

The Tides They Are a Changin'

For Bangkok's Chao Phraya River the future seems clear, even if the details are a little murky

By Micaela Marini Higgs

For three years, the controversial **Chao Phraya River Promenade** has made headlines for everything from alleged architectural plagiarism to environmental concerns. With plans to build an elevated bike lane and public walkway along a 14-kilometre stretch of the river, this government project is just a small part of the redevelopment happening along the Chao Phraya as construction for malls like **Icon Siam** promise to dramatically change the area's landscape.

While riverside property has long been considered prime real estate nearly everywhere else in the world, Bangkok is only just now trying to catch up and capitalize on the city's expansive waterfront. The cost of this catch up, which supporters hope will boost the local economy and provide a new way for the public to access the area, comes at the cost of communities who for generations have called the river home.

If you're wondering if you've missed some of the news about the current progress of the River Promenade, it's likely you haven't. Some of the government's early plans were initially kept under wraps to avoid price speculation in the area, and even now **Friends of the River**—a group

which is the most vocal opponent to the Promenade—continues to conduct letter writing campaigns urging officials to carry out impact analysis surveys and to share their master plan. The auction where construction companies bid on the project has not yet been held, so construction on the Promenade has yet to begin. In July, the BMA reported that they expected to demolish 14 communities that month, adding to the five that were razed earlier this year in preparation for the project.

Occupying public land, many of these communities have existed illegally for decades, running businesses and building lives along the river. Resettlement is a complicated issue the government must grapple with because while they can offer different accommodation, there's no way to replace everything that residents face to lose, especially people like fisherman and scavengers who rely on the river to support themselves, or business owners who have lost their customer base and income. Some of those who have already been displaced and relocated to government buildings like the Kiek Kai Flats complain that their new accommodations are in poor condition. When speaking out to the local press about the building's lack of utilities,



Existing development along the length and breadth of the Chao Phraya River

Photos by Danaan Andrew



Artist's rendering of the proposed River Promenade



Temples and landmarks dot the riverbank

Photo by Bruce Scott



Yodpiman River Walk by night

disrepair, and the higher cost of living, some residents added that they did not feel safe there.

What has made this issue so polarizing among the public is the power imbalance between a government that can propose projects and share few public details, and poor locals with few resources and little choice but to leave and collect whatever compensation they receive. In countless media interviews many residents have expressed resignation, saying they have no choice but to accept the government's decision. Critics of the project argue that a neighbourhood's residents give it a unique sense of place and bring value and history to the area. By evicting them to homogenize 14 kilometres along the riverside, they argue, the development not only destroys communities but will also make the Chao Phraya look like any other urban riverfront in the world.

Those who support the Promenade believe it will bring greater access to the river by inviting and attracting more people to the area and giving them a place to spend time. Attracting business and customers will allow remaining residents to become involved in new industries and generate opportunities for creative development.

They also point out that land encroachment has become a major issue not only for riverside development, but also for flood embankment projects in places like Klong Lat Phrao. Even if it weren't for the current riverside development project, the issue of land encroachment was going to be raised eventually, whether in municipal projects to help curb flooding or future efforts to change the city's infrastructure. Displacing residents might be an unavoidable cost of progress.

If the development of the river has any impact on preservation efforts, it might be that it's forcing certain groups to be selective, and proactive, about preserving buildings that might otherwise remain in decay. That's what happened with **Lhong 1919**, a Chinese trading pier built in 1850 that was moldering until last year when the family who owned it began renovating the three buildings and restoring their original decorative elements. Set to open to the public in the first weeks of this month, the space will include art and design shops, eateries, and co-working spaces.

When explaining to the *Bangkok Post* the catalyst that had pushed her family to preserve these buildings as a heritage site and lifestyle attraction, **Rujiraporn Wanglee** acknowledged that they didn't want the land to become another riverside condo. As land prices rise, the need to value and invest in landmarks also increases. What constitutes "genuine historical value" might be difficult to pin down, and funding for renovation efforts isn't always easy to come by, but many supporters of the project believe that truly important landmarks will remain, and even be better preserved, thanks to ongoing riverside development. The thinking goes that each individual shop house might not be unique or worthy enough of preservation, but that clearing the area will force the government to audit and determine which cultural landmarks are worth investing in while attracting private investors to projects like Lhong 1919.



Lhong 1919 by moonlight



Artist's rendering of Icon Siam

While the recent **Yodpiman River Walk**, which eradicated a large part of the historic flower market to build a shopping centre, was successfully completed, its mimicry of historical architectural failed to generate the same amount of interest and buzz that the city's renovated sites have. This points to a growing boredom with cookie cutter malls, and explains part of the outcry against the homogeneity of the Promenade. For riverside development to generate something new and exciting, its offerings have to keep a sense of place that roots them in the Chao Phraya, rather than presenting a Sukhumvit or Sathorn Road transplant.

The argument that the proposed designs, while beautiful, don't have any identifiably Thai features or elements that draw from the Chao Phraya, is one of the recurring points made by Friends of the River. Their May injunction against the project, for violating maritime planning laws, and their campaigns demanding greater transparency around the planning process and calls for studies on the project's ecological impact, have been a large part of keeping the controversy in the news. Besides advocating for the local community, and questioning the need and effectiveness of the Promenade, they also point out that the elevated bike path might negatively impact tourism by blocking businesses riverside views.

While we have yet to receive an ecological survey with detailed information that addresses the questions raised by Friends of the River, defenders of the project are optimistic that the Promenade and other developments will aid the local environment. Because Bangkok's *khlongs* all lead to the Chao Phraya, trash from across the city finds its way to the river and then out to sea, resulting in waters congested with plastic. Last month the annual 'Clean Up Bangkok River' event saw volunteers clearing trash from the water, collecting 132 kilograms of solid waste in one hour. While annual efforts help bring attention to the need to keep the river's waters clean, they aren't consistent enough to stop the onslaught of garbage that finds its way into the river thanks to the massive amounts of plastic bags and utensils handed out at street stalls and 7-11s. Defenders of the area's redevelopment point out that as more tourism and business is attracted to the river, the incentives for investing in keeping the water clean will increase—if only to keep away the smell of warm garbage.

While the exact fate of these projects and the changes that advocacy groups will be able to secure remains uncertain, it is clear that the Chao Phraya is changing. Piece by piece, the riverside is shifting from quiet residential neighbourhoods to lifestyle hotspots, filling with new galleries and restaurants.

With major malls set to open soon, the area can expect an influx in visitors and foot traffic. As we wait to see how the neighbourhoods along the river adapt to this newfound attention and business, we can only hope they retain the elements and unique atmosphere that attracted us all there in the first place. ■



Rujiraporn Wanglee and son Waran