

Gentrification and Heritage Tourism: Spatial Conflicts in Central Bangkok

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Abstract

Approximately 300 people dwelling next to Mahakan Fort in central Bangkok were sentenced to make way for a public park, as part of the conservation of Bangkok heritage district and 'gentrification' aiming at transforming neglected areas and creating a world-class tourist city. The community members have been struggling for several years to land sharing with city authorities and the elites who failed to appreciate the value of the inhabitants as part of the heritage setting.

Instead of proceeding with the forced eviction, the community members have demonstrated their ability to conserve the site and to manage their own affairs. They have tried to turn the contested area into a living museum and offered their own services as guardians of the site by organising a night-watch system to protect the site. They also created the beginnings of a public park more pleasant than empty lawns, offered to pay rental fees to the city authorities, and proposed tourism as a vehicle for promoting their cultural heritage.

The paper argues that creating a public park without community participation is not always the best solution of heritage conservation. Meanwhile, preservation of the park and urban heritage conservation cannot be dissociated from indigenous people living in the historic district. It is living heritage embodied in local people to give a real meaning of visitor experience.

Keywords: Gentrification, heritage conservation, tourism, eviction, land sharing

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Introduction

Heritage conservation in Thailand is today faced with several obstacles that have become manifest in the failure to recognise local culture values and vernacular heritage (Stent, 2013).

Communities, who are living around urban historic quarters for several generations and have a high concentration of distinctive cultural assets, should be involved in the planning and implementation processes of urban heritage conservation. Currently, a number of the urban historic quarters and communities in Bangkok are threatened by rapid economic and social transformation. While important palaces, royal temples, archeological sites and urban landmarks have been preserved, old communities and their distinctive characteristics featuring ‘ancient’ wooden structures, traditional cultures, and intangible heritage have received little attention in urban heritage conservation and development by local authorities (Pimonsathean 2007). Even worse, they are threatened to comply with local authorities’ order to leave their home site to make way for a public park in coalition with tourism. This can be seen as a threat appeared with the attempt by the city authorities to demolish the small but vibrant community of Mahakan Fort residing in central Bangkok. The long-standing ruling class members and the city authorities failed to appreciate the value of early nineteenth century wooden vernacular architecture, social practices, and local cultural values in this traditional community, and attempted to turn the space into a public park in order to open space of ‘royal heritage’ namely the old city wall, fortifications, and other historic monuments.

The paper examines challenges in safeguarding urban space of the Mahakan Fort Community (MFC) who has been under threat of displacement as a result from the urban historic conservation project, and the strategies used in their resistance to the forced eviction. The author proposes an approach to urban community conservation which encompasses physical elements of the historic community as well as the consideration of their socio-economic and intangible heritage dimensions. The forced eviction of the MFC has been recognised by numerous NGOs, other slum communities, and educational institutes as an outstanding case which the community members have been fighting in court since 1992, against local authorities for safeguarding their land and community legacy. This fighting leads to a conservation approach which addresses the need for community involvement in heritage conservation and development. Today this community has been a learning center and a tourist attraction for modern visitors who are keen on issues of conflict management, community heritage conservation, vernacular architecture, and arts and crafts production.

Gentrification and Heritage Conservation

Understanding the consequences of urban redevelopment process, especially in gentrification and historic preservation is a main concern of urban scholars, cultural heritage experts, human right activists, and tourism planners. According to Daher (1999: 45), gentrification is defined as “...*the process by which low-income occupants of developed or rehabilitated areas in urban or rural settings are replaced by higher-income occupants*”. Such process generally attracts new residents and new economic activities and consequently creates an increase in property values and taxes which the

original inhabitants cannot afford the rent. This also leads to displacement, disruption to livelihoods, and discontinuity of local cultural values and ways of life (Daher, 1999). Thus, gentrification is related to the production of new social identities for the middle class through the restoration of deteriorated working-class neighborhoods.

Although the concept of gentrification originally started with ‘residential gentrification’ of inner city areas, it is also associated with regeneration and tourism (i.e. tourist facilities replace those affordable to the local residents) in the global context, including the new urban colonialism, which has adverse social impacts on original residents living in the areas (Atkinson & Bridge, 2005; Orbasli, 2002). Meanwhile, gentrification is linked to ‘revanchist’ public policies which spatially discriminate people by class and race through the process of displacement – initiated, encouraged, and approved by authorities, according to Pokharatsiri (2013). The concept of ‘new urban revanchism’ is commonly seen in developing countries, especially Thailand, where space symbolises the power of ruling class and institution (Pokharatsiri, 2013; Prakitnonthakan, 2013). Accordingly, vernacular heritage is not officially valued and recognised; thus, local inhabitants are rarely involved in decision regarding their own heritage, or involving historical sites that are located within their communities (Stent, 2013).

Rationale of Rattanakosin Master Plan

Being influenced by the notion of urban development and city beautification, a conservation of Bangkok old town or Rattanakosin was initiatively aimed at drawing investment and geared towards the development of tourist attractions into previously neglected areas and creating a world-class city. This Bangkok old town has been well protected under the Master Plan of Conservation and Development of Rattanakosin (hereafter Master Plan) in 1982, along with the supervision of the Rattanakosin and Historic Towns Committee (hereafter Committee) which is formulated by the central government and chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister. The Master Plan significantly contributes to the safeguarding of three historic royal areas of the old town including (1) the location of the Grand Palace and the Temple of Emerald Buddha, (2) the eastern side of the first area where a number of monasteries and palaces of royal families still remain today, (3) the western bank of the Chao Phrya river which was served as the capital during 1767-1782 (Sirisrisak 2009). It is noted that 133 items of the prominent structure for preservation were announced on the occasion of the bicentennial anniversary of the Chakri Dynasty. These objects have been expressed in architectonic and visual form the authorised memory of the city (Askew 2002). Likewise, Prakitnonthakan (2013) also observed that the Master Plan selectively features heritage conservation of high culture - such as palaces, monasteries, forts, walls, and government offices created by royalty and aristocracy:

“These plans to conserve and develop the area are completely determined by the frame of mind which draws on the royal-nationalist bundle of historical memory. Most of the projects are designed to open up vacant space in order to improve the views of prominent monuments associated with the monarchy”.

(Chatri Prakitnonthakan, 2013: 133)

It is accepted that the Master Plan has contributed to the preservation of surviving physical manifestations of the Indic urbanism which once lay at the basis of the

Siamese state (Askew, 1994). However, community heritage such as historic quarters and communities, everyday life, vernacular culture, traditional markets, and shop houses, is excluded from the Master Plan (Pimonsathean 2007; Sirisrisak 2009). The conservation plan includes decisions to preserve and renovate Mahakan Fort and the historic gate and wall, but traditional living settlements become neglected to maintain 'sense of place' (Shinawatra, 2009). The conservation plan was hardly discussed with the public and local residents living around the area. It seems that there is no place for cultural heritage of local people in the conservation plan. Accordingly, a variety of conservation projects that were developed in the Master Plan created adverse impacts on local inhabitants, who had not been involved in urban planning and conservation processes (Wungpatcharapon 2009).

In Bangkok old town, some squatter communities are supported by NGOs and politicians in claiming the right over the land. One of which is the MFC, a small, but mutually supportive community of around 300 inhabitants (67 households) residing between the old Bangkok city wall and the city moat next to Mahakan Fort, one of the two historic fortresses, which still have been in existence nowadays. Originally, fourteen fortresses were built in the reign of King Ram I (in the 1780s), along with the establishment of Bangkok and the Grand Palace, to protect enemy invasion. It is noted that many people may not be aware of an existence of this small community situated on the land of 7,836 square metres, 52 metres wide by 150 metres long (Aruninta, 2009).

In January 2003, the MFC was served with an eviction notice by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) as part of the Master Plan. In order to expand the green space within the city for tourism, the BMA stated that removing the community and creating open space would help tourists to have a dedicated site from which to view nearby prominent monuments built by kings (such as Mahakan Fort, the city wall, Loha Prasat, and Wat Saket) and enhance tourist safety from criminal elements (Pithouse, 2008; Prakitnonthakan, 2013). However, there is no serious study whether the green space is real or illusory.

This eviction order marked a tense moment of struggle, protest, and harassment because the community members tried to defend their humanity right to land, as defined by the UN Human Right Council (2007), "*the human right to adequate housing is the right of every woman, man, youth and child to gain and sustain a safe and secure home and community in which to live in peace and dignity.*" For the beautification of Bangkok old town, the MFC - who has still lived for up to six generations and worked there - was offered relocation to a site on the periphery of Bangkok, 45 km away. Through personal communication with the community members on 19th January 2013, the new site in Minburi district is a long distance with poor infrastructure and no vehicle access to hospitals. In addition, the relocation to the new site deteriorated relationships of social intimacy including their traditional occupations which require a high degree of face-to face communication in business. If these people relocate to a far site for commuting, it will mostly prevent their descendants from carrying on forever. It can be noted that they are forcibly evicted in disregard of the law, leaving them subject to disruption to their daily life, economic opportunities, livelihoods, and social support systems.

Vernacular Architecture and Living Heritage

In his research project on Rattanakosin Charter, Prakitnonthakan (2013: 141) described a collection of vernacular heritage at the MFC reflecting an evolution of wooden structures featuring the late 18th century traditional Thai houses, with their characteristic large open spaces underneath:

“There are old-style stilt house residences dating back to the early Rattanakosin period: “gingerbread” style wooden houses reflecting the taste for foreign styles during the Fifth to Seventh reigns; and wooden houses belonging to the past half-century or so. The layout of the community is old and quite unique, not found in any other neighborhood on Rattantakosin Island or elsewhere”.

The distinctive layout of the community enables individual houses to make great use of the common area. The houses are built next to one another and all have good access to a community courtyard. Interestingly, there are no walls and fences isolating each family as existed nowadays in Bangkok (Prakitnonthakan 2006 and 2013).

In terms of historic value, the MFC was served as the birthplace of traditional performing arts of *Likae* which was performed in the royal palace. In other words, it was the ancient home site of aristocrats and artisans who had worked at the Siamese court. The MFC also features a series of ‘traditional’ occupations including the hand-manufacture of ascetics’ images (hermit dolls), making bamboo bird cages, breeding fighting cocks, goldsmithing, food production and vending. Nowadays such traditional occupations are still the main source of income for some residents who depend on their close association with the ‘backpacker enclave’ of Khaosan Road. Importantly, the MFC is a loyal Thai citizen who desires to develop their site as a living tribute to national tradition (Herzfeld 2006). They have an active committed to the conservation and maintenance of historic sites around their home site.

Forced eviction from the historic community would amount to a violation of housing rights and against the principles of conservation in the Washington Charter (Prakitnonthakan, 2013) and would, at the same, mean the death of what the Harvard’s anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2006) described as a “...*vibrant, cohesive community with a remarkable sense of collective responsibility and mutual support.*” Furthermore, the demolition of this old community would mean the end of “...*a rare complex of vernacular architecture*”, including beautiful old teak houses without fences which are worth preserving in rapidly modernising Bangkok.

Reaction to Forced Eviction

Considering Mahakan Fort area as the untidy and crowded slum community clustered behind the white imposing wall, the city authorities failed to appreciate the community heritage that is inherited from past generations. The BMA has probably calculated that what happens to the MFC will affect the rest of twenty communities that make the Rattanakosin area their home sites. According to the Master Plan, buildings constructed after the nineteenth century were to be demolished and replaced by open space (Shinawatra, 2009). The provision of the Committee came into force, during the 1990s, in an attempt to ‘cleanse’ local communities residing in urban

historic quarters (Pokharatsiri, 2013). After 13 years of conflict, the first house in the community was razed in the process of clearing one third of the community. This happened despite disagreement of other 38 homeowners who did not take compensation money from the city. Ten more homes were the next to be demolished since the homeowners have received all compensation payments.

The community members organised themselves and tried to prevent the eviction using all the recognised methods. They staged protests, delivered petition to the BMA, built barricades and organised a night-watch system to guard the community. In the words of Tawatchai Woramahakun (cited in COHRE 2003), a community leader, when pointing out a barricade to prevent the authorities from coming into the community and destroying their houses:

“This is the only thing we can do to protect ourselves because the BMA is determined to evict us and they can come in at any time with bulldozers and officials to do it.”

Furthermore, they set up a vernacular museum of the site and refused to abide by frequent court decisions to proceed with the eviction. Until now, the MFC has remained in existence, although they have been living in constant fear of eviction. The forced eviction at the MFC has raised many questions, as follows:

- What is the value of the site? Is it necessary to preserve artifacts and architecture alone or is it necessary to preserve communities living in the settings?
- Who benefits from the development of a tourist park, and who pays the cost of tourism?
- Was the BMA evicting the community simply for tourism purpose? Should it be these people alone that pay such a devastatingly high price for the social cost of tourism?
- For gentrification and community economic development, it is true that the residents have no legal right on the land. Do, however, they have the right to be part of overall economic development in their community area in which they have resided for several generations and still worked there? If so, how?
- Do they have the right to determine the direction of historic conservation located within their community?
- In which ways could we resolve the conflict between the public park and housing issue?

The author argues that creating a public park without community participation is not always the best solution of urban development. In order for sustainable development in the government funded projects, planning needs to incorporate people from the bottom up (Wungpatcharapon 2009, Wattanawanyoo 2012). The Master Plan is certainly unpleasant news for twenty- one communities associated with the Master Plan. The idea of gentrification and urban redevelopment should keep the affected community as the priority and figure out how to develop the area later (Prakitnonthakan, 2006). Likewise, Michael Herzfeld (2003) commented that “No western tourists would be interested in a plain park, but a community within a park would make for a real tourist attraction”. It is true that domestic and western tourists may desire an authentic experience by interacting with local residents and learning

traditional cultures, arts and craft production within the communities (Richards and Wilson 2006).

What is more interesting about this community's resistance to the eviction is that they supplemented it with a number of additional, pre-emptive activities. Resistance to the change will be more powerful and productive if a driving force is inferior and vulnerable. In this case, the community has gained support from outsiders by creating a loose network with NGOs at the local level and international level, conservational network, other communities, government agency and educational institutes (see Bristol 2007). They gain support from many parties which propose a highly innovative land sharing plan (one-fourth area) as an alternative to eviction and relocation. The plan included the renovation of older buildings and the integration of local residents into a public park (Du Plessis 2005).

The MFC has tried to open up space for the formation and consideration of creative alternatives to their own displacement. From the perspective of community members, an empty and uninhabited park in this secluded space would provide a perfect haven for criminal gangs. Meanwhile, the public park behind the thick old wall with the canal in the back can be seen as a drug crime and prostitution spot as there is no night-watch system. Coming up with a new proposal, they offered to take turns to help maintain the park's cleanliness and provide security both day and night for those visit in exchange for permission to live in one fourth of the land. According to the project, the community will remain as a living museum while the rest of the land will be converted to the park as the previous plan. Importantly, they have jointly established a fund to preserve the ancient wooden houses and also offered to revitalise the floating market adjacent to the site so as to promote community-based tourism and traditional handicrafts. Providing recreation at no cost will also help to develop the community as a tourist attraction. If the public show interest, this historic community could certainly become another living heritage in Bangkok (Lipat-Chesler 2010).

The community started implementing part of this plan, and many outsiders rallied to the call to support them in this process. Some helped create the media to keep the public aware of the community's plight and used design as a negotiation tool to the authorities. Unfortunately, the project is still facing administrative and legislative difficulties and cannot be implemented (see details in Pokharatsiri, 2013).

The Learning Center

Having an interview with community members during the community field trip on 19th January 2013, the author has discovered that the residents have continuously implemented and turned the site into a living museum as suggested by educational institutes. They have created meandering pathways amongst the buildings and ancient trees, and turned the oldest existing house in the settlement into a museum and exhibition area for their proposal. This large community square is the place where people of all ages can participate in social events as they desire. It is noted that the site appeals many university students who come to learn community-based lessons such as conflict management, community-based tourism, urban heritage conservation and management. The visitors have gained the first-hand experience in sharing their views with the community members and their leader. Recently, the community has signed a memorandum of understanding with Rajamangala University of Technology Phra

Nakhon on the development of service learning program. This collaboration attempts to exchange knowledge between the community and students, instructors involved on how to wisely manage tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Being located adjacent to outstanding tourist attractions, especially the Golden Mount, Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall, Wat Ratchanada, the Democracy Monument, and Bangkok's largest backpacker enclave of Khaosan Road, the MFC can be a potential tourist attraction among western tourists who are keen to local cultural values and ways of life. The community is strongly recommended to devolve into a creative tourist attraction as the tourist backpackers could engage in authentic experience and participative learning in the arts, traditional cultures, architectural heritage and special character of the site. For educational purposes, the community members have offered a series of craft production workshop including making bamboo bird cages and making hermit dolls. In order to appreciate the enormous value of the community driven initiative, a revival of disappeared performing arts of *Likae* should be encouraged and incorporated into educational programs for young students and local people interested.

The community members demonstrate their commitment and sense of appreciation for cultural heritage. This reflects from their preservation of their traditional festivals inherited from the past including Loy Krathong, National Youth Day. In addition, a regular ritual for the protective Spirit of Mahakan Fort annually takes place one week after Songkran festival (traditional Thai New Year during 13-15 April). This event aims to pay respect to Spirit of Mahakan Fort who helps protect the inhabitants from any harm.

The community members have created social media, especially Facebook to raise public awareness of a marathon fighting for their own spaces and promoting their history, traditional wisdom, and social events including service learning projects within their community.

Conclusion

Heritage conservation should not be undertaken as a specialised activity of learned historians for the pleasure of the elites only. They should not be seen as high-class heritage commodification for the purposes of creating new social identities for members of the middle and upper-middle classes. Rather, heritage conservation should be seen as a complex activity aimed to enhancing cultural continuity, genuine community development and participation, and the reaffirmation of the sense of belonging to a shared place and way of life (Daher, 1999).

The conflict among local residents, the city authorities, and other players in urban conservation reflects the negative impacts of the top-down approach used in the Master Plan.

Recreating the pleasant scenery without considering the importance of local inhabitants will never succeed in surviving the site (Siririsak, 2009). The city authorities should not be passive participants in the conservation process. They should call for genuine community development and discourage all types of displacement or relocation. They should bear in mind that a country's most important resource is its people, and that without them, culture and cultural production will lose its special

meaning. It argues that driving out low-income communities will not contribute to their preservation. It will also bring about a decline and discontinuity of the historic quarter from being passed on. Instead, allowing the community to stay at the present site will help preserve vernacular heritage and support their ways of life. Modern visitors would prefer to interact with local residents, rather than simply a plain park.

The case of MFC illustrates a small, but vibrant and cohesive group of residents who have tried hard to open up their space for the formulation and consideration of creative alternatives to eviction through their strong actions and innovations. The community members show their strategies in counteracting eviction threats in an innovative manner, which is essential as part of developing sustainable strategies for the conservation and management of the site (ICOMOS, 2005). It also illustrates a unique opportunity for partnerships among key stakeholders including NGOs, other communities, educational institutes in promoting models for development which incorporate cultural assets and economic precincts as part of urban historic conservation. Creating a living museum, in coalition with a community-based tourism area, has been proposed as a meaningful vehicle for engagement in promoting their vernacular heritage and ways of life. Meanwhile, community-based tourism can influence policy in conservation of community heritage by creating general public awareness. The increase of visits to the MFC can help the community in negotiating with city authorities.

Despite the daily struggle to maintain their existence, the residents have also lived a normal, largely hidden life behind the wall. It is hoped that there will be no more inevitable threats that may harm this small strong community. The lesson from this case would give some insights for other historic communities particularly in developing countries that tend to have a similar approach in preventing the eviction in the light of adverse threats and pressures of gentrification.

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