

# BANGKOK 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

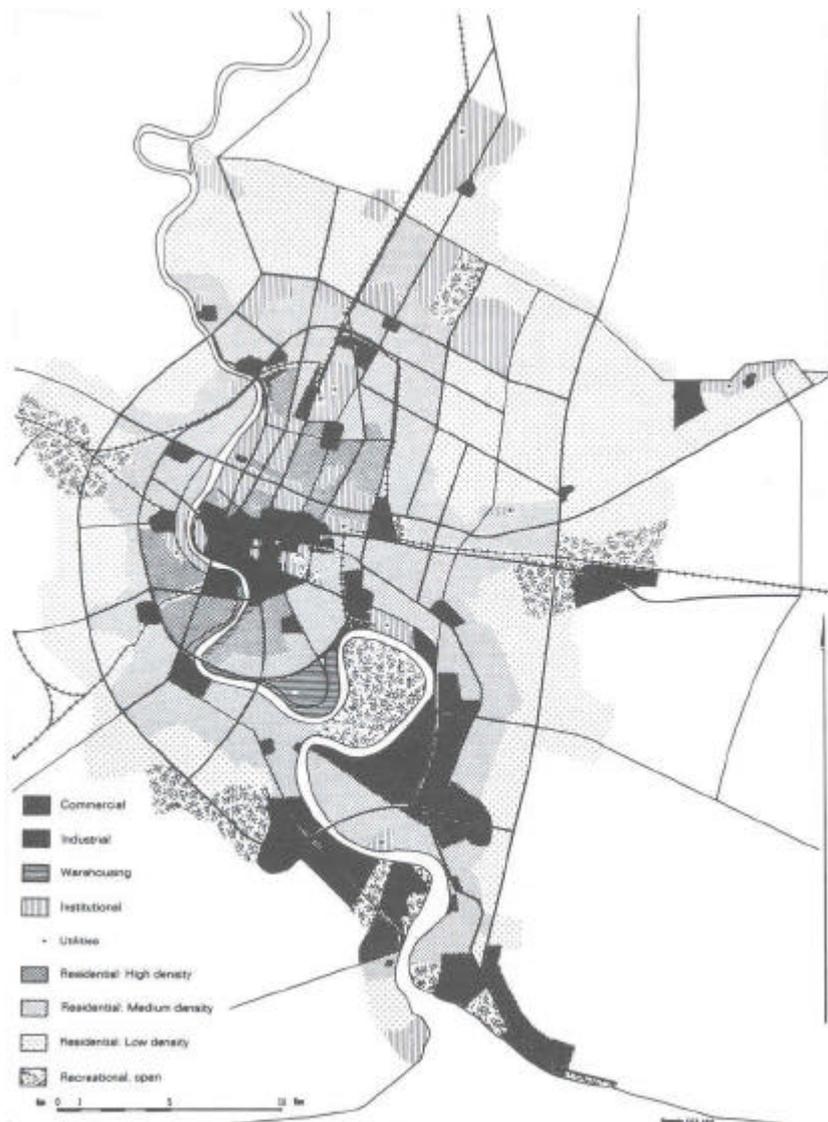
Bangkok is what geographers call a primate city: a metropolis which is by far the most populous and most influential in a country. Bangkok, in fact, is the political, commercial, industrial, cultural and administrative capital of Thailand. Indeed, Bangkok is the primate city – the world's preeminent primate city – if the disparity in size between the largest and the next largest urban centre in a country is the criterion of primacy; for Bangkok is approximately fifty times larger than the second city in the kingdom, the so-called 'northern capital' Chiang Mai. Bangkok is *the* centre of change, *the* proving ground for and *the* prime mover in the development of Thailand. Bangkok is the *beau ideal* of a primate city. Bangkok also is the *bete noir* of the Thai leadership faced with the complexity, the fearful interrelatedness, the damnable immediacy, even the sheer number of problems wanting solution. Those responsible for developing Bangkok reason that the problems of the metropolis, to a large extent, have been imported and so too should the solutions to these problems. So, the foreign consultant is invited to tackle at least the more obvious and troublesome of the symptoms of growth, and while so engaged is expected to train promising nationals in his ways. Meanwhile, as many qualified Thai as is possible are sent directly into the developed camp to discover these ways firsthand. To fault the leadership in this endeavour would be hypercritical, but the danger is clear: an adoption or too simple adaptation of the mannerisms of the city of the 'developed' world will harden Bangkok in a mean mold, committing it to an existence in mime. The city fathers are so overwhelmed by the problems of growth that the opportunities for the development of the metropolis, which is without piled improvements and free of disjointed political units, go unrecognised; and the experts prescribe only well-tried remedies and proffer plans which can do little more than ameliorate present difficulties.

Late in 1960, following almost three years of study, *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533 [A.D. 1990]* was submitted to the Thai Government by American consultants. Though the consultants believed a comprehensive plan to be concerned with the physical environment of a city or region, *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* may be considered the first attempt at a comprehensive urban plan in Thailand and the first plan seeking to provide a rational, consistent framework wherein specific physical plans could be developed. At the same time the consultants were to develop general, practical plans, including programmes for their

implementation' for a number of facilities and 'to institutionalise planning as a continuing... process in the...Metropolitan Area'.

On arrival, the consultants found no adequate map of the city. A base map of the area was then produced from aerial photos. Compiling information gathered from the many and various agencies involved and from field surveys, first-ever maps were made of such fundamentals - as administrative divisions in the Metropolitan Area, population distribution, land use, land assessments, traffic characteristics and the location of various facilities such as schools and markets. Obviously, a considerable time was devoted to providing the bare necessities of planning; further, Thai personnel were employed extensively and had to be trained prior to assuming even petty responsibilities. It appears that a considerably greater period of time ought to have been devoted to the compilation and analysis of basic data, for the result is neither complete nor critical. In particular, it seems strange that the available population data were not carefully assessed. (The Population Census of 1960, the first by the Central, now National, Statistical Office, was most informative, many characteristics of the population becoming known for the first time. None of the data elicited were used in preparing *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533*. Apparently, advance returns for the Metropolitan Area were not requested or could not be supplied before the contract between the Thai Government and its consultants terminated in August 1960) More importantly, most of the information which was acquired is static and descriptive of the leavings of past growth rather than indicative of trends in development. Since the worth of a comprehensive plan is in its use as a guide to directing anticipated developments most profitably, this is most unfortunate.

Not surprisingly, then, the Plan itself is essentially a land-use plan. Blocks of different uses are separated by access ways and designed to produce a pleasant mosaic-like structure able to accommodate comfortably four and a half million people, attendant facilities and anticipated industrial growth to 1990. Indeed, the consultants thought of the future land-use pattern presented as *the* Plan. The Plan, then, is apparently the very model of that type of planning eschewed in the so called new planning philosophy which insists on strategic measures and provision of the necessary fiscal, legal and administrative infra structure. Indeed, under the 'new' planning philosophy a Plan' is not prepared. In fact, *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* includes a budgetary document indicating the costs involved in providing necessary facilities, translates the land use plan into a series of



*First Revised Metropolitan Plan. Source: Sternstein, L.. Planning the Developing Primate City: Bangkok 2000 Canberra. 1971.*

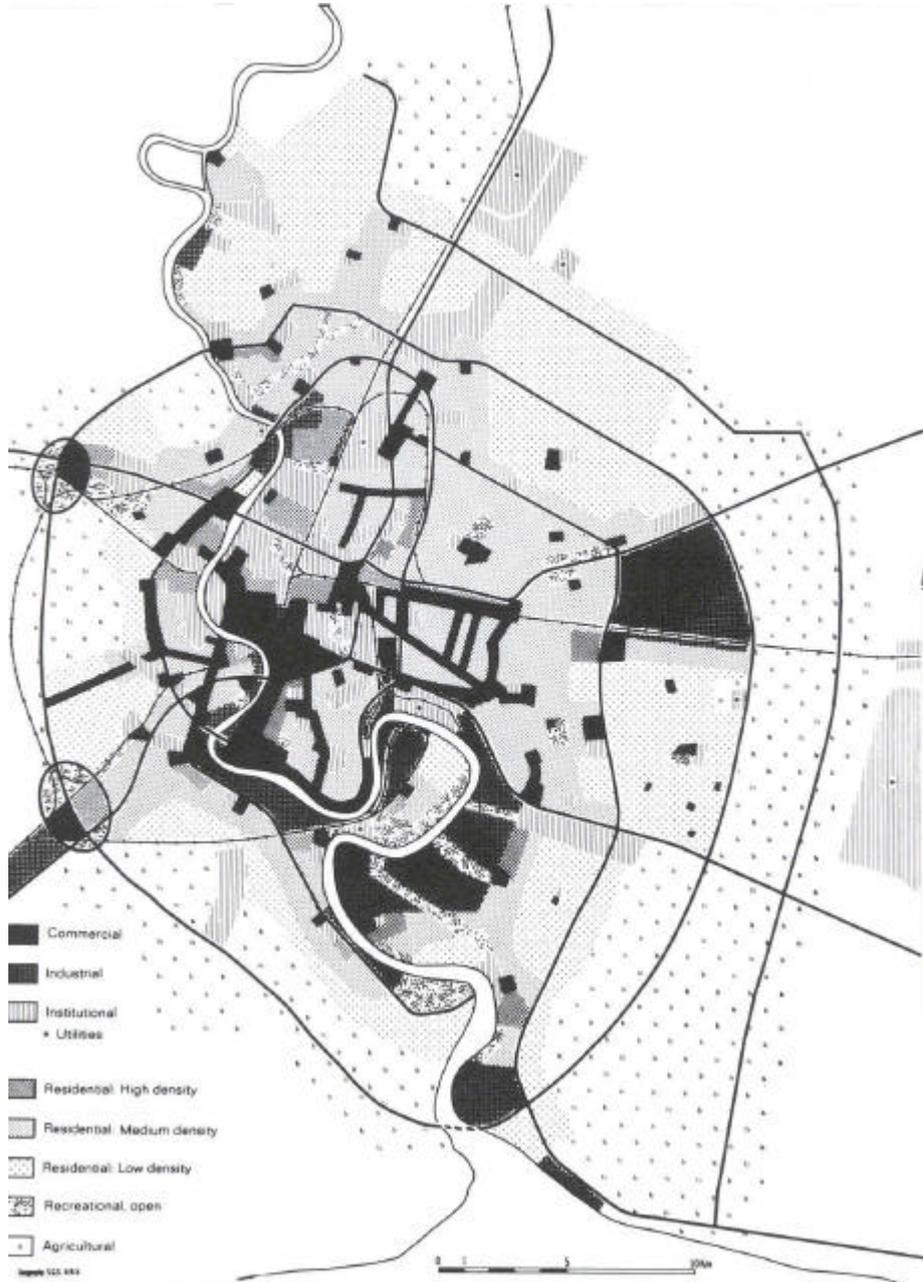
projects strategically phased over time, discusses the need for fiscal, legal and administrative change to enable implementation of the Plan, and makes perfectly clear that a comprehensive plan is a guide, a means to an end, not an end in itself. The 'old' planning philosophy is not less aware of the nature of comprehensive planning than is the 'new' planning philosophy, but where the 'old' produced a comprehensive plan regardless, the 'new' – painfully aware of the failure of comprehensive planning introduced directly into the developing countries – seeks first to provide the necessary planning milieu by gradually turning the *ad hoc* project-by-project approach into an integrated programme. This difference is fundamental and the merit of the new philosophy is evident.

Thai authorities referred to *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* in bolstering arguments for specific developments included in it when these cropped up in the traditional project-by-project approach and ignored it when the project was not included in the Plan. Neither the Plan nor any of its parts received official approval. The value of the land-use plan was, however, appreciated. Although the project-by-project approach is actively pursued by each agency involved in developing the city, each agency wants a guide to overall growth. A land-use plan rooted in actual use, duly cognisant of all projects contemplated by the many and various agencies responsible, and merely filled out through a clear and simple extrapolation, is a satisfying tactical device in working toward integrated, comprehensive planning.

*The Report on the First Revision of the Plan for the Metropolitan Area* prepared by the Department of Town and Country Planning in 1971 attempted to confirm *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* in the very changed condition of the metropolitan area after a decade of development. In the main, parameters critical to the invention of a comprehensive plan were revised, though certain not unreasonable suggestions in *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* were reiterated as were, disconcertingly, certain sadder features. Essentially, revision of *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* stemmed from a very great difference in the population anticipated in the metropolitan area in 1990: 6.5 million in the *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* as against 4.5 million in *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533*. This considerable difference derived from the fact that the authors of *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* envisaged government limiting growth to 4.5 million in 1990 in the belief that, failing this, population densities would increase and a huge financial outlay would be necessary to provide the public facilities required. Wisely, the authors of the *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* doubted the practicability of attempting to limit numbers in the metropolitan area to 4.5 million. The *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* argues that the population in 1990 will be 6.5 million and that government must find the wherewithal to provide the necessary facilities. The approach suggests a healthy pragmatism, but nevertheless, the estimate of 6.5 million people in 1990 is strewn with those questionable assumptions common to the prediction of population levels. Unfortunately, the *First Revised Metropolitan Plan*, as had its lineal ancestor *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533*, appeared immediately before the results of a national census. In view of the acknowledged errors introduced into *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* by the difference between the population in the metropolitan area reported in the 1960 Census and the estimate of the consultants, should not the *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* have awaited the results of the 1970 Census; particularly since the lack of accurate, readily usable data is officially bemoaned and the gathering of such information is urged on agencies of government as being indispensable to planning? The two plans appear to include approximately equal areas but to differ in general configuration. *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* includes 780 square kilometres and the *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* only 732 square kilometres. None of the area of the *Revised Plan*, however, is zoned for agricultural use as compared with more than two fifths of the area in *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533*. It may seem reasonable to exclude fringing cultivated lands from a plan of metropolitan land-use, but this suggests an 'empty' countryside into which the city may sprawl if necessary. In fact, the countryside is well populated. A first aim of city planning must be to contain this sprawl, since the integral metropolitan area comprises the city and the country surrounding. This interdependence should be clear on a plan of land-use.

Despite embracing both the haphazard growth of an intervening decade and ungoverned developments scheduled, the disposition of the various land uses in the *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* is more coherent than in *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533*. The removal of what intricacy there is in *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* gains credibility for the *First Revised Metropolitan Plan*; certainly it appears more a guide than a goal. This is not to imply that the *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* proffers no specific suggestions. Several novel ideas are brought into the plan. For example a national park is proposed immediately south of the Port of Bangkok on a piece of land surrounded almost completely by the Chao Phraya river. Here, the river is not bridged and the is-land-like area is yet rural. Government is warned that the next five years will see the area built-up and government is urged to seize the opportunity to preserve the area as open space. The uniqueness of the site was not noticed in *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* and the area was scheduled for residential use in most part. It would surprise and delight me if the area were not already in the hands of speculators. (Similarly, the proposed recreational use of vacated Crown properties in the heart of the city seems a forlorn hope.) A decade ago I wondered aloud in knowledgeable company as to why the narrow neck of this bulbous peninsula-like area had not been cut through and the river rechanneled. I was told that a canal had been cut, but not wide and deep for fear of greater intrusion of salt water into orchards and fields. These were already threatened by brackish tides made more threatening by the withdrawal of underground water for use by the rapidly increasing population and proliferating industry in the metropolitan area. The location of the port along the loop in the river bounding the area was a further obstacle. Still, I fancy a cut through this scrawny neck, the resiting of the port at the cut, and the blocking of the flow of salt water upstream by a submerged dam and fresh water wall. Another possibility would be to score channels through the area to allow for much needed expansion of the port. Others have speculated about this unique area, but the notion of a national park is praiseworthy.

It is also proposed that a large block of 'empty' land in the northeastern part of the city be purchased by government and that new offices and extensions to existing offices be located there. In *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* a new government area was proposed on the Thon Buri side of the Krung Thon Bridge and extension of the existing government area was also urged. The authors of the *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* argue that to extend the area now used by government is virtually impossible since this is in the heart of the city where land values are very high and surrounding properties are in private hands. The argument is true only in part,



Greater Bangkok Plan 2543 [A.D. 2000]. Source: Sternstein, L., *Planning the Developing Primate City: Bangkok 2000* Canberra, 1971.

for the existing national administrative centre could be expanded if the military moved from a number of spacious encampments in the heart of the city. The military is unlikely to move at present, however, and so the possibility is not mentioned. Allowing this as politic, still the existing seat of government might be expanded in other ways, particularly upward. Almost as obviously, it might also be extended along processional Ratchadamnoen Klang Boulevard, which is now faced on both sides by squat, dismal, woefully inadequate and decrepit structures housing a mixed bag of activities. Ratchadamnoen Klang Boulevard could be faced by efficient and attractive high-rise office buildings, interconnected and with ample offstreet parking, and backed by attractive high-rise apartment blocks housing a good number of those employed in the offices adjacent. Shopping and recreational facilities are already to hand and could be readily augmented. Finding the finance for this would be no more difficult than for a similar scheme elsewhere, perhaps less so. The reason for rejecting the Thon Buri site for government proposed in *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* is not stated in the *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* but the area passed into different use, mostly residential, during the intervening decade. The *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* sees Thon Buri more as a residential area than does the first plan and this is consistent with present use, but is the encouraging of a dormitory-like Thon Buri wise in the face of increasing congestion on the ways over the river?

The *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* proposes an elaborate system of communications, particularly with regard to land transportation. The roadway system described – and for which nothing less is claimed than that it will solve present traffic problems and prevent these recurring in future or at least for the next forty years or more – comprises three circumferential roads, a large number of radial and cross-town roads, many lesser major roads and several new bridges across the Chao Phraya, as well as a riverside drive actually overhanging its eastern edge so as to minimize costs incurred in expropriating land and demolishing buildings. The need for this riverside drive may be doubted since the plan includes a number of proposals that would thin traffic in the area. Well aware of the uncertainty of implementing such a gradiose scheme, even in part, an alternate way to ‘solve’ the traffic problem ‘immediately’ is proffered: two elevated roads with limited access, one above main canals for much of its length, the other above a major avenue. A monorail system, mooted previously, would seem a better immediate solution but no mention is made of it. It is warned that ‘immediate solution’ will require a huge financial outlay. Doubtless the cost will be high, but no higher and conceivably lower than the cost of providing a comparable portion of the proposed ground-level system. The elevated roadways scheme may find favour, but it is unlikely to solve the traffic

problem. A proliferation of roadway, in itself, has not answered the traffic problem anywhere. In any event, the *system* of roadways necessary will take more than a few years to build. At the present pace of roadway construction, even a half century would be a foolhardy schedule.

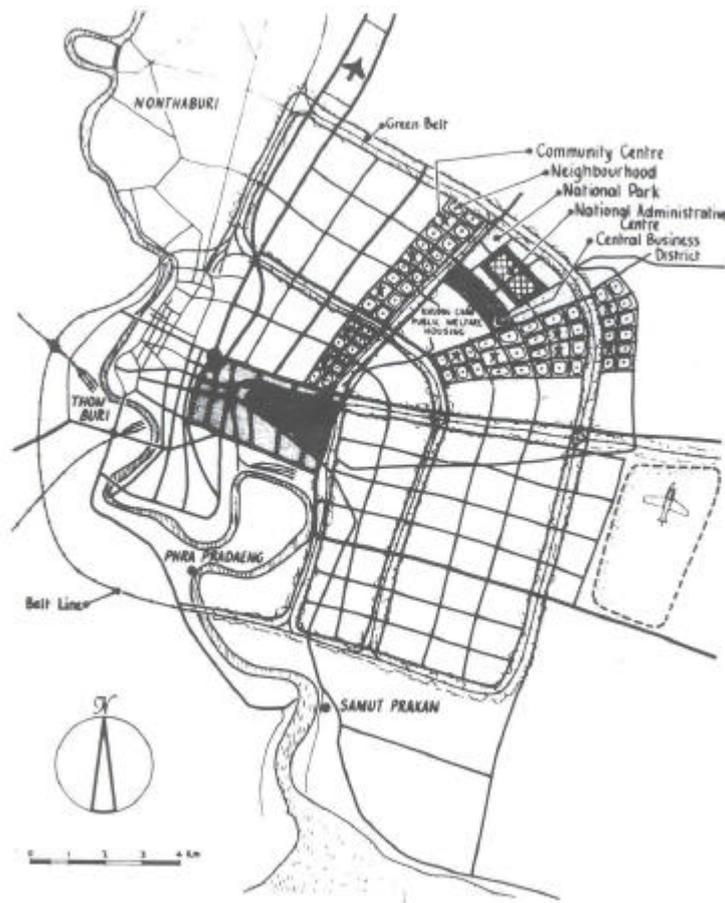
In concept and in execution a third plan for Bangkok, *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2543*, published in 1969, is not different from *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* or from the *First Revised Metropolitan Plan*. Like the latter it attempts revision of the first plan in order to incorporate present and scheduled uses of land different from those set out a decade before and to allow for the greater population anticipated, 6.5 million in the year 2000. As in *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* a restriction of population in the metropolitan area is envisaged, for the author foresees an insupportable 13.62 million in the year 2000 if growth is uncontrolled. To accommodate 6.5 millions, *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2543* includes 975 square kilometres, a quarter again as much areas as in *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533*, and earmarks land somewhat more generously for industry, government and other institutions, commerce and public utilities, decidedly less so for residential use, and more or less equally for recreation and for agriculture. *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2543* lies between *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* and the *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* in land use allocations. in the area in non-agricultural use and in configuration, but the use of land is set out more particularly than in the former and the system of road and rail ways is more elaborate than in the latter.

The *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* was published in 1971 by the Department of Town and Country Planning in the Ministry of Interior. *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2543* was published in 1969 by the City Planning Division in the Municipality of Krung Thep, one of two municipalities making up the city of Bangkok. The Department of Town and Country Planning was established in 1961 and assumed the responsibility for overall planning in the metropolitan area and in up-country centres as well. The City Planning Division was to plan only special projects which were consistent with the comprehensive plan set out by the Department of Town and Country Planning. In producing its own overall plan. the City Planning Division has pleaded the urgency of the situation and has got a generally sympathetic hearing, except at the Department of Town and Country Planning where *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2543* is ignored, officially. In fact, the Department of Town and Country Planning was established in order to avoid the criminal waste of severely limited time, money and manpower represented by separate yet similar plans for the metropolitan area. Effective planning stems from critical discussion and the airing of different views, which must be encouraged, but the use of near-identical means to gain near-identical

ends by two agencies of government each of which is aware of but does not acknowledge the activities of the other is irresponsible. In the circumstances, however, the Department of Town and Country Planning might have acknowledged the *de facto Greater Bangkok Plan 2543*, credited that which was good and incorporated as much of it as was possible into the *de jure* plan.

The *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* is remarkable for a lack of reference to prior or continuing studies. This, despite that the Department of Town and Country Planning should be vitally

interested in the working of each of the many agencies responsible for the working of Bangkok and must elicit opinion from them, if only to encourage the sense of interrelatedness necessary to a coordinated effort. Furthermore, one might expect that when a non-governmental authority is sufficiently concerned to present alternative strategies for metropolitan development these should be seriously explored. The *First Revised Metropolitan Plan*, however, does not acknowledge even the existence of Professor An Nimmanhaemind's *Solution to the traffic*



'An' Plan. Source: Sternstein, L., Planning the Developing Primate City: Bangkok 2000 Canberra. 1971.

problem in Bangkok-Thon Buri and establishment of a new national administrative centre which was delivered as a lecture – a impassioned lecture – and then published in 1970. Professor An Nimmanhaemindr's *Solution to the traffic problem and establishment of a new national administrative centre*, differs from the *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* and the *Greater Bangkok Plan 2543* in not being comprehensive (though the new national administrative centre proposed would involve total planning of the metropolitan area) and in not noticing the *Greater Bangkok Plan 2533*. But Professor An argues for views similar to those expressed in the other plans. For example, he notes the need to reorganise and extend the system of roads and railways in the form of rings and radii; the need to develop mass transportation; the need to control the use of land and the construction of buildings; the need to practice decentralisation and encourage birth control. Strikingly different, however, are proposals to limit the population of Bangkok-Thon Buri to 3,500,000, to remove the Port of Bangkok and to stop dredging the bar at the mouth of the Chao Phraya River immediately, and to relocate all offices of the central government at a new national administrative centre at Khlong Chan in the suburbs of Bangkok; proposals which have been greeted with more than dismay by responsible Thai authorities. Authority would probably like the population of Bangkok-Thon Buri to be around 3,500,000 as the present population gives problems aplenty, but the population was already about 3,500,000 in 1970. Even to get administrative machinery going which could act to encourage a slowing of growth in the foreseeable future seems hopeless: to reduce the population absolutely seems impossible. Again, there must be some among the leadership who are aware of the blunder in siting the Port of Bangkok, but to remove the Port now is unthinkable and therefore to stop dredging the bar is irrational. In fact, additions to the Port of Bangkok are underway and more are planned, for even with a new deep-sea port (or two) shipping facilities will be taxed, as trade will certainly grow rapidly in future;

The crux of Professor An Nimmanhaemindr's thesis is the establishment of a new national administrative centre in the Bangkok suburbs. This is not only to provide the Thai people with 'a new capital, beautiful, properly planned and modern, like Washington, D.C.' or Canberra, but to solve the traffic problem most economically. To cut or widen roads in the heart of the city is many times more costly than in the suburbs. Additionally, the new national capital would open up new areas for residential use, relieve crowding in the city and allow the conserving of places of historic and artistic worth. Authority thinks the proposal is impracticable; and the present economic and political situation, reflected in conservative budgeting, supports this view, though Professor An believes a good part of the necessary outlay

could be defrayed by the sale of present government buildings and the cost of the new centre would be less than the cost of necessary improvements to present sites and structures. Under a policy of decentralization, too, the proposed wholesale relocation of offices of the central government may be questioned; for what is proposed, really, is a recentralization, and the benefits described by Professor An are not likely to be realised. What might better be urged is a rational reconstruction of the administrative heart of the city so that the single purpose, eight hours a day, five days a week, administrative centre is once more a full time, well balanced administrative, commercial, residential and recreational area.

The *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* and *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2543* carry over from *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533* a too conservative approach to the planning of the metropolitan area and each proposes a schedule which will allow in future only a city of the Western fashion. Professor An Nimmanhaemindr's proposals appear extreme but, in fact, are simple borrowings from the West and cannot lead to any real deviation from Western ways, despite that these ways are wanting. I think it fair to insist that the great lesson to be learned from the city of the 'developed' world is what not to do in the city of the 'developing' world. To go this brutal way, at speed, would be foolish. To plan remedially is to forfeit the opportunity yet waiting. To grasp the opportunity for planning Bangkok needs people in authority who are aware of what is going on in the many and varied fields pertinent to urban development and who know Bangkok. There are few such people and their scarcity is all the more serious because all the many and varied ills of a remarkable and chaotic development appear equally urgent and hopelessly entangled. Forced to do something, authority turns to the experts, though the experts are not more than able technicians. In consequence, the planning of the metropolitan area is too much a mimicry of happenings elsewhere, inevitably in arrear of thinking and not dedicated, particularly, to discovering what is happening in Bangkok. Unique Bangkok, most primate of cities – embodiment of the distinct and splendid Thai ethos – is rapidly becoming any mean modern' city of some generations past and the planners seem intent on endorsing this.

Neither the *First Revised Metropolitan Plan* nor *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2543* received official approval; in time, perhaps, revised plans will be approved. Planning legislation is being considered: in time, planning legislation may be enacted. The first administrative step toward coordinated metropolitan-wide development has been taken; in time, metropolitan-wide development may be undertaken. Meantime, indiscriminate growth continues and will reduce the advantages to be gained from integrated planned development for some time to come.

