

The Forgotten Heritage of the Rattanakosin Area

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Abstract

In order to safeguard the vanishing traditions and the history of a city, it is necessary to document and record the forgotten heritage. The aim of this study is to raise public awareness of the cultural significance of the Rattanakosin area including ancient *wangs* (mansions) and shophouses endangered by the development of urban projects and the lack of good management leading to their deterioration. This includes Crown Property Bureau's assets of historical buildings on Rattanakosin Island. The research results show that heritage buildings are being demolished and replaced by modern concrete structures. The main conclusion drawn in this paper is that: *If the heritage buildings continue to be replaced with present day structures, in the near future the entire history of the Rattanakosin area might be lost.*

Keywords: Conservation, Development, Rattanakosin Island, Architectural Heritage, Urban Management, Urban

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Introduction

“Heritage: A Gift from the Past to the Future. *Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations* (World Heritage Information Kit, 2008:5). The “past” is the Foundation of the “present” which leads to the growth of the “future” if nothing is left of the “past.” How can the “future” survive? (Shinawatra Weerapan, 2002:7).



Figure 1. Wang Bang Plu was the palace of H.H Prince Prompong Artiraj and is in poor condition due to a lack of awareness and maintenance. Image courtesy of the Thai Fine Arts Department.

Background and the Significance of the Research

It is now widely accepted that the term tangible cultural heritage which originally applied to archaeological sites and great works of art is now used to support preservation in both urban and rural settings. In Asian cities where high development pressure and rapid urbanization prevail, many cultural heritage sites are being degraded or even destroyed at a faster rate compared to other regions (Feilden, B. M. & Jokileto, J., 1998:11).

Bangkok is one of Asia’s most challenging cities, a city of contradictions, both presently and in its past. (Marc Askew, 2002, p.1). Manuel Castells has argued that “... cities, like all social reality, are historical products” (Castells, M., 1983, p. 302). As a part of the evolution of the city many sites on Rattanakosin Island are especially significant as it lies in heart of Bangkok. Congruent with the meaning of Rattanakosin (Island of Indra’s jewel) it and the adjacent area is home to the Temple of Emerald Buddha, the Giant Swing, the Temple of Dawn and Sanam Luang (the public square adjacent to Wat Pra Kaew and the Grand Palace). This region has figured prominently in various chapters of Thai history and now stand as significant living cultural heritage sites in Bangkok.



Figures 2. Looking west from the Golden Mount, one sees few differences over a century other than that most buildings have grown a story or two taller. The row roofs reflect an ancient law still in effect that buildings in the vicinity of royal palaces cannot be higher than seven stories. To the right of center, the Grand Palace crowns the horizon; Wat Arun raises on the left. Near the center of the photograph is the Giant Swing and Wat Suthat. Source: “Bangkok Now and Then” by Steve Van Beek, 1999.

When the word of Rattanakosin comes to mind, most people would simply refer to the Grand Palace, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, Sanam Luang, Wat Pho and a few more tourist spots in the heart of old Bangkok.

Some would also include places like Banglamphu, Ratchadamnoen Avenue, the Brahman Giant Swing, the bustling Pahurat retail node, the Sam Prang community, and the abundant and unique architecture and cultural legacies of old neighborhoods. The architectural heritage of mansions (in Thai the term is *wang*) has been mostly destroyed, either because they were thought unsuitable for adaptive reuse or merely to give way to new buildings, as they were considered too old. There are other areas within Rattanakosin which display what might be called peripheral architectural heritage but where living heritage still survives. Much of this has been lost and is mostly ignored in public policy, which fails to acknowledge that Rattanakosin area is not only Wat Pra Keaw and Wat Pho. Thailand’s capital city has many gems shrouded in obscurity due to mismanagement. However, because of this lack of adequate public awareness and concern, the loss of such heritage is likely to continue unless in-depth study and conservation programs are established. This historic city has become more or less “frozen” and is on the road to decline. Therefore preservation efforts are need to be introduced as soon as possible, safeguarding the cultural environment of this historic city as well as its monuments.



Figure 3. Some buildings on Rattanakosin Island are becoming part of the forgotten heritage. Photographs by the author.



Figure 3 cont. Some buildings on Rattanakosin Island are becoming part of the forgotten heritage. Photographs by the author.

The aim of this research chronicles the status and what we presently know in order to raise public awareness of the cultural significance of the Rattanakosin area. Focus areas are as follows:

- To study the origins of the forgotten heritage of the Rattanakosin area.
- To study the important factors that account for its being abandoned in public policy.
- To determine who are the significant stakeholders and their present actions.
- To explore the management of these historical cultural heritage site.

There are several issues included in this study. However, the main focus has been to determine how to manage and conserve the forgotten heritage of the Rattanakosin area.



Figure 4. The study area. Source: GIS database 2006, Department of City Planning, BMA.

The total land area of Rattanakosin Island is 4.1 square kilometers, which is divided into the Outer and the Inner areas of Rattanakosin Island. While both Outer Rattanakosin and Inner Rattanakosin consists of *wangs*, temples, ancient remains, old neighborhoods and unique shophouses, this study focuses only on the properties of the Crown Property Bureau's assets (CPB). The CPB manages all the King's properties as a semi-governmental agency that has responsibility for the preservation of a variety of cultural heritage sites.

Especially, today the traditional and functional whole of historic towns are often threatened, especially in developing countries. Historical structures and sites are

threatened not only by pollution, but through developmental changes and infrastructure (roads, mass transits, etc.) are factors that lead to ongoing destruction. Bangkok is one of the cities is affected by this development trend.

In Chin Huo Xiaowei and Qixiaojin described their experiences in the conservation efforts of an old district called Shangxiahang in Foochow city. They examine not only the value of historical buildings, but also tried to recover the memory of the area with the local community. They noticed that even with a minimum change in façade, life styles were altered and memories were finally lost.



Figure 5. The heritage buildings with altered structure to fulfill the growing needs of its occupants in the Bangkok old town area. Photographs by the author.

In a study by Mrs. Tania Ali Soomro, conservation architect of Heritage Cell, Department of Architecture and Planning, NED University of Engineering and Technology, Karachi, Pakistan, she includes recommendations to document and record endangered heritage

In her case study of the historic core of *Karachi* (*Karachi*, is the most populous city of Pakistan). She describes how it was initially divided into several quarters (the word “*Quarter*” refers to an historic area) and how it grew as a fortified wall city currently know as the “*Old Town Quarter*” during British rule. The main conclusion drawn in this paper was; “*If the heritage buildings were continued to be replaced with present day structures, one day the whole glorious past of the historic core may be lost.*” Hence, she defined the term “*forgotten heritage*” as referring to an elapsed memory that has been overlooked or ignored over an incalculable stretch of time. Therefore preserving a heritage is essential as it entails fortification of a dying trend effected by changing cultural patterns. In the example mentioned above, it can be seen that many urban areas in the world face demolition. The best way to solve the problem is through conservation, preservation, protection, restoration and put in place legacy management resulting preservation for future generations. Where-with, the heritage city becomes a site of collective urban memories thereby conserving the roots of the urban community.

Hence, the term “*forgotten heritage*” refers to the loss of memory through urbanization and the risk for cultural heritage to be devalued and abandoned – fading away as spirits and forgotten.



Figure 6. In this picture of a Crown Property Bureau structure, the building is in very poor condition due to lack of awareness and preservation by the tenant and the CPB. It represents a loss of an old memory and heritage. Photograph by the author.

The first conservation of a historical district in Thailand began in 1976 in Bangkok’s core area Rattakosin by the National Authority.

Policies and laws related to monuments and sites on Rattanakosin Island are protected under the Monuments and Sites, Antiques, Art objects and National Museum Act enacted in 1934 and has been updated several times. Since the master plan for conservation and development of the Rattanakosin area was implemented in 1980, the focus has been on the national monuments situated near the Grand Palace rather than the living heritage. The master plan neglected inclusive collaborative interaction between the local residents and stakeholders, both government-to-government, local-to-government and local-to-local.



Figure 7. Logos of conservation organizations responsible for the Rattanakosin area.

Figure 7 shows the active organizations involved in architectural heritage management. They are comprised of governmental agencies, private organizations, and volunteer organizations. The Crown Property Bureau is especially influential and involved in the Rattanakosin area management decisions. Each organization follows its own agenda, policies and priorities while adhering to national policy and

legislation issued by various governmental departments – it is not surprising that conflicts may arise.

History and Urbanization of the Rattanakosin Area

During the Ayutthaya period the Rattanakosin area, which was known as Bangkok was located along the Chao Phraya River as shown in Figure 13. After the loss of Ayutthaya to Burma in 1767 when it had been damaged beyond restoration, His Majesty King Taksin established Thonburi as the capital during the Thonburi Period. By the end of the Thonburi period, this region was home to the Royal Palace and in the Thatian area the Chinese and Vietnamese communities were located.



Figure 8. Plan of Bangkok during the Thonburi period (1761-1782). Source: Silpakorn University Magazine in 1982, Drawing by the author.

The town of Ayutthaya became an archetype for Bangkok in the Rattanakosin area where its beauty and grandeur was replicated in detail including not only its urban plan, but also mirrored its three types of palaces: the Grand Palace, Bavorn Sathan Mongkol Grand Palace (*Wang Na*) and Bavorn Sathan Pimuk (*Wang Lang*).

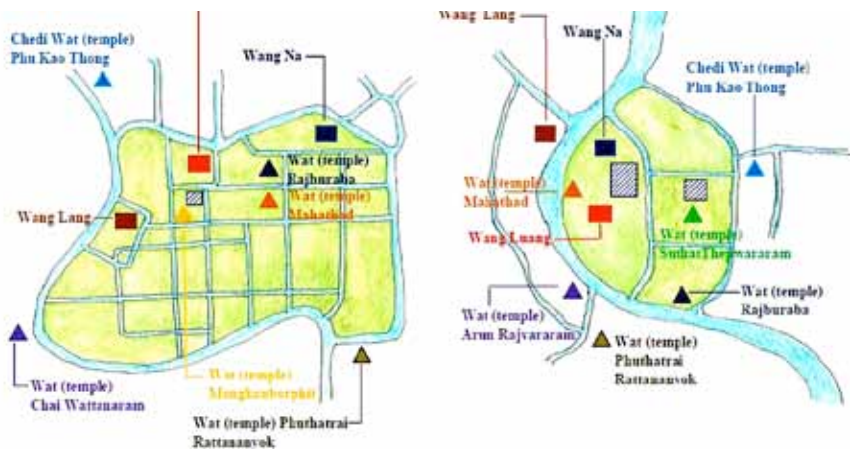


Figure 9. Ayutthaya on the left compared to the Rattanakosin area (Bangkok). Drawing by the author.

The location of Bangkok and its palaces was selected for protection following military strategic guidelines during the reign of King Rama I based on the *Nak Nam* treatise on war strategy. Consequently, the location of palaces was based on their need for protection, i.e. near a fort, moat and waterways.

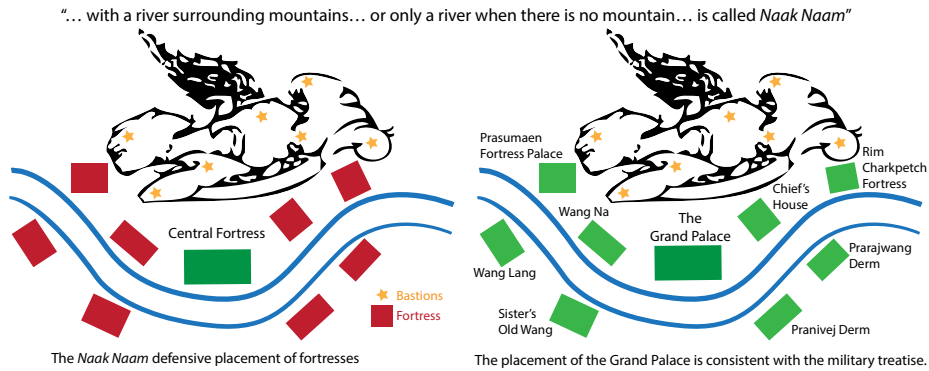


Figure 10. Ayutthaya on the left compared to Rattanakosin (Bangkok) on the right in plan view. Drawing by the author.

The Palaces and Wangs in the Reigns of King Rama I-III

In the early reign of King Rama I, palaces were located within cities. The Grand Palace and Bawon Sathan Mongkhon Grand Palace followed the pattern of Ayutthaya with the Wang-Na mansion in the North, the Wang-Luang mansion in the center and the Wang-Lang mansion in the South. During the latter period of King Rama I, he built palaces around the Grand Palace when his sons and grandchildren were old enough to leave. Later, during the reign of King Rama II, he built more palaces for his sons to prepare the government for the reign of King Rama III. Therefore, during the reign of King Rama III he commanded the construction of many more palaces for his sons to reside. Some princes received a new palace while others located to the palaces built during the reigns of Kings Rama II and III. It should be noted that the naming of palaces changed during the reigns of Kings Rama I - III when they were named according to important fortresses, canals, and bridges located nearby.



Figure 11. Phra Sri Rattanasasdam Temple or Wat Phra Keaw in the Grand Palace (Wang Luang)
Source: Phra Barom Maharajawang and Wat Phasri Rattanasasdam Book, Drawing by the author.

The Palaces and Wangs During the Reigns of King Rama IV-IX

Then, King Rama IV gave palaces to his sons by both building new palaces and renovating older ones. Besides, land was prepared for palaces during the reign of King Rama V, but it was particularly King Rama IV who built many palaces not only within the Greater Bangkok area, but also in the provinces for different purposes. During the reign of King Rama IV most palaces were built for his sons and they were still located within the city walls which extended from the old inner city moat to the east city walls. There were many palaces built during the reign of King Rama V aligned with initiated improvements in economic, social and political life. The reforms included the selection of palace locations off of Rattanakosin Island and the introduction of architectural styles from the West. Then with King Rama VI, who only had one daughter the construction of palaces was minimal. Most palaces were renovated and no new palaces was established in Bangkok as he preferred building in the provinces instead. His only palace built in Bangkok was the Phrayathai Palace, which was located in a former King Rama V farm. When he passed away, King Rama VI's mother, Queen Sri Patcharintra resided there until she too passed away. King Rama VII had no offspring. King Rama VIII passed away before marriage and King Rama IX has resided in the Jitlada Villa Royal Residence until now. From the reign of King Rama VI until now, personal palaces of the royal kin are more like homes than palaces. Also, of all the palaces built during the King Rama I period are still utilized by the current King and there is only one Grand Palace left. The rest of them were all demolished and out of the approximately 130 palaces for the royal kin there is nearly no trace left. Most were transformed to be governmental offices or leased to private organizations, while the remaining palaces are supervised by the Crown Property Bureau.

Wangs in Danger

The *wangs* located on Rattanakosin Island and some properties of the Crown Property Bureau have suffered from from the effects of the environment. These represent the lack of awareness of the buildings' cultural value and historical heritage. Consequently, they are at risk for being completely forgotten.



Figure 12. Shows three wangs in danger. Left - Wang Krom Luang Prajak Silpakom. Center - Wang Krom Phra Sommut Amornphan. Right - Wang Preang Nara. Photograph by the author.

Analysis of the Cultural Heritage of Rattanakosin Island

From a review of the history and urbanization of the Rattanakosin area. It is disappointing that historical buildings and places have been forgotten for a number of reasons. First there is the lack of documentation and an understanding of their

architectural value, especially in the case of industrial structures. Such heritage is frequently threatened by rapid economic expansion and social transformation. It was realized that some of the older buildings on the island were already destroyed as they were unsuitable for adaptive reuse or merely to give way to new facilities. Some of the old palaces and old shop-houses should not be left to deteriorate further as they still reflect historical and architectural value as symbols of Thai history. Conservation status is rarely conferred on buildings that deserve preservation, let alone achieving registration status. These structures need to be actively included in a coordinated program of historic preservation.



Figure 13. Wang Saphanseaw no. 5 or what is also known as Wang Krom Luang Prajak Silpakom depending on ones source. It lacks a proper sign due to the lack of verifiable evidence. Photograph by the author.



Figure 14. Wang Krom Phra Sommut Amornphan has been overshadowed by buildings and clutter by the people who live near this historical building. Photograph by the author.

How Does Heritage Become Forgotten?

The disappearance of the *wangs* has several causes and this article would be incomplete if it was only concerned with preservational awareness. The causes are as follows:

- The building was ruined through lack of maintenance and/or climate
- Removed to build a temple
- Removed to build infrastructure
- Removed to build the Royal Field (Sanam Luang)
- Removed to build a new royal garden
- The building has burned
- The building has changed ownership
- The building was significantly altered to serve another function
- The significance of the name and place has been forgotten

As an example, some *wangs* were sold to be demolished to build a shopping center or commercial buildings, such as the shopping area in the Wangburapa district that used to host *Wang Burapa*.



Figure 15. Wang Burapha in 1946, left. Source National Archives of Thailand. Wang Burapha in 2014, right. Photograph by the author.

For other *wangs* occupied by heirs of the royal family, almost none are now utilized as a palace. There are only a few *wangs* whose main buildings still remain, but many are used by the public as offices. Thus, it is unfortunate that most *wangs* built since the early Rattanakosin period have been demolished. Not only is there no historic evidence but also there is no plaque to introduced these heritage sites to the new generation or tourists. Some *wangs* remain presently, however neither the public sector or government, especially the Crown Property Bureau, has no clear policy in place to improve nor solve the problems. From my interviews, I found issues of conflict such as between the tenants and the Crown Property Bureau on issues ranging rental rates and upkeep. At Wang Preang Nara there is a case of dispute regarding rent and their own improvement plans. Also the Wang Krom Lung Prachak Silpakom remains in a very poor condition with the CPB having no restoration plans even though its location is right behind the well-maintained Rattanakosin Hotel. The CPB has a lack of information and therefore no details are available for many similar properties. Additionally, Wang Krom Phra Nares Worarit located at the office of Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of

the United Nations is rented from the Crown Property Bureau. The author was not allowed to take photographs around the building even though a research project letter from Silpakorn University was presented.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The contribution that Rattanakosin area represents should not be easily forgotten, especially the old *wangs* and shophouses. However, when the researcher began to study the area for conservation and development potential, it was found that the glorious past of the district was almost buried by dust.

A possible step towards creating better planning can be thought from two perspectives; a material one and a spiritual one as shown below:

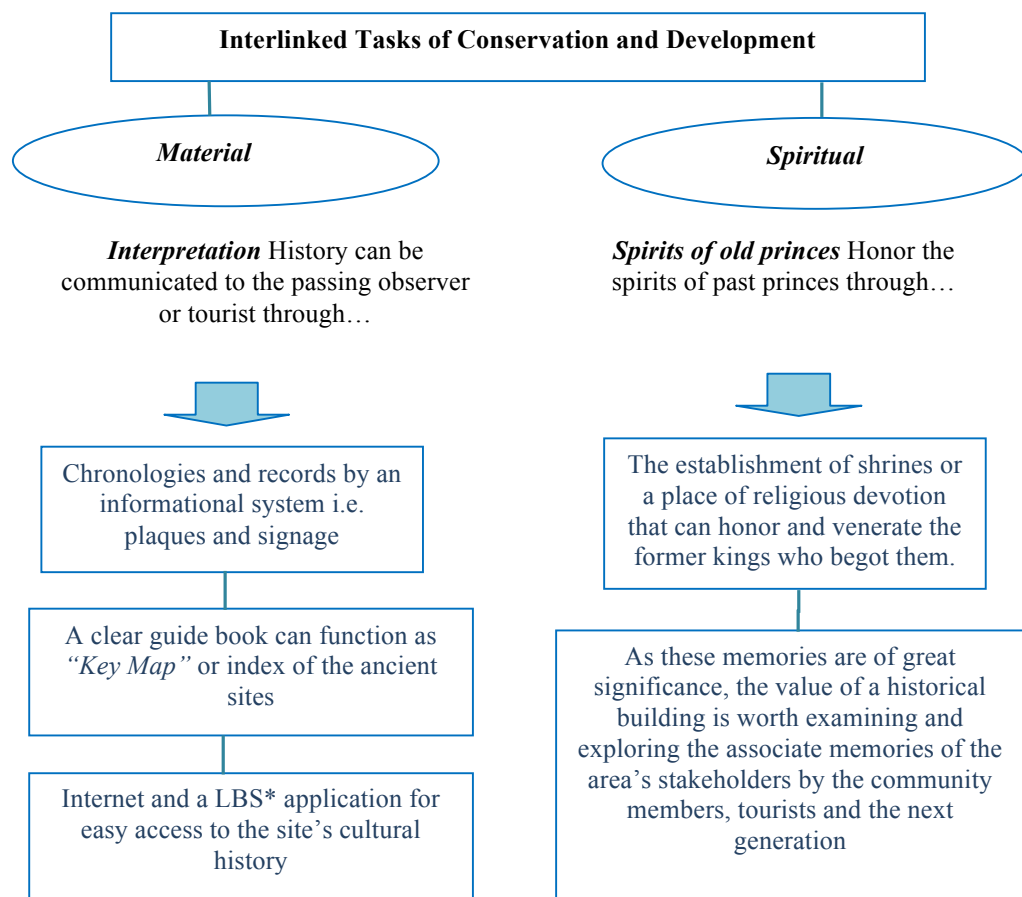


Figure 16. A diagram explaining the planning for conservation and development of the cultural heritage in the Rattanakosin area. *LBS: The Integration of Location Based Services in Tourism and Cultural Heritage applications.

We need to reiterate the significance and value of the architectural and cultural heritage on Rattanakosin Island to the *wang's* tenants, the locals and stakeholders, especially for the next generation to ensure their preservation. These two inter-linked tasks involve the awareness of their heritage and of the design and planning and for best practices ensuring sustainability.

This includes the process of maintenance for preservation in the planning and design which is far more difficult than the job of labeling, signage, and mapping. Besides, with the internet and LBS (Location Based Services) applications in the future the residents, stakeholders, tourist along with the Crown Property Bureau can all easily access to the cultural heritage of this district. The researcher hopes that this may enhance the preservation of historic buildings that are currently neglected, especially the Crown Property Bureau as the owners of these valuable historical structures. However, to improve the environment of a historic area in an inner city like Rattanakosin Island, the public sector is not able to accomplish real success without the cooperation of private parties. For this teamwork to succeed mutual understanding is needs to be encourage. On a more spiritual level there is a need for shrines to honor the royals that begot them. Furthermore, with rapid economic development and globalization, our important tangible and intangible heritage is at risk for being lost or abandoned. Today the young generation seems to be attracted to foreign culture more than their own. To protect Thai heritage, we have to acknowledge the lack of cultural values, but also discover ways to disseminate, protect and present our heritage for future caretakers – the next generation.

Finally, from my review of this topic, I have learned that no matter how much time has passed, the value of Thai architecture through the eras instills a legacy of ideas and art that never fails to charm and impress visitors. If we plan and manage our architectural heritage, there is beauty that may increase and not merely fall away as ruins and traces of the old leaving one to only find it in museums.



Figure 17. The Chao Phraya Palazzo Hotel before restoration and renovation.

The Chao Phraya Palazzo Hotel dates back to 1923 when Bangkok had an influx of Italian artists working under the commission of King Rama V. Praya Chollabhumipani - a noble of the Royal Court Custom Department was assigned to design and build this mansion. It was originally named “Baan Bang Yee Khan” and is typical of the Palladio inspired architecture of this period. Its location right on the bank of the Chao Phraya River made it an observation station for the owner’s formal custom duty as well as his home.



Figure 18. A rendering of the present day Chao Phraya Palazzo Hotel. From www.prayapalazzo.com.

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