

Rattanakosin Charter: The Thai Cultural Charter for Conservation¹

Chatri Prakitnonthakan

“The BMA should not seek popularity by allowing oddities in the Rattanakosin Island Conservation Area... This matter is wrong for the conservation of Rattanakosin Island. The Vishnu shrine is not something old which we need to preserve, not something built before the Fifth Reign, but an oddity built later, and considered inappropriate, because it mars the cultural heritage.”²

(Adul Wichiancharoen on the demolition of a Vishnu shrine beside Wat Suthat, 25 February 2011)

“However, it doesn’t mean that new things that have no history have no value... so if the new Supreme Court is beautiful it will be both attractive and valuable, communicating the historical meaning of the area where it is sited near the Grand Palace... who would not support the building of a Supreme Court that the whole Thai nation can be proud of as a place of outstandingly beauty at the heart of Rattanakosin Island.”³

(Adul Wichiancharoen on building a new Supreme Court complex beside Sanam Luang, 22 May 2009)

A Vishnu shrine under 10 meters high built on a plot of less than 30 square meters beside Wat Suthat was criticized by the former chairman of the Subcommittee for the Conservation and Development of Rattanakosin Island as an “oddity”, something new and without value that marred the cultural heritage of Rattanakosin

¹ An earlier version of this paper appeared in Thai in *An* (Read), 3, 1 (October-December 2010), 76–89. Translation by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit.

² “Ko tho mo moen roe san khang wat suthat” (BMA not interested in dismantling shrine beside Wat Suthat) *Thai Post*, 25 February 2011.

³ Office of the Courts of Justice, “Bot sampat sastrachan Dr. Adun Wichiancharoen khrongkan kosang akan san dika mai” (Interview with Professor Adul Wichiancharoen on the project to build a new Supreme Court building), *Rop rua san yuthitham* [Around the courts], 2, 16 (June 2009), 5, 10.



Figure 1. Comparison of Sanam Luang at present (above) and as projected after construction of the new Supreme Court rising up to 32 meters high (below), illustrating the immense impact on the landscape.

Island. He appealed through the press to force the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority, the agency responsible for the area, to have it urgently demolished.

Around three years earlier, when the government proposed as part of its celebration of the King's 80th birthday to build a new 32-meter tall Supreme Court complex on an area of 10,000 square meters close to the Grand Palace, this building would have been twice the legal height limit of 16 meters on Rattanakosin Island, and over 150 meters long.⁴ This same former chairman of the Committee for the Conservation and Development of Rattanakosin Island supported its construction, arguing that being new did not mean being without value, and paid no attention to its height which would certainly impact the neighboring landscape of old buildings (see Figure 1).

These two examples display the inconsistency in principle, thinking, and standards that the Rattanakosin Island Committee has applied in many other situations over many decades past.

In truth, the Cabinet approved the 32-meter height of the new Supreme Court complex as a special case by a resolution on 19 July 1987,⁵ yet as head of an agency that provided government with technical advice on matters pertaining to the conservation of this area, the chairman of the Committee for the Conservation and Development of Rattanakosin Island did not merely fail to challenge the project, in

⁴ See details in Chatri, "Bang hetphon thi sangkhom mai khuan yom hai 'roe-sang' san dika mai" (Some reasons why society should not accept the new Supreme Court building)," *Sinlapa watthanatham*, 29, 5 (March 2008), pp. 132–46

⁵ Office of the Courts of Justice, "Khwam pen ma kan kosang akhan san dika lang mai" (Background to the new Supreme Court building), *Rop rua san yutthitham*, p. 12.

contrast to his public protest over the Vishnu shrine, he even came out to voice his approval and support through the press.

From a superficial angle, these interviews might seem to display the lack of standards and principles on the part of an individual. But a serious look at the issue of conservation on Rattanakosin Island shows that this kind of double standard is so common that it goes far beyond the behavior of any one individual.

I think these interview statements are clear examples reflecting the basics of rationality, belief, and principle on the issue of conservation in Thailand. If measured by any international yardstick, these basics of rationality, belief, and principle appear abnormal and inconsistent. But if we view these matters in the context of Thai history, society, and politics, we shall find that the approach to conservation in Thailand has a distinctive character that differs from international principles and standards. In other words, there is a Thai cultural charter of conservation which has a distinctive character. In this article, this is called the Rattanakosin Charter.

The Rattanakosin Charter cannot be understood within the framework of international standards of conservation but can be understood within the context of the distinctive thinking, belief, and ideology on the subject of conservation in Thailand. That is the key proposition of this article.

What is the Rattanakosin Charter?

The concept of conservation as it is understood today appeared in the world only some 200 years ago as part of the emerging ideology of the modern nation-state. In Europe, thinking about conservation can be traced back to the Renaissance,⁶ yet the discourse about conservation, about the value of things to be conserved, about the utility that can be had from conservation, and about the methods of conservation known at present are all new cultural constructions created around the eighteenth century in the process of establishing modern nation-states.⁷

In the past 200 years, buildings and monuments that had fallen into ruin and been left derelict whether for reasons of age, natural disaster, or human warfare, and that societies (prior to the era of the modern nation-state) saw as of no value or

⁶ Maurizio Peleggi, *The Politics of Ruins and the Business of Nostalgia* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2002), p. 4.

⁷ See further detail in Worrasit Tantinipankul "Kan plian plaeng naeo khit nai kan sang lae buranapathisangkhon wat luang nai ratchasami phrabatsomdet phrajurajomklaoyaoyuhua jon thueng patjupan: kho khatyaeng nai kan anurak boransathan lae watthanathm baep chatniyom" (Change of thinking on building and renovation of royal temples (wat) from the Fifth Reign to the present: nationalist disputes over conservation of monuments and culture" in Suwanna Kriangkraipetch *Prawatisat nai miti wattanatham sueksa* (History from the perspective of cultural studies), Bangkok: Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, 2009), pp. 213–221

interest,⁸ have become priceless objects, representations of national greatness, and the ultimate symbols of a nation's culture.

In modern nation-states everywhere, conservation sits alongside the production of knowledge through history and archaeology as one of the tools of nationalist ideology.⁹ This modern concept of conservation has developed in stages and been disseminated far and wide as one major international concept of the present-day world, and of course the Thai state has not escaped its influence.

The discourse on conservation entered Thailand in the late nineteenth century¹⁰ through the elite of the court as part of the process of developing a modern nation state, in much the same way as in the rest of the world.¹¹ Since then, thinking on conservation has gradually developed in Thailand in parallel with the discourse on conservation at the international level. Today, Thailand has established many agencies and organizations, both public and private, to take specific responsibility for conservation. Thailand has also established networks of cooperation with organizations at the international level, instituted education on associated disciplines following international principles, and adopted international techniques and frameworks of thinking about conservation.

However, I would like to propose that there is no truly ready-made international concept of conservation. The meaning of conservation, the definition of heritage, the selection of what should be conserved and what may even be demolished, all these matters are shaped afresh in each society.

Of course, there are many international organizations such as UNESCO,

⁸ This does not mean there was absolutely no thinking of this sort at all. Some major sites considered sacred according to religious belief, or some worshipped images with special meaning for a society, have been well looked after. However, the vision and methods of traditional conservation are of the same as their modern equivalents. For example, in traditional Thai society Buddha images could not be left to appear old or headless, and conservation made them appear always new, but in modern society, old things, even headless Buddha images, have value that is worth preserving, and renovating things to look new is considered a destruction of their historical traces and hence improper conservation. This is a matter to be considered in detail elsewhere.

⁹ See for example the use of history and archaeology in the service of nationalist ideology in Bruce G. Trigger, "Alternative Archaeologies: Nationalist, Colonialist, Imperialist," *Man*, 19, 3 (September, 1984), pp. 355–360.

¹⁰ Many studies argue that Thailand practiced conservation long before adopting the modern international approach, as seen for example from the old Pali text, *Winai mahawak*, which talks about the renovation of stupas, or from passages in the chronicles about renovating various religious monuments. These studies attempt to give local roots to conservation. See for example Pinrat Kanchanathithi *Kan anurak moradok sathapatayakam lae chumchon* (Conservation of architectural heritage and community) (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2009), pp. 18–22. But in truth such matters should not be called conservation according to the definition and discourse as understood today, because these are a product of modern society, not at all related to or similar to what is called renovation in traditional framework.

¹¹ See details in Maurizio Peleggi, *The Politics of Ruins and the Business of Nostalgia*, pp. 13–17.

ICCROM,¹² and ICOMOS,¹³ that set out the framework for conservation and collectively try to propose basic international principles that various countries should uphold and implement under several charters on conservation such as the Venice Charter of 1964, the Florence Charter of 1981, and the Washington Charter of 1987.

But in truth, all these various international principles must always confront the specific context of each society and always in a different way. Out of this confrontation, through a social process which is part conscious and part unconscious, part deliberate and part unwitting, some principles are accepted, others are rejected, and many new ones are added. The final result is a charter displaying the distinct character of each society.

If we ask what enters into this confrontation with the international principles of conservation, the answer is the *culture* of each society. For this reason I shall call the result a "cultural charter of conservation."¹⁴

Conservation in Thailand cannot escape this reality. Thus Thai society has its own "cultural charter of conservation," which I call the Rattanakosin Charter. This charter operates in parallel with the approaches and methods of conservation at the international level.

The Rattanakosin Charter is not inscribed as an official written document, yet has power to determine the whole field of conservation. It is a frame of mind that controls the approach to conservation in Thailand without anyone being aware of the charter's existence because, like the air that we all breathe, the charter is something that we cannot see yet exists for certain.

All the various international principles of conservation, no matter how well accepted at the world level, no matter whether preached by experts from wherever, and no matter whether drafted into written laws in Thailand, if they conflict with the Rattanakosin Charter then they will always be violated or bypassed.

However, although the Rattanakosin Charter is paramount, its content and principles are not fixed and constant. Any "cultural charter of conservation" has its own internal dynamism, with the content always changing as the social context changes, by adding, subtracting, modifying and supplementing its constituent principles.

¹² ICCROM is the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, an international organization founded in 1956 with responsibility to give advice on conservation of world heritage.

¹³ ICOMOS is the International Council on Monuments and Sites, an international organization which aims to promote consciousness about conservation and its methods, as inscribed in the Venice Charter.

¹⁴ One inspiration for this idea of a "cultural charter of constitution" came from Nidhi Eoseewong's article on "Ratthamanun chabap watthanatham thai", originally published in *Sinlapa Watthanatham* 13, 1 (November 1991), pp. 266–84), and translated by Chris Baker as "The Thai Cultural Constitution," *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asian Studies*, 2 (March 2003).

More specifically, the two related factors that shape the Rattanakosin Charter as a frame of mind that determines the approach to conservation are the *power relations in the society* and the *bundle of historical memory*.

Conservation: Historical memory and power relations in society

If we ask who created the Rattanakosin Charter or the “Thai cultural constitution of conservation”, how it was created, and for what benefit, the short answer is that there was no single person. The charter is a collective creation by many different individuals and institutions. The compiling of this charter is a function of the power relations in society and the process of establishing historical memory.

The conservation of cultural heritage in any society is not simply a matter of managing the cultural materials inherited from the past by setting up the appropriate machinery and applying international-standard techniques. Rather conservation is a process of establishing memory about the past. This memory is compiled by a constant process of selection, rejection, addition, and subtraction. Conservation is a process of constructing and reconstructing new memories about the past, rather than a process of storing existing memories or reviving old ones.

The definition of heritage – of what a society should remember and preserve, or what a society should forget and erase – is a matter of contestation. The ability to define what a society should remember and what it should forget is a form of power. Anyone who wants to capture the power of the state or capture the power to lead society must be able to capture the ability to define the memory of the past.

Memory is not merely a process of recording any events that took place in the past, but rather a process of recording those past events that have power to influence actions in the present and the future.

The historical memory of any society is the result of a process of selection, of deciding to record some events from the past and to forget others. The choice of what to remember or not remember is a function of the power relations in that society. Memory that is antagonistic towards the power structure of the present is likely to be suppressed or erased, while memory that supports the power structure of the present is likely to be recorded, reproduced, and disseminated so that it becomes the society’s collective memory. However, the memory that is rejected in one era may be rehabilitated in another era, while memory that was once widely accepted and disseminated may later be suppressed and forgotten if the power relations of the society change.

The choice of which buildings and other materials should be conserved and which should be neglected or demolished is determined by the structure of power relations in each era. This structure is not fixed and permanent. The society’s collective frame of mind concerning the past is related to the power relations of the time. Whenever those power relations change, memory that was once buried or

forgotten can reappear and be constructed as the collective memory of the society. Power belongs to those who construct memory, and conversely memory has the ability to consolidate power.

When memory and power are two sides of the same coin, then memory is a battlefield which must be constantly fought over. Those who can capture the collective memory of a society are those who have power; and those who have power can establish the memory from which they benefit as the collective memory of the society. The contestation over historical memory appears in all areas of society and in everything that is built by human endeavor, because all cultural materials are stores of memory and battlefields for the contest over memory.¹⁵

Conservation is one area of this battlefield over historical memory because conservation is a process of selecting what to keep and what to erase as part of historical memory in response to certain objectives in the present day.¹⁶ The “space of conservation” is an arena where protagonists contest over historical memory with the objective of recasting the power relations of society in a new form. Out of such struggles comes the definition of a “cultural charter of conservation” of each society.

In this article I try to describe the Rattanakosin Charter as a way to understand the approach to conservation in Thailand, and particularly to understand how the historical memory is constructed and the power relations in society are defined within the “space of conservation.”

At the outset I should note that these are only my preliminary propositions about the contents of the Rattanakosin Charter and that a fuller account must await deeper study in the future.

Rattanakosin Charter: Principles and key propositions

The Rattanakosin Charter has at least four main clauses, which are interrelated and which collectively define what kinds of historical memory, including cultural heritage of any kind, should be considered valuable and worthy of preservation, and what kinds have no value and can be erased.

These principles are not written into any international charter of conservation. Each principle is an indicator of the power relations in Thai society at the present day. Understanding this charter not only helps us to understand the practice of conservation in Thailand, but also helps to clarify the structure of relations between various groups in Thai society.

¹⁵ I have used the same approach to study the contestation of historical memory in the planning and building on Ratchadamnoen Avenue, see Chatri, “Khwam songjam lae amnat bon thanon ratchadamnoen” (Memory and power on Ratchadamnoen Avenue), *Mueang Boran*, 33, 4 (October–December 2007), pp. 67–86.

¹⁶ J. E. Tunbridge and G. J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1996), pp. 5–6.

Clause 1: Conserve only the heritage of high culture under the ideology of royal-nationalism

A key mandate of the Rattanakosin Charter is that only the heritage of high culture – such as palaces, monasteries, forts, walls, cities and government offices created by royalty and aristocracy – should be selected for conservation on grounds that this heritage alone has the highest historical value.

If we study the list of buildings on Rattanakosin Island that have been registered as historical monuments, we will find that this mandate is clearly being followed. If we scrutinize the Masterplan for the Conservation and Development of Krung Rattanakosin we will find this mandate stated even more clearly.

The mandate to conserve only the heritage of high culture is the most outstanding feature of the Rattanakosin Charter and of the Thai cultural charter of conservation in general. If evaluated by international principles of conservation, the bias in this mandate is clearly incorrect. The Venice Charter of 1964 states:

The concept of a historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilization, a significant development or a historic event. This applies not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time¹⁷

This bias did not arise casually, but within the context of the Thai political economy over the last half century or so, within a political atmosphere characterized by “conservatism” and by a reversion to making the monarchical institution the central focus of everything in Thai society – the focus of politics, focus of national sentiment, focus of being Thai, and focus of the cultural heritage of the whole nation.¹⁸

This atmosphere was constructed anew from 1957 onwards along with the construction of historical memory in a form that Thongchai Winichakul has called “royal-national history.”¹⁹ In this construction of memory, the Thai nation in the past was always surrounded by enemies that threatened the country’s territory, and only one elite group, namely the kings, took up the heroic duty of standing up against these enemies.

¹⁷ The Venice Charter, Definitions, Article 1, accessed 9 September 2012, at http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.pdf

¹⁸ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*, revised edition, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2007 [1979].

¹⁹ Thongchai Winichakul, “Prawatisat thai baep rachachatniyom: jak yuk ananikom amphrang su rachachatniyom mai rue lathi sadet pho khong kradumphithai nai patjuban” (Thai history in royal-nationalist style: from the era of covert colonialism to new nationalism or the cult of King Rama V of the present-day Thai bourgeoisie” *Sinlapa Watthanatham*, 23, 1 (2011), pp. 56–65.

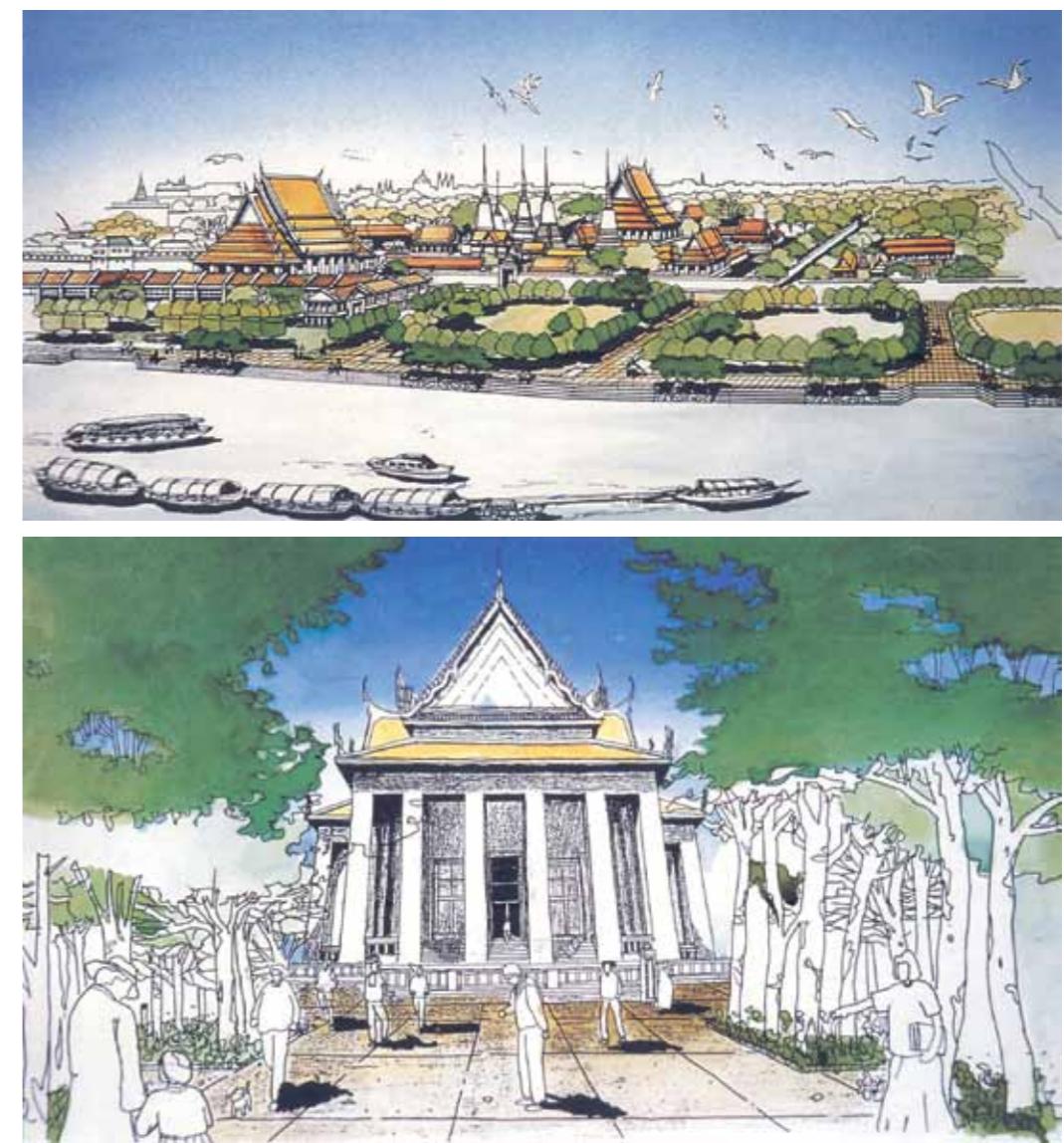


Figure 2. Views of Rattanakosin Island in the 1994 Masterplan (from the Masterplan)

Once this royal-national historical memory, full of heroic tales about kings, has put down deep roots in Thai society, it is natural and unavoidable that conservation on Rattanakosin Island should reflect this construction of historical memory in the selection of what to retain, and what not to retain. Hence the cultural heritage created by royalty has priority while the cultural heritage of other groups of people is overlooked.

This approach appeared initially in the plans to conserve and renovate monuments on Rattanakosin Island at the time of celebrating the 200th anniversary of Bangkok in 1982.²⁰ In these plans, there were nine monuments selected for

²⁰ See details in National Archives, Fine Arts Department, *Chotmaihet kan anurak krung*



Figure 3. Views of Rattanakosin Island in the 2003 masterplan to develop Ratchadamnoen Avenue and the adjacent area (from the plan)

conservation and renovation, another two projects for “rebuilding” monuments, and many subsidiary projects, almost all of which were about palaces, monasteries, and other important monuments that are the heritage of “high culture.” This approach was consolidated in twenty projects in the Masterplan for the Conservation and Development of Krung Rattanakosin launched in 1994.

These plans to conserve and develop the area are completely determined by the frame of mind which draws on the royal-nationalist bundle of historical memory. Most of the projects are designed to open up vacant space in order to improve the views of prominent monuments associated with the monarchy. They include: a project to open up the view of Wat Bowornsathansuthawat; a project to landscape the Chao Phraya riverbank to open up a view of Wat Pho; a project to create vacant space and a public park in the vicinity of the Navy Club in order to open up a view of the Grand Palace; a project to demolish commercial buildings to open up a view of the Golden Mount; and a project to create a public park at Mahakan Fort to open up a view of the fort and city wall (see Figure 2).²¹

From the outset, both academics and non-academics criticized this Masterplan for paying no serious attention to the history of Rattanakosin Island which was not solely about royalty and the elite, resulting in a plan which, if implemented, would create a lifeless area full of nothing but public parks, monasteries, palaces, forts, and walls. Yet this kind of bias in the selection of cultural heritage for conservation still survives to the present day.

Another large-scale project, which is quietly going ahead, aims to conserve and develop Ratchadamnoen Avenue and the adjacent area (which is owned by the Crown Property Bureau) to be like the Champs Elysées in Paris. A leading architectural company was commissioned to draw up a masterplan for this purpose around 2003. The plan has been nicknamed the *chong elise thai* or “Thai Champs Elysées” plan (see Figure 3).

In this plan, the first two of the five statements defining the vision are: 1. “Maintain as a road for royal ceremony, official ceremony, and public ceremony;” and 2. Make Ratchadamnoen Avenue into “a road that communicates the continuity of the history of the Chakri dynasty.”²² These two points display the approach of conservation under the influence of royal-national history very clearly.

Although the first point refers to official ceremony and civic ceremony, there is nothing on these topics in the whole volume of this masterplan. The history of this

rattanakosin (Records of conservation of Rattanakosin Island).

²¹ See details of the whole plan in Synchron Group *Phaen maebot phuea kan anurak lae phatthana krung ratanakosin* (Masterplan for the Conservation and Development of Krung Rattanakosin) (Bangkok: Synchron Group, 1997).

²² NESDB, *Khrongkan jat tham phaen phung mae bot kan phatthana phuen thi thanon ratchadamnoen lae phuen thi boriwen to nueng* (Project to make a masterplan for the development of Ratchadamnoen Avenue and the adjacent area) (Bangkok, 2003), p. 2/1.



Figure 4. View of the Chao Phraya River in “Bright Chao Phraya River Project in Honor of His Majesty the King”, 2008 (*Rattanakosin rim chao phraya*)

road's associations with democracy scarcely merits a mention, and is not emphasized in any of the plans. The insertion of “official ceremony” and “public ceremony” in this point seems designed to make the statement look beautiful rather than to lead towards any real result.

In this way of thinking, the space of Bangkok (not only Ratchadamnoen Avenue) appears in history from nowhere in 1782 through the actions of King Rama I alone, yet in truth this space has a long history over many centuries before then and a social complexity that cannot be captured by relating the history of Bangkok through the actions of kings alone. Bangkok was the successor to Thonburi, which was founded by King Thaksin as a consequence of the area's long history as a fort and harbor. And so on.²³

In the case of Ratchadamnoen Avenue itself, King Rama V's decision to create the road is only part of its history. The road has figured in many other episodes including the era of the People's Party, 14 October 1973, and Black May 1992. Besides, the area has a history before the road was built. The landscape, neighborhoods, residents (Lao, Mon, Cham, Chinese, Indian), and how they made a living are all part of the historical memory on the space of Ratchadamnoen Avenue yet they do not appear in the “Thai Champs Elysées” plan at all.²⁴

The latest grand project which reproduces royal-nationalist historical memory, the distinguishing feature of the Rattanakosin Charter, is the “Bright Chao Phraya River Project in Honor of His Majesty the King” launched by the Tourist Authority

²³ See details in Sujit Wonghet, *Krungthep majak nai* (Where did Bangkok come from) (Bangkok: Matichon, 2005).

²⁴ Though the project was heavily criticized and seems to be on hold, in fact it is at the stage of working out the details of implementation, and will appear in a new form under a new name and not as a single large-scale project but several localized projects to evade criticism.

of Thailand in 2008 (see Figure 4). It includes a masterplan for the conservation and development of the area along the Chao Phraya River on the Bangkok side from Tha Phrachan to Pak Khlong Talat. The various constituent projects are designed to preserve buildings which are associated with the monarchy and open up vacant space to create outstanding views of the Grand Palace and monasteries built by kings – much the same approach as that adopted over the past 30 years.²⁵

Clause 2: Reject the modernist cultural heritage of the People's Party era

The first clause of the Rattanakosin Charter, which mandates conservation of only the heritage of high culture under the ideology of royal-nationalism, implies that the cultural heritage of one particular era in Thai history must be erased from Rattanakosin Island. That is the cultural heritage of the People's Party era.

The People's Party was a group of people who launched the revolution in 1932 to change the system of government from absolute monarchy to democracy and who had only a short period of prominence from 1932 to 1947.

From that period, the People's Party has left behind a large heritage of art and architecture on Rattanakosin Island (see Figure 5). This cultural heritage is in the style known as Modern Architecture or Modernism, a major movement in art and architecture in the world in the 1920s. The People's Party adopted this architectural style as it enshrines a political ideology of equality under democracy, rejecting the power and role of monarchy. Importantly, this style emphasizes modernity and has no attachment to traditionalism.²⁶ The cultural heritage of the People's Party era inevitably clashes with the heritage of high culture surrounding the institution of monarchy.

Hence it is quite natural that the Rattanakosin Charter, which is founded on an ideology of royal-nationalism, must be antagonistic towards the cultural heritage created in the People's Party era, and it is not surprising that the Rattanakosin Charter aims to attack and demolish the value of the cultural heritage created in the People's Party era.

Erasing the historical memory that includes the cultural heritage of the People's Party era is one main mission of the Rattanakosin Charter. We will not find such an approach in any international charter at all.

Significantly, in the present circle of conservation at the international level, the heritage of the modernist era in the 1920s, which is the style of the cultural

²⁵ See details of the project in SJA, *Raingam khrongkan chaophraya sotsai thoetthai ongrachan phaen ngan kan jat than phaen maebot kan prap prung boriwen rim mae nam chaophraya (wisaithat)* (Report of the project Bright Chao Phraya in honor of the king, to make a masterplan for improving the area along the Chao Phraya river (vision)) (Bangkok, 2008).

²⁶ See details in Chatri, *Sinlapa sathapatyakam khana ratsadon: sanyalak thang kan mueang nai choeng udomkan* (Art and architecture of the People's Party: Symbol of the politics of ideology)) (Bangkok: Matichon, 2009).



Figure 5. Examples of architecture of the People's Party, from top: Bangrak Post Office, Justice Ministry, stupa of Wat Mahathat, Bang Khen (National Archives)

²⁷ The charter is at www.international.icomos.org/18thapril/2006/nizhny-tagil-charter-e.pdf.

heritage of the People's Party, is attracting growing interest because this style reflects an important era in world history – the advent of industrial society. A specific organization has been founded to campaign for conservation of this era's cultural heritage under the title, The International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage (TICCIH), and a specific charter has been composed about the heritage of this industrial era, called The Nizhny Tagil Charter for the Industrial Heritage.²⁷

In Thai society under the Rattanakosin Charter, the contents of this international charter are unacceptable, because the cultural heritage of the industrial era of the 1920s was adopted by the People's Party as a political symbol in opposition to the heritage of high culture under the ideology of royal-nationalism. So this international charter has no place in Thailand and will certainly never be used.

A case that confirms this proposition concerns the Sala Chalermthai theatre. Though this building was freighted with historical memory and stories about the culture of showing plays and movies in modern Thailand yet it was demolished to open up a view of the Loha Prasat or Wat Ratchanadda built on the command of King Rama III.

Other examples of the architecture of this era, which have value for the study of modern Thai political history and as the products of the industrial era, are under ever-increasing threat. The Khurusapha Printing House on Phra

Sumen Road was forcibly delisted as a registered monument for conservation so that the building could be demolished to make way for a public park and replica of the city wall. The Supreme Court, built as a symbol of regaining complete judicial autonomy in 1937, is to be demolished to build a new Supreme Court complex in the architectural style of royal-nationalism. Shophouses in Soi Wanglee were demolished not many years ago even though these houses and warehouses on a river jetty were one of the most important places in Bangkok seventy years ago.

Even the complex of commercial buildings on both sides of Ratchadamnoen Avenue may be among those demolished in future because they have not been registered as monuments and the Crown Property Bureau, owner of the land, has begun gradually not renewing the rental contracts with old tenants so that the



Figure 6. Sala Chalermthai (top) and Sala Chalerkrung (bottom), same architectural style but different heritage value (http://statics.atcloud.com/files/comments/56/561630/images/1_original.jpg; National Archives of Thailand)

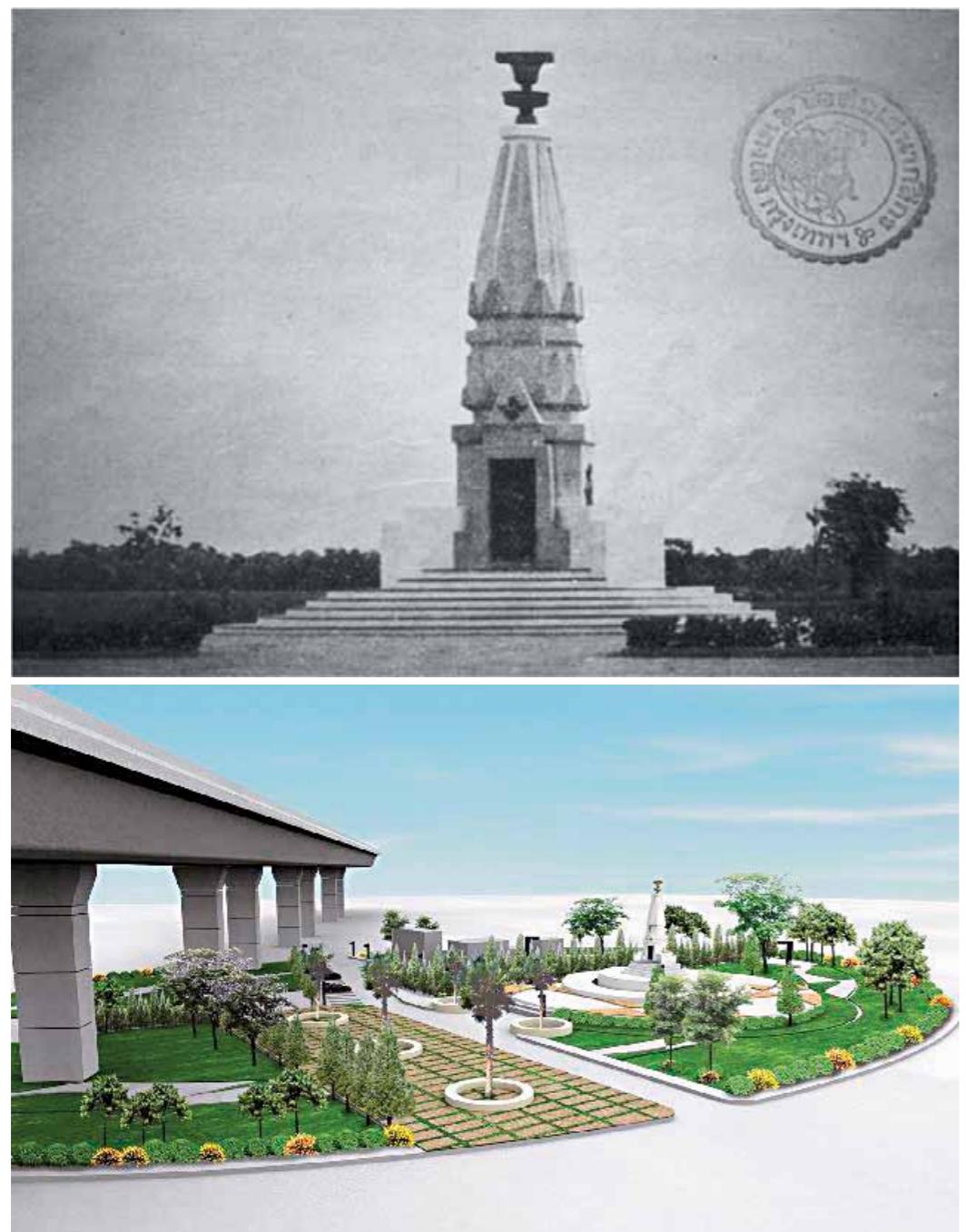


Figure 7. Monument to Suppressing the Rebellion, built 1935 (top); model of the overpass at Laksi intersection and the new position of the monument (bottom) (www.prachachat.net/news_detail.l.php?newsid=1247742636)

buildings can be developed in line with the “Thai Champs Elysées” concept. Their future is very uncertain. Yet the buildings are a perfect example of their era both in terms of their distinctive architectural style and their historical value, as they have formed the backdrop to many scenes in Thailand’s modern political history.

It is noteworthy that a building from the same era and in the same distinctive architectural style of this industrial era, yet which was built not by the People’s Party but by the king, is accorded greater historical value and judged worthy of conservation. The case in point is the Sala Chalermkrung theater.

The style of the Sala Chalermkrung is indistinguishable from other buildings built in the era of the People’s Party. The time difference between the Sala Chalermthai and the Sala Chalermkrung is less than ten years. Their conservation value should be equal but that has not been the case. The Sala Chalermkrung was judged to have enough historical value to be worthy of being conserved. This strange double standard is incomprehensible if we do not appreciate the essence of the Rattanakosin Charter, but quite obvious if we do. This is because Sala Chalermkrung was built on the command of King Rama VII.

If we compare the demolition of the Sala Chalermthai with the conservation of the Sala Chalermkrung from the perspective of international conservation we must be surprised by the contrasting fate of the two buildings despite their similarity in style and timing. But within the framework of the Rattanakosin Charter, the Thai cultural charter of conservation, which suffuses the subconscious of most conservationists in Thailand, the contrast is not surprising at all.

The latest incident which confirms this principle concerns the Memorial to Suppressing the Rebellion, popularly known as the Laksi Monument. This memorial is another product of the modernist art of the People’s Party era. Built in 1935 to commemorate the defeat of the Boworadej Rebellion in 1933, it was moved to make way for a new overpass at the Laksi intersection. The leader of the revolt was Prince Boworadej Kridtakorn a high-ranking member of the royal family, who once held a ministerial post in the time of King Rama VII.

This memorial of the People’s Party era has national significance and used to be the site of an annual ceremony to remember the event. After the end of the People’s Party era, the memorial was renamed as the Laksi Monument and the ceremonies were discontinued. Much later a large roundabout was built surrounding the monument and making the monument virtually inaccessible. The Monument to Suppressing the Rebellion thus lost any historical meaning, and became the most isolated and lonely monument in Thailand.²⁸

Around 2010 there was a project to build an overpass across the Laksi intersection. As a result the monument was moved from its original site and placed in a small garden constructed anew alongside the bridge. Even though the monument still exists, it is located in a meaningless position and lacks any symbolic force as a monument (see Figure 7).

²⁸ See details in Chatri, *Meru khrao prap kabot boworadet: meru samanchon khrung raek klang thong sanam luang*” (Cremation at the time of the suppression of the Boworadej Rebellion: First commoner’s cremation in the center of Sanam Luang,” *Fa Dieo Kan* 5, 2 (April-June 2007), 212–29.

Under international principles of conservation, an overpass across an intersection where there is a monument built over 80 years ago would have to be designed to avoid the monument rather than cutting straight through it. But in this case, the monument belongs to the cultural heritage of the People's Party era. Moreover the monument casts a high-ranking member of royalty as a historical villain. This is certainly not in line with the royal-nationalism of present-day Thai society; hence the project to build an overpass across Laksi intersection could go ahead following the principles of conservation in the Rattanakosin Charter.

Clause 3. Reject the cultural heritage of ordinary people

Another implication of Clauses 1 and 2 is that the “cultural heritage of ordinary people” should be ignored or overlooked.

The cultural heritage of ordinary people has no place in the Rattanakosin Charter. Even though Thailand advanced to become a modern democratic state nearly 80 years ago, power relations are still clearly class-based. Only a handful of elites have access to resources, political power, and economic opportunities whereas the majority of people are still seen as subjects with no power or social role.

These power relations result in the bundle of historical memory about ordinary people being suppressed and denied space in history. The wheel of Thai history still seems to be turned by an elite minority including the king, royal family, and nobles.

Since the bundle of historical memory in Thailand still revolves around elites, the history of ordinary people has value only as personal memory or group memory with no place in the pages of national history. As a result, cultural heritage produced by ordinary people is valueless and can be thrown away.

The area of Tha Thian Market is a good example. In the Masterplan for the Conservation and Development of Krung Rattanakosin, the area of Tha Thian Market is merely a slum with no historical value. Hence the shophouses and market are slated to be demolished, including Ban Metta, a detention center for juvenile offenders. The only building to be spared is the Chakrabongse Palace. These changes will open up the view of Wat Pho.²⁹

Tha Thian Market is a very old market dating back to the beginning of the Bangkok era. For a long period, it was a center for exporting goods to provincial towns and a distribution center of goods to feed the city. Yet this history is not judged worthy of being remembered and conserved. It can be sacrificed so that Wat Pho may be seen more clearly.

Tha Thian Market area is full of buildings from many successive eras. Though the area is crowded and the buildings may not be judged as beautiful by the criteria of high-class art and architecture, from the perspective of international conservation

²⁹ Synchron Group, *Phaen maebot phuea kan anurak lae phatthana krung rattanakosin* (Masterplan for the Conservation and Development of Krung Rattanakosin), p. 246.

they fall within the category of the heritage of local buildings according to the Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage of 1999, which stipulates that

The built vernacular heritage is important; it is the fundamental expression of the culture of a community, of its relationship with its territory and, at the same time, the expression of the world's cultural diversity.... Examples of the vernacular may be recognised by: a) A manner of building shared by the community...³⁰

However, such a definition of values does not appear in the Rattanakosin Charter.

The Mahakan Fort community is another example where the cultural heritage of ordinary people can be erased according to the criteria of the Rattanakosin Charter.

The Mahakan Fort community area is situated on a historical site called “Below the city walls,” meaning the space between the city wall and the moat. This area has been densely settled since the early Rattanakosin era, and similar areas can



Figure 8. View of Pak Khlong Talat after renovation (<http://www.yodpimanmarket.com/development.html>)

still be found in other towns and cities. The Mahakan Fort community has several distinctive features that have not survived in any other location. There are old-style stilt-house residences dating back to the early Rattanakosin period; “gingerbread” style wooden houses reflecting the taste for foreign styles during the Fifth to Seventh reigns; and wooden houses belonging to the past half-century or so.³¹ The layout of the community is old and quite unique, not found in any other neighborhood on Rattanakosin Island or elsewhere. This layout enables each house to make great use of the common area. The houses themselves are built next to one another and

³⁰ Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage, accessed 27 March 2010, at http://www.icomosthai.org/charters/vernacular_e.pdf.

³¹ See details in Chatri, “Phuen thi pom mahakan: jak panha rueang kan anurak su wikit panha thang kan mueang” (Mahakan Fort area: from conservation problem to political crisis), *Asa* 2-3 (2007), pp. 81-92.

arranged in such a way that all have good access to a community courtyard, a common space for drying clothes, and other common facilities. There are no walls and fences isolating each family as found in modern housing developments.

From the standpoint of international conservation, the Mahakan Fort community is an historical area of the city that warrants conservation under the Washington Charter of 1987.³² But this is yet another international principle that does not appear in the Rattanakosin Charter. The existence of the Mahakan Fort means that major historical monuments built on royal command are not prominent enough. Hence the Masterplan for the Conservation and Development of Krung Rattanakosin evaluates this community as a derelict slum appropriate only for complete demolition so that a public park can be built and thereby open up the view of nearby monuments.

The latest example in this same category is a project to renovate the Pak Khlong Talat area by demolishing some buildings and renovating others to restore the architectural appearance of the area in the Fifth Reign (see Figure 8). The area at present is typical of a market – crowded, busy, full of vendors. The project will create an environment appealing to middle-class taste, with a boxing ring to provide shows to attract tourists, and air-conditioned buildings for comfort.³³ There is no thought of conserving the old setting of the area's residents as that has no significance in the Rattanakosin Charter.

Clause 4: “Building anew” to enhance the high cultural heritage is acceptable

A prominent feature of the Rattanakosin Charter is to allow new buildings and additions to historical buildings, even though in many cases these are against principles of international conservation. The key point is that such new construction is acceptable if it confirms and reproduces historical memory in the ideology of royal nationalism.

For many decades, there have been plans to build many small public parks scattered around the monuments in Rattanakosin Island, ostensibly to reduce the density and increase the amount of green in the city. However there has been no serious study whether these planned public parks are consistent with the lifestyle of people living on Rattanakosin Island, and no serious study whether the shortage of green space is real or illusory. Significantly, such plans to increase green space on the grounds that the current supply is inadequate always fail to count green areas in monasteries. There are many such areas and these are consistent with the lifestyle of Thai society over a long period.

From my long observation, I have a hypothesis that the true objective of creating green areas has nothing to do with how they might be used by city people,

³² Washington Charter at http://www.icomosthai.org/charters/Washington_e.pdf, accessed 27 March 2010.

³³ See details of plan to renovate Pak Khlong Talat at <http://www.yodpimanmarket.com/development.html>

but reflects a wish to create vacant space to give added prominence to monuments built by kings. This again reflects the bundle of historical memory in the style of royal-nationalism.

One example is the “Maha Chedsadabodin Royal Pavilion” the space where the Sala Chalermthai theatre once stood. This open plaza is hardly used at all by city people because, with no big trees to give shade, the plaza is far too hot during the day and only usable in the late evening. In addition, the large royal pavilion on the area has been designed with the high-class architecture associated with royalty, so ordinary people cannot enter.

Thus this plaza is not seriously intended for use by ordinary people but is another space designed to reproduce historical memory in the style of royal-nationalism. All the architectural components point in that direction – the Rama III memorial, the vacant space (without many tall trees) to provide views of the Loha Prasat, and the palace-style architecture that prohibits use. These same components can also be seen at Santichaiprakan Park in the vicinity of Sumen Fort.

The demolition of the Mahakan Fort community in order to create a public park is another clear example. As already noted, this demolition runs against the principles of conservation in the Washington Charter, but that has no impact on the Rattanakosin Charter at all. In addition, a park on this site would not attract much use by the general public. The Mahakan Fort area is rather closed-off because the only access is by four remaining tunnel gates through the city wall. In the daytime the park would be too hot for anyone to use, and in the evening the area would be too dangerous to enter. Hence the true objective of building a public park at Mahakan Fort is simply to create vacant space that offers a grand vista of nearby monuments, including Mahakan Fort, the city wall, Loha Prasat, and Wat Sakae.

One large-scale project presented in public recently, the “Bright Chao Phraya Project in Honor of the King”, is the latest example that confirms this aspect of the Rattanakosin Charter. This project aims to develop the area along the Chao Phraya River from Tha Phrachan to Tha Thian Market by building many historical reproductions rather than conserving existing buildings. These reproductions include: a clocktower which used to be in the palace of King Rama IV; palace buildings at Rachaworadit Pier; a foreign ambassador's residence and a model junk; a royal landing stage at Wat Pho jetty; a Peacock Gate; a gate to Tha Phra at Tha Chang; and many large barges strung all along the riverbank to be used as a tourist shopping mall (see Figure 9).³⁴

All these projects, apart from faking history which risks turning the riverbank into a funfair rather than a historical site, destroy the old Thai setting of a riverbank, especially the string of barge reproductions along a large stretch of the river. But

³⁴ See details in Wiraphan Shinawatra, ed., *Rattanakosin rim chaophraya* (Rattanakosin beside the Chao Phraya) (Bangkok: Plusplace, 2009)



Figure 9. Examples of renovation under the “Bright Chao Phraya Project in Honor of the King”: From top, barges for tourists along the riverbank; reconstructed clock tower; the former ambassador’s residence, and model junk (*Rattanakosin rim chaophraya*)

Charter. Even though the Vishnu Shrine beside Wat Suthat and the new Supreme Court complex are both new buildings, the former was built by ordinary people in connection with their religious belief and thus has little value under Clause 3 of the Rattanakosin Charter, whereas the latter, even though so huge that it affronts

³⁵ See details in Chatri, “Anuson sathan pruetsapha prachatham: kan mueang rueang thi tang lae khwam songjam bon thanon ratchadamnoen” (The May 1992 memorial: Politics of position and memory on Ratchadamnoen Avenue) *An* (Read), 3,4 (Oct 2011 to March 2012), pp. 76–91

those involved in this project do not share these concerns because the project will greatly expand the space devoted to the royal-nationalist bundle of historical memory on Rattanakosin Island, which is the main objective of the Rattanakosin Charter.

Another example is the permission given to create a plaza to celebrate the anniversary of King Rama IX in 2009 at the head of Ratchadamnoen Avenue on land once occupied by the old Public Relations Department building burnt down during the events of May 1992, whereas the project to build a memorial to those who died in the May 1992 incident, which is sited in the same vicinity, has been delayed for more than ten years, and there is no indication when it will be realized.³⁵

The four clauses presented above frame the thinking, belief, and ideology on conservation in Thailand.

Let us now reconsider the words of the chairman of the Committee for the Conservation and Development of Rattanakosin Island, cited at the start of this article, in light of the Rattanakosin Charter. The two interviews seem to contradict each other so starkly that there can be no principle or standard in conservation. But in truth, the two statements both reflect the principles and standards of the Rattanakosin

international standards of conservation, will replace a modernist building of the People’s Party era, which has no value under Clause 2 of the Rattanakosin Charter, and is associated with a government project to honor the king, and hence is in line with Clause 4 of the Rattanakosin Charter. The fact that it breaches the law on the height of buildings is immaterial.

The criteria of selection, method of thinking, and ideology in this example exemplify the “frame of mind” which dictates the evaluation of all cultural heritage on Rattanakosin Island, and indeed all over Thailand.

Besides the Rattanakosin Charter, we should also discuss the agencies and departments involved with conservation in Thailand. Even though there are large numbers of them, for structural reasons they all accept the conservation thinking contained in the Rattanakosin Charter in its entirety.

Rattanakosin Charter and conservation agencies in Thailand

In the circle of conservation in Thailand there are many agencies, organizations, and individuals, including sub-agencies of international conservation organizations. The multiplicity of agencies should operate as checks and balances on one another, resulting in conservation in Thailand having the same openness of mind and widespread participation by people from different walks of life that are characteristic of the international agencies.

But if we look closely at the structure and personnel of these agencies, we find that they are so intertwined that they cannot act as check and balance on one another, nor have conflicting views. Most personnel in these conservation agencies are drawn from a small circle. A few people serve on the boards of many different agencies, with the result that these agencies all have the same views, and accept the conservation principles contained in the Rattanakosin Charter.

The major agencies dealing with Rattanakosin Island are the Fine Arts Department (FAD), Committee on Rattanakosin Island and the Old City, ICOMOS Thai, the Society for the Conservation of National Treasure and Environment (SCONTE), and the Subcommittee on Conservation of Art and Architecture within the Association of Siamese Architects.

Although there is a multiplicity of organizations they do not counterbalance one another. Take the example of the FAD and ICOMOS Thai. In principle they should be independent of each other, as the FAD is a government department and ICOMOS Thai is a sub-agency of an international NGO, not reporting to government. But in reality, ICOMOS Thai is a sub-agency under FAD since the director of FAD serves as its chairperson.³⁶ The FAD and ICOMOS Thai cannot have any conflict of view on conservation because the same person heads both agencies. There are

³⁶ See details on history and structure in <http://www.icomosthai.org/>

controversial cases where ICOMOS Thai should play a role but cannot do much, such as over the demolition of shophouses in Soi Wanglee (heritage of modernist architecture from the People's Party era). In this case, the FAD sent a letter stating that the buildings had some value but not enough to warrant being registered as a monument. ICOMOS Thai, under the chairmanship of the FAD director, could not offer a different opinion. In the end the shophouses were demolished.

Another problem is the mesh of cross-memberships among the boards of these agencies. If we look at the lists of the board members of the FAD, the Committee on Rattanakosin Island and the Old City, ICOMOS Thai, and SCONTE, the same names appear repeatedly. Some individuals sit on three or more of the boards. As a result all these agencies reflect the thinking of a small group of 15 to 20 people. Moreover, most of these people come from government departments such as the FAD and the Committee on Rattanakosin Island and the Old City,

Even though some of the boards are quite large – the Committee on Rattanakosin Island and the Old City has thirty persons and is chaired by a deputy prime minister – but most of these people are appointed *ex officio* from various organizations and departments located on Rattanakosin Island such as the under-secretary of the Ministry of Defense, director of the Highways Department, head of the Budget Bureau, secretary-general of the Royal Household, director of the Crown Property Bureau, minister of education, governor of Bangkok, and so on.³⁷ The people sent to sit *ex officio* on these boards may have little or no interest or knowledge about conservation. As a result seven or eight specialists largely determine the direction of policy and implementation by these agencies. These experts are the same small group of people mentioned above.

For these reasons it is not surprising that Thailand has many conservation agencies but only one approach to conservation, namely that mandated by the Rattanakosin Charter. There is no counterbalancing power, no new ideas, and no space for ordinary people to participate in the work of these agencies. The planning, policy-making, administration, and implementation are confined within a small circle of bureaucrats and experts who virtually all have the “frame of mind” of the Rattanakosin Charter.

At present there many new faces from a new generation of academicians in the circle of Thai conservation. They have new ideas, new concerns, new principles, and new approaches to evaluating cultural heritage. But because of the structure of the conservation agencies, with cross-memberships and domination by a small circle of people, new ideas cannot flourish and replace the principles of the Rattanakosin Charter.

³⁷ See details in *Mati khana rathamontri thi kieo khong kap amnat nathi khong khan kammakan anurak lae phatthana krung rattanakosin lae mueang kao* (Cabinet resolution on the powers and duties of the committee on the conservation and development of Rattanakosin and the old city) (Khana kammakan krung rattanakosin doem, xerox n.p., n.d), pp. 2–3

The struggle to change the Rattanakosin Charter

Yet, as stated at the start of this article, a cultural charter can change.

When power relations in society change, resulting in changes of historical memory, eventually the criteria for evaluating cultural heritage will change too. As is evident from the social and political events of the past decade, Thai society is undergoing a major structural change in power relations. As a result, a new struggle for the space of historical memory is emerging. The Thai cultural charter of conservation will inevitably face challenges, including demands for changes in its principles, ideology, and mandates. This process at the moment is very much at the beginning, yet we can sense changes to come.

In the last ten years, communities on Rattanakosin Island have begun to get together in order to consolidate their strength in negotiating with government over projects of conservation and development. They have begun to construct a new bundle of historical memory, different from the old bundle; begun to place the historical memory of their communities more in the public sphere where it can attract the interest of society; begun to overturn old forms of historical explanation in favor of new ideas which will change the criteria used to evaluate cultural heritage.

The Banglamphu civic action group came out to oppose the demolition of Khurusapha Printing house which the government deemed as lacking any historical value, by offering an opposite view. As a result of pressure from this civic action group, the printing house was eventually registered as a monument.

Many people on the Rattanakosin Committee were highly resentful of this outcome. This struggle should not be viewed as merely a conflict between individuals but rather as a challenge to the Rattanakosin Charter, the major cultural charter of conservation. This challenge has begun to change the old bundle of historical memory, begun to undermine the power of experts who claim to know about evaluating the historical value of heritage. This resentment stems from a shift in the structure of power relations rather than from the conflict between individuals.

Another signal of change is the struggle against the demolition of the Mahakan Fort community. The plan for a public park has not been realized. The community created a diverse and widespread network of support with bargaining strength that the government could neither ignore nor overcome. By defining itself as a “community below the city wall” and a “community of ancient wooden houses”, the Mahakan Fort community began to reconstruct a version of history that could fight against the version of history wielded by the government. At present, we cannot predict which of these versions of history will win, but the struggles spread over the past ten years signal that the Rattanakosin Charter is beginning to lose its traction.

Apart from the case of the Mahakan Fort community, there have been conflicts in the past few years over the conservation and development of the Woeng Nakhon Kasem area around Wat Mangkorn Kamalawat and the area of Pak Khlong Talat.

Residents challenged government agencies over the definition of what was worth and not worth conserving, again signaling that the Rattanakosin Charter is being increasingly questioned.

In defiance of Clause 2 of the Rattanakosin Charter, during the political conflicts over the past three to four years there have been efforts to revitalize the history as well as the cultural heritage of the People's Party era. People have participated in ceremonies to commemorate the 1932 event at the plaque recording the event set



Figure 10. Commemorating the 1932 revolution at the People's Party plaque and a UDD ceremony at the Memorial to Suppressing the Rebellion (www.prachatai3.info)

into the road on Ratchadamnoen Avenue. Many networks campaigned against the demolition of the old Supreme Court buildings, and while the project has not been cancelled it has been postponed indefinitely. There is a growing tendency to see the value of the cultural heritage of the People's Party era.

On 12 March 2010, a group from the United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD, the red shirts) held a rally and ceremony at the Memorial to Suppressing the Rebellion at the Laksi intersection (see Figure 10). For several decades this monument could be said to be historically dead. Had it been demolished, nobody would have noticed. But this ceremony has revived the monument, and offered a challenge to historical memory in the style of royal-nationalism to some extent.

These are the small beginnings of a struggle for space to redefine the Rattanakosin Charter. It remains to be seen how this struggle will end. Yet, I am quite confident that this struggle will not merely change the thinking and principles on the conservation of cultural heritage, but will also shake up the bundle of historical memory and shift the structure of power relations in the long term.