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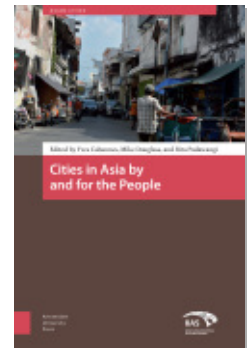
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### 3 Inhabitants of Spontaneous Settlements in Bangkok: Networks and Actions Changing the Contemporary Metropolis

*Fanny Gerbeaud*

#### Abstract

Bangkok is conducive to squatter settlements, that is to say, often illegal settlements developed from an opportunity and need for housing. These houses, which offered shelter to nearly 20 percent of the population of the Thai capital in 2000 (Pornchokchai 2003, 6), represent an opportunity to rethink not only urban development, but also the role of citizens in the fabrication of the city. My research in several spontaneous settlements between 2005 and 2011 shows that people are mobilizing networks to assert their right to the city and their ability to ensure a portion of its management, particularly around issues of historical and cultural heritage and cleaning canals. In the renovated and legalized parts, and in social housing, spatial and social appropriation bring real added value to the neighbourhood. The installation of professional activities, leisure spaces, meeting points, and additional spontaneous housing restore the functional diversity so precious to the Thai people while creating attractive connections at the neighbourhood level. Finally, these illegal but gradually institutionalized transformations renew the practices of city professionals (architects, social housing organizations, urban planners) and the vision of the authorities on how to think about the future of the metropolis. Are informal settlements—once a symbol of poverty—gradually renewing the international image of Bangkok? The participation of these residents in urban fabrication offers an interesting alternative to the planning, construction, and transfer of the construction of Bangkok to a few specialists. The discussion in this chapter is based on interviews with

city stakeholders (the population of shanty towns, architects, landlords, and elected officials) and illustrations from spatial analysis.

**Keywords:** neighbourhood, spontaneous settlements, metropolization, Bangkok, Pom Mahakan, Bang Bua

## 1 Introduction

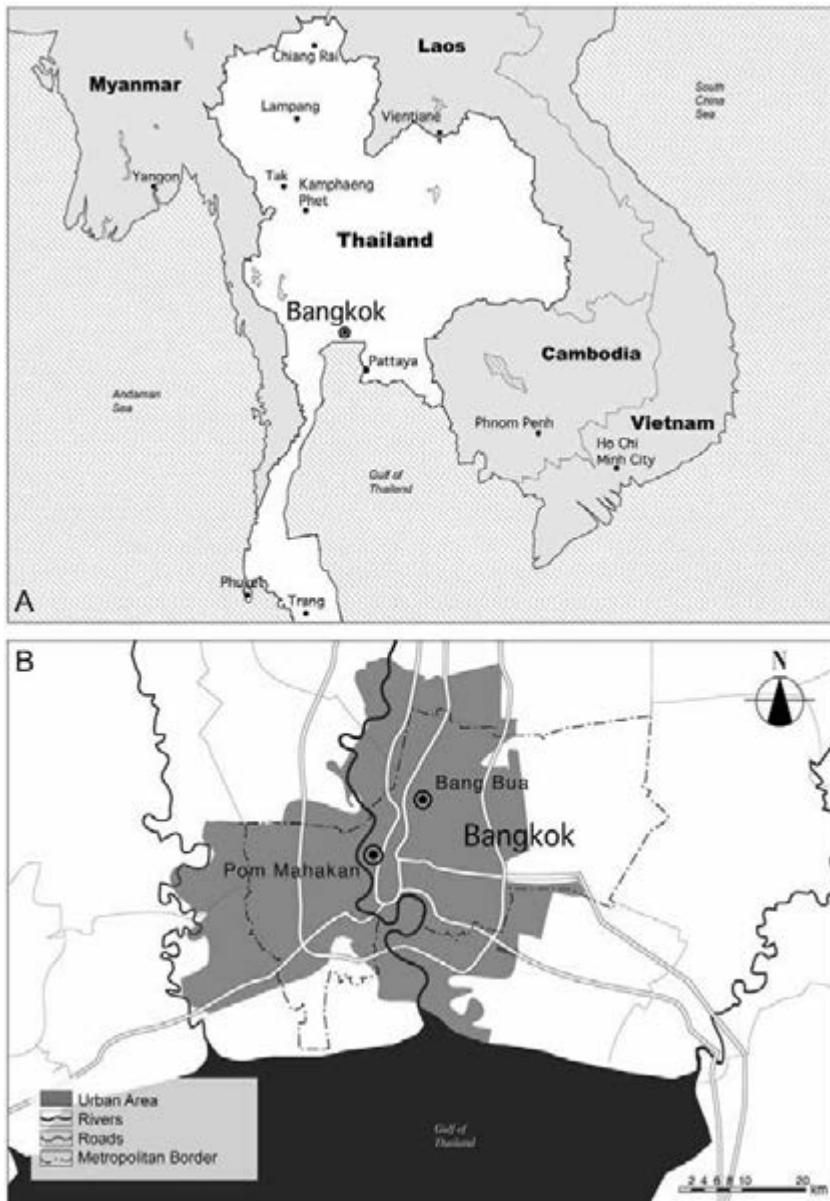
In 2000,<sup>1</sup> nearly 20 per cent of the population of Bangkok, Thailand was living in spontaneous housing settlements, making it a good example of metropolises in emerging countries (Pornchokchai 2003, 6). While in the past the principal cause of using spontaneous housing was rural exodus, nowadays the lack of affordable housing near workplaces, along with demographic and land pressures lead residents with different living standards and educational backgrounds to reside in such settlements. The housing is sometimes irregular (squatting), sometimes governed by implicit contracts (rent or unreported taxes) whose terms are frequently re-negotiated with the major landowners.<sup>2</sup> Some settlements existed even before Bangkok became the capital of the Kingdom; when there is no proof of land ownership, one claims common law rights inherited from Thai ‘feudalism’—the so-called Sakdina System.

Tenure insecurity and the changing nature of housing are common denominators, even for residents who may at the same time have financial comfort and a rewarding professional status. Pornchokchai notes that most residents of spontaneous housing settlements have been Bangkokian for generations. They stabilize their economic and housing situation over time, which tends to confirm that such spaces play their full role as a

1 A census in 2000 reported 796 communities in Bangkok that concentrated 19 per cent of the inhabitants of the capital (Pornchokchai 2003, 6–11). Housing in slums in 2005 accounted for only 5 per cent of the capital, according to the Thai Appraisal Foundation (Interview with Sopon Pornchokchai, president of the Thai Appraisal Foundation, by the author, February 2007). Spontaneous settlements developed due to a lack of jobs in the provinces, impoverishment of a part of the population, and soaring property prices. Today, it is mostly due to the urban growth of Bangkok. The seasonal movement of provincial farmers into Bangkok to work on construction sites partly explains the persistence of these sectors.

2 The Crown Property Bureau and the Buddhist monasteries own large plots in the heart of the capital. Some institutions (the Department of Public Works, Bangkok Metropolitan Administration) manage non-constructible land. Canal banks, land adjacent to roads, and rail infrastructure are often filled with spontaneous housing because the Town Planning Code does not allow construction there.

**Figure 3.1** Maps of (a) Thailand and (b) Bangkok with Pom Mahakan and Bang Bua



Source: Ariel Shepherd

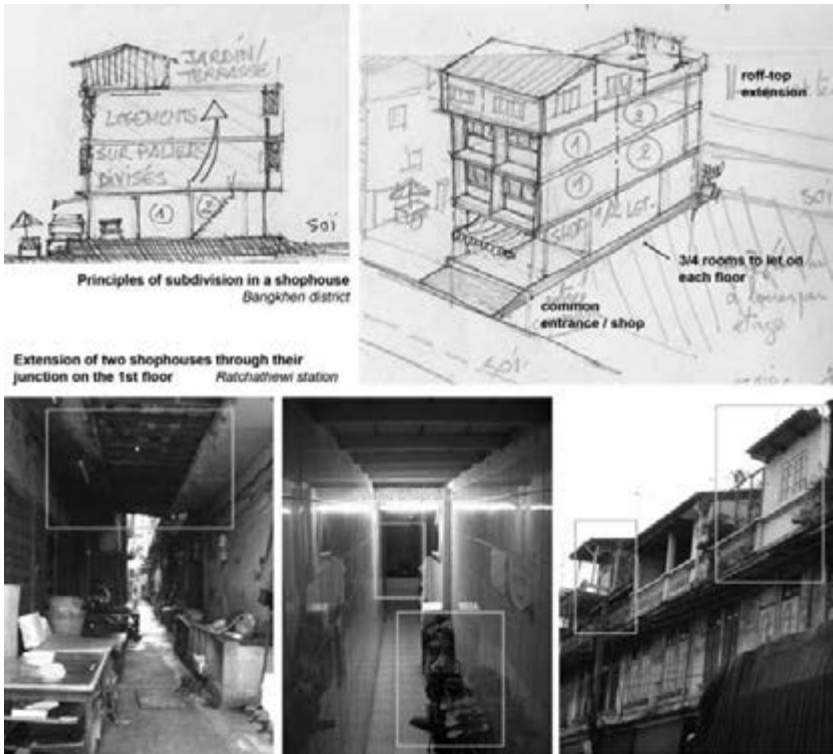
place of integration (socially and economically) and may contribute to the social advancement of individuals. However, spontaneous housing settlements mostly remain home to the disadvantaged and to newcomers with low incomes. Nice air-conditioned houses stand side-by-side the cramped shelters of the underprivileged. Housing densification in and around these spontaneous settlements implies both the overcrowding of shelters and good-neighbourly relations in shared spaces. According to the needs of the residents, each square metre is used and draws a subtle, permeable limit between private and public space: drying of clothes, two-wheeler parking, repair or material storage prevent outsiders' access to the house; more welcoming flower pots and chairs indicate an entrance and a possible meeting point. A wider bit of lane allows the storage of benches or games for children. There is a progression from the outside to the private sphere through these mobile amenities that are meeting and pausing spaces. The dwellings themselves also remain highly porous, both in their design and in their daily use and practices, which sometimes recall Thai vernacular architecture. The housing generally includes a *sala* ('outdoor veranda or multipurpose room') used for cooking and housework, which bridges the common corridors and the private space of the house. Along with the gradual upgrading of spontaneous settlements, the inhabitants tend to take more space in the public debate over land management and rights.

Access to the city by inhabitants is frequently negotiated, while their legitimacy is growing in dealing with the urban actors. Although the production process of these settlements is largely informal,<sup>3</sup> regularization now takes precedence over the evictions and forced relocations common between 1960 and 1980. These spatial characteristics and evolutions are found in all informal settlements, be it today in Brazil or in post-war France (Pétonnet 2002).

In this chapter, I use the term 'spontaneous' to emphasize the context of the emergence and evolution of these constructions. 'Spontaneous housing' can be defined as a process of incremental and opportunistic construction based on more or less legal spatial appropriation. This definition applies

3 The adjective 'informal' was initially adopted for the labour market or the unofficial sector in the 1970s (Charmes 2003, 1) to describe loosely structured small-scale activities in which actors use knowledge acquired outside the education system. The designation gradually spread to informal settlements, defined as built-up geographical areas managed by the informal sector. The Thai architect Davisi Boontharm (2005, 11) has written that the cities of Southeast Asia 'are principally characterized by the size, diversity and flexibility of their devices, and physical space, tied to the economy and trade', mainly helped by the informal sector. All the translations from non-English sources are by the author.

**Figure 3.2 Tolerated spontaneous extensions on shophouses, around Ratchathewi BTS Station**



Source: author

to Brazilian favelas, the villas of Argentina, or comparable settlements in Southeast Asia or Central America. These spontaneously constructed housing complexes gradually become an integral part of the normal urban fabric, despite the persistence of a certain insecurity and spatial promiscuity. This chapter gives credit to Chryssanthi Petropoulou’s analysis presenting ‘spontaneous’ as the most correct term ‘because it gives a dynamic definition of these areas that could help planners to create a different opinion of the phenomenon’ (Petropoulou 2007, 1).

Spontaneous practices also exist in the current formal property market—for example, the elevation of buildings and extension of shops and row houses into the public space (see Figure 2). Between the regular and the spontaneous, it is rather a question of a transition than of a limit, which helps the assimilation of *dense communities* (*Chumchon ae at*, the official Thai name for spontaneous settlements) and its people as well as space and

economic activities mix with the formal urban fabric and shops around. As Chulasai (1985, 30) pointed out: ‘Some of these changes are done illegally but without problems, since there is insufficient surveillance from government inspectors and the regulations are obsolete.’

Spontaneous building practices are more tolerated than accepted by the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA), which is unable to restrain such excesses. The BMA must handle these in-between situations, as there is no absolute control of the urbanization of the capital. The surprise comes when urban projects are launched and people have to be compensated: ‘If they stay over 10 or 20 years [...] when there are many invaders, the BMA must pay or offer compensation for these households. It’s not easy, that’s why we now have CODI. Before, it was the NHA [who was meant] to solve these problems’ (City Planning Department, BMA, interview by author, 26 June 2009).

## 2 The Metropolis, Context of a Battle for Recognition

In this chapter, I focus on the spatial dimension of ‘spontaneous housing’, with the assumption that such building practices have become actively involved in the construction of the capital and reorientation of its development priorities through the involvement of slum dwellers. These results are based on my PhD research (Gerbeaud 2012), in which I studied the phenomenon of spontaneous housing and its close relationship with the metropolitan process.

Primarily an urban phenomenon, spontaneous housing is particularly significant and a great source of tension in global metropolises and cities. For François Ascher, metropolitanization is ‘an increasing concentration of men, activities and wealth in urban areas of several hundred thousand inhabitants, multifunctional, highly integrated into the global economy’ (2010, 33, translation by the author). As such, cities are rich in opportunities at the local, national, and international level. They constitute a large pool of low-income households whose main asset is providing physical labour and cheap services. Cities represent interfaces where contradictory objectives, uses, and radically different representations pool, meet, and communicate<sup>4</sup> in a context of increasingly rapid exchanges.

4 Sassen writes, ‘metropolitanization does not only refer to amplification or intensification of international mechanisms affecting these poles, at the cost, sometimes brutally, of reconciling divergent interests—to the new realities of the global economy. It is not a geographically

Metropolitanization is somehow also a territorialized globalization,<sup>5</sup> generally materialized by internationally networked large metropolitan areas; the global dynamics outweigh the local ones. On the one hand, this may result in the production of *margins* (Goldblum and Franck 2007): areas where the heightened pressure from *exogenous spatial dynamics* allows other interfaces. These margins (i.e., slums) at the limit between several urban systems may link or unlink urban centres and thereby rapidly change the attractiveness and influence of cities in a territory. On the other hand, the area becomes more utilitarian and abstract. Because the city works as a network, it is not just a physical territory. With information and communication technology, the worth of the space lies in the quality and speed of connections with related spaces it offers, and less in its local peculiarities. Still, the territory remains one of the main reasons for social, political, and economic negotiation. This symbolic dimension, via the local culture or the image issue (in line with the city's reputation), will strengthen the advantages of one city or another, often linked to the development and individualization policy of the metropolis in a competitive environment.

In this context, media coverage and metropolitan networking tend to enhance the visibility of the 'excluded.' Inequality and hierarchy strongly mark the Metropolis (Sassen 2004), both locally and nationally. It is these inequalities associated with the relative loss of power and legitimacy that allow the emergence of a 'parallel urban political geography' (Sassen 2004, 20). These tensions play a role in making the metropolis 'one of the places of connection (*nexi*) where new claims from the powerful and the disadvantaged, can be materialized' (Sassen 2004, 22). Cities are 'in this sense favourable to the emergence of a new range of political, "cultural" and subjective operations, or even a new way of claiming which could open the way to unprecedented forms of "citizenship"' (Sassen 2004, 19).

For Sassen (2010), global slums equipped with facilities and an urban organization serve as a platform for their inhabitants in a dual society. The

circumscribed dynamic, but an expanding process constituting a hierarchical network of metropolitan areas maintaining (selectively or globally) privileged interrelationships with certain common features, reflected throughout the "metropolitan areas" as the verticalized international business centre (CBD—Central Business District), the industrial parks vowed to high technology (high "tech") often coupled with new residential areas (or "new towns"), major infrastructure networks (multimodal platforms) and major international airports' (as cited in Goldblum 2010, 1–10).

5 Globalization is described by Giménez (2005, 484) as 'the process of deterritorialization of very important sectors of social relationships on a global scale or [...] the multiplication and intensification of supra territorial relations, that is flows, networks and transactions that go beyond territorial constraints and implementation in areas defined by borders'.



global slum is the ‘poor’ counterpart of the gentrified areas (leading edge). Its growth and characteristics are then closely related to metropolitan issues, and the metropolis itself is obliged to take this spatial production into account to avoid its functioning being threatened. The highly ethical question of the right to the city raised by the inhabitants of these margins and their international supporters is used as an argument enforceable to *jus soli* (their right to stay on the land they live on). As they become spatially more visible and in their speeches more tangible, their marginal situation becomes a pressing issue of urban governance via the concepts of civil society and empowerment.

In this chapter, I test this phenomenon in Bangkok. Transforming the urban fabric allows the residents of spontaneous settlements to gain access to the city and to become fully-fledged city dwellers. By designing and building these dwellings, these ‘ignorants’ enter the metropolitan fabric and force spatial professionals—such as city planners—to reflect on their practices. They become proactive managers of some parts of the city’s territory, even providing attractive alternatives to planned urbanization.

My argument is divided into three parts. The first is devoted to negotiations over the right to the city in spontaneous housing settlements through the development of networks of communities that lead to shared land management. The second tackles the spatial dimension itself, showing how the residents’ actions play a role in the adaptation of the city to its users and encourage urban actors to better calibrate their responses. Finally, I discuss the repositioning of spatial professionals in favour of greater involvement of residents, which leads to a promising multiple actors and joint-metropolitan design.

### **3 Community Networks: Empowering People to Weigh in on City Politics**

The phenomenon of spontaneous housing is often associated with poverty, underdevelopment, and deviance. This terminology encourages a negative and overly simplistic perception of these spaces. ‘Slums’ or ‘over-crowded communities’ are logically viewed as an eyesore to eradicate in the metropolises of emerging countries, especially as the international exposure of these cities increases. The process of metropolitanization also implies a strong attractiveness of the region conditioned by fierce inter-metropolitan competition; spontaneous housing develops in environments with population and land pressure. Spontaneous settlements can also harm the long-term outreach of Bangkok as well as exacerbating transportation problems,

pollution, and the implementation of urban policies. They are disturbing to the very heart of the metropolis. Thus, adaptations such as public transport network extensions and the release of attractive real estate are necessary for its further development. They also represent alternatives to current urban development that grapple with local uses and interests.

To be accepted as proper residential neighbourhoods in the capital, locals address urban development's key issues such as tourism, popular heritage, attention to the environment, and business dynamism in their own way. The clever use of the media and new means of communication helps networks of residents be heard within the contemporary metropolis and by the local government. They also receive help from influential public and private organizations that are active on a large scale and act as spokespeople by putting their actions around particular issues of urban development and empowerment into perspective. Two cases are particularly evocative: Pom Mahakan, on the peninsula of Rattanakosin (the historic centre of Bangkok), and Bang Bua, a settlement on the bank of a channel on the outskirts of Bangkok. In each case, the space serves as an interface and a tool between inhabitants and the authorities to achieve social, environmental, and economic goals.

#### 4 **Pom Mahakan: Defining a Popular Heritage for Touristic Bangkok**

Inhabited even before Bangkok became the capital of the kingdom, Pom Mahakan is an ancient community with its own architecture and traditions. It is known as the birthplace of *Likay* ('traditional Thai theatre'), and for its local handicrafts (i.e., bird cages and sculptures) and cuisine (see Figure 3). According to metropolitan authorities (City Planning Department, BMA, interview by author, June 26, 2009), the residents—sometimes called the invaders— of Pom Mahakan do not have a land lease to prevent eviction. This situation is both controversial and highly publicized internationally. Pom Mahakan occupies a strategic piece of land in the heart of Bangkok's heritage area, near the canal, the Golden Mount, and Ratchadamnoen Avenue. This avenue is considered the Thai version of the Champs Elysées, a 'status symbol of Bangkok as in many Western countries' and 'civilization' (NESDB 2003, 1, 4). As addressed in the Rattanakosin masterplan, the authorities (i.e., the owners) are considering the creation of a more secure and attractive urban park for tourists in Pom Mahakan as part of the beautification of the city centre. The community is living its last days as Pom Mahakan is being demolished in the beginning of this year 2018.

**Figure 3.3 Pom Mahakan's domestic architecture and traditions: Thai massage, cock fighting, fireworks, bird cages**



Source: author

For Pimonsathean (a researcher at Thammasat University, Bangkok. Interview by author, October 2010; NESDB 2003), the Rattanakosin masterplan corresponds to the implementation of a vision: the conservation area should ensure the promotion of Thai culture and lifestyle and highlight the symbols of both the Chakri dynasty and Western influences. Not only would this plan damage the image of the historic site that the public sector is trying to safeguard, but it would also spoil tourism, economic stimulation, natural resource management, and the urban context that operate as a means of improving the quality of life of the inhabitants (NESDB 2003, 1, 4).

The BMA justifies the objectives of the master plan for security reasons and the common good. According to Herzfeld (2006,135-146), the eradication of parasitic elements not only matches the visual optimization of this urban renewal—i.e., spaces free from any permanent appropriation, street vending, or squatters representing the residents of spontaneous housing—but also is the embodiment of state power.

Some inhabitants whose families have lived in the area for 200 years have learned that their community can contribute to metropolitan development and beautification with their part of the city's architectural and intangible heritage. Over ten years of conflict, the population has adopted arguments that guarantee the support of influential international actors, who put pressure on the BMA. Out of the nearly twenty Rattanakosin communities predating the shift of the capital to Bangkok, identified by the BMA, Pom Mahakan is the first to have received a notice of eviction. For the BMA

it is important to resist pressure, as this case ‘will affect the progression of events in the rest of the area covered by the Rattanakosin Island Plan’ (Herzfeld, cited in Wungpatcharapon 2009, 3). Although the fate of Pom Mahakan remained unknown until 2018, it largely depends on Thai and international opinion, thanks to the network that has made it both a global and a governance issue.

Though initially the architecture of Pom Mahakan was not at the heart of the residents’ concerns, space is highly representative of the inhabitants’ quest for regularization. Residents have renovated common areas in accordance with their intended tourist functions. Some examples include surface treatments (brick and stone pavement) comparable to the archaeological sites of Ayutthaya and Sukhothai and explanatory signs in Thai and English to guide tourists to discover the community and its traditions. At the level of housing, the residents stay ahead with a renovation plan based on a ‘self-development’ approach (Herzfeld 2003, 104). This strategy of ‘moral rehabilitation’ is aimed increase the authorities’ trust in them by showing their sense of responsibility and ability to be legitimate citizens of Bangkok.

The residents have mastered their negotiating tools by working with academics, the media, and certain Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).<sup>6</sup> Their smooth speeches, including those by the former head of Pom Mahakan, perfectly boast of the strengths of the community. Meanwhile, residents have had recourse to the implication of multiple actors with authority in the heritage matters: various universities have proposed actions in response to eviction measures taken by the BMA; and some community architects (namely, Community Architects for Shelter and Environment – CASE Studio) have also held talks with the residents over three years. The debate has also become an issue of international importance with the interference of organizations such as UNESCO and human rights’ associations and the actions of foreign scholars,<sup>7</sup> particularly those studying the issue of *heritage* and the

6 On the communication level, NGOs and associations such as the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights support the protesting communities and provide expertise comparable to that of the authorities. For Marc Askew, they ensure local and international support that can weigh heavily in the decisions of the state.

7 Bristol (2007, 12) provides a table of the various organizations involved in the Pom Mahakan issue, including: professionals; local, national, and international communities; universities (including the four largest in Thailand, and Harvard); and international organizations such as the Chumchonchai Foundation, Centre on Housing Rights and Eviction (COHRE), Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), and Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI). Also see Wungpatcharapon (2009), who details the chronology of all support received for the preservation of Pom Mahakan and the requests made to the Thailand National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and submitted to the United Nations.

democratization of access to the city. As space is at the heart of their struggle, at the same time it aims to propose another renovation model of the ancient city centre. Bristol (2003) and Herzfeld (2007) for example, have highlighted the historic architecture and traditions in Pom Mahakan, as well as the cohesion of the inhabitants who plead for the area's maintenance. These approaches have resulted in an undemocratic and even authoritarian image of the actions of the BMA (Herzfeld 2003). By displaying a community acting transparently and using popular participation against the government's project for the Pom Mahakan area, the media participates in discrediting urban services.

This case demonstrates how a controversial notion (i.e., cultural heritage) can be mobilized to justify the appropriation of space in the city and to gain recognition. The quest for Thai identity and real Thai values is very relevant in a time of globalization. Here, heritage becomes a collective construction and a means to achieve regularization, economic development, and the preservation of a popular architectural 'corpus'. The community cohesion demonstrated by the adherence of residents to this argument undoubtedly has a strategic dimension, while orienting the issue on historical value, taking an opposite view to the authorities by exploiting some of the goals of development. It also provokes a new level of awareness on the part of the residents. A community architect who has been active in the community of Pom Mahakan since 2006 realizes this:

Some said it was a very old community with a historical value, so we worked on this aspect to develop a housing plan with the people. At that moment I thought it was not a slum problem but rather that of the city, a challenge for Bangkok. It seemed that everyone in Bangkok had to know about this issue because it involved many communities on Rattanakosin Island. We invited the media (TV, magazines) to inform about it and mediate the case. Some have written books, articles, [while] others [have] made films on Pom Mahakan [...] Heritage is a way to create a network, to bring people together around a common issue, but in practice we have to find more than that [...] the reality [...] and not an imagined romantic way of living. The heritage issue can gather a lot of people. (interview by author, 5 August 2009)

This is also the case for other projects in Bangkok that focus on architectural value, for example the renovation of Na Phra Lan that has been carried out by private individuals by inviting residents to preserve and take possession

of the architectural heritage they live in.<sup>8</sup> Residents are encouraged to follow the preservation recommendations for their built heritage in exchange for a valorization of their surroundings—a positive renovation for tourism and for the image of the city. This process marks the beginning of a re-appropriation of heritage architecture and conservation of a living heritage.

Heritage preservation, with the reduction of pollution, and the environment, have become issues of collective action in the historical areas of Bangkok. Further, they allow the development of an engaged local civil society. These objectives are in line with the sustainable development targeted by the Thai constitution and promoted by major international organizations. The second case study (i.e., Bang Bua) described below highlights the development of collective action across several dense communities in the form of networks.

## 5 **Bang Bua: From Canal Cleansing to Managing Communities**

In Thailand, the term ‘community’ becomes meaningful in the context of social networks. Presented as a valorizing socio-spatial organization, communities are associated with notions of slowly evolving solidarity, mutual assistance, and sharing (values, beliefs, and resources). They are also groups in opposition<sup>9</sup> to or support of something—i.e., ‘people who share the same interests or activities and form a relatively new group, [in] five–ten years’ or ‘a group that shares the same problems’ (community architect, interview by author, 2009). It is the community of conditions (Pornchokchai 1992; UN-Habitat 2005). The term ‘community’ also has a legal definition, given by the BMA in 1991 for operational purposes (Archer 2009, 32): a community has at least fifty dwellings and must be registered in the district. It can then receive aid and appear on official maps as part of the city. The networks of dense communities sometimes include a large number of settlements in several provinces of the country; the main goal of such communities is to give a voice to their inhabitants, either to protest urban projects that would affect them or to work upstream for their regularization. These networks are generally

8 This project, led by Yongtanit Pimonsathean, has been awarded the 2011 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation.

9 Askew (2002) explains that the 1990s saw the development of community networks as local organizations (federated inhabitants) under the impulse of local and international NGOs whose number is increasing.

locally managed by a committee or representative of the community, who acts as the intermediary with local authorities and as referent in the affairs of all informal settlements.<sup>10</sup> As much as the charisma of the community leader, group cohesion is fundamental for getting a community's claims and projects progressed towards the local authorities. The ability to define a common course of action is in fact a prerequisite for public funding<sup>11</sup> for spontaneous housing settlements, which therefore sometimes excludes very poor groups (Gerbeaud 2012). Space—through regularization—is generally the main demand of the inhabitants, but other communities might federate around urban agriculture projects, pollution control programs, and joint activities (i.e. caring for the elderly, proposing activities for the community children). By organizing, a group enters the process of negotiating urban space—especially with the development of community-based organizations,<sup>12</sup> where 'the more educated leaders [...] facilitate access to NGO networks and media' (Ockey, cited in Tapie et al. 2008, 45).<sup>13</sup> At the same time, international networks are active in disseminating the news of actions, participatory projects, and concepts. In return, they contribute to 'unlock[ing] people energy' (DPU 2012; Boonyabantha n.d.). This 'people energy' means that poor people gain confidence in their ability to change the environment and begin to 'believe in their relationship with the others in the city' (Boonyabantha n.d.). The following quotation illustrates the urban and even societal vision of the organizations working with these community networks:

Klong Bang Bua was the first network of canal communities in Bangkok to successfully negotiate a long-term lease to the public land they occupy, which is under Treasury Department ownership. This lease could never have been negotiated by a single community, which has no bargaining power. But

10 According to Pornchokchai (1992, 64), in 1990, 54 per cent of the slums had a community committee; 24 per cent were assisted by the BMA, 4 per cent were assisted by the National Housing Authority (NHA), and 12 per cent were held by the residents independently.

11 In this, I am particularly referring to the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI), a leading public body for affordable housing, and the NHA, whose main objective is the absorption of dense communities and housing renovation.

12 The institution of community committees in the 1970s, corresponding to the increasing involvement of international NGOs, also saw growing community influence in the media landscape—the 'weapon of the urban poor' (Ockey, as cited in Tapie et al. 2008, 45).

13 According to Askew (2002, 146), the 'emergence of slums as organized localities, has developed through the increasing intervention of the state as well as the reformist middle class—in the guise of academics, specialists and NGOs—in response to concerns for social, environmental and housing conditions in the slums'. These actors play a role in the changing vision and the subsequent actions of authorities towards the spontaneous settlements.

as a network of 12 communities, and with the ‘network power’ support of the city-wide network of 200 canal-side communities in Bangkok, Bang Bua was able to convince the authorities that redeveloping their communities in the same place is good for the people and good for the city as a whole. (Wungpatcharapon and Tovivich, cited in ACHR, CODI, and CAN 2011, 6)

Being part of a Community Based Organization or a community network helps to develop community projects with the local actors and owners. Through the empowerment of the several communities involved, it gives way to more balanced discussions with the authorities, thanks to this ‘network power’, and broadens the issue of spontaneous settlements to metropolitan environmental and social challenges.

The development of national and international community networks is closely related to media coverage of globally relevant challenges. In Bangkok, where water pollution in the canals is worrying, spontaneous housing settlements—which are often accused of being responsible for the pollution—are also the origin of interesting water treatment initiatives. This is the case of Bang Bua, a high-profile member of the Canal Community Network. Despite an eviction notice, the inhabitants of Bang Bua had expressed a desire to remain on the site and to comply with the district legislation if the community was regularized. They also appealed to the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI) and received help from its community architects. In this way, the residents have been able to retain control of the renovation program by receiving technical support from professionals, enabling the protection of community relations and the existing social fabric. The residents’ participation in the construction and management also facilitates a sense of belonging of the project that continues after its completion. After cleaning the canal (CODI, n.d.; CODI, 2004; ACHR, Kerr, n.d.), residents worked on the reconstruction of a densified community on the mainland. Two to three storey-houses replaced the single-storey houses on land and those built on the canal. This densification allowed for three common spaces to be created for recreation purpose (playground and gardens). Community architects and residents jointly worked on a masterplan and then designed several types of housing depending on inhabitants’ desires, neighbourhood relationships, and ability to pay. The number of households remained equal and the participative process reinforced social bonds, both with the authorities and within the community. Regularization in Bang Bua has initiated a renewal rather than a complete assimilation into the capital, thanks to the never-ending



appropriation and transformation process. The rebuilt community now keeps on adapting to its users' needs following the masterplan.

In this and other regularized spontaneous housing settlements, the residential fabric slowly creates a road structure comparable to the hierarchy of city road systems, with the same layout of businesses and services. Around the Central Business District,<sup>14</sup> houses and dense communities tend to disappear into the urban landscape as they adopt the aesthetic codes and comforting equipment of the formal housing market: airconditioning, bigger rooms, proper construction details and standardized materials. These transformations make some settlements attractive to the middle classes due to their centralized location and offers of profitable financial goods and services. There is therefore a tendency to accept these constructions as a way to generate both housing and an urban fabric that is attractive to a more prosperous population—although it always remains affordable for low-income families. These operations contribute to normalizing the area's residents and adapting the inhabitants' territorial uses of the city. While houses are gradually assimilated into the urban fabric, this housing stock challenges the current housing market and its inhabitants' evolving practices are also attracting metropolitan interests: gentrification is for the moment avoided in projects supervised by CODI thanks to the principle of community tenure of land in Bang Bua. Both the inhabitants and the entire community are owners. For this reason, regularized housing units remain financially accessible to the less well off, who also find a potential network of solidarity and integration in the community. In settlements where land pressure is higher, adjacent to the Central Business District, the future could resemble Brazil's *favela* tourism, especially when the rental price of a condominium flat is the same as that of a house with a garden (Valladares, 2006). Legalized settlements have less need for community networks than more remote or vulnerable populations.

The Canal Community Network (CCN) acts as an interface of exchanges, an opportunity to share experiences between settlements that have already started their renovation and those in the process of preparing a project. As a source of inspiration, a community hall in Bang Bua that was built as part of the renovation features a display with a model of the project and panels explaining the natural filtration of wastewater before it is discharged into the canal. This exhibition space is frequently visited by the members of the network as well as NGOs and foreign associations (American victims of

14 I studied the evolution in Sanam Polo (near Lumpini Park) and several spontaneous settlements near Pahon Yothin and around Kasetsart University.

Hurricane Katrina, Southeast Asians, and so on). The CCN gives residents both local visibility—by bringing together a number of urban dwellers living in comparable situations—and an international dimension. It has also had knock-on effects,<sup>15</sup> especially because of the positive international reception of the project, and has made Thailand an exemplary example of the defence of dense communities. Because of this international presentation, dense communities indirectly exert pressure on the policies of the metropolitan government and bring changes to the methods of integrating public participation and consultation. The effects can be witnessed at the district level and within the public institutions dealing with housing issues (e.g., NHA, CODI) or owning land. The effects on the BMA are less evident due to the composition of the Board, and generally depend on the impact of groups of people in the news. This trend also applies to other communities (e.g., rural communities, including interest groups), confirming the development of the civil society that is initially born of urgency.

Spontaneous settlement is a connecting interface of the city that is able to offer tailored solutions for the use of residual spaces from which it is impossible to make a profit—at least, according to the planning regulations. In their reactivity to the environment and ability to create links around participatory projects, these architectural activities are comparable to the urban farming communities analysed by Boossabong (this volume). Whether it is the production of housing in urban interstices or organic food grown on the roofs of buildings, the actions of these groups are subversive interventions demonstrating alternative interests and the need to adapt the production system.

Spontaneous housing offers a way of making the city within the spaces, activities, and social relationships that it fosters. It challenges the methods and process of making the city, beginning with the delegation of its design to specialists where so little authority is given to its residents. The changes observed in some of these settlements in terms of housing show that non-specialists can be responsible for architectural and urban design, and even for the adjustment to standardized and planned production. This calls for the rehabilitation of this residential design process, especially in terms of public participation, equity in access to urban areas for the poorest weigh heavier in the management of the metropolis. Here too the commitment and energy devoted to the qualitative production of space significantly

15 As an anecdote, a photograph of our team has been incorporated into a presentation board in the community room as 'evidence' of the international outreach of Bang Bua in the academic world.

exceeded that of the ordinary city dweller, mostly because people have had to find their own answer to their needs and, by doing so, have retained their connection to building their environment.

If people's participation can greatly contribute to city-making, lot servicing and connecting to networks remain necessary to ensure the sustainability of such sectors. Working alongside the expertise of urban actors, spontaneous production is undeniably an asset in people's interaction with the city, especially because it offers original forms—and means—of development.

## 6 Spontaneous Spatial Action: Building the Metropolis Jointly

This section elaborates how direct spatial transformation in the context of spontaneous practices participates in the adaptation of Bangkok to its users. One example of spontaneous additions to buildings on the current real estate market can be found in the social housing projects of the National Housing Authority.<sup>16</sup> These standardized buildings have been built since the 1960s according to Bangkok's policy of the relocation of slum dwellers. They usually consist of several-storey buildings designed according to the principles of modern architecture—a free façade, roof terraces, and sometimes following the free plan<sup>17</sup> with the use of stilts on the ground floor. Wide lanes separate the large grassy outdoor areas of the buildings, which are set back from the sidewalk. Each floor of often more than 10 flats has 24 m<sup>2</sup> to 33 m<sup>2</sup> apartments.<sup>18</sup> The covered stairwells overlook the service corridors and common garbage chutes. The production of these facilities continues, albeit in improved versions.

These social mass housing facilities were meant to provide decent housing and a minimum amount of comfort by incorporating former slum dwellers into a system of regular practices (monthly payment of rent, bills, and contact with the administration) in an appropriate urban setting. The buildings were built to withstand the relocation and rehousing of slum dwellers, without

16 The NHA is responsible for social housing programs at the national scale (mass housing projects and plans), including the 1 million housing units 'Baan Mankong Plan' and 'Baan Eua Arthorn Plan' launched in 2003 by the Shinawatra government. Under the Baan Eua Arthorn Plan, 600,000 housing units were supposed to be built by 2008, where the Government Savings Bank (GSB) was to finance 100,000 of these units. CODI (Community Organizations Development Institute) was to renovate 400 000 units in 'communities' (spontaneous housing settlements) via the Baan Mankong Plan.

17 The Free Plan or 'plan libre', defined as one of the five points of Modern architecture by Le Corbusier, stands for an open floor plan generally supported by concrete beams and poles and without being interrupted by bearing walls.

18 All Din Daeng stands out, with an apartment area of about 40 m<sup>2</sup>.

**Figure 3.4 Two phases: a permanent hairdresser's shop on the sidewalk (left, 2007); a repair shop and a grocery under consolidation (right), Klong Toey Lock 1-10**



Source: author

integrating transformation of apartments and social relations of the tenants. Mass relocation into public housing has certainly brought better residential living conditions, but irregular incomes, lack of space, the inherited slum lifestyle, and finally the residents' *daily* way of living has done away with the orderly and normalizing design of the NHA housing blocks. For example, some street vendors have continued their work (e.g., food preparation, crafts) in their apartments, although the space was too small for such activities.

Thirty years later, more or less important additions to the buildings and outdoor areas have developed and consolidated the structures that were too narrow and poorly adapted for use. Some residents have built ground-floor extensions from their balconies into public areas. The vast outdoor areas have been covered with temporary (storage, playgrounds, sheltered parking) and permanent (workshops, micro-enterprises, subsidiary housing services) activities recreating closed areas and shopping streets instead of the intended sidewalks exposed to sunlight (see Figure 4).

In Klong Toey Lock 1-10 near the port of Bangkok, a group of ten blocks of flats was built in the 1960-70's opposite the Klong Toey settlement to relocate families whose homes had burnt down. As in earlier experiences of social housing, these flats are located in a highly urbanized area, close to workplaces and key public services. In this housing complex, spontaneous grafts have recreated a 'commercial corridor' in the main street, (see Figure 5) from the site entrance to the channel, which marks the boundary of the NHA land. These two types of architecture connect at a place where an indoor market, a Thai boxing ring, and community meeting rooms have been established. These spontaneous grafts provide continuity with the street, reducing the difference between the social housing and the neighbourhood. Residents have access to restaurants, cafes, and hairdressers at the ground

**Figure 3.5 Rented areas for spontaneous commercial structures behind the yellow line. Bonkai housing estate's commercial corridor**



Source: author

floor of their building. Not only do these attract outside customers—ensuring social diversity and mixed usage—but their linear configuration, where each staircase has an airlock effect, also controls and thus secures the area as a buffer between the street and the intimacy of the residential buildings.<sup>19</sup>

Spontaneous grafts act as a service by the complexity of the spaces, uses, and connections created to perform different functions. Klong Toey residents of flats 1–10 benefit from a planned, standardized, and already realized base, on which they can improve their everyday surroundings. Spontaneous grafts respect the pre-existing elements while also highlighting their shortfalls. Thus, they invite the appropriation of more space and changes to the architecture, including the incorporation of more flexibility into the design process. They also open the social buildings to greater functional and programmatic diversity and consider the changing needs of future residents in the design and development of relocations.

However, as spontaneous actions can become endemic and turn these areas into bigger ‘slums’ than what they were considered to be before their relocation, it is necessary to create a framework for these grafts. In cases of high land or population pressure, total lack of supervision has resulted in the development of spontaneous housing that overrides the original spatial organization. These practices were unforeseen by the NHA at the time of the housing complex’s design, and are difficult to manage once in place. They have required reflection on the part of NHA so that they can take advantage of these grafts to monitor and improve on Klong Toey rather than banning them. Extensions are now possible in specific zones,

<sup>19</sup> See Gerbeaud 2012 for more examples.

regulated by a monthly commercial location fee. By this means, the NHA controls the evolution and densification of its housing stock and reinvests the received financial contributions into the maintenance of the green areas and buildings. The fact that external renters are allowed shows that this social housing is attractive to both outside vendors and passers-by.

Unable to obtain better-located land closer to transportation and commercial amenities, due to land prices in the capital, the NHA acts on other determining factors to improve its social housing services. These improvements include lowering building heights and increasing the surface area of the apartments, providing commercial and storage space at the ground floor of the buildings, and including community halls and other areas for residents' daily use. Such improvements result in an enriched residential area made by and for the people because mainly maintained by the once informal activities the former slum dwellers developed in the social housing estates. The advantage of this system is that it provides win-win solutions and demonstrates how the people can be a source of ideas for new practices. These grafts onto public housing show that a common understanding of space is possible, especially because the Thais living in the spontaneous settlements are still engaged with the construction of their own living environment. When relocated, they use their past experience to better adapt social housing to their needs. The case of mass social housing also questions the relevance of extensive urban planning and the attitudes of spatial professionals. Over time, these actors have changed their approach to metropolitan management and even architectural design in response to the improvements made by spontaneous building activity. By appropriating the transformations made by the people, they enrich their interventions in the city and better meet the objective of an inclusive and participatory city.

## 7 The Changing Role of Spatial Professionals: City-Making, a 'Four-Handed Project'

### 7.1 Popular Participation to Legitimize and Improve Projects among Public Actors

One of the fundamental aspects of this adaptation is the integration of participatory processes into the design and the evaluation of housing projects *a posteriori*. Popular participation involves, for example, the co-design of projects (at least in some phases) and a greater degree of communication to facilitate the involvement of each actor. The projects of CASE—or in

some cases CODI—cannot be done without the participation of residents starting from the design phase; the new use of satisfaction surveys by the NHA and the increasing number of information meetings conducted by the BMA require a similar re-organization of standard practices. Evaluation and satisfaction questionnaires are frequently used to upgrade social housing projects and improve their management. Integrating a participatory dimension taking into account the opinion of users implies a moral questioning of the actors: the project time will be extended in the definition phase of the program, the financial package, the presentation of the project, and the construction of a new typology.

Allowing semi-fixed structures made by the inhabitants on empty areas was the first step to recognizing the added value of the people's spatial transformation of the site. It is used to reveal the missing amenities and weaknesses of social housing programs, including the geographic distance with the employment centres—a departure point for enhancing participative action in social and economic goals. The NHA does more than evaluate previous projects. In fact,

CODI deals with slum settlements but we create new communities, so [that participation will take place] after the residents moved in. We try to set up recreation or cooperative spaces so that they can develop a community. [We] also [try] to generate more income activity so that when they move to our project [...] we [can] try to help them with the income generation, occupation, or training. Quite often we have to provide some participation because we build in new areas [...] so we have to provide transportation or we try to coordinate with the BMA so that they bring in services. (NHA, interview by the author, 2008)

This respondent is a member of the Government Housing Bank, which finances social housing projects. To him, the participation of residents in the development of new types of social housing like condominiums is important. Representative techniques encourage co-designing and testing of ideas.<sup>20</sup> For example, the use of three-dimensional models by the NHA

20 A member of the Government Housing Bank (GHB, interview by the author, July 2009) explained how the architects at the NHA tend to materialize people's ideas rather than designing the projects: 'Actually, the people involved in the project already have their ideas about the project, a design basis, so they give their ideas for the architect to conceptualize it in a 3D model, and show how the housing units are, [and] how the building is, which is the concept of the building. But I would like to tell you that in terms of design we got the ideas from the people, not the NHA.'

and CODI allows more flexibility and provides a more accessible rendering for people who have not mastered the tools of an architect or planner. Such representative techniques are both a way to present and jointly develop the project and a tool for raising residents' awareness of their desires and opportunities. Such participation allows the residents to 'imagine their fate' and involve them in urban renewal projects to make 'projects perhaps easier' (GHB, interview by author, 2009) as people work on a similar visual basis. In general, urban authorities and designers play an arbitration role in the participatory process and tend to 'propose' rather than 'impose' projects, which are also sometimes less detailed to allow a margin for appropriation and transformation after delivery.

The issues of participation and the legalization of spontaneous housing are indicative of a vision of society, in the sense that they involve delegating the control of space. Participation requires stronger cooperation between different actors and paves the way for decentralization and strengthening the role of the population as a major actor in the fabrication of the urban environment. According to Somsook Boonyabancha (architect and Founder of CODI), community architects have a highly social role. The objective of CODI is to strengthen civil society through its most involved members—i.e., the residents of dense communities—and to open a 'space of change' (DPU 2012). Spatial intervention is therefore more a way than a goal to keep a largely vulnerable and low-income population in the capital. It is above all a mean to reach a democratic ideal where participation could help in elaborating a more flexible urban frame able to accommodate the transformations and appropriations of its users.

Although the context has changed, this phenomenon is parallel to the right to the city in the sense of Henri Lefebvre (1974). Empowered non professionals actively build the urban environment while the actions of dense communities embody a questioning of the architects' interpretation 'of the perceived and experienced meanings by those who live there' (Lefebvre 1974, 113). This is the realization of urban space of high 'utility value' and 'intended for "users"' that is created by a part of the 'working class' of Bangkok, thus blurring the line between professionals and users in their capacity to create a qualitative environment.

Unlike CODI, the BMA is more oriented toward gathering information or allowing a limited participation than on the joint development of projects with the population. Participation is not an integral part of the organizational changes, although one of my interviewees said that the people had become 'much more involved in the affairs of the city, [...] much more active' (BMA intern, interview with the author, 2010). Abandoning control of the



city, even partially, is still difficult for the BMA, especially when it comes to validating the growing importance of residents illegally occupying attractive land. The BMA therefore reacts in a way that is more in line with its general scale of action. A researcher from Thammasat University reported positive developments in urban planning, showing the willingness of the BMA to better control real estate and buildings in the future (although the 'Bangkok Project Plan' was not in place at the time of my interviews). These developments include pre-emption of land and buildings of different functions, the adoption of a *comprehensive plan* in 2006 with demographic projections, and the requirement that the proposed construction of new buildings undergo an Environmental Impact Assessment certification. The BMA always seems to act alone, without really taking housing into account while the private sector adapts faster, however, a form of emancipation of institutional actors of the BMA can be observed. We find changes in the attitude of urban governmental bodies followed by new modes of action, experiments and joint working. Not only do these adjustments provide more weight to the public housing actors in front of the private sector, but they seem to act in the direction of the assimilation of spontaneous housing and Bangkokian 'illegal or non-standard' practices at the cost of internal reforms and their partial calling into question.

If you look from the beginning at what CODI is doing, we can say that this is not acceptable to the local authorities, because sometimes they do things outside the law. But after the process of raising awareness by Somsook [Boonyabancha, former Director of CODI], after some time, the opinion of the local authorities turned positive, so there is a collaboration between CODI and local authorities at the national level.

There is also an impact on the environment. It is a joint effort between the City Plan and housing [issues] and the building capacity of the local government. That changed in terms of attitude, for the local authorities, even for the politicians. It is better accepted. When we try to make laws that make the building code flexible or the 'second standard' for low-income people [...] it did not happen in the past, but it is possible today because the attitude of people has changed, the low-income people change [...] they agree with the way low-income people work. So, why not try to make all that legal by easing the building code? (NHA, interview by the author, 2009)

While regulations are 'relaxed' to give way to experiments, the emergence of an architectural practice dedicated to dense communities shows that certain practitioners have reconnected with the social role of architecture

by recognizing the value of the practices of non-informed persons in the metropolis (Tovivich 2010).

## 7.2 Rethinking the Architecture Project by the Experience of Spontaneous Housing

Spontaneous housing can also be a direct source of inspiration for architects and planners. Beyond the architectural heritage issue and land management issues lie the question of spatial design, especially for the urban poor. Spontaneous architecture now involves less self-construction, but it also represents the antithesis of the production of architects. Without denying the debate on inadequate housing and self-made architecture, the community architects work in a form that is closer to militant activism than a service provider. Spontaneous construction occurs incrementally and in response to strong constraints, which is the opposite to an architectural project that generally emerges in detail as a finished object. Working for CODI or CASE, the Thai architectural agencies active in Southeast Asian communities, are poorly paid and require a strong commitment. For some students or young architects, it provides the opportunity to work differently, targeting a shared learning objective with residents also acting as designers (ACHR, 2008). In addition to numerous publications of the ACHR (ACHR, 2010a; ACHR, 2010b) and Community Architects Network (CAN) on the methods and objectives of working in spontaneous settlements,<sup>21</sup> university courses are being developed to train future community architects. For example, Arsomsilp Institute of The Arts, acting as an educative non profit organization, offers a master's degree in Community and Environmental Architecture.

The experience of community architects extends to other areas of spatial design in Thailand. The TEN project in Minburi (in the outskirts of Bangkok), designed by the founder of CASE and some of her architects, gathers several characteristics from spontaneous settlements and community design,. These included co-design, incremental architecture, and sharing spaces to optimize costs and access to services that are otherwise inaccessible: a swimming pool, shared gardens and covered spaces, a shadow theatre, and the rooftop terrace. Additionally, the heterogeneous aesthetic constructions

21 See the websites of ACHR, CAN, Open Network Architecture, and CODI (in particular the 'What is a "Community Architect"?' section), which refer to online brochures and videos describing the values, strengths, and conditions of work in dense communities at the international level. One such example is the *Baan Mankong Program: Participative Approach in CODI* (<http://www.codi.or.th/housing/Participatory.html>).

and constructive intelligence based on the local climatic and cultural conditions (roof overhangs, natural ventilation, outdoor kitchen instead of air-conditioning etc.) were also incorporated. This project has not only been the subject of numerous publications, but has also been visited by architecture students and NGOs during CODI conferences. This meeting point between 'serious' architecture and the inherited knowledge represented by popular architecture represents a pivot in the way of doing projects.

## 8 Conclusion

The challenge of spontaneous construction does not only concern housing, but also the social and civic involvement of the population in a city's affairs. Individual actions regarding equity, heritage, participative design, or the recognition of spontaneous actions raise questions about the standardization of practices, relevance of standards, and more generally how to 'think' and 'make' the city. The act of building becomes subversive and transgressive. This goes beyond a philosophical positioning on control through regulations and prioritization, and the 'right response' to a site in terms of consumption (space, materials) and the way of doing a project.

Residential production also has a social influence on the city. Through the physical construction of a spontaneous 'community', the links between residents strengthen and create (what they call) an 'identity'; space is its material expression. This identity is claimed during conflicts about illegally occupied land. What has been built becomes the key tool in demanding the status of a citizen and legitimizing the group and its weight in political affairs. The defence of a common good and the environment create civic awareness in cases of pollution or environmental disaster. Through good land use or cleaning polluted channels, they prove that they are worthy to stay on the land. This moral rehabilitation exists in Brazil and Mexico,<sup>22</sup> where the interventions of neighbourhood architects and the implication

22 See the following international projects of contemporary architectural intervention in spontaneous settlements: The biblioteca Parque Espana in Medellin (architect: G. Mazzanti) for the Integral Urban Project 'Acciones en mi barrio'; Playground structures in Klong Toey and Minburi in Bangkok by CASE architects; the Casa Familiar Project and other participative actions (architect: T. Cruz); and the 'Favela-barrio' program in Rio de Janeiro led by the architect and researcher S. Ferraz Magalhaes. Widely publicized, these projects and quite often iconic architectures contribute to the impact of the residents of spontaneous settlements on urban development and socio-economic issues in the metropolitan context. It also spreads interest in developing a shared conception of urban space.

of the residents in the spatial improvement of their spontaneous housing settlements provide a respectable status to the city.

Informal settlements may well be a way for Bangkok to distinguish itself as a culturally active city highlighting its history and heritage. It is, then, in terms of urban governance that spontaneous housing highlights the need to rethink the process of renewal and urban development and take into account its potential in terms of both the participatory process and the creation of a culture of negotiation and skill sharing.

Spontaneous housing creates new opportunities in the management of urban space and a more inclusive and shared governance (Berner 2001), of which Sassen (2004) showed the importance in the context of competition between metropolises. It is a way to access, by claiming land, to equal rights and status despite the absence of a title of ownership. It is also a way to strengthen the link between the user and the city as residents transform and manage bits of territorial space. It is what Lefebvre calls the 'proclamation and implementation of urban life as the rule of use' (Lefebvre 1974, 146). As far as the transformation of space, the Thai case illustrates the Right to the City that Harvey defines 'not just [as] a right of access to what already exists, but [as] the right to change this'<sup>23</sup> (Harvey 2003, 1-2). Though paved with difficulties, as shown in the case of Pom Mahakan, this way to a shared design and management of land is particularly stimulating for other countries, giving way to more flexibility and cohesion between the users and what space embodies both physically and symbolically.

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23 'The right to the city is, therefore, far more than a right of individual access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart's desire. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right since changing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake ourselves and our cities is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights' (Harvey 2003, 1-2).

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