

IIAS Reports and Announcements *continued*



Southeast Asia Neighborhoods Network (SEANNET)

A four-year regional research programme (2017-2020)

THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR ASIAN STUDIES has been awarded a four-year grant by the Henry Luce Foundation (New York, NY) for the Southeast Asia Neighborhoods Network (SEANNET) program (2017-2020). This new 'urban' initiative of IIAS is about research, teaching and dissemination of knowledge on Asia through the prism of city neighborhoods and urban communities in six selected Southeast Asian Cities (Mawlamyine in Myanmar; Chiang Mai and Bangkok in Thailand; Manila in the Philippines; Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam; and Surabaya in Indonesia).

The program will support the development of contextualized knowledge on the spatio-human environment of neighborhoods in the six selected cities through participative field-research, in situ policy roundtables, local capacity building exercises, academic conferences, publications, documentary films and new syllabi. The aim of this micro-local framework of scholarly and civic engagement is to generate alternative, generalizable paradigms on city neighborhoods. A second ambition of the program is to shape and empower a community of early career scholars and practitioners working on/from Southeast Asia who will contribute to the growing body of humanistically informed knowledge on Asian cities.

The SEANNET program has the ambition to generate an 'alternative' system of knowledge of cities in South-East Asia whose significance goes beyond the region and should also be of interest to scholars and professionals from China, India and the West. This new knowledge is 'alternative' in the sense that it will complement current predominant paradigms about cities in Asia as shaped by conventional urban studies, which still draw heavily from technical disciplines such as urban planning, engineering, economics and architecture, but are limited in their understanding of the social fabric of urban societies in Asia. As set out by the present initiative, it is through the collaboration with local partners engaged in participative research that the involved international scholars can learn from the region's multifarious cases of neighborhoods and explore new standards of locally contextualized city-making pedagogy with implications and applications going beyond Asia.

SEANNET will be connected with the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA), a transnational platform of over 100 researchers from 17 Asian, European and North American universities. So far, UKNA has focused on India and China, where urban development is often considered through the meta-perspective of a centralizing state and its technocratically-determined vision of cities, which are primarily perceived as vectors of economic growth, technology and socio-political control. Consequently, knowledge production on cities in these countries – and by extension, among many foreign scholars working on Asia – continues to be dominated by state-sanctioned 'technicians of cities'. In spite of UKNA's ongoing efforts to include institutions from the social sciences and the humanities, as well as from applied education, technocratic epistemologies continue to dominate imaginations of cities among many Asian and Western urban experts.

The realization that the massive transformation currently affecting Chinese and Indian cities has much to do with the process of knowledge-making and dissemination among and by these state-sanctioned city practitioners has led IIAS and some of its UKNA partners to focus on the question of pedagogy. This is where Southeast Asia becomes interesting, as the relative structural weakness of the Southeast Asian state to impose norms on how a city should be read and defined leaves more room for local citizen agency, offering an opportunity for scholars and other urban actors to re-appraise their understanding and actions on cities in Asia.

The cities of this very diverse region have many different phases thanks to the difference in nation-state building processes and differing levels of economic and institutional development. Singapore, for instance, features a high degree of integration 'at the top' between state technocrats and their real estate and financial corporate counterparts. Such a structure, is rarely matched in other Southeast Asian countries, even in large metropolises like Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City or Jakarta, whose growth is only partially determined by the state and its agents. Even in a highly centrally planned Vietnam, the influence of state actors in urban development pales in comparison with their Chinese counterparts. The structural autonomy of these cities makes it difficult for the state, its actors and its state-sanctioned expertise to control their evolution. Large-scale urban transformations are often shaped by the existence of a massive transnational corporate complex with the financial muscle and power to 'shape' these cities, often in collusion with local authorities. This phenomenon has increased considerably in the last twenty years or so. It has, in turn, led to the emergence of new forms of local responses which, in a number of cases, saw citizens' organizations take original modes of action, including in the form of grass-root movements. A number of Southeast Asian cities are experiencing cases of citizen-based resistance movements against mega urban projects, and with them, the beginning of the definition of alternative discourses on city-making processes. This trend is being encountered in the metropolitan areas of Manila, Jakarta and Bangkok, as well as in a number of intermediary cities, especially in highly decentralized countries like Indonesia or the Philippines. These forms of local urban participation are themselves often connected to movements of renewal in the cities' provincial hinterlands. In a number of intermediate cities of Southeast Asia the link between rural hinterlands and city centres remains strong and therefore needs to be further explored.

The SEANNET program not only seeks to document the struggle of neighborhood residents against large developmental interests by underscoring the creative forms of micro-level agency among neighborhood dwellers, it also sets out to frame them into alternative educational and transmittable knowledge. In that sense, the story of Southeast Asian neighborhoods will not only consider resistances and resilience of communities and their residents, but also how bottom-up innovations can impact upon, and effectively change policy strategies at the top.

Organization of the program

The SEANNET program is organized into four phases: (1) methodological framing; (2) field research implementation; (3) interactions, discussions and analysis; (4) dissemination of research and deliberations' outcomes.

The first, critical part of the program is aimed at a methodological framing and field research preparations. It will be officially completed with a day-long final workshop during ICAS 10, in Chiang Mai (July 2017). The conclusion of the ICAS meeting will set in motion the second phase of the program, consisting of case-study research, carried out by local researchers and with a duration of approximately nine months each, in the following six historic neighborhoods: Wua Lai, Chiang Mai (Thailand); Wat Kae Nang Leong, Bangkok (Thailand); Wards 13 and 14, Phú Nhuận district, Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam); Escolta Santa Cruz district, Manila (Philippines); and Kampung Peneleh, Surabaya (Indonesia). The next phase of the program will be aimed at discussion and analysis through various activities, including for each case-study a localized, in situ, roundtable, followed by a workshop for the development of a policy action plan. During the fourth and final phase of the program, the results from the fieldwork and roundtable sessions will be further analyzed and transformed into academic research and pedagogical outputs.

Seeking to emphasize multi- and cross-disciplinary understandings of 'the city', SEANNET explicitly engages local researchers in the process. The resulting pedagogy will likely be experiential, dialogical and ethnographic. These characteristics have been broadly identified through a body of knowledge produced by previous researches and activities carried out by IIAS and its partners. In the process of the SEANNET program, they will be further refined through exchanges that specifically engage new partners out of the selected Southeast Asian case studies.

Network, coordination and management

Organized as a platform of individuals and institutions under the coordination of IIAS and connected with the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA), SEANNET is meant to bring together and nurture a collection of early career scholars and urban practitioners, and their institutions, to shape a new community of like-minded city specialists who will share a common engagement linking scholarship and local practice. This network will be shaped by the involved local, regional and international researchers. Each case-study is conducted by local researchers under the direction of both a local and international principal investigator¹. The overall intellectual breadth and direction of the program is led by a Steering Committee consisting of scholars from the following partners: Chiang Mai University – Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD); Gadjah Mada University – Department of Architecture and Planning (DOAP); Harvard University – Asia Center; International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS); National University of Singapore – Asia Research Institute (ARI); Paris-Belleville National School of Architecture (ENSAPB)-IPRAUS/UMR AUSser; Yale University – Council on Southeast Asian Studies; and the University of California, Irvine – Department of Anthropology. As overall program coordinator, IIAS is responsible for the inter-institutional, logistical and fiduciary management of the overall program.

Website: www.ukna.asia/seannet

Program Coordinator: Paul Rabé (IIAS/UKNA Secretariat)
Deputy Coordinator: Lin Xiaolan (IIAS/UKNA Secretariat)
Regional Facilitator: Rita Padawangi (Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore)

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References

- 1 With affiliations with institutions such as the University of Yangon; Chiang Mai University; Thammasat University; Vietnamese-German University; Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya; UMR- AUSser; Harvard University; Yale University; Paris Diderot University; University of the Philippines; National University of Singapore.

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Lampang, Thailand,
(c) Paul Rabé.

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Mawlamyine,
Myanmar. Courtesy
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