

FROM LOCAL FLOATING MARKET TO URBAN RECREATIONAL AREA: REDEFINING SPACE IN A CHANGING CONTEXT – A CASE STUDY OF BANG MUANG COMMUNITY AND WAT BOT BON COMMUNITY

Policy Belief



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I. INTRODUCTION: WHY BANG MUANG AND WAT BOT BON?

Khlong^[1] Om Non or Mae Nam^[2] Om was once considered a part of Chao Phraya River. It runs through Nonthaburi Province from Mueang District to Bang Kruai District, and connects with Khlong Bangkok Noi at Wat^[3] Chalo, which links Nonthaburi Province with Bangkok (Thonburi side). Khlong Om Non is over 17.5 kilometers long (from the mouth of the canal to Wat Chalo, Bang Kruai District). Khlong Om Non is lined with the diversity of communities ranging from ancient wats built since the early Ayutthaya period to the early Rattanakosin period, Chinese shrines at various alleys of the mouth of the canal, original riverside communities consisting wooden houses for residence or trade according to the owners' purposes, and modern-era housing estates along the canal, including various roads and pathways. This reflects the diversity of the Khlong Om Non area throughout history, from (at least) the Ayutthaya period to the present. The changes that have influenced the communities along Khlong Om Non both economically and socially, serves as the reflection of changes in the economy and society on a broader Thai societal landscape.

Through observations during a boat journey from the mouth of Khlong Om Non to Wat Chalo, we found that in various neighborhoods along Khlong Om Non, particularly in the areas of Bang Muang and Wat Bot Bon (Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning, 2005), spanning from the Bang Yai Kao Market (Bang Yai Canal mouth) to the bridge crossing Khlong Om Non on Road 5038 (Ratchaphruek Road), stand out significantly compared to other neighborhoods along Khlong Om Non. This can be attributed to five factors.

[1] Khlong (Thai: คลอง) translates to "Canal" in English.

[2] Mae Nam (Thai: แม่น้ำ) translates to "River" in English.

[3] Wat (Thai: วัด) refers to a Buddhist monastery or temple.

1. The wats, with their historical significance in various epochs, comprise those built during the early Ayutthaya period to those in the early Rattanakosin period. On the contrary, other community wats were typically constructed between the late Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin periods. Such disparity reflects the establishment of local communities over long periods. Additionally, the wats in this neighborhood hold historical importance due to ancient remains, such as the prang at Wat Prang Luang, the scripture hall and the Mandapa of The Lord Buddha's Footprint at Wat Amphan. Particularly noteworthy is the area along Bang Muang Canal to Wat Bot Bon.

2. The riverside communities are densely populated compared to others. We observed that wooden houses in the Bang Muang Community and Wat Bot Bon Community remain inhabited, both along Khlong Om Non and various side canals (particularly Khlong Bang Yai Canal, Khlong Bang Khu Wiang, or Khlong Takhian). Additionally, there are wooden houses converted into grocery shops, barber shops, and boat repair shops. In contrast, we found that many wooden houses along riverside communities in other communities were significantly abandoned and deteriorated.

3. There are numerous restaurants. Riverside restaurants in this neighborhood offer a variety of cuisines and prices, from cooked-to-order restaurants and noodle shops (street food stalls) to high-price restaurants (cuisine) and coffee shops ranging from low to high prices. Some open early in the morning, while others from afternoon until evening, and some in the evening until nightfall.

4. There are well-found and well-known floating markets in Nonthaburi Province that are famous among urban tourists, include Wat Takhian Floating Market in Khlong Bang Khu Wiang, which is a tributary of Khlong Om Non. There is also the Wat Bot Bon Floating Market along

Khlong Om Non.

5. There is a variety of accommodations, ranging from high-end hotels and resorts to mid-range and budget-friendly hostels, particularly in the Wat Bot Bon Community area and along Khlong Bang Khu Wiang.

The question is why the Bang Muang community and Wat Bot Bon community maintain vibrancy, liveliness, and adaptability amidst urban expansion, while other areas do not reach this level. We analyze that there are two factors that sustain the vitality of these communities.

II. THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE AREA AS A TRADING GATEWAY

Through observations made while traveling by boat and conversations with elderly members of the community, as well as research related to the social history of the Bangkok Metropolitan Region and Thonburi side, it is evident that in the past, the Bang Muang community and Wat Bot Bon community were significant areas for the economy and trade of various communities along Khlong Om Non. Bang Yai Kao Market served as an important gateway for the trade of agricultural products of Khlong Om Non, before they were transported to larger markets such as Nonthaburi Riverside Market, markets in Bangkok, or even exported abroad. This led to the emergence of nearby floating markets in the past, such as Bang Yai Floating Market (which is now discontinued), extending from the area in front of Wat Sao Thong Hin to Bang Yai Kao Market, Bang Khu Wiang floating market at Khlong Bang Khu Wiang. (We observed that houses in this area tend to exhibit characteristics of terraces blended with canal-side pavilions. For further examples of transitional places between riverside houses and Khlong Om Non, Chapter 3, please explore the Facebook Page: อ้อมนนท์: การพัฒนาชุมชนริมน้ำอย่างยั่งยืนท่ามกลางความเปลี่ยนแปลง). Even though these floating markets have discontinued due to changes, the community members still hold memories of them. This reflects the importance of the "economic and trade gateway status" of the Bang Muang community and Wat Bot Bon to the community, fostering bonding between them and events from the past.

The riverside lifestyle of the Bang Muang community and Wat Bot Bon community remains activities that people used to do in the past. An important example is the offering of alms to rowing boats Buddhist monks. We personally experienced the tradition of offering alms along the canal during a stay at a hotel in the vicinity of Wat Bot Bon. This experience felt like we were back in time to the past, but in a neighborhood that has changed into an urban community.

Wats in this neighborhood reflects the long-standing history of the community. The laterite prang at Wat Prang Luang is an architectural relic from the early Ayutthaya period. The placement of such a prang in this area highlights the importance of this neighborhood in history, as wats with prang were typically erected by the elite class of that era in prominent locations. Moreover, the Mandapa of the Lord Buddha's Footprint at Wat Amphawan serves as another important archaeological site that represents the significance of Bang Muang community.

Wats in this area also play an important role in supporting the floating markets, which are a source of recreation for the urban people during weekends, such as Wat Takhian Floating Market or Wat Bot Bon Floating Market. In addition to the floating market, wats also house sacred objects in Buddhism, Brahmanism, and others following the trends of the "Mutelu[4]" type. This reflects the efforts of the wats to adapt to suit the recreational trends of urban people seeking places to eat, visit, and make vows amidst the uncertain economic fluctuations.

These internal factors, serving as social and cultural capital, distinguishes Bang Muang and Wat Bot Bon from other communities.

[4] Mutelu (Thai slang) refers to supernatural or luck-bringing power

III. ROADS AND ACCESS TO NEIGHBORHOOD AREAS

The construction of roads has significantly induced changes to the communities along Khlong Om Non, resulting in both positive and negative impacts. We will analyze the positive impacts of the roads on the Bang Muang Community and Wat Bot Bon. The roads have opened access to important areas, rendering it more convenient for outsiders to reach these neighborhoods. The roads have transformed the riverside areas into tourist destinations for relaxation and leisure, such as hotels, restaurants, or floating markets. Whereas in the past, access to these areas may have been limited to waterways. In other words, the roads have increased the commercial value of the areas and created opportunities for developing them into a weekend destination.

The roads that open up Bang Muang Community and Wat Bot Bon Community for leisure and tourism development include Kanjanapisek Road (Bangkok Western Outer Ring Road), Nakhon In Road (Route 1020), and Ratchaphruek Road (Route 3021). Kanjanapisek Road provides access to wats and recreational places in Bang Muang Community, such as Wat Phikun Ngoen, Wat Prang Luang, and resort hotels. Nakhon In Road allows both locals and visitors to access recreational places and tourist destinations in the Wat Bot Bon area, such as the Wat Bot Bon Floating Market, Wat Takhian Floating Market, homestays, and restaurants along Wat Utthayan to Wat Thai Charoen (Ban Chin). Ratchaphruek Road facilitates access to leisure and tourist destinations in the Wat Bot Bon Community (Bang Krang Subdistrict side), including restaurants and accommodations.

However, a significant obstacle to accessing leisure places in both communities is the narrow and winding side streets. We found that driving to leisure destinations is difficult, especially on weekends when there is traffic congestion in the narrow side streets heading to the areas. This inconvenience can lead to discomfort and accidents. This is a crucial issue for stakeholders, including government agencies at both central and local levels, private sector entrepreneurs, and local civil society. They should engage in consultations in the form of cooperative networks for developing areas and infrastructure that can accommodate the growth of recreational places.

IV. CONCLUSION: HISTORICAL CAPITAL, TRANSPORTATION EXPANSION, THE NEW DEFINITION OF NEIGHBORHOODS, AND URBANIZATION

The new definition of Bang Muang community and Wat Bot Bon community derives from historical capital and modern-day transformations, including urban expansion and transportation development. If the emergence of this new definition is to benefit both the original riverside community and urban residents seeking relaxation from economic and social fluctuations, stakeholders involved in neighborhood development should prioritize the social history of the area to exhibit the community's historical roots and enhance the quality and educational value of tourism, wherein tourists gain insights and memories, aligned with the trend of creative tourism. Developing the surrounding area to facilitate access to tourist sites and connect with other areas in the Khlong Om Non neighborhood is inevitably related to the history of communities in Bangkok. If the areas can be developed into nodes that bridge the relaxation areas of Khlong Om Non with those of other Bangkok communities, such as the Bang Kok Noi community and Khlong Chak Phra, through building networks between local government organizations and activity groups in the community, it will foster both tourism activities and the exchange of resources and knowledge in the long term.



Image 1: the Mandapa of The Lord Buddha's Footprint at Wat Amphan, Khlong Om Non



Image 2: the prang at Wat Prang Luang Khlong Om Non



Image 3: Alms-giving ceremony in the morning at Wat Bot Bon community.



Image 4: Reflecting quietly, Wat Bot Bon community.



Image 5: Riverside accommodations, Wat Bot Bon community.