

# MARKET FASHION – TALAD ROT FAI, BANGKOK

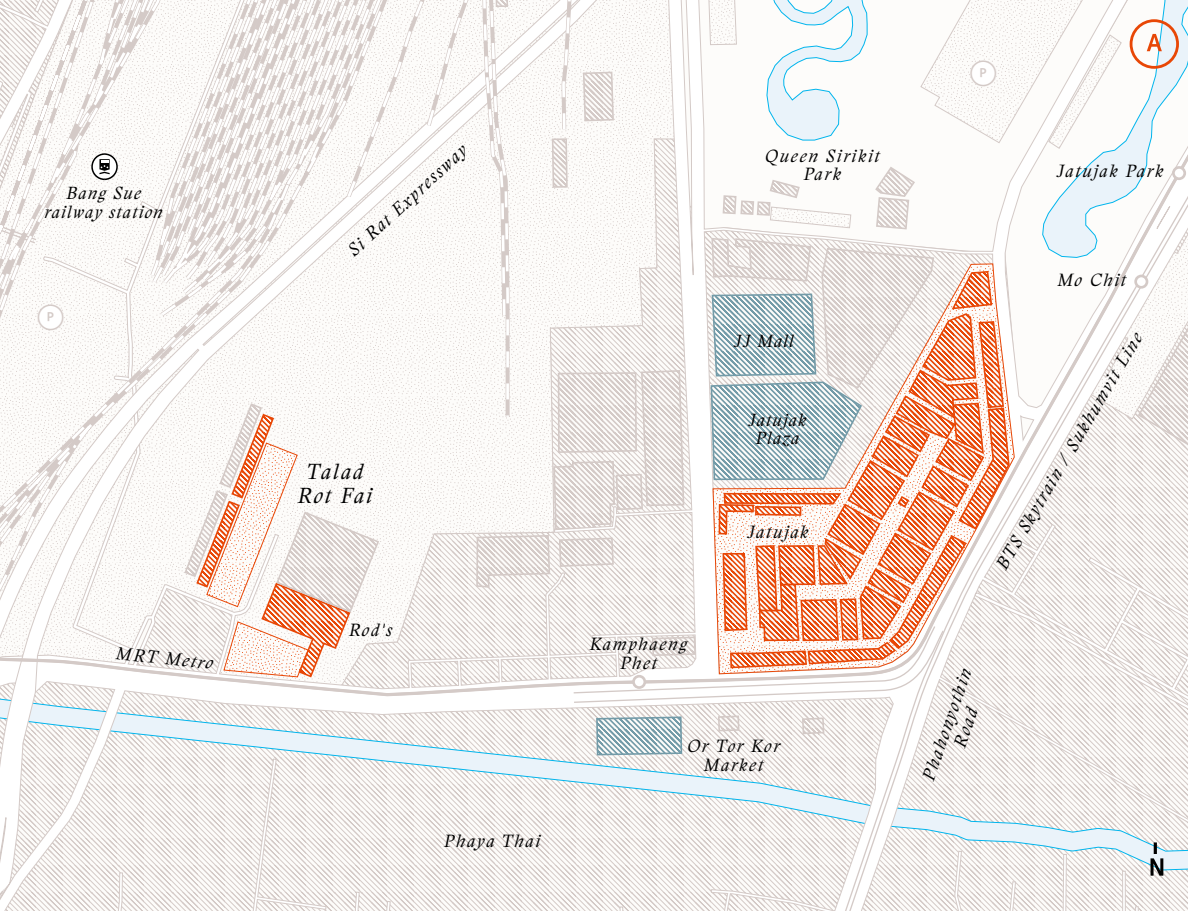
It is testimony to markets' enduring capacity to generate hubs of commonality that people not only flock to them to satisfy basic needs but also choose to spend their leisure time there. The city of Bangkok with its rich array of markets is a case in point: informal trade is so engrained in Bangkok's urban fabric that virtually every neighbourhood features a line of vendors selling street food, cheap textiles or household goods, rendering street market consumption one of the most mundane routines of Thai everyday life. On the other hand, Bangkok also boasts one of the largest weekend markets in the world. Jatujak Market, or JJ for short, is reputed to attract 200,000 visitors every Saturday and Sunday. As a shopping and leisure destination it competes with Bangkok's high concentration of spectacular super-brand malls such as Central World and Siam Paragon. In contrast to the immaculate spaces of these climate controlled environments, visitors to JJ squeeze through cramped tin covered alleys when browsing the market's more than 15,000 stalls lined up 15 rows deep. Organized into 27 sections, the product types on offer range from fashion to home décor, collectibles to arts, and gardening to pets – the latter category being one in which traders have gained worldwide notoriety for trafficking illegal and endangered species.

The origins of JJ date back to 1948, when the then Prime Minister, Plaek Phibulsongkhram, promoted a policy of one flea market per town. In Bangkok, the first flea market was initially held on the open field of Sanam Luang right next to the Grand Palace. It was relocated several times in its early years but always remained in the heart of Bangkok's political district. In 1982, to make space for Bangkok's bi-centennial celebrations, it was moved to its current site, a fenced-in, 35-acre lot on the grounds of the State Railway of Thailand's former golf course near Jatujak Park. In the historical context this flea market programme may seem paradoxical, given that in the twentieth century most emerging economies sought to ban street trade as incompatible with the aesthetics of a modern Western-style state. However,

while the de-facto dictatorship of Phibunsongkhram is credited with the modernization of Thailand, his policies were also driven by an explicitly nationalist agenda. Establishing one flea market per town was meant to encourage people to purchase primarily Thai products and to cut imports, specifically from China, thus securing Thailand's independence from neighbouring powers.

Today, JJ, together with many of Bangkok's other street markets (see pages 28–35), is often regarded as out of sync with Thailand's progression towards a globally integrated advanced consumer economy. The aspiring youngsters populating the city's high-end malls are perceived to be much more in line with Thailand's avowed mission to become the region's model capitalist state than the uncontrollable mayhem of a congested market whose operations result in rubbish-filled streets and an undesirable listing in the US Trade Representative's Special 301 Reports. Yet, in the shadow of JJ a new kind of market typology has emerged that might well prove capable of meeting the challenges presented by a monopolized market of global corporate chains – a market culture fostered by a new generation of young entrepreneurial creatives that fuses issues of identity and occupation in a self-styled atmosphere of productivity and enjoyment.

Located approximately 500 metres from JJ, the celebrated hipster mecca of Talad Rot Fai has brought Bangkok to the forefront of a global phenomenon of bottom-up creative cities that is usually associated with highly contested gentrification processes in the centres of old power such as New York, London or Berlin. The market's name, Talad Rot Fai (Train Market), refers to the original site of the market, a former rail yard featuring a paved rectangular open space backed by disused railway carriages and flanked by two rows of cargo depots. The market was the brainchild of two antique dealers at JJ, who in July 2010, seeking to expand their business, leased a nearby nine-acre site from the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) for a period of three years. Unable to fill the vast warehouses with their







TALAD ROT FAI



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own merchandise, they started offering spaces to fellow traders. The terrain was subsequently divided up into retro boutiques and arts, crafts and furniture stores interspersed with the odd display of vintage cars and car accessories. A significant proportion of the buildings were left undeveloped, which added to the site's sense of discovery.

At the heart of the original Talad Rot Fai, occupying the former head offices of the railway yard, sat Rod's, a restaurant/bar/music venue run by one of the market's founders that blended smoothly into his antique shop in the warehouse section. This combination of entertainment and trade at Rod's set the tone for turning the "Train Market" into one of Bangkok's favourite places to hang out. Promising a good time is central to Talad Rot Fai's continuing appeal at its new venue, where Rod's still operates, and the main reason why an avant-garde scene of young fashionistas gathers at the market. The "magic" of Talad Rot Fai lies in its spatial logic of long rows of brightly coloured gazebo-type stalls, selling customized fashion items such as t-shirts, shoes, glasses, jewellery, and other accessories, which stretch between food stalls and pop-up bars at either end. Here, the emphasis is not on hunting for the best deal but rather on doing the walk along the stalls from one bar to another, which becomes a ritual of cultural communality, much like the *passeggiata*, the classic collective Sunday stroll in Italian towns and cities. Consuming and buying at the market paves the way for spending time with friends and experiencing a sense of cultural belonging.

#### Retro Community

Aesthetics play a key role in establishing this sense of counter-culture. In the case of Talad Rot Fai it is vintage chic with a specific focus on Americana that provides the basis for reciprocal recognition. With most of the goods on offer being "customized" or simply scarcely sourced, the market's flavour of uniqueness does not rely on original craft production. What matters is that Talad Rot Fai as a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk provokes a captivating feeling of community that is shared by both sellers and buyers. The conviction that both groups contribute to the making of the place is essential for this new type of social economy to prevail. As the roles of traders and customers become blurred, business





activities and enjoyment become interchangeable. This supposed dissolution of value hierarchies and the backgrounding of profit interests allows the market to be embraced as a connective cultural framework.

Prioritizing the lifestyle experience of its customers as its main selling point distinguishes the Talad Rot Fai venture from other JJ off-shoots such as Jatujak Plaza or JJ Mall, which build primarily on a spatial or temporal expansion and consolidation of the same business model as pursued at JJ. The proprietors of Talad Rot Fai like to spin the hype that, while they offered selling spaces during the first three months for free, it was only when they began charging rents that vendors really started to show interest. While this rhetoric follows the fashion of presenting business ventures primarily as some kind of creative experiment, the rapid and almost instant success of Talad Rot Fai was also based on the coincidence of two external factors. First, the new market benefited from the closure of the nearby Ratchada Saturday night market, which arguably has to be credited with fostering the popularity of retro-chic amongst young Bangkok residents in the first place. Originating as a swap meet for vintage car parts, many of Talad Rot Fai's now iconic stall setups involving remodelled vw vans and retro pick-ups first emerged at Ratchada. Second, the area in which Talad Rot Fai was established already had a reputation as a trendy nightlife destination, with bars and clubs lining the stretch of Kamphaeng Phet between JJ and TRF, taking advantage of a peripheral location in a non-residential area.

While nowadays the vast JJ flea market sells predominately cheap goods or mass-produced nick-nacks aimed at tourists, much of which is sourced from China, Talad Rot Fai engages with the global market in a very different way. Here, globalization refers less to the global circulation of goods than to embracing a global cultural vocabulary of teenage life-styles. American retro provides the basis for appropriating a “glocal” identity of creative expression and a self-made environment, both socially and economically. Responding to a global taste for individual style, customized fashion replaces indistinguishable Chinese mass production. In a perhaps unintended way, the young entrepreneurs at Talad Rot Fai can be seen as perpetuating Phibulsongkhram's 1948 policy of economic independence through a flea market culture, albeit in a very different fashion – one based not on

references to a national folklore but on a fusion of global styles and iconographies.

When the three-year lease for the former rail yard expired in June 2013, the market was shut down and the grounds immediately dug up for work on the new SRT Red Line. In anticipation of this development, the proprietors had already established a sister site in Srinakarin near Suvarnabhumi Airport in the east of the city, to which the entire market has now been moved. However, while the original market's attraction was based to no small extent on the ambience of its old, abandoned and worn out buildings, this second, bigger version of Talad Rot Fai is an entirely new structure located on a brownfield site on the outskirts of the city. Comprising standardized light-weight metal structures, it has been decorated with retro-style mock-ups, including a replica pagoda and a gateway flanked by two kitsch brass warrior statues, making it resemble more a village-themed shopping outlet than an underground market. It is still called the “Train Market” even though its new site no longer has anything to do with trains – instead, its new neighbour is the massive 500-metre-long Seacon Square shopping mall and entertainment centre.

With branding now central to maintaining customer support, the aesthetics employed at Talad Rot Fai have shifted in a direction more in line with modern retail principles. However, the nomadism of Bangkok's hipster night markets points to a peculiar bond between precarious conditions and fashion's craving for new hype and constant change. The current process of consolidation and expansion at Talad Rot Fai's new site may be in line with Thailand's official policy of promoting its creative industries, one spearheaded by a king who is himself portrayed as an artistic entrepreneur. However, the sustainability of this move – towards a market environment supported by a shared creative inclination rather than a standard template of brand-building and market-share expansion – remains to be tested.