

# Seen from the Street: Manila and Bangkok

By **A. Lin Neumann**  
and **Kavi Chongkittavorn**

**Southeast Asia is home to some of Asia's most colorful cities, and Manila and Bangkok stand out as two examples that attract, intrigue and sometimes repel residents and visitors alike.**

**Veteran journalists A. Lin Neumann and Kavi Chongkittavorn provide on-the-ground snapshots of these two sprawling metropolises and how they've changed over the years.**

## **Manila: Loving a City that Might Have Been** By **A. Lin Neumann**

WITH MORE THAN 10 MILLION PEOPLE, Metro Manila is the sixth largest city in Asia, a sprawling mega-city that perhaps more than any other in Southeast Asia has become a symbol of urban chaos, mismanagement and decay. Anyone familiar with the city knows about its gated compounds for the wealthy in protected suburbs surrounded by squalid squatter settlements. Manila Bay, once a jewel of a harbor, is these days usually shrouded from view by clouds of dense air pollution. The longstanding and painful fact that thousands of people live atop garbage dumps in parts of the metropolis as they eke out a living from smoldering trash heaps is a poignant reminder of the city's failure to manage its explosive growth.

I have lived at various times in Manila over the course of some 30 years. And it was always this way. A jumble of painful neglect punctuated by liveliness inspired, one imagines, by the need of its residents simply to survive. I admire the tiny shops that spring up selling roast chicken or repairing flat tires for a few pesos, but while other Asian cities have become hubs of progress, Manila has gone from being the cosmopolitan heart of Southeast Asia in the

1950s to being a place often feared and loathed by both travelers and residents. But I like it. No, I love it, not because it glitters with efficiency like Singapore or is finding a way to cope with the messiness of massive growth to build a new urban landscape like modern Bangkok. I love it because its citizens persevere with such good humor despite a lack of urban planning, the abandonment of most of what must have once been elegant about the city's public spaces and the fact that it is hard to imagine Manila ever getting much better.

The broad avenues that once traversed the city with a certain grace now seem a distant memory. Not too many years ago, Roxas Boulevard along Manila Bay was a picturesque and sweeping avenue before it lost most of its view of the water to reclaimed land projects at the same time that many of the stately structures on the land side of the boulevard decayed from neglect. Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, or EDSA, where the four-day People Power revolt against then President Ferdinand Marcos unfolded in 1986, is now a nightmarish collection of grey concrete overpasses, fuming buses and gnarled traffic. When I was there in 1986 it was still possible to walk along the highway; none but the foolish would dare do so today. The Pasig River, which empties into the bay and was the reason Manila was founded there centuries ago, was the heart of transport and development until World War II. It has long been abandoned by both business and the wealthy and is now considered biologically dead; the smell of decay rising from its blackened waters in the dry season can be overpowering. In the rainy season, its many tributaries and creeks, long blocked by chaotic development and lined with squatter shanties, are unable to drain properly, and flooding is a constant problem.

But coming here more than 30 years ago fresh out of university and with little money in my pocket, I learned the contours of this remarkable mess of a city from the backs of jeepneys, the inside of chaotic buses and on foot. I would walk from Taft Avenue in the Malate district near Manila Bay toward the old downtown

district of Quiapo along the Pasig River, where even today one can still make out the remnants of what the country's second colonial conqueror, the United States, had in mind for what was then a quaint, semi-rural Spanish-colonial city.

Putting aside the wisdom of America's colonial adventure in Asia more than a hundred years ago, it is still remarkable — and now somehow tragic — to consider the master plan for Manila conceived by Daniel Burnham, the famed Chicago architect who rebuilt Chicago after

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the great fire of 1871. Few people today know it, but Burnham designed a plan for Manila with grand boulevards, green spaces and neo-classical architecture, only a fraction of which was ever built.

I still marvel at the grand open space of Manila's Plaza Lawton near the Pasig River (now called Liwasang Bonifacio) and the central post office, which was intended to be the end point of Taft Avenue, a street once lined with massive acacia trees for several kilometers from the post office to the boundary with Pasay City to the south. Designed in classical style by Filipino architect Juan Arellano in 1934, the post office is still there and still wonderful, even if it is surrounded on all sides by traffic and fumes. The acacia trees are, of course, long gone and Taft Avenue has been largely left to decay in the shadow of the city's light rail transport system.

Near the central post office, a bus terminal obscures the view of the abandoned Manila Metropolitan Theater, another of Arellano's architectural jewels. Built in 1935 as an art-deco showpiece with gilded statues, grillwork of birds of paradise and stained glass, it was rebuilt after being destroyed in World War II. For decades it drew crowds when the center of Manila life was on the Escolta, the once-posh downtown shopping district that in the 1950s still drew shoppers from Singapore and Hong Kong for the quality and style of its stores. Imelda Marcos renovated the theater in the 1980s but it soon fell into disrepair, largely because potential paying customers more accustomed to a night out at five-star hotels in Makati considered the neighborhood inconvenient. It was closed in 1996 and successive government plans to reopen it or turn it into a museum have yet to bear fruit.

Other echoes of what might have been remain, such as the Mehan Garden, a former botanical garden during the Spanish colonial period that was a public park until it was abandoned to decay and controversy in the 1960s. Paco Park, a tiny circle of greenery in old Manila was a cemetery during the Spanish period and is now an oasis of greenery and one of the few quiet places in the city. Rizal Park, long the city's only real public park and the site of the execution by the Spanish of national hero Jose Rizal in 1896, remains. When I lived in the area, I enjoyed long walks in the park despite warnings from Filipino friends who feared it was unsafe because of the crowds of beggars and squatters.

The nadir of the city's senseless decay was the demolition in 2000 of the Manila Jai Alai Stadium on Taft Avenue to make way for a municipal courthouse that was never built. American architect Welton Becket, who also designed the original Los Angeles airport and many homes for Hollywood stars, designed the four-story Jai Alai building. Opened in 1940, the Manila Jai Alai's glistening, cylindrical glass front was supposed to evoke the velocity of the Basque game after which it was named, and that was once a craze in Manila. Adjacent to the old Congress building, Jai Alai's Sky Room was *the*

place to see and be seen in its day and walking by the abandoned structure years ago it seemed to me like one of those magical buildings like the Raffle's Hotel in Singapore that captures an entire era. A spirited campaign to save the building was ignored by former Manila Mayor Lito Atienza, who decried the structure as a reminder of gambling and other vices, despite the presence of numerous government-owned casinos in the city. John L. Silva, a member of Manila's small network of preservationists, told *Asiaweek* magazine at the time: "Every time we tear down an old structure, particularly one that resonates with history and milestones, we as a people lose another marker that explains who we are as a nation, where we came from and where we are going."

The former national Congress building, the abandoned Manila City Hall and a handful of other neo-classical structures from the Burnham plan still remain near the end of Taft Avenue, but the area is no longer a destination for government activity or much of anything else except chaotic traffic, and few people visit the structures.

What lingers is a reminder of what might have been had the commonwealth administration of President Manuel L. Quezon not scuttled the Burnham plan in the 1930s. Burnham envisioned a capital city of grand parks and buildings that would become the heart of the capital, with neighborhoods fanning out from the center near the bay. Quezon instead opted to move the seat of government to a city he created in his own name in what was then rural land far north of Manila. Ever since the creation of Quezon City, what became Metro Manila has gradually lost its heart, becoming like Los Angeles without the infrastructure.

While the charm of the city now lies in its interior spaces and oddball gems, like the scenes of penitents marching up the aisle of Quiapo church on their knees in search of salvation, the overall effect of total decentralization has been a mess. Quezon City never became a proper capital and its national government buildings are poorly maintained. The Presidential Palace remains in

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old Manila. The House of Representatives is in Quezon City and the Senate is stuck on an out-of-the-way piece of reclaimed land in Manila Bay. It can take an hour or more to drive between the two legislative bodies.

After the destruction of World War II, the center of commerce and business gradually moved to the vast property development that became Makati, a brilliant plan hatched by the Ayala family to transfer the wealth of the city to an entirely new series of communities. The gated “villages” of Makati isolated the wealthy from the chaos of the urban landscape and allowed for the construction of an efficiently run commercial hub under the control of the Ayala Corporation. I suspect that the truly powerful, rarely forced to see the steady decay of the metropolis, easily put it out of mind.

Meanwhile, governance was in the hands of the 17 cities and municipalities that now make up Metro Manila. Attempts to manage the sprawl through a central authority have been hampered by political rivalries and bureaucratic infighting. The current central body, the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA), has no control over water systems, taxation or public transport. “The central government controls the financing, construction, and maintenance of roads and bridges. MMDA is in charge of garbage disposal but provinces and municipalities will not allow it to set up sanitary landfills or dumps within their territories,” according to a report by the Asian Development Bank, *Managing Asian Cities*, released in June 2008. The result, a portion of the

report concludes, is a “disjointed and fragmented setup [that] also abets parochial behavior and negates the agglomeration benefits of effective metropolitan governance.”

In other words, no one is in charge. That leaves a lot of quiriness and pluck to admire, but it also puts Manila and its environs near the bottom of the heap in terms of livability. Me? I plan to retire there. How to explain love?

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# Bicycling in Bangkok: The City is Improving By Kavi Chongkittavorn

I REMEMBER FEBRUARY 16, 1986 vividly. My bike got stuck in the steel drainage system along Sukhumvit Road in front of Soi 33. I suffered a slight cut on my forehead from my fall because I did not have my helmet on. I was trying to avoid a mammoth public bus that had been chasing me for five minutes with a loud horn. What could I say? Bangkok was decidedly unfriendly to bicycles.

In the city's car-only streets, unruly traffic was the biggest threat to the lives of bikers and pedestrians. Bangkok, popularly known here as the City of Angels, was in 1986, to me at least, the Biker's Nightmare. For nearly six years, I negotiated my way by bike through Sukhumvit and its small alleys back and forth from office to home at my own peril. My insurance company, not to mention my wife, begged me to stop. But I had no choice. I hated cars.

Two decades ago, Bangkok seemed to be the most hostile city in the world for bikers. Once you were on Bangkok's streets, your life was hanging by a thread. You had to be quick and heartless, ready to break traffic rules, especially numerous red lights. To survive, you devised your own rules. Once you rode past one car, you could not look behind you because of the cars in front of you. Along Sukhumvit Road, I pedaled on the side of the incoming traffic just because the road there was a bit smoother.

It was a stressful ride. Once you were on your bike, you could not stop for coffee or ponder the upcoming day. There were no resting places along the way. If you stopped, you might choke to death on the air pollution. That was long be-

fore the constant headlines and public alarm over the calamity caused by climate change. At that time, oil cost a mere \$18 a barrel, a far cry from the current \$120. Few Bangkokians dared to use a bicycle regularly, and at one time some called me the Journalist on the Bike.

After a 15-year sabbatical from the two-wheeler, I recently returned to my mountain bike and retraced my old route on a nostalgic ride. I biked along Sukhumvit Road, still the city main's artery, as I did before my office moved to the suburbs. It is much different now.

Two months ago, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration opened a 1.2-meter-wide bike lane in the heart of Bangkok's business center linking Sathorn Road to Rama IV Road. The news was well received, as it came at a time of high oil prices and the government's urgent call to save energy. But for me, even Sukhumvit, which still has no bike lane, was surprisingly pleasant. I found car congestion on the road was reduced and the level of air pollution bearable. Another important improvement is the lower level of small dust particles. The city's improved infrastructure put in place in recent years - the above-ground Skytrain and a subway - have reduced traffic jams.

Bangkok is also greener today than ever before. A total of about 800 hectares of greenery has been added to the city, with seven new parks, both small and medium-sized, created throughout the metropolitan area. The city's four-year-old greening scheme was one of the campaign pledges of current Bangkok governor Apirak Kosayodhin, who is seeking a second

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term. The city's drivers today also seem to have improved their driving manners and they are more considerate towards bikers. The municipal authorities have been educating drivers on the rights of bicyclists, even making bike safety a question on the driver's licensing exam. In coming years, the BMA plans to add more bike lanes throughout Bangkok — something I dreamed of long ago. With the prospect of more people pedaling through the city, I feel liberated.

These days, biking along Sukhumvit on the weekend, I can stop for a cup of coffee and read the morning newspapers at Soi Prompong or Soi Thong Lor. My favorite coffee stopover, Baan Rai, is located at the corner of Soi Ekkamai and Sukhumvit, a notorious intersection capable of slowing the entire city's traffic to a snail's pace. Now, Bangkok's traffic bottleneck has been transformed into a more dynamic commercial

center. The once-chaotic Ekkamai bus terminal, popular among budget travelers going to Pattaya and points south, has been renovated and improved. Residents in the area can sit out in the open mini-garden sipping coffee without fear of succumbing to air pollution. Like other Asian cities, gourmet coffee shops are everywhere. Baan Rai, a local franchised café, offers a full range of coffee from growers in northern Thailand at about half the price of expensive international coffee franchises.

After coffee, one can bike to the multi-billion baht Thailand Creative & Design Center on Sukhumvit Soi 25 on the 7<sup>th</sup> Floor of the Emporium Shopping Mall for the latest design exhibition. It is my regular hangout because the air-conditioning is cool and the reading materials are up to-date. Last month, my list of favorite places in the city grew to include the newly built Bangkok Art & Culture Center at the busy Pathumwan intersection near Siam Square. An ongoing international short films festival there is a magnet for young people who otherwise would be loitering around the many nearby shopping arcades. City officials have boasted repeatedly that Bangkok can one day rival great cities like London, New York, Paris and Tokyo. Maybe Bangkok *can* be the hub of the new Asia.

Bangkok is more sophisticated today than ever before, its people are more affluent and want a living environment that is friendly, clean and green. They demand an active art and cultural life to go with their affluence and the progress we have made.

And with additional bike lanes, Bangkok is now my kind of city.

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