BANGKOK BOUNDARIES

Social Networks in the City of Mubahnchatsan[1]

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ABSTRACT

Bangkok is rapidly transforming into a city of *Mubahnchatsan*, the Thai version of the gated community of which the inhabitants belong to the same income group. In the vast urban field of this city, new *mubahnchatsan* for various income groups are built at an incredible rate. As such, Bangkok is yet another example in a range of cities where gated living is becoming the norm instead of an exception. Urban studies literature gives these gated communities a bad press. Walls and gates are said to create exclusionary spaces that physically separate the lives of the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. The public sphere is undermined because these groups do not meet. Wissink, Dijkwel and Meijer looked into this supposition: do various groups in Bangkok still meet?

Keywords : *urban fragmentation, social networks, Bangkok*

[1] *Mubanchatsan (in thai) means a housing estate*

"I have learned that normal and friendly people live in the slums of Klong Toey. The slums are not dangerous at all, rather cosy, lively and thrilling. We can just enter and walk around in these neighbourhoods and nothing will happen". Welcome to Krung Thep, or Bangkok, city of angels and capital of Thailand, but also city of contrasts. Enormous wealth alternates staggering poverty, ancient temples stand next to glittering office towers and construction workers have their lunches at the roadside stands together with international businessmen. Speaking is Nat, a student of Chulalongkorn University. Nat took part in our research into social networks in Bangkok. Together with Marie, a Dutch research team member, he was to research the slums of Klong Toey. At first he seemed somewhat reluctant to enter the slum areas, but eventually he played a crucial role in gathering the information there. To the Dutch researchers, his surprised (and delighted) conclusion at the final research meeting was somewhat amusing. However, it indicates that there is a real concern: how do groups in Bangkok live together and how well do they know and understand each other?

This question seems especially crucial in Bangkok, a city full of walls and gates that surround a seemingly endless amount of mono-functional and mono-cultural enclaves. Take housing, for example. Remarkably, a large part of Bangkok's estimated 12 million inhabitants live behind gates regardless of the income group! People with low incomes live in walled slums like Klong Toey, close to their workplaces where they earn limited amounts of Thai baht. More often than not they have more than one job daily and they cannot afford the costs of transportation. The urban middle classes move out to Bangkok's suburbs. Here, the creation of series of *mubahnchatsan* results in an extensive urban field where market segmentation leads to a remarkable bundling of income groups. People with low incomes live amongst other people with low incomes; higher middle class people amongst other higher middle class people. More often than not, the members of the higher middle class have an additional condominium in the city, close to their workplace.

The spatial organization of work, shopping and leisure is also characterized by the reality of spatial partitioning. On closer observation Bangkok's urban field consists of a series of separated walled units that are selectively connected. This emerging spatial structure appears to be in line with recent urban theory on the post-modern city. According to well-quoted authors as Davis, Sorkin, Sennett, Castells, Graham & Marvin and Zukin in this type of city the rich have disconnected themselves spatially from the poor, they have abandoned public space and are retreating in the pseudo public spaces of shopping malls, golf clubs and gated communities. Invariably, this observation is linked to fear of the disappearance of old public spaces and the chances for different social groups to meet. Since splintering hinders face-to-face interactions between

various groups –the sort of interaction that supposedly was constitutive of the emergence of society in the first place – it is easily perceived as a threat to community and democracy. Crawford (1999: 23) therefore signals that the analysis of developments in space is framed by a 'narrative of loss'. This narrative "contrasts the current debasement of public space with golden ages and golden sites – the Greek agora, the coffeehouses of early modern Paris and London, the Italian piazza, the town square. The narrative nostalgically posits these as once vital sites of democracy where, allegedly, cohesive public discourse thrived, and inevitably culminates in the contemporary crisis of public life and public space, a crisis that puts at risk the very ideas and institutions of democracy itself". The splintered spatial development of Bangkok easily fits in with this narrative of loss.

DIVIDED SPACES – DIVIDED CITIZENS?

At first glace, the framing of spatial changes by the narrative of loss feels as though it fits. However, a closer look reveals that this narrative is built on some arguable suppositions. Amongst these, the narrative wrongly links urban form directly and causally to social interactions. Propinquity – face-to-face contacts in physical places – is seen as the prerequisite for social interaction that contributes to important corner-stones in society like 'community' and 'solidarity'. Therefore it presupposes that these values are lost once urban form is splintered. However, no direct and one-directional causal link between spatial form and the characteristics of social practices can be indicated. Within fragmented urban fields, various groups can and do meet and new ways of meeting and exchanging can and do emerge. So the narrative of loss should be confronted with a detailed analysis of the contingent consequences of urban splintering for social networks. Therefore, the question arises how people behave within the fragmented urban form of Bangkok.

Answering this question necessitates a theoretical framework to study social networks in the fragmented urban setting of Bangkok. As such the 'social network theory' of authors like Claude Fischer (1982) and Barry Wellman (1999) is extremely useful. This analytical framework emerged in the 1970s in order to study the alleged 'loss of community' in the United States. It focuses on the interpersonal networks of individual inhabitants. Interestingly, the research showed that there is no link between neighbourhood and community. Community feeling turned out to diminish within neighbourhoods, but at the same time it arose at different spatial levels. Therefore, instead of a loss of community, the social network analysis signalled a rescaling of community.

This framework can also be deployed in research into the social networks in Bangkok. For that reason, in the spring of 2005, the cooperation between Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok and Utrecht University in The Netherlands resulted in a mutual research project. The research team consisted of eight Dutch and ten Thai junior and senior researchers.[2] The research design focussed on different types of neighbourhoods because the inhabitants of Bangkok live separated in various types of gated area's. Four types of neighbourhoods were selected: informal settlements (70 Rai and Lock 1, 2, 3 in Klong Toey) *mubahnchatsan* for the low- to middle middle class (Warangkul 'The Private Home', Wararak Khlong Sii and Rangsit Klong Saam), mubahnchatsan for the middle- to high middle class (Golden Lanna, Baan Ram Indra and Baan Lad Prao), and condominium complexes (Sunisa apartments and Baan Chan). Four mixed teams of Dutch and Thai researchers visited the neighbourhoods. They established the characteristics of the neighbourhoods and their inhabitants by neighbourhood observation, interviews and a standardised questionnaire; they studied the social networks of these inhabitants within and outside the neighbourhoods and analysed the perceptions of these inhabitants of their own and other neighbourhoods.

SOCIAL NETWORKS IN BANGKOK

Now what are the differences between the inhabitants of the researched neighbourhoods and their social networks? First of all, let us mention that the research itself already gives an insight into these differences. For one, what stood out most was the different levels of response we were able to get in the different types of neighbourhoods. It turned out to be very difficult to get into expensive *mubahnchatsan*. And when we did, it was hard work to be allowed to get our questionnaires filled in. The inhabitants were usually very helpful and interested, but the managers of these high-end *mubahnchatsan* more often than not refused cooperation. They were not happy about outsiders coming into the neighbourhoods and were keen to protect the privacy en security behind the walls. Getting into informal settlements and less expensive *mubahnchatsan* was no problem at all. People were genuinely interested in our presence, cooperated willingly and gave us an extensive insight in their lives.

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[2] *The 2005 Bangkok research is part of a bigger research project on* ***The politics of the spatial resegmentation of the Asian metropolis*** *(www.respace.org). This project empirically studies the impact of spatial form on the public sphere in Bangkok, Tokyo, Shanghai and Mumbai.*

Our questionnaire contained several questions about the social activities people undertake in their neighbourhoods. In presenting our research, we divide the outcomes over the four neighbourhood types. The first question concerns the amount of households that the residents of the various neighbourhood types have contact with. As Figure 1 shows, on average informal settlement dwellers have the most contacts within their neighbourhoods. Interestingly, there is also a gradual difference between the two types of *mubahnchatsan*. The general rule seems to be, the richer the less contact.

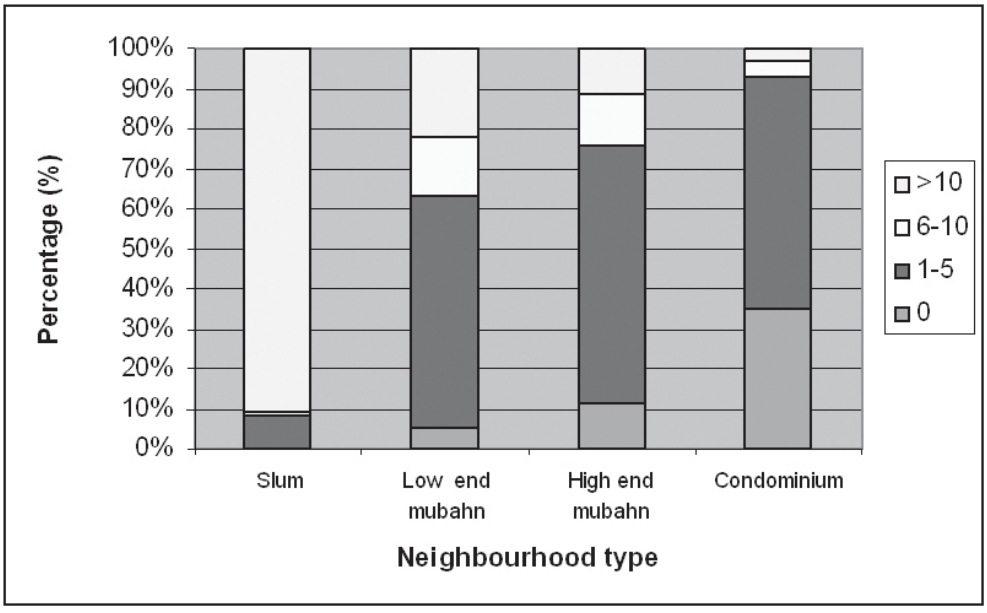

Figure 1: The amount of households you have contact with (per neighbourhood type)

Next, we tried to get an idea of the social interaction in the neighbourhood. Therefore we inquired 'how often do you greet your neighbours?'. The results in Figure 2 are in line with our expectations, which are based on the results of the amount of households people have contact with. Again, there is a considerable difference between answers of the respondents in informal settlements with condominiums: twice as many slum dwellers greet neighbours daily. An interesting result, that gives a very clear first indication of the characteristics of the interaction within this neighbourhood type.

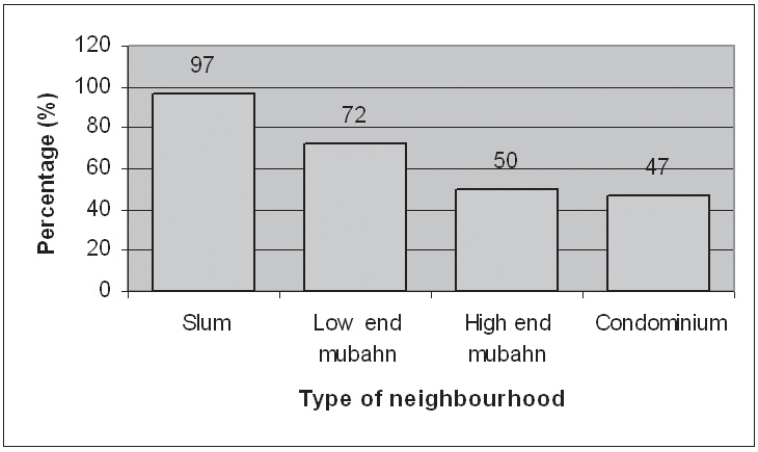

Figure 2: Residents daily greeting their neighbours, % per neighbourhood type

Although greeting your neighbours gives an indication of the interaction within a neighbourhood, it doesn't tell much about the intensity of these contacts. Having dinner together does, especially given the importance that is given to eating by most Thai. Therefore we asked how often people have dinner with their neighbours. Table 1 show the results. 'Eating' is of course a more intimate and time-consuming activity than 'greeting' so it is done less often no matter which neighbourhood is considered. On average the residents of the different types of neighbourhoods do not eat with each other often, and if they do it is less than once a week. But it seems to happen more often in informal settlements.

Table 1: How often do you eat with your neighbours?

Type of neighbourhood	Average	Standard Deviation
Slum (n=77)	3,9	1,0
Middle class Mubahn (n=155)	4,1	1,2
Higher class Mubahn (n=57)	4,4	0,9
Condominium (n=79)	4,5	0,9

A third question focussed on the amount of time neighbours joined in on neighbourhood activities. This is of course depends on the fact if these types of get-togethers are organized at all. Nonetheless, the answers to this question in Table 2 come close to those for 'eating'. Again the category condominium shows the least social interaction among the residents: neighbourhood activities are not organized. It is safe to say that there are some activities organized in

the other types of neighbourhoods, but these are either not that often (less than once a week) or residents do not join in that often.

Table 2: How often do you join in on neighbourhood activities?

Type of neighbourhood	Average	Standard Deviation
Slum (n=77)	4,0	0,8
Middle class Mubahn (n=155)	4,1	1,0
Higher class Mubahn (n=57)	4,1	1,0
Condominium (n=79)	4,6	0,8

Next, we also inquired if neighbourhood residents depend on one another: 'did they receive help from their neighbours in the past year?'. Figure 3 indicates that again there are some differences between the neighbourhood types. The amount of social interaction in the condominiums is remarkably low compared to the other neighbourhoods, where receiving help seems to be pretty common. Again, the informal settlement shows the highest percentage of people receiving help.

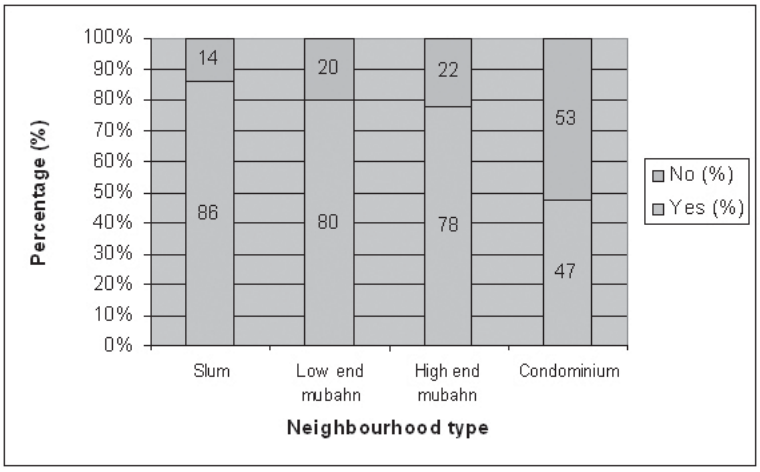

Figure 3: Did you receive help from neighbours this year (per neighbourhood type)?

Another indicator for interdependency is borrowing things to or lending things from other people. The below figure shows the percentage of inhabitants per neighbourhood type that never borrow anything from their neighbours. The results in Figure 4 again point in the same direction. Condominium residents hardly ever borrow anything from or lend anything to their neighbours; the

slum dwellers almost all rely on each other. It should be noted however, that having more may decrease the need to rely on others. The difference between the two types of *mubahnchatsan* for 'borrowing' seems to indicate this roll of income.

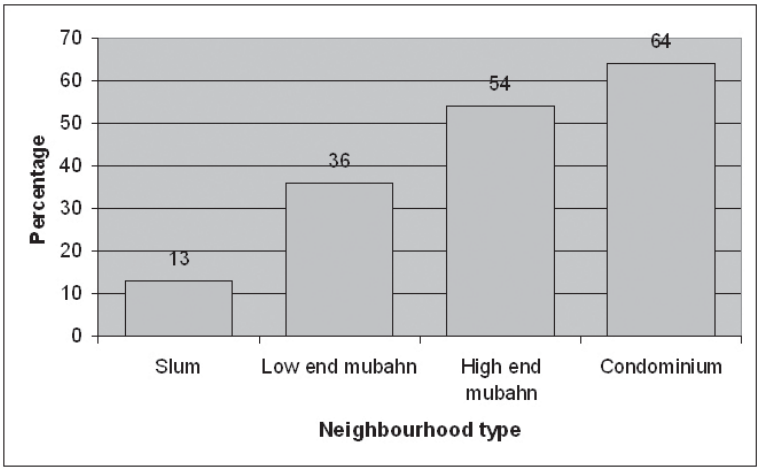

Figure 4: Do you never borrow/lend from your neighbours (per neighbourhood type)?

Next, we inquired about the importance of walls. As has been explained, walls are an important feature of the urban landscape of Bangkok. But maybe they have various meanings. They may protect and enclose one, but keep out and shun another. We asked the how important people thought walls around their neighbourhood were. As Figure 5 shows, *mubahnchatsan* residents think walls around the neighbourhood are important. They wish to experience their living environment as a place of safety, security en privacy. Half of the slum dwellers don't think walls are important at all. They could not care less if they were walled in. They may never have thought of this as an option or necessity for their residential area.

Finally, we asked about the contact people have with people from other income groups. Thai society is typified as hierarchical, so we wanted to have an indication if people are really bound to their 'class'. A note must be made here, that the results show how often Thai people themselves think they have contact with people from different income groups. As Figure 6 shows, there is hardly any difference between the neighbourhood types. It is actually quite logical that these percentages should be about the same, because it takes two to have contact. More interesting is the actual percentage: the daily contact rates are all being between 60 and 70%! This is quite unexpected, because segregation theories seem to tell us otherwise.

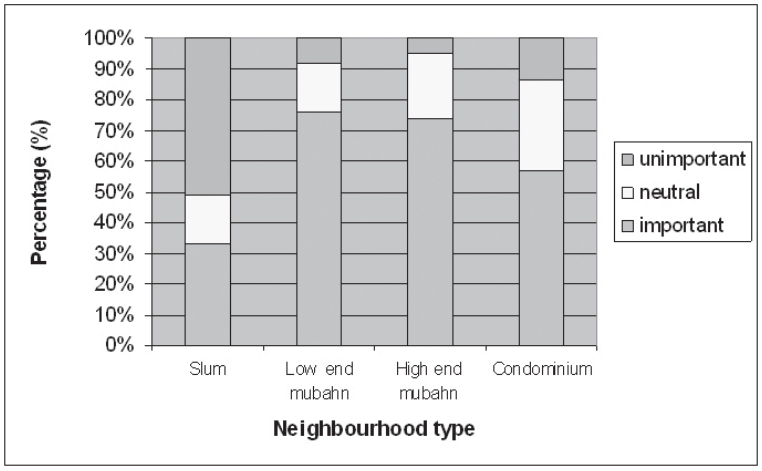

Figure 5: The importance of walls, per neighbourhood type

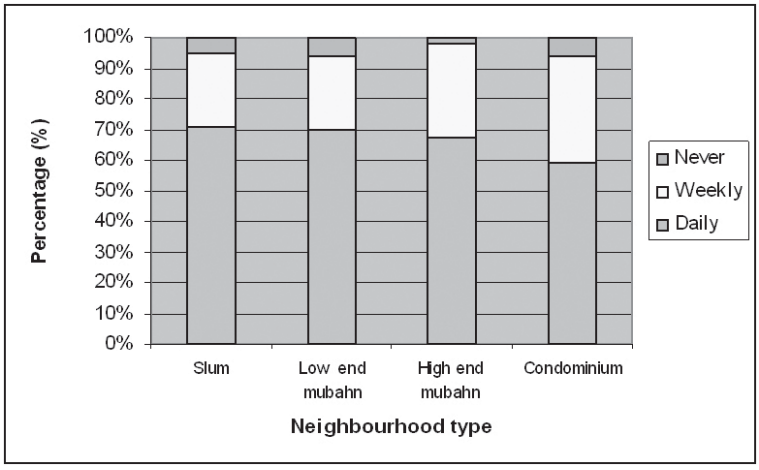

Figure 6: How often do you have contact with people with another income?

As explained above, apart from these answers derived from the questionnaire, we also asked the respondents to plot the location of their workplace, daily restaurants and leisure activities on a Bangkok map. The results of this part of the research have not yet been processed. However, a first view does clearly indicate that the daily networks of high-end *mubahnchatsan* inhabitants are very extensive, the car in combination with the sky train being the main means of transportation. Alternatively, the networks of the inhabitants of informal settlements and low-end *mubahnchatsan* are small, with most activities being restricted to the vicinity of the neighbourhood.

Our conclusion is that social networks and interactions within the neighbourhood vary considerably between the researched neighbourhood types. Life in the low-end housing types has a relatively small spatial scale, while at the same time it is typified by relatively intense social interaction within the neighbourhood. In contrast, life in the high-end residences has a considerable spatial scale, but here interaction within the neighbourhood all but exists. So slum dwellers seem to have the most integrated networks within their neighbourhoods. The physical space of the slum with a lot of little shops and restaurants and chaos on the narrow streets, makes for a whole different atmosphere than the lonely lobby at a condominium complexes or the extremely well groomed, quiet streets of an expensive *mubahnchatsan*. At the same time, the answers to the questionnaire indicate that these inhabitants of various types of neighbourhoods, during their daily life, still do meet each other. That conclusion was also supported by the more extensive interviews and by so far unpublished adjoining research into meeting places in the city. Most important in this respect are informal meetings: with footstall vendors, live-in maids and the like. Furthermore, we caution that since income turned out to be the determining factor demarcating the differences between the neighbourhood inhabitants, it is not at all sure that there is a causal relationship between the type of neighbourhood and social interaction.

PERCEIVING OTHER NEIGHBOURHOODS

As has been shown previously there is considerable variation in the housing types of Bangkok's residents and many of these types are tightly separated from each other. According to the elitist literature this may lead to a situation where biased opinions can flourish and a distorted views of social reality can emerge. In order to test this we asked the residents of the research areas to rate five different types of neighbourhoods (high-middle class *mubahnchatsan*, low middle class *mubahnchatsan*, high middle class condominium, low middle class condominium and slum) on a scale of 1 to 5 in order to assess their opinion about the desirability of these residential types and about the social interaction within the communities and with the rest of society.

As Table 3 shows, all residents rate the high middle class *mubahnchatsan* as by far the most desirable living environment. Actually the high middle class *mubahnchatsan* is the only type that scores positive at an average rating of 2.01 against 3.21 – 4.23 for the other neighbourhoods. At the same time, the rating of the other housing types shows considerable variation. There is a strong correlation between the desirability of the lower middle class *mubahnchatsan*,

the lower middle class condo and the slum when correlated against income. Where lower income groups see these neighbourhoods as still relatively desirable the higher income groups completely disagree. Although the correlation for the informal settlement is present, this correlation is completely caused by the residents of the slum themselves who see the slum as the second most desirable housing type after the high middle class *mubahnchatsan*.

Table 3: The perceived attractiveness of the different types of neighbourhoods

Type of neighbourhood	Average	Standard Deviation
Slum	4,23	1,0
Low Middle class Mubahn	3.21	1,1
High middle class Mubahn	2.01	0,8
Low Middle class condo	3,88	0,9
High middle class condo	3,48	1,1

The relatively low rating of the high middle class condo further confirms the deep-rooted resentment of the majority of Bangkok's population against condominium living, even when it concerns luxurious condominium living. Most of Bangkok's property developers have expressed the opinion that the dislike for condominiums is likely to change over time as the highly (quite often foreign) educated new generation becomes a more dominant group within the middle class and takes up central city living as part of their new and international lifestyle. This opinion is partly reflected by advertising campaigns such as the one by AP-Citismart in which new condominiums are marketed as "a New York style of living". The opinion of project developers in this respect was partly confirmed by our research showing a correlation, although a weak one, between the age of the respondents and the preference for living in a high middle class condominium. The younger respondents thought more favourable of living in a condominium then the elderly. This opens up the possibility that inner-city condominium living can become more then just an accessibility trade-off and can become a serious alternative to the suburban *mubahnchatsan* in the future. However, for now preferences seem to focus on *mubahnchatsan* and from this point of view their dominance of the housing market is likely to persist into the nearby future.

Safety is an important element in the lives of many of Bangkok's residents. The majority of the respondents considered the high middle class *mubahnchatsan* to be the least crime-ridden environment. When you look at the numbers for the high middle class condo and the low middle class

mubahnchatsan that are both physically separated from their surroundings and guarded by security personnel, the difference with the high middle class *mubahnchatsan* which is secured in a similar way is quite striking. Although security measures are similar and on the basis of the conducted interviews with residents it appeared that actual crime rates are quite similar as well, as Table 4 shows, the perception is not so similar at all. This might be an important factor in the success of the high middle class *mubahnchatsan*: although they offer a similar package of safety measures as offered by some of the other residential environments, they manage to create an image that they are a lot safer and therefore also as a lot more attractive. Another striking point that can be derived from this data, is that although most groups rated the neighbourhoods with physically present crime prevention measures like walls and security guards as safer, the slum inhabitants did not. They perceived all neighbourhoods including their own as equally safe, while all other groups rated the slum as the least safe environment. This means that either the slum dwellers are misinformed about their own neighbourhood or all other residents group are misinformed about the slum.

Table 4: The perceived insecurity of the different types of neighbourhoods

Type of neighbourhood	HM Mubahn	LM Mubahn	HM Condo	LM Condo	Slum
HM Mubahn	3,14	2,63	2,65	2,36	1,88
LM Mubahn	3,34	2,63	2,44	2,11	1,64
HM Condo	3,57	2,89	3,18	2,35	1,62
LM Condo	2,88	2,23	2,62	2,25	1,55
Slum	2,73	2,84	2,97	2,77	2,56
All respondents	3,14	2,63	2,65	2,36	1,88

While all see the high-class *mubahnchatsan* as the most desirable living environment, and almost all perceive it as the safest environment, as Table 5 shows, it is not seen as the environment where people expect to find a high level of community feeling. Based on the perception of neighbours greeting each other and neighbours giving assistance when needed it scores only slightly better then the two condominium types but less then the lower middle class *mubahnchatsan* and far less then the slum. Apparently, according to the majority of the respondents there is a correlation between income and community attachment. Thus there will be less interaction in expensive neighbourhoods. The residents of the high middle class *mubahnchatsan* themselves who rate their neighbourhood significantly lower then the slum and the low middle class *mubahnchatsan* also share this opinion. For the largest part these perceptions

seem to reflect the reality of the actual contact between the residents as showed previously. So it appears that people have a rather accurate image of the amount of interaction that takes place between the residents within other neighbourhoods.

Table 5: Perceived levels of neighbourhood interaction

Type of neighbourhood	Greet their neighbours	Help their neighbours
Slum	1,68	2,33
Low Middle class Mubahn	2,66	2,37
High middle class Mubahn	3,35	2,74
Low Middle class condo	2,75	2,85
High middle class condo	3,82	3,13

But where the wealthy are perceived to interact less within their own community, they are also perceived to contribute most to underprivileged groups of society. We asked whether inhabitants believed the residents of the various neighbourhood types where willing to contribute money to underprivileged groups. As Table 6 shows, on this variable both the high middle class *mubahnchatsan* and the high middle class condo scored better then their less expensive counterparts. Of course wealth plays an important part in the ability to give money in the first place but this possibility should be combined with the willingness to actually do this and in the eyes of most of the respondents at least the willingness is still present. However, the fact that the lower middle class *mubahnchatsan* scores higher then the high middle class condo indicates that wealth is not the only important factor. But still at least for the high middle class *mubahnchatsan* it can be said that although community participation appears to be missing, the general perception seems to be that the residents of the exclusive neighbourhoods are still willing to contribute to society and in this way still are part of society. While this view holds true for the majority of the respondents it doesn't apply to the inhabitants of the slum who actually see themselves as the group that contributes most to the underprivileged. At the same time, all other groups perceive them as the group that contributes the least. Again this shows that the views of the slum dwellers and the views on the slum dwellers are not in line. It may indicate an exclusionary position of the inhabitants of informal settlements within society.

Table 6: Perception on willingness to contribute to the underprivileged

Type of neighbourhood	Highest level of solidarity	Runner up
HM Mubahn	HM mubahn 2,40	LM Mubahn 2,55
LM Mubahn	HM Mubahn 2,46	LM mubahn 2,48
HM Condo	LM mubahn 2,59	HM Mubahn 2,70
LM Condo	HM mubahn 2,33	LM Mubahn 2,51
Slum	Slum 2,10	HM mubahn 2,38

Finally, although the perceptions of and on the slum dwellers are not always in line with each other, Table 7 indicates that the respondents all see themselves as part of the entire Bangkok society and that they don't see any clear social divides within society. This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that all respondents claimed to be equally proud of being a resident of Bangkok as a whole as of their neighbourhood in particular.

Table 7: Pride taken in being a resident of Bangkok and your current neighbourhood

Type of neighbourhood	Proud to live in Bangkok	Proud to live in neighbourhood
Slum	2,21	2,16
Low Middle class Mubahn	2,27	2,15
High middle class Mubahn	2,22	2,25
Low Middle class condo	2,44	2,59
High middle class condo	2,24	2,13

We conclude that the opinions that various groups of inhabitants of Bangkok's neighbourhoods have of each other seem to be in line with the self-perception of these groups. But there is one exception: the self-image of the inhabitants of informal settlements is much more positive than the image that other groups have over these Bangkok residents. The surprised statement of Nat on the friendliness of slum inhabitants at the farewell meeting of our research project, with which we started this article, clearly illustrates this fact.

CONCLUSION

According to the 'narrative of loss' concerning the spatial restructuring of cities around the world, a splintered spatial structure results in a lack of social integration. Our empirical research especially focused on this link between spatial form and social networks. This research shows that indeed there are remarkable differences between the social lives of the inhabitants of various neighbourhood types. In general it seems, that the lower the income, the smaller the daily urban networks, but also the more integrated. In informal settlements, social life is rich and thriving; in expensive *mubahnchatsan* it seems to be hardly existent. However, in line with the conclusions of the 'social network' research, adjoining research into meeting places indicates that inhabitants of high middle class *mubahnchatsan* do have rich social networks in which they interact with members of their own income group. The difference is that these networks are not organized at a neighbourhood scale. So at first, looking at neighbourhood interaction and formal meeting places, the conclusion could easily be that different groups don't live 'together'. However, at the same time it was concluded on the basis of the unanimous evaluation of all social groups, that people of the various neighbourhoods do meet each other. Especially, informal meetings turned out to be crucial in this. At the same time, it turned out that the perception of inhabitants of informal settlements, and of these settlements itself in particular didn't conform to the lived experience of informal settlement inhabitants. In modern day marketing terms: the informal settlements of Bangkok and its inhabitants have an image problem.

So, we conclude that spatial form itself doesn't prevent people from meeting each other. It doesn't have a determining influence on social networks that can always still link. But at the same time it indicates that meeting itself is not enough for cross-group understanding. In Bangkok groups do meet, but perceptions – specifically of and on the inhabitants of informal settlements – don't seem to fit. This is all the more remarkable, because in general, people can go into slum areas, but like Nat, maybe nobody does. This leads to some very interesting questions: would a more integrated spatial setup prevent such differences in perception, as the authors of the narrative of loss seem to think? Are there other means for social integration? Do inhabitants of Bangkok themselves perceive this situation as problematic? To answer these questions, a more detailed analysis of social interaction is needed. For instance, it would be very interesting to create a research project in which different social groups interact concerning the spatial development of a specific area. Will it be possible to establish such interactions? How will communication develop? Will all groups play equal roles? It is to the creation of such a project, that the research will turn in the future.

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