

Abstract

Phra Meru Ground, or Sanam Luang, has always been an important landmark of the city of Bangkok. The study traces the history and development of this urban public space from the early Bangkok period through the present time. It is found that Phra Meru Ground has undergone a process of transformation which can be distinguished by three phases.

In the first phase (late c18 to mid c19), Phra Meru Ground was used mainly as a sacred site for cremating members of the royal family. It was also used as a paddy field which supplied rice for the royal household.

The second phase (mid c19 to 1932) when Siam underwent a modernization program, increasing activities began to take place here. It was turned into a site for public celebration the return from Europe of King Rama V, celebrating the centenary of Bangkok, First Siamese Trade Exhibition. Phra Meru Ground also began to function as a recreational ground for holding modern sports activities such as golf tournaments, horse racing, and kite flying contests.

In the third and final phase, Phra Meru Ground continues to serve as a royal cremation ground. Numerous newly created royal and state ceremonies and festivals take place here increasingly. These range from festivals on Constitution Day, Traditional New Year Day, to celebrations on Their Majesties' Birthdays. Another important social change of this period is reflected in the use of Phra Meru Ground as a place for political speeches and rallies.

The author has also observed the use of Phra Meru Ground by different groups of people around the clock. It is found that while the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority may want to reserve the place as a public park for the urbanites, Phra Meru Ground, particularly at night time, is populated by migrants, the homeless, and low-income people who engage in a variety of brisk but often shady businesses.