

# MODERNITIES AND MEMORIES IN BANGKOK

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## ABSTRACT

**W**at Pathumwanaram, a green oasis in the heart of the newly redeveloped Central Shopping District of Bangkok, represents not only a repository of cultural memory within this modern corner of the city, but also bears witness previous episodes of historical modernities and memories in Thailand. It is the purpose of this paper to juxtapose modernity and memory as coupled concepts which continually interact in space and time. Memory is an important concept of modernity outlined here through the concepts of 19th century French philosopher Henri Bergson, and modernity has developed its own memories, especially in this particular area of Bangkok where so many historical forms of modernity have found expression between the eras of Rama IV to Rama IX. Cultural memory and modernity are continually redefined by every generation and differently interpreted by every individual. Modernities and memories are therefore dynamic, living elements of the city, rather than fixed in place or meaning.

**Keyword :** *Cultural memory, modernity, shopping district, urbanism, Bangkok*

## LIQUID PERCEPTION



*Figure 1: The doors to the ubosot in Wat Pathumwanaram, like the window shutters, have carved wood bas relief scenes of wet rice farming and water based life.*

Carved gold-leaf wooden shutters frame scenes of wet paddy rice farming, grazing water buffalo and lotus gardens. The bas relief floats within an encrusted background of miniature diamond shaped mirrors. These reflective surfaces evoke a bucolic, water based life within the raised colonnaded ambulatory of Wat Pathumwanaram's ubosot in the heart of modern Bangkok. When saffron-robed mendicants circumambulate the temple, the glimmering shutter surfaces mirror the sky, trees, lotus gardens and worshipers in a kaleidoscopic mosaic of shifting reflections. Recently, the mirrored shutters also reflect a new urban panorama beyond the monastery precinct: cranes and scaffolding complete the finishing touches on two vast commercial complexes frame the temple complex just outside the new Siam Central Station, the main junction point between Bangkok Transit System's first two mass transit Skytrain lines, converging just outside the sanctuary's walls. This spurt of construction is just the latest of a series of social and architectural experiments that have been built outside the temple walls, as the monasteries 150 year history parallels a century and a half of modernization in Thailand.



Figure 2: The main buildings of Wat Pathumwanaram, from left to right, the vihran, the stupa and the ubosot.

The spatial and temporal compression within this corner of contemporary Bangkok - a collapse of histories, geographies and cultures – frames this essay about the intersection and collapse of modernities and memories. Siamese collective memory is most vividly described in the *Traiphumikata*, Thailand's Theravada Buddhist canon. The *Traiphumikata* describes three worlds - one formless, one comprising form but no sensation, and finally the world of form and sensation - divided into thirty-four levels of existence. (Khanjanusthiti, 1996) For centuries, Siam has constructed symbolic urban realms which interpret this cosmological model in architectural details, ritual space as well as in city planning and design. Radical contemporary Buddhism now interprets the *Traiphumikata*'s super-mundane realms as psychological states in the here and now. (Sivaraksa, 1988) The repeating cycles of human existence based on suffering, death, karma, merit making and rebirth can be understood best through meditation practices which still the body and mind in order to bring attention to reality as constant flux and change. 19th century French philosopher Henri Bergson, in **Matter and Memory**, describes the passing of time as a cone in which the apex is the constantly rushing forward present and the past is preserved as memories within regions or sheets which accumulate over time. One remembers by plunging into separate sheets or regions of the past in search for particular recollections which are then brought into the present moment as reflections. The modern experience of time or duration, for both Bergson and contemporary Buddhism, is one of in which there is an awareness of a continual co-presence of the past in the present.

Wat Pathumwanaram was constructed in the middle of the 19th century by King Rama IV, as part of a royal enclave of palace retreats along the San Saeb Canal. With the expansion of the Kingdom of Siam and growing commercial contacts with Europe, the Grand Palace at the center of Bangkok grew over crowded. Here, east of the capital, the Thai elite began to experiment with the

architecture, landscapes, dress codes and decorum of the colonial world, while simultaneously reinterpreting rituals and pleasures from newly constructed memories of the historical capitals of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya – “rediscovered” by Rama IV. Today, the kilometer long stretch of Rama I Road, parallel with the canal, is the setting for new modern consumer desires marketed through a potpourri of historical and contemporary references. The monastery complex now shares this long block between canal and road with four major shopping mall/mixed-use commercial complexes comprising the Central Shopping District of Bangkok. (McGrath, 2005) Surprisingly, the recent profusion of reflective and transparent architectural skins and surfaces of the new commercial centers come to resemble, more and more, the aesthetic dematerialization - if not spiritual dimensions - of Wat Pathumwanaram’s glimmering illusionary shutters. Digital screen printing as well as new glass and LED technologies create new luminescent images and reflections back to city inhabitants wandering through the malls or gliding above the city on the elevated Skytrain. Additionally the water gardens which formed the monasteries context and iconography are thematically deployed as fountains which animate the public spaces of the malls.



*Figure 3: LED screens proposed for the new Zen Department Store anchoring the corner of Central World Plaza.*



*Figure 4: Wat Pathumwanaram wedged in between Siam Paragon, in the background, Central World Plaza in the foreground, and the BTS Skytrain to the left.*

## BANGKOK'S CENTRAL SHOPPING DISTRICT

The grand opening of Bangkok's glittering newest shopping mall, Siam Paragon was broadcast throughout the Kingdom in December of 2005. The mall replaced the verdant Siam Intercontinental Hotel, torn down in 2002, on Crown Property Bureau land next to the Royal gardens of Srappahum Palace, just west of Wat Pathumwanaram. The grand entrance to the mall is a faceted glass "jewel" meant to glitter like diamonds in the day and glow with the colors of gems — from ruby, sapphire, emerald to topaz — in the evening. Inside Siam Paragon are car showrooms, a food court, fountains and the largest aquarium in Southeast Asia - Siam Ocean World — as well as the luxurious jewelry shops evoked by the faceted entry. The mall has nine different sections: Luxury, Fashion and Beauty, Digital Lifestyle, Living and Technology, The Exotic East, Dining Paradise, Paragon Gourmet Market, Paragon Department Store, and the Paragon World of Entertainment. The mall expects to draw 100,000 visitors a day and make Bangkok a shopping destination eclipsing even Hong Kong and Singapore. (<http://www.siamparagon.co.th/>)

While the spiral ramps to Siam Paragon's 4,000 parking garage loom above Wat Pathumwanaram's western flank, the expansive construction site of Central World Plaza rises to the east. According to the project architects, Altoon and Porter, Central World Plaza is being redeveloped as a mixed-use center that will include a seven-story high, 350-meter long digital Media Wall, with the capability to project multiple LED images, ticker tape and lasers. The new high-tech face of the greatly expanded center looks out on a revitalized

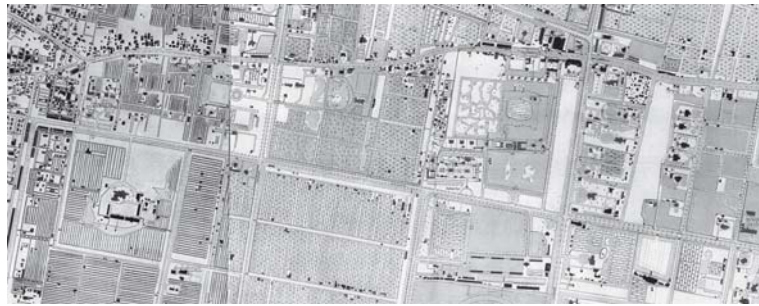


plaza – which, like Times Square in New York, serves as the gathering space for the annual New Years Countdown, and in the cool winter months as enormous German beer gardens, complete with fountains and gardens. The architects claim that among the new offerings that will flash across the big screens are a variety of retail “rooms” or precincts, an Olympic ice rink, bowling, a fitness center, a Convention Center, high-rise hotel, 50-story office space and multiple entertainment spots. The redesign turns the eight story mall inside out by moving the vertical circulation including stairs, escalators and elevators to the interstitial space between the wall of the building and the media screen, which hangs from the existing façade. (<http://www.altoonporter.com/>)

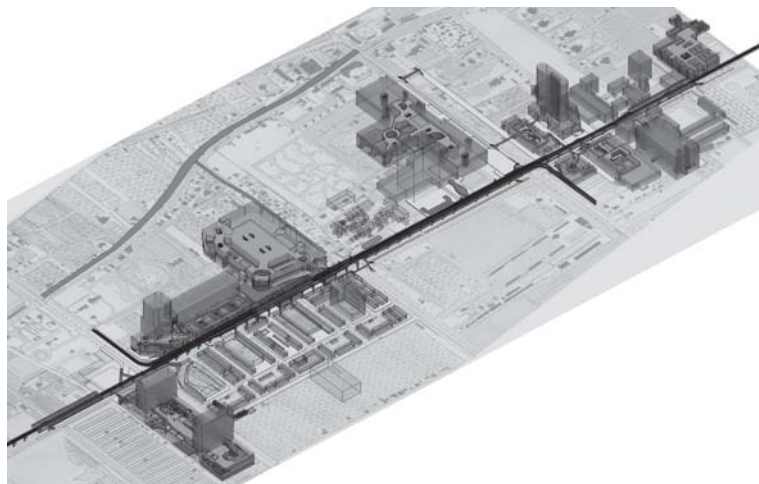
Siam Paragon and Central World Plaza are just the latest incarnation of a thirty years series of architectural and social experimentation along this stretch of Rama 1 Road. The area first became a modern shopping destination with the construction of Siam Square on Chulalongkorn University property along the south side of the street just east of Pathumwan Intersection in the 1975. Siam Square, a gridded enclave of blocks containing small shops, offices, movie theaters and bowling alleys, was innovative and experimental in its use of French prefabricated, pre-cast concrete technology and its adoption of American style “park and shop” convenience. The district became a youth-centered shopping district filled with restaurants, coffee houses, boutiques and “cram” schools due to its proximity to Bangkok’s first university. Siam Center, a mall of small boutiques clustered around three atria, was developed north of Rama 1 Road with support from the Thai Tourist Authority. Two pedestrian bridges were constructed across the wide boulevard, and Siam Center became an extension of Siam Square’s youth market by the early eighties. In 1985, wealthy rice merchants built Mah Boon Krong Center on land leased from the University across from Siam Square. MBK center is a huge mixed use complex comprised of a seven story shopping mall with two atria, a department store, hotel and office building. MBK mall was linked to Siam Square by a futuristic tubular elevated pedestrian walkway across Phayathai Road with a moving sidewalk inside.

MBK was overshadowed in 1990 when the first phase of an even larger mixed use mall, office building and hotel project called the World Trade Center opened one kilometer down Rama 1 Road. Its construction anchored a second shopping node at Ratchaprasong Intersection by complementing smaller shopping centers and hotels east of this intersection - Amarin Plaza and Sogo Department Store connected to the Erawan Hotel, and Gaysorn Plaza connected to the President Tower and Le Meridien Presidential Hotel. The owners of Siam Center responded in 1996 with the completion of an office building and high end shopping mall on the northeast corner of Pathumwan

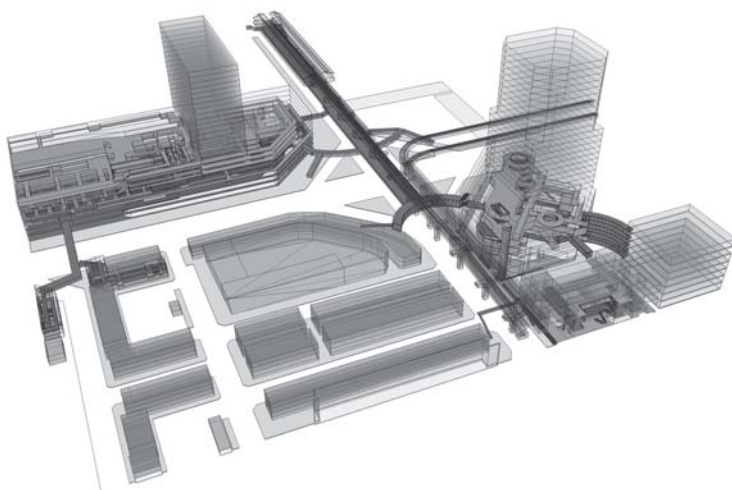
Intersection called Siam Discovery Center. A raised plaza and fourth level bridge connected the two shopping centers, while multiple bridges connected both to a new multi-level parking deck. The rapidly escalating scale of commercial construction was evenly paced as every five years a new mall was built. All the later shopping centers built large parking structures and relied primarily on automobile access and by the mid-nineties, Walking between malls was difficult and unpleasant given the heat and pollution, and Bangkok's legendary traffic jams made it difficult to drive to one shopping complex, and impossible to visit a second by car. As a result, the malls were engaged in a competitive Darwinian struggle of out doing the previous commercial enterprise, and fickle Bangkok shoppers abandoned one mall for the next. A new exclusive mall – the Emporium – opened much further east of this district, and seemed to promise the premature decline of the entire Rama 1 Road shopping district.



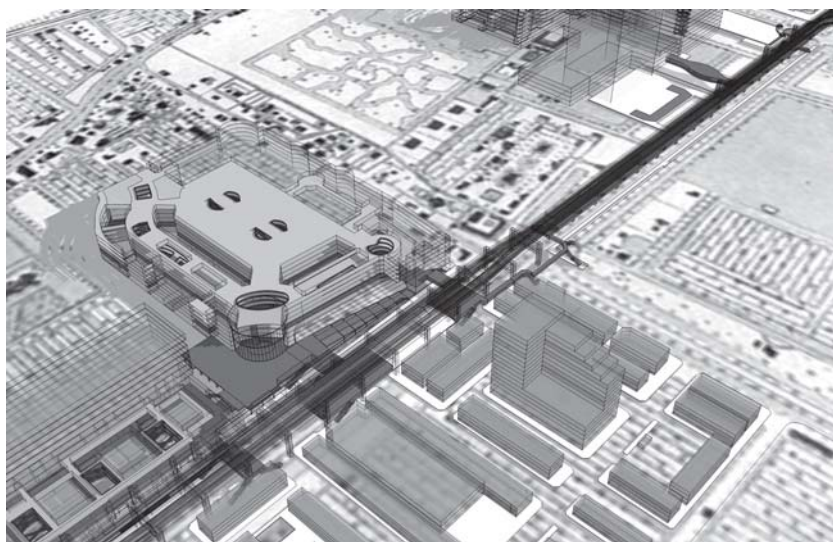
*Figure 5: 1932 Royal Army Survey Map showing Rama 1 Road and the water gardens of Pathumwan Palace.*



*Figure 6: The shopping centers along Rama 1 Road superimposed on top of the Royal Army Survey Map of 1932.*

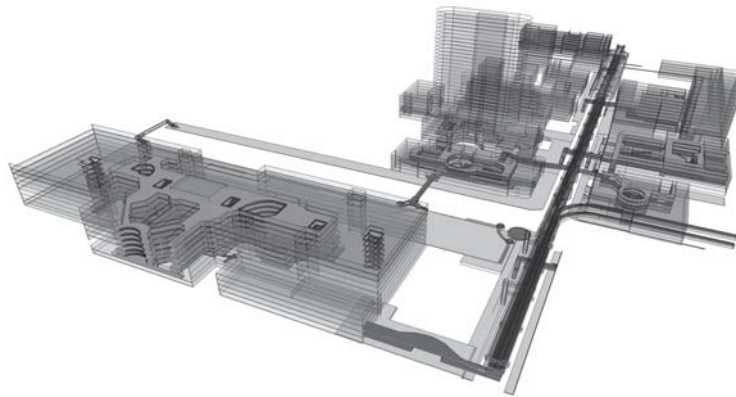


*Figure 7: Detail of computer model showing connections between shopping centers and Skytrain platforms at Pathumwan Intersection by Urban Design students: Chaiyot Jitekviroj, Pornsiri Saiduang and Ratchawan Panyasong*



*Figure 8: Detail of computer model showing Siam Paragon to the left and Central World Plaza to the right, bracketing Wat Pathumwanaram, show in red in the map, by Urban Design students: Nara Pongpanich and Kobboon Chulajarit*





*Figure 9: Detail of computer model showing Ratchaprasong Intersection by Urban Design students: Yuttapoom Paojinda, Kobboon Chulajarit and Krittin Vijittraitham*

## BOOMS, BUSTS AND REVITALIZATIONS

The catastrophic Asian economic crisis of 1997 began with a real estate bubble, bank failures and currency speculation in Thailand. The financial collapse followed a decade, between 1985 and 1995, when Thailand was the world's fastest growing economy, and huge, glittering commercial buildings previously symbolized the promise of national prosperity. After '97, real estate development turned into the counter symbol of economic depression, as hundreds of commercial developments in central Bangkok were idled by bankruptcy, shoppers disappeared, and the city became none for its haunting hollow concrete shells. Lucien Hank's identified the threats of isolation and abandonment as being the constant fears of the social narratives in Thai frontier rice farming villages during the transformative early decades of Thai modernization.(Hanks,1972) Here these cultural fears became manifest prominently in the symbolic heart of the modern city.

The millennium celebrations in 2000 were a happy distraction for Bangkok, with a grand countdown and fireworks display in front of the bankrupt World Trade Center development, distracting attention from the view of its hollow, unfinished office tower. But in the fallout from economic collapse, there were tangible transformations in the city's psyche. A national soul search took place, with the King supplying a message of Buddhist self-sufficiency, and a new political party named "Thai love Thai", led by telecommunications billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra, achieving government control. The millennium also brought the first phase of city's long delayed mass transit system: two lines of the elevated Skytrain, whose concrete viaducts forcefully torque and slide by

each other and meet at Siam Central Station on the long block of Rama I Road between Pathumwan and Ratchaprasong Intersections. The Skytrain initiated a renovation and building boom for a glamorous shopping district lined with continually reconstructed shopping centers.

MBK Center was the first of the malls to realize the potential of both the millennial optimism and the new accessibility the Skytrain provided at their doorstep. Metallic silver defined the 21st century, and the mall was reclad in aluminum panels and a giant elliptical illuminated sign. Additionally, the interior of the shopping center was connected directly by second and third level bridges to the Skytrain's National Stadium Station mezzanine, which extends a large, elevated public platform eastward across Pathumwan Intersection. However, the greatest new social change ushered in was the new political philosophy of Thaksin: unrestrained, credit-based optimistic consumerism. Thaksin made shopping a national duty at all levels of society.



*Figure 10: Billboard on Rama I Road just outside Wat Pathumwanaram advertising the new Central World Plaza.*

The immediate success of MBK's renovation started a chain reaction of architectural makeovers, as Gaysorn Plaza and Erawan refurbished in concert with new sky-bridge connections to Chit Lom Station's concourse near Ratchaprasong Intersection. By 2005, a massive construction site stretched the entire length of Rama I Road between Pathumwan and Ratchaprasong, as the two largest shopping center and mall developers in the country both completed flagship developments east and west of Wat Prathumwanaram. The

Mall Group recently completed the super luxury Siam Paragon and is renovating Siam Center and Siam Discovery Center as one integrated complex directly connected to both National Stadium Station and the Skytrain's main junction at Siam Central Station. The Central Group has assumed control over the former World Trade Center and the renamed World Central Plaza has completed the long abandoned office tower in its first phase, a glass lantern with flat reflecting pools facing the Skytrain. Central created a lengthy extension of the Skytrain's elevated walkway system now connecting Siam Central Station through Chit Lom Station at Gaysorn and Erawan, with Central's flagship department store at the opposite exit of Chit Lom.



*Figure 11: Break dancers on the BTS Skytrain platform above Pathumwan Intersection.*

Richard O'Connor has identified two aspects of indigenous Thai urbanism - community and hierarchy - and finds evidence in contemporary Bangkok in status displays of funerals and cinemas. (O'Connor, undated) The shopping district of Rama I Road is a monumental symbolic representation of Thai urbanism, reflecting indigenous ideas of cosmology, social relations and psychological states. Embedded within this layered and complex space is Wat Pathumwanaram. The monastery was built as what Jumsai identified in Sukhothai as a "water chapel"; temple buildings seem to float on islands in lotus garden lakes. The court of King Rama IV arrived to the water palace of Pathumwanaram and the temple by boat via the San Saeb Canal, the same canal which continues on to Ban Chang, the village studied by Lucien Hanks and his colleagues at Cornell. The closed illusionary shutters of Wat Pathumwanaram represent the rice farming and watery scenes reflecting remnants of the royal lotus gardens, alluding to Sukhothai, but also creating

sanctuary in the midst of the commercial heart of Bangkok. Khlong San Saeb still connects the back of the malls to the Royal Rattanakosin enclave and the Chao Phraya, but also continues beyond the Outer Ring Road to the agricultural fringe of Greater Bangkok.



*Figure 12: San Saeb Canal at the Jim Thompson Museum.*

## MEDITATIVE RETREAT

Early in the morning, before the shopping malls open, one can find the doors of Wat Pathumwanaram open. The first temple houses a giant Buddha image, and a monk accepts offerings and gifts from local visitors. Behind the first hall is the white stupa containing the relics of the Lord Buddha. The last hall is a quiet place for meditation practice. The columns and walls are filled with figures kneeling, with eyes closed and hands in prayer. A lone meditator is present, and as he finishes the quiet examination of his mind and body he glances up. The upper frieze of the hall contains a giant mural of the Royal barges circumnavigating the entire interior of the hall in a stately procession representing the annual visit of the King to various temples along the River and canals of Bangkok. The wheels of the Skytrain can be heard over the silence of the boats encircling the hall.





*Figure 13: Murals of meditators, Wat Pathumwanaram.*



*Figure 14: Mural of Royal Barges, Wat Pathumwanaram.*





*Figure 15: Door bas relief, Wat Pathumwanaram.*

According to Roland Bogue, the Philosopher Henri Bergson found himself split into two individuals, one whom observes the other like on a stage, one the actor in his role – the automata, the other the independent spectator – free and real. For Bergson, time and memory are not inside us, but it is the interiority that we are in, in which we move, live and change. The actual and the virtual, physical and mental, present and past are inseparable ongoing coexistences. (Bogue, 2003) Theravada Buddhist meditation practice, likewise, enables the attainment of such perception by the development of a separate consciousness which surveys centered, sensory-motor existence from a floating, detached, non reacting vantage point. This practice is most ideally developed in isolation – the most learned priests in Sukhothai were in the forest monasteries to the west, while in modern Thailand, wandering ascetic monks still seek

enlightenment in the forests, equipped only with a tent-like umbrella and an offering bowl. While the palaces of Pathumwan were royal recreational retreats, the Pathumwanaram monastery was built as a forest meditation temple outside the city limits. Monks still make their rounds in the small streets leading to Rama 1 Road before the malls open and commuters file off of water taxis on Khlong San Saeb and the Skytrains at Siam Central Station.



*Figure 16: Monk crossing Pathumwan Intersection collecting food offerings in the early morning.*

Now that the connectivity of the Skytrain has catapulted the Rama 1 area into another stage of modernity, the historical memory of the early canal based settlement pattern of these super blocks needs to be investigated. In addition to Wat Pathumwanaram and Srapathum Palace, Khlong San Saeb also connects to the Jim Thompson House and Museum. A potential cultural and ecological corridor extends along the canal behind the glimmering shopping malls, and could offer alternative circuits outside the closed world of shopping and consumer display. It will be the ability of Bangkok's architects, designers and artists to connect the multiple experiences of modernity and cultural memory in this vital heart of Bangkok that will ensure the quality of the urban experience of the heart of Bangkok. Key nodes in this alternate circuit behind and around Bangkok's Central Shopping District, moving from west to east, include the Jim Thompson House and Museum on Soi Kasemsan 2, the public water taxi stop at Phayathai Road, the new Bangkok Metropolitan Museum of Contemporary Art under construction at Pathumwan Intersection, the museum

planned for Srapathum Palace, Wat Pathumwanaram, the rear gardens of Siam Paragaon and Central World Plaza, and finally the public boat terminal at Pratunam. The interconnection of these two parallel urban armatures, the canal and Skytrain, would provide a multi-level civic realm unique in the world.

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