

Reviving the Neglected Heritage of the Rattanakosin Era: The Case of the Old Chao Phraya River Oxbow

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Introduction

Historic urban communities in the major towns across Thailand are facing rapid demolition as a result of urban development. According to a report of the National Housing Authority of Thailand,¹ there are 140 historic urban communities, which can be classified into five categories: floating houses, waterfront houses, shop houses, urban villages and market communities. Comprised of simple wood structures, these homes and shop houses of humble architectural craftsmanship represent unique patterns of early urban settlement, knowledge of light wood frame structure, and the livelihood and culture of the Chao Phraya River Valley. And yet, the cultural landscape of these urban clusters of wooden houses does not figure in the official Thai conception of architectural heritage, which focuses on Buddhist and royally-related structures.²

In this article, I focus on three river-based communities in the area of the Old Chao Phraya River Oxbow in Thonburi. These three communities are: Khlong Bangkok Noi to the north, Chakphra in the middle, and Bangluang or Bangkok Yai at the south. This area was selected in part because of its unique historical relationship with the Rattanakosin Island Historic District.

The residents of this area are the descendants of low-ranking bureaucrats who served the ruling classes in the capital city of Bangkok. It is also well known as the birthplace of the popular female protagonist “Mae Ploy” in the Thai classic novel, *Four Reigns*, or *Si Phaendin*. This research will highlight this area’s historic significance, the major problems causing its decline, and the struggle by its canal

¹ Research Section of the National Housing Authority of Thailand and Faculty of Architecture, Thammasat University, *Final Report: Study of Housing and Community Standard for Conservation of Identity and Value of Historic Towns*, September 2010, p. 21–22.

² Weeraphan Shinawatra, “Understanding Cultural Landscape in Thai Urban Context: Bangkok Neglecting Water-Based City,” conference paper for the 6th international Symposium of Southeast Asian Technical University Consortium (SEATUC), March 2012.

communities to preserve the local identity of their urban settlements. My aim is to show that the Thai state's official heritage discourse neglects not only the vernacular architecture, but also the histories of farmers, merchants and bureaucrats who established these river-based urban settlements on the periphery of the royal capital. I will argue that restoration and planning efforts must focus not only on conserving the physical fabric of vernacular architecture, but also on documenting and revitalizing the intangible culture and local histories of its residents.

Old Chao Phraya River Oxbow: Bangkok's last canal community

The water-based communities along the Old Chao Phraya River Oxbow contain urban settlements that date back to around 1767 when King Taksin established Thonburi as his capital. When his successor, King Rama I, moved the capital across the river to the east side, which today is the Rattanakosin Historic District, most bureaucrats continued to live on the Thonburi side, concentrated in the area which today is Khlong Bangkok Noi–Bangkok Yai.

The origin of this area can be traced back to the reign of King Chairacha of Ayutthaya (r. 1534–1546) when he ordered the excavation of a shortcut route to reduce travel time to the Gulf of Thailand (see Figure 1). This shortcut grew wider as a result of the direct flow of the river, and is now recognized by most Bangkok residents as part of the Chao Phraya River, while the old oxbow became a small channel (later mistakenly called a canal) encircling communities of bureaucrats who served the palace from the beginning of the Bangkok period through the end of the absolute monarchy.

In stark contrast to the bustling metropolis of Bangkok on the east bank,

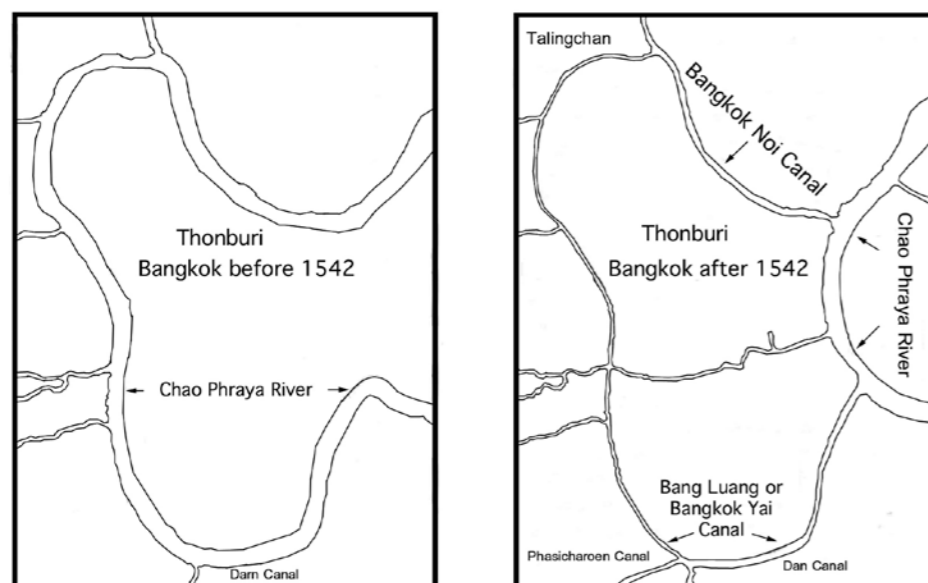


Figure 1. Thonburi and Bangkok before and after the shortcut was created in 1542

Thonburi on the west bank of the Chao Phraya River has not faced the same level of rapid development and urbanization, and thus still maintains the historic urban fabric of early canal communities which date to the establishment of Bangkok as the kingdom's capital. Moreover, an alternative narrative of the official history of Rattanakosin Historic District can be found among the residents, whose predecessors served royal members in Bangkok's palaces and worked in the old city district. The urban settlements of the Old Chao Phraya River Oxbow – with their everyday activities in communities along a canal network – constitute a unique cultural landscape in keeping with the definition of World Heritage³ and represent the living history of the Rattanakosin era. The uniqueness of this cultural landscape is reflected not only in the wooden houses, but also the market places and small but elaborated royal temples along the canal—structures which bear untold, alternative histories of the Rattanakosin era, which will be discussed later in this article.

The local houses along the Old Chao Phraya River Oxbow can be divided into two categories: houses of commoners and bureaucrats. The former (see Figure 2) are simple, light-frame wooden structures for local farmers and merchants, and the latter (see Figure 3) display unique architectural details reflecting European influences that were incorporated into royal villas in Bangkok during the reigns of King Chulalongkorn and King Vajiravudh respectively. The houses of local commoners exemplify the pattern of early urban settlement in the area with its distinctive canal lifestyle. Those of bureaucrats, with their unique architectural features, such as hip roofs with ceramic tiles and shutter windows, demonstrate the knowledge of art and crafts which was transferred from ruling elites to petty bureaucrats and commoners. However, these wooden houses and canal communities are now in a seriously dilapidated state and in need of a proper development and conservation plan.

The population in the community has declined because the younger generations have moved out to live near their workplace or to suburban areas. For the most part, only senior residents are left, and they face difficulties in maintaining the historic wood houses. Vacant lots near the main streets have been transformed into new suburban housing developments and factories, which clash visually with the old community. Moreover, immigrants have come into the area as labor for the factories, changing the socioeconomic profile. The newly developed network of roads was not planned to connect to the old canal network, thus creating difficulty for traveling

³ In the World Heritage Convention 1992, the Committee acknowledged that cultural landscapes represent the “combined works of nature and of man” designated in Article 1 of the Convention. They are illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal. Cultural landscapes fall into three main categories: First is the clearly defined landscape designed and created intentionally by man. The second category is the organically evolved landscape and the final category is the associative cultural landscape associated with powerful natural and religious elements. The area of Khlong Bang Luang also fits the category of the evolved landscape.



Figure 2. Wooden houses along Khlong Bang Luang

from the canal community to other parts of Bangkok.

The roads leading to the community are narrow pedestrian walkways, not wide enough for full services of basic public infrastructure, such as garbage collection, sewage systems, and tap water. Therefore, refuse and garbage is illegally disposed into the canal causing water pollution and blocking transportation. Moreover, in some areas, utility ducts are installed along the edge of the canal, creating visual chaos around the canal communities. Long tail boats carrying tourists for sightseeing activities also generate loud noise disturbing the neighborhood. These physical problems are driving some indigenous residents to move to other parts of Bangkok, which offer better public facilities (see Figure 4).

Most of the historic conservation plans and reports produced by the Rattanakosin Committee consider only the Rattanakosin Historic District on the east bank of the



Figure 3. Wooden houses with hip roof and simple gable roof



Figure 4. Abandoned wooden house along the canal of Khlong Bangkok Noi and Chakphra

Chao Phraya River and perhaps also King Taksin's palace district in the Thonburi area (see Figure 5). Furthermore, there have been no studies supported by the government or academic institutions on the history of the bureaucrats who served the royal rulers in the Rattanakosin Historic District in the past, nor any conservation plans for these historic wooden houses. The Old Chao Phraya River Oxbow needs a historic conservation plan that can safeguard this area and provide solutions for sustainable tourism, as well as a plan to renovate the public facilities and utilities.

Without such a conservation plan, such as the one implemented in the area of Rattanakosin Island, mega projects and infrastructural development can be introduced without any consideration of preserving the fabric of the historic community. Indeed, this process is already underway. The mass transit system in Thonburi is now in the construction stage on Charansanitwong Road, the major artery cutting through the water-based communities of this area (see Figure 6). The elevated train stations will become the new neighborhood centers, and the land value of the area will increase exponentially. The owners of historic wooden houses will be able to earn more from selling their property for new high-rise towers and condominiums. Without proper planning, the construction of public facilities such as concrete flood walls and utility ducts, that government authorities must provide for these new developments, will create more visual chaos and block the view to the canal. The historic canal community of Bangkok will soon disappear, and the alternative histories of the petty bureaucrats who were the life and soul of Rattanakosin Historic District will vanish.

Ministry of Public Works with the Museum Department from the Ministry of Moral Affairs. The first director general of the FAD was Prince Krommaphra Naretworrarit, King Vajiravudh's uncle, King Chulalongkorn's half-brother and a former minister of the capital. Moreover, when King Prajadhipok established the Royal Institute and merged the FAD into this new institution, the key directors of the units within the Royal Institute were also prominent royal members.

In 1935, three years after the end of the absolute monarchy, the nationalist government reestablished the FAD and dissolved the Ministry of Palace Affairs into a small office of Palace Affairs. The government then moved the royal guild unit of the Outer Palace (*kong chang wangnok*) and classical court performance (*kong mahorasop*) to the FAD.⁷ After this revival and consolidation, the FAD continued to play an important role in constructing national heritage and identity, but most FAD staff were royal court servants. Thus we can say that the FAD was the state conservation office responsible for producing and disseminating the “authorized heritage discourse” to fortify the nation's identity grounded in the intellectual legacy of royal arts, architecture, literature, rituals and crafts.

From the annual reports published by the FAD from 2001 to 2011, we can see that the FAD's main duty is to carry on the same sort of conservation work and museum collection as was envisioned by previous royal rulers, dating back to King Rama I's search for Buddhist manuscripts for the Convocation of Lord Buddha's Canon at the beginning of the Bangkok period, and King Chulalongkorn's establishment of the Museum Department in 1897.⁸ Moreover, the FAD often portrays itself as the agency executing the wishes of the king and royal members to nurture Thai arts as the heritage of Thailand. In addition, it claims to act under the auspicious direction of the king as the great artist and the father of the nation's heritage conservation.⁹

With respect to historical conservation, the FAD's Office of Archaeology makes surveys and prepares documents while the Office of Architecture provides technical knowledge for conservation. The primary tasks of the Office of Archaeology include: surveying of historic sites, evaluating historic significance, preparing documents, and maintaining connections and networks of international institutions involved with conservation. However, the FAD does not have much experience in the conservation of living, historic communities, although it has organized seminars supporting local advocacy and collaboration with communities since 1990.¹⁰

Establishment of the Fine Arts Department, 2011, p. 7, use the term the *chang pranitsin* or guild of decorative arts instead.

⁷ “Entering the 100th year of Fine Arts Department”, p. 8.

⁸ Bulong Srikanok, “Retrospective review of the duties of the Fine Arts Department” in *90 Years Fine Arts Department, 2001*, p. 12.

⁹ Somsuda Leeyawanit, “Entering the 100th year of Fine Arts Department” in *100 Years of the Establishment of the Fine Arts Department, 2011*, p. 11.

¹⁰ “Office of Archaeology” in *96 years of the establishment of the Fine Arts Department, 2007*, p. 68.

Some of the FAD's staff are aware of the recent focus on cultural landscape as defined by UNESCO and the World Heritage Committee, but they still lack staff with expertise in both architectural conservation and community development to collaborate with local communities. Only in 2010 did the FAD start to work with local organizations to manage five historic sites in provincial towns¹¹ but these towns still request the FAD to execute their renovation projects. Moreover, the conservation law in Thailand has no compensation programs for the owners of historic properties, thus it is difficult for the FAD to work with the private owners of living heritage. Listing them as national heritage will limit the owners' right to develop their properties and could affect their everyday life without financial compensation. The FAD needs a better legal framework with financial support and more staff who can work closely with communities and owners.

According to several FAD annual reports, the work of the Office of Architecture includes supplying various architectural designs, ranging from large-scale government buildings such as monumental libraries, grand exhibition halls abroad and Thai traditional architecture for royal temples to small structures of stages, pavilions, gateways and street furniture for royal ceremonies, rituals and government events, along with implementing conservation plans and maintaining more than a thousand historic sites in Thailand. With a staff of less than one hundred¹² (including about 20 architects and four landscape architects), FAD's Office of Architecture is overwhelmed with work requested by government agencies.

Due to all of these historical factors and human resource limitations, historic, cultural landscapes such as the Old Chao Phraya River Oxbow are largely neglected by the FAD. Even though the early settlement of canal communities in this area would fit with the World Heritage Committee's definition of a cultural landscape, this early canal urban settlement still has no place on the national heritage list. The work by the FAD most closely related are some studies and conservation projects on Thai vernacular architecture that involved royal members in their history. It is clear that the FAD's primary duty is to protect and conserve the royal architectural legacy.

Chaotic public facilities

The problems with public facilities in the loop of Khlong Bangkok Noi-Chakphra-Bang Luang are largely due to the lack of cooperation among government agencies at both national and local levels. As noted above, the old urban communities in the heart of Thonburi district have small narrow roads and canal networks, and public utilities and facilities were installed in an unplanned manner, causing

¹¹ “Archaeology Office” in *100 Years of the Establishment of the Fine Arts Department, 2011*, p. 47.

¹² “Office of Architecture” in *100 Years of the Establishment of the Fine Arts Department, 2011*, pp. 111–113.

difficulties in maintenance. For instance, the narrow roads in the community are wide enough for bicycles and pedestrians, but not for garbage trucks, resulting in illegal trash disposal in the canal (see Figure 7). Water and air pollution have followed. Moreover, due to the lack of connections to the local road system, boats are still a primary mode of transport in the area. Residents in the past used to paddle boats or take shuttle boats to work, but today engine-powered boats operating for tourists dominate the canal, making paddle boats unsafe. Boat tours along Khlong Bangkok Noi are very popular among foreign visitors staying at the luxury hotels along the Chao Phraya River, but the boats' diesel engines produce noise pollution and high waves, affecting the livelihood of residents along the canal.

To solve the problem of canal transportation, these canal communities need to work with various government agencies at both national and local levels. The Marine Department issues licenses for operating boats and the Department of Pollution Control is responsible for mitigating noise. The Bangkok Metropolitan Authority's Transportation Department and Drainage Department regulate the water transportation system including barriers along the waterways and jetties (see Figure 8). For solving problems over inappropriate utility ducts, structures, and barriers, residents of this water-based community need to negotiate with various state agencies. The electric power, telephone and tap water lines belong to the three different national agencies (Metropolitan Electricity Authority, Telephone Organization of Thailand and Metropolitan Waterworks Authority), while planning of pedestrian walkways, sewage, road, trash collection, and lighting systems are maintained by the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA) through the district office.

Since Thailand was not colonized by European colonial rulers but rather selectively modernized by its royal rulers, the internal social organization in government agencies in Thailand still has a hierarchical order and feudal character. The heads of different agencies still act as feudal masters surrounded by circles of lower ranking noblemen. Planning decisions and agreements among government agencies are difficult to execute since all decisions by representatives must first get approval from the heads of their agencies. This condition makes it difficult to move



Figure 7. Utility duct overhanging houses along the canal and illegal trash disposal at the junction of canals

forward with the implementation of any masterplan in Thailand.

Given the current problems, the area of the Old Chao Phraya River canal loop needs proper planning to improve and manage all public utilities and transportation systems in an integrated manner. The area also needs conservation planning and zoning regulations to protect it from new infrastructure development that could wipe out the communities, as is likely to happen with the new skytrain stations that create a demand for new, high-density residential developments around these transportation nodes. However, as it now stands, the Rattanakosin Committee and its Secretariat, the Office of Environmental Planning and Policies, can regulate the development only of the government properties that are located near the royal temples and palaces in Rattanakosin Historic District.

New hope for saving Khlong Bang Luang

Although the main government agencies, such as the FAD and the Office of Environmental Planning and Policy, are still preoccupied with larger scale conservation work, numerous international and national advocacy organizations, such as the Society for the Conservation of National Treasure (SCONTE), the Association of Siamese Architects (ASA), the School of Architecture and Design of King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), the Department of Urban and Regional Planning of Chulalongkorn University, the Artist's House, the River City Shopping Center, and ICOMOS Bangkok Office, recognize the historical value of the canal loop of Khlong Bangkok Noi–Khlong Bang Luang in the nation's cultural landscape. This private-academic network has endeavored to support local advocacy groups in the area to improve the living conditions of canal communities. For instance, the group has proposed sightseeing boat trips for tourists along this canal loop, with a focus on the history and cultural heritage of the community (see Figure 9).

The trip could cover important historic sites from the Museum of the Royal Barges at the northern loop and include the group of historic royal temples with elaborate architectural details (Wat Ratcha-Orot, Wat Apsornsawan, Wat Nang,



Figure 8. Concrete structures for protection against flooding and erosion cause visual chaos and block transportation

and Wat Nangnong) and waterfront markets at the southern end. For the sake of local residents, the boats need to install engines with special equipment to lower the noise. The Faculty of Engineering at KMUTT can provide the test run for this equipment. The Marine Department can then mandate this equipment for all future navigation licenses. This private-academic group can also help to represent the local community in negotiation with various agencies responsible for the improvement of public facilities in the canal. For instance, the ticket cost for boat trips should be paid per hour instead of per ride, which encourages a boat driver to earn more payment by driving faster, causing high waves that damage the banks of the canal and make other waterfront activities unsafe.

Sketching homes, recovering local histories

A survey of historic wooden houses to support the new boat trip and create a record of historic wooden houses was conducted by a group of students from the School of Architecture and Design, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (see Figures 10, 11, 12). It revealed not only the tangible record of wood structures, but also important information about the intangible culture, livelihoods, and local histories of Khlong Bang Luang and Rattanakosin. For instance, among eight wooden houses surveyed along the Khlong Bang Luang to Bangwak canal, four belong to the descendants of bureaucrats who worked for royal elites, and the rest belong to the offspring of farmers and merchants. Currently, senior residents of these

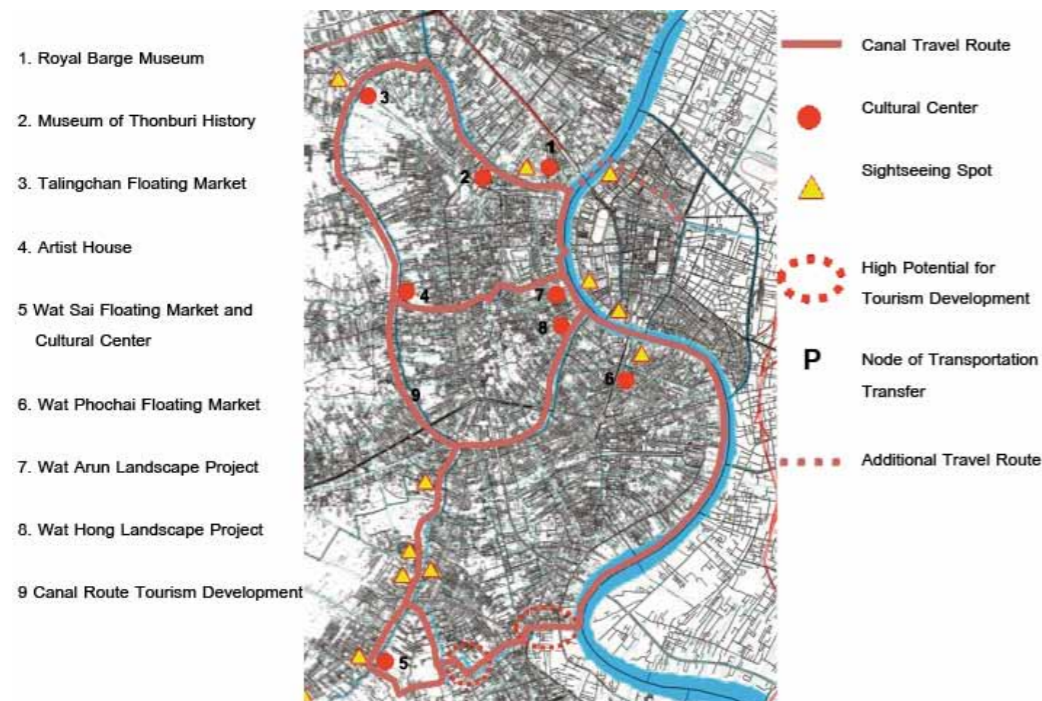


Figure 9. Map of proposed boat trip along Khlong Bangkok Noi Chakphra and Bangkok Yai including Khlong Dan

houses cannot afford to maintain the entire houses and live only on the first floor.

The second house belonged to unknown royal servants, but was sold to the current owner whose house is nearby. The third house originally belonged to Prince Kromphraya Devavongs Varopakarn, the first finance minister in Thai history, and was passed down to his daughter, Princess Srisalalai. The ownership was then passed on to her cook, the mother of the present owner. The fourth house belongs to the grandchild of a palace servant who was married to a palace policeman. His grandparents both worked in the palace and had described paddling by boat to work in the Grand Palace. The sixth house belongs to a village headman whose great grandmother owned a factory that dyed saffron robes, and who had worked for royal elites. A photograph shows her in female palace attire of the early twentieth century, wearing a lace blouse and Thai traditional lower garment or *jongkraben*.

Among the four houses belonging to commoners, the fifth, seventh and eighth once belonged to orchard farmers while the ninth belonged to a merchant selling farm tools and fertilizer. These houses also trace the local history of Thonburi's early agricultural settlement. The drawings and perspective sketches from surveys of the houses not only provide a technical record for conservation, but also encourage the owners of the houses to share more information and realize the aesthetic value of both their stories and houses. The drawings provide baseline documents for conservation which professional and academic institutions can use to help the owners conserve their homes, both in terms of the technical knowledge and suitable materials for renovation. These drawings can also be a starting point for eliciting the stories of community members, their patterns of everyday activities, local events and festivals that are the intangible heritage and an integral part of local wisdom linked to the royal heritage of Rattanakosin Historic District. There are several old canal markets and communities that have maintained their heritage and can be a spark for local revitalization, as was the case at Samchuk in Suphanburi and Amphawa in Samut Songkhram.

The clusters of historic wooden houses along the canal need to be safeguarded from new developments. Although academic institutions and private business groups are helping them, the overall masterplan for historic conservation zoning and special building regulation such as height limits and façade control is still the key to protect them from unchecked real estate development. Conservation zoning must be developed and the BMA should impose new building regulations in this community for careful real estate development. With the present construction of elevated and underground mass transit systems, an effective conservation plan needs to be discussed as soon as possible.

In fact, the BMA's Planning Office had already undertaken a study for a Special Conservation Zone for the Khlong Dan junction at the southwest corner of Khlong Bang Luang in response to the BMA's earlier extension of the BTS skytrain. If major agencies such as the Rattanakosin Committee and the FAD recognize its historic value and establish conservation zoning for this old Chao Phraya River Oxbow,

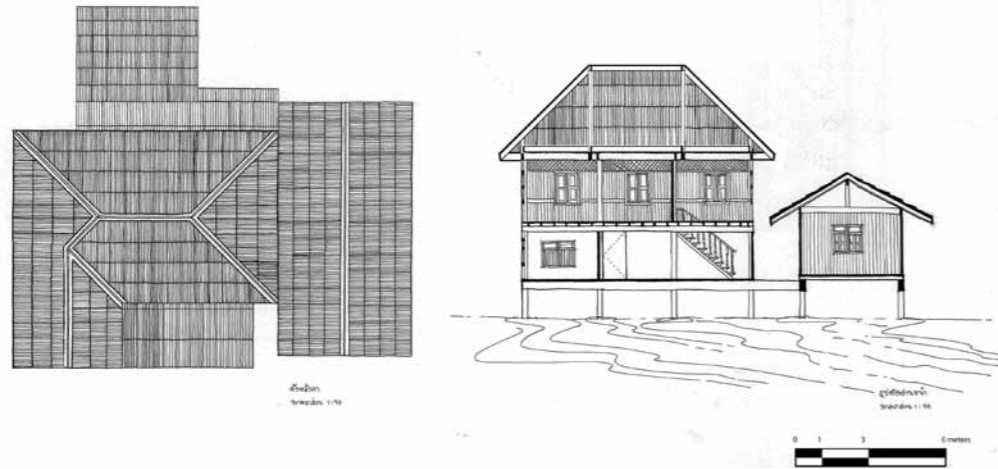


Figure 10. Plan and elevation of a house once owned by a royal family member (drawn by KMUTT 4th year architecture student, Ms. Sutthida Pholkaew)

the BMA’s Office of City Planning can propose a height limit regulation that will curb new development in the area. The history of the Old Chao Phraya River Oxbow should be recognized as a vital part of the national history of Rattanakosin Historic District, and national conservation and planning agencies must take action before it is too late.

Conclusion

The deterioration of the canal communities along the Old Chao Phraya River in Thonburi highlights the problem of the “authorized heritage discourses” in Thailand which privileges the cultural heritage of royal and elite lineages as if it were national heritage. One enduring ramification of this narrow definition of

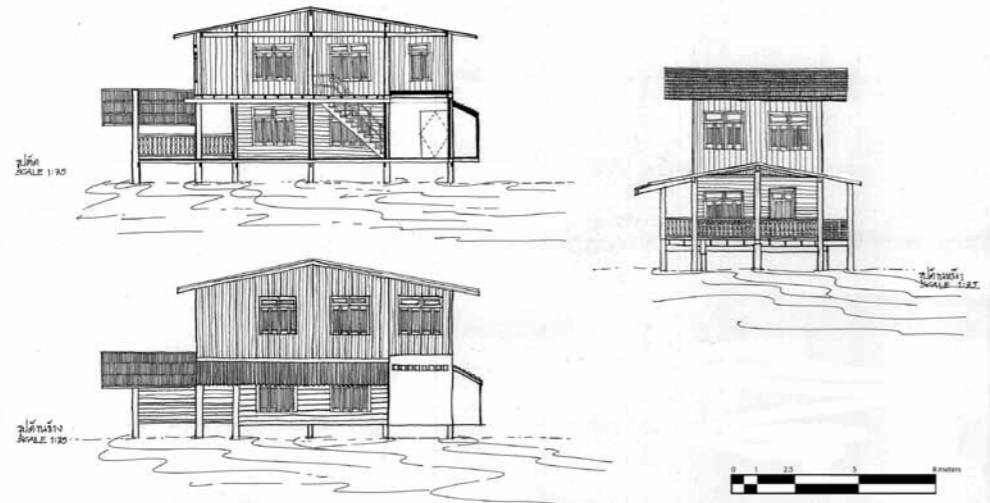


Figure 11. Section and elevation of a house belonging to a commoner (drawn by KMUTT 4th year architecture student, Ms. Yuthika Kalayanasuko)

heritage has been the funneling of resources and expertise into the restoration and preservation of elite heritage to the exclusion of Bangkok’s diverse and dynamic vernacular cultural landscapes. Over the past twenty years, engaged academics and critical heritage practitioners—together with international heritage organizations such as UNESCO—have promoted a reconceptualization of heritage, shifting from the physical fabric of sites and objects to the living practices, meanings, and values inscribed in objects and places. This new conceptualization seeks to broaden the space for the representation of alternative histories and vernacular cultural heritage by involving local communities and cultural agencies more actively as stakeholders.

Recently, several state cultural agencies in Thailand have promoted decentralization and have worked to incorporate local advocacy groups into their work. In principle, this move should help redefine the meaning and practice of heritage conservation in less rigid and more diversified terms. However, the leading heritage agency still lacks staff to monitor the conditions of historic structures and work with local communities living in and around historic sites across Thailand. With its centralized structure and limited number of specialists, the state authority takes action only when conservation conflicts become visible to the public. This means that more vernacular heritage and old towns will deteriorate before proper conservation takes place.

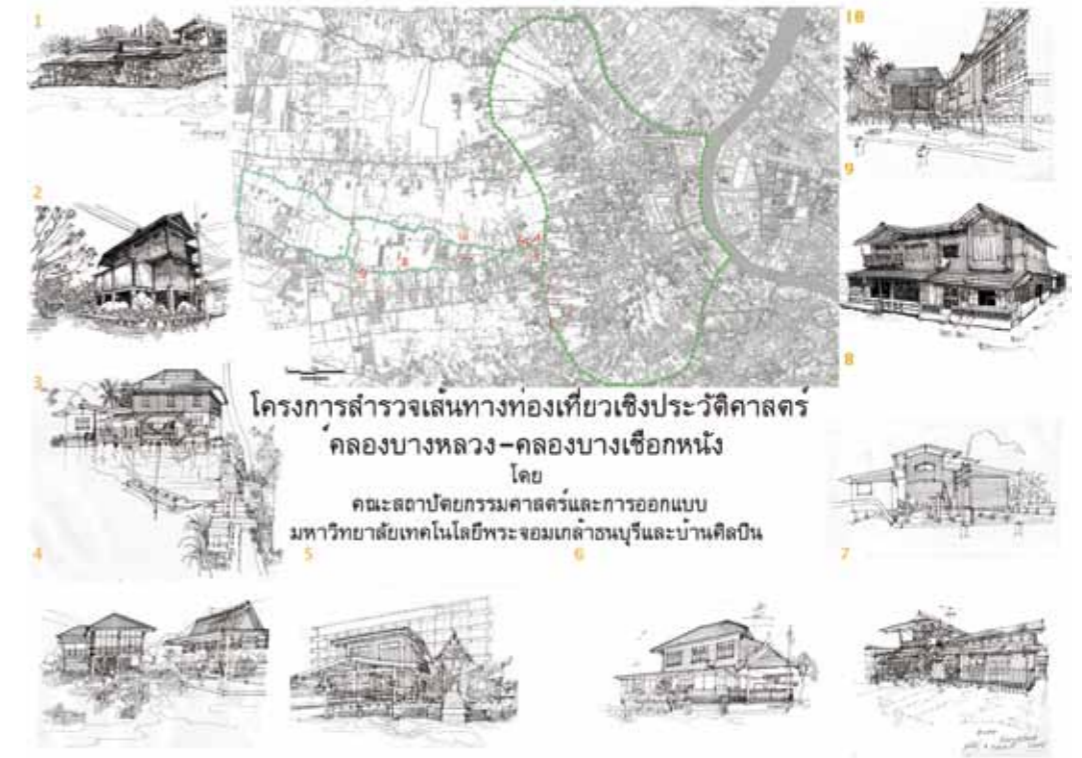


Figure 12. Map of scenic boat trip and perspective sketches of houses along the route of Khlong Bang Waek and Bang Luang

For instance, there is a current problem in Bangkok's Chinatown (Yaowarat), where the tangible and intangible heritage will be seriously impacted by the real estate development around underground mass transit stations, while in Thonburi, new mass transit stations are also under construction which will soon affect canal communities. The Ministry of Culture established provincial cultural offices and cultural councils, which should be encouraged to work with communities to safeguard historic places as well as intangible heritage, but in fact these local offices have no connection to the heritage conservation agency even though they fall under the Ministry of Culture as well. Similarly, the BMA has a planning office and district community tourism offices that can work for community heritage, but these offices rarely maintain long-term collaboration with the FAD.

Today, a growing number of middle class and professional groups in Bangkok are working with local communities to recognize, revitalize, protect, and manage their heritage. Firstly, the emerging local and professional advocacy groups for historic conservation should be encouraged to work with academic institutions, and also build alliances with the private sector to respond to the rising demand for eco-tourism and boutique hotels. These initiatives can bring economic benefits to local communities and small businesses, provided that they abide by proper conservation guidelines and development plans. Secondly, Thailand's authorities involved with heritage issues should embrace new approaches to documenting historic structures that focus more on the artistic impression through architectural rendering and sketches, as these kinds of representations can foster a sense of local pride and can also be reproduced via various print and digital media to raise social awareness about heritage sites and their communities. Several methods (such as the highly detailed rendering of Vernadoc¹³) have been developed by academic and private institutions, with the aim of supporting local communities in their efforts to document, promote and manage their heritage in both its intangible and tangible forms.

Thailand is a country rich with heritage, but clearly not all heritage can be protected and conserved. Nevertheless, the leading heritage agencies could do a lot more to support conservation and revitalization of Thailand's diversity by reforming the legacy of the nationalistic, centralized bureaucracy responsible for conservation. These state agencies need to reinvent themselves with a more proactive approach towards working with local communities in order to understand these communities' sense of ownership, intangible values and history.

¹³ Vernadoc or Vernacular Documentation is a process, initiated by a Finnish architect, Markku Mattilla, of collecting data on historic buildings by using simple tools and techniques but high-quality drawings. A Vernadoc drawing combines a detailed, realistic sketch along with an architectural draft for conservation. The realistic drawing brings out the value of the building and creates a sense of pride among owners. Sudjit Sananwai of Rangsit University introduced the technique in Thailand since 2007.