Mapping the lived experiences of Bangkok’s soi

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Abstract
One of the most distinctive urban characteristics of Bangkok is its sois. Soi is an alley that branches out from the main thoroughfares. This terminology applies to both the artery system of streets and canals. Soi is considered as a sub-street or a tertiary type in the hierarchy of the streets of Bangkok, the spatial layout of which follows old agricultural patterns of the water based settlement. They produce the labyrinth-like spatial and social configurations initiated by various agreements and practices between the landowners and residents. The public investment in road infrastructure couldn’t cope with the speed of urbanisation in Bangkok. Apart from the main roads constructed by the public authorities, the soi where the majority of population in Bangkok lives is created by private initiative. For this paper, I only present part of the bigger project, which is still on going. In this very initial state of my investigation, I focus only on one family; mine.

Keywords: public space; Bangkok; superblock; soi; mapping.

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One of the most distinctive urban characteristics of Bangkok is its sois. Soi is an alley that branches out from the main thoroughfares. This terminology applies to both the artery system of streets and canals. Soi is considered as a sub-street or a tertiary type in the hierarchy of the streets of Bangkok, the spatial layout of which follows old agricultural patterns of the water-based settlement. Soi branches away from the main street bringing access into the innermost parts of the superblocks (Boontharm, 2013). They produce the labyrinth-like spatial and social configurations initiated by various agreements and practices between the landowners and residents.

Bangkok used to be known as the “Venice of the East,” with life orientated towards its complex water system of Chaophraya river and its canals and irrigation structures. Throughout 234 years of development, the city has undergone a tremendous change, evolving from its traditional, aquatic roots (Jumsai, 1997) and distinctly tropical green city character into a megacity of artificial topographies of concrete.

The end of the nineteenth century was the period when Bangkok still maintained the feel of an amphibious city. Starting from the end of the nineteenth century, it evolved into a sprawling system of land-based settlements, while the mid-twentieth century until today marked of the most drastic urban transformations. For the last five decades, despite the great effort of producing urban planning documents by the authorities to shape Bangkok, none of those plans were successfully implemented. Reasons are the lack of statutory force and law enforcement, the inability of government agencies to coordinate and cooperate, and the supremacy of property interests in the fast growing city (Nim, 1963; Askew, 2002).

The public investment in road infrastructure couldn’t cope with the speed of urbanisation in Bangkok. Apart from the main roads constructed by the public authorities, the soi where the majority of population in Bangkok lives is created by private initiative. In the peri-urban of Bangkok, where more than tens of square kilometres are occupied by hundreds of thousands of people, the process of urbanisation happened exclusively by the juxtaposition of private allotment projects. Very few of the secondary streets link to the main public roads, to relieve the surcharge of traffics on those main public corridors (Charmes, 2002). Bangkok followed an erratic expansion of the soi system and dependence on automobiles, which caused seemingly endless ribbon developments, often leaving huge enclaves of inaccessible land locked within the heart of the unplanned superblocks. Seen from this perspective, soi is the result of the opportunistic private land market made by and for affordable middle class society. At the same time soi is socially produced urban fabric, issued from the negotiation of right to access which leads to right to construct and accumulative lived experiences. The production of soi is a progressive phenomenon, and took a long time to process.

Superblock and soi are typical Bangkok’s suburban landscapes. There are common characteristics among the soi in Bangkok, such as the width of approximately 4-6 meters, enough for two cars to pass in opposite directions. This narrowness conditions the speed of the traffic to slow movement. However, each soi has its own pattern, its own turns and its own dead-ends. Each soi has its particular history, its way of life and its local social construct. The main roads and the soi are the juxtaposition of two completely different worlds. Pichard-Bertaux expressed these phenomena as “Soi is generally described as narrow, winding and dark while the main road is the symbol of progress, opulence and bright. However these two worlds are far from opposing each other, they complement
each other and can’t be dissociated (Pichard-Bertaux, 2011). The spot where the two worlds connect is pak soi (mouth of the soi). It is a strategic place which acts as the gate to the hidden community inside. It is also the node of activities, one can find the concentration of shops catered to everyday activities, such as newsstands, drugstores, convenience stores, food and drink stands, and public transport nodes. This location also attracts several informal push-carts offering diverse food and goods.

Within the context of relentless, uncontrolled, rapid and heavy transformation of Bangkok, a number of local readjustments were taking place. Within such contexts, one can identify a number of ideas and examples of situation-, time- and place-specific inventiveness. For example, the self-organized transportation system - such as motorbike-taxi services which facilitate residents’ travel within the soi, or the minivan bus system, which helps people move from the centre to their suburb without many stops, or diverse types of mobile vendors who serve the residents who live deep in the soi (Polakit and Boontharm, 2008).

The vast superblock with its complex labyrinth-like pattern of soi creates a tapestry of neighbourhoods, with a different sense of belonging by their residents. Soi indeed can be like a business street or thoroughfare or even an intimate lane of a quiet residential compound depending on its location, configuration and practices. Soi are complex, offering many things to diverse groups of people. For residents, they are the stages at which fully lived local lives and urban practices unfold, they are produced in an interplay of those lives and their other characters. Soi, as any other urban phenomenon in Bangkok, are not "purely" lanes, they are conflictual frameworks of an unfolding complexity.

For this reason, the investigation of soi urbanism cannot be achieved by the knowledge of a single discipline alone (Arkaraprasertkul, 2010). The purpose of this paper is to argue for the trans-disciplinary methods of investigating the realm of a neighbourhood in the specific context of Bangkok’s superblock and its soi from the perspective of the residents’ lived experience. For those with lived experiences in this environment, soi are never the background notion of concrete everyday lives and memories of concrete people. By referring to Lefebvre’s trialectics, exploring those spaces as conceived, perceived and lived, I discuss the complexity of socio-spatial production of the concrete neighbourhood.

As I want to emphasise the importance of concrete, real lives of concrete, real people in concrete, real situations, my particular emphasis will be on vécu, the lived experiences which I can unpack both as an academic and as a long-time resident - those of my own family members, including myself, and acquaintances in the soi.

For this paper, I only present part of the bigger project, which is still on going. In this very initial state of my investigation, I focus only on one family; mine. Lefebvre (1974) suggests that the body is one useful way to locate and understand how space is socially produced. In this particular case the “body” is me and each of my family members’. I am aware of the limitations that I and my family can only establish part of the whole representation of soi Aladin. My complete research is aimed at capturing multiple stories from broader groups with a deep level of local involvement and knowledge.

By addressing the vécu, the approach to an individual’s living experience is necessary, and the subjectivity in the method of enquiry is unavoidable. Human experience is important in urban research; it is always situated in a social, cultural, and spatial context. Individuals directly and indirectly are subjects of conditions of their social milieu. To record and communicate the deep meaning and the sense of neighbourhood, I combine the method of narrative and mapping as an attempt to present the non-measurable and qualitative
aspects of the place. The story of my neighbourhood cannot be told without the presence of the soi. Soi is not only the spatial structure of the neighbourhood, it is also the physical and mental space where body movements and social interactions occur. I hope that through layering different individual stories of diverse experiences of the past and present we can reassemble the content (physical, spatial and social) and their relationships and achieve some kind of reading of this concrete neighbourhood.

At this initial stage of research, I only attempt to experiment with this method through my own family. The results are not intended to offer a complete understanding of the neighbourhood social construct, but my aim is to start with “one of” the complex whole and the most meaningful. In this paper, I value the subjective views of each family member’s experience. Those subjective views could constitute important parts of the significantly understandable picture of soi Aladin neighbourhood.

Radović (2014, 2016) argues for the legitimacy of subjectivities in the investigation of the urban:

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\text{[…] in urban research we need to multiply subjectivities, to both \ldots flatten subjectivities} \\
\text{\ldots to make a statistical sample, or far more interesting\ldots and \ldots layer subjectivities – to} \\
\text{keep each and every of them simultaneously individual and contextual}
\]

I challenge the layer of subjectivities and avoid flattening them. For this paper, I have selected three narrative maps of my siblings and mine who were born and grew up in this neighbourhood. The maps describe the living experiences in the neighbourhood of soi Aladin. I let them tell their personal stories and express their feelings, thought and emotions about this neighbourhood, including how they describe the boundary or the realm of this neighbourhood. The record of their and my experience is done through writing. I advocate the “sketch and script” methods (Boontharm, 2012; 2015), in this particular case ‘mapping and narrative, graphical/artistic representations and texts. This spatial narrative would let the reader freely perceive. They are a patch-work of facts and feelings.

I use mapping techniques to translate those narratives to spatial form. Through this process, an active engagement between me and the texts have occurred. There is a challenge in mapping subjectivities. Mapping the narrative is to give another dimension of understanding the built environment; it could link the stories to space or just an illustration, a chart, a picture or a work of art on its own. I deliberately do not seek the dull, systematic and informative mapping, but push it towards thought, emotions and aesthetic. Do I map the reality or my imaginary? Or map the unmappable? (Radovic, 2016)

\[
\text{[\ldots] I can only be sure (and even that only to a certain degree) that that I can know} \\
\text{what matters – to me…(subjectivity… subjectivities) \ldots mapping is process of spatial} \\
\text{representation of thoughts, emotions, feelings… spatial expression of somebody’s …} \\
\text{some – body’s (individual or collective body) experience, thought, hunch…[\ldots]}
\]

\[
\text{[\ldots] Mapping subjectivities opens fascinating fields for urban research… the subjectivity} \\
\text{of the researcher… the subjective of the researched… the subjectivities of the} \\
\text{researched [\ldots]}
\]

(Radović, 2016)

The aim of employing the sketch and script methods isn’t only about subjectively and
forcefully glorifying and bringing excitement to my unexciting and mundane soi. This method is an open field which invites readers to subjectively read and contemplate these representations, as one of the dimensions, the long neglected dimension in urban research (Radović 2014, 2016).

Fig. 1. SKETCH - mapping narrative of my eldest brother

Fig. 2. SCRIPT – the narrative of my eldest brother with the highlights of important keywords (the bigger size of words represent the aspects that are common and found in other narratives).
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Fig. 3. SKETCH - mapping narrative of my elder brother

At the place where soi Aladdin is located now was a small settlement. They were vilages or small groups of farmers. In the construction of Ratchaprasong road, the family of Aunt J. was evicted and they didn’t have any alternative housing. They were really poor. The grave of Uncle M. is still at the plot of land where he worked and lived. He was a farmer and his son, my elder brother, was also a farmer. He described his elder brother as the first person to provide food for the family. Uncle M. and Aunt J. were married and they had two children. They worked hard to provide food for their family.

Fig. 4. SCRIPT - the narrative of my elder brother with the highlights of important keywords (the bigger size of words represent the aspects that are common and found in other narratives).

The neighbours:
- the grocery shop of Aunt J.
- strange animals of Uncle M.
- the toffee jar and soda at Aunt S’s shop
- our neighbourhood sphere

the soi is named after the Aladdin-type kerosene lamps of the Chinese tycoon, N.

Villas of the affluence from central Bangkok

lotus ponds
ride bicycle

the grocery shop of Aunt J.

sweet iced black coffee and sweet iced black tea brewed by Uncle M.

Uncle M., an ox named Daeng

Aunt J.

rice paddies and orchards

the neighbours

in the affluence of wealthy people from Phra Nakhon were building their villas. You must remember the house next to us is a house called “Yoke Phat Song” the hundred dollars. That was the very first generation of wealthy people who built houses in soi Aladdin. Not only the affluence from Phra Nakhon, there was also a Chinese merchant whom everybody knew as N. (a Chinese tycoon named N. I doubt that his real name was N.) who made a rush purchase of almost all Aunt J’s land. Uncle J. had sold most of them. They sold the land to merchants who intended to make their own homes. The land belonged to six N’s daughters. Six N’s house was located to our left, facing the road. It was a house built by the N family, the richest family in soi Aladdin. The land of the Aladdin lamp business was the majority of the land owned by Aunt J. The shop is named after his famous business, Aladdin.

Apart from the family, the shop has also been owned by other families. The family of Uncle T. was also a part of the family. His parents also own a huge number of land near Aunt J. Aunt S’s family was both Chinese and Thai. Aunt S’s house was located to our right. It was a house built by the S family. The family of Aunt S’s was also big. The family of Uncle K. was the largest. The family of Aunt K. was also big. They were very kind and caring. They were also the neighbours of our family. They had a lot of land and they were in the business of agriculture. They also had the reputation of being the best farmers in the area. They were very helpful and always willing to help others. They were also very kind and caring.

Our neighbourhood sphere is as broad as the superblock itself.

In our opinion, we believe that the Chalermphrakiet, Aladdin, and Sathorn areas are connected. People living in these sois could move around to visit or meet through these connections. It creates social interactions of various kinds. Therefore, the residents of these sois can be considered as living in the same neighbourhood.
Fig. 5. SKETCH – my mapping narrative

The short cut through the empty plots of land
the secret path
a fierce goose
the swimming pool at Uncle A’s house
the mysterious door
the walk to my grandmother’s house
the neighbours
Aunt S’s shop
the grocery shop of Aunt J.

The floods
lotus ponds
learning to ride bicycle
the noise of cats fight

Daeng the ox
the smell of vegetables and meat

I have lived in many countries, many cities and many places. I have moved every 2-3 years for the last 25 years. But the place I call my neighbourhood is always near Aladdin. I think it has to do with being born and growing up in that place. It is an anchor point of my life.

Unlike my brother, I didn’t have an exciting experience of jumping in the archdrds, or getting into the lotsa ponds. I liked to walk alone and summer holidays when we usually walked there with grandma. I remember because it was impossible to lose track of the map or the route of the map because of the way I was born. In every season as the plot was waterlogged and got muddy, it rose and sank several places as they got stuck in the thick mud and muddy water. It was amusing that somebody had built a wooden walkway to assist the pedestrians. I assumed that nobody would walk there.

I remember in the summer holidays, we took permission to go through three or two side. Another path is the one that shoots up to the back of the house. It is narrow, between two walls, it looks rough, but two people can hardly pass in opposite directions, but two people can hardly pass in opposite directions. We used this path often to go to school. It was shorter than walking through the lotsa ponds. I remember I was very young and sometimes I had to go there on my own. I was not allowed to do it when I was very young, there was a mysterious door on the back fence of my house, which was opposite to the house of my grandma house and Khun T’s house. My father told me that it was the entrance of the right way to our house. I remember the door was located in the room above the grocery shop. It smelled like a room full of old clothes. I remember the long and boring time waiting for my grandma or grandma B while they were buying and chatting with the shop owner and other customers. I would sit and played with the chickens that walked freely.

I remember Uncle M who would always have a food stand bandai with a brown cat and a tattoo on his

Sometimes I practiced alone by knowing on my knee (if it is a wall). I had to go far when I could ride. I would sit behind my elder brother to go on and I remember going to know the place of the empty plot. I have the memory of Uncle A’s house. I remember Uncle A brought the plot in the right of our house and he had access to it. Uncle A and his family left. And the plot and the house disappeared. I didn’t know the reason why the door disappeared between my grandma and Khun T’s house. There must have been some mutual agreement to abandon this side of the right way.

I remember Aunt T and her family. I even used her shop as one of the case studies in my PhD thesis. I will remember the door was located in the room above the grocery shop. Uncle T even had a room above the grocery shop and played with the chickens that walked freely.

As for this place, the boundary of my neighbourhood changed over time.
Discussion
Maps assist me in reading soi as the spine of our neighbourhood. The group of farmers’ houses (Aunt J’s and Aunt S’s families) is the historical core of this neighbourhood. The narratives suggest that both of them are entitled to be credited as community founders. The North-South axis of soi Aladin, is the vertebral colon of the neighbourhood. This is the traditional and symbolic centre of space prior to the arrival of the soi itself. The semi-rural atmosphere around the junction J and S shops could resist the fierce urban development for several decades, but nothing lasts forever in Bangkok.

1) Childhood – Neighbourhood
Examining the personal attachment to the neighbourhood of soi Aladin, my brothers and I share strong attachment to the neighbourhood of our childhood. Many scholars who study the importance of childhood neighbourhood confirm that the street and path, and in my case the soi can “allow children to develop social competencies and to perform or enact their growing maturity through movements in and away from the home and their neighbourhood” (Christensen and O’Bien 2003). The bicycle routes that my brothers took allowed them to “explore their local place, and by accumulating such knowledge they gained confidence and could become the users of the city” (ibid). Soi Aladin offered us an array of places to explore. We could acknowledge the rice paddies, the lotus ponds, and the orchards as sensed, perceived and experienced reality; they are stored within our bodies as tactile knowledge and a “community of senses” (Rasmussen and Smidt 2003). We were making meaning of our environment through our bodies and their movements. This neighbourhood provided “the emplaced knowledge in localities through a multitude of places, items and people” (ibid). All the aunties and uncles of the neighbourhood were the persons with whom we established social connections outside the family and school units. Animals, trees, ponds, and ditches were items that our bodies interacted with. Rasmussen and Smidt conclude the importance of childhood and neighbourhood nicely as:

The neighbourhood is perceived by the children through a number of concrete parts, where social, cultural and physical elements are inseparable and interwoven. The children are present in the neighbourhood, and they have the neighbourhood ‘under their skin’.

(Rasmussen and Smidt, 2003).

2) Neighbours
Neighbourhood is all about neighbours and those face-to-face relationships. In those narratives several names were repeated. The closest ones are next door, close enough that we could penetrate into their private realm. The key people in the neighbourhood are important, in our narratives, Aunty J, Aunty S, and Uncle M were the main characters and my brother and I interacted with them closely during our childhood. As kids, my brothers and me addressed them in the Thai way using the terms we call our relatives (brother, sister, aunt, uncle, grandma etc.) Knowing neighbours and having an established relationship is the first step to feeling and creating the neighbourhood. However, not all neighbours had a good relationship.
3) Permeability
Social space doesn’t always need to be in the public space, as for soi Aladin, there is no other public space except the alley itself. The alley allows connections to happen. But with good social contact, the barrier between public alley and private realm can be permeated; like my brothers who could get into the rice field and orchards of the neighbours, or mysterious doors which allowed neighbours to cut across each other’s property to connect across the soi. Was it possible only when we “knew” and “trusted” our neighbours? Was it possible only for the past generation; during the time when everybody knew everybody and when soi Aladin was still more of a village than a city? The shop of Aunty J was a shack without fence and completely open. There were big trees on both sides of the alley. There were benches for anybody to sit and buy drinks. This is the way of traditional life in a village. Her family houses were the centre of this settlement. This openness also invited customers and passer-by to come in and go out easily, or sit for a while.
The permeability is also applied to the path or short-cut on un-built land to cut across the two sois. People in the soi share that tactile practice. Especially when we live on the edge of a superblock, only locals know how to get out to the main street using these secret paths.

4) Realm of Neighbourhood
The narratives and mappings above demonstrate the impossibility in finding the cohesion of the exact neighbourhood sphere among the family members. Even people from the same family with the same background perceive the realm of their own neighbourhood completely different. This could support the frustration that scholars encounter while they agree upon a single definition of this construct. The sense of neighbourhood is definitely non-measurable; this slippery term is as complex as the city itself. In spatial terms, my siblings and I could not agree on one exact boundary of our neighbourhood but through their descriptions, our realm of neighbourhood is linear. It was constructed linearly and it stays linearly in our mind.
Unlike the moobanchadsan (housing estate or gated community) where the association of residents and common facilities are formed and active (Askew, 2002), soi Aladin doesn’t have any of those. There were no official organisation and no common spaces, we only have the ordinary and mundane soi. The social structure of soi Aladin is invisible, but if I may point out the node of intensity of our social interaction, it would be at the corner shop of Aunty J. The history and the formation of this soi evolved around her and her family’s lands. In this context, when an epicentre of a neighbourhood is formed around a unique person, that neighbourhood is socially quite vulnerable. Since Aunty J closed her shop and later passed away, the heart of this fragile community has vanished.
My eldest brother and I agreed on the deflation of our personal realm of neighbourhood. That tactical connection through somebody’s land is also a weak connection. It confirms that in the case of soi Aladin, as many other soi in Bangkok, the private interest usually comes before the collective one. The path that has been collectively built and used for almost twenty years can be easily blocked and disconnected. Because of this simple gesture, the path that could ease the bond between families has been cut.
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References


