

Linked Research Project: Understanding Community Resilience

The role of shared spaces in reducing vulnerability within informal settlements in Bangkok, Thailand



This project forms part of ongoing research collaboration between the Global Urban Research Unit at Newcastle University with Supervisor Dr. Peter Kellett, and a team led by Dr Rittirong Chutapruttikorn at Bangkok University. The project involved KMITL University in Bangkok.

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Flooding in Khlong Bung Pai

"...disasters occur as a result of the impact of hazards on vulnerable people" (Wisner et al, 2004:87)

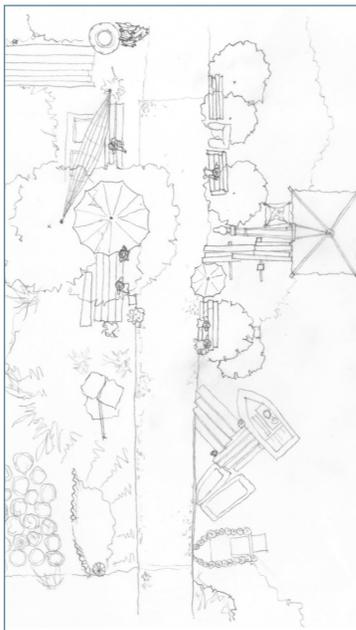
Introduction

Bangkok suffered extensive flooding in 2011 which impacted greatly on informal settlements already suffering social and economic hardship. My research formed part of a group project aimed at assessing risk, vulnerability and resilience in these communities. My individual research focussed on studying the interrelationship between physical and social aspects of 'community'.

During 8 weeks of fieldwork, the research focussed on two informal case-study communities in Bangkok: Khlong Bua Kwan and Khlong Bung Pai. Yin (1989) describes a need for case studies as arising "...out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena"(p.14). The case study communities were insecure- they did not own the land on which they lived, therefore they faced the threat of eviction. Their position alongside 'khlongs' (canals) made them more vulnerable to the effects of flooding.

Aims

- To understand the reality of community life in the informal settlement case studies
- To study the potential of external shared spaces, through urban agriculture, to improve health, save money and potentially increase income through selling produce
- To test methods of mapping as a tool to understanding linkages, boundaries and unused spaces within the community



My own drawing recording use of shared spaces along Khlong Bung Pai pathway

Methods

The qualitative fieldwork methods included interviewing residents both in their homes and in shared community spaces (such as their community centre) and carrying out focus group discussions. When faced with the language barrier I adopted more visual methods of communication such as using timelines to clarify the order of events.

Mapping spaces proved useful to understand how shared areas of the community were used. This was recorded through drawing the canal-side spaces, and also by creating a socio spatial map with residents. My own drawing served to document the physical aspects of the shared spaces within the settlement (allotments, fishing, seating).

The inclusion of visual as well as verbal communication methods relates to theory on PRA (Participatory Rural Approach). Slim et al. (1995) describe that through this approach communication is improved as "people's ability to express themselves verbally can be heightened if they can simultaneously present things visually" (p.57).



Community mapping exercise Khlong Bua Kwan



Community map drawn by residents of Khlong Bua Kwan community

Community Participation

A participatory research approach was adopted and one exercise led residents to create their own map of their community with minimal prompting. Areas of the map were drawn by residents showing kinship clusters within the community (known only to residents). They also marked on the map areas considered to be worst affected by flooding. The outcome was an improved understanding of not only the physical aspects of the settlement (which can be observed) but of the underlying social and temporal aspects of the community.

Through spending extensive periods of time in community, and involving residents with our research, we felt it was important to 'give something back'. This opportunity arose at Khlong Bua Kwan where we produced a map of the settlement drawn to scale and including all houses that formed part of the community. This was given to the residents in order to form part of an application to help them to secure a collective land title.

References:

- Slim, H., Thompson, P., Bennett, O., and Cross, N., 1995. *Listening for a change: Oral Testimony and Community Development*. London: Panos
- Wisner, B., Blaikie, P., Cannon, T. and Davis, I., 2004. *At Risk: Natural hazards, people vulnerability and disasters*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge
- Yin, R.K., 2003. *Case Study Research: Design and Method*. 3rd ed. California: Sage Publications

Conclusion

- Residents used leftover and shared space in a variety of ways within the two communities.
 - Spaces were created to facilitate social interaction (seating places alongside shared pathways) in the absence of a community centre (Khlong Bung Pai).
 - Other areas were utilised for income generation (such as fishing) and urban agriculture.
- Through adopting a method of mapping, where residents draw the community themselves, I discovered that residents see the community in social rather than spatial terms. This method of community engagement proved invaluable to uncover community ties and examples of resilience which could not be gained through a purely visual and spatial mapping of the settlement.
- A stronger sense of community leads to more organisation and a drive to improve living conditions, and decrease vulnerability to flooding. Involvement with relevant networks improves the situation and status (gaining land titles) of a community, making them more resilient to disaster (eg.flooding).



Plants grown along pathway through Khlong Bua Kwan community



Hanging plants grown in areas in front of dwellings in Khlong Bua Kwan



Fishing in Khlong Bung Pai produce is traded within the community



Chillies being hand picked Khlong Bung Pai community