
Interstitial metamorphoses: informal urbanism and the tourist gaze

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Received 16 January 2012; in revised form 13 March 2013;

published online 29 October 2013

Abstract. Marina Warner has argued that it is in the interstices between inconsistent cultures and ideas that creativity and new paradigms—metamorphoses—arise. In cities of the developing world, the most prominent instances of interstitial spaces and practices relate to questions of urban informality. In one sense, informal settlements insert themselves in the cracks and gaps of the formal city; in another sense, there are the frictions where informal space rubs against the formal, with interstitial practices arising in the cracks and gaps that such confrontations produce; informal economies emerge, spaces and practices are intertwined and intersecting. In yet a further sense, informal practices can invade even the most emblematic spaces of state and formal economy. So, a question: where might one seek signs of metamorphosis—new forms of creativity, new ways of thinking, transformation to a different social condition—in these various forms of informal/formal intersections and interstices? We explore this question with regard to public spaces and political events in Bangkok. The argument of this paper is that a new and potentially transformational level of invasion comes with the searing gaze of global media and tourist intrusion.

Keywords: metamorphosis, assemblage, formality, informality, interstitial practices, Bangkok

Introduction

“[T]ales of metamorphosis often arise in spaces (temporal, geographical, and mental) that were crossroads, cross-cultural zones, points of interchange on the intricate connective tissue of communications between cultures. . . . in transitional places and at the confluence of traditions and civilizations.”

Warner (2004, pages 17–18)

In *Fantastic Metamorphoses: Other Worlds* Marina Warner (2004) speculates on transformations and the underlying energies and processes whereby one motif, representation, or idea generates another. She concludes that, on the evidence of history, the transformations that mark great creativity and leaps to new modes of thought and life will most likely occur in those places and times where different cultures collide and all ideas of immutable identity come apart. Metamorphosis, or life-as-change, runs counter to the idea of the unique, singular nature of identity and its defence. We search, therefore, for those ‘transitional places’ or places of becoming where one might detect the emergence of a new urbanism, politics, and aesthetics. The Warner insight is intriguing but does not suggest a methodology for dealing with the questions we pose. While this paper is at one level an exploration of insertions and subversions of present Bangkok, it also explores methods for bringing critical reflection to such disruptions and instabilities—for theorising them. We begin with a limited survey of the literature that attempts to theorise deep social change (Bloch, Benjamin, Foucault, Nederveen Pieterse, de Certeau, and Deleuze and Guattari), which we see as throwing some light on

Warner's idea of interstitial metamorphosis as being epistemologically and ontologically consistent.

Ernst Bloch (writing in 1932) coined the term 'nonsynchronism' to identify the phenomenon of living in a range of different times at once but in the same place, where the montage of new and old held potential for the emergence of new hybrid meanings (Bloch, 1997), producing a "coexistence of realities from different moments of history" (Jameson, 1994, page 307). Walter Benjamin proposed the parallel concept of the dialectic image where one element of an image deconstructs another and both are thereby called into question. Benjamin was interested in the ways juxtapositions of difference in urban life could reveal something of a larger truth—spatial logic could reveal what a linear logic could not, through a 'dialectic of awakening'; for Benjamin dialectic images compel discourse (Buck-Morss, 1989, page 262). Foucault's theory of heterotopia suggests something similar: "heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault, 1986, page 28). Jan Nederveen Pieterse has more recently drawn attention to the way that globalisation produces an interpenetration and hybridisation of modes of production and organisation. Drawing on what Michael Mann (1986) calls 'interstitial emergence', he argues: "Furthermore, not only these modes of organization are important but also the informal spaces that are created in between, in the interstices. Inhabited by diasporas, migrants, exiles, refugees, nomads ..." (Nederveen Pieterse, 1995, pages 50–51). Michel de Certeau likewise suggests that, as the institutional order of power in space becomes more totalising, it also becomes more available for subversion: "The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order" (de Certeau, 1984, page 108). Resistance insinuates the very structures of a hegemonic order.

Our focus in this paper falls on the interstices between and intersections across the formal/informal divide, particularly as it plays out through streetlife and informal settlements that infiltrate so many cities of the Global South. We suggest that theories of assemblage deriving from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) can be fruitful in this regard. Thinking about urban informality and informal settlements has remained largely within binary logic where the formal and informal tend to erase and undermine each other. Yet current thinking suggests an intertwining, intersection, and integration of such modes of organization (Roy, 2011). Most typical are the 'between conditions': formal neighbourhoods becoming informalised through infiltration and encroachment; and informal settlements becoming formalised through upgrading and other forms of hierarchical control. Thinking, analysis, and action need to move beyond the somewhat essentialised concept of 'informality' to deal with these dual conditions. Assemblage theory (De Landa, 2006; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) can be characterised in several primary ways. It is based in methods of 'schizoanalysis' involving an assumption of split identity wherein the subject of analysis is always multiple, where the whole emerges from the interactions, intersections, and interstices of parts. This entails not only an epistemological shift to a different interpretation of the same thing but an ontology of difference—a focus away from things and identities and onto the interconnections and flows through which they are assembled; as Deleuze puts it:

"What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is symbiosis, a 'sympathy.' It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind" (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007 [1977], page 69).

This is critical urban theory that seeks to take the Foucaultian critique of micropractices of power further and to incorporate productions of desire as well as discipline. It opens up the spatial imaginary in a critical manner, connecting actual with potential (McFarlane, 2011).

While assemblage thinking pays attention to categories such as class, ethnicity, and gender, it is antireductionist in eschewing singular root causes. Both material and discursive dimensions of the city are seen as fundamentally important, but the focus falls on the intersections between them rather than on the reduction to causes. The material states of cities (buildings, bodies), the practices performed within them (informal constructions, resistances), and the regimes of statements produced (signs, discourses) are all important as both engines of change and emergent outcomes.

Assemblage is a radically multiscalar approach which seeks to understand synergies between scales and opposes any reduction of small-scale to large-scale change. Top-down thinking privileging change from above is countered by a focus on understanding the relations and dynamics between scales as sociospatial change spreads up, down, and laterally (Dovey, 2011; 2012). This entails an attention to microspatialities that may seem like a fetish, but it is here that one finds the micropractices of power embedded in the politics of everyday life. Multiscale thinking is inherently interdisciplinary and requires that we think across the fields of geography, urban planning, urban design, landscape, architecture, art—overturning any hegemony of a particular field. Assemblage analysis is empirical, not in the sense of crunching data but in paying close attention to the sensations and experiences of everyday urban life.

In the sense that concepts are tools for thinking, means rather than ends, assemblage theory embodies a highly promising toolbox for rethinking the informal/formal urbanism conundrum. A range of twofold concepts that resonate with informality/formality are deployed—rhizome/tree, smooth/striated, network/hierarchy, minor/major (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Dovey, 2010, page 22). Informal practices are rhizomic in contrast to the tree-like structures of urban regulation and planning; they involve minor adaptations and tactics in contrast to the major strategies of master planning; network connectivity in contrast to hierarchical control. Importantly, assemblage thinking focuses attention on synergies, liaisons, and alliances between such seemingly opposed forces. It incorporates informality as fundamental to understanding the production of cities.

The rhizome is a key element of assemblage thinking that resonates with informality but also suggests a model of logic and knowledge acquisition opposed to the classical and hierarchical 'tree' of knowledge. Described as acentered, ahistorical, nonsignifying, without organising memory or central automation, the rhizome is found in lines of flight and flows of desire rather than points of order. It breaks from the logic of the assembly line having no beginning or end—like the state of metamorphosis itself (Berger, 2004). Assemblage is a multiplicity of constant folding, unfolding, refolding. Because the city is an assemblage, there are interstices between its ever-multiplying elements; the destabilising, subversive, dissenting, rhizomic infiltrations into these interstices are the mechanisms of metamorphosis.

While informality penetrates the most formal of structures, and the most informal of settlements become formalised, there remains a chasm between a city of elitist dreaming and a real life of the streets; between middle classes who view the city from high-rise towers and elevated toll roads, and an informal city of hawkers and squatters often hidden beneath the expressways and behind the facades of the formal city (Dovey and King, 2011). One way of articulating this condition is through the various relations between the state, the middle classes, and the urban poor: flows of desire that stabilise around coalitions of interest while often riven with contradiction. The state relies on the image of a well-ordered city for its legitimacy, while visible evidence of informal settlements and practices undermines this sense of order, signifying both a weak state and the problems of the poor. The informal economy is untaxed—a form of economic subversion—yet the state also relies upon this low-wage labour to sustain the economy. The state thus turns a blind eye to an informal

sector that it needs yet does not wish to see or to service. For the middle classes, the slums are primarily seen—if at all—from car windows, fast-moving trains, corporate towers, and high-rise housing enclaves, at a distance from which they may be imagined away. As with the gaze of the state, this ‘unseeing’ coexists with middle-class dependence on cheap labour. This coalition of interests between state and middle classes can extend to imagining the slums away in another sense since the land occupied by informal settlements is often prime development opportunity. These are sites of negative symbolic capital where escalating land rent can produce windfall gains if—and only if—informal settlements are erased. Such a coalition can also share an underlying fear of social uprising.

For the poor, informality is a primary means by which poverty is managed as tiny market niches and opportunities are exploited, materials are scavenged and assembled. It is not the distinctions between formal and informal that matter so much as the alliances, hybrids, and synergies that connect them; this is a cofunctioning formal/informal assemblage. AbdouMaliq Simone (2010) uses the metaphor of the crossroads or intersection to describe the ambiguities of urban streetlife that sustain a multiplicity of highly adaptive practices that are mediated locally through a constant exchange of gazes and what he terms a ‘politics of anticipation’—playing the game of urban life from within its interstices, seeking opportunities for informal insertions into the formal economy. There is dependence on both the scraps from the formal economy and the opportunities of informality, a desire to keep the microflows of money, ideas, and materials moving. The opacity of the assemblage is a key resource within it, and the capacity to move between visibility/invisibility is a practice of power for a range of different actors. The exchange of gazes between classes is asymmetric—informal settlements are unseen (and unentered) by the middle classes yet the poor are often employed in the shopping malls, gated communities, and corporate enclaves. The poor see the whole city while the middle classes see just a part; only one half knows how the other half lives and one result is a production of envy without an equivalent production of compassion.

While characterised by local complexities that may be opaque to outsiders, such streetlife is also saturated with the global effects of multinational capital flows, supply chains, markets, migration flows, and geopolitical struggles. Our interest here falls on the intrusions of tourism and particularly its encounter with and taste for urban informality (Dovey and King, 2012). This is an aestheticisation of poverty that both feeds and feeds off global outrage at the condition of the poor. All social fractions are confronted by the new form of globalisation represented in the tourist onslaught and its disturbing gaze, disturbing because it insists on seeing what is routinely unseen. The indigenous relations of state and middle classes to the poor as outlined above begin to shift, crosscut by altogether new perceptions. We now seek to explore some of these issues through the case of Bangkok. Our methods here are multiple and based on over a decade of periodic fieldwork and analysis (Dovey, 2008, chapter 7; Dovey and King, 2011; 2012; Dovey and Polakit, 2010; King, 2008; 2011; King and Dovey, 2012).

Bangkok

During the latter half of the 19th century, the Siamese monarchy initiated a programme of superimposing a weak network of roads on a city of water—river and *khlung* (canals) (Smithies, 1993). Such roads, *thanon*, were initially interstitial in an aquatic metropolis; today the relationship is more likely to be seen as reversed, with still-surviving *khlung* becoming marginal to a land-based city. The *khlung* were mostly excavated or at least altered in the 19th century, often by prisoners of war from the Muslim south as semi-slave labour who were then informally permitted to settle along the *khlung* they had been compelled to dig. Such settlements have expanded massively through internal migration, their ambiguous land tenure often with a source in sweat equity. Houses are commonly made of recycled materials, dilapidated, often on stilts in the water or its marginal marshes. They are for the most part invisible from the

roads yet tourists have long taken boat trips along the khlong in search of a ‘real Bangkok’ of simple lives, photo opportunities, and remnant floating markets (King and Dovey, 2012). There is also a nostalgic rediscovery of that ‘real Bangkok’ by the local middle classes and we see a production of new floating markets and khlong tours for both tourists and local elites. The khlong have been filled by the nostalgic dream of authenticity and an anthropological search for origins (Cuttaleeya and King, 2007).

Bangkok has a complex history both as coloniser and as colonised, yet caught in the myth of Siam not having been (politically) colonised (Baker and Pasuk, 2005; Terwiel, 1983). The city has long been a site of intersections between the dominant constructions and imaginings of Thai identity and its ethnic others (such as Lanna, Lao, Malay, hill tribes, Burmese, and Sino-Thai). Intersecting all of this are new transnational forces of tourism and mass media bringing new opportunities for investment, yet opening the state and society to global scrutiny. Global tourism and media inevitably prise open and destabilise the ordered world of state and middle class; they can also provide a global audience to the officially hidden, the oppressed, and the dissident.

There are other superimpositions, on other dimensions of reality. The city is peppered with temples (*wats*) and shrines; alongside corporate towers and condominium blocks, in front of other buildings and sometimes atop them, there will also be a miniarchitecture of spirit houses—protecting the land or honouring the ancestors. In almost every house there will be a small shrine, garlands and amulets on almost every vehicle, amulets on the body (King, 2011, page 74). This is a landscape attesting to the reality of an immanent spiritual world understood to subsist beneath the surface of ephemeral, physical space. This spiritual world is one of multiple meanings. Thai Theravada Buddhism would embrace a realm of pure virtue and wisdom where any idea of a deity is redundant; yet its far-distant origins in Hinduism and a multideity universe permeate a Thai ontology. The royal ceremonies of a Theravada Buddhist monarchy are Brahman. An animist past remains omnipresent, nature is alive, enchanted, and there seems to persist what Morris Berman calls a “participating consciousness”: merger, or identification, with one’s surroundings (1984, page 2).

Another realm of both ontological and spatial ambiguity arises with gender. A dramatic increase in the range of gender categories can be observed in Thailand since the mid-1960s, as “new male and female same-sex [*gay king, gay queen, tom, dee*], male bisexual [*seua bai*] and male-to-female transgender/transsexual [*kathoey*] emerged in public discourse and formed the basis of new homosexual and transgender identities and cultures in Bangkok” (Jackson, 2003; Sinnott, 2004). In Thailand there has been no historical movement for state control of sexuality (Wyatt, 2002, pages 57–61). So whence this explosion in gender categories? The answer, Peter Jackson suggests, is in media and *farang* (foreigner) exposure. While there are earlier accounts of cross-gender and cross-dressing issues, the tourist gaze beginning with the American Rest and Recuperation horde during the Vietnam War produced the proliferation of gender identities in the cabarets, bars, and streets, and a sensationalising media of the 1960s and 1970s brought the proliferation to public attention. In a Siamese culture characterised by androgyny, polygamy, and an absence of proscriptions, such behaviours and identities would have been unremarkable. The intrusion of Western media brought these ‘oddities’ to attention and into discourse, transforming both the public space of the city and the indigenous culture itself. In traditional Siam, prostitution would neither be paraded nor condemned so long as surface appearances were not disturbed (Morris, 1994, page 32). The tourist invasions changed all that with the go-go bars, raunchy displays, and street prostitution (Askew, 2002, pages 253–255).

In summary, Bangkok space presents as a world of ambiguities and multiple meanings—aquatic and terrestrial, material and spiritual, uncertain genders and uncertain identities.

Ambiguities and double meanings are unstable: they can fly apart; they can also be infiltrated by new, ambiguous meanings and identities—in the interstices. A primary interest here is in the effect of ‘outsiders’—the modern media but especially the gaze of the farang, whether tourist or expat resident. What are the relations between social change and the intrusions of this penetrating global gaze? As intrusions proliferate into the interstices of space and society—new ideas into a world of ontological uncertainty, new peoples into uncertain identities, new communities into a world both aquatic and terrestrial, new enterprises into hybridized economies (of which more anon)—how does that world change? Does it *metamorphose* into something radically different and new as argued by Warner? While we explore this question through the space of Bangkok, it is ultimately a question of universal application. Our method is to take specific cases of transformations, not to ‘explain’ them but to expose something of the complexity and ‘density’ of the subversions that they harbour. From the great diversity of Bangkok space and our own experiences of that city over several decades, we select four cases for discussion—each a site of overlapping stories within the city.

Case 1. Ratchadamnoen

Modern Thailand can be viewed as uneasily wedged between rival polities: a persisting monarchy, Western-style popular democracy, yet with the constant threat of military dictatorship (Reynolds, 1987; Terwiel, 1983). This unease can be detected in the ways institutions and symbols of power have become organised along Ratchadamnoen Avenue. This is a grand royal processional boulevard leading from the old palace to the new, and a former king’s emulation of modernist, imperialist Europe (Peleggi, 2002a) (figure 1). The initial overthrow of the monarchy in 1932 conferred a form of parliamentary government that was inserted, spatially, into the most emblematic and prominently sited of royal monuments: the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall (King, 2011, page 26). The military (and somewhat fascist) dictatorship that soon displaced the fledgling democracy constructed a signifier of the democratic dream they had destroyed, in the form of a Democracy Monument which interrupts the royal boulevard at its centre. When the dictatorship built the National Assembly as a new parliament house in the early 1970s, it was placed between the throne hall, royal museums, and former palaces and effectively screened by them (Koompong, 2008). The current office of the Prime Minister, Government House, is on a side-street off Ratchadamnoen and screened by its trees.

Ratchadamnoen, grand avenue of the political, military, and royal display, has traditionally been the locus of political protest by the democracy movement led by students and the middle class, with most notable eruptions of violence in 1973, 1976, and 1992 (Dovey, 2008, chapter 7). The next major such events in 2008 were of a different flavour; the middle-class crowd donned yellow shirts, the symbolic colour of the King, to display opposition to the democratically elected Taksin Shinawatra regime. The yellow-shirts, however, were increasingly dogged by others in red shirts, aligned with the rural-poor majority and urban immigrants from the marginalised (erstwhile Siam-colonised) provinces. Ratchadamnoen is the premier venue of invasion and dissent. In its northern reach is the Makkawan Rangsang bridge where the police and military traditionally block access further north. In the 2008 yellow-shirt (elitist) uprising, defences collapsed and Government House was occupied for ninety-eight days. A stage was built for music, rallies, celebrations, and antigovernment rhetoric. While reactionary in intent, the yellow-shirt uprising was creative in producing a new form of politics specifically tailored to the international media.

The Democracy Monument, despite its fascist beginnings, had long become the focus of the democracy movement and the key site of the vast demonstrations and epochal events in 1973 that ended a military dictatorship. Close by on Ratchadamnoen is a highly problematic monument to the ‘martyrs’ of 1973: deaths are regretted, yet the photographic

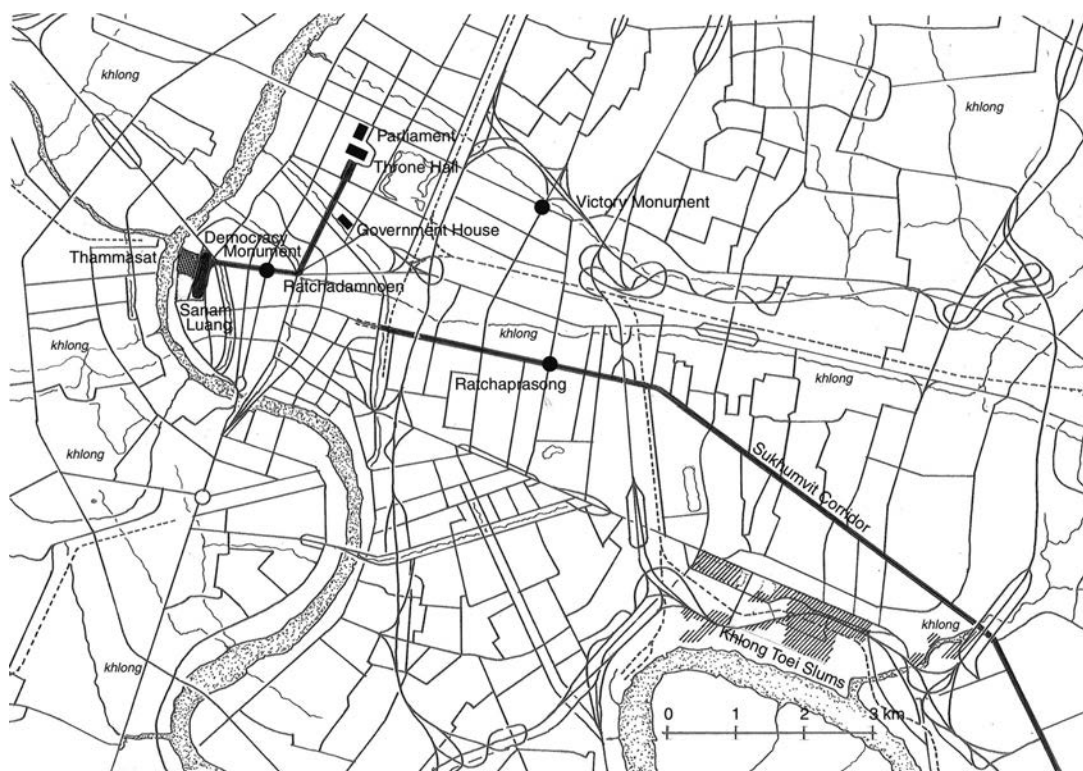


Figure 1. Inner Bangkok, indicating sites referenced (source: R King).

displays and their rhetorical captions put the blame for such losses on undemocratic students (Peleggi, 2007, pages 189–192). Most notably the monument omits any mention of the far more outrageous carnage in 1976 when the campus of nearby Thammasat University, the intellectual home of the democracy movement, became the site of the massacre, burning, and raping of its students by right-wing and royalist paramilitaries (Peleggi, 2007, page 101). This campus and the vast adjacent open space of Sanam Luang have been key parts of this landscape of dissent. Sanam Luang is the grand ‘royal field’ or ‘King’s ground’, site of the most auspicious of royal ceremonies and frequent assembly point for the rallies that would then proceed along Ratchadamnoen to the Democracy Monument. This is a space haunted by unspoken memories that insert themselves into the conscience of a nation that would expunge such memory.

The assembly of forces, actors, actions, and desires here can be represented as in figure 2 showing the various relations between state, poor, and middle classes outlined earlier. The red-shirt versus yellow-shirt rift, eminently suited to colour television and the more recent use of colour in daily print media, has played out since 2006 in a state that oscillates between red and yellow. After a 2008 ‘judicial coup’, a royalist government came to power and the yellow-shirt link (connecting the elite/middle class to the state) seemed to be in place but soon disintegrated. The 2011 democratic elections brought a more overtly populist, red-shirt-supported government; again the links soon disintegrated and instability returned. This mapping of forces can be seen as what Deleuze and Guattari term the “abstract machine” or “diagram” of the immanent productive forces of an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, page 142). The tourists (that is, us) do not stand outside this assemblage but rather circulate through the interstices as one of the more productive forces within it.

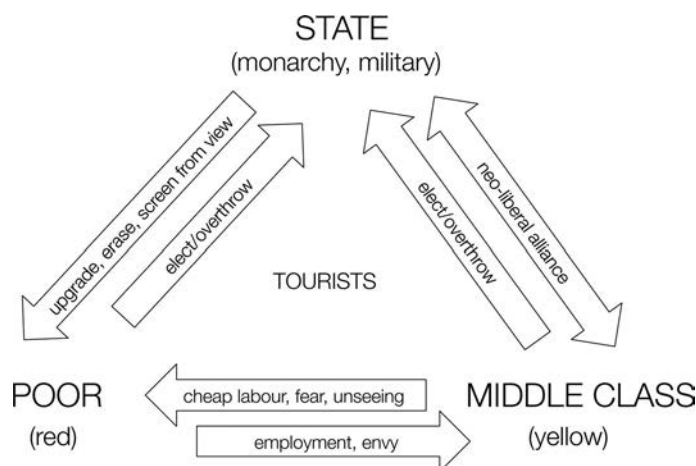


Figure 2. Bangkok: a diagram of actors, actions, and intentions (source: K Dovey).

Case 2. Khlong Toei

Although informal settlements run like sinews through the body of Bangkok, the vast domain of the Khlong Toei slums presents as something especially alien and confronting to any imagining that would pose elitist politics or the contests of Ratchadamnoen as the 'real' Bangkok. There are still remnants of a canal called Khlong Toei but the term now describes a district of Bangkok that encompasses its most expensive residential precinct and also its most notorious slums. The former is especially represented in the high-end condominium blocks with grand views into the great expanse of the Khlong Toei slums.

The Khlong Toei district, fronting the Chao Phraya river, became the locale for the relocation of Bangkok's port beginning in 1938 and completed after World War 2 (Askew, 2002) (figures 1 and 3). The low-income refugees who built it and others who continue to operate it and its linked industries were, in the Thai manner, permitted to settle on unwanted land behind the port. That land, however, is no longer unwanted: the Port Authority, its legal owner, sees its commercial value in the present metropolis. The slums are mostly unvisited, unseen, and undiscussed except when popular media highlight their reported squalor, vice, and crimes. Such reports have two, albeit opposed, effects: for some middle-class and elite fractions this will build support for Port Authority intentions to forcibly evict the poor from their misery; reformists and their NGO allies see a 'cause'.

As Bangkok's most famous slum, Khlong Toei has engendered a whole subculture of reformers and activists along with an industry of 'slum improvement' and welfare-focused slum tourism (Bello et al, 1998, pages 110–112). There are innovations in forms of tenure, new systems of microfinance, and new approaches to education, community health, and health care. Tenure is an especially difficult issue: the public-sector National Housing Authority, long engaged in upgrading here, has directly leased 61% of the slum land from the Port Authority. The rest was cleared for Port Authority use although squatters occasionally reappropriate it and the authorities again attempt clearance.

Ambiguous forms of tenure in Khlong Toei remain and the struggle occasionally escalates into violence. In October 2008 the Port Authority contracted Legal Professional Co to clear the area of the Khlong Toei wet market. There were months of bitter conflict and standoffs, rent increases to force the vendors out, then thugs and hooligans (often employed from another slum) and, finally, killings. In March 2009 the guarding screen of religion was invoked in the form of an ad hoc shrine to mark the murders, to protect the market, and to mediate between poor vendors and poor thugs. All these agents—Port Authority,



(a)



(b)

Figure 3. [In colour online.] Shades of the Khlong Toei slums: infiltrations under an elevated highway and along a railway easement (source: R King).

Legal Professional Co, vendors, thugs—were caught in various crevices of a system over which no one had control and all in a searing media gaze.

These practices of slum resistance—the reformism ‘industry’, new tenure experiments, innovations in microfinance, education, health care—also need to be seen against elite programmes and ideologies. First is King Bhumibol’s ‘sufficiency economy’ philosophy: we should all desire no more than is sufficient for a fulfilling, simple life, returning to an older, more sustaining, less ruinous economy (Pasuk and Baker, 2000, pages 193–216). The King’s ideas emerged gradually from the rural assistance projects that he began sponsoring in the late 1950s to counter the rural assistance focus of the insurgent Communist Party of Thailand. From 1988, however, this burgeoned into a programme of rhetoric that served to gloss over the worst effects of neoliberal economic policy (Anand, 1999; TDRI, 1999). A second elitist movement was the OTOP (One Tambon [village or district] One Product) programme of the Thaksin Shinawatra regime (2001–06) to give ‘development’ money to rural communities in return for electoral support (Pasuk and Baker, 2004). Such elite programs also intersect with broadly based ideas and ideologies such as the ‘Buddhist economics’ or ‘Dhammic socialism’ of Buddhadasa Bikkhu (1906–93) (Nantasarn, 2006, page 21; Peleggi, 2007, page 113). All three of these movements (sufficiency economy, OTOP, Dhammic socialism) can be seen as innovations arising from radically different perceptions of the unresolved interstices between an elitist, capitalist, formal economy and society, and the ‘other Thailand’ represented in the depressed, more informal sphere of slum and rural poverty. It is the elitist failure to address *rural* inequality and deprivation that gives increasing light to the *urban* slums. While the worst of Western-style capitalism and Asian political populism might still run rampant in Thailand, they constantly intersect with these more radical ideologies, with the reality of both rural and urban poverty and with increasingly critical media scrutiny.

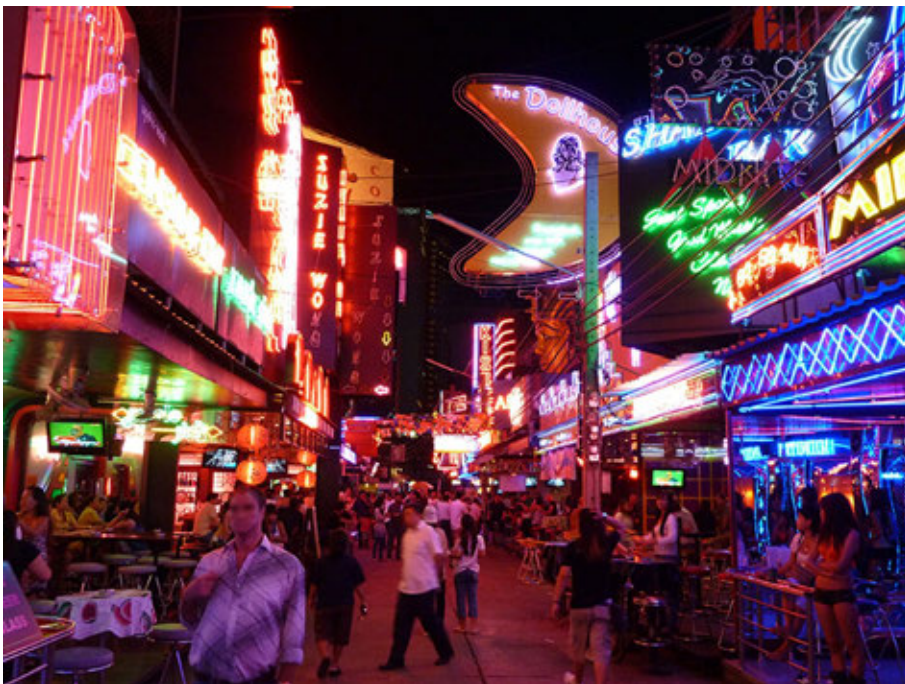
Case 3. Sukhumvit

Thanon Sukhumvit—Sukhumvit Road—began as the west-to-east armature along which Bangkok expanded in the 19th and 20th centuries from the old centre of Rattanakosin to become the heart of the city’s global economy. Sukhumvit is Bangkok’s street of riches and poverty, five-star hotels and shophouse slums, up-market malls and street vendors, royals and beggars; it is the focus of Western and Middle-Eastern tourists, both business district and heart of the informal, pirate economy (figures 1 and 4). Much of its activity is in its *soi*, laneways numbered in sequence as the city expanded, running off at various angles and constituting a vast, linear labyrinth of great complexity. There is also degraded, overcrowded housing throughout Sukhumvit and its *soi*, on the upper floors of shophouse blocks, in remnant khlong-side settlements, and in the occasional squat. These expressions of Bangkok’s underside supply much of the very low-income labour that props up the Sukhumvit economy; they also supply many of the entrepreneurs for both its informal and underground economies—the vendors, beggars, and prostitutes. The consequence of these intersecting economies is a zone of spectacle and attraction for the city’s millions of tourists. At the heart of this tourist district is Soi 4 (Nana): a zone of neon, pavement-side drinking, go-go bars, and an endless display of prostitution and gender transgression. Tourism in large measure becomes the consumption of transgressions and, thereby, is itself transgressive against elitist ideology of unified nation, transcendent monarchy, and Buddhist piety. Yet tourism is also the economic prop of the nation.

Sukhumvit’s underclass is paradigmatically interstitial. To attempt conversation with the vendors, beggars, prostitutes, pimps, standover men, bike riders, *tuk-tuk* (motorised rickshaw) drivers, and the like can be illuminating. In hundreds of such encounters over a decade, a question of “where do you live?” was mostly answered with ‘Sukhumvit’—Bangkok’s most upmarket and expensive locale. The real answer is in the interstices of the



(a)



(b)

Figure 4. [In colour online.] Sukhumvit as interstitial space: intersecting economies, realm of consumption and spectacle (source: R King).

tourist, expat, and royal realm, in the overcrowded upper levels of dilapidating shophouses, old offices, buildings awaiting redevelopment, abandoned houses from earlier eras, ruins, and squats. Another question would be where do you eat? Again, *locally*, from the vendors of cooked food on the sidewalks at night and early morning (when the more up-market vendors of tourist trinkets have vacated). It is never necessary to ask them where they work, for the conversation will occur as they work their beat or their spot on the sidewalk. The vendors,

stall-holders, and beggars do *not* insert themselves in the protected locales of case 1, above, except to join an uprising.

There are yet more layers to Sukhumvit interstitiality. While the prostitutes (of multifarious genders) may be swift-of-foot and vanish into the crevices of the soi as the police descend, illegal vendors and stall-holders are not so mobile. Nor can they easily avoid either the police or the gangs and their standover thugs collecting ‘taxes’ to pay for protection (Dovey and Polakit, 2010; King, 2011). Then there are the tourists: while it is the tourists’ spending that enables the panorama of Sukhumvit, they are forever farang, alien.

The paradoxically opposed, inconsistent infiltrations of development and dilapidation largely account for the forever-changing complexity and muddle of Bangkok space. Sukhumvit emerges in the interstices of the most global and the most local; in the interstices of rival yet mutually dependent economies from a hybridised mode of production (Nederveen Pieterse, 1995); meshing the flows of desire of the postmodern hyperspace (Jameson, 1991; 1998) with the struggle for survival of the urban poor. How is this gargantuan transgression and its venality to be reconciled with the benefits it brings to the nation as well as to the urban poor? Sukhumvit is many spaces, many realities—the quintessential heterotopia (Dehaene and De Cauter, 2008; Foucault, 1986, pages 23). One of the more fascinating of urban places in any city, it has generated a significant literary and cinematic expression (King, 2011, pages 100) and offers insight to a much broader set of urban conditions. In Thailand it tends to compel some redefinition of the nation (possibly even of monarchy and religion) in the disorienting, schizophrenic sense argued by Fredric Jameson (1991).

If we follow Sukhumvit for five kilometres to the southeast from its beginnings, we encounter another Bangkok where it intersects with the sprawling Khlong Toei slums. The Soi 71 area in the 1990s was fairly uniformly three-storey shophouses in economic decline. Since about 2000 two simultaneous but radically opposed infiltrations have occurred: first, as the demand for very low-rent housing began to exceed supply in the Khlong Toei slums, the very poor colonised the derelict shophouses of Soi 71 and its neighbouring soi. Second, the opening of the elevated skytrain along Sukhumvit in 1999 provided high-speed access, and developers of high-end condominium towers moved in on the devalued shophouse rows. Soi 71 is now the site of an extraordinary intersection of the poorest and the richest, often apparent in billboards depicting desirable lifestyles with images of paradisiacal condominiums and gated communities, mounted above the slums they are to replace (figure 5). These giant wish images are countered by a proliferation of small images of Mae Nak—Bangkok’s most renowned, loved, and feared ghost—whose shrine is nearby, invoked to bestow misfortune on the property developers, especially those threatening the locally popular Phrakhanong Market.

Case 4. Ratchaprasong

If we return along Sukhumvit to its beginnings we find the Ratchaprasong intersection, a major node framed with the city’s most upmarket shopping malls and plazas, greatest concentration of five-star hotels, embassies, and the emblematic Erawan (Brahman-Hindu) shrine. Here the elevated skytrain, which now covers the boulevard for most of its length, peels off into a branch line with a spaghetti junction of flyovers and pedestrian conduits. For those who can afford it, the new railway provides fast access up and down the length of Sukhumvit together with a new range of views into and across the city and its soi. At Ratchaprasong the aerial infrastructure places the public space of the intersection (normally choked with traffic) in the full glare of the global gaze.

In April and May 2010 this intersection became the focus of political struggle. Before this time demonstrations by both yellow-shirts (urban elite) and red-shirts (mostly aligned with the rural poor) had focused on the more symbolically potent sites along Ratchadamnoen Avenue as outlined in case 1. In September 2006 a yellow-shirt-endorsed military coup ousted

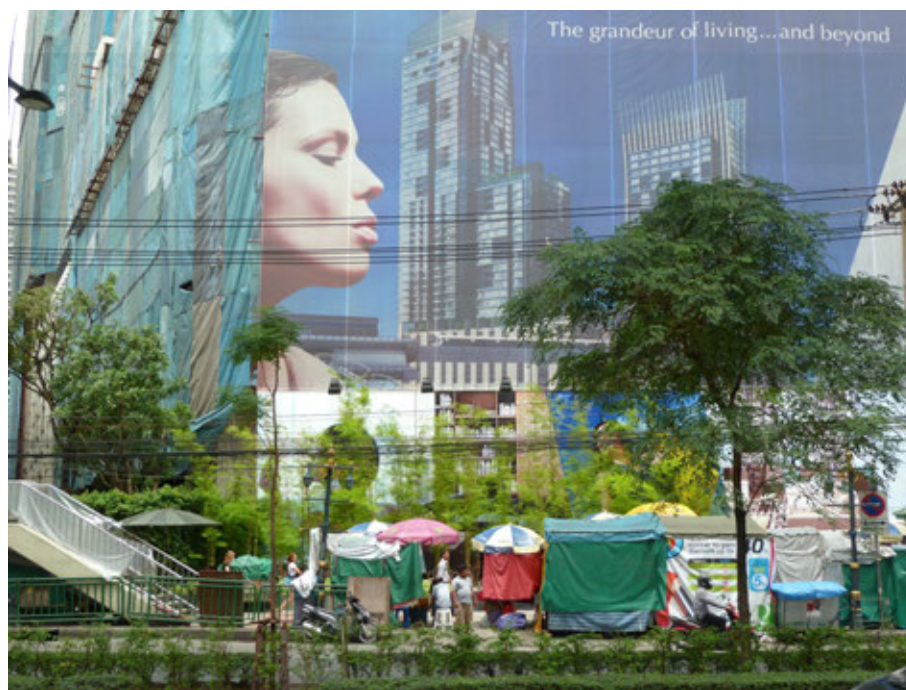


Figure 5. [In colour online.] Sukhumvit: slum, informal street market and a billboard image of something better (source: R King).

the democratically elected, allegedly corrupt, and red-shirt-supported Thaksin Shinawatra government. A further election reinstated majority rule leading in turn to further yellow-shirt uprisings in 2008 with the occupation of Bangkok's airports, closing down the tourist industry until a judicial coup initiated a yellow-shirt-supported government. The year 2009 saw red-shirt counterrallies of increasing size and vehemence, peaking in March to May 2010. This insurgency was notable initially for its mobility. The rural poor had access not only to the city but to motor scooters and mobile phones that led to an ever-moving spectacle of red crowds that were able to move up and down Ratchadamnoen and across the city, around the Victory Monument, television headquarters, and commercial districts. At the height of the uprising the focus moved from Ratchadamnoen to Ratchaprasong where the red-shirts captured and held the intersection and surrounding streets, closing it to traffic for some five weeks in April and May 2010.

Ratchaprasong was an astute choice of location. While the symbolism of the Democracy Monument, the King's ground (Sanam Luang), and the Prime Minister's office had long lent potency to various movements for change (case 1), Ratchaprasong reflected a different strategy that focused on flows more than static symbols. They had learnt from the yellow-shirts' success in closing down the airports but they now seemed to use rather than exclude the tourists. The intersection is the primary entrance to the Sukhumvit district whether by car or public transport; to control it was to control those flows and indeed to capture the attention of global tourism and mass media. In the middle of the intersection the red-shirts set up a provisional stage surmounted with a banner in English saying "Welcome to Thailand— We just want democracy" (see: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/hfwh/4535057130/lightbox/>; also <http://www.travelblog.org/Photos/4969568>). The first part of this acclamation echoed a tourism marketing slogan repeated on billboards all over Thailand. The second part piggybacks off the first as a direct address to the farang (foreigner): "please come, and support democracy"; perhaps "welcome to the real Thailand". The exposure of the demonstrators to global media became (for a time) a form of safety zone, a buffer against the state's attempts to remove or

harm them. When government media portrayed the red-shirts as ‘terrorists’ to pave the way for violent eviction, a banner appeared on the stage and so in Western media, proclaiming them “Peaceful protesters, not terrorists”.

While the occupation of Ratchaprasong opened a window to the glare of mass media, it substantially closed the flows of capital in Bangkok—middle-class shopping, business, and entertainment became largely paralysed. On 19 May the army counterattacked, casualties were heavy, and the city centre was torched—most notably the adjacent Central World Plaza shopping mall—tarnishing the symbols of prosperity, globalisation, and modernity (figure 6). The gutted mall at Ratchaprasong was swiftly covered up behind vast hoardings proclaiming happy themes but not before the image was captured on film and marketed globally by ‘Thailand Delights’ (see: flickr.com/photos/thailanddelightscom/5273324271/). The importance of images in this context needs some comment. Jackson (2004) has suggested that the politics of modern Thailand be understood in terms of a ‘regime of images’ deployed to orchestrate a *performance* of modernity and build legitimacy for both domestic and global audiences. This modern ‘performative state’ has its roots in the premodern ‘theatre state’ (Jackson, 2004; in a similar vein Peleggi, 2002a; 2002b) with a focus on court ritual. Modern Thai politics is, overwhelmingly, theatre, and nowhere has this been more powerfully manifested than in the theatrical uprising by yellow-shirts in 2008 (case 1 above) and then in the merging of rock concert and mayhem at Ratchaprasong in 2010. The red-shirts in particular harnessed their protest to this wider performance of modernity, moving it from older urban theatre to centre stage, where it was framed by glittering shopping malls and aerial railways with a captive international audience. The impact of new media—mobile phone, Internet, Facebook, Twitter—transformed both practices and impacts of insurgency.

The colour coding (yellow, red) is a superficial expression of a series of deep divides in Thai society: within the capitalist market it reflects opposed media empires; socially it reflects the urban elite versus rural poor; ethnically the Thai versus Isaan-Lao; and for some it is military/monarchy versus democracy, also army versus police. Between these it is



Figure 6. [In colour online.] Interstitial spirits: the Erawan shrine at the torched Ratchaprasong intersection (source: R King).

difficult to identify any interstitial zone, yet there are interstitial classes. The first interstitial class is also colour-coded: yellow and red give orange, the colour of the jackets worn by the army of motorcycle-taxi riders (figure 7). They are at the bottom of the transportation hierarchy, yet without them the city could not function. As they wait on street corners, weave through the traffic, soi, alleys, and communities, they gather information that is then passed on variously to police and gangsters. Both police and agents provocateurs will know of the assembling mob. Yet the orange-jacket taxi riders are typically refugees from the poor countryside; they are thereby also the reporters of events in the city back to the rural villages and red-shirt cadres; they are the essential intelligence service of the radical rural poor. They are interstitial in their colour coding, as a class, as a subeconomy, and in their communicative function.

The second interstitial figure is also orange, in this case the beautiful blazing saffron of the Buddhist monks who emerge every morning in almost every community in Thailand to engage in the exchange of offerings and merit with rich and poor alike. The monks serve as reminders of the immanent sanctity (and therefore equality) of all life and of the ideals of Dharmic socialism. Yet one does not see saffron mixed with the red or the yellow; the *wat* compounds in which they live have been largely spared the politics and the violence.

The final interstitial figure is the foreigner, the tourist, *farang*, the distanced observer—us. Most would gaze upon this uprising from high-rise hotels, offices, or trains like de Certeau's (1984) distanced observer. Yet down in the street, as well as on the banners, the foreigner is welcome. The most furious of dissenters will make space for the outside observer who may then transmit their grievances to a global audience and polity. The foreigner, who appears so totally global, occupies a crucial interstice between local and global, while the rural poor, who appear so local, have learned well to use the city and its interstices for their representational and spatial tactics. In the chasm represented by the burnt-out shells of Ratchaprasong, a new



Figure 7. [In colour online.] Interstitial colour: orange-shirt motorcycle taxi riders awaiting clients, under the sign of middle class imaginings and Thai “billboard modernity” (Basche, 1971, pages 256) (source: K Dovey).

consciousness at many levels and perhaps a new Thailand is emerging as new congeries of power assemble. This is the sort of evolution—metamorphosis—that Warner’s argument could refer to. Certainly a new politics emerges, mediated by new classes (like the orange-shirts, always interstitial) and new technology (the mobile phone, the blog).

Metamorphoses

To conclude, we return to Warner’s concern with metamorphoses of which she suggests four modes—mutating, hatching, splitting, and doubling. We have already described aspects of Bangkok in terms of the mutation of different modes of organisation and production. Warner illustrates hatching with Leda’s seduction by Zeus in the form of a swan, from whose egg (in one version of the legend) is hatched Helen of Troy and a never-ending sequence of misfortune. Bangkok’s Sukhumvit is a constant display of Siam/Thailand’s impregnation by its own erstwhile colonies, now its invaders, and from the neocolonising hordes of global tourists and mass media. What is born from such intrusions, suggests Warner, will be surprise (Warner, 2004, page 18). The third and fourth of Warner’s modes of metamorphosis are splitting and doubling (the latter really a manifestation of splitting)—the horror of the *doppelgänger*, the ‘double walker’. At one level, this is the experience of being simultaneously in mutually contradicting scales of existence—as being both de Certeau’s eagle on high *and* the walker in the streets; as enmeshed in Bloch’s nonsynchronous world. The intruding gaze of tourists and media can come to double the vision of the indigenous observer who also begins to see the society distanced, from on high, and thereby to see its inequities, injustices, and monstrosities. Yet this indigenous observer is still also the walker (hawker, taxi rider, consumer) reproducing the world that now horrifies. The self begins to split under the alien gaze, to metamorphose. This, it would seem, is the condition of deterritorialisation, disorientation, and ‘schizophrenia’ identified by Deleuze and Guattari (1983; 1987). The subject is enmeshed in the interstices, here between genders, economies, meanings, ways of occupying space. This is the same form of metamorphosis that can beset the writer, investigative journalist, or artist in the movement towards the *avant-garde*.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that, while the rhizome arises out of capitalist logic, its effect is to undermine that logic and replace it through a new assemblage of fragments (new economies, new meanings). The idea that a spatial logic can undermine language is also the gist of Walter Benjamin’s argument about the *avant-garde* and the dialectic image. Sukhumvit is not a work of art yet its effect is that of the *avant-garde*—it outrages and overwhelms; it crosscuts elite and official imaginings of the city and it undermines both meanings and spatial practices. At a more direct level, while tourist interpretations of Bangkok are likely to be partial and mistaken, they are also likely to fly in the face of both elitist views of the nation as harmony and a middle-class ‘unseeing’ of poverty and exploitation. When the television documentary, investigative journalism or tourist happy snaps go global, there is a challenge to both elitist boosterism and middle-class delusion.

One is likely to be struck by Bangkok as being first a space of intersecting, incompatible, yet always interdependent economies—formal versus informal, Thai (royal) elite versus Sino-Thai, domestic versus global. Such an understanding would conform with the Nederveen Pieterse (1995) notion of articulation of modes of production as a principle of hybridisation. We can depict these modes as planes or surfaces. Though each constantly manoeuvres to infiltrate the territory of the other, there are also gaps—interstices—between different surfaces; new interests and practices are constantly being invented to occupy these interstices, in the process eroding and distorting the surfaces. It is the Deleuzian metaphors of rhizomic infiltration, of constant folding and unfolding, that can especially enable the observers of this political economy to describe what they are seeing. The assemblage is constantly coming apart and reassembling in new, always-already unstable forms. Because the spiritual and the

political fold into each other, which is due especially to the double role of the monarchy, the conjoined spiritual–political constantly undermines the assemblage. The spiritual can variously lend the assemblage political legitimacy or destabilise it. Practices of power—both strategies and tactics—emerge through a series of shifting alliances and conflicts between monarchy, military, media, the crowd, and a global audience.

While contingencies will always differ, these stories are far from unique—one would find similar spaces, memories, and repressions, particularly in Asian cities (Dovey 2008; 2010; King, 2008; 2009; Wu, 2005). The Ratchaprasong events of May 2010 can be viewed as profoundly subversive street theatre in a similar way to Beijing's 'Tiananmen Incident' of June 1989 (Wu, 2005). Ratchaprasong, however, is more global than Tiananmen, occurs in a less repressive society, and takes place at a later stage in the evolution of global media technologies. Like Tiananmen it engenders a global outrage that inevitably tears at indigenous perceptions and values. The outcome is metamorphosis of ideas and behaviours. Ratchaprasong can also be seen to represent a more general shift in the urban focus of political resistance from monuments of institutional power to nodes of global media and capital flows. This was also evident during the 'Arab spring' with its focus on Tahrir Square in Egypt and Pearl Square in Bahrain—both key nodes on the edge of older cities where the material flows of traffic can be arrested and global flows of images and ideas can be accelerated. This sociospatial assemblage is at once material and representational in a manner that resists reduction to textual analysis or modes of production.

In the end two urban interstices loom large: first, the gaps between economies and ways of life—between formal and informal, between wealth and poverty, between different urban morphologies and modes of production—whether seen from on high or on the street. Second, there are the gaps between what is seen and reported by the society's outsiders—its tourists and media commentators—and, in contrast, the official and elitist imaginings of how the city *should* be. It is in these gaps that one looks for the emergence of new dissent, resistances, aesthetic expressions, and, accordingly, creativity.

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