From Silt to Shit:
The Past and Present of Post-Natural Bangkok

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Abstract
Using the Anthropocene as a guiding proposition, this essay offers a critical historical geography of post-natural Bangkok, and an equally critical assessment of present-day gentrification. One of the most interesting aspects of the recent literature on the Anthropocene is its geological approach to nature and culture. I borrow the notion of layer to convey the idea that contemporary Bangkok is the product of a process of material layering that may be traced back to the early nineteenth century. Contemporary Bangkok is here represented by Centenary Park, a green space under construction in the city center that is being marketed as a “great gift” to society. In line with my approach, I make an interpretive, critical analysis of Centenary Park and its immediate surroundings. The park is part of a next-generation, open-air shopping district, including upscale apartments, known as Lifestyle Center and Community Mall. Finally, I provide a critique of the concept of “hybridity” as a valid approach to both Thai modernity and the Anthropocene.

Keywords
Anthropocene, Bangkok, community mall, critical geography, historical geography, hybrid modernity
Introduction

I have been following the progress of a construction site for almost two years now. It is still partly in ruins: a vanishing grid of shophouses, known for its many car part shops, falling prey to gentrification (Fig. 1). I am in Pathumwan, a central district of Bangkok, built around the leafy sprawl of Chulalongkorn University (CU). The old buildings have been slowly replaced with a shopping mall, several high-rise condominiums, a collection of faux Chinese low-rise apartments, and the various shopping streets connecting the parts.

Some of the shophouses are still standing, and a small number of garages operate normally as if the bulldozers were not themselves busy in the near distance. But the shape of things to come is starting to materialize. Taken together, these new architectural features form a Lifestyle Center—a down-scaled, upmarket, mixed-use space with a carefully designed neighborhood feel. It is a good example of what Baudrillard called simulacra, that is, a copy so perfect that it consumes the original (Gillem). The “original” is not difficult to locate, so long as one thinks of it through the middle-class imaginary of “authenticity.” The package includes the dreamy aesthetics of European street life—principally, the Paris that Haussmann built—
combined with a part-Buddhist, part-capitalist reinvention of urban nature, to the exclusion of other unworthy natures, and a sanitized version of the crumbling southeast-Asian shophouse. Sharon Zukin put it best when explaining gentrification in downtown New York:

Beginning with the gradual disappearance of traditional manufacturing and growth of financial services, moving through the residential conversion of lofts and office buildings, and promoted by media buzz about alternative sources of art, design, and cuisine, these neighborhoods have been re-imagined as the creative hub of a symbolic economy. (725)

The Lifestyle Center suggests new developments in the pursuit of spatial and economic optimization. Responding to a “desire for convenience” on the part of the citizen/consumer, it “simulates a more complete urban experience” whereby “shopping, dining, entertainment, and even housing” are organically integrated (Gillem 16). The result is an atmospheric trick of totality that relies on the engulfing feeling of fresh air. Retailing is second to housing in importance, not only in terms of sheer potential profit but also because developers seem to have found a way to colonize every moment of everyday life. If the euphemism Lifestyle Center wasn’t fishy enough—at least from the perspective of critical theory—developers speak interchangeably of Community Mall. There is a community in the making that only exists insofar as its members inhabit the shopping mall. This essay starts from the assumption that the Lifestyle Center, also known as Community Mall, is the latest and most “perversely profitable” (Smith, Urban 6) trend in spatial commodification.
The land belongs to Chulalongkorn University, “Pillar of the Kingdom” and proud receptacle of siwilai, or “civilization.” Siwilai (Winichakul) is an elite-driven, Western-infused construct of ideal Thainess: upper-middle class values in the midst of a forest of foreign symbols. Siwilai is informed by a self-confessed love of nature that links Buddhist beliefs with the more problematic practice of environmentalism. In that spirit, the Lifestyle Center will include a park, commemorating CU in its one hundredth anniversary, to be celebrated throughout 2017 (Fig. 2).¹ The marketing of the park is a typical example of urban “renaturing” and raises important questions concerning the ethics of regeneration and the green-washing tactics that usually go with it (Schuetze and Chelleri). The university campus lies next to the new park. It is a beautifully maintained botanical garden, testament to CU’s commitment to the task of “sustainability,” the current (English) buzzword in the Thai mass media.

But Pathumwan is prime real estate and about 20 per cent pricier than the trendy Sukhumvit Road, where gentrification is the order of the day. This profit

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¹ This paper was written in May-June 2016, then revised until its final submission in April 2017. By then the construction of the community mall had made considerable progress, and the park had been formally inaugurated, if not yet opened to the public. I have chosen to retain my analysis of Chulalongkorn University Centenary Park as it was in May-June 2016. Some minor details have changed—for instance the original name of the green space was Centennial, not Centenary Park—but overall the project is what I thought it would be in the original analysis. See Moreno-Tejada.
margin—think of oil companies and their claims of “corporate responsibility”—allows CU to reserve a few blocks for a park that is condescendingly presented as a “great gift” to society. A discourse of generosity, populist and patronizing in a seamless continuum between Asian traditions and fascist politics, lubricates the process of gentrification. Chulalongkorn University is the main Thai institution of public education. It represents the official rhetoric of the military junta, whose claim for legitimacy derives from eight decades of authoritarian rule. As such, CU is not only cultivating the land but also minds and hearts through the heavy use of propaganda. The result of this effort is a consensual redefinition of the nature/culture duality, and a redrawing of the line separating the two. Culture is increasingly understood as whatever pertains to middle-class leisure (that is, the practice of siwilai). Fresh air, gently pumping out of the new park, provides an illusion of cosmological completeness. Meanwhile, real nature remains endowed with all the threatening qualities of otherness: debris, filth, poverty . . . what I shall refer to as “shit.”

The community attached to the shophouses has mostly vanished. Franchised retailers, professors and students—those who can pay the relatively high rents—and above all young professionals populate the newly built apartments, and stroll about in the newly opened shopping center. Cars fill up the parking lot every evening, and on the weekends one might stumble into a free concert or a themed market at the atrium of the mall. This is an open-air shopping center, as I will explain later, so it is not isolated from new streetscape. The complex feels organic. Many more people will come when the project is completed. The park is advertised online, in large explanatory panels flanking the entrance of the mall, and in the seven-foot tall fence that surrounds the construction site. After toying with various names, Chulalongkorn University opted for Centenary Park. It is expected to be completed in time for the celebrations. As explained on the university’s website:

There will be a building for exhibitions and activities. There will also be classrooms and parking space. The top of the building will be a green roof which will blend in with the garden to create beautiful sceneries and reduce heat. This park will . . . recycle rain and waste water to plant trees and support an eco-system in the city. There will also be various local plants and trees in the park to build a forest in the city. There will also be shrubs, groundcovers, water plants. The Chula 100-year road [one of the main streets will be renamed] will be filled with local trees along the way. (‘CU Centennial Park Project” n. pag.)
The Anthropocene and the City

All cities are geological.
—Ivan Chtcheglov
“Formulary for a New Urbanism”

This essay traces the geology of Centenary Park. More generally, it offers a critical historical geography of modern Bangkok, and an equally critical assessment of the Community Mall. It is now said that we are living in the Anthropocene, the era when human activities started to have an impact on the environment on a planetary scale. The term is quite recent, although it rests on an earlier assumption: that nature, like space, is produced (Smith, Uneven). What is novel about the concept of Anthropocene is the suggestion that humans, particularly since the Industrial Revolution, have engendered “a distinctive . . . biostratigraphic signal” (Zalasiewicz et al. 6). This means that our imprint in the world is geological, and therefore subjected to the rules of geological time. In other words, the “effects are permanent” (6) and evolution on Earth will fall within the parameters of contamination.

In the Amazon Basin, one of “the most natural” landscapes in the world, biologists have been studying large deposits of anthropogenic soils for decades (Denevan; Kawa, Amazonia). They refer to these as terra preta or black earth. Terra preta covers large tracts of supposedly virgin Amazonian forest and is the product of millennia of (pre-industrial, pre-Columbian) human agency. Terra preta is much more fertile than the pristine tropical soil and is highly valued in the earth-bound realm of Amazonian peasancies. Terra preta is an ancient anthropogenic layer: its thickness, expansion and economic potential speak of the power of humans over the rest of the natural world. Modernity, through artificial extensions of the body, has multiplied exponentially the human capacity to create layers of terra preta. The production of natures of unnatural value has led to this point, when overpriced real estate—developers trading in dirt, rubble, and air—has the potential to destabilize the economy on a global scale.

The anthropogenic signal is strongest in the city. Even the most mediated of lifestyles is connected to the soil and will leave a permanent trail. Computers depend on silicon, which abounds in the Earth’s crust. The argument goes that we won’t be able to fully understand virtual existence without also looking deep underground (Parikka). I will save this essay on “The Cloud,” which is nothing if not a stroke of marketing genius that hides a history of colonialism and a rather prosaic reality of
privately owned underwater cables (Starosielski). Centenary Park is an abstract expression of nature/culture in that very sense.

As regards “post-nature,” I am carefully avoiding the pitfalls of what I call the myth of hybrid modernity, which will be dissected throughout the essay. The myth includes, but is not limited to, the idea that culture and nature can no longer be distinguished from each other. “What things reveal today,” Jedediah Purdy writes, “is that they are neither natural nor artificial” (15). This seems true, although the statement could be easily misconstrued. For one, some places are more natural than others: the Amazon is nothing like an urban park. Also, the term “post-natural” only implies the end of pristine nature, not the end of nature per se. On the symbolic plane, nature continues to exist, undisturbed by human agency, as the exact opposite of culture. It manifests itself in a different form—saturated with soot, sewage, and plastics. But in the “civilized” imagination, which is deeply rooted in primordial structures of feeling, nature is still a place of unspeakable darkness. Separating ourselves from nature is what we do. In modernity, particularly in the modern city, we have become very good at it. Keeping this in mind, I will now move on to study the anthropogenic layers—from silt to shit—that have created post-natural Bangkok.

**Layers**

**Silt**

“If one digs into the ground in Bangkok, one soon finds salty water and shells,” noted the German ethnologist Adolf Bastian in 1863 (48). Bastian and almost every foreigner who left a written record, until the early twentieth century, also remarked on the supremacy of water over land in what was dubbed the Venice of the East. The majority of Bangkokians lived in houses made of wood and bamboo, raised on stilts or floating on the Chao Phraya River, and along the various canals that divided the inner city while connecting the whole with the rice fields in the outskirts. Rice was the first post-natural frontier of modern Bangkok. Its intensive cultivation from the second half of the century created the original anthropogenic layer: naturally occurring silt that fertilized the soil when the waters receded. In common with the activity of the Nile and other major basins, prior to the introduction of modern water works, much of this silt was underused or lost at the bottom of the river.

Canal building domesticated the tidal and monsoon waters of the Chao Phraya delta. Canals (khlong) channeled the silt in the direction of the rice frontier and maximized revenues through taxing, commerce, and the creation of new landholdings...
Modernity is often associated with the traumatic drawing of straight lines across maps and landscapes (Ingold, *Lines* 160-61). This has something to do with achieving independence from the natural world. But for that very reason, straight lines in the shape of labor-intensive infrastructures belong in all complex societies, where a centralized authority controls the production and distribution of goods. That was the case of the Chakri dynasty of Thailand (then known as Siam) that founded Bangkok in 1782, and that remains in power to this day. Many of the early canals were a frontal challenge to the languid meanders of the Chao Phraya River and were built, by corvée labor and prisoners of war, before the opening of the country to the world industrial economy (Tanabe).

Apart from the principles of scientific management (Brummelhuis), what modernization brought to Bangkok was a culture of speed and weight that was unheard of in the region and that found little to no competition among the local elites. Chinese junks dominated Siamese commerce until the Bowring Treaty of 1855, when King Mongkut (1851-68) officially endorsed the corollary of free trade. Even before steamboats turned the world’s oceans into a Western lake in the second half of the century, Europeans were ahead of the pack: “Chinese vessels,” Bastian wrote, “may be reckoned to travel some three times slower than European ones” (51). As for weight, in mid-nineteenth century Siam only the temples and royal palaces were made of stone, “although Bangkok’s Europeans also make use of this material in their buildings” (49). These were literally the foundational stones of modern Bangkok, and the stuff of early siwilai. The 1850s and 1860s were the very early days of this momentous transition, though, and Bastian could still provide a vivid account of the weightless fluidity of life as it happened in the popular districts of old Bangkok:

Rubbish is easily disposed of, and the close proximity of the water seduces people into washing and keeping clean. Owners can also move at will, letting their dwellings float up—or downstream with the incoming or outgoing tide, where they can tide them up at a new mooring place. However, such moves can also be involuntary if the houses are moored on unstable soil. When I was living with the missionary Mr. Chandler, we saw one morning a new street floating past our eyes, which had broken loose during the night, and which was brought back by its inhabitants to its original location only with considerable effort. (50)
Living on solid ground implied a different kind of bond with the environment. This new nature was not covered in silt but in the hefty draperies of “civilization.” The idea that Siam needed to become *siwilai* gained momentum in the late nineteenth century. The importance of the monarchy in this process cannot be stressed enough. The King was owner of the land, main legislator, and planner of future works of engineering. The court was a testing ground for the Western values and manners that would eventually be passed down to the rest of society. Benefiting from Siam’s strategic location as a buffer state between British Burma and French Indochina, Mongkut and his son Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) avoided formal colonization by any European power. Nonetheless, they were avid modernizers, who also managed to create a neo-traditional cult around the figure of the monarch. If modernity is sacred by nature, that is, if consumerism is driven by irrational desire, in Thailand it is even more so because of its close connection with the royalty. With royally-endorsed *siwilai* came a series of characteristically modern layers that gradually separated the people of Bangkok from the soil, the water, and the air.

At this point, it is important to question again the myth of hybrid modernity. It is probably a fact that, as Thai schoolchildren know all too well, the monarchy saved Siam from European colonization through an expert translation of Western values and aesthetics. However, the result was not a national utopia that set Siam apart from Europe and all the other Asian countries, in a syncretic-but-triumphantly Thai fashion. *Siwilai* amounted to internal colonialism, a heavy burden on the poor and the ethnically diverse peoples of the interior. Modernity in Thailand is an elitist project of self-preservation through Westernization. To define the Thai case, by no means unique, Michael Herzfeld has coined the term crypto-colonialism. As regards architecture, Koompong Noobanjong has convincingly shown how the majority of state buildings of late nineteenth-century Bangkok were commissioned in Western style, and that “Siamese architectural elements were an afterthought or merely ornamentation” (108). It wouldn’t be wise to extrapolate this comment to the entire spectrum of *siwilai* policies. In fact, the opposite seems to be the rule. At its worst, *siwilai* looks like a thin coating of cosmopolitan incoherence that only a few can afford, supported on a set of parochial taboos and dreadfully stiff manners, and justified on the grounds of harmony and a cherry picking of traditions that calls itself “Thainess,” while hiding and suppressing centuries of vibrant local knowledge.

After silt, then, the first of the modern layers was **pavement and brick buildings**. The aquatic city slowly gave way to a city of roads. Mongkut built
Charoen Krung Road parallel to the river in the early 1860s. By 1883 there were nearly 80 streets and over a hundred smaller lanes in the capital (Askew 31). The main roads were paved and electrified, and they were flanked by rows of brick shophouses (tuk thaeo) that replaced the old wooden homes (ban ruan), creating new spatial configurations (119). In the shophouses of Bangkok, generations of Chinese migrants lived and traded, giving birth to a bourgeoisie that dominates the economy of Thailand to this day. Centenary Park is being built on the ruins of a cluster of shophouses whose inhabitants represented the lower tiers of this socioeconomic class (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Car parts pile up in one of the last functioning rows of shophouses, facing the future park. May 19, 2016, 1:00:06 PM.

Shoes

Another modern layer was clothing, soap, and a set of related manners transmitted through the rituals of education, both formal and familial. Tailored
garments covered Siamese bodies in the name of siwilai propriety, an idea that had Victorian flavor (Peleggi, *Thailand*). Shoes are particularly interesting because naked feet were obligatory in order to keep one’s balance in the boats and floating houses of old Bangkok. Tim Ingold, writing about the modern use of shoes and boots, has asked the following question: “Could it not be, at least in some measure, a result of the mapping, onto the human body, of a peculiarly modern discourse about the triumph of intelligence over instinct, and about the human domination of nature?” (“Culture” 321). Class divisions come into play here. In modern Bangkok, the naked or semi-naked foot continues to be a balancing tool of the manual laborer and is also a site of barbaric symbolism. The provincial peasant began to be portrayed as an alien in the city, a natural man, not only a symbol of backwardness but also the very embodiment of barbarism. Racialized representations of country folk applied mainly to the millions of ethnic Lao migrants who arrived from the Northeast and who took up jobs in the service and construction industries—street vendors, construction workers, and eventually taxi drivers and prostitutes.

Water came to be seen as a source of pollution—from cholera and foul smells to the disenfranchised bodies who refused to leave the canals—and a handful of European engineers were hired to redefine “dirt,” and to segregate it from everyday life (Brummelhuis). From this moment nature was the symbolic and affective opposite of siwilai. As in the case of fin-de-siècle Paris (Gandy), hiding bodily waste from the bodily senses became a conundrum of policy making of the highest importance (Chitrabongs). Time itself was denaturalized and daily commerce in Bangkok adopted specifically British rhythms. “Always under the influence of this insupportable Anglomania,” wrote the French visitor Lucien Fournereau in 1892, “the offices, shops and bazaars remain open from ten o’clock to four p.m., despite the scorching heat and the blinding rays of a flaming sun” (46). Vajiravudh (1910-25), Chulalongkorn’s successor, warned against the *Cult of Imitation* (Kittiarsa 70) but was himself something of an Anglophile and even translated Shakespeare into Thai. Vajiravudh too was the founder of CU, which is now about to celebrate its one hundredth anniversary.

Since the 1930s, a string of military governments has given Thai modernity a distinctively martial character. As suggested above, Thai schoolchildren receive an uncritical patriotic education that blends the Western idea of civilization with the naturalistic principles of Buddhism and the Confucian-inspired maxims of military discipline. Finally, through the mass media, Thais learned to look up to white skin as the color of beauty, virtue, and privilege. Brown skin became a frontier, a stubborn
layer of wildness, in need of domestication. In the mall across the road from Centenary Park, almost all skin products on sale carry the promise of “whitening.”

Cool Air

The third of the modern layers was air conditioning, which turned Bangkok into a city of boxes. Someone has probably drawn comparisons between the advent of the cargo container and the weather-controlled shopping center. If not, a detailed study is overdue. They were both the product of 1950s modernization, and they were both born in the United States. They respond to similar needs—spatiotemporal optimization—and they are part of wider networks of intermodal exchange. In order to be effective, cargo containers must be compatible with overland freight and handling systems (Klose). Much like consumerist goods, people flow in and out of shopping malls through highly developed road systems, which require the use of oil-burning vehicles (Mennel). Cool air was quickly identified with the flow of things, people and information, and fluid mobility came to be associated with the growing middle-class. Also, shopping malls represent a mostly windowless architecture, which makes the shopper blind to whatever is happening in the street, thus completing the process of sensuous segregation from the outdoors. The mall in the Global South is a microcosm of the ideal city: the unpleasant sights of underdevelopment are swept under the rug, and life is lived in an intoxicating bubble of branded coolness that evokes as much the lifestyle of the “rich North” as it does the climate.

Consumerist culture boomed in Bangkok during the era of US-sponsored development (khwamwattana), coinciding with the Vietnam War and the height of the Thai government’s anti-communist campaigns. Another iteration of the myth of hybrid modernity emerges at this juncture: terms such as “glocalization,” ever so popular since the collapse of the USSR, are elegant in their simplicity, but limited in their ability to convey the uneven and manifestly ideological qualities of the exchange taking place between the global and the local. Any study focusing on “glocalization” will likely underplay the charm, thus far unstoppable, of the American Way of Life. A suburban lifestyle that revolves around driving and shopping is arguably the most defining feature of the expanding global middle class. It is true, however, that the Thai shopping mall has localized characteristics. Unlike Americans, at least until recently, Bangkokians seem quite happy to shop in the city center. Moreover, the suburban mall in the US is declining due to the rise of online shopping. By contrast, the shopping center in twenty-first century Asia functions as “an agent of urban
regeneration” (Jewell 233-38). In Thailand, online shopping is relatively rare, and driving to the mall is still an absolutely modern habit, not a thing of the past.

Shopping malls in Bangkok are often clustered and interwoven through chaotic overpasses, and they contain fresh market-like spaces—food courts and inexpensive clothing stalls that spill onto the street. There is an air of organic sociability about these contact zones, where the mall meets the backstreet (soi), and the rich meet the poor. The Bangkokian ecologies of shopping feel rooted by comparison with their suburban counterparts in Europe and the United States. The apparent chaos around the malls of central Bangkok results in an impression of tropical timelessness, a static picture of hybrid cultural existence, validated by hundreds of happy-go-lucky smiles. That is the idea one gets when flipping through just about every tourist guide book, and it is not absent from the academic literature either. There is no such permanence. Street life is going the way of the urban peasant, smiles do not automatically signify resignation, and it is clear that Thai social structures are anything but hybrid. They are poor but happy, as Henri Lefebvre noted (153), is the type of sentimental babble that naturalizes class divisions, especially so in strictly hierarchical societies. The Central World shopping complex was set on fire during the 2010 protests. Thailand’s recent political history shows that beneath the surface there are unresolved class tensions, and a simmering violence that siwilai observers see with a mixture of horror and embarrassment. With respect to popular culture, Bangkok’s famed street life is not being eradicated wholesale. However, through the introduction of health and safety standards, branded kitchens, higher rents, and a mass media rhetoric that sanctions fashionable forms of outdoor dining, street vending is undergoing a process of silent commodification.

Shopping centers are boxed moorings. They play the role of urban anchors that concentrate and channel socioeconomic flows, creating new understandings of nature and culture, in a manner similar to that of the nineteenth-century canal systems. The shophouse was a modern statement of purpose, but in practice it mixed interior and exterior living, as well as family, work, and leisure time. The mall was masterminded in connivance with the downtown office, the condominium, and the suburban home. The air-conditioned car is the link between these parts. Roads are famously jammed in the Thai capital. The elevated Bangkok Transit System’s Skytrain (BTS), completed in 1999, allows commuters to travel in the comfort of a capsule of cool, dry, purified air, ten meters above ground.
Fresh Air (and Shit)

The mall at the heart of this project of urban regeneration—fittingly called I’m Park—does not have air conditioning in the main building. It is roofed but not sealed. Only each individual shop and the basement enjoy the luxury of artificial weather. It may be ironic that the air-conditioned basement offers the sole affordable rents for non-franchised businesses. But it is not cheap, and only the most dynamic stores last more than a few months open; with the exception of the food court—I counted six stalls—the majority of shops are not in use. The outdoor parking lot is of modest dimensions and fills up in the evenings, although there isn’t much to do in the area yet. Very few street sellers may be seen, almost none, and the nearby open-air shopping quarter is at present a picture of desolation (Fig. 4). The Lifestyle Center is waiting for the park and the faux Chinese apartments to be finished. Business will then pick up. This shopping mall is relatively unimpressive, nothing like the massive retail structures built on the other side of Pathumwan (McGrath, “Modernities”). I’m Park is on the quiet side, nowhere near a BTS station (the most important line of gentrification in Bangkok) and not even boasting a movie theatre. I estimate that half the stores are coffee shop franchises, a two-storied Starbucks being the main draw, and the rest are mostly chain Japanese restaurants (Fig. 5).
Fig. 4. Open-air shopping street, located behind the high-rise towers. May 23, 2016, 7:56:51 PM.
At I’m Park, emphasis is on strolling up and down the stairs and along the wide, wooden corridors. It is a victory for “breezy” architecture, for even in the hot summer days the air flows naturally inside. This new nature is similar to the one found in other newly-built open-air malls of Bangkok—such as Asiatique: The Riverfront, a revamping of the long-forgotten river—and is aligned with the principles of the so-called experience economy. In the experience economy “[c]ommodities are fungible, goods tangible, services intangible, and experiences memorable” (Pine and Gilmore n. pag.; emphasis in original). The idea is that we have been through various phases in the “progression of economic value,” including the extraction of commodities (canals and silt, for the purposes of this essay), the making of goods (shophouses), and the delivering of services (shopping centers). This would be the last and most advanced phase. It is based on the staging of experiences that will be fondly remembered at home. None of the businesses at the mall can stage a memorable experience by themselves, not even Starbucks. Only the owner of the land is able to coordinate the parts that make up the Lifestyle Center. Living a “life of ease” and constant beauty in the open (while shopping, and above all, while paying rent or a mortgage) is the experience. The University is gentrifying the area, renaturing the Thing, and capitalizing on the discourse of sustainability.
Let’s not forget that CU is an intellectual mirror of state propaganda, the state being in the hands of a patronizing military government. At the Community Mall, there will be no place to hide and the trappings of authoritarian capitalism will be on full display. Conformity will be monitored, not only by CCTV cameras and security guards, but also through social surveillance, which in Thailand operates mainly on Facebook. Many Thais act as if they shared the government’s presentation of their country as a place of utmost harmony—that’s certainly the case among liberal professors of CU who fear losing face, their jobs, or worse if they don’t keep a low profile—but others do believe it and are willing to protect it. The experience economy, much like political populism, relies heavily on affect. It aims to make people feel. The act of remembrance will also be a bodily experience, linking memory with the promise of future shopping sprees. Social scientists are fond of the term “desire,” which they use to describe global consumerism in late modern times. In Thailand, desire became charged with fear after the 1997 economic crisis. The middle-class fear of economic loss reaches new, more sinister depths after each military coup. Desire is the domain of magic, but it should not be understood in strictly abstract terms: for over a century now, advertisers and ministers of propaganda alike have known that Pavlov’s dog salivated when the food wasn’t even there. What appears to be magical is in fact rather scientific.

The experience economy—this layer of authoritarian fresh air—is betting on design. At the turn of the millennium, Mike Featherstone brought to our attention the problem of “aestheticization of everyday life” (64-80) or the apparent merging of billboards and day-to-day existence. Wi-Fi at the Community Mall will have a double purpose: first, it will be a platform for the virtual aestheticization of Bangkok, through the selection of beautiful natures to be shared on social media and the rejection of aesthetically unpleasant ones that will never see the light of day; second, it will be a disciplinary device for the enforcement of state power from below, via old-fashioned eavesdropping and around-the-clock “neighborhood watch.” Other familiar concepts (hyperreality, spectacle, panopticon) may be used to describe the Lifestyle Center. They all sound less hyperbolic than they did when, and where, they were originally formulated—less like conspiracy theories and more like sober assessments in the highly organic realm of the experience economy. The Community Mall’s success depends on the realistic detail of its microscopic beauty. In the urban Anthropocene, lines have been drawn between culture (whatever pertains to middle class leisure) and nature (everything else). Surfaces are beautified though a process of “spatial cleansing” (Herzfeld, “Spatial”) that takes place on an inch-by-inch scale, and that

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2 See, e.g., McGrath, “War.”
applies to all things, both living and inert. The result is a mall with no walls, and a 
sensuous atmosphere that might offer a new answer to the old marketing puzzle of 
how to re-enact the intangible feeling of “authentic” nature and culture.

Dirt is very real. The construction site is surrounded by rubble and debris, or 
what some scholars have started to refer to as shit (Hawkins; Kawa, “Shit”). Shit is 
the designer’s worst nightmare and the sensorial opposite of desire: it puts you off, it 
breaks the spell. Shit is anything other than culture-as-sivilai: real nature in the era 
of the Anthropocene. Shit has a life of its own. It moves and shifts shape. It is the 
out-of-control plastics, the unwanted weeds, the paddles of rotten water, the foul 
smells of decomposition that upset the trained cosmopolitan nose, the layers of black 
grease left by the last of the car part shops, the rats running along the curve, the stray 
dogs, and the illogical wanderings of poor people who still hang around like ghosts, 
and who will not be welcome in the soon-to-be-completed Lifestyle Center. Shit is 
what happens when spatial cleansing touches new frontiers, and when it fails. And it 
is not anecdotal. On the contrary, as the literature on the Anthropocene suggests, shit 
is geological, inscribed in the Earth’s crust, and here to stay.

There are two good reasons to support the idea that modernity is always 
unfinished business. First, geographical expansion is inherent to modern capitalist 
growth (Harvey), a quality that has also been identified in projects of metropolitan 
“re-greening” (Birge-Liberman). Second, human nature (Smith, Uneven 2) needs to 
be accounted for. It has to do with the fact that we are animals, part of nature and not 
merely surrounded by it, as the word “environment” suggests. Culture would be, as 
Sigmund Freud insisted, the layers hiding the unsettling truth. If this is the case, then 
there will be a shadow of suspicion in every person taking a selfie at Centenary Park. 
Not even the most cunning of designers would be able to get rid of wildness 
altogether. Real nature is felt with special force in the Tropics, mainly but not only 
through the sense of smell. Shit has a visceral effect on the citizen-cum-shopper, 
perhaps comparable to Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject: a disgusting, physical 
otherness that “lies there, quite close, but . . . cannot be assimilated” (1). Jedediah 
Purdy also addressed this issue in his volume on the Anthropocene:

You might have felt the macabre fascination of stumbling across a 
decaying carcass and feeling your eye focus on a seething layer of 
maggots, or held a cut of meat and sensed the spooky familiarity of the

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3 The Shit Museum, part of the Anthropocene Project, is also a good example. <http://www.theshitmuseum.org/news-stories/the-anthropocene-observatory/>
joints where it was cleaved, which correspond all too neatly to those of your own body. (14)

These encounters are very common in the Tropics, where the senses are amplified in the heat and humidity (Fig. 6). Nothing is stranger than the smell of death as you leave the shopping mall, Frappuccino in hand.

Fig. 6. Shit accumulates across the road from the future park. A few weeks ago, this was a block of shophouses. May 22, 2016, 12:53:00 PM.

Conclusions: Water

Bangkokians live in fear of the flood. It threatens the city every year towards the end of the monsoon. As of late, the image of the sinking city has captured the popular imagination. “Bangkok is sinking and may be under water in 15 years, study says,” wrote the Weather Channel in 2015, citing a government report. Rising global sea levels and sinking local land combine to create a perfect storm. The soil is subsiding because of the excessive pumping from the underground aquifer and, in the words of Thailand’s National Reform Council, “the weight of mushrooming development” (Bangkok” n. pag.). There are too many tall buildings in Bangkok and they press down on the land with a force that finds no hint of accommodation. The tallest building in Thailand, standing over 70 floors high and already winner of a bunch of awards (e.g., Best Luxury Condominium in Southeast Asia) is about to be
completed. To a layman’s ears this sounds like an old cautionary tale of greed, lust, and moral corruption: the weight of uncompromising development, literally, will be the downfall of this modern-day Babylon.

Engineers and architects are aware of the need to adapt their creations to local requirements. They have to dig deep—about fifty meters in the case of high-rise buildings—in order to find a solid base on which to lay the foundations of vertical structures. The city rests on top of a thick deposit of soft clay and silt. This unstable material, once the fertilizer of the rice frontier, presents significant problems to the construction and maintenance of every infrastructure. The green-roofed learning and exhibition center of Centenary Park is now being rooted into the soil, and the air is filled with a deep vibrating noise, like a gigantic drum being played in the distance, at the irregular pace of the five pile drivers digging in the ruin (Fig. 7).

![Fig. 7. Pile drivers in the background. The slogan reads: “Chulalongkorn Park 100 Years ‘A great gift to society.’ Elegant heritage and knowledge coordinated to create a sustainable technology.” Thursday, May 19, 2016, 1:00:23 PM.](image)

Buddhism is a nature-loving religion and comes equipped with skepticism towards excess and artifice. Thai monks have long been involved in the philosophical, political, and grassroots aspects of environmentalism (Darlington). King Bhumibol (1946-2016) was perhaps Thailand’s best green ambassador. In the 1960s, like his
ancestors Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, Bhumibol participated in engineering projects, improving irrigation and generating hydroelectric power. Around that time, Bhumibol also championed a movement, a Buddhist-inspired program of moderation and virtue which came to be known as the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP). A recently published book (Avery and Bergsteiner) introduced SEP as a remedy for these troubled ecological times. A quick read, however, raises the question of whether SEP was originally intended to be yet another seminar on corporate responsibility. The slogan currently doing the rounds is, “from sufficiency to sustainability.” It represents the mainstream media’s (that is, the junta’s) attempt to actualize the vision of the monarch. Love of nature works on at least two discursive levels: as an essence of Thainess that predates modernity, and as a sure sign that Thailand is “keeping up with the times,” which is what siwilai is all about (Winichakul 531).

The possibility of a truce between the Buddhist faith and the corporate world, in which the former does not turn into a parody of itself, is open for debate. There is a lot of green talk in Thailand and a healthy pride in its tropical lushness. But public policy is limited to narrow ends, and otherwise reduced to photo opportunities. Illustrated magazines regularly invite the middle-class reader to join the “slow life” movement. The truth of the matter, though, is that Thailand is undergoing rapid modernization. Nature is an obstacle more than anything else. It is the shit that threatens siwilai.

My analysis has been admittedly incomplete. Religion, politics, and language should be given more weight in future interpretations of the Thai Anthropocene. Specific contributing factors include the traditional Asian disregard for material history—at least when compared to the European love of ruins—that turns Bangkok into a developer’s sandbox; the Thai openness to the cult of newness, which probably has Buddhist roots; and the equivalence that exists between royally-sponsored siwilai and aspirational middle-class lifestyles, which only adds an extra layer of sacredness and infallibility to this twenty-first century phantasmagoria.

Of course, there is another side to this Doomsday scenario: a demonstrable connection between greenery and well-being (e.g., Ljungkvist et al.). The University is generously covering prime real estate with a beautiful layer of grass. The park is indeed “a great gift.” I have chosen, however, to look at things through a critical lens. Generosity is a well-known discursive recourse of authoritarian rule, a fascist tactic that finds echo in the deep wells of Asian history. Modernity has sinister undercurrents, and money and privilege dictate the production of reality. Money and privilege dictate the planting of trees in Centenary Park, too. I have presented a double critique of modernity. The first critique is ontological: using the image of
layering, and with an interpretive rather than empirical purpose, I have described modernity in Bangkok as a history of separation from, and redefinition of, the natural world. In the Anthropocene, nature is that which upsets middle-class sensibilities with “threats to the good life” (Berlant 10). The second critique is epistemological: modernity, especially non-Western modernity, is often explained in terms of hybridity. This has to do, in my view, with the influence of the paradigm of globalization, formulated in the 1990s, and with the post-ideological precepts of postmodern theory. Whatever the case, the idea lingers in the vocabulary of the Anthropocene. My contention is that modern nature/culture is not the hybrid impossibility conveyed by these theories. The boundaries are clear, there is no overlap, only the contents are changing, not the meanings. Space, too, is splintered, full of sharp edges, and defined by friction, not liquidity. Furthermore, hybridity suggests complexity, and theories of chaos diffuse the blame, directly or indirectly, reinforcing the discourse of power. Complexity is easily perceived at a close distance and deserves careful attention. The disenfranchised, for example, have much more power than we normally realize; this happens to be my usual line of research. However, as soon as we separate ourselves from the object of study, modernity reveals itself as a rather simple story of occupation and dispossession.

Works Cited


**About the Author**

Jaime Moreno-Tejada has a BA in History and Anthropology (Complutense University of Madrid) and a PhD in Historical Geography (King’s College London). Moreno-Tejada studies the features of modernity and modern spaces, from 1800 to the present day. He is particularly interested in frontiers, and currently studies the tropics in transnational perspective. Recent publications include *Transnational Frontiers of Asia and Latin America since 1800* (Routledge 2017), co-edited with Bradley Tatar. Moreno-Tejada is a research scholar at the Ronin Institute.

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