

Bridging Global Policy-making and Local Intensive Developments in the Urban Voids of a Megacity: Insights from Bangkok

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Abstract

Megacities and rapidly urbanizing territories are contemporary issues which have now reached international attention and institutional recognition. Megacities and rapidly urbanizing territories in Southeast Asia especially are subject to both intensive and extensive patterns of growth that are reflected by the dynamics of densification in consolidated urban areas and loss of agricultural lands due to development in peri-urban areas. The New Urban Agenda and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide an international shared understanding of policies and knowledge to tackle, among other issues, loss of agricultural land, general land use management, segregation and inequalities within megacities and rapidly urbanizing regions. However, oftentimes, this international level of policy-making loses its strength when the urban issues are scaled down to local applications. Influenced by the presence of local private interests and global economic forces, the local urban processes of intensive and extensive growth appear to be detached from the general international policy framework and affected by site-specific dynamics. This article examines the level of this separation in Bangkok, especially in regards to a specific kind of the aforementioned intensive growth at the metropolitan scale, the development of the urban voids - terrain vague. I discuss how this separation is more evident in those empty, underused, and abandoned areas where possible intensive developments could happen. Furthermore, I evaluate this separation by reflecting on how it can affect the upcoming future of the megacity of Bangkok.

Keywords

SDG; Policymaking; Redevelopment; Megacity; Bangkok; Peri-urban

1. Introduction

1.1 Urbanization in the Megacities

Southeast Asia's urbanism presents common traits defined by many authors as the constant change (Ricklefs et al., 2010), the private inception and development (Hogan et al., 2012); and oftentimes, there is a highlight on it being alternative and late compared to the developed Western World, while more aware postcolonial perspectives are emerging (Ong, 2011). Southeast Asia's urban development speed and growth in the core decades of neoliberal policies (from the late 1970s onward) drove the generic local layout of the places into a globalized new urban condition. The fast pace of urbanization for some of these territories in the last two decades led to the emergence of the phenomena defined as megacities and rapidly urbanizing territories (UN-Habitat, 2022). Within these, a recent study defined two different spatial-temporal pathways for the megacity's growth (Chakraborty et al., 2022): extensive and intensive. These two strands of development occur in cities and territories of Southeast Asia with usually a loose or deregulated public control and with a public-private partnership or governance which change in time.

An extensive pathway of development refers mostly to transformations outside — or on the fringes — of the territory of the city (i.e. the peri-urban area), characterized by urbanization of former agricultural lands at the edges of the city, the edification of new or satellite towns, new settlements, and comparable developments (Chakraborty et al., 2022). An intensive pathway of development is described in this article by phenomena which happen within the territory of the urban area: the densification of consolidated areas, the redevelopment of portions of the city (based either on natural amenity as, for instance, riverside redevelopment or road, block, or neighborhood requalification). This article acknowledges this last form of intensive development in Bangkok. Various data can show the extent of this growth, in terms of growth of the built-up area (2944 sq. km in 2015, almost double the 2002 quantity), Atlas of Urban Expansion, 2016), population growth (a steady increase of greater than 3% from 1988 until 2015), built-up area, density decrease during the decades (-1.1% since 1988, with a 2015 value of 81 persons per ha (Atlas of Urban Expansion, 2016).

1.2 International Framework and Local Developments

The United Nations (UN) has the jurisdiction and the influence to provide development guidance for all adherent states. In the field of the built environment, the UN operates mostly through the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) to define an internationally shared framework of principles, policies, and actions to limit, control, and make urban development more sustainable. The United Nations New Urban Agenda (United Nation [UN], 2017) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute the main tools through which the member states coordinate their processes of city-making to an internationally desired standard of sustainable development (UN, 2015).

1.3 Problem Statement

A disconnect can be found between the intent and guidance of the global international development framework when applied in a local context (a practice also known as the 'localization' of the SDGs). All levels of international policy-making have — due to their shared nature — no extensive detailing or specificity to particular, local, situations. This issue is exacerbated by the lack of tools found in the various national legislations: for instance, in the Thai context, the application of UN principles is not matched in the codes or directly

included in the zoning laws, but is left to the various public stakeholder activities and their project-based activities.

This separation delivers two critical effects. First, the difficulties of implementation generate a loss of the potential beneficial effects that might accrue through the SDGs. Second, the lack of tools available from the national normative bodies creates a barrier for the private stakeholders in scaling down these frameworks, leaving the future developments mostly up to the free market's sentiment variations. Influenced by the presence of deregulated private initiative and under the influence of global economic forces (Sassen, 1991), the local urban processes of growth appear to be more affected by local profit-oriented and site-specific dynamics - rather than from an international policy framework, leaving free way to the privatization of the urban development. This situation appears to be more evident where the urban issues are scaled down from general instances to local cases.

1.4 Objective

Given this background, the focus of my article is to discuss issues related to the urban voids - or terrain vagues. In them, seldom do the operations of infill, brownfield, and gray fields development allow the private stakeholders the opportunity to develop or redevelop urban sites without, or with little, obligation of providing benefit to the public and compliance to the SDGs while incrementing the urban density on the cities.

The article has two objectives. The first is to examine how the international tools such as the UNSDGs address the intensive privately initiated developments which take place in hypothetical urban voids located in the megacity of Bangkok. The second is to discuss whether an eventual separation between these international tools and the local contexts could affect the space of the megacity Bangkok in the future.

2. Research Methodology

The research connects four main topics relevant to land-use and policy-making in metropolitan contexts: megacities in Southeast Asia, SDGs, Bangkok's urban development and the urban Thai normative body, and the recurrent topic of the urban voids' redevelopment. To better encompass the multifaceted nature of these topics (defined and limited blurrily by technical insights, constituted by institutional-normative references, addressed by gray literature, and part of the academic debate), a qualitative 'semi-systematic' method of literature review was undertaken. 'Semi-systematic' methods are deemed able to encompass diverse topics (Snyder, 2019), integrate and encompass different instances (Baumeister & Leary, 1997).

This literature review method facilitates the investigation of the four selected areas of analysis (urbanization in megacities; the international framework of urban development; empty urban areas; Thailand and Bangkok) through four consecutive steps.

Firstly, the topic search was conducted using a mixed approach that considered Scopus-indexed journals in the English language retrieved from online depositories; key-references for each topic, available in peer-reviewed edited or non-edited books, or in peer-reviewed non-indexed journals selected manually by the author, given their importance and relevance to the theoretical debate (based on reported metrics in Google Scholar or ResearchGate where possible); and finally, grey-literature documentation produced by national and international government and non-government organizations, to reconstruct and define the state-of-the-art for each topical area.

Secondly, the selected documents were filtered manually by the author considering their relevance to the article and to the overall narrative. This allowed the exclusion of a few out-of-topic records which would not have enriched the discussion of the article, nor narrowed the focus of the topics (especially in regards to Thailand and Bangkok). Thirdly, selected documents and sources were summarized, highlighting the parts necessary to address the research question. Lastly, the sources were interpreted, summarized, and articulated logically in the final text.

After the literature review, the article structure includes a discussion that focuses on the article's nodal issues (section 4), and a final conclusion section (5) which summarizes the findings.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Urbanization in the Megacities

The topic of megacities and rapidly urbanizing territories has been discussed in the literature mainly in regards to a shifting world (Chen & Heligman, 1994; Fuchs et al., 1994), economic growth (Castells-Quintana & Wenban-Smith, 2020), globalization and international linkage (Lo & Marcotullio, 2000), and related concepts associated with other disciplines, such as the megalopolis (Qiao et al., 2014). In 2007, the year in which the global urban population first exceeded the rural population the discussion on megacities intensified, especially with regards to the shifting world demographics: Africa, China, and Southeast Asia became objects of focus (Kraas, 2007). Recent reliable predictions indicate that more than half of the projected global increase in population by 2050 will occur in eight African and Asian countries (UN, 2022a), setting up a mark on the urban agenda for these locations.

An early accepted definition of the term megacities appeared in a series of reports by the UN in 1987 (UN, 1987), which noted that cities with a future projected population of over 8 million inhabitants would be considered a megacity. This 8 million population threshold was adopted by others (Chen and Heligman, 1994; Fuchs et al., 1994), although some have used a lower threshold of 5 million inhabitants (Kraas et al., 2014). More recently, the most internationally accepted definition of the term includes cities above 10 million inhabitants (UN, 2018). In 2018, there were 33 megacities in the world, hosting almost 7% of the world population: the number is expected to become 43 in 2030; the threshold of 5 million inhabitants will be bypassed by an additional 28 cities, above the current 48 having that population, and similar trends are expected to happen in the smaller cities (UN, 2018). This development pattern made the recent international agendas more sensitive to a view of urbanization which includes both megacities and the concept of rapid urbanization of cities and territories (UN-Habitat, 2020, 2022).

The growth of a megacity is connected by its path in time, as noted by Chakraborty et al. (2022). Of the four distinct spatial pathways for megacities growth identified, only one of them, the "transition-to-densification", is the closest to the notions of urban environmental sustainability and land consumption - if paired with extra provisions of green space (Chakraborty et al., 2022). This pathway also is aligned to the UN 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015), since it provides elements of sustainability to its course. However, only a minority of megacities have experienced this pathway, while the majority both in total and in Southeast Asia — Bangkok included — are related to another pathway, the "oscillating/ping pong", not directly connected to any urban, environmental and historical traits. It alternes traits of intensive and extensive development: a mix of infilling, edge-expansion and growth in colonized areas external to the perimeter; it is typically associated with a decline

of density and edge growth. This poses, in its geographic meaning, a condition of complexity that must be considered.

3.2 The International Framework

The SDGs represent a practical tool for the implementation of UN policies with regards to a general sustainable world development, as established in the main foundational document of the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015). The document, which followed decades of discussions and agreements, was developed and approved by the General Assembly and consists of 17 goals for sustainable development, that have a total of 169 quantifiable targets. The Goal concerning the urban environment is covered by SDG 11 (Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable); a few of the main topics concerning the megacities are covered by the SDG 11 targets, such as the access to housing (target 11.1), integration and sustainability of human settlements and land consumption (SDG 11.3), the overall impact of cities (11.6), inclusion and efficiency (11.b; UN, 2015; UN, n.d.). Some other objectives concerning the urban environment also are met through consideration of two or more goals, as for instance the topics which refer to urban environments and climate actions (SDGs 11 and 13), or other SDGs concerning ecosystem conservation (SDGs 11.3 and 15 mostly, with targets 14.5 - in regards to maritime areas; and 15.1, 15.4 in regards to natural green ecosystems. Public events, publications, and project-based actions are the tools for SDG goal and target implementation, while academia actively supports the implementation as well (Grossi & Trunova, 2021; Berisha et al., 2022).

SDGs do not represent the only international tool in the definition of urban politics. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) carries out projects of urban governance, smart city policy, and technological development, as summarized in publications such as “The Handbook of Smart Urban Innovation” (United Nation Development Programme Global Centre for Technology [UNDP Global Centre], 2021).

UN-Habitat, the UN Agency which since 1977 has the mandate on all matters concerning human settlement and urbanization (UN-HABITAT, n/a), sets up the institutional understanding on the policy-making about urban development with a few relevant documents and tools, actions, and projects.

The New Urban Agenda (UN, 2017), the document produced after the 2016 Quito Conference (Habitat III), emerged after a long process and incorporates the SDGs into a broader discussion about urban development (UN-Habitat, 2017). It established a general shared roadmap on sustainable development and urban matters as the fulfillment of a settlement’s social function; the development of the participatory approach; the achievement of gender equality; valuing of the various scales of urban economy; promotion of safe and accessible mobility; adoption of risk reduction and management; and safeguarding the environment of human settlements (UN, 2017; UN-Habitat, 2017).

Other documents and guidelines, such as the World Cities Report (UN-Habitat, 2020; 2022a) provide extensive direction on urban governance. The documents represent a contemporary update able to provide “clarity and insights into the future of cities based on existing trends, challenges and opportunities, as well as disruptive conditions” (UN-Habitat, 2022b). The reports include strengthening and clarification on some of the key-operational points contained in the New Urban Agenda as “leave no one behind”, ensures sustainable and inclusive urban economies, and environmental sustainability (UN, 2017).

However, recent criticism has been raised towards the SDGs and the overall international institutional framework, including their ability to provide solutions establishing a multitude of goals on top of the existent policies (The Economist, 2015), the perpetuation of the capitalist neoliberal approach to urban development

(Weber, 2014), and recently, the SDG real capacity of challenging the institutional status quo and of understanding the broad causes behind issues (Schleicher et al., 2018). Kotzé et al. (2022) provided an extensive critique of the SDGs, especially in regards to the environment and of the priority of the economic instances above other concepts, such as planetary integrity. Others have called for integration between goals and targets, with a focus on the possible implementation processes (Stafford-Smith et al., 2017). In regards to Southeast Asia, there is a lack of academic focus on the local implementation of the SDGs and the need to frame the commitment of intermediate and lower governmental stakeholders in such application (Yusof et al., 2022).

3.3 Empty Urban Areas

The topic of the urban voids, empty, underused and abandoned areas in the urban environment, provides a possible key for framing megacities' intensive urban developments. The literature on the nature of the empty spaces is granular and often design-based, and gravitates within two possible readings. The first is represented by a reading of the urban voids coming from the humanistic field of social studies, from which the French term *terrain vague* was derived. The *terrain vague* (De Solà-Morales, 1995) represents a broad term which frames the undefined, "undetermined, imprecise, blurred, uncertain" (De Solà-Morales, 1995, p.120) temporary character of an empty, abandoned, underused or transitional urban area (Figures 1a, 1b). If framed in a temporal and spatial continuum, these spaces pose several opportunities for reflections and for an immaterial connection with the urban fabric and the city; the intervention of architecture and urban design embody an act capable of "changing estrangement into citizenship" (De Solà-Morales, 1995, p.120), an "aggressive instrument of power" (De Solà-Morales, 1995, p.123) which homogenizes that residual space to its contemporary city-making logics.

The second reading draws from the fields of urban geography and economics, where a leading line of thinking comes from the rent gap theory (Smith, 1979; 1987). This theory oversees a possible gentrifying change of a context whenever "the disparity between the potential ground rent level and the actual ground rent capitalized under the present land use" (Smith, 1979; p.545) occurs. A spatial transformation is then the correlation of a destination change within an applied economic framework and it is "most likely to occur in areas experiencing a sufficiently large gap between actual and potential land values" (Smith, 1987, p. 464). The theory, originally developed to explain housing rent dynamics, has now been expanded to other contexts and generalized to broader extents (Slater, 2015).

The common point among the two diverse readings is represented by the focus on the difference between the actual situation and a possible future one, and on the arrival of a changing action — either the "violent" transformations (De Solà-Morales, 1995) or the economic improvement (Smith, 1979; 1987). The operations of infill, brownfield and greyfields development are, in the field of the design-led practices, the operational categories of broader spatial transformations. As asserted in the international literature, description of these transformations oftentimes is based on case studies or practical leading examples of theorization (De Sousa, 2002). The operational categories represent the nature of the intervention: the contemporary infill mostly regards integration of the empty spaces in the growing city (Abedini & Khalili, 2019); the brownfield concerns mostly consider the process of deindustrialization, contaminated lands, and the integration of the areas back into the urban fabric (De Sousa, 2002), including knowledge which spans from the methodologies (Cappai et al., 2019) to recent case studies (Orderud et al., 2020); the greyfields often is paired with the concept of de-malling, or the demolition or redevelopment of malls and older structures into a more appropriate function for the socioeconomic context (Guimarães, 2019; Pagano & Bowman, 2000).

To focus the scope of the article, in the discussion phase, the words infill, brownfield, and greyfields are considered as being integrated under the general umbrella of ‘redevelopment’.



Figure 1a. An example of urban void - terrain vague in Bangkok in 2022. In this example, located in the central Ratchatewi district, we see the temporary and ‘undetermined’ status of an urban plot that is surrounded by urban developments of different ownership, age, consistence, and state of maintenance. Photo by the author.

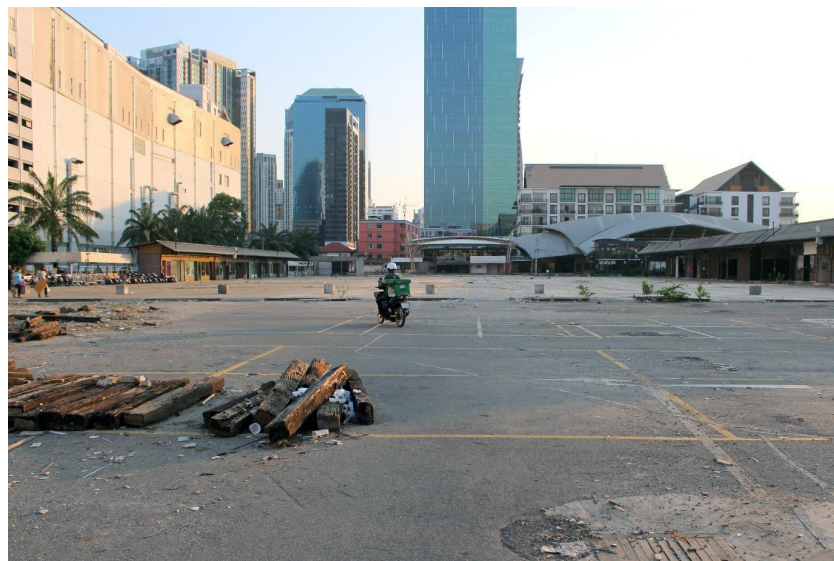


Figure 1b. Another example of urban void – terrain vague in Bangkok in 2022. In this example, located in a popular venue in Ratchapisek Road, the momentary deferment of the temporary use (street market) caused a further degree of ‘uncertainty’ and suspension through which emerged another temporary functional use of the space, a shortcut for pedestrian and motorbikes. Photo by the author.

3.4 Thailand and Bangkok

The Thai normative framework for the urban environment includes a general national address to the development (as the ‘National Economic and Social Development Plan’ for the policy and the ‘National Spatial Development Plan’ for the spatial level), a regional and subregional address, a provincial set of ‘Comprehensive Plans’, and a local address (the ‘Comprehensive Plan’) and some other specific plans (Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment [ONEP],

2021a; ONEP, 2021b; Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism of Japan [MLITT], 2013). Further executive regulations of details are in place at more specific levels of design (such as the setback rules or the rules for the single construction typology in terms of safety, etc.), as procedures for ensuring an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of some specific kind of project ('high rise', 'extra-large building', with a certain floor surface, or retail, as per the condition 27 of the relevant regulations; ONEP, 2021b).

For the scope of this research, it is helpful to identify a few key dates to clarify the temporal dimension or timeline of how development in Bangkok reached the megacity status. The first contemporary plan of Bangkok, 'The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533 [1990]' was released in 1960 by Litchfield and Associates, followed by variations and alternative versions, but without being officially adopted (Sternstein, 1986). In 1972 after the merging with Thonburi, Bangkok became for the first time a Metropolis with a central administration and a structure of territorial administrative units, while in 1975 with the Town and Country Planning Act (TCPA) Thailand produced the first legal tool to regulate urban planning. The year 1992 saw two normative changes: the national adoption of the first environmental regulation, the Enhancement and Conservation of the National Environmental Quality Act B.E. 2535 (1992) — which later served as a basis for the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedure— and the approval of the first 'Bangkok General Plan'. Despite the official implementation of the 1975 TCPA Act, the shortcomings in its application left Bangkok and other towns without approved plans until 1992 (Roachanakanan, 2007; 2008). It was only in 2006 that the first bulk control construction, open space, and bonus was implemented in the legal framework (The Bangkok Land Use Comprehensive Plan B.E. 2549 [2006 A.D.]).

The plan, with its amendments and updates, acted, essentially, as a land-use plan to provide a loose and flexible guidance for diverse private development. It accommodated a project-by-project approach conducted by agency activities (Askew, 2002) and private coalitions of private or publicly participated nature (Askew, 2002). The general overall ratio of land cover/land use showed a constant densification in built-up space (Ali et al., 2018) during the decades, indicative of Bangkok's aforesaid pathway towards a megacity (Figure 2).

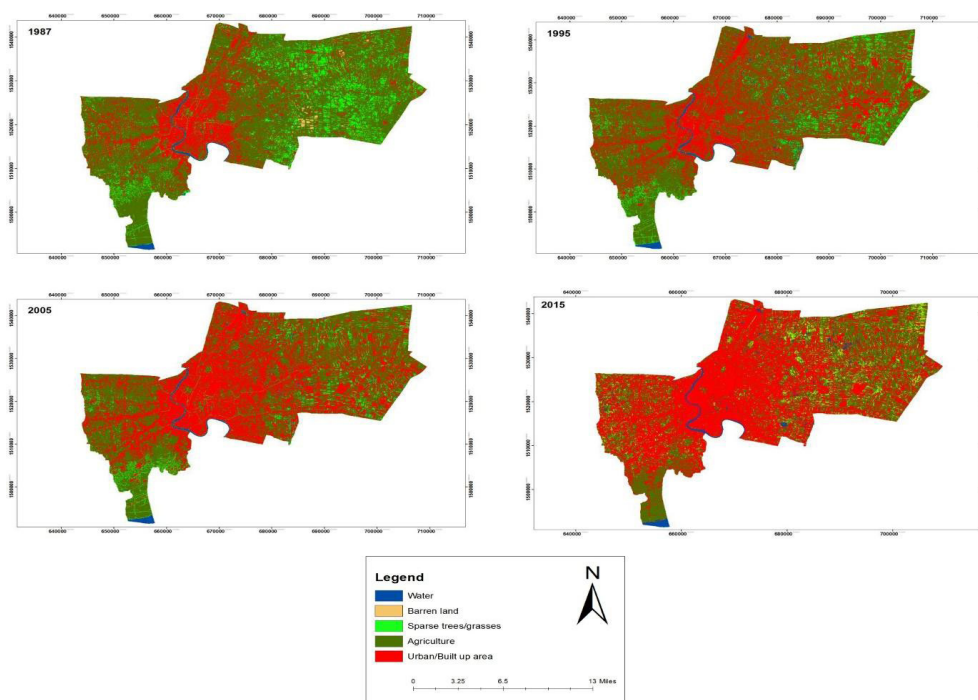


Figure 2. Consolidation and densification of urban areas: “Land cover/land use change maps of BMA from 1987 to 2015.”.

From Ali et al. 2018.

4. Discussion

A first insight which emerges from the literature review is the disconnection of the topics involved in the analysis. The theory underlying the megacity concept is relatively recent and descriptive to a vast extent. It relies on the presence of homogenized data: only recently elaborated analysis provided viable outcomes to build further knowledge about densification in the urban areas.

A more specific insight is the lack of holistic studies for the Southeast Asian context — and more specifically for Bangkok — showing the detachment of the international framework and policy to the topic of urban intensive development. The two themes arise from different standpoints and diverse backgrounds - holding firm their own different magnitude and local specification. What has been identified in this paper is the disconnection which affects two concurrent sets of dynamics within the same urban arena — in the case of this research, the Bangkok Metropolitan Region.

International policy-making purposely has an interest in being universal, internationally shared, and exemplary. It implicitly embodies a certain degree of genericity in order to fit, be scalable, adaptable, and adoptable in diverse contexts of the world. The various documents, sources, and reports which compose the main bulk of this framework, are coalescing in scope and consistency in the recent years, particularly as the 169 SGD targets address a broad range of possible global issues. Additionally, these tools have a vast scope that considers different spheres of human well-being and humanitarian aid. They arise from the development of the social sciences and from the integration of different humanistic and scientific disciplines (i.e., social science, human geography, natural sciences, etc.). However, criticism in the last few years insists on heavy structural issues which undermine the global ideological rationale of the UN-based policies: the top-down prioritization of the instance, the weak role of environmental prioritization versus the social and the economic pursuit of the results, the neoliberal base of private property, materialism, and market-based action (Kotzé et al., 2022). This latter point of criticism can be specifically intended as a trait d'union with the topic of urban intensive development. In the context of Bangkok, many sources, indicators, and data show how decades of urban development mostly has occurred in a deregulated and privatized manner. The late public intervention by the policymakers since the 1970s established the first bureaucratic organization, urban laws, regulations, and policies without setting a limit to the development; national economic development coincided with urbanization. From the 1970s, Bangkok's urban history was profoundly influenced by the role of the 'Comprehensive Plan' as a primary tool of territorial order and development: the practice of making such a tool the sole instrument for urban governance revealed strong limitation over the intervening decades. The main root can be reconducted to the inner limitations of this tool. Mainly, to be an instrument focused on the sole physical aspect, beside only in the 2006 the first volumetric prescriptions were added. Then, to be unspecified in a deeper scale at letter state. Finally, the lack in the urban regulations of multi-disciplinary provisions towards public health, safety, hygiene, environment, and social preservation. These topics were absent from the legislation and amended only from the 1980s onward in an uncoordinated manner: they are at the root of several urban development challenges in Bangkok. Additionally, the decades following the 1980s became part of the bigger economic phenomena connected to the international new globalized economy.

The transition from agriculture to the manufacturing sector as a main driver of GDP has occurred in several countries throughout Asia. The strengthening of the urban region was led by an expanded wealthy middle class, but interestingly, the growing strength of private developers and companies involved in the construction and urbanization sectors became capable of destabilizing the economy as evidenced by the 1997

financial crisis (Dick & Rimmer, 1998). The growth in the peri-urban areas of Bangkok and the general concept of 'bundling' several functions of urban life into privatized complexes for living became popular, where working and leisure oftentimes were located within the consolidated city in forms of malls (Dick & Rimmer, 1998). It is in malls and in the residential tower that it is possible to observe the most tangible effects of the ambitions of the private stakeholders to the built environment, as remarked by Askew and others.

The neoliberal approach to the national economy and the deregulated context made the massive, intense, and limitless urbanization a legitimate and legally abiding feature in the city-making process. The focus therefore needs to be placed on the legal tools which have allowed this process to occur — as discussed in the section 4.4. It is worth mentioning that beside the laws and regulations described, other various frameworks for the evaluation of sustainability and green are disconnected from the city-making practice and not compulsory. For instance, the Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG) evaluation framework is compulsory only at a very broad level (only for general evaluation of listed companies, not for single projects), while at the level of design, LEED or similar green or performative building ratings are considered, but are not obligatory nor binding at any state of a project approval.

Within this state-of-the-art, for what concerns the urban development in the private empty areas of the town — as the redesign of terrain vagues — it appears clear that a regulatory gap affects the matter. The obligation of complying with the zoning plan is left solely to the spatial volumetric verifications conducted during the release of the construction permit and, in some cases, by the EIA approval. The EIA ties four components together (physical resources; biotic resources; value to human use; value to quality of life; Thailand Board of Investor [BOI], 2014) to assess the environmental impact of a single project. In the actual framework this constitutes, *de facto*, the strongest possible link between the international and the local sets of regulations. However, this link appears to be existent mostly as a matter of overlapped distinct spheres of action (the local protection of the environment by the government; the international policy-making), rather than a strong and mutually reinforcing dynamic. Considering equally the limited criteria assessed by the EIA and the lack of any reference to the UN normative, a twofold conceptual disconnection appears to exist.

Private stakeholders involved in the planning, design, and development of vacant and underused sites do not appear to have any sort of obligations towards the previously debated international policy-making frameworks. The free market, together with a plot's possibilities of development in terms of zoning and FAR emerge as the main controls on development and redevelopment of any sort in the urban voids. The possibilities of redevelopment of a particular urban plot are hence subordinated to: its potential transformative values which reduces the range of all possible designs; its market appetibility; the four factors evaluated by the EIA, only within the limit of the procedure (as, for instance, the quantity of 'green' spaces).

The international agencies of policy-making retain less power in relation to these sites. International agencies can pursue their plans (localization of pilot projects, implementing actions, etc.) in contexts and other situations more easily than the redevelopment of the private empty urban voids. Whenever redevelopment of an empty area with an increase of density occurs (an issue covered by several scattered SDGs; Lal et al., 2021), it appears evident the international tools have a very limited impact given their missing translation in law and codes terms, in this localized context.

The possible following actions can go in different directions. A reformative path, for instance, should take into account the inefficacy of the existing tools and model new benchmarks and holistic approaches considering these limitations (Korff, 2020). A lack of reform of the factors — or the missing introduction of possible links between local and international policies (as different categories of benchmarks in the EIA

evaluations, inclusion of ESG and green building principles in the laws, for instance) could persist in perpetuating the status quo.

Controversy spurred recently in regard to some EIA processes (Bangkok Post, 2022), and multiple attempts of normative reform going towards deregulation could negatively impact certain environmental management procedures and widen the gap with the existent international tools of policy-making. The diffused presence of commercial spaces, the redevelopment of the existent ones, and the launch of new ones in strategic downtown locations (Klinchuanchun, 2022) does not favor the pursuit of the key-values of the SDGs, the NUA, nor the reports on inclusive urbanization. Inclusion, integration, 'leave no one behind', promotion of civic engagement, and environmental sustainability thus become disconnected. It can be added also how these types of developments can increase inequalities and segregation. This last point can represent a further possible future pathway for investigating the issues presented in this article related megacities in general, and of the Bangkok megacity in particular.

5. Conclusions

The emerging strands of criticism towards international policy-making and the critical evaluation of the local practices of intense urban development emerge from the clash of their two distinct rationales. The international framework of policy-making is centralized, institutional, and conformist; subject to criticism, but nonetheless impactful and meaningful, scalable, and universal. Alternatively, privatized city-making is privately fueled, globalized, related to each country's specific history of planning, and subordinated to the customs and the fluctuations of the socio-economic features of a context. For Bangkok, this specificity can be multiplied considering the historical role of primate leading individuals and institutions, compounded by its role as a national primate city, with the subsequent stratification of layers inherent to the city-making. Another Bangkok-specific factor is represented by the role of the Comprehensive Plan in the whole planning and urban history of Thailand and Bangkok – and by the past vicissitudes in regards to various plan adoption and implementation.

The contemporary issues of the intense developments in the megacities are still a global contemporary matter of discussion; although participatory instances are emerging at various levels of the debate, even initiated by private stakeholders.

The battleground of this contrast is materialized, in this essay, by the urban voids: their redevelopment is capable of embodying complexities and contradictions of present forms of city-making. It is important then to cast more light on the dynamics which appear to exist between these clashes of public and private interests, and between local and global nexuses of developments - as the ones heretofore discussed.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization: F.P. Federico Puggioni

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