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Public space in Bangkok

Commoners in search of a commons

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"WHO wants a park?" This is meant as a rhetorical question, one that has been put to Jatuporn Tansirimas, a 39-year-old project manager in web design, and his friends quite a lot lately. He gets this response, he thinks, because he has been campaigning for something that would typically be left to Thailand's kings to grant, rather than for any of its businessmen, politicians or ordinary citizens to bring about themselves. Or could it be that Thai people just don't care about parks? Mr Tansirimas and his friends, anyway, believe that Bangkok, which has just been recognised as the world's most-visited city, ought to have a new park. And not just any park: they want their country's capital to find its own equivalent to New York's Central Park.

It all started seven months ago when Tok, a friend of Mr Tansirimas, was driving along an elevated expressway. The road led him into a noodle-bowl of high-volume expressways that sucks cars in from all directions and spits them out into the centre of Bangkok. As he had many times before, Tok caught a glimpse of a vast patch of green, studded with trees and abandoned railway coaches, stretching along the highway in the city's Makkasan area. For the first time, he looked it up on Google Earth, and then posted a picture of the plot on Facebook, asking people to imagine it as a park. Within 24 hours some 900 people had shared his link.

The idea amounts to turning Bangkok's last remaining open space into a park. It has since grown into a movement of sorts. Ten people are now running an organisation they call Makkasan Hope. Its Facebook campaign (its motto, in Thai: "We Want Makkasan to be a Park and Museum") has won more than 19,000 "likes". A concert earlier this year attracted a few thousand listeners. So far none of this adds up to very much, Mr Tansirimas admits.

The number of clicks they have attracted is less impressive than it might be, for a city that boasts more Facebook users than any other in the world. In another context though, it is remarkable. In contemporary Thailand, effective calls for change tend to start in the countryside. The voice of the urban middle-class has been stunted by a combination of rising prosperity and a long period in which the army has held sway in politics and society.

Approximately the same number of Bangkok's residents, some 22,000, have signed an online petition demanding that the state, specifically the State Railway of Thailand, turn the plot into a public-park-plus-museum. The land was donated to the railways by King Chulalongkorn (ie Rama V), more than 100 years ago.

If their hope becomes a reality, the Makkasan area would become the biggest park in the city centre, putting into second and third place respectively two famous royal gifts: Lumpini Park (built by Rama VI in the 1920s) and Benjasiri Park (built to honour the 60th birthday of Queen Sirikit in 1992).

The rectangular-shaped plot at Makkasan is in fact only a third the size of New York's Central Park. But that makes it nearly as big as London's Hyde Park and a lot bigger than either Beijing's Beihai park or the Lodhi Gardens in Delhi.

The governor of Bangkok, Sukhumbhand Paribatra, has backed calls for creating a park and has tweeted that he would "beg" for the plot to be turned into a park (to use a literal translation). In practice Mr Sukhumbhand's support may not count for much; the land is owned by the railways, not the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration that he controls. And so the governor, re-elected for a second term earlier this year, will have to look elsewhere in the city if he is to fulfil a promise he made earlier, to give the city another eight square kilometres of green space by 2017.

As Mr Tansirimas sees it, the central issue is something more important even than land development. "It's about the direction the city is taking," he says. Current trends look very unpleasant. According to a recent study, Bangkok has mere 3.3 square metres of green space per person. This is less than any other city in any of the Asian countries that are in a similar state of development. The very worst Asian cities, by this measure, are Kolkata (1.8 square metres) and Jakarta (2.3 square metres). The average green space per inhabitant in the 22 cities surveyed in the Asian Green City Index is 38.6 square metres. (Guangzhou wins that contest, with 166.3 square metres per person and Hong Kong ranks near the top with 105.3 metres. Beijing enjoys 88.4 metres and Delhi 18.8).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends that "cities provide nine square metres of undeveloped (unpaved) open space for every inhabitant". It is unclear exactly how their boffins arrived at this number. But it does appear that reserving only a third that much space, per person, might incur some rather disastrous side effects. Scientists studying Bangkok's thermal environment have found that the average surface temperature in the region of greater Bangkok stood at 26.0° in 1994. By 2007 it had risen to 37.8°, and by 2009, the most recent year available, to 39.8°.

Alas, if the past is any guide Makkasan will more likely become part of the city's ever-expanding concrete jungle of shopping malls, condominiums and office buildings. There is no formal plan to develop it and no institutional mechanisms that would guarantee public participation. Property developers have already been trotting out the idea of turning the land into "a business gateway to the ASEAN Economic Community"—which echoes the fashionable idea of establishing Thailand as the centrepiece of the region (or of mainland South-East Asia, anyway).

The rationale for pouring more concrete has already been offered. Apparently, the land at Makkasan must be sold to plug a 100 billion baht (\$3.3 billion) hole in the pocket of the state railways. The 1.2 square-kilometre plot at Makkasan may indeed be the railways' crown jewel, but it is only an astonishing small 0.003% of the land it owns nationwide. So a more compelling argument may be required at some point.

Sitting under a tree in Bangkok's Lumpini Park, Mr Tansirimas and another organiser for Makkasan Hope, Khomsan Kiatsupaibul, say the environmental case for more green space is obvious. "We are not putting ourselves against anyone" says Mr Kiatsupaibul, who works as a graphic designer. "We are just saying, 'This is what we think could be done with the plot—what do you think?'" Their own hopes are for verdant, open space of course, but also for something more. Mr Tansirimas thinks Bangkok also needs something like a public "space where you don't have to spend money. Where will our children grow up—in department stores?"



(Picture credits: Makassan Hope and Google Earth)

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