

CHAPTER III

Analysis of Change in Bangkok's Movie Theater Geography

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter took inventory of technological and infrastructural changes in Thailand as the country pursued the somewhat vague notion of modernity. Movie theaters, I posit, were an important social component in the perception of self as modern, though they themselves were subject to physical and spatial augmentations resulting from broader political and economic changes. Moving chronologically through several political eras, I show how Bangkok's movie theater industry changed from a business characterized by widespread differentiation in regards to the type and content of films shown, the social composition of the audience, the socio-spatial relationships between theaters and the communities they were in, as well as the quantity and personal tastes of movie theater owners, to one that has succumbed to commoditization, homogenization and monopolization, with over 90% of the market controlled by two huge conglomerates.

In Chapter III I will draw from the data outlined in the previous chapter to analyze the outcomes of these changes for movie-going in Bangkok, as well as more general meaning for Bangkok society. Utilizing more case studies from my research, we will be able to see up close how what were once considered community common areas, providing employment opportunities and social opportunities for nearby residents, has been almost completely reorganized.

3.2 Sources and outcomes of movie theater changes.

As Bangkok increasingly moved from a pedestrian city to a motorized city, stand-alone movie theaters began to fail financially. Community residents with sufficient financial means often purchased cars and moved to more exclusive housing developments further afield, taking their spending power with them. Theater chains like Apex, Hollywood and Co Brothers, who combined operated dozens of stand-

alone theaters city wide, began to see revenue fall as the more well heeled of their patrons came less frequently. Though experiences differed from neighborhood to neighborhood, by and large the trend was for second-run theaters, and even some of the first-run theaters, to attract a lower class clientele.

3.2.1 Changing demographics: the pornography factor

In contrast to the days when the entire community, rich and poor, were attending films in the same theaters, by the late 1980's movie-going was changing in two primary ways. For poorer segments of the population, the movie theater became a place to relax in; a refuge in an otherwise crowded urban environment. These patrons were attending screenings as much to escape the heat and cramped conditions of their living quarters as they were to actually enjoy film. Regular film fare was of secondary importance to them. Two movies, back to back, for the price of one were often advertised to attract this market segment. For people working outdoor jobs, exposed to the elements, such as street vendors, tuk tuk drivers and general laborers, or those with flexible work hours, double-feature movie theaters provided anytime relief from toil, rain or the scorching sun. This type of programming allows the viewer to come and go as he or she pleases, without having to adhere to a fixed movie schedule.

Also in attendance were those socially and economically marginalized from mainstream society; the social drop-outs, loafers, underemployed and urban laborers in need of respite from the heat of the street. In short, those who were often endowed with ample free time and no better alternative than the theater to be in.

With mainstream audiences no longer attending, theater owners and managers began adapting to the needs of this lower-end market. Mid-night showings of pornography became increasingly common as a means of finding more revenue. In the early days, the variety of pornography shown was "softcore," usually containing no explicit sexual content. In its extreme, gratuitous female nudity was enough of an incentive for the sexually frustrated. But as time went by, however, "hardcore" pornography became the viewing fare of choice, attracting an explicitly specific kind of patron – the porn junkie. Much like a heroin addict seeks regular doses of the drug in order to maintain both a high and mental equilibrium, the porn junkie,

following a similar stimulus-induced logic, finds both physical and mental satisfaction from images of sex. The unsatisfied carnal desires of a largely male, urban under-class were provided the space and the viewing material to help them release, as many first and second-run theaters across Bangkok made the switch to pornography.

With pornography came various forms of sexual exchange within such theaters. For young couples in search of privacy, X-rated theaters provided a relatively anonymous space at an affordable price. In other cases, full-fledged prostitution was occurring. Before long, such theaters become viewed as social pariahs, like flop-houses for drug addicts are in the neighborhoods they stand, attracting only the most undesirable elements of society.

From an ownership perspective, the choice to attract patrons via pornography is done as a means of maintaining revenue and upkeep of a building which has lost value in terms of its mainstream movie theater function. Short of major investments, like upgrading to state-of-the-art movie theater equipment for superior quality entertainment in the hopes of attracting a mainstream audience, or converting it into a different kind of venue altogether, screening pornography is the cheapest way of guaranteeing revenue. It requires no real economic expenditure, as only the content of the film fare is different. This also allows owners to bide their time, waiting until the value of the land the theater sits on has reached its peak. At that point, a major change takes place, usually in the form of demolition of the theater, forever altering the face of a neighborhood.

Although not as widespread as they were in 1980's and 90's, Bangkok is still home to a handful of operating porno theaters. In the Wong Wian Yai neighborhood, the Happy Theater¹ surreptitiously remains open, screening pornography from 10 in the morning until late at night. At nine o'clock on a Saturday morning the author visited the Happy Theater, having no prior knowledge of its operational status. Most of the neighborhood residents that were questioned about it only knew the Happy as an abandoned theater. But that was a misnomer, as the author would soon find out.

Unlike many of Bangkok's stand-alone theaters dating to the 60's and 70's, the Happy faces directly onto the main road, rather than being tucked away

¹ Name changed to protect its identity.

within a commercial plaza or market. The theater's lower lobby is rented out to a variety of small businesses. On one side of the floor, 7 or 8 folding metal tables are set up as part of a *guay tiow* (noodle soup) business. Across the lobby stands a series of small shops, including one selling magazines and newspapers and another selling stationary supplies. It is a very active environment. Up above, an old sign made of meter-high cut-out letters spelling "Happy" (in Thai script) is bolted to the wall. It is visibly covered in spider webs and dust. An escalator once led from the center of the lower lobby to the upper lobby, but it has since been removed, leaving a noticeable gap in the balcony rail. Nailed to the wall are hand painted signs announcing "4 movies in a row" and "Chinese, Japanese, Western and Thai movies." The advertised film fare does not reveal the content of the movies. Through the author's research, however, he has come to the conclusion that for any theater advertising 3, 4 or 5 "movies in row," the content of the film and nature of activities taking place inside is sexually oriented.

After a few inquiries, the author was directed past the lower lobby, where he found a broad, curving staircase at the theater's rear, leading to the upper lobby. After a cautious ascent, three or four men were found lounging against the wall of the upper lobby. One man, sitting on a milk crate, motioned for the author to come over to him. At first sight the man was confused for the theater manager, but after a brief exchange he revealed himself to be an off-duty taxi driver, waiting for the theater to open. In his hand was a half-consumed bottle of Thai whiskey.

The author and the taxi-driver entered into a conversation, which soon turned to the nature of the attending clientele. In frank tone of voice, the taxi driver explained that for patrons of the Happy, the darkness of the theater provided a space for sexual release. Without going into detail, he conveyed that without such places, the attending men would likely have to resort to more extreme measures; to "do bad things" What he meant by that was not totally clear. As he continued speaking he appeared to become emotionally charged. The author's questions were met with scowls and an increasingly threatening manner of speaking. Out of concern for his safety, the author excused himself and casually walked down to the lower lobby, where he met the theater manager, a more congenial man in his early 70's. Another

conversation ensued, in which the Happy's manager humorously revealed why the theater continues to operate in its current guise. "The men who come here want to 'get it up,' too, and this is the only place they can do it" (interview with Happy Theater's manager).

While the author and the manager spoke, a "ladyboy" bought a ticket to enter the theater. It was later explained that "ladyboys" play a critical role in the sexual aspect of such theaters. They provide services for the patrons while they watch the pornography. In theaters like the Happy, the clientele tends to identify themselves as heterosexual, while the pornography being displayed is designed for heterosexual men. However, in the cover of darkness, the fact that services are provided by a transgender prostitute are easily overlooked, while theater patron fantasizes about sex with a woman. Other theaters have adopted similar characteristics but for homosexual men, in which "ladyboys" play a lesser role.

In the absence of a mainstream movie-going audience, many stand-alone movie theaters began catering to marginal segments of their communities in order to maintain a revenue stream. A poorer or sexually deviant clientele began to dominate ticket sales in some theaters. These changes, however, were indicative of larger forces at work in Bangkok. A growing urban middle-class throughout the 1980's saw changes in living patterns that adversely affected not only movie theaters, but entire urban neighborhoods. Capital followed the emergent middle-classes to new suburban communities, while the older downtown neighborhoods became a concentration of low-cost housing for low-paid laborers. It is only natural that movie theaters would face economic challenges under such conditions.

During the bubble economy period of the 1990's, much of downtown Bangkok land occupied by movie theaters grew in value exponentially. Before long, theater owners were demolishing their old businesses and selling the land for the construction of condominiums and office towers. By the early 2000's, only a handful of first-class stand-alone movie theaters were left, namely Apex's three Siam Square theaters of the Siam, the Lido and the Scala.

3.2.1.1 “Cruising Ground” movie theaters

The term “cruising grounds” is an informal expression which denotes a usually public place, or a space where gay men seek sexual activity. An internet encyclopedia defines the act of “cruising” as different from prostitution in that the parties involved do not seek money for sex.² In numerous cities around the world, specific movie theaters have taken on characteristics of “cruising grounds” – Bangkok being no exception.

Today in Bangkok there are at least two theaters which function exclusively as cruising grounds, while a third has the dual role of screening current movies and serving as a space of sexual exchange. The two exclusively gay theaters do not screen current movies of any kind. In fact, the showing of film at all is done simply as a means of providing a light a dim light source so that patrons can assess one another before moving engaging in sex of one kind or another. The theater which screens current movies is a slight anomaly in terms of its sexually oriented use. Generally speaking, neighbors residing in vicinity of this particular theater are aware of what takes place there. However, since it advertises and posts posters for current films, much like a second-run theater, it also occasionally attracts patrons who are unaware of the goings on inside. The author was one such person.

Just like in other kinds of “cruising grounds,” most of the intercourse occurring in these theaters is not the paid kind. Patrons go because they are genuinely interested in the experience, though the author has been told that select patrons do attempt to collect money for their services. That practice, however, is the exception to the rule.

The irony of the “cruising” theaters is that they do not screen pornography of any kind.

3.2.2 Changing demographics: the adolescent factor

There were other changes taking place in 1980’s Bangkok which caused neighborhood stand-alone theaters to fall into decline. Accompanying the loss of the financially ascendant classes came changes in the way people went to the

² Wikipedia, Gay Cruising in England and Wales;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay_cruising_in_England_and_Wales

movies. As has been discussed in prior sections, movie going was very much a community social event in most of Thailand. The nuclear family was often the main unit of attendee, making use of the movie theater as a place to meet and greet other families living in the area. But by the 1980's, family attendance at the movies had largely dissolved. In her 1992 Doctor's thesis, Kultida Boonyakul Dunagin explains the changes in the act of movie-going a result of several factors (Boonyakul Dunagin: 1992). For one, by the mid-1980's "the popularity of video cassette players and the improvement of the quality of television programs, coupled with economic problems and heavy traffic in Bangkok, most adults prefer to stay and watch television or videos" (Ibid, p. 64).

With adults opting to stay away from silver screen entertainment, Thai movie producers began focusing on films geared toward a younger audience. In so doing, they were aiming for the "after school" crowd of teenagers, interested as much in socializing with friends as they are with watching movies. How did this adversely affect the stand-alone? It happened in several ways.

For one, teenagers' spending habits are different than that of adults. In their free time after school or on the weekends, they try to maximize the amount of activities they can engage in. Outside of showing movies, most stand-alone movie theaters contain scarce other activities which appeal to teenage sensibilities. A few theaters, like Rama Theater on Rama IV Road, contained bowling facilities on the premises, but outside of that there was little else. So when multiplex theaters began opening up in the new multi-purpose shopping malls, a variety of activities would be made available for teenager consumption. Both of the two current leading theater operators in Bangkok, Major and SF, tend to combine their theater operations with a mix of bowling, karaoke, arcade games and fast-food restaurants. Whereas in the past, going to the movie theater was a social process hinging on the joys of cinema, it has now become a social process hinging on an entire entertainment package, with cinema part of the deal. For the average middle-class family, undertaking all these activities as part of the movie going process marks a considerable expenditure, which most financially conscious adults would be either uninterested in for social reasons or because of the high price it would entail. Thus teens spending money obtained from

their parents, with little sense of the value of work, make the expenditure and power the multiplex-dominated movie theater industry.

Another reason why teenagers have helped influence the decline of stand-alone movie theaters has to do with pornography and class-demographics mentioned in the previous sections. During the author's research, he was made aware that several of Bangkok's second-run theaters have become places where lower-class young people with no place of their own to engage in sexual activity go to for intimacy. That phenomenon, combined with theaters showing pornography, would generally be shunned by teens seeking more mainstream entertainment and cause stand-alone theaters in general to take on a reputation as places for dirty, less wholesome activity.

This fact is reflected in a conversation that the author had with an employee of Apex's Lido Theater, one of the last remaining stand-alone theaters in Bangkok. While talking about the customer demographics at the old stand-alone theaters versus shopping mall multiplexes, the employee claimed that "Apex's three theaters rely on ticket sales to adults, who are genuinely interested in watching film. Across the street [at Siam Discovery, Siam Center and Siam Paragon] is where all the kids go. They think our theaters are old and dirty, so they stay in the shopping malls. If only they would come watch a movie here, they would learn that our theaters are more comfortable and cheaper, too" (interview with Lido Theater employee – October, 2009).

While shopping mall multiplex theaters in different neighborhoods around Bangkok serve as entertainment catchments for young people of various classes, the stand-alone theaters have become the near-exclusive domains of lower-class movie-goers – adult and adolescent alike (the only exception to this rule is the three Apex-owned stand-alone theaters at Siam Square, which cater to a completely different crowd – the author will explain later). This in part is attributed to their significantly lower ticket prices, but also in the way that the few which remain are situated throughout the city. Like the stand-alone movie theater when it was at the height of its popularity, their juxtaposition with the surrounding environment makes them most accessible to a localized, pedestrian population. For a potential movie-goer living outside the range of "walkability" from the theater, driving marks the most

convenient method of arriving there, other than the subway or Sky-Train. However, stand-alone theaters generally lack secured parking spaces on the immediate premises. Multiplex theaters in shopping malls do have parking, on the other hand. The decision for the driving movie-goer is simple: go to the stand-alone and probably struggle to find a parking space and have only one viewing option, or drive right in to the secured shopping mall and have multiple movie choices in one place. For those with the means to drive, as well as teens seeking a greater variety of entertainment, attending movies at the local shopping mall is the more appealing option. Thus the operating stand-alone theaters draw largely from local populations without the means or interest to travel to the shopping malls. At the time of this writing there are only 5 operating second-run stand alone theaters that do not screen pornography or serve as “cruising grounds.”

3.2.3 The unique case of the Apex three

In the previous chapter, we examined how movie exhibition in Bangkok was dominated by two competing theater chains Pyramid – also know as Apex, and Co Brothers. In that section, we were able to see how the children of Co Brothers theaters were able to take advantage of changes in Bangkok retail infrastructure during the mid-1990’s and locate their next line of theaters within the new shopping malls. Apex, although at one point the largest theater chain in the country, was unable to make a similar transition, and hence saw its once vast holdings of stand-alone movie theaters slowly decay, without opening any new ones. The reasons why Apex did not successfully transition are unclear. However, despite the fact that they lost the Bangkok “movie theater war,” they were able to maintain three first-run stand-alone theaters in the center of the city, where other completion could not.

Apex Theater still-function three first-run stand-alone movie theaters are at Siam Square, in the heart of Bangkok’s commercial district. Despite all three theaters – Siam, Lido and Scala – being over 40 years old, and severely lacking the multi-purpose entertainment accoutrements that appeal to most adolescents, Apex maintains these theaters in pristine condition. This is attributable to the nature of the clientele who attend screenings there, as well as the kinds of film shown there. Survival for the

Scala, Lido and Siam theaters is made possible by a dedicated fan base cognizant of the cinema trio's cultural importance and superior viewing quality.

As mentioned above, Apex tends to draw a slightly older crowd than the multiplex theaters do. One reason is that they play a steady stream of art-house films, with the original language soundtrack. A better educated, more mature audience is more prone to be attracted to such viewing fare than teenagers, who are more interested in mainstream action and comedies from Hollywood or the domestic production companies. Furthermore, among many of Apex' regular customers, the theaters themselves are as much as part of the appeal at the programming. For many adults, this appeal stems from the fact that there are no crowds of angst-filled teenagers seeking instant gratification from a variety of entertainment forms. The lobbies of Apex's are intentionally devoid of such amusements. For many of Apex's clients, the appeal is the theaters themselves. Architecturally, they are embody 1960's modernist design, a style which is increasingly rare in Bangkok these days. The auditoriums in the Siam and the Scala are enormous, allowing for a better viewing perspective and on-screen aspect ratio. In short, as physical structures they are well appreciated by their unique clientele – movie fans.

But there is one more element that has contributed to the continued life of the Apex theaters. Since the opening of the Sky-Train in 2000, with its Siam Station situated directly in front of the three Apex theaters, the venues have been afforded a critical transportation life-line as compared with the other first-class stand-alones. Had no station been opened directly beside the theaters, allowing patrons to access the theaters with ease and comfort despite their congested locales, it is likely that the Apex three would have long ago met the wrecking ball. In light of that, it is this author's hope that the Apex theater will be able to maintain operations for many years to come.

3.3 Conclusion

Bangkok's stand-alone giants, as luxurious as they may have once been, were unable to fully cover their costs and maintain themselves as viable business operations. Investment in new equipment became less and less frequent, as dated

technology led to an increasingly sub-par movie experience. Screens would need to get replaced; speakers broke; chairs began to fall apart after years and years of continual use. For many old theaters, built during an era where there was less stringent rules regarding sanitation, pest infestation became common. During numerous interviews I was told how rats were a common resident of many of the old theaters, adding further to the decrepit nature.

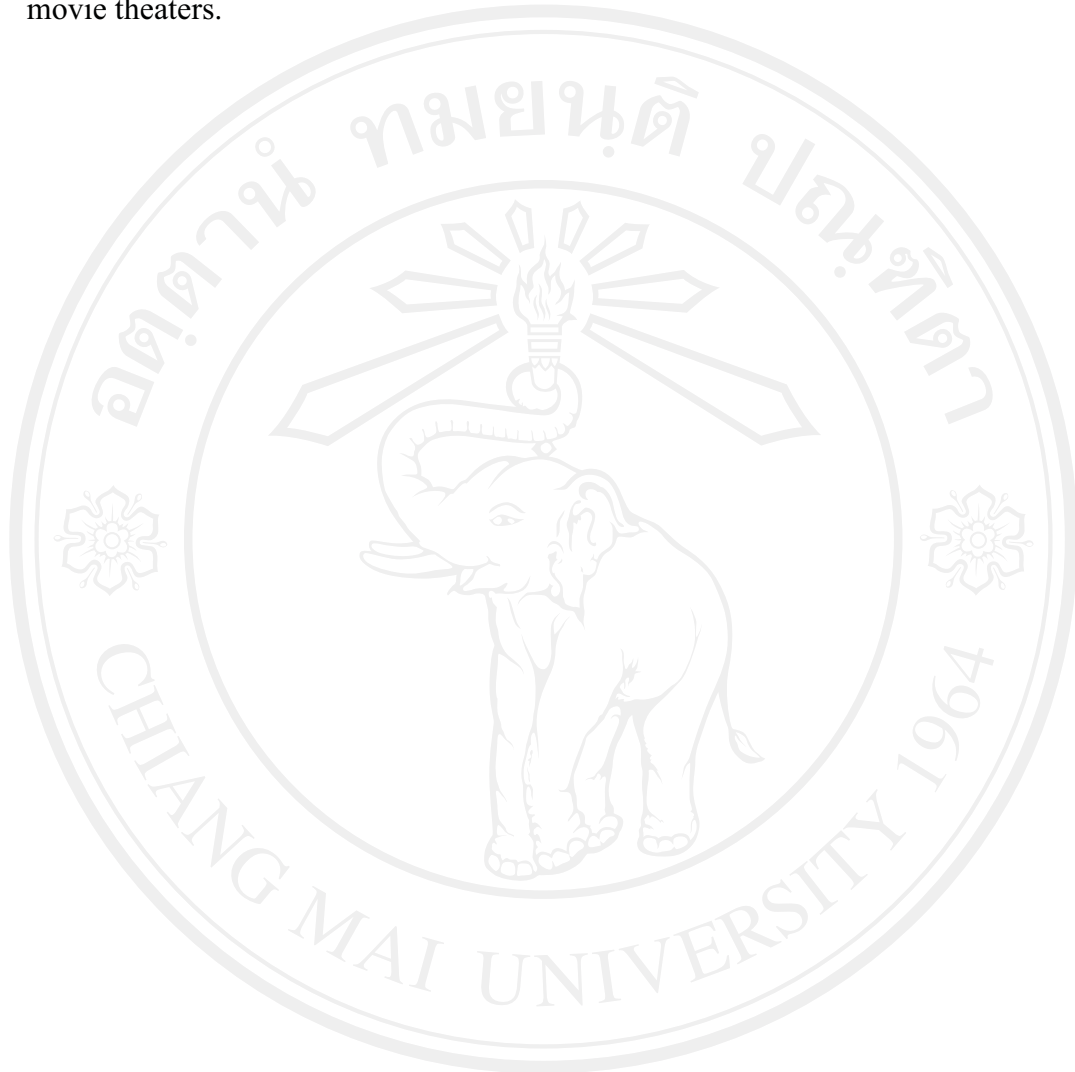
Many theaters held out until changing land-use patterns had precipitated dramatic rises in the value of the land they stood on. Often this was done by covering the costs of maintenance through the underground screening of pornography, or serving as places of sexual exchange for more deviant members of society.

In the midst of decline, Apex has managed not only to hold on to three classic stand-alone theaters out of its once prolific empire. Moreover, Apex has managed to fashion its three remaining theaters at Siam Square into some of the only venues in Bangkok screening a film fare alternative to the mainstream films filling the multiplexes. This has given it a small, but devout following among the city's cineasts.

Nevertheless, the fact that Bangkok's once glorious stand-alone movie theaters have been largely stricken from the fabric of that urban polyglot is tribute to the changes that have occurred at a broader level. In the words of Lewis Mumford, "the city records the attitudes of a culture and an epoch to the fundamental facts of existence."³ What are we to think of a city like Bangkok, now that the venues featuring its most advanced visual art form have been removed from the city-scape, only to be replaced by sterile and formulaic multiplexes in shopping malls replete with similar attributes? Is the nature of Bangkok found simply in its economic base, rather than the social emergent that has long enlivened its streets, canals and neighborhoods? An examination of Bangkok's cinema scene, while keeping in mind the broader socioeconomic transformations outlined above, clearly shows that what was once dominated by community social considerations has become domain of the individual, yet without much variance, if judged by the viewing material. Economic efficiency has replaced distinction of taste, content and form. If the structure of cities and their physical attributes is a record of the times, then surely future generations

³ Lewis Mumford – "The Culture of Cities," p. 5.

will look back at the years flanking the turn of the 21st century in Bangkok as a time of greed over grace, when the soulless multiplex came to dominate the world of movie theaters.



ลิขสิทธิ์มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่
Copyright© by Chiang Mai University
All rights reserved