

We speak louder than before: A reflection on participatory housing design for low-income people

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Abstract:

There have been several attempts throughout the last four decades to include slum dwellers as formal members of Bangkok city by developing housing for them. The Baan Mankong (secure housing) is the latest programme which heavily emphasises the participatory approach. It allows squatters to play a key role in the creation of their new dwellings. Looking at two case studies, 'Bangramad' and 'Chonglom' community, this paper critically discusses the impacts in terms of both benefits and disadvantages of this programme. It dramatically alters the squatter way of life and their dwellings. This alteration is the result of residents' willingness to change and is also influenced by many outside factors such as the involved actors' limited understanding of the squatter's actual needs as well as the absence of the participatory process particularly during architectural design stages. This paper also presents 'participatory action research' which was employed to study the life of the squatters and at the same time the researcher collaborated with the squatters in order to resolve the informants' difficulties understanding architectural design matters.

Squatters' recent situation and the new Baan Mankong housing programme

A 2007 survey reported that there were approximately 6,334 informal communities across Thailand (Sirilaksanaporn 2008: 27). Around 445 communities faced eviction and 200,000 families will be affected (CODI 2008: 8). Amongst these, 386 communities are railway squatter settlements (Chiengtong and Witayasomboon 2009: 19, Sirilaksanaporn 2008: 28) which are this paper's concentration.

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Railway squatters illegally live on land which belongs to the State Railway of Thailand (SRT). Most of these residents are from rural areas who came to work in the city. Initially starting from just a few shacks, they encourage their relatives or friends from their hometown to settle with them. Thus the numbers of informal buildings gradually increases until the land is saturated with informal housing. Most houses are built provisionally. Squatters use recycled materials they find or buy at very cheap prices in order to build their dwellings. Old timber, corrugated tin, plastic sheets, and advertisement banners are popular materials they make use of. Most dwellers lack any initiative or enthusiasm to improve their houses because they do not know when they will be threatened with eviction. These settlements are regarded as slums.

Indeed, squatters from these communities, who commonly occupied the SRT lands, thoroughly understand they live illegally. Hence they have joined together with members of other slums to make a network called the 'Slum See Paak'¹ intended to deal with evictions. They primarily negotiate with land owners to make a property sharing agreements. Over ten years of fighting, they succeeded in securing a temporary house registration certificate. This gave them the right to enrol their children in school as well as build and install basic infrastructure such as water and electricity (Chatrabha 2001: 13). Furthermore, over approximately two years of land lease negotiation, twenty-four communities achieved a land rental contract from the SRT of which ten secured the land lease for thirty years² (BMC 2005: 14, CODI website 2004).

After signing these rental contracts, people are able to register for economic support from the government to finance the building of new housing. A government funded organisation named Community Organisations Development Institute (CODI), implemented a government housing programme called *Baan Mankong* to facilitate communities who wish to upgrade their quality of life.

The *Baan Mankong* programme emphasises the participatory approach in which low-income inhabitants, including their organisations and networks, are allowed to take a key role in the management and design of their new housing environments. They do this by collaborating with many other agencies part of the CODI, such as local governments, NGOs, as well as professionals and academics within the cities where the communities are located (CODI update 2008: 5). Boonyabanha (2005: 25), the director of the CODI, clarifies the *Baan Mankong* concept stating that:

This programme imposes as few conditions as possible, in order to give urban poor communities, networks and stakeholders in each city the freedom to design their own programme. The challenge is to support upgrading in ways that allow urban poor communities to lead the process and generate local partnerships, so that the whole city contributes to the solution.

Additionally, communities deal with the design process and housing permission requests with assistance from the CODI or volunteer architects (e.g. academics and professionals). Community members participate in every stage of the design process with the designers. The process entails a survey of the existing and residents' requirements, a plan of the community's layout, a design of the dwellings, and a housing permission application. The CODI agencies also play a consultancy role during infrastructural installation and housing construction (CODI update 2008: 58-59). Government funding infrastructure subsidises provides housing loans directly to poor communities (Boonyabanha 2005: 24) under the condition that the residents return the loan within fifteen years with interest as well as the community's operational cost. They also have to establish a community savings fund and must have collected a minimum of ten percent of the amount of money they expect to take

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on loan. Otherwise, they could not borrow the money or build the house until their savings are adequate (Onndum et al 2007: 2-35). Additionally, a community cooperative acts as a representative for all financial transactions. Hence, the money returned to the government will return under the name of the particular community, not an individual.

Figure 1: A diagram of the process of acquiring a new house.

Collaborating with Squatters: conducting Participatory Action Research

During six months of fieldwork, two communities, *Chonglom* and *Bangramard* were surveyed when the new houses were in the design stages. The community's layouts for both *Chonglom* and *Bangramard* were already finished and the basic infrastructure was under construction. *Chonglom* were waiting for a CODI architect to design their houses, while the designs for *Bangramard* were being discussed by participants; some problems were discovered.

In *Chonglom*, residents started thinking about the sort of the dwelling which they wished to live. Many of the residents also expressed rich ideas for their future residencies. However they were unable to convey these abstract desires as designs on paper. Moreover, in order to pursue the construction of these houses, they needed architectural drawings of the proposed dwellings in order to request residential planning permission. Without technical knowledge to produce such information (e.g. plans, sections, and other architectural drawings) they had no choice but to rely heavily on the CODI architect. Unfortunately, the designer was not available at that moment so people had no choice but to wait.³

As an architect, I volunteered to work with the residents to find a solution to these problems. Based on discussions with NGOs and communities leaders, we arranged a design workshop. Around forty-five *Chonglom's* dwellers attended to create the drawings and scale-models of their future dwellings. After the workshop I continued to work with several participants who wanted to elaborate their designs. Although I could not help them to produce the final product - building blueprints - because of my economic and time constraints.

In contrast to *Chonglom*, the *Bangramard* community had several meetings with the CODI architect and a new dwelling was already designed. Due to *Bangramard's* location in a rural conservation and agriculture zone, only a single house was given permission in this area (GGWG 2006: 7, 61). A single two storey house was proposed. Although a dialogue between residents and the designer had taken place on four occasions, the design was still far from agreed. I found that the issue was not about the design but poor communication. People could not understand the architectural drawings and they did not know technical jargon. What people imagined about the house was not what the architect intended. The design was revised again and again and they blamed each other. As a consequence, they felt dissatisfied with the collaborative process.

Here, the scale-model of the house was constructed as a means of helping future residents to better understand the design. Various architectural elements, obtained mainly from the proposed design of the CODI architect and derived from additional interviews, responds to the stated needs of dwellers as well as observations of their

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previous homes. This information provided more choice and flexibility which presented greater opportunity to meet dwellers' needs.

Collaboration between researchers and those researched was conducted in order to better understand the issues in the squatter settlements and developing solutions to these. This method is called 'participatory action research'. These collaborations led to the exchange of knowledge between architectural designs techniques and an in depth understanding of the inhabitants' lives and context from participants' experiences (Stringer 1999: 10, Stoecker 1999: 884). Such activities consolidated our relationship, which made the investigation of their way of life and future dwelling much more convenient. Moreover, this gave me a chance to contribute something to the settings I studied.

More permanent house and a huge debt

People in both communities were not keen on improving their informal houses because their tenure was so uncertain. Their living conditions and future were insecure particularly considering their inability to make long term plans. This precarious pattern of life was given some stability when they got a land lease for thirty years. Many of them confided in me that they did not really want to move into the new dwellings. However, when considering the future of their families, especially their children. They did not hesitate to join *Baan Mankong*. *Onn's* expression illustrates this idea, she said:

Many friends asked me, do I regret destroying this home? I simply say 'yes, I really do'. But it is worth it. If it can be used in exchange it for thirty years of permanent tenure, I accept that. My daughter is just eight years old. If we did not attend the project [Baan Mankong] and the SRT suddenly need the land back, I have no idea where we would go.

Onn (36 years old), Bangramard resident, 9th October 2008

In addition, when they are able to legally access infrastructure their expenditures for water and electricity decrease.⁴ As well, when they secure a permanent house their quality of life and standard of living are also improved. The 2005 *Baan Mankong* report examined this point. They found that after communities are given access to basic infrastructure, members tend to increase site maintenance and overall cleanliness. The communities' environments were found to be more aesthetically pleasing and ordered. Moreover, personal and property security also improve (Mongkonchaiaranya 2005: 3-6).

On the other hand, this project also forced the participants into great sums of debt. Although many families agreed with the programme's obligations, residents were concerned with housing debts that they are obligated to return monthly within fifteen years, including the thirty years land rental fee. People who were not able to save as much money also worry that the amount they are able to secure by loan may not be enough for building a new dwelling. They may be indirectly forced to borrow much more money from other sources with higher interest rates.⁵ These commonly cause the resident stress. The following statement from one resident in *Klong Bang Bua*⁶ who complained in the *Siamrath* press (2009) presents the resident's stress:

Our current dwellings are still fine for us. If we build the new ones, not only will we have to dismantle them but we also must go into

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debt. Nowadays, we already struggle with our limited income. Whoever is satisfied to join the programme, let them join but do not force us.

The new house may be a wonderful product of the *Baan Mankong* programme. However this investment also leads to a large debt which the residents have no choice but to confront. It causes them a lot of pressure and long term stress. This is a significant reason why many of squatters hesitate to participate in the programme.⁷ Strategies for reducing participants' debt should be given much more concern and resolutions implemented.

New dwelling: New image

While many others in Thai society seem to scorn squatter settlements, it is the place many dwellers call home. The meaning of home for squatters may not be different from the homes of the elite or middle-class. It may be a private place where each family member can come together. It is the place in which they freely unite on their own. These activities not only respond to their requirements (Lewin 2001: 361), but also create a sense of belonging (Cooper-Marcus 1995: 188) and enhance the sense of autonomy within the home. Although the conditions of informal homes of squatters are inferior in comparison to the permanent homes of higher strata people, a considerable number of its residents confess that they love to live in their informal homes. For the poor, meanings of it are much more than a shelter. This is well illustrated in the account of *Noi* who is living in a very small house with her husband, mother and four children:

I remember the day I got it [the building]. There are not any walls. It was a shack. [...] At the moment I have no money to improve it but I need my family to live together. I brought my mother and my children to see. It is so small and not wide [2.5 x 6 metres]. I asked them "can you live here" and they said "yes". We slept side by side that night. [...] The physicality of it is insignificant. For me living together is the essence.

Noi (45 years old), Chonglom resident, 14

December 2008

Figure 2: Present condition of Noi's home.

However, the squatter communities are always seen pejoratively by outsiders. The given settlements have been considered as a significant source of drugs and the dwellings of criminals; as such squatters are continually threatened with the threat of eviction (Chientong and Witayasomboon 2009: 12, HDF 1992: 9). They are also considered an eyesore of the city. Hence, the first distinct policy in the 1960s was slum elimination in order to maintain the physical appearance of a well-ordered and

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beautiful city (Pornchokchai 1985:13). Negative assumptions within Thai society exclude the people and cause them to suffer about their own being. The precarious condition of their environment is cheapened by others' lack of understanding and other prejudices. While the threat of eviction directly leads to physical damage, minimal respect from society towards them continually corrodes their mental and self-esteem. Although recently the government's action has changed towards slums and eviction threats have decreased, the negative attitude still exists in Thai society. With these negative attitudes which slum dwellers unavoidably confront, they wish to eliminate such unsightly scene of the slums in order to ease their daily life in the city. An attempt to change their built environments does not only signify improvement of their housing to meet social standards of acceptance, but also yields a better status and self identity. Owning a permanent house on secure land is desirable as they believe it will give rise to many positive impacts both their physical and mental well-being.

In the investigation by Rhabibadana (2007), which focused on the adjustment of squatters' worldview and attitude after having a house in the *Baan Mankong* programme, discovered that the squatters were very proud to have the new legal house. This is something they never dreamt they would have. The study is summarised here: *'having a permanent house significantly raises the community's status from the fringe, in which is called through many disrespectful names, to the developed community. Its dignity is increased equally or more than other neighbourhoods'* (Rhabibadana 2007: 2-3). One interviewee's account in such a study is presented as a sample of the attitude changing:

It [community] used to be slum, but now it is a house. In the past when we went back home, we were afraid to say we live in Kao-seng [the name of community]. People might look down [or] have antipathy. However, recently we speak proudly that we live in Kao-seng. We speak louder than ever before.

Source: Rhabibadana (2007:

3)

The new dwelling impacts on individuals' attitude as well as the identity of such communities. They derive pleasure in their new found self-worth and feel that their status has moved upward as their dwellings are equivalent to those of others in other neighbourhoods of the cities. The image of the house can represent status. It also can be, *'a way of rising up the social ladder and ability to acquire and conform to accepted tastes* (Dayaratne and Kellett 2008: 60). The new community and the new buildings are selected to replace the squalor of the squatter settlements and their informal homes. This is done in order to increase respect in society as well as show that they are not a slum anymore.

Housing appearance: The conflict of similarity or diversity

An argument about the appearance of a new house among the *Bangramard's* dwellers took place while the house was being designed. They faced a significant dilemma. The community had to make a decision regarding the appearance of the houses of every new homeowner.⁸ The question was whether each house could be built differently or whether they should all look the same. A considerable number claimed that if the houses were similar, the community would appear ordered and beautiful and it would not look like a slum. In contrast, some community members argued that the houses be constructed in different sizes, shapes, forms or materials but that they could also be ordered and beautiful. They commented further that the

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community should concern themselves with the residents' real needs and familial financial situations rather than just the community's appearance.

There are two noticeable issues that can influence the similarity or dissimilarity of houses' appearances. Firstly the residential zoning regulations the zone defines the housing types. For example, the *Bangramard* community mentioned earlier located in a green line zone can build only a single detached house because it is a rural conservation and agricultural area (GGWG 2006: 7, 61). In contrast to this, people who live in *Chonglom* - a brown zone or a dense residential area - have many more options. They can construct single detached houses, twin detached houses or row houses (GGWG 2006: 5, 10-11). Secondly, due to the restricted permissions process for securing residential planning permission, residents try to avoid this process as much as possible by only submitting one or two architectural designs for permission. If dwellers agree to use different designs, each family must request the planning permission individually. If they employ only one design, they can request permission together. This, however, causes them to build the houses in the same shape and form.

However, the most significant issue here relates to community agreement because it directly affects the aforementioned factors. When people confront these problems, they always have a meeting and their solutions often result from these engagements. With this point, they may use different designs in accordance with differing planning permission requirements, if most of the members insist on doing so. The similarities or dissimilarities of the dwellings are only one result of such collaborative and collective processes.

On the one hand, people who support the idea that new houses should be constructed according to the same plans gave the reason that the orderly built form can shift the view of the slum to an image of a harmonious community. It represents the achievement of development and improvement. The following account from *Onn's* father is an example of this:

If each family built the house to their preferences - one builds one type while the others build another - I think the whole picture of the community would not be beautiful. But if we make them look similar, when others (people outside the community) see it; they will admire us. Our community is close to public road. It will present our identity. If our community is well-ordered and beautiful, it can be a good example for others.

Onn's father (62 years old), Bangramard resident, 9th

October 2008

At this point, *Yamchoa*, the leader of *Bangramard* added that inversely the same feature - unintentionally planned homogeneity - can spontaneously take place by working, designing, discussing and making agreement together among the residents through a long participatory process. It also can reflect their close relationship. She mentioned:

The houses all look the same because we all work together. We live in the same community. Our opinion and agreement are the same. It shows our relationship. [...] We gradually make it. We design it. We create it together. This is not an idea from one individual but it is from thousands and thousands meetings we had. Where people can ask what they want to ask. In which they can deliver the designs they want to deliver. Because we discuss a lot, because our views have come to coincide, [that is why] the appearance is the same.

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*Yamchoa (48 years old) community's leader, Bangramard, 14th
October 2008*

At the end of the day, the majority of the community members agreed to use the design of a two storey building sent for residential planning permission. The major reason which underpins this engagement is that they want to build the new houses as quickly as possible. They started to fight over the land rental agreements, which consumed ten years of peoples' time until participating in the design of a new dwelling. Moreover, some inhabitants had already dismantled their houses and temporarily move into rented rooms elsewhere because their homes located in areas where new buildings are proposed. Most residents did not want to wait too long for the permission because they were afraid that using more than one design would delay the construction of the house.

On the other hand, people who disagreed with the idea of uniform appearance argued that the community should be concerned with other impacts the dwellers may confront after constructing the houses rather than focusing only on the aesthetic features of the house, rushing to requesting planning permission and constructing these. The design which most people prefer may be unnecessarily big and expensive for some. This leads to extra expenses that some must pay for features (i.e. floor space) they do not really need. This type of disagreement is represented in the dialogue between *Pa-umpa* (who is partially paralysed) and me:

Pa-umpa: Indeed, I don't want to move to there [new house]. I would like to live here [recent home].

Rittirong: Oh...Why? The new house is better isn't it?

Pa-umpa: How is it better? I prefer a one storey house. I don't want two storeys. It is difficult to go up and down.

Rittirong: You can build the one story house, can't you?

Pa-umpa: No...no...they [the majority] told me to build the same two storey house. I would build a one storey and I will stay at the back of the house. I will let someone rent the front for selling things. I can't go upstairs. If I really want to go up, my right hand can take me. But it is impossible for me to go down. The left half of my body can't move.

Rittirong: Um...

Pa-umpa: I have no children. They already passed away. There are only two people - me and my husband. A one storey house is enough. I don't want to be in debt. I wouldn't want a beautiful house. I also don't use the upstairs. The house would consume too much wood, too much labour [and] too much money.

Rittirong: Different people have different needs.

Pa-umpa: Yes. But you know if our houses are not all the same, they [the majority] will blame me. Its proportions would not meet their standards. When they said it like this, I can't make any argument.

*Pa-umpa (58 years old), resident of Bangramard, 23rd
February 2009*

Pa-umpa and her husband must put more energy into earning money to build the two storey house. Although only the one story dwelling better fits to their lifestyle and their needs, the community's commitment to one design forces them to invest more money in their new house. It can be summarised from this conversation that the different needs, number of family members and the affordability must be taken into account in

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the process of designing the houses and in the decision making process regarding the design.

Although the decision regarding the design has already been agreed, the conflict among community's members still persists. The process of securing a new house may quickly proceed further from the design stages to the construction stages, but it also created this new problem for some families which, of course, would affect more or less to the whole community, particularly in terms of economy.

Outside influence: Another conflict of housing appearance

Beside the aforementioned community issues, there are also outside factors which influence the similarities and dissimilarities of the built form. They are divided into two main aspects: level of participation and the lack of understanding between the outside facilitators and the community members.

Participation is the main concept that the *Baan Mankong* programme emphasises. As mentioned earlier, it gives people the power to fully organise their own community while various outside agencies within the cities act as consultants (CODI public relation section 2008: 14). As such many actors are invited to be involved with the programme and the community. Collaboration among them is managed and facilitated by the CODI agencies.

Baan Mankong is a colossal project whose goal is to upgrade two hundred thousand units by 2011 (Sirilaksanaporn 2008: 44). While the number of housing units the CODI agencies have to deal with is large, the number of facilitators, particularly architects, is small.⁹ As a consequence, the participation concept in the design process is difficult to achieve an operative level. In order to make the design process more efficient, some have focused less on participation. For instance, one house design could be utilised by many communities, where the architect designs the house instead of the people, and the diversity of people needs are ignored. *Thongchai* explained constraints of the CODI architect:

The quantitative policy that we promise the government affects our work a lot. If we need full participation in every detail and if our goal is that the community manage and examine everything by themselves, making them understand all of this requires a large amount of time. [...] The work is done with just some level of participation [not full] because the numbers [in the community] are very high. [...] CODI architects could not collaborate intimately with the community. We cannot intimate engage with the community because we also take other roles. We have to plan, arrange, and coordinate with others at the same time.

Thongchai, head of CODI architect section, 23 December 2008

As mention in the first issue, outside agencies also participate in the community in some regards. The understanding between such agencies and the residents is another issue that affects the built form and the image of the community. With regards to the community's identity, the *Baan Mankong* programme enhances this issue by providing a budget specifically meant to generate a *Baan Mankong* identity (CODI 2008: 48). It is meant to enliven, "the visual character of the new community" (CODI update 2008: 4). Nevertheless the word 'identity' itself is ambiguous. It could be interpreted as having different meanings by different actors. Such vagueness of meaning led to the misunderstanding and the conflict regarding the built environment

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between the agencies and the residents. It is not clear in the CODI's documents, 'what identity is'.

In practice, at *Bangramard* it was proposed by outside agencies to create the community's identity through its architecture. Given the surroundings, the community is considered as having a high potential to create an attractive architecture. However the proposal is not clear for the residents. The leader complained:

They [project consultants from academic field] would like to create identity [for us]. They visited and mentioned that the community is close to the floating market. It surrounds by many old orchards. [and] A lot of ancient houses are around here. They said it can establish an identity. [...] The academics often propose something like this but they didn't clarify what it is. They just say we could make identity. I think their identity will cause us to spend a lot of money.

*Yamchoa (48 years old) community's leader, Bangramard, 14th
October 2008*

In addition to this, the CODI architect designed new houses for them by using two mono-pitch roofs abutting each other in the same form (Figure 3). He proposed this design and persuaded that this built-form represents the new image of this community. However some dwellers resisted.

Figure 3: (left) The scale-model of the new house which was proposed by the architect

*(right) Typical Perng-Maa-Ngaen in Thailand, Source:
www.siamensis.org/oldboard/4662.html*

The mono-pitch roof in Thai is *Perng-Maa-Ngaen*. *Perng* is commonly understood by many Thai as the temporary building with a shed roof and *Maa-Ngaen* illustrates the action of a dog which is raising its head and looking up. The proposed roof was simply perceived as two temporary buildings attached each other. There was an immense dispute between the residents between those who agreed with the architect

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and who disagreed. *Onn* said this to the residents the day that the designer proposed this design:

I remembered he [the architect] tried very hard to propose the identity through this roof [she showed me the scale-model] but people do not get it. It looks like a gable but it is not a gable. It is a zigzag. People didn't understand why the form must be like that. He explained to us for more than an hour. He stated that this is our community's identity. Someone asked him 'why aren't you using a gable, the normal roof?' He tried to describe further that this roof also provides good ventilation. Wind can come into the house. The house will not be hot. Oh... He explained a lot. People still half agreed and half disagreed.

Onn (36 years old), Bangramard resident, 9th October

2008

People who preferred this design agreed that the building would look modern, beautiful, and generally remarkable. A considerable number also appreciated that the building would stay cool because of the ventilation scheme. On the other hand, as many dwellers disagreed with this character, they interpreted it negatively, namely in response to the form as well as the name. Some dwellers considered using this roof for their dwelling as inappropriate because it is popularly use for temporary building. They wanted to build a permanent house, thus constructing such a roof would suggest instability. They did not want to live in temporary houses anymore. Moreover, other unfavourable interpretations such as a separation (from the roof appearance), waiting (from the action of the dog), and incompleteness (from its form) were also expressed. The following dialogue delivers these feeling of disfavour:

Rittirong: How about this roof? Do you like it?" [I presented her three sorts of roof. I ask these questions after showing her the scale-model of design that the architect proposed.]

R-sim: Waiting...no, I don't want it. It is not good. The old saying said the 'Maa-Ngaen' is waiting. It [good fortune] won't arrive. It is true believe me. Is there anyone that wants it? It is not beautiful. I don't want it. I don't like it. It looks like a guy who was born incomplete. Like a person who has half-half [asymmetry], he lacks something, he is not perfect. A roof should be like this [points to a gable roof]. We have used this for a long time.

[Her neighbour was walking past, so she asked her to see the scale-model.]

R-sim: Hey...hey...Mon! Do you like this roof? It is our new house.

Mon: [Mon looked the scale-model and replied softly] "No...It is not beautiful.

R-sim See...[turned to talk with me] Its not only me who doesn't like it.

*R-sim (65 years old), Bangramard resident, 25th
December 2008*

Finally, this proposed roof style was refused because most residents, especially the older, insisted on using a gable roof for the new houses. A decision was made and the architect was informed in a later meeting. The dwellers clearly stated that they did not comprehend well the word 'identity', but to what extent do the outside agencies understand its meaning? Attempting to create the new housing image and the community's identity by using the domestic architecture as a representation must

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take into consideration how people interpret and understand the word 'identity'. Further than that it has to clarify clearly beforehand what identity is.

Discussion

Although the *Baan Mankong* programme succeeded in developing a standard housing model in many communities and change squatter settlements to become legal communities, some shortcomings arose which were the result of the policy itself. While a huge number of housing units across country can call attention to and secure a large sum of money from the government, this certainly impacts the quality of community development. They may rush into the participation process and generally remain ignorant of the real requirements of the participants. This is particularly the case with regards to two significant issues which this paper concentrated on: financial and social aspects.

Financial aspect

The greatest concern of squatters when they make a decision to join the programme is the enormous debt they must take on. During my survey, one significant strategy for reducing the loan was discovered which is commonly proposed by the squatter themselves. It is the method of gradually consolidating funds for their new house while they are both living in and working on the house. This is suggested in place of the dramatic change from their informal dwelling to the new building.

Based on discussions with some dwellers who proposed this idea, they explained that the house does not necessarily need to be newly built and finished within a short period of time. They would prefer to gradually construct and collectively develop the house depending on the money they have. Likewise the interviewee in the study of *Onndum* says this regarding the idea:

I am not sure about my income. I would like to build the house without paying instalments. The house should be built bit by bit with the money I have. When the money runs out, I will earn more to develop it. Personally, I don't want to go into debt. Indeed, I want to attend the programme without debt. My secure housing is that I have no debt.

Source: Onndum, Boonmatayat et al. (2007: 2-44)

The longitudinal study by Kellett (2005) in which he returned to investigate the same case study over a period of time presented the benefits of gradual consolidation of squatters' dwellings. His case study showed that the temporary housing materials are steadily replaced by more permanent materials in later stages of living. While residents develop the house, it also improves their quality of life. He also mentioned that consolidation can lead to a higher income (e.g. renting room to another) and the extra money in turn further aided the improvement of the housing conditions (Gough and Kellett 2005: 245).

However, some residents are concerned that if everyone does this, their community will still look like a slum. They are afraid that some dwellers will use temporary materials (e.g. advertisement boards, used tins) to construct the house again. In contrast to this, people who proposed this idea argued that community conditions have already changed. In the past, they did not want to improve the house because

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they could be evicted at any time. They did not want to invest in permanent materials or acquire housing elements that would meet the social acceptance because of they did not have ownership (Dayaratne and Kellett 2008: 60). But today the security tenure is very stable at least for thirty years. They believed that everyone would need to make the house liveable, beautiful, and of course make it a home. Under such consolidation processes, it is possible that the dwellers and their dwellings would develop together, *“over long periods of time through everyday dwelling and care”* (Dovey 1985:42).

Social aspect

Rhabibadana (2007: 5) pointed out that after having a new house and permanent living status; people felt that their social position shifted from lower-class to middle-class.¹⁰ The study was also concerned with whether feelings of status would impact to a change of dwellers' attitude, taste, and behaviour. This may change their pattern of living from dependent upon groups to become more independent ways of life like other Thai urban middle-class. Each family must concentrate more in its income to pay its debt; as such their way of life may gradually become more individualised.

The class adjustment is also conveyed through their new housing. Characters of *Mubanjatsan*¹¹ (private housing development), *“where [there] are conspicuous symbols of the middle-class lifestyle based on consumption, indulgence and display”* (Askew 1994: 174), are imitated to represent their new social position. Such characteristics are frequently mentioned and proposed by the squatters during the planning process of the community's layout and design of the new houses. Dividing equally the plot sizes based on a grid layout of standard blocks is an example in which this can be, *‘read as conventional, and have the potential to develop and become the same as other parts of the city’* (Kellett 2009: 4), while the appearance of the houses, particularly using the same facade can be, *‘read as a crude barometer of the social standing and economic health of the occupants’* (Kellett 2005, 35). The aim to replace this squalor image by imitating and using as a model the designs of *Mubanjatsan* is to transform their image to meet standards of societal acceptance.

However, it has been found that many significant aspects of their way of life are not a high priority in such design processes (e.g. sharing allotments to reduce household expenditures and employing common production space). It is the facilitators' responsibility to encourage the acknowledgment of such issues. The new housing plots may be designed according to the number of members of a household, the income of a household, and necessities of their means of life. The house may be built in different sizes in order to meet their demands and allow them to improve in accordance with the changes and/or developments of their future situations.

Source: Chanoknart Na Ranong 1 September 2009

Figure 4: Images of Mubanjatsan in Bangkok

Figure 5: New houses in Banramard (under construction)

Source: <http://www.thaisecondhand.com>

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Although the idea of gradual consolidation cannot immediately eradicate the slum picture in many squatters' sensibilities, it sustains the dwellers' long term economy status such as those who cannot access mainstream jobs or who face difficulties earning more money. Building a new community could also mean that there is a need to investigate community values (e.g. close relationships among community's members) and encourage people to realise the worth of such values. In order to reach these goals, the residents are not the only significant actor, but the designers as well. The account from *Thongchai* can summarise the role of architect.

How shape, form, function, and size of their dwellings will appear depend on what we [architects] put into them. We should encourage them to understand themselves first. Before that, the architect must build the relationship with community and must understand the community also. It is not necessary for the houses to have the same appearance, but we have to make them realise their own identity. If we want them to build the new community and give them only money without supporting by architects, I believe the houses will look similar. It will become a new Mubanjatsan [private housing development] or it will become another slum. This is not participation at all.

Thongchai, head of CODI architect section, 23

December 2008

Conclusion:

This article has reflected on the participatory design process of the latest housing programme for low income people in Thailand which mostly focuses on the operational level. It concludes here by that joining the *Baan Mankong* programme, the residents have an opportunity to construct self-made environments. The collective process of working within the squatter communities in hand with outside agency collaboration can bring a sense of ownership and social respect to the residents. Holston (1991: 462) and Kellett (2009: 7) concluded in their own work that the constructed images and identities through the aesthetics of the dwellers' built environments moved the inhabitants away from an image of homeless squatters. This image is being replaced with one of prosperous citizens, which helps to disseminate the disrespectful perception of the inhabitants which has been associated with them for a long time. Their image is being transformed.

However, considerable preventative forces from both inside and outside the communities take place during the participatory design process and prevent them from building new homes. The freedom of community self-selection, the freedom of budgeting one's own resources, and the freedom to shape one's environment of which is the existential value of the informal settlement (Turner 1968: 357), is being limited by official control, regulation and especially by the project facilitators' lack of understanding. There are also forces from people themselves. Creative action, energy and confidence to produce own new environment cannot be fully expressed. They are prevented by inside issues which are embedded within them. Based on the insecurity of their past and experience as an illegal dweller, fear of authority still haunts these people. Building the houses which look the same can better show the power of the group helping to counter those that subjugate them. In addition, an ideal social order through grid layout is a result of not only equal distribution of plots among members who have less order in their life, but also the desire to create the

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place as close as possible to dominant formal housing areas (Kellett 2009: 3), in order to raise their status to more closely resemble others in society. Though the meaning of their home at this stage may remain far from a truly autonomous place (Dovey 1985: 46), it of course helps to integrate these people as formal residents of the city.

Notes:

- 1 'Slum See Paak' (in Thai) or Four Region Slum Network (in English) was officially established in 1998 by slum dwellers who had common problems, such as the threat of eviction. They are supported by an NGO named COPA (Community Organising for People's Action). They aim to advance the housing right where security of tenure is their first priority. Improving slum dwellers' quality of life, developing their livelihood, and mobilising policy for social justice are their secondary objectives (interview Lui, NGO, 30 September 2008).
- 2 The others got shorter contracts which it must be renewed every three years for instance. More details about land lease contracts in other situations between the SRT and the residents can be found in the Baan Mankong cities (BMC 2005: 14) or at <http://codi.or.th/baanmankong/index.php?option=articles&task=viewarticle&artid=19&Itemid=3>
- 3 During my fieldwork, participation in the dwelling design at *Chonglom* had not started. The CODI architect who takes responsibility in these two communities told me that there are twenty-eight communities in a queue urgently waiting for design drawings and around forty communities across country are engaged in the participation process. He is the only architect who takes care of all these settlements (16th November 2008).
- 4 Within many informal settlements, residents buy water and electricity from their neighbours. They must pay two or three times of the actual cost (Group interview *Chonglom* leaders 18 September 2008).
- 5 This incident took place in the *Soi Pasuk* community who joined Baan Mankong in 2003 (Onndum et al 2007:2-38).
- 6 *Klong Bang bua* is also a member of the Baan Mankong programme. They consist of fourteen sub-communities who live along Bang Bua canal (Sirilaksanaporn, 2008:40-41). Some of them are in the process of constructing dwellings. Many of these are almost finished.
- 7 Another reason I found is that many residents who do not attend the programme regard themselves as temporary residents of the city. The money they earn is sent back to their families in their home towns typically located in rural areas.
- 8 *Bangramard* negotiated a settlement to share the land with the SRT. Although the land owner allows them to continue living in the location they previously occupied, the area they granted is smaller. The agreement states that people must build the new dwelling only on the provided areas and have to dismantle their informal dwellings, which are widely scattered across the whole of the land, after the new houses are finished. The rest of the land will return to the SRT.
- 9 The head of architectural section told me that there are only seventeen architects (in December 2008) who take any kind of responsibility in these communities across the country (Thongchai, head of CODI architect section, 23 December 2008).
- 10 As elsewhere, the middle-class in Thailand is not easy to define. This paper will employ the term based on Englehart (2003: 255-256) in which the middle-class people are defined as the urban white-collar workers, professionals and business owners.
- 11 *Mubanjatsan*, or housing development in English, is usually built with developers' investments. Dwellers will move after it is completed and can make payments while living there. The house designs within these estates generally have the

same character and same plot size. It is occupied primarily by middle-class people.

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