

# A CASE STUDY OF THE CONTENTION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY IN “MAHAKARN FORT” CONSERVATION PROJECT FOR TOURISM

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**Abstract.** This study aim to work out on the best solution of “Mahakarn Fort” Conservation and Public park project to provide green area and historical attraction for sustainable tourism in Ratanakosin Island. Bangkok’s oldest fortress may soon be confined to the history books. Remaining residents of Mahakan Fort, whose community dates back to the 1800s, have been told by the city to move out for the public park project.

The 6,400 sqm. of this area will be turned into a public park intended to be a tourist attraction. The whitewashed Mahakan Fort is one of two from 14 Forts surviving citadels that defended the old walled city. The octagonal fort is a picturesque, but the neighbor in village is more interesting. This small community of wooden houses has been here for more than 100 years, but since the mid-1990s it has fought the Bangkok municipal government’s plan to demolish it and create a ‘tourist’ park.

The community blocked progress and even proposed the development of another tourist attraction: a Li-gair (bawdy dance-drama) museum honouring the dance tradition that traces its creation to a school located here in 1897. Some of the homes were eventually demolished, resulting in the park you see today. But behind the fort many others remain.

For 24 years, residents in Mahakan Fort have been living with an uncertain future as governor after governor tried to proceed with the park project. Last month, however, an eviction notice was put up a final call for the remaining 57 families living here.

**Keywords:** Mahakarn Fort, Public Park, Mahakarn Community, Living Museum, conservation, Sustainable tourism.

## INTRODUCTION

Today only two forts remain out of 14 (Fig.1) that were built more than two centuries ago. PhraSumen Fort is one of the remaining forts that was built during the end of the 18th century to protect Bangkok from possible invasions.

When King Buddha YodfaChulaloke (Rama I) ascended the throne as the first ruler of the Chakri dynasty in 1782, he decided to establish Bangkok as the new capital of the Kingdom. The capital was founded on the Eastern side of the Chao Phraya river in the Rattanakosin area. Because only a few years before that, in 1767, the Burmese had completely destroyed the old capital of Ayutthaya, the King had a number of fortifications built and canals dug out to protect Bangkok. PhraSumen Fort was built in 1782 as one of 14 forts (fig.1) of which only two remain today, the other one being Mahakanfort.

The King also had city walls built and a number of canals dug out that acted as a moat surrounding the city. With the Chao Phraya river protecting Rattanakosin in the West, **Brief Statement of the threat and conflict.** Ratanakosin Island Project is conceptual framework start on B.E.2478 focus on Ratanakosin Island conservation specify called “Rattanakosin Area” with the tourism promotion. According to Ratanakosin Area consist of the important historical places including the national culture. The concept of the conservation emphasize on the conservation and rehabilitation in King Rama V. moreover, The government office, community,

and other building will be rebuild for the development serve the conservation committee targets. Conservation and improvement of Mahakarn Fort is one part of this project as the master plan (Fig.2) have to remove the community out of this area and turn on the entire area into public park. Bangkok Metropolitan Administration has return back this land in B.E.2536 from the private sector and the royal property. Next, the community will be planed the transmigrant at Chalong Krung Sub-District, Minburi District under National Housing Authority. ( Ratanakosin Project, 1996)

In fact, the people was assisted only the land, the people must find the fund for their new house. The new place have no facilities such as schools, hospital, lack of transportation and far away from their working area. so the return back to Mahakarn Fort Community again.

The Community start a new negotiation with Bangkok Metropolitan Administration by requesting 1 rai of the land to build the regulated housing and volunteer of security guard by themselves, moreover, the people provide security guard 24 hours at the public park. The will return 75% of prepaid money back to BMA.

BMA. Confirmed the previous conception as in Rattanakosin master. The reason was the government official must work by the function and the law. Therefore, Mahakarn Fort Community submitted the request to the Administrative Court.



Fig1: The map show 14 forts location.

Fig2: Master plan of Mahakarn Fort conservation

BMA needs to follow 1992's royal decree but it's not true that we can't change the situation. In fact, if we look at history, there are many cases in which royal decrees were changed. I also see a degree of inequality in law enforcement.

Government-backed projects often receive special legal treatment, like the new Supreme Court building—Rattanakosin construction regulations limit buildings to 16 meters tall, yet the government allowed itself to build a 32-meter-tall building. Recently, the Marine Department has also been eyeing changes to regulations governing rivers as the government promotes its River Promenade project. For Mahakan Fort, it has been 24 years since the decree came out, and there are many studies—not just mine—pointing out how the original park project does not fit with modern needs.

The plot is dead space surrounded by a wall and the river, which does not make it a suitable or safe space for a park. There are two crucial groups that can change the situation now: the government's Rattanakosin preservation committee and the cabinet. The committee is actually overlooking Rattanakosin policy. They can reconsider the plan and propose a new scheme to the cabinet, who can then state a new royal decree to help save the Mahakan community. (ChatriPrakitnonthakan Associate Professor of Silpakorn University's Faculty of Architecture)



Fig.3:Mahakarn Forts and community are located at the center of the important historical place including with the national culture.

**Origin of conflict.** The government provide Mahakarn Fort improvement project and combined area for public park as one of “ Ratanakosin Area “. The project determine to move all of Mahakarn community. The mentioned community was interested as the historical initiated community, way of life, and ancient profession. The conflict between government and the people concerning the development strategic, historical value of the place(Fig.3) which the people has to reside in this area. The summary of the differ conceptual framework as follow

*The government concept:* The government want to remove the old house of the community to fulfill the concept for the conservation “Mahakarn Fort ” (Fig.4-Fig.5) and provide viewing around the public park for the people and tourist *The Community concept:* The people in the community don't want to move from this area they want to stay to conserve the cultural way of life as a living museum. From the reason mentioned above show the difference in conservation conceptual framework this was an original of conflict.

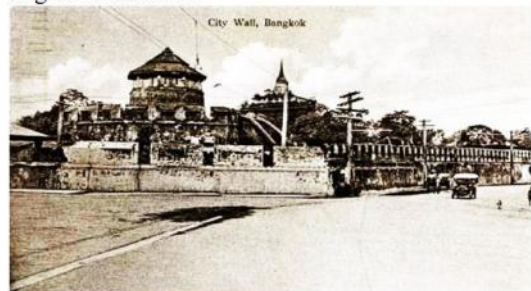


Fig.4:Mahakarn Fort in the past.

Fig.5: Mahakarn Fort at present.

Today, the BMA claims present community members have no original historical link to the area, since the original owners moved out when the BMA expropriated the land in 1992. The community, however, insist they are the descendants of families who lived in the area centuries ago, and who gave birth to a rich part of Thailand's arts and crafts heritage that includes Phraya Petchpanilikay, Thailand's first musical folk drama performance. (This is actually where the area's original name, Trok Phraya Petch, comes from.) Craftsmanship still exists in the area today, with locals making traditional-style birdcages and carving Rue Si Dud Ton (miniature statues of hermits).



Fig.6: Households originally located in the Mahakan Fort community

**Living museum.** A living museum, also known as a living history museum, is a type of museum which recreates historical settings to simulate past time periods, providing visitors with an experiential interpretation of history. It is a type of museum that recreates to the fullest extent



Fig.7: Members of the Pom Mahakan community and their supporters lock arms together in a symbolic show of opposition to eviction by the city. Photo: Matichon

### Is the living museum concept a good solution?

We all agree that Bangkok has a really sparse amount of public space compared to other cities. But Bangkok is also not like other cities. It has a dense concentration of old communities (fig.6), so whenever you decide you want a new public space that means it will affect one of these communities. The BMA just thinks about getting rid of people in order to create their vision of a beautiful city. But look at SaphanLek market. Getting rid of that market has resulted in a deserted space next to the canal which has been of no help to the city whatsoever. If the Mahakan model proposed in 2009 were to be attempted, it could change Bangkok's vision for public space development. The BMA should follow a development model which puts people first. Given this area's long history, it truly is a living museum."

**The Government final call.** On Mar 28, the BMA's Public Works Department set a notice sign in front of the fort wall telling residents that they must relocate from the area by Apr 30. Now, conservationists, environmentalists, academics and other communities have come together to help save the area from transformation into a park and remove all the community out of the historical site. Having fought eviction for more than 24 years, community representatives insisted they will not leave.

**Summary.** The movement of Mahakarn Fort Community (Fig.7) is one of the various examples encounter the conflict concerning land use for public park between people and the government. This is the only one option for government treats to the community serve the public area as the green space of the city. ( Nardsupa,1997) Bangkokian want to conserve the local historical area, did not like to destroy the ancient historical evidence of Ratanakosin and could not continue the community along with the green area and the conservation of historical architectural heritage. It has importance both physical and cultural dimension. On the other hand, people of the community suggest the improvement of both physical and cultural dimension. This is an alternative concept for the best solution of the conflict. So, the government should improve and decide for the implementation as follows;

1. Receiving the community suggestion on the development community residence as living museum
2. People participation in the final decision making will be conducted.
3. Compromise the concept of architectural heritage conservation and culture as harmony condition.
4. Provision public opinion for the appropriated conservation model for both side.
5. Suggestion the final conservation concept to the authority for the consideration.

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