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Bangkok living: Encountering others in a gated urban field

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the social effects of gated living in Bangkok. Income inequalities in this little-researched Thai capital are among the highest in the world, while income groups live highly segregated and often behind walls and gates. According to one dominant criticism, this 'enclave urbanism' prevents intergroup encounters, thus undermining mutual understanding and solidarity. This view seems consistent with recent observations that prejudices between income groups in Bangkok are high. Reporting on research on the social networks of Bangkok's various resident groups, we reflect on the role of the city's gated urban structure in this polarization. We conclude that social networks in poor neighborhoods are close-knit while neighborhood contacts in high-income areas are sparse. We also conclude that encounters between different income groups do take place, with exception of the super-rich. And while our research does not show negative attitudes towards others in general, it does indicate a potentially problematic stigmatization of low-income neighborhoods.

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1. Introduction

Meet Khun Chat (44). In 2003, together with his stay-at-home wife, he left his inner-city condominium and moved to Baan Ladprao, an exclusive suburban *mubanchatsan*—the Thai version of a gated housing estate (Askew, 2002). The expensive Lexus and enormous villa mirror his success as an entrepreneur in the electronics industry. Currently he tries to replace the live-in maid. Khun Chat moved to Baan Ladprao because it is close to his family, and relatively close to work. The safety of this gated estate was another reason. The community itself was not so important; Khun Chat has no desire to connect with his neighbors. It is good that they are respectable citizens, but for socializing he turns to work relations and family.

Also meet Khun Rungrote (36). With his family of four he lives in Wararak, a middle class *mubanchatsan* in Rangsit, just north of Bangkok. Khun Rungrote works at an electronics firm. His neighbors are nurses, clerks, and policemen. Many have young children. Khun Rungrote moved here two years ago, because he wanted to live closer to work. The houses are much smaller than in Baan Ladprao, but the community is gated as well. As in Baan Ladprao, the streets are empty during the daytime, but later children play and neighbors have a chat. Every month, fifteen neighborhood families meet for dinner and drinks. They have become friends and Khun Rungrote is happy to live here.

Now meet Khun Vichai (39). His home is in 70 Rai, the legalized part of the informal Khlong Toei harbor settlements.¹ Khun Vichai lives in a small wooden house together with his wife, two children, two brothers and their wives. Living here all his life, many neighbors are childhood friends. Khun Vichai wants to stay here. Every day he meets friends, and every week they eat together. Home is close to his work at the port as well. In general Khun Vichai is happy, but he is concerned about security. He agrees with the walls around the slum; bandits might steal their belongings. The fact that strangers can easily pass the gate does not worry him. His neighbors are alert and people here take care of each other.

Welcome to Krung Thep Maha Nakhon, or Bangkok; capital of Thailand, and city of contrasts. Ancient temples stand next to shiny office towers, classy condominium complexes alternate slums, and construction workers eat at roadside stalls next to suited businessmen and women. These contrasts result from a highly dynamic national economy that recorded an astonishing growth of just below 8% between 1960 and 1997, and just above 4% thereafter. The city has grown well beyond its initial boundaries into a forty-by-forty kilometer urban field. With production factors in a few hands, and contacts between business and politics very close, some families grew immensely rich (Suehiro, 1992; Duangmanee, 2016). Economic growth also created new middle classes (Ockey, 1999, 2004; Shiraishi, 2006), and it attracted domestic and foreign migrants, thus feeding cheap labor into Bangkok's economy (Bocuzzi, 2012; Keyes, 2014). Bangkok thus became one of the most

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¹ See Askew (2002, pp. 139–169) for a discussion of Bangkok's informal settlements in general, and Khlong Toei in particular.

unequal cities in the world, both in income (UN-Habitat, 2012: 69) and wealth (Duangmanee, 2016).

Bangkok's housing market mirrors these contrasts. Poor workers like Khun Vichai live close to their work in informal settlements or shared shophouses. The middle classes have moved to the suburbs, into endless *mubanchatsan* like Wararak and Baan Ladprao. Extensive market segmentation and uniform housing types have created a remarkable uniformity of income groups within these housing estates. In addition, there are many condominium complexes; high-end in inner-city locations and low-end in the suburbs. The city's super-rich live on extensive private estates. Thus, Bangkok's residential market is highly segmented with segregated income groups in diverse types of urban enclaves that are often walled and gated.

As has been well reported, over the last decade Bangkok has seen dramatic political conflicts between so-called Red Shirt and Yellow Shirt movements (Montesano, Pavin & Aekapol, 2012). While these conflicts directly result from an inter-elite struggle over the control of the country, it does feed on wealth and income inequalities as well (Pasuk & Baker, 2012; McCargo & Ukrist, 2005; McCargo, 2005; Stent, 2012; Keyes, 2014). The effects of these struggles for Bangkok are profound, as the city has become the crucible for long-lasting and sometimes deadly political occupations. Mediation between both camps is not only hampered by disparate political interests, but also by intergroup prejudices relating to the hierarchical nature of Thai society (Mulder, 2000; Stent, 2012), and associated forms of power and inequality (Bocuzzi, 2012; Stent, 2012; Thongchai, 2014; Keyes, 2014; Pasuk & Baker, 2016). Thus, supporters of the urban-based Yellow Shirt movement are depicted as self-interested middle-class and elite voters, who 'know better' what is good for the country. They are resented as *ammatt*—a term from the old Thai feudal society for aristocrat or lord—as they get treated better than others through 'double standards' in court decisions and politics, and they think they deserve this. Meanwhile the migrant and rural-based Red Shirt supporters are depicted as *khon ban nok* ('villagers') or *phrai*—the feudal term for serf that the Red Shirts also use themselves to depict the injustice of their situation. They are looked down upon as ignorant, uneducated, and stupid, are insulted as 'buffaloes'—a very rude remark in Thai—and are seen unfit to vote as they can easily be swayed by 'dark forces' like former populist prime minister Thaksin.

Possibly, these prejudices also relate to the highly segregated housing setting of Bangkok, as this might prevent exposure to people with different backgrounds. This suggestion is certainly supported by the alarmist literature on private urban governance (Pow, 2015), which argues that gated enclaves hinder intergroup encounters, thus threatening community and solidarity (Caldeira, 2000; Frug, 1999; Sennett, 2007; Young, 2000). With this paper we reflect on the relevance of this assumption for Bangkok through the following research questions: *Does enclave urbanism in Bangkok prevent intergroup encounters; and does this result in negative intergroup perceptions?* We answer these questions in nine sections. We will first present theories on the social effects of gated housing estates, before confronting these with the literature on encounters. We translate the conclusions from that discussion in a design for research in Bangkok. An introduction to our research neighborhoods is then followed by a presentation of our findings. We answer the research questions in the concluding section.

2. Enclave urbanism and the 'narrative of loss'

The urban studies literature describes today's city with apprehension (Judd, 2005; Pow, 2015; Prakash, 2010). According to Amin & Thrift (2002, p. 32), the idol of this literature is the "authentic city, held together by face-to-face interaction whose coherence is now gone". They describe a 'narrative of decline' that interprets social cohesion as a result of propinquity, and assumes that in today's cities, with diminishing propinquity, social cohesion is disappearing. Similarly, Forrest & Kearns (2001, p. 2126) observe "a common belief that there

is less social cohesion now than in some (usually) unspecified period". These alarmist views on urban cohesion are mirrored by discussions on public space in terms of decline and loss (Hajer & Reijndorp, 2001). Crawford (1999, p. 23) argues that a 'narrative of loss' guides this discussion, which "contrasts the current debasement of public space with golden ages and golden sites." This "inevitably culminates in the contemporary crisis of public life and public space, a crisis that puts at risk the very ideas and institutions of democracy itself".

Over the last decades, the dystopian framing of urban development through this 'narrative of loss' is reinforced by ideas about the 'splintering' of cities, and the related radicalization of class segregation. Well-quoted authors like Castells (1996) and Graham and Marvin (2001) suggest that the transition to a post-industrial or network society is supported by new techniques of spatial separation adding to the already problematic nature of cities. The result is a new form of urbanism—*enclave urbanism*—in which cities are restructured as patchworks of enclaves, each home to a selected group or activity (Wissink, Van Kempen, Li, & Fang, 2012). Essential to this emerging enclave urbanism is the introduction of social, legal and physical boundaries, relating to differentiated regimes of public and private governance. And while premium enclaves are well connected by privatized infrastructures, others are increasingly cut-off. Through regulated access, enclave urbanism creates new forms of in- and exclusion.

The urban studies literature has been especially focused on the emergence of residential enclaves, and more specifically on gated communities as new affluent residential enclaves (e.g. Atkinson & Blandy, 2006). There has been some attention for variation in this literature, with Blakely and Snyder (1997) for instance discerning three types of gated communities. However, attention for diversity is overshadowed by a generic interpretation of gated communities across cities and countries (Hogan, Bunnell, Pow, Permanasari, & Morhshidi, 2012; Pow, 2015). Studies mostly start from a universal definition of gated communities that takes the U.S. gated community as its theoretical model; for instance through the often-quoted definition by Atkinson & Blandy (2006, p. viii) of gated communities as "walled or fenced housing developments, to which public access is restricted, characterized by legal agreements which tie the residents to a common code of conduct and (usually) collective responsibility for management". Starting from such 'objective' definitions, studies then observe a spread of gated communities over the rest of the world (e.g. Atkinson & Blandy, 2006; Glasze, Webster, & Frantz, 2006) including Asia (e.g. Connell, 1999; Hogan & Houston, 2002; Hogan et al., 2012; Leisch, 2002; Pow, 2009; Waibel, 2006; Wu, 2005).

There is considerable attention for the social effects of gated communities. While some argue that these effects can be positive (e.g. Foldvary, 1994; Manzi & Smith-Bowers, 2005; Salcedo & Torres, 2004), overall the literature is overwhelmingly negative (Pow, 2015). Criticism especially focuses on two aspects. First, when gated communities provide urban services like electricity, water, education, and security, the quality of these services in 'leftover' spaces breaks down. Therefore, exclusion from enclaves can entail exclusion from amenities (Graham & Marvin, 2001, but see Hendrikx & Wissink, 2016). Second, enclave urbanism hinders face-to-face contacts between groups; contacts seen as constitutive for social coherence (Caldeira, 2000; Frug, 1999; Sennett, 2007; Young, 2000). The rich retreat to the pseudo-public spaces of shopping malls, gated communities and leisure parks, leaving behind less fortunate citizens. This undermines the public sphere, as groups that do not meet will not understand each other.

Iris Marion Young (2000, p. 211) has been one of the strong advocates of these criticisms (see Wissink, Schwanen, & Van Kempen, 2016). In her view, class segregation results in "an entire way of life in which relatively well-off people can conduct nearly all of their everyday activities insulated from encounters with those less well-off". This magnifies privileges by offering residents a collective space of comfort and security. Services like schools, shops and transportation in these neighborhoods are superior, and social capital here is larger (e.g. Wilson,

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