The blight of beautification: Bangkok and the pursuit of class-based urban purity

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Michael Herzfeld

Department of Anthropology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

ABSTRACT

‘Beautification’ is often invoked as a justification for forms of urban reorganization that threaten existing ways of life and ignore the aesthetic values and social needs of poorer residents. The case of Bangkok, dramatically exemplified by the official campaign to evict the community of Pom Mahakan, shows how little attention is paid either to the social problems that such modernist uses of ‘tradition’ are likely to cause or to the vernacular architecture that is being destroyed in the name of ‘development’ and of a harshly selective conservation regime. The future of Bangkok’s vernacular past looks decidedly bleak.

Bangkok: twice beautified, twice blighted?

Bangkok, once a city of canals and today known to many visitors as a place of extensive markets, has already lost the canals and is now in serious danger of losing many of its characteristic markets or seeing them transformed into carefully controlled tourist spectacles. Advocates of preserving ‘ways of life’ (Thai witthichiwit) are losing the battle to keep long-established populations as well as recently assembled communities in place. The struggle over the tiny settlement beside the eighteenth-century fort known as Pom Mahakan, where the residents have fought a quarter-century battle against the threat of comprehensive eviction (see Herzfeld 2016), is paradigmatic of this subjugation of everyday life to the twin, interlocking demands of neoliberal economic policy and a conservation regime that attends to monumental buildings but ignores lived spaces.

A further irony of this situation is that neoliberalism is logically at odds with the officially endorsed ‘sufficiency economics’ model advocated by the late King Bhumibol (Rama IX). Construction companies and individual entrepreneurs are steadily increasing their profits even as entire populations of poor and marginal inhabitants are banished to the furthest and most insalubrious suburbs, forced to share living quarters with more fortunate kin, or deprived of the shelter of a decent home altogether and excoriated as creatures unworthy of the name of human beings.

This situation is not unique and has many parallels in Asia. The official mantra under which most such schemes are promoted is that of urban ‘beautification’. Few, however, ask in whose eyes the new vision is truly beautiful; the question is implicitly treated as meaningless because the modernist aesthetic paradigm claims universality. As Yongtanit (2006) remarks...
of one such project, that of Tha Tian in Bangkok, its original incarnation was not viable because it was “based on city beautification without taking ownership pattern, economic viability, social aspect and cultural diversity into account”. Officials have generally been reluctant to bring local and global views into dialogue as a serious aspect of urban design.

**Tradition as a facet of modernity**

Efforts have instead been made to represent officially generated formal architecture as representative of ‘tradition’, a claim that in many cases is only rendered superficially credible by also engineering the disappearance of the humbler specimens of vernacular architecture. That architecture would belie, or at least complicate, many of the claims made by establishment architects about what actually does constitute tradition. Meanwhile, the global emphasis of new construction is often enhanced, as in Shanghai, by buildings designed by architects of international renown. This impossibly paradoxical conjunction of *ersatz* tradition with high modernity, a combination that reflects the larger conceptualization of tradition and heritage as both intrinsically local or national and yet somehow universal at the same time, is only possible because tradition and heritage have been reduced, by UNESCO as much as by national governments, to an IKEA-like modular framing that leaves no space for the untidy activities of real human beings.

Thus, the traditional-global pair is far from being a dichotomy; it is, rather, a tautology, in that ‘tradition’ is a product of global modernity. It is also a tautology with dire consequences, many of which can be seen in the desperate attempts of activists in Singapore and Hong Kong to save what little of the local past is left and in the destruction that planners seem to be authorizing as a means of papering over what they see as undesirable internal conflicts and perhaps civilizational embarrassments as well (see, e.g. Cheung 2003; Goh 2014a, 2014b; Hui 2012).

Indeed, there are patches of light but they are few and far between. It is almost as though neoliberal planners were determined to create new value by pushing old architecture to the brink of extinction, a process well described by Thompson (1979). The few surviving specimens, especially if associated with an alien culture, can then be framed as monuments to a modernist sensibility of conservation – just as, according to Paul Rabinow (1989), French colonial planners framed the few pre-colonial buildings they deemed worthy of preservation as testimony to their liberal tolerance in the Maghreb and in French Indo-China. In Orthodox Christian modern Greece, even during periods of intense nationalism, a similar liberal sensibility preserved mosques as evidence of Greek cultural tolerance but redirected their use to such supposedly universal and liberal activities as the teaching of music (see Figure 1).

In both the architectural reconstruction of tradition and the selective preservation of older monuments, the defensive claim to be salvaging a disappearing past produces some strange, and contested, side-effects. Perhaps the most striking of these effects is the oft-reiterated claim that buildings erected by foreign architects express local values. An example is the highly politicized case of Bangkok’s relatively new Suvarnabhumi Airport. The original building was designed under the lead of American architect Helmut Jahn, but was upheld as expressing Thainess through its use of certain materials and its emphasis on the play of light. The special pleading that was required to achieve this curiously agile argument is quite evident, and was very quickly attacked by local critics (see Koompong 2009). The solution, which every tourist passing through Thailand’s main airport gets to see, was to decorate the most monumental space with huge, colourful sculptural images from Thai epic poetry. Those
who seek beauty in modernist abstractions can thus admire the larger framing of the whole complex, while those with a more literal understanding of traditional arts can focus on the sculpture, not to speak of the Thai traditional goods on sale at the OTOP shops that are a signature aspect of the airport’s commercial activity. Framed within the larger structure are simulacra of temple pavilions, representing a modernist secularization of religious architecture, the effects of which are not unlike those of the Greek and North African examples already cited, except that this time the goal is not to celebrate the liberalism of European democracy. Thais do not necessarily view the commercial adoption of temple motifs as sacrilegious. The Thai architect Chatri (2015) has identified a shift in the use of temples from highly sacred spaces to places of public spectacle. This shift appears to be acceptable and indeed advantageous to those exercising political authority. Architects and planners clearly aim to promote global ambitions through a selective and strategic traditionalism.

Thailand is not new to such paradoxes, and indeed they represent a pattern that can be identified throughout East Asia and beyond. Because Thailand was a ‘crypto-colony’ however (Herzfeld 2002) – a nation-state whose independence was recognized by the Western Powers on condition that its leaders essentially did the latter’s bidding in matters diplomatic and economic – it seems to display the features of this strain in a more stark form than can be found in, for example, Tokyo or Beijing. Shanghai, unsurprisingly, is another matter. There, the Bund, with its imposing colonial buildings, is an enduring monument to the history of foreign intrusion into Chinese cultural and political life. The current rebranding of Shanghai as an international trade centre has encouraged the aggressive reproduction of Western models with superficially local architectural features in contexts ranging from imposing high-rise office blocks to modest storefronts.

The political origins and social impact of developmentalism

A similar pattern was set in motion in Bangkok in the second half of the nineteenth century. The city’s first real street was Rachadamnoen Avenue. That name, literally ‘The King’s Progress’,
hints at the developmentalist ideologies that were to become increasingly dominant in the subjugation of Thai working-class interests to a foreign-inspired elite; the passion for ‘development’ (kanpatthana), with its evolutionist overtones, has dominated Thai official thinking since the time of Rama V (reigned 1868–1910), and reached an apogee of sorts during the dictatorship of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (in power 1938–1944 and 1948–1957). It continues to inform official practices, including the pursuit of urban beautification as well, not coincidentally, as an insistence that ordinary people adopt Western dress; for a relevant poster of the period, exhorting the adoption of Western dress, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plaek_Phibunsongkhram#/media/File:Thai_culture_poster.PNG (downloaded 22 January 2017). As will be shown, there is a direct relationship between architectural design and bodily comportment and clothing.

To this day the name Rachadamnoen remains usefully ambiguous. It can be understood literally as an innocuous reference to King Rama V’s habit of parading along the street in the Siamese state’s first automobile. That the origin of the name is attributed to British models (Kingsway or the Queen’s Walk in London), however, unapologetically betrays its larger significance as an illustration of both the crypto-colonial condition and the larger ‘global hierarchy of value’ (Herzfeld 2004), as does Rama V’s, and many others’, expressed desire to regard the street, which has strategic significance for any government trying to control protest or revolution, as ‘the Champs-Elysées of Asia’. During the reign of King Bhumibol (1946–2016), huge portraits of the king and members of the royal family adorned the streets, and many remain in place as a mark of mourning for the recently deceased monarch (Figure 2).

Rama V’s vision of the future of Bangkok was directly tied to his Westernizing and modernizing ambitions for Siam – ambitions that, as a cultural programme of development and civilizing (khwamsiwilai; cf. the French mission civilisatrice; see Thongchai 2000), were deliberately intended to dissuade Western colonizers from using the alleged primitiveness of the Siamese people as an excuse to invade. Possibly with the best intentions in the world, therefore, Rama V set the stage for a much more insidious form of control. The architecture of his own age betrayed these crypto-colonial ambitions, especially at the heart of his own moral and religious authority, the Grand Palace (Woranuch 2002). It also paved the way for much more massive, and therefore more destructive, interventions.

In fact, it could be argued that planning up to and immediately beyond World War II left much of the older fabric of the city intact, although its symbolic orientation changed.
drastically as a result of Rama V’s own policies and subsequent contestations of official historiography (see Tambiah 1976; Wong 2006; Koompong 2012; Herzfeld 2016). Most Bangkok residents continued to live in relatively self-contained sections of the city, small areas that were essentially like medieval European parishes in that in each the effective social centre for all activity was the temple (wat), to which, almost always, was attached a market space (the talad). The entire mosaic of small temple-based settlements, many of them of specific ethnic origin (Chinese, Punjabi, Mon, Lao, Cham and Malay), was served by an elaborate system of canals – the phenomenon that, in a telling phrase, led to the naming of Bangkok as ‘the Venice of the East’. There is an excellent overview by Askew (1994). The significant difference was that whereas Venetians had been used to the idea of conservation and the re-use of old buildings at least since the Renaissance, Bangkok residents had no such conceptual resources with which to combat the allure of Western models (see Harrison and Jackson 2010). The canals did not look like a romantic thing of beauty that would transport visitors back in time. For most people in Bangkok they seemed to be a throwback, and one they were happy to abandon at the first opportunity. They therefore traded the smell of sewage for the choking stink of petroleum.

The effects were catastrophic. The average temperature in an already sweltering city rose by several degrees; the traffic jams became steadily worse, and were only relatively recently, and very partially, alleviated by the construction of the BTS Skytrain and Metro (subway). For a while after the 1997 economic crash, driving a car became too expensive for many. The solutions afforded by three-wheelers and motorcycle taxis were nearly abolished because of various illegalities associated with both (see, e.g. Sopranzetti 2017). Moreover, access to forms of transportation is markedly differentiated. Rides on the Skytrain and Metro are well beyond the means of an itinerant vendor who sells a main meal for perhaps the equivalent of an average ticket. Therefore, their creation further exacerbated class tensions, eventually contributing to the political tensions that led to the emergence of the current dictatorship. Many of the regime’s supporters already enjoy the advantages of private cars and expensive public transit, and are the most ardent exponents of ‘developmentalism’ in a range of spheres from philanthropic activism to the fast rebranding and re-designing of the national capital.

The watchword of these changes has been ‘beautification’. Thus, the core issue is the initial point about the political character of architectural aesthetics. A ‘law and order’ approach to governance matches the middle-class desire for a tidy, ‘spatially cleansed’ (Herzfeld 2006), carefully demarcated and socially segregated city. Whether under the present regime or under the equally developmentalist but socially more left-leaning government of Thaksin and his immediate successors, Thai officialdom (itself, as is common internationally, largely composed of people from bourgeois families and inclined to take a very literal and positivist view of legal requirements) has found this attitude both congenial and convenient, and has shown little sympathy for poor or marginal groups of people whose interests are damaged by it. They argue, for example, that the Pom Mahakan community must be removed despite its frequently expressed desire to remain as municipally employed guardians of their historically important site. They concomitantly overlook the fact that the ‘common good’ so often invoked to justify these interventions really only serves those with the money and leisure time to come and enjoy the facilities – cycling paths, green lawns, perhaps a food concession or two – that are expected to replace the dwellings of ordinary people. A good example of this attitude is to be found in the recent article by Peerawat (2017); for a counter-argument,
see the response by Apiwat et al. (2017). The official design of the envisaged development of the site has been posted prominently on the street (Rachadamnoen) in front of the old citadel; it shows well-dressed people—many of whom, significantly, look at least as European as they do Asian—strolling or cycling contentedly amid a mostly empty lawn that has replaced the current residents’ dwellings.

That some of those dwellings have historical interest as specimens of vernacular architecture, as both the residents and activists have repeatedly stressed, does not interest the authorities. Despite the BMA’s earlier promise to preserve a few of the older houses, current planning is at best ambiguous on this score. In the most recent planning publicity, a few houses do appear, although without any obvious connection to living people. If the promise is kept, it may involve removal to a different location. State-authorized heritage discourse decontextualizes the lived material environments of ordinary people in the name of an aesthetic that is largely foreign to them (see also Askew 1996).

Nevertheless, some working-class Bangkok residents apparently claim to endorse the beautification aesthetic. Their positive attitude partly reflects a long-standing push for ‘civilized’ standards, in which the model was originally Western urban architecture but has increasingly become the work of Asian-trained, Asian-based planners. Foreign observers who remark that this is ‘simply’ a foreign aesthetic risk ignoring the agency of local people who consciously and willingly make a choice to adopt it. Writing of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), for example, Harms (2016) has judiciously insisted that local people’s admiration for the modernist aesthetics of developmentalism are not merely a knee-jerk act of obeisance to authority but a willing and conscious, if nuanced, choice. The same seems to hold true for Bangkok. Moreover, it would be inconsistent for anthropologists to argue against such attitudes for a restoration of ‘authenticity’, a concept they have been at the forefront of criticizing.

**Architectural etiquette and the politics of space and embodiment**

None of this means that scholars should avoid investigating the political implications and dimensions of such acquiescence. Nor is it enough to speak of the insensitivity of the authorities to residents’ desires. The way in which the dominant aesthetic encodes aspects of radically and increasingly unequal social relations requires critical analysis: to perform this operation—to read Thai architectonics socially—requires that the culturally specific complexities of Thai class hierarchy should be addressed first. This is not a simple matter, if only because, as elsewhere in southeast Asia, in Thailand hierarchy is almost always suffused with the possibility—now latent, now dominant—of its opposite, egalitarianism, in ways that might surprise foreign observers. The most authoritarian discourses seem to coexist with powerful reminders of a common humanity, making any form of arrogance socially risky at best. Perhaps the most potent political expression of this phenomenon is way politicians apostrophize their supporters, potential and actual, as phi-nawng. This term, sometimes translated as ‘brothers and sisters,’ more precisely means ‘elder siblings-younger siblings’ (Herzfeld 2016).

Siblinghood implies a deep commonality defined by shared descent; age, by contrast, is by its very nature hierarchical. University students, for example, use this mode of address to emphasize that older students have the duty of nurturing the values of their younger colleagues. That the phrase is hierarchical is clear when one calls out to a waitperson in a
restaurant ‘nawng khrab/kha’ – ‘younger sibling’, a term softened by the polite particle khrab (male) or kha (female) that nevertheless underscores rather than diminishes the sense of an unequal relationship: noblesse oblige. Thus, the idea that all a politician or community leader’s followers are phi-nawng encapsulates pretensions of equality that simultaneously reinforce hierarchy. A younger sibling may endorse the solidarity of family relations even though these militate against the junior member’s interests, perhaps seeking in that solidarity a defence against external hostility.

The architectural equivalent of the code of politeness (marayat) is beautification; and, like the code of etiquette, it superficially softens and masks the structural violence of sometimes brutal economic and social discrimination. Poor Thais, like poor Vietnamese, can hardly fail to be aware — as successive governments keep telling them — that they live in an underdeveloped country, and that they would do well to embrace the trappings of an aestheticized modernity even when these effectively exclude them. Perhaps the most dramatic recent illustration of this contest in Bangkok today has been the battle over the future of Pom Mahakan; whether it was to be a ‘historic monument’, the inner spaces of which are destined as a public park, or a living community with its own sometimes contrarian, vernacular and largely oral historiography.

For the people of Pom Mahakan, and for numerous other communities facing eviction from zones designated as ‘historic’ by the municipal authorities, exclusion from modernity may initially be masked, but it is real and omnipresent. Projects to relocate the residents of Pom Mahakan, for example, gave them unattractive choices between socially inoperable high-rise quarters or virtual exile to a desolate area outside the city proper — in effect, a re-banishment to spaces considered socially and culturally beyond the pale.

Thus, despite the affable politeness of the sibling formula, poor Thai citizens’ experience of bureaucratic authority is not usually polite at all. Bureaucrats may use courteous formulae in slapping down the requests of working-class petitioners, and those petitioners may engage in the same polite discourse in response; but the latter’s subsequent grumbling attests to a sophisticated understanding of the violence being politely committed against them.

Such elegantly draped brutalities have deep roots, and conventional historiography has given Thai working-class activists two powerful sets of historical allusions with which to interpret their present predicaments. One alludes to the allegedly feudal sakdina system and the other to the old aristocratic distinction between phrai (commoners) and ammat (aristocracy of royal origin) (see Herzfeld 2016; Sopranzetti 2017). As metaphors for the present, both have gained currency in recent years, obscuring the fact that the most immediate model for bureaucratic haughtiness is the old colonial system that allegedly never held sway in Thailand. The invocation of older forms of hierarchy plays into the hands of a modern bureaucracy formed on a crypto-colonial or Westernizing model. Public functionaries engage in a massive production of khwampenthai (‘Thainess’) which itself is modelled on European prototypes (see Thongchai 1994, 2000); it distracts attention from the Western origins of so much of the allegedly Thai traditions of governance in which they engage, from Western-style uniforms worn on every possible occasion to elaborate protocols in the presence of royal personages.

In this way, the bureaucrats seem content to allow their clients to portray the relationship as a feudal one, rather than allowing themselves to be viewed as colonial-style agents who, instead of serving the public, treat its members with disdain. They also have a vested interest
in the pomp and ceremony associated with the monarchy, and especially with the abasement of the citizen’s body in the presence of the monarch — a dimension with, as will shortly become apparent, important implications for the modelling of space.

To understand the mutual entailment of architecture and politics, it is necessary to examine the larger semantic context in which the language of beautification expresses the current official urban aesthetic. Most significant of all is the term khwamsuai-ngam, the abstract noun usually translated as ‘beauty’, which is in turn the root concept in ‘beautification’. In Thai, khwam indicates an abstract property, like the suffix ‘-ness’ in English. Ngam is a conventional word for beauty, especially in relation to such devices as women’s cosmetics, thereby suggesting a concern with images (see Jackson 2004) that notably matches a generic concern with appearances in Thai society, including the term hai du di (to make oneself look good). Goodness itself, however, is contested term; for some it is a moral term that counters the claims of wealth; in Pom Mahakan, a sign on one old house reads, ‘This house is good, therefore it is rich’. On the other hand, phu di (‘good people’) are those whose middle-class values are performed as respectability.

Suai is arguably more complex; while it also has implications of female beauty, as in chang soem suai (beautician), it has implications of formal propriety, as in ‘looking nice’. Thus, for example, rice that is eaten with a spoon rather than with one hand — in other words, steamed white rice rather than the northeastern peasants’ preferred sticky rice (khao niaw) — is called khao suai (literally, ‘beautiful rice’); the practice of eating with spoon and fork rather than with the right hand is commonly credited to none other than the civilizing king, Rama V, and steamed rice is too loosely packed to be pressed together to mop up other foods. Indeed, polite Thais modestly eat a little ‘beautiful rice’ before trying the more flavoured items on the table.

Other usages are also suggestive. A monk encountered in Bangkok insisted that for a photo-op he would be more suai if he could be photographed holding a portrait of the late King Bhumibol (deceased only a couple of months earlier) to include in the picture with him; he achieved this by taking from a newsstand a magazine with the late monarch’s portrait on the front cover and solemnly holding it in front of himself. In this case, the term suai clearly meant something less obviously aesthetic and more effectively glossed by a term like ‘seemly’, in which sense it also seemed to resonate with the bourgeois concern with khwam riap roi, ‘neatness’ in the sense of combining sober respect with orderliness.

This last term has long been associated with the rightist-nationalist dictatorships of post-World War II Thailand (Thak 2007); it is the counterpart in personal comportment to law and order in governance and, not coincidentally, to spatial cleansing (Herzfeld 2006) and gentrification (Smith 2006) in the arena of urban planning. It is the expression of what in recent years in particular has become a class war (Sopranzetti 2012), at a time when the assault on the old vernacular architecture seems destined to succeed. The process is hardly new; Greek architectural motifs have appeared in a surprising variety of post-World War II buildings, from the rather down-at-heel 1940s Royal (Rattanakosin) Hotel at the bottom end of Rachadamnoen Avenue to the over-sized Ionic columns embedded in the high-modernist façade of the Amarin Shopping Center in the business-oriented zone of Rachaprasong (Figures 3 and 4). These are not a sign of ideological kinship with that other crypto-colonial state in the Mediterranean, Greece, but a re-enactment of Western imperial design rhetoric announcing the consolidation of cultural power in a world dominated by bourgeois ideals of respectability. There are parallels with Greece in this regard too; see especially Bakalaki (1994).
In this context, the monk’s pose takes on new meaning. Self-presentation with a portrait of the late monarch may appear far removed from most people’s imagination of the ancient Greece rhetorically invoked on the Amarin façade. In fact, it is an expression of the way in which ideas of Thai tradition, their once sharply hierarchical implications softened in the familial concept of the king as the benign royal father (pho luang), have become part of what Marcel Mauss (1935) called ‘techniques of the body’. These Thai techniques are deeply bourgeois in their imposition of norms of respectability; they are also physiologically hierarchical. They include standing to attention every evening when the national anthem is broadcast in the street; they require everyone to sit down on the sidewalk when the monarch passes in front of the Grand Palace in a motorcade (Figure 5) (and to stand still elsewhere when the royal entourage is passing at a sufficient distance from the pedestrian walkway), avoiding letting commoners be seen at a higher level such as a balcony when a member of the royal family enters a public building on the ground floor, and refusing to allow ordinary people to travel on an overpass if a member of the royal family is due to pass on the lower road. While such rules seem far removed from the symbolism of royal respect to be found in the UK, one of the Thai monarchy’s prime models, they reinforce the rise of a more general public commitment to both respect and respectability.

While in the Thai system of manners the symbolism of height is particularly consistent, the connection with roads is also far from coincidental. Rama V was the owner of Thailand’s first automobile, which was paraded along Rachadamnoen Avenue, and the construction of that road was itself the symbol and instrument of the reorientation of the Siamese kingdom from a flexible, segmentary polity into a Western-style nation-state with clearly defined borders. If, then, as Peleggi (2002) has argued in considerable detail, the Siamese monarchy adopted many of the accoutrements of the British bourgeoisie, this made for a strong association between the middle class — now vastly increased in proportion to the rest of the nation — and the throne, an association that has been clearly expressed in the recent resurgence of right-wing politics and its association with middle-class fears of an insurgent proletariat.
In this context, the physical abasement of citizens’ bodies is also deeply significant. Height marks superiority: the *wai*, a gesture of greeting and gratitude made by pressing the palms of the hands together in front of the body, may not convey hierarchical implications in its original Indic habitat, as indeed it does not in modern China, but in Thailand it is a fairly precise indicator of differential social status among persons: the higher the other’s status, the higher the palms are supposed to be held. Thus, a supposedly Thai gesture has been deployed as a mark of *marayat* that same code of manners already mentioned. The code’s Sanskrit name should not obscure the fact that, in its emphasis on good manners and hierarchy, it reproduces Victorian ideals of respectability, thereby simultaneously hinting at both bourgeois status and royalist traditionalism.

This same fusion is found in other cultural areas as well, notably in the use of Western utensils for eating (in contrast to neighbouring Vietnam, for example, as well as to the relatively poor and marginalized northeast of Thailand itself); this practice was introduced by none other than Rama V. To this day, again, the apparent Thai obsession with uniforms strikes Western visitors as an exaggeration of what used to be common in their own countries; even university students are constrained to follow a strict dress code (and must wear uniforms when sitting examinations), and ordinary bureaucrats must be prepared to don uniforms for every formal occasion. Here, too, there seems a close association among royalism, bourgeois aspirations, and a traditionalism that emphasizes hierarchy rather than egalitarianism. No wonder the bureaucrats rarely if ever object when they are accused of being feudal rather than true civil *servants*; the latter is the last status that their bourgeois pretensions would lead them to desire!

**The dispossession of a body politic**

Architectural modernism incorporates the same principles. ‘Architecture’, as an observation made at least as early as 1910 has it, ‘is the clothing of the body politic’. All public buildings are now clad in funereal black-and-white bunting, for example, and many sport temporary shrines honouring the late monarch. The association, however, goes far deeper. Markets offer one excellent example of the architectural realization of status relations. Markets are largely low-rise affairs, and necessarily so; street vendors not only work at street level but can also be moved around, especially as they depend on local mafiosi to provide them with safe spaces to set up their stalls. Nonetheless, what really offends modernist
sensibilities is their messiness. They confound boundaries; and, in their older association with temples, they also cause a breakdown in the categorical separation of functions that is the hallmark of modernist planning – planning that, as Chatri (2015) has noted, entails the isolation of temples as public spaces rather than as places of deeply embedded religiosity. This is in much the same spirit as the authorities’ several attempts to replace the Pom Mahakan community, its strong local attachment hitherto maintained through ritual acts and the care of spirit shrines, with a public park. The Bangkok Post has been particularly diligent in reporting the many attacks on markets by the authorities, but other journalistic sources also provide rich data. Chatri (2003, 2012) has been a strong advocate of the Pom Mahakan community’s fight against eviction and was the designer of the most recent land-sharing plan that would have saved the residents from that fate (see also Herzfeld 2016).

Mary Douglas (1966) famously argued that dirt was ‘matter out of place’; and, as far as the modern West was concerned, she saw the guardians of order as very much the middle classes – those who had most invested in the status quo. Her argument is grounded in a spatial metaphor that, when we consider planning issues, takes on literal significance (Campkin 2013). Middle-class urbanites around the world seek an urban environment that is not only ecologically clean but has ‘clean lines’ – that is, an environment in which the use of space is clearly defined. Bourgeois urban planning is as much about aspirations as it is about social justice, and does not shy away from the destruction of anything deemed not to fit those aspirations and the socio-spatial vision that sustains them.

Older working-class communities in Bangkok still associate market activities with temple spaces, which are also co-mingled with dwellings and shops. Thus, recent city administrations, alert to and imbued with bourgeois sensibilities, have made strenuous attempts to get the food vendors off the streets and to corral them into safe food courts, as has happened in Singapore; to remove the majority of markets, retaining only a select, controlled few that will continue to serve the tourists rather than local people (although local colour is what they are expected to produce!); and to demolish those communities, of which Pom Mahakan offers a spectacular example (see Figures 6 and 7), that are resistant to the overall planning strategy.

Figure 6. Pom Mahakan: old houses.  
Figure 7. Pom Mahakan: the bureaucrats’ vision.
Historic sites are usually those associated with the dominant ideology. In Thailand, that perspective predominantly emphasizes ‘palaces and temples’ (wat kap wang) in precisely the spectacular sense intended by Chatri (2012); see Figure 8, showing the combination literally enshrined in the Grand Palace beside the eighteenth-century city wall it shares with Pom Mahakan). Such a vision offers little or no space for vernacular architecture, and certainly little or none for an inhabited version of it. In short, history is modernized, which also means that it is reified, decoupled from social dynamics, and represented in the static idiom of old-fashioned museums. Moreover, in this vision there is no space for inconveniently unsightly people. Anyone rendered homeless or unemployed by that strategy will be relegated to a visual oblivion, banished to distant and unpleasant suburbs, in a pattern that disturbingly recalls the policies of Mussolini’s Rome in the 1930s. Former Bangkok Governor Samak Sundaravej went so far as to compare the homeless with stray dogs—a serious insult in the Thai value system; see Herzfeld (2016).

Under the present, military-backed regime, itself the conceptual successor to the now-distant past of Phibun’s pro-Axis authoritarian government and to concepts of culture and order that were originally developed in the Thai context by Luang Wichit Wathakan (himself an open admirer of Mussolini’s ideas; see Barmé 1993), the pace of spatial cleansing has quickened appreciably. The regime is supported by those middle-class elements that view monarchy as the embodiment of their own cultural aspirations and of the direction in which their country should ‘develop’ (patthana, another term associated with the dominant ideology). Thus, urban beautification, so deeply associated with order and with the values that seem to be guaranteed above all by the institution of monarchy, finds a global argument in the increasing appetite of large cities for dramatic high-rise buildings.

Bangkok is full of them (Figure 9). No matter that they look generically Western; a way will often be found to treat them as fundamentally Thai, as the discourse around the Suvarnabhumi Airport architecture shows, adumbrating a Western bourgeois aesthetic to the desires and aspirations of middle-class Thais. Height, as we have seen, is a mark of
respect/respectability and of power, as are clear lines of demarcation among the different activities and functions associated with urban life. One can therefore be a good Thai by acting like an ersatz European; one might look like a very bad Thai, or perhaps even too good a Siamese, by insisting on what outsiders often see as the messy, confusing and fundamentally disordered and rude arrangements that until a few decades ago characterized the way of life of most of the Siamese people and actually furnished them with a clear sense of order and courtesy.

Arguing for ‘beauty’ and associating it with ‘development’ thus hints at a crypto-colonial genealogy of taste that also harmonizes well with popular images of globalization and with some of the practical imperatives of neoliberal managerialism. Local people who feel victimized by these developments – the people of Pom Mahakan again offer an excellent example – are quite explicit about their practical implications. A zone is being created for middle-class use in which a supposedly common good will actually exclude the poor, who will either be forced to commute to and from work over long and potentially expensive distances or left to compete with hostile local operators in their new locations (see especially Mydans 2017).

These developments are consistent with what other observers (e.g. Sopranzetti 2017) have noted, irrespective of whether the evictees nevertheless appreciate beautification in aesthetic terms. Nor will the residents benefit from ‘self-gentrification’ (Herzfeld 2015) or ‘gentrification from within’ (Non 2016). They will no longer be there to do so. Those few who have benefited from schemes to keep them in place will doubtless be better served, and they will indeed self-gentrify. Therefore, when we argue, as Harms rightly does, that some of those most directly affected by beautification schemes are inclined to view the modernist aesthetic in positive terms, we must also ask to what extent they are doing so because, unlike the vast majority of their erstwhile neighbours, they are being invited to join the middle classes (and are believed to be capable of doing so), or because they think they may just have a chance of being invited to the party.

Figure 9. Tourism year – ‘the Thai way’.
The end of the social and the brutality of beauty

The message of this paper is indeed a somber one. Unfortunately there are now few gleams of hope for threatened communities in Bangkok. Given a rapidly growing bourgeoisie, it is all too easy to brand anyone who opposes development and beautification as obstructionist and backward and lacking in good taste and discrimination.

Discrimination, however, is precisely the issue; and it is class-based (and partially region-based) discrimination that the authorities are practising. As Bourdieu (1984) has shown for the judgement of taste that he called ‘distinction,’ aesthetic decisions are always inherently political. In Thailand, where discourses about power are entangled with a play of authoritarian and egalitarian impulses that would be quite unfamiliar to most European or North American observers, it is all too easy for the authorities to dismiss these criticisms as the venomous outpourings of ignorant foreigners. Yet that device, to which strong-arm regimes resort the world over, is itself an index, paradoxically enough, of how deeply embedded their ideology is in the global hierarchy of value; it reproduces the standard argument of national culture, which in reality is based on a modular understanding of cultures-as-things rather than on a dynamic and socially viable conception of culture-as-process. Their model is derived from Europe, decorated with ‘Siamese’ or ‘Thai’ elements, much as the Italianate elements of the Grand Palace sport elephants and other nativist ornamentations. Such is the essence of the crypto-colonial dynamic.

Unlike the old cities of Europe, however, Bangkok does not have a tradition of preserving even the physical fabric of vernacular dwellings, let alone permitting the older residents to remain ensconced in them (not that European cities have all done well in that regard). The push to drive out the existing population serves the interests of the rising middle classes in the short term; there is thus also no motivation for memorializing the vernacular past. The longer term is obscure but threatening. Current policy threatens not only the social lives and cultural presence of the poor but also the remnants of their past. In so doing, by increasing homelessness and resentment, it also threatens the very security and social stability that the bourgeois state craves.

This paper has been almost exclusively devoted to Bangkok. Working from already-available evidence, one could make very similar observations about the dynamics of Kunming (Zhang 2010), Seoul (Davis 20110) and Shanghai (Non 2016), to cite just three other Asian cities that seem to be rushing fast towards the suppression of older lifestyles, despite some heroic pockets of alternative strategy, and appear to be doing so very much under the pressure of demands from an upwardly mobile and rapidly expanding middle-class population. Clearly there are many people who want their cities to go in that direction. But who will speak for those who do not? Who will force the planning authorities to understand that their preferred aesthetic is socially unsustainable, ethically questionable and culturally monolithic? Even then, will those with the power to make a difference have any desire to do so?

Notes

1. OTOP, a policy initiated under the now-disgraced prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, was an attempt to encourage individual rural communities each to produce a single product that would represent local tradition as part of the larger diversity that officially characterizes ‘Thainess’. The policy and associated institutional support have been substantially revised since Thaksin’s fall, but the emphasis on locality and tradition remains firmly in place as an anchor for the aggressive export of nationalistically conceived tradition.
2. Greece, mentioned previously, is certainly another example of this phenomenon.
3. On the history and significance of Rachadamnoen Avenue, see Wong (2006); Koompong (2012).
4. For a recent discussion of the significance of roads for the anthropological analysis of power, see especially Dalakoglou (2017).
5. The phrase occurs in a discussion reported in a volume of the Royal Institute of British Architects reporting on a Town Planning Conference in October 1910 (384). Variants of it have appeared subsequently, including in my own paper in Harrison and Jackson (2010), i.e. exactly a century later! However, it appears to be a phrase in fairly common use.
6. One exception is the Crown Property Bureau's preservation of a set of Chinese-style shophouses in Tha Tian, Bangkok, where arrangements were made for residents to move back in, at affordable rents, after the renovations had been completed. However, this is a rare example of enlightened action in this context, and may have been motivated by the shophouses' proximity to, and architectural compatibility with, the neighbouring Grand Palace and associated religious buildings. See Yongtanit (2006).

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