



12 THE URBAN PALIMPSEST: THE TRANSFORMATION OF BANGKOK AND ITS PALACES DURING THE COLONIAL ERA

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Introduction

We seek an understanding of cities, and the role they play in the evolution of cultures and civilizations, by looking within them, searching for patterns, asking questions about the growth and decline of cities, the forms into which they grow, and the effect of these forms upon urban culture and life. Although it is only partial in the understanding of the city, the bulk of the material of the urban form is enormously rich (Summerson 1963: 166). Traditionally, architectural history mainly concerned itself with "high architecture", as expressed in great civic buildings (Ackerman 1980: 72), thus the total building output of the city, the entire system of built form, was not properly understood. Similarly, urban history traditionally concerned itself with the urban heritage of the major world civilizations, such as India or China. The urban forms of the lesser world cultures, such as Southeast Asian cities, are largely unseen and unstudied (O'Connor 1983: 114). Despite the fact that the geographical location between the major world cultures has left this region with a rich and diverse texture of urban forms, it was traditionally accepted that "South-East Asia in general does not have a strong urban tradition" when compared to East or South Asia (Yeung and Lo 1976: xvii).

This study argues that there certainly was a local language of urban form which has evolved, palimpsest-like, through history. The early urban scape has left impressions which remain and shape succeeding built forms of varying styles. Unfortunately, nowadays that language seems to be poorly understood, within the contemporary climate of globalization. The palimpsest is on the verge of being discarded, as Paul Ricoeur describes: "Thus we come to the crucial problem confronting nations just rising from underdevelopment. In order to get on to the road toward modernization, is it necessary to jettison the old cultural past which has been the *raison d'être* of a nation?" (Ricoeur, 1965: 277). Instead, the heritage of urban form should be carefully read and interpreted, in order to create a firm standing point for a city capable of consciously interfacing with the forthcoming global changes.

In order to navigate through the rich texture of Bangkok's urban palimpsest, a theory of Southeast Asian urbanism postulated by Richard O'Connor (1983) is taken by this study. According to that theory, there are two concepts that are common to most Southeast Asian urbanism, *internal essence* and *external paradigm* (O'Connor, 1983: 11). *Internal essence* is the sphere of social and cultural cohesion, deeply-rooted in ethnic kinship and tradition. It is the intrinsic essence of the society that saturates in all levels of life, starting from a single house, to a city. It is what holds the city together, maintaining the stability and continuity of urban life.

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On the contrary, *external paradigm* is the way by which the elements of the community are arranged. Three sets of paradigm have been adopted consecutively in Southeast Asia: the Indic, the Colonial, and the Modern. "Today that world is modern, so everyone is ranked in a paradigm of modernity. Earlier, when the outside world was Indic, an Indic idiom defined the social hierarchy and its institutions of king, court, and social ranking" (O'Connor, 1983: 11-13).

The palimpsest-like urban form is a result of the dialectic interaction between internal essence and external paradigm, the latter being the stylistic and technological changes brought by the world outside. The interaction between the recurring themes and the contrasting variations of urban form is of interest here. The recurring themes thus represent the internal essence of urbanism, while the variations reflect the ever-shifting paradigm.

A major part of this study involves the systematic deconstruction of an urban fabric in terms of its constituent parts. As stated earlier, this study perceives the *typology* of the palace compound as a microcosm of the surrounding urban *morphology*. Formal and spatial elements of the palaces are here abbreviated into a typology that represents both the palace and the city. Furthermore, readings of city maps and images are also conducted, in order to validate the postulated urban typology.

The City and the Palaces

Bangkok was founded in 1782, fifteen years after the fall of the ancient Thai capital at Ayutthaya. The city was surrounded by water: the river to the west, and two parallel moats to the east, which formed a great system of urban armature that sustained all sorts of public activities, including transportation, commerce and defense (Suksri 1996:16-17). Palaces and temples were also constructed along these major waterways, forming neighborhood centers for the surrounding urban fabric that supported the population of 20,000 (Nagavatchara 1985: 71-72). The Grand Palace, the king's principal residence, was also the administrative center of the capital. Its urban supremacy was expressed through its commanding location and magnificent architecture. Covering an area of 61 acres, the Grand Palace was the epitome of an urban center (Fig. 1). The palace is divided into four parts: the Outer Court, the Central Court, the Inner Court, and the Palatine Temple (Kalyanamitr, 1982: 328-331).

The north side of the palace compound contained the Temple and the Outer Court. The latter part included the public buildings such as the law court, the royal treasury, and the garrison. Two ceremonial ways lead from the Outer Court to the most important area of the palace, the Central Court, which contained the throne hall, and the king's residence. To the south of that was the Inner Court, the domain of the royal consorts and their children, the living quarters for the female courtiers, guardswomen, and servants.

Apart from the Grand Palace, smaller palaces were also built

for members of the royal family. Building a palace compound was a major urban development strategy, as the city expanded into several directions over time. In the mid-nineteenth century, for instance, Bangkok fully expanded to its wall, so the king ordered a new moat dug further east. While the city almost doubled in size, princely palaces were built for the king's sons along the new moat, thereby giving direction to the city's future expansion in that way, and the extended area soon became populated.

Almost a century after the construction of the Grand Palace, Bangkok had expanded under the mounting pressure of Colonialism in the nineteenth century. After his return from a visit to Europe in 1897, King Rama V decided to build a summer palace on the outskirts of Bangkok, four kilometers to the north of the Grand Palace. In 1902, rice fields were purchased and transformed into a palace compound (Suksri, 1996: 195-196). Avenues, bridges, canals, and other infrastructures were also constructed, accommodating the subsequent development in the area. The results of this building program still resonate to this day in the configuration of Bangkok. The palace compound itself was in fact a showcase of the newly-acquired Colonial paradigm, imposed upon the traditional palace type, transforming it into a model for all urban developments around the country (Fig. 2).

Like the Grand Palace, the Dusit Palace consisted of three courts and a Palatine Temple. The Outer Court here was located at the eastern part of the compound. Its main entrance opened to the majestic throne hall, a domed structure in the Italian Renaissance style. To the west of the Outer Court was the Central Court, which contained the king's residences. The Inner Court of the Dusit Palace was located to the west of the Central Court, separated from other parts by two canals. The large area was one of the first Western-style housing developments in the country. It had villas and apartments for the female courtiers, all linked together by lakeside rambling paths.

Architectural Typology

Both palaces embodied a large number of buildings for various palatial functions. The common impression of a palace compound, as reflected by travelers' writings, is that of profuse splendor. In this study, however, a palace compound is considered to be more than just a spectacle of Thai architecture. Like a palimpsest, it is perceived as a microubanism which summarizes how the city had maintained its identity through the time of rapid transformation. Adaptations for survival are noticeable in both the typology of architectural forms, and in the planning principles that held these forms together.

The architectural typology of the Grand Palace was conceived from the social arrangement which put the king at the apex of the society, justified by Indic symbols of power. In case of the Dusit Palace, here was Bangkok's first encounter with the Colonial paradigm in full force. European architects,



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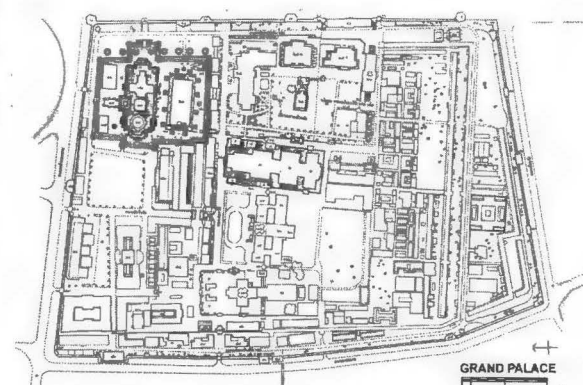
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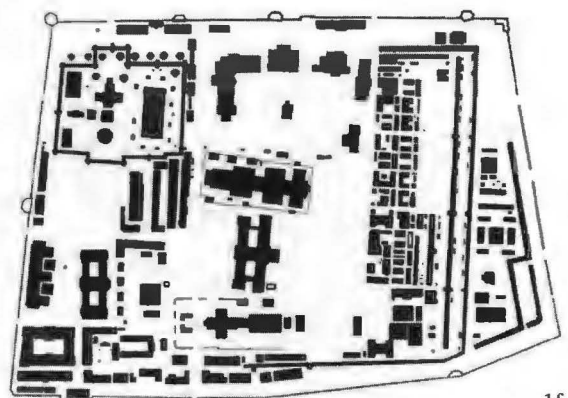
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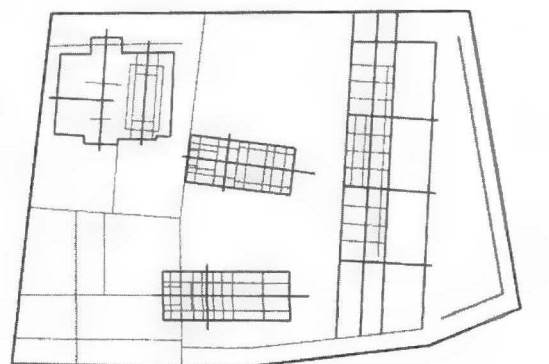
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Figure 1 The Grand Palace.

a Aerial view, looking south.

b Throne Hall.

c The king's residence.

d The Inner Court.

e Plan.

f Figure and ground.

g Geometry.



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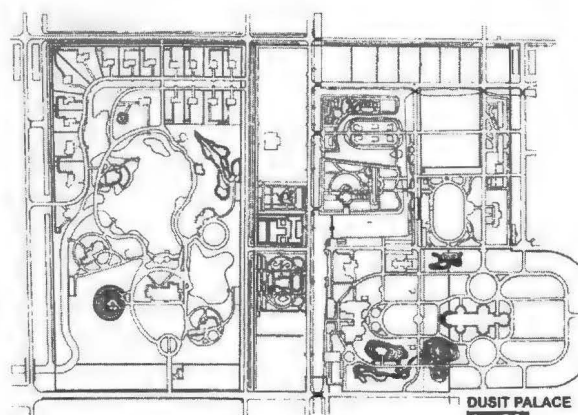
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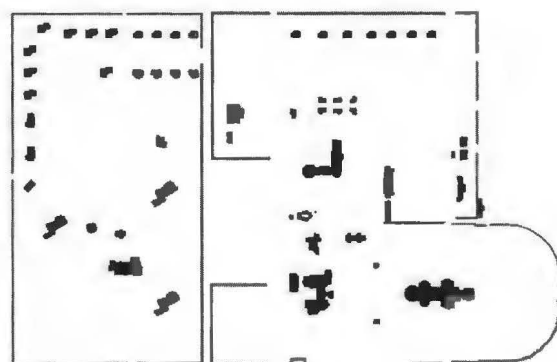
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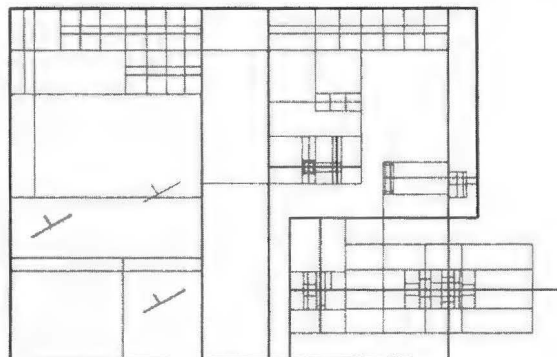
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Figure 2 The Dusit Palace

- a Aerial view, looking north
- b Throne Hall
- c The king's residence
- d The Inner Court
- e Plan
- f Figure and ground
- g Geometry

engineers, and gardeners were asked to replicate the grandeur that the king experienced on his journey through the European courts (Tiptus 1992: 17-18). Most dramatic was the change in the architectural typology, as the palatial functions remained basically Thai, but the form and space were attired in all sorts of European fashion of the new paradigm. Three examples of building types are chosen here to illustrate that *paradigm* change.

The first example is the throne hall (Fig. 1b, Fig. 2b). In the Grand Palace, the concept of divine kingship was made visible through the multi-tiered pyramidal spire, which represents Mount Meru, the Indic center of the universe. Inside was the throne, also shaped as Mount Meru in miniature, surrounded by images of deities and mythical animals (Jumsai 1988: 131-132). A hundred years later, the main throne hall of the Dusit Palace was built "...in the style of Italian Renaissance, and was generally considered to be the finest piece of this style east of Suez" (Seidenfaden, 1932: 252). The spire, the Indic model of Mount Meru, was here replaced by the dome, a Western model of heaven. The royal throne under the dome, however, was still executed in the traditional Thai style, complete with all Indic symbols of heaven and power.

Another example is the king's residence (Fig. 1c, 2c). In the Grand Palace, the king's residence was built in the traditional Thai style. The symmetrical, one-story floor plan was covered with tiers of gable roof, polychrome glazed tiles, and gilded gable decoration, all of which clearly manifested the king's sovereignty. In case of the Dusit Palace, the traditional multi-tiered gable roof gave way to new kinds of roof forms: hip, octagonal, mansard, vaulted, to name but a few. Especially in the king's residence, multiple roof forms were incorporated together, covering the complicated floor plan. The king's octagonal bedchamber was placed at the top floor, an attempt to express his majesty's supremacy in the new architectural typology.

The last example here, is the mansions of the Inner Court (Fig. 1d, 2d). Due to the limited space of the Grand Palace, its Inner Court mansions were tightly arranged on uniform blocks. Originally, the mansions were typical groups of wooden Thai houses, each a cluster of two to four buildings around a central courtyard, all raised on stilts. Later, due to overcrowding, these mansions were replaced by multi-story masonry mansions, occupying the same blocks (Suksri, 1996: 216). In the Dusit Palace, instead of either traditional Thai houses or dense building blocks, scattered villas were built for members of the Inner Court. This new forms of housing was a far cry from the crowded mansion blocks of the previous generation. It is exactly a predisposition of the transformation of Bangkok's residential area during the late nineteenth century, as the city was greatly changed by all sorts of modernization, especially the introduction of the automobile. The colonial paradigm had brought more than mere stylistic changes by then, bringing also the garden city ideas, together with new building materials and techniques. The indigenous urban form which was densely based on water soon became obsolete.

Formal Composition

These stylistic and technological changes may seem to be profound, but in fact the essential concepts were safely transferred from one palace to another, from one generation to the next. The reading of the essential compositional rules that hold these architectural forms together shows that, despite the obviously different forms, the Dusit Palace still managed to maintain many of the Grand Palace's planning principles. Some obsolete notions were discarded, while new ones were adopted.

At first glance, the organization of forms and spaces of the Grand Palace seemed almost chaotic. In fact, there were some underlying rules of composition that reflected city structure outside the palace wall. First, buildings and spaces were subdivided into autonomous complexes, each with its own set of rules, some sort of axial or gridiron structure (Fig. 1g). The orientation of these autonomous complexes was subject to topography, visual harmony, and palatial functions, not to any rigid geometric order. Regularity and symmetry was kept within each complex, while the juxtaposition of these complexes led to the "organic" character.

In comparison, the organization of space and forms of the Dusit Palace may seem to be diametrically opposed to that of the Grand Palace. Upon closer scrutiny, however, one found that the palace still maintained the essential structures of the ancient palace typology. The major difference was the axial orthogonality of each group of buildings. Unlike the varied orientations of the building complexes of the Grand Palace, all parts of the Dusit Palace are parallel with one another (Fig. 2g). The groups of buildings, however, remained autonomous, set amidst the lush landscape.

Apart from that, the compound was still divided into three courts, each with relative autonomy. An orthogonal street system was used as a matrix for the arrangement of these building complexes, enhancing the visual regularity of the landscape. The placement of the complexes, however, was not absolutely regular. The "organic" character from the Grand Palace survived, in a downplayed manner. Equally significant, was the change in the formal and spatial relationship. The Grand Palace had a dense urban fabric interrupted by spaces, while the forms of Dusit Palace were placed as objects on empty ground. This latter characteristic was almost modern in nature, a predisposition of the coming paradigm.

Urban Transportation

Reflecting these changes in forms and planning principles of the two palaces, was the city of Bangkok itself. The ground of the city was not and could never be erased completely for the stylistic and technological changes brought by the Colonial era. Unlike its contemporaries, Bangkok was not a *tabula rasa* when Colonialism was engulfing the region in the nineteenth century. By the time the foundation of the Dusit

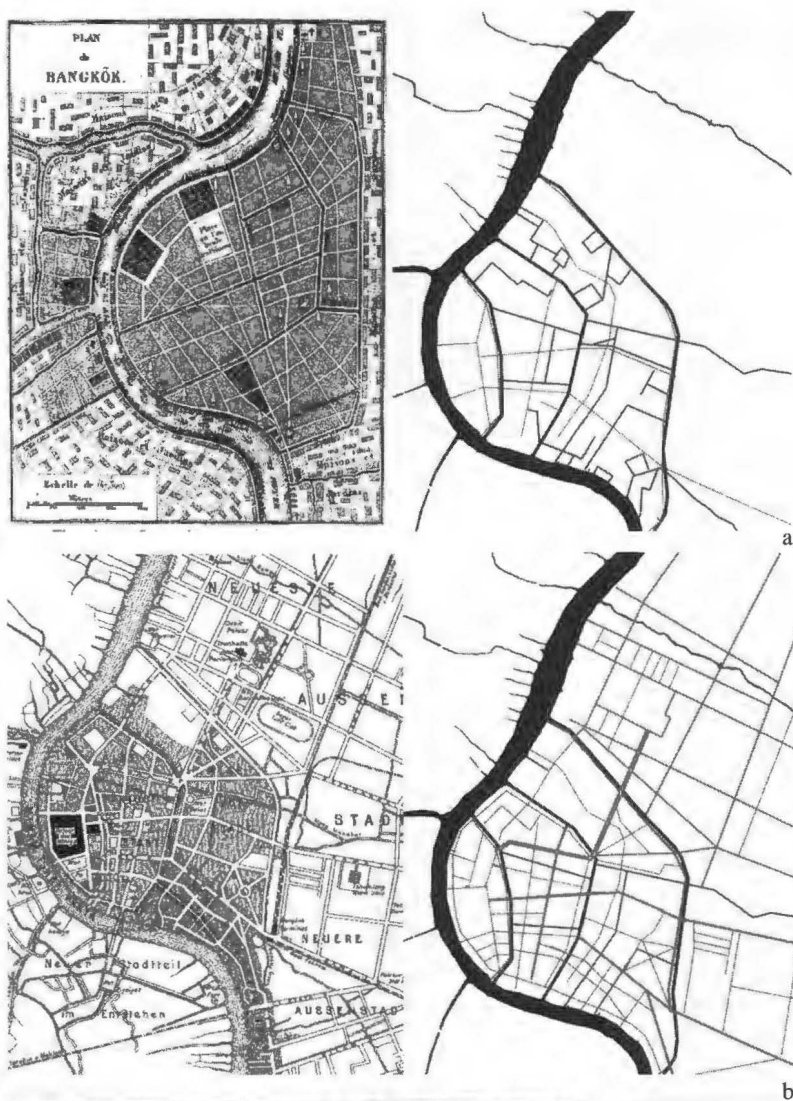


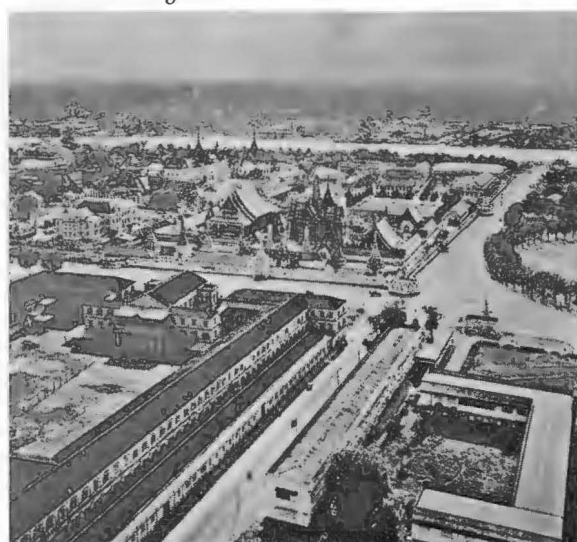
Figure 3 Urban Transformation

a Bangkok 1854

b Bangkok 1927



a



b

Figure 4 Urban representation.

a City scene, 19th century mural painting. Wat Suthatthepwararam, Bangkok

b Aerial view of Bangkok, early 20th century

Palace was laid, the city was more than a century old, probably at its prime as a manifestation of Thai urban tradition. The seemingly dramatic changes in the latter half of the nineteenth century were in fact gradual integration of progress into the existing urban pattern.

A reading of two maps of Bangkok is conducted here to demonstrate such an incorporation (Fig. 3). The first map, drawn by a French missionary in the early days of Colonial influence (Pallegoix 1854), stylistically shows the indigenous city on the river, its urban fabric criss-crossed by extensive canal system. These canals were not only the major urban armature for movement and transportation, they also generated the "organic" character of the city, with their spidery lines and curves. The areas inaccessible by water were linked by a secondary system of dirt roads or brick-paved footpaths (Suksri 1996: 17), their configuration determined by the surrounding waterways. The map also shows the major structures of the city: palaces and temples, scattered along the main routes. Each with some sort of orthogonal or axial structure, these building complexes were distinctly rendered against the backdrop of the densely organic urban fabric.

The second map shows the city fully expanded in 1927, two decades after the Dusit Palace was constructed (Credner 1935). Waterways began to lose their importance as the city's arteries, as land-based transportation was greatly developed. Automobiles, trains and streetcars had brought new configurations to the city, driven by their unprecedented speed and scale. While wide straight streets and boulevards were cut through the city, the European concepts of perspective and Cartesian geometry were incorporated into the Thai mind. The map also shows the expansion of the street system to the east, linking the old city with the new business districts and port down the river, while the flatland outside the old city wall to the north was developed around the Dusit Palace. The subsequent urban densification led to the rotated patches of grid patterns of the city, following the curves of the river. The palimpsest of Bangkok had expanded, combining its *genius loci* with the new progress.

Apart from these cartographic representations, the same urban transformation was also reflected in other kinds of urban representation. The traditional urban structure, with the autonomous complexes of palaces and temples set against the organic urban backdrop, was reflected in Thai art as well. Traditionally Thai painting made no attempt at depicting any real sense of depth or distance, thus the city and architectural setting is flatly drawn in isometric perspective (Fig. 4a). Similar to the way the groups of buildings in the Grand Palace were placed together such that "each volume is suggested separately, so that each architectural feature (is) represented in its own perspective, usually with no thought of unifying the various view-points and, of course, with no single vanishing point" (Boisselier 1976: 64).

Not until the second half of the nineteenth century, when the new streets were cut, did the notions which had until then been traditional begin to change. In Thai art, new subject matters were included, together with the adoption of the

European law of perspective, and a system of tonal gradation to suggest volume and depth of field (Boisselier 1976: 54). The new urban form marked its presence in Thai mural paintings as well as in the real city outside. One can feel the conflicted emotions in the paintings: the subject matters called on the past, as if to fix it in memory, while the new forms and techniques, emblems of progress, look toward the future.

These changes in urban imagery came to the culmination with the new medium: photography (Fig. 4b). Unlike the stylized, poetic depictions of the city in the traditional paintings, engravings and photographs of the real Bangkok were mechanically produced and disseminated, spurring parallel transformations in cities throughout the kingdom.

Conclusion

The study has tried to describe the palimpsest-like transformation of the city of Bangkok, as manifested in the actual forms of the city, in its microcosm of palace compounds, and in its representation in art.

The similarities and differences of the two palaces suggest that there were some intrinsic essence that had been transferred from one era to the other. The subdivision of the organic urban fabric into districts centered by building complexes of public institutions, the multiple orientation of street grids in relation with the topography, particularly the water's edge, were some of the most common urban concepts encountered in Bangkok. Another significantly durable concept was the materialization of the social structure through built forms. Despite the stylistic or technological changes, the Dusit Palace compound was still zoned into three courts, according to the ancient palace planning principle. The Italian Renaissance-styled throne hall was still a model of heaven, similar in meaning to the spires of the ancient palace in Ayutthaya, built half a millennium earlier.

The transformation from the Indic paradigm to the colonial one was clearly inevitable. These palace compounds exhibited several coping mechanisms or strategies of change to facilitate the process. Unlike many other countries, Thailand was fortunate enough to remain independent through the age of Colonialism. Consequently, the adaptation to the new paradigm was consciously undertaken. By being selective, adaptive, and flexible, the essence of urbanism was transferred from one generation to another. Unavoidable damages and losses were also kept at a minimum.

The city of Bangkok has changed dramatically since the completion of the Dusit Palace. Similarly changed are the society and culture. After the coup of 1932, which started in front of the Dusit Palace, the absolute monarchy became constitutional. The democratic movement led the Colonial paradigm to its demise, and brought Modernity into the scene as the next paradigm. Bangkok has been transformed into a regional metropolis, shaped by global transactions, as demonstrated by the current economic crisis. Changes are inevitable, but it is challenging to maintain the intrinsic sense

of community, and other essence of urbanism, as our ancestors did.

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