

Life on the Tracks: Reconstructing Home in Informal Railway Settlements, Bangkok 2011

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Abstract

The usual approach of social housing policy in Thailand has been to regard low-income groups as passive recipients of programmes. However, the most recent upgrading programme, Baan Mankong, has encouraged residents to play a key role in their new housing by participating in its creation with project facilitators. This not only helps them to improve their dwelling environment, but also provides the opportunity for redefining their status from illegal squatters to that of formal citizens. Consequently, numerous communities who live alongside the railway tracks in informal settlements enter this housing improvement programme.

The home and its construction process within the changing period are explored to achieve a better understanding of how informal ways of life influence the squatters' new housing. Previous research studies have examined both the informal self-built environments and the official upgrading project outcomes, yet focusing on them separately. This study aims to fill this gap by addressing dweller-dwelling relations in such situations of change. Drawing on a literature from a range of disciplines, these issues are examined through the theoretical frameworks of reciprocal relationships between informal settlement and vernacular design, culture and built-environment, house and home, as well as community building and participation.

The study offers a series of insights into how the dwellers collectively upgrade their built environments and how these new dwellings impact on the social, economic, and cultural life of the dwellers. The housing improvements and their impacts have been explored and documented through a collaborative action research approach. This was carried out together with other data-driven techniques in two informal railways track settlements in Bangkok, to which later two additional communities were added to understand each stage of the housing development process. The study critically examines how such housing processes empower the participants and how its outcomes present their new social identity. It is argued that a fuller understanding of these processes of upgrading and constructing home could provide a valuable lesson for future programmes of housing and community development elsewhere.