

# CITY OF GREAT DISTANCES

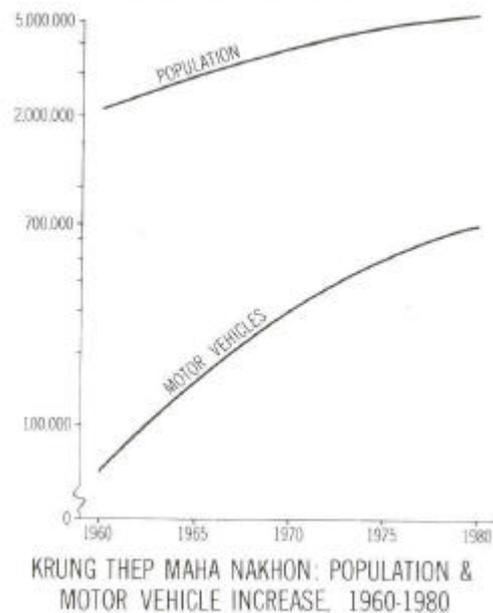
A handsome guide-book to Bangkok, published in 1927 by the Royal State Railways, law the city in future as *a vast well laid out, park-like town intersected with a network of broad shady roads running in all directions; a city which would become much more even than now the city of great distances', by which name it is already known.* Barely two decades before, Bangkok rightly bore the epithet 'Venice of the East'. The transformation, though rapid, had not taken place overnight but was the result of cumulated construction under the guidance of the Chakri kings who sought to refashion their capital after the Western mode and to reinforce its place as the hub of their kingdom. The Great King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868-1910) and his predecessor King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851-1868) were particularly assiduous in working the change, though the groundwork for modernization had been laid by Rama III (1824-1851) and the work was carried on by Rama VI (1910-1925) and Rama VII (1925-1935). These monarchs and their heirs succeeded admirably in their endeavours; though Bangkok is neither well laid out' nor park-like', and 'shady roads' are few indeed. Roads do run 'in all directions', but traffic crawls. Bangkok is a 'city of great distances' because to go any distance takes a great deal of time. This unfortunate condition may be attributed to an unfettered speculation in and use of land, coupled with an ungoverned increase in the population of the metropolis. Without controls on urban development, the attempt by government to provide ways for a vehicular population which has burgeoned since the Second World War has been in vain; worse, has needlessly sacrificed the more charming, even uniquely attractive, features of the city. Perhaps the worst aspect of the drive to

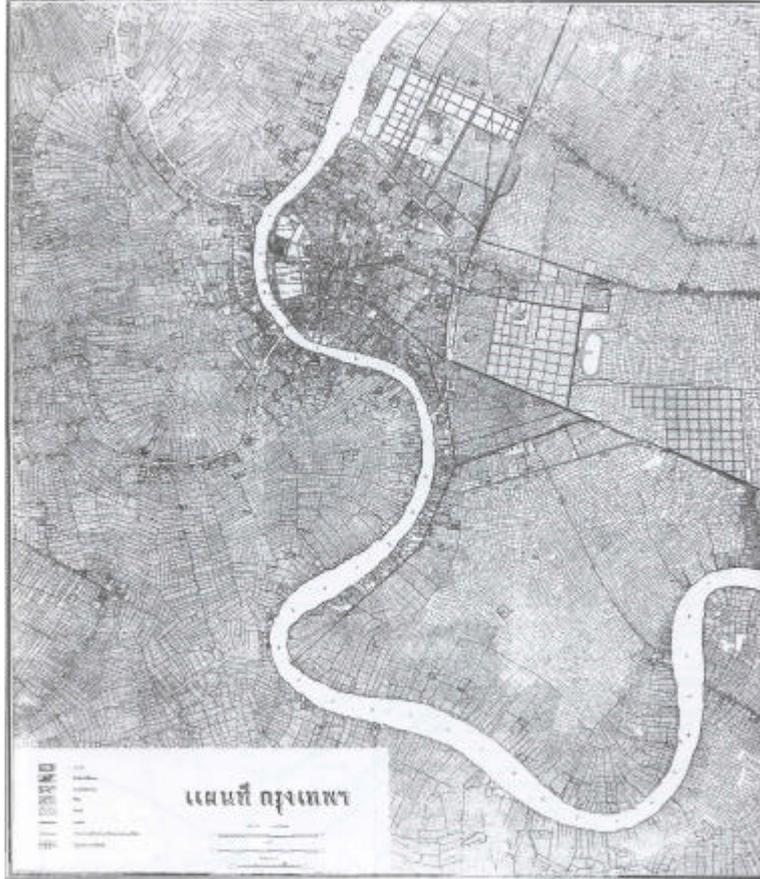
◀ *Redrafted and adapted version of an oversized (2 x 3 metres) original handcoloured map' of Bangkok. Unattributed, undated, unscaled and unoriented, the original (in Thai) appears to be the earliest large-scale chart of the capital based on detailed surveys. Dating this plan is difficult because planned as well as present features are shown (the Dusit Palace area, for example, was not yet on the ground) and the original itself was updated by overdrafting; however, a date in the mid- to late 1890s seems certain Source: Original held at the National Library of Thailand.*

▶ *The 'population explosion' in Bangkok: not man alone but also his machines. Source: Based on registration data from the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration.*

modernize has been the destruction of the system of urban waterways which had earned for Bangkok the favour of a comparison with the Queen of the Adriatic. Many canals have been pierced by roads and now are merely foul pools. Many waterways have been buried beneath avenues. Many streets have been widened by uprooting bordering shade trees, filling paralleling 'borrow pits' and canals, and covering the scars with hot tar. In short, the network of waterways has been dismembered. Its function as a transportation system has not been reconstituted by roadways. Its function as a drainage system has not been replaced, though a grandiose, costly scheme of sewerage, drainage and flood protection has been drawn up and bits are being implemented. The ameliorating effect of the waterways on oppres-sive city temperatures has been nullified, while the urban area has been resurfaced with heating con-crete. The incalculable recreational value of the waterways has been lost, while the public is 'served' by an ever diminishing, already woefully inadequate area of parkland and playground. The beauty of the waterways has been despoiled, while Bangkok has become as any mean, modern city anywhere; truly, a 'city of great distances'.

The tragic transformation of Bangkok may be readily inferred from the graphic illustrations on the following pages.





*Photographically reduced version of a large (circa 105 x 120 centimetres) original map of Bangkok. Although undated and including planned as well as present features, this map was made in the late 1890s, soon after the earliest detailed chart of the capital shown on a prior page. Taken together, the two maps clearly show the limited extent of the built-up area of Bangkok and the close, if not intimate, association between the city and the countryside at the turn of the century. Source: Original held at the Royal Survey Division, Army Survey Department, Royal Thai Army.*

These plans, derived from large-scale survey maps of Bangkok, clearly show the expansion of roadway and the contraction of waterway in the capital since 1935. In fact, the reduction in the significance of waterway vis-h-vis roadway is understated in this series, since many of the waterways shown were no longer working; each water-way - including even the arterial Chao Phraya "river" - had lost a large measure of its importance, and the network of waterways no longer played a central role in the working of the city.

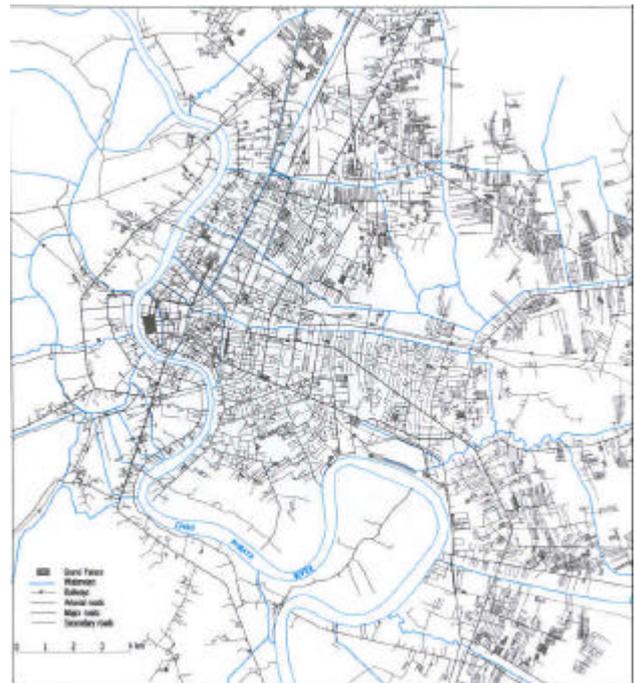
Source: Originals held at the Royal Survey Division, Army Survey Department, Royal Thai Army and in my personal collection.



Circa 1935

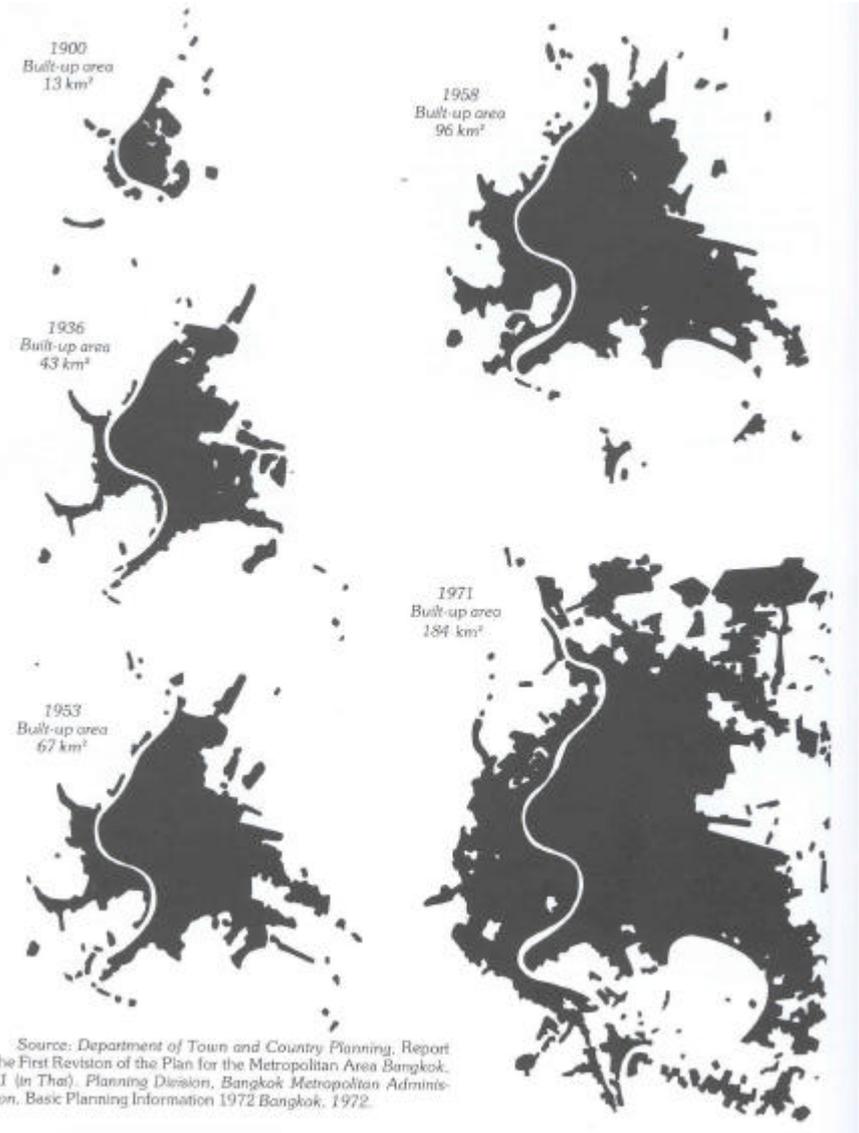


Circa 1955



Circa 1975

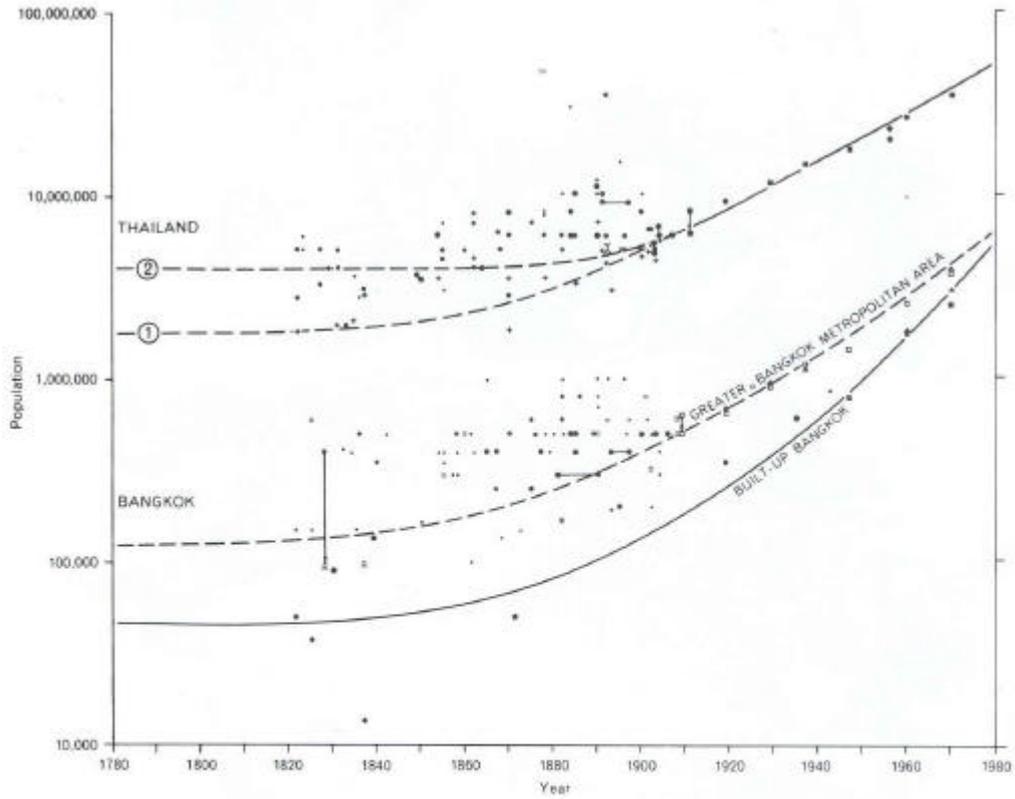
# COVERING THE NUTURING EARTH WITH CEMENT : "EXPLOSIVE" EXPANSION OF BANGKOK SINCE 1900



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Figure 1. Population Growth Trends 1780-1980



- Census : municipal area
- Census : GBMA/Monthon Krung Thep
- Census : Postal, city and suburbs
- Quasi-Census and Sample Survey
- Registration : municipal area
- Registration : GBMA/Monthon Krung Thep
- Eyewitness : resident
- Eyewitness : resident, 'city and suburbs'
- Eyewitness : resident, 'city proper'
- Eyewitness : transient, no area nominated
- Eyewitness : transient, 'city and suburbs'
- Eyewitness : transient, 'city and immediate suburbs'
- Eyewitness : transient, 'city and part-city'
- Identical annual estimates from same source throughout period
- Cited by eyewitness
- Cited by eyewitness, 'city proper'
- Estimates from Bunnag 1963 and 1977
- Revised estimate
- Eyewitness : calculated for Thailand-as-now