Bangkok Living
Social Networks in a Gated Urban Field[1]

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Abstract: *Over the years, implicitly or explicitly the relationship between spatial form and the social world has been recurrently discussed in urban studies. Recently, this topic again gained relevance through the emerging critical debate on the social consequences of 'gated communities'. In this debate, more often than not, gated communities receive a very bad press. With reference to cities like Los Angeles, Sao Paolo, Johannesburg and Istanbul it is argued that walls and gates create exclusionary spaces that physically separate the haves from the have-nots. The lucky ones can retreat in their own spatial worlds, leaving less fortunate urban citizens behind. Spatial form thus functions to maintain and enhance social-economic inequality. On top of this, it is argued that the resulting physical separation of social groups undermines the public sphere. After all, groups that don't meet won't know and understand each other. So, the conditions for cross-social community, solidarity and maybe even democracy are under attack. We ascertain that this critical interpretation of 'splintering urbanism' presupposes that a specific spatial form (gated enclaves) leads to specific social consequences (e.g. lack of community and solidarity) that especially hurt the disadvantaged. On theoretical grounds, we question such an elitist and spatial deterministic approach. And we prompt researchers to replace ideological reasoning on gating by precise empirical analysis of social life within gated urban fields. This paper presents a first discussion of such research conducted in Bangkok. In this Asian metropolis, not only the rich, but also the poor live behind gates. At the same time, the relational networks of inhabitants of various neighbourhoods within this splintered urban field turn out to leave space for cross-cultural encounters. However, we show that this doesn't necessitate understanding and solidarity.*

Divided spaces – divided citizens?

Meet Kuhn Chat (44). Since 2003, when he left his inner-city condominium, he lives in an upscale suburban mubahnchatsan (the Thai version of a gated community), called Baan Lad Prao. He's an entrepreneur in the electronics industry. His company is rather successful securing him a place among Bangkok's upper middle class. His social status is partly mirrored by his expensive Lexus and the large villa that he shares with his wife and their pet-dog. His wife is unemployed and stays home most of the time. Until recently, they had a maid living in, but she has recently left and the family is still searching for replacement. In the past Kuhn Chat also lived in the Lad Prao area; this heavily influenced the decision to move into the current community. Above all, it is close to where his family lives and relatively close to his work. Besides the location, the safety aspect also appealed. The community itself played no big part, since Kuhn Chat has no desire to interact with his neighbours. All he knows is that they are respectable citizens. If he would be looking for companions, he would much rather turn to his work relations and family.

Then meet Kuhn Rungrote (36). With his family of four he lives in the middleclass mubahnchatsan that consists of 1000 inhabitants called Wararak, north of Bangkok in Rangsit. This middleclass Thai man works fulltime at the design department of an electronics firm. His neighbours work as nurses, mailmen and policemen. Many families have young children here. Rungrote moved here only two years ago, when the Wararak was completed, because he wanted to live closer to his work. Before that he lived in the city of Rayong, in the east of Thailand. The houses in Wararak are much smaller than in Baan Lad Prao. The community is guarded all day; an ID has to be shown upon entering the premises. Like Baan Lad Prao, during daytime there isn't a lot of activity on the streets. But later on the day, people, especially children, come out and play badminton or hide and seek. Every month his family gets together with about fifteen other families that live in the mubahnchatsan to have dinner and drinks at one of the houses. He says they've become friends and really have a good time. They discuss many topics, ranging from the children's education to health problems and tips on good doctors. Kuhn Rungrote is happy to live in this community.

Now meet Kuhn Vichai (39). He lives in 70 Rai, the only legal part of the informal settlement next to Klong Toey. The neighbourhood is located next to the port, where he also works. Vichai lives in a small, ramshackle wooden house together with is wife, two children and two brothers and their wives. All their life they've been living here and he knows most of his friends since childhood. This is also why Vichai wants to stay here. Furthermore, it is conveniently close to his work. The family is proud to life here, and they the cosiness of the neighbourhood. Everyday they meet lots of friends in the streets; and every week they have communal meals with their various neigh-bours. In general Kuhn Vichai is happy. Security is his only big concern. He agrees with the walls around the neighbourhood; bandits might come in and steal their belongings. The fact that strangers can still walk into their community through the gate doesn't worry him; his neighbours are alert so everybody takes care of everybody.

Welcome to Krung Thep, or Bangkok, the city of angels and capital of Thailand; but

also city of contrasts. Enormous wealth alternates staggering poverty, ancient temples stand next to glittering office towers and constructing workers have their lunches at the roadside stands together with the minions of international business. And for the urban scientist, this city directly stands out because of the incredible amounts of walls and gates that surround endless amounts of mono-functional and mono-cultural enclaves. For instance, take housing. Remarkably, most of Bangkok's estimated 12 million inhabitants live behind gates. And this feature regards all income groups! Low-income people like Kuhn Vichai live in walled slums like Klong Toey, close to the workplaces where they earn their limited amounts of Thai baht. More often then not they have various jobs every day, and mostly they can't afford the costs of trans-portation. At the same time, the urban middle classes move out to Bangkok's extensive suburbs. Here, the creation of endless series of mubahnchatsan (walled housing estates like Baan Lad Prao and Wararak that are depicted as a modern variation on the traditional Thai village) resulted in an urban field of 40 by 40 kilo-metres (Friedmann & Miller 1965). Extensive market segmentation of these neighbourhoods leads to a remarkable selection of income groups. Higher middle class people like Kuhn Chat live amongst higher middle class people; low income groups like Kuhn Rungrote amongst low. And more often than not, the upper echelons of the higher middle class have an additional central condominium close to the workplace. Spread out between these housing enclaves, large amounts of cheap grey concrete flats that didn't yet make way for a new mubahnchatsan make up for the remaining part of the housing market.

This reality of spatial partitioning also characterizes the spatial organization of work, shopping and leisure. In short, the urban field that is Bangkok on closer observation consists of a series of separate spatial walled units that are selectively connected. Therefore, no wonder that connections are especially important in this urban area. To give an example, for housing, proximity to motorway entrances and sky train or metro stations is of key importance. And understandably, motorways, trains and metro's, electricity and fibre class networks first of all connect most of the important work place areas (the port of Klong Toey, the administrative centre of Chang Wattana, the financial cluster of Silom and the old airport in Don Muang and the new one in Lat Krabang. And furthermore, understandably, in addition to the big suburban malls that are scattered about in this urban field, next to the sky train stations, a seemingly endless series of concentrations of exclusive shopping malls has arisen, with more often than not a very exclusive supply of brands.

Gating and Social Integration: the Theory

Bangkok's emerging spatial structure appears to be remarkably in line with recent urban theory on the post-modern city. According to such well-quoted authors as Davis, Sorkin, Sennett, Castells, Graham & Marvin and Zukin in this city the rich have separated themselves spatially from the poor, they abandoned public space and retreat in the pseudo public spaces of shopping malls, golf clubs and gated communities. According to this argument, the adjustment of city space reflects a growing economic and social gap between 'haves' and 'have nots'. Invariably, this observation is linked to fear for the disappearance of the public spaces of old, and with them the changes for

different social groups to meet. Historically, this argument is supported with reference to the emergence of modern society in the Medieval European cities (Sennett 1974). It is stressed that the necessary precondition for this emergence where especially those public places (the market square, the park, town hall) that are now disappearing.

As Amin & Thrift (2002: 32) show, a good many stories on modern urban life, and especially the most popular stories of writers like George Simmel and Walter Benjamin, tell a story of a authentic city, held together by face-to-face interaction whose coherence is now gone. In these stories, community and solidarity are depicted as a result of propinquity. In political theory, authors like Arendt (1958), Habermas (1989) and Sennet (1974) stress that the existence of a public *sphere* is a necessary precondition for democracy. In turn, the emergence of such a public *sphere* is easily linked to the sharing of physical places (the park, the coffee house, the conference room) where political ideas can be expressed and discussed.

Now, starting from this analysis, current spatial restructuring represents a grave danger. Depending on which author to quote, the current city can be described as a dual city, a partitioned city, a fragmented city or even a carceral archipelago (Sassen, Marcuse, Soja). Regardless of the vocabulary applied, the bottom line appears to be that our cities are being pulled apart, that the different social groups that once mixed so freely are now separated from each other. According to the authors mentioned, this separation is caused by the changing organization of modes of economic production. With the quick transition from an industrial to an informational economy, both space and labour have been given different meanings. Space transits from place-based to flow-based (Castells 1996). The space of flows, in which the rich 'haves' live, demands different inputs of labour than the spaces of place, where the rest of unlucky society is left behind. Knowledge has grown in importance leading to ever-greater gaps in income between those who have the attributes to make it in this new economy and those who don't (Sassen, Soja). With this growing income gap comes a wish to protect the privileges that have been gained; a wish to create spaces in which the privileges will not be challenged or spoiled by the less fortunate.

According to Castells, the global elite lives in the space of flows and feels more connected to their fellows in other world cities then to the men and women driving their taxi's or filling their shopping bags. They make up a society separated from the rest by the means of money, culture and more and more by spatial barriers; barriers constructed around places that were once public assert the position of the elite as being in the same city but not sharing the same city. To minimize contact with the rest of society they only visit places exclusively designed for their specific purposes. They work in exclusive office towers, eat in fancy restaurants, spend their limited leisure time at their private country club, shop at exclusive shopping malls and live in their gated communities and guarded condominiums. Within the city, when in transit, they retreat into their private vehicle or when the conditions demand it switch to rapid mass transit. Public transport was ones a place where different social classes could meet but in the post-modern city public transport is hardly ever truly public. Visible and invisible barriers are present that keep the different social classes from mixing. Rapid mass transit services are supplemented by systems of sky-bridges which are created to provide direct excess from one privatized place to the next, surpassing the streets down there, and preventing the need to mix with the rest of the population. In

this way rich public life is exchanged for a weak surrogate, creating what Trevor Boddy (1992: 125) termed the analogous city.

Various authors consider this separation the result of a deliberate attempt to re-establish the economic dominance of the elite. By physically separating themselves, their privileges don't have to be shared and the status quo can be maintained. Separation is not only the outcome of dominance but it is seen as a prerequisite for maintaining this dominance (Castells 1996: 415). Because the elite requires spatial separation to maintain its privileged position, it creates gated communities and private shopping complexes in which to retreat. And by separating itself it automatically shuts out the rest of society, thereby separating them as well. So in the words of Ronald van Kempen (2002: 50): 'Cities are not naturally divided: they are actively partitioned. There are those that do the partitioning and those that are subject to it'. Others have described this same phenomenon in different terms but the overall message remains the same: although in the post-modern city all groups are separated from each other, the initiative for this separation is taken by de urban elites that choose to separate themselves, thereby forcing their preferences upon all others.

Now, this urban 'splintering' is viewed with great care. Since splintering hinders face-to-face interactions between various groups – mind you, the sort of interaction that supposedly was constitutive of the emergence of society in the first place – it is easily perceived as a threat to community and democracy. This analysis is easily linked to the idea of a radical split between the rich 'haves' that go and live in preferred and walled enclaves, linked by privatized infrastructure, and the poor 'have-nots' that stay behind in an increasingly less attractive public domain. In this respect, Davis (1992) chooses the depiction of future space in the movie Blade Runner as a metaphor for things to come in the current real world. In this movie, the rich and happy live above the ground, while the unlucky flock the sewers. Blade Runner depicts a world in which inequality is reproduced in the breaking up of space. Therefore, spatial segmentation gets a leading role as cause of social bads: it spells loss of community, loss of public sphere, and in the end loss of solidarity and even democracy. And this critical overtone in the analysis spatial developments in urban fields seems to be widely supported. Crawford (1999) therefore signals that the analyses of developments in space are framed by a 'narrative of loss'. This narrative "contrasts the current debasement of public space with golden ages and golden sites – the Greek agora, the coffeehouses of early modern Paris and London, the Italian piazza, the town square. The narrative nostalgically posits these as once vital sites of democracy where, allegedly, cohesive public discourse thrived, and inevitably culminates in the con-temporary crisis of public life and public space, a crisis that puts at risk the very ideas and institutions of democracy itself" (ibid: 23). The spatial development of Bangkok seems to be totally in line with this storyline in urban theory.

The Respace Project

At first glace, the framing of spatial changes through the narrative of loss might fit in with intuition. However, on closer look it contains serious flaws (Wissink 2003: 7-9). First of all, it suggests the disintegration of a previous existing unity. However

formerly space very definitely was segmented as well (by the borders of the nation state of cities and of neighbourhoods, and the question arises what integrated those spatially segmented societies socially. Second, the narrative of loss wrongly links former 'integrated' space with inclusive deliberation. This doesn't seem to be true because exclusion has always been part of the urban world, and the question arises how old forms of power and inequality related to space. Third, the narrative of loss wrongly links spatial changes directly to community and democracy. It has a strong orientation on propinquity – face-to-face contacts in physical places – as the prerequisite for specific characteristics of social action like solidarity. However, as is shown often before, no direct and one-directional link between spatial form and the characteristics of social practices can be assumed. Therefore the question arises how people behave within specific spatial forms in places and what – if any – are the results for social interaction. Fourth, the narrative of loss seems to be based on a general linear view of history that doesn't take local outcomes of global phenomena into account. In this unilinear view, differences between city regions are differences in time, and eventually every city will acquire the same characteristics. However, from an institutional point of view, it seems clear that political regimes, and the characteristics of the organization of building have profound influence on the local outcomes of general global influences. An analysis of theses influences calls for a detailed comparative local analysis. And fifthly, the narrative of loss also overlooks variations in the local valuation and in the political attitudes towards spatial segmentation.

So, as Crawford (ibid: 23) observes, the "perception of loss originates in extremely narrow and normative definitions of both 'public' and 'space' that derive from insistence on unity, desire for fixed categories of time and space, and rigidly conceived notions of private and public. Seeking a single, all-inclusive public space, these critics mistake monumental public spaces for the totality of public space". Now, understanding the specifics of the development of spatial forms, of the valuation of these forms, of possible consequences for social life, and of the in specific places asks for detailed empirical research. So we need to complement the literature on the general similarities of trends in global spatial restructuring with a detailed analysis of the contingent ways in which specific sets of actors in specific contexts try to restructure the physical and socio-technical fabric of cities in specific places around the world, of the ways they use the resulting places and of the valuation of these places. They can only be answered with detailed comparative empirical research into the politics of spatial segmentations. Interestingly, in their seminal work on new spatial dynamics, Graham & Marvin (2001: 417) point to such a need as the main challenge to urban research: "This book suggests, then, that a central challenge for urban research is to undertake detailed and comparative empirical investigations into the ways in which physical and socio-technical shifts towards splintering urbanism, and unbundled networked infrastructures, are being politically and socially constructed in profoundly different political, cultural, economic and historical contexts. Such research needs to encompass developed nations, newly industrializing nations, developing cities, and post-communist metropolitan areas embedded within different state, political, cultural and urban traditions".

This analysis has resulted in the project on *The politcs of spatial segmentation in the Asian metropolis* (see www.respace.org, currently under revision but soon to be ready). This project sets out to empirically study the consequences of changing spatial forms for

the public sphere. It focuses on the Asian metropolis because in some of these the current spatial developments mentioned in urban theory play out very drastically here. At the same time the variation in spatial forms and social life seem to vary markedly. With this in mind, Bangkok, Tokyo, Shanghai and Mumbai have been selected as research locations. From the start it has been clear, that the research in these cities consists of various questions that need to be individually answered but are interlinked at the same time. How does spatial form develop and what factors do cause this form to emerge? How are social groups distributed within this spatial form and again what causes this distribution? What do social networks of these social groups that are distributed within this spatial form look like? How can the public sphere in the city under study be characterized? How are spatial form and the public sphere valued? And what are the causal relationships between these factors (spatial form, group distribution, social networks, the public sphere, valuation)? So in all, this makes up for quite a complex research that consists of various steps that need to be taken at each of the places under study.

Since the start of the Respace project at the end of 2003, Bangkok has so far been the main centre of research (in 2006 our attention will shift to include Tokyo). The initial project (conducted in 2004) showed Bangkok to be the splintered metropolis that was described above. It also showed that income differences seemed to be paramount in social stratification and spatial distribution. Then, the next step was to research the social networks of groups within this splintered spatial form. For that reason, during the spring of 2005, in cooperation with Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok[2], a research group consisting of eight Dutch and ten Thai junior and senior researchers was established. At first a general division was made into four types of neighbour-hoods: informal settlements, mubahnchatsan for the low- to middle middleclass, mubahnchatsan for the middle- to high middleclass and condominium complexes. In determining specific research areas, excess and contacts where guiding. In total ten neighbourhoods were selected: two informal settlements, one mubahnchatsan type low income government housing project, two middle middleclass mubahnchatsans, three high middleclass mubahnchatsans, and two condominium complexes (one low and one high middleclass).

Then four mixed teams of Dutch and Thai researchers were created to visit the neighbourhood types under study. They had to establish the characteristics of the neighbourhoods and their inhabitants under study; study social networks; and study perceptions of self and others. For this we partly relied on diverse research methods. First we went into the neighbourhoods for observation of houses, roads, facilities, people, sounds, smells and the like at different moments during the week. Through interviews with the developers, the National Housing Authority and property managers, we gained extra information on the neighbourhoods like prices and sizes of

[2] We extend our thanks to Adjarn Thip and her students of the Faculty of Architecture of Chulalongkorn University for their endless help in our project. Without them we would never have been able to gather the information we did. Thai people are very modest and cautious of strangers entering their neighbourhood, especially (large) western people that don't speak their language. With the help of the Thai researchers we were able to gain entry to far more places and people than we could have dreamed of.

plots and houses. Meanwhile a questionnaire (in English and Thai) was put together that was used in every research-neighbourhood. The questionnaire included questions on general characteristics of the residents of neighbourhoods (income, age and household composition), on the reasons people lived in their neighbourhood, on the amount and type of contacts with neighbours, on the contact with people with other social characteristics (income e.g.), on the perceptions of the different types of neighbourhoods in Bangkok and on solidarity (proud of their neighbourhood e.g.). One part of the questionnaire included marking the locations where the respondents shop, eat and work on a map, providing an impression of the scale and scope of the networks people move around in. And finally, with the help of the Thai researchers, in each neighbourhood we interviewed a few residents to gather specific information on residents to supplement the general information gathered by the questionnaire. What follows is a presentation of a first analysis of the resulting research material.

Research Neighbourhoods

In Bangkok, informal settlements vary tremendously in size and standard, ranging from the enormous Klong Toey neighbourhood to little pockets along railway lines and underneath elevated highways. These areas all have in common that densities are enormous; at the same time basic facilities cannot be taken for granted. The informal settlements we chose to research are both in Klong Toey. One is the 70 Rai community, the area where Kuhn Vichai lives, and the only part of the Klong Toey settlement that actually has formal contracts now; the other Lock 1,2,3 which is totally informal. The Klong Toey settlement is located south of Sukumvit on land that was formerly owned by the port authority. It is Bangkok's largest and most famous informal settlement and exists since the 1930's. Most households are at the economic bottom of the urban hierarchy. The quality of housing in Klong Toey varies considerably from small wooden shacks to relatively well-maintained stone row houses. Facilities are very basic and many households suffer from overcrowding. Our research in two parts of Klong Toey showed that the average households consist of 5,8 persons with extremes going as high as twenty people in houses that are no bigger then 30 square meter. This means that a lot of activities spill over on to the street causing a very lively atmosphere. Klong Toey's continued growth is mainly the result of natural growth. Most of the respondents in our research indicated that there were born in Klong Toey and didn't expect to be leaving the neighbourhood anytime soon. The reasons indicated for living in Klong Toey are dominated by the wish to life close to work (58%), and the wish to live in close proximity to family members (55%), with all other factors playing only a minor part (<10%).

Condominiums and apartments can be found in all parts of Bangkok. However, there is a significant difference between those found in the central areas of the city and those elsewhere. In close proximity to the city's skytrain system condominiums offer tremendous luxury at premium prices and most of the residents are well off business-men and expatriates. Away from the nodes the glitter and glamour is exchanged by bare concrete and residents are more likely to be factory workers and taxi drivers. So the condominium market is subdivided on the basis of price levels and this division is closely related to location (expensive spells central and vise versa). In our research we

studied two condominiums complexes: Sunisa apartments, located in the northern parts of Bangkok near Don Muang international airport and Baan Chan located centrally in one of the soi of Sukumvit road. The difference in price level is considerable with unit prices at Sunisa ranging between 1100 and 2500 Baht per month while prices at Baan Chan are in the 4,0-8,5 M Baht range[3]. These price differences are also reflected in the available living space with an average unit size of 20 square meters at Sunisa against 70-150 square meters at Baan Chan. However, regardless of these prices, in Bangkok condominiums are generally regarded as a temporary place of residence that mainly fulfils the need to live in close proximity to work. They are not considered good places to raise a family. This view is supported by the relatively small household size (4,0 persons at Sunisa and 2,9 persons at Baan Chan). And living in close proximity to work was by far the strongest motivation for families to live here (60-55%). Furthermore, between 40-55% of the residents didn't expected to still be living at their current residence in three years time (in comparison, in all the other researched neighbourhoods more then 95% of the residents expected to be living in their current house in three years time). There are some differences though between the two types of condos: where safety plays only a small part in the choice of residence at Sunisa (28%) it is a major factor for the residents of Baan Chan (56%). The reverse goes for affordability with 51% of the residents of Sunisa indicating it as an important motivation and only 18% at Baan Chan.

As was explained above, the mubahnchatsan is the Thai equivalent of the American gated community. They are by far the most popular housing type with about 65% of all newly registered houses (in 2004) being located within a mubahnchatsan (GHB, 2005). It is estimated that close to 25% of all houses in Greater Bangkok are located within mubahnchatsans (Dijkwell, Meijer & Wissink, forthcoming). The mubahn-chatsan is a single developer housing project, aimed at a small economic group and strongly separated from its surroundings by walls and gates. Unlike the gated community, in Bangkok the mubahnchatsan isn't just for the privileged classes; almost every social class has its own type of mubahnchatsan and government currently even supplies mubahnchatsan houses for the very poor. So the subdivision in price levels is also very prominent in the mubahnchatsan market. In our research we studied five mubahnchatsans ranging in price from 0.9-1,7 M Baht for the cheapest to 10-25 M Baht for the most expensive. The more expensive mubahnchatsans (including Baan Lad Prao where Kuhn Chat lives) contain a bigger houses (up to 480 m² instead of 84m²), and more luxurious facilities. And most of all they are located closer to important nodes. For the purpose of this article the five neighbourhoods are divided in two groups with the two mubahnchatsans for the middle-middleclass in one group (including Wararak where Kuhn Rungrote lives) and those for the higher-middleclass in the other. The two mubahnchatsans in the first group are both located in the far northern part of Bangkok at more or less the edge of the city while the other three projects are located closer to important nodes: far more centrally or in close proximity to one of the major toll way entrances.

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[3] 1000 Baht is approximately 20 euro.

What unites these projects is that they all have a similar physical structure; all are demarked by 15 feet walls and guarded around the clock by onsite security guards. The houses are single detached and large to very large and facilities consist of a well-kept park. The expensive projects contain a swimming pool. While the projects look very similar there are differences as well. For instance, the more expensive projects have slightly older residents (37,4 against 34,4) and slightly bigger households (5,0 against 3,3) then the less expensive projects, indicating their different stage in the household cycle. But there are also some bigger differences between the different projects. While security is the dominant motivation in the expensive mubahnchatsans (57%) it is of much less importance in the less expensive projects (30%). The same goes for proximity to work (46% against 26%). The reverse applies for the role of affordability. 78% Of the residents of the first group of mubahnchatsans sees affordability as a major motivation for their choice, while less then half (37%) of their counterparts in the second group shares this motivation. But one of the most striking differences is the presences of live-in maids which where present in 39% of the more expensive projects against only 2% in the less expensive projects.

Mubahnchatsans are not only developed by project developers and aimed at the middle to high middleclass. Government is also active in the same field but their target group consist of the people with low incomes. Klong Saam is such a 'Baan Uhr Athorn' project, located at the far northern edge of the city of Bangkok the project consists of 477 tiny two storey single detached houses. Although the prices (400.000 Baht) of the houses are considerably lower then in the privately developed mubahn-chatsans the structure is very similar. The project is located in the same area as the two aforementioned cheaper projects (north of the city) and although the average house is smaller the facilities and look of the project is very similar. The average household size is at 3,7, which is comparable to the middle middleclass mubahnchatsans. And also the motivation for their residential decision is very similar to that of the residents of the cheaper privately developed mubahnchatsans with affordability the main factor of choice.

In conclusion, the Bangkok housing market is split up in various units that consist of uniform units, income being the main characteristic. The expensive houses are located in proximity to infrastructure nodes. Cheap housing has to be found at the boarders of Bangkok's extensive urban field. In their choice of residence, all social groups seem to make a trade off between affordability and proximity to work (measured in time and price). For the lowest income groups this results in houses in a central slum that is close to the workplace or in a remote government housing project. For the middle classes the choice is between a centrally located condominium and a suburban mubahnchatsan. Different income groups hardly seem to be mixed so Bangkok's spatially splintered structure goes hand in hand with the distribution of income groups over spatial units. At the same time, in the uniform neighbourhoods of cheap and expensive housing types can be located directly next to each other, or next to almost any other activity for that matter. As a result, Bangkok's housing market can be perceived as very segregated or very mixed, depending on the scale of analysis used.

Social networks in Bangkok

Now what are the differences between the inhabitants of the researched areas and their social networks? First of all, let us mention that the research itself already gives an inside into these differences. For one, what stood out most was the amount of response we were able to get in the different types of neighbourhoods. It turned out to be very difficult to get into expensive mubahnchatsans. And when we did, it was hard work to be allowed to get our questionnaires filled in. This may indicate that the residents don't care for outsiders coming in and have literally bought their privacy en security behind the walls. At the same time, getting into informal settlements and less expensive mubahnchatsan was no problem at all. People were genuinely interested in our presence, cooperated willingly, and gave us an extensive insight into their lives.

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

Figure 1. The amount of households residents have contact with, per neighbourhood type
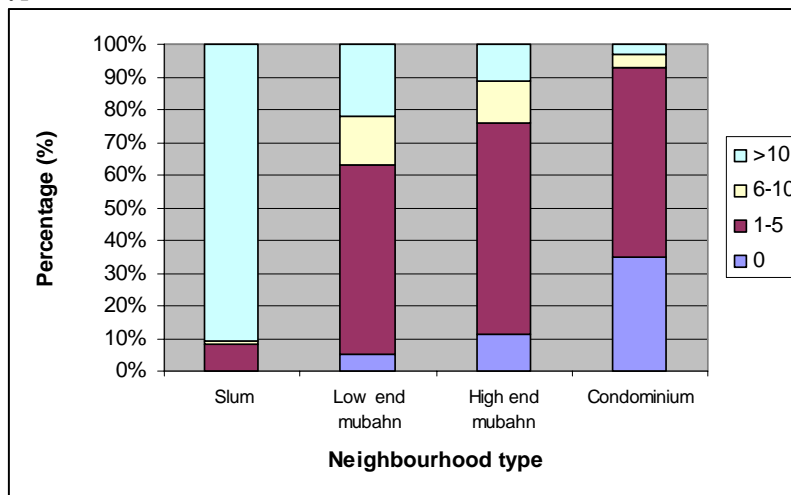
Next, we tried to get an idea of the social interaction in the neighbourhood. Therefore we inquired 'how often do you greet your neighbours?'. The results in Figure 2 are in line with our expectations, which are based on the results of the amount of households people have contact with. Again, there is a considerable difference between answers of the respondents in informal settlements with condominiums: twice as many slum dwellers greet neighbours daily. An interesting result, that gives a very clear first indication of the characteristics of the interaction within this neighbourhood type.

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Figure 2. Residents daily greeting their neighbours, % per neighbourhood type
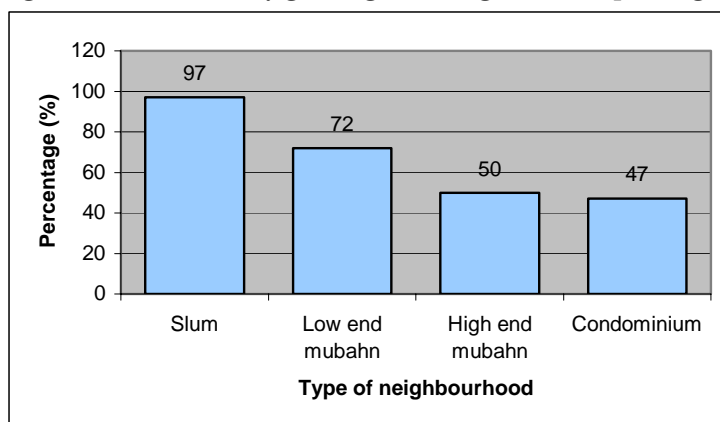
Although greeting your neighbours gives an indication of the interaction within a neighbourhood, it doesn't tell much about the intensity of these contacts. Having dinner together does, especially given the importance that is given to eating by most Thai. Therefore we asked how often people have dinner with their neighbours. We used five-point scale for this (1 = >1x per day, 2 = 1x per day, 3 = 1x per week, 4 = <1x per week 5 = never). Table 1 show the results. 'Eating' is of course a more intimate and time-consuming activity than 'greeting' so it is done less often no matter what the neighbourhood. On average the residents of the different types of neighbourhoods don't eat with each other often, and if they do it's less than once a week. But it seems to happen more often in informal settlements.

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

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

A third type of interaction we questioned residents about concerned the amount of times they joined in on neighbourhood activities. This is of course depends on the fact if these types of get-togethers are organized at all. Nonetheless, the answers to this question in Table 2 come close to those for 'eating'. Again the category condominium shows the least amount of social interaction among the residents: neighbourhood activities aren't organized. It's safe to say that there are some activities organized in the other types of neighbourhoods, but these are either not that often (less than once a week) or residents don't join in that often.

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

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

Next, we also inquired if neighbourhood residents depend on one another: did they receive help from their neighbours in the past year? Figure 3 indicates that again there are some differences between the neighbourhood types, with social interaction in the condominiums remarkable lower then in the other neighbourhoods, where receiving help seems to be pretty common. Again, the informal settlement shows the highest percentage of people receiving help, with almost 9 out of 10.

Figure 3. Did you receive help from neighbours this year? Per neighbourhood type.
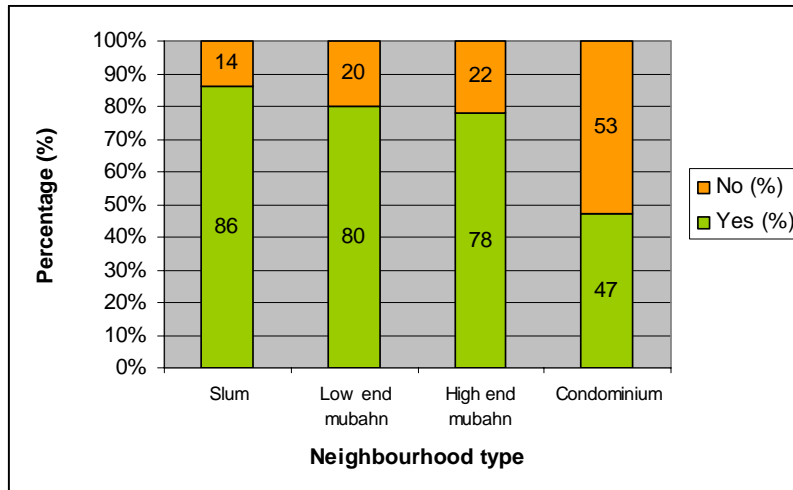

Another indicator for interdependency is borrowing things to or lending things from other people. The below figure shows the percentage the never borrows anything. Doing these two things is supposed to indicate if people rely on their neighbours to some extent. The results in Figure 4 again point in the same direction. Condominium residents hardly ever borrow anything from or lend anything to their neighbours; the slum dwellers almost all rely on each other. It should be noted however, that having more means maybe decreases the need to rely on others. The difference between the two types of mubahnchatsans for 'borrowing' seems to indicate this roll of income.

Figure 4. Percentage of residents that NEVER borrow or lend anything from their neighbours, per neighbourhood type.


13
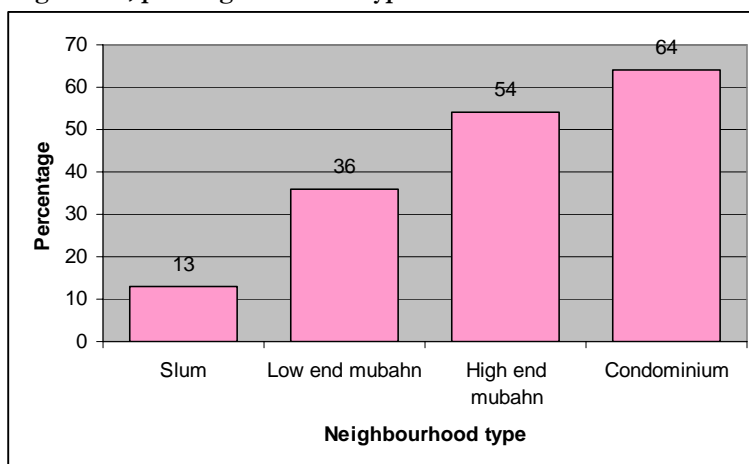
Next, we inquired about the importance of walls. As has been explained, walls are an important feature of the urban landscape of Bangkok. But maybe they have various meanings. They may protect and enclose one, but keep out and shun another. We asked the how important people thought walls around their neighbourhood were. We again made use of five-point scale (1 = very important, 5 = very unimportant). As Figure 5 shows, and could be expected, the residents of the mubahnchatsans think walls around the neighbourhood are important. They wish to experience their living environment as a place of safety, security en privacy. Half of the slum dwellers don't think walls are important at all. They couldn't care less if they were walled in. They may never have thought of this as an option or necessity for their residential area.

Figure 5. The importance of walls, per neighbourhood type
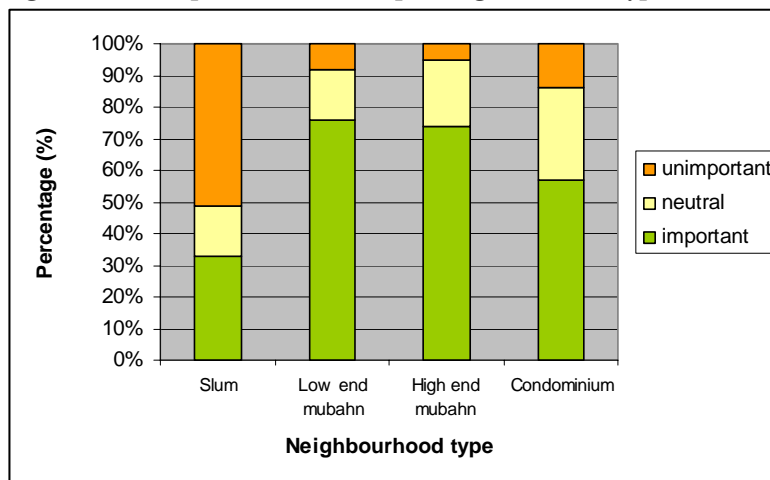
Finally, we asked about the contact people have with people from other income groups. Thai society is typified as hierarchical, so we wanted to have an indication if people are really bound to their 'class'. A note must be made here, that the results show how often Thai people themselves think they have contact with people from different income groups. As Figure 6 shows, there is hardly any difference between the neighbourhood types. It's actually quite logical that these percentages should be about the same, because it takes two to have contact. More interesting is the actual percentage: the daily contact rates are all being between 60 and 70%! This is quite unexpected, because segregation theories seem to tell us otherwise.

Figure 6. How often do you have contact with people with another income?
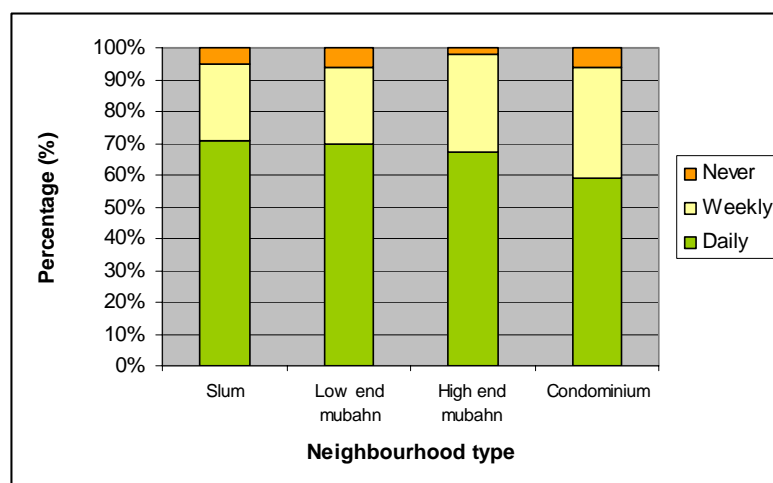
As explained above, apart from these answers derived from the questionnaire, we also asked the respondents to plot the location of their workplace, daily restaurants and leisure activities on a Bangkok map. The results of this part of the research have not yet been processed. However, a first view does clearly indicate that the daily networks of high-end mubahnchatsan inhabitants are very extensive, the car in combination with the sky train being the main means of transportation. Alternatively, the networks of the inhabitants of informal settlements and low-end mubahnchatsan are small, with most activities being restricted to the vicinity of the neighbourhood.

Our conclusion of this first analysis is that social networks and interactions vary considerably between the researched neighbourhood types. Life in the low-end housing types has a relatively small spatial scale, while at the same time it is typified by relatively intense social interaction within the neighbourhood. In contrast, life in the high-end residences has a considerable spatial scale, but here interaction within the neighbourhood all but exists. So slum dwellers seem to have the most integrated networks within their neighbourhoods. The physical space of the slum with a lot of little shops and restaurants and chaos on the narrow streets, gives a whole different picture than the lonely lobby at a condominium or the extremely well groomed, quiet streets of an expensive mubahnchatsan. These results back the perception you have of the neighbourhood types when just walking through them. At the same time, the answers to the questionnaire indicate that these inhabitants of various types of neighbourhoods, during their daily life, still do meet each other. That conclusion was also supported by the more extensive interviews and by so far unpublished adjoining research into meeting places in the city. Most important in this respect are informal meetings: with foodstall vendors, live-in maids and the like (cf. Eames & Granich Goode 1980 on informal meetings). Furthermore, we caution that since income turned out to be the determining factor demarcating the differences between the neighbourhood inhabitants, resulting in mono-income housing estates, it is not at all sure that there is a causal relationship between the type of neighbourhood and social interaction.

Perceiving the Other

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

As Table 3 shows, all residents rate the high middleclass mubahnchatsan as by far the most desirable living environment. Actually the high middle class mubahnchatsan is the only type that scores positive at an average rating of 2.01 against 3.21 – 4.23 for the other neighbourhoods. At the same time, the rating of the other housing types shows considerable variation. There is a strong correlation between the desirability of the lower middle class mubahnchatsan, the lower middle class condo and the slum when correlated against income. Where lower income groups see these neighbourhoods as still relatively desirable the higher income groups completely disagree. Although the correlation for the informal settlement is present, this correlation is completely caused by the residents of the slum themselves who see the slum as the second most desirable housing type after the high middleclass mubahnchatsan.

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

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

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

their dominance of the housing market is likely to persist into the nearby future.

Safety is an important element in the lives of many of Bangkok's residents and especially among the wealthy and those living in mubahnchatsan safety plays an important part in the choice for a specific residential environment. The environments in which the residents indicated that safety plays an important role are also the neighbourhoods of which the general population expects that the crime rates are relatively low. The majority of the respondents considered the high middle class mubahnchatsan to be the least crime-ridden environment. When you look at the numbers for the high middleclass condo and the low middleclass mubahnchatsan that are both physically separated from their surroundings and guarded by security personnel, the difference with the high middleclass mubahnchatsan which is secured in a similar way is quite striking. Although security measures are similar and on the basis of the conducted interviews with residents it appeared that actual crime rates are quite similar as well, as Table 4 shows, the perception is not so similar at all. This might be an important factor in the success of the high middleclass mubahnchatsan: although they offer a similar package of safety measures as offered by some of the other residential environments, they manage to create an image that they are a lot safer and therefore also as a lot more attractive. Another striking point that can be derived from this data, is that although most groups rated the neighbourhoods with physically present crime prevention measures like walls and security guards as safer, the slum inhabitants did not. They perceived all neighbourhoods including their own as equally safe, while all other groups rated the slum as the least safe environment. This means that either the slum dwellers are misinformed about their own neighbourhood or all other residents group are misinformed about the slum.

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

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

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

takes place between the residents within other neighbourhoods.

Table 5. Perceived levels of neighbourhood interaction

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

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

Table 6. Perception on willingness to contribute to the underprivileged

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

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

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

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

We conclude that the opinions that various groups of inhabitants of Bangkok's neighbourhoods have of each other seem to be in line with the self-perception of these groups. But there is one exception: the self-image of the inhabitants of informal settlements is much more positive than the image that other groups have over these Bangkok residents. This fact was underlined remarkably at the end of our research project, when the various researchers evaluated the project. When asked for his opinion, Polt, a Thai junior researcher that cooperated in the Klong Toey research stated that he was surprised (and delighted) to have found out that the people in this informal settlement are very normal and friendly. The lively neighbourhood atmosphere was thrilling, and he was amazed that these neighbourhoods aren't dangerous to walk into. With these remarks, Polt also explained his initial reluctance to cooperate, when before every initial meeting in Klong Toey, he would call with an excuse.

Conclusion

We arrive at our overall conclusion. First of all let us repeat that this is a first presentation of vast research material gathered in Bangkok in the spring of 2005. And that this material only results in answering one of the various questions that together make op the Respace project. This project has the ambitious goal of studying empirically, the relationship between spatial form and the public sphere in various Asian metropolises. The first part of the project, conducted in 2004, showed Bangkok to be a vast urban field that consists of a series of selectively interlinked urban units. There turned out to be a rich variety of these units, but at the same time they showed to be mono-functional and mono-cultural. The research especially focussed on an explanation of the mechanisms behind this spatial structure[4]. The research showed that in housing Bangkok's spatial development resulted in a variation of neighbourhood types, most of them bordered by walls and gates. Within these neighbourhoods, units are remarkably similar, income and housing prices being the determining factor.

Now, according to what has been called a 'narrative of loss' concerning the spatial restructuring of the cities of our time, this splintered spatial structure is perceived to result in a lack of social integration. Our empirical research presented in this paper especially focuses on that specific part of the argumentative chain linking spatial form

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[4] For an initial presentation of this analysis in Dutch, see Wissink (2004). Further publications in English will follow in the near future.

to the public sphere. This research shows that indeed there are remarkable differences between the social lives of the inhabitants of various neighbourhood types. In general it seems, that the lower the income, the smaller the daily urban networks, but also the more integrated. In informal settlements, social life is rich and thriving; in expensive mubahnchatsan it seems to be hardly existent. However, at the same time it was concluded on the basis of the unanimous evaluation of all social groups, that people of the various neighbourhoods do meet each other. But at the same time, it turned out that the perception of inhabitants of informal settlements, and of these settlements itself in particular didn't conform to the lived experience of informal settlement inhabitants themselves. In modern day marketing terms: the informal settlement of Bangkok and it's inhabitant have an image problem.

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

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