


'Public' Prayer Rooms of Contemporary Bangkok

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ABSTRACT

 This paper investigates the exclusivity of Muslim prayer rooms found distributed throughout urban Bangkok. Although the prayer room can hardly be considered domestic, its existence is not really 'public' either. Increasingly, this little worship space is accommodated in some public facilities owned by state organizations and private corporations. In this paper the prayer room is examined in three interrelated scales: the geographical network, the placement of the room within a facility and the interior. The examination reveals inscribed body-place relationships which are conceived specifically to different projected images of each place and different social categorizations of Muslim users.

Keywords: *prayer room, public space, Muslim space, subjectivity, spatiality*

INTRODUCTION

In nations neighboring Thailand, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, Muslims are in the majority. Many Thai Muslims who have visited the countries agree that the prayer room is a very common element found in public facilities. When it is time for prayer, they think about the room before the mosque. Its importance and omnipresence in these countries allow one to consider the prayer room an essential form of 'Muslim space'. But in Bangkok, the capital of a Buddhist kingdom, one should not consider the prayer room in the same manner. Here, the room is seldom found. In fact, the prayer room is an exclusive function found mainly in private sector facilities.

For devout Muslims, the prayer room increasingly becomes a part of daily life. This paper's investigation is specifically organized around the accommodations of the individual prayer room in the city of Bangkok.¹ The term 'public' added to the prayer room here, however, is not used without intention. It is specifically employed to problematize prayer rooms in 'public' places. They are to be found mostly within the seemingly-public facilities of private organizations, i.e. shopping malls, private hospitals, and exhibition centers. Although the prayer room is accommodated within such facilities, its public awareness is ambiguous, as it is a controlled environment rather than a conventional public space. Moreover, it involves different groups of Muslim

¹ This paper is part of the chapter 'Public' Prayer Rooms of the author's research: 'Stranger' / 'Home-Land': Muslim Practice and Spatial Negotiation in Contemporary Bangkok, PhD Dissertation, Architectural Association School of Architecture, 2012.

users, such as foreigners or locals and customers or workers – not generally Muslims as a segment of the Thai public. Ultimately, the paper aims to understand how particular relationships between the Muslim prayer room and the Thai metropolis are constituted.

PRAYER ROOMS AND BODILY PRACTICES

The prayer room is a function closely associated with the body and the city. It is both a material support for the practice of the five daily prayers as regulated by Islam, and it can also be considered as a public function increasingly found in the contemporary city. In the discussions below, the fundamental properties of this space are explained through the relationship between the body and its interior organization and elements. Secondly, the present conditions of Bangkok's prayer room are reviewed.

A Room for Prayer

The prayer room is a space organized in particular ways and equipped with particular elements so that the procedures of the prayer can take place properly. In its spatial organization, the prayer room is commonly a walled space. The size of the room has no certain standard but depends on the probable number of users. The other crucial function of the room is to provide the direction to the city of Mecca (Qibla) in Saudi Arabia. The room is not necessarily planned emphasizing the Qibla axis, but the users should be able to re-orient their bodies towards that direction. As a supporting function to the prayer space, the area for the ablution of the body before the prayer is to be provided either within the room or in a separated area nearby. Another necessary condition is the division of the prayer area according to gender (see Figures 1-7).



Figure 1:
Prayer area



Figure 2:
Direction to Mecca (Qibla)



Figure 3:
Ablution Corner



Figure 4:
Partition between sexes



Figure 5:
Prayer Mats



Figure 6:
Prayer Dress



Figure 7:
Praying Calendar

Figures 1-7:
Basic elements of the Muslim prayer room

Besides its spatial organization, the prayer room includes objects determined primarily by function. The most common element is the prayer mat. It is not a religious requirement to pray on the mat but it provides comfort during the practice. The mat is the smallest spatial unit defined by the movements of the body during the prayer. In many cases, sets of religious dresses for women (*telekong*) to perform their prayers are provided in a small closet. In some cases this includes garments for men (*sarong* and skull hat). Many prayer rooms also have

prayer calendars. Because the calendar usually has beautiful images of mosques, both local and international, it also becomes a decorative element.

PRAYER ROOMS IN BANGKOK'S 'PUBLIC' FACILITIES

Although the main function of the prayer room is fundamentally related to an intimate practice, the description of this space as a 'room' is inherently urban. In Muslim homes in Bangkok, however, the prayer room does not actually exist. There is only an area where the prayer is often carried out, which is not necessarily defined as a room. It is uncommon to dedicate a room only to the prayer practice. It is implied that a prayer room is one that is located outside the domestic realm. By the term 'public', the paper focuses on prayer rooms found in the facilities of state organizations and those in private or corporate organizations which appear public.² Nevertheless, the public character of the prayer room and the Muslim users as members of the public are not to be conceived in a straightforward manner. Different prayer rooms maintain different forms and degrees of 'publicness'. Some are generally open to everyone while some appear exclusive or operated through certain restrictions. Before starting an investigation into such ambiguity, it is crucial to understand the present conditions of Bangkok's prayer rooms.

² This includes the public facilities owned by the state but contracted to operate over the long term by private companies and also the facilities of state enterprises (Rattawisaahagit). In some private organizations where the number of Muslim employees is significant, prayer rooms can also be provided. But this kind of prayer space is not open to the public. Only some examples used by the public will be discussed.

Social and Legislative Contexts

It is quite common knowledge that *lamat*, or *namaz*, is a predominant form of prayer in Islam. Nevertheless, the public prayer room is an unfamiliar element in the Thai capital due to two factors; the rare chance for the Thai majority to witness the prayer ritual, and not understanding that prayer is obligatory five times daily – at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and nighttime.

Unlike the necessity of facilities for the disabled, which are now required by Thai building codes in most public buildings, the prayer room is not recognized in any form of legislation.³ Most Muslim prayer rooms are initiated by individual organizations. In most cases, however, the room is an addition rather than an element integrated in the design and construction processes. The comparison between the facilities for the disabled and the Muslims here is not exactly an issue of equality, as the categories are not compatible, but rather a concern of subjectivity employed. It reveals that whereas the function of the disabled has become an established requirement, the public prayer room is still an unfamiliar element ambiguously defined.

Ownerships and Distributions

The historical development of public prayer rooms in Bangkok is unclear. It is certain, however, that in 1949, a room was initiated in Vajira Hospital's 'Muslim Building' (*Tuek Mutsalim*) by a group of wealthy Muslim families who had donated funds for constructing a building for Muslim patients.⁴ Although prayer rooms now appear in state facilities, they have mainly been provided and developed by the private sector in various shopping malls, hospitals, conference and exhibition centers. Some public facilities such as restaurants and hotels operated by Muslim entrepreneurs include prayer rooms.

The types of ownership, however, do not reflect simple patterns of distribution. The room cannot be easily found everywhere. Because there is no legal or official requirement for prayer rooms, the availability of these spaces in Bangkok does not depend on a central planning authority, but on the managerial decisions of various organizations, all of which differ from each other. Also, there is currently no official report or account on the provisions and locations of prayer rooms by state organizations.⁵ Nevertheless, the patterns of prayer rooms can be roughly defined as more intensified in Bangkok's city areas than in the suburbs. The availability prayer rooms in public facilities' allow the rooms to play a significant role alongside mosques.

THE PRAYER-ROOM RELATIONSHIP: RITUAL AND PLACE

The Muslim prayer room is an interesting site where different forms of relationships between subjectivity and spatiality develop. This section addresses the theoretical framework in relation to conceptions of the subject and place. Specifically, the prayer room is entangled in the tension between a constructed body-place relationship and the effects of this relationship on notions of the public and public space.

Because most of the prayer rooms in Bangkok are not operated by Muslim groups, the existence of a prayer room is inevitably determined by the ways in which the Muslims and their practices are externally conceptualized. Referring to Homi Bhabha, this raises the question of how subjects with marginal positions are pedagogically accounted for or omitted by the more powerful authorities (Bhabha, 1994). And in relation to Henri Lefebvre's discussion on social spatiality of perceived, conceived and lived spaces, this would be a question of how public

³ This is possibly due to the fact that although the Muslim prayer is obligatory it has a certain level of flexibility to be performed outside the mosque and prayer room.

⁴ Bangkok international airport's (Don Mueang) prayer room is included in the plan of the terminal building in 1995. For Vajira hospital, the report on the attempt to develop the Muslim Building can be found in Massari P. (1995) "Garanee Seuksa Rong Payaabarn Mutsalim Nai Prathet-Thai [the Muslim Hospital in Thailand: A Case Study]," Santichon Magazine June-August, pp. 27-35.

⁵ It is only recent that around 20 prayer rooms are included in the map of mosques, prayer rooms and Muslim organizations distributed during the exhibition Muslims@Bangkok organized by Muslim Siam Forum for Art & Culture at Bangkok Art and Culture Center (BACC) between 12-13 May 2012.

domains are conceived and represented by such authorities (Lefebvre, 1991). In this regard, the prayer room can be considered a reflection of forms of Muslim subjectivity and spatiality conceived by different organizations.

These formations are specifically constituted around the manipulation of diverse intersections of ritual and place. To investigate the prayer room's exclusivity or openness, it is, therefore, important that the particular body-place relationship constructed in relation to the provision of the room is comprehended at different scales. As the Muslim prayer is a form of activity foreign to the conventional notion of the Thai body (its practices and representations), David Sibley's discussion of 'geographies of exclusion' becomes relevant as patterns of provision or absence of the prayer room in public facilities become specific indications of inclusionary or exclusionary conditions at the level of networks of places (Sibley, 1995).

At the scales of the building and the interior, the intersection of Judith Butler's discussion on social identities and Michel de Certeau's notion on places identities become relevant. For Butler, forms of subjectivity are constructed through the 'stylization of the body'. These are the 'performative' processes governing the abided gestures and movements of not only the gender identities but also other social identities (Butler, 1990). By this understanding, the Muslim subjectivity is broadly generalized through the practice of the prayer. But the conceived identity can be specifically differentiated further through places' various stylizations. For de Certeau, the way place is represented or conceived can be investigated in its construction and reconstruction that are projected as 'proper' for certain social identity. Propriety also governs forms of operations which require 'strategies' to manipulate an owned place in various determined ways (De Certeau, 1984).

Indeed, the conceptual formation of subjectivity through bodily actions is not formed in a vacuum, and the provision or the control of place is not formed without the body. By bringing together Sibley's, Butler's, and de Certeau's notions, the investigation on the emergence and organization – both spatial

and temporal, both within and without – of the prayer room are the ways in which certain conceptions of the subject's social identities and degrees of publicness of places can be clarified.

PRAYER ROOMS AND CONSTRUCTED RELATIONSHIPS

This section delves into current yet unknown conditions of prayer rooms in Bangkok. The rooms provided by state and corporate organizations, found in various building types and economic were investigated. In these terms, the prayer room becomes a unit in which relationships between body and place are constructed and operated by positions of authority. The constructs and operations are analyzed in different yet interrelated scales.

DISTRIBUTING PATTERNS IN THE URBAN AREA

Prayer rooms do not function in isolation from the city. Although each facility's prayer room is set according to the policy of each organization, it is also conceived in relation to the facility's physical location and context. A departure from Bangkok's centrality will enable a perspective and an understanding of the relationship between the city center and its surroundings.

The Centrality of Bangkok

Focusing on prayer rooms of state facilities in central Bangkok reveals a near-empty center. Most of the prayer rooms are located in the outer areas of Bangkok. This correlates with the architectural programs of these facilities, which are more related to international and regional users: the new national stadium, a train hub, two regional coach stations and an internationally-famous weekend market.⁶ Only two medium-sized hospitals provide prayer rooms for Muslims (see Figure 8).⁷ In fact, many prayer rooms in these state facilities came to exist

⁶ These are Rajamangala stadium, Hua Lampong central train station, Ekamai and Mochit regional coach stations and Jatujak weekend market. Mochit is the station for northern, northeastern, eastern and some central and southern routes and Ekamai is the station for routes to eastern seaside provinces.



Figure 8:
Prayer rooms at state facilities in central Bangkok

only through the negotiations of Muslim employees and organizations.⁸ Consequently there is the lack

of state-provided prayer rooms at the core of the Thai metropolis.

⁷ These are Vajira Hospital and Bangkok General Hospital (or Klang Hospital). It should be noted that Bangkok Art and Cultural Center (BACC) recently accommodates Muslim prayer room. But the initiative seems to come after the organization of the exhibition Muslims@Bangkok at the venue between 12-13 May 2012 as there was no prayer room provided at the time.

⁸ For Bangkok General, the room was requested by a group of Muslim employees, with the help of Muttafa Manga who was the vice mayor of Bangkok between 2000 and 2004 (Interview, Khwanlada Sudsertsin, 31 January 2011). Similar to the hospital, the prayer room of Rajamangala sport complex, completed in 2009, was initiated by a Muslim executive, Dr. Nonchai Santibutr, the Director of Office of the Governor at the Sport Authority of Thailand (Interview, Nonchai Santibutr, 1 February 2011). At Jatujak weekend market, there are two prayer rooms: an old prayer room, which was constructed long ago by Muslim sellers, and a new prayer room, which was completed in the period when a Muslim officer, Aroon Srijaroon, became the director of the market in 2009 (ThaiPR.NET, Talardnud Jatujak Perd Haung Lamat Nerng Nai Deuan Rommadon [Jatujak Market Opened the Prayer Room in Ramadan Month] (Thailand Press Release, 27 August 2009 [cited 28 January 2011]); available from <http://www.thaipr.net/general/247119>. It should be noted that, for both the sport complex and the market, the main reason of the provision of the prayer room is the upgrading of the facilities to the international level.

The absence of prayer rooms in state facilities in central Bangkok is largely filled by the private sector (see Figure 9). Indeed, the landscape of prayer rooms is shaped by business aims. Nearly

all prayer rooms found in this area are owned by corporate organizations. This reflects a high correlation between centrality and internationality, because most prayer rooms are found at highly



Figure 9:
Prayer rooms at private facilities in central Bangkok

internationalized facilities such as luxurious shopping malls and hospitals.⁹ These prayer rooms are concentrated mainly around Ratchaprasong Intersection and generated by the continuing growth of Muslim foreigners participating in Thailand's medical tourism business. The prayer rooms in these facilities are initiated mainly to support this specific group of foreign customers and patients; this intention is very evident in the Arabic version of websites (see for example, Figures 10-12). Although local Muslims also have access to the rooms, they are not the group initially targeted as the users of these international facilities. Central Bangkok, as

seen from the development of these facilities, is an exclusive territory foreign even to the local Muslims.

Besides the center of Bangkok the location of prayer rooms indicate the connection from the capital to regional and international destinations. To add to the list of state facilities, two airports and a regional coach station provide prayer rooms.¹⁰ This provision seems to be related to the functional standards of an international transportation hub. In the case of the coach station, the provision is significantly related to the majority of Thai Muslims who live outside Bangkok, in particular the southern region.

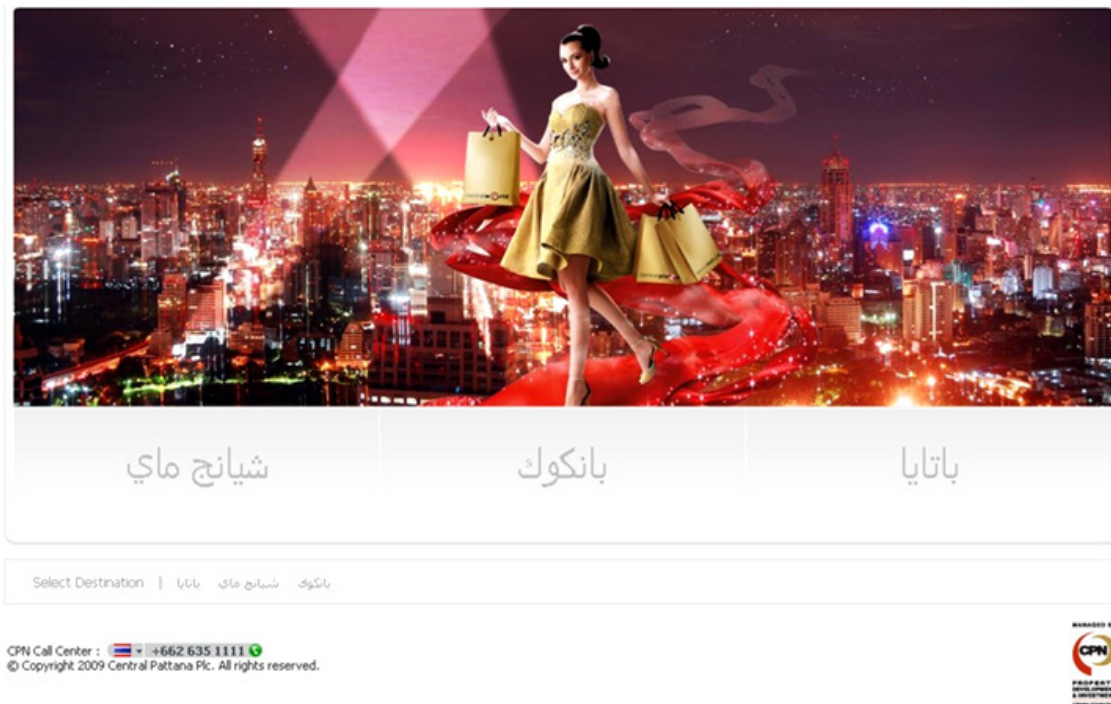


Figure 10:
Homepage of Central World Plaza in Arabic

⁹ These notable shopping venues are Central Chidlom, Central World Plaza and Siam Paragon. The less famous malls that are still frequented by foreign Muslim customers are MBK Center, Platinum, Robinson Sukhumvit, and recently IT Mall Fortune Town. (Central World Plaza is the only place where there was an open ceremony for the prayer room; the invited openers were Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Thailand and an ex-minister who is a Thai Muslim. Kampong Newspaper September 2009.) For hospitals, these highly international places are Bumrungrad, Bangkok Hospital and Samitivej. In addition, Vejthani, Piyavej, Phyathai and Paolo also target foreign Muslim patients.

¹⁰ In this case, the airports are Suvarnabhumi and Don Mueang. For the coach stations, this is Saitai (the station for southern routes).



Figure 11:
Homepage of MBK Center in Arabic



Figure 12:
Homepage of Bumrungrad Hospital in Arabic

For private organizations, the random locations of facilities providing the prayer room are three conference and exhibition centers.¹¹ Although each of these centers is a significant local venue, each promotes its status as internationally recognized. Their prayer rooms are not merely initiated by considerations towards local Muslims but as entities representing their international status.

The Other Centrality

If the existence of public prayer rooms in central Bangkok is highly determined by universal standards and exclusive privileging of foreigners, the rooms in areas further from the center facilitate local users. But, again, the provision of the rooms is mainly recognized by business organizations. Within the *Ramkhamhaeng* and *Klongtan* districts in the east Bangkok, there are a considerable number of Muslim communities. Although they are not the majority, the presence of these urban communities triggered the creation of prayer rooms. They create a scattered pattern found in local malls and hospitals (Figure 13).¹² For the areas of *Minburi* and *Nongjok*, Bangkok's peripheral east, where the number of Muslim communities is the highest, only a loose concentration is found (Figure 14), mainly in private

hospitals. In local malls, it is common to find many Muslim eateries but no prayer rooms.¹³ Like the prayer rooms of state facilities, it should be noted that some of the rooms here exist due to the initiatives of Muslim employees.¹⁴

Besides state and private facilities, the facilities owned by Muslims are increasingly providing prayer rooms. The reason is the considerable number of Muslim communities in transitional and peripheral Bangkok. Although such facilities can be found in the center of the city, concentrated patterns emerge only in transitional east Bangkok (see figure 13).¹⁵ The area includes one Muslim hotel and approximately a dozen Muslim restaurants, many advertised as specializing in 'international' cuisines.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the facilities in this network share a slightly similar conception with large corporate organizations with regards to Muslim customers, who are seen as a special group interested in and able to afford trying multinational food which is normally not *halal* (religiously allowed). The advertisements of these facilities often include the prayer room as a special service. Accordingly, these emerging Muslim facilities with prayer rooms on the east of Bangkok are collectively becoming an exceptional network distinct from other ordinary Muslim facilities.

¹¹ These facilities are Queen Sirikit National Convention Center (QSNCC), Impact Convention and Exhibition Center (IMPACT) and Bangkok International Trade and Exhibition Center (BITEC). QSNCC is the only facility in central Bangkok; although the place is a state property, it has been operated by a private company since its opening in 1991.

¹² The concentrating area is particularly along parts of Ramkhamhaeng, Ladprao and Srinakarin roads. Two major malls providing the prayer rooms are The Mall Ramkhamhaeng and The Mall Bangkapi, but from the ways in which the rooms are organized and operated the rooms are mainly provided for Muslim employees (the issue will be discussed in detail in the next section). A prayer room is also found at Seacon Square, once the fifth largest mall in the world, which since its early years in the 1990s has also targeted foreign customers. For private hospitals in this area, prayer rooms are provided at Ramkhamhaeng, Petcharavej and Vibharam hospitals. On the transitional west of Bangkok, there are Nontavej, a private hospital, and Robinson Department Store Rattanathibet for a considerable size of Muslim communities in Nontaburi, an adjacent province of Bangkok.

¹³ In this area, three private hospitals, Synphaet, Serirak and Navamin, and two state hospitals, Nopparat and Nongjok (Wetchakunrasm), provide the prayer room. Large suburban malls in the area such as Fashion Island, Carrefour, Big C and Tesco Lotus do not have the room. It is only recently that a new community mall, a small branch of Tesco Lotus, provides the prayer room.

¹⁴ At the Mall Ramkhamhaeng and the Mall Bangkapi, the prayer rooms are initiated and mainly used by Muslim employees since 2010 (Interview, Nassari Masamae and Suthep Boonmalert, 5 February 2011). For Nopparat Hospital, the room has been provided since 2006, a result of appeals from Muslim doctors, nurses and officers (Interview, Maream Daraman, 31 January 2011).

¹⁵ There are several Muslim restaurants with prayer rooms in the center (in Nana's Sukhumvit 3/1 and around that alley which is sometimes called 'the Middle-East Town of Bangkok') but these places mainly target Muslim foreigners.

¹⁶ In particular, the roads where these facilities are concentrated are Ramkhamhaeng, Rama IX and Srinakarin. The hotel located in this area is Regent Hotel & Apartments (while another Muslim hotel, New World Lodge, is located in the historical zone of Bangkok). The Muslim restaurants which are also located here are, for example, Sinthorn (multi-national cuisines), Fahana (Italian cuisine) and Aladin (Japanese cuisine).

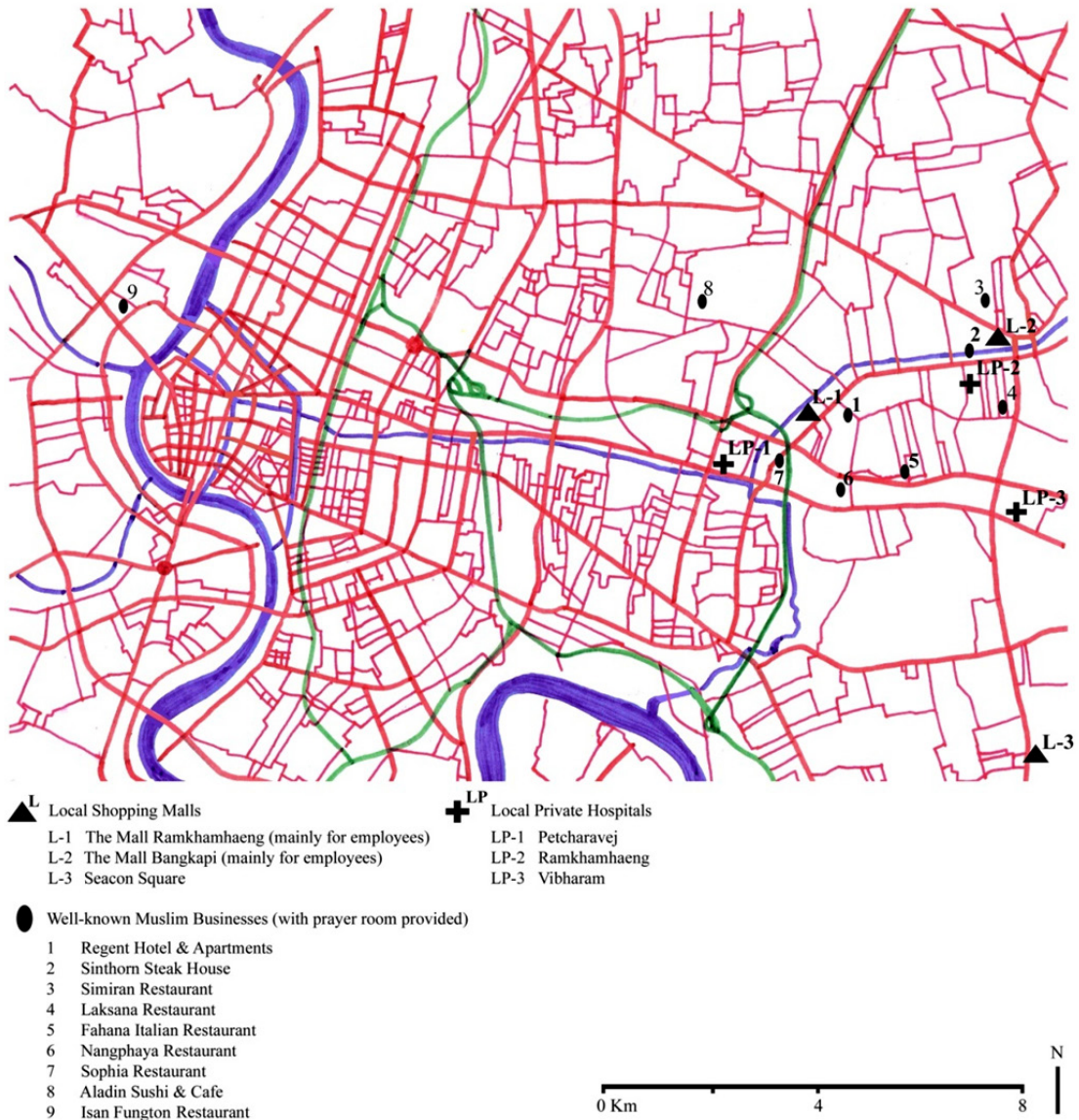


Figure 13:
Prayer rooms at private facilities in transitional Bangkok

By investigating distribution patterns of prayer rooms, new relationships between the prayer practice and public territories are recognized. What is found is that the clustering of prayer rooms in central Bangkok is based on criteria other than those concerning Bangkok Muslims. Contrary to this, the prayer rooms found in the transitional area of Bangkok are an alternative form of centrality related to local Muslims. According to these observations, the two conditions of centralities are socially and geographically consolidated.

FUNCTIONAL AND OPERATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN BUILDING

The existence and character of prayer rooms within public facilities are partly due to the function and position within the city as well as the internal organizational logistics. The spatial and temporal organization between the prayer room and the building in which the room is situated will be addressed.

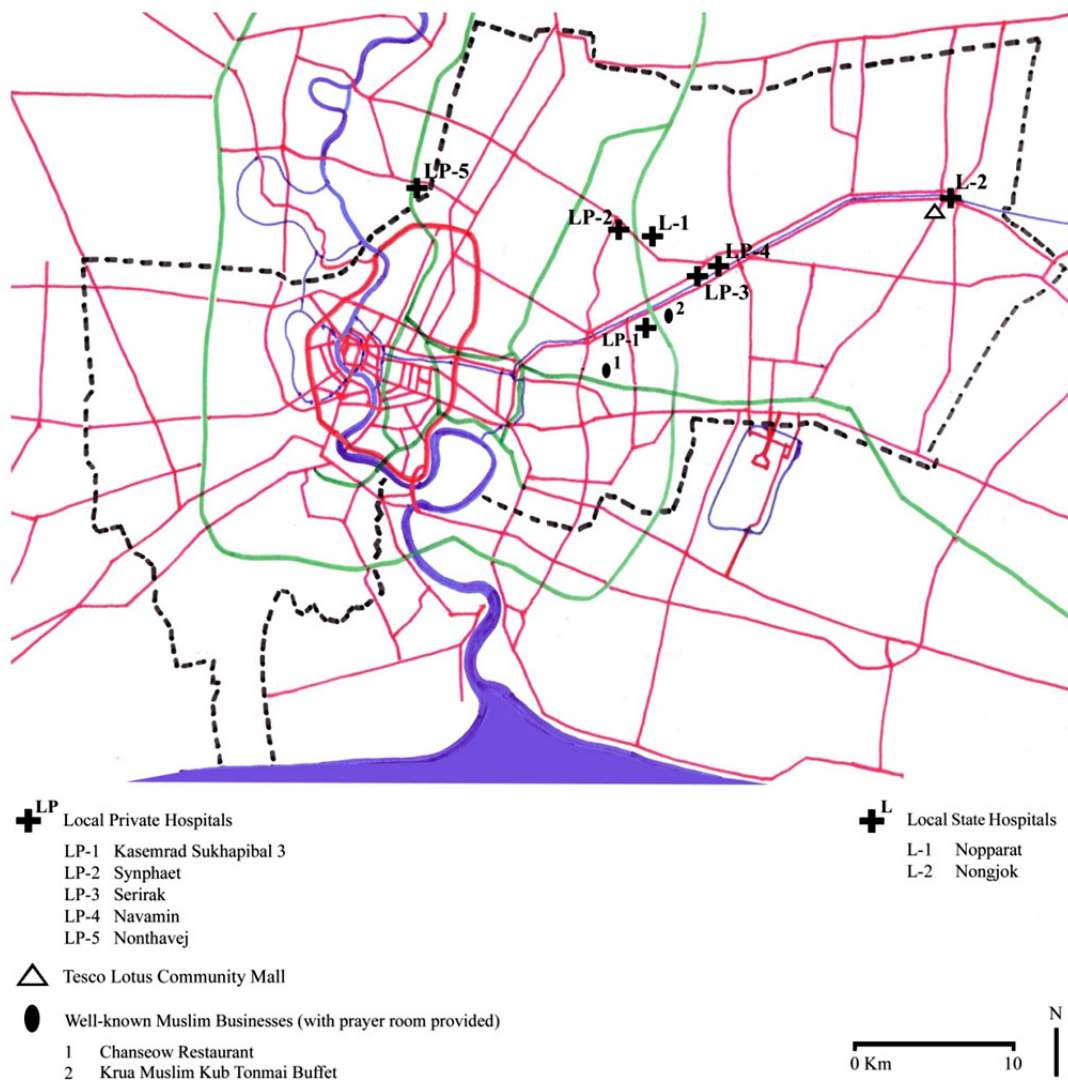


Figure 14:
Prayer rooms at state and private facilities in peripheral Bangkok

Locations and Connections

Because a prayer room is commonly an additional function, the ways in which the room is integrated into the spatial organization of each place reflects how the identity of place and the identity of user are conceived. Prayer rooms are often transformed from

available rooms or leftover spaces within buildings. In the case of hospitals, both state and private, a prayer room is commonly adapted from a patient's room in a ward. Nevertheless, in some private hospitals where there are many Muslim foreigners, the prayer room is purposely built outside the ward area (see Figures 15-16).¹⁷ This not only gives the

¹⁷ These hospitals are Bumrungrad and Bangkok hospitals (not to be confused with Bangkok General). Both are the leading hospitals servicing patients from the Middle East.



Figures 15-16:

The prayer rooms at a private hospital, Bumrungrad, and a state hospital, Bangkok General. The prayer room of Bangkok General is transformed from a patient room.

prayer room a better location, but also reflects the specificity of the ritual. By this comparison, the prayer of Muslim foreigners is given more importance and a dedicated space.

For other facilities, prayer room locations are often out of the main areas. Although, in these cases, there seems to be no difference between the locations of prayer rooms prepared for foreigners, locals, customers or workers. There is a significant difference by which these locations are linked to other parts of the host facility and how these connections are communicated.

The existence of prayer rooms are indicated through the placement of signs and symbols within each facility. In the most international facilities of Bangkok, such as shopping malls, hospitals, transportation hubs and exhibition and conference centers, prayer rooms are connected with other parts of the building through well-allocated signs (see Figures 17-20). Besides the name of the prayer room addressed in Thai and English, many of the signs include Arabic (*Musallah*). Moreover, the simplified figure of the 'body-in-prayer' as a symbol for the prayer room is also commonly used. Contrary to this, the prayer

rooms of local facilities serving local Muslims and Muslim employees are quite isolated from the rest of the buildings through ill-informed signage systems.¹⁸ The symbolic figure of the praying body is rarely used. Consequently, the provision of the room is often known to local Muslim visitors only through their own discovery or inquiring with the facility's information desk.

Regulations

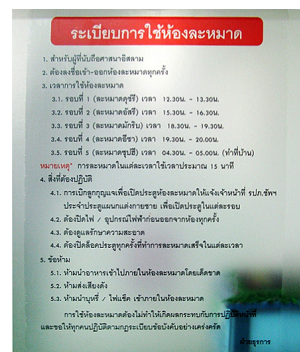
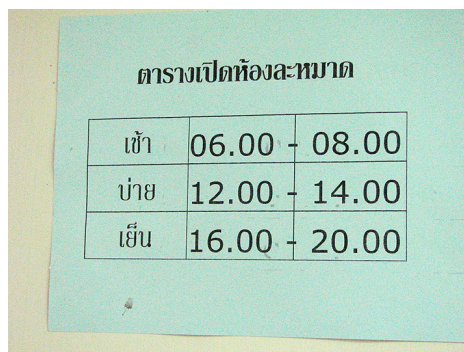
Relationships between prayer practice and place are also found in the way the rooms are managed. Several of the prayer rooms in shopping malls and local hospitals do not remain open throughout the service hours of the facilities. There are three to four fixed periods in which the room can be used, and these are within an hour of each prayer time. This form of temporal organization appears more in local facilities (see Figures 21-23).¹⁹ The schedules of participation contrasts with the way daily prayers are actually practiced. From noon to late evening all four prayer times are in fact continuing from one to another and it is not necessary to pray at the beginning of each time.

¹⁸ The notable exception here is the prayer room of Seacon Square shopping mall.

¹⁹ For local facilities, the scheduled service is found at The Mall Bangkok, Vajira Hospital and Synphaet Hospital. Although the schedules and regulations of The Mall Bangkok seem to be addressed to its Muslim employees, they are also applied to general users.



Figures 17-20:
Prayer room signs in international facilities, such as Bumrungrad Hospital, Piyavej Hospital, Robinson Sukhumvit and MBK Center are well-distributed.



Figures 21-23:
Signs addressing scheduled service hours and regulations of prayer rooms at local facilities: Vajira Hospital, Synphaet Hospital and The Mall Bangkapi.

Another issue relates to the ways in which usage is recorded. A group of facilities requires participants to sign in and record the time. (see Figures 24 - 25). These requirements are construed as alienating

because it is a mandate to generate a visiting record justifying the necessity of the room. This form of request is found at two shopping malls, five hospitals and one sport stadium; nearly all of them are the

prayer rooms mainly used by local Muslims.²⁰ This practice is not required at international facilities as prayer rooms are established through functional standards of building types, such as the airport or coach station, or through exclusivity, such as the luxurious mall. Both through establishing service hours and requiring identification reflect the notion of place through forms controlling its internal elements and users.

By examining the spatial and temporal organizations of prayer rooms, the body-place relationships inscribed by the provision of the rooms can be revealed. Each room is established differently as part of each public facility. For instance, prayer rooms of international facilities are well embedded into the places more than the rooms of local facilities. Likewise, international facilities seem to connect the rooms with their operating hours better than local facilities. The degree of public awareness of rooms in international facilities seems to be higher than that of local facilities. The ritual of the prayer is not hidden, confined only within the often isolated prayer room or welcomed only during certain time periods.

ARRANGEMENTS OF THE INTERIOR

The relationship between the prayer practice and the prayer room can be investigated from the room's interior design. The prayer room's internal organizations are not always determined by the prayer practice. Besides the necessity to provide an intimate praying space, with an ablution area and the direction of Mecca all other arrangements are not essential to the prayer practice but are related to the projected identity of each place and its users.

Spatial Arrangements

The provision of additional areas from the prayer space not only conveys a sense of luxury but also reflects a special recognition towards certain Muslim groups. Focusing on the spatial division of the two sexes, the prayer rooms in facilities frequently visited by local Muslims are commonly designated as a single room. This means there is no appropriate



Figures 24-25:

Signing Books at a local hospital, Ramkhamhaeng, and a local mall, The Mall Bangkapi.

²⁰ These are MBK Center, the Mall Bangkapi, Klang Hospital, Vajira Hospital, Nopparat Hospital, Nontavej Hospital, Ramkhamhaeng Hospital, and Rajamangala National Stadium. There are two places which are possibly visited by Muslim foreigners: MBK and Rajamangala.

separation between men and women. The contrary is found in most prayer rooms of facilities visited by Muslim foreigners (Figures 26-29).²¹ In addition to this, the provision of the ablution area can also be differentiated. Most ablution areas in world-class facilities are purposely built and are generally separate from the prayer room. If it is located inside the room, it is often of quality design. Less attention, however, is given to ablution spaces in local facilities (Figures 30-31).

There are often areas beyond the actual requirement of the daily prayers in several facilities regularly

visited by Muslim foreigners (Figures 32-35). The exemplary cases are Bumrungrad Hospital and Central Chidlom, the two most luxurious facilities. Besides the provision of separate prayer rooms for different sexes and the dedicated ablution area, these facilities also provide sets of privileged areas redefining common practices in the prayer room. At Bumrungrad, the prayer room has an expanded gathering area equipped with a set of comfortable sofas located in front of the room; it is also the largest prayer room, due to the facility having a significant number of Muslim patients and employees. The room is even used for the weekly congregational



Figures 26-29:

Internationalized facilities often have the prayer space divided by sexes; here, the prayer rooms of MBK shopping center and Piyavej Hospital are shown above. At local facilities, the room is often provided as a single room; in the pictures below, the prayer rooms of The Mall Bangkapi and Nongjok Hospital are examples.

²¹ Most prayer rooms of internationalized facilities, such as Central World, Central Chidlom, Bumrungrad Hospital and Bangkok Hospital provide the prayer room for both sexes. Among local facilities, only several provide a small partition within the room. These include The Mall Bangkapi, Nontavej Hospital, and Nopparat Hospital.



Figures 30-31:

At international facilities, the ablution area is often provided as a separated space while at local facilities, it is often provided within the prayer room. Here are examples from Bangkok Hospital and Seacon Square.



Figures 32-35:

Additional areas in or in front of the prayer rooms where Muslim foreigners regularly visit. Above pictures are from Bumrungrad Hospital, Bangkok Hospital, Central Chidlom and Robinson Sukhumvit.

prayer on Friday. The department store provides an area of comfortable sofas and a table, a corner for making tea or coffee and a set of lockers for personal belongings during the prayer. Although the prayer space here is relative small in comparison to other places, the additional areas offer the highest sense of privilege for Muslim customers.²²

Decorations

Besides the differences in spatial arrangements, there are also different levels of preparation of objects related to the prayer. These include prayer mats, praying attire for Muslim women and men, plus shelves of religious books. Generally, international facilities are better equipped, as the elements of the prayer room become a sign of global standards and privilege. A beautiful set of women's praying attire is found neatly hanging at Central Chidlom. At Central World Plaza, the provided dresses are advertised as being changed daily.²³ These minute service details mean the highest attention is given to the prayer practice. Contrary to these classy and high-standard facilities, in local facilities these objects are not provided, or are provided carelessly or inadequately.

The issue of adornment is also central to the constructed identities of place and its users. More attention is clearly given to prayer rooms

provided for international customers according to international standards. The prayer room of Central Chidlom is the most stylish and it clearly involved designers. (Figures 34, 36-38). Pointed arches are used to define entries as well as acting as the *mihrab* giving direction to Mecca; there is no superfluous element to create a sense of exclusive solitude. Also, a partition defining the ablution area is made of blocks in a beautiful geometric pattern. At Central World, although the planning seems awkward, the decoration stands out. Here, the walls of the entry corridor are covered by wallpaper in an 'Islamic' pattern. Likewise, Paolo Hospital and Bangkok Hospital try to incorporate patterns, arches and pavilions into the decorations (Figures 39-42). At Bumrungrad hospital and Bangkok's international airport, the prayer rooms are covered by large ornamented carpets. These highly adorned atmospheres are not found in ordinary facilities. Local rooms contain banal decorations put up here and there consisting mostly of images of religious sites. Additionally, the condition of prayer rooms provided mainly for Muslim employees in local facilities can be worse, as things are provided in very poor condition (Figures 43-44).

By investigating the body-place relationship through the interior condition of the prayer room, the sense of exclusivity of the prayer room at the more internationalized facility is affirmed. The relationship



Figures 36-38:

The prayer room at Central Chidlom shopping center, which targets foreign Muslim, appears to be the best equipped and decorated prayer room.

²² Robinson Sukhumvit is another mall frequented by Muslim foreigners which also provides an additional seating area, a coffee corner and a bookshelf.

²³ Kampong Newspaper September 2009.



Figures 39-42:
Examples of prayer room decorations in international facilities. These pictures are from Central World Plaza, Paolo Hospital, Bangkok Hospital and Rajamangala National Stadium, respectively.



Figures 43-44:
The prayer room at The Mall Ramkhamhaeng. The room, in poor condition, seems to be provided mainly for Muslim employees but is also used by customers.

that is found relates to the way in which the practice of the prayer is connected with additional areas, special objects and decorations. These provisions operate through the minute understanding of the prayer procedures, through the specific extension of the prayer's related activities and through the projected atmosphere enhancing the performance of the prayer. What is significant is the contrast between the interior of international and local facilities; the internal organizations reflect specific conceptions of users and specific identities of places.

CONCLUSION

The Muslim prayer room is a function increasingly found in Bangkok's public places, yet it is an ambiguous 'public' facility. This paper investigated the current exclusivity of the prayer rooms of state and corporate organizations which changes the conventional notion of public space. The development of each prayer room is made through different conceptions of the patrons. These conceptions are based on 'foreign' and 'local' categorization, in regard to marketing priority. The distinction, gradually unfolding throughout the examination, constantly intersects with the general distinction of the social class of users, the richer Muslims (mainly foreigners) and the poorer Muslims (mainly locals). The latter also contains differences between potential customers and employees. In terms of spatiality, the conclusions of these multi-faceted and multi-scale relationships between the prayer practice and the prayer room also form limitations of the degree of public awareness and the increasing degrees of exclusivity.

More and more, public prayer rooms become utilized by Muslim minorities working and living in urban Bangkok. The investigation reveals that there are many important state-facilities which could accommodate a prayer room on the basis that they are regularly visited. Nevertheless, the critical question for further investigation is how the constructed relationships between the prayer room, the prayer practice and the participants are being negotiated or altered by practicing Muslims. The central concern for the task is not, however, to bring back a familiar sense of the term 'public' to this specific facility and its users, a specific part of the Thai public. Rather, it should be the negotiating processes engendering the particular formations of intimate spatiality and Muslim subjectivity in the city of Bangkok.

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