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The Modern Nomads

Yanawa, Bangkok



"There are people living in there!" says a plump lady with trembling hands. She points to an entire fleet of idle freight trains; it has been disengaged from its track long ago and it's now covered with rust.

"They probably use mosquito nets inside the freight cars. See that? All the freight doors have been slid open for ventilation," she continues sorrowfully.

The lady tells me that those who live in the freight cars are probably day laborers who often come to sleep here at night; they are mostly men who are living away from their families. Some of them are migrant workers from Myanmar. They are no different from their foreign company executives who share the same fate of sleeping and living in airplane cabins on their way to work.

The site is surrounded by large trees and signboards which read:
PROPERTY OF THE RAILWAY AUTHORITY OF THAILAND.

Just a few meters away from the signboards - and the freight cars - are groups of standardized worker shacks. They belong to a private development company that managed to lease out the land from the Railway Authority. No one knows exactly what they are planning to build on this vacant lot.

"Too bad," says a thin curly haired lady who speaks with a very soft apologetic voice. "We were planning to build a playground for our kids here; we've already bought soil and filled in portion of the land there. Then they came and put those signboards and shacks there."



Both ladies come from the same squatter commune which is known as Chueplueng 2. It sits right next to the abandoned freight train on the land belonging to both the Railway Authority and the Treasury Department. There are 180 families altogether; they're packed into a mere area of 4800 sq. meter. The plump lady is the chair lady of the community saving group here. She has made plans on how the community could be reorganized.



"Here's the new layout," she points to the new masterplan. "Everything has to be rebuilt. The pathways are too narrow." Indeed, there would be no way for the people to escape from settlement in the event of fire; those 1-meter pathways around the settlement could easily be blocked by a single burning house - there is no redundancy in the escape routes.

Chaiyapon, an architect from CODI, tells her that it would be very difficult to rebuild the entire community anew, "it only happens in projects where the leaders are super persuasive." He says that most communities usually zoned out the area where people are willing to rebuild in their entirety and leave out the other areas (to be built in the 2nd phase).

"You should group those people who will be building new houses together," says Chaiyapon.

"Yes, actually they tend to live near each other...I never thought of that before," says the pump lady. She offers him a bottle of water and leads the way to the center of the settlement. There is a tall tower with loud speaker attached to it - a reminiscent of a Soviet era. When politicians come, the loud speaker is used to announce their propaganda and speeches.



A large sign near the community co-op reads:

CHUEPLUENG 2 COMMUNE
KORKAEW PIGUNTONG : ADVISOR TO THE MINISTRY OF TRANSPORTATION.

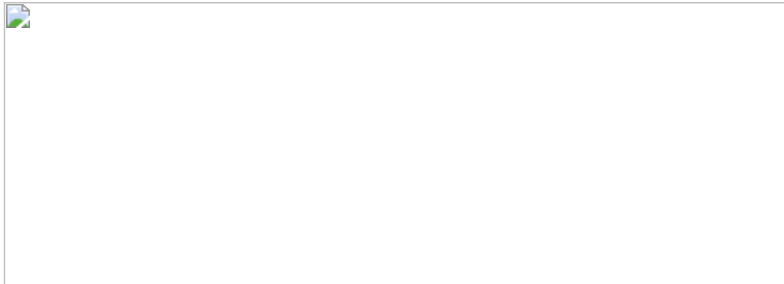
In Thailand, such a sign is necessary. It tells intruders and mafia developers that this site has a "patron" who could provide protection to the slum dwellers in the event of trouble.

Korkaew would later become one of the main leaders of the "Red Shirt" movement during its April-May 2010 uprising.



There's also a community clinic near the center of the settlement. It's supported by Health Development Foundation. Above the clinic is a large ominous signboard; it's shaded by the shadow of the 2nd floor overhang. The signboard harbors a picture of a very serious-looking cop; it reads: IF YOU FOUND ANY CLUES ABOUT WHO'S DOING DRUGS, CONTACT MR. CHARTCHAI, POLICE GENERAL. Again, in Thailand this could be read as: "Don't mess around in this area, Police General Chartchai is our benefactor here!"

A few teenagers are hanging out in a nearby steel-framed shack; it's a computer and internet center. The chair lady shakes her head with disapproval. "They simply don't like studying; they just play games." Inside the internet cafe, young teenagers braced themselves next to computer screens; shooting animated robbers and sport cars and handling virtual AK-47 with the same dexterity as their cell phones. The wall, just above the *Grand Theft Auto* station, hangs a large portrait of a half-smiling monk in a transcendental meditative posture.



There are 2 computer centers here in this commune; sometime the teenagers could do amazing professional 3D CAD sketch up with the computer. "I will try to convince some younger folks to do sketch up plans for us when we start the project," says the chair lady. Chaiyapon nods approvingly. I told the chair lady that in the southern provinces, teenage computer gamers have turned themselves into digital map-makers to settle the land dispute of communities around Budo-Su-Ngatpadi National Park. They managed to secure the land for their elders. It's the triumphs of "Hackers."

Existing Plan

