



Reading the Cracks: Post-Field Trip Reflections Concerning Urban Transformation in Bangkok

We touched down in the capital with our bags laden with an array of participatory mapping, interviewing and assessment tools, and our minds trained on encompassing (read, ambitious) definitions of and strategies for socio-spatial transformation. The Urban Development Planning (UDP) and Building and Urban Design in Development (BUDD) students arrived on a mission to understand *Baan Mankong* (Secure Housing) as a source of urban transformation, and we began our journey clutching text-book definitions distanced from reality. Indeed, on reflection, for the programme to measure up to our original definitions, it would almost have needed to be a conveyor-belt for empowered communities well versed in Foucault, Young, Harvey and Lefebvre, fired along the path towards a *Right to the City*.

It was not that our initial ideas were wrong, nor had we constructed them as absolute markers against which to measure Baan Mankong. However, from day one there was no avoiding the fact that faced with a living, breathing urban reality, our desk-based definitions and pre-field strategies were developing cracks. Still, cracks (to quote Leonard Cohen) are 'how

the light gets in' and in realising our mistakes we came to better understand the process. Theory, we came to understand, considered in abstraction from reality can only ever go so far. Baan Mankong was not a fixed entity waiting patiently to be dissected, analysed, sized-up and weighed-in; it was a flexible, moving target that touched down differently depending on its context. Transformation, correspondingly, was a sliding continuum, a process, not a state of being. And as with all people-centred programmes, the people involved and powers at play adapt, accept, reject and revolt against norms and structures, introducing subjectivity and, to paraphrase Foucault (1979), 'breathing life into history'.

On the ground, our learning process advanced through various channels. Given our area of investigation, our experience quickly meandered away from formal academic and professional arenas, trespassing into the city's more informal passages. This developed through our experience of the built environment, our interactions with people, and our diverse cultural explorations. Indeed our most interesting programmatic insights were gleaned through conversations snatched during taxi rides with our student interpreters, or by gesticulating wildly with non-English speaking community residents.

Above: Private Residential Complex towering over the Lung-Talad-Kao-Wat-Pra-Ya-Krai neighbourhood in Bang Kho Laem district (Camila Cocina)

Below: DPU Students with Suan Plu community members (Camila Cocina)



There is a language to field research, and it is not always a spoken one.

Working with communities from across Bangkok and Pattaya, we experienced a broad cross-section of Baan Mankong projects at varying stages of development, making it difficult to draw general conclusions on the questions of scale and collective action. Some communities had designed inclusive housing models with a provision for subsidising low-income/unemployed members and renters; others had divided around questions of cost. Some existed as relatively self-contained projects; others engaged with other Baan Mankong

communities across the city, sharing knowledge and savings. Some were aware of their role within broader urban dynamics; others were less engaged. Some faced challenges of relocation; others faced those associated with in-situ upgrading.

Overall the model for delivery in the hands of the people themselves is premised on a belief that 'small scattered savings and loan groups that are supported to learn from each other... are likely to link to other groups and form networks as they become more mature' (Boonyabancha, 2001). Secure housing therefore provides a springboard from which it is possible to reach larger city-wide scales, and approach wider development questions such as health, welfare and education. Whether this is achieved, and at what speed, largely depends on those people at the centre of this process, and on their individual and collective capacity to act and learn. City Development Funds could be the key to reaching scale but they remain relatively embryonic.

While former CODI Director Somsook Boonyabancha (2012) undersells the programme saying 'it's not perfect, it's okay', her awareness of imperfections is refreshing. During our time in Bangkok, we witnessed the workings of a remarkable low-income housing programme. As a work in progress, it was not transforming everything equally, nor free from the challenges of exclusion. Yet it delivered real world benefits to thousands of Thai people. The journey towards urban socio-spatial justice will be as long as it is challenging, with an uncertain end. At least, with the support of the networks facilitated by Baan Mankong, Thailand's people will not walk it alone.

By Camila Cocina and Francesco Pasta, BUDD 2011-12 with Emily Kelling and Tim Wickson, UDP 2011-12

Boonyabancha, S. (2001) **Savings and loans; drawing lessons from some experiences in Asia. Environment & Urbanization**, 13(2), pp.9-21.

Boonyabancha, S. (2012) **'Co-production of housing at scale: Collaborative people-centred partnerships for slum upgrading in Bangkok, Thailand'** Workshop. Bangkok: Thailand.

Foucault, M. (2000). **Useless to Revolt?** in M. Foucault, J.D. Fabuion (editor). *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Volume 3* (pp. 449-453). London: Penguin Books. (Original Work Published in Le Monde, May 1979).

DPU summerLab Returns to Rome and Zurich

This late summer marked a second successful run of the DPU summerLab series led by **William Hunter** and **Giorgio Talocci** and coordinated by **Camillo Boano**. Our first lab, titled *Liminal Contours*, ran from August 6 -11, 2012 in Zurich. The workshop, held in collaboration with the ETH Zurich, combined a series of lecture talks, city walks/site visits, and design exercises to address contextual city trends while comparing two opposing demographic entities, set against one another in a current urban periphery (shipping container clusters for creative start-ups and the relocation of prostitutes into a Dutch-style, legalised prostitution zone). Through a critically interpretive analysis of the situation, the group identified measures that could take the form of alternative tactics to increase their unspoken potential as new urban generators.

In a similar fashion, the series found itself in Rome for a second *Occupation City* workshop, again working with Francesco Careri of Stalker/Roma Tre University. Paying particular attention to the occupation of a former military base at Porto Fluviale, the investigation sought out ways in which the residents could achieve a greater sense of acceptance in the area, while promoting a degree of public awareness through the 'opening' of their inner courtyard as a 'shared' space for the city. Various

interventions and strategies were presented at a public event held at the occupation.

Dialogues in Development

The Dialogues in Development public events series got off to a dynamic start in 2012 with a short screening of the film *Dear Mandela* accompanied by a talk from Mzonke Poni (Chairperson of Abahlali base Mjondolo, and previously a leader of the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign) reflecting on the history and gains of the Abahlali Base Mjondolo (people of the shacks) in Durban, as part of one the Western Cape's most significant pro-poor movements in the post-Apartheid period. This was followed by an intriguing discussion in June 2012 between **Giorgio Talocci**, DPH Phd candidate and Francesco Careri of the renowned urban collective Stalker. This event, titled *On Walking and Cooking* presented two recent experiences undertaken by Careri's Laboratorio Arti Civiche in Brazil that questioned alternative ways of interacting with informal communities and the growing interest of mainstream design in the realm of informality.

In October, 2012 **Professor Yves Cabannes** delivered the talk *People Don't Wait for Plans to Change Cities* which critically engaged the World Habitat Day

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Below: DPU summerLab workshop participants exploring at an urban farm in Zurich (Giorgio Talocci)

