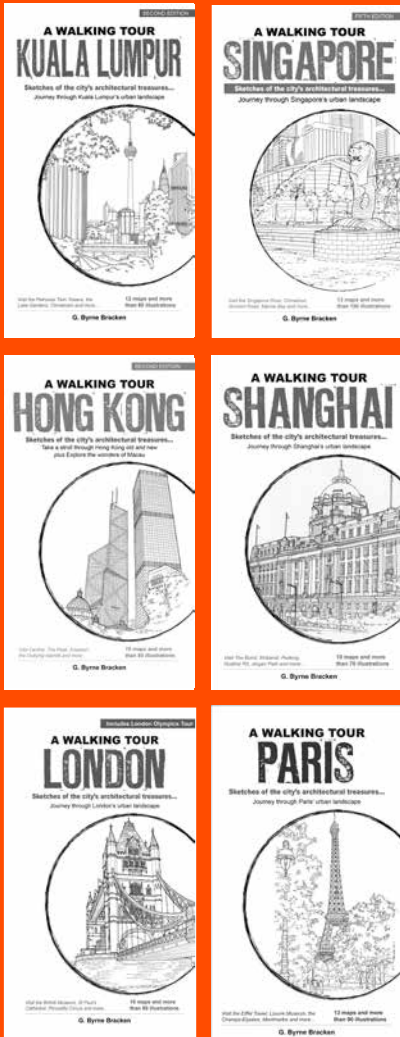


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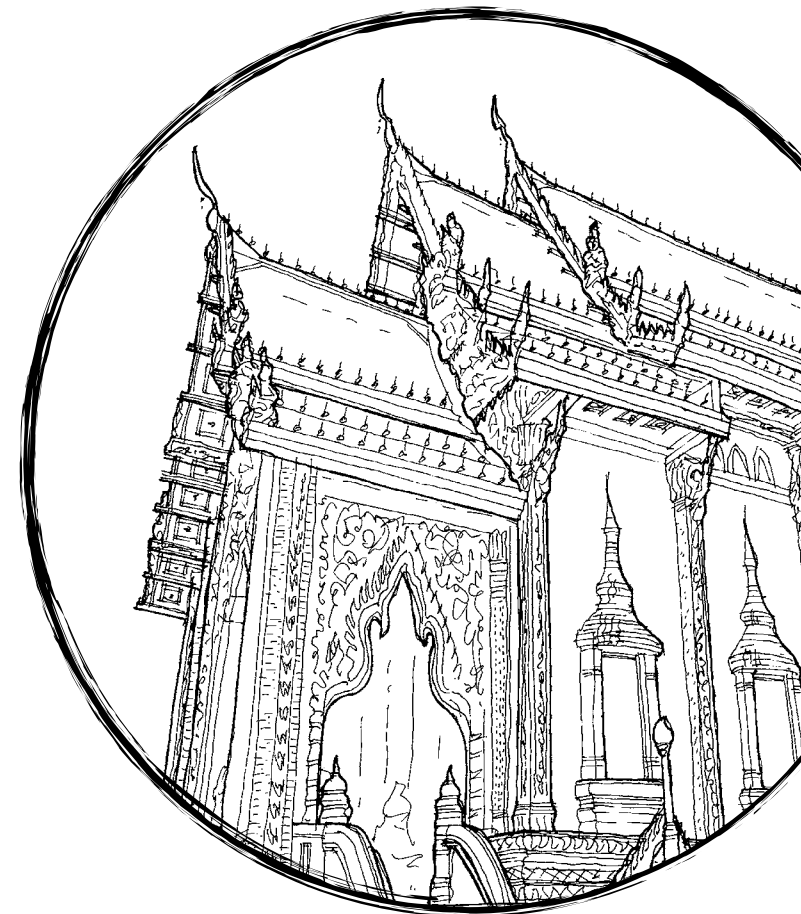
A WALKING TOUR
BANGKOK

G. Byrne Bracken

A WALKING TOUR **BANGKOK**

Sketches of the city's architectural treasures...

Journey through Bangkok's urban landscape



Visit Rattanakosin, Silom Road,
Chinatown, and more...

11 maps and
100 illustrations

G. Byrne Bracken



Gregory Byrne Bracken is an architect and inveterate walker, both of which occupations he has pursued across the globe – from London, Paris and Berlin to Bangkok, Singapore and Hong Kong. He lectures in architecture at the Technical University of Delft in the Netherlands, where he received his PhD.

Front cover: Wat Suan Phu

For Review only

A WALKING TOUR BANGKOK

Sketches of the city's architectural treasures...

Journey through Bangkok's urban landscape



Gregory Byrne Bracken

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All text and illustrations by G. Byrne Bracken
Designer: Benson Tan

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank everyone who has helped me with this book, particularly Melvin Neo, Justin Lau and Benson Tan at Marshall Cavendish for their wonderful support.



Suggested Itineraries

For Review only

Introduction

History

Charoen Krung Road
Rattanakosin
Bang Lamphoo
Dusit District

Culture

Rattanakosin
Dusit District
Further Afield

Markets

Prathunam
Silom Road
Charoen Krung Road
Chinatown
Bang Lamphoo
Further Afield (Chatuchak Weekend Market)

Shopping

Prathunam
Wireless Road
Silom Road
Charoen Krung Road
Chinatown

Children's

Prathunam
Dusit District

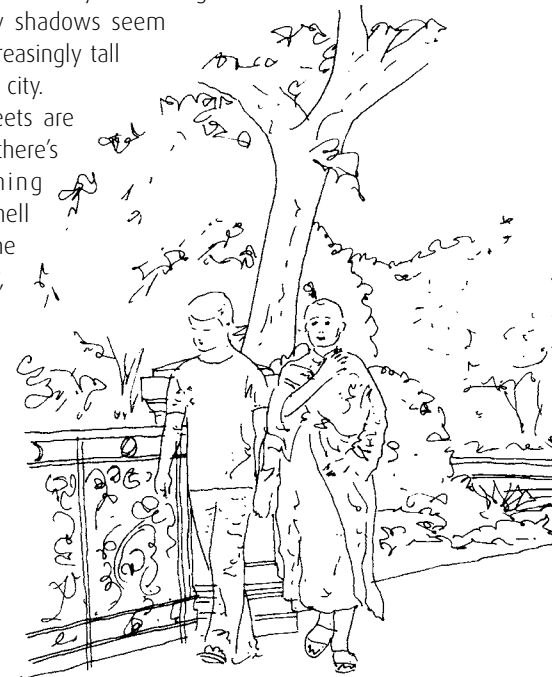
Bangkok is notorious for its traffic, which means that walking is one of the best ways of getting around the city. It is also greener than most people realise with a number of different areas, almost cities within a city, which are best explored on foot.

Each chapter of this book shows a suggested walking route, each following on from where the previous one left off. These try to cover one particular area per walk, like Chinatown or Rattanakosin, but the city's Downtown is so large that it has been split into three separate walks. Distances can be huge, city blocks in Bangkok are big and have few crossing streets, the advantage is that once you're on the road you'll have less chance of missing the things you want to see. The buildings and sites listed are only suggestions for visiting, they don't have to be followed rigorously, and apart from the usual temples, mosques, churches and museums there's also information on other places of interest, like skyscrapers which have restaurants, bars or galleries with good views of the city.

Be careful when following some of the routes as Bangkok can be treacherous — uneven paving, crumbling edges, even gaping holes that are left unprotected — so watch your step, particularly when you have your eyes gazing upward at the buildings. Remember to stop often, don't overdo it in the tropical weather. Drink plenty of liquids, and there are numerous shops, cafes and restaurants en route to stop in and rest. Parts of Bangkok can be surprisingly green, with shady trees lining the roadways, but increasingly shadows seem to be coming from the increasingly tall buildings in and around the city.

Most of Bangkok's streets are lively day and night, and there's nearly always something interesting to see, and smell or even taste, so enjoy the experience. Do remember, however, that if you want to go into places like temples and some museums you must dress appropriately (i.e. you can't wear shorts, tee-shirts or sandals).

Monk and friend



Notes

For Review only Map of Thailand

A Note on History

After a particularly savage attack by the Burmese in 1767, Auytthaya, the capital of Siam (as the Kingdom of Thailand was then known), was destroyed. It had been the country's capital for more than four centuries and had been as large and rich as many European cities. The site was now considered too vulnerable and so a new capital was founded by King Taksin farther down the Menam River at Thonburi. A short time later the King went mad and was overthrown by one of his generals, Phraya Chakri, who put him to death. Phraya Chakri then took the title Rama I and founded the Chakri dynasty, which still reigns today, King Bumibol (pronounced Bumibon) is known as Rama IX.

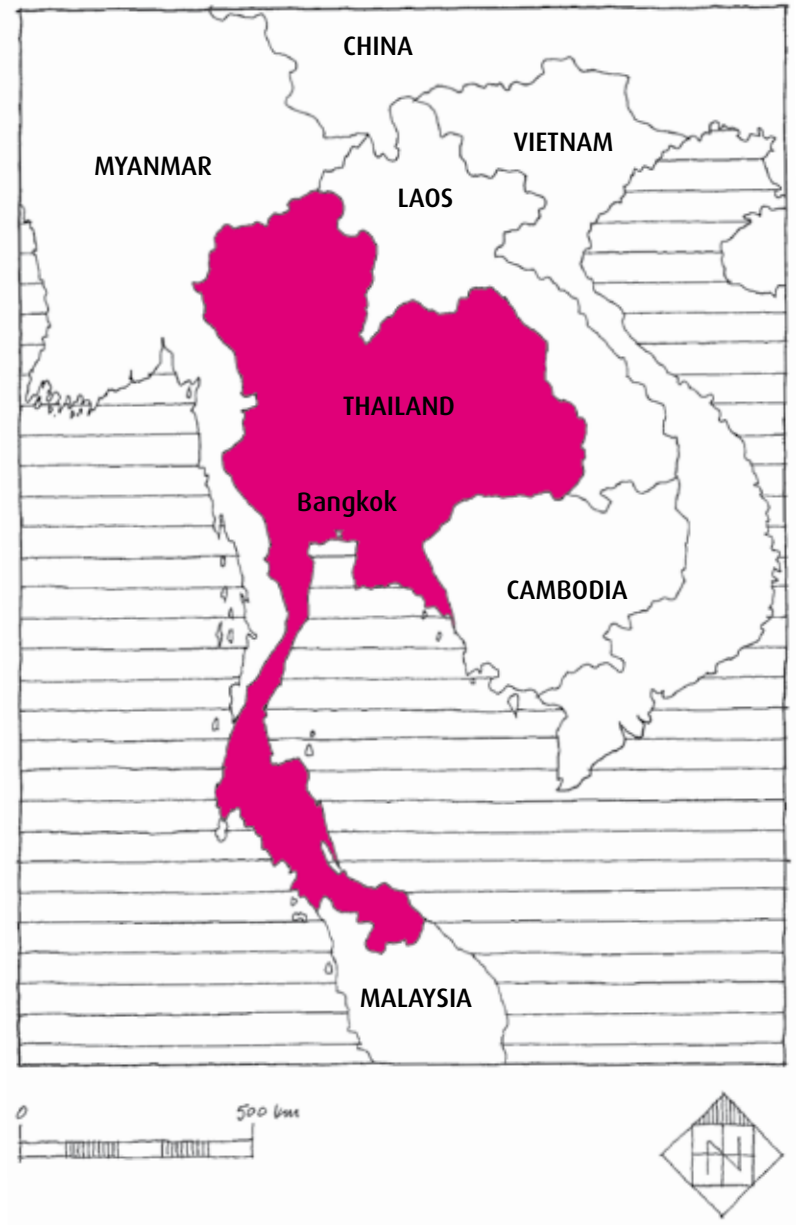
Did You Know?

King Taksin was executed in the prescribed way for Thai royalty, by being tied up in a velvet sack and beaten to death with a sandalwood club.

Rama I then moved the capital, which was known to Westerners as Bancok, or the village of the wild plum, to the more easily defended eastern side of the river, forcing the Chinese merchants who had settled there to move farther downstream to what is present-day Chinatown. He built a series of defensive canals, a palace and a new temple to house the Emerald Buddha. He called the new 'Royal Island' Rattanakosin, but the name Bangkok stuck in Westerners' minds. At Rama I's coronation in 1782 he renamed the new capital Khruang Thep Phra Maha Nakhorn (the City of Angels, the Capital City), and it is still known to Thais as Khruang Thep (City of Angels) a shortened form of what has since become the longest city name in the world.

Until the second half of the twentieth century the main means of transport in the city was by boat, and though a lot of the canals, known as *khlongs*, have since been culverted, it still remains one of the best ways to see Bangkok. Filling in the canals wasn't just an aesthetic impoverishment, the waterways had acted as drains for the entire delta and their loss has left the city more prone to flooding than ever, but it didn't do enough to alleviate the road shortage anyway. The Chao Phraya River, which changed its name from the Menam in honour of Rama I, is teeming with craft, from huge cargo barges to ferries and longtail boats, and is the backbone of a network of canals, which in Thonburi are still relatively intact and give a flavour of what Bangkok life used to be like.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Rama V relocated the royal family to the Dusit district in the north of the city, where he constructed impressive avenues, palaces and temples, while the area around Sathorn



For Review only Bangkok Districts

and Silom Roads became a fashionable enclave for rich foreigners who built gracious villas overlooking the wide roads and tree-lined canals.

The second half of the twentieth century saw uncontrolled urban expansion, particularly to the east. Bangkok in 1900 was about 13 square kilometres, but by 1980 had ballooned to 330 square kilometres, and it is still growing. Earlier attempts at orderly planning were obliterated and the city now has a series of different centres; from Rattanakosin and Chinatown, to the area between Silom Road and Prathunam, and even Sukhumvit Road. But if the visitor is prepared to explore, the city can be very rewarding, with pockets of charm in the oddest places, from serene temples, to lush parks, and even little corners of traditional activity that still take place much as they must have done in the days of Rama I.

Note: Siam

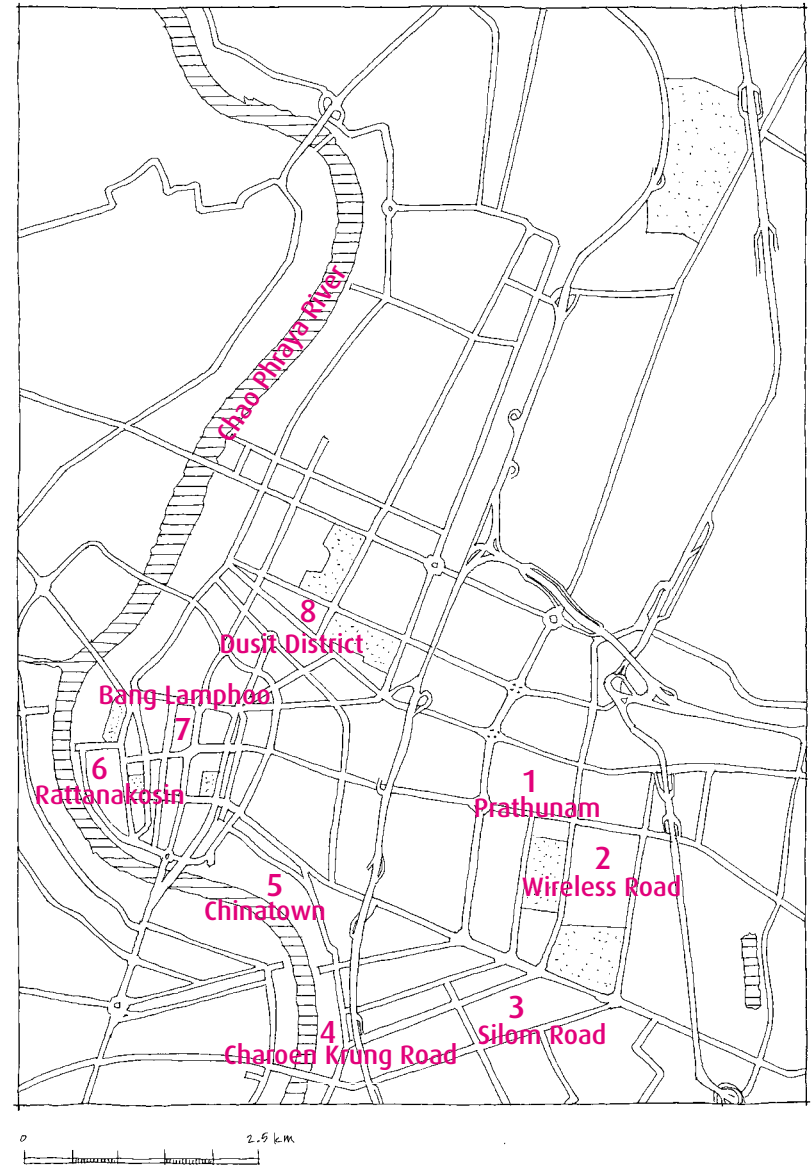
When Field Marshall Phibul became Prime Minister of Siam in 1939 he changed the name to Muang Thai (Land of the Thai), even though it is more commonly called Prathet Thai (Kingdom of the Thai) by the Thais themselves, and almost exclusively Thailand, an odd mix of Thai and English, by the rest of the world. It was done partly to try and break the Chinese stranglehold on the Thai economy (the overseas Chinese here are less visible than in other Southeast Asian countries, but their influence is still considerable), and to lay claim to territory housing Thai people which had been lost to the neighbouring French and British colonial empires over the previous decades. By allying themselves with Japan during World War II Thailand hoped to regain what had been unjustly wrested from them, in this they were unsuccessful, but like other politically motivated name changes, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Irian Jaya (New Guinea), Burmah (Myanmar), Siam has perhaps lost something in the translation.

Note: Loy Krathong Festival

One of Thailand's best-loved national festivals pays homage to Mae Khong Kha, the goddess of rivers and waterways. In the evenings of the full moon during the 12th lunar month (November), people gather at rivers, lakes and ponds to float *krathongs*, which are small lotus-shaped baskets containing flowers, incense and candles. The festival originated in the north of Thailand and places like Chiang Mai and particularly Sukhothai are still the best places to see it today.

A Note on Climate

Bangkok's climate is governed by three seasons: the cool season, running from November to February, is the pleasantest time to visit, temperatures average around 27 degrees; the hot season, beginning in March, with highs of up to 37 degrees; and the rainy season, which varies from year to year, but usually starts in May and reaches a climax in September or October, with



eighty per cent of the annual rainfall occurring during the late afternoon showers, which are often accompanied by spectacular thunder and lightning.

A Note on Spelling

Spellings differ in Bangkok, on maps, in guides and even from place to place. Those in this guide are standardised with a mind to simple, clear pronunciation.

A Note on Icons

To inform readers about the interesting features of the places they pass, we have added icons, drawn by the author, to represent the following:



Must See



National Monument



Good View



See At Night



Drinking



Eating



Shopping

A Note on Dress

You should dress comfortably for the tropics, but remember that in Thailand you should also cover up your body as much as possible. You will not be allowed into places such as temples wearing short trousers or short-sleeved shirts. Shoes must be removed before entering certain buildings, temples mainly, but some homes and offices will expect you to do so as well, basically if you see a pile of shoes at or near an entrance, you should remove your own as well before entering.

Note on Social Behaviour

Thais address people by their first name, usually with the word '*khun*' in front of it, which is used for both males and females. Thais rarely shake hands, using the traditional form of greeting known as the '*wai*' to say hello, goodbye, thank you and to apologise. As complex in its social ramifications as the Japanese bow, the *wai* is a prayer-like gesture made with palms pressed together in front of the chest, nose or forehead. Feel free to imitate one if someone *wais* to you — any clumsiness will be forgiven — but it's best not to initiate one as it can be embarrassing, particularly for the Thais. Never raise your voice or allow yourself to seem angry, you'll be even less likely to achieve your objectives — Thais avoid confrontation at all costs. Pointing your feet at anyone is considered rude, so be careful how you sit, especially if you're crossing your legs, never put your feet on a table. In temples, make sure you sit with your feet tucked away from the sacred images. Public displays of physical affection, other than innocent ones between friends such as hand-holding, are generally frowned upon.

A Note on Taboos

Monks are revered in Thailand, and most Thai men spend at least some part of their lives in a monastery. Most taboos to do with monks concern women, who are not allowed to touch a monk, or directly hand anything to one. The royal family is not only revered but is genuinely loved. Criticising or defaming them will not only be crass and offensive, but can, under certain circumstances, be considered a crime. Because the Thai currency bears the king's image, you must treat it with respect, and if you happen to be anywhere and they start to play the National Anthem, follow the lead of the Thais around you and stand to attention.



Checklist

Sunglasses.

Sunscreen.

A small umbrella for the frequent showers. It can also come in useful as a parasol.

A small hand towel.

A small bottle of something to drink is essential.

Tiger Balm, when applied promptly to mosquito bites is extremely effective in preventing them from itching and becoming inflamed.

For Review only

“Bangkok is the most hokum place I have ever seen, never having been to California. It is a triumph of the ‘imitation’ school; nothing is what it looks like; if it is not parodying European buildings it is parodying Khmer ones; failing anything else it will parody itself.”

— Geoffrey Gorer, *Bali and Angkor*

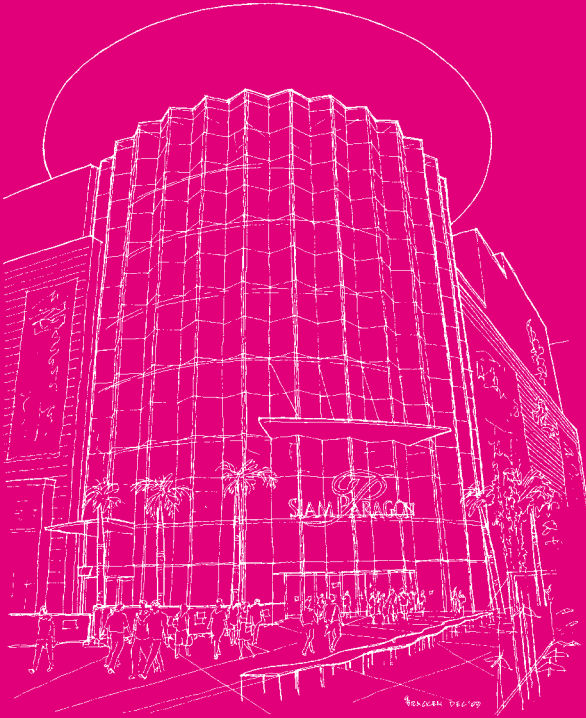


For Review Only



Prathunam

Nearest Skytrain Station: National Stadium
Approximate walking time: 1 hour 30 minutes

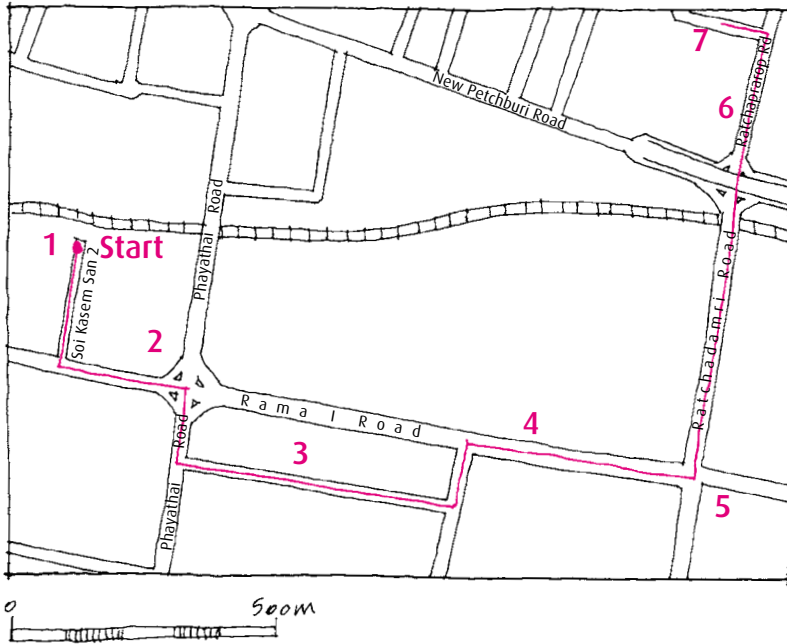


Downtown North

Prathunam means 'water gate' in Thai and refers to the canal lock which used to be located on Khlong San Sap here. This area is home to an interesting mix of buildings, old and new, including Jim Thompson's famous Thai-style house, some stylish new shopping centres, and the Baiyoke Tower II, the tallest building in Thailand.

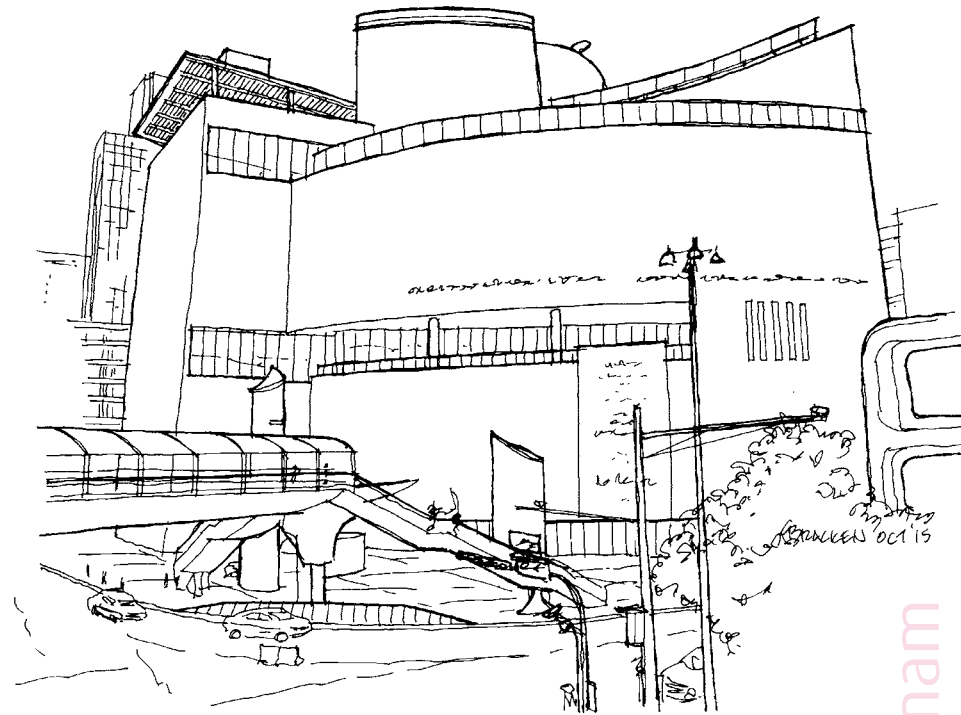
THE WALK

For Review only



KEY

1. Jim Thompson's House
2. Bangkok Art and Culture Centre
3. Siam Square
4. Wat Pathum Wanaram
5. Erawan Shrine
6. Prathunam Market
7. Baiyoke Tower II





Jim Thompson's House



If you are walking from the National Stadium Skytrain Station, follow Rama I Road away from the direction of Phayathai Road and turn right into Soi Kasem San 2. Jim Thompson's House will be on your left at the end of this narrow laneway. Thompson was instrumental in reviving the Thai silk industry after World War II. In 1958, he bought a traditional Thai house, dismantled it and rebuilt in the centre of the compound and added to it using a number of other traditional houses found in Ayutthaya. They were reconstructed using traditional methods (wooden pegs, no nails) but follow an unconventional plan, with some of the walls turned inside out to better highlight their craftsmanship. The deep red colour of the exteriors is unusual and is the result of wood preservative and has nothing to do with Thai traditional style, although it is very striking.

The small garden is densely planted and overlooks a narrow stretch of the busy Khlong San Sap which used to be a centre of silk weaving. Thompson was a knowledgeable collector of Southeast Asian art and antiquities and the house contains some fine stone carvings, Buddha heads and traditional Thai paintings. There is an easy informality to the whole place, it's almost as if Thompson has just popped out for a moment, in fact he disappeared without

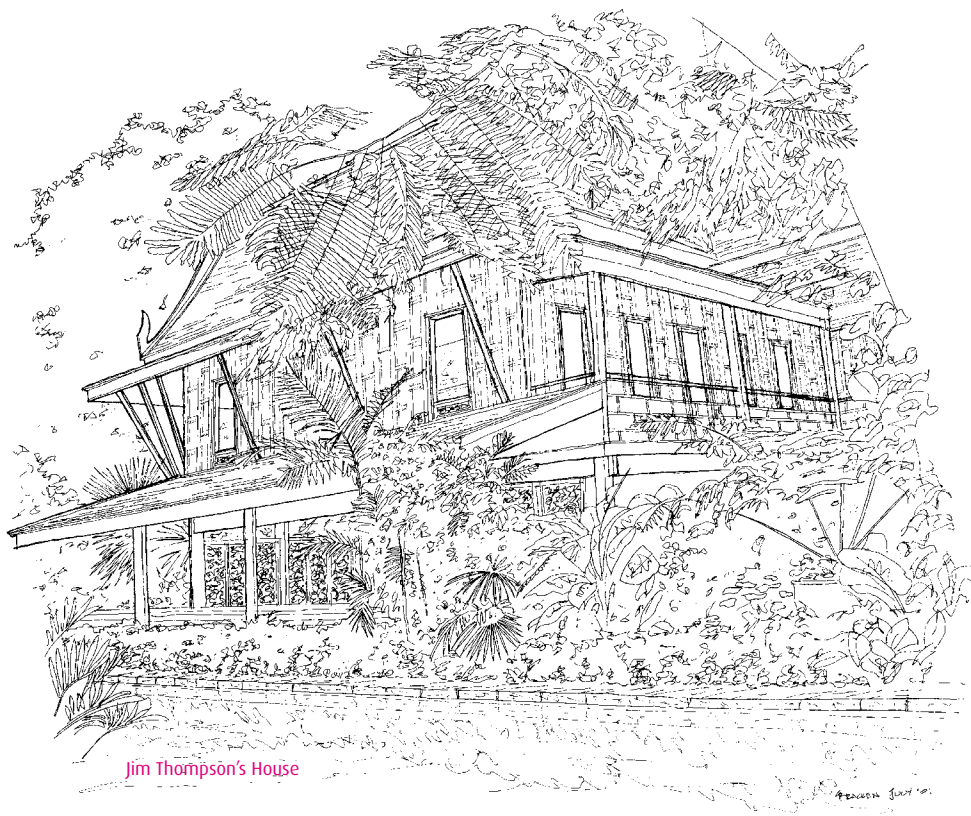
trace in Malaysia in 1967. Access to the house is via guided tour. There is also a bar and restaurant, as well as a gift shop.

Jim Thompson's House

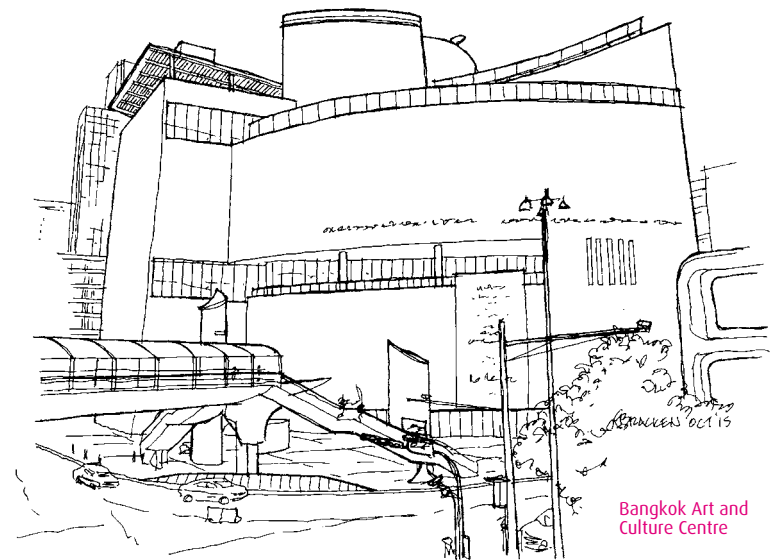
Opening times: 9am to 5pm daily.
Admission charges.

Note: Jim Thompson

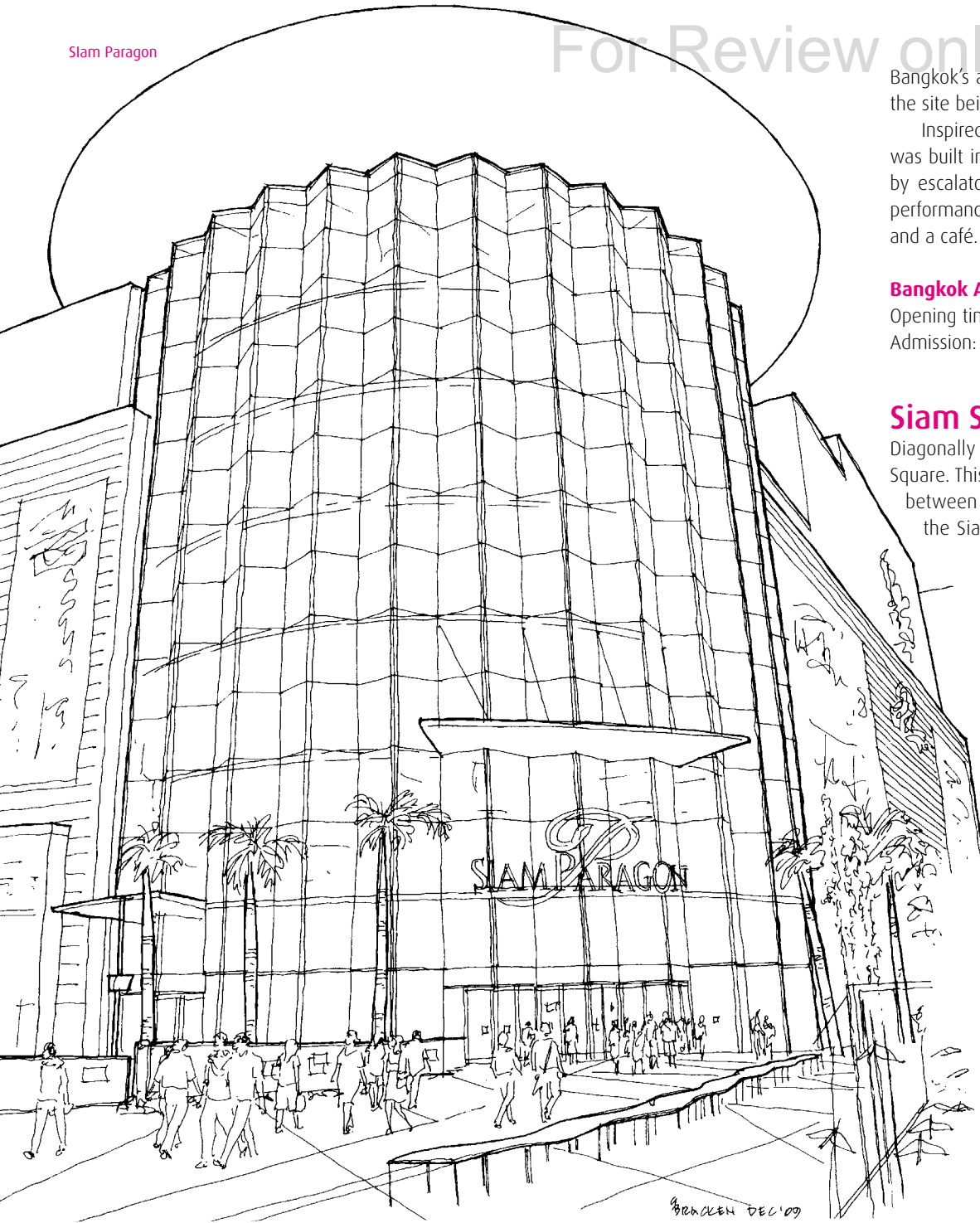
Born in Delaware, USA in 1906, Jim Thompson had worked as an architect in New York before coming to Thailand in 1945 as the Bangkok head of the Office of Strategic Services, an early version of the CIA. In 1948 he founded the Thai Silk Company Ltd and almost single-handedly revived an ailing industry. He then disappeared quite suddenly in Malaysia's Cameron Highlands in 1967. Some maintain he got lost in the jungle, not a particularly pleasant way to die, but rumours persist that there was CIA involvement, the fact that his sister was murdered in the USA the previous year didn't help. The most likely theory, if a little mundane, is that he was knocked down by a car or lorry and his body buried to cover up the accident.



Jim Thompson's House



Bangkok Art and Culture Centre



Bangkok's artistic community who had to battle to prevent the site being used for yet another commercial venture.

Inspired by the Guggenheim Museum in New York, it was built in 2008 and contains an airy atrium criss-crossed by escalators and lined with sloping walkways. Home to exhibition and performance spaces, there are also meeting rooms, a library and study area, and a café.

Bangkok Art and Culture Centre

Opening times: 10am to 9pm, Tue-Sun

Admission: free

Siam Square



Diagonally across the junction of Rama I and Phayathai Roads sits Siam Square. This isn't a square in the usual sense but actually a grid of small sois between Chulalongkorn University and Rama I Road. Located just opposite the Siam Centre, one of Thailand's first shopping centres, and beside a number of popular cinemas, this open-air square is packed with small shops and stalls selling music, books, accessories and clothing. A number of young Thai designers also sell their work here. This area has become something of a new city centre of sorts, being the Skytrain interchange. Across Rama I Road from Siam Square sit a number of upmarket shopping centres, including the older **Siam Centre** as well as the newer **Siam Discovery Centre** and **Siam Paragon** complexes. Siam Paragon is also home to **Siam Ocean World**, a massive aquarium, which is a huge attraction, especially at weekends for families with children. There is the obligatory underwater tunnel as well as a massive eight-metre-deep tank for coral reef as well as a smaller tank where visitors can actually touch sea creatures such as starfish.

Siam Ocean World

Opening times: 9am to 10pm daily

Admission Charges



Note: Skytrain

Elevated on a pre-stressed concrete viaduct supported by massive columns supporting spans of anything from 35 to 60 metres, the Bangkok Skytrain follows two of the city's main arterial routes, Silom and Sukhumvit Roads, transforming certain parts of them into sunless chasms. Delightfully, the new elevated public spaces which have been created on the 23 station platforms 12 metres above street level reveal Bangkok to be a far greener city than is at first apparent. With an average travelling speed of 35 kilometres per hour (or three times faster than the usual pace of cars in the city), the Skytrain indeed makes for a convenient and pleasant way to get around.

Wat Pathum Wanaram



Leave Siam Square by turning right onto Rama I Road and you will come to Wat Pathum Wanaram on your left after the junction with Henri Dunant Road. This temple, with its delightful cluster of buildings asymmetrically arranged among mature trees and shrubs, and sitting overlooking a small canal, is unlike any of the others in the city. It does not feel urban or hemmed in despite opening onto a busy road and being overlooked by the Skytrain and surrounding skyscrapers. Originally planned by Rama IV in the 1850s as a

Wat Pathum Wanaram



royal pleasure garden, it was known as the Lotus Pond (Sra Pathum) and contained a private place of worship for the king. Now it is home to the Phra Meru Mas, a reconstruction of the Princess Mother's crematorium and supposed to represent Mount Meru, the mythical home of the gods. It is a rare example of ancient craftsmanship, featuring ornate stencils and lacquered sculptures. Following the Princess Mother's cremation at Sanam Luang in 1996 her remains were transferred here in an elaborate procession. She was particularly revered, for although being born a commoner she was the mother of two kings, Rama VIII and his brother, the current king, Rama IX.

Wat Pathum Wanaram

Opening times: 8:30am to 6pm daily

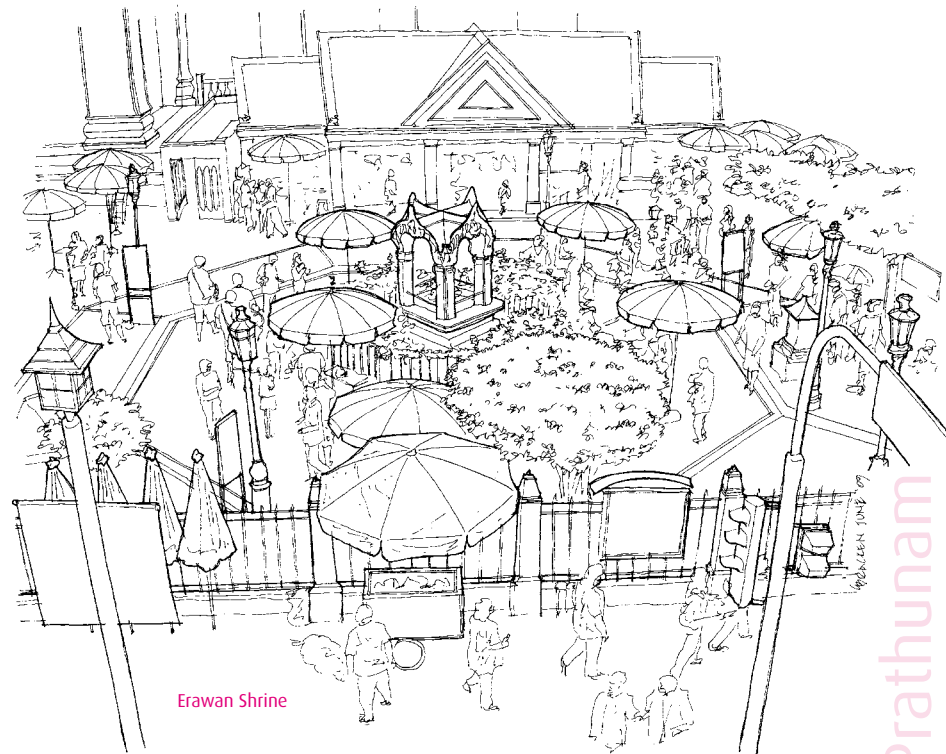
Admission: free

Erawan Shrine



Continue along Rama I Road and the Erawan Shrine will be diagonally across the busy junction with Ratchadamri Road. This garish L-shaped shrine is one of the best known in the city, mainly because of its prominent location on a

Erawan Shrine





busy corner outside the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel. It dates from the 1950s when a number of accidents occurred while building the hotel (the foundation stone had been laid on an inauspicious day), so it was decided to build a shrine to Brahma and Erawan (his elephant mount) to try and appease the bad spirits. The accidents stopped and the shrine rapidly gained a reputation as a place to seek divine intercession.

Busy day and night, the faithful come to light incense and pray, and they often pay the colourfully dressed temple dancers to perform in thanksgiving for prayers answered. It is interesting to observe that even the passing motorcyclists make the traditional *wai* of respect as they pass, temporarily abandoning their handlebars at full speed! For a good view of the shrine, climb onto the elevated pedestrian walkway crossing this busy junction.

Erawan Shrine

Opening times: 9am to 5pm daily
Admission: free

Note: Makrut

Thai chess, or *makrut*, is played everywhere in Bangkok, and at all times of the day and night. More like a simplified version of the Japanese game of Go than Western chess, it is often played on sheets of tattered cardboard with bottle caps for pieces.

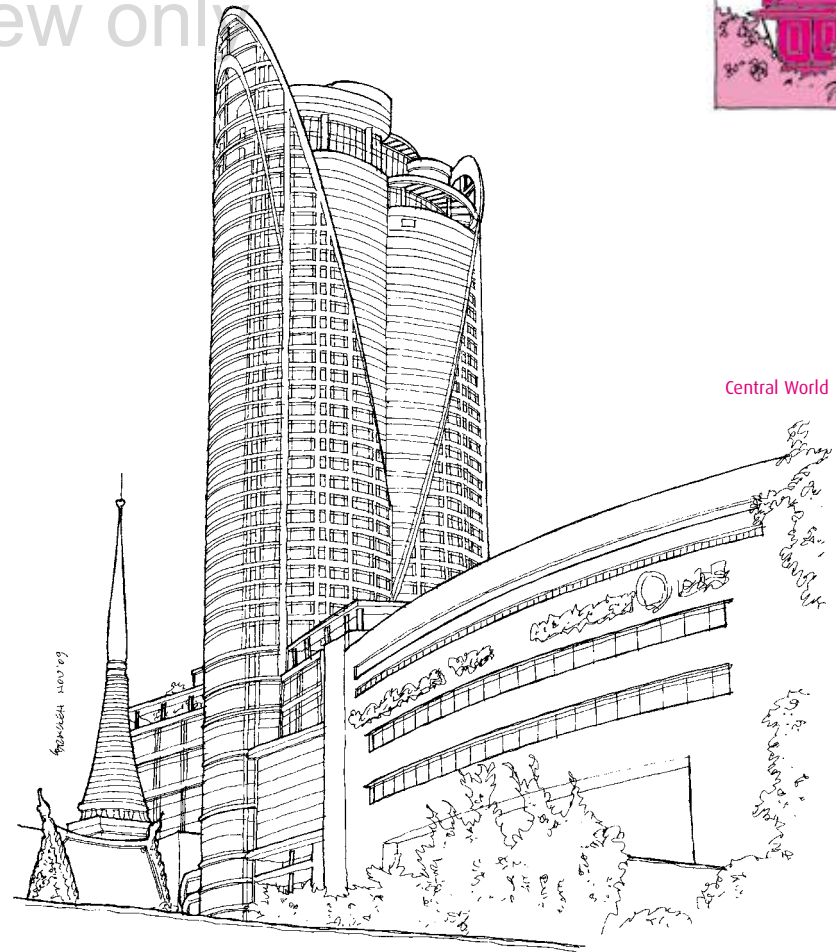
Prathunam Market



With your back to the Erawan Shrine walk up Ratchadamri Road. **Central World** will be on your right occupying the entire city block and set well back from the street. This vast shopping complex also contains a convention centre and an office and a hotel tower all built between 2005 and 2007. Continue along Ratchadamri Road by crossing the bridge over Khlong San Sap and you will end up on Ratchaprarop Road. The **Prathunam Market** will be on your left. This popular market takes up most of this city block. Prathunam means 'water gate' in Thai and refers to the canal lock which used to be located on Khlong San Sap here. Also known as Chalermlok, this market occupies a maze of covered stalls and is a favourite place for Thais to shop, it is particularly good for cheap Indian fabrics as well as sewing accessories and also stocks a wide range of general domestic items. It is also a popular late-night eating spot, with noodle shops and food stalls staying open long after the nearby bars and cinemas have closed.

Prathunam Market

Opening times: 9am to midnight daily
Admission: free



Central World

Baiyoke Tower II



Continue along Ratchaprarop Road and take the first roadway to your left and you will be able to see the 309-metre-high Baiyoke Tower II ahead of you. Designed by Bangkok-based firm, Plan Architecture, the balconies on the nearby Baiyoke Tower I, designed by the same firm, have been painted a rainbow range of colours that seem to dissolve into one another as they ascend the building. When it was built the Baiyoke Tower I was the tallest structure in the city, it was quickly surpassed by any number of newer developments and now seems completely dwarfed by its newer neighbours. The Baiyoke Tower II is still the tallest building in Thailand. Perhaps the top of it could have been finished off a little more elegantly, it seems to be a poor imitation of New York's gorgeous 1920s skyscrapers, but it is still an impressive sight. The tower is home to a 400-room hotel and also contains an observation deck on

For Review only

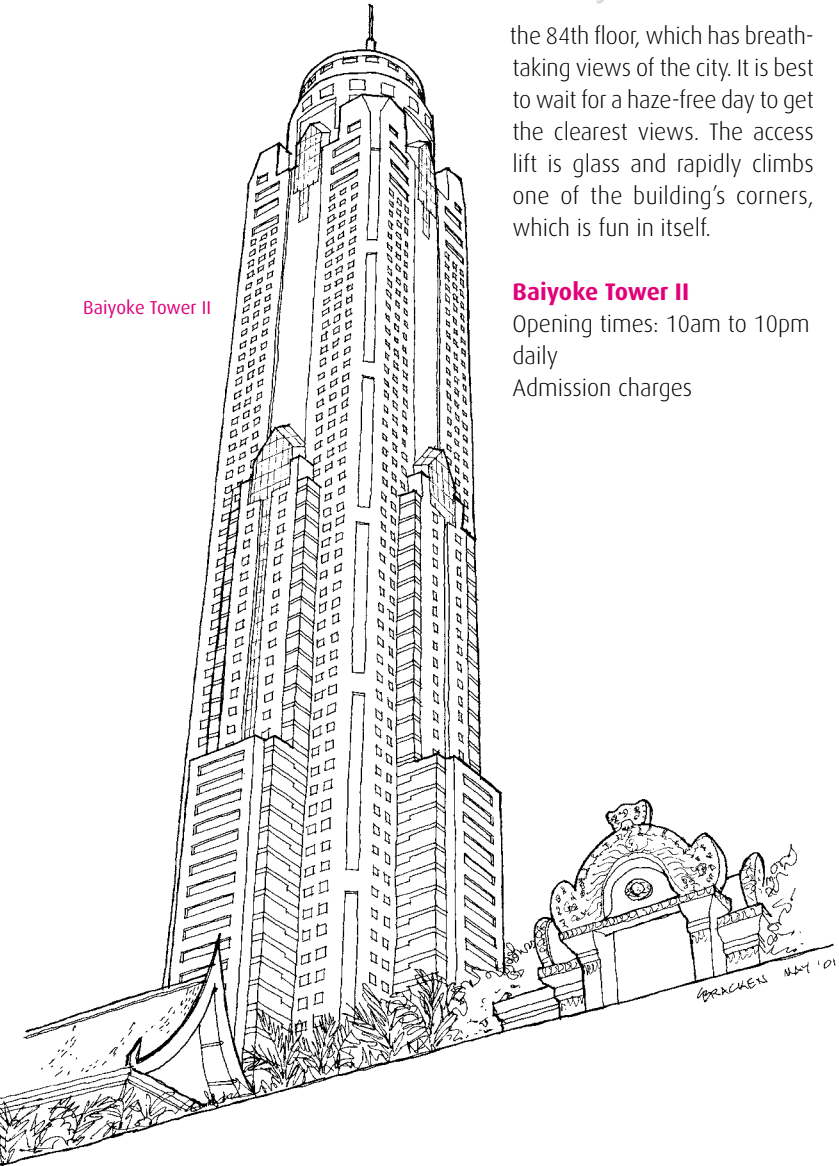
Baiyoke Tower II

the 84th floor, which has breathtaking views of the city. It is best to wait for a haze-free day to get the clearest views. The access lift is glass and rapidly climbs one of the building's corners, which is fun in itself.

Baiyoke Tower II

Opening times: 10am to 10pm daily

Admission charges



Link to the Wireless Road walk:

Walk back along Ratchaprarop Road, turn left onto New Petchburi Road and then right onto Wireless Road.



Traditional Thai House

Traditional Thai houses are well adapted to the tropical climate, using natural materials such as hardwoods, bamboo and dried leaves. They are raised on stilts to protect them from flooding and have steeply slanted roofs the better to throw off rainwater.

Central Plains House

The central plains are the hottest part of the country and a large veranda is common. Acting as an outside living area, it sometimes has several houses clustered around it.

Water House

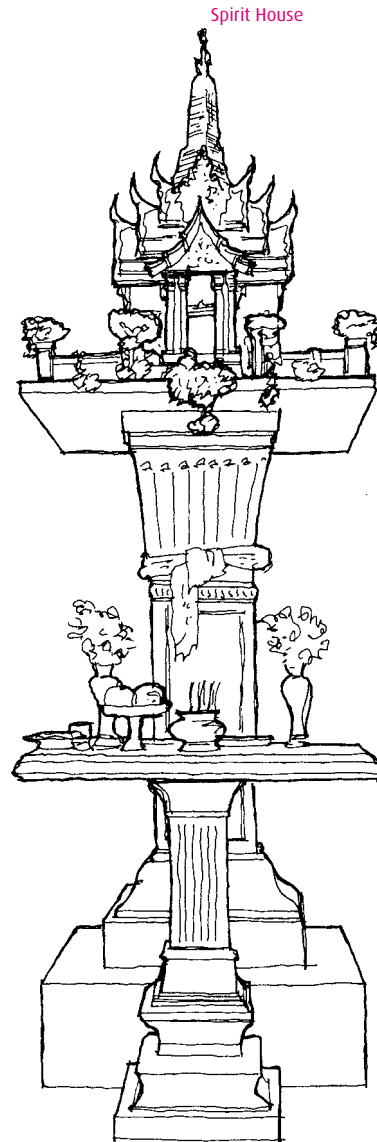
Houses built on water are common in flood-prone Bangkok and along the rivers of the central plains. They are either built on posts above the water line or on bamboo rafts which float during floods.

Shophouse

Shophouses used to be a common building type in Bangkok, as they were throughout Asia. The family usually lives above the business premises, which can be anything from a small workshop to a shop or restaurant. Usually two- to three-storeys in height, the neoclassical style predominates. There are also some handsome Art Deco examples dating from the 1920s onwards, and in Chinatown there are some unusual gothic-style ones.

Spirit House

These can be seen everywhere in Bangkok. Small structures, usually on poles, built to placate the spirits of the land — and when you see a patch of virgin forest in Thailand you can understand the Thais' reverence for the spirit of so mysterious a place. These little houses are the first thing built when land is cleared and are adorned daily with offerings of incense, food and flowers.



Thai Architectural Styles

Khmer

9th to 13th Centuries

Temple complexes, mostly made of stone, were built by the Khmers in northeast Thailand and usually contained staircases lined with carved *nagas* leading to a central sanctuary, often decorated with reliefs depicting Hindu myths, and topped by a central *prang*. Wat Arun (Temple of the Dawn) on the Chao Phraya River is a Khmer-style temple.

Sukhothai

Mid-13th to 15th Centuries

Thailand's 14th-century capital saw the most radical leap in the country's architecture. King Si Intharathit and his successors built *wihans* and *bots* to house images of the Buddha amid the ruins of earlier Khmer structures. *Chedis*, modelled on the bell-shaped reliquary towers of Sri Lanka, were often added. The Sukhothai Hotel on Sathorn Road borrows elegantly from this architectural tradition.

Ayutthaya

Mid-14th to 18th Centuries

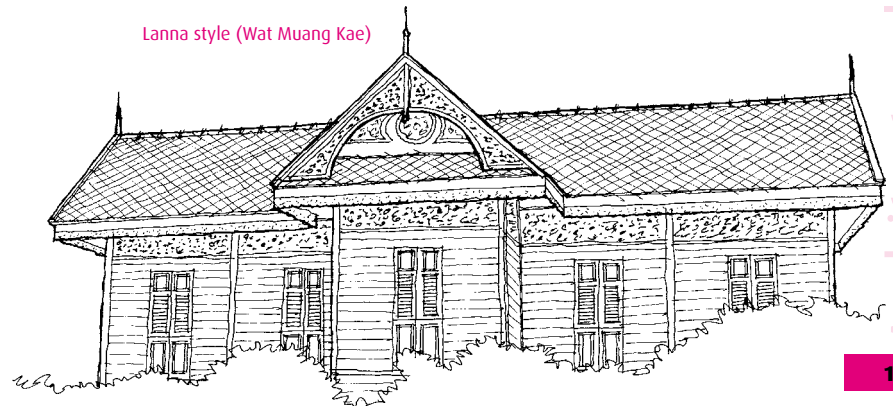
Little of the architecture of Ayutthaya survived the destruction of the Burmese invasion of 1767 but the style seems to have been a subtle modification of Khmer *prangs* and Sri Lankan-style *chedis*, with elaborate decoration of *cho fas* and door and window pediments. Wat Ratchaburana in Chinatown has an Ayutthaya-style *prang*.

Lanna

Mid-13th to 19th Centuries

The religious buildings from this period took their influence from Sukhothai, India and Sri Lanka. Although few buildings remain from Lanna's golden age of the 14th and 15th centuries, later temples, in places like Chiang Mai, often featured the intricate woodcarving and gilded *cho fas* and murals associated with this style. The small Wat Muang Kae on Charoen Krung Soi 36 has Lanna-style decorative features.

Lanna style (Wat Muang Kae)





Rattanakosin

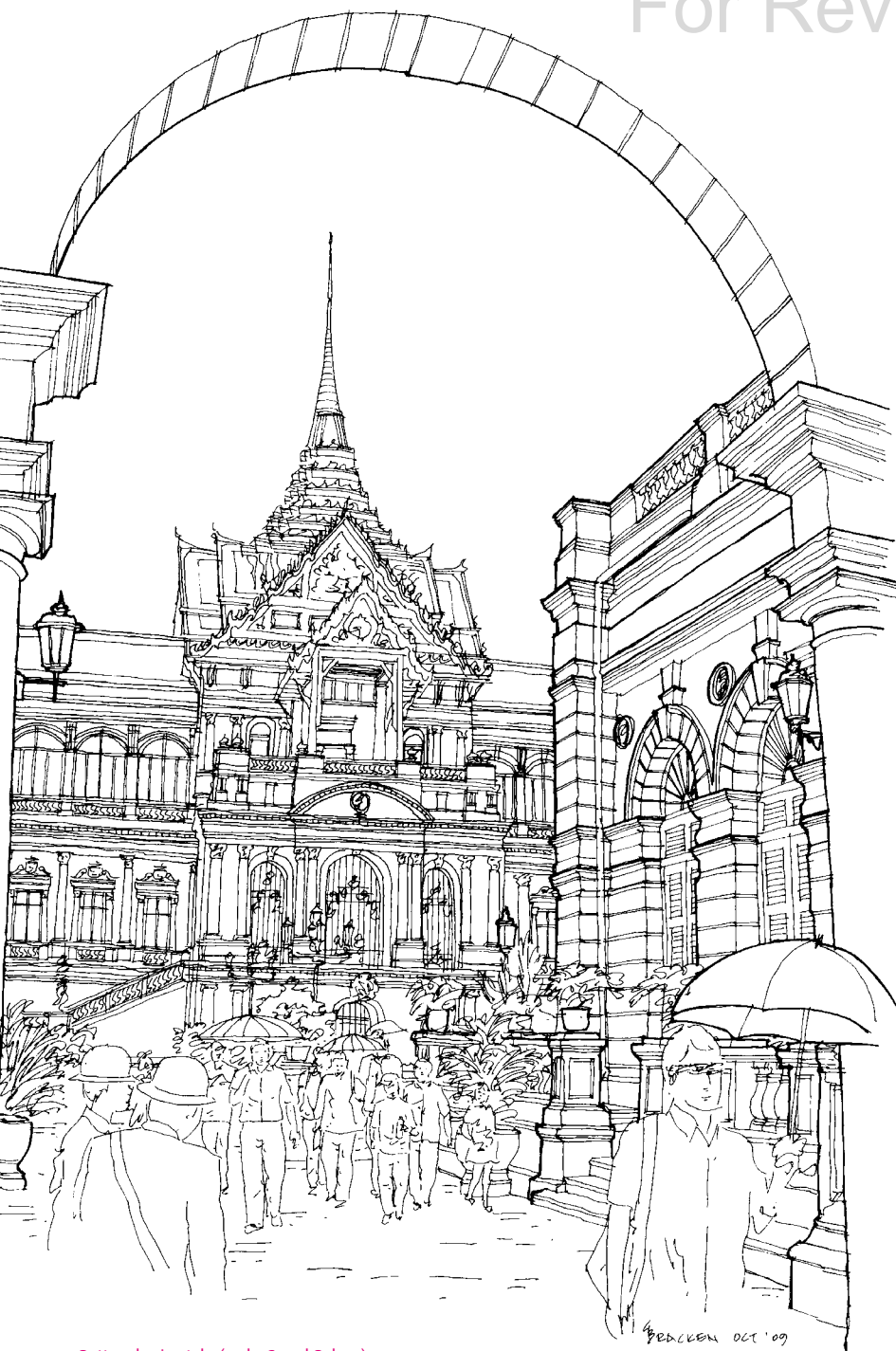
Late 18th Century to present day

Also known as the Bangkok style, the first *wihans* and *bots* built in the new capital after the fall of Ayutthaya were similar to the ones that had been destroyed by the Burmese. Later, larger and more elaborate temples were built, while by the end of the 19th century buildings such as Wat Benjamabophit (Marble Temple) increasingly borrowed from the West, as did many of the buildings in the Grand Palace complex. The balcony in the Grand Palace complex overlooking Sanam Chai Road is typically Rattanakosin in style with a mix of Thai and Western elements.

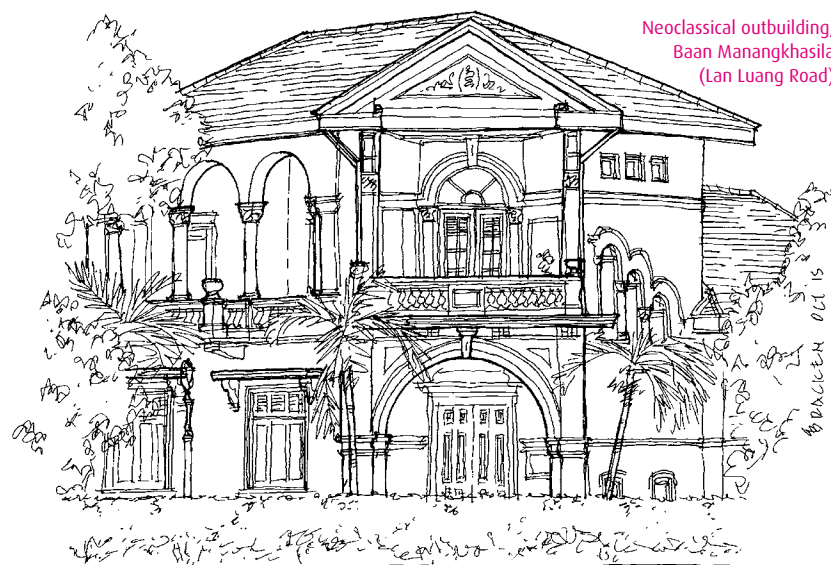
Western Architectural Styles

Neoclassical

While the shiny new skyscrapers and endless vistas of dusty concrete apartment blocks do tend to give some of downtown Bangkok a somewhat Western flavour they hardly do much to advertise the elegance of the West's architectural achievements. There are, however, some rather more attractive imports to be found in the city. These invariably fall into one of two styles: neoclassical or gothic. Neoclassicism was a throwback to ancient Greece and Rome. This style was elegant and harmonious but disappeared with the fall of the Roman Empire. It was revived in the 17th century, first in Italy and then throughout the rest of Europe and North America, thanks to Andrea Palladio, an Italian architect who studied the ruins of ancient Rome and adapted their styles to suit his era. With the spread of the European empires the style became global.



Rattanakosin style (arch, Grand Palace)



Neoclassical outbuilding,
Baan Manangkhasila
(Lan Luang Road)