

Extreme Makeover: Third World Urban
The Singapore and Bangkok Workshop Blog

– Diana Jue

A SIGUS-MIT collaboration with EBA of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, and the Department of Architecture of the National University of Singapore
10-23 June 2008

Arrival Day: Singapore Arrival, Individual Explorations, and Workshop Introduction

As an introduction of myself to the readers (primarily parents, I suppose), I am Diana Jue, a rising senior in MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning. I'm also a fortunate member of this fabulous Singapore-Bangkok workshop that was organized for this MIT class. This two week experience is an opportunity for us students to research different housing typologies by examining the housing situations in Singapore and Bangkok, Thailand.

Our first day in Singapore was unorganized, giving us an opportunity to rest from our 20+ hour flights and to explore the city. The weather was hot, humid, and wet. I maneuvered through the MRT (subway) system, saw the famous Merlion statue in the harbor, wandered through Chinatown's food and street markets, visited an assortment of shopping malls that have sprung up along the different MRT stations, rode a high-flying cable car to Sentosa ("Singapore's island resort"), visited the Southernmost Point of Continental Asia (it's not as exciting as the name puts on), and napped at the beach. It was an eventful first day, filled with touristy sightseeing opportunities and eating delicious food throughout the city.



Merlion statue by the marina



Chinatown shophouses



Touristy market area in Chinatown



A neighborhood near Chinatown that will soon face its future



The Vivocity Mall roof deck with an incredible wading pool

Singapore is clean, structured, and very controlled - at least that's the impression that I first received. The landscaping is complex and beautiful. Skyscrapers and outlandish architecture dot the downtown financial area. There is a manicured look and feel; I could sense that the city was planned intentionally using its effective and affordable public transportation. The Sentosa beaches are fabricated like a Walt Disney resort and sprinkled with tourist attractions. Where we are living, shopping malls are commonplace. In my exploration of the city, Chinatown provided the sole glimpse of what I assume is "old Singapore," only because the buildings look older and

have more character. Lack of character is also a theme that permeates the city. The tall glass and concrete buildings, along with the high density, vertical public housing complexes project an image of modernity (to some people) but make me wonder what was Singapore and if Singapore cares.



Riding a cable car to Sentosa



Can you believe I was here?!



At the beach

The workshop's first official group meeting was held at our hotel, the YWCA Fort Canning Lodge. We met the Singaporean and Thai students who will join us in this learning experience. Preliminary introductions included Polaroid photos and declaring whether we would like to live in Singapore or Bangkok and our decision criteria. I'm not sure which city received the most votes. People who chose Singapore picked it for its job opportunities, convenience of transportation, stability, and organization. People who chose Bangkok picked it for its culture, freedom, diversity, and city life. As one Thai student put it, he would want to live in Singapore on the weekdays but spend his weekends in Bangkok. Of course, most of us MIT students made our decisions based on conjecture since we haven't spent much time in either city. Acknowledgment of individual criteria was the main point of the exercise, and later in this workshop we'll explore the criteria of residents who live in these cities' housing developments.



Yummy shaved ice

Arrival Day Comments

Ploy (Thailand workshop member): Thanks a lot for your effort. Times fly so fast. Back to June 11(DAY0), i still remember our first meeting. We, Thai students, were waiting outside, while you guys are at the lobby. Tiffany was the first person I met from the MIT group. Then introduction part with the Polaroid--I look so funny. Remember, when someone try to call the Thai student as E-BA (which in Thai mean crazy). And Adib was so amazing helping us organizing the S'pore's trip. Seem like I was the only Thai who chose to live in S'pore on that day .(Ploy-Pim-Aong-and Thian). And If you ask me again, I'm still pick S'pore as a place to live and work. I'm really glad to have an opportunity to join this workshop. Many Thanks to Prof. Reinhard Goethert, Prof.Non Arkaraprasertkul, and MIT to give me such a great opportunity. Let me know, if there's any other workshop. I'll sign up!! We all should keep in touch! Ploy

Day 1: Creating Home

On our first day of the workshop, we visited three sites that described housing issues and solutions from the "expert" point of view and saw a public housing development up close. I framed the day based on a morning discussion at the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA): How do you plan for home? Themes related to this reappeared throughout the day, such as belonging, community, identity, and ownership.



At the URA, we watched a Singapore promotional video and were led through an exhibit about Singapore's development history. The URA definitely knew how to put on a show and amazed us with an incredible scale model of the city with an accompanying light show. Kelvin, our host, fielded many questions from us. I found it interesting that the URA has only just begun to include small-scale public participation in its development process. In other international cities I've visited, the citizens would have been outraged by the notion of a government authority controlling how they live. Definitely, Singapore could not have developed without its highly controlling sociopolitical system (this is a country where about 80% of the population lives in subsidized housing and there are fines for littering and buying gum). I asked about the possibility of the organization of local government; the answer I received implied that this would not happen any time soon.



Kelvin, our URA tour guide who made multiple appearances throughout our stay in Singapore



A huge scale model of Singapore, light show included



Lunch in a hot, crowded cafeteria

We visited the architecture offices of WOHA and ARC Studio, two firms that have designed high-rise, high-density public housing developments. Both firms designed solutions to address two of public housing's problems: lack of individual expression and lack of community. Singapore's public housing developments range from 4-5 story walk-ups to 40+ story high-rises.

On the outside, the facades of all these units look identical. The inside configuration is also identical. WOHA's very conceptual designs included ways for the resident to make personal design choices, such as including a different type of window (e.g. bay window or balcony) and a different indoor configuration of walls to create rooms that are appropriate for gradually changing needs. ARC presented Duxton Plain, a public housing development that will be built and also includes a flexible interior. Both designs give the resident ways to express themselves, since public housing here is fairly standardized and homogenous.

High-rises can also easily lack a sense of community, since people live vertically and see and rely on fewer people. Both firms tried to address the issue of community space with sky gardens, or green spaces raised vertically. WOHA even experimented with this concept in its own office; we had a lot of fun walking into an outdoor garden that was almost enclosed in the middle of a building. In practice, we wondered if so many gardens could be maintained. Maintenance was a problem in the US's public housing developments; when a space belongs to everyone, people treat it as if it doesn't belong to them.



We test WOHA's vertical garden prototype

We finished our day with a walk around Tiong Bahru, getting a first-hand observation of public housing from the non-expert view. Tiong Bahru was one of the earliest public housing estates in Singapore, and gradually newer residential buildings were added to the original four story walk-ups. We were fortunate to see a fourth-story flat in a 1950s development that was owned by a grandmother who had lived there for 60 years. Her daughter said that there was nothing that she didn't like about her home, except that there was no elevator (although she has gotten used to it). The flat was spacious, and the family owned a nice computer and television (priorities?). We also saw the flat of a British expatriate, which was beautifully renovated. The expat said that community-building was difficult because of the housing development's incredible diversity. For example, there were 20 Chinese workers living in the flat upstairs, which was illegally used as a dorm room. I wonder how communities and the urban fabric will change as a new population moves into these older flats, which are fairly pricey.



Tiong Bahru Estate. Looks like a nice little community, doesn't it?



These look a lot more fun than the high rises

And many other questions were raised throughout the day: In a socially engineered city, what will the long-term effects of extending public participation be? How do communities form naturally? Can they physically be designed for? Will parks and programming be enough to create community identity? How do architects balance designing efficiently and designing for community? Is giving residents an option to change the configurations of their home enough to fulfill the desire to express individuality and create self-identity?

Haruka, our TA, also pointed out that there are few items in our hotel giftshop that are uniquely Singaporean, except for the Merlion. What is Singaporean, anyway? The country is a very young ethnic melting pot; can its citizens connect with tradition or culture like other countries can? Does it need to in order to forge a strong sense of national identity? How will this sense of identity be altered with a projected high increase of foreigners?

Oh, yes. And food. Breakfast at the YWCA has been fantastic so far. Each morning there is typically a noodle dish, a rice dish, eggs, potatoes, and other sides. In the city, we typically eat in market/cafeteria areas, getting our food from stalls and sitting at tables with fans whirring above us. The eatery across the street from the URA was incredibly busy during lunch time. At these places that are lined with food stalls, I've learned that the best food comes from the vendors with the longest lines. So far, I've eaten a variety of food: Hainanese chicken rice, Indonesian food, fried carrot cake (egg with white radish), popiah (rolled up crepe with turnip, bean sprouts, and hoisin sauce), coconut cakes, lots of shaved ice, a flat noodle dish with oysters, and a few dishes I've forgotten the names of. It has all been quite yummy.

Day 1 Comments

Serene (Singaporean friend from MIT): AHFFFH yay you're eating the REAL singapore food!

Boon (Singaporean friend from MIT): Yay you found the oysters! (You can actually get it in Boston - Taiwan Cafe!)

Day 2: This or That? Good or Bad?

Surbana: "We Think It. You Live It."



Our day began with a presentation by Surbana, a 1000-person private developer that also designs public housing projects. Some issues came up from this presentation that put yesterday's experiences of conceptual design into the larger framework of implementation.

Something that came up was the practice of the HDB intentionally keeping public housing quality low to distinguish it from private housing. Although there are many ideas that add elements of choice to public housing projects, few are actually adopted by the Housing Development Board (HDB). If public housing projects offer the same flexibility and options as private housing, then expensive private housing becomes less desirable. Apparently, the way that public housing is priced in relation to private housing hangs in careful balance. At Surbana, an architect showed us a video explaining how a user could interact with a website to make very detailed choices about his unit's configuration, facade, and interior design. HDB would not let this video be shown to users, perhaps because of logistical concerns, perhaps because of other concerns. I find it disappointing that public housing quality could become more but is held back.

I'm still curious about any types of ground up political movements because of dissatisfaction. From talking with the Singaporean students who are helping with the workshop, it seems that citizens acknowledge the same issues with the Singaporean government that we foreigners have noticed. However, from what I know, there have been no organized, bottom-up, citizen-organized movements. The government does a fine job providing materially for its people, but is this enough to make them happy?

Sengkang: Concrete Jungle

In my opinion, the housing development we visited in Sengkang, a new town in Singapore's "suburban" heartland, is like monolithic and imposing. I just saw column after column of high-rise buildings. Residential and commercial uses are separated. It has a sterile feeling because of the design or because of the development's newness and lack of people living in the units. At Sengkang, our assignment was to interview families about their housing situation. Specifically, we wanted to find out their recommendations for future housing.



New tall residential high rises in Sengkang

My team decided to immediately take the elevator to units with laundry hanging outside to dry since this signals that the families would more likely be home. During our exploration on the seventh floor, we found a unit that was being worked on and asked if we could walk around inside. To me, the units felt surprisingly large (90 square meters); they consisted of three bedrooms, two bathrooms, one living room, one kitchen, and one bomb shelter (Singapore is an island with nowhere to run in the event of a nuclear attack). The units feel cool and are designed with great cross-ventilation.

After looking at the empty flat, we walked up a few levels and peeked our eyes through screen doors. Eventually, an older man was willing to talk to us about what it was like to live in Sengkang. Soon enough, he invited us inside for refreshments and more conversation. He was retired, and his wife sold soya bean drinks at the mall part time. He lived with his sons, who lived on two different stories in the same housing block (sometimes he and his wife stayed with the older son; other times they would stay with the younger). He moved in very recently because his sons were getting married and needed their own units. He liked living in his unit because he had a great view of the green space and because it was conveniently located close to amenities and the MRT station (that's only 22 minutes to Chinatown). He didn't like living in his unit because few of his friends were there, there wasn't too much communal space on upper levels, and the design of the floor gave little opportunity for social interaction.

Toa Payoh: Hoorah for sky gardens

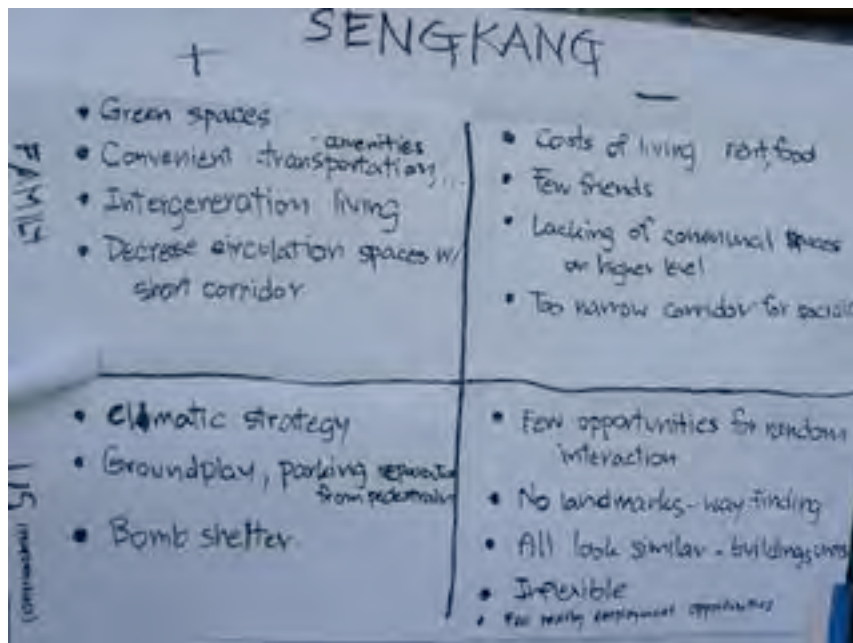


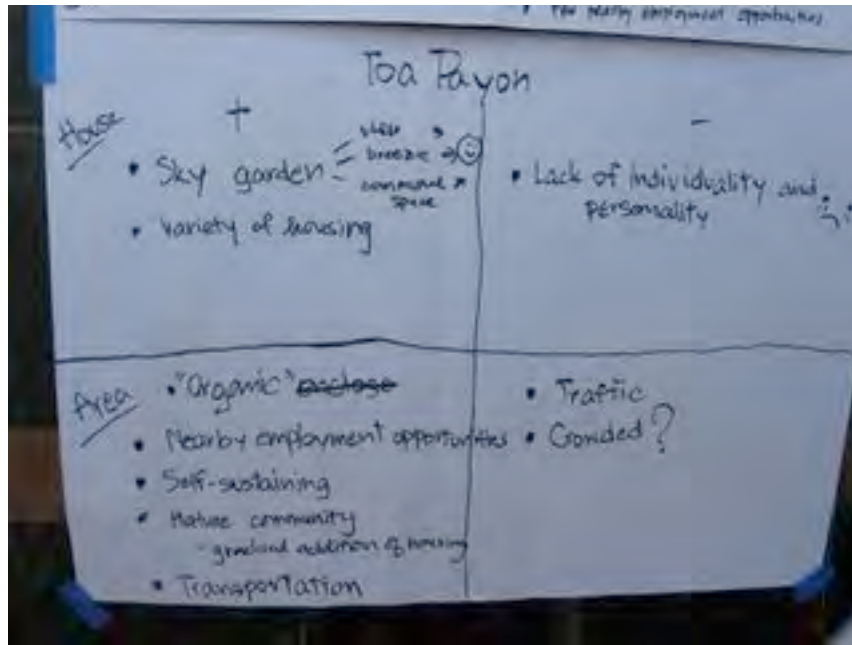
Lively mall in Toa Payoh



Sky garden

Our last stop was Toa Payoh, the one of the HDB's first new towns that were located outside of the city center. The area has a very lived-in feel, and the uses are mixed (there are residential units right next to the shopping mall and street shops). After walking through an HDB exhibit, we debriefed on the 12th-story "sky garden" that provided an amazing view overlooking Toa Payoh. We broke into our surveying teams and wrote down the family's impressions of their housing development and our impression of the housing developments. You can see my team's results here:





A few of us took the elevator (the lift) to the 40th story of this residential high rise. The view from here was amazing, too:



Random: Toon, a Singaporean student, bought some fresh durian for us to try. For most of the MIT students, it was their first time. Interestingly, our hotel floor also smelled like durian when we returned. The government even has laws against durian; for example, you can't bring durian on the subway or else you'll receive an unknown penalty. Here's the sign:



Day 2 Comments

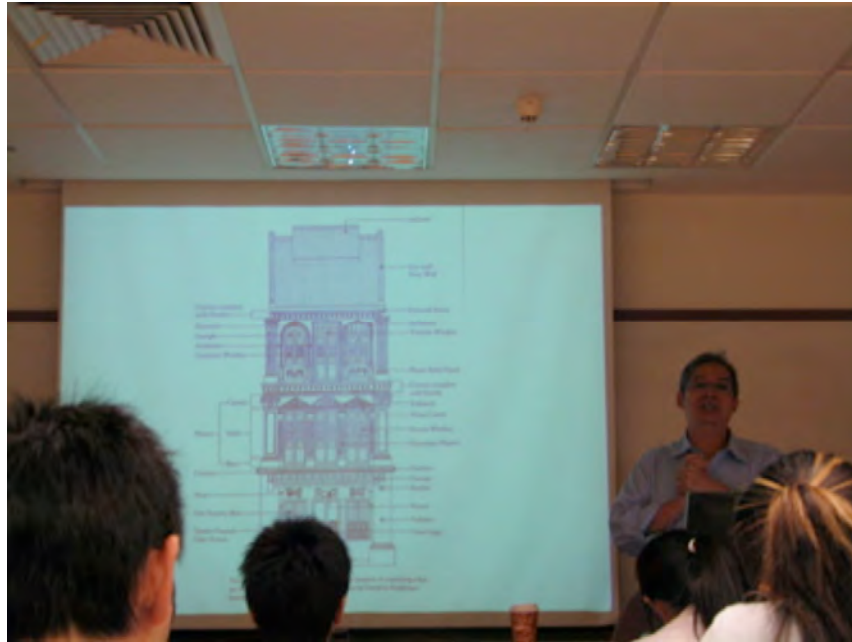
Serene: tee hee I wasn't lying about the durians=) mannnn I think you know more about Singapore housing stuff than I do now! It's so exciting that you're visiting all these places - I live in Yio Chu Kang if you know where that is=)

Boon: It's not really an unknown penalty - everyone's just gonna beat you up cos of the smell.

Day 3: What is an Architect/Planner to do?

On the last day of our workshop in Singapore, we heard three very different lectures at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

The first lecture was called Conservation Policy & Practice of Shophouses in Singapore and presented by Dr. Widodo in the architecture department of NUS. The lecture was about Singapore's lack of true historical preservation, although historical conservation is done in name. Dr. Widodo focused primarily on shophouses, which are an older housing type consisting of ground floor commercial space and housing above. These were prevalent throughout the city but were razed down due to shoddy living conditions. In some areas like Chinatown, an area of shophouses was redeveloped into a commercial and office space, completely changing the use of the buildings and the life of the neighborhood.



Dr. Widodo lecturing about historical preservation/conservation at NUS

From my time spent working in community development in Boston's Chinatown, I am personally critical of any redevelopment that destroys a neighborhood's social network and vibrant street life. The salt in this wound is Singapore's attempt to preserve and mimic the past by merely saving a building facade or even recreating an old facade by scratch. This redevelopment practice lends an artificial, sterilized, theme park feel to some of Singapore's communities. The entire lecture led to more questions: Can culture really be preserved by maintaining a neighborhood's physical appearance and use alone? If culture is constantly being shaped by external factors, how can we say that redevelopment practices are "bad" for cultures and communities?

The URA's top down approach to planning (highly controlled, little public participation) and its conflict of interest between development and redevelopment are two issues that influence how neighborhoods are preserved. These two issues were touched upon by the next two lectures given by Professor Non and Professor Goethert. Professor Non discussed Shanghai's politics of urban form - basically a history of Shanghai's development and city-wide redevelopment. It seemed to completely contrast Dr. Widodo's talk. Or perhaps it was the other side of the same coin but very large scale. I thought it was interesting how razing down and rebuilding can actually help create a culture (British colonialism's li nong homes in Shanghai, for example, were embraced by Shanghai and became icons for the city). So is it legitimate to criticize current redevelopment in places like Shanghai and Singapore?

Professor Goethert discussed something that interests me a lot - Community Action Planning to rebuild communities after disasters. This means directly involving the people in a rebuilding process, not just through a forum or by giving them the ability to approve plans, but through direct participation in jointly deciding what, where, and how things will be built. It's a fascinating process and concept that completely changes what it means to be an architect/planner.

That was a theme of the day's lectures - for me at least. As a planner, what will I be doing in third world countries? Can people plan for themselves better than I can plan for them? And am I willing to relinquish the control? What is my role?

After the lectures, we did the fun stuff. We ate lunch at a Chinese restaurant at Vivocity, a mall with a fantastic roof garden. Professor Goethert treated us to a ride on cable cars to the top of Mt. Faber, where we took pictures of the view and of the Merlion (I found four on the trip). Then some of us went to Little India, which reminded me a lot of India but with a slight Singaporean twist (no street vendors, no cows, but ample air conditioning in indoor restaurants).



This is Singapore (view from Mt. Faber). Looks like Legos, doesn't it?



Our attempt at bringing MIT to Singapore



View of the water from the cable car



Men watching a Bollywood film outdoors in Little India



Gotta love the colors in Little India

Day 4: Good-bye Singapore, Hello Bangkok

Today was travel day, and we flew from Singapore's Changi Airport into Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport. Most of us flew on AirAsia, a budget airline that only allows one piece of carry-on luggage that weighs 15 kg. The plane was cold, and refreshments were not free, but at least it was relatively inexpensive.

My first experience with Bangkok was the cab ride to our hotel. On the highway onramp, I noticed a speed limit sign was boldly flashing the number 60. Then I looked at the driver's speedometer and saw that he was going 140. As we weaved in between lanes (and sometimes straddled two), I noticed the mix of buildings in Bangkok, from high rises to run down houses right next to the highway. Immediately, Bangkok felt much bigger and messier than Singapore. It also had an attitude (character?), which our driver exemplified when he sped toward our hotel and stopped the taxi within inches of the hotel lobby.



Driving into the city.

At 5pm, we met the Thai students who are also in our workshop. Most of them are economics students from Chulalongkorn University, and some of them were with us in Singapore. With the Thai students, we went through introductions, provided our own impressions of Singapore, shared some pictures about Boston and MIT, and debriefed about what we learned in Singapore. The evening's goal was to update our new students on what we learned and of course to help us organize our own thoughts. In true Professor Goethert fashion, we worked in teams to distill our ideas on huge pieces of white paper. The new students had to present the posters.

Altogether, the presentations provided a great overview of Singapore and its housing issues. The nation's controlling government was the key factor that made it possible to implement such a program. A key problem is the lack of identity and community. Of the three housing types we visited (4-5 story walkup, 11-17 story mid-rise, and 40-50 story high-rise), the walkup seemed to have the most social benefits and the high-rise the least. But in areas where land prices are high, high-rises had more economic benefit (high return on land, more housed people to support nearby area).



Toon, our new Thai team member, presenting our posters.

Day 5: Transportation Whoas and Woes

What a long day. We began by taking the MRT (subway) to the Thai Cultural Center, where a van took us to the Ministry of Town and Country Planning. Dr. Thongchai Roachanakanan spoke with us about Bangkok's development issues (on last names: the immigration card for entering Thailand had an incredibly long space for surnames, apparently to accommodate for Thais). Truthfully, I found this lecture to be very vague. Our question and answer session must have lasted nearly two hours, yet even when it was finished, I still felt that so many things were left unanswered. Surprisingly, some of the Thai students I talked to thought that our speaker told us more than they expected. Does Thailand have a political lack of transparency problem? Very much so.

Some issues that came up during the lecture and Q&A session:

1. Dr. Roachanakanan thinks that Bangkok has a "gloomy future." I thought that was depressing. Yet from the question and answer session, we were told that Bangkok is "not so bad" and then told that people smile a lot (apparently, it's the "Land of Smiles"). I guess the professionals and the people have very different views of the city. Dr. Roachanakanan thinks that Bangkok doesn't need to be like Singapore or other Asian tigers (i.e. Taiwan, South Korea). Rather, his goals are for Bangkok to become a good society for the people living there. However, is there even no hope for this?
2. Dr. Roachanakanan seemed depressed about his own country when he compared it to Singapore, where anything mandated by the government could happen instantly. Thailand lacks this political will. It's a country where there are multiple government authorities (the city government and country government are led by two different political parties, for example), and it has to deal with strong market forces. Power is definitely a key factor in Singapore's success.
3. Information is lacking. We had this ridiculously long discussion about population size and population growth. Nobody seems to know how many people live in the city or in the surrounding areas. Dr. Roachanakanan's surveys didn't match with figures found in

reports. If the city isn't expecting future growth, then there is no reason to prepare for it. I wonder if they're forgetting to count the undocumented city inhabitants who live in the slums.

4. Although the government isn't very powerful, the business and informal sectors are thriving, and this city is booming economically and bringing along the typical urban woes such as traffic. These planners - with their plans that were created only very recently (the first comprehensive plan was created in 1992!) - they are falling behind more and more quickly.



After the lecture, we were fed by the Ministry of Town and Country Planning. Yay for free lunches. Then we took a van to the Emporium Mall to see a design exhibit. However, it was closed, so we had dessert instead. We then hopped the BTS Sky Train, a train on an elevated track, and traveled west through the Central Business District.

At Saphan Taksin, we got off and walked around the old part of the city, which was around 150 years old and filled with narrow streets and shophouses. The shophouses are 4-5 stories, narrow, and are commercial spaces on the bottom. The neighborhood was loud because of the traffic, but it was also very quaint - walkable, green, and lively. Singapore doesn't have places like these, but Bangkok is filled with these.



We examined an old French embassy building that squatters have taken over. It looks like they steal electricity and share cable television. Ironically, the building is located right next to government facilities and a police station. In our attempt to return to the street without back tracking our steps (the worse thing you can do when exploring), we ended up walking through a Buddhist monastery. Here we stopped for refreshments at an outdoor vendor. I've found a new favorite: sweetened rice-flavored green tea that costs around 20 baht.



We made through the neighborhood to Si Phaya Pier, where we hopped on a boat. Boats are another form of public transportation in Bangkok. Many homes, schools, and tourists spots are located along the Chao Praya River. On the boat, it began to rain. The region is in the middle of rainy season, and it begins raining in the late afternoon. The waves were becoming tumultuous, and water splashed into the window-less boat. But the view of the older, somewhat dilapidated houses and businesses along the river was amazing.



Because of the rain, we skipped the originally intended Grand Palace, we ended up at a coffee shop, where we settled down for drinks. I had a Thai tea frappe, which was strong in flavor and ridiculously sweet. It was fantastic. This trip so far has been filled with eating throughout the day. Apparently, we're being fairly Thai when we do this. Professor Goethert had us come up

with class t-shirt designs, which we voted on (even the manager of the restaurant gave her opinion). Then we discussed questions to ask people on the following day.



By the time we left the coffee shop, it was nearly 8pm and still raining. We walked the streets, looking for cabs. Unfortunately, it took us about half an hour to get a free one and we almost took the bus (which I still want to try). Our cabs took us to the Paragon Center, where we looked at the orchid exhibition and ate dinner in the food court. I had a delicious fried egg and shrimp omelet over rice.



For the ride back to the hotel, I took a *tuk tuk*, which are like the auto rickshaws I took in India. They're like noisy golf carts, and the drivers drive fast, particularly with tourists. At least the breeze and the street view was great. The smell of car exhaust - not so much.



Day 6: Sense of Place

Today was another day spent meeting Bangkok's urban professionals. We visited the City Planning Department of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), which plays a similar role in Bangkok as the Urban Redevelopment Authority in Singapore. However, the BMA portrayed a much less sophisticated image than the URA, which is also reflecting in its city planning.



The BMA lobby was quite sparse compared with the URA's showcase

Our hosts for the morning were Ms. Anchalee Patamasawan, Director General of the Department of City Planning; Assistant Professor Bhubate Samutachak, Director of the Green Development Institution; and Mr. Sompong Chirabundarnsook, Chief of Western area development planning sub-division, Urban Development Planning Division.

Placed at our conference table seats were maps of the metropolitan region. I asked one of the Thai students to show me where the office was. He had a difficult time finding it. Evidently, very few Bangkok students use maps and rely more on monuments to move around the city. My direction-finding abilities are functioning more poorly in Bangkok than in Singapore, too. I think it's because of Bangkok's size and limited subway system, which helps me orient myself. If I or the Thai students were to draw a map of the city, I'm fairly sure that we would all be off.

Mr. Chirabundarsnook gave us another lecture about Bangkok's development history. The fact that Bangkok's urban planning is so young stood out once again. The city's first comprehensive plan was in 1992. That's only about 15 years ago, but the city has been around for much longer. And the plan is basically a land use plan of rings drawn around the city center, which was most likely not adhered to. The current city plan only planned up to 2022, which many might argue is not far enough into the future. This notion of focusing on present needs, not worrying about the future, and reacting to problems instead of preparing for them seems to be a general trend in Bangkok planning. It's probably related to the city and country's political instability. Why would investment be made in city planning if there is very little guarantee that it will be implemented due to political changes?

Mr. Chirabundarsnook also talked about subcenters, which are self-contained communities outside of the city center. These are satellite cities that combine living and working outside of the city so that people don't need to live in Bangkok. The idea is not new, and for our activity with the BMA we worked in groups to create a strategy/objectives, implementation plan, and risk assessment for new subcenters.

My group laid out subcenter objectives that were similar to the BMA's: controlled urban growth (population and urban growth are not bad, but how growth occurs could be), sustainable development, and based upon the live-work model. However, we wanted to make sure that the city center was also being supported while the subcenters received most of the attention and investment. Our implementation included support from the government and the private sector. In all stages of implementation, the government provides economic benefits to entice the businesses to settle in the suburb or to entice people to move out there. The major risks (out of many) are political instability, lack of a government budget, and the lack of a market for businesses.



Group posters, ready for presentation

The BMA hosted lunch, during which I had an interesting discussion with some of the Thai students. One reason they took the class was to get an insider's look at their city, which they don't know too much about. Apparently, Bangkok city planning lacks transparency. The government controls the media. The information they heard in the morning was all new to them, too (this may also be because they're in a different academic discipline; perhaps the architecture/planning students know more about city?).

Our next stop was the Baiyoke Sky Hotel, the tallest building in Bangkok and the tallest reinforced concrete building in the world, since nobody builds with reinforced concrete anymore. It is 88 stories tall. The view is great. Seeing the juxtaposition of the CBD's high-rise buildings next to low-rise homes helped me better understand the city's built form. Bangkok's sprawl was evident - from the top deck, the city looked like a sea of buildings. Also interesting was the number of large, empty, deteriorating buildings that have been that way since Thailand's 1997 financial crisis.



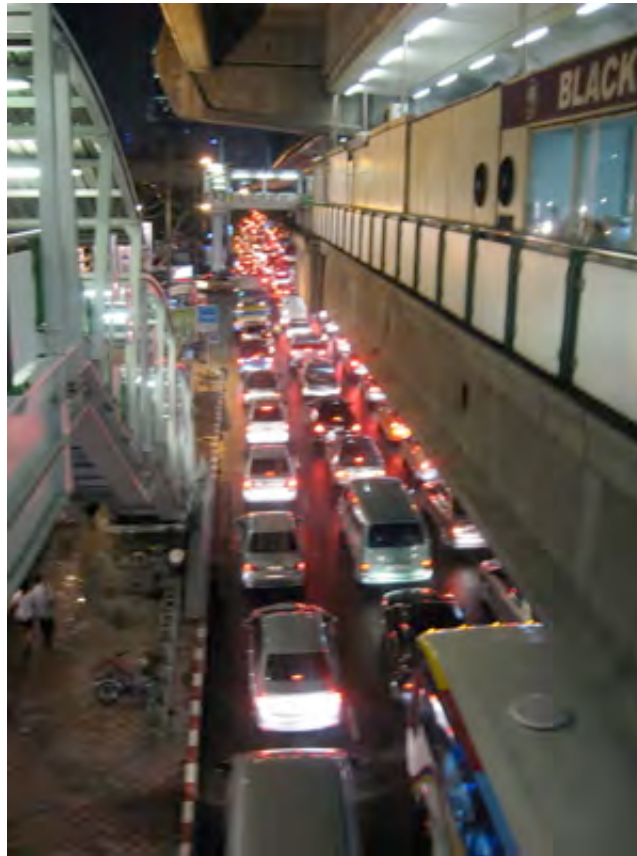
I love aerial shots. This is Bangkok's Central Business District and surrounding areas.

We went back to the Emporium Mall to see the Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC). This consists of a library with design-oriented books, computers (so many Macs), a special exhibit about materials (increases my appreciation of course 3), a members-only lounge (comfy), and exhibits on design (interesting). There was also a special exhibit about Thai modern architecture, which, well, wasn't very "modern" at all, compared to what we've seen in other cities like Singapore. Architecture in Thailand just seems to copy buildings of the West.



TCDC lobby – fancy place

We students had dinner at the mall, and some of us went to the Swalum Night Bazaar, a night market near the Lumpini MRT station. These crowded rows of shops sold clothes, bags, some small appliances, some food, and of course, Thai massages.



Bangkok traffic – yikes!



Scoping out goods at the night market



The market lights up at night

Day 7: Out to the Suburbs

In the morning, we hopped into vans and drove to Minburi, a suburb to the east of Bangkok. It was originally a wetland with agriculture as its main industry because of fertile soil. Factories popped up along the river and provided industrial jobs, but these factories also polluted the water. Minburi actually means "Town of Fish."

We visited Patama Roonratwik, an award-winning architect who founded Community Architects for Shelter and Environment (CASE). By "community architect," she means an architect who designs directly with the community. I feel like she and her work embody so much that we've been learning in this class. It was an honor to be her guests.



Patama introduces us to Minburi

Our meeting place was TEN house, a compound designed by a group of architects who wanted to communally live together. Its purpose was to provide housing for what Patama called the "informal urban poor" - that is, the squeezed middle class that can't afford to buy new residential developments and aren't poor enough to receive aid from the government. The house is very nice, although the two years put into jointly designing it seemed obsessive.



TEN house

The workshop members took a boat trip around the rivers and canals of Minburi. I can honestly say that this boat ride has been the best one I've ever been on. We rode motorized gondolas, so were barely inches from the murky water (Non told us to plug our ears just in case). But the sights were amazing - not in the way that they just awed you with beauty, but in the way that they were just real. The ride was an intimate look into the private lives of these community members, many of whom live in slum conditions.



Concrete walkway along a canal



The best boat ride of my life

We saw: houses on stilts along the canal (apparently illegal - there is a threat of eviction although these houses have been here for 10 years plus), houses made from corrugated sheets of metal and other inexpensive materials, high-rise residential units, new single family homes/townhouses that provided a backdrop against the low-rise shacks, green plants and green plant pickers in the water, concrete walkway along the canals, motorbikes along those walkways, fishing nets, cows, chickens, fishermen, women, children who smiled and waved to us, and a lot of personality and character.







Boat ride views of different housing types

For lunch we went to the "new market" food court. There are a few markets in Minburi, many of which we visited: the old market, the old new market, the new market, and the C-mart/Tesco. The old wet market is like a traditional market with food stalls outdoors and vendors laying out their produce on the ground and their flapping seafood in buckets. I saw things like turtles and fruits that are only native to Southeast Asia. The new market where we ate was in a large, un-air-conditioned building filled with vendors. The food was great, once again - I had chicken satay (7 baht a stick) and pad thai. There was also a KFC nearby, and yes, somebody did eat there.



Peppers for sale at the new old market



Fruit for sale at the new market



Lifestyle for sale at TESCO (the “new” new market)?

I thought our post-lunch discussion about what we saw on the boat ride and in the neighborhood was very interesting. Many people felt strongly that the juxtaposition of slums and new residential units was "interesting" or maybe even wrong. Many people also felt that "the government should do something," which of course is a lot to ask for since the government here lacks money and political will. That's why I'm all for Patama's approach of working with the community to design low-cost, appropriate housing solutions for these absolute urban poor. As

professionals, I really do think we need to be careful about applying our own judgment to other people's living conditions; that is, we can't necessarily assume that the people are miserable. But at the same time, we should also try to see what's objectively wrong and try to be of use.



Sitting in a KFC after lunch, waiting to be picked up. Tired.

After Minburi, we visited Chulalongkorn University to pay our visit to the Dean of the Economics Department. She wasn't there, but at least we got to use the computer lab. And also interesting are the uniforms that college students have to wear.

Day 8: CASE Study

Today we again drove out to Minburi and met with architect Patama and her assistant Ploy. Patama gave us an incredible lecture about the work she does as a community architect. Her firm, Community Architects for Shelter and the Environment (CASE), creates appropriate housing and encourages the residents to have an active role in all steps of the development process. Patama and Ploy work directly with low-income communities (the "slums" of the neighborhoods) improve living conditions.

The design process is very different from other architecture firms. CASE first establishes social connections with a neighborhood (which can take years), and then hosts workshops where community members basically plan their own neighborhoods. Patama and Ploy use scale models that residents can arrange on large, scale floor maps. In doing so, they harness the creative abilities of people who live in these informal settlements. Residents are the ones who know the

physical and social layout of their neighborhoods, and they're ingenious when it comes to creating their own solutions.

Obviously, the design process is very different. Patama insists that she's "not a social worker" and that she's "still an architect." Some people would argue otherwise. CASE alters the role of architects and planners in developing countries; they become articulators instead of just providers.

After the lecture, we split into groups and surveyed households in five different communities. There was a list of things to ask families about: boundaries, neighbors, garbage disposal, transportation, workplace, access points, shopping, school, land rights, residency, and satisfaction. My group visited Bang-Chun Pattana, a Muslim community that is currently confronting overpopulation and a drug problem. We found and talked with Prasert, neighborhood chieftan. He's a nice, older fellow. For our discussion, we sat outside on our porch. Pim and Toon, the Thai students in my group, did the speaking and recording. I was the designated photographer; Anh was the general "observer." Prasert was a fantastic resource for information. Afterward, we walked around the neighborhood's canals and roads. School just let out, so the main U-shaped road was overcrowded with kids buying candy. While we were waiting for our ride, we also heard the call to prayer.



The chieftan.



A shot of the Bang-Chun canal.

Back at TEN house (our meeting place with CASE), the groups worked on posters for the ten answers and a development timeline. We presented our findings. One group went to two neighborhoods called Lam Hin and Suk ka tong, and we're hoping to organize an MIT group to return to Thailand and help Lam Hin build a bridge.



Making posters on the floor of TEN house.



Presentations.

After our time spent in Minburi, we headed over to Toon's parents' house for a nice home cooked meal. Yes, about 30 of us fit in their living room and dining room. They were incredible hosts, and we thank them for their hospitality.



At Toon's parents' house, listening to Ploy's announcement (Ploy was like... group Mom)

Day 9: Let's Play Tourist

On Friday, we were graciously given the day off. I think it was interesting timing for a vacation day, especially since the workshop had gained momentum from our visits to the suburbs. Also, having a vacation day earlier would have helped me orient myself in the city. But a day off is a day off, and I appreciated it a lot.

Ploy, a Thai student and general Mom of the group, helped organize a trip to two of Bangkok's tourist hot spots: The Grand Palace/Temple of the Emerald Buddha (sounds like an Indiana Jones sequel, but this is one of Thailand's most sacred sites) and the Jim Thompson House. To get to the Grand Palace, we took another boat ride along the Chao Phraya River. I believe I've gained an appreciation of water transportation from this trip.



This time, we took a tourist boat instead of a regular public transportation boat. The tour guide talked about all of the hotels along the waterfront but neglected to tell us about houses like these.

The Temple of the Emerald Buddha is extravagant, gold, and shiny. Just being around so much glitter made the heat feel hotter. I'm amazed that it's kept in such great shape. I particularly enjoyed the Thai Ramayana mural depicting the battle between monkeys and giants. We had fun taking pictures of the various temples and craftsmanship, but many of us felt worn out pretty quickly and decided to forgo exploring inside the Grand Palace.



One example of a structure at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha.



No, we were not the only tourists doing this.

The Jim Thompson Center for the Arts and the Jim Thompson House had an exhibit called Tomyan Phadib, which describes itself as "an art exhibition of Thai and Japanese artists exploring the coexistence of the traditional and the contemporary." The title "Tomyan Pladib" combines the Thai soup Tomyan and the Thai word Pladib, which means "raw fish" and references Japanese cuisine. I enjoyed this exhibit (and the air conditioning) a lot.



Japanese pop artist Yoshimoto Nara's Sleepless Night [Cat]

Jim Thompson was an American architect who moved to Thailand permanently after serving in the second World War and revived the Thai silk industry. He had a fondness for Thai culture, and now his teak wood house serves as a site of cultural heritage, art, and preservation.

After a tour of the Jim Thompson house, I headed out to Chinatown to walk around the neighborhood. Interestingly, nearly every major city I've visited has a Chinatown, complete with a Chinatown gate. The Chinese diaspora is just fascinating. I walked the main streets (Charoen Krung and Yaowarat), the narrow roads between the main streets that have been turned into cozy market areas, and the narrower residential alleyways. Some sights: neon restaurant signs lined up and down tall buildings, middle-aged women doing aerobics in a temple courtyard, many small cats, older men and women sitting behind screened doors watching crowds walk by, tourists (like myself), older men examining relic-like stones with magnifying glasses, and a lot of high-density housing. For dinner I picked up food on the street: deep fried dumplings, a kilo of lychee fruit, and guava juice.



Bangkok Chinatown gate



Aerobics in a temple courtyard

Day 10: So Many Posters

On Saturday morning, some of us went to Chatuchak Weekend Market to shopping. I've come to believe that shopping is a regional past time - there seem to be malls everywhere! How these stores sustain themselves is beyond me. Anyway, Chatuchak is huge and somewhat confusing, especially if you go through the narrow aisles, away from the main roads. A few guidelines I find useful when market shopping: 1) It's best to buy when you see something you like because stores

tend to disappear once passed; 2) Buy in bulk to cut down the price; 3) Cut the price in half (or more) when you start bargaining and stick to your guns!



The pet area, although filled with cute animals, was mostly sad.



Yummy fresh-squeezed 100% orange juice, perfect for thirst quenching on a hot day.

Our work day officially began in the afternoon at Chulalongkorn University. The day's task was to create and present three posters. The first poster compared the pros and cons of Singapore and Bangkok's anticipated growth strategies. The second poster compared housing types that we saw during our neighborhood visits on the previous day. We were to provide the type name, description, image, housing pattern (an aerial shot of the building footprints), density, and circulation. To introduce the third poster, Professor Goethert said, "We all have our own models." This was a throwback to the first day of the workshop, when we decided if we'd rather live in Singapore or Bangkok depending on individual criteria. Now we had to create a group "City Vision" that ranked four important criteria that reappeared throughout the workshop among students and families we surveyed: 1) Home/ family/ friends/ community; 2) Lifestyle/ culture/ beauty; 3) Organization/ security/ cleanliness; 4) Jobs/ employment/ cost of living. We also had to associate implications with these criteria.

My team voted to figure out priorities on the third poster. We ended up with 1) Employment, 2) Community, 2) Lifestyle (tie), 4) Organization. Toon tied this order together with a small hypothetical scenario: After you come home from work, you want to spend time with your friends and family, and you may therefore go out to experience the citylife. Then we threw in a few of our own: climate, regional location, and prominence.



Poster-making.

In the middle of poster creating, we were kicked out of our air-conditioned room and finished in the cafeteria, where we also presented. Some interesting thoughts came up during the presentation. For example, most people believed that Singapore's planning process was superior to Bangkok's planning process. In Singapore, what you plan is what you get. In Bangkok, this isn't the case and, well, you see what you get instead. Politically instability seemed to be the primary detrimental factor to city development; is political stability underlying all good development? For me, this brought up another city that we talked about during the class: Dhaka, a city with a weak government but booming textile industry. Also, perhaps the

"benevolent dictator" model is the best way to ensure city development - the dictator can get things done, and his benevolence makes sure people are treated well.

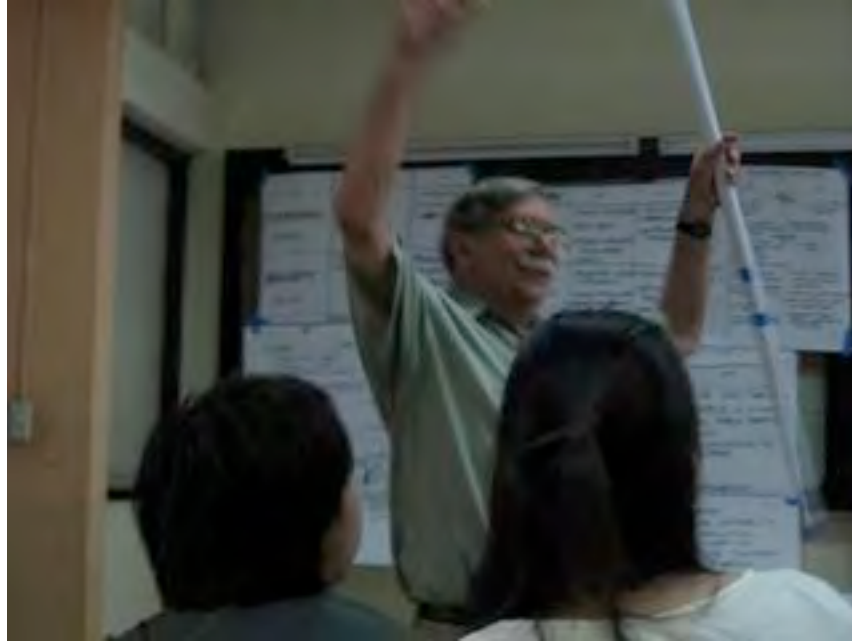
We found that Singapore's small size may also have been a huge driver of its effective planning measures. While Bangkok could spread out and start and stop construction as seen fit, Singapore had little land to waste and couldn't mess up. Also, smaller cities are easier to plan and to manage economically. Therefore, if we hypothetically delineate the boundaries of a growing city and force a "compact city" model, would this be a good way to grow?

A huge problem in Bangkok is implementation. The city has plans, but these plans do not manifest. Perhaps, then, planners also need to plan how to get their message across. Communication is key, which is a lesson that I feel has risen many times in this class. A plan includes a way to get the people on the plan's side so that it is implemented (unless you have a dictator...).

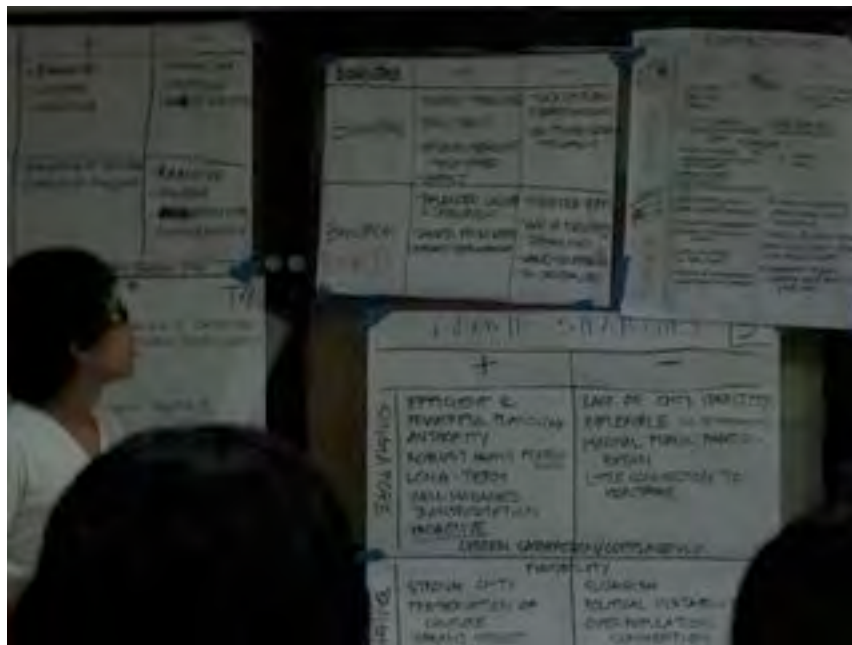
For our City Vision poster, my team came up with many physical implications of our priorities. For example, employment's implications included appropriate zoning and mixed-use spaces. Community's implications included open spaces, shared facilities, and communal living. Lifestyle's implications included urban design on a human scale and wide sidewalks (Bangkok's sidewalks impressed me - there's so much street life because the sidewalks are wide enough for outdoor eating and hawking). Organization's implications included an easily understandable street system (a New York City grid?) and landmarks for way finding.

But how much power do physical plans have? Many other groups focused on non-physical implications. If you achieve the non-physical goals first (stable government, strong economy, "smiling society"), then does the physical plan make a difference?

Professor Goethert made another throwback to our first workshop day by having us decide whether each City Vision element is better satisfied by Bangkok or Singapore. A conflict came up about whether Singapore or Bangkok provided more economic prospects. Some thought Singapore because the jobs were obviously better. But a lot of us thought Bangkok because there was a range of jobs, and economic diversity is absolutely vital to a healthy city. For example, a poor immigrant could arrive in Bangkok and immediately pick up a service job. Singapore seems to lack these opportunities. Big cities like Bangkok (and New York) seem to thrive on this labor. And since the economic strata is so varied, a city must figure out how to house everyone.



Professor Goethert encouraging us after a long day.



So many posters.

Day 11: The End?

On our final day of the workshop, we arrived at Chulalongkorn University in appropriate attire: lovely pink and black t-shirts spotted with caricatures of ourselves living in housing types encountered on this trip. Our goal for the day was to apply a development strategy to Bangkok's future urban growth. The five groups each chose a different development types: finger development, subcenters, mini centers, infill (compact city growth), and spine development

(along the river). In the afternoon, we ate lunch and heard a great presentation on urban growth by incoming Department of Urban Studies and Planning Masters in City Planning candidate, Andrew Gulbrandson. At the end of the day, we gave Power Point presentations of our strategy.



Pretending to be the skyscrapers on our shirt.

I was in group five, and, Anh came up with the idea of spine development. Bangkok is situated near the Chao Phraya River, but the city seems to ignore the great asset. We developed a strategy for Bangkok to utilize the waterfront by creating a mixed use, green pedestrian promenade along the water. We would also preserve Bangkok's rich cultural tradition by preserving the heritage sites along the water and increasing water transportation usage. In our plan, Bangkok would stretch up and down the Chao Phraya River as it grows. I think that most of my team was pretty tired - or at least I was. However, we at least created something presentable in the time limit given.



Group 5 board work.

The other groups gave great presentations for their development patterns. That physical layouts on a macro scale will have economic and social implications is intriguing. I had learned about development patterns like green belts (preserving a ring of green space around the city center) and strip development (commercial development along major road corridors), but never had I compared multiple patterns at one time in such a simple yet thorough manner. Definitely, something I've gotten out of this entire experience has been learning how to simplify the complex information I've observed or postulated by presenting it with a rubric, whether on a giant piece of paper or through Power Point. The data and thoughts that are often muddled in my head becomes easily understandable with these exercises.

After each group presented, Professor Goethert and Professor Non handed out certificates of workshop completion to each of the students. Even Ploy's mother and another MIT alum helped hand out certificates (Professor Goethert likes to involve everyone). I now admit the slight corniness, but I enjoyed everyone's enthusiasm upon receiving their certificate and a handshake.



Presentations.

We then drove through nightmare-ish Bangkok traffic to King Power (Thailand's self-proclaimed king of duty free). Here, we ate a dinner buffet while watching Thai puppet dancing. The food was so-so, but the variety was incredible: Chinese noodles and rice, seafood, pasta, sushi, dim sum, freshly pan-fried dumplings, multiple meats, breads, sodas, desserts, and ice cream. The Thai puppet dancing was fun. I found the dancers to be more interesting than the puppets, though; some of the dancers portrayed their puppets' emotions through their own facial expressions.

At the evening's end, we took pictures on the patio outside. It was our last night together, so we tried every configuration of people known to us. Since we wanted to linger together as long as possible, we were probably the last people to leave the restaurant. What a bittersweet evening of hugs and farewells sprinkled with hopeful see you later! As discussed, the Lam Hin bridge project - which includes more adventures in Thailand - would soon be underway.



Group 5.



Thai students plus Professor Goethert.

Although this has been said multiple times already, thank you again to our fantastic hosts at NUS and Chula! The workshop would not have been as well-organized, insightful, or fun without your skilled minds and warm, hospitable hearts. Keep in touch!

Day 11 Comments

Pim (Thai student): We'll def keep in touch! Thanks for the journey Diana :D