

SciencesPo.



Viability in Bangkok

GLM STUDY TRIP REPORT 2026



Published by Sciences Po
Urban School in May 2026

Contributions by students from the Master
Governing the Large Metropolis

Editing by:

Gunjit Verma, Aleksandra Mostovaja,
and Yuga Banerjee

Layout, cover, and design by:

Aleksandra Mostovaja

Video by:

Célimène Marchand and Sasha Sterin

**Supervised by the dean of the Sciences
Po Urban School:**

Tommaso Vitale

Study trip in Bangkok administrated by:

Cyriel Pelletier, Antoine Tisserant, Kittisak
Ruangmun, Boonyakorn Damrongrat, and
Waranyoo Senasu

1 Place Saint-Thomas d'Aquin,
Paris, France 75007

Contributing authors:

Adrian Stein
Ainhoa Giboire
Angèle Selemanni
Anna Foucault
Anupama Suresh
Daniel Sjöholm
Elie Martin
Enrique Unruh
Ethan Chan
Héloïse Romey
Isaure Crépin
Jeanne Gounot
Jeanne Lussot
Jeanne-Pauline Reverte
Jia Ni
Kade van Meeteren
Leo Collins
Lison Plantavid
Lourens van Luijk
Manuela Noreiga Troya
Melissa Ugo
Mila Choudhury
Milo Contreras
Nicolas Ospino
Nil Fontanarosa
Nitarisoa Rakotoveloa
Oorvi Dhotre
Paul Louboutin
Ritaj Kalaskar
Saerom Chong

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Immense gratitude

to the following organizations and
individuals who shared their time and insights with us

Bangkok Metropolitan Administration

Viputh Srivaurai, *Chairman of the Bangkok Metropolitan Council*

National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA)

Pattrawut Charoenroop, *Associate Professor*

Danuvas Sagarik, *Associate Professor*

Pawinee Chuayprakong, *Associate Professor*

Agence Française de Développement, Bangkok Office

Antoine Mougnot, *South-East Asia Task team leader*

Anne-Laure Ullmann, *South-East Asia Transport task team leader*

MuvMi

Tawit Sangveraphunsiri, *Head of Operation*

Japan International Cooperation Agency, Bangkok Office

Sasaki Ryosuke, *Representative of JICA Thailand Office*

Confederation of Street Vendors in Bangkok

Urban Design and Development Center (UDDC) and Chulalongkorn University

Prof. Niramorn Serisakul, *Director of UDDC*

The Forestias by MQDC

Kittiphun Ouyiamaphun, *Project Director of The Forestias*

Duang Prateep Foundation

Ms. Prateep Ungsongtham Hata, *Thai Activist and founder of Duang Prateep Foundation*

The French Embassy in Thailand

Ludovic Andres, *Attaché for scientific and academic cooperation*

Théo Dulac, *Cooperation Officer for Science, Higher Education and Climate Affairs*

Acknowledgements

by Gunjit Verma

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to the success of this study trip to Bangkok.

First, we extend our heartfelt thanks to the faculty and staff of the Governing the Large Metropolis (GLM) programme at the Urban School for designing and facilitating this valuable learning experience. Their guidance and support made it possible for us to engage critically with the complexities of urban governance, planning, and development in one of Southeast Asia's most dynamic metropolitan regions.

In particular, we would like to thank our Dean, Prof. Tommaso Vitale for accompanying us throughout the study trip. His insights and feedback during the daily reflection and discussion sessions helped us critically engage with our observations.

We are especially grateful to our Academic Advisor, Cyriel Pelletier and Administrative Manager, Antoine Tisserant for their dedication and hard work in organising the study trip. From coordinating logistics and schedules to facilitating communication with partner organisations and ensuring the smooth running of each visit, their efforts were essential to the success of the programme.

In particular, we would like to thank Boonyakorn Damrongrat for her invaluable support throughout the study trip. Her hard work in organizing the schedule of the trip, communicating with organizations, and willingness to provide guidance, and assist us throughout our stay greatly enriched our understanding of the city and its urban challenges. We are deeply grateful for her and her team's (Waranyoo Senasu and Kittisak Ruangmun) generosity, professionalism, and commitment to making this study trip both productive and memorable.

We would also like to extend our thanks to the organisations, practitioners, researchers, public officials, and community representatives who generously welcomed us and shared their expertise, experiences, and perspectives. Their contributions provided invaluable insights into the opportunities and challenges of governing a rapidly evolving metropolis.

Finally, we thank our fellow GLM students for their enthusiasm, curiosity, and collaborative spirit throughout the trip. The discussions, reflections, and exchanges among peers greatly enriched the experience and contributed to many of the insights presented in this report.

Abbreviations

AFD	Agence Française de Développement
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BCP	Bangkok Comprehensive Plan
BEM	Bangkok Expressway and Metro Public Company Limited
BKK	Bangkok
BMTA	Bangkok Mass Transit Authority
BMA	Bangkok Metropolitan Administration
BRT	bus rapid transit
BTS	Bangkok Mass Transit System
BTSC	Bangkok Mass Transit System Public Company Limited
CBD	Central Business District
CCSA	COVID-19 Situation Administration
CCTV	closed-circuit television
CPHO	Chonburi Provincial Health Office
DEPA	Digital Economy Promotion Agency
DPF	Duang Prateep Foundation
FAR	Floor Area Ratio
FLM	first and last mile
GCR	Global Construction Review
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GI	Geographic Information
GIS	Geographic Information Systems
GISTDA	Geo-Informatics and Space Technology Development Agency
HSR	High Speed Railway
IFC	International Finance Corporation
InSAR	Interferometric Synthetic Aperture Radar
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
LST	Land Surface Temperature
LVC	land value capture
M-MAP	Mass Rapid Transit Master Plan

MIS	Management information systems
MLIT	Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism
MOT	Ministry of Transport
MQDC	Magnolia Quality Development Corporation
MRT	Metropolitan Rapid Transit
NDVI	Normalized Difference Vegetation Index
NESDC	National Economic and Social Development Council
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSR	Minimum Open Space Ratio
OTP	Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning
PAO	Provincial Administration Organizations
PAT	Port Authority of Thailand
PPP	public-private partnership
SRT	State Railway of Thailand
SRTA	SRT Asset Co., Ltd.
SRTET	State Railway of Thailand Electrified Train Company
TAO	Tambon administration organization
TAMI	technology, advertising, media, and information
TCDC	Thailand Creative & Design Centre
THB	Thailand Baht
TOD	Transit-Oriented Development
UDDC	Urban Design and Development Centre
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDRR	United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
UR	Urban Renaissance Agency
USD	United States Dollar
VAT	Value Added Tax
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing

Editors' introduction

by Yuga Banerjee

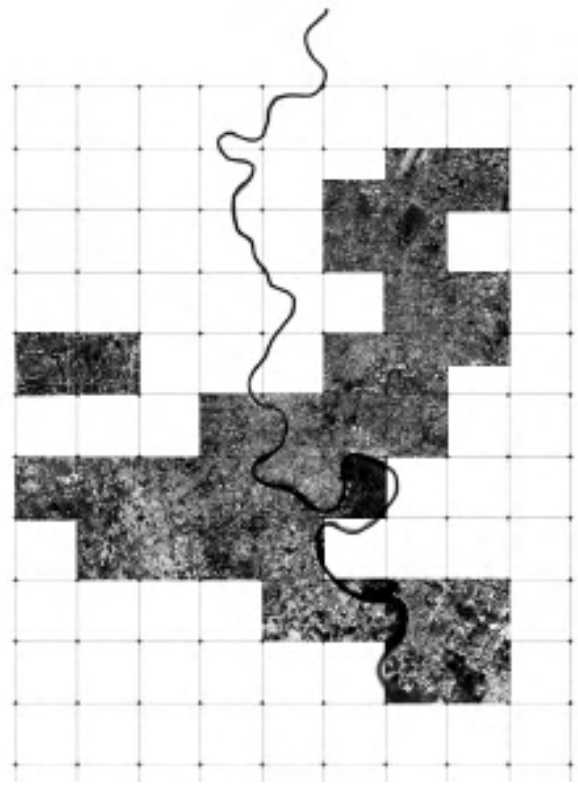
Bangkok is a city that many of us conjure from guidebooks, travel segments on YouTube, or stories from others' vacations there. It's a city of superlatives; well known pre-pandemic as the most-visited city, or as the street food capital of Asia. However, as we encountered on our study trip, Bangkok resists easy description. Locally known as Krung Thep, the city boasts a population of over 14 million people in its metropolitan area, a number which has more than doubled in the last 50 years. The city has grown faster than it planned for, sprawling outward into former rice paddies and absorbing surrounding provinces into its ever expanding metropolis. This concentration has come with the costs of infrastructure strains, increasing heat islands, and large parts of the city left grappling with the effects of inadequate planning. The mainstream narrative of Bangkok, then, is one of ambition and overcrowding, that now has to keep pace with its own growth.

We soon found that this narrative only tells a part of the story. Soi, which are the narrow lanes and alleys that branch off Bangkok's main roads, are the capillaries of the city, and are deeply embedded in its fabric. Bangkok grew along its khlongs, the canal network, forming corridors which were later filled by roads now accommodating the city's car, tuktuk and motorcycle-based present. These systems, the soi and the khlong, are key

terms in Bangkok's urban glossary that modern maps fail to fully capture. We scratched the surface of understanding them by walking. Turning off a main thoroughfare into a shaded alley to find a temple or a noodle-shop, or suddenly discovering an expansive street-market that you didn't expect. Riding the canal boats which still carry commuters and market workers through the city's waterways just as much as they transport tourists. The process of discovering the city was also a reminder of our position in it.

Arriving as a cohort of urbanism students from Sciences-Po, we had our notebooks, frameworks and a certain professional confidence in our analytical tools. The actors we visited and observed navigated the city on their own terms, however; terms that we couldn't pretend to be familiar with already, let alone critique or report on with full veracity. We tried to hold this awareness throughout the week, also acknowledging our role as foreign visitors in one way or another.

The theme that emerged from our daily debriefs while on the trip, and that organises this report, is Viability of the City. It arose from a common observation we had: that development in Bangkok frequently preceded planning, and outpaces governance. That the city's hunger for advancement and smart, world-class infrastructure does not always translate into outcomes that are du-



rable, equitable or even legible for those who live with them. And yet, the city does work. Maybe not always as intended, or for everyone, but it does function through improvisation, informality and the budding ingenuity of local solutions. This functioning, however, is not neutral: it is produced through unequal combinations of public planning, private provision, informal adaptation, and selective protection. Maybe not always as intended, or for everyone, but it does function through improvisation, informality and the budding ingenuity of local solutions. And as we'll see in this report, the underlying perspective for you, the reader, should be to grasp the breakneck speed at which Bangkok is trying to out-compete its rival cities in Asia. Construction, growth, global flows of money, people and goods, all converging in Bangkok, but how far can this process go, without collapsing in on itself. The city has achieved tremendous and real growth, without a doubt, but is its urban fabric being stretched beyond repair? Viability should not be understood as the opposite of dysfunction. Bangkok functions through improvisation, informality, private provision, fragmented institutions, and unequal adaptation. The real question is whether these arrangements remain socially, ecologically, and politically sustainable over time. Our question is whether this viability extends to Bangkok's other ambitions or not. The ten articles in this report examine that question from multiple perspec-

tives. Whether it's the urban governance, flooding, traffic congestion, access to public space, housing, informality, our question remains: how viable are these processes and decisions? Thus, for us, we add a new dimension to understanding urban sustainability: the medium to long term viability of a city, its resilience to persist effectively without being overwhelmed by the challenges it faces. Taken together, the articles pose a set of questions about the city, rather than offering a verdict on it. In that sense, viability is treated here as an analytical question rather than a label.

Data Against the Waters

*By Oorvi Dhotre,
Anupama Suresh, Adrian Stein, and
Mila Choudhury*

This chapter examines how the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) governs and uses data to manage flood risks in the city, taking flood risk management as a lens through which to assess Bangkok's broader move toward data-driven urban governance. It focuses on how flood-related information is collected, integrated, and mobilized through sensors, digital mapping systems, inter-agency coordination, and citizen reporting, while also questioning to what extent these efforts practically improve resilience. The exploration shows that the BMA has built a sophisticated data infrastructure for monitoring, planning, and emergency response. However, some gaps remain in the technocratic approach to flood risk management concerning social vulnerabilities. The chapter explores the potential for using the existing data-driven infrastructure for more inclusive and adaptive planning in order to sustain the city's long-term viability in the face of intensifying flood events and climate change.



Data Against the Waters: Governing Flood Risk in Bangkok

Figure 1: Traditional Thai canal community space with wooden houses on stilts along narrow waterway with a boat passing through a residential floating neighborhood, Martin Vonk, 2026



Every rainy season, Bangkok becomes a city negotiating with water. This negotiation is not only hydraulic; it is also institutional, social, and distributive. Monsoon downpours, rising water levels in its many canals, and the city's maze of soi and low-lying districts make flood management an everyday challenge rather than a once-a-year emergency. In some neighborhoods, flooding can appear within minutes, disrupting mobility, livelihoods, and access to services. In response, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration has increasingly turned to data, from sensors and digital maps to citizen reports, to understand, monitor, and manage flood risks. This chapter examines how the BMA uses data to govern flooding, and asks whether these tools can do more than improve response: are they able to support more inclusive and adaptive planning in order to sustain the city's long-term viability in the face of intensifying flood events and climate change?

Data Collection for Flood Risk Management

The BMA employs a multi-layered and data-driven governance approach to the collection and management of information on chronic risks, the focus of this chapter being flood risk. The collec-

tion methods integrate physical infrastructure, cross-agency coordination, digital monitoring, as well as citizen engagement. Central to this strategy is the BKK Risk Map, a digital database initiated under Governor Chadchart Sittipunt to provide real-time risk information for both officials and the public, serving everyday decision-making and emergency evacuations alike.

Underlying this data-driven governance approach is a centralized yet collaborative budgeting structure that enables the development and maintenance of flood risk data systems. The BMA allocates funding through its annual budget, with resources distributed from the central administration to individual departments (BMA 2026). Departments and district offices submit budget proposals to the BMA, which then determines allocations based on operational needs and strategic priorities that favor integrated systems, directing funding toward the consolidation of monitoring infrastructure, real-time data capabilities, as well as socially informed risk assessment. These priorities are guided by the Governor's "Smart & Resilient City" agenda, as well as the development of an integrated command and control system known as the "Single Command Centre" ("BMA Command Centre," BMA 2026).

This system also supports cross-departmental coordination, as certain units receive funding to consolidate and standardize data from multiple sources, strengthening the overall data ecosystem and enabling more effective justification for future investments in flood prevention. Notably, key tools such as the BKK Risk Map are already embedded within existing departmental budgets, meaning their development and maintenance are sustained as part of routine operations rather than requiring separate or additional funding requests (BMA 2026).

Flood data collection in Bangkok is embedded within a broader ecosystem of inter-agency collaboration, drawing on inputs from both internal departments and external partners. The BMA works across multiple units, including drainage, environment, traffic, and disaster prevention, while also incorporating data from national agencies such as GISTDA (Geo-Informatics and Space Technology Development Agency) and the Royal Thai Survey Department enabling the integration of diverse datasets, ranging from satellite imagery and topographic data to environmental and infrastructural indicators, forming a more comprehensive basis for flood risk assessment.

At the core of BMA's flood data collection is its reliance on real-time monitoring technologies, which are increasingly centralized within the BMA Command Center. Established in 2026, this facility is aimed to serve as the city's central "brain," consolidating previously fragmented data streams, including traffic congestion, drainage performance, and air quality, into a unified, high-tech hub (Tokitphanaprai 2026). These include water level sensors and a vast network of over 36,000 CCTV cameras, with a goal of reaching 60,000 in order to meet international megacity safety standards (Bangkok Post 2016). These provide visual verification of flooding on main roads and at critical "flood watch" points ("BMA Command Centre," BMA 2026). Supporting this is operational data from water pumps and drainage infrastructure, which help



Figure 2: GLM student's in front of the architecture model of Bangkok, Antoine Tisserant, 2026

monitor the system performance during heavy rainfall events. This real-time data is critical in making swift, evidence-based decisions during flood events and reducing redundancy across different government agencies.

Alongside sensor-based systems, the BMA collects extensive administrative and observational data through its institutional network. Flood risk data is compiled under the 2022 Bangkok Flood Prevention and Mitigation Action Plan and is primarily managed by the Drainage and Sewerage Department ("Flood Risk Map," BMA 2026) with all 50 district offices contribute localized flood risk reports, identifying flood-prone areas, "flood sound points," and recurring problem zones. This decentralized reporting mechanism allows for granular, place-specific knowledge to feed into city-wide datasets, enhancing the spatial accuracy of flood risk mapping down to the soi level.

Flood risk maps also incorporate historic data by using past flood incidents and trends, enabling the identification of recurring vulnerabilities. For long-term risk assessment, the BMA collaborates with agencies like GISTDA to utilize satellite imagery ("System Architecture – GI

Platform,” BMA 2026). This remote sensing data helps calculate drought and flood risk indices through factors like the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) and Land Surface Temperature (LST). On a similar note, to address the long-term viability of the city, the BMA also incorporates data on risks like land subsidence, utilizing compression indicator stations and satellite-based InSAR to monitor sinking levels that exacerbate flood depth (BMA 2026).

A significant pillar of the BMA’s modern data strategy is the use of crowdsourced data and social surveys to bridge the gap between official sensors and on-the-ground reality. The citizen data platform Traffy Fondue allows residents to report localized flooding, drainage obstructions, or structural damage directly to the BMA, providing granular data that is often missed by static sensors. Furthermore, the BMA conducts social surveys across 2,003 registered communities, assessing factors such as population density and property value to categorize areas into five risk levels (BMA 2026). This community-level data has been vital in identifying social vulnerabilities and prioritizing assistance for at-risk groups. This formulation of data infrastructure, as information collecting, also works as an allocation device by directing administrative attention toward some claims, places, and groups more easily than others.

The resulting data from these multiple sources is consolidated within the BMA’s Geographic Information (GI) Platform and visualized through tools such as the Bangkok Risk Map. This platform integrates multiple hazard layers into a unified spatial interface, allowing both officials and the public to access real-time and predictive flood risk information. By translating complex datasets into accessible visual formats, the system supports more informed decision-making, from daily urban management to emergency response and evacuation planning.

Municipal Spatial Data Infrastructure

The UDDC has strongly promoted pedestrian The collaboration previously mentioned extends beyond just flood risk, and plays a crucial role

in the Municipal spatial Data Infrastructure. The horizontal coordination between the departments and vertical coordination between the following contributes greatly to the integrated urban data governance of the city (City Planning and Urban Development Department 2026):

- Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation
- City Law Enforcement Department
- Traffic and Transportation Department
- Drainage and Sewerage Department
- Environment Department
- Public Works Department

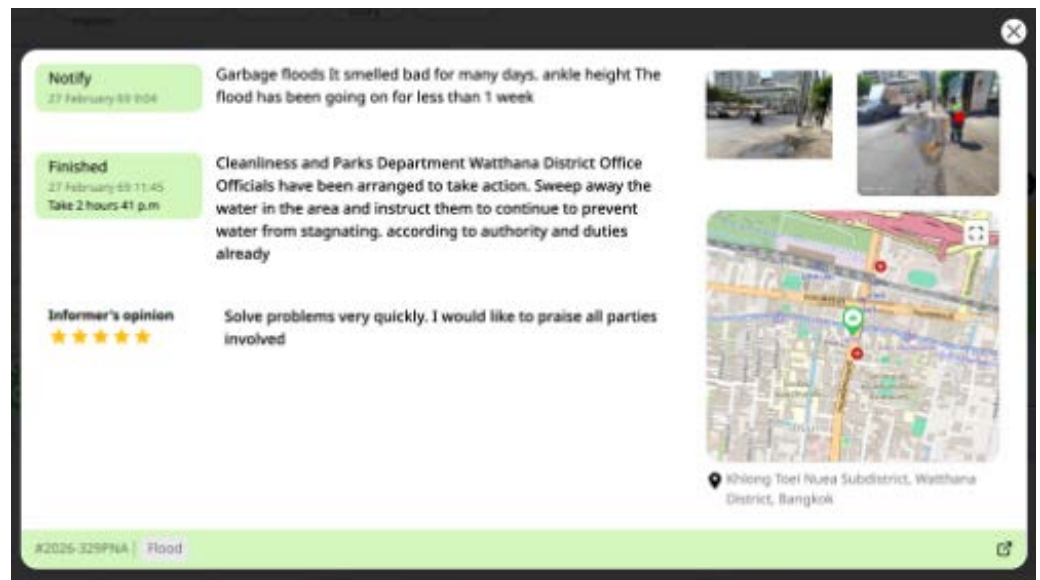
There is also vertical coordination involving the BMA, national and international agencies that provide critical external datasets.

The collective efforts of all organizations led to the creation of a centralized urban command centre which had its final inspection done in February 2026 (“BMA Command Center,” BMA 2026). It integrates several missions including traffic control, flood control or air quality monitoring. One of the major features is that the command centre possesses a real time dashboard which aids in decision-making and faster emergency responses. It includes specifics of flood levels, PM 2.5 and information about vulnerable groups like bedridden patients, to ensure prioritized care during emergencies. The urban command centre is hence a significant infrastructure supporting Bangkok’s transition to a smart and resilient city. A notable technological highlight is the adaptive traffic control system, currently operational at 74 major intersections, including Sukhumvit and Rama IV. This system automatically adjusts traffic signal timings based on real-time traffic volume to alleviate congestion; however, police officers maintain manual override capabilities to clear paths for ambulances and emergency responders. Governor Chadchart emphasized that this integration transcends surveillance, it is aimed at leveraging technology to enhance urban productivity and improve the everyday quality of life for all residents. On the environmental front, the Governor reported an improvement in air quality by nearly 50% compared to the previous year, achieved through aggressive cross-sector collaboration and integrated monitoring (“BMA Command

Figure 3: On-site measurements help track changing water conditions and improve early warning systems, Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, Flood Risk Locations Dashboard, 2026



Figure 4: Example of a flood-related incident reported on Bangkok's citizen data platform in Feb. 2026. The local district administration responded quickly to address the reported issue.



Center,” BMA 2026).

Digital mapping infrastructure is the backbone of platforms like flood risk maps. At the very base, the digital and cloud infrastructure like servers, the BMA data centre, and the operating systems enable computing, storage, data processing and integration for GIS services. The GIS and MIS databases store and manage spatial and non-spatial data. This data is then shared across departments. GIS map services provide standardized maps which are the base maps used to build flood models. An important role is played by the GIS Data Catalogue which serves as a data library for the city, organizing all map views and GIS layers such as rainfall data, elevation, and the drainage network, crucial for flood mapping. The data are utilized in GIS-based applications

like the flood risk map, which can be used by citizens and officials for awareness, monitoring and planning (City Planning and Urban Development Department 2026).

The funding for this digital infrastructure comes from the annual BMA budget allocated for the City Planning and Urban Development Department. The funding for the digital infrastructure is a part of the department’s budget. Furthermore, the budget allocation is explained on the public data platform to highlight transparency (BMA 2026).

Altogether, the BMA’s digital mapping infrastructure integrates multiple departments, allowing for improved internal coordination and supervision and reduced data-sharing burdens. This is an example of data-driven governance through

an integrated platform, rather than individual departments.

Social Vulnerability in Bangkok's Data-Driven Risk Governance

To understand whether Bangkok's data-driven flood risk management can sustain the city's long-term viability in the face of flood events, we must assess the structural processes that reproduce social vulnerability. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR 2015) defines risk as the interaction of hazard exposure and social vulnerability. Vulnerability goes beyond exposure: it is the predisposition or propensity of humans and the environment to be adversely affected due to a lack of adaptive or coping capacity.

While the BMA has moved toward a data-driven model to manage flood risks, the implementation often reflects a technocratic bias that fails to address the underlying drivers of vulnerability. In Bangkok, unplanned and uncontrolled urban growth has historically led to land-use changes that have aggravated flooding and therefore worsened the vulnerability of certain communities. As the city expanded, green spaces and natural floodplains were lost to development, and canal capacity was reduced due to encroachment and rising volumes of solid waste. This transformation created a geography where flooding actively widens social inequalities. Informal settlements, frequently located along canals or in low-lying areas, face a double burden: they are the most exposed to localized flooding and have the fewest resources to recover when disasters occur.

Current flood governance in Bangkok reflects an approach that appears to view the city as an optimisable machine which turns issues of urban governance into technical puzzles to be optimized for efficiency rather than questions of complex social relations. A significant obstacle to addressing social vulnerability is the fragmented and siloed nature of urban data. Despite the creation of centralized platforms like the BMA command centre, horizontal and vertical coordination remains hindered by time delays in data

sharing between functional departments and across administrative levels. When data is not integrated, decision-makers are unable to utilize it to inform policies that reflect local realities and needs. Consequently, the current infrastructure supports mostly reactive rather than preventative responses. Furthermore, the governance model is vulnerable to shifts in institutional priorities, which can lead to the loss of continued availability of data necessary to protect vulnerable zones.

The BMA's various data-driven governance platforms aim to increase citizen engagement by allowing residents to report localized issues. However, these tools assume a high level of technological literacy and physical access to digital devices. This may create a digital exclusion barrier for the elderly, persons with disabilities, and the urban poor, who may find it harder to navigate these systems or evacuate during emergencies. Moreover, reliance on high-tech simulations risks replacing community-led co-planning with top-down technocratic simulations which erases the historical understanding residents have of their needs in their specific neighborhoods. Lastly, in data-driven governance models such as the BMA's, data selection bias can become an issue when the struggles of those in the most marginalized areas go unrecorded because they do not fit the parameters of the digital tool.

Bangkok's current data-driven risk governance is technically sophisticated but socially incomplete. The critical question for long-term disaster risk reduction in Bangkok thus becomes how its data infrastructure translates into effective adaptation, including for the most vulnerable.

Moving from Measurement to Adaptation

The BMA has established a comprehensive Climate Change Master Plan 2021–2030 with adaptation measures targeting flood resilience. Drawing on its extensive flood-risk database, the plan identifies urban, coastal, and river floods as three of five critical hazards in Bangkok and funds water-resource and coastal-erosion responses through its own budgets. Many

Potential 1 m Flood Exposure in Central Bangkok Based on Terrain Elevation

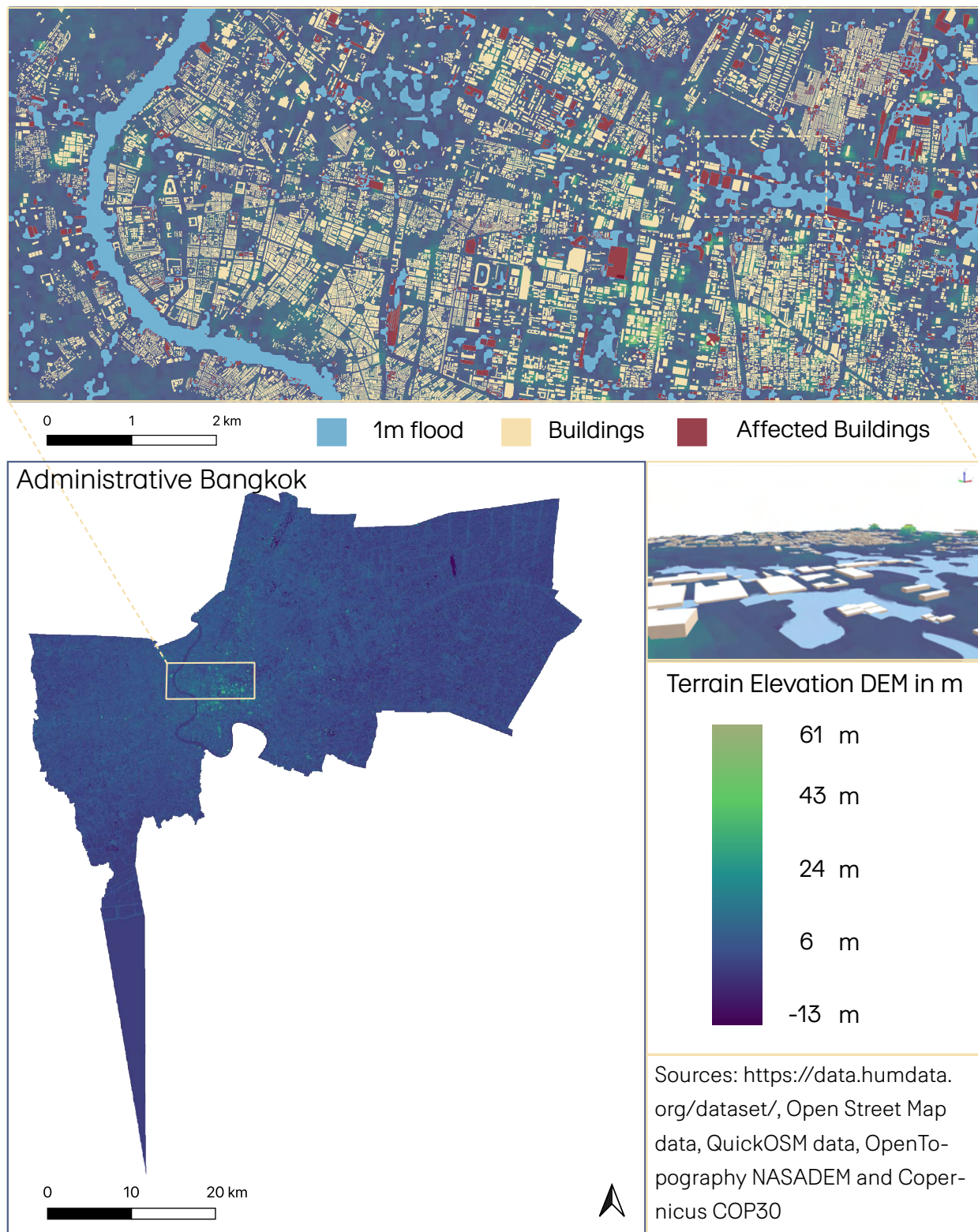


Figure 5: Map of potential 1-meter flood exposure in the Central Bangkok area. The map should be read not only as a hazard map, but as a map of built exposure - the result of past land-use, infrastructure, and settlement decisions, Aleksandra Mostovaja, 2026

measures are technical grey infrastructure: flood protection along the Chao Phraya river, drainage optimisation, urban canal dredging, controlled “monkey-cheek” retention ponds, and a permanent coastal erosion defense structure in Bang Khun Thian. However, the plan also includes nature-based solutions such as mangrove reforestation to reduce coastal erosion and block flood-water entry (BMA 2022).

The BMA’s focus for flood risk adaptation lies in everyday monitoring and rapid, transparent responses. With international funding and support from the UN’s Climate Technology Center & Network, the UK’s foreign aid organisation, and private data-analysis firms, the BMA has developed a real-time flood forecasting system that enables spatially precise alerts and emergency measures (CTCN n.d.; UK FCDO 2021; MottMac 2025). The city government also prioritises rapid responses to citizen reports on the public Traffy Fondue platform, where residents submit over a thousand local reports in peak rainy season months. District governments typically respond within days, and the BMA publishes all localised flood mitigation measures and their budgets online, most of which implement the Master Plan through drainage improvements, flood-protection construction, or canal dredging (BMA n.d.).

Despite sophisticated flood response mechanisms, support for strengthening flood resilience in socially vulnerable areas remains underdefined in Bangkok’s adaptation plans. Bangkok’s Climate Change Master Plan offers no targeted measures to reduce flood-related vulnerabilities of groups such as informal settlers, the elderly, or people with disabilities (BMA 2022). While the flood mitigation projects detailed on the digital public platform offer a variety of technological solutions, they do not address the underlying structural vulnerabilities. Flood resilience planning moreover follows a top-down approach, implementing policy and budget priorities from public authorities rather than enabling communities to co-plan resilience and integrate local experiential knowledge (Laeni, van den Brink, and Arts 2019).

Land subsidence considerations prompt a fur-

ther critical reassessment of the BMA’s technical, data-driven governance. Bangkok experienced severe ground and building subsidence in the 20th century but has since stabilised it through monitoring and groundwater pricing. However, some evidence suggests that its current methods - physical benchmarks and satellite remote sensing - may only capture the now stabilised subsidence of large structures with solid foundations on lower soil layers, while missing sinking of top-soil layers and actual street levels (Bremard 2022). While this measurement debate is unresolved, it highlights a weakness in the BMA’s reliance on technical data: if foundational measurements prove to be incomplete, complex and costly simulations can become inaccurate, a gap that better embedding of citizens’ experiential knowledge in systematic planning and policy processes could address.

Bangkok can serve as a model for robust data-driven flood-risk governance, yet its adaptation framework still has notable gaps. To sustain the city’s long-term viability, the BMA can use its strong institutional coordination framework to move beyond its technocratic approach and adopt a wider social lens. This requires (1) turning vulnerability assessments into land-use policy that specifically targets the needs of informal settlers and high-risk groups; (2) ensuring all data on environmental thresholds and social vulnerabilities are critically assessed for blind spots and biases; and (3) building on the BMA’s established citizen data platform to strengthen participatory and bottom-up community co-planning that values experiential knowledge and empowers citizens to shape not only emergency responses but proactive resilience measures. Ultimately, data is only as effective as the social and ethical framework within which it is used: without an explicit commitment to social equity and inclusive planning, Bangkok’s digital infrastructure will continue to produce a sophisticated map of a city that remains profoundly and structurally vulnerable. The challenge is therefore not to choose between data and participation, but to embed data within institutions capable of recognising vulnerability, contestation, and local knowledge.

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Decentralization and Urban Governance

*By Manuela Noreiga Troya,
Nicolas Ospino, Isaure Crépin, and
Lison Plantavid*

This report examines how the degree of centralization of Thailand's bureaucratic structures shape the political governance of Bangkok, drawing on Falleti's (2005) sequential theory of decentralization and Kübler and Pagano's (2012) framework of urban multilevel governance. By analyzing the country's three-tier administrative system – central, provincial, and local – alongside its fiscal architecture, the article finds that, despite Thailand's 1997 'People's Constitution' enshrining decentralization as a constitutional obligation, power redistribution has remained structurally limited.

The mechanism chosen to devolve revenue, intergovernmental transfers, does not delegate enough responsibility or autonomy to local governments, omits differences among them in financial capacity, and has paradoxically reduced local fiscal autonomy while appearing to increase local revenues. Whether one looks at transfer of functions, fiscal

responsibilities, or representation, the same pattern emerges: though partial autonomy was achieved, the reality is characterized by complex interactions between levels and persistent hierarchical structures hindering local authorities' independence. Case studies of the 2011 Bangkok floods and the COVID-19 pandemic reveal that this institutional architecture produces fragmented crisis governance: the scope and timeline of interventions were constrained by a centralized decision-making structure combined with partial local autonomy, producing uneven outcomes across Bangkok's districts. The Thai case demonstrates that constitutional decentralization, absent fiscal reform and genuine political devolution tend to displace rather than redistribute central control, a dynamic likely to persist in unitary developmental states where bureaucratic elites hold on to structural incentives to contain local agency.



Decentralization and Urban Governance in Thailand: How Centralized Bureaucratic Structures Shape Bangkok's Political Administration

Figure 1: Night view in Bangkok, Adrian Stein, 2026



On Decentralization

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a push towards decentralization throughout the Global South. This formal engagement with decentralization can be traced back to the so-called third wave of democratization and to the impressive growth of civil society organizations and movements within urban areas ¹(Stren, 2012), in a context of rapid informal urbanization in the developing world. Essentially, decentralization refers to the transfer of significant powers and functions, along with fiscal responsibility to carry out these powers and functions, from the national to the local level of government, with the final goal of strengthening local authorities. Falleti (2005) defines decentralization as “a process of state reform composed by a set of public policies that transfer responsibilities, resources, or authority from higher to lower levels of government in the context of a specific type of state” (328).

As highlighted by this definition, decentralization

¹ An example from the Thai context is the Confederation of Street Vendors in Bangkok, on which there is an article in this issue.

has three components: transfer of functions, fiscal responsibilities, and representation (Stren, 2012; Resnick, 2021). Following Falleti’s (2005) taxonomy, administrative decentralization can be understood as the turnover of administration and delivery of social services – education, health, social welfare, housing, etc. – to subnational governments. Fiscal decentralization refers to policies designed to increase the revenues or the fiscal autonomy of subnational governments, either by the creation of new subnational taxes, by delegating a previously national tax authority or by increasing the transfers from the central government. Finally, political decentralization aims at opening up new spaces for the representation of subnational polities. Notably, progress in one area may not necessarily lead to progress in another one, and how these three components are devolved and sequenced will affect the final balance of power between the national and subnational governments (Falleti, 2005; Resnick, 2021). This is to say, not all decentralization policies result in greater autonomy for local governments.

Striking a proper balance of power between national and subnational governments is key for carrying out large-scale interventions that will

improve the wellbeing of a city's inhabitants and allow it to prosper, particularly in a context in which the world economy increasingly pushes cities to compete among each other (Stren, 2012). On the one hand, local arrangements are more likely to succeed if they can benefit from the resources and organizational capacities of higher levels of government. On the other hand, the top-down approach of many national initiatives can bypass many genuinely important but politically weak voices at the community level. Decentralization is, therefore, not only an issue that touches upon government efficiency, but also concerns democratic representation and participation, as territorial autonomy determines the geographical scale at which collective decisions are made; it traces the spatial boundaries of the democratic "demos".

Analytically, understanding decentralization is also important for understanding urban governance. As stated by Kübler and Pagano (2012), "cities are under the influence of upper level governments, notably national governments and, in most cases, other subnational government levels [...] Urban politics and policy dwell within this constitutional framework where higher level institutions structure constraints and opportunities" (p. 2). In this context of vertical subordination, city autonomy can be understood as a form of agency that depends both on legal rules and political practice. Both of these factors result in specific and dynamic constellations of power, where decision-making authority is shared, networked, and contested across government levels. As such, the national context should not be conceived as the constraints of local autonomy, but rather as the infrastructure that shapes local agency. This is an important point to underscore, cities act under certain frictions, incentives and constraints that are important in understanding its trajectory, but this should not be read in a deterministic manner. Cities shape and get shaped by this constitutional structure in which they work in, through both political posturing and contestations.

Decentralization in Thailand

The political administration and institutions

Analyzing the broader issues surrounding decentralization allows us to now dive into the political and administrative layout of Thailand and observe the extent to which its bureaucracy applies such perspectives to governance.

The Kingdom of Thailand is a unitary country with a strong tradition of centralization (OECD/UCLG, 2016). In fact, the concentration of power among elites and central authorities is deeply rooted in the country's history. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Thai government pursued a strategy of centralization, primarily centered on national survival and internal stability. This approach sought to modernize governance, strengthen the monarchy's authority and more generally protect the country's independence from outside colonial threats, using Bangkok as its core. In this context, the appointment of provincial governors played a major role in restricting local autonomy because they wielded considerable influence over local affairs.

The institutional architecture of the Thai administrative system consists of three levels, according to the National Administrative Organization Act of 1991. First, the central government is organized around the Prime Minister, the cabinet and ministers. Together, they set policies and control most resources. Second, the provincial administration brings together the 76 provinces, Changwat, which are run by governors appointed by the national government, divided into 876 districts with an appointed district head and sub-districts (United Nations Thailand, 2004). This layer largely acts as an extension of the national government through offices of the various central ministries, agencies and departments (JICA, 2001). Third, the local administration is made of local governments with elected leaders and still under supervision of the central state. Local autonomy is roughly divided into two levels: multi-municipality-based regional authority, meaning Provincial Administration Organizations (PAOs), and municipalities. The latter includes both Thesaban, which were instituted in urban areas, and Tambon administration organizations (TAOs) which were instituted in rural areas (JICA, 2001).

The interactions between these three levels are governed by oversight mechanisms. However in practice coordination tends to be controlled from the top rather than being collaborative. Consequently, an asymmetrical duality has emerged from this general structure: indeed, local autonomy exists formally but the state, nevertheless, retains supervisory authority. As a result, decentralization exists more as a legal framework than as a practical redistribution of power.

Nowhere is this asymmetry more visible than in Bangkok. In fact, it is one of two unique cases of the local government system, with the City of Pattaya which is in Chonburi province. The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA)'s head is elected through direct election by the citizens and has the functions of both a province and a Thesaban. As such, Bangkok represents a partial exception: governed by an elected governor, it enjoys greater administrative autonomy, yet remains under central supervision, illustrating the limits of decentralization even in the country's most advanced urban setting.

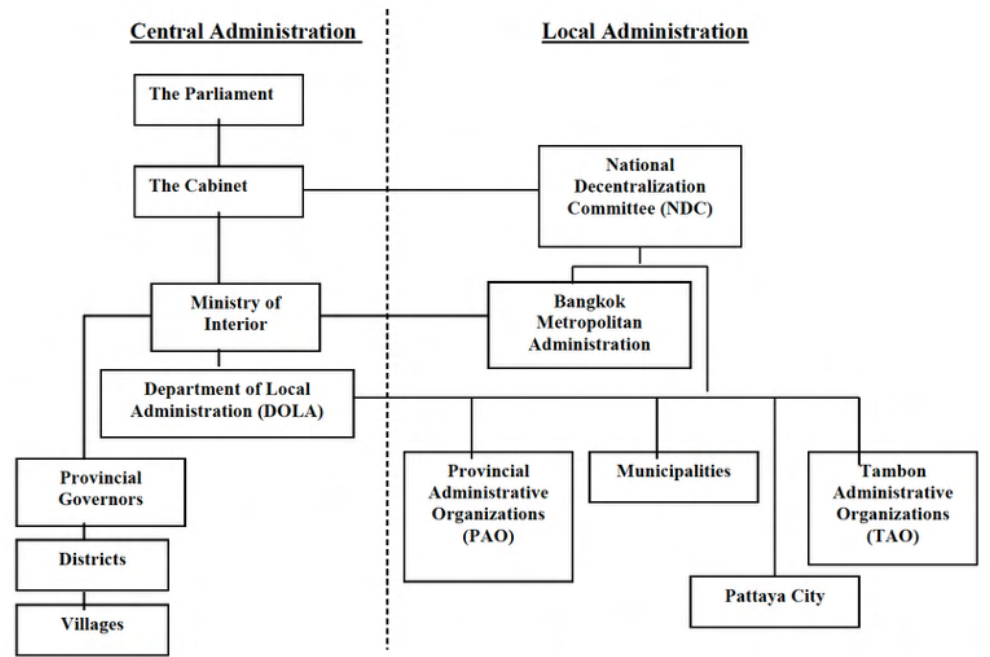
The Thai Constitution of 1997 and the Decentralization Law of 1999 marked the beginning of an official reform process, representing an ambitious attempt in the country's history to restructure the balance between central and local authority. Before this reform, local bodies such as the Thesaban existed but operated under appointed leadership and with negligible fiscal autonomy and Bangkok had a directly elected governor since 1985, this is its historical specificity, but with limited powers (Kermel-Torrès 2004, 151-159). The Constitution and the Decentralization Act work together as a form of roadmap for execution, with the former setting the vision and the latter creating the implementation roadmap. Known as the "People's Constitution", it institutionalized local governance, required election of local officials (before this, many were appointed), granted local units more legislative and fiscal autonomy and added provisions for public consultation. It also enabled a concrete transfer of powers: 245 functions previously held by the central state were planned for transfer to local governments, spanning 11 ministries and 50 departments (Chardchawarn,

2010). These spanned several key policy areas, including education and culture, public health, infrastructure and urban planning, social and economic development, environmental management, and social services, domains that had previously been exclusively administered by the central state (Wongsekiarttirat 1999). Section 78 explicitly stated the state must decentralize so that localities could be self-reliant and make decisions independently (Klein, 1998). As such, decentralization was made a constitutional obligation, not just a policy choice. The 2007 Constitution reaffirmed the same vision, which demonstrates that the reform was not a mere anomaly within the Thai political landscape (Hooghe et al, 2016). Nevertheless, the gap between constitutional ambition and institutional reality remained significant: the transfer was incomplete as only 181 of 245 functions had been effectively devolved by the end of the first plan in 2008 and even transferred functions often came without real decision-making power because the underlying legislation was not amended. This creates a form of delegated responsibility without equivalent delegated authority. According to the World Bank's 2023 Thailand Public Revenue and Spending Assessment, local governments account for only 13% of current public spending, reflecting limited decentralization of service delivery despite numerous rounds of legislative reform (World Bank, 2023). Therefore, such a deep structural imbalance could not be fixed by legal reform alone.

Fiscal Decentralization

As mentioned above, Thailand has a strong tradition of centralized governance. This translated into a similarly centralized fiscal structure and revenue expenditure system. In fact, before the 1997 Constitution, only 10% of total government spending was by local governments, while the remaining 90% of national revenue was held by the central national government (Nantharath et al., 2020). Local governments only collected minor taxes and had very weak revenue raising powers; thus, their revenue capacity depended strongly on taxes collected by the central government from which they received a small share, and on grants or transfers also allocated

Figure 2: Administrative Structure of the Royal Thai Government. From Sakon Varanyuwatana and Duangmanee Lao-vakul, "Progress of Fiscal Decentralization in Thailand" (conference paper, 2010), ResearchGate



by the central government. However, transfers were discretionary and unsystematic: there was no clear formula regulating grant allocation and the central government held strong control over these financial mechanisms.

The new Constitution inaugurated decentralization efforts in Thailand. In the following years, reforms introduced to further this decentralization efforts brought changes to the fiscal and government spending system to devolve higher revenues to the local governments. Notably, the Decentralization Act of 1999 determined that the central government has to devolve at least 20% of its total revenues to local governments; and this amount had to reach 35% by 2006 (Varanyuwatana & Laovakul, 2010). This 35% were planned to be shared among all local administrative organizations, on an equal footing or, in other words, without intermediaries: Provincial Administrative Organizations, Municipalities, Tambon Administrative Organizations and Special Local Administrative Organizations (such as Bangkok Metropolitan Administration or Pattaya City). More generally, this Act mandated the attainment of certain fiscal targets and the assignment of larger revenue sources for local governments. This change went hand in hand with the

increase in responsibilities and functions falling under the umbrella of local governments: indeed, the Decentralization Act devolved 245 functions, over a 10-year period, to local levels of government (Nantharath et al., 2020). Moreover, the 1999 Act required the establishment of the Office of the National Decentralization Committee, which had to specify the responsibilities of local governments and the ways through which revenues would be allocated to enable local governments to respect these new responsibilities (Unger & Mahakanjana, 2016). The National Decentralization Committee consisted of the 28 members, including the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Interior, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Interior and its Director-General, 12 representatives of local government, and 12 senior experts

The beginning of the 21st century saw a net increase in the share of total government revenue allocated to local governments. Indeed, in 2002, 20.2% of total government revenues was already spent by local governments (Nantharath et al., 2020) and in 2008 this amount reached 25% (Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior). The 35% goal was however abandoned by the interim government put in

place after the 2006 military coup d'État (Varanyuwatana & Laovakul, 2010). While the 25% mark was kept by the same interim government, the actual local government's share of national revenue has decreased since 2008. Indeed, it only reached 17% in 2023 (3,9% of Thailand's GDP) (World Bank, 2023).

The devolution of revenue to local government has mainly been carried out through the increase of intergovernmental transfers, which include shared taxes and grants. Shared taxes encompass, mainly, the 1/9th of the Value Added Tax (VAT) allocated to local governments, 10% of excise and alcohol taxes, the full amount collected on real estate registration and a part of mineral and petroleum taxes (OECD/UCLG, 2016). The amount transferred to local governments is decided on a per capita basis; it does not take into consideration differences between local governments in terms of financial capacity or differing financial need. These shared taxes represent the core of local government's revenues; indeed, they represent around 45,1% of total local revenue (Varanyuwatana & Laovakul, 2010).

On the other hand, grants refer to both general and specific grants allocated by the central government to enhance public service provision at the local level. They were, for a long time, decided by the Ministry of Interior's Department of Local Administration, which held discretionary power in allocating resources and in deciding the nature of the grant (Unger & Mahakanjana, 2016). In 2018, a fiscal recentralization reform gave the central Budget Bureau under the Office of the Prime Minister direct control over these local government budget allocations (Gilley & Laochankham, 2024). This partly explains why grants are widely criticized in decentralization discussions. Allocation schemes are often described as anything but transparent: indeed, the amount available each year is unpredictable (as it depends on central governments discretion and on national fiscal conditions) and there are no systematic criterias to decide who gets what. Distribution of grants is thus often seen as arbitrary and politicized, both by academics and by local authorities. As an example, politicians

at the regional and local level often believe that the most certain way to secure grants from the central government is to have ties with important national level politicians. In other words, grant allocation ties local governments to arbitrary decision-making at the national level; this explains why some described it as a tool conceived by and for the central government to monitor the activities of local governments (Varanyuwatana & Laovakul, 2010).

All together, shared taxes and grants amount to more than 80% of total local government's revenue (Varanyuwatana & Laovakul, 2010). It is thus clear that intergovernmental transfers are the backbone of revenue decentralization in Thailand as inaugurated by the 1997 Constitution and the 1999 Decentralization Act. In fact, the 1997 Constitution mandated the increase of local revenue but did not assign new tax revenue bases - more generally, there were no legal and policy actions taken towards reforming local fiscal structure. The absence of any fiscal reforming efforts put the burden of the planned increase of local government's revenue onto these intergovernmental transfers dependent on national level redistribution of their revenue.

But the lack of fiscal reform to accompany decentralization is even more surprising when one looks at the share of locally levied revenue in local government's total revenue. Locally levied revenue includes all taxes levied by the local governments: these are mainly property and building taxes as well as signboard taxes (OECD/UCLG, 2016). Here too, tax rates are decided by the central government despite these taxes being collected locally. But even more striking is the fact that their share in local government's revenue has actually decreased since the beginning of the decentralization process in Thailand: for instance, the property and building tax, the most important of them, represented 4,4% of local revenues in 2006 while it amounted to only 8,5% in 1998. Overall, the share of locally levied revenue went from 8,9% of all local revenue to 5% between 1998 and 2006 (Varanyuwatana & Laovakul, 2010). This number has risen slightly in recent years but without much consistency; indeed, according to the Ministry of Finance of

Thailand it reached 15% in 2020 but then fell to 9% in 2021 (Government of Thailand, 2022).

What about Bangkok's case? While having a special local administrative organization and somewhat more power than most local governments, Bangkok's fiscal capacity is still embedded in the general Thai fiscal system. The share of the city's own-source revenue (14%) shows no significant difference with the rest of the country: for 2019, it was higher than other municipalities' (8%) and provincial administrations' (7%) but smaller than for districts and sub-districts (16%) (Gilley & Laochankham, 2024). Besides, compared to the general figure of 15% for the following year (2020), 14% does not appear to be exceptional. In other words, Bangkok deals with the same constrained fiscal structure as other local governments and does not benefit from its slightly different status.

However, in recent years, Bangkok has made a concerted effort to strengthen the collection of its land and building tax. Most notably, the city has expanded its tax base by improving property registration and classification systems, while ensuring that this information is regularly updated. In 2024, Lavaron Sangsnit, Finance Permanent Secretary, stated that Bangkok had completed 99.4% of its land-use assessments, covering approximately 2.1 million land plots, 2.2 million houses, and 1 million condominium units. By significantly improving the coverage and accuracy of its property database, Bangkok has been able to bring more assets into the tax net. This administrative strengthening directly contributes to higher and more consistent tax revenues, while also laying the groundwork for future increases through better valuation (Chantanusornsiri, 2024). If we believe the figures put forward by city governor Chadchart Sittipunt -in an interview with the Bangkok Post in September 2023-, the BMA collected 11.12 billion baht that year from the land and building tax (Wancharoen, 2023). Thus, Bangkok's fiscal autonomy is also a land question: it depends on whether the city can convert urban value into public capacity, and cities are looking towards innovative mechanisms to convert the value of land, under a context of limited budgets. Nevertheless, these efforts remain

exceptional and limited, and are essentially individual initiatives by singular local governments to increase their governance capacity, and not systemic policies by the Thai government.

Overall, decentralization in Thailand has not truly increased the power of local governments regarding the levy of taxes and fiscal autonomy but it even reduced it at first. Indeed, decentralization has been carried out without reforming the fiscal system and improving local government's revenue raising powers. By doing so it has strengthened the importance of intergovernmental transfers in their mission to allocate larger revenues to local governments. This has, in a way, ensured central government's control over local finances and has strongly conditioned local governments' financial autonomy. City governments are being delegated responsibilities for which they have no financial and technical capacity to undertake.

Governance dynamics in Bangkok: interactions between institutional framework and metropolitan realities

Interactions between institutional framework and operational implementation in Bangkok

Building on the institutional framework described above, it is interesting to understand how the administrative structure influences the concrete implementation of urban policies. In this regard, the 2011 floods and the Covid-19 pandemic illustrate the operational articulation between the different levels of government, as well as the resulting impacts on the effectiveness of interventions (Marks & Lebel 2016 ; Marks 2015).

The 2011 floods, one of the most severe disasters in Thailand's recent history, affected residential, commercial and industrial areas of Bangkok for several weeks, mobilizing a variety of public actors at different levels. Crisis management involved both central and local actors: while national authorities defined overall strategies, the BMA and municipal districts (Khet) were responsible for local implementation, including evacuation, protection measures and relief distribution.

However, this distribution of responsibilities revealed coordination challenges. In Bangkok, tensions emerged between national priorities – such as protecting industrial zones – and local needs related to residential areas. The BMA had limited capacity to adjust centrally defined strategies, despite its proximity to affected populations. As a result, differentiated effects were observed: central areas benefited from faster responses, whereas peripheral districts experienced delays due to logistical constraints and limited staff (Marks & Lebel, 2016). This situation thereby illustrates a certain hierarchy of interventions (Marks, 2015), but also shows that local capacity to respond depended not only on resources and coordination, but on the degree of autonomy granted within the centralized system. Similar coordination mechanisms were observed during the Covid-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic the central government created the Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA), presided by The Prime Minister himself. Provincial governors were given some responsibility, but mostly to enforce restrictions in their jurisdictions, acting more as intermediaries following directives rather than decision-makers. As a result, decision-making and resource allocation largely remained at the top level. Still, the Ministry of Public Health did not have control over the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration. This created gaps in communication, data-sharing and command authority between the Ministry of Public Health and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, two bodies operating in parallel with no hierarchical link between them. In practice, this made containment in the capital more complicated during Bangkok's waves 3 and 4 with delayed treatment, overwhelmed facilities and chaotic vaccine roll-out. This fragmentation was further exacerbated by a lack of inter-operability between data systems across levels of government, as vaccine and testing databases remained unsynchronized for months (Tuangratananon et al, 2024). National guidelines issued by the Ministry of Public Health and the CPHO were implemented locally by the BMA and district authorities (Khet), which coordinated hospitals, testing centres and enforcement measures (Boossabong & Chamchong, 2020 ; Tuangratananon et al., 2024).

Here again, differentiated effects appeared within Bangkok: central areas implemented measures more rapidly, whereas peripheral districts faced delays in testing and vaccination campaigns due to logistical and staffing constraints (Marks & Lebel, 2016). These limitations were not only operational but also institutional, as key resources – such as vaccine allocation and budgetary flexibility – remained centrally controlled. This limited the BMA's ability to adapt responses to local conditions. Bangkok's governor can be publicly accountable for outcomes without fully controlling the fiscal and administrative means that produce them.

From a decentralization perspective, this reveals a mismatch between responsibilities and capacities: although local authorities are formally in charge of implementation, they remain dependent on central decisions and resources. In a more decentralized scenario, greater fiscal autonomy and control over local resources could have enabled more rapid and spatially adapted responses, particularly in vulnerable areas.

These two cases thus illustrate how urban governance in Bangkok is characterized by complex multi-level interactions, where a formal distribution of responsibilities translates into uneven operational outcomes. More specifically, what appears as a prioritization of interventions reflects the dominance of central-level decision-making over local adaptation. Indeed, although local authorities are legally recognized, their capacity to implement policies depends on both available resources and the degree of autonomy within this hierarchical system (Marks 2015; Tuangratananon et al. 2024). In this sense, centralization does not merely restrict local autonomy: it also perpetuates and exacerbates existing regional inequalities, turning Bangkok into a two-tiered metropolis where the ability to govern locally depends less on the actual needs of the population than on one's position within the administrative and fiscal hierarchy.

Political stakes in Bangkok's governance

If the persistence of hierarchical structures limits the ability of local authorities to respond auton-

omously to specific local needs, particularly in crisis situations, these tensions however reflect a broader political pattern in Thailand, where institutional centralization is intertwined with historical power relations between national elites and local actors.

Indeed, urban governance in Bangkok is not merely about the execution of public policies, it is deeply shaped by political issues and tensions, which manifest in speeches, bureaucratic practices, and the balance of power between national and local actors, thus affecting the cohesion of these policies as well as their legitimacy at the metropolitan level (Chopyot & Samakeetham 2024).

In Bangkok, these political dynamics are particularly visible due to the city's specific institutional status, as its governor is directly elected, unlike provincial governors appointed by the central state. This gives the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) a stronger political legitimacy and visibility, which can raise expectations regarding its capacity to act autonomously. However, this political legitimacy does not necessarily translate into greater decision-making power, as the BMA remains dependent on centrally controlled fiscal resources and regulatory frameworks (Varanyuwatana & Laovakul 2010 ; Gilley & Laochankham 2024).

This creates a tension between political responsibility and institutional capacity, reflecting an imbalance between transferred responsibilities and effective authority in practice. For instance, during the 2011 floods and the Covid-19 pandemic, the BMA and its governor were highly visible and often held accountable for policy outcomes at the local level, despite having limited control over key decisions and resources (Marks 2015; Tuangratananon et al. 2024). This illustrates how, in this context, local authorities may bear political costs without possessing full policy autonomy.

First a political issue, the debate on decentralization in Thailand has been shaped since the 1997 Constitution not only by technical considerations but also by competing discourses on

the role of the State and local responsibilities. Among these discourses, some emphasize the reluctance of central authorities to transfer power to local administrations, interpreted as a form of “bureaucratic patrimonialism” and a way of maintaining political control over territories (Chopyot & Samakeetham 2024). The idea that decentralization could threaten national stability is frequently invoked, thereby legitimizing continued central control in key areas such as security or strategic planning.

This dynamic is also reflected in concrete governance mechanisms. In particular, central authorities retain significant leverage over local governments through control over budget allocations and intergovernmental transfers (Varanyuwatana & Laovakul 2010; Gilley & Laochankham 2024). Although difficult to measure precisely, this can create incentives for political alignment between local and national actors in order to secure resources. In the case of Bangkok, this reinforces the dependence of the BMA on central authorities, despite its formal autonomy.

More broadly, these dynamics show that decentralization in Bangkok remains politically constrained. While the existence of an elected governor suggests a move towards greater political decentralization, this has not been fully matched by administrative and fiscal devolution. As a result, urban governance in Bangkok is shaped by a tension between visible local leadership and persistent central control, limiting the extent to which local authorities can effectively respond to metropolitan challenges (Marks 2015; Tuangratananon et al. 2024). The Thai case demonstrates that constitutional decentralization, absent fiscal reform and genuine political devolution tend to displace rather than redistribute central control, a dynamic likely to persist in unitary developmental states where bureaucratic elites hold on to structural incentives to contain local agency.

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Private Solution for First and Last Mile

By Elie Martin and Anna Foucault

This article examines the challenge of first and last mile (FLM) transit in Bangkok through the case of MuvMi, a private electric tuk-tuk sharing service operating across twelve city neighbourhoods. Drawing on academic literature, field observations, and direct engagement with the company's management team, we situate MuvMi within Bangkok's distinctive urban morphology, where superblocks and narrow soi render conventional mass transit insufficient for door-to-door connectivity. After mapping existing FLM solutions, we analyse MuvMi's operational model, its tensions with the traditional tuk-tuk sector, and its ecological and social implications. We argue that while such market-driven micro-transit initiatives offer promising responses to Bangkok's FLM gap, their capacity to achieve the scale and equity required for city-wide impact remains constrained by commercial imperatives and the broader fragmentation of Bangkok's transport governance.



Private Solution for First and Last Mile Transit

The example of electric tuktuk-sharing with MuvMi

Figure 1: Map of the superblocks in Bangkok, BANGKOK Beta 20.5.0 a Visionary Scenario

Challenge of First and Last Mile Transit

Bangkok offers a compelling lens through which to explore the persistent challenge of first- and last-mile (FLM) transit. Over recent decades, the city has invested heavily in high-capacity public transport infrastructure - including the BTS Skytrain, MRT subway, and suburban rail extensions - alongside initiatives to upgrade bus and boat services (Natirojanachaicharn, 2023). Yet these improvements have done little to alleviate the pervasive congestion that continues to define everyday mobility. The reason lies not only in the reach of these systems but in the connections between them: despite new transport corridors, many residents still struggle to travel from their homes to the nearest mass-transit station (and symmetrically from the last station to the final destination). The challenge is therefore less about network coverage than about connectivity within Bangkok's complex urban fabric. For countless commuters, the daily obstacle is bridging that short but difficult distance between local streets and high-capacity lines; a gap that makes visible the deeper question of equity and inclusion in the city's public transport landscape.

Bangkok's urban morphology is distinctive for



its pattern of superblocks, large land parcels delineated by arterial roads and internally structured by a maze of narrow side streets, or soi. These side streets are not necessarily connected to one another, and they are often dead ends (The Ecology of a Soi, 2022). These soi create a fragmented urban fabric that restricts movement and results in a highly hierarchical street network (Boontharm, 2016). While the superblock configuration supports local security and residential intimacy, it poses significant challenges to networked mobility (Arkaraprasertkul, 2010). Because most soi are too narrow or disconnected for standard public buses or even minibuses, movement within them depends on small, flexible, and typically informal vehicles, such as motorcycle taxis, tuk-tuks, and songthaews. These micro-scale services form the connective tissue linking local neighborhoods to main arteries, yet they operate largely outside formal regulation or planning (Wongwiriya et al. 2015). Mobility in Bangkok is thus inherently polycen-

tric and multimodal, making the strengthening of first- and last-mile connections a central priority for improving the overall transport network and alleviating urban congestion. The morphological constraint and the related dependence on flexible modes of transport underpins the broader issue of mobility in the first and last mile connectivity. The first/last-mile problem is therefore not only a technical gap between transport modes; it is a socio-spatial effect of Bangkok's land subdivision and street hierarchy.

Our approach distinguishes mobility from transportation, emphasizing the multiplicity of meanings, practices, and social relations that shape movement (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Adopting a mobility lens shifts analysis away from infrastructures and technologies toward the embodied and lived experience of moving through the city. In Bangkok, this perspective reframes the first- and last-mile (FLM) issue not merely as a logistical calculation of distance or time, but as a continual negotiation with planned infrastructures and urban form (Cervero & Golub, 2007). Residents construct adaptive travel strategies: walking, taking motorcycle taxis to connect with main roads, boarding buses or canal boats, and transferring to rail systems. The result is a mosaic of mobility that reveals both ingenuity and vulnerability: while such practices allow remarkable flexibility, they can also be costly, unsafe, and time-consuming, particularly for low-income travelers (Thaithatkul, 2025). Viewing FLM through the lens of mobility thus makes it possible not only to consider individual practices but also to analyze “from below” the competition and conflicts that arise between actors as they negotiate the city's transport hierarchies.

The Transport Network

Bangkok's overall transport ecosystem reveals striking diversity. connects the urban core with outlying districts, bus and BRT lines traverse nearly every major boulevard, and the city continues to rely on its historic waterway networks for passenger services (World Bank 2007). However, integration between these systems remains limited (Asian Transport Observatory 2024). At the backbone of the formal public tran-

sit network stand the elevated BTS Skytrain and the underground MRT subway. The BTS Sky-Train system operates in 2 lines with an approximately 68.5 kilometers in length with a total of 60 stations, while the MRT network comprises two fully operational rapid transit lines and two fully operational monorail lines, with another rapid transit line under construction (“Structure and Stations : Routes,” n.d.). The MRT network currently spans 133 kilometres, and the additional planned 171.63 kilometres will bring the total projected length to 304.63 kilometres. These networks transported around 410 millions of people in 2024 along radial and peripheral corridors, thereby reducing travel times in the city's heavily trafficked central corridors while largely bypassing the congested road network (“Volume of rail transport users in the year 2017. 2567” 2025; “Annual Report BTS 2025,” n.d.).

These rail-based systems are complemented by a sprawling bus network that includes over 200 routes, with a fleet comprising around 3,500 buses from BMTA alone, plus additional buses from private operators. In addition to the public buses, non-air-conditioned “fan buses” are also an option, and limited-stop BRT services operate on dedicated lanes along major arterials such as Rama III and Ram Intra, providing cheaper, more flexible coverage in peripheral areas where the heavy-rail network does not yet reach. The city's river transport system includes the Chao Phraya Express Boat lines carrying approximately 40,000 passengers daily (other sources state 150,000), crisscrossing the main waterway, connecting key piers located near business districts, temples, and tourist hubs, while smaller boats operate on inland waterways, serving areas that are sometimes poorly served by road transport (Ratanawaraha and Chalermpong 2014).

This network is currently being expanded as part of the government's “W-Map” plan, which aims to invest in new waterways and improve this means of transport by 2032 (Team France Export, 2023). In addition to these official public transportation options, there are many other modes of transport that are more or less informal and more or less shared: motorcycle taxis carry passengers short distances through con-

gested streets; shared minibuses (often called “songthaews”) operate on fixed routes where official buses are scarce; and ride-hailing apps such as Grab and Bolt connect private cars, taxis, and motorcycle services. This brings us to an important point: digital platforms are joining physical infrastructure to reshape the landscape of mobility options. And the formal and informal systems thus coexist in mutual dependence. Yet, despite this wide variety, interconnectivity between these networks remains limited: each mode of transportation is largely managed by separate agencies. BTS and MRT operate in parallel with separate management structures, and do not always coordinate with one another, with the buses, or with the Chao Phraya Express Boat. As a result, the different means often apply different fare structures and ticketing systems, forcing users to pay multiple times for their journey, change platforms, and use poorly served transfer points: a situation that reinforces, rather than bridging, the spatial and social divides between the city center and its outlying neighborhoods.

The literature on the first and last mile defines it as the initial and final legs of a multimodal trip, connecting home to transit and transit to destination, respectively (Kåresdotter et al. 2022). However, this ostensibly simple concept gains complexity in cities like Bangkok, where urban morphology, informal economies, and social inequalities intersect. For instance, Banister’s (2008) sustainable mobility framework emphasizes the need to integrate local accessibility within broader transport hierarchies, while one can also point to institutional fragmentation as a major barrier to multimodal integration (Seamless Transport Policy, 2012). In Bangkok, physical disconnection and institutional incoherence together produce a system where accessibility depends as much on socio-economic position as on infrastructure provision.

Given, the physical constraints of soi-urbanism that prevent building a highly networked metro and bus system, addressing the FLM gap in Bangkok therefore demands rethinking the city’s mobility systems not simply as physical networks but as socio-technical assemblages

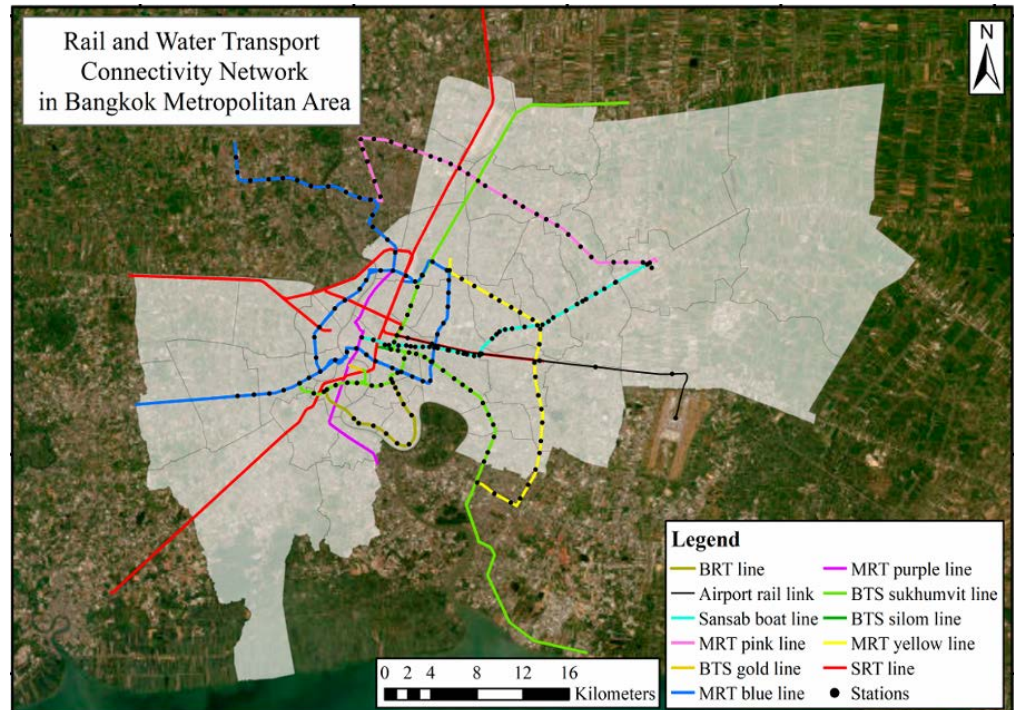
where informal means of transportation are not a mere stage of transition but indispensable. Informal modes should not be viewed merely as symptoms of underdevelopment but as active components of urban mobility that provide flexibility and resilience (Maksim and Bergman, 2016; Wattanawanyoo, 2018). Informal modes are not merely transitional leftovers; they are part of the operating system of Bangkok’s mobility. Policy interventions need to recognize and build upon this reality to improve safety and reliability, and enhance the mobility environment that links people to (public) transport nodes (Thaithatkul 2025). Equally important is an inclusive perspective on planning, not privileging only speed and capacity but valuing connectivity, inclusion, and everyday accessibility. In this sense, Bangkok’s first- and last-mile challenge involves finding solutions for getting around in the interstices of mass transit systems. From the commuters’ perspective, informal solutions may exist, but it is important to assess why these are often inadequate, expensive, or unsafe. FLM is not a secondary problem but a central lens for understanding the broader dynamics of urban mobility: it invites a more holistic understanding of the city; one that bridges infrastructure and lived experience, informal systems and everyday innovation.

First and Last Mile Connectivity in Bangkok: What are the Solutions?

Faced with the FLM challenges identified above, various solutions have been proposed to improve urban mobility in Bangkok. First, we will discuss a theoretical approach that seeks to model the optimal allocation of transport infrastructure across the city, before turning to more concrete interventions such as walkability improvements and shared mobility schemes.

To address FLM challenges, Boonprong et. al. (2025) developed a methodological approach based on Geographic Information Systems (GIS), combining a spatial optimization algorithm, the Maximal Covering Location Problem, with isochrone accessibility diagnostics (a curve connecting all points reachable from a given lo-

Figure 2: Connectivity map of Bangkok, Boonprong, S., Varnakovida, P., Rinrat, N., Kaytakob, N., & Kitsamai, A, 2025



cation within the same travel time). Concretely, if an intermodal hub is placed on a map and a 20-minute isochrone is drawn, the resulting zone delimits all locations from which that hub can be reached in 20 minutes or less using the actual transport network) (Boonprong et al., 2025). The objective was to determine the best possible locations for intermodal hubs, that is, transfer points where multiple transport modes converge in a single, purpose-designed location, building on the existing network: BTS, MRT, SRT, Airport Rail Link, and waterways. Three scenarios were compared, a single hub, three hubs, and five hubs, tested against different access time thresholds (15, 20, and 25 minutes).

The solution identified as optimal by the model is the five-hub configuration, located in the districts of Bang Sue, Khlong Toei, Bang Khen, Thon Buri, and Bang Khae (Boonprong et al., 2025). This configuration provides the most spatially balanced coverage across the city, serving both the east and west banks of the Chao Phraya River, the latter having historically been underserved by the rail network. Each of the five hubs is positioned at the convergence of existing high-capacity lines, allowing the framework to build on current infrastructure without requiring

new heavy-investment construction. These hubs integrate multiple modes of transport, including rail systems (BTS, MRT, SRT, Airport Rail Link), buses/BRT, and in some cases water transport, rather than relying only on metro and bus. Together, they could potentially serve more than 3.2 million residents within a 20-minute radius. It is important to emphasize that these results remain purely modelling-based in nature.

Other means can also be considered to improve FLM mobility; mainly walkability, biking and shared mobility. Each of these options has its pros and cons, which is why they should be implemented together, since it is the variety of possibilities that enables inclusive mobility.

Studies show that urban design can also be a tool to improve walkability and therefore encourage residents to walk, whether for utilitarian or recreational purposes (Ratanawichit et al., 2025). First-mile walking supports both sustainable mobility and public health by enabling these two types of walking activity, however we should note that the specific hot and humid climate conditions of Bangkok make walking difficult. Despite Bangkok's walking environment improving in selected (central) areas, overall it

remains uneven and hardly walkable for long walks. Academic studies also show that not only environmental variables make walking difficult in many neighborhoods but we also witness social determinants; this means that the city is not equally safe or convenient for all users. Therefore, even with better infrastructure, we should suppose that not all inhabitants will accept to walk for longer distances.

Considering biking, it currently does not have a major role in Bangkok, for several reasons, including the climate, air pollution but also the infrastructure. Indeed, the heat and humidity pose obstacles to cycling, but they can also serve as an excuse for failing to improve the infrastructure. Climate can dampen the numbers but not eliminate cycling; In fact, cycling is more widespread in other countries in the region, despite the same climatic conditions. In fact, encouraging bicycle commuting as a mode of transportation in daily life significantly depends on public policy (Ungsuchaval et al. 2022). The cycling infrastructure is minimal to non-existent, and in our conversations with stakeholders designing new urban plans for Bangkok, they want to make Bangkok first “walkable”, and then think about making it “cyclable”. We could nevertheless note that, since last August, the private company Hello Ride has invested in the bike sharing market, proposing shared bikes in Bangkok. It is difficult to find statistics on the number of cyclists, but from what little we have observed, cycling is far from widespread.

Motored shared mobility is another affordable and sustainable option to improve mobility while decongesting the streets (Shaheen and Chan, 2016). This option is also appealing not only for connecting to public transportation but also for linking parts of the city that may be far from transportation hubs. When integrated with fare and information systems (such as integrated ticketing systems or route-planning apps), shared mobility can reduce private car use, alleviate traffic congestion and lower emissions, and help create a more efficient urban transportation network suited to Bangkok’s sprawling, multi-modal environment. Finally, the shared mobility sector is highly diverse and segmented: from

carpooling and bike-sharing to ride-hailing services, minibus carpooling, and shuttle services, each market segment faces its own unique challenges. Currently, the Thailand shared vehicles market has hit USD 1.2 billion (Ken Research, 2026). Although we don’t have specific figures for Bangkok, we can expect the capital to play an important role.

MUVMI on the Ground : a Case Study in Private first/last mile Urban Mobility

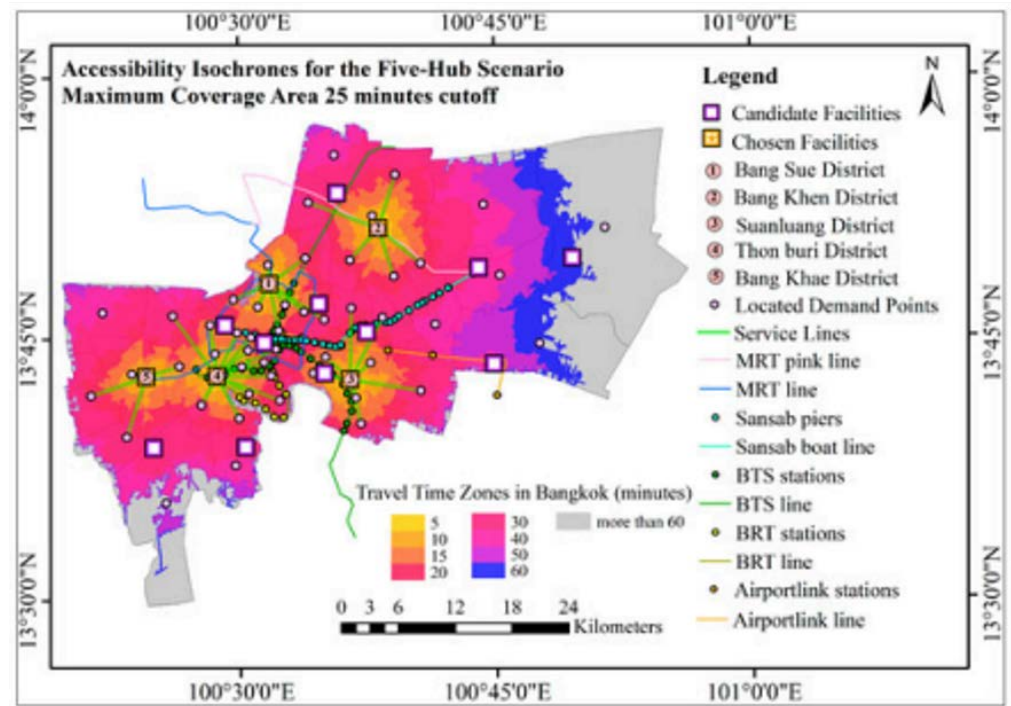
The below analysis should be read in conjunction with the fact that it is based on conversations with the management and inability to access internal company data constrains us in not being able to verify the claims.

Apart from the solutions presented above that would improve mobility for the first and last mile, we want to discuss one particular case currently going on in Bangkok. Thus, in this last section we will present, through the concrete example of MuvMi company, how the private sector in Bangkok is trying to implement a solution to the FLM issue, therefore providing a service that is not fulfilled by the public sector. We will also present the potential limit of such an initiative and the complications they may face.

MuvMi

MuvMi is a Bangkok-based startup founded in 2016, deploying electric tuk-tuks bookable via app to bridge first/last-mile gaps with the BTS and MRT networks. It deploys over 600 electric tuk-tuks across 12 Bangkok neighborhoods. MuMi presents itself as an on-demand ride-sharing that is affordable and convenient, comfortable, clean and safe. Its official discourse rests on three pillars: an environmental mission (claiming over 1,200 tons of CO2 avoided), a social inclusion agenda (with around 15% senior citizen drivers and 5% women), and a smart city narrative combining AI routing, and partnerships with governments and businesses (« About Us - MuvMi », s. d.). Muvmi offers an alternative transportation service to the traditional tuk-tuk, featuring a fixed price (no haggling with the driver) and claiming to be safer. When used with an

Figure 3: Map of Bangkok in the scenario of intermodal hubsm Boonprong, S., Varnakovida, P., Rinnrat, N., Kaytakhob, N., & Kitsamai, A, 2025



app, MuvMi integrates the wireless infrastructure into the transport network. MuvMi's customer base is diverse, but according to discussion with the management team the typical customer is a middle-class woman: it is a service that meets local demand by targeting communities and individuals with limited mobility.

In addition to the classical tuk-tuk sharing service and in order to maintain a certain profitability, MuvMi also offers other services. These include MuvThing, a last-mile delivery service using their electric tuk-tuks for small to large businesses; MuvAds, an advertising solution that leverages the fleet to target specific neighbourhoods and measure direct marketing impact; a Monthly Shuttle Service, providing companies, schools, or residential communities with fixed-route, fixed-schedule rides without requiring app bookings; and a Tourist Pass, offering visitors rides to Bangkok's main attractions throughout the day. Supporting these operations is a robust in-house infrastructure: MuvMi owns its entire fleet of electric tuk-tuks and has developed its own proprietary charging stations, purpose-built to meet the specific needs of their vehicles. The company also operates a live monitoring system that tracks each vehicle in real time, enabling

efficient fleet management, rapid response to issues, and continuous optimisation of routes and service quality.

Relationships with External Actors and Tensions with Traditional Tuk-Tuks

Positioning itself as an alternative to the classic tuk-tuk rather than an ally of the traditional sector, MuvMi is competing with them in their own market. The relationship with traditional tuk-tuk drivers is therefore ambiguous. MuvMi's entire founding logic is built on a critique of the traditional tuk-tuk model: When Urban Mobility Tech surveyed passengers in Bangkok, they reported that traditional tuk-tuks lacked standard pricing and generated noise and air pollution. Based on conversations with the management, drivers are not always licensed, riding behaviour can be rash, and fares are routinely subject to negotiation, with passengers often finding themselves overcharged. Thus, MuvMi according to them is positioned as a solution to these frictions.

MuvMi operates a centrally managed fleet, fundamentally altering the labour model from independent self-employment to salaried work within a corporate structure. As for driver training, the

company covers all training costs. In conversations with the management, Muvmi employs 2000+ workers with a 60-40 split in favour of part-time drivers. While MuvMi presents this as an improvement in working conditions, it simultaneously displaces the autonomous economic model of traditional tuk-tuk operators. MuvMi drivers can work part-time or full-time, and this status affects the compensation structure: full-time drivers receive a monthly salary, while part-time drivers are paid on a daily basis based on their shifts, 85 baht/hr plus tiered bonuses. The flexibility offered by part-time drivers makes them essential to the company's economic sustainability. This tension echoes a broader global dynamic in platform economies, where the formalisation of informal mobility often comes at the cost of economic autonomy for existing workers (Andika, 2025).

Ecological, Social and Other and Opportunities and Limits

Some ecological benefits from the usage of electric tuk-tuks could come from a reduction in noise pollution while cutting PM2.5 emissions in a city plagued by air quality issues. Moreover, the shared-ride model boosts efficiency, reduces overall vehicle use, and allows it to navigate narrow soi inaccessible to larger transport.

MuvMi's ecological impact has to be assessed beyond the green image that the company presents. Despite benefits, the impact remains localized. While CO2 emissions are eliminated locally, lithium-ion batteries rely on environmentally costly rare metals, and improper disposal poses serious ecological risks. Compounding this, MuvMi's batteries last only around one year, generating a high volume of waste. Rather than solving the problem of pollution, electrification largely shifts it elsewhere. Scaling requires infrastructure like charging stations. Lastly, electricity sourcing may indirectly burden grids if not fully renewable. For that, MuvMi relies on external companies and it is hard to assess the environmental impact and inability to access the internal corporate practices do not allow us to make robust claims either in favour or against with regards to the evaluation of their GHG emissions.

MuvMi's electric tuk-tuks may also enhance safety by relying on skilled drivers to lower the accident risks. Their app-based booking and GPS tracking provide real-time ride monitoring, driver verification, and emergency alerts, minimizing incidents like overcharging or unsafe detours common with traditional tuk-tuks. Shared rides further promote safer travel thanks to in-vehicle cameras that deter incidents (theft, assault).

Socially, MuvMi impacts the local mobility market ambiguously. Drivers can be empowered with steady income through a fair commission model and training programs. MuvMi team is claiming to foster economic inclusion, for example by hiring people nearing retirement who can't find other jobs. It seems to benefit low- and middle-income residents (in the neighbourhoods concerned). Drivers employed by them don't have to pay maintenance and gasoline costs. It is important to note, however, that the service is not available everywhere or at all times: it covers 12 neighborhoods and is only available from 6am to 10pm. Finally, it also builds awareness on sustainable mobility, as well as helps for the cultural preservation of the tuk-tuk. Looking ahead, however, MuvMi's current model faces significant scaling constraints, as owning and maintaining a full fleet entails high capital costs. In response, the company is reportedly moving toward a leasing model closer to that of Uber, whereby MuvMi would provide the platform and brand while drivers lease their vehicles independently, shifting financial risk onto individual operators and potentially undermining the very labour protections the company currently presents as a social advantage. The formalisation of informal mobility may therefore improve reliability for passengers while reallocating economic risk from the company to drivers.

Conclusion

The first and last mile challenges faced by Bangkok are far from unique, they reflect a broader urban mobility crisis shared by many large metropolises across the Global South, where rapid urban growth has consistently outpaced the development of integrated public transport networks. However, these challenges must be

understood within Bangkok's very specific urban context. The city's distinctive spatial fabric, characterised by a dense network of narrow soi branching off main arterial roads, makes conventional mass transit solutions difficult to extend to residential areas. The presence of paratransit has filled these gaps, yet in an uncoordinated and often unreliable manner. To this must be added the constraints of Bangkok's tropical climate, where heat, humidity, and seasonal flooding further discourage walking and cycling as viable mass first and last mile options. In this context, private initiatives such as MuvMi appear as particularly relevant responses to the shortcomings of the public transport system. By offering flexible, affordable, and low-emission shared rides tailored to the city's complex street morphology, they represent a promising model for bridging the gap between major transit hubs and end destinations of Bangkok's residents. However, questions remain as to whether such market-driven solutions can achieve the scale and equity needed to serve the city as a whole. Muvmi's viability depends on whether it can be integrated into public mobility governance without deepening territorial and labour-market inequalities.

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Between Expansion and Fragmentation

*By Ritaj Kalaskar
Jeanne Lussot, and Jia Ni*

Since the 1980s, Bangkok has experienced acute traffic congestion and deteriorating air quality, driven by rapid urban expansion and a predominantly monocentric spatial structure. Over this period, the metropolitan population has grown from approximately 4.7 million to more than 11.3 million, alongside a dramatic increase in private vehicle ownership from 600,000 to 6.8 million. In response, successive governments have invested in mass transit systems; however, the effectiveness of these interventions has been constrained by limited integration between transport infrastructure and land-use planning.

This article examines the extent to which Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) has been implemented in Bangkok and evaluates its capacity to address structural challenges in urban mobility. Drawing on the evolution of Bangkok's urban rail network and planning frameworks, including successive mass transit master plans, the analysis highlights the role of institutional fragmentation, regulatory

constraints, and uneven accessibility outcomes in shaping transit performance. Particular attention is given to the interaction between land-use regulation, transit accessibility, and land value dynamics, which together influence both ridership patterns and the feasibility of land value capture mechanisms.

The findings suggest that, despite significant network expansion, TOD in Bangkok remains limited by weak coordination across agencies, inadequate last-mile connectivity, and disparities in the spatial distribution of accessibility benefits. As illustrated by flagship projects such as the Bang Sue redevelopment, ambitious planning visions are often undermined by governance complexity and implementation constraints. The paper argues that TOD in Bangkok should be understood not as a discrete planning model, but as an ongoing process requiring alignment between infrastructure investment, regulatory frameworks, and institutional capacity.



@ Lourens van Luijk

Between Expansion and Fragmentation: Evaluating Transit-Oriented Development and Urban Rail Governance in Bangkok

Figure 1: Sign showing cooperation between Japan and Thailand, Adrian Stein, 2026



Introduction

Since the 1980s, Bangkok has experienced acute traffic congestion and deteriorating air quality, driven largely by rapid urban expansion and a predominantly monocentric spatial structure. Over this period, the metropolitan population has increased from approximately 4.7 million to more than 11.3 million inhabitants (MacroTrends, 2026). This growth, combined with a development model heavily oriented toward road infrastructure, has contributed to a dramatic rise in private vehicle ownership—from roughly 600,000 to 6.8 million (Janofsky, 2012). In response, successive governments have pursued substantial investments in mass transit systems, including recent financial commitments such as a USD 50 million investment from the International Finance Corporation (IFC). However, the effectiveness of these interventions has been constrained by insufficient integration between transport infrastructure and land-use planning. Consequently, despite significant expansion of rail networks, Bangkok continues to face persistent congestion and associated environmental pressures, underscoring deeper structural challenges in urban governance and transport coordination.

Bangkok's Urban Rail Network

The operational network today consists of multiple systems developed over time. The BTS Dark Green Line, also known as the Silom Line, the oldest, began operations in 1999 (37.02 km with 22 stations), with its second phase opening in 2018. The BTS Light Green Line, also known as the Sukhumvit Line (14.2 km, 13 stations) also began operations in 1999. They are operated by the Bangkok Mass Transit System Public Company Limited (BTSC), a public sector holding. The Blue Line, operated by Bangkok Expressway and Metro Public Company Limited (BEM), another public holding, spans approximately 21 km with 19 stations and began operations in 2004, with extensions in 2010, 2014, and 2019. The Purple Line (23 km, 16 stations) has been operational since 2016 under the same operator. The first phase of the Red Line caters to 35,000 people/day. It was opened to the public in 2021 along two corridors between Bang Sue-Rangsit (26) and Bang Sue-Rangsit (15km). Operational management of the Red Line is handled by the State Railway of Thailand Electrified Train Company (SRTET), a subsidiary of the State Railway of Thailand established specifically to oversee electrified commuter rail services. The Airport

Rail Link, is also operated by SRTET, and covers 28 km with 8 stations which opened in 2009. This line is used by an estimated 68,000 people/day.

Transit Oriented Development

In this context, Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) has emerged as a key planning approach. The main objective of TOD is to increase public transit ridership while limiting urban sprawl. This is achieved by promoting compact, walkable, pedestrian-oriented, and mixed-use development around transit systems. By design, TOD aims to reduce reliance on private vehicles and increase the use of public transport, thereby addressing car dependency and contributing to lower air pollution levels. This requires strong coordination between land use and transport planning. Such integration can help recapture land value, as location-efficient neighborhoods tend to reduce spending on transport, enhance overall livability, and improve proximity to services like schools and hospitals. Typically, TOD is structured within a pedestrian catchment area of 500–1000 meters, corresponding to roughly a 10-minute walking distance from rail stations (ITF, 2023).

Planning and Development of TOD

Bangkok's mass transit development has been guided by a series of evolving master plans. The first Mass Rapid Transport System Master Plan, introduced in 1994, envisioned a 135 km network and was implemented in two phases: Phase 1 (1995–2001) and Phase 2 (2001–2011). This was revised in 2000 as the Urban Rail Transportation Master Plan for Bangkok and Surrounding Areas. During this period, a study found that the number of residential units along the Blue Line increased from 3,000 to 48,000 between 2004 and 2009 (Pongprasert and Kubota, 2018).

In 2010, the plan was further expanded into the Mass Rapid Transit Master Plan in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region (M-MAP), which proposed 12 routes totaling 509 km, comprising 8 primary and 4 secondary networks. Most of these plans were led by the Office of Transport and Traffic

Policy and Planning (OTP), while the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) played a major role as both financier and technical partner, supporting key lines such as the Blue Line, Purple Line, and Red Line. Of the approximately 280 km currently operational, JICA has financed around 74 km through Official Development Assistance (ODA) loans, while also contributing technical expertise, rolling stock, and investments in high-speed rail and smart city initiatives linked to TOD.

In 2019, JICA partnered with OTP for the M-MAP 2, which was officially released in 2025, adding 130 km of new routes. The total network is planned to reach 465 km by 2035 and exceed 600 km by 2040. JICA has also supported TOD interventions along the Red Line extension, including improvements to pedestrian access, feeder transport, and station-area infrastructure. In parallel, a High-Speed Rail Master Plan aims to connect Bangkok to the rest of Thailand, with two projects (473 km) under construction and six more (1,994 km) in preparation.

Despite this expansion, usage and density vary considerably across the network. Daily ridership at stations ranges from 964 to 66,715 passengers, while population density around stations spans from 1,995 to 19,184 people per square kilometer (Nyunt and Wongchavalidkul, 2020). Urban rail systems remain highly congested during peak hours, partly due to legacy public-private partnership (PPP) contracts involving multiple operators, which constrain the expansion of rolling stock. Addressing these limitations requires better management of demand and ridership risk, potentially through mechanisms such as viability gap funding and minimum revenue guarantees. Additionally, interchange efficiency remains uneven, with transfer times ranging from approximately 5 minutes (e.g., Asok BTS to Sukhumvit Blue Line) to up to 15 minutes (e.g., Hua Mak Airport Rail Link to Yellow Line).

Uptake and Accessibility of TOD

On the demand side, one of the most critical, yet often overlooked, factors influencing urban rail uptake is walking. A study on TOD acceptability

ty highlights that walking remains the dominant mode of access to metro stations, accounting for 62% of trips, followed by motorcycle taxis at 22% (Pongprasert and Kubota, 2018). However, this reliance on walking varies significantly across income groups. Walkers are more likely to belong to low-income households (<20,000 baht/month), while middle-income (20,001–50,000 baht/month) and high-income groups (> 50,000 baht/month)—particularly women in middle-income households—tend to rely more on motorized modes. In terms of walking thresholds, high-income groups accept shorter distances (around 438 meters) and shorter durations, while middle-income households are willing to walk slightly longer distances (around 505 meters). Low-income households exhibit the highest tolerance, accepting walking distances of up to approximately 535 meters, and are also more likely to use TOD and rail services during non-peak hours. This differential acceptability and accessibility in walking in Bangkok, underlies that while constructing TOD plans, the characteristics of prospective users and residents must be kept in mind, along with concerns of climate and appropriate cooling infrastructure.

Two key dimensions shape walking behavior: the feeling of walking and the benefit of walking. The “feeling” is influenced by physical conditions such as obstacles on sidewalks, narrow or uneven pathways, excessive street crossings, and dead-ends, all of which reduce comfort and safety. The “benefit” reflects perceived advantages: high-income groups associate walking with health benefits, middle-income groups with a sense of freedom, and low-income groups with cost savings (Pongprasert and Kubota, 2018). Accessibility is therefore not simply distance to transit, but the unequal capacity to absorb heat, time, discomfort, risk, and cost.

However, despite the centrality of walking, Bangkok remains a city that functions more effectively for cars than for pedestrians or public transport users. Within a 30-minute travel time, an average resident can reach approximately 1.9 million people by car, compared to only 130,000 by public transport—meaning that car travel provides access to roughly 14 times as many peo-

ple. This stark contrast, highlighted in the OECD report, reflects weak last-mile connectivity and poor pedestrian infrastructure (ITF, 2023). Thus, TOD in Bangkok requires fundamental reclaiming of space on the road network from car users to all multi-modal users.

Another study examining the components of density, diversity, and design finds strong correlations between interchange stations, bus lines, and park-and-ride facilities and transit ridership (Nyunt and Wongchavalidkul, 2020). Bus services emerge as the strongest predictor, as commuters frequently combine metro and bus travel. Interchange stations also play a critical role in facilitating network efficiency. In contrast, ferry services show no significant correlation, while railway station connectivity is negatively correlated with metro usage. The study also finds that residents of high-rise developments are more likely to use metro systems than those living in single-family housing. This should be read in conjunction with the fact that public transit in Bangkok is not well-connected across multi-modal uses.

This persistent gap between transit reach and commuter behavior points to deeper structural failures. At the heart of the issue is a regulatory framework that prioritizes density incentives over spatial cohesion, creating a landscape where high-rise development and local-scale infrastructure are fundamentally misaligned.

Land-Use Regulation and Spatial and Institutional Fragmentation

The efficacy of Bangkok’s TOD is fundamentally dictated by the city’s land-use regulatory environment. It provides the formal mechanism through which station-area intensification, mixed use, and pedestrian access can be enabled or constrained. The Bangkok Comprehensive Plan (BCP) serves as the principal legal instrument for controlling urban development through a system of permitted and prohibited uses (BMA, 2013). This framework manages urban density primarily through Maximum Floor Area Ratio (FAR) and Minimum Open Space Ratio (OSR), which are further constrained by building-height controls

and specific setbacks along roads and canals. These regulations directly dictate the cost of building, a restrictive FAR forces developers to spread high land acquisition costs over a smaller total floor area, potentially making high-density station-area developments economically non-viable for certain housing segments. To mitigate these constraints, a FAR bonus system exists for “public benefit” provisions, such as incentives for developers who include public parking at suburban park-and-ride stations to align private development with mass transit objectives; they are granted up to a 20% FAR bonus, according to Article 37 and 38 of the BCP’s Ministerial Regulation (BMA, 2013). FAR bonuses should be read not only as planning incentives, but as allocation instruments that distribute development rights and future land value.

The regulatory landscape is characterized by a fragmented governance framework that complicates the acquisition of development permits and the overall implementation of TOD. Multiple public agencies operate with overlapping jurisdictions: the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) is responsible for urban planning, building permits, and the management of public parks. Concurrently, the Ministry of Transport (MOT) and the Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning (OTP) lead the rail master plans. The National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) must approve the overarching master plans, while the Digital Economy Promotion Agency (DEPA) provides the necessary assent for Smart City components. For large-scale flagship projects involving the sale or lease of state-owned real estate to private companies, such as the development of State Railway of Thailand (SRT) land, further layers of approval are required. This lack of a systematic district-scale framework often results in a gap between citywide zoning and the specific design requirements of individual station areas, further limiting the effectiveness of transit systems (OECD, 2015). Furthermore, the fragmentation can result in land-use plan revisions that, while intended to support transit, have inadvertently been associated with increased traffic volumes due to uncoordinated intensification. A critical case is found within the Sukhumvit area.

Following the 2013 BCP revisions, land-use controls were adjusted to allow for higher FAR bonuses within a 500-meter radius of a mass transit station (BMA, 2013). However, these revisions did not differentiate between main arterial roads and narrow residential alleys, known as soi. As a result, developers utilized these density bonuses to construct “low-rise, high-density” condominium projects (typically 8 stories, as the Building Control Act B.E. 2522 caps height at 23 meters for roads narrower than 10 meters) along streets as narrow as 6 to 10 meters. The surge in residential units was not met with road-widening or improved pedestrian infrastructure, leading to a “cascading effect” of traffic congestion within these superblocks. Instead of reducing car reliance, the increased density in confined spaces choked the internal road network, as residents still relied on private vehicles or ride-hailing services for the “last mile” to the station. Thus, any TOD project should appropriately predict and model for traffic estimates in the future.

Land Value Effects and the Limits of Value Capture

Not only can land use regulation directly control how station-area land is used, rail accessibility is capitalised into land and housing prices in Bangkok, albeit unevenly across corridors and over time. A spatial-econometric analysis of residential land values in the Bangkok metropolitan region found that proximity to mass transit stations is significantly associated with higher land prices; the preferred spatial lag model implied an average decrease in land value of approximately USD 0.0002 per square foot for each additional metre from a station (Anantsuksomsri & Tontisirin, 2015). There is also evidence from inner-city corridors indicating a steep price gradient with increasing distance from BTS stations. More recent condominium price studies further show that the marginal premium of station proximity varies significantly across the city: in major central corridors, being 100 metres closer to a station is associated with increases of over USD 200 (6-6.5k Baht) per square meter, while in suburban corridors the premium was reported as under USD 80 (2.5k baht) per m² for the same distance change (Vichiensan et al., 2022).

These spatially uneven land-value effects imply that uniform land value capture (LVC) mechanisms would be poorly aligned with the heterogeneous distribution of accessibility benefits. A value-capture mechanism that ignores these gradients risks taxing formal proximity while missing the geography of actual windfall gains. LVC has also been identified as a relevant instrument for TOD financing, offering a pathway to recycle part of the accessibility-generated land value into station-area public space, feeder systems, and network improvements, particularly where public transport funding is insufficient and PPP rail projects face ridership risks requiring mitigation through mechanisms such as viability gap funding or revenue guarantees (ITF, 2023).

However, the feasibility and equity of LVC depend on an enabling fiscal and legal framework, including property-tax administration and transparent regulatory systems. Success also hinges on how such instruments account for the spatially uneven distribution of accessibility benefits. In contexts where land-value gains vary significantly across corridors, uniform value-capture mechanisms risk reinforcing existing inequalities between central and peripheral areas. For example, if a blanket betterment tax or property tax surcharge were applied citywide, landowners in lower-income peripheral areas would bear a disproportionately high fiscal burden relative to their actual capital gains. This would fail to effectively capture the massive windfall wealth concentrated in the city center while potentially disincentivizing development in the suburbs, where residents already face weaker last-mile connectivity and access to only a fraction of the population reachable by car. More broadly, the institutional basis for land-based financing instruments in Thailand remains under development, including limitations in fiscal capacity, the absence of comprehensive legal instruments for value capture, and weak coordination between land-use and transport authorities, all of which constrain the systematic implementation of LVC and its coordination with transportation planning (OECD, 2022). For example, while the Land and Building Tax Act was a significant step toward modernizing property taxation, its current

implementation remains insufficient for LVC. According to the OECD framework, effective LVC requires local governments to have the autonomy to adjust rates or create “special assessment districts.” In Bangkok, BMA remains heavily dependent on central government subsidies. Low effective tax rates, combined with numerous exemptions for agricultural and residential land, mean that the property tax is currently a tool for general revenue rather than a high-yield instrument for infrastructure cost recovery.

Moreover, Thailand lacks a dedicated “Betterment Levy” or “Impact Fee” law that specifically targets the “unearned increment” (the rise in land value caused solely by public investment). Currently, the BMA relies on indirect “negotiated” LVC, such as the FAR bonus system. However, as the OECD report highlights, these developer-incentive models are “one-off” and do not provide a continuous stream of revenue for the long-term maintenance of the transit network. Without a national legal mandate for betterment taxes, the state cannot systematically claim a portion of the massive wealth generated for private landowners along corridors like Sukhumvit or the Blue Line, reducing the financial viability of TOD projects and the corresponding LVC.

Taken together, the challenges of urban transport in Bangkok cannot be understood solely as a question of infrastructure provision, but must be situated within a broader urban system shaped by land-use patterns, regulatory frameworks, and the uneven distribution of accessibility benefits. While mass transit expansion has been positioned as a central strategy for addressing congestion, its effectiveness remains contingent on the extent to which land-use regulation, station-area development, and financing mechanisms can be coordinated in practice. In this context, TOD in Bangkok should be understood less as a discrete planning model and more as an ongoing process of aligning transport investment with spatial restructuring and institutional capacity.

Limits of TOD Implementation in Bangkok

Despite extensive investment in rail infrastruc-

ture, the effectiveness of Bangkok's transit network is severely constrained by deep-seated institutional and financial fragmentation. TOD hinges on two pillars: land-use and transit. If any of these twin pillars are not efficient and have serious lacunas, it can hinder the entire viability of the TOD project. A definitive example of this complexity is the long-standing debt dispute between the BMA and the BTS. As of October 2025, the BMA was required to settle a debt of THB 36.44 billion (comprising THB 31.48 billion in principal and THB 4.96 billion in interest) for the Green Line project. Furthermore, should the government choose to buy back the concession before its 2029 expiry, it would face an additional estimated cost of THB 50 billion (Thai Enquirer, 2025).

These staggering figures signify an institutional coordination failure with fragmented PPP (Public-Private Partnership) concession structures. For instance, while a proposed 40-baht flat fare policy is projected to increase ridership by 50-60%, its implementation remains deadlocked by these ongoing financial settlements and the lack of a unified ticketing system across different operators (Thai Enquirer, 2025).

As a result, these multi-billion baht investments have yet to alleviate persistent congestion. According to the TomTom Traffic Index (2025), Bangkok's average congestion level has climbed to 67.9% (a 1.3 percentage point increase from 2024), with mid-afternoon congestion levels peaking at an extraordinary 337%. During these peak times, travel speed is reduced to a mere 2.5 km per 15 minutes. These statistics indicate that the performance of Bangkok's transit system is shaped less by network expansion than by the spatial organization and poor pedestrian conditions (e.g., potholes, utility poles obstructing sidewalks, and a lack of wheelchair-accessible ramps) that continue to force residents back into private vehicles.

The Case of Bang Sue: Smart city

The Bang Sue redevelopment project illustrates Bangkok's ambition to position TOD at the core of its urban future. Located at a strategic junction between the city center and its two airports,

and centered around Krung Thep Aphiwat Central Terminal, the project aims to transform former railway land owned by the State Railway of Thailand into a new mixed-use urban hub. Combining TOD principles with a "smart city" vision, the project seeks to integrate transport infrastructure with residential, commercial, and business functions (Chupanit, 2024). However, its development also raises broader questions about the viability of such projects in a context marked by fragmented land governance, complex institutional arrangements, and uneven infrastructure development.

Bang Sue as a Flagship TOD Project with a highly ambitious planning model

Bang Sue constitutes a key node in Bangkok, with potential for Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) to reduce traffic congestion and boost the city's attractiveness. Its position is strategic: it is located 10 kilometers away from the CBD, 14 km from Don Mueang Airport and 35 km from Suvarnabhumi Airport. Its current use is dedicated to old housing and ancillary railway facilities. The land is owned by the State Railway of Thailand (SRT). Basing themselves on the concepts of TOD and the Smart City, JICA plans to turn the area into a mixed use space, combining offices and commercial and residential infrastructure. The Bang Sue urban development project aims at boosting the attractiveness of the area around the Krung Thep Aphiwat station, which opened in 2021, crossed by both the Red Line and a future high-speed rail. Through this project, Bang Sue seems to embody Bangkok's ambition to build a "viable" future city through TOD and smart city planning.

The master plan for the Bang Sue development project according to the Smart City concept (Fig.2) was prepared by JICA with the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) and the Urban Renaissance Agency (UR). Divided into several zones, the project aims at developing medium-sized commercial facilities and stores along major roads, housing for SRT staff, railway depots and headquarters for leading Thai companies in a mixed-use approach. The plan also provides bus terminals

and an Energy Complex for the Ministry of Energy. The Bangkok Metropolitan Agency (BMA) manages large parks in the area as well.

The plan's main objective is to form a new base in Bangkok around a new terminal station. Some of the required urban amenities range from offices to serve the transportation hub, to broader commerce and housing, by way of tourism and accommodation, with the goal of linking Bang Sue to the attractive "environment hub" of Chatuchak Market for instance (JICA slides). Regarding transport, Bang Sue is planned to boost accessibility, relocating and reorganising regional and neighbourhood bus centers, as well as ensuring BRT and other feeder transport in the area while ensuring safe pedestrian circulation. The plan's ambition is to position Bang Sue as a model smart city. According to Thailand's Ministry of Transport, the station is intended to become the country's first "5G smart station," integrating advanced technologies such as automated passenger assistance systems and real-time operational control. More broadly, the Transit-Oriented Development guidelines promote walkability, non-motorized transport, and mixed land use, reflecting a comprehensive vision of sustainable and integrated urban development. The project reflects a highly integrated and future-oriented planning model inspired by international best practices. However, this model assumes strong coordination and regulatory capacity.

Governance Complexity and Fragmentation

The Bang Sue project, which began with its design phase in 2008 and remains an on-going TOD and redevelopment, reflects Bangkok's overall fragmented governance framework. The land is owned by the State Railway of Thailand, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration is in charge of urban planning regulations, zoning and managing the parks, and several national ministries are involved throughout the process. Land-use regulation is divided across multiple institutions and requires overlapping approvals for zoning, permits and project development. The master plan for the area was initially developed in 2017. The Ministry of Land, Infrastruc-

ture, Transport and Tourism (MLIT), UR and JICA proposed their plan to the Thai authorities in March 2023 which covered the questions of land use, smart element technologies and the layout. The Bang Sue Master Plan then had to be approved by the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC), while the assent of the Digital Economy Promotion Agency (DEPA) was required for the Smart City Plan. Upon securing a budget from them, Thai authorities planned to hold a public offering for private companies. The SRT and SRTA updated JICA's master plan, which reflected the relocation plan of the Ministry of Transport (MOT). The master plan represents the first step of a long process of approvals, questions of funding and private sector involvement extending over several years. The multiplication of actors creates coordination challenges that slow down and complicate implementation, which is threatening the city's viability.

The Smart City Plan includes the establishment of five stations around the Bang Sue district, which would be connected by sky decks to support smart mobility services. The overall Smart City Plan relies on "Seven Smarts": smart mobility, smart energy, smart environment, smart living, smart people, smart economy and smart governance. Different areas in the Bang Sue area are ought to fill the purpose of each "Smart". This dimension makes Bang sue a "next-generation" smart TOD project, through 5G smart station enhancing technology-driven mobility, accessibility innovations and principles of walkability, mixed-use and cycling.

Possible Infrastructure and Mobility Constraints Challenging Prospects of Viability

TOD depends on functional transport systems, for which Bang Sue's function as a hub connected through the Red Line and a future HSR appear strategic. Bang Sue station is served by both the Dark Red Line, a long-distance commuter rail metro linking Bang Sue to northern suburbs, and the Light Red Line, connecting it to western corridors. The MRT Blue Line and future high-speed rail creates a bridge between Bang

Figure 2: Bang Sue Area Development Action Plan Project, Smart City, 2039



Figure 2: Urban Development Master Plan Bang Sue. Source: JICA Report, 2017



Sue and regional cities. In addition, an expansion of the Airport Rail Link is planned to further integrate Suvarnabhumi Airport into this network, reinforcing Bang Sue's role as a multimodal transport hub centered around Krung Thep Aphiwat Central Terminal (Bang Sue Grand Station). However, delays, the fragmentation of metro operators and the uncertainty of future lines may challenge this ambition. The fragmentation of the station is not only due to the multiplicity of actors. There are different ticketing systems and planning authorities for each transportation mode. This strains the ease of multimodal travels across the city through a lack of network integration and passenger continuity. The difficulty of aligning timelines, investment strategies and operational standards across these actors foster coordination challenges. Indeed, without reliable and integrated transport infrastructure, TOD remains a planning vision before it can become an operational reality and poor transit systems will fail to attract users despite infrastructure provisions.

The Bang Sue project has potential in improving Bangkok's overall viability, notably because of its strategic location and its strong planning vision integrating international expertise. The planning frameworks emphasise walkability, environmental sustainability, and smart mobility. Yet, their realization depends on effective coordination across multiple institutions and the timely completion of transport infrastructure and the mobilisation of private investment, which remains uncertain in a context of complex regulatory procedures and unclear returns. Bang Sue reveals that TOD in Bangkok is not limited by planning ideas, but by the city's ability to coordinate land use, infrastructure, and governance, proving that viability is a question of implementation capacity beyond ambition. Regulatory complexity, phased infrastructure delivery, and financial uncertainty represent additional constraints which further complicate implementation. In a context marked by fragmented governance and uneven project delivery, the gap between design principles and concrete implementation may undermine the long-term viability of such initiatives.

Conclusion

This report has examined the challenges and opportunities of implementing TOD in Bangkok, highlighting the critical role of land-use regulation, accessibility, and governance structures. While extensive investment in rail infrastructure and ambitious projects such as Bang Sue demonstrate a strong commitment to TOD principles, their effectiveness remains constrained by fragmented institutional arrangements, uneven accessibility outcomes, and limited integration between transport and land-use planning.

TOD in Bangkok should not be understood solely as a planning model, but as a complex process that requires coordination across multiple scales and actors. In particular, the uneven distribution of accessibility benefits and land-value gains raises important questions about the feasibility and equity of land value capture mechanisms as a financing tool.

Ultimately, the success of TOD depends less on the scale of infrastructure investment or the ambition of planning visions, and more on the capacity to align governance, land-use regulation, and financing mechanisms in practice. Without such alignment, the gap between planning principles and implementation is likely to persist, limiting the transformative potential of TOD in addressing urban congestion and sustainability challenges. For TOD to become successful in Bangkok, transport operations, land-use regulation, and value-capture mechanisms will have to be aligned in practice will have to be successful and efficient in service and value-capture. For TOD to become successful in Bangkok, both the transport operations, land-use regulation, and value-capture mechanisms will have to be aligned in practice. TOD in Bangkok should be understood not as a discrete planning model, but as an ongoing process requiring alignment between infrastructure investment, regulatory frameworks, and institutional capacity.

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Informality and Belonging

*By Aïnhua Giboire, Leo Collins, and
Melissa Ugo*

Since 2014, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) has pursued a campaign to reduce street vending under the slogan of returning pavements to pedestrians, in hopes of improving traffic flows and managing public space. However, these policies have had severe effects on street vendors and the communities they serve, exemplifying the conflicts that arise when global urban ideals are overlaid on unique streetscapes such as Bangkok's. The formalization of street vending through designated selling zones and vendor registries, alongside constant relocations and removals due to nearby construction, has radically changed the way vendors operate. Vendors are especially vulnerable to being excluded by the documentary and bureaucratic requirements of formalization: almost half of Bangkok's vendors only have a primary education, and thus likely face difficulties with procuring the internet access and bureaucratic understanding to comply with these new regulations. The

over 70% of vendors who are women are also disadvantaged by these policies, as they are now forced to contend with all of the new benchmarks required to maintain legal vending status on top of domestic and caregiving responsibilities. The city's space-based approach is different depending on locations in the city: heavily touristed vending sites, such as Khao San Road, are exempted from these new regulations, while vendors are displaced in most other parts of the city to contain the perceived chaos that vending creates. However, vendors across the city have unified to create the Confederation of Street Vendors, which advocates for their rights and desires as the rules around street vending change. Such an organization aims to provide opportunities for healthy communication between keystone informal workers and ambitious local governments, links which have the potential to redefine how the informal economy and public space interact.



Informality and Belonging: Struggles over Public Space in Bangkok and the Implications for Street Vendors

Figure 1: Urban renewal near the Bobae market, Bangkok, 2026



Bangkok offers a sharp example of what happens when global ideas of urban progress meet the realities of street life. In recent years, concepts such as the smart city and the 15-minute city have circulated widely in urban policy with the promise of cleaner streets, better mobility, more efficient services, and neighbourhoods where daily needs can be met close to home. These models are compelling political tools used in the name of modernisation since they are both practical and desirable. But Bangkok's sidewalks are not simply corridors of movement. They are also places of work, where food is bought at low cost, where neighbourhood routines take shape, and where informal economies make the city function. This makes the regulation of public space especially consequential. But Bangkok's sidewalks are not simply corridors of movement or residual spaces; they are also places of work, where food is bought at low cost, where neighbourhood routines take shape, and where informal economies make the city function. They are infrastructures of livelihood and everyday welfare. This makes the regulation of public space, and of sidewalks, especially consequential.

Since 2014, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) has pursued a campaign to reduce street vending under the slogan of returning pavements to pedestrians. The municipality's justification has been consistent: improve walkability, restore order, increase safety, and manage public space more effectively. These objectives are not trivial in a congested city; the demand for clearer sidewalks and better-regulated streets responds to real urban pressures. Yet the effects of these policies have been substantial. WIEGO reports that more than 500 designated vending areas were removed after 2014, and Sawitta Lefevre in Reuters noted that by 2018 around 20,000 vendors had been displaced from 478 locations (WIEGO 2018; Sawitta Lefevre 2018). Recent regulations have added further conditions through permits and tax registration.

Bangkok is particularly relevant in this sense, as it brings the debate beyond discussions of legality and informality. Rather, it reflects two competing understandings of public space: one as a managed surface of circulation imagined by

the municipality, and the other as a lived space shaped by the long-standing social use and urban practices of the street vendors. Understanding how these actors navigate this conflict and hierarchy sheds light on how different visions for the city's sidewalks are constructed.

Three Exclusion Mechanisms

The transformation of Bangkok's sidewalks has not occurred through a single intervention. Instead, it resulted from the accumulation of regulatory instruments that, taken together, constitute an exclusionary system which reshaped where vendors are established and under what conditions.

While informal, the sector has long thrived because it meets market demand. However, as Nirathron and Yasmeen (2019) document, the BMA has increasingly sought to manage this sector through a "space-based approach" that prioritizes urban orderliness. This transition was primarily codified through the Maintenance of Cleanliness and Orderliness in the Country Act (1992), which authorized officials to demarcate temporary vending areas and established an official registry of vendors, while penalizing through fines those who sell outside these permitted zones.

This policy, stemming from a will for formalisation, has evolved alongside the street vendor's adaptation. Where vendors changed their working hours or shifted to less visible locations, regulations have followed. One notable addition is the creation of buffer zones around temples and religious sites, where vending is now prohibited or tightly controlled, following operations such as the "Returning the Pavement to the Public" one. This spatial strategy reflects what Bromley (2000) identifies as "containment," a pervasive policy where vendors are systematically excluded from some areas to preserve a specific urban aesthetic and "protect" areas of symbolic national significance from "disorder". Street vending itself may be part of Bangkok's cultural and national urban identity.

On top of this evolving pattern of exclusion, the

local confederation of street vendors reported that periods of urban construction and infrastructure development have been used as a recurring mechanism of removal of street vendors from their original location. Vendors are evicted during construction works and are rarely guaranteed the right to return once projects are complete. In practice, redevelopments tend to incorporate design elements (greening, street furniture) that make street vending increasingly difficult. This phenomenon is noticeable in areas such as in the surroundings of the Bobae market.

The effort to bring informality within the bounds of official governance has produced a system in which access to public space is increasingly determined by administrative compliance and financial capacity rather than by need or long-standing urban practice. The question then becomes: what are the concrete consequences of this changing system, and who bears its costs?

The Uneven Impacts of the Regulations

While the reduction of vending spaces available and the strict requirements to keep selling have impacts on all street vendors, they are nonetheless not affected to the same extent.

One of the barriers the confederation of street vendors puts forward is digital exclusion. The introduction of online registration platforms as the primary gateway to formal vending status creates a structural asymmetry in which those with reliable internet access, digital literacy, and an understanding of bureaucratic processes can comply, while those without are effectively barred from participation. In a context where 47.25% of Bangkok's street vendors only have a primary education or less (Nirathron and Yasmeen 2019) : a significant proportion of vendors are likely to face such difficulties. Hence, when formalisation is mediated through digital infrastructure, it does not simply modernise a system but also determines who is eligible to remain within it.

The gender dimensions of these impacts demands particular attention. Women constitute 72.75% of Bangkok's street vendor population (Nirathron and Yasmeen 2019) and formalisation does not affect them in the same way it af-

fects everyone else. The mental and logistical load of securing and maintaining legal vending status (locating compliant spaces, renewing permits, meeting financial eligibility thresholds) now falls on vendors who simultaneously manage domestic and caregiving responsibilities, when they were 22% choosing street vending for the time flexibility it offered for care duty in the first place (Nirathron and Yasmeen 2019).

This double burden is crucial to address given the relative lack of job flexibility women in Thailand face. Women with informal jobs like street vending tend to have less education than men (World Bank 2023), which limits their ability to pivot into higher paying careers, forcing them to rely on the unstable incomes that street vending provides. The insecurity of street vending in Thailand also exacerbates all of the administrative and logistical challenges that informal workers face, such as a lack of access to social protections like social security, occupational health standards, and information about their basic rights (World Bank 2023).

From an intersectional angle, this reveals that these burdens are not uniformly distributed among workers and even among women. The overlapping factors of age, gender, and educational background make the conditions of formalization especially difficult to meet.

Street Vending and Bangkok's International Positionality

These observations necessitate the exploration and definition of who is allowed to use urban space and who benefits from the urban development policies that are being implemented in Bangkok. Many of these strategies are designed to foster the perceived modernization of the city, aligning it more closely with more established urban superpowers such as Singapore. However, these plans are often put in place to appeal to foreign investors and wealthy residents, eschewing the needs of everyday Bangkok locals. The recent policy shifts governing street vendors are indicative of this pattern, creating an intriguing case study on how the right to the city is fought for and negotiated in a rapidly changing urban landscape.

One of Bangkok's defining features is its tourism industry. It is one of the most heavily visited cities in the world with over 30 million international visitors in 2025, owed in large part to its extremely tourism-friendly business practices (Sawitta Lefevre 2018). It is logical that Bangkok officials want to maintain this popularity, and are enacting policies that further cater the city to tourists. This often materializes in "cleaning up" public spaces, which usually involves evictions or relocations for long-time street vendors. However, these evictions are carried out unevenly - heavily touristed sites such as Khao San Road and Chinatown are largely exempt from these policies. Tourists are encouraged to experience the cultural heritage of Thai night markets, while local vendors and buyers outside of highly competitive central areas are excluded from these practices. This policy dichotomy encapsulates one of the many arenas where the wider fight for the right to the city is being contested: in this case between the local vendors and patrons that are ubiquitous to life in Bangkok, and foreign investors and tourists entering Bangkok as the city attracts more international attention.

Street vending is a means of economic survival for vendors and locals as well. The convenient, affordable meals that street vendors provide were a central factor in Bangkok's rise as a primate city. As the Thai government focused on transitioning from agriculture to industrial development, rural residents flocked to Bangkok for greater upward mobility, which often took the form of serving street food to the large influx of workers in the booming secondary and tertiary markets. Street vending is a pillar of Bangkok's economy today, circulating over ฿500 billion (€13.25 billion) in 2017 (Subsing 2026). The industry has also evolved to become a means for entrepreneurship, allowing vendors to have more autonomy over their employment and fostering the development of transferable skills such as financial literacy and networking (Maglumtong 2017), all while feeding over 3 million low income Bangkok residents and supporting over 1 million family members (Subsing 2026).

Figure 2: Small bridge near the Bobae market, Lourens van Luijk, 2026



Taking Action and Gaining Autonomy

As the relationship between street vendors and local governing entities became more contentious, vendors across Bangkok decided they needed to take action. The Confederation of Street Vendors in Bangkok was created in 2020 by street vendors affected by recent restrictions as an organizing force that advocates for their rights in a rapidly changing economy and political landscape. The union provides services such as negotiation training and legal consulting, giving vendors the tools, resources, and network to band together and make their voices heard as new legislation governing street vending is written and implemented. These programs are especially important given that the BMA does not have a way for vendors to contribute to the creation of the legislation that governs them, so the localized needs of vendors are not considered. The union's key policy recommendations directly address these concerns: they include a standardized process for vendors to be included throughout the entirety of the decision making process, as well as training and workshops for individuals to deepen their understanding of street vending. If these proposals come to fruition, it would mark a turning point in the struggle

for public space in Bangkok. Seminars directly connecting vendors to public officials have the potential to reshape conversations around who has the right to govern and occupy public space in Bangkok to be more collaborative, while accommodating the needs and goals of all involved parties. The Confederation thus transforms individual adaptation into collective representation, making street vending a matter of negotiable public policy rather than a mere enforcement problem.

The role that street vendors play in shaping urban space in Bangkok, and how governing bodies contend with that influence, creates an interesting paradox in global disputes for urban space. Many of Bangkok's leading officials have looked to European models of urban planning as inspiration for Bangkok's future. These strategies include dedicating more public space to pedestrians in transit, which has clearly influenced the BMA's efforts to move vendors off of streets and into Singapore-style hawker centers (Subsing 2026). This contrasts an interesting trend in some Western cities, which have turned to cities in East and Southeast Asia like Bangkok to learn what elements contribute to the vibrant streetscapes that the region is known for. Now, cities

like San Francisco have implemented their own night markets, such as the Sunset Night Market, in an effort to return public space to people and revitalize the local economy in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (Sos 2023). These competing global narratives illustrate the complexities of allocating urban space and exemplify a phenomenon of cities constantly seeking what they perceive to be lacking. As cities like Bangkok continue to rise on the global stage, there is an apparent opportunity for collaboration between cities that encompass a diverse range of urban contexts, which has the potential to redefine how the informal economy and public space interact. Bangkok's public space is constantly in flux, with a multitude of important actors, street vendors chief among them, reshaping who and what belongs on streets as the city evolves. The question may not be whether public space should be regulated, but whose uses of public space are recognised as legitimate and under what procedural conditions.



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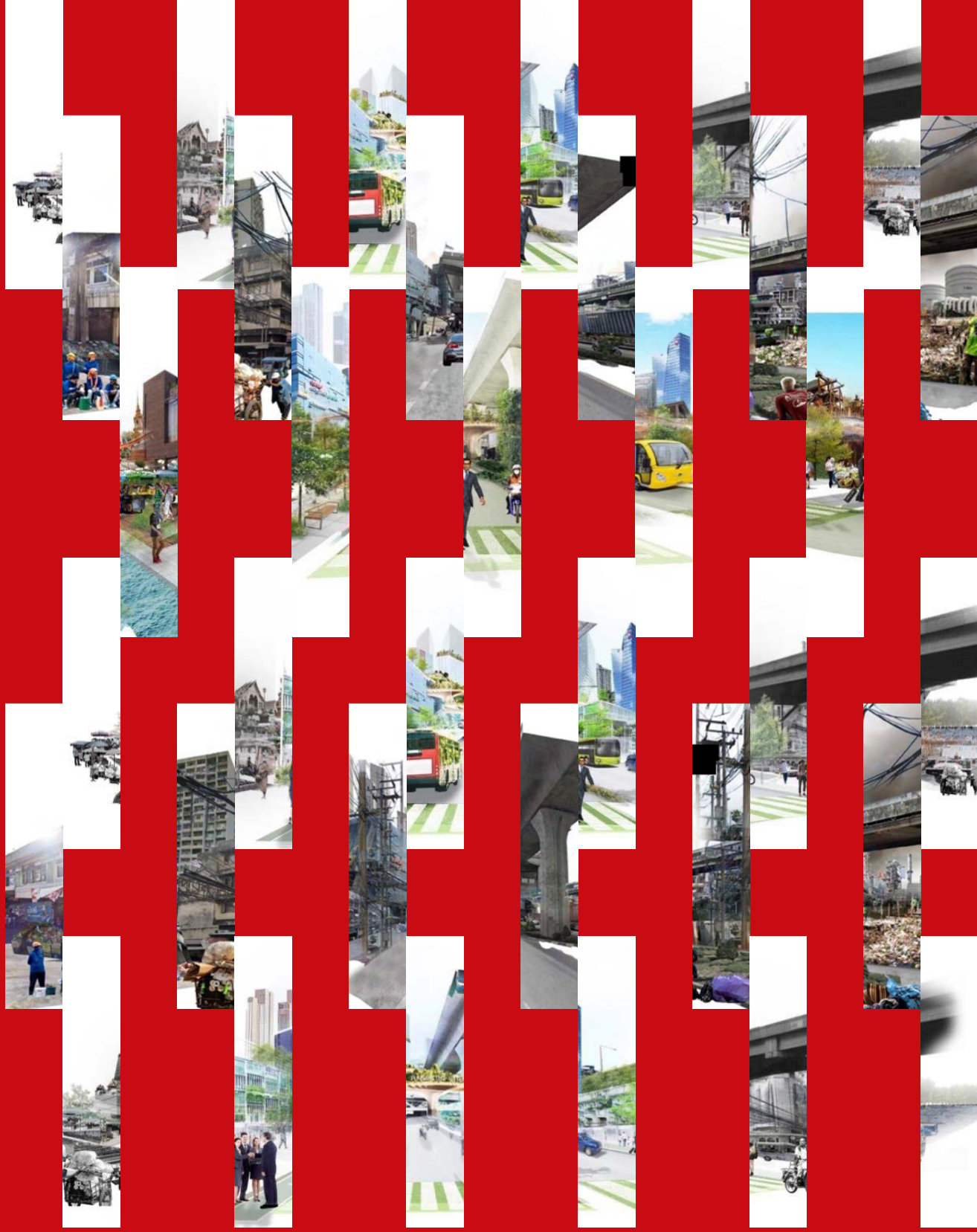
Making Bangkok Walkable?

*By Kade Van Meeteren, Paul
Louboutin, Nitarisoa Rakotoveloa,
and Lourens Van Luijk*

This article examines the role of Bangkok's Urban Design and Development Centre (UDDC) in shaping contemporary urban redevelopment strategies in collaboration with the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA). Focusing on recent projects in urban greening, regeneration, and sustainable development, it highlights how UDDC, which is based at Chulalongkorn University, has contributed to operationalizing the BMA's vision of a resilient and livable city by 2050. Drawing on case studies ranging from pedestrian infrastructure such as the Park Bridges and Victory Monument projects to the transformation of the South Sukhumvit district, the article adopts a critical perspective on Bangkok's evolving urban landscape and its alignment with European-inspired planning models.

Through the analytical lenses of walkability and green space urbanism, the study explores how UDDC-led initiatives

reconfigure urban space while navigating complex, multi-scalar governance arrangements. Particular attention is given to the interactions between institutional actors and local communities, revealing tensions between formal planning frameworks and everyday urban practices. While these projects aim to enhance environmental sustainability and urban livability, they also reflect a broader developmentalist agenda that risks marginalizing existing socio-spatial structures. Ultimately, the article argues that UDDC's planning philosophy, while innovative and forward-looking, often unfolds at the expense of Bangkok's traditional network of sois, which constitute one of the cores of community life. By situating these transformations within wider debates on global urbanism, the paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of how imported planning paradigms intersect with local urban realities.



Making Bangkok Walkable? Implications of Green Urbanism Interventions Led by the Urban Design and Development Center (UDDC)

Left: “The Desirable Future”, one of Visualizations of the four development models for the Phra Khanong-Bang Na Area designed by UDDC

Right: “An Undesirable Future”, one of Visualizations of the four development models for the Phra Khanong-Bang Na Area, UDDC



In the space of just a few decades, rapid urban development has transformed Bangkok into a sprawling metropolis of global importance. Yet tensions between modernity and tradition, like the elevated freeways superimposed atop a historic fabric of long alleys called *sois*, has left Bangkok with a burdensome legacy: it is now considered to be the world’s most congested city (Mark 2020). As a result, mobility and sustainability have emerged as key drivers of Bangkok’s urban planning ecosystem, which increasingly takes shape among a small circle of influential actors. Among them is the Urban Design and Development Center (UDDC) at Chulalongkorn University, which is uniquely positioned to translate its values and research into development projects—many of which are commissioned by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA)—that chart an ideological course for further growth.

To understand the mechanisms structuring the UDDC’s particular role in Bangkok’s development, this article presents a critical examination of three projects: we lend a primary focus to the South Sukhumvit Innovation District because of its magnitude, but we also draw on the vivid imagery of two “park bridges” projects to raise

questions about “green” urbanism. Considering these case studies both for their physical manifestations and the political systems underpinning them, we then discuss how walkability and green urbanism are mobilized as key urban planning ideals, both in Bangkok and in a globalized context of development.

Walkability as Eurocentric Planning

When urban planning concepts are translated into practice, the method is typically a reflection of local context. Yet many structures and aesthetics of urbanism, specific to their contexts, are often defined as concepts in order to be transposed onto other geographies. Walkability is commonly described as a neutral concept, but it is most often defined with references to a kind of urban fabric and proximity found in certain European villages; unsurprisingly, when walkability becomes operationalized as a toolbox for planners, the tools themselves are European references, too.

The entangled meanings of such planning concepts—and the purpose of projects informed by them—can often be found by situating planning in a broader theoretical context. The epistemol-

ogy behind urban planning theory—the way knowledge is defined as concepts that describe the city, and the way this description informs the practices that govern it—directly informs the contemporary power structures shaping Bangkok’s development. The very concept of a “city,” argues Neil Smith (1984), might be traced to industrializing England and the novel physical infrastructure needed to support a market economy. Consequently, the origin of urban planning is often placed in these specifically English (and other European) geographies of industrialization; indeed, Holston (1998) suggests that the initial purpose of planning was to provide technical solutions to the social crises produced by industrial capitalism. Following Heynen et al.’s (2006) use of urban political ecology, we might explain planning today as a mechanism of European modernist philosophy: social marginality and environmental destruction, produced through colonial capitalism, are spatially configured so as to shield affluence from its own externalities.

Naturally, the mechanisms through which urban planning functions must respond to the logics of European modernism; when planning is transposed into non-European contexts, local philosophies are replaced. Ananya Roy (2005) characterizes this exchange as the use of “First World ‘models’” to solve “Third World ‘problems’” through the formalization of urban space within technocratic standards. She notes, importantly, that such formalization is not typically concerned with improving livelihoods or well-being but rather producing an aesthetic that is rational and orderly. Concepts of walkability, urban greening, transit-oriented development, and density might fall within Roy’s category of “First World ‘models.’”

This epistemological bias is salient across contemporary texts on walkability, which commonly explain the concept through examples of mixed-use developments that use European urbanism as their aesthetic reference. One such work is Jeff Speck’s *Walkable City* (2012), which presents walkability as the singular planning concept that can rescue U.S. cities from climate change and suburban sprawl—a strikingly similar con-

text to Bangkok, given the city’s car-centric development history—underscoring the success of several New Urbanist projects in reducing car dependency. What is essential about Speck’s use of the theory is not whether urban dwellers ought to be able to walk, but how walking is framed as serving urban development goals. Similar to Moreno’s (2020) 15-minute city theory, walkability serves here as a way of achieving the vital economic proximity championed by Glaeser (2011) within an aesthetic narrative of sustainability and well-being. To demonstrate this paradigm, the following sections place selected UDDC projects in this theoretical context, ultimately considering how and why walkability functions as a rejection of Bangkok’s historic soil fabric in favor of European ideas.

Walkability in Bangkok

The UDDC has strongly promoted pedestrian infrastructure projects, including “park bridges” and shaded walkways, as a means through which development can shape a more ideal, livable, and environmentally conscious Bangkok. Indeed, the Governor of Bangkok, Chadchart Sittipunt, took inspiration from European green urbanism when defining his vision for a sustainable city: one where a park is never farther than a 15-minute walk. To this end, the UDDC established a “good walk” score to identify high-potential areas and reduce reliance on vehicles (UDDC 2026). But parks are more than just public spaces in the UDDC’s vision; crucially, they can become microclimates, regulating urban heat islands and improving thermal comfort for residents—an essential infrastructure of sustainable development.

Chao Phraya Sky Park, located near the city’s historic temples, and the Green Bridge, linking Benjakitti Park and Lumpini Park, are two of the UDDC’s “park bridge” projects—designed to improve walkability and accessibility to green spaces. Across similar projects, urban lighting and street trees are recurring themes, exemplified by the Saphan Kheaw entrance area, on Witthayu Road near the Green Bridge. The stark contrast between the project’s “before” and “after” renderings, shown below, is emblematic of

the UDDC's curated vision for urban beautification (Fig. 1). These visuals suggest that such redevelopment projects may draw on globally circulating ideals of green urbanism, rather than more explicitly engaging with local architectural and cultural forms.

Since 2010, planning in Bangkok has increasingly drawn inspiration from European models of modernist and global urbanism, emphasizing infrastructure-led development, zoning, and large-scale projects aimed at competitiveness and modernization (Bamrungkul et al., 2023). These imported models, which frequently overlook local practices and informality, often do not fit Bangkok's socio-spatial realities, resulting in fragmented urban growth and underused public spaces (Ibid.). Described as a source of connectivity between economic opportunity and communities living beneath it, the Green Bridge, like Chao Phraya Sky Park, is portrayed as a necessary link between people and greenery. But for whom are these infrastructures conceived? This is also a question of allocation: which users, practices, and local histories are selected as compatible with the future city? Do they realistically meet the needs of nearby communities and those living where the infrastructure is built? These questions challenge the implications behind the UDDC's urban design and planning practices.

The South Sukhumvit Innovation District

Following the Policy Dialogue on the future of Bangkok as a "livable, sustainable and resilient city" in June 2024, the UDDC led a charette to develop a new masterplan for South Sukhumvit, an area that, unlike some neighboring districts, has not yet been guided by an established strategic plan. South Sukhumvit includes the districts of Phra Khanong and Bangna, both of which are facing rapid demographic change. Historically, the Phra Khanong-Bangna area played an important role as a water gateway into Bangkok, and was home to several industries, including oil refineries. Over the past three decades, South Sukhumvit has transitioned from a suburban area near an industrial riverside into a diverse residential area marketed as a zone

of opportunities. Indeed, the UDDC is seeking to reposition these suburban districts as "Bangkok's Gateway."

The Phra Khanong-Bangna area is home to more than a million people, with a heightened population density along the rail lines on Nut and Udom Suk (UDDC 2026). The area also serves as a strong economic hub with a particular focus on emergent technology, advertising, media, and information (TAMI) industries. Residents who are primarily first jobbers have access to essential public utilities, such as restaurants and department stores, as well as affordable housing prices.

Despite such affordability, however, South Sukhumvit is a case of unequal distribution of housing across space. Wealthier households are generally located in Phra Khanong, Bang Chak, and On Nut, living in high-rise condominiums spread along the Bangkok Mass Transit System (BTS) Sukhumvit Green Line. Conversely, middle- to lower-income households are concentrated near Bang Na-La Salle-Bearing and Si Lam Srinakarin, deeper in the sois (Ibid.). These lower-income class groups are more geographically isolated and have less access to public transportation because of the limited feeder transport connections. As shown on the map below, a lower-income urban area appears to be located within the superblock bounded by the BTS Green Line to the west and the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) Yellow Line to the east (Fig. 2).

Additionally, as Professor Niramorn Serisakul Bourgon, head of the UDDC, briefly explained during our visit, South Sukhumvit presents many urban and social challenges. First, the urban fabric of the area is quite unique, as it is organized as a massive superblock of approximately 1.2 km², with 50% of the total road networks consisting of sois or, in other words, dead-end streets (South Sukhumvit, n.d.). Internal and external traffic flowing inside this superblock is therefore a major connectivity issue for inhabitants. Secondly, because of limited feeder transport and poor pedestrian infrastructure, access to public transportation is fairly limited for those

Figure 1: Visualization of before and after of the entrance area of Saphan Kheaw, UDDC



living inside the sois framework. Thirdly, the area is facing a shortage of green space: in the Phra Khanong district, only 3.4 m² of green space is available per capita, while the Bang Na district is averaging 5.0 m² per capita, which is relatively low compared to Bangkok's average of 7.27 m² of green space per capita (UDDC, 2026). Finally, South Sukhumvit is facing one last crucial challenge: under-utilized land. According to Professor Niramon Serisakul Bourgon, vacant space can be divided into 3 types: large land plots mainly state-owned and located on Sanphawut Road and along the Old Railway Road, then medium plots scattered along the main sois, and finally, small plots of land scattered along the sub-sois, which branch out from main sois and tend to be more residential. Fragmented land ownership thus questions the feasibility of such a large-scale urban development project in Bangkok's suburbs.

To address the multiple challenges present in the South Sukhumvit area, the UDDC led a col-

laborative planning workshop with strong community involvement. The UDDC identified the concentration of intense development along the Skytrain lines as the main issue. Public and private investment remains focused around transit-oriented development areas, while the center of the superblock continues to lack the necessary measures needed to support more isolated and marginal communities (Ibid.). One proposed solution is to channel the expansion of the Skytrain system and its related suburban growth further into the sois, in order to increase the housing stock support and commercial activities.

“This area is convenient for travel only on the Sukhumvit and the main road connecting to Srinakharindira. Beyond that, it is a maze-like network of sois and soiways (narrow lanes and dead-end streets in Bangkok).”

- Resident from South Sukhumvit, UDDC 2026

Accessibility and connectivity are therefore one of the core elements of the new plan established by the charrette, where urban planners and other stakeholders plan to connect two sides of Sukhumvit Road by reducing the number of dead ends, which would eventually open the soi network to larger arterials of the superblock.

Another key intervention is to double the amount of available park spaces from approximately 4.2 m² per capita to at least 10 m² per person within a 15-minute walking radius. This is part of a broader urban greening plan set by the Governor of Bangkok. Thus, the transformation of South Sukhumvit is tied to the creation of a livable and sustainable urban center where long-term residents and new residents are welcomed. According to Professor Niramorn Serisakul Bourgon, new park space and more accessible public transportation are also ways to attract younger generations participating in the TAMI industry. In addition to urban greening, rezoning, and land use, repurposing is a core element of the new master plan proposed by the UDDC. Turning existing industrial structures and other underutilized land into vibrant community spaces reveals the UDDC's ambition to develop South Sukhumvit as one of Bangkok's main vital hubs.

Analysis

European Frameworks in Thai Contexts

An integral element in the framework of the UDDC is its approach to urban renewal in Bangkok as a critique of historical Thai urbanism. Bangkok's urban landscape is largely characterized by a network of "superblocks" that contain a network of sois, alleys that run off a thanon (main road) (Fig. 3). Sois often have dead-ends and are developed as a consequence of the conversion of rural land into urban territories (Situsingha, 2006). Soi are not simply obstacles to connectivity; they are existing infrastructures of proximity, belonging, and informal coordination. In the late 20th century, public funding for planning and infrastructure could not match the rapid urbanization of Bangkok (Boontharm 2016). As such, the sois were maintained by

private initiatives, retaining much of the original form that was structured by their rural histories (Boontharm 2016). The UDDC takes the stance that this urban form is the core obstruction to walkability in Bangkok, as the superblock structure forces drivers to use the narrow soi to feed onto the main roads: a job most easily executed with a personal vehicle like a car or a motorcycle. At the same time, as argued by Koen DeWandeler (2007), the sois are an important site of community within the metropolis. As such, they act as a remnant of village life in a continuously urbanizing context (Situsingha, 2006). As noted by Davisi Boontharm (2016), unique senses of belonging are created across different sois, established by each soi's "particular history, [its] way of life and [its] local construct".

The aforementioned approach of the UDDC becomes particularly clear in the masterplan for South Sukhumvit, where it focuses on markers of "development" and economic opportunity. At the core of the project lies the development of a central business district whose connectivity is hindered by the soi structure of South Sukhumvit as it currently exists. This type of development is largely driven by a philosophy around walkability and the "15-minute city," an idea formulated from a Northern perspective (Caprotti et al. 2024). To achieve this, the UDDC takes specific inspiration from cities like Paris, which has been recognized for its walkability and dense public transportation system. Yet Paris's Haussmannian urban form starkly contrasts the soi urbanism of Bangkok. This raises the question of whether these frameworks can be applied to Bangkok while retaining the unique urban identity that has facilitated the infrastructural backbone of its communities (Boontharm 2016). In this sense, the soi urbanism of Bangkok is regarded as standing in the way of reaching a development potential that maximizes efficiency and profitability—what Jennifer Robinson (2002) calls the "developmentalist" approach. In this view, the city's rapid growth is a means toward Western ideals that require radical restructuring of urban forms.

Figure 2: Map representing different socioeconomic status (income by month) in South Sukhumvit Area, UDDC

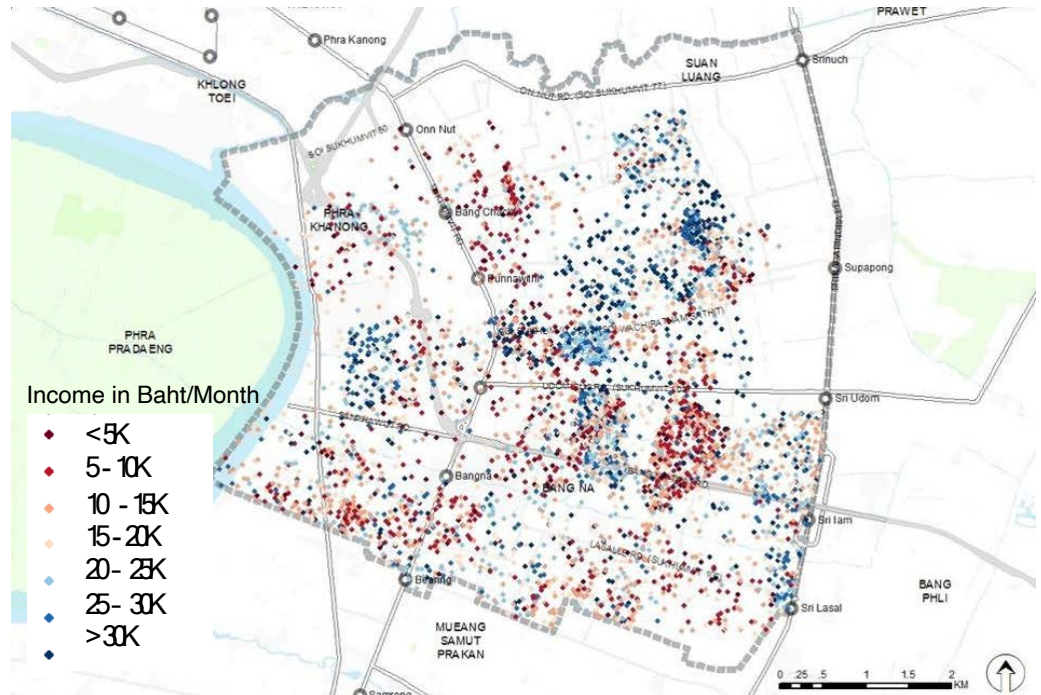
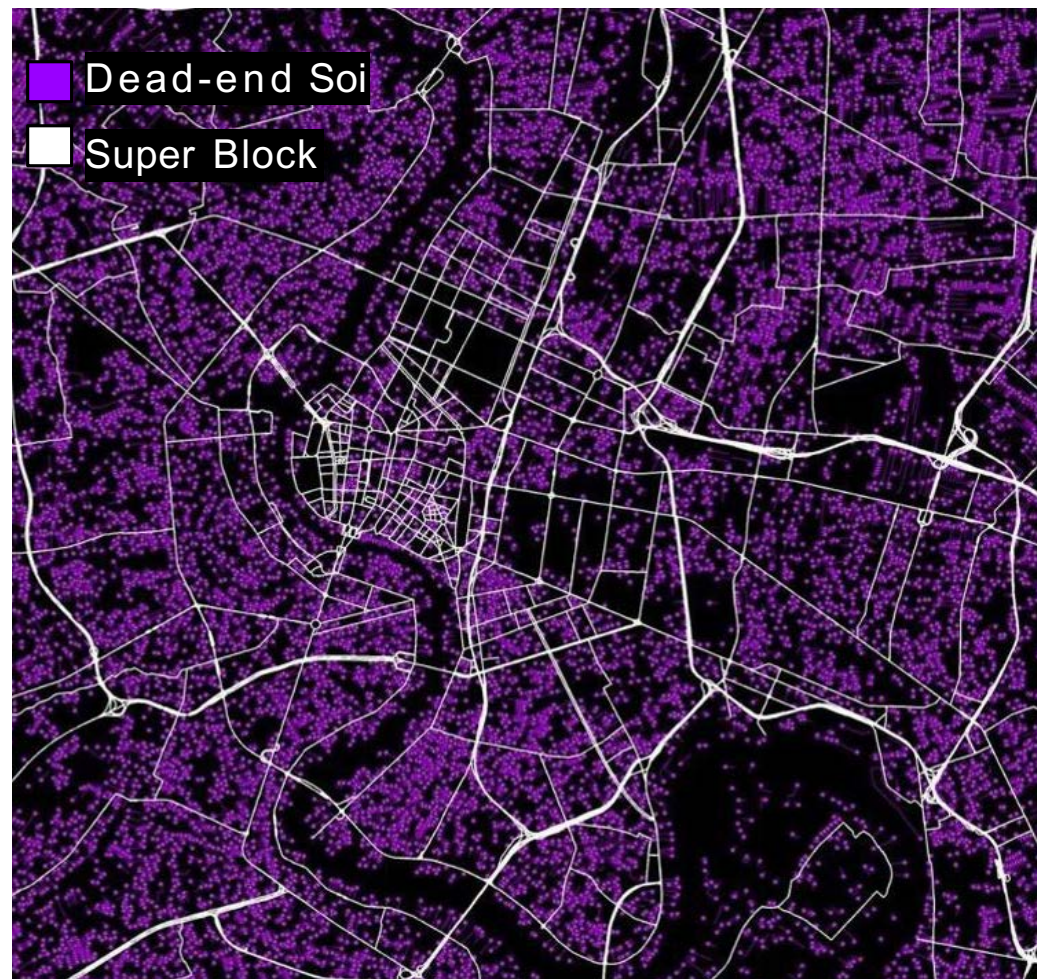


Figure 3: Visualization of superblocks and soi urbanism in Bangkok, UDDC



Politics in Bangkok Urban Planning: Responsibility and Decision-making

The UDDC rightly diagnoses circulation as a key issue for Bangkok. Yet, their approach has the potential to undermine local needs and communities. To understand where this approach comes from, it is important to examine the political and institutional structures within which the UDDC operates. As the UDDC is a non-governmental planning agency rather than a state entity, they are reliant on patronage and funding from the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) and other public bodies. Its ability to act is therefore shaped by which projects are commissioned. In this sense, the planning done through the UDDC's academic framework is inherently non-neutral; their projects must be patronized through a political process.

This process only reinforces Robinson's aforementioned "developmentalist" lens, as development agencies like the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) have established a strong connection with the BMA and the UDDC. Highlighted by a recent signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the AFD and the BMA, the importance of development agencies in Bangkok's urban planning cannot be underestimated (Indo Thai News 2025). This MoU grants €450,000 to the BMA for "green urban development," which aims to use French expertise to tackle Bangkok's sustainable development concerns. This funding structure, which involves domestic political actors and foreign development banks, highlights the institutional constraints of an agency like the UDDC. The "developmentalist" approach is thus deeply embedded in a broader funding structure where projects tackling environmental concerns and circulation require foreign funding.

Right to the City Perspective on Redevelopments

This "developmentalist" approach is particularly visible within the redevelopment of South Sukhumvit, which is projected to become "a new innovation hub that is both livable and productive" (South Sukhumvit, n.d.). In 2018, the National

Innovation Agency announced plans to transform South Sukhumvit into a "model innovation and digital district in Thailand" (South Sukhumvit, n.d.). This vision is embedded into the greater ambition of Bangkok Metropolis to establish itself as a "competitive, livable and sustainable region" in 2037 by becoming "an international center of commerce, medicine, education and transportation". This framework highlights economic growth as the main driver and objective of South Sukhumvit's transformation (South Sukhumvit, n.d.).

The UDDC's role in this redevelopment process is to help ensure a more equitable distribution of the economic benefits of this project. In addition to addressing the lack of green space and the chronic flooding characterizing South Sukhumvit, the UDDC centers on physical accessibility and connectivity in order to extend investments into the inner part of the neighborhood. If physical barriers due to lack of transportation are removed, economic opportunities would reach residents seamlessly wherever they live in South Sukhumvit and vice versa. While this project has equity and inhabitants' needs in mind, it is worth asking who this urban transformation really serves. A look into the "right to the city" as defined by Lefebvre helps answer this question: the right to the city implies the right of inhabitants to participate in the production of urban space. As this process is increasingly dictated by the state and private capital, Lefebvre argues that inhabitants' decisions should be centered in this process so that a city truly reflects the needs and aspirations of those who inhabit it (Purcell 2002).

Although the UDDC's planning process included a public consultation, South Sukhumvit's redevelopment is still largely driven by institutional actors who shape the future of this district. Inhabitants' voices are included within the space's production process once the general framework has been set by the BMA and the AFD.

Among the four development scenarios portrayed by the UDDC, Downtown Cha Cha Cha is the most "desirable" one that "everyone" would "naturally" hope for (Kiatchaiyakor, 2022). This

Figure 4: The four development models for the Phra Kha-nong-Bang Na Area, UDDC

“The Skytrain is coming to you: “a future based on haphazard development—a situation where development remains limited to areas along roads and skytrain routes, essentially developing along a central axis”. Residents will face traffic congestion, air pollution, and flooding.



ภาพสะท้อนของอนาคตฐาน “รถไฟฟ้ามาหาเธอ”

Die Hard 4.0: “an undesirable future. It depicts development extending beyond the Phra Khanong-Bang Na area along the Skytrain tracks to areas with lower costs of living for the private sector, particularly emerging economies, startups, and first-jobbers.”



ภาพสะท้อนของอนาคตที่ไม่พึงประสงค์ “Die Hard 4.0”

The Wolf of Wall Street: “development occurs along the streets, subway lines, and in private areas, but does not spread into the inner areas.”



ภาพสะท้อนของอนาคตทางเลือก “The Wolf of Wall Street”

Downtown Cha Cha Cha: “a desirable future. It depicts a new downtown area that is livable, productive, and ideal for both existing and prospective residents.” Existing and new residents integrate “seamlessly” through collaboration and participation. Source: Kiatchaiyakorn



ภาพสะท้อนของอนาคตที่พึงประสงค์ “Downtown Cha Cha Cha”

language reveals assumptions on what is the best future for South Sukhumvit and on the criteria that determine what is a desirable place to live. It presents this convergence of desire as inevitable and obvious which prevents the emergence of alternative futures from inhabitants. This specific choice of words shows that South Sukhumvit's inhabitants' needs are decentered in the decision-making process that led to this district transformation. Rather, it is pre-defined assumptions that are prioritized when charting the future trajectory of South Sukhumvit.

Though using “everyone” makes this future inclusive, the illustration of those scenarios suggest that certain groups do not fit within the most desirable future for South Sukhumvit. This becomes a “politics of desirability”, where the planning images do not only represent the future, but also rank these imagined futures morally. Die Hard 4.0 “undesirable” scenario mostly portrays people from low-income groups, manual workers and homeless people while Downtown Cha Cha Cha streets are filled with white collar workers. One could argue that this visual choice reflects the improvement of socio-economic conditions this redevelopment would bring, but it also implies the erasure of a certain group to the benefit of first jobbers, who monopolize the visual representation of South Sukhumvit's most desirable future. This visual replacement questions the “seamless” integration between old and new residents that the UDDC wants to achieve.

Conclusion

While extending economic opportunities to the inner neighborhoods of South Sukhumvit could contribute to a more even distribution of wealth, Robinson's analysis of developmentalist cities also invites a more critical view of the kind of economic growth this approach promotes. South Sukhumvit's redevelopment prioritizes the TAMI sector, and the district is home to True Digital Park, a complex building with workplaces, event spaces, and shops described as “Southeast Asia's largest tech and startup hub” (True Digital Park, n.d.). More broadly, in alignment with developmentalist approaches, South Sukhumvit redevelopment policies appear to favor “econ-

omies that have a global potential” rather than supporting a “diversity of economies that have a wide range of spatial reach” (Robinson, 2002).

According to Robinson, such policy choices subordinate local dynamics to a particular global logic. South Sukhumvit's transformation into a “hub of opportunities” is oriented toward a specific population and toward attracting private global investment, which may limit the project's ability to deliver its promised benefit to all inhabitants equally. This redevelopment gives an increasing presence and power to global actors in South Sukhumvit, which is precisely the observation that led Lefebvre to theorize the right to the city. In this case, efforts to address the area's concrete urban issues coincide with the late inclusion of residents in shaping their community's future, within a pre-defined horizon of desirable development. At the same time, external institutional actors and private capital increasingly shape urban decision-making.

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Gated Communities in Bangkok

*By Héloïse Romey, Milo Contreras,
and Nil Fontanarosa*

This report examines gated communities in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area through a political economy and urban sociology framework, drawing on field observations from a study visit to Forestias by Magnolia Quality Development Corporation (MQDC) in March 2026. It first argues that gated communities in Bangkok are not marginal housing forms, but a dominant mode of urban development produced by the interaction of private developers, state retreat, and an upper class willing to escape the city center. The analysis shows that gated communities in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area emerge through a structural coupling between speculative real estate development and weak regulatory oversight, enabling private actors to function as de facto urban planners. Three mechanisms explain their proliferation: land grabbing and speculative expansion, privatized infrastructure

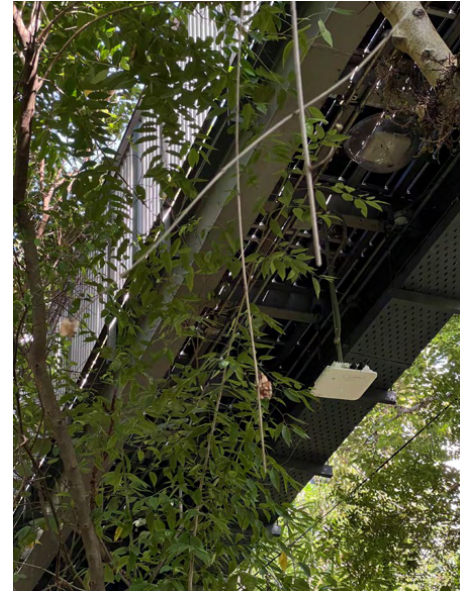
provision, and narratives legitimizing spatial enclosure. The following case study of Forestias MQDC demonstrates how gated communities in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area can be marketed as ecological and social utopias while operating as peripheral enclaves dependent on metropolitan infrastructure. The project commodifies “nature” as a form of spatial and social distinction, transforming environmental amenities into exclusive goods. The findings show that gated communities in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area institutionalize enclave urbanism by producing social selection, spatial fragmentation, and the privatization of public and ecological resources. More broadly, Bangkok represents a case of enclave urbanism emerging in a rapidly growing metropolitan region where developer-led planning results in cities structured by withdrawal rather than integration.



Gated Communities in Bangkok Metropolitan Area: A Political Economy of Enclave Urbanism and the Forestias MQDC

Left: Entrance canopy at the Forest Pavilion, The Forestias, with residential towers visible in the background, Héroïse Romey, 2026.

Right: Underside of an elevated structure in the central forest area of The Forestias, showing vegetation and a mounted technical device, Lourens van Loujk, 2026



Given the prevalence of gated communities in Bangkok as the standard form of housing for members of the middle and upper classes, as well as for a number of the urban poor, this article seeks to understand the mechanisms at work in the making of a city of enclaves. In order to understand this significant phenomenon, the article first examines the historical, economic, and social factors behind gated communities, before reflecting on whether it is possible to claim that the city is sustainable given the fragmentation of living spaces resulting from this widespread housing model. What is at stake behind the urban segmentation and compartmentalisation driven by the economic interests of land development, as well as the upper classes' quest for exclusive spaces, is the maintenance of social cohesion within a diverse and highly unequal city (Boonjubun 2019). Finally, we draw on the specific case study of a luxury property development, The Forestias, by MQDC, that we visited during our study trip to Bangkok. This focus allows us to examine the narratives shaping gated communities beyond the mechanisms of political economy described in the first part. The issue is not only that gated communities separate residents, but that they privatise some of the conditions of urban viability: safety, greenery,

drainage, mobility, and maintenance.

Part I : The Social Production of Gated Communities

1. How did Bangkok's Urban Forms Create Gated Communities?

Land Property Shift, Industrialization, and Land Speculation Since the Late 1890's

Under the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1853-1910), driven by the Thai elite's desire to reshape the city according to European standards, Bangkok shifted from a water-based city to a land-based city. Land titling, which did not previously exist, was developed by the Thai elite during the 1890s. All unutilised lands around Thailand's political center were claimed and distributed through property titles to the monarch, the royal family, the nobility, and a group of Thai and Chinese commoners (Boonjubun 2019). Land titling therefore did not simply record existing ownership; it created the legal infrastructure through which urban land could be accumulated, transferred, and transformed into a speculative asset.

Later, during the 1950s, Thai political leaders

followed the recommendations of the World Bank regarding objectives of industrialization and privatization, which put an early end to any planning for the city of Bangkok and left the market dictating the city's development (Boonjubun 2019). Starting in the 1960s, Bangkok's industrialisation accelerated the city's sprawl, through the construction of both factories and housing for the newly arrived migrant workers (Senivongse 2021).

This development of the construction business led to a land speculation boom. At the same time, the expansion of land titling did not simply formalize existing patterns of ownership but helped establish the legal infrastructure through which urban land could increasingly be treated as a marketable and speculative asset. In 1972, 51,7% of the urban land belonged to 5% of the landowners, with the most disadvantaged population not owning any land (Senivongse 2021). The existence of vast properties owned by the upper class shaped the layout of today's major traffic arteries, which were determined so as not to cut across properties but to run along them, creating the superblocks that are still the essential components of Bangkok's urbanism as well as the root of the many connectivity and congestion issues afflicting the city (Senivongse 2021).

The Emergence of Suburban Gated Communities and Inner-City Condos in the 1980s

From the mid-eighties to the late nineties, Bangkok's upper class started moving further away from the city center, into "suburban enclaves", as living conditions in the city center had become severely compromised due to a lack of strategic planning (Moore 2022). The construction of an extensive highway network, followed by the development of urban rail systems such as the BTS (Bangkok Mass Transit System), enabled the upper and middle classes to access a better quality of living by moving away from the city center and settling in the suburbs. That is how gated communities had become the standard form of housing for these two social classes (Senivongse 2021). In 2017, more than half of the residents of Nonthaburi (a province that is part of the Bangkok urban area) were living with-

in a gated community (Senivongse 2021).

Regarding the affluent people still living in the inner city, most of them live in condominiums. Renters are often single-person households, while there is a tendency for young couples to move to gated communities in the suburbs. These people are rarely seen in the streets outside their cars, and insofar as a significant number of residential and office buildings have direct access to mass transit stations, some people can live their lives completely avoiding any contact with the street (Moore 2022).

This reclusion of the upper and middle classes in enclaved spaces, accessible only to those who can afford them, is a symptom of a privatization of public space, which can lead to no other consequences than the weakening and disintegration of public services (Boonjubun 2019).

2. Drivers of Gated Communities

"Urban politics is and always has been about power: its genesis, its acquisition, and its forms and uses"

- Davies and Imbroscio 2009, 4

Understanding the proliferation of gated communities in the Bangkok metropolitan region requires placing power relations at the centre of analysis. These developments do not emerge as isolated market responses or purely cultural preferences. Rather, they are produced through the interaction of influential actors, including developers, state authorities, and regulatory frameworks, operating within a transforming city. In Bangkok, these dynamics create conditions in which gated communities appear not as exceptional forms, but as a normalized mode of urban development. Their expansion is rooted in the intersection of political arrangements, institutional practices, and planning regulations, while being legitimized by cultural narratives (Boonjubun, 2019).

The Politics Behind the Gates

First, the development of gated communities is

inscribed in a particular regional context. Indeed, globalization and economic growth in Southeast Asia have created attractive markets for ‘world-class’ urban space, drawing large amounts of investment. Facing these economic pressures, local political elites respond by adopting growth-oriented policies and decentralized planning systems favouring private interests (Shatkin 2008). This socio-economic context has resulted in a trend of housing real estate development that expands outward to suburban areas of the Bangkok Metropolitan Region through the construction of gated communities (Kinmalai and Kiyoko 2013).

Many authors have described Bangkok’s system of urban development as one where public authorities have retreated to such an extent that private developers now play the dominant role, effectively acting as *de facto* planners for large parts of the city (Boonjubun 2019; Khongsong and Anusorntharangkun 2026; Kinmalai and Kiyoko 2013). The primacy of economic interests in Bangkok leads to a city shaped by models of development prioritizing private interests over collective values. As Sintusingha and Mirgholami (2013) put it, Bangkok is not a city designed for Bangkokians. Indeed, the stark rise in gated community development appears to reflect the need to increase the profit margins of private developers rather than responding to a grassroots demand for more gated housing (Kinmalai 2018).

Urban development in Thailand has been known to be a place where developers collude with local governments in order to pursue private interests. Studying the development of a gated housing estate in Eastern Bangkok, Khongsong and Anusorntharangkun (2026) found multiple instances of violations of resident rights, land regulations, and zoning laws by the developers. Not only did the consequences of the legal breaches negatively impact residents’ livelihoods, but they were done exclusively to minimize costs and maximize profits.

Corruption in urban development is made possible by the many loopholes existing in regulations and laws. These include the personal discretion-

ary power that individual bureaucrats have when issuing construction permits, conflicts of interest where government officials act as consultants for projects they are tasked with inspecting, and the general lack of democratic oversight that could hold actors at the origin of development projects responsible for their outcomes (Khongsong and Anusorntharangkun 2026). This is where regulation becomes productive: it does not merely fail to control developers; it creates opportunities through which private urbanism becomes possible.

Narratives of Urban Separation

Gated communities in Bangkok have long been analysed not only as a particular trend in the arrangement of urban space, but also as a manifestation of cultural dynamics deeply rooted in Thai society. Indeed, social separation and distancing already existed in the city before the acceleration of gated housing development. Bangkok is a city with wide disparities in terms of power and wealth, and the hierarchical nature of Thai society has historically produced a segmented property market (Moore 2024). During the 1980s and 1990s, before the current peak of gated housing development, higher-class residents were rarely seen on the street, in contact with the city only through private motor transportation (Cohen 1985).

Imported cultural narratives related to gated housing have become important for contemporary urban development in Bangkok. Analysing the American context, Low (2001) identifies the relevance of the “securitization discourse” in the rise of gated communities. As he argues, gated communities become a psychological lure providing a safe haven within a context riddled with increased media coverage and national hysteria about urban crime. In this sense, the feeling of increased urban insecurity and decay, even if not empirically verifiable, serves as a justification to build walls and gates.

The same securitization discourse that saw the rise of gated communities in America is found in the marketing around gated communities in Bangkok. If urban crime in the city remains rel-

atively low and stable, the presence of CCTVs and security guards is an important selling point for gated projects. Browsing on social media forums related to life in Bangkok's gated communities, it is common to find this exact sentiment mirrored:

“The reason we moved into a gated community is ultimately about safety. While property crime is low in Thailand, we are still very vigilant about protecting our property”

- Reddit user comment on “Why do Thais like gated communities?”, 2025.

Thus, locally rooted cultural dynamics of social separation could potentially be interacting with imported narratives of securitization to produce a cultural context that legitimizes the development of gated housing estates.

However, it would be a mistake to conceptualize Bangkok's gated communities as spaces where elite speculative investments produce private space accessible only to the highest highest-earning residents of the city. As Boonjubun (2019) finds, enclosed private spaces in Bangkok are ubiquitous, and poor urban residents will often find themselves living in gated communities. His conclusions contradict the previous assumption that residents of gated communities are only the affluent and middle classes. While, for some residents, gated communities are driven by aspirations of social distinction and spatial separation from the wider urban population, they also appeal to less affluent groups through the promise of safety and a sense of community. Their widespread adoption across different social strata suggests that gated living cannot be reduced to elite strategies of exclusion alone. Rather, the dominance and ubiquity of gated communities in Bangkok point to the need for new analytical categories capable of capturing their broader social, cultural, and urban significance (Boonjubun 2019).

3. Effects of Gated Communities: The Enclave Urbanism of Bangkok and the Viability of the City

Gated communities in Bangkok are character-

ized by perimeter walls, controlled entry points, and private security staff, which generate social, spatial, economic, and environmental effects that reshape urban dynamics (Wissink and Hazelzet 2016; Boonjubun 2019). These residential enclaves emerged as extensions of historical drivers, including rapid urbanization and industrialization from the 1960s onward. Fundamental mechanisms, such as impermeable physical barriers, resident selection through pricing and covenants, and privatized service provision, all perpetuate fragmentation, often at the expense of cohesive citywide development (Sangkharam 2024).

Social Effects and Underlying Mechanisms

Social separation is systematically produced by gated communities through the concentration of socioeconomically homogeneous populations. High perimeter walls and vigilant guards minimize incidental encounters between affluent residents and those in informal settlements nearby or in low-rise districts (Wissink and Hazelzet 2016). Social dynamics in these condos involve private governance regimes that self-select residents via high entry costs and rules, thereby reducing solidarity and amplifying perceptions of inequalities (Boonjubun 2019). The stratification induced by gated communities is thus reinforced through multiple filters: prohibitive purchase or rental fees tend to attract wealthier residents, while community association bylaws enforce behavioural norms that reinforce social separation. Over extended periods, insiders frame external populations as inherent security risks, solidifying biases. For instance, Chaitawat Boonjubun's study of more than 400 households in the city shows poorer gated dwellers stigmatizing outsiders as threats, thus mirroring elite behaviours. Private recreational infrastructure, including clubhouses and playgrounds, supplants traditional public gathering spaces. Thus, limiting opportunities for social exchange between different groups, leading to a decrease in the informal solidarity historically embedded in Thailand's urban villages (Boonjubun 2019).

Network analyses also reveal asymmetrical connectivity: affluent networks extend selectively to

elite counterparts elsewhere, which bypasses broader societal integration. In contrast, poorer gated residents exhibit higher internal cohesion yet diminished upward mobility through contacts. These dynamics amplify inequality by institutionalizing class isolation, as residents internalize narratives of protection that justify exclusion, ultimately weakening collective responses to shared urban challenges such as flooding or traffic congestion (Wissink and Hazelzet 2016; Sangkharom 2024).

Spatial Effects and Access Restriction Dynamics

Spatial fragmentation arises as gated perimeters close established pedestrian and vehicular pathways, leading to detours that extend travel distances and times. Bangkok's pre-modern street morphology, characterized by narrow soi (alleys) and fragmented lot divisions inherited from agrarian parcelling, already constrains easy and direct connectivity. Gated enclosures further intensify this condition by converting public spaces into fortified buffers (Sangkharom 2024). Enclosure modifies in this way not only movement, but also the spatial distribution of greenery, drainage, and everyday access. Mechanisms driving this process include legislative provisions, such as those in the post-1959 Town and Country Planning Act, which allow private land assembly without requiring public thoroughfare, as well as developer strategies that prioritize internal loop roads over perimeter permeability. This privatizes amenities, like swimming pools or jogging tracks, which formerly were part of the shared urban commons. Sangkharom's thesis on Lumpini gates also documents how those living outside the gated communities faced 20 to 30% longer routes, undermining the 2024 Bangkok Masterplan's Transit-Oriented Development and 15-minute city goals.

Consequently, public spaces adjacent to gates degrade into peripheral zones, perceived as unkept or hazardous, while internal amenities hoard greenery and drainage features. City-wide, this contributes to documented declines in accessible tree canopy, which is down 10.5%

between 2018 and 2022, thus exacerbating heat islands and flood vulnerabilities in ungated areas, as privatized stormwater systems serve only enclosed populations (Cowan 2025).

Economic and Environmental Consequences

Property values in gated communities increase due to promises of safety and added facilities, often adding tens of thousands of dollars to home prices, while resources are diverted from public infrastructure. Affluent residents rely on private amenities like pools and gyms rather than municipal ones, which can potentially lower contributions to the shared systems (Boonjubun 2019). In Bangkok, the 1979 Condominium Act permits legalized foreign ownership of individual condominium units, driving up surrounding land costs and displacing lower-income households and informal vendors from nearby neighbourhoods.

Environmental sustainability is similarly skewed inward. Gated landscapes incorporate progressive features like permeable pavements and native plantings that help mitigate local runoff and enhance microclimates, yet these remain inaccessible, fragmenting potential citywide ecological corridors essential for biodiversity and cooling (Safiudin et al. 2022). Developers capitalize on sustainability branding to justify enclosures, but the net effect privatizes ecological gains, which conflicts with national carbon neutrality timelines and equitable green access mandates.

Part II : Forestias as a Representation of These Dynamics

1. Visit to Forestias

Our visit started in the lobby of the complex, where a host asked four of us to set off a surprise animation on the wall, with flowers, animals, and the "rare whale" appearing successively. We were then led upstairs to the "Chamber of Secrets", feeling like we were entering a room hiding a treasure. Protected behind an armoured door, a cinema room with a 360° screen covering its four walls was playing a commercial promoting Forestias project, a gated community located in Samut Prakan province, less than

Figure 3: Entrance staircase to The Forestias, Héloïse Romey, 2026



Figure 4 (left): Staircase leading to the park area, Aleksandra Mostovaja, 2026



Figure 5 (right): Image of the robot that would be able to answer simple questions, Héloïse Romey, 2026



Figure 6: Photo of the whale sculptures in The Forestias, Melissa Ugo, 2026



Figure 7: Entrance hall at The Forestias, the screen showed different animals strolling in nature, including deers and whales, Aleksandra Mostovaja, 2026



1km away from the Bangkok Metropolitan Area's limits. The idea conveyed is simple: in a city with few green spaces and harmful pollution, people should opt for housing that offers their family the quality of life they deserve. Ecology is presented to be at the heart of the project, which created a place where "people, animals and nature" can finally live together.

We then had the opportunity to visit one of Forestias' green areas, including skywalks, animal sculptures, a playground, and a pool designed to look like a natural river basin. In the background, we could hear bird song recordings and classical music, which were playing on hidden speakers throughout the forest. Presented as an urban oasis, it did feel like a parenthesis outside the city's bustling streets, but it did not exactly feel like we were in a forest, rather than in a really well-planned park.

The Forestias residential complex, which could be described as a luxury property development, began welcoming its first residents in 2018. The site represents 64 hectares divided into five distinct residential developments (Whizdom, Mulberry Grove, The Aspen Tree, Forestias Signature and Six Senses Residences), each offering a different living experience at a higher or lower price, from studio apartments to a 6-bedroom villas, and therefore targeting different audiences. For example, The Aspen Tree is a retirement community designed for people aged 50 and over. Residents of the Forestias all have access to the green space at the heart of the area (4.8 hectares), but the residential developments themselves remain only accessible to their own residents. This shows that, as well as being a citadel-like residential complex reserved for the wealthiest, The Forestias reproduces a second level of segregation within its own walls, in addition to the segregation it imposes on the rest of the city, thus reflecting an intra-class segregation based on economic criteria. In 2026, the occupancy rate stands at 90% for high-rise condominiums, 60% for mid-rise condominiums, and just 10% for villas. 10% of the residents are foreign nationals. Expatriates have been allowed to buy condominium units since the Condominium Act of 1979 (Boonjubun 2019). Part of The

Forestias was designed by Foster + Partners, a renowned British international architecture firm. Due to its proximity to the district of Bang Na, The Forestias are frequently marketed as part of it, highlighting the attractiveness of fast-developing areas such as Bang Na for upper-class people looking for a place to settle in Bangkok.

2. Peripheral Enclave and Metropolitan Logic

Despite its name and imagery, the complex is not a forest in any literal sense, but a peripheral enclave inserted into a highly urbanized zone. Forestias is "in nature" only through marketing. Geographically, it is part of Bangkok's expanded urban region. Forestias is actually located in a buffer zone between the city center and the main airport of Bangkok, Suvarnabhumi. It takes 30 minutes to reach the airport by car from Forestias. To do so, the fastest path for the residents is to use the Bang Na expressway, a 55 km long highway flyover, the longest in the world, which was built at the end of the 1990s to connect Bangkok's city center to the new airport (Wikipedia 2026, "Bang Na Expressway"). Located just in front of the entrance of Forestias, the Expressway is immediately accessible for the residents commuting to the city center for their daily activities (Google maps 2026).

Gated communities are not accidental exceptions but products of Bangkok's urban expansion. The periphery becomes the new space of exclusivity, and suburban nature is made possible through infrastructure, land availability, and class mobility. Like other gated communities in the greater metropolitan region, Forestias is the result of the action of private planning carried out by private investors. In this case, it is the Charoen Pokphand group (GCR staff, 2019), controlled by the Chearavanont family, which is the sole operator of 7-Eleven convenience stores in Thailand as well as the world's largest producer of shrimp and animal feed, a global top three producers of poultry and pork, and the single largest investor in mainland China today, commanding over a fifth of China's entire feed meal market ("Charoen Pokphand Group," n.d.). To construct such an ambitious project, the Chearavanont family conducted years of long

campaigns and negotiations to turn previously unbuilt land into high-value real estate (Carlisle, 2019).

3. Forestias as a Marketed Utopia With Nature Built From Scratch

The project presents itself as an ecological utopia for those able to afford it. Its marketing re-frames the city as a site of pollution, contamination, stress, and insufficiency, while positioning Forestias as a haven of health, domesticity, and coexistence with nature. “Nature” becomes a social and symbolic form of luxury. Ecological language here functions less as an environmental statement and more as a branding tool, as what is advertised is not sustainability but a lifestyle that turns ecology into an aesthetic. The complex shows that it offers a healthier and more “complete” life through ecology, family life, and coexistence with nature.

4. Forestias as a Symptom of Urban Distrust

Ultimately, Forestias expresses a mistrust of the city as a shared environment. It shows the idea that urban life needs to be escaped rather than improved. It treats green space, safety, and well-being as private commodities, and the promise of people, animals, and nature living together, found in MQDC promotion for Forestias, hides the fact that this coexistence is controlled and selectively accessible. Developed on Bangkok’s outskirts, it markets itself as an escape from the city, still within easy reach, allowing connection with nature. This rhetoric underscores a rejection of urban density, which positions the project as an urban oasis within the city’s sprawl. Foster + Partners’ masterplan explicitly addresses a “growing disconnect between contemporary city life and family traditions”, where urban demands strain intergenerational ties, prompting younger generations to flee to the city while elders remain in rural areas. By clustering villas, condos, and residences around a gigantic forest, the development of this project creates a self-contained paradise that sidesteps public infrastructure issues like traffic congestion, pollution, and overcrowding. Critics of similar “forest city” projects highlight how such enclaves foster

alienation, erasing local heritage for “fake” green environments accessible only to the privileged (Wei 2023). Green space here is a gated luxury: the Six Senses Residences in the complex highlights 27 villas encircling a “residents-only lagoon” at the forest’s edge, with private pools, onsens, and gardens. Access to the treetop canopy walk and hundreds of plant and animal species is guaranteed by private lifts, ensuring tranquillity for residents while shielding them from Bangkok’s metropolitan area. This mirrors broader trends where urban greenery screens private from public realms, prioritizing privacy over inclusive ecology.

The project also shows controlled coexistence with nature: the setup of the complex promotes biodiversity but excludes non-residents, fostering a selective harmony where wildlife can thrive in a supposedly protected forest reserve that is accessible only to those who can afford it. Ultimately, this intergenerational lifestyle destination may reflect a broader neoliberal turn in urban planning, where nature is framed as a branded form of escape, and inequalities may, to some extent, be reproduced through the discourse of ecological development (Wei 2023).

Within the constructed forest of the housing estate lie dozens of hidden security cameras. They are an important point of Forestias’ marketing, resonating with the securitization discourse that represents public space in Bangkok as dangerous (Haanstad 2012). After the gates, cameras serve as an ultimate layer of security, assuring urban safety for the residents who have access to it. Securitization theory shows that issues like crime become existential threats and justify extraordinary measures like gated isolation. In Bangkok, public spaces, often overcrowded, polluted, and subject to theft, are depicted as dangerous, especially by the media, which amplifies residents’ fears despite actual crime rates being rather low (Haanstad 2012). Forestias capitalizes on this: its website highlights the fact that dozens of cameras are hidden into the forest and on the complex, marketed as vigilant guardians ensuring safety inside the gates. These cameras are painted as the ultimate security layer, with 24-hour protection and CCTV systems linked to

Figure 8: Bang Na Expressway, Wikipedia Commons, 2026



an MQDC control center, resonating with narratives portraying Bangkok's streets as chaotic and untrustworthy (Huawei Enterprise).

This discourse manifests physically after entering the estate's gates. Security robots roam 24/7, equipped with HD cameras and voice links to control rooms, extending surveillance into the forest paths. Unlike static cameras, these mobile units cover the outdoor areas at eye-level, emphasizing Forestias' smart-city ethos with sensor networks and autonomous vehicles. By having those features, the complex reaffirms the outer world's menace, allowing the residents to withdraw into a safe bubble while potentially reinforcing social divides.

The Forestias targets Thailand's upper classes, with units priced from 7 million THB (around 180 000 €) for studios to 250 million THB (around 6.5 million €) for luxury villas, far beyond median Bangkok household means. This exclusivity underscores social stratification: a small part of Bangkok's population can afford such enclaves, often corporate executives, property tycoons, or overseas Thais seeking multigenerational

living situations. Foreign buyers, limited by condo-ownership laws, dominate villas, further pricing out locals and perpetuating inequalities in a city where around 30% of the population lives in informal settlements (BMA 2018). Its central forest privatizes ecology, in contrast with dwindling public parks amid urbanization. While marketed as a template for sustainable urban living, it siphons investment: MQDC's financing prioritizes private smart grids over public infrastructures. Surrounding areas in Bang Na report strained greenery, with Forestias' gates blocking pedestrian flows and exacerbating traffic. Potential spillover includes elite-driven gentrification, hiking local land values and displacing informal vendors. Ultimately, confidence in Bangkok's collective urban fabric erodes as enclaves proliferate, with hundreds of gated projects in the city, trading solutions for segregation. Forestias withdraws from challenges like inequality and climate vulnerability, turning nature into a commodity that deepens divides rather than healing them.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the production and implications of gated communities in Bangkok by linking structural urban dynamics to their material expression in the case of the Forestias project. The first part showed that gated communities are not incidental or purely demand-driven forms of housing, but the outcome of long-term transformations in Bangkok's urban development. Private interests in urban development are reinforced by political arrangements that empower developers, regulatory weaknesses, and narratives that legitimize spatial separation through discourses of security and lifestyle aspiration. The second part demonstrated how the Forestias project embodies and intensifies these tendencies as a privately planned, greenfield megaproject located on the metropolitan periphery. Far from constituting an alternative to Bangkok's urban condition, Forestias depends on and reinforces the dynamics of the wider metropolis, particularly through its reliance on highway connectivity and its integration into patterns of suburban expansion (Sangkharom 2024, Cowan 2025).

Taken together, these findings raise critical questions about Bangkok's development model. The proliferation of gated communities can be interpreted as a symptom of declining confidence in the city's capacity to provide safety, environmental quality, and collective well-being through public means. In this sense, the choice to live in enclosed developments reflects a perception that the city, in its open and collective form, is no longer fully viable for certain segments of the population.

However, gated communities should not be understood merely as responses to a perceived lack of urban viability; they are themselves part of the processes that generate it. As demonstrated throughout this article, they embody the privatization of services, the fragmentation of space, and the withdrawal of social groups from the collective urban realm. Yet they do not simply reflect these dynamics; they actively reproduce and intensify them. As several studies have shown (Levin et al. 2026; Atanga et al. 2024;

Hammad et al. 2024), the privatization of services, the fragmentation of spatial networks, and the withdrawal of resources and social interactions from the public realm all weaken the systems upon which urban life depends. The enclosure of green spaces, the disruption of connectivity, and the erosion of shared infrastructures reduce the capacity of the city to function as an integrated whole. In this sense, projects such as Forestias illustrate a broader paradox. They offer a controlled and optimized living environment for their residents, while at the same time contributing to the very urban conditions they seek to escape. Ultimately, the continued expansion of gated communities in Bangkok suggests a shift from the idea of the city as a collective project toward a model of urbanism based on selective withdrawal and privatized well-being. If a viable city depends on accessibility, connectivity, and shared resources, then the rise of enclave urbanism represents a fundamental challenge to it. Forestias is therefore not outside Bangkok's crisis of viability; it is one of the ways that crisis is selectively managed for those who can pay.

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From Slums to High-Rises

*By Enrique Unruh and
Jeanne-Pauline Reverte*

This article critically examines the redevelopment of Bangkok's Khlong Toei informal settlement, focusing on who is included or excluded from visions of a future world-class city. It analyzes the competing proposals of the Port Authority of Thailand (PAT), which seeks large-scale relocation, and the Duang Prateep Foundation (DPF), which advocates an alternative, community-inclusive redevelopment model centered on partial in-situ upgrading and high-rise housing. The paper conceptualizes the project as a site of tension between market-driven urban transformation and grassroots claims to the right to the city: socio-spa-

tial, spiritual, economic, and political. It argues that while vertical relocation may preserve centrality and access to jobs, it risks undermining established social networks, informal economies, and deeply embedded spiritual practices tied to place. At the same time, the DPF's strategy reflects a form of counter-planning that seeks inclusion through negotiation, yet partially reproduces the same market logic driving displacement. Ultimately, the case of Khlong Toei highlights the limits and contradictions of participatory and "inclusive" redevelopment under conditions of strong land valorization pressures.



From Slums to High-Rises: Costs and Considerations of Vertical Self-Determination in Khlong Toei

Figure 1: Presentation by Prateep Ungsongtham Hata, founder of Duang Prateep Foundation, Aleksandra Mostovaja, 2026



Introduction

Several of our visits have sketched the image of a Bangkok looking toward the future, striving to overcome the obstacles that hinder its rise to the status of a “world-class city”, one that would be made more efficient, walkable, with no visible signs of poverty and a distinct architectural signature. Many of the actors we met made the solving of traffic congestion and vulnerability to flooding, among others, a key priority towards this goal.. But who does the “smart city” vision leave aside? The degree of inclusiveness of this future-oriented version of the city calls for critical examination in light of our visit to the Duang Prateep Foundation and the informal settlement of Khlong Toei.

This neighborhood, built in the 1930s on what were once swamps and paddy fields, is considered one of the largest and most densely populated slums in Bangkok and is located on land owned by the Port Authority of Thailand (PAT) (DPF, 2013). The Khlong Toei Port in the mid-20th century was one of Thailand’s major ports for maritime cargo transport and has historically employed many residents of the settlement, who were tolerated on the port’s outskirts as a source

of cheap labor, many of whom came from several waves of in-migration from outside Bangkok (Shoji et al., 2024).

Over the past 20 to 30 years, there has been a gradual process of land-use reclassification in the area, shifting from predominantly port-related functions toward mixed-uses, including increased commercial activities with the planning of sport facilities, event venues or hotels, among others. This has opened the way for new development proposals and strengthened the Port Authority of Thailand’s (PAT) ability to develop and access its land. In 2022, the PAT issued a relocation plan proposing that the Khlong Toei community be moved to the Nong Chok site, on the outskirts of the city, a plan strongly opposed by the Duang Prateep Foundation (DPF). This non-profit organization, which emerged from a grassroots movement within the Khlong Toei community advocating for the right to education for underprivileged children, presented an alternative proposal to the PAT’s redevelopment project on World Habitat Day in 2025. The DPF called for 20% of the land to be allocated to the community, to be developed according to an alternative design and financed by private actors (notably through making parts of the area avail-

able to private companies for commercial activities). Key to DPF's counterproposal is the construction of high-rise apartments for displaced community members on a nearby 92,800 sq. meter area, previously occupied by a tanning leather factory. The conflict is therefore not only about relocation, but about who has authority to define a viable future for centrally located low-income residents.

The Khlong Toei redevelopment project, which brings together a wide range of stakeholders, appears to embody a double tension. On the one hand, the Duang Prateep Foundation's opposition to the current redevelopment project led by the PAT illustrates an attempt by vulnerable populations to negotiate their inclusion within a particular vision of the future city. In this sense, the DPF proposal can be understood as an allocation trial, testing whether land value, community continuity, centrality, and private finance can be recombined without full displacement. On the other hand, it also raises questions about the representativeness of this struggle and the sustainability of its potential outcomes, which we propose to examine through four main dimensions: socio-spatial, spiritual, economic, and political viability.

Relocation Proposal to High-Rise

The DPF proposal of relocation to high-rise buildings entails a reorientation of community life from a horizontal to a vertical spatial structure. In this transformation, residents who once lived side by side now inhabit stacked environments within multi-story buildings. Drawing on existing literature on vertical urbanism and slum transitions from informal, ground-level settlements to high-rise infrastructures, the discussion highlights three key dimensions of this shift: community cohesion, spiritual well-being, and the economic welfare of residents.

Community Cohesion Challenges

The relocation of a neighborhood into a new spatial environment implicitly entails the dismantling of the social spaces that structure everyday residential life. In a horizontal neighborhood, com-

munity connections tend to form more organically as third spaces emerge, even in contexts of high density, whether through home-based markets, informal intersections, or local playgrounds. Our team observed several such spaces within the existing spatial arrangement of Khlong Toei. As highlighted by the Duang Prateep Foundation, "residents are accustomed to their open-concept life in the slum" and the existing neighborhood layout has been vital to "socialize, build relationships, and find customers for their business" (Ferrero et al., 2018).

Current relocation plans propose transforming this horizontal neighborhood into a vertical housing community through a high-rise urban design model. Studies of similar developments demonstrate that high-rise communities "often lack the social spaces typical of horizontal living, raising concerns about declining social interaction, which is vital for community well-being" (Abdullah, Samsiah, & Leng Pau Chung, 2025). Furthermore, reorganizing a community within a vertical urbanist paradigm tends to produce new spatial power relations (Harris, 2015). Even when not explicitly defined, the floor on which one resides in a high-rise setting often carries implicit associations with social class. This dynamic recalls historical and contemporary examples, such as Haussmannian Paris, where floor levels corresponded directly to social rank (Yonah & Lawrence, 2022), or modern Singapore, where elite residents often occupy the highest penthouses (Harris, 2015). Thus, while the relocation of Khlong Toei to high-rise housing may appear more spatially efficient, it risks erasing established social spaces and introducing new hierarchies - both of which could significantly undermine community cohesion.

The Duang Prateep Foundation emphasizes the preservation of community as a vital element of the relocation process. Within their research materials, the foundation highlighted both residential participation and the development of "communal spaces" as key tenants of this transition. Several comparable cases of relocating informal settlements into vertical high-rise housing were examined in order to identify best practices, including examples from Sri Lanka, Nepal, and In-

dia. These examples illustrated the necessity to thoughtfully plan for community relationships by creating spaces, such as multi-purposes rooms, adjacent parks, or simply seating areas in the lobby and besides elevators. High-rise relocation projects that fail to provide these spaces exhibit diminishing social cohesion between neighbors as the number of interactions dwindle in the new, vertical environment (Abdullah, Samsiah, & Leng Pau Chung, 2025). The foundation's recognition of this risk and desire to preserve the Khlong Toei community dynamics, even within the context of spatial rearrangement, will prove crucial in the transition.

Still, the creation of new communal spaces cannot, by itself, replace the older ones imbued with layers of shared history. Some degree of mourning for these lost spaces may, in fact, ease the transition toward the new. In an ideal world, the shift toward verticality would retain traces of the community's former horizontal fabric, perhaps through adjacent green space or outdoor meeting areas surrounding the new high-rises (Monacelli, Tondelli, & Ferrante, 2021). Yet, power dynamics involving the city and port authorities may make the integration of such elements challenging to realize.

Transition of Spiritual Spaces

Central to the Khlong Toei relocation is the relationship between Buddhist residents and the more than 140 shrines embedded in the neighborhood fabric. During the transition process, many of these shrines will be removed or relocated, producing a rupture between residents' spiritual practices and their living conditions (Abe & Shimizu, 2021). Beliefs and taboos associated with Theravada Buddhist shrines have direct implications for residential spatial organization, since the "construction, removal, and relocation" of shrines and religious items must be accompanied by the performance of rituals in which "religious leaders obtain permission from land gods and spirits" to rearrange and move them (Abe & Shimizu, 2021). In this sense, the project implies not only a spatial relocation but also a spiritual one. Without consideration for the religious value inherent within the Khlong Toei neighbor-

hood, the high-rise development risks disrupting the spiritual practices of residents. Residential viability here includes ritual continuity and the possibility of maintaining relations with place-based spirits, shrines, and protective practices.

Of course, the relocation is taking place within the specific context of Thailand, where Theravada Buddhism is the most commonly followed religion, so these spiritual practices are broadly recognizable and, in principle, should be accommodated (Abe & Shimizu, 2021). The Foundation, aided by its emphasis on resident participation, is certainly aware of the shrines and of the challenges involved in their relocation. To account for this, the Foundation notes that communal spaces may be used as areas of worship, indicating some degree of consideration for this religious reality. Still, the official documentation provides only limited details on how this transition will actively incorporate these concerns and ensure that the beliefs and practices of local residents are protected and centered throughout the relocation process.

Economic Impacts of High-Rise Relocation

Part of the rationale for constructing high-rises is to keep residents close to Bangkok's economic center, thus preserving access to employment opportunities. However, the relocation will entail the removal of several "micro-businesses" currently operating in Khlong Toei and serving as the "main source of income in many households" (Ferrero et al., 2018). Many residents run businesses from their homes, such as general stores and fruit stands, drawing customers among neighbors who work outside the community. These enterprises are supported in part by the neighborhood's spatial arrangement: because many homes open directly onto the street, they can attract passersby on a daily basis. In a vertically reorganized layout, such businesses become less viable since vertical reallocation risks separating dwelling from livelihood, a separation that formal housing models often assume but informal settlements often do not. With apartments now facing hallways rather than streets, foot traffic will drop sharply, making it much more difficult for home-based informal

markets to operate effectively.

The Foundation is again aware of this issue and is attempting to offset lost income through other mechanisms within the high-rise environment. For example, similar high-rise relocation models have integrated residents into the operation of the buildings themselves. Maintenance and administrative jobs may be created and allocated to community members who previously earned their livelihoods from market spaces or services that are no longer feasible in vertical housing (Ferrero et al., 2018). In addition, the communal spaces mentioned in the previous section could be appropriated for the buying and selling of goods produced by residents (Ferrero et al., 2018). While not explicitly foregrounded in relocation plans, former market owners might retain the opportunity to run their shops within multi-purpose rooms at the high-rise ground level, which could partially compensate for income lost through the closure of street-based stalls. Still, the total space available for merchant activities will be smaller than what was accessible in the existing fabric. Under the current arrangement, residential spaces could double as market areas, since residents could operate businesses directly from their homes. In the high-rises, these functions are more mutually exclusive, and access to commercial areas will likely become contentious. How these spaces will be distributed among residents remains to be seen.

Political viability

The inclusion of more vulnerable populations in a “new Bangkok” aspiring to world-class city status also involves negotiations and confrontations of a political nature. In the case of the Khlong Toei neighborhood, the Duang Prateep Foundation is not merely a passive witness to a redevelopment project imposed upon it; it also acts as a negotiator and actively challenges the project. This leads us to question the political viability of the competing redevelopment initiatives that seek to transform the informal settlements of Khlong Toei. How politically acceptable is the project supported by the DPF, against the PAT proposition? What are the forces at play that, on the one hand, push for change, and on the other,

advocate for maintaining the right of vulnerable populations to reside in the city’s most central areas? What kind of balance can be achieved between these competing pressures?

Pressure for land profitability is undoubtedly one of the major forces driving the redevelopment of the area, which benefits from a highly strategic central location (alongside the Chao Phraya River and near a major port in Bangkok). This reflects a recurring mechanism in the resettlement and relocation of slums in Bangkok, which are often centrally located and subject to pressures originating from the private sector (Viratkapan and Perera, 2006). Khlong Toei is not only perceived as an aesthetic “blight” by authorities seeking to attract international investors; it is also viewed as an area to be “secured” in a broad sense - both in terms of land control and public health (particularly regarding waste management and resilience to flooding). Moreover, it could generate significant profits for developers if it were repurposed for economically oriented uses.

Many slums beyond Khlong Toei have faced evictions, relocations, and resettlements, which, over the course of the city’s history, have led to the formation of political movements organized around the idea of defending “slums.” Preceded by a period of growing interest in issues of social and environmental sustainability, housing, and welfare - fueled by academic research and project funding from international organizations - the 1980s marked a shift in negotiation strategies surrounding the right to the city. These included the strengthening of community development and anti-eviction activities through an increased reliance on NGO networks, as well as lobbying and media engagement (Askew, 2002).

The current advocacy of the Duang Prateep Foundation ultimately fits within a long history of political mobilizations that have repeatedly opposed eviction projects, particularly those led by the PAT, since 1982 (Chulalongkorn University (BSAC), 2018). This long-running history of successful resistance to eviction has contributed to the crystallization of a strong sense of identification with Khlong Toei as a “locality,” almost akin to a sense of national belonging, as reflected

in the popular expressions reported by Askew: “Kankhon Khlong Toei” (the city of Khlong Toei) or “Thawip Khlong Toei” (the continent of Khlong Toei) (Askew, 2002). It is precisely this image of a unified community that the DPF draws upon in its advocacy, presenting social ties as a form of wealth to be preserved (Kamalipour, 2016; Chulalongkorn University (BSAC), 2018).

It is interesting to note that the foundation continues to operate in line with the strategies developed as early as the 1980s, leveraging a range of associative and international allies in its ongoing confrontation with the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) and the PAT. This is reflected, first, in its partnership with Chulalongkorn University, which can be seen as an attempt at legitimization by grounding its alternative relocation proposal in scientific expertise. It is also evident in the way the foundation stages its interactions with various international organizations, particularly UN-Habitat, as illustrated by the institutional promotion featured on the DPF’s english-version website. Finally, our own presence at the foundation and within the slum - where we walked through several alleys guided by the DPF and members of Chulalongkorn University - can also be understood as a form of “slum tourism” and also be reflected upon as part of the politics of visibility surrounding Khlong Toei (Wattanawanyoo, 2010).

In sum, although the strong momentum driven by market forces toward the redevelopment of the area appears, to some extent, to be counter-balanced by the mobilization of the DPF and its allies, the future of Khlong Toei - subject to competing pressures - remains uncertain. In any case, the DPF’s advocacy for a “socially integrative approach” to relocation (Chulalongkorn University (BSAC), 2018) clearly shows that the issue is not so much opposition to relocation itself, but rather an effort to influence its terms, so that the needs and preferences of displaced populations are taken into account.

Conclusion

Beyond participatory processes initiated or facilitated by external actors, the case of Khlong Toei

can be interpreted as a form of counter planning and community effort for self determination. But the effort of the Duang Prateep Foundation to be recognized as a legitimate planning force by hegemonic state and capital actors makes use of similar market logic than the PAT to support community-based action and advocacy. Building legitimacy on (or handing the problem altogether to) these economic forces might lead to perhaps suboptimal solutions in terms of viability, leading to inefficient and exclusionary outputs and, therefore, unsustainability. Ultimately, the tension that persists is whether and to what extent local communities like the members of Khlong Toei can be represented and provided for amidst the future-oriented redevelopment of BKK.

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The Bangrak District

*By Daniel Sjöholm and
Jeanne Gounot*

This article examines how Franco-Thai diplomatic relations and France's colonial legacy are shaping contemporary urban transformation in the Bangrak district of Bangkok. Drawing on historical analysis and urban case study methods, we study the transformative reuse of European architectural heritage as a foundation for the development of a creative city. Franco-Thai relations, officially established by the 1856 Treaty of Friendship and Commerce and reinforced by the French colonial presence in Siam during the 19th century, have left visible traces in Bangkok's urban landscape, such as the French Embassy, the Cathedral of the Assumption, the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, and the Beaux-Arts-style institutional buildings along Charoen Krung Road. In recent years, Bangrak has undergone a rebranding as a "creative district" thanks to initiatives such as the 2016 BUKRUK Festival and the relocation of the Thailand Creative & Design Centre to the historic Grand Postal Building in 2017. We demonstrate that

this repositioning leverages European heritage both as symbolic capital and as adaptive infrastructure for galleries, design studios, boutique hotels, and cultural venues. Heritage thus becomes both a resource for creative urban development and a mechanism through which urban land is revalued and reclassified. This process, however, highlights certain tensions: how can heritage preservation and adaptive reuse support local economic vitality without displacing established residents and workers? We argue that the transformation of Bangrak demonstrates how international diplomatic heritage integrates into daily urban life, and how heritage neighborhoods can serve as physical infrastructure for new forms of economic activity, while simultaneously requiring safeguards against gentrification. This case study demonstrates how postcolonial architectural landscapes create both opportunities and risks for equitable urban development in global metropolises.



The Bangrak District: Preservation of 19th-century European Architectural Influences and their Integration into the Modern “Creative District”

Figure 1: This piece of art, which celebrates the original alliance between Siam and the French monarchy, hangs on the exterior of the wall surrounding the French embassy, Daniel Sjöholm, 2026



Franco-Thai Relations

On Soi Charoen Krung 36, a narrow riverside lane in Bangkok's Bang Rak riverside district, two different worlds can be found. On one side sits a mid-century mosque; on the other, the French ambassador's residence, whose Beaux Arts verandas and Roman-arched galleries have overlooked the river since the nineteenth century (Bangkok Archive, n.d.). In close proximity one can also find the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, the French Embassy, and Assumption Cathedral. The relationships and tensions that this proximity creates are, to a certain extent, shaped by the longest-running diplomatic relationship in Thai history: that with France (Ministère des affaires étrangères, n.d.).

France and Siam, as Thailand was known in the 1600s, have been in contact for nearly four centuries. Their relationships of partnership, war, and friendship have left visible marks on Bangkok's streets, its architecture, and its communities. The European Heritage

Days, an annual event in which the French, Danish, British, Norwegian, and other European embassies open their doors and sponsor tours

of historical buildings across the city, offer a lens through which to examine this shared, and sometimes contested, legacy (Goethe-Institut, n.d.).

The Portuguese had been the first Europeans to reach Thailand, but the French under Louis XIV were the first European power to exchange ambassadors with a Thai king, King Narai (Yanaprasart, 2001). King Narai sought to expand relations with the French to counter Portuguese and Dutch influence in his kingdom. In 1684, a Siamese embassy led by Khun Pijai-wanit and Khun Pijitmaetri met with Louis XIV at Versailles, requesting the dispatch of a French embassy to Thailand (Yanaprasart, 2001).

For their part, the French's ambitions went beyond simple trade. The aim of the French was not exclusively commercial but also political and religious—to spread Catholicism in Southeast Asia. French meddling in Thai affairs reached its peak in 1688, when bold and unsubtle interference in Thai politics led to a new king deciding to expel French troops in the country (Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 1997). This absence would last 150 years.

In the 19th century, France re-entered Siamese affairs as a republican, modernized colonial power operating in a region it was actively reshaping. Although Thailand itself was never colonized, French naval forces blockaded the Gulf of Thailand until Thailand renounced its claims over a territory on the left bank of the Mekong River. This event became formative in Thai national memory and made it more likely to intervene to oust the French from Indochina in the 1940s (Horvath, 1995).

As mainland France was under occupation by German Nazi troops in the early 1940s, Thailand seized the opportunity to launch a war to expel the French from the Indochina region: modern-day Vietnam and Cambodia. For the first time, Thailand defeated the European power and extracted serious concessions from France (Horvath, 1995).

Whatever the complications of history, French-Thai relations today rest on a foundation that both governments describe as a strategic partnership (AFD, n.d.). The relationship is built off of and formalized through the 1856 Treaty of Friendship and Commerce, and today the nations benefit from a robust economic interdependence (Ministère des affaires étrangères, n.d.). France ranks among the leading European investors in Thailand, and its investment stock has expanded significantly since the early 2000s, reflecting the growing attractiveness of Thailand as a regional production and distribution hub (Audjarint, 2017).

This economic presence is highly visible through the operations of several major French firms. Companies such as Michelin, Saint-Gobain, and others have established long-term industrial and commercial bases in the country, with Michelin alone operating multiple production facilities and investing heavily in expanding capacity (Reuters, 2024). In total, hundreds of French companies are active in Thailand, supported institutionally by networks such as the Franco-Thai Chamber of Commerce (Reuters, 2024). Many French nationals live in the country, while hundreds of thousands of Thais and French travel between the two nations annually (Ministère des

affaires étrangères, n.d.).

These ever-evolving diplomatic and economic ties have also left a tangible mark on the Thai capital itself, particularly visible along the Chao Phraya River in Bang Rak (Le Petit Journal, 2013). This area emerged in the 19th century as a key zone of foreign settlement following the opening of Siam to Western trade, and it became a cosmopolitan enclave hosting various European consulates, commercial enterprises, and religious institutions. The French Embassy, established on this riverfront site in 1857, stands as one of the oldest diplomatic missions in Thailand and a material witness to this period of intensified contact (Le Petit Journal, 2013).

Surrounding it, landmarks such as the Assumption Cathedral and the historic Mandarin Oriental Hotel contribute to a distinctive architectural ensemble that reflects layers of European, and specifically French influence (Guivarc'h, 2023). The buildings reflect colonial-era trade networks, missionary activity, and early globalization (Guivarc'h, 2023). They also show that throughout the history of Franco-Thai relations, international affairs have been embedded into and affected daily life in Bangkok.

In recent years, Bang Rak has undergone a new phase of transformation, as city planners and cultural actors seek to reposition it as a “creative district” (Fernández, n.d.). This rebranding builds directly upon its historical identity as a zone of cross-cultural exchange. Former warehouses, embassies, and colonial-era buildings are being repurposed into galleries, co-working spaces, and cultural venues, aligning with broader trends in creative-city urbanism. In this way, French and European heritage in the area provides both symbolic capital and physical infrastructure for new forms of economic and cultural production.

From the European and French Heritage in Bangkok to the Bang Rak “Creative District”

Bangkok’s French architectural heritage has given rise to a hybrid landscape, where neoclassical facades stand side by side with skyscrapers.

While these buildings certainly represent a cultural heritage, they now also serve new purposes, such as housing galleries, cafés, and hotels. Charoen Krung is Bangkok's first major modern street (1864), originally built to connect the "European Quarter" of Bang Rak -home to European consulates and trading houses- to the Royal Palace and government offices in Rattanakosin under King Rama IV (1851-1868) (Robinson, 2022). Later, under King Rama V (1868 - 1910), Italian and German architects introduced Neo-classical and Neo-Renaissance styles from Europe into palaces and public buildings, particularly in the Dusit and Phra Nakhon districts: Chakri Maha Prasat in the Grand Palace, Wat Ratchabophit, and the buildings of Chulalongkorn University (Citrinot, 2019).

Today, Bang Rak is considered Bangkok's "creative district," where the arts and culture coexist with the preservation and adaptive reuse of historic buildings. It all began in 2015, thanks to the initiative of a group of people who wanted to improve the quality of life and living conditions for those who live and work in the neighborhood (Robinson, 2022). In January 2016, the BUKRUK festival was held, during which street artists from 13 countries joined Thai artists to paint the walls of the riverside neighborhoods, encouraging the public to explore the area on foot or by bike (Citrinot, 2019). Later, in 2017, the Thailand Creative & Design Centre (TCDC) moved from Sukhumvit Road to the Grand Postal Building. It was accompanied by its research centers, a fabrication lab, an exhibition space, and a bench of activities thought to stimulate Thailand's creative economy (Robinson, 2022). In addition, the neighborhood hosts the annual Bangkok Design Week, La Fête's Gallery Night, art galleries and exhibitions, as well as boutique hotels and trendy bars. The neighborhood is home to people who have lived and worked there for generations, those who have settled there to start their own businesses, as well as visitors from all over Thailand and around the world (Citrinot, 2019). The main goal of rethinking Bang Rak was to preserve the waterfront heritage while attracting creative entrepreneurs from Bangkok, with the ultimate aim of influencing the broader economic landscape, but without slipping into gentrifica-

tion (Fernández, 2026). This remains an empirical tension rather than an achieved outcome.

Conclusion

Bang Rak illustrates how long-term international relations can shape urban form and everyday life in durable ways. The historical interactions between the French and Thai governments and people have left material traces that remain visible in the built environment along the Chao Phraya River. These sites continue to be reinterpreted and repurposed within contemporary urban development strategies.

The transformation of Bang Rak into a creative district demonstrates how heritage can be mobilized as both a cultural and economic resource. By integrating historic architecture into new cultural and commercial uses, the area reflects broader processes of adaptive reuse and creative-city planning. At the same time, this evolution raises ongoing questions about preservation, inclusivity, and the risks of displacement. limiting the transformative potential of TOD in addressing urban congestion and sustainability challenges. For TOD to become successful in Bangkok, both the transit systems and land-use will have to be successful and efficient in service and value-capture. The adaptive reuse of heritage does not only preserve memory; it also creates new economic categories through which neighbourhoods become investable.

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Shaping Governance Beyond Finance

*By Saerom Chong,
Angèle Selemani, and Ethan Chan*

Development finance institutions increasingly shape governance beyond their lending portfolios. This article examines how the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) structures sustainable urban and climate governance in Thailand through three interrelated mechanisms: financial intermediation and green-standard diffusion, agenda-setting through strategic framing, and institutional coordination through its Bangkok-based Southeast Asia Regional Office. Drawing on AFD's regional strategy, the SUNREF green finance

programme, and recent urban policy forums, the article argues that AFD's significance lies less in direct project delivery than in its capacity to embed environmental criteria within local banking practices, render building decarbonization a legitimate policy object, and convene actors across institutional scales. Bangkok functions not merely as a country office location but as a regional governance node through which sustainable urban priorities are discussed, coordinated, and projected across the wider ASEAN context.



Shaping Governance Beyond Finance: AFD's Cross-Sectoral Influence on Sustainable Development in Thailand

Figure 1: Scooters passing by at a busy street, the skywalk in the background, Mila Choudhury, 2026



Southeast Asia is increasingly shaped by the convergence of rapid urbanization, climate vulnerability, environmental degradation, and persistent social inequalities. In this context, development finance institutions do not operate only as providers of capital. They also participate in defining the frameworks through which transition, resilience, and sustainability are understood, prioritized, and implemented. The Agence Française de Développement (AFD) illustrates this broader role in Southeast Asia. Its 2020–2024 regional strategy is organized around low-carbon transitions, territorial resilience, environmental preservation, and the reduction of inequalities, while the creation of the Southeast Asia Regional Office in Bangkok in 2018 positioned the city as a strategic hub for coordinating activities across seven ASEAN countries and for deepening dialogue with public authorities, businesses, donors, and civil society (Agence Française de Développement, 2020).

Thailand provides a particularly useful entry point into this regional configuration because AFD's influence there is not expressed through a dense portfolio of highly visible projects alone. Rather, it appears through a combination of financial intermediation, technical assistance,

policy dialogue, and institutional coordination. This is especially significant in Bangkok, where rapid urban growth, expanding construction, and mounting environmental pressures raise broader questions about the long-term viability of the city. In such a setting, the issue is not simply whether development continues, but what standards, priorities, and partnerships are shaping that development. AFD's presence in Thailand is therefore important not only because it finances selected interventions, but because it helps circulate green-finance standards, frame urban and environmental priorities, and convene actors across institutional scales (Agence Française de Développement, n.d.; Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, n.d.).

This article argues that AFD's significance in Thailand lies less in direct project delivery than in the ways it structures the conditions under which sustainable urban development is discussed and pursued. Its influence can be traced through three interrelated mechanisms: financial intermediation and the diffusion of standards, agenda-setting through strategic framing, and coordination through its Bangkok-based regional office. The central question, then, is not simply what AFD funds, but how it helps shape the

categories, instruments, and institutional relationships through which sustainable urban and climate governance are organized. This report therefore asks: to what extent does AFD's Bangkok-based regional presence shape sustainable urban and climate governance in Thailand through financial standards, agenda-setting, and institutional coordination?

Funding Infrastructure

AFD's influence in Thailand is exercised through the way financial instruments are structured to shape local banking practices and investment criteria. Its role extends beyond direct lending into a broader form of governance influence. The clearest example is the €20 million credit line extended to Kasikorn Bank under the SUNREF programme, AFD's green finance label, to support renewable energy and energy-efficiency investments in existing commercial buildings in Thailand (Agence Française de Développement, "Developing the Energy Rehabilitation of Commercial Buildings"). Rather than financing end users directly, AFD channels capital through a domestic financial institution, combining credit with technical assistance in project identification, assessment, and environmental and social responsibility. The operation also functions as a mechanism for embedding standards within a local intermediary, shaping how projects become legible as financeable, how environmental performance is evaluated, and how green-finance practices are institutionalized within the Thai banking sector.

This mechanism is particularly important in a country where the challenge is more about directing investment toward sectors that can significantly affect the future environmental performance of the built environment. Public AFD documentation presents the operation as part of Thailand's energy transition, with the stated objective of financing energy rehabilitation in commercial buildings and supporting the longer-term development of Kasikorn Bank's portfolio in this sector (Agence Française de Développement, "Developing the Energy Rehabilitation of Commercial Buildings"; Agence Française de Développement, "Thailand"). The programme has with

it a credit line and the corresponding standards attached to this credit line; as conditionality operates at multiple stages, where AFD defines eligible project categories and performance criteria, the intermediary bank applies those norms in its lending decisions, and the final borrower must demonstrate measurable gains in energy efficiency. The credit line, thus, does not only finance projects; it helps define what counts as a credible green investment. This is reflective of how the AFD is merging technical assistance with its traditional financial credit lines.

There are limits of this influence though, where public documentation does not specify the criteria by which Kasikorn Bank was selected as intermediary, nor does it identify the final beneficiary firms or provide building-level data on implementation outcomes. The structure of the programme also appears fundamentally demand-driven, since uptake depends on whether building owners seek rehabilitation financing. These limits make it difficult to assess the programme's downstream effects independently or to determine how far the standards introduced through the facility diffused beyond the immediate operation itself. Still, the case shows how AFD's role in Thailand operates through financial intermediation rather than through direct control: by inserting environmental and technical criteria into domestic lending structures, it seeks to shape the terms on which green urban investment becomes possible (Agence Française de Développement, "Developing the Energy Rehabilitation of Commercial Buildings").

Agenda-Setting Influence

Agenda-setting in urban policy makes some urban risks and sectors legible for intervention, while others remain harder to finance or institutionalise. AFD's influence in Thailand also operates through the strategic framing that defines which urban and environmental problems are rendered actionable in the first place. Its South-east Asia Regional Strategy 2020–2024 frames the region through a set of interconnected challenges of greenhouse gas emissions, climate vulnerability, biodiversity loss, and persistent

social inequalities. It also organizes AFD's response around low-carbon transitions, territorial resilience, environmental preservation, and the reduction of inequalities. This framing establishes the categories through which certain sectors, infrastructures, and urban risks are made visible as priorities for intervention, and it links them to specific tools of finance, technical assistance, and partnership-building. External analysis of AFD's climate mainstreaming similarly emphasizes that the institution translates global climate commitments into regional intervention frameworks and then seeks opportunities at country level that align with these strategic priorities, especially through upstream screening and indirect support instruments. Agenda-setting isn't simply about the statement of general goals, but is also about the prior work of defining which problems deserve intervention, which solutions become legible, and which actors are positioned to deliver them (Agence Française de Développement, Southeast Asia 2020–2024 Regional Strategy; Eschaliér, Deheza, and Cochran).

This agenda-setting role is significant because Bangkok's rapid construction and real-estate expansion raise a broader question about the long-term viability of the city itself. Bangkok remains the principal concentration of Thailand's assets, infrastructure, and economic activity, yet it is also highly exposed to flooding, heat stress, and wider climate-related disruptions. Recent World Bank analysis notes that Bangkok and the Upper Gulf face increasing risks from flooding and sea-level rise, and even cites research suggesting that parts of the city could become unviable by 2050 if these pressures are not addressed. The same report identifies heat stress as a growing threat to productivity, livelihoods, and health, especially in the south-central provinces where Bangkok is located. Complementing this, the World Bank's report *Shaping a Cooler Bangkok* (2025) emphasizes that rising temperatures are already affecting public health, economic productivity, and overall quality of life, while also noting that effective implementation of climate resilience measures requires stronger coordination, policy alignment, and long-term planning. The issue is thus whether the built environment now being produced is compatible

with long-term resilience. AFD's strategic framing seeks to insert criteria of decarbonization, building performance, and territorial resilience into an urban development trajectory otherwise driven by speed, market demand, and conventional construction logics (World Bank, Thailand Country Climate and Development Report; Rubinyi et al.).

The SUNREF programme not only finances rehabilitation in commercial buildings, but it also turns the energy-efficient commercial building into a privileged site of intervention. A building is no longer treated simply as a private asset or a neutral component of urban expansion, it becomes a node at which climate mitigation, financial innovation, technical expertise, and urban sustainability converge. Through the Kasikorn Bank operation, AFD's own documentation frames the issue in a particular way, where Thailand's construction and building sectors are energy-intensive, existing commercial buildings represent an opportunity for efficiency gains, and financial institutions can be mobilized to steer rehabilitation toward lower-carbon outcomes. This framing is strengthened by the wider Thai policy context, where the mid-term review of the UNDP/GEF project on promoting energy efficiency in commercial buildings in Thailand identified low awareness among banks and building owners, weak confidence in the commercial building efficiency market, and a lack of practical implementation experience as key barriers to building-sector energy efficiency. Given this, SUNREF can be seen as a wider effort to make building decarbonization a financeable and institutionally recognizable problem within Thailand's urban development landscape (Agence Française de Développement, "Developing the Energy Rehabilitation of Commercial Buildings"; PEECB Mid-Term Review Report).

The programme shows how AFD attempts to frame building decarbonization as a legitimate object of policy and finance, and how it seeks to embed that framing in local financial and technical practices. Seen in this way, AFD's agenda-setting influence lies less in dictating Bangkok's future than in helping structure the terms through which sustainable urban growth is inter-

preted and acted upon.

Network and Coordination Influence

AFD's influence in Thailand is also exercised through its capacity to organize relationships across scales. Bangkok is institutionally significant as it hosts the Southeast Asia Regional Office, a structure established to pool the expertise of AFD, Proparco, and Expertise France while intensifying dialogue with local actors, businesses, bilateral and multilateral donors, and civil society. AFD's capacity to assemble actors, circulate expertise, and connect national priorities to wider regional and international agendas means that its network influence is not ancillary to its financial role, but is one of the principal ways in which that role is extended, translated, and embedded in the governance of sustainable urban transition. The evidence thus demonstrates institutional positioning and convening capacity more clearly than it demonstrates direct causal effects on policy outcomes.

This coordinating function is visible in Bangkok's recent urban policy dialogues. The June 2024 forum *Toward 2050: Future Bangkok for a Resilient and a Livable City*, organized by the BMA, AFD, UDDC-CEUS, and the Department of Regional and Urban Planning at Chulalongkorn University, brought together more than 240 participants from government, academia, the private sector, and other urban stakeholders. Reports and coverage on the event highlights the range of themes under discussion, from urban design, climate adaptation, biodiversity, health, to resilience, where the event created a common space for municipal authorities, academic institutions, technical actors, and external partners to exchange perspectives. While the forum provides evidence of convening and institutional brokerage, the publicly available documentation offers limited evidence of direct policy commitments attributable to the forum alone. The event demonstrates how AFD participates in assembling a collaborative space for potential interventions rather than providing concrete policy change.

The same logic extends beyond the city, where

the five-year memorandum of understanding signed in December 2025 between the BMA and AFD framed cooperation around sustainable urban development, long-term knowledge exchange, and three specific priorities: air quality, green infrastructure, and access to green finance. Public reporting on the MoU indicates an intention to institutionalize Thai-French cooperation in urban development, but again the available evidence is stronger on framework-setting than on measurable policy outcomes. Read together with AFD's presentation of its Thailand office, which highlights the implementation of regional projects, the hosting of Proparco's regional operations, the presence of sectoral experts, the organization of training and workshops across Asia, and cooperation with Thailand's TICA, this suggests that Bangkok functions as a regional interface rather than merely a country office. Regional mechanisms described in AFD's Southeast Asia portfolio reinforce this interpretation, where the ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility supports governments through technical assistance, project structuring, complementary studies, and workshops, while the Regional Power Trade Coordination Committee links technical assistance to cross-border electricity planning and environmental assessment. These instruments do not show that AFD directly governs Bangkok, but they do indicate how its Bangkok presence helps connect local authorities, financial actors, technical agencies, and multilateral partners across wider circuits of policy coordination.

These dynamics show that AFD's network influence lies in its capacity to bring actors together and provide a common framework for strategic action. It convenes actors who do not ordinarily operate within the same institutional space and sheds light on broad priorities such as resilience, ecological transition, and green finance into shared agendas and technical discussions and it scales local urban concerns into wider regional frameworks of cooperation. Bangkok serves as a strategic node through which sustainable urban governance is discussed, coordinated, and projected beyond the city itself.

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With gratitude to all those who made this study trip possible, អរគុណ