Projections • 14. New Uses for Old Rivers: Rediscovering Urban Waterways

From boats to bikes? Assembling contestations along the Chao Phraya river in Bangkok, Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, real estate developers, and the national military government of the Kingdom of Thailand have rediscovered their interest in Bangkok's Chao Phraya riverfront. In 2015, plans surfaced to build a bike lane next to the river to create public space and to enhance the flood protection of the delta capital. Quickly, however, environmental and social activists mobilized against the plan's negative ecological and social impacts. In this paper, I draw on assemblage theory to focus on the practices of two environmental NGOs. I discuss their use of social media, socio-material artifacts, and subversive events to create space for alternative planning proposals. The particular theoretical assemblage perspective is chosen to attend to the materiality and partial agency of non-human actants, such as the river itself and the objects used by the NGOs to mount resistance.

Keywords: river; waterfront; assemblage; smooth space; urban planning; Bangkok

Introduction

Rivers around the world are of pivotal importance to urban spaces. In Bangkok, the capital city of the Kingdom of Thailand, the Mae Nam Chao Phraya river bisects the city from north to south and historically unites profane and sacred urban-hydro interactions. The river provided food, fresh water, security, and transport during the 19th and early 20th centuries (Askew 2002). Furthermore, the river has shaped local identities, religious beliefs, customs, and everyday practices in the city (O'Neil 2008). While the Chao Phraya gradually lost its importance for city life during the modernization processes of the 20th century, more recently, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), real estate businesses, and the current military government¹ have taken an active interest in the Chao Phraya riverfront again (Church 2015).

In 2015, plans surfaced to build a bike lane next to the river to expand Bangkok's scarce public spaces. Media reports subsequently revealed that the proposed bike lane was supposed to be protected by a high flood wall to enhance flood protection within the low-lying delta city. Quickly, a group of urban planners and environmental activists founded the NGO Friends of the River (FOR) and started to point out that such a structure would be disruptive to the river's ecology. While the NGO has a small base of only a few active members (predominantly young professionals), it has a much wider reach through social and conventional media. Activists and urban planners from the well-established NGO BIG TREE joined FOR in their protest, fearing that local (irregular) riverfront communities would be put at risk of eviction by the proposed embankment and bike lane.² BIG TREE similarly is a group of young professionals that started to lobby for the conservation of urban trees in the Thai capital in the early 2010s. By now, the group has become a recognized voice in the struggle to preserve the city's green spaces and waterfront.

In this paper, I use an assemblage theory lens to attend to the socio-ecological struggles that revolved around the Chao Phraya riverfront in 2015. Assemblage thinking is particularly suitable for the Bangkok case as it foregrounds the partial agency of non-human actants. According to Bennett (2010), the term “assemblage” designates a perspective in which change is effected through collective actions, including non-human “thing power” (Bennett 2010, 2). An assemblage perspective thus allows me to discuss the Chao Phraya river not only as an object of socio-ecological concern but as a non-human actant as well. Relying on the assemblage approach, the paper aims to rethink the value of the urban waterscape in Bangkok. In addition, it draws attention to the socio-political struggles unfolding in the city. Under the present political conditions in Thailand, such struggles highlight the continued presence of progressive forces in the country. Despite military rule, an engaged public remains that is interested in creating spaces – however provisional – for democratic engagement with city planning in Bangkok.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I introduce my theoretical framework. I draw on work from both urban geography and social movement research that displays an interest in assemblage theory, materiality, and agency. Next, I reflect on my research methods and discuss the data presented in this paper. In the following empirical sections, I analyze activist resistance against the Chao Phraya redevelopment project through an assemblage approach. I particularly focus on two instances: (1) a student exhibition and (2) the river festivities during the 2015 *Loy Krathong* holiday. I offer some concluding thoughts in the last section of the paper.

Assembling resistance: Materiality, agency, and smooth spaces

Assemblage theory has gained much currency within urban geography and social movement research (see, e.g., the special issues *Area* 43, no. 2, *City* 15, no. 2-4, and *Studies in Social Justice* 12, no. 1). In this paper, I particularly draw on the literature that emphasizes assemblage theory’s attention to materiality and agency (Bennett 2005, 2010; Braidotti 2011, 2013; Coole 2005) as well as social movement research foregrounding the concept of “smooth space” (e.g., Arenas 2014; McFarlane 2009; Watt 2016). Assemblage theory seeks to uncover how particular relations between heterogeneous elements are forged (Anderson and McFarlane 2011). Within this process of forging alignments, an assemblage brings together two sets of concern: “Deleuze and Guattari [...] use the term assemblage to highlight the way in which material content (bodies, actions, passions) and enunciations (statements, plans, laws) are linked” (Li 2007, 265). An assemblage approach thus seeks to combine analysis of statements and discourses with an attention to the materiality of objects or bodies enrolled in social interactions (Legg 2009, 2011). In this paper, the collective actions of the environmental NGOs protesting the government’s river promenade plan are framed as a socio-material assemblage that comprises statements, practices, heterogeneous objects, the river, and people from diverse socio-political backgrounds.

Materiality

Although there is no single correct use of assemblage theory, I perceive it as belonging to a vitalist ontology that views matter itself as both self-organizing and animated (Braidotti 2011, 2013). Bennett’s (2005, 2010)

concept of “vital materialism” illustrates this perspective and explains how, within the space of an assemblage, materialism is never understood as a deterministic force. Rather, a vital materialist position proposes to see matter as capable of connecting or disconnecting heterogeneous elements. From this perspective, social life emerges from and continuously draws on the materiality confronting us. Social interactions are irreducible to purely cognitive or linguistic exchanges. In other words, the “stuff” that surrounds us is not mere background to our actions, thoughts, and emotions, but is actively shaping our lives. Materiality is thus developing some form of agentic capacity to affect changes within us and within our socio-political interactions (Braun and Whatmore 2010).

Agency

By granting “stuff” a certain degree of influence over our actions and emotions, a careful re-conceptualization of the key social science category “agency” is advanced. Agency within the space of an assemblage is thought of as distributed (Bennett 2010) or shared (Coole 2005) between various components. Crucially, such an agency – the power to affect some form of change – is ascribed to human as well as non-human actants. In her analysis of a major power cut for example, Bennett (2005) includes a detailed examination of the flows and ruptures of electric power during the blackout. To understand the power rupture and the complexity of modern infrastructures, she argues that one needs to appreciate the force of electricity alongside political actors and economic interests. Similarly, Strang’s (2014) work on the force of water and its connectivity across time and space suggests that materiality is steeped in affordances to change, unfold, and produce both different and repeating outcomes in the material world we inhabit.

Creating smooth space through activist assemblages

Apart from the importance of materiality and agency in assemblage theory, an assemblage always claims a particular territory or terrain. The concept of assemblage is thus fundamentally spatial (Anderson and McFarlane 2011). The aim of an activist assemblage formed between human and non-human actants is the creation of what Deleuze and Guattari (2013, 552) call “smooth space.” Smooth space is a space freed from the over-coding forces of the state and other governing institutions. It is a space where alternative interactions are tested and where potentialities are explored (Watt 2016). Smooth space can, for example, be found in protest movements such as *Occupy*, where heterogeneous groups came together to experiment with alternative ways of relating to each other (Arenas 2014). *Occupy* precisely developed its strength through the relations and synergies that emerged between its heterogeneous parts. The collective movement became more powerful than its individual parts and transformed itself into a pluralistic transnational network of resistance. The occupied sites were turned into temporary smooth space, used to test alternative ways of relating to each other and to the city. Despite the potentials of smooth space, Deleuze and Guattari (2013, 581) warned their readers: “Never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us.” Here, they highlight the provisional and fleeting nature of smooth space. Such spaces are often short-lived before they become stabilized and cease to provide the chance

to create radically new relations. Watt (2016) similarly notes how the provisional smooth space created by an activist assemblage always remains in danger of eventually being turned back into governed state space.

Research methods

This paper draws on three principal research methods. First, it is informed by five months of ethnographic research in Bangkok (October 2015–February 2016). During this time, I became involved in the two environmental NGOs FOR and BIG TREE and participated in some of their activities. The ethnographic accounts included in the empirical sections of this paper were collected at two activist events and involved conversations and chats, observations, and chance encounters with other event participants (Cragg and Cook 2007). Second, the paper relies on media reports discussing the riverfront proposal that appeared in the *Bangkok Post*, *The Nation*, and other English-language newspapers during the research period. Third, the paper draws on five expert interviews conducted in Bangkok during my fieldwork (see Appendix). The interviews were held as semi-structured “conversations with a purpose” that allowed for discussing, correcting, or confirming information while still leaving room for participants to express their own ideas, emotions, and experiences (Rubin and Rubin 2005). While most interviews were conducted in people’s offices, the BIG TREE activists were interviewed in their secret “headquarter,” a coffee shop in the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC). The political circumstances in Thailand after the *coup d’état* in 2014 warranted an anonymization of all participants to protect their privacy.

At least two shortcomings must be acknowledged. First, my inability to speak or read Thai made it impossible to engage more deeply with Thai language sources or analyze any untranslated government documents. It also limited my interaction during the protest events I attended. To address this limitation, I enlisted the help of two student interpreters during some of the interviews. Unfortunately, a degree of loss in terms of liveliness and accuracy of conversation remained within these translations. The second shortcoming lies in the relatively short period of time I spent in the field. When I left Bangkok in early 2016, the outcome of the river promenade project was still undetermined and until the present, there are conflicts around the design of it. My paper only attends to the first months of struggle without being able to give details on further progress. Online sources (media reports and Facebook) allowed me to partially follow later developments and retain a degree of connectedness to the field.

Struggles at the riverfront

Even the briefest account of Bangkok’s historical development cannot avoid discussing the importance of the Mae Nam Chao Phraya river for the Thai capital. Historically, the river’s water served as a means of connection and transport in the city (Terwiel 2011). Today, encounters with the previous fluvial lifestyle along the river are mainly limited to tourist attractions, such as the floating markets in the western part of the city. The increase in terrestrial infrastructure and housing since the late 19th century, during which city planning started to favor streets over canals, led to a steady decline in houseboats and stilted river houses. Yet the Chao

Phraya riverbanks still host a few (irregular) communities living in stilted and floating homes. These occupants are relying on small strips of unclaimed land along the river to build their houses (Storey 2012). More recently, the riverfront was turned into a new frontier of urban development within the Thai capital (Church 2015). The river promenade project discussed here fits into these wider developments to transform the area along the river. As one activist pointed out,

We suspect that this [project] will just turn into a proper road when it is finished. Because this would help so much with the developers along the river. [FOR spokesperson, November 2015, Bangkok]

The project was officially announced by the military government leader General Chan-o-cha in a national address on May 15, 2015:

The first project [I want to announce] is along the Chao Phraya River in order to improve the scenery and so that people can use [it] for exercising, cycling and other recreational use. [...] This is a concept of the government which the Prime Minister has initiated for the people to enjoy. (Chan-o-cha 2015)

In the above statement, the General stresses that the project is needed to “improve the scenery” of the river and enhance the aesthetic appeal of the area. Moreover, he presents the project as a gift to the people. He seeks to draw in the population of Bangkok by expressing his enthusiasm for building a space “for the people to enjoy.” The rationale here appears to be working through people’s assumed desire for public space. By portraying the project as a joyous initiative for sports and recreation, the plan is steeped in a particular notion of happiness or positivity that would render doubts, resistance, or opposition towards the project unnecessary.

While the General presented the project as a novel idea, newspaper articles suggest that similar redevelopment plans had been sporadically circulated since the 1990s. Official (English-language) documents are hard to come by, but news articles illuminate the historical emergence of the promenade plan. The initial plan, attributed to Winai Somphong, a former member of Thailand’s Democratic Party, envisioned the construction of a proper highway along the waterfront, with bus and car lanes intended to relieve the congested inner-city roads (AECEN 2016). This plan had its roots in the economic and real estate boom when the river was merely perceived as a vacant space, conveniently running north-to-south through the sprawling capital. As such, the Chao Phraya was perceived as an ideal space for constructing a new fast lane to sooth an electorate of increasingly frustrated commuters. The 1997 financial crash and political turmoil during those years led to the plan being forgotten until the Yingluck Shinawatra government reconsidered the proposal (Kongrut 2015a, 2015b). After a devastating flood in 2011 and the *coup d’état* in 2014, the proposed plans were picked up again, yet with a new “green dimension” (Finn 2017; Wancharoen 2015, 2016).

The director of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning at Thailand’s Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) shared the following information with me in an interview:

In the beginning it was just a road to relieve the congested traffic. But I think at the same time as the crown prince began the promotion of bicycling activities, people became more interested in biking. So they proposed that at the same time we can have the track for biking [at the promenade]. And to me this is ok. It is like projects in Korea or Japan. But the NGOs here, they are against it and oppose the project. [MONRE director, January 2016, Bangkok]

This interview passage reveals that the monarchy – a continuously influential force in Thailand – potentially approves of the proposal. The director’s statement further confirms that the project’s bike lane was only introduced as an afterthought, while the original intention was “to relieve the congested traffic” in the city.

The statement of General Chan-o-cha from May 2015 continued to give further technical details on the planned promenade:

We will construct a walkway on either bank of the river starting from Rama 7 Bridge to Somdet Phra Pinklao Bridge, a total distance of 7 kilometres, hence, total construction will be 14 kilometres with 7 kilometres on each side of the river bank. Construction will start in 2015, with a certain timeframe, by which the Ministry of Interior, Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and concerned agencies are to decide on how to proceed with the project in order to finish on time. The timeframe for this project is expected to be completed in 18 months, starting from January 2016 and to finish in July 2017. (Chan-o-cha 2015)

The General stresses that the lack of public space in the city will be tackled through the planned intervention in the form of the promenade, which already seems to have fixed temporal and spatial dimensions to produce an enjoyable riverfront experience. To substantiate the proposal, the government released a construction plan for the promenade, which was circulated widely within the media. Activists from FOR reproduced it in an information leaflet and shared a copy with me (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Image of river promenade plan.
Source: FOR brochure, given to author during interview, November 2015.

The images show a uniform bike path running parallel to the riverfront. The design clearly resembles an ordinary highway more than an urban recreational space. The lane rests on a row of concrete pillars and is secured by flood walls along each side, which raise high above the water level.

This uniform plan contrasts starkly with the reality of diverse river uses today. As Image 1 shows, along the Chao Phraya, skyscrapers stand next to historical temples, churches, and private houses. Walking along the river, one sees traditional (albeit often informal) pillar houses right next to modern piers with high-end

shopping facilities. The government's plan thus crucially ignores the socio-ecological "messiness" of life at the riverfront.

Image 1: The Chao Phraya riverfront. Source: Author's image, October 2015.

Contesting concrete: Learning about materiality and inequality

Through intense debates on virtual platforms like Facebook, FOR activists realized that there was a need for more information on the project:

So in a way, for non-design people, it is hard to understand all the problems [connected with the proposal]. So that is why we thought that at least we need to do a study and try to make it simpler for the general people to understand the issues [involved]. [FOR spokesperson, November 2015, Bangkok]

Determined to organize some form of resistance against the plan, the activists needed to first learn more about the complex socio-ecological issues involved, before being able to educate the wider public about the challenges inherent in the government's design proposal. Quickly, FOR and BIG TREE understood that the entangled issues of housing rights and the river's fragile ecology were little understood by the public. They decided that a critical conversation about the project would need to be informed by insights from various disciplines. FOR thus organized a series of public learning events to inform themselves and others about the plan:

Actually we don't have all the knowledge. But we got some support from [experts]. We tried to get the information from the related fields. Like [from] experts [such as] hydrologists and river ecologists and engineers. And they supported us. We invited them for lectures to understand the situation better. [...] And then we transformed that into easy graphics to better [communicate] the situation. [FOR spokesperson, November 2015, Bangkok]

In particular, water experts raised FOR and BIG TREE's awareness regarding the impact of the highway-like structure on the already endangered ecology of the river. Learning more about the specific local conditions brought about a deeper acknowledgement of the consequences of the plan for non-humans like aquatic species and the river itself. One material feature – the concrete needed to build the structure – particularly worried the activists, as the concrete pillars were predicted to further obstruct the flow of the water. Moreover, between the columns, rubbish might gather on the water's surface, contributing to the pollution of the river. Furthermore,

Our Chao Phraya is so near the sea. We are affected by the tides of the sea. [...] We talked to the engineers [and they said] that it [the promenade] will also affect the current of the water coming down. It

[the river] will be narrower and [that] will make the current stronger and faster such that it will destroy the riverbank even faster. [FOR spokesperson, November 2015, Bangkok]

Increasingly, the proposed river promenade was perceived as an unwanted state intervention that not only aimed to restructure public space in a particular way but also aimed to restructure the space and flow of the river itself. The intervention came to be seen as a socio-ecological problem which threatened to subordinate the flow of the water to the desire of the government for public space.

A second problem foregrounded by the activists was the potential eviction of people living along the riverbanks:

You know that there are some houses that are built a bit over the riverfront? So the government is trying to push these out. Because they are called ‘informal housing.’ So they know that these people are not legal. And the government uses the project to clear them out as well. [FOR spokesperson, November 2015, Bangkok]

The proposed cycling path and promenade thus directly compete with housing spaces of the urban poor. As the statement indicates, a contradiction emerged between the planned project as promoted by the military leader Chan-o-cha, who claimed that the promenade was for all people to enjoy, and the lived reality of the urban poor occupying the waterfront. Through the work of FOR and BIG TREE, these tensions were covered in media reports:

‘It’s like you move the fish out of the river to live on the shore,’ Sophee said to describe the impact on her neighbours once they can no longer catch fish to sell. Like all of the riverside residents, Sophee, 59, used to oppose the regime’s 14-billion-baht mega project. Her home in the Mittakam 1 community near the Krung Thon Bridge is among 309 households in 12 communities which will be demolished and replaced by a concrete promenade. (Mokkhasen 2017)

As such, the redevelopment of the waterfront poses virulent questions about who benefits from the new proposed river promenade. While the project might increase the enjoyment of the waterfront for particular interest groups (e.g., tourists, expatriates, the urban middle class), it would threaten long-standing communities with displacement. Hence, ‘restoring’ the river comes with particular social and ecological gains and losses that are distributed unequally. Especially low-income, informal populations along the river seem to be both marginalized within the planning process and erased from the envisioned outcome of the proposal.

FOR and BIG TREE’s dissent with the project increasingly began to address these socio-ecological concerns around the well-being of humans and non-humans along the river. Importantly, their approach insisted on taking seriously the “messiness” of urban life. Learning about various issues that were strategically obscured in the government’s praising of the proposal meant acknowledging the interconnectedness of the river’s ecology with the heterogeneous socio-economic positions represented on the waterfront. The uniform design and static

concrete materiality of the promenade came to represent the worries of the NGOs about the unsuitability of the proposal to meet the diverse needs of people and river alike.

Creating smooth space

Interviewer: Are the protests harder [to organize] now?

Activist: Now? Well now we couldn't form a march or protest with more than five people...

[Independent environmental activist, January 2016, Bangkok]

As official demonstrations have become illegal in Thailand since the 2014 military coup, activists need to find new tactics to express their dissent. As mentioned before, online platforms such as Facebook play a key role for organizing dissent and distributing information, as the activists I met stated. This confirms research on the enabling role of social media for activist movements worldwide (e.g., Rousellin 2016).

Yet, FOR and BIG TREE were not content with limiting their protests to the virtual realm of the city. The two NGOs approached a local university to launch an interdisciplinary study project. Students from architecture and planning courses were encouraged to present their own redevelopment proposals for the riverfront. In small groups, the students went to the river and interviewed local dwellers, boat companies, municipal officials, tourists, and residents to make their design proposals as inclusive as possible. The results were then displayed in the BACC (see Images 2 and 3). The students developed careful studies of local communities along the river and the fragile ecology of the Chao Phraya.

In their proposals, a radical difference to the government's design became obvious, as none resembled the concrete highway-like structure envisioned by the government. The student proposals made visible the interrelated challenges for local ecology and people, which the junta's plan had hitherto ignored. Rather than presenting a uniform, even monolithic, bike lane, the proposals reflected the mixed use of the riverbank and the interconnectedness of social, cultural, environmental, and political issues in the area. One group especially emphasized the importance of preserving the local river ecology by suggesting to integrate a learning center into the redevelopment scheme (Image 3).

Images 2 and 3: Exhibition of student proposals for the redevelopment of the Chao Phraya riverfront, displayed in the BACC. Source: Author's images, October 2015.

During my visit to the exhibition, I observed that the proposals communicated the students' ideas well to the wider public. Small groups of people stood in front of the posters and models, discussing their feasibility and

aesthetics. Through the material artifacts displayed (e.g., posters, models, images), visitors ranging from tourists and expats to students and teachers were drawn into conversations and debates about the river.

The designs presented by the students can be seen as an important part of the activist assemblage emerging in Bangkok. By fostering conversations about the river, the proposals supported the creation of a temporary “smooth space” in which alternatives could be discussed and tested. The site of the exhibition within the BACC also proved important in creating encounters between activists and the general public. The BACC presents a space where alternative thoughts, unconventional ideas, and political topics can be addressed, as I learned from one of the BIG TREE activists. As briefly mentioned above, the centre is seen as an unofficial NGO “headquarter,” as one of the activists told me. For a few days, the student exhibition created a time-space in which BACC visitors were encouraged to examine alternative river futures.

Enrolling the river as an actant

A few weeks later, the activists took the opportunity to address the redevelopment of the river at the popular *Loy Krathong* holiday. *Loy Krathong* is an important Buddhist celebration to thank the goddess of the rivers. By releasing little floating devices with candles and flower decorations, people both praise the goddess and ask her forgiveness for past environmental wrongdoings. *Loy Krathong* is a key holiday in Thailand and a peaceful and family-friendly urban spectacle that brings hundreds of Bangkokians to the urban waterscape (Noparatnaraporn and King 2007, 74; see Image 4). FOR decided to use this event to gather public support for their protest. They set up an open-air exhibition of the students’ design proposals at a public park by the riverfront (Image 5). Arguably, their tactic to raise awareness about the government’s contentious promenade project worked because they quietly subverted an official socio-cultural event for their own political cause.

Image 4: Stall selling Loy Krathong floating ornaments. Source: Author’s image, November 2015.

Image 5: Exhibition of student designs in a public park by the river. Source: Author’s image, November 2015.

The religious festivity for redemption and contemplation about human-hydro relations was used to stage an encounter among activists, local communities, tourists, and the wider city population to openly expose the problems of the government’s promenade plan. Such moments of encounter, ripe with emotional and affective potential, are crucial in momentarily punctuating the workings of power. Hardt (2015, 215), following Spinoza, has pointed out that “being affected by others, by external forces, is not a weakness but a strength, a power.”

Connecting themselves and their action to the joyful event of *Loy Krathong* augmented FOR's capacity to reach out to people, as "Joy, for instance, is the increase of our power to think and act" (Hardt 2015, 219). Creating alternative urban futures might thus work particularly well when positive emotions, rather than reactive ones, are enhanced. Joyfulness or "fun" within social activism seem conducive to encouraging wider public engagement with political problems. This approach contrasts with the top-down communication of the government that had normatively prescribed the river promenade as a space "for the people to enjoy" (see quote above) ahead of its realization.

For the festivities, FOR had prepared their own floating cardboard boxes and invited people visiting the open-air exhibition to write down their own ideas and dreams for the future of the river. These boxes were then released into the river alongside the religious floating devices. The power of the river's stream was harnessed to let the small objects float on and be widely circulated through the city (Image 6).

Image 6: Loy Krathong activity to protest the 14 km river promenade. Source: Author's image, November 2015.

Rather than creating a temporary "smooth space" for deliberations (like within the BACC exhibition), the people attending the *Loy Krathong* celebrations were drawn into the web of protest more actively. The direct access to and interaction with the river allowed people to closely engage with the protagonist at stake. People were given the chance to articulate their concerns about the river's future and encouraged to contribute alternative visions. The act of releasing floating devices did not appeal to a goddess for personal forgiveness but expressed a collective, yet radically heterogeneous, set of wishes for a sustainable urban future along the Chao Phraya. As such, the shared activity serves as a powerful reminder that even in times of military rule and top-down urban planning, alternative assemblages can emerge and find a voice in tightly regulated urban spaces.

By setting off material objects into uncertain and uncharted circulations, the activists were hoping that their alternative imaginations would spread along the river and be transmitted to additional audiences. The possibility that some of the floating devices would be found and read by people celebrating *Loy Krathong* further down the river amplified the activists' subversive potential. As Strang (2014) pointed out, water connects all of us at various scales and levels, reminding us of mutual co-dependencies. The current of the river opened up the possibility of unforeseen connections and encounters between water, activists, and other urbanites. Hence, the river itself was enrolled in the activists' struggle, becoming a veritable actant within their protest.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown how the Chao Phraya riverfront in Bangkok has become a contested site in the city, as the government plans to redevelop the waterfront into a bike lane. Despite the highly politicized political context in Thailand, activists have sought to engage with the military's proposal to redevelop the waterfront and used various tactics to articulate their concerns.

Through the concepts of “assemblage” and “smooth space,” the tactics of FOR and BIG TREE have been analyzed. Learning constituted a central aspect of their initial activities. By linking social and ecological problems, the activists developed an understanding of the planned river promenade that acknowledged the interconnectedness of life along the river, rather than reducing the building of the promenade to a purely technical exercise. Within the activist assemblage, it became obvious that the promenade needed to be contested on both social and ecological grounds.

Two specific activist interventions in the city allowed for the creation of temporary “smooth space” in which alternative river futures could be imagined and shared. The alternative promenade designs functioned as coordinating devices that allowed people to connect and discuss the proposed promenade. The floating devices released during the *Loy Krathong* festivities can be interpreted as material objects capable of transporting the protest to unforeseen places in the city. The affective and artistic qualities of these devices are of particular importance to generate interest or involvement of bystanders. The circulation of the floating boxes along the river created the possibility for wider publics to connect to the struggle and to be drawn into the activist organizations. What is more, the river itself became a powerful actant within the activist assemblage, taking the activists' concerns into unplanned directions. As such, the socio-material objects used in the struggle speak of a potentiality to create space for alternative ideas and planning proposals, by allowing spontaneous and unplanned urban encounters. The concept of “smooth space” is useful here as it is seen as a fleeting time-space in which new democratic discourses and practices may emerge.

While the two events achieved to establish a temporary “smooth space,” the struggle along the waterfront is far from over. Public and online protests as well as negative media reports considerably slowed down the government's plans, but reports on other potential redevelopment schemes for the river continue to circulate in Thai media. Given Thailand's dismal human rights and freedom of speech records, actions to reach out to a wider public and to initiate some form of debate around urban planning projects can be seen as an important first step on the way to more democratic urban futures.

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Appendix: List of interviews

FOR spokesperson, November 2015, Bangkok

MONRE director, January 2016, Bangkok

Independent environmental activist, January 2016, Bangkok

BIG TREE activist (male), February 2016, Bangkok

BIG TREE activist (female), February 2016, Bangkok

Footnotes

1. Thailand has seen political turmoil since 2005, when the populist, pro-poor Taksin Shinawatra was re-elected. A year later, the military intervened into the brewing conflict and forced Taksin to resign and flee the country. His sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, became prime minister in 2010. Unrest and conflict between the so-called Red Shirts (Taksin supporters) and Yellow Shirts (supporters of the military and the King and predominantly urban middle-class) continued, however. In May 2014, the Thai military ousted prime minister Yingluck. The military has since postponed elections and a return to democratic rule. Since the military *coup d'état*, Thailand's ambiguous human rights standards have further deteriorated, and democratic rights have been systematically diminished. Demonstrations with more than three people, for example, are no longer permitted (e.g., Dalpino 2012; Farrelly 2016). ↵

2. Due to language barriers and lack of gate keepers to these riverfront communities, the focus of this paper is on urban activists and their tactics to subvert the river promenade assemblage. For a discussion of other eviction struggles along two Bangkok *khlongs*, see my dissertation (Tuitjer 2018). ↵