

# CASE STUDY SUKHUMVIT LINE

— OR LEARNING

# FROM BANGKOK

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1. Urbanism has, since the neo-rationalistic attempt to reconstruct the European city in the eighties, apparently had some difficulties defining a common motto or unifying metaphor as e.g. City Beautiful = The Garden City movement or City Scientific = Functionalism. "The City Accessible" could be a general description for the re-emerging interest in the significance of infrastructure, which turned up during the nineties, with OMA's Euralille project as role model.

## BANGKOK – THE 'CITY ACCESSIBLE'

Bangkok belongs to a group of generic metropolises, which has been dramatically changed within the last few decades by the wave of globalization that was the generator of the East Asian economies until the collapse of 1997. The city that was once 'The Venice of Asia' has transformed into something approaching the hedonistic capital of modern lifestyles. The transformation started in the early sixties when the first buildings of more than six floors were built. At that time, skyscrapers marked the arrival of modernity and were celebrated as a key sign of development. During the eighties, the number reached over a thousand. Twenty years later, nobody has an idea of the number of skyscrapers nor is there any control of the extent of modernization. It is only recently, that zoning laws formally legalizing the situation have been formulated. Bangkok's skyline is auto poetic and appears as an endlessly indistinctive relief of center-less, built-up areas spread over an urban region extending 1,500 km<sup>2</sup>. Not only have the dimensions of the city exploded, but its original structure has also been blown up. The concentric system of canals that once tied the city together as a kind of unity, has been filled up with asphalt and vital circulation is now handled by a new and constantly collapse-threatened road system.

The globalized urban growth literally follows new paths. The patterns of localisation characterizing the contemporary city seem amorphous in a geometrical and plan-aesthetic sense but seen in a time and mobility perspective, the formless pattern has its own logistic rationality. The international business empires, shopping centres and the new jet-set conglomerates in enclaves of hierarchies of accessibility around the infrastructural nodes. The skyscrapers and boxes of consumption do not shoot up at random; they are placed strategically where connections are good, where the flow of people, goods, and capital meets the least possible friction. It is a new city movement – CITY ACCESSIBLE<sup>1</sup> – and its primary characteristics consists of structures of connectivity, not constrained by any territorial relations of proximity. In contrary to the inert spaces of the traditional street, modern infrastructure connections are primarily dependent on speed, and therefore relatively independent of distance. The principles of localization and the architectural fixation of place in the modern metropolis, are basically fixations of time, and it is not only the physical form of the city that is bursting its contextual



Bangkok roadscapes.

relations: individual buildings and architecture as a whole has also broken free of the historical defined paradigms of style.

The modern urban areas, arising ex nihili east of the historical districts of Bangkok, should not stylistically be mistaken for western clones – they are icons of 'temporalization'. The generic city is first of all a space of time, localizing itself within environments of mobility around the major traffic arteries. In Bangkok, this happens along the river, next to the exit ramps of private expressways, near the new airport, along the newly built Sky Train, and around the stations of the future subway. The better the connections, the faster the new terminal buildings and clusters of attractions will be established. However, a kind of bottleneck paradox is incorporated within the pattern, which constantly threatens to constipate. The road system in Bangkok is loaded beyond its breaking point. During rush hours, the traffic moves at a snail speed of 9 km/h; the noise, the heat, and the massive carbon dioxide exhaustion is self-fuelling. It is almost unthinkable to move around on foot along the main roads in Bangkok, those who barely can afford a transportation device will buy one anyway. The public network of streets and roads is vertically dispersed in a hierarchy of speed. Private consortiums have



Superimposed expressway system Bangkok.

"The Splintered City"  
– seen from a Sky Train station



built alternative routes 'around' the public space and the condensed "Jam-Space" (Koolhaas 2001c:685 ). Across the city, enormous tracks of concrete serve the affluent population groups, and soon the subway wormholes will open new middleclass-exits from the noise- and pollution hell of ground level. The integrated city is "splintered" (Graham, Marvin 2001) by the tollbooth.

The vertical traffic segregation of the public space has literally divided the city into different cultural layers. A geographic locality can easily be a niche or existenzminimum for an illegal settlement, be a production site for a small industrial company, give shelter to a service firm e.g. a small car mechanic, and at the same time be the distribution canal for the information society's flow of symbols and brands to the global consumer culture. The horizontal city structure is breaking up; a new three-dimensionality of physical structures and cultural sense of time is emerging in the city. Bangkok has been divided into different layers of economy and lifestyle, which cannot be represented by a traditional cartographical plan. An official up-to-date map of the city is not available - what is measured, registered and mapped out by the authorities only shows a section through one of many layers of the city. The different speeds of globalization should be measured by the time it takes to move from one place to another. The longer it takes, the more friction, the bigger the difference in the cultural environment. In general, it is faster to jump with the Sky Train from mall to mall than to leave a shopping center, cross the parking lot and highway to enter the nearest shantytown. The actors of the different cultural domains have different abilities to move and are not linked to the same kind of infrastructures. You have to change from Sky Train – to automobile – to walking – in order to reach the bottom of the 'global village'. The happy oxymoron and the image of the unproblematic fusion of the local

society and the global economy are in fact quite problematic. The space of the global village is fractured into different speeds both physically, economically and culturally.

## SUKHUMVIT LINE

In Bangkok, globalization happens quite tangibly and very visually across the existing structures as new layers are added. A kind of doubling - "Gobble-lization" (Architectural Dimension 1995) where the economies are on top of each other as independent and hermetic circlets. The corridor of development that runs along the new SkyTrain system in Bangkok and which attracts a major part of global capital like shopping centers, entertainment resorts, hotels and eager consumers, hovers 12 meters above what remains of original local settlements. The Bangkok Mass Transit System, BTS, is in spite of its name and a number of daily passengers of about 250,000 not an ordinary public transportation system. The rail system is 100% private property, built by Siemens and designed to make profit. A single trip from The On Nut station in the east to Siam Square in the west cost 10 times the price of an ordinary bus ticket. In this perspective, the system excludes far more locals than it serves now. Seen from the shantytowns along Sukhumvit Road, there is no doubt that this new Sky Train is a private business. The security guards at the entrance stop smiling, if any attempt is made to climb the toll-booths, or if anyone tries to sell their own products at one of the stations.

However, provided with an entry permit in the form of a 'travel pass', there is hardly any doubt about the advantages of the system. Since its opening in December 1999, BTS has transported more than 120 million people around the city and made connections that were once almost unthinkable. A number of business districts, headquarters, shopping centers, "Best Selection Condominiums", tourist attractions and hotels have been connected by a 23½ km long string consisting of two independent lines. Sukhumvit Line, running the 17 km from Sukhumvit Road to the weekend market at Mor Chit in 30 min., and the 6½ km long Silom Line connecting the National Stadium with the river at the grandiose Shangri-La Hotel – a trip done in less than 23 min. The trains shuttle from early morning to midnight, and have made it possible to make appointments on time within the range of the BTS system. An executive living in one of the luxury-com-



BTS map.

plex-condominiums at Thong Lo can be in the financial district at Silom Road within twenty minutes, a trip that earlier would have taken at least an hour by car during rush hour. The so-called 'Sky Bridges', leading directly from the stations to the big malls and department stores, assure a minimal impact from beggars, street dealers and the tropical climate. The BTS network is not yet completely developed, it does not reach the big residential areas around Thonburi west of the river, and the connection to the future international airport east of the city is still to come, as is the extension north to Lum Lu. The expansion of the rail system will probably never reach the historic district at Rattana Kosin and Phra Nakhon. The giant concrete constructions carrying the sky rail are so highly modern, that they threaten to dwarf the old city's status as monument. The sky net primarily serves modern Bangkok's secular programmes, the entertainment areas, the financial centers and the consumption districts. The Sky Train track is a synchronic development-string representing an independent, dynamic vector around which the urban growth takes place, a currency snake with 23 heads generating a new kind of urbanity: "FlowCity" (Graham 2001: 4), and at the same time a sectional study of the generic Bangkok, a diachronic story about the city 'Ohne Eigenschaften'.

## LABYRINTH AND PANORAMA

The E9 train station is a logistic indication of the Sukhumvit Line's eastern destination at Sukhumvit Soi 81, an approximately 20 min. train ride from Siam Square. The two-story tall construction of suspended platforms carries the station's stairways, sky bridges, bullet-proof ticket stands, air-conditioned shops, small newsstands, snack bars, platforms, observation areas with benches and trash cans. It is named On Nut, referring to the highway beneath heading east out of the city. In the shade of the On Nut station's 60 m. long rectangular platform lies the six-lane wide Sukhumvit Road, an enclosed farming plot, a chunk of wooded wasteland, a group of bus stops and the Lotus department store's parking space. The area beneath the station is not a coherent space; it is just a place in the center-less web of the generic city, a place with no identity or name. The dense traffic, the fences around the private plots, the concrete pillars of the BTS track and the billboards of the department store make it impossible to gain an overview of the area at ground level. The labyrinthine and nameless place can only be seen comprehensibly from the station's elevated horizon. The passengers who leave the train at E9 and enter the stationary platforms find themselves at On Nut. It is a topological construction borrowing its horizon from a subjacent plan, which conversely cannot see itself.

'The free Official BTS Sky Train Map' is an excellent guide, but also a study of how the modern Bangkok's system of flow attempts to represent itself. Engineers and architects carefully designed the 12 m high pillars of pre-stressed concrete, spaced 35 – 60 meters apart along the entire distance, but the exact significance of those enormous Atlantes for urban development and the cultural sphere is still somehow unarticulated. The traditional architectural and urban understanding lacks an optic, which can bring forth a new understanding of the Odyssey of modernity. On the sponsored fold-out-maps, handed out to tourists and other strangers, this 'double-ground' of labyrinth and panorama is marked with a green spot. On the other hand, the temples, architectural monuments and historic places are drawn both iconically and in detail. The modern infrastructural hubs have not yet found a representative form depicting their spatial influence on the city. Thus, the companies that finance the printing of the maps 'engrave' themselves around the stations, and not the subjacent city structure. Even though the Sky Train has

only been operating since 1999 and most of the businesses probably came before the train, the logic of address is reversed. We are encouraged to visit "AMJ Jewelry at E9" or "Business Mission Asia at S2" etc. The chains of shops obviously plug themselves into this virtual city of crowd using the Sky Train to increase their turnover, but this inversed and a-historic kind of localization is also valid outside the commercial logic. In general, there is a toponymical law of gravitation ruling the generic spaces. The companies who have more than one address along the Sky Train system or those who sell goods that are not material or clearly fixated e.g. Hilton, Amex, Budget, Best Western etc. are branding themselves directly into the traveler's communication equipment. "Forget The Number Just Dial The Brand Name" (The free official BTS Skytrain Map, Feb 2002).

After the opening of the Sky Train, the shopping center at On Nut has become a transferium, a place where you park your car in the morning, change means of transport, buy breakfast and shop again in the evening on your way home. The daily flow of hungry middle-class has created a market for a series of fast-food chains. McDonald's, Dunkin' Donuts', Pizza Hut, Starbucks, Dairy Queen and Kentucky Fried Chicken are placed side by side, selling snacks at prices five times higher than with the street vendors outside. It is all a game of lifestyle, about how products and forms of life are placed in a symbolic context. The Sukhumvit Line plays a special role in this game. The Sky Train physically connects the different business chains, offering a variety of well-known branded goods and a rolling commercial. The Sky Train has its own media strategy and a commercially promoted newspaper, which is a kind of cult publication.

The entire rail system, the stations and the stout constructions are at the same time a significant actor in the new symbolic division of the urban space following the process of globalization. The stations are not just means of transportation they are also trade stations, a carefully stenographic display for those products and consumer goods associated with stylish prosperity; whose image it is important to raise above the level of daily necessity. Upstairs at the stations, Italian ice cream and coffee, European delicatessens, lifestyle magazines with luxury car sections, mobile phones with designer covers, everything for golf, skin products with French names, the right kind of sunglasses and spring water from a world outside the smog, are sold. In fact, the observation platform delivers the perfect pa-

noramic background for the goods. The city skyline elevates its potent contour of global investment as a real-time scene behind the lifestyle products and places the consumption in the right kind of context. Right under the stations, down in the labyrinth of uncontrolled activities, a sub-industry of street traders and minor business flourishes in a kind of symbiosis with the global image economy. The street level environment often emerges as aesthetized backgrounds in the hip lifestyle magazines. The residual city (Nielsen 2002) is the large-scale supplier of those images, which the market without costs copyrights and uses to promote its own products.

The Sky Train represents a precise section through the symbolic economies, layered on top of each other in Bangkok. On the top level, the world famous brands and the globalized systems of productions circulate, underneath are the local (re)produced products and the local economy. The example illustrates what Koolhaas has called 200% urbanism (Koolhaas et al. 2001b: 18), an urban development progressing in two different spheres and two different speed levels; a 100% local and specific + a 100% global and generic.

### STARTING FROM: ON NUT

The trip with the Sky Train starts at On Nut. Arriving at the station the train is totally wrapped in a commercial for a telecommunication company stating, "The future is Orange". The styleless style, which totally dominates the generic cityscape out here, has an almost exotic character when seen in transit. The view disappears without any warning; the buildings cluster along Sukhumvit Road and create dense space around the rail tracks. Soon after the train passes under Inthra Expressway, we are suddenly in the middle of a gigantic traffic node in five levels. On top at 18 m. height runs an expressway with several exit ramps. Six meters under where the train tracks cross parallel beneath, the Sukhumvit Road runs on pillars. The Phra Canal's floating traffic cuts at ground level. The wide-open horizon, which suddenly shimmers across the windows, becomes shaded and turns into something experienced as an interior. The space between the quadruple rows of columns carrying the elevated expressway vanishes perceptively, intensified by this superficial impression contained by the cathedral-like effect of the heavy constructions. It takes a

couple of seconds to pass the place. A moment later, the panorama reappears and the staggering wasteland hidden under the superimposed expressway is out of sight.

Those covered ventral sides, concealed under the city's many corridors of toll roads, are invisible on all the regular maps, but real enough for those people who use them every day as illegal shelters, sleeping quarters, temporary habitations, shady accommodation, trading spaces, ball parks, open air cinemas, walk paths and parking. There are several hundred thousand square meters of those forgotten spaces beneath the modern infrastructures of Bangkok. Most of the activities are accepted, or at least tolerated, by the Highway Authority and Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, BMA, who formally control the areas together with the private investors. However, none of the alternative uses indicate any kind of planning or any conscious utilization of the special programmatic potential. The site underneath the expressway does not exist in any official representation of the city, it is by definition a 'non-site', an intensively used space which is not named as space. The investment and the attention is exclusively drawn towards the enormous hordes of commuters, driving overhead. The commuters represent lifestyles that are not stagnant, but rather extended in constant transit between dispersed attraction points. Out of the official daily population of 10 million in Bangkok, around 50% are commuters. With its approximately 4 million registered cars, the city has become a permanent place of migration, a kind of an internal exile the pulse of which represents a meta-topical field which is geographically marked, but which can hardly be localized (Virilio 2001).

On the other side of the six-storied traffic inferno, another rhythm takes over. A web of high voltage lines flies past the window and shows that we are in a residential area. It is not easy to determine the orientation of the houses, which is back

Residual space under the Inthra Expressway.



or front facade, because the housing complexes are wrapped in air-condition boxes, ventilators, waste pipes, electrical cables, phone wires, water containers and TV-antennas. The modern infrastructural web of sewerage systems, electricity, climate apparatus and electronic connections, which the good architect normally hides in ducts, over ceilings and under floors, are here exposed as a very visual mesh above the buildings. The better maintained the buildings appear to be, the more aviaries of technical equipment and security systems stretch over the houses. It is not quite clear whether these tentacles of civilization have come to attack or protect the architecture.

### THE ENCLOSED PARADISE: TENNIS, GOLF AND POOL

After a short break at E8, the trip through the 'City of Angels'<sup>2</sup> continues. The SkyTrain has made it possible to see the city's figured and disfigured areas from another angle (Boyer 1995). The overview gives insight into the vacuum zones behind the graffiti inscribed fences and walls, but it also makes it possible to look down into the private gardens and the paradisaal resorts. From the Sky Train windows, you can see all the golf courses, tennis courts and swimming pools that are an established part of the private developments. The gated communities, where the wealthy live protected from the environment, have taken over the classical planning palette - red, green and blue- but here the tricolor signifies the recreational as; tennis, golf and pool. The landscapes of the modern city no longer function as the antithesis for the built, as ground for the architectural figure. The landscape is used as a programmed space for an uncommitted hedonistic community, large numbers of members of the new middle classes rehearsing to take part in "Utopia of Golf" (Koolhaas 2001a). Bangkok has more private golf courses than public parks. Not far from Phra Kanong Station, one of the many driving ranges can be seen. From a distance, the facility looks like a prison with its enormous fence, but behind the bars are only people who exploit their newly gained economical freedom practising this new sport. The popularity of golf has boomed, creating a 'ketchup effect' in the demand for new greens. The train passes right by the driving stands, staged as a regular clubhouse, with both porter and parking space. In an open construction that is centered around a bar and its scattered tables, golfers are placed on two levels, rehearsing their sport.

<sup>2</sup> Bangkok's original name is Krung Thep: City of Angels.

## TRANSURBANITY

The thin net construction disappears from the range of vision; the cityscape returns to its indefinable character; soon after the train stops at E7. Outside on the platform, we see a BTS billboard. The slogan goes: "More trips, more smiles – with a BTS Skytrain 3-Day Tourist Pass". BTS is promoted as a roller coaster: "Unlimited trips, unlimited fun". The SkyTrain is its own end - the trip is the final destination. The rail system is organized as a channel of consumerism, a cinematic entertainment packet designed for the affluent tourists and shoppers.

Bangkok has no noticeable zoning. All the modern programmes are spread out, regardless of where you go. The only place that is unambiguously localized is the historic center, and here the trains do not run. In these modern urban areas, the notion of a specific site is dissolved and the addresses of destination are replaced by the label of attractions. *Loc*i have become *logo*, a mark attachable *anywhere*. BTS is scripted as a modern "drift" (Sadler 1999), between a series of consumption attractions; for US \$ 6.60 you can buy admission to the entertainments of this eventful city. The collage companioning the commercial text uses a wide-angle portrait, not a targeting zoom, to indicate the happy omnipotence of this transit space. BTS is not just a necessity, a service or pure means of production; it is an independent environment, a new kind of urbanity, which exists parallel to and above the other urban activities in Bangkok. Modernistic planning practice still influences the conception of the city as a

Transportation as drift - BTS commercial.



separated terrain of housing, production, recreation and transport, but the conventional doctrine of the industrial society's territorial division is no longer up-to-date. In the authorized 'Index of Places', the only existing categories are transport, cultural centers and monuments, river sites, markets & shopping centers and entertainment. Functionalism's quartered production-scape is transforming drastically. What we are presented with here, is a consumption-scape. BTS-city is sightseeing, cultural theater, shopping with a view, themed consumption places and event space on sale.

The trip continues further west past the science museum and the planetarium. Even though the area are slightly denser than further east, it is difficult to speak about this section as a transition between center and periphery (Juel-Christiansen 1999). The modern Bangkok has several different centers spread over an enormous urban area, and the suburb has therefore intruded all over. The historical center, approximately the same size as two of the big highway intersections, is perhaps the best fixed. The big banks at Silom Road define some kind of a financial center south of the temple area, but sometimes it is simply a series of entertainment venues, an event or a single building that constitutes the point of density in the polycentric urban web. That is why you do not move into the city, but always through the city, and this 'through' is now with the BTS line and the new infrastructures becoming an independent urbanity. This network and the transient city structure can hardly be transcribed in historic terms like suburb or periphery, profoundly attempting to identify a phenomenon by localizing it. The collapse of architectural logic has not made it easier to determine the status of site. The exteriors of the buildings do not clearly show when they are built or which function they serve. The raw concrete building we pass a couple of minutes after the Ekkamai Station is maybe from the sixties and maybe an office building, but the Roman inspired, castle-like construction with the beer drinking male statue of liberty standing next to it is not necessarily a part of the collective heritage and quite certainly not a historic defense structure. The urban text is not an orthographic system, a language in continuous development; it is a free composition of themes gathered from all available times and places. It is not just in the theme parks or within the entertainment industry that the cultural quotations have loosened the historical figure of progression.

Inside the cracked "Expodome Home Center", Bangkok.



Soon after, just before we reach E6 and the Thong Lo Station, a neo-Palladian deluxe-edition villa turns up, with three complete floors plus tempietto at the top. The economical vigor, displayed in this 'White House', has made the cultural statement abstract and detached from historical chronology. This phenomenon of architectural free-style composition can hardly be written as part of an order of social geography – because right beside the nouveau riche style building is a small industrial plant, a concrete deposit yard and some very humble cottages. We are not in any particular neighbourhood either geographical or socially and not witnessing any dynamic kind of sequence or any serial vision of spatial relations (Cullen 1961). The modern Bangkok is not divided into unambiguous geographical segments, neither socially, architectonically nor production-wise. The ideal of correlation in the built environment has been absolutely defeated; the notion of architectonic context has been abandoned, and has no relevance for the conception of reality. All the residential enclaves spread over the city are designed to seal off as much of the context as possible, with hedges, guards and electronic security systems. The master plans are introverted and the landscape is utilized as green entrenchments. Utopia has become an identity-fort.

A couple of kilometers north of the rail line at Pattanakarn, stands what is left of Expodome Home Center. Here, you could buy a completely designed one-family house, complete with furniture and front garden, before the economical breakdown of 1997 left the private housing marked on standby. The houses are still on row and displayed sorted according to size and style inside the center, which could be mistaken for any other kind of supermarket. On the prospectus, the different types, the Cornell or the Harvard, are inserted in an archaic landscape painting, which in principle could be anywhere in the world. Suburbia has become a global condition and its architecture an

universal consumer article subject to ordinary market conditions and the logics of demand and supply. The notion of style has changed from being a cultural discourse to something like a universal commodity with symbolic value and engrafted connotations of building tradition. The private housing market's uniform condition of production, has made the architectural expression a matter of "imagineering" (Shannon 1998). The exotic is no longer alien. The renaissance has no copyright on Palladio, the Irish Pub at the Phrom Phong Station *is* local and the International Style *has* become a national symbol. The generic city is endotic.

### THE CITY OF STACKED ORDER

The Thong Lo Station slides by, in the distance stands a cluster of high-rise buildings. Their appearance is emphasized by a void, momentarily forming a visual foreground. The smog wraps the buildings in a thick atmosphere, making them seem dim and distant. The middle ground is relatively flat and almost vanquished by the optical illusion created by the train track's elevated eye level. This particular viewpoint, the distance and the sliding movement, give this random group of high-rises a brief monumental status. Before E6 they were totally congruent with the indifferent cityscape, and after a short ride they disappear again behind some six-story buildings standing along the Sukhumvit Road. The characteristic contour, composed by the movement and the incidental viewpoint has, strangely enough, no ground. The individual buildings stand apart; they are not connected by a territorial integrity and do not depict any integrated figure outside this momentary scenery. The distinctive outline does not inscribe any condensed ground in the urban structure. The picture is not merged together. This tableau is a superficial phenomenon, a mirage constantly emerging and vanishing in the urban landscape. Bangkok is full of such unstable silhouettes; they appear and disappear several times during the trip. The high-rise buildings stand dispersed, the visual alliances between them are random, and it is impossible to identify any principle of gravitation for the



Stacked order, Bangkok.

concentration of capital as in the American downtown. There is no point where the city appears entirely against a horizon. Bangkok has no cohesive skyline, objectifying the towering city under a unifying contour, and there is no scenery unifying the panorama as a whole. The only taxonomy to be identified during the voyage is the regularity in the exterior of the skyscrapers. Two kinds of high-rise appear again and again - the smooth and the ribbed. Those with glass facades mirroring the surroundings and those with balconies absorbing the view; those mushrooming up in order to be seen, and those rising to conquer the view. The city panorama quite clearly has a double symbolic economy. An exposure value, utilized by business empires and a voyeuristic amenity value, converted into rent by the private housing market.

At Soi 30, the BTS train passes one of the big condominium complexes. Waterford Diamond Tower has 46 floors and 500 apartments, rented at prices between 350 and 1,650 USD a month. (Best Selection 2001: 20) The building is from 1998 and characteristic of many modern apartment houses. The tower is divided into four sections but in principle it consists of three different architectural elements: a parking level, an apartment level and a stylish top. The elements are tied together by a simple repetition, a kind of architectural 'cut and paste' - a structure repeated in the majority of apartment houses. At the bottom, the base with the unarticulated parking deck is usually equipped with a pool on the rooftop – the privileged part of the city does not start until the 10th floor. Hereafter, a trunk of stacked dwellings follows and at the end, an elaborate top usually crowns the building. The skyscraper does not have any roof in a traditional sense – it is crowned. A villa with garden, a temple, a piece of rainforest or some other grounded setting, usually concludes the high-rises. The structure is repeated all over, the only variation is in style

Typical pool-on-the-top parking structure, Bangkok.





and height. The majority of the apartment towers are built in a white, modernistic style with a compositionally moderate exterior and homogenized surfaces. Another category is the culturally corresponding, high-rise building incorporated in the local building tradition e.g. by having tiled roof cornices between the floors or gilded ornaments at the corners. A third category is the emphatic tower, borrowing from the paths of architectural history or Hollywood's expressive nouveau-riche-style. The phrases fluctuate but the skyscraper is basically its own genre, because of what the facade coverings do not control; what essentially determines the expression is the scale. It is size that constitutes the bearing part of the building's semantic construction, not the incidental facing. Even the crystalline monoliths housing all the company headquarters and financial nerve centers have an architectural problem of scale. The glass facades are in fact reflecting the visual impression, dissolving the stylistic exercise with elements to pure planes and leaving behind an almost flat chested surface, but the neutral clothing is still an architectural image trying to control the critical mass through a representational order, maintaining the demarcation line between inner mass and outer appearance.

The instrumental effect of heaviness, the "bigness" Koolhaas (1995a: 495-517) speaks of, is still effective in an uncontrolled manner, exposing its hidden agenda for the city. The skyscraper has its point of gravity founded out of place, it is a vertical landscape at a distance, and just as conjoined with the panorama the stacked city is, just as entrenched it is to its surroundings. The high-rise constructions have their own context of forbidden gardens around them, and extensive security systems stop all unwanted intrusion from the nearby environment. If an accident should happen, the occupants can be evacuated via the heliport on the roof, because the community of the vertical city is not tied to place, but is related in a more global kind of connectivity.



Cut-and-paste palazzo-style high-rise, Bangkok.

## ZIP.URBANISM

The train runs by Waterford Diamond Tower, the building moves out of sight, but new high-rises appear constantly behind the row of trees and houses standing close to the Sukhumvit Road. From the seats in the compartment, you see right down to the terraces of the four-to-five floor buildings running along the sky rail. Some of the houses seem deserted and decayed, the address is not attractive for living any longer, but trading is still doing well underneath the elevated track. The Sky Train's concrete constructions lie as a roof above the six-lane road and have turned Sukhumvit Road into a tunnel, where traffic noise and exhaust gases hang heavily in the air. In the narrow intervening space between the rail and the row of facades, a wedge of daylight cuts down through the fumes and smoke from the many street kitchens that stand everywhere on the narrow sidewalk. The impressions in the compact space under the concrete vaults are innumerable; the street environment in this labyrinthine tunnel system has an almost subterranean intensity like in "Blade Runner" (Jameson 1991). Even though we are not in the rainy season, the street is still filled with particles. The atmosphere sticks to the body; it is almost impossible to orientate yourself visually, the path through all the street-booths and the swarming crowd is inert, and it is almost impossible to have a conversation down there. The contrast to the frictionless panorama along the transit track, hovering 12 meters above, could not be bigger. This encapsulation of the public space, which BTS causes here, is perhaps the result of a compromise between the external investors and a series of overall development considerations. But at the same time, a very deliberately arranged programme of hermetic environments, daily attracting tens of thousands of people above the concealed underside. All the shopping centers linked to the rail-system are organized in a pattern, recalling a happy version of the involuntary encapsulation that has afflicted Sukhumvit Road.

Further ahead at the next stop, two principally identical but largely different spaces cross as tangents. At E5, one of the main attractions along the parallel structure of encapsulated spaces lies, constituting the BTS net's programmatic front. From the Prom Phong Station, there is an almost direct connection between the rail and the Emporium shopping center's interiorized spaces of urban-like scenes. All the well-known fashion houses

are inside the center: Louis Vuitton, Giovanni Versace, Gucci, Hugo Boss, Armani and Prada, situated side by side, as small shops in a street simulated sequence. The interiorized city, inside a neutral container, has six floors, formed around a central atrium, but the consumption attractions are in principal a continuous sequence constructed after the same motive as the outside street. You neither have to walk up nor down inside this reconstructed city. Escalators and elevators have been added to suspend the floor division, the movement through the building is experienced as a continuous horizontal twine. Actually, there is less friction here than on the outside street, and the climate is adjusted to suit modern clothing. The center maintains its high profile through the expensive brands and the up market shops. The customers are quite clearly not primarily from the neighborhood, and in this sense Emporium resembles any other shopping center in all the big cities in the world. The structure is physically and visually introvert, the architectural language spoken here has absolutely nothing to do with the surroundings. The postmodern portico has a base of displays and a monumental entrance, but besides this, the shell does not reveal anything about the interior. The environment inside is designed independently of the context, as a hermetic concept, which truly thematize the city, but the realities outside are physically and aesthetically kept at a distance in order not to corrupt the interior idyll. The architectural promenade of ramps and winding stairs, introduced by the early modernists as a recipe for dynamic space, and the transparent city-vista they celebrated, have been outstripped by the arbitrariness of the mechanical connections and the hermetically encapsulated enclaves. The ideal of integration has been replaced by a practice of differentiation. And the tendency can be traced all over, not just in the shopping centers, but also in the entrenched developments, the commercial entertainment parks, the boxes of consumption, the private recreation resorts, the terminal buildings, the towering headquarters and in the gated university campus areas. The polycentric city is a hinterland, it does not have any distinctive figurative appearance and does not refer to any force of homogenization integrating the built environment. It is as if the whole city is enclosed in an unidentified interior, every single element represents its own island of order, and every single building is struggling to sustain a solitary status. The ideal of architectonic cohesion is replaced by an order of polarity, where each individual building is either totally introverted or absolutely

3 ZIP is a single compressed file which has become popular in the electronic world, because it "wraps" its contents and therefore very suitable as a global exchange format. ZIP-ification is apparently a feature characterizing physical dispersal to. ZIP-urbanism is large scale down-loading of structures capable of handling the standardized processes of production.

Charismatic scene from Bangkok.



monumental. Concurrently with the disappearance of the outer border of the city, a profusion of internal limits has apparently emerged, maintaining a network of forced composed and exacerbated differences (Koolhaas 1997). The city is no longer a defined common characteristic gathering the single elements; it is a field of encapsulated differentiated identities. Context has become contrast – the unified city has become Zip.Urbanism.<sup>3</sup>

While the train leaves E5 the roof terrace of Hotel 24 Inn can be seen, a guesthouse has taken over the former residential housing standing next to the rail line. The building's original raw concrete structure has been covered with red boards and the roof garden has been given a pitched roof. The renovation work has given the façade a particular Swedish/Austrian ambience, making the building quite distinctive from the other row houses. This visual trick is used in several places, but more frequently among the small hotels around the stations using the uninhabitable façade against the rail as billboard. In this manner the block at Prom Phong has developed a distinct series of architectural markers of nationality attracting different groups of tourists and making them feel at home when the train stops at the station. Just after E5 is one of the city's few green parks and public spaces: Benjasiri Park. The park has all the standard equipment and is almost a real English park. The city's recreational enclaves are exactly as generic as the surrounding architecture and exactly as contextually autonomous as the buildings. A few years ago, the place was rice fields and a couple of hours away from here was the tropical jungle, but Benjasiri Park might as well be in Rome or Southaven. The modern city park should not be mistaken for landscape scenery, drawing its roots from the memory of nature; on the contrary, it has to be seen as a new generic fiction with close links to the entertainment industry. The green surface

of the park is treated exactly as a plot, and the underlying motif is more a fairytale than a landscape matter. The landscape scenery's references to nature no longer function as constituent anti-thesis to the urban, because the generic city is far too open, far too dispersed and far too merged with the terrain. The generic city is nor city nor landscape just "scape" (Koolhaas 1995b). And as a result, its counterpart (what used to be called landscape), has engaged as pure escapism; a well-deserved excursion away from the generic, an aspiration for something firm, a happy otherness or an authentic condition – no matter where it may come from: Palladio, the Statue of Liberty or Nēuschwanstein. The generic city is a charismatic regime (Weber 2000).

### FORTUNE TOWN: THE INVERTED CITY

Suddenly, a valley opens through the mosaic of white high-rises and gray blockhouses flickering by the train window. BTS crosses over the to-by-five lane Ratchadaphisek Road, one of the major public ring roads. Two kilometers north, the road cuts the large open railway terrain at Makkasan Railway Plant and the Second Stage Expressway. Where the expressway exit meets Ratchadaphisek Road, the Fortune Town shopping mall is situated. The mall is 216,415 sq. meters, has about 400 computer stores and specialty supplies plus a 406 bedrooms Deluxe five star hotel, a Lotus Supercenter Store, a food court, a 31 floor office tower, thousands of parking spaces and a cinema complex united within a gigantic building volume, looking like something between a sphinx and a wrecked space station. The enormous body consists of a roughly 500 m long and nine story tall horizontal plinth, from where two towers arise. The plinth is divided into two layers, the lower four floors contain the mixed shopping program and the up-



The Fortune Town shopping center, Bangkok.

per five are parking floors. The individual architectural elements like the hotel, the office silo, the parking decks, the entrance, the separate façade elements and the outer stair construction à la Pompidou are as independent parts, a colossus, but put together they enter a submissive status. The elements are both integrated with the lump and at the same time autonomous expressive, it is like the principle of gravity dissolves the fragmentation without absorbing the parts totally. A couple of towers more or less, a planetarium or a new cross addition would not make a big difference to the overall impression. The architectonic battery does not control the lump. The building's size and programmatic complexity exceed any recognizable typology. There is no connection between the physiognomy of the bastion and its functionality.

The architectural expression stated in Fortune Town's outer appearance does not belong to the tradition celebrating stability of the architectonic object, and the building's functionality has quite clearly abandoned the logic of fixation characterizing the type. The programme is like a cell-structure, a unity of constant alteration, subsequently accommodating the changing market, like a diagrammatic dynamic, never freezing in a plan – a kind of event geography. Fortune Town is a hybrid construction, and as the name indicates, not just an architectonic piece in the city, but a whole town quarter that, besides all its events and all the commercial activities, actually has integrated something resembling a traditional 'urban life'. The building's interior circulation is arranged around an internal cavity, absorbing the crowded masses of people and organizing it in a vertical space, easily mistaken as a public space. The atrium is 100% privately owned and the spatial concept is a simple inversion of the classical plaza, equipping the consumption machine's interior with a system stimulating the shopping activity – but the hybrid form makes it difficult to maintain the classical distinction between public and private, inside and outside, city and building defining the typological order. The interior has incorporated something of the exterior, and the clear distinction between square and building has dissolved. The shopping center's semi-public space is also working as weekend theater, gallery for up-coming artists, office for the government's Public Relations Department PRD, hosting education shows, free internet accesses, teenage rendezvous, family trips and a variety of other non-commercial activities. The mall is not just a simple matter of consumption exclusively containing commercial facilities. The introverted city is quite ob-

viously a space exchanging social symbols and a stage for a ritual arrangement rooted outside functional rationality. The shopping environment's marketplace may be the modern society's primary social mediator (Shields 1992). The thousands of daily visitors are not just buying necessities, they are also coming to watch, to be seen and take part in the symbolic play of lifestyle. The shoppers are on identity-work, struggling to establish their individual identity as consumer - their 'shopject'. Maybe the atrium's hybrid nature is what the square was for typology.

## SOI COWBOY

In the area around the Asoke Station is Soi Cowboy, one of the city's internationally known 'red light districts'. Some of the go-go bars neon signs can be seen from the station platform. The displays of the area are carefully wrapped in delicate euphemisms like "W4U" or "Absolute Private Room". The sex industry transcribes the service level of the 'clubs' to something like camaraderie, consumption and Rock'n Roll to avoid any direct confrontation with the authority's official course: "zero news, zero sex and zero violence" (Hanru, Obrist 1998: 8). A soft censorship protects political stability and even though Bangkok is totally enveloped in billboards, neon signs and commercial posters, its urban space is apparently self-purifying, leaving no explicit messages and critical statements behind.

## THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE FLOATING ECONOMY

A few hundred meters from the liminal (Shields 1991) zone at Soi Cowboy is the fashionable Sheraton Grand Sukhumvit. The Sky Train almost grazes the postmodern façade of the hotel. Passing by, you almost look directly down into the lobby. The building begins, like most of the other high-rises in the city, as a natural continuation of the urban infrastructure. From the adjacent roads, continuous lanes of concrete run the first couple of floors up above ground level as a kind of feather mechanism or buffer zone for the traffic flow. The entrance ramps and parking decks are vital parts of the building's structure; they link the vital external connections, the expressway and the airport to the internal vertical transport. The guests literally drive directly from the airport

terminal via the elevated transit corridors and straight into the lobby's "Lounge Paradise" (Auge 1995: 110) at the fourth floor, where the elevators direct them to their pre-booked rooms, while their cars are taken to the garage by the porter. Modern travel is completely frictionless; accelerated speed has encapsulated the passengers in comfortable cabins, the distance passed is almost only a visual impression. Sheraton's international image guarantees all kinds of standardized comfort and raised above street level's noise is the obligatory, "free-form tropical swimming pool" like a diadem in the synthetic chain of nature-associations, which are standard requisites at generic destinations.

Grand Pacific Hotel, across Sukhumvit Road is newer and the style is more streamlined and almost neo-modernistic with its ornament-free-whiteness. The building complex consists of a wide blunt boat-formed plinth, from where a tower of room-decks raises up 15 stories. Long black ribbon windows give the building a horizontal touch, dissolving the tower's heaviness, and make the slightly curved volume look like an 'image' of a distended sail. At the foot of the symbolic bow fountains bursts from a conventionalized oceanic pond. The Grand Pacific's architectural means of expression are quite clearly making connotations to the maritime metaphors of the thirties. The building's polished expression is in some sense related with the International Style, but it is not the building elements functional status nor the maritime constructions and equipment details, like the porthole, the thin railings and the open deck, which are thematized, but rather the notion of voyage and of being afloat in the urban sea. The hotel more resembles a commercial containership than an ocean liner in technical manifestations; the metaphor anticipated by the design has more 'succession', freight and flow of goods than poetic ship-engineer-aesthetics attached to its character. The symbolic language of the building is emblematic of the new "floating economy" (Harvey 1995) which has hit Asia.

## HOLLOWS

The train passes the luxury-hotels, Times Square and continues further into the more stylish Sukhumvit Shopping Area. Shortly after, a hole in the passing row of facades emerges. A low shanty development has invaded a temple area, making a clearing in the landscape of modern buildings. The simple do-it-yourself built

dings cluster around the temple, pulled back from the Sukhumvit Road. The green metal sheet roofs of the sheds are almost interwoven, and from above it is hardly possible to see the ground of the densely packed enclave. The families down there are literally living on the soil. The contrast between the aura of instant wealth and the adjacent recently built and well-kept, 20–30 floor housing blocks is quite brutal. It is as if the development has passed over the site and left a pocket of unchanged-ness in the middle of the modern. Enormous areas in the city are covered with such more-or-less illegal shantytowns, lacking in the most basic necessities like sewerage systems, clean water and electricity. Shantytowns are a permanent and growing (back)side of the city, left beyond the reach of both market forces and governmental interests. As soon as the interest for these areas emerges as soon as there is a price set on the ground, the 'problem' automatically disappears to somewhere else. Wealth has already pressed most of the shanties away from the tourist- and shopping districts – to the abolished industrial sites at the river, the empty infrastructural wedges along the railroad net, the khlongs and the residual areas under the elevated expressways. The temple areas have an exceptional position. They are not directly involved in the market-controlled developments, they function as kinds of resistant pockets in the middle of modernization. Here the informal settlements are more or less preserved, and here all the poor immigrants and land workers enjoy a temporary asylum.

The train continues further through the compact streetscape and a couple of minutes later the Sky Train stops at E3. From the Nana Station's platforms, there is a view over a ruinous cityscape. On the northern side of the track is a vast undeveloped site. East of the open dusty lot, a five-floor ruin rises up through some low tree crowns. The floor constructions are still raw and from the upper columns rusty reinforcement bristles up in the air.



Wasteland behind WTC, Bangkok.

The construction was probably stopped due to the economical breakdown in 1997. Bangkok has more than 400 of these so-called "hollows" awaiting the return of the tiger economy. Some of these hollows are finished, complete with façade, but empty of life, and others stand as tall transparent ghost-contours in the city's atmospheric relief. On the naked ground at the bottom of the building's skeleton at Nana, a couple of families live in cardboard boxes. These spaces of omitted order; *terrain vague's* or residual landscapes (Nielsen 2002) found all over in the generic city are often incubators for sprouting activities of a both social and cultural kind. The phenomenon invokes a renewing of planning practice, understanding this lack of order as a potential thread against the integrated ideal. This eagerness to homogenize, which rules the discourse, fails to see that the city's development does not always happen as a continuous process that can unproblematically be integrated in the existing order. Sudden economic changes, as the collapse of the economy at the end of the nineties, new conquests such as the Internet, or political turbulences have had a significant influence on Bangkok's physical structure, but can hardly be regarded as part of a coherent organic pattern of development (Sola-Morales 1996: 13).

### THE INTERIOR-DECORATED SHED

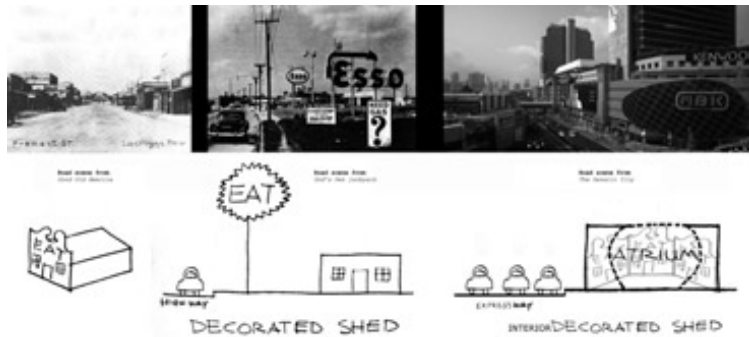
At the beginning of the Ploenchit district, the Sky Train bends west and just before E2 it passes the Mahanakhon Expressway running north-south. The expressway runs as a straight moat through the urban landscape. A far distant bridge is the only object crossing the gorge. Convoys of gigantic billboards stand along the edge of the transit-space and dispatch commercial messages down to the commuters. Especially around the eleva-



Billboards conquering Bangkok's skyline.

ted highways, where the contact with the surroundings already are experienced as an uplifted focal plane, these billboards have almost conquered the horizon and replaced it with paradisaical landscapes of posters. Most of the billboards are bigger than the houses on which they are mounted, and even though they are invisible on all available maps, they are in fact fixed points of orientation for the road-users and a kind of two-dimensional architecture in the transit-space. In addition, outside the big traffic corridors, these commercial coulisses are a regular part of the generic cityscape, representing an autonomous system of order; a visual leaf of images and signs enrolled in the economy as a kind of 'photosynthesis' or circulation of hallucinatory desires transformed into consumption causing economical growth. The modern Bangkok is hit by a veritable pictorial tempest driven by global market forces, and this new economy of signs (Lash, Urry 1994) visible all over, has loosened the iconic relation with the

Learning from Bangkok – Venturi, Izenour and Scott Brown's decorated shed has become an interior decorated shed. The façade that became a roadside sign is now a living a post-modern after-life as interiorized decor.



building which Robert Venturi, Steve Izenour and Denise Scott Brown mapped in *Learning from Las Vegas* (Venturi et.al.1997). A lot has happened since the architects from Yale discovered how signposting had replaced the façade as a communicative plane. The billboards along Mahanakhon Expressway have no relation to their geographical sites, they do not refer to any specific place and do not monumentalize any shed (Venturi et. al. 1997: 88-89). De-contextualized, the iconography focus is no longer at the roadside, it has moved inside as a kind of 'environmentalization' of container-architecture. The architectonic index has jumped down from its pedestal and is now hunting the shed as an interior scene.

Siam Square, Bangkok.  
V The National Stadium Station at Siam Square



The train stops at E1. The view over the Chit Lom area is blocked, the station's platforms are the only ones fencing out the view along the whole Sky Train-network. A solid tall entrenchment runs along the platform and shields the view. The barrier was built due to protests from the prestigious Mater Dei School situated at the base of the station. The school, known for teaching the kids of the money-elites, tried to prevent the construction of the Sky Train by stressing environmental problems and concerns for safety, related to having a public transportation system right outside their premises. The protests did not lead to a prevention of the Sky Train, but forced BTS to modify their original design and to erect this visual barrier (Asia Times 1999). Today, the clumsy arrangement of submissiveness clearly displays that power is still manifested as a visual regime in the urban context.

### SPACE OF SPHERICAL SWARM

After some 20 minutes ride, the train reaches the Central Station at Siam Square, the nodal point of the BTS system and at the same time one of the city's most hectic nerve centers. The densely packed café- and business district is defined to the north and the west by two main roads, Thanon Rama I and Thanon Phaya Thai. In the intersection between these two six lane roads, the

Sukhumvit Line turns north and continues along Thanon Phaya Thai, while Silom Line runs the last hundred meters west along Thanon Rama I, and terminates at the National Stadium. The traffic-intersection suspends a dynamic space of movement and a swarming of people in several layers. Under the BTS track's double ramification runs a system of pedestrian bridges, platforms and stairway constructions, connecting the big mall-complexes MBK, Siam Discovery Center, Siam Center with the train-net and the subjacent street level. The Sky Train's pillars are anchored heavily in the green islands formed by the road systems delta formation of dividing traffic lanes. The asphalt plane is loaded with regulating graphical bands and blinking traffic signals. The square around the three-dimensional intersection is framed by big shopping centers and the compact business quarter, and despite this, its space is experienced as torn apart, totally fragmented by all the tangents and forces of moving traffic, constantly floating through the site. The perceptible bombardment is massive and the monstrous construction filling the place provides an overwhelming impression. It is as if the engineering achievement has a hidden agenda of spatial efficacy, transcending its functionality, and seals the pure rational project with something alienating. The visual overload, which the place emits, makes it more or less impossible to establish any kind of focus; there is no privileged locality in the space, anchoring it in well-known perspective stability. All the traces point away and leave this transit space as a lacuna in the exchanging dynamics, dissolving any sense of direction in a kind of 'Piranesian disappearance'.

If you leave the "Piranesian Space" (Nielsen 2001: 147-153) at Siam Square and walk into the MBK Shopping center you will find a carefully organized interior, the aesthetics of which in many ways mirror the logistic arrangement of Siam Square outside. From several levels and all directions, tens of thousands of people daily enter the eight floors high and 140,000 sq. m large shopping complex. The parking lot at the west side feeds all floors directly; at the bottom people enter from the east, through the sluices at street level, in the south people stream in from the Sky Train's pedestrian bridges, and from Siam Square people are directed in by the tunnel over Thanon Phaya Thai. A large central atrium accumulates the flow of people and functions as the center's hectic machinery of distribution. The internal space is organized as an excavation of the built volume around the canals of flow. The only element occupying the hollow space is an

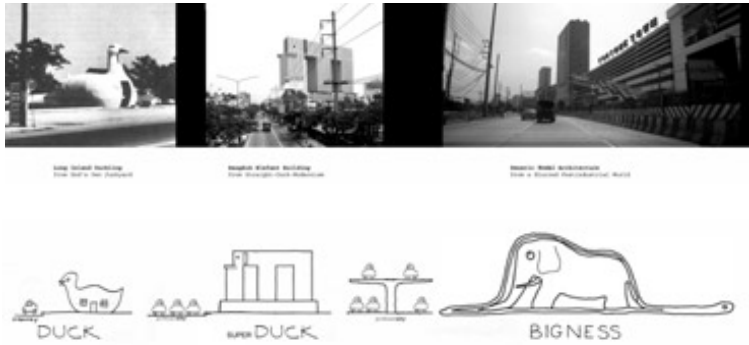
ingenious zig-zag pattern of escalators, landings and galleries connecting the different floors. Mirrors, fittings and polished surfaces covering the escalators reflect the visual environment, making re-reflections and dissolving the massiveness of the constructions in a superficial flickering impression. The kaleidoscopic effects multiply the constant flow of people and together with the music, live images and blinking neon commercials, it fills the atrium with a spherical swarm. From the balconies furring the void with a panoptic tribune, the shoppers can watch each other and follow the spectacular scenery of moving shoppers. The aesthetic of movement, which the atrium so clearly emanates, is repeated in all the small niches and in the entertainment package, plugged into the regular shopping programme. The bowling alley, the monumental wide screen TV, cinema center and the flipper-machines contribute to maintaining the feeling of being in an eventful and cinematic space (Gibian 1997).

## THE ROBOT AND THE ELEPHANT

Three stops later, the BTS reaches the square at The Victory Monument. The train moves in a semicircle around the monument situated as a distinct focal point in the middle of an oval island encircled by traffic. The obelisk, with central-point fixation and a unifying character represents the absolute contrast to the flow dynamic at Siam Square; it also marks a point of gravity in the Hausmannic street order dominating the city around the Royal Palaces at Dusit Park. After making this *bowing* for the historic exclamation mark, the Sky Train continues another five stations before it reaches its terminal station at Mo Chit. Here is the well-known weekend market and the obscure White Elephant - "the strangest skyscraper in the world" (Bangkok Skyscraper Atlas 2002) that together with the Robot-building in south defines the outer orbit of the tourist gaze (Urry 1990). BTS turns and starts its roundtrip back to On Nut.

## LEARNING FROM BANGKOK

The modern urban-scape, of which this narrative through Bangkok via the BTS track gives an endoscopic impression, does not lead to any clear unequivocal description of what the generic



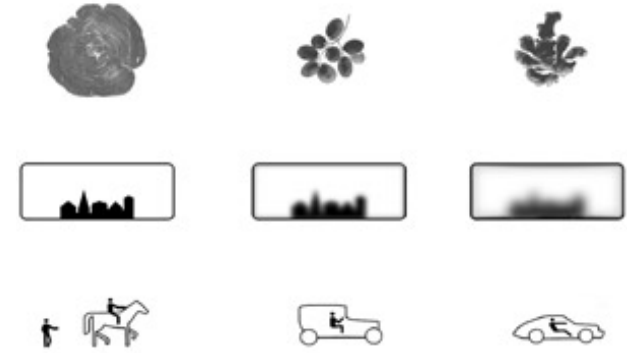
city is. However, even though the story does not call for a new theoretical manifest for what we know as the generic city, the excursion has made hopefully some contribution to the necessary process of invalidating the fortified hypothesis of 'The City'.

This trip through modern Bangkok's different cityscapes demonstrates quite clearly how the metaphors and conceptual frameworks provided by the traditional understanding of the city are not able to give any positive definition of the phenomenon. Apparently, neither the classical concentric representation of the city nor the revised polycentric model can give us any structural understanding of its formlessness. We still know more about what the generic city is not. We are still facing the fundamental problem, which the loss of meaning and representational crisis are causing, leaving behind a failure to grasp its nature, making it difficult for us to formulate any constructive critique, making a point of departure for a devoted dialog with this new and overwhelming reality. An obvious possibility is of course to declare the conditions unbearable and return to historic models, which seemingly contain all the qualities that the modern city apparently lacks. The problem is, however, that retrospective affection for the metropolis of the nineteenth century and revisionism's attempt to disguise an identity crisis through promises of 'New Urbanism' are neglecting a number of conditions making it untenable as a model.

First and foremost, the critique represses the most painful experience, which urbanism made in the seventies, that architecture and planning is unable to play the role as society's most powerful tool. Planning as geometrical subjugation of development belongs to the past. Eventually, the utopian tradition

Learning from Bangkok – the direct relations between building topography and representation known as the Duck, in Learning from Las Vegas - became skyscraper style and matured as Super Duck. The small duckling became large in the age of modernism. From "The Problem of Large" we have learned that Extra Large Ducks are swallowed by "Bigness", because there is no life to the outline. That's exactly what happened to the beast in Antoine De Saint-Exuéry's: "Le Petite Prince".

How we understand, represent and experience the city are related – but the post-polycentric city and its highly mobile life forms still haven't found any adequate architectural representations.



has been surprised by the dirty realities so often, that the contemporary practice of planning can no longer escape formulating a program following the economy.

Another point where the discouraged sceptics are, so to speak, lost in town, is when in ecstasy for a particular environment, they automatically identify a pleasant atmosphere with a particular place and believe that urbanity can unambiguously be localized the same way. Modern forms of urbanity are – as the infrastructural perspective in this case study should illustrate – to a large extent a *tempos*, a procedural character, which the *topos* of the *Nolli* plan cannot anchor. It does not make sense any longer to consider the city as a stable object, which can be represented in the classical schematics of figure-ground. The symbolic organization of space has proven to be inefficacious in relation to the modern city's operational conditions.

A third and essential weakness implicit in the critique of formlessness is the very ideal of homogenization insisting on cohesion and continuity in the urban space. The globalized post-industrial urban development is hardly incorporable in an historic order; as long as the traditional readings of context convulsively attempt to make the city become itself again, there will not be any useful instrument generated. On the other hand, the most dominant current alternative to this pessimism of modernity, the so-called pragmatic turn, is still missing a normative argument for what should happen with architecture and planning, when the city can neither be captured in a uniting figure, nor made an object integrated in a larger order.

The heterotopic city is facing a series of unsolved paradoxes. Modern infrastructures are at the same time convenient



connections and almost insurmountable obstacles. Privatization of the transit-space has created a new kinetic elite and contributed to a further blurring of the distinction between public and private space. We have to readjust the understanding of the street, road and square as a common accessible sphere. Mobility and transit have been commercialized for a long time; many of the places related with access have now had tollbooths mounted. We have to rethink public space as a common achievable and non-commercial space, no matter whether it is linked with culture, history, trade or physical flow. One thing is certain; the total cultural mutation of Bangkok has become a new laboratory of identity for both architects and urbanists.

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