

Saranrom Garden: From Siamese Royal Garden to Thailand's Public Park

สวนสราญรมย์: จากราชอุทยานสู่สวนสาธารณะ

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Abstract

The opening of regal parks for public use in the West has usually been perceived as a part of a growing idea of the park as public venue. In Siam and Thailand, Saranrom Garden is one of the most obvious examples to demonstrate the aforementioned change in land uses. It was transformed from the monarchy's recreational ground to a seat of state agency and eventually to a public space. The investigation on the history of Saranrom Garden reveals how the concept and practice of public parks came into existence in a non-Western culture without a direct colonization from the West.

In addition, the analytical and critical readings on the development and utilization of the park argues that Saranrom Garden: 1) was employed by the ruling elites as an instrument to represent a modern society; and 2) functioned in terms of a hegemonic discourse, whose accessibility to the public resulted from an imitation of Western practice to display the “civilized” identity of the elites rather than from a genuine concern to produce a social “release valve.”

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยเชิงวิพากษ์ขั้นนี้ศึกษาสวนสาธารณะ กรุงเทพมหานคร ซึ่งเป็นตัวอย่างสำคัญของการเปลี่ยนแปลงพื้นที่จากสวนในวังหรือราชอุทยานไปสู่การเป็นพื้นที่สาธารณะ โดยที่การเปลี่ยนแปลงในลักษณะดังกล่าวนั้นได้เกิดขึ้นก่อนในประเทศไทย ตัวอย่างเช่น จังหวัดเชียงใหม่ ที่เปลี่ยนแปลงในลักษณะดังกล่าวในช่วงปี 1980-1990 ที่ผ่านมา

จากเหตุข้างต้น งานวิจัยขึ้นนี้จึงได้ทำการค้นคว้า วิเคราะห์ และวิพากษ์ ประวัติศาสตร์ของพื้นที่สวนสาธารณะ โดยมีเป้าหมายเพื่อหาคำตอบว่า แนวคิดและลักษณะการใช้งานของสวนสาธารณะตั้งแต่เข้ามาสู่ประเทศไทย ซึ่งไม่ได้เป็นประเทศอาณานิคม ได้อย่างไร ทั้งนี้ สาระของงานวิจัยได้แบ่งชี้ว่า 1) สวนสาธารณะถูกใช้เป็นพื้นที่เพื่อการแสดงออกถึงความเป็นสังคมสมัยใหม่ของชนชั้นนำ และ 2) การใช้พื้นที่สวนสาธารณะ มีเงื่อนไขของอำนาจเข้ามายุ่ง โดยที่การเปิดพื้นที่ให้สาธารณะเข้าใช้นั้น เป็นผลสืบเนื่องจากการลอกเลียนแบบวัฒนธรรมตะวันตก เพื่อแสดงออกถึงความทันสมัยของชนชั้นนำ มิใช่เกิดจากการพยายามสร้างความเท่าเทียมทางสังคม หรือเพื่อปรับปรุงคุณภาพชีวิตของประชาชนให้ดีขึ้นแต่อย่างใด

Keywords (คำสำคัญ)

Saranrom Garden (สวนสาธารณะสุรรมย์)

Culture and Politics in Urban Space (การเมืองและวัฒนธรรมกับพื้นที่ว่างสาธารณะของเมือง)

History and Theories of the Built Environment (ประวัติศาสตร์และทฤษฎีทางสถาปัตยกรรมและสภาพแวดล้อมสร้างสรรค์)

Locational and Cultural Identity in Architecture and Urban Space (เอกลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมในงานสถาปัตยกรรมและการออกแบบพื้นที่ว่างสาธารณะของเมือง)

Critical Studies on Public Park (การศึกษาเกี่ยวกับสวนสาธารณะในเชิงวิพากษ์)

1. Introduction

The opening of regal parks for public use in the West has usually been perceived as a part of a growing idea of the park as public venue, whose construction sought to meet recreational needs and deal with the social problems of poverty, disease, and poor living conditions of the working-class people in the Industrial Age (Henneberger, 2002, p. 16). Prominent cases in point include the Royal Parks of London--regarded as freely accessible open space by the introduction of the 1851 Crown Lands Act--which further signified a move from the monarchical-dominated to modern and democratic British society during the nineteenth century.

In Siam, which later becomes Thailand, Suan Saranrom or Saranrom Garden is one of the most obvious examples outside the Western hemisphere that demonstrates the aforementioned change in land uses along with the said implications. Commissioned by King Rama IV in 1866, it was altered from the monarchy's recreational ground to a seat of state agency and eventually to a public space under the management of Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) a century later.

Owing to such historical importance, this study first examines how the concept and practice of public parks--like the Saranrom--came into existence in a non-Western culture without a direct colonization from the West. By placing the garden within a context of modernization and Westernization processes, the inquiries reveal the links between the urban green space, as well as its social, political, and cultural settings.

Second, as shown by the functional transformations of the Saranrom Garden, the modernization and Westernization of the country were largely characterized by top-down processes of globalization and homogenization. Accordingly, the analytical and critical investigations on the garden maintain that it had been: 1) employed by the ruling elites as a tool to symbolize the creation of and/or progress towards

a modern society, thus becoming a representation of the "modern Thai" identity through the acceptance and adoption of Western modernity; and 2) essentially operated in terms of a hegemonic discourse, whose accessibility to the public resulted from an imitation of Western practice to display the "civilized" identity of the elites rather than a genuine concern to produce a social "release valve" in built forms for the people.

2. The Origin, Concept, and Realization of Public Park in the West

The conception of public park can be traced back to the ancient time when emperors, triumphant generals or the wealthy created and sponsored "parks" or landscaped open spaces for ordinary people. Providing the open spaces for the public became a practice of the royalty and elite class that continued on through the medieval time into the European renaissance period (Henneberger, 2002, p. 14). However, the Queen Victoria's time (the mid to late nineteenth century) epitomized the development of the public park and, by the end of her reign "*the great period of park-building was complete*" (Lambert, 2012, p. 5). The concept of public parks, invented and shaped by the Victorians, had influenced the foundation of parks region-wide in Europe and North America (White & Duffy, n.d.).

As Henneberger (2002, p. 14) describes, during the Victorian period, the royal private parks were often used for public purposes and much of the royal park space was opened to the public. Yet, the usage of a royal park was initially limited to privileged activity determined by the royalty and to selected class of people, who possessed keys to the locked park gates. The restriction of usage was gradually eased and many of the royal parks were opened to general public, particularly with the introduction of the Crown Land Acts 1851. Most of the large urban parks consisted of a zoo, a band stand, building structures for assembly, an outdoor concert theatre, and playground.

Nonetheless, the usage control of the public parks remained, though reduced, and was regarded as a means to promote what was the authorities accepted as “correct leisure” (Lambert, 2012, p. 6). The elements put into the public parks denoted the values the authorities wanted to promote to the society; statues of military victories or heroes signifying patriotism, statues of local worthies representing the dedication for public, and inscriptions on other structural elements indicating desirable civic virtues (*Ibid*). In addition, statues of the Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, reproduced and placed in public parks nationwide, could serve as an instrument to popularize the royalty and encourage people’s loyalty.

The opening of royal parks for public use in the nineteenth century England was an important part of a growing idea of the park as public place at the time the country underwent change from monarchical supremacy to democracy (Henneberger, 2002, p. 15). This was a critical period of the transition of public parks from regally initiated to fully public funded. The shift took place in the course of a public park movement that aimed to deal with the social problems of poor living conditions of the working-class population and recognized the need for places to unwind and exercise (*Ibid*, p. 16). The creation of public parks became a means to improve both the health and the morals of the working-class. The public parks were perceived as special locations where people from all classes in the society could mix freely (White & Duffy, n.d.) and, therefore, provided the valves to release pressure in order to avoid social turmoil (Lambert, 2012, p. 6). Apart from the royal parks, many of the Victorian public parks were presented to the public by the wealthy and some were founded by people’s contribution.

3. The Genesis, Historical Developments, and Interpretations of Saranrom Garden

3.1 A Regal Private Garden

Saranrom Garden was a part of Saranrom

Palace, located in the southeast of the Grand Palace in the historic area of Bangkok or Rattanakosin Island. The palace was commissioned by King Rama IV (Mongkut, r. 1851-1868) for his retirement. However, the sovereign passed away before his dream of living in retirement as advisor on state affairs could be realized. The construction of Saranrom Palace, commenced in 1866, continued onto the next reign (King Rama V or Chulalongkorn, r. 1868-1910) when its garden was created (Chulalongkorn, H.M., 2011, p. 397).

Saranrom Garden was one of the projects established after King Rama V visited Singapore in 1870. Nevertheless, it was not until 1874 that the day was set for royal planting in Saranrom Garden. In this occasion, various plants were presented by royal family members, Buddhist monks, and government officials for landscaping the palace’s garden (Darunowat, 1874 in Nawigamune, 1996, p. 61). It was probably around this time that the landscape work of the garden was nearly completed. When finished, the garden was famous and also known as the ‘King’s Garden’, as named in several records by Europeans (see, for example, Child, 1892).

Although the constructions of regal residences accompanied by beautiful and spacious gardens were common for Siamese monarchy, the creation of Saranrom Garden signified a paradigmatic shift on the mode of cultural consumption during the Fourth Reign. Together with other buildings commissioned by King Rama IV—such as Phra Nakhon Khiri hilltop retreat in Petchaburi province—Saranrom Garden exhibited that Western art and architecture had rapidly gained both the royal preference and patronage after 1850.

Notwithstanding the fact that the sovereign did not survive to see the Saranrom in its glorious days, it can be argued that his idea of living in a private mansion outside the crowded confinement of the Grand Palace derived from a global trend in the Victorian era for the ruling elites to dwell in an aestheticized version of what appeared to be a

natural environment (Peleggi, 2002, p. 6). Long before ascending to the throne, Mongkut was an enthusiast of Western education, scientific knowledge, and modern technology, aside from being well acquainted with Westerners since he was still a princely monk. The scholar king was thereby undoubtedly a connoisseur of Western material culture, as exhibited by his correspondence with Queen Victoria, which he articulately wrote:

“Your Majesty’s empire looks like a garden of paradise, while mine is so unkempt as if it were a jungle” (Mongkut, H.M., 1857 in Sukata, 2000, p. 12).

By using a metaphor of a beautiful garden for the British Empire, King Rama IV’s letter implied that the notion of “beauty” according to British cultural norms became a criterion for what is desirable and superior, whereas traditional Siamese standards were relegated to a lesser position.

3.2 A Representation of the Monarchy’s “Civilized”

Self-image and a Prelude of Public Inclusion

A year after the royal planting, the garden was employed as a venue for a royal garden party and the description of the event in a newspaper showed that the landscape work was pleasing. Groups of royal family members, elites, officials, merchants, and Europeans were invited to attend the party. Its festive scene was described in the newspaper *Darunowat* that the garden had various types of trees and flowers. Grass looked green and fresh. Many enjoyed walking and viewing through the garden, while European children played on a carousel. At dusk, the garden was lit by the lanterns set around the area, whereas traditional Thai music and brass band were performed. The garden elements incorporated gazebo, bridge and pond, all of which surrounded by shrubs and flowers. A variety of food and drinks, as well as betel and cigarette were provided in the tents. The royal quarter was lit and distinctively decorated with a large mirror and several pictures on the walls (Anonymous, 1875, pp. 46-47).

Six years later, King Rama V asked Henry Alabaster, then his British personal advisor, to manage the garden and allowed him to select his own keepers (Suttisongkam, 2008, p. 572). Alabaster (1836-1884) arrived in Bangkok as an interpreter for British Consul and later involved in various development projects, including the survey and construction of Charoen Krung Road widely regarded as the first modern road in Bangkok and in Siam. The Briton subsequently became King Rama V’s personal advisor in 1873 and took parts in several fields of the country’s development including survey, map making, post and telegraph, museum, library, and urban landscape (Smith, 2005, p. 207). He was eventually awarded the rank of Phya First Class and served Chulalongkorn until his death in 1884 at age of 48 (Garnier, n.d.).

While being put in charge of the Saranrom Garden in 1881, Alabaster reported to the monarch about the decay of the garden (Official Letters to His Majesty, MR 5NGor/14; Official Letters to His Majesty, MR 5NGor/15). He wrote that it was vacant and unkempt. Trees and plants were stunted, while iron chairs, decorative items, and gas lamps were missing. Alabaster also commented on the existing landscape that its designer did not understand the gardening.

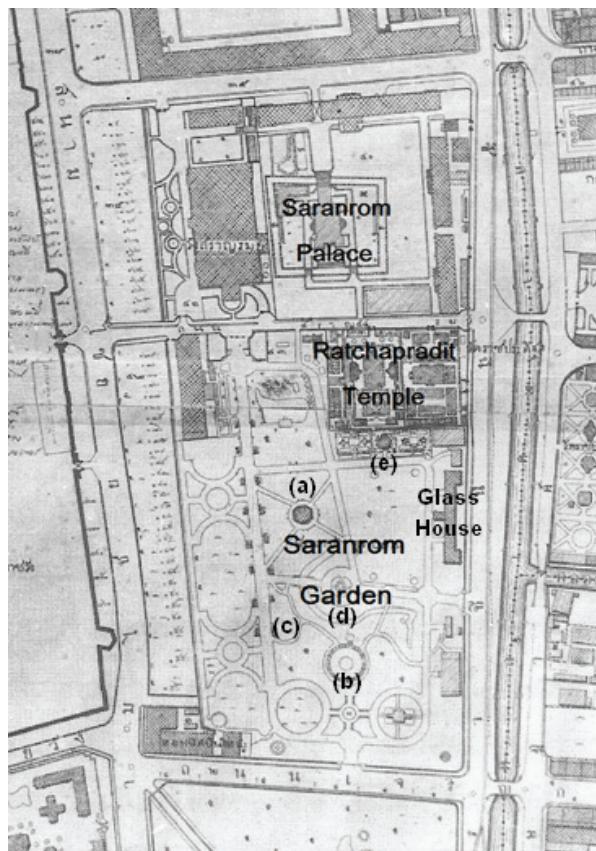
Alabaster further criticized people’s access to the garden and suggested an entry control. He noted that plants and flowers in the garden were damaged and stolen. Besides, Saranrom was a royal garden and, therefore, people should not be able to access the area freely, but should be allowed to enter occasionally by the sovereign. Alabaster thus asked Chulalongkorn to close the garden during the renovation and to assign keepers in order to protect new trees that he imported from London and Singapore. He subsequently suggested a weekly open access after the restoration was finished.

It was probably during Alabaster’s supervision that Saranrom Garden was looked after and adorned with greenery once again. In addition, the access control, proposed by Alabaster, was put into practice.

Its entry was occasionally permitted by the king. Smith (2005, p. 16) wrote in 1882 that the public were allowed in the garden at any time when there was no royal presence. In 1892, Child noted that the garden was open to the public every Saturday. However, the middle-class in a sense of those appeared in Europe had not yet emerged in Siamese society at this time. Also, a public park and its function were a very new idea for ordinary people. Therefore, unlike European countries where public parks acted as a valve to release social pressure, Saranrom Garden remained a space for only the elites and without actual public use.

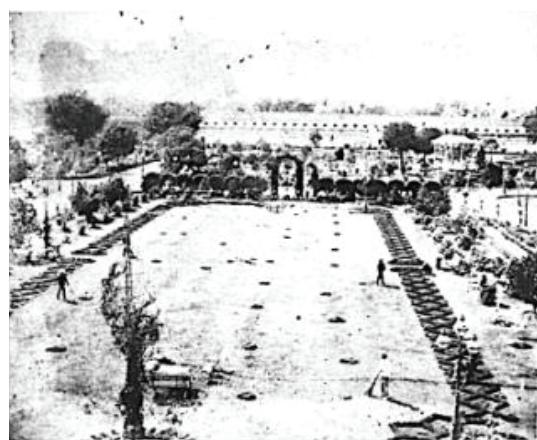
Although Alabaster was in charge of the garden for only four years before his death (i.e., 1881-1884), he successfully returned the role of pleasure green area to the Saranrom. The garden became famous and was selected as one of Bangkok's significant places, pictured and published for sale in 1884 (Smith, 2006, p. 263). Even after his death, Alabaster's garden design and his approach on staff management were still referred to and followed (Official Letters to His Majesty, MR 5NGor/40; Official Letters to His Majesty, MR 5NGor/43).

During the ensuing decade, a European record illustrated that the Saranrom was a formal garden with an orderly pattern combined with the use of geometric shapes in its landscape design (Figure 1 and 2). It consisted of many elements imitating its



(Source: Edited from Department of Fine Arts, 1982)

Figure 2. A Layout Plan of Saranrom Garden, ca. 1890s, showing Its Landscape Design and Locations of Its Building Structures ((a) a Victorian-style Gazebo (b) a European-style Fountain (c) a Brass Band Pavilion (d) the Memorial (e) a Chinese Pavilion).



(Source: Department of Fine Arts, 2005)

Figure 1. Saranrom Garden or the King's Garden and Its Early Landscape during the Fifth Reign.

Western counterparts, including conservatory, gothic aisle, Italian monuments in remembrance of the late Queen, fountains, summer houses, bandstands, lawns, and a mock zoo (Child, 1892). These characteristics of the garden were likely Alabaster's original design.

Based on Child's narrative, aside from the growing of local plants a slight connection with Siamese tradition of gardening was solely the potted plant, which was popular in traditional Siamese houses. A building of a monument to commemorate an important event or person was a new practice in Siam. In addition, the practice of keeping an animal in a cage for people's viewing was not a Siamese

custom, but a new kind of recreation in colonial countries (Srisuwannakij, 2006, p. 55). The bandstand and lawn served the new activities in music and sport. The mock zoo, the music in the garden, and the Western sports and games all reflected the new fashion of recreation influenced by Western culture.

Certain building structures and landscaping elements, constructed during the Fifth Reign, still remain intact and their designs could provide a clearer picture of the garden at that time. These structures and elements consist of: 1) an octagonal gazebo in the Victorian style with marble floor and timber posts (Figure 3a); 2) an elegant metal-casting



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)

(Source: The Authors)

Figure 3. Remaining Building Structures in Saranrom Garden from the Fifth Reign: (a) a Victorian-style Gazebo (b) a European-style Fountain (c) a Brass Band Pavilion (d) the Memorial to Queen Sunantha Kumareerat and Princess Kannaporn Phetcharat (e) a Chinese Pavilion.

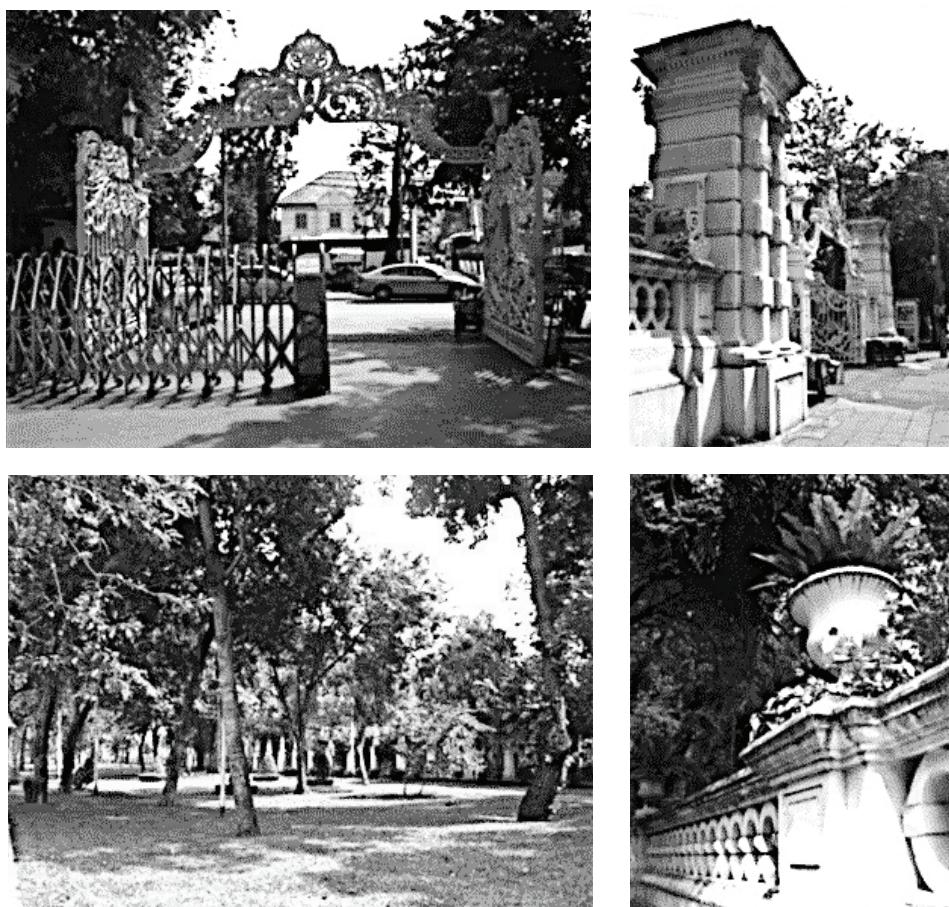
two-storey fountain in European Style (Figure 3b); 3) a brass band pavilion with a double roof design (Figure 3c); 4) the Khmer-style marble monument to Chulalongkorn's consort Queen Sunantha Kumareerat and his daughter Princess Kannaporn Phetcharat who died in a tragic boating accident (Figure 3d); 5) a shrine of Chao Mae Takhien Deity, a former

Chinese Pavilion built in an octagonal shape (Figure 3e); 6) a glass house, a one-storey building designed with glass windows, perforated louvers and parapet (Figure 4); and 7) the garden's fences on the north and west, handsome walls on the south and east, and elegant portals with King Rama V's royal emblems on top (Figure 5).



(Source: The Authors)

Figure 4. The Glass House.



(Source: The Authors)

Figure 5. A Collection of Photographs displaying Saranrom Garden's Fences, Walls, and Portals.

The eclectic design of the garden's elements illustrates a combination between traditional and Western influences on built environments. While the former still existed in the forms of Khmer-style monument and Chinese pavilion, the latter was displayed by the Victorian pavilions, fountain, glass house, as well as the garden's walls and portals. The assortment somehow reflects the broader society. Although Western styles and practices became fashionable for Siamese elite group, traditional ideas were not rejected, but were brought about to combine with the new ones.

Throughout the Fifth Reign, reception parties were organized in Saranrom Garden now and then, particularly for welcoming royal guests. Of the events, the pleasant activities encompassed strolling and viewing exotic plants and flowers, listening to the music performed by brass band, eating and drinking, observing royal elephant parade, as well as watching Siamese martial art performances and traditional sport games (Smith, 2005, pp. 81-82, 137; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MR 5T/10). However, the attendants of these events were limited exclusively to higher-class people: Siamese elites, wealthy merchants, and the Westerners. In this regard, the uses of Saranrom Garden for the receptions of royal guests, garden parties and leisure activities significantly displayed new forms of social practice, developed among the ruling elites in their quest for civility for Siam.

During the Fifth Reign, the Saranrom became a pleasure "garden or park" (Bock, 1884, p. 32) and, as seen in the European records, it was tended to open to the local populace. However, due to its conditions of access and actual users, the Saranrom Garden's function as public space was unclear because its public usage was strictly regulated and actually only the elite class and the Westerners appeared in the scene.

As stated earlier, the creation of Saranrom Garden was an integral constituent of the Siamese ruling elites' quest for—if not obsession with—being "civilized" according to the Western model (literally transmogrified in Thai as *siwilai*). The refashioning of

their self-image gave rise to the creation of a new self-identity through a process of cultural appropriation, assimilation, diffusion, and displacement. In cooperation with modernization and Westernization, King Rama V fostered Siam's reputation as a civilized country via the importation, promotion, popularization, and conspicuous consumption of Western material culture, namely art, architecture, urban design, costume, customs, and education (see, for example, Wyatt, 1994; Peleggi, 2002; Wong, 2006; Navapan, 2013; Noobanjong, 2013). These activities brought to the kingdom a number of Western artists, architects and engineers, who introduced new techniques and expanded the palette of expression as seen from the creation of Saranrom Garden.

Moreover, albeit not being officially codified, Saranrom Garden performed as a social ordering device in built forms, as much as it was a contrivance of self-aggrandizement for Siamese kings. In conjunction with the Neo-classical Saranrom Palace, this Western-style garden resonated well with the fact that hiring the Europeans to design and build them was prohibitively expensive, and only the monarchy could afford to do so.

Yet in essence, the "civilized" image that the elites proudly adopted signified a peculiarity of a crypto-colony (Herzfeld, 2002, pp. 900-901). On the one hand, the remaking of the elites' self-image was a fulfillment of their desire to identify themselves with European monarchy. Because intermarriage with the Europeans was prohibited due to a mandated separation between races and religions, the only way to become a member of the so-called "global royal fraternity" was to live a similar lifestyle, read the same books, and behave in the same manner. On the other hand, this very creation of a new self-identity was an affirmation of a capitulation by Siamese kings and their courts to Western hegemony, which was "*mirrored, via the travelogues by the court's foreign guests and the later visits of Rama V to Europe, [in terms of] a recognizably 'civilized' image back onto the West itself*" (Peleggi, 2002, p. 20).

3.3 A Representation of a Modern Nation-state and Its Identity

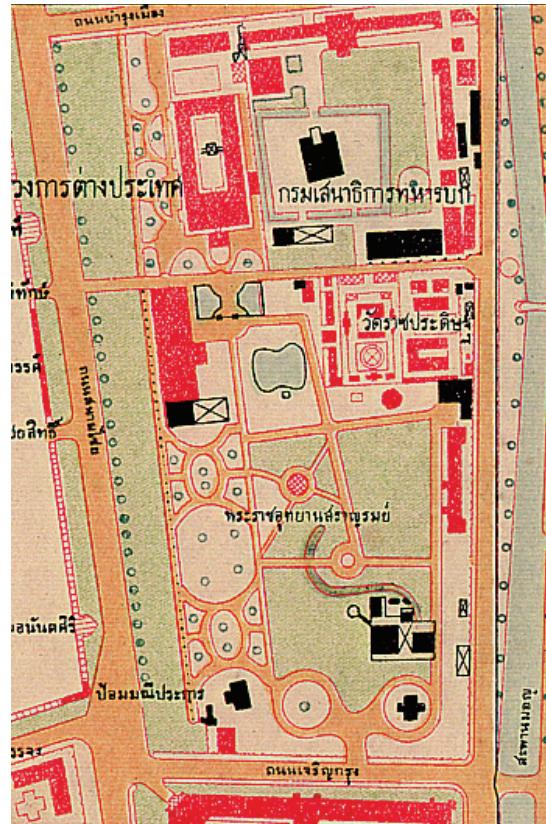
The reformation of the Saranrom Garden continued into the next reign (Vajiravudh, r. 1910-1925), reflecting changes of royal preference and Siamese elites' lifestyle. In the early years of King Rama VI's era, several building structures in the Saranrom Garden were altered or refurbished. For instance, a theatre for *Khon* (Thai classical masked dance) was modified to serve new uses including two billiard rooms, two reading rooms, a meeting room, a pantry, the king's bathroom and dressing room, and officials' bathrooms. The Glass House, once occupied by the Dvi Panya Club--the social club founded by King Rama VI when he was the Crown Prince, was altered to be a reception room with a reinforced roof structure (Ministry of Palace, MR 6W/23).

The garden's layout plan and landscape in the 1920s (Figure 6) slightly differed from the one drawn in the 1890s (Figure 2). While a pattern of area arrangement was maintained, a few more wooden buildings appeared in the new plan. One of them was possibly a theatre for play, a famous performance during King Rama VI's period, because at that time timber structure theatres were widely constructed in palace grounds, including the Saranrom Garden (Srisuwannakij, 2006, p. 91).

Although the appearance of the garden might not considerably change, new activities were carried out and emphasized the social function of the garden. During the Sixth Reign, the Saranrom Garden became a site for the annual Winter Fair, where people from all ranks enjoyed the shops and plays (Department of Fine Arts, 2005, p. 256). The Winter Fair previously took place at Chitralada Palace before it was relocated to Saranrom Garden because the location of the garden made it more convenient for people to get to with no need of vehicle use (Unknown, 1924 in Nawigamune, 1996, p. 154). The fairs were not only joyful events, but also a means to promote and publicize the royal approach or concern for the country development at the time. As in 1922, opening

shops in the fair, as invited, was considered an expression of unity (Ministry of Municipal Government, MR 6N/232), a significant concept the monarch attempted to promote to the society. Shops were placed both inside and outside of the Saranrom Garden. Those sponsored by the monarch and government departments were located inside the garden, while those known as *sampeng* and perceived as the low quality ones were placed outside.

Apart from hosting the royal ceremonies or state events, other organizations could ask for the king's permission to use the Saranrom Garden as well, e.g. "Our Day" British Red Cross Fete (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MR 6T/49). In a nutshell, the Saranrom operated in terms of a "quasi-public space," where people from different socio-economic classes could interact with each other. The festive uses during the Sixth Reign made a tangible change on Saranrom Garden as it became a public park akin to those in the West in terms of a place for social congregation.



(Source: Royal Thai Survey Department)

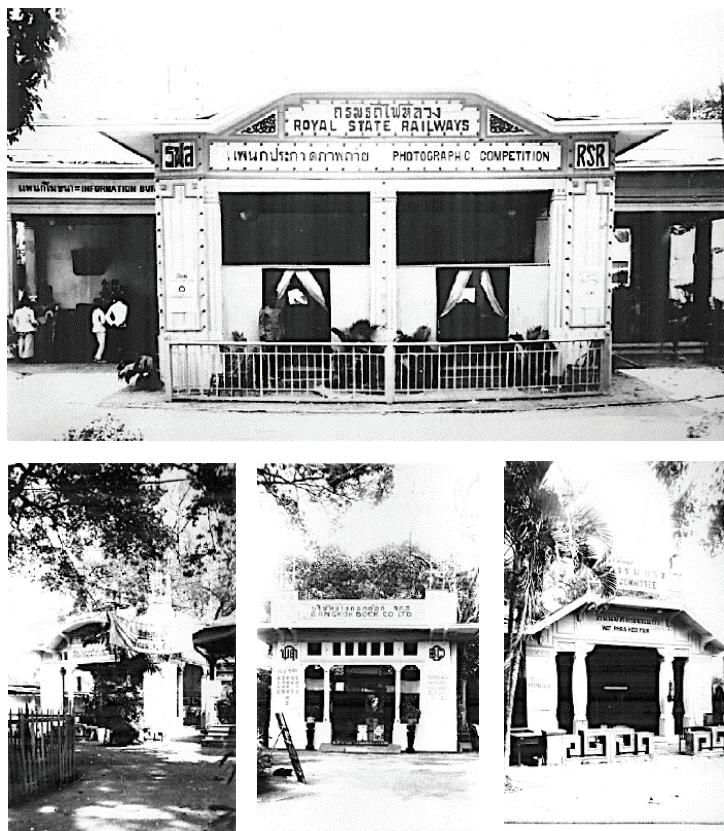
Figure 6. A Layout Plan of Saranrom Garden, surveyed in 1922, 1930 and printed in 1932.

By functioning as a showcase for the cultural modernization of the Siamese ruling elites under King Rama VI's directive, the social festivities at Saranrom Garden were a well-crafted public relations measure, rendering an image of Vajiravudh as a benign and progressive ruler. In a similar way, new kinds of recreation taken place in the garden, such as Western sports, social club, and dialogue play, benefited Siamese elites by being a means to make them "civilized" and to display their economic capability. Moreover, because participation to these activities was not limited by class but affordability, they became one of the paths to social mobilization (Srisuwannakij, 2006, p. 166). Like the Winter Fair mentioned above, the Western recreational practices were also used by the monarch to build and promote a concept of unity via created plots of the plays as well as member associations in sport games and social clubs.

As a matter of fact, the fête at Saranrom Garden was nothing new to Bangkok residents.

People had become accustomed to public festivities and social gatherings taking place in the capital city since the time of Chulalongkorn. Prior to the Winter Fair at the Saranrom, King Rama V and his court often held annual fundraising fairs at Wat Benchamabophit (the Marble Temple), where the royal elite including the king himself assumed entrepreneurial roles by running stalls to raise money for the temple ("Wat Benchamabophit Fair", 1907).

As the royal elite of the Sixth Reign moved to assume a more thoroughly Westernized identity, the hybridized Siamese-European structures like the Marble Temple were no longer deemed a fashionable accouterment or appropriate way to be "civilized". However, the organization of the Winter Fair followed the idea of the Temple fair as seen from the stalls sponsored by government departments and business companies, as well as famous activities like photograph competition, included in the fairs since the period of the former reign (Figure 7).



(Source: National Archives of Thailand)

Figure 7. A Collection of Photographs taken from a Fair at Saranrom Garden in 1927.

Saranrom Garden served King Rama VI in a comparable manner to what the Mable Temple did for King Rama V, regarding the politics of representations in built forms to create the modern Thai identity. The garden was employed to legitimize the mediation of the monarchical power, buttressed by the crown's egocentric position under the pretext of transforming the kingdom into a modern-nation state to combat Western colonization.

Overall, this concept acted as a framework of reference for architecture of the state and urban space to propagate political messages to the masses through the creation of the national and cultural identity of Siam, which was actually a projection of specific characteristics to mobilize the people to come together and express their solidarity and feeling of belonging that could be politically exploited. By constructing the royal self-image *vis-à-vis* the collective image of the Thais united by the personality of the king, the Saranrom Garden epitomized a material embodiment of Thai nationhood, as shown by its social activities that were performed under the dominance of the regal authority.

Both the creation and transformation of Saranrom Garden fell into a well-established Occidentalizing project, initiated since the reign of King Rama IV (Kitiarsa, 2005). Because the Siamese ruling elites saw the Western model of modernization as the source of and method for achieving a respectable status among the civilized countries, the Occidentalizing project furnished them with a new and refined identity apart from simply framing their worldview about the West and modernity itself. Royalist advocates always portray the Occidentalizing project as anchored in a selective approach to the Westernization and modernization processes. By perceiving Westerners as "suspected Others," the Siamese royal elite did not embrace all aspects of the West and modernity in the process of their cultural adaptation, but played an active and authoritative role in generating, combining, and projecting Thai versions of contested meanings through the designs of the

built environment (Aphornsuvan, 2004, pp. 96-105), as demonstrated by the eclectic landscape elements at Saranrom Garden as a case in point (i.e. Western landscape and garden elements, Chinese pavilion, and Khmer-style monument) (Figure 3-5).

Nonetheless, the preceding analytical discussions on the Saranrom contradict the royalist's assertions and suggest the following. The otherness in the design of the garden indeed indicated a very important aspect of Siam: an anxiety to become a civilized nation-state that could still preserve its own traditional social practices and cultural heritage, thus generating a kind of split national mentality. Also, the identity of modern Siam as a nation-state could never be completed without foreign contributions.

3.4 A Seat of State Agency during the Post-absolutist Period

During the era of Vajiravudh's immediate successor, King Rama VII (Prajadhipok, 1925-1935), buildings in Suan Saranrom were still well maintained, whereas the garden itself remained a venue for special events. Examples include the social gatherings by the War Veteran Organization and Siam's Scout Corps (The Secretariat of the Cabinet, 1994b, pp. 364-366), as well as American missionaries' centennial celebration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MR 7T/17), and Siam Red Cross Day (Office of the Royal Secretariat (Miscellaneous), MR 7B/13). Apart from hosting meetings of various organizations, the Saranrom Garden was employed for *Lo Ching Cha* ceremony, a Siamese traditional ritual. The ceremonial procession was formed at the garden before moving to the Giant Swing (The Secretariat of the Cabinet, 1994a, pp. 647-648). Furthermore, the Saranrom housed Siam's Lawn Tennis Club, founded by King Rama VII himself in 1926 (Srisuwannakij, 2008, p. 117).

Notwithstanding the utilitarian purposes of Suan Saranrom as a park and quasi-public space, the offices of the abovementioned social entities along with their festive events held at the Saranrom were exclusive to those supported by the monarch, the

government, and non-profit or charitable organizations. This mandate was put in place by King Rama VII as a response to a request from a group of Chinese merchants to arrange a market fair on the ground of the Saranrom, which was previously reserved for royal events or those with public welfare. The sovereign deemed that Suan Saranrom was not appropriate to be employed for profit-seeking activities. Consequently, he recommended a use of Lumbini Park instead and guided them to make their request to the Ministry of Interior (Office of the Royal Secretariat, MR 7RL/46).

In the early years of Prajadhipok's reign, Saranrom Garden was looked after by the Royal Guard Regiment until the Siamese absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932 by a bloodless coup that turned the kingdom into a constitutional monarchy regime. After the revolution, King Rama VII gave the management of Suan Saranrom to the newly formed government. The crown also granted permission for the People's Party or Khanaratsadorn--the political group leading the 1932 coup *d'état* consisting mainly of foreign-educated civil servants and military officers--to erect its headquarters on the ground of the Saranrom (Figure 8). In this respect, Hongston (2012, p. 127) pointed out that the selection of the Saranrom Garden--where the Dvi Panya Club was located--as a site for constructing the People Party's

head office bestowed the Saranrom Palace and its grounds a vital role in mediating power after the demise of royal absolutism in Siam.

In 1934, King Rama VII had a falling out with Khanaratsadorn, following the blotted royalist rebellion led by Prince Boworadet a year earlier. The beleaguered sovereign exiled himself to England in 1934, and abdicated the throne in 1935. Prajadhipok remained there until his death in 1941. His young nephew, Prince Ananda Mahidol--foreign born and Western educated--assumed the regal title of Rama VIII. The youthful monarch did not take permanent residence in Thailand until the end of World War II. For the next quarter of a century, the monarchy did not play a visible role in Thai society.

Owing to the ongoing global economic depression of the 1930s coupled with the People's Party's reconciliatory efforts, the new leadership sought to introduce new meaning into old forms of cultural artifacts to convey political messages: to mediate the power of the post-absolutist regime. To cite some examples, several handsome princely and aristocratic mansions standing along Rajadamnoen Avenue or in the Dusit district were nationalized. Their regal and aristocratic origins were transformed into Thailand's national heritage, changing from private treasure to state-owned properties.



(Source: The Authors)

Figure 8. The Head Office of the People's Party (Currently the Administrative Office of Saranrom Park).

Being a part of the power politics manifested through the built environment, Suan Saranrom was turned into a site for accommodating the offices of state agencies in addition to the headquarters of the People's Party as already mentioned. Interestingly, unlike other former regal structures that were nationalized after 1932, the Neo-classical Saranrom Palace (Figure 9) had operated as a seat for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs even before the demise of Siamese royal absolutism. In other words, the place had a close historical association with its post-absolutist civic duty.

Since the time of Chulalongkorn, Saranrom Palace occasionally functioned as a living quarter for foreign dignitaries during their state visits to Siam, in conjunction with serving as a princely residence. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (then Krom Tha) occupied the palace for two years (1885-1887) before it was relocated. The agency was later moved back to the Saranrom Palace in 1926. In 1992, a new ministerial compound located outside the historic Bangkok area was completed. Since then, a large portion of the palace has been closed for a major renovation, which has yet to finish (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2012).

The historical connection between Saranrom Palace, its garden, and the country's diplomatic

affairs, might be one of the reasons why the People's Party did not decide to demolish or abandon the place, or erect a Modernist structure in place of the elegant Neo-classical Saranrom, as were the cases for many government and public buildings commissioned after 1932. Such politics of representations seemed to work for the coup promoters quite effectively in mediating their power via the built environment, especially when taking the regal genesis of the Saranrom into account (also see Usavagovit-wong, 2012, pp. 80-84 for analytical discussions on the creations of meanings and memories via recognition and reproduction of public space in social-spatial practice).

In sum, the preservation of both the palace and garden rendered the 1932 revolution as a continuation of the national history rather than a break from the past. By re-appropriating the Saranrom, Khanaratsadorn was able to depict and legitimize themselves both as champions of democracy and guardians of the constitutional monarchy via the arbitratative, creative and assertive powers of the place.

Following the 1932 revolution, other organizations sharing the space in the Saranrom Garden for their head offices encompassed Vajiravudh College Alumni Association and Department of Public Welfare (The Secretariat of the Cabinet, (2)SR. 0201.



(Source: Department of Fine Arts, 1982)

Figure 9. Saranrom Palace during the Fifth Reign (Left) and Saranrom Palace as the Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Late-twentieth Century (Right).

69/82). Under the directives of the post-absolutist administration, the garden became a venue for government-led festive events and social activities. The most significant of which was the annual celebration of the Constitution Day, commenced in 1932 but first arranged in Saranrom Garden in 1938. The celebration was a grand event and very famous for people, who could enjoy a variety of stalls and entertainments, sponsored by both government departments and private companies. The duration of the event varied each year, from three to fifteen days, and its heyday lasted from 1933 to 1940 before the global political situation shifted and the country was at war a year later (Prakitnontakarn, 2005, pp. 131, 141-143). The use of Saranrom Garden for the public celebrations of the Constitution Day obviously highlighted its function as public space during the post-absolutist period.

Similar to the ruling elites in the previous era of absolute monarchy, the government as the state rulers utilized the public arena to express and promote their political ideas and objectives, as well as to legitimize their power. Apart from the fact that the Saranrom Garden was selected to be a site of the headquarters of the People's Party as mentioned earlier, it was also used as a stage to promote the government's ideas to the mass and thus to form the collective notion. This was done through particular activities set in the celebrations of the Constitution Day, such as an essay contest and a competition of stalls, the design of which had to reflect the concept of constitution and the main principles of the People's Party (Prakitnontakarn, 2005, pp. 132-134).

Apart from the public celebrations, Saranrom garden was regularly used for hosting temporary markets to sell products in affordable prices in order to lessen people's living expenses (The Secretariat of the Cabinet, (2) SR.0201.69/82). On June 3, 1960, the cabinet finally decided to place Suan Saranrom under the care of Bangkok Municipality (now Bangkok Metropolitan Administration [BMA]), which has remained in effect since then.

3.5 A Public Park and the Royal Restoration

As explained before, Saranrom Garden is now opened as a public park and under supervision of the BMA. Certain structures and landscaping elements, constructed during the Fifth Reign, still remain intact and well-maintained (Figure 3-5). As for the headquarters of the People's Party (Figure 8), which gave rise to a new role of the Saranrom Garden, is currently utilized by the BMA as the administrative office of the park, and standing modestly at a secluded corner of the property.

The transfer of Suan Saranrom to the BMA occurred under the military dictatorship of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1959-1963). Together with the military officers of the "coup group," or *khanarat-taprahan*, these younger men mostly held conservative views and were supporters of the monarchy.

Espousing orderliness, cleanliness, and conformity, these locally educated strongmen were traditionalists, whose nationalist ethos embraced Vajiravudh's concept of Thai nationhood based on the triad values of nation, religion, and monarchy, in place of exogenic and intangible ideas like constitutionalism and democracy, as promulgated by the People's Party (Chaloemtiarana, 1979, p. 96).

Politically, Thanarat employed the monarchical institution as both the focus of loyalty for the citizens and the source of legitimacy for maintaining his "despotic paternalism." He resuscitated the role of the king, as well as many ancient Hindu-Buddhist royal customs and ceremonies in conjunction with enacting the *lèse-majesté* law. The restoration of the monarchy elevated the incumbent monarch--King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX, r. 1946-the present)--to an omnipotent and sacrosanct status, which was a far cry from the powerless figurehead of his brother, King Ananda Mahidol (r. 1935-1946) (Mokarapong, 1972, pp. 283-293).

In order to maintain a very visible public bond of allegiance to the monarch and the royal family, Thanarat mandated that any plot against the head of government constituted a threat against the sovereign

and the nation, and *vice-versa*. On that account, an argument can be made that Thanarat, his clique, and the king depended on each other, resulting in both a division of labor and a close network between the monarchy and the military-dominated government (Chaloemtiarana, 1979, pp. 81-91). Likewise, it is not too far fetch to hazard that the transfer of Saranrom Garden to the BMA that finally turned the regal garden into a “genuine” public park did not occur by chance with regard to the royalists’ return to power, but it was a well-conceived public relation measure implemented by the post-People’s Party regime to reintegrate the monarchical institution with the Thai society. This would, in turn, supply a much-needed aura of legitimacy in the eyes of the people for the junta to continue their totalitarian rule.

4. Persisting Questions

The development of Suan Saranrom from a royal garden to a public park substantially reflects the country’s social and political movements through the course of time. The history of Saranrom Garden and its built structures illustrates that the garden was mainly used by Siamese ruling class, i.e. the monarchs and the governments, who directed the significant changes of the garden to please their will or to fulfill their needs and goals. Since its handover to the BMA, Suan Saranrom has been largely confined to function as a green urban space for public leisure. The roles of the monarchy and the government on the garden are becoming less obvious than those of the general public.

In any case, a close examination on Saranrom Garden discloses that the predominantly Westernized design of this regal garden actually contains non-European landscape elements as well, namely the Khmer-style Monument and Chinese Pavilion. Such an eclectic characteristic of the garden raises a series of intriguing questions, thus calling for further inquiries into the Thai national and cultural identity concerning

the issue of power mediation in the built environment. For instance, do the eclectic and hybridized side-by-side with Western-style built forms represent a Thai way of expressing modern identity or a Western way of expressing Thai identity? Or neither? Or both? To what degree has Westernization been necessary to achieve modernity? Since the productions of cultural artifacts since the time of King Rama IV have contributed to the formation of a collective vision of the past for Siam and Thailand, in what way and to what extent has the modern Thai identity been influenced by other cultures?

5. Conclusion

Through the investigation of the development of the Saranrom Garden, this study first illustrates how the Western concept and practice of public parks came into existence in Thailand, the non-Western and non-colonized country. The study discloses that the Siamese rulers, i.e. the monarchy and the government, were significant agents of the Western-influenced development of the Saranrom Garden and its transition from the regal garden to public park. At the beginning of the development, King Rama V asked the European to design the garden and, therefore, introduced the Western-style landscape and elements into the local environment. The new forms of leisure and social activity as well as the festive events, apparently reflect the Western practices. The development of the Saranrom Garden was somewhat similar to the development process of public park in the West in terms of that it was established as a royal private garden and its early public use was dictated by the monarchy. Yet, its role as a public park was not originated from the social needs, which instigated the public park movement in Europe.

Secondly, the study reveals that the Saranrom Garden was used by the ruling elites as a representation of the “modern Thai” identity. The Western characteristics of urban form and Western way of

socialization ascribed the civilizing attribute to the city and provided the monarchy with a modern image, a pursuit of which was intense in this period of the country's modernization. In addition, while the public parks in Europe offered a social "release valve" as a part of the solution of social problems, the context of Saranrom Garden was different. Without any concern of social needs, the increasing public accessibility of the Saranrom Garden derived from a replication of

Western practice in order to exhibit the "civilized" identity of the elites.

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