

Davisi Boontharm. *Tokyo/Bangkok/Singapore: Intensities, Reuse and Creative Milieu.* Tokyo: International Keio Institute and Flick Studio, 2012. 135 pp. n.p., paper, ISBN 978-4-904894-05-7.



Reviewed by Supitcha Tovivich

Published on H-Urban (October, 2014)

Commissioned by Heide Imai (Hosei University, Department of Global and Interdisciplinary Studies)

When planning and designing a lively and creative milieu, maintaining balance between control and spontaneity is challenging. On the one hand, designers need to define and determine certain behaviors, activities, and standards. On the other hand, appropriate design should support spontaneous growth and adaptation of users through different times. Within debates in the postmodernist era, perceiving planning and design as control seems outdated and ineffective. Current debates focus significantly on the extent to which design can embrace changes, flexibility, and adaptability, while encompassing great respect for the capacity and creativity of local communities (both designer and non-designer citizen). Davisi Boontharm's book *Tokyo/Bangkok/Singapore: Intensities, Reuse and Creative Milieu* is a great example that illustrates well how "urban requalification" precincts in three cities in Asia--Tokyo, Bangkok, and Singapore--can support bottom-up and emergent inventive ideas within their existing, established milieus.

This book developed from Boontharm's interest in the sociocultural context of sustainable urban regeneration with an emphasis on four overlapping themes: reuse, creativity, consumption, and place. Following the urbanist Charles Landry's definition, "creative milieu," as stated in the book *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators* (2000), includes ordinary streets and the banality of everyday life of urban creativity which is non-institutional, abstract, and non-measurable. Boontharm argues that "local creative precincts will prove to be strong enough to withstand the spread of generic commercial spaces and generate value, which will reach far beyond that of their commercial activity" (p. 7). Her research questions are based on three dimensions: resource, activities, and cultures. First, what is the capacity of the existing building stock to accommodate and express local creativity? Second, what role do local creative practices (groups and individuals) play in requalification of the existing building stock? Third, how does the cultural difference get expressed through the new environ-

ments that evolve from creative use of the existing building stock?

The book is divided into three main parts. In the the first part, the introduction, Boontharm presents the significance of her research and her hypothesis; asks pertinent questions; and introduces the conceptual framework of the term “urban requalification,” with an emphasis on the resource approach to the building stock, urban regeneration, reuse culture and discourse on value, theories of creativity and value, theories of the dialectics of creativity and consumption, and theories of place and place making. In the second part, Boontharm examines case studies from three Asian cities—Tokyo, Bangkok, and Singapore—that illustrate how physical reality of the creative milieu phenomena in different contexts can be examined. The final part offers further discussion and a conclusion.

For her Tokyo case study, Boontharm explores three areas of the city: Harajuku, Daikanyama/Nakameguro, and Shimokitazawa. In this section, she highlights the differences between two categories of places—the *omote* (front) and *ura* (back). She describes the *omote* phenomenon as the main streets of Harajuku—Omotesando, Meiji Dori, and Aoyama Dori—on which flagship stores of major global fashion brands are located. The *ura* or the hidden side of Harajuku, which is the core of Boontharm’s research, includes Urahara, Onden Shotengai, Cat Street, and Aosando. These streets “are marked by successful requalification of small-scale old spaces into new, ever-changing uses and activities” (p. 33). She uses Urahara as an example of “commeresidence,” houses that were built for residential use and were subsequently transformed into shops. It is important to mention that Boontharm highlights the tensions between the (perhaps short-lived) creativity milieu of Urahara and radical consumerism. Daikanyama/Nakameguro is also an example of the transformation of old blocks of apartments into authentic, small-scale, and upcoming creative shopping. Fi-

nally, Shimokitazawa shows how local governance can be empowered, self-aware, and resilient to a top-down government project. At the same time, Boontharm questions the extent to which a strong community base can halt gentrification in the long term.

In her discussion of Bangkok, she explores Chatuchak Weekend Market and Siam Square. Chatuchak Weekend Market was built as a temporary structure in 1982 because of the relocation of an old Sanamluang market, and transformed to be the biggest weekend market in Thailand. The thirty years of the market’s existence has enabled reuse, recycling, and requalification. Boontharm examines creative space use in tiny spaces, the gaps between stalls and open spaces, and ad-hoc activities on a pedestrian promenade. Siam Square is a long-standing example of reusing and recycling shop houses. Upper levels are used, independently from the ground floor, for commercial activities. The variety of activities that take place there is immense. Both cases illustrate that Bangkok has its strength in spontaneity and bottom-up responses.

Haji Lane and Wessex Estate are the focus of her Singapore case study. “Unlike Tokyo and Bangkok where creativity flourishes randomly and spontaneously, mostly initiated by the locals, Singapore dedicates and plans on certain precincts being creative” (pp. 104-105). Haji Lane was once a narrow back lane that became a fashionable spot in Singapore which supports youth subcultures. It is a rare example of bottom-up freedom in Singapore. Boontharm observes different uses during the day and night. She states that “all that is possible in Haji Lane [is] because its buildings were not at the core of the conservation zone. Businesses situated on the Lane use the lack of restrictions as a license to freely reuse, recycle and reinvent the milieu of Kampong Glam, and let Haji Lane develop on its own accord” (p. 115). On the contrary, Wessex Estate is listed as a heritage site and was designed to be an art studio for “the

creative class,” which incorporates artists, designers, and architects. Boontharm maintains that the estate can be defined as luxury, segregation, exclusion, elitism, and domination of foreigners over local creative people. Thus, she argues that it does not fit her definition of reuse and recycling and does not contribute to the creative milieu or the requalification of the precinct. Wessex Estate shows that the creative class alone can generate a creative precinct, as the key to successful creative milieu is in blurring the division between the “creative” and the “not-creative” actors in urban space.

In conclusion, Boontharm notes that “urban requalification precincts are the ones which value and support emergent inventive ideas within its existing, established milieu.... The lessons from Tokyo, from Bangkok and from Haji Lane in Singapore demonstrate how established places provide solid ground and contexts for creativity to flourish.... In Tokyo ordinary buildings and non-self-conscious approaches to reuse and recycling of their parts and elements acquire sign value which translate into an atmosphere of the whole milieu. In Singapore, such awareness is carefully guarded at the level of urban authority, while in Bangkok it emanates from the demands of market forces or institutional regulations” (pp. 128-129). Boontharm summarizes her findings by referring to Nan Ellin’s book, *Postmodern Urbanism* (1996): good urbanism is always a balance of control and freedom. She emphasizes the importance of local and bottom-up creativity in our banal and mundane everyday lives.

The book offers insight into the reuse, recycling, and requalification of existing old buildings in relation to the creative milieu. The three case studies illustrate well the diverse character of the creative precinct. The book will be helpful for discussions in contemporary urban design and architecture, especially in Asian cities where local contexts and creativity are often ignored by designers, architects, and planners.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Supitcha Tovivich. Review of Boontharm, Davisi. *Tokyo/Bangkok/Singapore: Intensities, Reuse and Creative Milieu*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. October, 2014.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39797>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.