The Rajadamnoen Avenue: Contesting Urban Meanings and Political Memories
ถนนราชดำเนิน: พื้นที่แห่งการต่อสู้และความขัดแย้งด้านความหมายและความทรงจำทางการเมือง

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Abstract

This research presents an inquiry on the transformations of Rajadamnoen Avenue and its adjacent areas. Constructed in the late-19th century, this 3.2 km-long urban stretch has operated as a representation of power, therefore occupying a prominent space both in the urban fabric of the capital city and in the collective psyche of the Thais. Aside from serving the monarchy and existing power holders, the Rajadamnoen has functioned as the locus of all major contests to power and authority in Thailand. While challengers to power haved transformed its landscape, the avenue has also conditioned how and where the contestants could use it to make their marks, claims, demands, and representations.

Because of such historical and political importance, the upcoming analytical and critical discussions first look into the Rajadamnoen as a symbolic device for the state and ruling authority to manifest, legitimize, and maintain political power. The focus of these investigations subsequently shifts to examine the avenue in terms of a contested space, where ordinary citizens haved re-appropriated it by means of semantic subversions to practice their social and political activities as well as to create their modern identities.

Although the physicality of the Rajadamnoen has not been substantially altered during the past four decades, the political struggles have changed the meanings and memories of the avenue considerably in many ways. For that reason, this study seeks to illustrate the complexity and paradoxes in interpreting the meanings of this strip of urban space, which coexist, converge, contradict, and contest with one another.

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ได้ทำการศึกษาการเปลี่ยนแปลงของถนนราชดำเนินและบริเวณใกล้เคียง ผ่านมิติด้านการเมือง สังคม วัฒนธรรม รวมทั้งบริบทอื่น ๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้อง ซึ่งเป็นที่ทราบกันทั่วไปว่า นอกจากความสำคัญทางกายภาพที่มีต่อกรุงเทพมหานคร อันเป็นเมืองหลวงของประเทศแล้ว ถนนราชดำเนินยังทำหน้าที่ในการสื่อสัญลักษณ์ด้านการแสดงอำนาจทางการเมืองอีกด้วย ถนนหลักสายนี้จึงได้กลายมาเป็นที่ซึ่งกลุ่มพลังฝ่ายต่าง ๆ ใช้เป็นเวทีสำหรับการต่อสู้ เรียกร้องเพื่อบรรลุวัตถุประสงค์

ทางการเมืองของตน โดยที่กิจกรรมทางการเมืองดังกล่าว ไม่เพียงก่อให้เกิดการเปลี่ยนแปลงของพื้นที่ตลอดแนวถนนราชดำเนินเท่านั้น แต่รูปแบบของการเคลื่อนไหวทางการเมืองก็ได้ถูกกำหนดจากความสัมพันธ์ในเชิงสัญลักษณ์กับถนนราชดำเนินเช่นกัน

จากความสำคัญทางการเมืองและประวัติศาสตร์ที่ได้กล่าวมาข้างต้น งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้จึงได้ทำการ 1) ศึกษาถนนราชดำเนินในฐานะของเครื่องหมายแห่งอำนาจและความชอบธรรมของรัฐ สำหรับชนชั้นนำในการบริหารและปกครองประเทศ และ 2) ค้นคว้าทั้งในเชิงวิเคราะห์และวิพากษ์เกี่ยวกับถนนราชดำเนินในฐานะของพื้นที่แห่งความขัดแย้งและการต่อสู้ โดยมุ่งประเด็นไปที่การแสดงออกทางการเมืองและการสร้างอัตลักษณ์สมัยใหม่ให้แก่ตนของภาคประชาชน

ถึงแม้ว่าทางลักษณะกายภาพของถนนราชดำเนินนั้น จะไม่ได้รับการปรับปรุงเท่าใดนักตลอดช่วงสี่ทศวรรษที่ผ่านมาก็ตาม ทว่า การเคลื่อนไหวและต่อสู้ทางการเมืองตลอดระยะเวลาดังกล่าว กลับก่อให้เกิดความเปลี่ยนแปลงด้านการสื่อความหมายทางสัญลักษณ์และความทรงจำที่เกี่ยวกับถนนราชดำเนินอย่างมากมาย ด้วยเหตุนี้ สาระของงานวิจัยจึงได้แสดงให้เห็นถึงการสื่อความหมายซึ่งซับซ้อน ไม่ชัดเจน ไม่เป็นระเบียบ ทับซ้อน และขัดแย้งกันในตัวเองของถนนสายนี้ อีกประการหนึ่งด้วย

Keywords

Culture and Politics in Architecture, Urban Space and Design (การเมืองและวัฒนธรรมกับงานสถาปัตยกรรม)
History and Theories of the Built Environment (ประวัติศาสตร์และทฤษฎีทางสถาปัตยกรรมและสภาพแวดล้อมสรรค์สร้าง)
Locational and Cultural Identity in Architecture and Urban Space (เอกลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมในงานสถาปัตยกรรมและการออกแบบพื้นที่ว่างสาธารณะของเมือง)
Critical Urban Studies (การศึกษาเกี่ยวกับเมืองและชุมชนในเชิงวิพากษ์)

1. Introduction

Located at the heart of historic Bangkok, Rajadamnoen Avenue is arguably the most important public space in the capital city. Built in the late-19th century as a representation of power, this urban strip has been the center of all major contests to power and authority in Thailand during the 20th century and beyond. Whereas challengers to power have transformed its landscape, the avenue has conditioned how contestants use this path as well as where along it they make their marks and representations.

Conceived during the height of the royal absolutism era, the construction of the Rajadamnoen was an integral part of the 19th century Siamese ruling elite's appropriations of the west and modernity in order to: 1) refashion a "civilized" self-image to counter the Europeans' colonial expansions; 2) exercise their hegemonic power; and 3) create an urban environment that served as a material manifestation of a westernized and modernized identity for the kingdom (Peleggi, 2002, pp. 84-85; Povatong, 2007, pp. 32-54). After the demise of the absolute monarchy in 1932, this urban corridor has continued to function as a showcase, representing Thailand as a modern nation-state, aside from being the place for major opponents to make their political demands, claims, and acts. Accordingly, the avenue occupies a prominent space both in the urban fabric of Bangkok and in the collective psyche of the Thais (Prakitnonthakan, 2007, pp. 67-86).

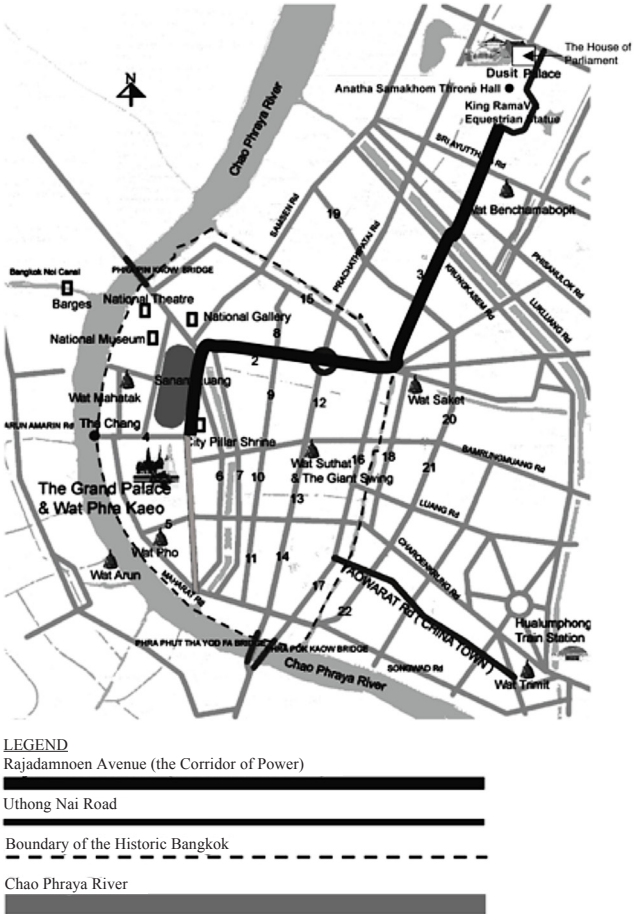
Owing to such historical significance, this paper examines the transformation of Rajadamnoen Avenue's landscape and urban space (Usavagovitwong, 2011, p. 80). First, it investigates the construction and transformation of the avenue as a political space, i.e., a symbolic device of the state that manifests, legitimizes, and maintains political power. The focus then shifts to the politics of urban form, perceiving the Rajadamnoen in terms of a contested space (Ibid., p. 79), where ordinary citizens negotiated the rulers' intentions by subverting the built semantics through their social and political activities (also see: Perera, 2002; King, 1990; Kusno, 2000; Yeoh, 1996). In addition to the bloodshed that happened in 1973, 1976, and 1992, the inquiry incorporates recent socio-political developments - namely the coup of 2006 together with its ongoing aftermath - illustrating the ways in which the avenue has become a locus for public demonstrations and violence.

As Aasen (1998, pp. 3, 10) once argued in relation to Thai cultural artifacts, this study reveals that the production of architecture and urban forms in Thailand involves the ebb and flow of life rather than the stabilization of identities. The Rajadamnoen's landscape indeed contains layers of power, operating like a signifying system, as each successive regime of power constructed their own symbols (Duncan, 1989, pp. 17-19). The upcoming discussions aim to uncover the complexity and paradox of interpreting the meanings of the avenue, which coexist, converge, contradict, and contest one another.

2. The Regal Path Towards Modern Polity

Commissioned by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868-1910), the term "Rajadamnoen" literally means the path of royal procession. It is not a visual axis - a straight line - as in western capitals, but a 3.2 km-zigzag path that spatially and symbolically connected the political and administrative centers of the time: the Grand Palace and the Dusit Palace. The entire thoroughfare is made up of three continuous segments: the inner *(Rajadamnoen Nai)*, the middle *(Rajadamnoen Klang)*, and the outer Rajadamnoen *(Rajadamnoen Nok)* (Figure 1).

Spanning over half a kilometer long, Rajadamnoen Nai runs south-north, originating from Na Phralan Road in front of the Grand Palace and ending at Phanbipob Liela Bridge that crosses the Loard Canal *(Klong Loard)*. Due to its width of merely 28 m, Rajadamnoen Nai possesses little to no room to accommodate a promenade (Department



Source: The Author

Figure 1. The Location of Rajadamnoen Avenue in the Urban Fabric of Bangkok.

of Fine Arts, 1939). Turning right and eastward, Rajadamnoen Klang stretches 1.2 km to Phanfah Lielas Bridge, crossing the old city's moat where Rajadamnoen Nok begins. Bending left and north, the 1.4 km outer Rajadamnoen is the longest, crossing the Padoung Krung Kasem Canal and terminating at Sri Ayutthaya Road in front of the Dusit Palace (Figure 1).

Influenced by a number of grand European thoroughfares, Rajadamnoen Avenue features a majestic design of broad and straight traffic lanes, lined with trees (Suksri, 1996, pp. 195-197). For instance, both Rajadamnoen Klang and Nok are 58 m-wide and contain six lanes each way. Two are located at the middle for ceremonial use, particularly for horse-drawn carriages and cars. One is on the island for a sidewalk or promenade, lined with mahogany trees. Another two are for cycling, while the last is for pedestrian traffic and lined with a row of mahogany trees (Smithies, 1986, p. 40).

Dubbed as the "corridor of power," this 3.2 km-stretch of urban space operated as a key visual and spatial component in the discourse of power in terms of a mediating space for the modernizing elite to pursue their political agenda. As a case in point, the difference in terminology for each section of Rajadamnoen Avenue demonstrates a shift of the administrative center of Siam from the confinement of the walls and moats around historic Bangkok *(Koh Rattanakosin)* to King Rama V's newly created "suburban" Dusit Palace, whose construction started in 1890. At the same time, the relocation of the seat of power quintessentially signifies the consolidation of power by Chulalongkorn and the victory of his modernizing faction over the Siamese conservative circle in their prolonged political struggles.

In effect, not only did the Rajadamnoen expand the capital outside the city walls, opening it to the world, but it also represented a new Thai modernity by adapting western modernity, as evident from royal edifices in Dusit Palace, such as Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall. Although the avenue was a key project conceived by the monarch, historical records suggested that European architects, artists, and engineers working in several state agencies - especially the Italian team who executed Dusit Palace - were employed for the design and construction of the Rajadamnoen too (Jansen, 1933, pp. 1279-1294; Povatong, 2005, pp. 25-42).

Framing his suburban palace, King Rama V built several handsome European-style mansions for his sons and daughters along Rajadamnoen Nok and in adjacent lands. Collectively known as Dusit District, the area was quickly developed, resulting in a real estate boom that further stimulated growth for the capital city (Antonio, 1997, p. 20). The realization of the regal residential enclave was financed by the Privy Purse with a budget apportioned for the

royal household (Suksri, 1996, pp. 19-20, 245, 264). Yet, the construction of infrastructure, e.g., water supply, electricity, and sewage system, in Dusit District was funded by tax money that could have been utilized for other municipal improvements to benefit the populace, rather than the creation of a pleasurable and comfortable living space for the royal elite alone. Hence, the making of a civilized identity to signify the cultural refinement of the monarchy through the construction of the westernized environment at Rajadamnoen area extracted a high price from the Siamese people in monetary terms (Jottrand, 1996, p. 284).

At the urban scale, Rajadamnoen Avenue connects two important open spaces: the Royal Field *(Sanam Luang)* (Figure 2) and the Royal Plaza *(Lan Phra Borrom Rupe Song Mah)* (Figure 3) in front of the Grand Palace and Dusit Palace respectively (Figure 1). The Royal Field was created at the same time as Bangkok itself, serving mainly as a cremation site for the monarchy with secondary functions as a rice field and public space for the capital city. The Royal Plaza possesses a totally different genealogy, however. Impressed by Louis XIV's equestrian statue at Versailles during his 1907 European tour, King Rama V sought to erect a majestic urban tableau for himself. Sculpted at Seusse Brother's workshop in Paris, Chulalongkorn's equestrian statue was unveiled on November 11, 1908, coinciding with the 40th anniversary of his reign (Peleggi, 2002, p. 108). Its expense was covered by public donations (Ministry of Municipal Government, 1912).

Source: The National Archives

Figure 2. The Royal Field.

Source: The Tourism Authority of Thailand

Figure 3. The Royal Plaza.

The commission of King Rama V's equestrian statue exhibits the ways in which the Siamese sovereign legitimized and maintained his ruling authority by borrowing aspects of western material culture useful to construct a modern image in the built environment (Perera, 2002, pp. 99-106). Apart from exemplifying the cult of personality, the iconography of this public monument symbolically renders Chulalongkorn's position as "the national father" in the narratives of the modern history of Siam and Thailand. Standing graciously alone in the expansive space of the Royal Plaza, King Rama V led the country on horseback through a long path of westernization and modernization as symbolized by the axial grand vista of Rajadamnoen Avenue. Both the statue and public square complement the imposing western-style Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall in Dusit Palace situated behind them (Figure 3) (Noobanjong, 2006, pp. 76-99).

Overall, the significance of Rajadamnoen Avenue is greater than an accouterment of the royalty's civilized identity; it is a symbol of King Rama V's vision for a modern Thai nation, later incorporated into the creation of Thainess or *khwampenthai.* Nonetheless, Chulalongkorn's idea of the nation, or *chat*, was ideologically unlike that of the contemporary west, which is based on the concepts of citizenship, civil rights, and liberty. For him, *chat* is more akin to Louis XIV's idea of the

state, an absolutist state in which the royal subjects, divided into orders by birth, are united as one socio-political entity under a divine ruler (Baker, 1990, pp. 225-226). In other words, Rama V's *chat* is an amalgamation between the Indo-Buddhist notion of righteous kingship or *dharmaraja* and European absolutism, an idea uniting the Siamese of all classes and races under the personality of the crown known as *samakkhi* (Tambiah, 1976, p. 198).

3. Displacement and Replacement of Urban Meanings and Memories via Physical Modifications

The revolution in 1932 was the first successful challenge to the monarchy's project of modernization and Rajadmnoen Avenue. On 24 June 1932, a small group of foreign-educated military personnel and civil servants known as the People's Party (or *Khana Ratsadon*) successfully staged a bloodless *coup d'état*, a brilliant bluff that overthrew the absolutist regime and installed a democratic rule.

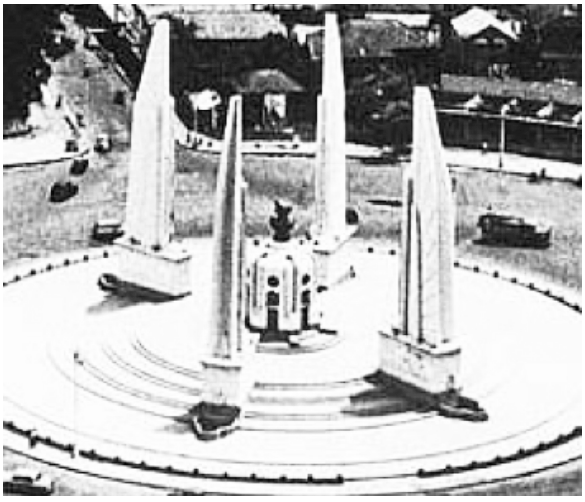
The Rajadamnoen and its vicinity were the locus of this uprising. In the early hours of June 24, the plotters arrested and detained high-ranking aristocrats and influential princes at Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall. By 4:00 a.m., a group of conspirators commandeered tanks and armed vehicles from a cavalry barrack in Bangkok under the ruse of quelling a Chinese uprising elsewhere in the city. Utilizing the same pretext, another group successfully mobilized the infantry and met the rest at the Royal Plaza in front of Dusit Palace. Having been told previously that a military exercise was taking place, the troops either ignored the commotion or joined the plotters, thus unknowingly participating in the revolution. Two days later, King Rama VII (Prajadhipok, 1925-1932) finally agreed to serve as a constitutional monarch (Stow, 1991, pp. 16-18).

Despite the demise of the old regime, the new government continued to employ Rajadamnoen Avenue as a showcase to display power and to represent Thailand as a modern nation-state. While the post-1932 administrations used most of the existing structures and public spaces, they too added several state-funded construction projects and monuments, therefore changing the meanings of the avenue. For instance, Khana Ratsadon subsequently placed a small brass roundel on the ground of the Royal Plaza to commemorate their revolution, contesting the regal origin of the plaza and the Rajadamnoen (Figure 4).

The person who transformed Thailand most and put the stamp on this urban corridor after 1932 was Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsonggkram (Plaek Khittasangkha or Pibul): a founding member of the People's Party and a prime minister (1938-1944 and 1947-1957). The most crucial project was the Democracy Monument (Figure 5), which was erected

Source: The Author

Figure 4. The Commemorative Roundel at The Royal Plaza.



Source: The National Archives

Figure 5. The Democracy Monument and Its Setting.

Source: The Association of Siamese Architects

Figure 6. Rajadamnoen Klang and the Rajadamnoen Edifice Group.

to celebrate the victory of the 1932 revolution over Siamese absolutism. The memorial radically altered both the physicality and signification of Rajadamnoen Avenue.

Under the pretext of nationalism and democracy, Pibul fashioned a militaristic state, focused on a process of modernization. In the cultural arena, the government embarked on a Nation Building Program, issuing a series of twelve Cultural Mandates aimed to "uplift the national spirit and moral code of the nation and instilling progressive tendencies and a newness into Thai life" (Ministry of Propaganda. 1942, p. 982). Instructing people how to conduct all aspects of social life, such as communication, dress, behavior, and how to be a Thai citizen, these mandates were "necessarily in the interest of progress and civilization and for the world to see that Thailand is a modern nation" (National Archives, 1942, 0701.22.1/7).

Nevertheless, Pibul's cultural mandates on *khwampenthai* - or the Ratthaniyom - proved to be conceptually schizophrenic since several measures taken to define the new Thai identity were as much western as Thai (Kasetsiri, 1974, pp. 25-88). The most vivid example is the name of the country, changed in 1939 from *Siam*, a native word signifying an ancient absolutist regime, to *Thailand*, a hybrid Thai-English term meaning "land of the free" and a modern democratic nation-state. "Thailand" also denoted a close kinship with Tai-speaking populations in Southeast Asia, reflecting the premier's vision of creating "the Great Thai Empire," a *terra firma* for all Tai-speaking ethnic groups to dwell in unison (Terwiel, 1980, pp. 133-151).

Being an integral part of the Nation Building Program, the prime minister envisioned "the Rajadamnoen as the Champs-Élysées, and the Democracy Monument [as] the Arc de Triomphe" of Bangkok (Nuan la-or, 1997, p. 83). The main axis of the avenue "will be widened and lined with handsome edifices, making it the pride of modern and civilized Thailand" (Ibid). Devised as an amalgam of several modern stylistic features from the west, the Democracy Monument, he said, would act as "a center of all things progressive, distributed by the Rajadamnoen to other parts of the country" (Ibid). In this grand scheme, the avenue would perform as a node for channeling western ideas and models to the rest of Thailand.

Accompanying the construction of the Democracy Monument was the expansion and modification of Rajadamnoen Klang. Framing this section of the avenue, the government erected the Rajadamnoen Edifice Group (Figure 6). These modernist buildings housed several functions, including shops, offices, restaurants, and a theater, operating as a sensational stage full of vibrant urban activities – such as Chalermthai Theater and Rattanakosin Hotel - for the Democracy Monument to proclaim its glory. Aside from representing Thailand's engagement with western modernity, the quality of novelty embedded in the design of the monument and the renovation/expansion projects for Rajadamnoen Avenue epitomized the modernization and westernization processes of Thai identity or *khwampenthai.*

In the social arena, the abovementioned modern structures were invigorated by the Constitutional Celebration Fair. Begun in 1934, the *fête* occurred from November 28 to December 8 annually, to celebrate the progress of the nation during the post-1932 period. As a consequence,

architecture and urban space along the Rajadamnoen Klang operated as a public relations device, enabling the government to cultivate popularity among people through social practice and self-ascription (Khumsupha, 2005, p. 105).

The new projects both enhanced and transformed Rajadamnoen Avenue. As it intercepted the connection between the two palatial nodes, the Democracy Monument performed a discourse, which negated the authority and legitimacy of the absolutist rule to a subservient status under the guise of nationalist and democratic ideologies. Its positioning at the heart of the Rajadamnoen not only disrupted the physical continuity of the royal processional path, but also symbolized the monarchy's succession. By establishing their place in the modern history of Thailand, the People's Party and its government appropriated Rajadamnoen Avenue to signify a "corridor of egalitarian power," based on their definition. Since then, this meaning has both coexisted with and contested the original signification.

In addition to new commissions, Pibul's administration took over several residences of Chulalongkorn's progeny on Rajadamnoen Nok. For example, the government transformed Chan Kasam Palace into the Ministry of Education, and Paraus Sakawan Palace into the Headquarters of Bangkok Metropolitan Police. The nationalization of these palatial structures demonstrated the authoritative power of Khana Ratsadon over the defunct absolutist rule.

Regardless of the intended signification, the symbolic multiplicity of the Democracy Monument should be noted. Its militaristic design elements, i.e., the erecting profile, swords, cannons, and bas-relief sculptures, suggest that this public structure in fact performs as a self-glorifying contrivance for the armed forces rather than a *bona fide* manifestation of the revolutionary spirit of the People's Party. Ironically, the Democracy Monument testified to military despotism, signaling fascism and the practice of lip service to democracy (Wright, 1992, pp. 178-181). So, in both cases, using western images to represent Thailand and military elements to symbolize democracy, Rajadamnoen Avenue instead stands for confusion and hypocrisy.

4. The Military Regime and Restoration of the Regal Authority

Albeit siding with the Axis Powers, Thailand was saved from losing World War II by the *Seri Thai* (Free Thai) underground resistance, organized by Pridi Panomyong, the leader of the civilian faction in Khana Ratsadon who was elected as prime minister in 1946. Within the same year, however, Prajadhipok's nephew - King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII, 1935-1946) - was mysteriously shot dead and succeeded by his younger brother Bhumibol Adulyadej, the present sovereign. Accused of being the regicidal mastermind, Panomyong ran away and sought refuge in France in spite of the fact that he served as King Rama VIII's regent during the war. He died in exile there four decades later (Wyatt, 1984, pp. 259-260).

Pibul fled abroad just before the fall of Japan in 1945, but was brought back to power by the armed forces in 1948. During his second premiership, Pibul portrayed himself and his administration as fervid fighters against communism, advocating democracy in place of fascism and ultra-nationalism as an ideological façade. He took this position not only to advance a militaristic right-wing political agenda but also to decimate the influence of Panomyong, while seeking approval from the U.S. to use violence to suppress left-wing activists. In 1948, 1949, and 1951, Panomyong's remaining supporters made failed attempts to depose Pibul (Jeamteerasakul, 2003, pp. 34-36). Amidst this tremulous decade, key administrative positions in the cabinet were occupied by the military officers of the "coup group," or *khanarattaprahan.* These younger men mostly held

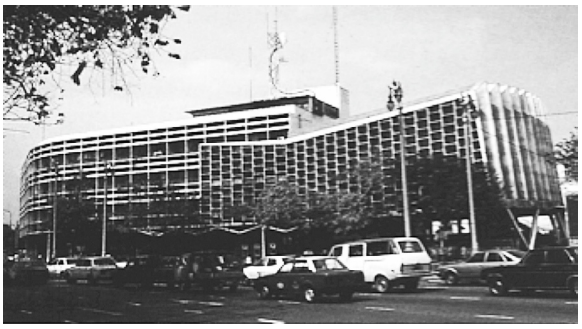
conservative views and were supporters of the monarchy. Be that as it may, the beleaguered premier was able to survive by skillfully maneuvering prominent members of the *khanarattaprahan* against each other and against his American patrons (Fineman, 1997, pp. 12-16).

With their growing political clout, the *khanarattaprahan* commanders began to push for a more visible and authoritative role for the monarchical institution in Thai society through the politics of representation in the built environment. For instance, in 1952, the cabinet proposed to replace the central portion of the Democracy Monument with a statue of King Rama VII (National Archives, 1942; Ministry of Interior, 1952, p. 56). The project did not materialize, since Pibul did not sanction it, citing a lack of available funds (National Archives, 1942; Ministry of Interior, 1953, p. 1).

With the rising influence of the royalist advocates, the cultural policies of Thailand in the 1950s reverted to King Rama VI's (Vajiravudh, 1910-1925) principles of preserving and promoting traditional artistic expression and practice (Chaloemtiarana, 1979, pp. 81-91, 96). In built forms, the government resumed a quest for the national style via the process of Siamizing western and modern architecture. To cite some examples, many hybrid modern-Thai edifices were erected along the outer Rajadamnoen, especially government offices such as the Ministry of Transportation (Figure 7). Still, the second Pibul administration did not employ the national architectural style exclusively as a political vehicle, but utilized the international style for government and civic buildings as well, as evident from the modernist design of the Bureau of Public Relations Headquarters near the Royal Field (Figure 8). Once again, the urban environment of the Rajadamnoen from 1948 to 1957 sent a mixed message about Thainess, expressing both the traditional and the modern, Thai and Western, authoritarianism and democracy, resulting in complex and contradictory symbolic signification.

Source: Boonaum Hongkham

Figure 7. The Ministry of Transportation Building.



Source: the Association of Siamese Architects

Figure 8. The Bureau of Public Relations Headquarters.

The *coup d'état* that brought down Pibul in 1957 proved to be another turning point in modern Thai history. The ex-premier escaped to Japan and never set foot again on Thai soil. Up to the mid-1970s, Thailand was mostly governed by a series of military dictators, beset with coups and counter-coups (Mokarapong, 1972, p. 229). Espousing orderliness, cleanliness, and conformity, the junta leaders - Field Marshals Sarit Thanarat (1959-1963) and Thanom Kittikachorn (1963-1973) - were traditionalists. The nationalist ethos of these locally educated strongmen embraced Vajiavudh's concept of Thai nationhood based on the triple pillars of nation, religion, and monarchy, in place of exogenic and intangible ideas like constitutionalism and democracy, as promulgated by Pibul and the People's Party.

Politically, Thanarat utilized 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 along with many ancient Hindu-Buddhist royal customs, in conjunction with enacting the *lèse-majesté* law. The restoration of the monarchy elevated the incumbent monarch to an omnipotent and sacrosanct status, which was a far cry from King Ananda Mahidol's powerless figurehead position. Apart from reviving royal ceremonies and maintaining a very public bond of allegiance to the monarch and the royal family, Thanarat mandated that any plot against the head of government (meaning himself) constituted a threat against the sovereign and the nation, and vice-versa (Ibid, pp. 283-293).

In contrast to the regal restoration, Thanarat and his collaborators portrayed the People's Party and its members - notably Panomyong and Pibul - as anti-monarchist and hence "un-Thai." In the government's collective efforts to negate the influence of the 1932 coup promoters, Khana Ratsadon and the democratic revolution as a whole were rendered as an inept and premature endeavor to bring democracy to Thailand (Jeamteerasakul, 2001, pp. 34-36). Although the junta retained some aspects of Pibul's Nation-Building Program, mainly the modernization process, they abolished and/or altered most cultural policies and social practices initiated by the previous administrations. With the suspension of the constitution and termination of the twelve Cultural Mandates, the meanings of the built forms commissioned by the People's Party–led administrations lost their *raison d'être* and were re-semanticized to express royal authority and, by association, the power of the military regime at the expense of democratic egalitarianism.

At the heart of Bangkok, three prime examples of built forms demonstrating this slippage of meanings: (1) Rajadamnoen Avenue, (2) the Democracy Monument, and (3) the Rajadamnoen Edifice Group. As the military government suppressed commemorative activities for the 1932 revolution, such as the Constitutional Celebration Fair, many monarchical rituals took place in large public spaces located at both ends of the Rajadamnoen. As cases in point, the Royal Field hosted the Royal Ploughing Ceremony, whereas the Royal Plaza held the review of the Royal Guards on His Majesty's birthday.

Consequently, the Grand Palace and Dusit Palace re-emerged as the capital's twin cultural-cum-political nodes, while the Rajadamnoen was revitalized to stress its regal origins. In contrast, the Democracy Monument faded into obscurity, merely serving as a traffic roundabout. The junta reinterpreted the golden-stacked bowls on the memorial as a representation of King Rama VII's, not the People's Party's, noble deeds. Since Prajadhipok had relinquished his absolutist power in 1932 because he did not wish to see Thai blood being spilled, the gilt bowls were re-construed as symbolizing the granting of the constitution by the benevolent monarch, while his acquiescence to the people's request as propagated by the coup promoters was disregarded. By changing the significative framework to the three pillars of Thai nationhood, similar reinterpretations were given to the Rajadamnoen Edifice Group as well. They came to represent the symbolic continuation of the grand-scale modernization process inaugurated by Rama V. In essence, the built forms commissioned by Khana Ratsadon along this urban corridor have been converted into a kind of historical artifact, with a limited ability to mediate power (Prakitnonthakan, 2004, pp. 333-334).

Furthermore, with respect to the creations of the built environment, the designs of public structures during this period still fluctuated between the national and international styles, as seen from the commissions of buildings along Rajadamnoen Avenue - such as the National Theater in 1960 and the National Assembly in 1971 - situated near the Royal Field and the Royal Plaza respectively (Figure 9-10).

Source: The Ministry of Culture

Figure 9. The National Theater.

Source: The Secretariat of the Parliament

Figure 10. The National Theater.

5. The Politics of Contested Space for People's Self-empowerment and Democracy

Notwithstanding the aforementioned confusions and irony in regard to its symbolism, Rajadamnoen Avenue has continued to be perceived as the supreme space in Thailand, particularly for those who chose to challenge the authority of the state. The avenue has played a central role in the power struggles and the subsequent transformations. From the 1960s, various groups of people have re-appropriated and re-inscribed the Rajadamnoen through their political rallies, protests, and bloody street fighting, turning it into a symbol of the Thais' struggle for democracy and self-empowerment. Although the physical environment has not been much altered, the meanings and memories of what the avenue stands for have changed to signify and/or incorporate these political acts (Duncan, 1989, p. 18; Hershkovitz, 2002, p. 395-420).

In 1973, Thai college students orchestrated a series of massive demonstrations against the Kittikachorn military government, which developed into the October 14 uprising that brought down the regime. Originating in the late-1950s, the resistance was initiated by students from Thammasat University, a higher educational institute with a history of fighting for justice. Established by Panomyong, it was originally called the University of Moral and Political Sciences, an outcome of the sixth principle of the Khana Ratsadon to provide the people with full education (Panomyong. 1932, as cited in Baker & Phongpaichit, 2000, p. 72).

Prior to the bloodshed, peaceful speeches and marches were held at the Royal Field in front of Thammasat and along Rajadamnoen Avenue. On October 14, 1973, a huge demonstration of 400,000 people marched from the university to the Democracy Monument demanding the release of political activists and student leaders from prison (Wright, 1991, pp. 198-200). In order to win public attention, sympathy and support for their demonstration, students located their political activities on the same foundations of legitimacy that the military employed: the triple values of nation, religion, and monarchy. Then they subverted these foundations and used them against the Kittikachorn administration.

On that day, urban spaces around the Democracy Monument and along Rajadamnoen Avenue, together with the march itself, were adorned with royal images, Thai national flags, Buddhist emblems, as well as patriotic and democratic banners, generating a surreal but tangible and energetic atmosphere. The itineraries encompassed the Royal Field, Democracy Monument, Royal Plaza, and King Bhumibol's Chitralada Palace. The places with regal significance were strategically chosen to indicate people's grievance to the monarchy and the royal grounding of the Thai nationhood (Winichakul, 1999, p.10).

As the protestors began to appropriate the symbols of the authority, ambivalence and hybridity

started to creep into the built environment. The students employed Sanam Luang to mean the earth, the ground for democracy, and Thai nationhood. Therefore, they made the Royal Field more pious and significant. In this sense, they were not opposed to the king, but were constructing an alliance with the ideal kingship and appropriating his symbols. At the same time, the Democracy Monument signified modernity, in conjunction with people's struggles to fulfill the democratic dream (Dovey, 2001, p. 274). Taken together, these narratives discursively connected the students' walk towards democracy and modernity with the triple foundations of *khwampenthai,* enabling them to be in line with the ''good'' values - as propagated by the authorities and royalty - while simultaneously challenging the power of the junta.

Initially, the Democracy Monument was supposed to be a resting point for the demonstrators on their way to the Army Headquarters. Yet, by the time the rally reached Rajadamnoen Nok, it was quite unorganized and was confronted by armed troops. The outer Rajadamnoen was surrounded by mahogany trees and impenetrable fenced compounds, preventing the crowd from quick escape. The Royal Plaza was easy to barricade too, making the demonstrators highly vulnerable. The military and police force began to exploit these urban conditions, by blocking the protesters from moving forward and accusing them of being anti-military, anti-parliament, and anti-monarchy. In the following day, the beating and shooting started from the outer part of the Rajadamnoen and the adjacent areas (Phongpaichit & Baker, 1999, pp. 300-301).

Students who gathered around nearby Chitralada Palace to ask for royal support were attacked by riot police. Although King Rama IX opened his residence as sanctuary, vicious fighting between the unarmed demonstrators and infantrymen - backed by tanks and gunship helicopters - escalated throughout the Rajadamnoen. As a number of casualties increased over the next few days, the king decided to intervene by asking Kitikachorn and his accomplice, Field Marshall Prapas Jarusathien, to go into an exile and appointing a provisional government headed by Professor Sanya Dharmasakti (1973-1975). Bhumibol later granted permission to cremate the fallen protestors at the Royal Field, which had hitherto been reserved for royal cremations and state ceremonies (Winichakul, 1999, p. 11). Accordingly, both the students who continued their radicalism at Thammasat University and their fallen comrades received a place in the Rajadamnoen, meaning the avenue came to represent student activism and their subversion of the junta (Dovey, 2001, p. 274).

This chaotic democracy ensued for the next three years. In 1976, panicked by the fall of Indochina to communism coupled with the rise of socialist-oriented ideology in Thailand, ultra-rightwing elements in the armed forces seized power and massacred students at Thammasat University on October 6, eliminating the political activities of the youth. The Rajadamnoen Nai and Sanam Luang witnessed brutal crimes committed by government troops and paramilitary forces on unarmed students. Some female students were abused on the ground of Thammasat University, while men were mercilessly killed. A number of dead bodies were hung on tamarind trees around the Royal Field. Many surviving students fled; others joined the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) to wage a revolutionary war. The anti-government struggles intensified throughout the country, causing unprecedented animosity among Thai people and claiming thousands of lives. It went on until the conclusion of the Cold War (Phongpaichit & Baker, 1999, pp. 298-310).

During the 1970s and 1980s, Thailand was once again riddled with military *coup d'états*, successful or otherwise. It was not until the end of the 1980s that the country's socio-political situation could be somewhat stabilized. Despite the atrocities, the massacre of students at Thammasat University had largely been ignored by the post-1976 administrations. King Rama IX distanced himself from the

incident as well. Realizing the stain of silence, the bureaucratic government initiated public relation campaigns to salvage the image of the ruling authority, and to negate the legacy of the youth revolution, as exemplified by the following proposal for the Democracy Monument in which the Rajadamnoen became the key symbol. These objectives were accomplished by several measures, such as revising school textbooks, as well as popularizing patriotic songs, plays, and literature. They were reinforced by a depiction of the sovereign by the mass media as the "father of the nation," who had worked tirelessly through his networks of charitable foundations and social organizations for the socio-economic betterment of his subjects (Winichakul, 2012).

In 1982, the Fine Arts Department classified the Democracy Monument as "not worthy of conservation" and tried to revive the 1950s plan made by Pibul's cabinet to substitute its central portion - including the image of the constitution - with a statue of King Rama VII. Prajadhipok's image would signify the concept of divine constitutional monarchy and simultaneously render the 1973 student movement and 1932 revolution of the People's Party as the national villains. However, the proposed renovation was again shelved, due to opposition led by those in academia (Rojpojchanarat, 1987, pp. 155-162).

In 1989, the physicality of Rajadamnoen Klang was eventually altered by the demolition of Chalermthai Theater - a part of the Rajadamnoen Edifice Group - to: 1) make room for a reception pavilion for honorary guests of the state; and 2) clear the vista for Wat Rajanatda built by King Rama III. The razing of this theater represented much more than just a chance adjustment of the urban setting along the Rajadamnoen. It was indeed a conscious effort by royal apologists to erase the legacy of the People's Party from public memory while propagating the hegemony of the regal authority (Prakitnonthakan, 2007, pp. 67-86).

As the progress of Thai Democracy appeared quite promising at the beginning of the 1990s, in 1991 General Suchinda Kraprayoon deposed a civilian administration, elected two year earlier. Fearing for a return of another junta rule, the urban middle class organized large-scale protests against Kraprayoon and his supporters in Bangkok in early May 1992, marking the rise of the urban bourgeoisie in Thai politics (Murray, 1996, pp. 257-269). During the so-called "Black May" incident, Rajadamnoen Avenue and the Democracy Monument served the protestors in a similar capacity as they did in 1973.

With a group of opposition leaders going on hunger strike at the Royal Plaza, the event was launched peacefully. It drew a crowd of 100,000 people onto Rajadamnoen Avenue for protest rallies that moved between this public square and the Royal Field. Symbolically, the act of fasting referred to the Buddha's spiritual and intellectual journey in search of enlightenment through self-control and self-denial. In contrast to the military - personified by their use of brute force, lust for control and power - the protestors claimed higher moral ground, supported by their strong inner determination for democracy.

Dissimilar from the rigid top-down hierarchy of the student movement, the horizontal organization of the 1990s-demonstrators was made possible by modern telecommunication technologies, particularly mobile phones. Originally, the rallies had a playful sense of festivity where theater and dance mingled with free speech, music, food vendors, and spectators. Ribbons were attached to the trees along Rajadamnoen Avenue to mark it as a sacred space with a lively atmosphere (Missingham, 2003, pp. 43-64, 187).

The military high command ordered a crackdown on the night of May 17. The flashpoint was near the Democracy Monument. To prevent people from joining the demonstrators at the Rajadamnoen, the government issued a media blackout. Nonetheless, the censorship and distortion of public information

backfired on the government. Because the people wanted to see what was happening, a rapidly growing number of urban residents came to the Rajadamnoen and ended up partaking in savage fighting against heavily armed troops. Unlike the student massacre in 1976, the connection of modernist open spaces with permeable streets around the Democracy Monument enabled this urban insurgency to persist for some days. The killing and brutality stopped when the general, at Bhumibol's request, left the prime minister post. The total death toll is still unknown, but is estimated to range anywhere from 50 to over 200 (Human Rights Watch, 1993). The sovereign's intervention, narrowly averting the prospect of civil war, re-established the royal authority as the country's supreme socio-political arbitrative force (Praagh & Solars, 1996, pp. 252-269).

The outcomes of the 1992 uprising brought a fifteen-year hiatus to the military's involvement in politics. The armed forces suffered a serious blow, bearing a stigma as oppressors who murdered unarmed advocators of democracy. On the contrary, by receiving the moral support from the king, the protestors were viewed by the Thai society as national heroes by scarifying themselves for democracy. The Black May incident seemed to secure the fate of both the Thai democracy and Rajadamnoen Avenue in the collective Thai psyche, becoming an integral part of their modern identity (Dovey, 2001, p. 274; Tejapira, 1996, p. 7).

In 2001, after decades of indecision, the October 14, 1973 Monument was finally erected on a site 400 meters west of the Democracy Monument (Figure 11). On May 17, 2005, the stone-laying ceremony for the long-overdue Black May Memorial took place. Located on the north corner of the Royal Field where the Bureau of Public Relations Headquarters used to stand, the site has been transformed into a park named *Santiporn,* meaning "blessing for peace," but the construction for the monument has yet to start. In any case, the fact that the events in 1973 and 1992 have been memorialized in public space highlights the troubling absence of a physical memorial for the slaughter of the students in 1976 (Winichakul, 1999, pp. 10-11; Dovey, 2001, p.278). The October 6 massacre is still too ambivalent to be represented in built forms. So, the atrocious crime in 1976 would largely stay a blank chapter in the history of the nation. Be that as it may, after decades of indecision the memorial of October 6, 1976 was eventually unveiled at Thammasat University in 2000, the site where the tragedy befell (Wong, 2006, pp. 183-140) (Figure 12).

Source: October 14 Foundation

Figure 11. October 14, 1973 Memorial.

Source: Thammasat University Archives

Figure 12. October 6, 1976 Memorial.

6. Yellow versus Red: The Military *Coup d'état* of 2006 and Its Ongoing Repercussions

Following the Black May incident, Thailand undertook comprehensive political and legislative reforms, leading to the promulgation of the People's Constitution in 1997, emphasizing human rights, public participation, and decentralization of power. After 1992, elections had been held regularly. However, on September 19, 2006, Thailand experienced a rude awakening from its false sense of political stability. Thai people found themselves again under military rule when the popularly elected but very controversial and corrupted Thaksin Shinawatra-administration (2001-2006) (widely called by the Thai press as "the Thaksin Regime") was removed from office by a *coup d'état*.

Since 2006, the country has suffered ongoing political turmoil and social disorder, particularly in Bangkok, culminating in bitter division and resentment among its citizens across the socio-economic borderlines, deep down to the household level with over a hundred losses of lives. Time and again, Rajadamnoen Avenue has become the center of activities in this prolonged conflict.

Prior to the downfall of the Thaksin regime, Thailand was already plunged into a socio-political crisis. From 2005, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), or Yellow Shirts, had organized a series of street protests against Shinawatra, citing his corruption and abuse of power. Consisting of middle and upper-class urban residences and southerners, the core leaders of the PAD were largely composed of royalists. They regularly invoked the ruling sovereign in their protests and claimed that their opponents were disloyal to the monarchy. The PAD even accused the premier of attempting to turn Thailand into a kind of "disguised republic" (Bagehot, 1963, p. 266; Tejapira, 2012a; 2012b).

Strongly opposed to Shinawatra's populist economic policies and to a decentralization of political power, the alliance was supported by conservative elitist factions in Thai society and by the army. As noted by the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), the political agenda of the PAD has fascist qualities, although they may not describe themselves as such (Asian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2008). Apart from openly calling for the military and Thailand's traditional elite to take a greater role in politics, the PAD has suggested constitutional amendments that would make the parliament a predominately royal-appointed body (Head, 2008).

The PAD seemed to follow a well-proven formula for organizing political demonstrations in Bangkok, devised by the students' movement in the 1970s. From 2005 to 2006, key locations of public space along the entire Rajadamnoen Avenue - i.e., the Royal Field, the Democracy Monument, Phanfah Lielas and Makawan Rangsant bridges, as well as the Royal Field - were utilized in terms of an urban stage where a series of protests occurred, which sometimes lasted for weeks with thousands of attendances. In order to win public attention, sympathy and support, the PAD located its political activities on the triple values of *khwampenthai.* So, the physical surroundings around and along the Rajadamneon Avenue were decorated with the national colors, yellow flags, Buddhist emblems, regal images and seals, accompanied by patriotic and royalist banners like "The PAD rescues the Nation," and "We love the King" (Lee & Drukier, 2006).

The regal origin of the avenue provided legitimacy for the Yellow Shirts to pursue their political objectives under the dominance of the regal authority. Moreover, monks and the disciples of Santi Asoke - a radical sectarian movement in Thailand's Theravada Buddhism - were usually found at the PAD's protesting sites. As a consequence, the references to the Thai nationhood, Buddhism, and monarchy were subverted by the Yellow Shirt demonstrators, and then used against the Thaksin regime. Via this politics of representation in built forms, the Rajadamnoen functioned as a contested

space, where the Buddhist ideology in conjunction with the royal authority were semantically re-appropriated as a hegemonic discourse, thus enabling the PAD leaders to vilify their entrants and push forwards their demands.

The general election of 2007 held after the *coup d'état* instigated another turning point in national politics. As Shinawatra's People's Power Party (PPP) won the elections (in his absence), the Yellow Shirts resumed their activities. In 2008, the PAD re-launched street protests and seized Government Houses, as well as Suvarnabhumi and Donmuang international airports, to pressure the government to resign. After wreaking havoc to the country's economy, their sieges and demonstrations ended when the Constitutional Court dissolved the PPP and banned its leaders from politics. The Thai armed forces pressured many PPP MPs to defect to the Democrat Party and elect Abhisit Vejjajiva as the prime minister in 2009 (Banyan, 2009).

At the same time, the PAD's counter-movement, called the National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) or the Red Shirts, argued that the Vejjajiva administration (2009-2011) took power illegitimately. Demanding dissolution of the parliament and a fresh election, the UDD allied itself with the For Thais Party (the former PPP). Leaders of the Red Shirts further accused the country's elite - e.g. the military, bureaucrats, judiciary and other unelected officials - of undermining democracy by interfering in politics (Ibid).

The UDD political movement first appeared in 2006 to oppose the coup. Since many of its members are supporters of the deposed premier, the Red Shirts call for amnesty to be given to Shinawatra, thus resonating the interests of the PPP. In response to the Yellow Shirts, the UDD initiated large-scale demonstrations in 2008 aiming to get rid of *Amatyathipatai*: the governing system in which the traditional elites, nobles, and the bureaucratic polity ruled. Motivated by the UDD leaders' promises to restore true democracy by eliminating social injustice and political disenfranchisement, Red Shirt supporters were mainly liberal academics and activists, coupled with rural people and the urban poor, especially the northerners and northeasterners - the electoral bases of the demised TRT and PPP - who benefited from Shinawatra's populist policies in relieving their poverty and promoting socio-economic advancements (Ghosh, 2008).

Yet, far from being a "grass-root uprising," the UDD movement was well funded and organized by influential figures who had suffered detrimental repercussions from the change of power since 2006 (The Economist, 2010). A number of the UDD participants were indeed harsh critics of the monarchy, displaying slogans and singing songs in their protests against what they believed to be the rule of "virtual absolutism" in modern Thailand (Tejapira, 2012b). For that reason, the political activities of the UDD were sometimes interpreted by the PAD and royalist advocates as an act of defiance or even an insult to the regal authority. Although some were prosecuted by the Vejjajiva administration under the *lèse-majesté* law, members of the Red Shirts in general were not necessarily hostile to the monarchy (Wehrfritz & Seaton, 2008, p. 30).

In their politics of representation from late 2008 to early 2009, the Red Shirts appeared to mimic the strategies employed by the PAD in staging public demonstrations at key locations along Rajadamnoen Avenue - such as the Royal Plaza and the Democracy Monument - which were decorated with the national colors, red flags (the Thai national flag comprises red, white, and blue strips), Buddhist emblems, and pictures of the royal family, together with patriotic and democratic banners. The regal genesis of the Rajadamnoen also enabled the Red Shirts to argue that their protests were intended to protect the monarchical institution from the Yellow Shirts' misappropriation of the royal authority. Buddhist monks were often found in companions with the Red Shirt protesters as well (BBC News, 2010).

Nevertheless, the UDD was different from the PAD when it came to a symbolic association between ideology and the built environment. The co-existing meaning of the Rajadamnoen as a "corridor of people's self empowerment" and "path towards democracy" offered legitimacy for the UDD to advance its causes. The urban history of the avenue in terms of a "contested space against military dictatorship" was subverted, and then used to oppose the 2006 coup promoters, the Yellow Shirts and their sponsors, along with Vejjajiva administration, whom were collectively portrayed by the Red Shirts as servants of the *Amataya* regime.

The Red Shirts' allusions to the democratic ideology proved to be a crucial aspect in their politics of representation in urban space in spite of the fact that both the UDD and PAD incorporated the term "democracy" into the titles of their movements. Besides the triple values of *khwampenthai*, the political rhetoric against the *Amataya* regime, the Yellow Shirts, and Vejjajiva government of the Red Shirt leaders embraced the six principles of the People's Party. The UDD core members frequently cited the notions of freedom, peace, education, equality, economy, and unity in their speeches. By ideologically associating itself with Khana Ratsadon, the UDD was able to gain sympathy from people who disagreed with the 2006 coup and its ramifications but were not necessarily political allies of Shinawatra (The Economist, 2010).

The UDD further called for resignations of the chief of the Privy Council: General Prem Tinsulanonda (the premier from 1980 to 1988) and the prime minister, together with a revocation of the 2007 constitution (The Telegraph, 2009). Its massive demonstrations expanded in mid-March 2009 sprawling to various places in Bangkok, before spreading out of the capital on April 7 to Pattaya City in Chonburi province. The protests turned violent and became a riot, lasting three days from April 12 to 14 with some casualties. Shinawatra, who is living in exile since 2008, frequently telephoned during the UDD protests.

In February 2010, the Supreme Court ruled for a confiscation of assets worth 46 billion Baht (approximately $1.5 billion) from the Shinawatra family. A month later, the Red Shirts commenced a new round of public demonstrations in the capital city, pressing Vejjajiva for a new general election. In addition to their encampment on Rajadamnoen Road, the Red Shirts completely blocked off vehicular traffic and lodged themselves on Rajaprasong intersection and the adjacent area, occupying a sizable portion of the central business district of the capital city and transforming it to an urban fortification, barricaded by razor wire, walls of rubber tires, and wooden spikes (Millitary Admits Firing at Reds, 2010).

On April 10, lethal violence exploded at the Rajadamnoen in the areas near the Democracy Monument from clashes between the UDD protesters and army personnel, resulting in 24 deaths including a Japanese journalist and 5 soldiers, coupled with over 800 injuries (Ibid). During the subsequent weeks, armed forces miserably failed to curb the Red Shirt demonstrations that spread to other parts of the country. The Red Shirt leaders finally decided to move out of the Rajadamnoen and consolidated their activities at the Rajaprasong intersection instead (Harvey, 2010). In effect, the UDD's occupation of the Rajaprasong signified a fundamental shift in their discourse of contested space from a symbolic demonstration against the state to a strike on the country's commercial and financial systems.

In order to rectify previous fiascos in dispersing and controlling the crowd, soldiers were authorized to set up live firing zones near the demonstrators and shot anyone entering these areas on sight. On 19 May, under a pretext of reclaiming the public space from the Red Shirts' occupation, combat troops backed by armored personnel carriers attacked the UDD's encampment around the Rajaprasong, causing 91 deaths and 1,378 injuries on both the civilian and military sides. Some UDD leaders surrendered; others escaped. Arson

attacks and riots raged across Bangkok as the Red Shirts were forced out from their strongholds. Simultaneously, unrest and destruction occurred in a number of provinces in the north and northeast with many government and public structures burned down by the UDD sympathizers. The unrest lasted for several days and nights, despite the impositions of curfews (McElroy & MacKinnon, 2010).

The death and destruction from the 2010 urban riots in Bangkok - known as the Savage May - seriously weakened the Red Shirt's activities. The popularity of the UDD in the capital city hit its lowest point in the immediate months after the incident. Nonetheless, the movement steadily reorganized itself, especially in the northern and northeastern regions. In less than half a year, the UDD had regained sufficient sympathy and strength to stage public commemorations to commemorate the Savage May at the Rajadamnoen on the 10th and at the Rajaprasong on the 19th of every month (No Violence amid Sea of Red, 2010). A year later, the UDD movement proved to be a major political factor in the upcoming election.

Following a general vote on July 3, 2011, Puea Thai Party (former TRT and PPP) won a landslide victory, forming a coalition government joined by four other parties, whereas the Democrats are now serving as the opposition in parliament. The new administration is headed by Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's youngest sister, who became the first female prime minister. Some analyses argued that Puea Thai's balloting success was a punishment for the Democrats and the entrenched elite for the coup of 2006 and its aftermath - pointedly the Savage May - by the supporters of Thaksin (The Daily Telegraph, 2011).

After the election, Thailand has been relatively calm, yet remains socially divisive and politically explosive. Regardless of the dissimilarities among those taking part in the country's political conflicts, the main cause centers around the contradictions between the two ruling classes: one gaining power via democratic election, the other consisting of independent groups outside democracy. Amidst the crisis, both factions have interfered in state affairs and undermined important political institutions. As long as they keep wrestling for power and do not address the problem of the bipolar state, the chance that violence will resurge is highly possible, if this controversial political structure of the country has not been resolved (Mydans & Fuller, 2011). Correspondingly, how the upcoming developments could affect the politics of representation along the Rajadamnoen stays undecided.

7. Conclusion: Rajadamnoen, the Path of Complexity and Contradiction

For Thais, Rajdamnoen Avenue continues to represent a space of politics, not only for rulers, but also their challengers. It is a contested and negotiated space, which signifies the continuous struggle for the interpretation of Thai society. Embellished by a multitude of regal paraphernalia, such as royal images and emblems on arches and gateways bearing mythical statues, its landscape today symbolizes the omnipresent power of King Rama IX. On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of accession to the throne of the current ruling sovereign (the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations), on June 9, 2006, the royal couple held a grand audience at the balcony of Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall in front of a crowd of thousands standing at the Royal Plaza and along the Rajadamnoen. The ceremony was attended by several foreign monarchs, in which the avenue resumed its original meaning and usage as a path for the royal processions.

In spite of his Majesty's contributions, the paradoxical symbolic signification of the avenue reflects the incompatibilities between the concepts of: 1) divine rule and democracy; and 2) political competition between constitutional monarchy and democratic egalitarianism. The subjugation of democratic foundations, liberty, equality, and

fraternity, to omnipotent royal authority discloses the underlying problematic relationships among the monarchy, constitution, and modern Thai society.

In essence, the omnipotent authority of the ruling sovereign, mediated through the present urban tableau of the Rajadamnoen, exhibits the fundamental assumptions of *khwampenthai* which have been promulgated by royalist advocates since the end of Khana Ratsadon's period that: 1) the monarchical institution symbolizes the nation's heritage, continuity and unity; 2) the monarchy is an institution above politics and other politicized organizations; 3) the sovereign is very much tied to the essential identity and heart and soul of the nation, and this kind of emotional connection cannot be easily replaced; and 4) the king is above all else the nonaligned arbiter and guardian of the nation's political system (Sattayanurak, 2011).

Although the importance of royal ground to modern Thai nationhood is undeniable, the royal authority serves as an agent to mediate power. Most political parties and movements wish to be on the king's side, at least symbolically. Under the pretense of protecting the prestige of the monarchy via the *lèse-majesté* law, the regal authority has been utilized, if not exploited, as a discursive means to suppress opposing political and social views. Unlike the powerful Chulalongkorn who created the Rajadamnoen, the incumbent monarch commands respect and authoritative status from Thai people by both legal stipulation and his virtues. During the six decades of his reign, King Rama IX has assiduously dedicated himself to numerous royal initiative projects on socio-economic development to enhance the wellbeing of his subjects.

Throughout its long history, the landscape of Rajadamnoen Avenue has operated as a manifestation of royal authority, an expression of the military regime's ambitions, as well as a physical representation of the people's struggle for civil empowerment, liberty, equality, national unity, and modern polity. At the same time, it has been a site for contests to power and building democracy, subjected to successive de-inscription, re-inscription, re-appropriation, and re-articulation by many social agents through semantic subversions.

As illustrated by previous discussions, the Rajadamnoen represents a paradox and peculiarity of post-1932 Thailand (Hattakijkoson, 1983; Eoseewong, 1995; Hityachiranand, 1995; Tejapira, 1996; Wong, 2006). However, the conflict, confusion, and dualism of meanings of Rajadamnoen Avenue - which coexist, converge, contradict, and contest with each other - are indeed a contradictory depiction of the country and its identity. In order to signify meanings, oblique means of communication, e.g., allegory, parody, and irony, are preferred over direct ones. Accordingly, the avenue could convey messages for both constitutional and despotic regimes, military and civilian administrations, resistance and violence, liberation and repression, as well as inherited power and meritocracy. In sum, the resilient, hybrid, and polysemic Rajadamnoen still stands in the middle of Bangkok for the totality of Thai politics. It continues to be the place to celebrate the achievements of the state together with significant challenges to its policies.

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