

'World-Class' Living?

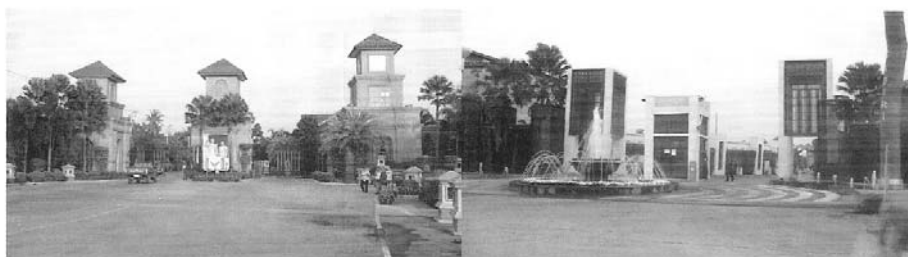


Fig. 8.
Photographs
showing
entrances of
two gated
communities
Source:
Karnchanaporn
and Kasemsook

Gated communities

Bangkok's urban growth has accelerated with the extensive expressway construction programmes together with a series of ring road expansions intended to consolidate the city centre with the urban periphery. At the same time the mass transit system (Bangkok Transit System – BTS) was built to help ease the city's severe traffic problem. Due to these road construction programmes, and demand from a rapidly growing urban middle class, gated communities have become a significant part of the scene on the periphery. Figure 7 is a record of the locations of recently developed gated communities along the ring roads, showing 40 of them (whilst hundreds more remain unmarked). The roads provide accessibility to the previously underdeveloped land at the city edges whose prices are low enough for commercial housing development.

These gated communities are spatially designed with a cul-de-sac layout. A series of culs-de-sac branch from one to another through the main community roads. Very few connect directly to one another. This means that, topologically, the layouts lack permeability, resulting in limited accessibility between homes. Furthermore, two gated communities could be located next to each other with a high wall separating them – emphasising the characteristic of a spatial enclave. Within the high walls and guarded entrance and the spatially designed cul-de-sac layout, they suggest a spatial segregation of the gated communities that operates at two levels, within the community itself and between the community and the surroundings, even though they are built along the roads designed to integrate the city's areas (Fig. 8).

Recent interviews with 20 gated communities' residents in Bangkok and the vicinity area suggest numerous reasons for their decision to choose to live there, yet two of them stand out – namely security and social homogeneity (Karnchanaporn, 2005, 2006). A review of the house prices and household incomes clearly indicate that only the well-off can afford a house in these gated communities. A key characteristic of this group of people is that the majority of them are well-travelled, visiting many places in the world, or aspiring to go around the world. So why do they want to be excluded from their local context while buying into the global images of 'world class' living? What does 'world class' living mean to them? (Fig. 9).

Beyond the gates

Visiting, for example, a high-end housing estate to the north of the Ring Road, visitors pass through the guarded entrance – a check point with an elaborate security procedure – a request for a valid identification card in exchange for a visitor's pass,

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asking for the house number to be visited, a check of the vehicle's rear boot (or trunk i.e. the rear compartment of the car), a radio check for every turn before reaching the destination, an acknowledgment by the house owner, a visit time-schedule, and a double-check at the vehicle's rear boot upon departure from the estate. What is found in the estate is a famous café, a supermarket carrying expensive imported products, an Olympic size swimming pool with club house and shopping arcade adjacent to a man-made lake, and a children's playground which has adult supervision all the time. All houses face a 'public' community space and at the same time maintain living privacy. Just a step outside the gate, high walls fence off intruders, or, to be exact, the locals: a sharp contrast between the local underdeveloped but green area and the well-maintained landscape, and between the lively local neighbourhood and the hygienic estate (Figs 10a and 10b).

In Bangkok the story of the housing estates and the gated communities raises several questions – what happens, when blinded by the images of 'world class' living, the other side of the local living experience can no longer be perceived? But most importantly to what extent can what is seen through the medium of the billboard and marketing dreams be made intelligible? The housing estate market operates, as reading the billboard advertisements suggest, in a similar way to other products aiming to sell 'self-improvement' by means of the quality of life and social status signified by a luxury living atmosphere. It is not only the ownership of the house that is achieved but also the totality of the experience created by a private and exclusive environment. The terms used for naming the housing estates such as Urban Villa, Park Royal, Elegance Villa, Golden Heritage, the Emperor, and Metro Park are all expressive statements, stressing the image of luxury urban living yet to happen (Karnchanaporn, 2006). These kinds of residence and lifestyle were unprecedented and completely at variance with the ways of living in traditional Thai society. Evidently, the will to resist western subjugation was not strong enough to maintain traditional ways, thus moving Thailand towards a perceived 'world class' status represented by a diverse iconography drawn from the west. In the case of Thai

Fig. 9.
A photograph
showing a
billboard
displaying a
world-class
living campaign
Source:
Karnchanaporn
and Kasemsook

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Nuttinee Karnchanaporn and Apiradee Kasemsook, 'World-Class Living?' in Mike Jenks, Daniel Kozak, and Pattaranan Takkanon (eds), *World Cities and Urban Form: fragmented, polycentric, sustainable*, (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2008), pp.293-302.

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homebuyers, to consume and to fabricate the house that fits with a 'world-class' image is to appropriate a higher social status, hence making the image of world-class living marketable through advertisements.

Depicted by the billboards along the ring road, the current advertised trend emphasizes the sales pitch 'buy-into-the real' as a ready-to-move-into house. The 'house and its interiors' has become a product which is more real than ever: one which you can walk in and experience, one which is already tried and tested, and one which is part of the whole exclusive experience of living in a secured or gated community. Daily viewing of the billboard advertisements continually reinforces the 'dreamworld' which the housing estates create. The images of comfortable urban living presented on the billboards ensure that home-buyers should never be allowed to 'awake' from their dreams.

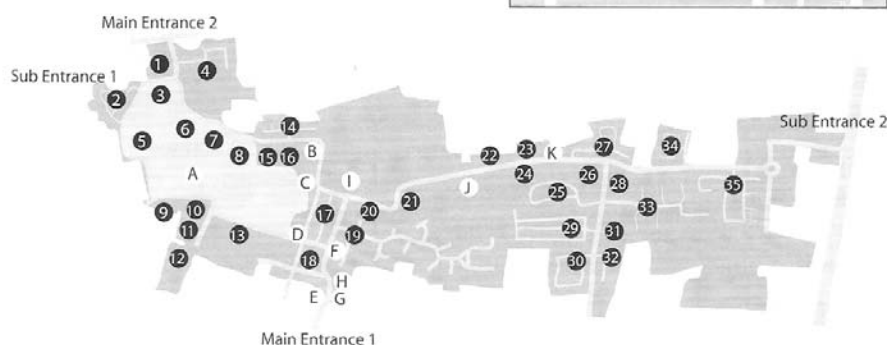
The dreamworld idea is consolidated by spatial and social segregation. On the surface, the gated community seems to pre-select a homogeneous social group whose members share similar values and personal characteristics. However, the spatial development reveals a deep preference. No longer is there a need to visit one's local neighbour – rather the preferred socialisation is within one's own enclave. The enclave takes an expansive form, from house to immediate neighbourhood and to the enclave's 'community'. The enclave itself is equipped with all the modern amenities and is security-provided. To some extent, its inhabitants are better connected with the global network than with the local one. It could be said that the convenient accessibility provided by the ring road and the expressway construction

Fig. 10a. (below upper-right)
Location map of Nichada Thani
Fig. 10b (below)
Nichada Thani, an affluent gated housing estate with an international school, a Starbucks coffee café, a high-class supermarket, an Olympic-size swimming pool, etc., located on a ring road of the greater metropolitan area of Bangkok
Source:
Karnchanaporn and Kasemsook

Key

- 1-20, 23-35 Single-house sub-compounds, some with private pool
- 12-13 Apartment units
- 21-22 Townhouses with common pool, gym, playground and park
- Total number of units 868 units

- A Nichada Thani head offices, Customer Relations & Security Office
- B Dental and Family Health Clinics
- C Nichada Club, Clark Hatch Nichada Club & Shopping Plaza
- D Chaengwattana Community Church
- E Samakee Gate Police Substation
- F Post Box
- G Rose Marie Academy
- H Nichada Sales & Rental Office
- I International School Bangkok
- J Nichada Plant Nursery
- K Sunshine Police Substation



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programmes turns to be a tool encouraging the urban middle class to gather in such enclaves. Thus the city becomes an illusion of 'world class' luxury living, without an interest to mingle with the locality.

In the other words, gated communities and their development are clearly physically and socially segregated. The form is self-reinforcing: the provision of infrastructure, roads and expressways will not help to integrate, but rather to connect 'world class' globalised housing with 'world-class' globalised areas on the city of Bangkok, and perhaps eventually to world cities through the new Bangkok airport. There is inherent in the form, in the illusions promoted by developers, and the dreams of the middle class, the creation (reinforcing) of unsustainable urban fragmentation both socially and physically.

Notes

1. The latest average annual individual income published by Department of Community Development, Ministry of Interior in June 2007 is of 43,737 Baht, which is equal to 1,215 USD or 101 USD/month – calculated by exchange rate of 36 Baht/ 1 USD.
2. Bangkok population statistical data was provided by Department of Provincial Administration, Ministry of Interior, on their website www.dopa.go.th (and an interview given by the Deputy Secretary, Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board on 28 June 2006, on 'Bangkok population sectors' in a report of Bangkok's Liveability: Who will answer?
3. Marc Askew (2002) names the social and economic changes that have been geared towards benefits of Bangkok as a capital rather than the rest of the country, whether in terms of the number of schools, universities, hospitals, medical practitioners, wages or salaries as the 'Bangkok-centred trends of development'.

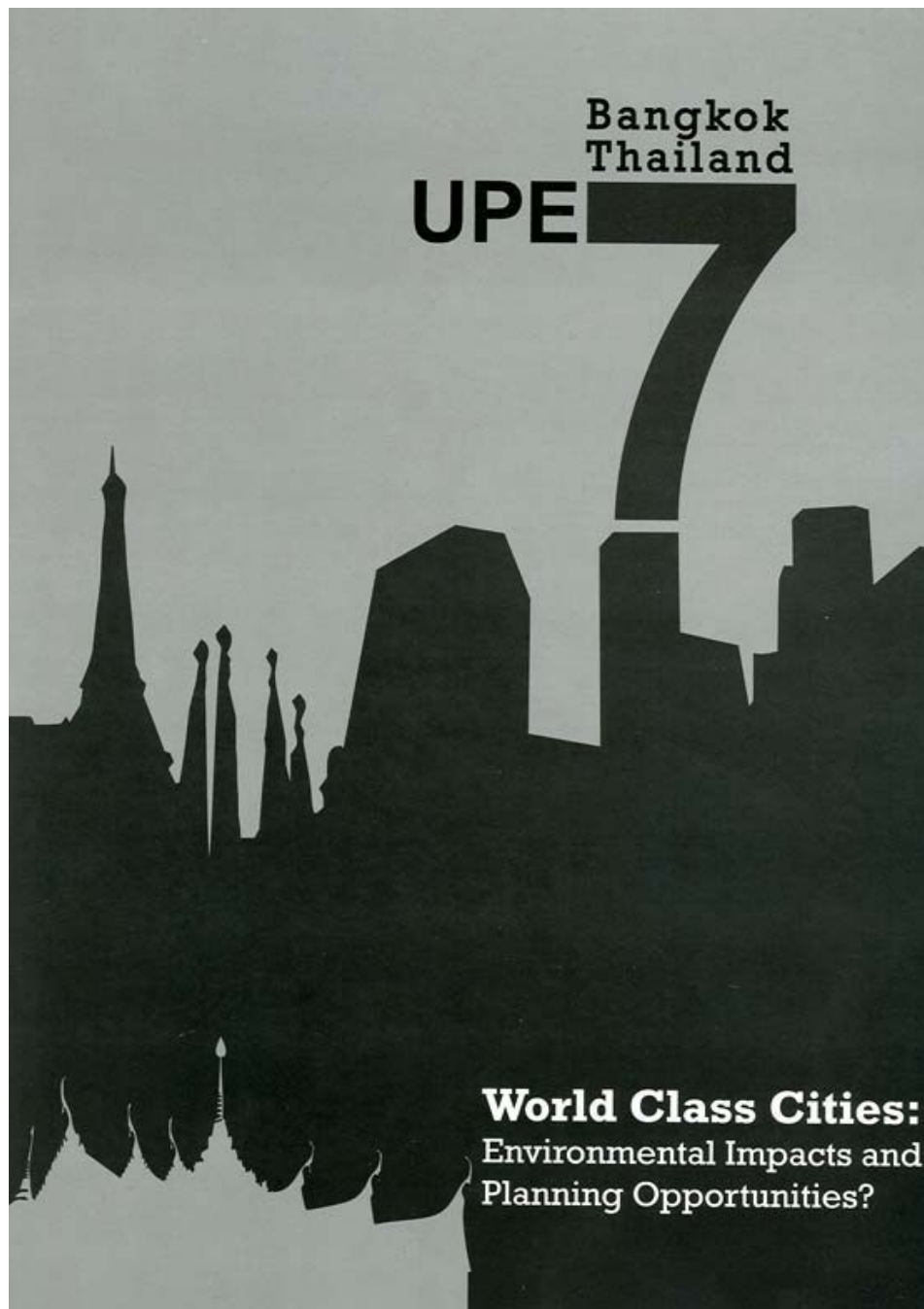
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Appendix 3

International Conference Proceedings

Nuttinee Karnchanaporn and Apiradee Kasemsook, '*World-Class Living?*,'
in Proceedings of 7th Urban Planning and Environment Symposium:
"World Class Cities" (Bangkok: Kasetsart University, 2007),p.35.
(AbstractPublication)



UPE7 - The 7th International Conference on Urban Planning and Environment. Bangkok, Thailand 3-5 January 2007

Abstracts

The 7th International Conference on Urban Planning and Environment (UPE 7)

WORLD CLASS CITIES

: Environmental Impacts and Planning Opportunities?

3-5 January 2007
Bangkok, Thailand



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Introduction

The 7th International Conference on Urban Planning and Environment (UPE 7)
"WORLD CLASS CITIES: Environmental Impacts and Planning Opportunities?"
3-5 January 2007, Bangkok, Thailand

1. OVERVIEW

Over 30 countries have cities that are considered 'world class' and major cities in more than 20 countries are aspiring to world-class status. In recent years, the use of the term "world class" has grown considerably. Having emerged from the discourse on globalization, 'world class' is now a ubiquitous term that reaches every aspect of our daily lives, from politics and business to our physical environment. However, it is a phenomenon that leads to many questions:

- How successfully does the "world class" phenomenon relate to the complexities of our urban environment?
- What are the impacts of these aspirations for planning and the environment?
- What are the consequences for the urban region?
- Does a world-class city mean that other cities in the country are deprived of resources?
- Do those cities achieving world-class status improve the quality of life for all their citizens, and are the changes sustainable?

The UPE 7 Symposium aims to:

- Explore the planning and environmental consequences of the 'world class cities' phenomenon.
- Question the impacts of cities achieving that status, and on those cities that do not.
- Provide a forum for the latest research and practice on a global scale.

What does "world class" mean?

The term 'world class' has grown as a phenomenon and so has its usage in various domains. For cities, proponents have made claims regarding the quality of life, environmental improvement, creativity, freedom and cultural assets, all in the name of being "world class". As a result, there has been a proliferation of indices and classification systems attempting to assess these claims. Today, we are inundated by waves of data that assess and monitor almost every aspect of our quality of life in cities.

How is the "world class city" concept transforming the way we understand urban planning and environment? The recent competition among cities to become the host of the 2012 Summer Olympics provides a high profile example of the "world class" phenomenon. Each competing city presented how their proposals had the best potential to be a catalyst in affecting large-scale urban change for the city. Several of the leading contenders such as London, New York and Paris relied heavily on their premise of revitalizing disused and neglected areas of their cities, and promises made to not only increase direct investment on urban infrastructure, environment and physical amenities, but on long term benefits such as low income housing.

On the one hand, it is easy to be skeptical of the media-driven nature of the term "world class". Critics argue that this phenomenon is no more than a buzzword, and does not adequately address problems in urban planning such as the uneven distribution of resources and expanding social and economic inequalities. "World class" is often associated with an emphasis towards globalization and private sector investment at the expense of longer-term services and sustainability.

To dismiss the "world class" issue however would neglect the significant effects that the world class phenomenon is now making towards the planning, managing and designing of our urban environments. Perhaps most significantly, the "world class" phenomenon impacts the cities and their inhabitants in developing countries – particularly places that are relentlessly striving to be world class. For Beijing, the 2008 Summer Olympics has provided the impetus for the government's push to radically transform the urban environment of the city. But there are also costs to the environment, to disadvantaged populations that may be