



# Small-scale Property Entrepreneurship in Bangkok Soi Affordable Housing Provision for Expatriate and Local Migrants

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## Abstract

This paper presents a research study conducted in the Ban Soi Sukhon neighbourhood in Bangkok. The study relied on archival research, longitudinal observation, and participation in the everyday life of the neighbourhood. It examined how the lack of a comprehensive master plan and planning controls triggered private land development patterns characterised by interconnected side-streets or “soi”. Owner-occupants who settled on the residential parcels along these side streets subsequently used their property to engage in petty entrepreneurial activities that helped provide affordable housing for successive waves of settlers who migrated from upcountry or from abroad. The paper illustrates this practice by discussing two small-scale housing projects created to accommodate newly arrived migrants. The first project is a “boutique” apartment building in 1988 built to accommodate expatriates and SMEs; the second is the 2007 conversion of educational and home-industry buildings into a residential development that caters for lower-income residents of the soi.

**Keywords:** Bangkok soi, Property entrepreneurship, Affordable housing, Migrants

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## 1. Introduction


This paper presents a case-study of the Ban Soi Sukhon neighbourhood in Bangkok. The word “soi” here denotes small “side-streets” that branch off a main road (*thanon*). Between the 1950s and the 1980s, this type of side street developed due to the lack of a comprehensive master plan and adequate planning controls and characterised urban expansion in Bangkok. *Soi* emerged because of residents’ and, later, petty entrepreneurs’ isolated initiatives to subdivide peri-urban land and sell it to middle-income groups eager to invest their savings. These newly established landowners, in turn, used their property to accommodate subsequent

waves of settlers from upcountry or abroad.

The authors relied on archival research, longitudinal observation, and participation in the everyday life in Ban Soi Sukhon to link the successive waves of “colonisation” (Appadurai 1995: 208) to broader urban trends and developments<sup>i</sup>. They view the progressive commoditisation, densification, and homogenisation of *soi* neighbourhoods as a “trajectory” resulting from unassuming “tactics” rather than from grand “strategies” (de Certeau 1984: xix)<sup>ii</sup>.

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with a coup that foreshadowed another economic recession. Macro-economic conditions reduced interest rates, but political instability held petty investors back from taking risks.

Yet, Pui saw another opportunity arise within walking distance of his family home. The daughters of Lue Sukhon still owned a large tract of land in the first stretch of the soi, where they ran a primary school, had a laundry service, and provided cheap rental rooms to street hawkers who earned a living near the *pak soi*. From 2003 onwards, the siblings began subdividing and selling the estate. In 2006, one 102 *tarang wa* parcel fronting the soi was

offered for sale. Pui considered to buy the plot and make another boutique apartment with smaller units for rent. When he calculated the cost of purchasing the land, destroying the existing structures, and constructing a four-storey building, he found that the rental revenue would not cover the invested capital. Since he wanted this project to offer added value for the street hawkers who were living there now, he decided to cut the investment by renovating the existing buildings rather than constructing a completely new structure. Calculations proved that this approach would cut the investment from 16 million to 9 million baht.

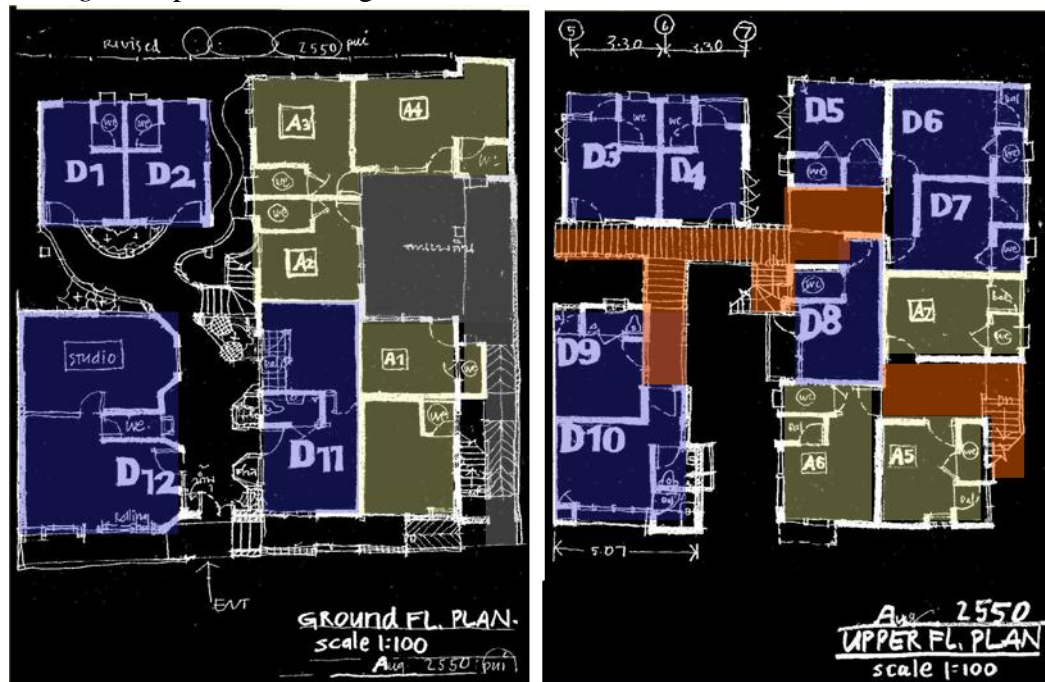


Figure 4. The floorplans of the ground floor (left) and the typical upper floors (right) of the “soi resort” as designed by Pui in 2007 (© Chatsiri Thanmarom)

Again, the project required several sources of funding. First, Pui used 2 million Baht from the financial reserve that he had obtained from his early retirement as civil servant. Second, he sold his share in the Rayong seaside resort for 2 million baht. And finally, his eldest son obtained a bank loan of 5 million baht. The instalment amounted to 35,900 Baht per month over a period of 30 years. And since interest on the 4 million baht would have amounted to 14,000 Baht, the project had to generate a monthly income of 62,000 baht.

Additional services such as air-conditioning, TV-antenna or hi-speed internet connection (150 baht/month) were available at moderate rates. To further emphasize the quality of life in this ‘soi resort’, Pui took care to restore the traditional spirit house in its original splendour and gave a prominent place along the main walkway in the project. Plenty of greenery was provided and, in line with traditional beliefs, a small water-party installed near the entrance.



Figure 5. The “soi resort” after completion in 2007 (© Chatsiri Thanmarom)

### 3.4 Property as a Resource for Securing a Place in the City

Pui’s housing history is not an isolated case: it reflects the tactics that soi residents devised to commoditise property and to singularize housing units. Many soi residents of his generation adopted this modus operandi. The sum of their housing histories amalgamated into a social history that echoes Kopytoff’s (1986) work on shifts in the commodity status of things. His views are valuable to evaluate how properties are built, altered, and eventually

deteriorate and change hands, or are revalorised and restored. Above all, soi residents sought to secure a place in the city, for themselves and for their offspring. Considering the going inflation of property prices, most residents of Pui’s generation anticipated that their offspring would no longer have the means to purchase landed property in a soi setting. Based on his own housing history, Pui made this clear by calculating the ratio between the starting salary for a Bachelor graduate and the cost required for a 120 sq.m. house.

Table 1. Calculation of housing affordability based on data from Pui’s housing history

Year	Salary (THB/ month)	Land cost (THB/sq.wa x sq.wa = THB)	Construction cost (Baht/sq.m = Baht)	Total cost (Baht)	Salary/ Cost
1977	2,000	800 x 50 = 40,000	2,000 x 120 = 240,000	300,000	1: 150
1989	6,000	8,000 x 50 = 400,000	6,000 x 120 = 720,000	1,100,000	1: 180
2007	10,000	70,000 x 50 = 3,500,000	12,000 x 120 = 1,440,000	5,000,000	1: 500

## 4. Conclusion

This paper presented a social history of the Ban Soi Sukhon neighbourhood. It illustrates that *soi* remain a relatively secluded point of anchorage in the bustling city life of many thousands of Bangkokians. The *soi* is more than a private realm to which residents return to sleep and recover energies for the next day. *Soi* environments constitute real places where the production of locality – as well as its

material outcomes – is intensified and can be understood best. This involves not only the production, representation, and reproduction of ‘locales’; it is also about economic realities, social identities, and political ideals. *Soi* residents were constantly trying out new ideas and developing tactics that could improve their living conditions and extend their command over their immediate environs. Through their practices of place, *soi*



residents materialised local time-space in a way that was not possible in the hurried, fleeting reality outside it. The myriads of trajectories that soi residents thus created, did not set the *soi* apart from the city<sup>viii</sup>. Rather, they wove dense linkages between everyday practices, the texture of urban life and macro-processes that transgressed the context of the city. Feld and Basso

(1996:11) argued that ‘as people fashion places, so, too, do they fashion themselves’. Similarly, *soi* dwellers were making the city into what it was, while the city was making them into who they were. *Soi*, as sites of everyday practices, thus constitute an urban living laboratory and an urban space *par excellence*.

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Notes

<sup>i</sup> X conducted most of this research in 1994-5 as part of his doctoral dissertation. X lived in the neighbourhood from 1989 till 1995 and Y from 1989 till the present. Y is also the owner and designer of the two described housing projects.

<sup>ii</sup> The use of these terms refers to Kopytoff’s (1986) processual model. According to this model, commoditisation involves that things - *in casu*, property - are more frequently or lastingly being moved in a “commodity state” (Appadurai, 1986:13). Densification refers not only to population density, but also to the frequency of exchange, the hallmark of commoditisation. The last term, homogenisation, refers to the flattening out of idiosyncrasies of distinct urban neighbourhoods, as well as to the levelling of values due to exchange.

<sup>iii</sup> In 1971, Yinyeod estimated the number of soi in Bangkok Metropolis at 2000 (Bangkok Post, 25 July 1971). Municipal authorities calculated the total length of soi in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area to nearly 1,900 km.; soi constituted 67 per cent of the city’s total road infrastructure (BMA 1987). Cohen (1985:1) labelled soi “one of the most ubiquitous and characteristic ecological features” of Bangkok. Yet, soi are conspicuously absent in literature on the city.

<sup>iv</sup> The Sukhons were one of the area’s most influential families. The *soi* was named after them.

<sup>v</sup> In 1993, road-front land along Phahonyothin Road fetched 35,000 baht per square metre. Land in *soi* one was sold for 12,500 baht per square metre. Deeper in the *soi*, a land broker offered land for sale at 7,500 baht per square metre and deep into *sut soi*, land still fetched 2,000 baht per square metre. The conversion rate at the time was £ 1.00 = 42 baht.

<sup>vi</sup> Pui’s parents had enjoyed free housing as part of the welfare options given to civil servants (called: *ban sawatdikan*). Once retired they lost the right to this welfare housing.

<sup>vii</sup> According to a survey of low-income rental housing conducted in 1991-92, apartments ranked as second most expensive housing type after detached housing. Less than 20 per cent of the surveyed apartments were let at more than 2000 baht per month; the average monthly rent was 1,523 baht. The average size of these apartments was only 16.6 square meter and consisted of one multipurpose room, a bathroom, and a small terrace. The units offered by Pui measured respectively 50 and 85 square meter and consisted of a multifunctional room, two bedrooms, two bathrooms and a terrace (Yap, De Wandeler and Khanaiklang, 1993, Working paper 3: 6, 20-1)

<sup>viii</sup> According to *de Certeau* (1984: xviii), trajectories, ‘although composed with the vocabularies of established languages ... and although they remain subordinated to the prescribed syntactical forms, ... trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop’.

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