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The Hilltop Shrine

Kao Takla, Sra Buri



In Sara Buri there's a hillside squatter settlement much like the famous Caracas informal commune in Venezuela. An old lady with a very round face is the chair lady of the community saving group here.

"The higher up you go, the more dilapidated the houses; there're more than 15 houses up there," says the old lady as she points up in the direction of the hilltop.

The houses up there are made out of thin Asbestos Cement Sheet and corrugated tin roofs. Some houses uses old recycled wood. A lone pathway up the hill is drenched in mud. Junk tires are used to keep the light-weight corrugated tin roof from blowing away with the wind.

Some of the houses are better off than others in terms of construction. Conventional construction like brick and cement could be seen in higher income households.



"Could you give us a house like that?" teases the old lady. "Could we have cement and brick houses?" she points to a large colorful house that belongs to a thin old lady. Next to the colorful cement house is a house constructed out of Asbestos Cement Sheets.

"It's up to you," says Fern an attractive young organizer from CODI; she's sweating profusely as she climbs the slope. "You and your group must decide how you want the design."

"The men don't come to meetings; they just drink whiskey," the old lady shakes her head. "Only old women like us are available," she laughs pointing to her aged cohorts who're struggling on the slope of the hill below.



"Why not upgrade the slope and turn it into steps; you guys could use the infrastructure subsidy for that," says Fern. The old lady looks up with an expression of amazement.

"Yes, please help us!" moans the old lady.

"We are not helping you!" says Muk bluntly. He is a tall thin man in his early 50s who wears a pair of square wire-rimmed glasses. As he speaks, his right hand moves in a circular motion like an artist who's trying to paint a picture on a canvas. Muk is a seasoned organizer at CODI; he has the ability to make people feel proud of themselves.

"You'd find out that you will be helping yourself really," Fern hurriedly interjects as the old lady starts to look surprised. The old lady is not used to officials telling her that she will be in charge of the project. There's a thin smile on Muk's face.

Fern tells the old lady that it would be more economical to bring in other squatters nearby into the area too - consolidating them. "People from many provinces came to live here," says the old lady. "I'm not sure if they would get along together. As for myself, I'm a local - from Sra Buri," she smiles roundly.



The area where the old lady and 60 other families are staying belongs to the Treasury Department. The old lady and her saving group want to join CODI's Collective Housing program so that the Treasury Department would allow them to lease out the land on a long-term basis - probably through CODI. Currently, about 3.3 Hectare is being occupied by the hill squatters.

We walk pass a large Athenian ruin of a furniture making shop - "Amorous Furniture." It got sued and had to close down years ago. A few meters from the "Amorous" ruins is small steel mill that recycles scrap metal; it is situated not far from the foot of the hill - near Mitrapab highway. We see scrap cars being recycle into new metal; a large grumpy-looking man is welding a piece of metal. He's doing what appears to be Shield Metal Arc Welding process; a pair of sunglasses is being used to keep the flame away from his eyes.



Behind the metal recycling center are several old wooden houses with pickup trucks in front of them; they carries a truck load of plastic water bottles. These houses are in surprising good condition compare to the others on the hill.

The large factory gave way to the more decentralized mills and home-grown recycle centers. Small-scale economy has proved to be more resilient in this hillside town.

"In addition to selling scrap metal and recycle plastic, we survive by planting and selling mushrooms," says the old lady, she curses loudly as she tries to climb a steep slope. "These mushrooms are abundance in this area," she continues.



Several dogs are barking fiercely at us from underneath the tin shacks that lined the hills. Each houses has a least 2 dogs to stand guard in this open hill. Large rain water reservoirs (the Ong) were planted on the hill like concrete mushrooms; there's no running water here in this squatter settlement.

"Now this area belongs to Ms. Woranaj," the old lady tries to delineate the extent of the Treasury Department's land - where the squatters are now occupying.

"We want a road above the site so that there could be a new entry point without having to walk up the hill through the entire settlement to get to houses above."

"That's the advantage of consolidating your site; if you could organize all the existing squatters into a more compact location, things would be much easier," says Fern.



Fern tells the old lady that CODI needs the existing layout of houses and their corresponding family members from the community.

"Just color coded the whole area," adds Muk. "Families that belong to your saving group could be colored red, and families that don't could be colored yellow," his right hand moves wildly; trying to imitate the act of coloring. Everyone laughs as he's referring to the recent Red Shirt vs. Yellow Shirt political drama.

"We need the existing information about family, saving membership, and jobs so that the Treasury Department would know that there are people living here for real," repeats Muk. "Then we could organize a meeting where the community could decide what to do."



Near the top of the hill, we met a young boy who is probably no more than 3-years-old; he's being raised under a large dilapidated wooden house with an old grandma next to him. The 2nd floor balcony is sagging down towards the ground. Near their house is a small shrine conveniently constructed out of tin and scrap boards; it is intended as a home for local ghosts and spirits. "They protect us," smiles the grandma.

"We should invite the kids here to help us plan the new community," says the old lady.

"Yes, the planning could consist of all 3 generations - the kids, the working adults, and the elders," says Muk.

"The older generation is like a tree with deep roots," says Fern.

"That's a very courteous way to put it," laughs the old lady.

We finally come to the top of the hill. It's the site of a large meeting hall; several dogs are already been placed in a cage in anticipation of our coming. They barked ferociously. The old lady turns on the light so that the room is now brightly lit with neon.

"That's a very expensive floor," Muk points to the marble floor in amazement. The old ladies' face light up; they show a rare sign of pride.



One of the old ladies tries to show that she's hiding something behind the curtain at the side of the meeting hall; she does this by pulling the curtain repeatedly even though it has already been closed.

"What's behind that curtain," asks Muk.

"Oh, it's nothing," says the old lady.

"Come on, there must be something special there; don't worry, we're not robbers!" Muk shakes his head.

The old lady gradually pulls open the curtain across the entire length of the hall. It reveals an entire wall full of Buddha statues; some are decorated with gold and silver.

"We hide them so that you won't feel overwhelmed!" says the old lady. "This feels like a monastery!" she laughs.

The whole stack of Buddha statues is probably worth millions of baht. The old lady says that she gave 2 statues to some government officers. The statues were handed down to

her from her old ancestor. They are probably the only source of pride for the people in this hillside slum.

Muk continues his play on psychology, "Don't worry, we won't speak of your wealth in front of others - especially government officials!" He makes a hush-hush sound.

Everyone laughs wholeheartedly; they suddenly feel empowered. They all glance down at a nearby ruin. It used to be a government office. There's a large sign which reads "The Ministry of...." The rest of the sign has been rusted out.