

Places *of* Pigeons *and* Prosperity:

South Philadelphia / Charoen Krung

by Camille Moreno

Introduction, Etymology, and Nascence

This essay presents a comparative analysis of the civic and architectural development of two different cultural districts: South Philadelphia, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Charoen Krung Road of Bangkok. Located over 8,700 miles from one another as the crow flies, these two districts rose out of systemically different conditions and through different policies despite sharing an original catalyst of development: foreign influence. This catalyst is due in part to both areas being waterfront sites that naturally attracted migrants through international passage, trade, and subsequent jobs. Despite their similarities, the two districts contrast in their growth framework. South Philadelphia's development exemplifies a "natural" cultural district, whose narrative qualifies as ground-up, whereas growth of Charoen Krung Road and surrounding area has been predominantly policy-led, embodying top-down district development. South Philadelphia is located in the Northeast United States between New York City and Washington, DC, and Charoen Krung Road in Thailand, in the heart of Southeast Asia. In their early states, both South Philadelphia and Charoen Krung Road possessed preexisting assets that qualified them as candidates for becoming cultural districts, such as "fine urban grain, walkability, diversity, variety, iconic landmarks, [and] multicultural architecture."¹ Other attractions, such as historical or cultural tourism, share fewer systemic traits.

Philadelphia's earliest known inhabitants, the Lenni Lenape Native Americans, named South Philadelphia *Moyamensing*, which translates as "place of pigeon droppings". The now extinct passenger pigeon (commercially exploited by white settlers for meat and shooting) was said to have blanketed the sky, leaving behind thick layers of excrement after nesting, rendering the area largely uninhabitable.² The chosen name may reflect a literal description of what the tribe observed, but analysis reveals conflicting symbolic significance between colonial and native totemic interpretations of the animal as either "profane dirty pests or sacred doves of peace."³ Though the Lenape acknowledged their inability to directly cohabitate with such a quantity of pigeons, the compulsion to cull and develop the area was entirely colonial. Shooting of the pigeons for sport, starting in the early 1800s, can be interpreted as both "human dominion over the bountiful land" as well as puritanical "cycles of abuse and patriarchy".⁴ Clearing of the pigeons for agriculture can be read plainly as waste management or metaphorically as social cleansing, a breach of the new Western frontier, and the "rising national optimism growing out of a pioneer heritage and violent eradication of natives"⁵ – be they human or fowl. Whereas pigeon

¹ Rugkhapan, "Learn From," 1959.

² Scharf, "History," 130.

³ Song, "Pigeon Trouble," 143.

⁴ Song, "Pigeon Trouble," 143.

⁵ Bronner, "Contesting," 422.

populations generally follow increased urbanisation,⁶ in the case of South Philadelphia, incipient development first led to pigeon eradication.

Migrating the pigeon as symbolic entity to Asian culture, an interpretation can be found more closely related to the Native Americans'. Since the Sixth Dynasty, pigeons have remained a rich symbol in Buddhism, with an overall representation of prosperity.⁷ Ancient Chinese culture regards pigeons as symbols for “auspiciousness and beauty.”⁸ Approximately 95% of the Thai population practices Theravada Buddhism and Thailand has retained a strong Chinese influence for over 400 years. The symbol of prosperity can further be associated to the history of Charoen Krung District, whose name loosely translates as “prosperous city”. More specifically, Charoen Krung translates to either “new road” or “road of the prosperous city” and is home to Thailand's first paved road. It was built in 1862 during the reign of King Mongkut, Rama IV, following a petition of material demands by European expatriates living in Bangkok. While the suffix “Krung” is widely accepted as meaning “road”, the prefix “Charoen” is slightly more ambiguous.

The fourteenth century *Khmer* word “Charoen” means “cultivation and growth,” particularly of nonmaterial entities. Nineteenth-century evolution of the word denotes transformation, development, and evolution — particularly out of the past and into modernity,⁹ thus the notion of prosperity. Rama IV observed a swelling foreign population in the area, stating that “their countries had roads that made every village or town look orderly, pleasant and clean. Our country was greatly overgrown with grass or climbers; our pathways were but small or blind alleys; our larger pathways were dirty, muddy, or soiled, and unpleasant to look at.”¹⁰ Paving of the road, a corridor for commercial infrastructure, laid the groundwork for both material and immaterial evolution, serving as an emblem for modernity, foreign influence, and accessibility, despite the fact that Thailand was never externally colonised. The automobile was a strong representation of modernity and power,¹¹ and the Road initiated a shift in primary and leisure transport from water to land. With it followed the migration of populations from the riverside and canals into the landscape. Positioned on the river, Charoen Krung had already been ideal for merchant trade — a natural site for development — but pressure imposed by Europeans exacerbated trade expansion substantially.

Development

A parallel can be drawn between the initial development of both districts and a rearrangement, or ordination, of the environment. Particularly evident is a foreign abjection to dirt and waste, the management of which “constituted an important ingredient in the development of the modern

⁶ Uttara, “Urban”

⁷ Zhu, Zhang “Evolution”

⁸ Zhao “Cultural Connotations”

⁹ Winichakul “Quest for Siwali”

¹⁰ Wilson, “Bangkok,” 50.

¹¹ Chaloeontiarana “Through Racing,” 542.

industrial city.”¹² Advancement of both areas was instituted by hygienic organisation, or dirt/waste displacement, to accommodate foreign taste, cultivate industry, and furnish the greater “civilizing mission of empire.”¹³ By gleaning the pigeons and surfacing the road, methods of ordination were employed to achieve spatial betterment and sanitation. The areas were primed for Western-dominant value systems, demonstrating that “perceptions of hygiene and dirt have become metaphors for a wider concept of progress.”¹⁴ Such sociospatial markers distinguish the developed from the not developed, the urban from the suburban from the rural, and represent “underlying socio-cultural and psychological impulses driving the imposition of different conceptions of order and disorder on specific buildings, whole city districts, or urban conditions.”¹⁵

Civic grooming can be seen as a metaphor for a “Bangkok-centric vision of a contemporary Thailand, marking a break with the perceived dirt and associated disorder of 'uncivilised' rural existences.”¹⁶ Moreover, the function of public space within government policy has played a critical role in Thailand’s rapid development and contemporary urban landscape.¹⁷ Rama IV's administration was the first to introduce creative district initiatives by recruiting European experts into ministry as consultants for construction technologies and urban architectural development. This expansion led to the area along Charoen Krung Road emerging as the country's first modern district,¹⁸ prompting development of even more infrastructure, including more roads, buildings, bridges, and transportation outlets. Perceived as a *yan farang* or “Western district,” construction included foreign consulates, government offices, riverfront warehouses, and religious spaces.¹⁹ Rama went so far as to issue a royal decree that halted migration of ethnic Chinese from the north to allow for even more Europeans to settle.²⁰ The Road saw its first Western shop houses; plaster-wall bearing structures built with steel, concrete, brick, or stucco in Paladian, European Renaissance, and Neo-Classical style – a departure from Siamese architecture, which traditionally employed clay, woven grass, bamboo, and stilts. The area eventually went on to be “politically selected as the space for creative district development due to these good architectural bones,”²¹ cementing its somewhat engineered “multiracial,

¹² Campkin, “New Geographies,” 7-8.

¹³ Campkin, “New Geographies,” 7-8.

¹⁴ Brody, “Dirt,” 157.

¹⁵ Campkin, “New Geographies,” 7.

¹⁶ Brody, “Dirt,” 166.

¹⁷ Brody, “Dirt,” 158.

¹⁸ Thanat, “Charoen,” A-29.

¹⁹ Rugkhapan “Learn,” 1959.

²⁰ Gu, “Lost,” 43.

²¹ Gu, 43 “Lost,” 43.

cosmopolitan history into a creative district alive with multipurpose spaces and new businesses.”²²

Urbanisation of South Philadelphia was more reflexive. When William Penn began planning Philadelphia, South Philadelphia was rural farmland, and remained so into the late 1800s. South Street, then known as Cedar Street, formed the original southern city boundary, with old Lenape routes, such as Moyamensing and Passyunk, continuing to underpin Penn's original grid as it extended southward.²³ As the region underwent rapid industrialisation, communities sprouted up along these avenues.²⁴ Located near the waterfront, with ships continually arriving from the Old World, the area was a point of entry and convenient settling place for immigrants seeking jobs near the docks. By the early twentieth century, Philadelphia had become an industrial epicentre. Rowhouses were built en masse as a cost-effective alternative to detached homes.

These houses were efficient — saving on labour, walls, and utilities, such as sewer and gas lines — being built in rows. Made from readily available clay bricks, the narrow dwellings utilised postage-stamp property footprints, forgoing both front and back gardens. The rowhouses facilitated urban migration to a population for whom home ownership was hitherto implausible if not prohibited for a number of reasons, including slavery and restrictive land ownership policy then common in Europe. The “workingman's homes” were cheaper to build than in neighbouring industrial cities, such as New York or Baltimore, thanks to Philadelphia's expansive geographic perimeters and city-planning policies. Philadelphia became known as the *City of Homes*. Immigration is thus recognised as an essential stimulant for its economic growth and development.²⁵

Urban migration has also been a key component to industrialisation of Charoen Krung Road. During the years of fading European colonial rule in the countries surrounding Thailand, civilising efforts emerged internally with Thailand demonstrating how Western it was able to steer itself. Efforts to enforce nationalism embraced “mastery of Western modernity and on harnessing that modernity to raise the nation to the same level of civilization.”²⁶ The ideals of progress were grouped under the term *development*.²⁷ Bangkok focussed on establishing itself as a principal import-export hub for Southeast Asia.²⁸ Influxes of capital were concurrently injected into the economy, aimed at developing new industries and businesses and the demand for an

²² Gu, “Lost,” 43.

²³ Seifert, “Three,” 256.

²⁴ Seifert, 256.

²⁵ Seifert

²⁶ Chaloeontiarana “Through,” 534.

²⁷ Pratt

²⁸ Gu, 42

urban workforce consequently increased and rural populations began to migrate to Bangkok in search of job opportunities, forging a “pioneering 'frontier' peasant culture.”²⁹

Following the turn of the century, industry decelerated along the Road. Global maritime trade slowed significantly in favour of land trade, and the narrow road could no longer accommodate the level of traffic required by big business. The commercial core shifted eastward while the middle class moved to the suburbs, leaving behind a quiet, derelict Road³⁰ out of “what was once one of Southeast Asia's busiest trade routes.”³¹ The Great Depression also brought an abrupt end to Philadelphia's expansion, prompting deindustrialisation, job loss, and, as in Charoen Krung, widespread suburbanisation against the backdrop of growing global economic integration. In both Bangkok and Philadelphia, the area underwent a transition from shipping and manufacturing to service-related industries. Impeded by acute economic struggle, many locally based firms were bought by larger corporations. Some moved away in search of cheaper land and labour, while others simply closed down.³² The exodus from the city left behind empty spaces available for adaptive reuse architecture and ripe for creation of creative urban spaces.

One such space that sat empty along Charoen Krung Road was the former Thailand Central Post, a spacious warehouse building with “quiet, old world charm”³³ that caught the attention of The Office of Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC) as they were launching the *Co Create Project*, a 2015 initiative created to establish Charoen Krung as Thailand's first Creative District. Founded in 2003 by prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, TCDC's mission statement decries a mission for Thailand to “capitalize on its creativity in designing products and services to better meet market requirements...spark inspiration and creativity in Thai society through international education...[and] enhance the competitiveness of Thai designers and entrepreneurs to compete in a global market with a full sense of pride.”³⁴ In 2017, TCDC relocated from a local shopping mall to Charoen Krung Road, converting the space into an Art-Deco creative complex with a sleek, minimal interior with the aim of establishing Creative District policy that would help turn creativity into a valuable economic asset.

Thailand's Creative Economy Agency (CEA) was established in 2018 and is the most commonly cited public agency that is credited with the creation of the Charoen Krung Creative District. Under its mandate, CEA focuses on creative industry development, policy planning, and creative city development both in Bangkok and across Thailand.³⁵ Another important actor is the Creative District Foundation (CDF), formed as a group of creative professionals wanting to give back to the area through responsible regeneration practices. The official charter of the foundation

²⁹ Brody, “Dirt,” 157.

³⁰ Rugkhapan “Learn,” 1959.

³¹ Rugkhapan, 1959.

³² Seifert, “Natural”

³³ Rugkhapan, “Learn,” 1959.

³⁴ Rugkhapan, “Learn,” 1959.

³⁵ Gu, “Lost,” 44.

highlights how the Creative District was one that should 'act as a catalyst that inspires Thais to push the envelope on their own innate creativity.' These three actors are the primary drivers for creative district initiatives, ranging from the promotion of the neighborhood to foreign and local visitors to the Bangkok Design week, and invitations to international panels and conferences to share and learn from the Bangkok model of creative district development.”

Creative development in the country has been equated with globalisation and a collective “desire to launch Thailand as an internationally respected player in industry, finance, and technology.”³⁶ The 1997 Asian financial crisis devastated Thailand's economy, seeing the country's foreign reserves devalued by half, with many blaming “Western style capitalism.”³⁷ Unemployment reached 1.75 million³⁸ with office and service economy workers suffering greatly, whilst “creative industries were relatively unimpacted,”³⁹ which prompted the government to reexamine and cultivate these industries for their resilience and economic output. In 2017 the country's creative industries regenerated £45.6 billion GDP, accounting for 11.5% and had an average growth since 2011 of 6.55% compared to the country's average of 5.34%. Bangkok's creative industry alone generated £21.2 billion, with £6.6 billion, or 32.13%, coming from the fields of design, architecture, and fashion. The country's progressive views on creativity were forged by this “creative turn” and gave rise to a range of policy programmes that encourage creative production and consumption domestically, as creativity is approached as a value-generating mechanism.

Creativity has become embedded in Thailand's National Strategy as one feature of their S-Curve Economy. The strategic spatialisation of creativity is seen as opportunity to harness the production, consumption, and profitability of creative output in a way that benefits the economy as well as cultural identity, bridging the incentives between creativity and the creative district.⁴⁰ More precisely, TCDC is conscious of international competition, acknowledging that creative districts are an issue that is being addressed around the world. The mission of the creative district will be to convert the “pre-existing assets into meaning...using local assets to produce creative design and commercially viable innovation that matters in the twenty-first century economy...urban space becomes an indicator of competitiveness and a key machine that drives the economy.”⁴¹ Moreover, the organisation aims to attract creative professionals to urban space.

Contrarily, South Philadelphia has maintained a large artist population without the influence of any intentional policy measures, but rather the fact that the area facilitated creative opportunism. Since the earliest arrival of immigrants, there was a natural “symbiosis between residential and

³⁶ Brody, “Dirt,” 161.

³⁷ Rugkhapan, “Learn,” 1955.

³⁸ Gu, “Lost,” 41.

³⁹ Gu, 41.

⁴⁰ Rugkhapan “Learn,” 1960.

⁴¹ TCDC 2016, p 26

commercial and cultural resources for a range of people.”⁴² Artists, artisans and a diverse assortment of cultural practices accompanied the arrival of immigrant communities during early industrialisation.⁴³ The area has a strong craft production, including jewelers, metal working, and framing firms, that connects to its industrial legacy...at the same time, the district's long-standing identity as an arts district has provided a foundation for a diverse mix of performance groups, galleries, design firms, and for-profit dance schools.⁴⁴ The infusion of cultures made South Philadelphia one of the most diverse districts in the city.⁴⁵ Traces of these many migrations still endure today through cultural and culinary traditions, community institutions, public celebrations, adaptive reuse of buildings, public spaces, and streets events.⁴⁶ “People would move to South Philly because it was close to jobs on the waterfront or in the garment factories,” says Bryant Simon, a history professor at Temple, “then they created a culture that reminded them of where they were from.” They opened restaurants, bakeries, planted grapevines, and built churches and community organisations. “They dug in, deep.”⁴⁷

The continued development of South Philadelphia as a natural cultural district is also due to a shared boundary with South Street, where during the 1960s a large number of artists and entrepreneurs arrived as properties were cheap or abandoned due to planned construction of the Crosstown Expressway.⁴⁸ Influxes of creative professionals moved into dilapidated areas. Over the following decades, artists continued to purchase and renovate warehouses and other properties. As economic conditions improved, the housing market remained relatively low. In the early 2000s, the Reinvestment Fund Market Analysis classified the majority of the area as “distressed.”⁴⁹ The poor state of the market inspired entrepreneurs to consider artistic endeavors as a desirable use of space, with many South Philadelphia property owners experiencing that artists proved to be good tenants who were responsible and took good care of the buildings. For the owners, the incentive was clear; “working artists keep the building occupied and in good use, maintain the space and share utilities, and interact with people who get along well with one another.”⁵⁰ The enlivened engagement with the area paralleled a turnaround of the local real estate conditions, with many attributing the success to artists. By 2008, the entire city had “enjoyed improved economic conditions and rising expectations for its housing markets.”⁵¹ By

⁴² Seifert, “Three,” 269.

⁴³ Seifert, 257.

⁴⁴ Seifert, 244.

⁴⁵ Seifert, 252.

⁴⁶ Seifert, 256.

⁴⁷ Hingston, “True South.”

⁴⁸ Seifert, 270.

⁴⁹ Seifert, 269.

⁵⁰ Seifert, 275.

⁵¹ Seifert, 269.

then, many of the artistic initiatives founded decades earlier had matured, and South Philadelphia had secured its legacy as a place with strong cultural character to which artists gravitate.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Conclusion

South Philadelphia has the advantage of proximity to Center City, allowing residents and organisations to commute downtown whilst maintaining lower cost of living. Naturally rich in cultural ecology, the area has 89 non profit cultural organisations, with performing arts (dance, music, theatre) making up the largest portion. The South Philadelphia cultural sector is dominated by smaller organisations with between \$50,000-500,000⁵² serving as an opportunity for emerging businesses and entrepreneurs. The district's legacy of adaptive repurposing of architecture is evident in its popular performance-based cultural traditions and rich event and street art culture. The creation and reuse of community spaces and institutions by immigrants has become part of a tradition of "cultural citizenship," making the area a place that continues to be attractive and receptive to foreigners.⁵³ To this day, South Philadelphia remains a community of homeowners, with 59% of units owner-occupied in 2005-09, 70% of which are rowhouses. However, the district has developed a vacancy problem, with 12% of units remaining vacant⁵⁴ and inflation causing the cost to increase over 400% since 1995. Buyers have gone from those who landed from abroad with nothing to those with "advanced degrees, SUVs, and IRAs,"⁵⁵ which puts into jeopardy the sustainability of accessibility to the very emerging creative professionals who came to the area seeking low cost of living, with gentrification being a ubiquitous threat.

Rowhouses are to South Philadelphia what the shop houses are to Charoen Krung, though policy has rendered the shop houses even less accessible a resource today, resulting in many also sitting vacant. With tourism as the most lucrative industry in the district, shop houses are valuable opportunities to intercept foreign visitors and the reconfiguration, or reclassification, of space, helped characterise the creative redevelopment of the district. Popular as sites for transformation and reuse with families and businesses, "the shop houses have evolved into an aesthetic branding for a creative city, most notably with their transformation into boutique hotels."⁵⁶ The CEA has advocated for designers to transform shophouses into boutique hotels, but despite conversation support from the private and academic communities, the local political authority currently offers no financial subsidies or tax credits to support shophouse preservation or restoration.⁵⁷ While holding cultural value, shophouse restoration is often technical and financially demanding.⁵⁸

⁵² Seifert, "Three," 242.

⁵³ Seifert, 260.

⁵⁴ Seifert, 241.

⁵⁵ Hingston, "True South."

⁵⁶Gu, "Lost," 80.

⁵⁷ Gu, 80.

⁵⁸ Gu, 80.

Furthermore, the narrow form of the shop houses offers either too much room or not enough for small to medium creative enterprises. For those who can financially afford to do so, two or more adjacent shophouses are often purchased for conversion, but without external support this is only an option for a select few. Despite the concentration of wealth in Thailand, political power often lies in the rural populations, resulting in a disconnect between policy makers and those creative entrepreneurs seeking to develop new projects and who would benefit from subsidies.

These economic, political, and demographic factors continue to shape the urban landscape.⁵⁹ This puts into question how much the cultural district is benefitting Charoen Krung's locals as well as tourists. Despite the creative population in Charoen Krung being diverse, the redevelopment and opening of new creative spaces is predominantly being led by the same individuals who share similar socio-economic backgrounds, are educated abroad, and have some form of inherited wealth. A 2020 survey of the local art industry revealed that the majority of creative professionals are under 45 years old and earn less than 20,000 (฿465.69) baht annually from their art profession, with the greatest shared concern being a "lack of resources and inclusivity in the art industry."⁶⁰ This raises the question of how much Charoen Krung being a cultural district is a political designation but in practice may lack the administrative efforts of providing support and infrastructure to emerging professionals.

Charoen Krung and South Philadelphia emerged from different narratives. Charoen Krung was bolstered by a top-down national policy whose incentive was to become modern, whereas South Philadelphia was a perfect storm of ground-up elements that attracted creatives as well as a variety of others seeking opportunity. Though initially disparate, in the end the two areas have similarities regarding the sustainability of their futures as cultural districts. Natural environment and rich historical legacy must find a way to reconcile and find tolerance for the continual arrival of newcomers, without which neither district would have been initially developed. Though gentrification is an omnipresent threat, both areas also benefit from being situated within a stable economy that has the incentive to support infrastructure and promote both economic modernisation as well as cultural diversity. Gentrification is only a threat when it challenges the traditions and viability of existing communities, otherwise it is simply more development. The challenge for both districts is to ensure the participation of local communities in the development and evolution of the culture. Foreign influence comes not just in the presence of migrants and tourists, but also in the form of aspirational policymaking and mobilisation of external ideas. The most critical factor is not retaining heritage or achieving a certain level of development or innovation, but rather supporting its own residents to allow culture and the arts to shape the future of the community.

⁵⁹ Gu, "Lost," 42.

⁶⁰ Gu 61.