

Negotiating for Squatter Housing Adjacent to the Historical Site: A Case Study of Kampaeng Ngam Community, Chiang Mai

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ABSTRACT

The study of securing housing in this particular settlement, Kampaeng Ngam, touches upon political influence and power struggle between low-income groups, assisted by NGOs and local authorities and the central government. Kampaeng Ngam residents have squatted on land along Mae Kha Canal and a historical earthen wall that is owned by the government. Historically, this area was unoccupied because it was subjected to seasonal floods. The eventual settlement of this community began after Chiang Mai had been selected as the primary northern urban center in the fourth plan of national economic and social development (1977-1981). Designation has led immigrants from rural areas to illegally occupy the land between the historical wall and Mae Kha Canal. As environmental decay along the canal has come to the foreground, city people formed negative images of the squatters as those responsible for destroying the canal. Furthermore, the governmental authorities have attempted to evict the squatters because they detract from the living city concept of promoting tourism through protecting and restoring historical resources. With the help of the People's Organization for Participation (POP NGO), residents held meetings with government officials to negotiate a solution that both parties could accept. Finally, the squatters moved down from the earthen wall and on to the adjacent land and established a set back of their backyards of 1-2 meters to establish a tourism route. Moreover, they help keep the canal clean as a means of improving the city's image. From this study, one could conclude that communities are willing to adapt their lifestyles to survive in the city context even though that area is environmentally degraded. The primary goal of their fighting is the legal right of land occupation and affordable housing in the city center. They are ready to work with government officials to achieve these goals.

Key words: Squatter housing, Kampaeng Ngam Community, Living city concept, Affordable housing

INTRODUCTION

Affordable housing is an important problem of every city in developing countries including Thailand. This problem seems to be more serious when its population growth is increased. In Thailand, the affordable housing issue raised in importance after World War II. The informal affordable housing does not happen only in the capital like Bangkok but also in big cities like Chiang Mai.

Chiang Mai is a province that is located in the northern part of Thailand. King Meng Rai established Chiang Mai in 1825. After he set unsuccessful towns in several areas, he finally found the valley plain of Chiang Mai and Lamphoon. King Meng Rai formed his city in a square shape with a city moat around it.

Because of Suthep Mountain at the west, then the city's topography slopes down from the west to the east. Suthep Mountain functions as a water catchment area and brings the run-off water to Ping River in the east that is used for supporting lives in Chiang Mai. Furthermore, there is Mae Kha Canal between the city moat and Ping River that serves as an outer city moat and irrigation system at the same time. By the city's geography, it can be seen that King Meng Rai had vision and was genius on site selection.

Around the settling time, Chiang Mai was flourished in cultural, commercial, religious and political issues. Chiang Mai's location, which connects China and Ayutthaya (central kingdom of Thailand in the past), brought many people to settle here. The residents did not only receive the benefit from the city but they also formed the culture in the city. Like other historical cities, Chiang Mai has segregated people of different cultures and nations by a zoning method.

Nowadays, Chiang Mai has grown up and covered a larger area than in the past. The municipal area is 40.216 square kilometers. The development has evolved from the traditional things to the new things. The image of the city has changed from the past. Zoning by their cultures and nations did not come to the citizen's mind. The settlement was influenced by land price under capitalism. In addition, the economic growth of Thailand also helped increase the city's boundaries. The large amount of immigration follows as a shadow of city growth. If some newcomers cannot afford their housing in the city, then they are going to invade the public land and form their own community. Kampaeng Ngam community is an example of the situation that happened when development of the historical city occurred.

PHYSICAL DATA

Mae Kha Canal is one criterion of the city's consideration that originates from the merging of two creeks which are Chang Kaen Creek and Hauy Kaew Canal of Suthep Mountain. Mae Kha Canal runs north to south through the city and merges with Ping River at Pa Dad. By its geography, this area is a flood plain and there were no houses there in the earlier years of Chiang Mai settlement. Nowadays, there are 7 informal communities along Mae Kha Canal that have 4,000 residents with 978 households. Kampaeng Ngam community is one of those informal communities that is located in the south of Chiang Mai.

DEVELOPMENT OF KAMPAENG NGAM COMMUNITY

The study of the Kampaeng Ngam community settlement is relevant to the type of urban development that has taken place around the canal and adjacent historical land. The case of Kampaeng Ngam community is located on land between the canal and the city's moat that is owned by the Department of Fine Arts - a central government institution in charge of the protection and restoration of historic monuments. Kampaeng Ngam started off with 4-5 families which could not be accommodated in the neighboring informal settlement on land owned by the Buddhist temple Wat Hua Fay. The growth of Kampaeng Ngam was boosted by the arrival of young families which could not settle on the plot occupied by the house of their parents in the neighboring settlement. In order to live close to their relatives, they illegally occupied public land. In 1955, a slaughterhouse was located in the vicinity of Kampaeng Ngam which further encouraged the growth of the Kampaeng Ngam. In later decades, the Thai government elaborated the First National Economic and Social Development Plan which promoted an accelerated industrialization programme for Thailand. The Fourth Plan (1977-1981) included policies designed to promote economic, political and administrative

decentralization, particularly in dominant city of each region (Yoddumnern-Attig and Attig(1993), cited in Y-Attig et al., 1999).

Under the capital system, rural society changed to urban society without planning or consideration for the people. Farmers were pressed by low prices for their goods and no land to farm. As a result, many land-less families, and especially their younger members, were forced into the industrialized labor market in order to put food on the table. Some migrants chose to illegally occupy Kampaeng Ngam and worked as laborer. The pioneers in Kampaeng Ngam used Mae Ka Canal as an irrigation system for the rice field and for consumption. The community gradually grew with immigrants from ethnic hill-tribe people which increased the size of its population. At present, nearly half of the 132 families in Kampaeng Ngam are ethnic hill-tribe people who migrated from the mountains surrounding Chiang Mai. The remaining families are from low-lying areas around the city.

ENVIRONMENTAL DETERIORATION

An increasing number of residents with the limitation of area in the community has led to some of the houses to be located on the remnants of Kampaeng Din, another historical site. Similar to other informal settlements in Thailand, Kampaeng Ngam has neither a sewage infrastructure nor a garbage collection service. Nowadays, residents can no longer use water in the canal because it is polluted by activities along the canal such as housing, businesses, restaurants, etc. Because of its invasion of a site on the remnants of the historical earthen wall along a polluted canal, the residents were blamed by the city for the existing canal pollution and spoiling a historical site.



Figure 1. Mae Ka Canal that is polluted by the activities of the community.



Figure 2. The invading houses on the remnant of the historical earthen wall.

ACTIVITIES AGAINST EVICTION THREATS

Kampaeng Ngam has been under increasing threat of eviction. Such threat has recently come to a head with the elaboration of plans by the Department of Fine Arts to restore Kampaeng Din to be a historical tourism site. Also the Chiang Mai municipality plans to improve water quality of Mae Kha Canal and change the land along Mae Ka Canal to a recreation area. These concepts detract from the living city concept from the central government that helps promote tourism and leads to an economic growth. The plan of both governmental offices are to evict the informal communities located in the area to a site 10 kilometers away from Chiang Mai city center. Ms. Nisakorn Arkure, Kampaeng Ngam's member, explained that she did not want to live too far from the downtown because of difficulty in travelling to her workplace. When the Kampaeng Ngam residents knew of the unstable status of living there, they formed their groups to negotiate with governmental officers with the help of NGOs called POP (People's Organization for Participation). The first activities that they did were to clean up Mae Kha Canal and to develop their group into Mae Kha Canal Committee in 1999. Furthermore, this committee responds by planting trees along the canal and set back the house that invaded into the canal. Gill (2002) quotes Mr. Boonrueng Palarangsi, a member of the Kampaeng Ngam community, where he stated: "Not only have we been working together to clean up the canal, we have also been planting trees along the canal and are now preparing to make a new bridge (across the canal). . ."

Moreover, they made an agreement to do a project of *housing improvement on the historical earthen wall and along the canal*. They started with surveying the household that invaded the historical site and the canal. In Kampaeng Ngam, they found 40 households that invaded the historical site. After getting data, they did a layout of the community together with a Naraesuan University student. The households, which invaded the canal, had to be set back and the housing on the historical site had to move down to the land between the wall and the moat. Mr. Boonrueng Palarangsi also said that even though the boundary of each house is smaller, they are willing to restore the earthen wall and keep the canal clean.

The housing improvement project began after they got a signal from Department of Fine Arts that they are able to live there under the condition of housing and landscape improvement in 2002. In summary, they moved down 3 households from the earthen wall to

settle on the land. In addition, 7 households were set back 1.5 meters from the wall and 1 meter from the banks of the canal.



Figure 3. The construction of houses that move to resettle on the land.



Figure 4. The earthen wall after the houses have been moved.

The process of housing and landscape improvement is in need of fundamental finances. This community is the pilot community that improves their housing landscape with their own budget. The residents received a financial aid from Chumchon Thai in the amount of 1,000,000 baht (25,000 US.\$). Moreover, they also collected from each household of the community 1 baht per day. The accumulated money cannot be withdrawn because it is used as a revolving fund to other households which are ranked by emergency problem.



Figure 5. New house's features.

Further of showing their potential of management and taking care of environment, they still tried to show the public that they could solve their problems by themselves. There are a number of projects that were created by their group such as collecting and sorting garbage both inside and outside the community for recycling, drinking-water factory, Mae Ka Canal tour, etc.

GOVERNMENTAL ACCEPTANCE

The Department of Fine Arts(DFA) official had a meeting with the Kampaeng Ngam community in February 2002. The DFA conceded that informal settlements such as Kampaeng Ngam be allowed to stay on their current location, under the condition that the dwellings directly built on Kampaeng Din were moved down to the land between the wall and the moat. Little by little, they learned how to better negotiate with the governmental officers. The mayor of Chiang Mai municipality, Mr. Boonlert Booranuprakorn, said that if Department of Fine Arts allowed the residents to improve their housing, then the municipality would also be able to make a rental contract with them . . . he had no eviction policy unless they did not maintain the canal and community's environment. Furthermore, Ms. Soomsook Boonyabuncha, head of Community Organization Development Institute (CODI), revealed that the cooperation between residents would continue until it formed tangible results. It is an important phenomenon that Kampaeng Ngam's residents work together to improve their community and change their reputation with the other citizens. Particularly, the process of linking problems together is the method of constructing the city. In addition, they still change the identification of the community to the public so that the poor are the people who construct the city and did not create problem for the city anymore.

CONCLUSION

Kampaeng Ngam started because of the growth and spread of the city and was settled out of the need to live in the city. The pioneer dwellers needed to live close to their relatives and use Mae Ka Canal in their agriculture business. Against the willing of the pioneer group, new settlers selected this area because it is not too far from the downtown. Moreover, the new settlement is not related to water access but uses water decay as a tool for supporting negotia-

tion with government.

Because of their poverty, it seems there is no other choice to be made. Even though the location of the community is environmentally degraded, they are willing to adapt their lifestyles to survive in the city context. Their activities are a tool to promote acceptance from the public and negotiation with the government. Even though they cannot solve the polluted water problem, they try to show the public that they support and maintain both the natural and historical environments of the city. The primary goal of their fighting is the legal right of land occupation and affordable housing in the city center. To achieve their goals, they are willing to work with government officials.

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