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Concrete never sleeps

A megapolis in the making

By BART WALTERS



So we all understand what I'm on about this month, the following is the Wikipedia definition of the word of the moment: Megapolis. "A megalopolis (sometimes called a megapolis or megaregion) is typically defined as a chain of roughly adjacent metropolitan areas. The term was used by Oswald Spengler in his 1918 book, *The Decline of the West*, and Lewis Mumford in his 1938 book, *The Culture of Cities*, which described it as the first stage in urban overdevelopment and social decline.

Later, it was used by Jean Gottmann in 1957, to describe the huge metropolitan area along the eastern seaboard of the US extending from Boston, Massachusetts through New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and ending in Washington, DC.

Great city

A megapolis is a Greek word that derived from Greek: μέγας – great and Greek: πόλις – city therefore literally a great city. The metric prefix mega- represents the number of million (1,000,000) in the metric system.

A megalopolis, also known as a megaregion, is a clustered network of cities with a population of about 10 million or more. America 2050, a programme of the Regional Plan Association, lists 11 megaregions in the United States and Canada. Literally, megalopolis in Greek means a city of exaggerated size where the prefix megalos- represents a "quantity of exaggerated size".

"Megalopolis" is way too many syllables for me. When I say it, I feel

like I'm spitting something out rather than speaking, so let's go with just plain "megapolis".

The phenomenon of the megapolis is a direct result of "urban sprawl", a term that kind of defines itself. People are driven to big cities in search of employment and a better life. Cities reach out with their improving infrastructure and access.

Sometimes it creeps slowly and sometimes it surges forward in breathtaking spurts. Here in Thailand we are prone to the slow creeping type spiced up with dynamic lurches forward. One thing is for sure, concrete never sleeps in the land of smiles.

Even if you don't live in a place that is technically a megapolis with 10 million or more people, we have all experienced the effects of urban sprawl. I grew up in Orlando, Florida, in the US. In the early 1970s we were a quaint old town with maybe a couple hundred thousand people.

There was a neighbouring town called Kissimmee. It was a long 30-mile drive through some flatland and swamps to get there and the only thing it was famous for was the annual 4th of July rodeo and a big alligator farm. As a kid, it seemed a world away.

Then a little tourist spot called Walt Disney World set up shop just the other side of Kissimmee and changed everything. Hundreds of thousands of people were employed nearly overnight.

Housing developments sprung up everywhere. Tourists packed airplanes to capacity forcing the

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airport to radically expand. Hilton, Marriott and Hyatt hotels appeared as if by magic. Kissimmee grew towards Orlando and vice-versa.

Nowadays, Kissimmee is really just southwest Orlando. That long 30-mile drive is completely infested with human beings and all their accouterments. You feel as if you never get out of the city. The same thing happened in the northeast as O-Town sprawled towards the beach. According to the 2010 census, Metropolitan Orlando now has a little over 2.8 million residents.

Home town

Think about your home town or somewhere you've lived for a long time. For sure, many of us have had similar experiences. Big cities grow outward and smaller towns grow towards them. Sooner or later they become considered one big place.

Here in Thailand, we are experiencing a legitimate megapolis marriage between Bangkok and Pattaya, or as many of my property-hound associates like to call it, "the Chonburi Coast".

The population of the Bangkok Metropolitan Area has topped 10 million people for a long time. The official population of Bangkok is just more than eight million residents.

But, when the surrounding Bangkok Metropolitan Area is considered, the true number is well in excess of 14 million inhabitants. I've had days in Bangkok where it seemed like all 14 million were out driving motorbikes at the same time.

As a long-time resident of

both Bangkok and Pattaya, I've experienced that familiar sensation of urban sprawl up close and personal. Get some old Asia hands together and you'll hear them reminisce: "Hey, remember when it used to take five hours to go from Bangkok to Pattaya?" It didn't always take that long, but it always could. Raise your hand if you've ever traversed these two cities the old fashioned way; all the way on Sukhumvit Road.

When I got here in 1999, what is now called the Bangkok-Chonburi Motorway (Highway 7) was progressing at a glacial pace. The Asian financial crisis that began with the collapse of the Thai currency in 1997 had squelched development on the Chonburi Coast. Buildings stood half finished. The boom was over.

Pattaya had not even begun to clean up its reputation nor was it anything remotely resembling a vibrant tourist destination.

The water was nasty. The "entertainment" was solely of the sleazy variety. It was simply too much trouble to make the trip unless you just had to get to skanky old Pattaya. If I wanted to go to the beach, I'd rather fly to Phuket. At least the beach was clean and I'd probably make it from Bangkok to a sandy beach faster than driving to Pattaya.

Slowly Thailand began to recover and get its economic mojo back. Thailand had become a real bargain to foreign investors and the money flowed in at an accelerated rate.

New life

Bangkok healed from the inside out. Completion of the first route of the BTS Skytrain in 1999 and 2000 breathed new life into the old Sukhumvit and Sathorn central business districts. People finding jobs ... people spending money ... people buying property; the hive was re-populated in short order.

Now that I've moved back to Bangkok, I get a little reminder of how it used to be every day. The gym I purport to attend is located in The Exchange Tower on the corner of Sukhumvit Road and Asoke.

Twelve years ago it was a partially finished skyscraper skeleton haunting the intersection like a concrete ghost. It sat without progress for so long; we



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all thought it would get torn down.

Today it is fully inhabited with a bridge to the Skytrain station at Asoke and interchange with the MRT Subway. The old Exchange Tower is bursting at the seams with occupants (including two Starbucks in the lobby) and is firmly anchored on what is inarguably the carotid artery of Bangkok. This is a shining example of the resilience of Bangkok and Thailand in general.

What used to be the end of the line on the Skytrain at On Nut is sprouting luxury condos and houses. Last week I got off the BTS two stops beyond that at Udom Sok and took a shuttle bus to Mega Bangna so I could shop at the massive Ikea store. As recently as five years ago, I didn't even know these parts of town existed.

But our little megapolis isn't just rebuilding its core; Bangkok is creeping towards the Chonburi Coast at an accelerating pace. What's more, Chonburi is creeping back.

When the Bangkok-Chonburi Motorway (Highway 7) became

relatively complete, it changed perceptions about how far it was from Bangkok to the sea. Suddenly, Pattaya was a day trip. It has not been without its glitches. Early passages could be frightening, with construction ongoing, making some trips slow and treacherous.

Just last month I got on the motorway in Pattaya heading towards the capitol. For years I've had to remind myself not to miss the odd and sometimes dangerous exit ramp that actually puts you on the toll-way from the highway out of town. This time I thought I'd missed it.

Toll-way entrance

Using the kilometre markers as a guide it dawned on me that I was already beyond where the toll-way entrance used to be. The kooky old ramp only connected to the frontage road now. The final seamless link to the motorway had been finished and I was on it. All I had to remember was to keep it under 120 kph on a smooth stretch of highway.

My last five trips from Bangkok to Pattaya have all been around the 90 minute mark. Never underestimate the power of a good road.

In 2006 Suvarnabhumi International Airport began operation in a location that surprised no one; an hour away from Pattaya. Again, this bold move has not been without some problems, but the success of our Megapolis' air hub cannot be denied.

Suvarnabhumi International is the 14th busiest airport in the world and the 6th busiest in Asia. Last year 53 million passengers passed through its doors.

In December 2011, Airports of Thailand (AOT) decided to speed up the second phase of expansion to complete in 2016 ahead of schedule. According to Transport Minister Sukampol Suwannathat, Bt62.5bn is planned to support the second phase. Phase Two would raise the airport's capacity to 65 million passengers per year.

Domestic terminal

At the same time, a new domestic terminal is planned. The new domestic terminal will cost an estimated Bt9.2bn and will handle 20 million passengers per year.

The combination of these two expansion projects would raise the annual passenger handling capacity to 120 million passengers per year; 85 million international and 35 million domestic by 2024.

Now Bangkokians and visitors can get to the airport via links with BTS (Skytrain) and MRT (Subway). The Prime Minister's new infrastructure plans include high speed trains between Suvarnabhumi and Pattaya.

That means in the future, a person could travel from Bangkok to have a cold one on the beach without ever getting in a car or bus. When that happens, our megapolis will begin to "fill" in with the airport at its centre operating as a transportation and logistics hub.

Have you ever been to a place and wondered, "why did they build the airport right in the middle of town?" The answer invariably is ... it wasn't built in the middle of



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town ... the town grew around it. This is exactly what is happening here in the Bangkok-Chonburi corridor. One day, Pattaya will just be known as “Bangkok Beach”.

Improving the roads, mass transit and airport have all done their part to lay down a foundation for our megapolis. But two intertwined events in the last couple of years have added motivation; Pattaya's property boom and the flooding in Bangkok two years ago.

Before the floods, Bangkok residents still held their nose when they spoke of Pattaya. In the opinion of long-time Bangkokians, Pattaya was one big festering neon distraction. Many people I know had not been to Pattaya in years.

During the floods, my longest tenured friend in Bangkok evacuated with his family as the floodwaters threatened their neighborhood. He, his Thai wife and their daughter found refuge in a condo I own in Jomtien.

He had not been to Pattaya in seven years. His wife had never been

and if another choice was available, they would not have come when they did. She said that just saying the word “Pattaya” made her want to brush her teeth and take a shower.

One Sunday afternoon we were all munching on some grilled prawns in Na Jomtien Beach watching kite-surfers bounce over the tops of the waves.

Reggae music played, beer chilled and my friend's three year old demanded a lesson in sand castle building. “Why didn't you tell me Pattaya was like this?” his wife queried. “Trust me darling,” he replied “seven years ago it was nothing like this.”

Now his wife's firm hold their annual company outing at Sunset Beach just south of Pattaya. And, I can tell from the brochures cluttering his coffee table, a campaign to find a beach getaway condo us in full swing.

Rediscovered

My friend and his wife are not alone. Bangkokians of all descriptions re-

discovered Pattaya. Many of them crowd roadways on weekends to get a little sunshine and fresh air; especially holiday weekends. Middle class Thais and expatriates alike are thrilled to find a legitimate beach resort an hour and a half away.

Infrastructure has made it easy to get to the beach, but it is the direction of Pattaya's urban development that gives people a reason to go there.

I remember when Royal Garden Plaza and Mike's Mall were the only shopping venues in town. Now, I rate Pattaya's Central Festival one of the best all-purpose shopping and entertainment centres I've seen ... and it's on the beach!

Nice and upscale

Nice hotels and upscale restaurants were scarce as hen's teeth. Now Pattaya can boast some truly magnificent resorts and hotels, as well as many more of the trendy boutique variety. The myriad of restaurant choices approaches the ridiculous. Pattaya seems to be a haven for chefs that thought they were retired.

The recent addition of unique entertainment venues like Mimosa, The Floating Market and the soon to open Cartoon Network Water Park make Pattaya an even more attractive weekend getaway.

A Thai couple I met at Le Baguette in North Pattaya were down for the weekend. "I'm so happy Pattaya is cool again," said the 30-something Thai lady. She told me that as a little girl, her family would make the trip to Sattahip once per year.

"It took a whole day to get there and a whole day to get home," she said. "Now we can just pop down any time ... sometimes we stay in Wongamat Beach and sometimes Jomtien". "And sometimes", she confided, "We go to Walking Street at night and take pictures ... farang watching ... it's a new sport."

Ask any property agent in Pattaya and they will tell you; more than half of condo-buyers are Thai. The weekend getaway pad is the new status symbol for upwardly mobile Bangkok Thais.

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Chulalongkorn University students on a field trip for a real estate course. I could hear them comparing the projects and dreaming of the day when they made enough money to buy a place at "The Palm" or "The Cliff".

In an odd way, the floods in Bangkok helped to make Pattaya hip again. They also had a knock-on effect in the business community. A lot of manufacturing and import-export companies that took big losses from the floods are re-building and re-tooling a little further south at the clusters of industrial estates between Bangkok and Pattaya. Further populating the Chonburi Coast and "filling in" the 167 kilometre distance between the two cities.

It is easy to talk about the creation of a megapolis in theory, but in the future, will people really live this way? Will Pattaya become Bangkok Beach? Will the Bangkok-Chonburi corridor truly be considered one big mega-city? For me, the answer is revealed in some of my own lifestyle changes.

A few months ago, I had to travel

from where I lived in Pattaya to Bangkok to attend three business appointments, all in different parts of the city. Since I am a fearful novice at driving in Bangkok traffic, I took a different approach.

I drove to Suvarnabhumi Airport, parked my car and took the BTS Skytrain link into town. Using only mass transit and about Bt50 in taxi fare, I made all my appointments unsweaty and on time. At the end of the day, I Skytrained it back to my car and drove home. In total I spent two hours in the car and didn't have one second of road rage. Genius!

Regular trips

Now that I've moved back to Bangkok, trips to Pattaya appear on my list of things to do and become accomplished and scratched off as easily as "pick up your laundry" or "get the car washed".

One thing is for sure. Every day when we wake up, Bangkok and the Chonburi Coast are closer; because here in our developing megapolis, concrete never sleeps.

Bart Walters