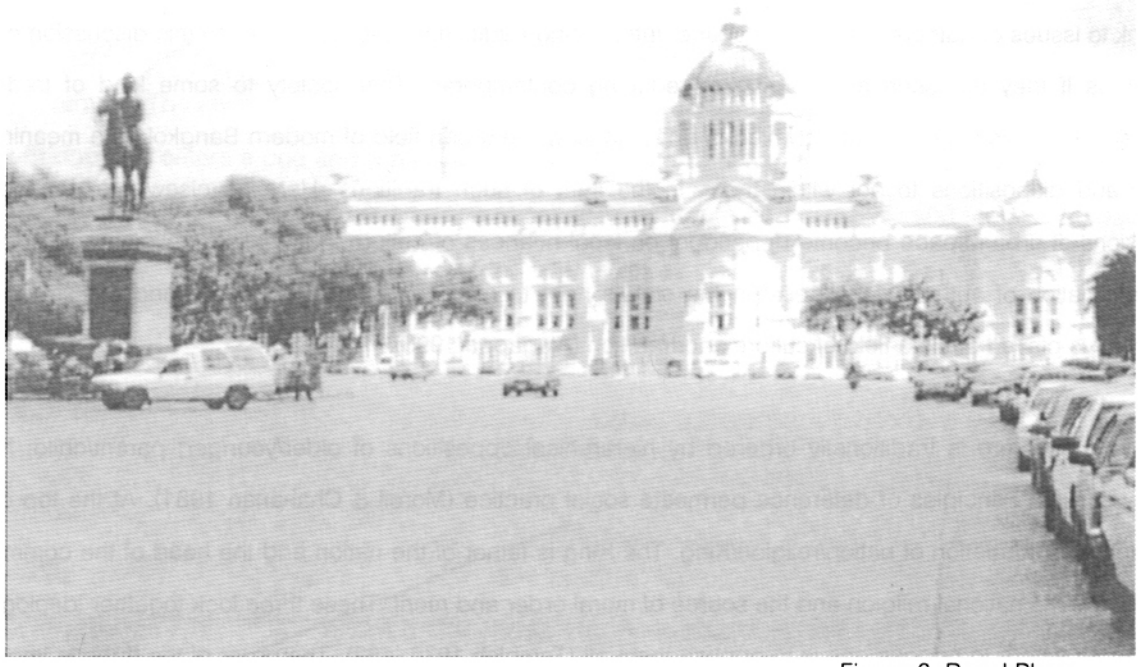

Figure 3: Royal Plaza

Thongchai (1994) has argued that the period of this reconstruction of the city was also a crucial period in the discursive construction of Thai identity and the emergence of what he terms the 'geo-body' --a construction of Siamese identity through the spatial technology of mapping. The nineteenth century threat of colonialism stimulated a crisis in Siamese sovereignty and identity. Maps were deployed to stabilise fluid boundaries and to identify the image of the nation with its territory. The re-development of Bangkok was a parallel phenomena of iconography and visibility. Ratchadamnoen Avenue re-framed the cognitive map of a new and modern Bangkok, stretching and stabilizing the royal territory across the city. Both the King and city, as icons of the nation, became more accessible, imageable and visible. The move to the Dusit Palace was at once a form of modernization and also a remaking of the traditional city with the King in the north-east (Korff 1993: 237). It was modern in the sense that the enclosing walls and canals of the traditional city were penetrated and bridged by the (then) fast flowing traffic. The King was no longer hidden in the palace but made visible in motorized parades. Yet the alignments of the boulevard --north then east then north again --can be seen as reitterating and extending the traditional alignments with power and sanctity under the mantle of modernity. The new avenue again integrated monarchy and morality through the axes of power and religion. This reconstruction of the city was largely in place by the death of Rama V in 1910, and there was far less development under the following monarchs. Rama VI built a new palace, Chitralada, a little to the east of Dusit as his residence which has been the King's palace ever since. The northern section of Ratchadamnoen Nok became lined with Palaces, Military Headquarters and later government buildings as various centres of power followed the King into the north-east.

Legitimation and Meaning

Before further exploring the politics of urban space in Bangkok I want to outline some aspects of Thai culture as they link to issues of authority and urban space. Introducing traditional belief systems into this discussion can be dangerous if they are seen as totalizing or reducing contemporary Thai society to some kind of traditional straightjacket. This is not my intent which is rather to view the urban field of modern Bangkok, the meanings of places and dispositions to act within them, in the light of such traditions. Here as elsewhere, the political dimensions of urban space become dependent on local nuances of culture, nationalism, religion and authority. The legitimation of authority, the belief in the state's right to rule, is a slippery concept and the struggle for legitimacy is played out in a field of culture and tradition (Alagappa 1995).

Thai social structure is traditionally ordered by hierarchical oppositions of older/younger; parent/child; higher rank/lower rank. Principles of deference permeate social practice (Morell & Chai-anan 1981). At the top of this hiererachy is a formation of nation/religion/King. The King is father of the nation and the head of the community. Buddhism is the national religion and the source of moral order and merit. These three lock together ideologically in a manner where to oppose one is to oppose them all (Tambiah 1976: 482). The order of the three is important and is reflected in the national flag of red (nation), white (religion) and blue (King) stripes—where the central blue stripe is framed by the smaller white and then red stripes. All forms of political power, including military coups and democratic constitutions, need to honour this triumvirate of nation/religion/King to succeed. Military power in Thailand has been based in a capacity to harness authoritarian governance to this legitimating triumvirate (Reynolds 1991). The harness, however, is unstable and there have been 17 military coups and 15 constitutions since 1932 (Sukatipan 1995). Thai Buddhist belief is also linked to community, justice and democracy, from which view authoritarianism is a perversion of Thai identity (Jackson 1991).

The social hierarchy is also geared to a conceptual opposition of order versus confusion (Morell & Chai-anan 1981). Confusion (*woon wai*) is a state of nuisance, instability or anarchy; those who engage in conflict are said to be *woon wai*. Confusion upsets the gentle order of Thai society, it is un-Thai. The 'cool heart' (*jai yen*) is highly valued as a mask of calmness in the face of confusion or conflict. Any challenge to authority must be calm and gentle or it will lack legitimacy. The high value placed on the stable social order links to a belief that it is only superior force that can create and maintain stability (Aasen 1998: 8). Thus instability, or confusion, can then be explained in terms of too little force and military force can be legitimated in the public interest (Dhiravegin 1992). Such a social structure is often seen from the West as passivity and receptivity to control; the social structure seems to mitigate against participatory politics since debate is disdained and power is self-legitimating (Hindley 1976; Wilson 1962: 74). Yet as Bourdieu's work shows, this is a familiar pattern in the West where discursive fields are commonly structured in a manner which sustains the authority of those who already possess it (Bourdieu 1993).

Thailand has generally been very open to Western ideas and technologies (Reynolds 1998) and the culture is characterized by a remarkable capacity to absorb new ideas, beliefs, names and meanings without displacing existing ones. Through layering and juxtaposition one can have both the traditional and the modern, Thai and Western, authoritarianism and democracy, inherited power and meritocracy (Wilson 1962). There is a great deal of slippage in spatial discourse --places often have several names which persist in common usage. Diffferent names can service different interests and meanings are often left in play (O'Connor 1990). Oblique communication is often preferred to the direct. Thai architecture is often comprised of hybrid and polyglot styles deploying allegory, parody and irony. This can involve a privileging of the ebb and flow of life, rather than the stabilization of identities (Aasen 1998: 2). This fluidity and slippage becomes rather interesting in the light of Western critiques of 'essentialism' and deconstructionist challenges to the stabilities of meaning and identity.

'Democracy'

A bloodless coup undertaken by an alliance of intellectuals and the military wrested absolute power from the monarchy on June 24,1932. The urban focus was on the new Throne Hall and Royal Plaza. This event is marked by a small pavement plaque in the plaza over which military parades march and cars drive (Reynolds 1992). The coup was inspired by Western notions of democracy based in the 'People's Party' and the Throne Hall was appropriated as an Assembly. However, the revolution soon became a military dictatorship under Phibunsongkram, aligned with Japan and inspired by the fascist politics of Mussolini. The King was disempowered under a constitutional monarchy, abdicated, and was succeeded by a young nephew who did not assume the throne for another 13 years. The throne hall fronting the royal plaza on the axis of Ratchadamnoen became the assembly while executive power moved to Government House located in a former palace to the east.

In the late 1930's the central section of Ratchadamnoen Klang Avenue was opened up for traffic, its central trees demolished and it was lined with 4-storey modern buildings in art deco style. The centrepiece of this scheme was a commemoration of the 1932 coup --the Democracy Monument (Figure 4). It is set on a circular plinth in a seven-lane traffic roundabout right on the axis of the royal procession road as the dominant visual symbol of this section of the boulevard. The monument combines images of the coup, the constitution, the military, Buddhism and nationalism.[iv] The centrepiece is a small circular building with six doors representing the six principles of the People's Party --freedom, peace, education, equality, economy and unity. The doors are decorated with swords and Buddha images and on top are stacked bowls which in turn support an image of the constitution in the form of a folded document. This central figure is framed by four slender vertical 'wings' with splayed striations which combine the dynamism and nationalism of Italian futurism with the Thai conception of an upper world. The monument is surrounded by a circle of 75 half-buried cannons used as bollards with their barrels facing down, framing and 'grounding' the monument in military power. Bas reliefs depict the coup makers creating an ideal democracy which is then defended by the military.

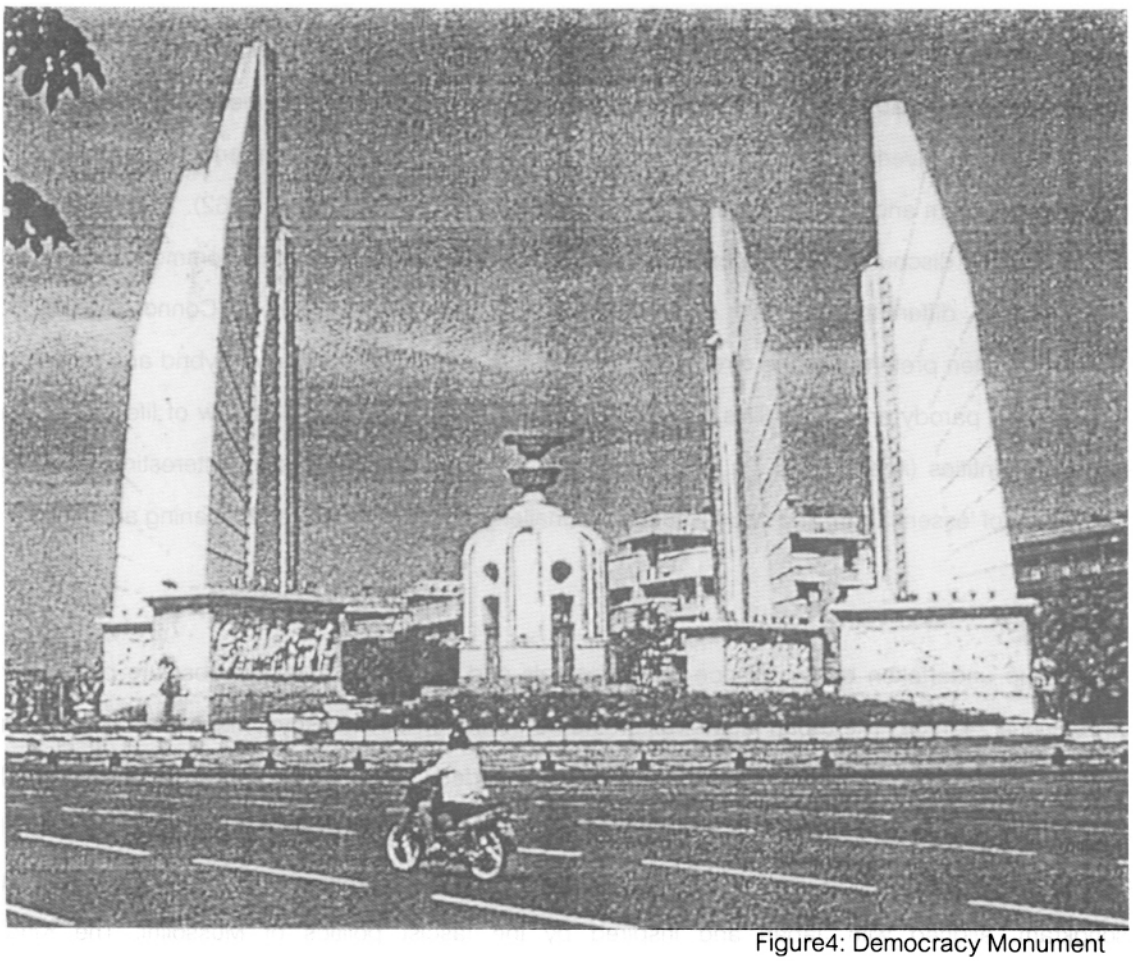

Figure4: Democracy Monument

The height, circumference and number of cannons were representations of the day and year of the coup. The monument has a rich layering of meanings including Buddhism, nationalism, militarism and democracy in a mix of styles from social realism to art deco and futurism. The most notable absence of signification is the monarchy -- the monument disrupts the legitimating triumvirate of nation/religion/King, and its location disrupts the axis of the royal road. While there is a certain awkwardness in the attempt to meld its various significations, it is a splendid embodiment of the contradictions of its time. It was not well-loved in its early years when it became symbolic of the military dictatorship for which it served as propaganda, signifying fascism and the false promise of democracy (Thongchai 1999).

The Path of Democracy

The earliest place identified as a site of democratic resistance to the military regime was Thammasat University, established in 1933 by the intellectual leader of the 1932 coup. *Thamma* is an ancient Hindu-Buddhist code of 'rights', or 'laws' and Thammasat University was conceived as an elite university for political and social thought. The site was well chosen, that of the former palace of the 'Deputy King' between Sanam Luang and the river. A so-called 'Peace Movement' grew on Thammasat campus through the 1950s and spilled onto Sanam Luang in the form of protest speeches and marches along Ratchadamnoen Ave towards Government House (Kwanjai 1998; Hewison 1997). Slippages of meaning were utilized as tactics when protests which began with everyday

issues such as rising bus fares turned into the demand for a new constitution (Morell & Chai-anan 1981; Prizzia 1985). The bridges on Ratchadamnoen Nok were the points of confrontation, however these demonstrations were generally non-violent and often successful --resulting temporarily in a new constitution in 1969.

Figure5: Ratchadamnoen Klang Ave, October 1973

October 1973 marked the first really large demonstrations when 400,000 people marched from Sanam Luang to the Democracy Monument and filled the entire kilometre of boulevard. They were well organized by students, carrying national flags and portraits of the King, supported by first aid and food crews. A student leader of the time has likened the movement of the 'wave' of people up Ratchadamnoen to a dance or aesthetic performance in which this space of authority was transformed into a theatre (Kwanjai 1998). The small animist figures which surmount the lightpoles on Ratchadamnoen were seen as part of a scene which was at once spiritual and political. The modernist vision along and across Ratchadamnoen enabled the spectacle of 400,000 people --a vision of the 'people' and 'nation' which had hitherto been something one only imagined. The 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) and the 'geo-body' (Thongchai 1994) of nationalist discourse were here rendered palpably real (Figure 5).

The Ratchadamnoen spectacle opened up a new image of a participative community --a vision not of chaos and division, but of order and peaceful protest; not the confusion of *woon wai* but the cool heart of *jai yen*. The

demonstrations were able to hinge democracy to the same base of legitimacy that the military had appropriated, that of nation/religion/King. Instead of being seen as creating conflict the spectacle was one of unity. The photographic images were propagated through the mass-media and were very potent.

By appropriating Ratchadamneon Klang Avenue the protest also caused a serious disruption to a major artery of city traffic. The heavily polluted traffic jams of Bangkok render much of the public space unlivable and this chaotic urban scene signifies a failure of urban policy to meet the public interest. The common slippage of issues from bus fares to constitutional reform is one indication of this discursive link. The demonstrations, despite their dangers, ironically established standards of urban livability which were increasingly rare in Bangkok --they represented not just a new kind of community but a new kind of urbanism.

The Democracy Monument was initially a resting point for the demonstrators on the way to the effective centres of power to the north --the Parliament, Throne Hall, Royal Plaza, Government House, Chitralada Palace and Military Headquarters. Yet beyond the Paan Fa Bridge large demonstrations became vulnerable, fragmented, less visible and ambiguous. The funnelling effect of the bridges created confrontation with police and military. There was also less opportunity for escape as the northern section of Ratchadamnoen is lined with large fenced compounds and is highly impermeable. While Royal Plaza is vast it is also a corner in the urban spatial structure where a large crowd can be effectively barricaded. By contrast, the central section near the Democracy Monument is a permeable street structure with many access points which were useful both as points of access and escape and for the supply of food and drink (Kwanjai 1998:154).

In the northern sections of the boulevard the spectacle of the large crowd was diminished due to the trees. Most importantly the meanings of public action became confused --the pro-democracy spectacle inverts to become a confrontation which may be variously seen or portrayed as anti-military, anti-parliament or anti-monarchy. In the early morning following the massive peaceful demonstrations in 1973 students outside Chitralada Palace calling for the King's support were portrayed as anti-monarchist. Those trying to escape across the canal into the palace (where the King opened the gates) were portrayed as attacking the King and were shot (Prizzia 1985). Attacks by the police and army then expanded to the Democracy Monument and surrounding streets. In all over 100 people were killed over the next days and several government buildings were burned including one on Ratchadamneon just south west of the Democracy Monument (Morell & Chai-anan 1981). At the King's intervention, the military leaders were exiled, and a more democratic (if temporary) constitution was established. Sanam Luang, generally reserved for royal cremations, was made available by the King for cremations of many of the dead students in 1974 (Charnwit & Thamsong 1999; Thongchai 1999).

The potency of peaceful behaviour in public space became apparent and the trajectory of urban space from Thammasat through Sanam Luang and along Ratchadamnoen was established as the 'path of democracy'

(Kwanjai 1998). This was a processional route from the bo-tree courtyard of Thammasat University, through the 'dome' building at the centre of campus to the university sports field, then to Sanam Luang and along Ratchadamnoen to the Democracy Monument, often stopping for rallies at the sports field and Sanam Luang. This spatial progression is an important discursive narrative: the bo-tree signifies the sacred Buddhist bodhi tree and establishes spiritual legitimacy; the 'dome' building signifies the intellectual authority of Thammasat University and the law of Thamma; Sanam Luang signifies the royal 'grounding' of Thai nationhood and mediation of the spirit of place; and Ratchadamnoen and the monument signify modernity and democracy. Thus there is a spatial narrative which discursively connects dharma, thamma, King, earth and nation in the march to modernity and democracy.

October 1976

In 1976 one of the former military leaders who had launched the killings in 1973 was permitted to return to Thailand as a monk. This was a cover for his return to power and protests escalated again at Thammasat and Sanam Luang. However, on this occasion the students were portrayed in the press as anti-monarchist and communist (Anderson 1998). On October 7 over 4000 right wing mercenaries and monarchists rallied on Sanam Luang and supported by the police and military they stormed the campus to engage in a frenzied killing spree. Thousands of students were arrested and many were burnt or beaten to death on Sanam Luang and hung from the Tamarind trees (Charnwit & Thamsong 1999; Wiwat et al 1998; Anderson 1998; Morell & Chai-anan 1981). The number of dead may never be known but there are claims of over 500 (Arun 1998). There is a Thai expression known as: 'kill the chicken to scare the monkey' (Callahan 1998); the larger democracy movement went quiet for over a decade.

There were no official cremations on Sanam Luang for these students and the unofficial ones have stained its meaning as a royal ground. The trauma of these events has rendered much of what happened unthinkable and unspeakable for many Thais. Yet the memories remain, anchored by the urban spaces in which they took place. The meanings of Sanam Luang in particular--the 'ground' of royal authority, place of fertility and royal cremation--can never be quite the same.

Thai-Style Democracy

The events of 1973 and 1976 had engendered a crisis of legitimacy for both the military and monarchy. Several attempts to deal with this were played out in urban form. One involves the construction of Parliament House (also known as the National Assembly) in 1973. It is sited on a part of the Dusit palace several hundred metres directly behind the Throne Hall, slightly off axis, on a relatively minor street facing the zoo (Figure 1). Access is via a circuitous road which diverts around the Throne Hall. The design was modernist with a broad low dome for the assembly but its profile is barely visible from the street and it does not register on the cognitive maps (or tourist

maps) of the city. The building was framed in a manner that accurately reflected the powerlessness of the Assembly.

In 1980 the entry to the Parliament building was replaced by a raised statue and forecourt which largely conceals the entrance to the building. This was a monument to King Rama VII who abdicated in 1935 after losing power in the first coup. As Thongchai (1999) argues, this monument constructs a narrative which portrays the monarch as the instigator and protector of Thai democracy --Rama VII becomes the martyr who sacrifices his power in the name of democracy. In urban spatial terms this monument completes a double-screening of parliament from the city. The building stands behind Rama VII and also behind the Throne Hall. The positioning of parliament within the city marginalizes it and frames it within a larger hierarchy, headed by the King.

In 1982 the Democracy Monument was classified by the Fine Arts Department as 'not worthy of conservation' (Vasana 1999) and there was an attempt to remove the constitution as its centrepiece, to be replaced by a statue of Rama VII. However, these changes were resisted since the events of 1973 had transformed the meaning of the monument (Thongchai 1999). Underlying these discursive struggles over urban form lies a key problem--a truly democratic constitution must displace the monarch as the 'ground' of political power. The widespread love of the King in Thailand has been portrayed as a form of democracy, as if he were 'elected' (Hewison 1997). This contradictory ideal of a 'democratic monarch' has fueled resistance to any written constitution which formally strips the King of political power. The monarch is seen by many as the real constitution or foundation of the nation; in a slippage of meaning, monarchy is seen as 'Thai style' democracy (Hewison 1997: 73). The tactics of double naming and slippages of meaning have enabled this contradiction of a democratic monarch to persist.

In the absence of democratic institutions the popular meanings of democracy become anchored by the constellation of urban places which have framed the struggle -- Thammasat University, Sanam Luang, Ratchadamnoen and the Democracy Monument. As Kasian (1996: 11) puts it:

> "As the battleground where key historical battles for democracy were waged, these natural or man-made physical things are popularly regarded as the concrete and hence stable and solid embodiment of the memory and spirit of the democratic movement.. For people to whom democracy remains an abstract, amorphous and oft-thwarted aspiration, they give a sense of concreteness, of shape and form, or time and place, to their dreams of 'democracy'."

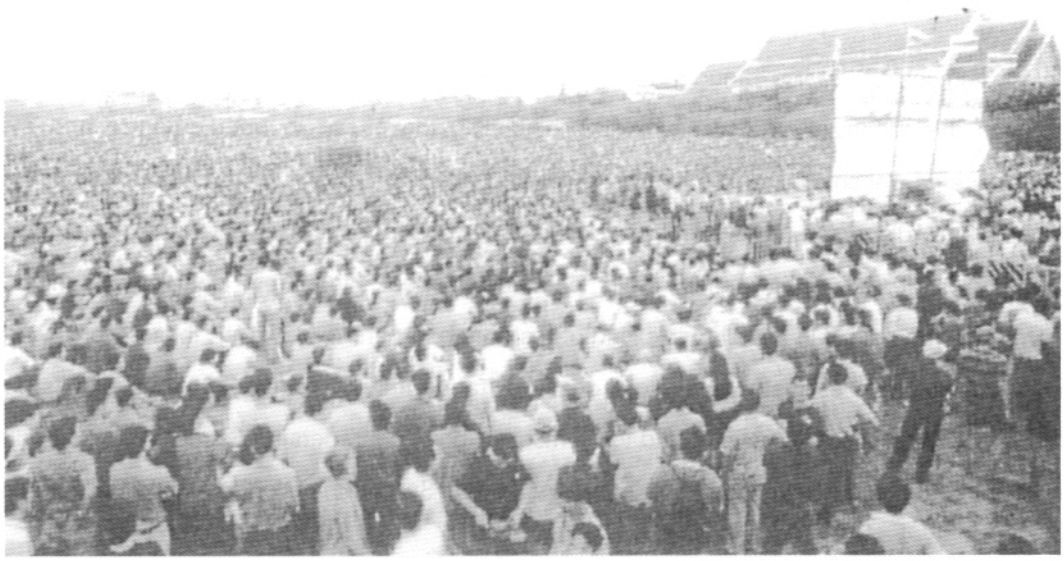

Figure 6: Sanam Luang, May 1992

Black May 1992

A gradual opening up of the political process in the 1980s, led to elections in 1988, but then another military coup in 1991. In May 1992 the opposition leader went on a hunger strike in the Royal Plaza, attracting protest rallies of over 100,000 people which moved between there and Sanam Luang (Figure 6). This hunger strike followed the effective use of such tactics in Tienanmen Square three years earlier (Dovey 1999: Ch 6). Fasting is a form of Buddhist merit-making, strengthening the spirit through self-control and self-denial. It claims the spiritual high-ground and highlights the contrast between military strength based on force and the inner strength of the democracy movement.

The early phases of this protest had a playful sense of carnival--social norms were suspended and the chaotic traffic disrupted as people from different classes mixed in a new public space where street theatre and dance mingled with free speech, music and food vendors. The demonstrations at once constructed and occupied, as Callahan (1998: 3) puts it: "a special space set off from the normal routine of traffic and pollution...". Ribbons were tied to trees along Ratchadamnoen like tree-shrines, rendering the entire boulevard as sacred space (Askew 1994: 155).

The crackdown began on May 17 and continued for several days along the length of Ratchadamnoen Ave. A primary point of confrontation was the Paan Fa bridge where the military set up a barbed wire barricade to

prevent movement into the northern stretch of the boulevard. Makeshift bridges formed of boats were constructed to get around it. However, such confrontations were becoming obsolete except as a tactic in the struggle for media attention. While the electronic press was strongly censored, newspapers remained a reliable source of news. The electronic censorship ironically attracted people to participate in a spectacle which they could not see on television (Pongsudhirak 1997). The struggle over media representation had an impact in real space as newspaper photographers became military targets and the Public Relations Building was burnt down.

Middle class demonstrators also brought a new communications network in the form of mobile phones, often linked through the organization of various NGOs, enabling the crowd to both organize and evade police. Resistance became decentred, relying on horizontal networks more than vertical hierarchies for organization: "Whenever the army dispersed a crowd in one spot another would appear elsewhere... " Callahan (1998: 86). The conjunction of modernist open spaces with permeable street structures along the central section of Ratchadamnoen was crucial in enabling this kind of resistance to persist. However, these events were not called 'Bloody May' for nothing --estimates of the total death toll range from 50 to over 100. Despite its portrayal as a middle class uprising the victims were found to be mostly labourers, traders and street vendors (Callahan 1998). The conflict finally concluded when the Prime Minister (General Suchinda) resigned at the King's request.

Monuments and Memories

One can walk the length of Ratchadamneon Avenue and find almost nothing to mark these events in Thai history. The civic boulevard is periodically decorated with images of king and nation (Figure 7) and a MacDonald's restaurant now overlooks the Democracy Monument. While the memories of both the moments of liberation and the slaughter have been kept alive in books, photographs and videos, there has long been a desire for urban memorials to those who have died. Many of the 400,000 who participated in 1973 are now in positions of influence and a proposed memorial to those events has broad support from the government and the King. The proposed site is on the south side of Ratchadamnoen, a 40 metre gap in the streetwall about 200 metres west of the Democracy Monument. This is the site of one of the government buildings burnt down in 1973 and the struggle over its use has become a metaphor for Thai politics --owned by Crown Property, leased to the military and rented by the lotteries commission. The monument will now go ahead in the form of a pyramid surmounted by a cone which will emit light. However, the major dispute has not been over the existence, site or design of the monument but over its name. Specifically, should it be called the 'October 14 Monument' (identifying the 1973 killings) or the 'October Monument', a slippage which might include those killed in October 1976? Underlying this dispute is the different role taken by the King in those events. It has been resolved, at least officially, to restrict the meaning of the monument to 1973 (Anjira 1999; Chaiwat 1998). But if there is one lesson from this story it is that meanings are not so easily fixed; and that monuments to the past can be mobilized as vehicles to the future.

Figure 7: Ratchadamnoen Klang Ave, 1999

Monuments in Thailand have traditionally been only for the dead.[v] The Democracy Monument, was originally an emblem for an ideal that was stillborn, yet it has been harnessed to the interests of democracy. Its meanings have been reconstructed through political action. Its role as a legitimating device for a military dictatorship was transformed into that of a lever for democratic change. This is an unfinished story which has many moves left to play in this urban field, in a game where so much is at stake and so many lives have already been lost. The role of urban design in all this is an oblique one which can be written off as largely neutral. Yet I would suggest that it is the apparent neutrality of urban form that lends it potency as a resource for the practices of politics in public space. And this is particularly so in the Thai context where fluidities of meaning and multiple identifications are integral to social practice.

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Notes:

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[i] The importance of collective memory has been noted in relation to Bangkok by Tomosugi (quoted in Askew 1994: 136).

[ii] To even consider the Kings role in politics is insulting to some Thais since the standard view sees the King as above politics and beyond criticism (Hewison 1997). Respect for the King is enforced by 'lése majesté' laws and self-censorship. While I regret any offence felt by Thai readers, it is not possible to properly examine issues of political legitimation in public space without examining the King's role.

[iii] While the King was the key agent in both initiating the development and overseeing its form, the urban design has been credited to the government architect Fariola.

[iv] The buildings which line the boulevard were designed by Chitsane Aphaiwong. The monument is attributed to M. L. Poom Malakul and the Italian born sculptor Feroci (also known as Bhirasri) who undertook the bas reliefs.

[v] Malinee Khumsupha, quoted in Vasana 1999.