



Pedestrian and cycling projects in Bangkok*

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ABSTRACT

Though the car culture in Bangkok is known worldwide, it has recently started to develop some people-centered projects in terms of pedestrian areas and cycling facilities. This presentation will address issues related to the existing car-free area (Khao San Road), the second floor "Skywalk" developed to link shopping malls and a rail system, and the proposal to develop 65.3 km of cycle ways with a budget of 38,475,000 Thai Baht (approx 10 million dollars) as well as an existing 2 km cycleway that is used by very few people. A general conclusion is that, though there is intent to develop sustainable transport infrastructure, little attention has been paid to the political, technical and structural issues of these interventions. The three examples will be analyzed as attempts to solve congestion problems that could be improved.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Bangkok has been well known as one of the worst examples in terms of what it has achieved to reduce transport-related emissions, congestion and accidents. It has an increasingly car-based society and little has been made to confront this with actual implementation projects. However, there are few examples that have been developed that show there is a slight interest in developing improved infrastructure for bicycles and pedestrians, though some of them have different goals or have not been clearly understood.

2 KHAO SAN ROAD AND SOI RAMBUTTRI

The first example that will be described is the “Road of the Ripe Rice”, Thanon Khao San. It is known for its high affluence of European backpackers and low-budget tourists, and it is characterised by a high volume of on-street commercial activity. Sidewalks are filled with vendor stalls, as is the edge of the street. Some years ago, Bangkok Municipal Administration decided to develop Khao San as a “walking street”, changing the texture on the road and closing it daily from 7:00pm to 5:00 am for exclusive pedestrian and bicycle traffic.



Figure 1. Khao San Road with high pedestrian flow. Source: Carlos F. Pardo

Due to the high volumes of pedestrians on the street at all times, it is easy to walk there during the day. Also, on non-car free hours (e.g. 5:00 am to 7:00pm), car speeds are low and there seems to be a priority for pedestrians during most of the time. On the other side, there have been little efforts to enforce the “car-freeness” of Khao San during the night. Though there is a policeman in each corner of the street and they have a boundary in both access points, there seems to be permission for some tuk-tuk (motorized three-wheel taxis) or motorcycle drivers to freely access the area to pick up or drop off customers. This has resulted in an ambiguous nature of the street: it has an official establishment of car-free area during the night, but legitimately been dubbed a “pedestrian-priority” street by all users, while private motorised vehicles are used at almost any time.



Figure 2. Khao San Road with high motorised vehicle flow. Source: Carlos F. Pardo

Soi Rambuttri is another “car-free” area which has only been developed as such because of the infrastructure characteristics (brick road is painted red) and pedestrian and bicycle volumes of users similar to the one in Khao San. However, there is no formal mandate from the traffic police that has banned car use inside the street. Thus, taxis and other vehicles freely ride through the Road with no restrictions whatsoever.



Figure 3. Soi Rambuttri with pedestrians. Source: Carlos F. Pardo

As in Khao San, Rambuttri has a high volume of on-street commerce as well as a considerable amount of restaurants and hotels. In these two examples, maybe a complete banning of automobiles would increase pedestrian and bicycle volumes even more, and improve the quality of service of the restaurants and hotels in the area.



Figure 4. Soi Rambuttri and its various commercial on-street activities. Source: Carlos F. Pardo

3 THE SKYWALK

Another example of pedestrian and cycling improvements in Bangkok is the Skywalk, an initiative from the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and the “BTS- Skytrain” Light Rail transport system. It was developed in order to link big shopping malls and the transportation system, as a very high-cost infrastructure for pedestrians, due to the fact that transportation entities of the city feel that they have little or no space for bicycles or pedestrians on the street.



Figure 5. Skywalk entrance at National Stadium BTS station. Source: Carlos F. Pardo

In itself, the skywalk is a very high quality and covered walkway which is very efficient to those commuting in the BTS system and to shopping malls. However, it is not the best option for people who are walking or bicycling from one place to the other, since they have to walk up and down flights of stairs (45 or more), which makes it very uncomfortable for a bicycle rider and even a pedestrian.



Figure 6. Skywalk near Chitlom station. Source: Carlos F. Pardo

In summary, the BTS skywalk has been developed as a very high-quality infrastructure with excellent access to the mass transit mode and some commercial areas, but is of little use for other citizens who have other trip intentions. It must be added that, in most crossings, the skywalk is the only legal way in which citizens can cross a street. That is, in the case shown in Figure 7, a person in a wheelchair would not be able to cross the street if he or she were commuting alone. In the case of a cyclist, he or she would have to use the street or walk up and down a much longer distance than if there were no skywalk.



Figure 7. Crossing near a Skywalk in Siam Square. The Skywalk is the only legal way to cross the street.

Unfortunately, though the skywalk is a solution to commuters of the BTS, it is not actually a solution to nonmotorised transport in Bangkok, and it poses more difficult questions as to the way Bangkok officials understand the topic of transport, pedestrian access and integration of modes of transport such as bicycles and mass transit.

4 CYCLEWAYS

4.1 THE PLAN TO BUILD CYCLEWAYS

Another big component of Bangkok's transportation system is their project to build cycleways. Their current mayor has pushed forward the sustainable transport agenda and has made cycleways a part of new transport interventions. The future project includes 50 different cycleways throughout the city, and they have already started planning some of them. However, most of them have been planned in areas of the city that have very low demand and there is little chance that citizens will use them as infrastructure for bicycles as modes of transport. Two of these projects are highlighted below.

4.2 TWO CYCLEWAYS: WIRELESS ROAD AND EKAMAI ROAD

The first of these cycleways is on the periphery of the city (Ekamai Road). When the author rode his bicycle to this cycleway, it took him one hour to reach the area, and twenty more minutes to find the beginning of the cycleway (see Figure 8). This cycleway runs a distance of around 4 kilometers towards the outside of Bangkok, and it is rather a long strip of concrete dedicated for bicycles. During the 30 minute ride along the cycleway, two motorcycles were found along the road and no bicycles. It was clear that this infrastructure was not being used properly as a means for safe and efficient use of bicycles inside the city.



Figure 8. Cycleway in Ekamai Road. Source: Carlos F. Pardo

Also, some portions of the Ekamai cycleway have been destined for other uses, and it is not clear if this is a sidewalk or a cycleway (see Figure 8). Also, it poses a very dangerous option for bicycle riders who have little expertise riding the vehicle. It is therefore a very limited infrastructure in terms of functionality.



Figure 9. Cycleway in Ekamai Road with little or no space for bicycles. Source: Carlos F. Pardo

The second example of a cycleway in Bangkok is also very discouraging. It is a 2-km stretch starting from the corner of Lumpini Park (wireless road) and arriving at Sukhumvit Soi 10. Though the cycleway has the same width as a two-lane road (e.g. around 5 meters wide), it has two main problems: its ramps and its accessibility to other places in the city.

First of all, the access ramps to the cycleway make it virtually impossible to start riding the cycleway. Its 35 steps in a very steep gradient (see Figure 10) shows that even an experienced bicycle rider is not able to ride up the access ramp. Also, when trying to walk up the ramp with the bicycle on one side, it poses a very difficult task for users. It is also not the only ramp throughout the cycleway. Along the 2 km ride, there are 6 different ramps with a similar steepness and difficulty to cross. This discourages the use of bicycles completely, to the extent that very few people ride the cycleway (on a weekend at 10am, no more than 4 people use the cycleway).



Figure 10. Cycleway starting from Wireless Road, at the corner of Lumpini Park.
Source: Carlos F. Pardo

The second great obstacle to using the cycleway is its lack of access to any place other than the entry and exit points. The cycleway has been designed with the same mindset as highways (see Figure 11), where there is little or no access to the cycleway and it seems to be designed for very long distance trips that have only one purpose. The fact that this cycleway has very limited access also makes it very dangerous for users, since it is very easy for a burglar to take a bicycle from anyone who is on the cycleway (e.g. there is no way of “escaping” into any street). In terms of these two obstacles, the cycleway is almost unusable for transportation purposes, and poses a very difficult problem in terms of the “image” of cycleways in the city (to be discussed below). From unconfirmed sources, it seems that the second cycleway mentioned here will be torn down as a result of lack of use.



Figure 11. Highway-like cycleway in Wireless Road, near Sukhumvit Soi 10. Source: Carlos F. Pardo

5 CONCLUSIONS

With the previous examples, it is clear that Bangkok has somehow addressed the problem of sustainable transport, but this address has not been in the most proper manner. There are various problems that make it very difficult for them to implement a coherent policy of nonmotorised transport in their city, mainly due to the fact that there is a very limited comprehension of what “sustainable transport means”.

First of all, it should be understood that any policy objective, such as developing cycleways to increase bicycle use, should always be strongly supported by technical arguments while implementing it. For instance, cycleways should be built with the clear intention to improve access and safety of bicycle users, who have different needs than those of car users. Also, designing cycleways should not be understood as a “scaled model” of a highway. The high quality of a nonmotorised infrastructure is not due to its width or level of segregation. It should be designed as a highly accesible and safe infrastructure.

In the case of Bangkok’s cycleways, its design and the places where they have been built have reinforced the lack of use of this infrastructure, thus giving way for policymakers to argue that cycleways have been built but still no one uses them, hence they are not needed in this city. It is a negative spiral where bad planning and implementation leads to miscomprehension, that will lead in turn to worse planning, and so on. In the case of the walking streets, both Khao San and Rambuttri are filled with pedestrians, but the lack of planning for a strict policy on motorised vehicle use in these streets turns the infrastructure into an ambiguous setting in which users are not sure what they should do (“should I walk on the street or on the sidewalk?”, “should I drive through the street or around it?”). Though the infrastructure seems

clearly intended for nonmotorised use, there is no clear policy as to who is the priority user in these areas.

Also, it is very important to see that most of these examples were developed for intentions different from the ones that they have been proposed. When international agencies have suggested Bangkok Administration to develop cycleways or pedestrian areas, they may have been understood as infrastructure for some recreational users or tourists, and thus designed this way. Also, when Bangkok was told that they needed space for pedestrians, they concluded that they had to develop a new space for them on a second-floor infrastructure (the skywalk), rather than redistributing road space for pedestrians and cars into a more sustainable system. Also, the skywalk was developed with a clear intention to increase commerce in the area, but there was little attention paid to all pedestrian use.

In conclusion, Bangkok municipal administration does not have a clear understanding of the goals of sustainable transport and promoting nonmotorised use of their infrastructure. The superficial (and high cost) implementation that has been developed has not addressed the key issues that should be addressed, and has resulted in a very expensive group of ill-designed infrastructure, which in turn would reinforce the wrong idea that cars are the key vehicle in a city.