



## BANGKOK (KRUP THEP MANAKHON): CITY OF ANGELS EAST



**WAR ON THE DREAM:**  
**How Anti-Sprawl Policy Threatens the Quality of Life**  
 By Wendell Cox

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Summary and Chapter Titles: <http://www.demographia.com/wod1.pdf>

DATA: 2005		Similar To
Metropolitan Area (Labor Market) Population (1)	11,300,000	Beijing
Urban Area Population	8,000,000	Chicago, Nagoya
Urban Land Area: Square Miles (2)	600	London, Montreal, Sydney, Rio de Janeiro, Cairo, Manila
Urban Land Area: Square Kilometers (2)	1,550	
Population per Square Mile	13,300	Tokyo-Yokohama, Buenos Aires, Beijing, London, Jakarta, Moscow
Population per Square Kilometer	5,150	
(1) Bangkok metropolis, Samut Praken, Nonthaburi, Pahum Thani, Nakhon Pathan and Samut Sakhon		
(2) Continuously built up area, portions of which are in each of the above		

20 November 2006

Bangkok, or Krung Thep Manakhon, is known as the city of angels. It has much in common with Los Angeles, also known as the city of angels. It begins with decentralization.

### The Urban Form: Decentralization

East and south Asian urban areas are known for their decentralization. Their general pattern of large Asian urban areas is a broad dispersion of high-rise buildings virtually throughout the urban area, with the notable exceptions of those ultimate exceptions Hong Kong and Singapore. The large Japanese urban areas exhibit this trend to a lesser degree than the urban areas of the Asian continent. Bangkok may be the ultimate in Asian decentralization.

Bangkok ranks as one of the world's 30 largest urban areas, with 8 million residents. It is growing, like other middle and low-income world urban areas as people continue to seek the economic opportunities of the city and forsake the poverty of rural areas. Yet, Bangkok's growth is nowhere near as strong as places like Lagos or Delhi. Nonetheless, Bangkok seems likely to achieve the rank of megacity by 2025, by adding reaching a population of 10 million.

The population of the Bangkok urban area is also well dispersed, but dense. The urban population density is approximately 13,000, not quite double the density of the western city of angels, Los Angeles urban area and approximately 50 percent greater than the Paris urban area. . However, the development pattern is different. Paris has a highly concentrated and small core, which lends itself to the best possible service by public transport. The Bangkok core, however, is not as dense as the Paris core. It has, however, a much larger area of high density, which makes the traffic congestion and air pollution challenges greater (below). That Thailand traffic drives on the left is a good reason for relying on drivers and taxicabs.

The core of Bangkok is really many cores, even more so that the urban areas famous for multiple cores, such as Los Angeles and Atlanta. Large office buildings will be found in at least five large business centers, or simply by themselves elsewhere in the urban area. The core is particularly large, perhaps 100 square miles (160 square kilometers). Western urban areas tend to have much more concentrated cores, often with intense development over an area of less than one square mile (three square kilometers). Bangkok's core is far larger, though the density of development over the larger area is less.

The large centers, however, are generally unlike the central business districts of western urban areas, with a mixture of low rise and high rise development. Thus, the Bangkok business centers tend to have lower employment densities than urban areas with more concentrated business districts, such as Hong Kong, New York and Chicago. The tallest building, at 85 floors, stands out by itself some distance away from any other major office building. Some of the cores are served by the rail transit system and some, including what appears to be the largest, are not.

Beyond the dense cores there are lower, but still high, density developments, which also include high-rise buildings. Most buildings are multi-story apartment and condominium buildings. No shantytowns were observed, nor any large expanse of informal housing. However, much of the housing stock is in buildings of up to five stories that have a derelict appearance, rather like some of the older sections of Singapore. Single family detached and attached housing will be found in the suburbs (below).

### **Prosperous Capital of a Middle-Income Nation**

Bangkok is the capital of Thailand, an emerging economy that has achieved middle-income status. Indeed, Bangkok has a look of prosperity that is not so evident in other middle-income urban areas, such as Istanbul, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires. There is construction all around, public and private.

Days before our visit, Bangkok's new international airport opened (Suvarnabhumi Airport), looking like a futuristic combination of Shanghai's Pudong and Washington's Dulles. At the same time and typical for a middle-income urban area, there are a number of uncompleted projects throughout the urban area, such as residential buildings that have been abandoned in mid-construction. Some of these projects rise to 40 or more stories, one a residential tower in the largest core area and the other another along the Bang Na highway leading out of the city to the east.

Nonetheless, there is much more construction being completed. Major office buildings and residential buildings are under construction. There is major roadway construction and the city's Skytrain elevated mass transit system is being extended to the new airport.

## **Mass Transit**

The urban area's most intense mass-transit is the Skytrain elevated rail system, which operates in the middle of major streets. It is not unusual to see streets clogged with barely moving traffic immediately below the elevated train line. The system was opened in 1999 and is still carrying 30 percent fewer riders than had been projected. There are two lines in operation. An underground metro line opened in more recent years. Between the two systems, approximately 600,000 passenger journeys are made on a daily basis. This represents approximately three percent of the daily passenger trips in the urban area.

Major residential and commercial buildings have been built adjacent to Skytrain stations. However, some of the most intense development in the urban area is well beyond the catchment area of either Skytrain or the metro. Virtually all major buildings near the stations have ample parking. New residential buildings continue to be built adjacent to the stations, sometimes providing 10 or more floors of parking for their residents.

The *Bangkok Post* reports that there are plans to expand the rapid transit system from its current combined length of 44 kilometers to nearly 300. Perhaps predictably, there are projections that the ultimate system will carry nearly 5 million rides perhaps. More realistically, the usual rule of thumb is likely to prevail --- that perhaps one-half as many riders will materialize, while costs will at least double, complicating the potential for completing the expansions.

Skytrain's physical structure is overwhelming and literally ruins the street environments on which it operates. The stations are particularly ponderous, though not as much so as the Delhi Metro's. Like so many of the world's public transport systems, some of the Skytrain vehicles have been wrapped in advertising, in the author's view demonstrating a contempt for customers. Industry insiders claim that the advertising does not obstruct vision --- not true. Worse, perhaps, the advertising makes it impossible for customers to see the internal environment of a train or bus, which could be of some concern in a high-crime area.

**Rejecting Skytrain: The Parking Expansion:** At the same time, Bangkok continues to build the infrastructure of automobility. New condominium and office buildings adjacent to Skytrain stations have generous allotments of parking. Up to 13 stories of parking were observed at buildings adjacent to Skytrain stations. It is important to note that these are not park and ride facilities. They are generally located in the core, where people live or work. The use of the parking is wholly unrelated to Skytrain or mass transit. People are driving their cars to work, despite the existence of Skytrain, or they keep cars at their condominiums despite Skytrain. The fact that considerable construction activity continues, including these large parking garages, is testimony to the limited mobility options a system like Skytrain is able to handle. It continues to operate at well below its projections, yet people continue to use cars, where they can afford them.

All of this is not to suggest that there are not park and ride lots on Skytrain. There is a large lot at the northern terminus, similar to park and ride lots that will be found associated with Metros around the world. This illustrates the role that, expensive though it is, new urban rail routinely provides in supplementing the automobile-based transportation systems that pervade modern urban areas, from the high-income world to the middle-income and low-income world. Such systems would be far more effective if their geographical extent were more limited and they were designed with more lines with the purpose of intercepting car travel nearer central business districts.

**Other Mass Transit:** Bangkok has other forms of mass transit. There is an abundance of conventional taxis. Tuk-tuks (auto rickshaws) are also available except in the core area. Finally, there are the motorcycle taxis, which have a particular advantage in being able to weave around and through the stalled traffic so often clogging Bangkok's streets.

Skytrain, with its elevation, provides a marvelous means for touring the central parts of the urban area. The metro is less attractive, given that the view from a metro car is little different in Bangkok than Paris or Baltimore. Your author tried all of the modes of transport except for metro for this reason.

### **Freeways and Traffic**

Bangkok has a reputation for having some of the world's worst traffic congestion. This is not surprising, given the comparatively high density of the dispersed core and the fact that people tend to purchase cars as quickly as they can afford them (or sooner). Bangkok provides some of the best international images of why mass transit fails to reduce traffic congestion. One way that local officials attempt to maximize traffic flow is with some of the longest traffic signal intervals imaginable. While I did not time them, some intervals at the busiest intersections seemed at least three minutes long, just for a single direction of traffic to flow.

Like Los Angeles, Bangkok has freeways. Indeed, some of them are wider than the freeways of Los Angeles. For example, the Bang Na highway has 20 lanes in some segments, with eight main lanes, six frontage road lanes and an impressive second deck of six lanes supported by pillars in the median of the freeway. This may be the world's widest freeway, at least until the 22 lanes of Houston's Katy Freeway are finished.

### **Traffic Congestion and Pollution**

There are the usual claims that the mass transit system has reduced traffic congestion. There is also the usual lack of hard data on the subject. If Bangkok's traffic congestion is better than it was before Skytrain or Metro, then the difference is probably not worth noting.

Bangkok faces the same intractable traffic and air pollution problems as exist in other large urban areas with relatively high density. Despite the claims of urban rail advocates, it is clear that there is far more demand for road space than exists. This will only get worse as Bangkok becomes more prosperous and travel demand increases (along with economic activity). The result will be even worse air pollution and traffic congestion.

Unpopular as it may be among urban planners, the hope of Bangkok and other highly dense large urban areas is dispersion. It involves reducing core densities, which is the only reliable way to reduce travel demand. This does not mean that the large and dispersed core of Bangkok needs to be reduced to suburban Portland densities. It does mean, however, that, Bangkok will function better in the long run if its core densities are generally lower, with more of the population living in automobile oriented land use patterns on the periphery. The urban form, for example, of Paris works quite well, with very high density in a small core and automobile oriented development surrounding it. The smaller Paris core and the Paris area in general have air pollution problems, but far less than in Bangkok. Bangkok does not have the luxury of the small, intense core. Bangkok might also gain from converting commercial vehicles, buses and auto rickshaws to compressed natural gas (CNG), which would reduce motor vehicle based air pollution.

### **The Thai Dream**

Bangkok has many new single family detached and townhouse housing developments. These are detailed in a substantial weekly publication. There is a large concentration of this new housing along the ring road to the west of the new airport. Virtually all of the detached housing developments are gated, as are some of the town house developments. There is a plethora of signs along the roadways in this area, directing new homebuyers to the developments.

## URBAN TOURS BY RENTAL CAR: ABOUT THE SERIES

*Urban Tours by Rental Car* offers perspectives on urban development obtained by automobile tours through urban areas. Rental cars are not the favored method for visiting cities, especially those outside one's own country. Instead, tourists and urban planners favor packaged tours or local public transport systems. Both are splendid ways for seeing the city as it used to be --- the very reason for most tourist visits. The historical core areas contain monuments, prime government and religious edifices and quaint neighborhoods that are often centuries old. This is particularly important to tourists from the newer urban areas of the American, Canadian or Australian West, where history extends not far before World War II. It is further understandable that few tourists travel thousands of miles to see the newer suburban areas that look very much like home. But most tourists do not profess to be students of the urban area.

For the urban planner interested in understanding the whole urban area, it is not enough to study the core alone, regardless of its architectural attractiveness, romanticism, history or affirmation of an individually preferred life style. No one, regardless of the depth of their education can develop reliable conceptions from an unrepresentative sample, and urban cores are the very essence of unrepresentative samples. Both public transport and packaged tours miss the larger part --- the expanse of sprawling residential and business development that rings virtually all major urban areas. They may be of little interest to many urban planners, but they should be.

Stripping away regional architectural facades, one might as well be in the suburbs of Phoenix, Portland, Perth or Paris. Here, the automobile is king, because no public transport system has been developed that can effectively serve destinations outside the core (at least at a price any society can afford). While public transport market shares are higher in European suburban areas than in the New World, much of the difference is attributable to lower incomes and less automobile access. Indeed, public transport's principal weakness, lack of automobile competitiveness, is itself a contributing factor to the rising motorization occurring from the suburbs of Copenhagen and Nagoya to the suburbs of Lagos and Mumbai. To oversimplify this phenomenon as being a "love affair with the automobile" is the equivalent of saying that Singaporeans or Brazilians have a love affair with air conditioning. Human beings prefer comfort to discomfort and they prefer free time to time over which they have no control.

It is no wonder that tourists return to the United States thinking that all Paris looks like the second arrondissement (less than one percent does) and that urban planners think all of Milan looks like the architectural treasures that surround the Cathedral. In fact, the sprawling suburbs of Europe, Japan, Canada and Connecticut resemble one another in many ways. For any seeking to study the urban area in its entirety --- not just the favored haunts of core-dwelling elites --- there is no alternative to "getting behind the wheel." Thus, "urban tours by rental car."

<http://www.rentalcartours.net>

<http://www.demographia.com>

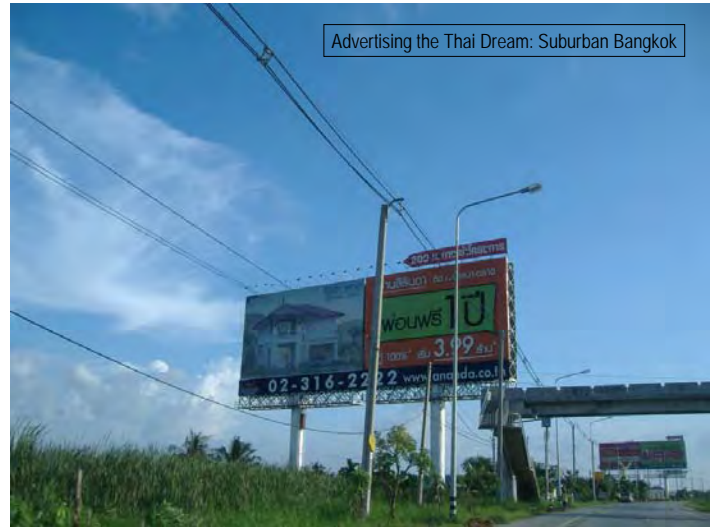
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Advertising the Thai Dream: Suburban Bangkok



Advertising the Thai Dream: Suburban Bangkok



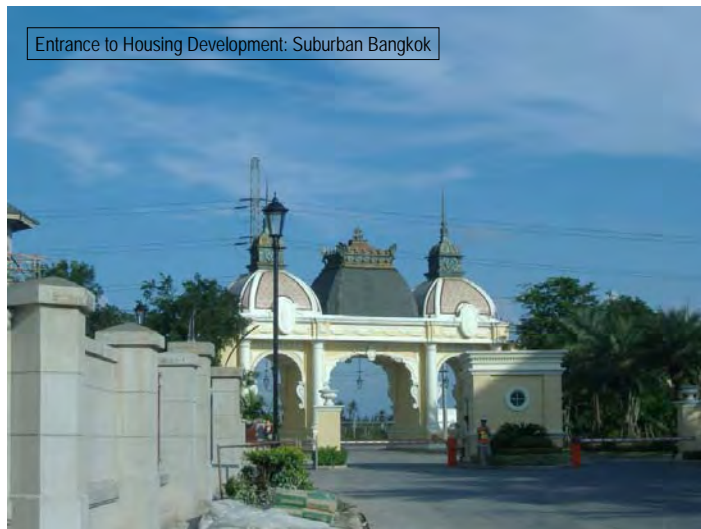
Advertising the Thai Dream: Suburban Bangkok



The Thai Dream: Suburban Bangkok



Entrance to Housing Development: Suburban Bangkok



Entrance to Housing Development: Suburban Bangkok







Detached Housing: Suburban Bangkok



Detached Housing: Suburban Bangkok



Detached Housing: Suburban Bangkok



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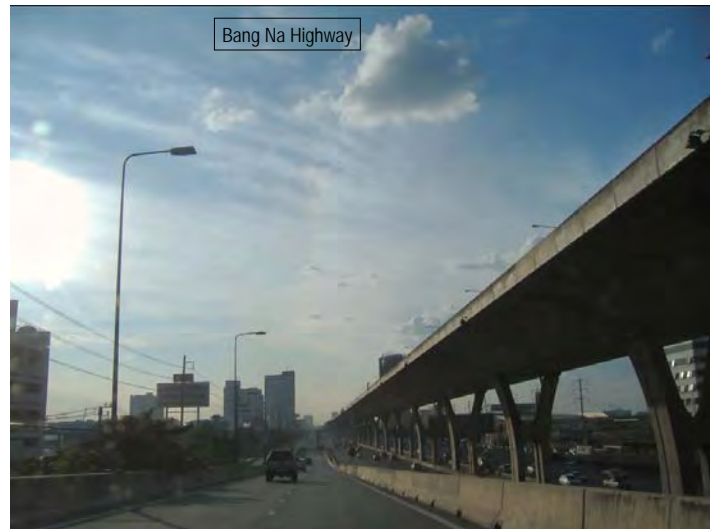
Bang Na Highway



Bang Na Highway



Bang Na Highway



Bang Na Highway



From an Auto Rickshaw



Office Parking Near Skytrain Station





Resident  
Parking  
Near  
Skytrain  
Station





Parking Adjacent to Skytrain



Park & Ride: North Terminal of Skytrain



Central Bangkok



Central Bangkok



Central Bangkok



Central Bangkok





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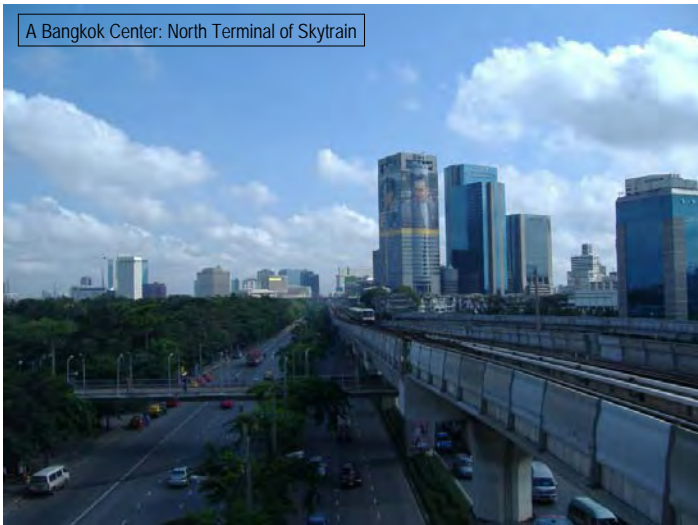




Central Bangkok



Older Residences: Central Bangkok



A Bangkok Center: North Terminal of Skytrain



Central Bangkok



Condominiums: Central Bangkok



Skytrain & Traffic









Central Bangkok



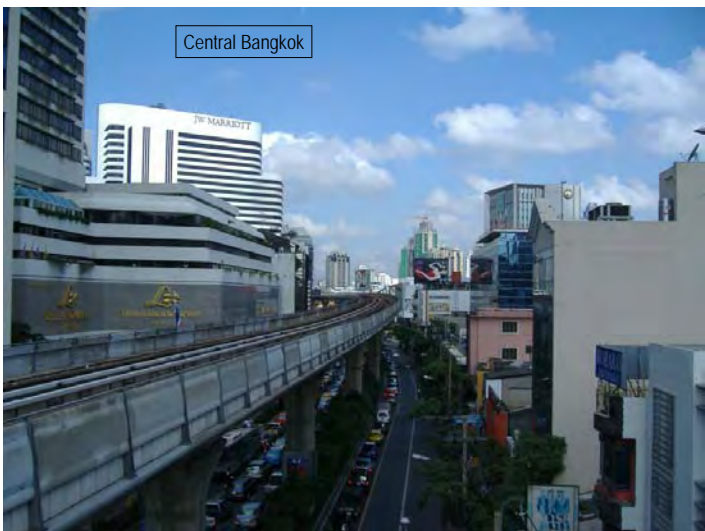
Central Bangkok



Central Bangkok: 85 Floors  
Baiyoke Tower II



Central Bangkok



Central Bangkok



Traffic & Skytrain





Central Bangkok Traffic



Central Bangkok



Central Bangkok



Central Bangkok



Skytrain Station



Skytrain Station



Abandoned Building Site at Skytrain Station



Skytrain Environment



Skytrain Station from the Street



Skytrain Environment



Skytrain Environment



Skytrain Environment







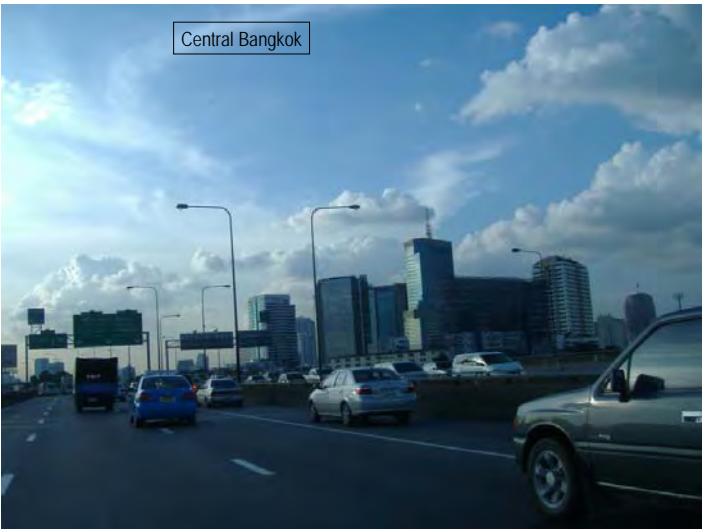
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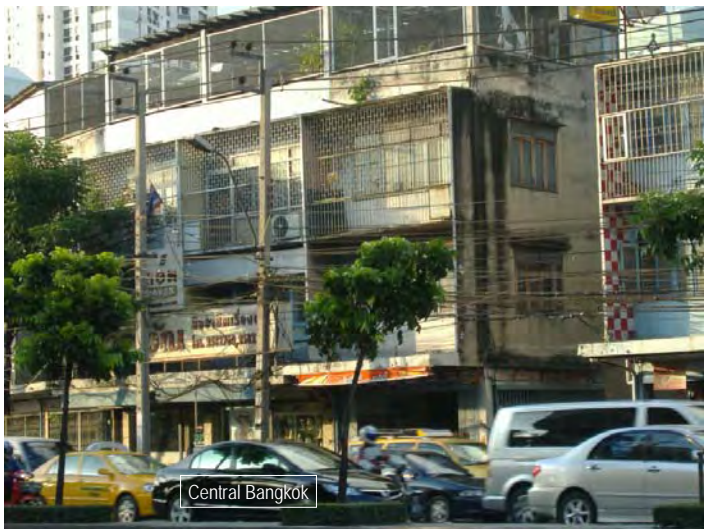
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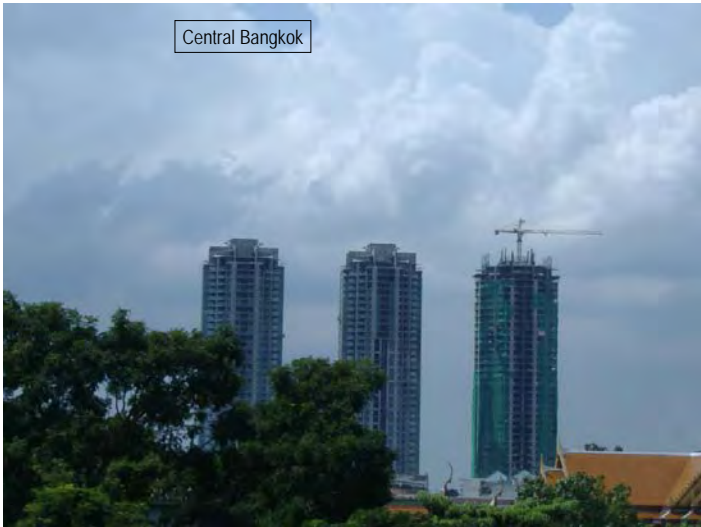


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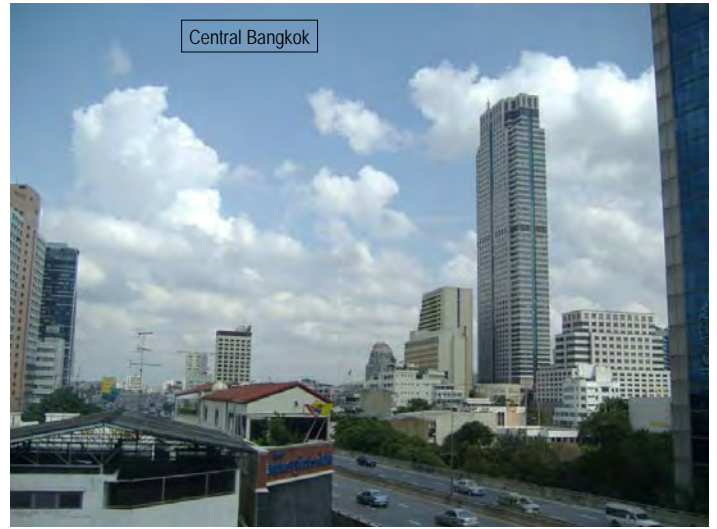
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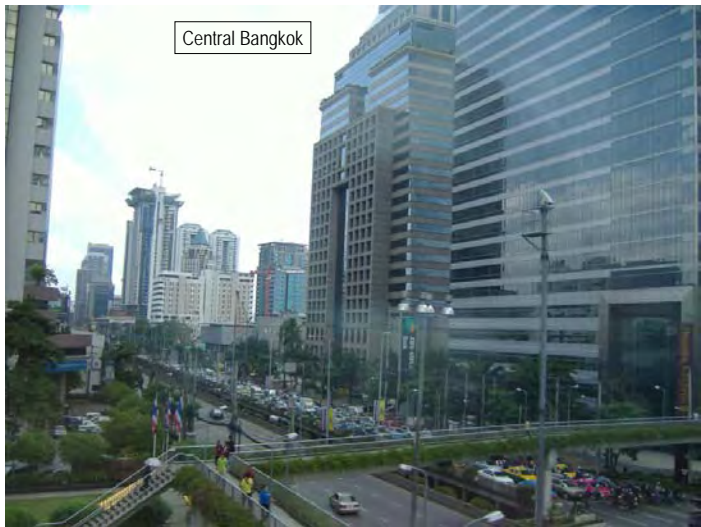
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