



Wat Lad Bua Khao

CASE STUDIES OF COLLECTIVE HOUSING IN ASIAN CITIES SERIES • MAY 2021

This little project may look a bit cramped and grubby, but if collective housing projects had their own museum, this one would be the star exhibit. Forty years ago, these 67 poor families, who had survived fires and evictions, negotiated to buy a small portion of the land they used to rent, and rebuilt their community on that postage-stamp-sized land, with help from some creative-thinking friends at the National Housing Authority. At the end of that extraordinary struggle, they made Thailand's first land sharing project and its first community-driven formal housing project, which would inspire so many others.

- Project Wat Lad Bua Khao
- Location Charoen Krung Road Soi 80, Bang Kho Laem District, Bangkok, Thailand
- Size 67 households
- Finished 1983
- Type Redevelopment of an old community on a small portion of the land they used to rent, under a land sharing agreement between the community and the private company that bought the land after a fire.

CONTEXT, PROCESS AND PARTNERS

Land sharing in Bangkok:

By the 1980s, there were about a thousand low-income informal communities in Bangkok, and a quarter of them were under threat of eviction, to make way for various commercial developments and urban infrastructure projects. Development pressure on land in the city was heating up, and conflicts between the housing needs of the poor and the development needs of the city were increasing. The losers in those conflicts were almost always the poor, who lost their housing, their support systems and their access to nearby jobs with eviction. When poor communities did manage to hold on to their inner-city land, a kind of stalemate ensued: the land owners (whether public or private) couldn't develop their land while the squatters stayed, and the squatters couldn't invest in better houses since their tenure was so insecure.

Land sharing is Bangkok's home-grown strategy for resolving these conflicting claims in a compromise solution which allows both the land-owner and the community people to benefit. After a period of negotiation and planning, an agreement is reached to "share" the land, where the settlement is divided into two parts. One part (usually the less commercially viable part) is given, sold or leased to the community people for rebuilding their houses, in a more compact arrangement, and the rest is returned to the land-owner to develop. There's no rule about how the land is divided: how much land the people get and how much goes back to the owner is all worked out during the negotiations.

At the core of a land sharing negotiation is the ability to translate the conflicting needs and conflicting demands of owners and occupants into a compromise which takes a concrete "win-win" form and is acceptable to all parties involved - not to any abstract policy or set of regulations. Land sharing is also a way of dividing the cream of urban prosperity a little more equitably: the community people may end up with less area than before, and the land-owner may get back less-than-all of the land, but the trade-off is that the poor can stay where they have been living and working, get secure land and decent housing, and keep their community and support systems intact. And the land owner saves the time, cost and loss of face of a long eviction litigation and finally gets to develop the land. Even the government benefits - it gets an added stock of secure land and housing to meet the city's urban poor housing needs, without having to pay for it.

Land sharing is a long and complicated process, and it doesn't work in every situation. Behind a successful land sharing scheme, there must be a very strong community organization, and often, the involvement of a skillful intermediary is crucial. But there are a growing number of cases where informal communities faced with eviction have successfully bargained to rebuild their community on a portion of the land they already occupy. This case study describes the very first land sharing project to be completed in Bangkok, in the Wat Lad Bua Khao community.

The community:

The old Wat Lad Bua Khao community occupied a 1.6 hectare wedge of privately-owned land, in the historic center of Bangkok. The crowded community stretched between the bustling Charoen Krung Road, to the east, and a large riverside temple complex to the west, from which the community takes its name (*Wat* is the Thai word for a Buddhist temple). The community was first settled in the 1920s when the Yannawa area was full of earning opportunities in the markets, factories, shops and riverside mills. Wat Lad Bua Khao's first residents were street vendors, rickshaw pullers, laborers and river transport workers who rented small parcels of land, where they built simple wooden houses and raised their families. At that time, land rent was the most common form of tenure in Bangkok for low-income workers, who could always find a bit of land to lease inexpensively, and then build their own house on it. The Wat Lad Bua Khao residents paid a monthly land rent of about 2-3 baht per square *wah* to the landowner, which worked out to about about US\$1 per month for a house plot.

As the city grew, more families joined the community behind the temple. By the late 1970s, there were some 383 families living in the community, under a patchwork of tenure arrangements: some had land rent contracts with the landowner, some were sharers staying with relatives, some were sub-tenants renting rooms or houses built by land renters and some were squatters. The houses were rickety, the basic services were primitive and the low-lying riverside land was often flooded, but the neighborhood had ample earning opportunities, and relationships within the community were strong and friendly. In many ways, Wat Lad Bua Khao was a typical example of the low-income communities that peppered the center of Bangkok.

Fire and eviction struggle:

In 1978, a big fire burned down almost all the houses in the community - a fire many believed had been started by arsonists. In Thailand, where the law states that land leases become invalid after a fire, arson is a time-tested technique unscrupulous landlords use to get rid of tenants and clear land for more lucrative

development projects. By the time of the fire, the land occupied by Wat Lad Bua Khao had become extremely valuable, in a central part of the city in high demand for commercial and residential development.

And sure enough, as the people began rebuilding on the still-smoldering ruins of their old houses, the landowner seized the opportunity and sold the land to a private sector developer, the Mahasin Development Company, for 10 million baht (US\$ 435,000). The company immediately served eviction notices to all the residents, offering cash compensation of between \$25 and \$250, depending on the family's tenure status and how big their plots were. 219 families took the compensation and left. Thirteen families who refused to go were taken to court, and all of them lost their pleas to stop the eviction. The company continued to use all sorts of dirty tricks to threaten, bully and coerce the remaining families to leave, and more families who couldn't bear the uncertainty or had other options moved out - mostly into other slums nearby.

In 1981, when only 67 very poor, very dispirited families were still staying on the land, in terrible conditions, a young Thai architect-planner named Somsook Boonyabanha visited the community, along with a group of her colleagues, including Natvipa Chalitanon, Ruengyuth Teeravanich and a few others. They were all working with the Center for Housing and Human Settlements Studies, at the National Housing Authority (NHA), and had been given the task of surveying all the slums in Bangkok that were under threat of eviction. The survey was being carried out in preparation for an international seminar on land for housing, which the NHA was planning to organize in 1982.

In her capacity as a government official, it was Somsook's job to understand and document the causes and effects of eviction, at a time when more than a third of all the slums in Bangkok had either been evicted recently or were facing eviction now. But in her capacity as a planner and a human being, she felt compelled to use her wits, her creativity and her design skills to help the people at Wat Lad Bua Khao - and other vulnerable slum communities they encountered in the survey - to find pragmatic alternatives to the inhumane and impoverishing practice of eviction. Her NHA colleagues felt the same way.

So Somsook and the team from NHA began working with the Wat Lad Bua Khao residents. Their first step was to ensure the people that they were not alone, and that other communities were facing eviction and finding ways to strengthen their negotiations to stay. They organized exchange visits between Wat Lat Bua Khao residents and other communities like Manangkasila and Thep Prathan, which were also combating evictions and were developing land sharing proposals to use in their negotiations with difficult land owners.

Land sharing agreement:

Inspired by those other communities, the Wat Lad Bua Khao residents took hope and formally asked the NHA for help in 1982. The NHA team then worked with the residents and used the land sharing concept to explore the physical and financial feasibility of the residents staying in the same place and getting permanent tenure rights. They determined that the 67 families would need at least 0.32 hectare (20% of the original land) to rebuild their houses in a much more compact arrangement, and that if they were to buy a small portion of their former community land - which everyone wanted to do - the most they could afford would be a rate of 500 - 750 baht (US\$ 22 - 33) per square meter.

With these calculations in hand, the negotiations began. Somsook and her colleagues at the NHA acted as intermediaries between the community and the Mahasin Company. The Bangkok Governor, the Yannawa District Chief and some high-ranking military officers were also persuaded to intervene and support the negotiations, on behalf of the community. After some long and difficult negotiations, a land sharing arrangement was finally agreed to by all parties, in which the 1.6 hectares of land would be divided into two parts:

- **20% of the land** (0.32 hectares) would be sold to the community members for 1.8 million baht (US\$ 78,260), or 563 baht (US\$ 24) per square meter, to rebuild their houses. This was the least commercially viable part of the land, tucked away in the back corner behind the temple school and accessible only through the temple compound.
- **80% of the land** (1.28 hectares) would be turned over to the Mahasin Company to develop commercially, as upper-income shophouses.

The residents also agreed to return any compensation payments they had received from the company. As part of the agreement, the NHA would provide technical support for the project design and implementation, subsidize the costs of bringing in basic infrastructure and arrange for mortgage financing for the land purchase by the residents. The Mahasin Company, for its part, would now be able to profit from the other 80% of the land. And that's just what they did: by August 1984, the company had built 96 upper-income shop houses, which were selling for 700,000 to 1 million baht (US\$ 30,500 - 43,500), bringing in profits for the company upwards of 50 million baht (US\$ 2.2 million).

Support groups and partners in the project:

- **Members of the Wat Lad Bua Khao community:** People's participation was the most important element in the implementation of the project. The residents were the main actors and decision-makers at every stage of the project, from negotiating to planning to building to post-project management.
- **The National Housing Authority (NHA):** Two units within the NHA were involved in the project: the Center for Housing and Human Settlements Studies (CHHSS) and the Community Development Department (CDD). Somsook Boonyabancha, a young Thai architect-planner, was working with the CHHSS and was a key person in helping vulnerable communities like Wat Lad Bua Khao to develop the first land sharing projects - many of which were identified during the 1981 Bangkok slum eviction survey she headed. The CHHSS assisted the Wat Lad Bua Khao community with technical aspects of the land sharing planning, including the development of the layout plan. The CDD built and paid for the paved lanes and drains in the community and administered the land loan from the Government Housing Bank.
- **The Yannawa District Authority** supported the project during the negotiation stage and helped with permissions and legal issues (this large district was later subdivided into four smaller districts, and Wat Lad Bua Khao is now in Bang Kho Laem District).

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

Planning and building the new community:

With help from Somsook and the team from NHA, the people developed a simple layout plan for the 0.32 hectare site. They managed to squeeze in 67 small house plots of about 40 square meters each (about 4 x 10 meters), in a very tight arrangement around a simple grid of narrow internal lanes. In October 1982, the 67 plots were allocated to families, through a system worked out by the residents committee, which had been set up to oversee the project.

Instead of designing any house models, the community decided to allow each family to design and construct their own house, according to their particular needs and means. But a few rules were established to guide the construction: houses should not be higher than two storeys, plots should not be completely built up and people could choose to build detached, semi-detached or row houses. There were no restrictions on the use of building materials, since existing building codes had been waived for the project, as part of the negotiations with the district authority. This was important, because almost every aspect of the project was sub-standard: the plots were too small, the lanes were too narrow, the density was too great, the setbacks were not observed. If all the prevailing building bylaws had been followed, the project would never have happened. Most of the families opted for detached houses, leaving a little space between houses, and mobilized funds for the construction from their own savings, from informal loans or using credit arrangements offered by local building materials suppliers.

The house construction went very fast. Most of the families built their new houses themselves, self-help style, with a few skilled carpenters hired here and there, and lots of friendly help from family and neighbors. To save money, a lot of families re-used building materials salvaged from their old houses: timber, floor-planks, doors, windows, stairways and roofing sheets. One group of six families living in adjacent plots decided to build their rowhouses together, with reinforced concrete frames and shared masonry walls, and hired a local builder to help them with the heavier work of building the concrete frame. The rest they built themselves. The construction began in February 1983, after the NHA contractors had built the paved walkways and infrastructure mains, and by September, most of the houses were finished.

Project timeline:

- 1920s:** First community members rent plots of land on vacant land behind Wat Lad Bua Khao.
- 1978:** Fire demolishes entire slum, which had grown by then to almost 400 households. Land is sold to developer, which issues eviction orders. 219 families take compensation and leave.
- 1981:** NHA makes first contact with Wat Lad Bua Khao community. Only 67 families are left on land now.
- 1982:** Land sharing proposal is developed and proposed. Company agrees to sell part of land to people.
- 1983:** Construction of new houses begins on 0.32 hectare portion of land in February. All 67 houses are completed by September.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT

Land tenure:

Before the land sharing project, the residents in Wat Lad Bua Khao occupied the privately-owned land under a variety of tenure arrangements. Some had land rent contracts with the landowner, some were sharers staying with relatives, some were sub-tenants renting rooms or houses built by land renters and some were squatters. The leases all became invalid after the 1978 fire, so whoever continued to stay in the community after the fire was technically a squatter. As part of the land sharing agreement, the private company that had purchased the entire 1.6 hectare site after the fire, sold a 0.32 hectare portion of the land to the 67 remaining community members, at a below-market rate. After the community members repaid their land loans to the NHA, they all became individual owners of their own plots of land, with land titles.

PROJECT FINANCING

Project costs and who paid for what:

Land:

The 0.32 hectare site was purchased from the Mahasin Company for 1.8 million baht (US\$ 78,260), or 563 baht (US\$ 24) per square meter. That rate was less than a third of the prevailing market rate for land in that area, which was about 1,840 baht (US\$ 80) per square meter in 1982.

- 200,000 baht (US\$ 8,696) of the land purchase amount was covered by the NHA.
- 1.6 million baht (US\$ 69,464) was financed by a loan from the Government Housing Bank (GHB) to the NHA, repayable in 5 years, at 14% annual interest. The NHA, in turn, extended the loan to the residents individually, charging 16% annual interest (the extra 1% was for overheads). The land loans worked out to about 22,000 baht (US\$ 956) per family. The residents had to make a down payment of 8,600 baht (US\$ 374) each, over a six month period, and then make monthly loan repayments of 530 baht (US\$ 23) for five years, with plots as collateral. The intermediary role of NHA in administering the loan repayments was made necessary by the GHB's reluctance to lend directly to the residents.

Infrastructure:

The cost of site development and basic infrastructure came to 1,081,200 baht (US\$ 47,008), and included:

- 180,000 baht (US\$ 7,926) for filling the land to above flood levels (paid for by the residents)
- 576,600 baht (US\$ 25,069) for site development, paved walkways, drains, streetlights (paid by NHA)
- 230,000 baht (US\$ 10,000) for installing water mains (paid for by the Metropolitan Waterworks Authority)
- 94,600 baht (US\$ 4,113) for installing electricity mains (paid for by the residents)

Houses:

Since long-term financing was available only for the purchase of the land, the families had to finance the house construction themselves, using their own resources (savings, short-term loans from relatives and moneylenders and credit from building materials suppliers). The average expenditure on new houses was 17,500 baht (US\$ 760). Compare that with housing costs in the area: In August 1984, the Mahasin Company built 96 units of upper-income town houses on the other part of the land, and sold them for 700,000 - 1 million baht (US\$ 30,000 - 43,500) each.

IMPACTS OF THE PROJECT

The land sharing project at Wat Lad Bua Khao allowed families who had lived for generations on the land, as insecure renters and squatters, to stay and get secure land tenure, good housing and full infrastructure. While the land sharing agreement left the community members with only a small portion of the land they used to occupy, the trade-off was that they could redevelop their houses legally and properly, and the rest of the land could be developed by the company that had bought the land. In the process, a community which had become illegal and run-down, was transformed into a fully legal, fully beautiful community. It was a win-win project for everyone.

From being occupants without any land rights, the residents in Wat Lad Bua Khao became land title holders. Improved tenure conditions allowed people to stay within reach of their social and economic opportunities, and to remain together as a community. The project also provided an opportunity for people to rebuild their houses and to integrate their community into the overall urban fabric legitimately, as full citizens.

For other slum communities facing eviction, the Wat Lad Bua Khao project became a much-needed example of land sharing as a potential strategy to avoid eviction and redevelop housing without the people being displaced. The project also showed how much could be accomplished when space is created for the community to be the main actor and at the center of the housing development process. When a housing project is driven by a community, it will happen faster, be cheaper, better, more appropriate and more efficient than anything the government or private sector could make. The project offered vivid proof of that.

It so often happens that as a city develops, the poor get evicted and banished to the periphery of the city, in a cycle of impoverishment that pushes them far away from jobs, schools, transport links and opportunities. The Wat Lad Bua Khao land sharing project showed that urban development can successfully accommodate low-income urban housing, and showed that keeping low-income people in the city is good for the poor and good for the city, making for a more inclusive, equitable and healthy form of urban development.

The success of the land sharing project at Wat Lad Bua Kao was largely due to the strong coordination between the residents, the NHA, the Bangkok Governor, the district authority and the Thai Army. While all of these different actors may have been motivated by very different purposes, the common goal of achieving a just and lasting housing solution to an eviction crisis brought all those different purposes and motivations into alignment and created a positive, problem-solving environment.

The Wat Lad Bua Khao project also illustrated dramatically a shift in the role of government in housing development, from being the planner, builder and deliverer of housing to being the supporter and facilitator of a housing development process that is driven by people. In this new kind of housing process, the community people are strengthened, and a more efficient housing delivery mechanism is enabled - a mechanism that can easily be scaled up to solve the large-scale housing problems in Thai cities.

The Wat Lad Bua Khao project was an early example in Bangkok of an innovative new kind of housing development in which the residents fully participated in every aspect of the project. Through the process of negotiation, planning and implementation of the land sharing project, the original informal community organization was transformed into a much stronger, more organized and more confident community organization, able to take on the responsibilities of managing finance collectively and planning for the future maintenance of their community and common facilities.

The size of the house plots and the width of the internal lanes in Wat Lad Bua Khao were quite decent, and a great improvement over conditions before the project. But all of them were lower than the local building regulations and planning standards allow. Under normal circumstances, negotiations to get permissions and building permits for construction that was technically *sub-standard* would have caused long delays in the building process - or stopped it from happening entirely. But because the project (as well as the other early land sharing projects) was supported by the National Housing Authority, and especially by the military government, which insisted on quick execution of projects and the removal of bureaucratic snags, the standards issue didn't stop the project from progressing quickly. That was important, because most formal planning standards and building bylaws are designed for middle-class people, not the poor. When it comes to providing housing the poor, these standards often clash with the reality of lots of people having to make their self-help housing as cheaply as possible on a very small site. The Wat Lad Bua Khao project showed that a more flexible attitude towards standards can support the creation of more creative, more reasonable and more large-scale solutions.

One of the main worries community members expressed during the planning stage was that after everyone got freehold land title to their own plot, at a cost that was so far below the prevailing market rate, many families would soon be tempted to sell them for a profit. There was nothing to prevent them from doing so. This was years before CODI or Baan Mankong or the common practice of low-income settlements registering as housing cooperatives before upgrading their housing. But a strong feeling of belonging to a community had been strengthened through time and through the long struggle to resist the eviction and make their new housing. That solidarity proved to be stronger than the temptation of easy cash. The almost hidden nature of the land was also on their side, for the site's obscurity and inaccessibility worked like a forcefield to keep a very greedy land market at bay. In this part of town, even such small plots in such a crowded settlement would attract many buyers, since they came with secure land title. A few years after the project was finished, the NHA carried out a survey to see how people were doing and how they were feeling about the community. 94% of the community members insisted that they'd never agree to sell their houses, since they belonged to this place, and since their friends, their families, their jobs and their support systems were all right there, in Wat Lad Bua Khao.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

This case study was prepared by ACHR in May 2021, and drew on several historic documents, including these two articles:

1. A 1988 article by Somsook Boonyabantha and Solly Angel, "Land sharing as a alternative to eviction: the Bangkok experience," which described five of Bangkok's early land sharing projects, including this one at Wat Lad Bua Khao. Please follow this link to read that article:

http://achr.net/upload/downloads/file_07012020155521.pdf

2. A 1986 article by Somsook Boonyabantha about the land sharing project at Wat Lad Bua Khao, which appeared in the journal *Open House International*, Vol. 11, Issue 1, 1986.

http://achr.net/upload/downloads/file_05052020163320.pdf

For more information about other community-driven and collective housing projects in Thailand, that are supported by CODI and the Baan Mankong Program, please visit the English part of the CODI website:

<https://en.codi.or.th/>

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PHOTOS

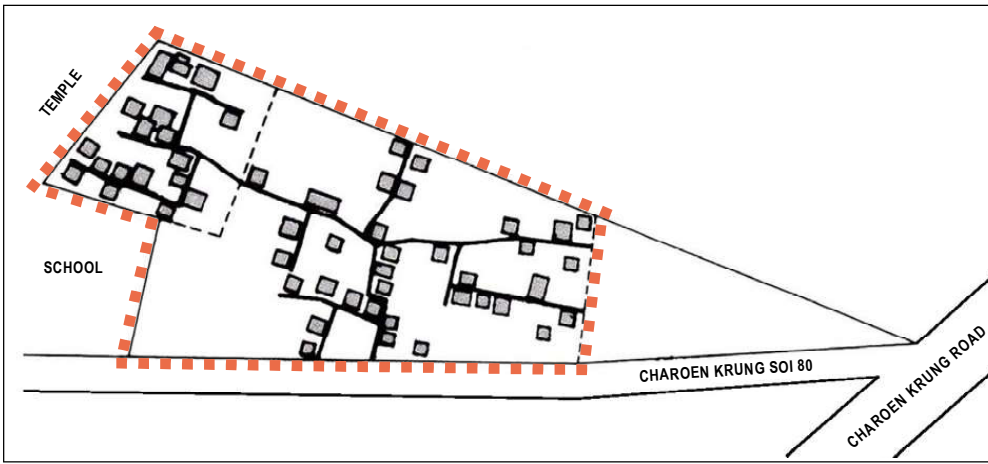


That's a photo of Charoen Krung Road (above), from the 1950s, and the Wat Lad Bua Khao Buddhist temple (to the right).



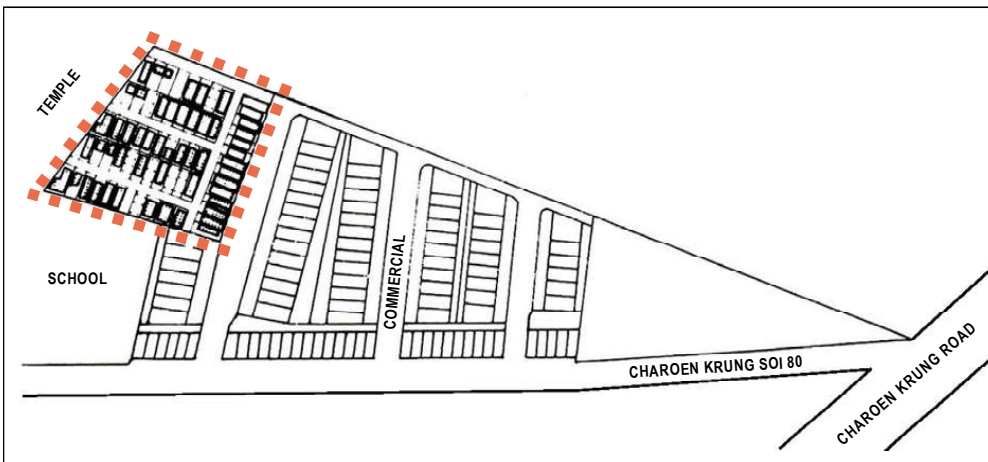
These photos show what conditions were like in the Wat Lad Bua Khao community in 1981, when the NHA team came to visit the first time, during their survey of communities in Bangkok that were facing eviction.





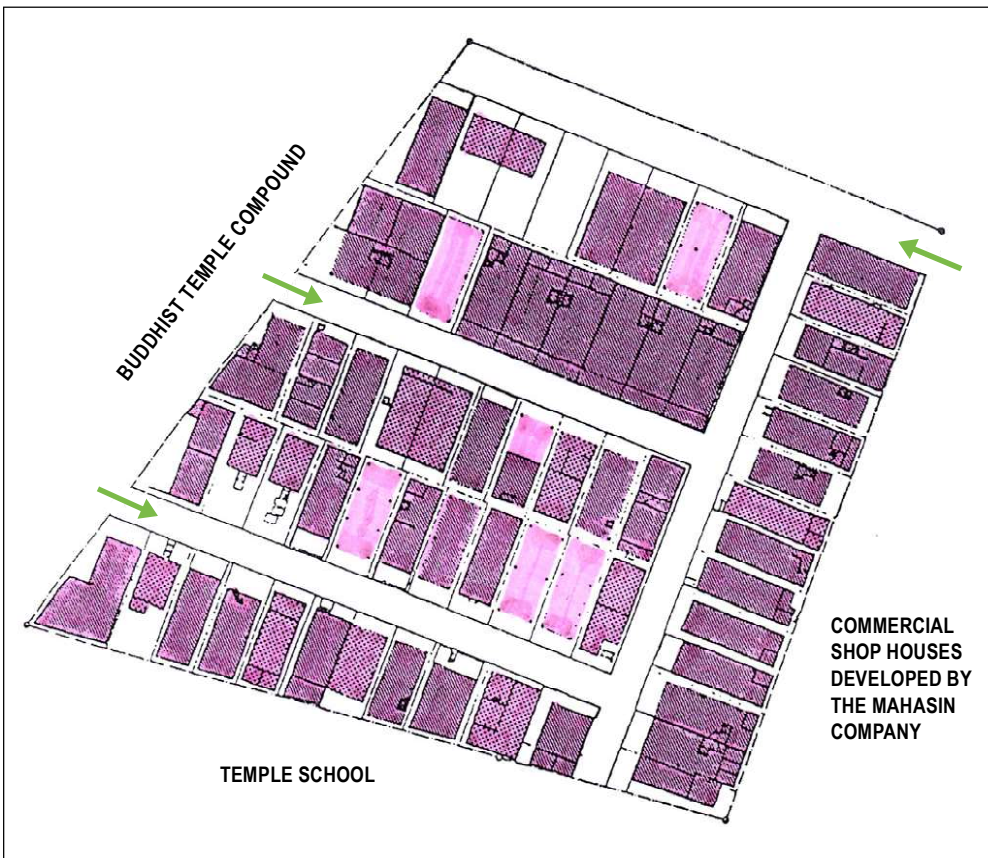
BEFORE land sharing:

Before the land sharing project, only 67 houses (out of 383) were still staying in the Wat Lad Bua Khao community, and they were scattered across the 1.6 hectares of private land that had already been sold to a private developer right after the 1978 fire.



AFTER land sharing:

Under the land sharing agreement, 20% of the land (0.32 hectares) was sold cheaply to the community to rebuild its housing in a dense layout of small rowhouses, while 80% of the land (1.28 hectares) was turned over to the company to develop commercially.



Here is a larger and more detailed drawing of the new community layout, on the 0.32 hectare piece of land. Most of the families built their own houses on their 40 square meter plots, but six families joined together to build rowhouses.



These two photos (above and to the right) are a little blurry, but they are among the few pictures remaining which show the process of construction of the new houses in Wat Lad Bua Khao. They were taken in 1983 and appeared in an article about the project a few years later.

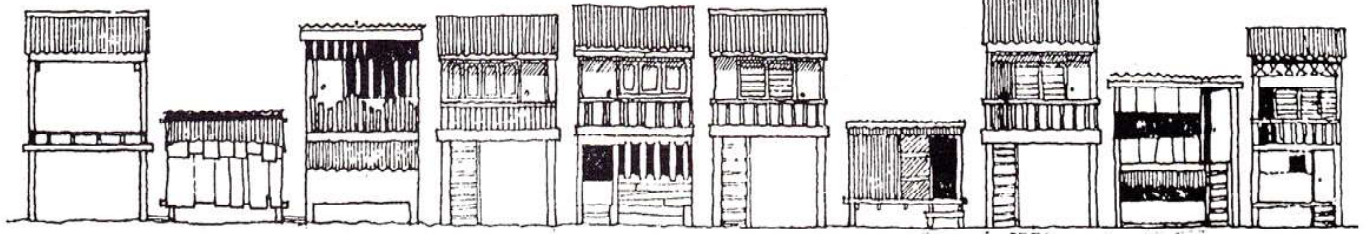


More photos taken by the NHA team during the construction process. Most of the families built their own houses, self-help style, and the work went very quickly. Construction started in February 1983, and seven months later, all 67 houses were finished.

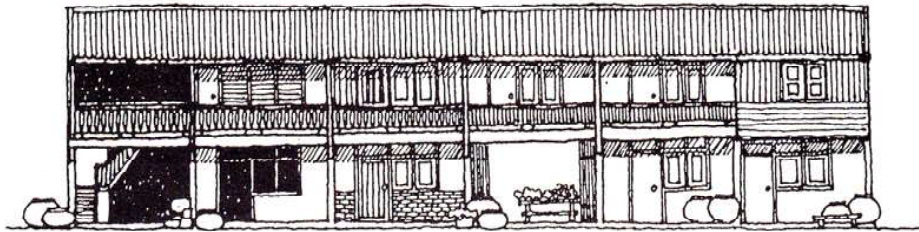


Take a careful look at the two wooden houses at the back of this photo from the construction process. You'll see them again 38 years later.

The new paved walkways and drains put in by the NHA were much appreciated and were kept spotlessly clean by the house-proud residents.



▲ Ruengyuth Teeravanich is an architect who was part of the NHA team that worked on the project. These are his sketches of the self-built houses along the east side.



▲ This is Ruengyuth's facade sketch of the group of six rowhouses where the families decided to build together, with shared walls.



▲ There are benefits to being hidden: Here is a recent satellite photo of the area around the Wat Lad Bua Khao community, which is still there 40 years later, partly protected from greedy market forces by its location, tucked away discretely behind the temple and the school.



▲ This photo shows the only way into the community, through the temple compound, with the temple to the left and the school to the right.



▲ That's what the community looks like once you make your way inside, along one of the narrow east-west lanes.



Most of the families set their houses a little back from the edge of the lane, to make room for flowers, little porches and storing bicycles and vending carts.



This photo was taken along the back north-south lane, which is a little wider, and has several small provision shops and places where the community people gather and chat.



Looking down one of the small east-west lanes, towards the leafy compound of the temple at the end, with so much evidence of how intensely every square inch of this tiny community is used.



Here are those two wooden houses we saw being constructed in 1983. Here they still here, and almost unchanged, 38 years later.



More pride of place in this elaborately decorated door and fresh pink paint job (above) and in the community's spirit house (right).

