

The Bangkok Transition Workshop

June 14-31, 2009 in Bangkok

This summer workshop was an entry level, intensive, 'hands-on' 2-week course for planners, architects, and economists focused on the unique 'soi' fringe structure of Bangkok. Questions explored included: What is the growth process, from the rural soi to the modern city? What are the key drivers of growth? How can the soi frame provide the basis for a viable growth strategy? Students from Bangkok joined MIT students and others exploring city planning and the fringe development process. It was offered jointly by the BBA International Program of Chulalongkorn University and SIGUS-MIT. June 15-31, Bangkok, Thailand.



WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

***Transition* – From Rural Fringe to Urban Center**

This 'hands-on' multi-disciplinary course focused on the expansion of cities. The workshop studied Bangkok in understanding process, focusing on its critical fringe areas of future expansion. Growth options were explored from planning, architecture and economic perspectives, using innovative Google-based planning, field surveys, and financial modeling. The goal was to develop a rudimentary awareness of urban development for future professionals. The workshop was attended by advanced undergraduates and first year graduate students in planning, architecture, and related disciplines. It was offered jointly by the BBA International Program of Chulalongkorn University and SIGUS-MIT and took place in Bangkok, Thailand, June 14-31, 2009.

Urban growth is at a critical juncture

Recent serious studies have identified the critical urban growth projections for 2030: urban populations are expected to double, and area expansion is expected to triple. Moreover, expansion is expected to be largely low-

rise for relatively low-income sectors. This growth is equivalent to building all of the urban housing of the past 6,000 years within 30 years. Bangkok is expected to follow this pattern and to grow rapidly. There is no agreement on overall planning strategy, which opens an opportunity to explore and define tradeoffs with their implications on city form and growth. The unique structure of the rural fringe – the *soi*-system – is both a hindrance and an opportunity for guiding development. A good understanding of this development process is lacking, which could assist planners in developing growth strategy.

Interdisciplinary effort was fundamental

The workshop brought together a range of disciplines for exploring effective coordinated guiding strategy. Traditional planning and architecture fields were coupled with economic and engineering perspectives. Understanding ‘real-life’ process through field surveys was a key input. Intellectual constructs developed in absence of on-the-ground awareness are very limited in their efficacy, and must be rigorously tested and adjusted with ‘real-life’ experience.

Students were challenged

A key feature of the workshop was active debate based on the intensive field studies, supported by selected readings to broaden and deepen understanding. Students worked in teams and developed alternative growth scenarios derived from the existing fringe process. The workshop met daily for two weeks, with lectures, hands-on in-class exercises, field surveys, and supplemented with individual sessions with faculty. The workshop met everyday in the afternoons starting at 1:00 and often carrying over through 8:00 in the evening.

Opportunity for 29 students

The workshop provides an opportunity for 29 students at the entry-level of study. Twenty-one were drawn from Chulalongkorn University, eight from MIT and three from Berkeley in California.

Completion Certificates

Five student teams developed growth scenarios for Bangkok, building on the current *soi* transition process. The scenarios explored were: Finger growth, compact city, new towns, river expansion, and ‘mesh’ rural villages. In addition, each participant submitted a short paper related to the process of development. A ‘Certificate of Completion’ from BBA-Chulalongkorn University and SIGUS-MIT was awarded upon completion.

Faculty

The workshop was a partnership between Chulalongkorn University and MIT. Dr. Reinhard Goethert was the key instructor and heads the SIGUS Group in the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT. He is active in both teaching and consultation internationally, and has 20 years of workshop experience. Prof. Non Arkaraprasertkul, represented Chulalongkorn University and is currently a Harvard-Yenching Fellow at the Oriental Institute, University of Oxford, England. He has substantial experience in South-east Asia, and has written extensively on urban planning. Other faculty and local experts were brought in as resources for specific topics.

Chulalongkorn University BBA International Program

Chulalongkorn University has long been considered one of the country’s most prestigious universities. It has eighteen faculties and a number of schools and institutes, and is regarded as the best and most selective university of Thailand. The BBA International Program at Chulalongkorn is committed to Thailand, the Asia-Pacific region and the global community. It is the first undergraduate level program that is taught entirely in English at

Chulalongkorn University. It offers programs on International Business Management and Accounting, preparing students for international challenges.

SIGUS - Special Interest Group in Urban Settlement

SIGUS-MIT focuses on developing areas worldwide, and explores the new professionalism emerging for architects and planners. It concentrates on service, participation and non-traditional client groups. Workshops, short courses, research and outreach programs stress participatory methods in promoting affordable and equitable housing. Established in 1984, SIGUS grew out of the rethinking of method, practice, and teaching driven by the rapidly expanding informal sector in both developing and developed countries.