

Sirivat Voravetvuthikun is a Thai entrepreneur whose real estate development business collapsed as a result of the Asian financial crisis. He is now selling sandwiches and sushi on the street, hoping to become "the McDonald's of Thailand."

Over the course of the interview, Voravetvuthikun takes the crew around the condominium complex he had built in the mid-1990s and discusses the impact of the Asian financial crisis on the Thai economy, his business, and his life.

Losing One's Business and Starting Over

INTERVIEWER: What's your business now?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: I'm now selling sandwiches on the street. Before I was a real estate developer till the economic crisis. The bubble burst then. I lost all my money and I couldn't pay a salary to my staff, so I had to... I have been selling sandwiches for four years on the streets to feed my staff.

INTERVIEWER: How's business?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Business is going up a bit. News media like you people, when [you put] me on the air, newspaper, television—Thai people know about my story, they come to help me. When I sell on the streets they come to buy my sandwiches. Now in Thailand, I can say if you talk about sandwiches, people will think of one sandwich.

INTERVIEWER: You had big dreams. What happened to [them]?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Before I had a big, big dream: I wanted to be a multibillionaire. I was a millionaire. But today my big dream is to be the McDonald's of Thailand, because selling sandwiches on the street now, I've developed a new Japanese sushi. I use Thai brown rice; I'm the first in Thailand. So hopefully in the near future I will rest my funds in the local stock market. It's called the MIA market for alternative investment, to help the SMP like myself. So in the near future I will be the McDonald's of Thailand.

INTERVIEWER: Is it hard for you personally to start over?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Yes, very difficult. Four years ago I couldn't sleep. I was in very bad shape. I was depressed. But my wife gave me the encouragement to forget about the past. We lost, let's say, around US \$10 million, so a lot of money for me, and I still owe a lot of money. I've been sued by the banks, the creditors. But because of my wife and because of the news media, because of the people, now I think I have the spirit to fight back, and I'll try to recover.

Bangkok's Boom Times

INTERVIEWER: If you can just think back to the atmosphere here in Bangkok in the early '90s, what was it like to be part of that?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: There is lots of booming in Bangkok, especially the high-rise buildings. You would look through the horizon, you would see hundred of cranes. Many, many tall buildings are coming up because they were competing with each other, trying to build who will be the highest building in Bangkok. And the banks at that time gave them the money, would loan them the money, because a hard asset was the best collateral at that time [that] the banks were counting on. Especially many listed companies in our local stock exchange could borrow from overseas what we call the foreign loans, because at that time our currency was too stable, fixed at one U.S. dollar to 26 baht, our currency. No one was thinking of the currency devaluation, because the interest rate that Western banks charged us was around half of what we had to pay locally. We were paying something like 15 percent prime rate. So those companies who borrow from overseas were paying something like 7 to 8 percent. So [it was] very attractive for them. Even some real, real rich people, they took advantage of the spread. They borrowed overseas at 7 to 8 percent without any fixing of the exchange rate, and they deposited with local commercial banks and financial companies. They earn something like 5 to 8 percent in a year. So these people just enjoy borrowing, getting the difference. Some other enjoy borrowing because of lower costs. I myself had not been able to borrow overseas because my credit line was not big, and my credit was not good, so I borrowed domestically. I was paying 17 percent interest rate per year. So things were kind of booming everywhere you saw, and people kept on spending. People bought expensive cars like Mercedes-Benz like crazy. Mercedes-Benz sales' growth rate was equivalent to the Japanese cars' growth rate.

INTERVIEWER: And then you were involved in trading and stocks. What was happening in the stock market?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: The stock market was booming. Also with the economy, many companies could raise funds on the stock market by issuing what we call the IPO. And also many of them could get the funds from overseas by issuing the convertible debentures and many options for the lenders, overseas lenders that they could buy stock in the future at a very attractive prices. So the stock market was booming because we had only good news. This company could raise funds, this company would expand—especially the telecommunications sector. So the stock index went up; people made money, including myself; the stock market, everyone made money. Investors, speculators made money; stock brokerage houses made money; listed companies could raise funds, gather cheaper funds than borrowing from local commercial banks. And our stock market was popular all over the country. Brokers opened branches upcountry like crazy. They competed, opening branches to attract the investors and speculators. So everything was booming, and money was easy. I got easy credit; many people got easy credit. So no, no one was thinking of the bad time coming up.

Especially we trusted the Bank of Thailand's figures. During the early 1990s, Bank of Thailand kept on telling us the private sector, the economy was going up, GDP [was going to] something like double digits. In early 1990s, if you recall, Thailand's GDP growth was second only to China's. China had something like 21 percent GDP growth; we had 12 percent. So everyone one was looking very optimistically. So [we] kept on investing, spending. I myself spent buying property and investing in stock, hoping that the prices would go up higher.

INTERVIEWER: Was that a dream of yours, to make money?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Yes, sir. Ever since I was a child I have been wanting to be a multimillionaire. I wanted to be rich, and that's my dream, and that's why I had to go to study in the United States, because in our society, the U.S.-educated people would have a better chance to become successful in life, because big companies would employ people with U.S. degrees, U.S. university degrees. My generation, we would try our best to at least get a Bachelor's degree from an American university, to have a good start.

INTERVIEWER: During the boom, in a sense, Thailand was becoming more like America, more capitalistic?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Yeah, it's going to be like American capitalist economy. And even the many U.S. analysts were saying that Thailand would be the fifth or sixth tiger of Asia, if you remember. Our economy is really geared towards the capitalistic economy. We have received a lot of influence from America.

INTERVIEWER: At the time you had a lot of foreign investors, American investors here, getting onboard the emerging market bandwagon. Did you talk to those guys when they came here? Why were they coming here, and what were they like?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: First of all, American investors would like to come to Thailand, the ones I have talked to when I was a stock broker, number one they looked at our potential: They thought that Thailand, with the population—[in the] early '90s we had something like 50 million people—[was a] big enough economy. We had a strong monarchy. We had natural resources; especially we were the largest rice-exporting country. We had pretty cheap labor. Our country's economy went up because of the exports. At that time the labor was very cheap, so they capitalized on the cheap labor in Thailand. And we happened to have skilled laborers also. So it was the labor-intensive, export-oriented economy. That's what brought us up, and that's what made our international reserves strong, until we overspent ourselves. I think we went a little bit too far and [were] too optimistic, and not too careful. I would add up another word: too greedy, including myself. Never had enough, so we were very optimistic. We thought that everything ahead of us would be fantastic, so why worry? Kept on spending. We bought things on credit, so everything went bust.

INTERVIEWER: What about the Thai people in general? Have they recovered from the shock of the crisis?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: No, sir. It's four years already. I think our economy is still in the crisis, because at that time we were really booming. We started very big, and now, because of the baht devaluation in 1997, the private sector went bankrupt, and that led to the

commercial banks to close themselves. That's led [to Thailand having] to go to the IMF, and that's leading to the government [going] broke, so now the investment in our country is very slow. And many people are out of a job. And official figures, we have something like 10 percent unemployment. We have 62 million people, about 30 million people in the working age, so three million people out of a job. Ten percent is a big figure. I do not see recovery in our economy. But for myself, I must survive, and I have been the symbol for the Thai people to have the fighting spirit.

The West's Role in the Asian Financial Crisis and Thailand's Economic Problems

INTERVIEWER: As part of this film we've been to Washington interviewing key policymakers, key officials who were in power during the Clinton administration. Robert Rubin [and] people like that talked a lot about the Washington consensus and their push to encourage countries like Thailand to open up to capital flows and that sort of thing. You were seeing all that with a Thai perspective as a business trader. What was going on then?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Yeah. First of all, Thailand needs foreign money, because we do not have enough domestic savings to contribute to our economic growth. The savings rate in Thailand is relatively low, so we have been depending on foreign money all along. There is some saying like that out of every \$100 invested in our country, at least \$20 we borrow from overseas, so I believe that we cannot escape from this kind of foreign money flowing in. But with the crisis, we Thai people have [had the] feeling that we have been taken advantage of by the West. When we fell down they came in and swallowed up. They had bankruptcies, commercial banks.

Financial institutions went bankrupt. We had to auction properties which the value was something like 80 percent discount. ... The few American finance companies, big groups [like] G.E. Capital, auction at something like 18 to 25 percent of the value. They have returned and sold back to some Thai people; they made a fortune. So this, if you heard, we have heard. I understand personally that in a capitalist economy that big eats the small—that's a saying—but if American people or American investors are really kind of sympathetic to Thailand or Latin American countries or any country in Asia facing a crisis and fail[ing], at least they should be more realistic, in my view. In the future, my country still needs foreign money, and I think already in the four years that we have been in crisis, many of them are

watching us; many have already reaped the profits, huge gains, and many are waiting to see, kind of come in and do the business, take the opportunity. ... Personally I'm counting on more of my people to be awake, not kind of falling asleep like in the past. We have to be on our two feet.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that the West, IMF, Washington, the Treasury Department, did they encourage countries like Thailand to open up and allow all this emerging-market money to flow?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Yes, I think that's the thinking, because every investor in this world, we look at the return. We have what we call high risk, high return, so whenever the market is saturated, their return is low. Of course to get a bigger return they have to go outside, although those countries that they go [to] may be riskier, so they expect higher return, and IMF and World Bank are the same. Many of the shareholders are the G7 countries, not to mention that United States is the biggest shareholder, biggest creditor, so they need to finance themselves. Their operations had to be profitable, but what I don't like is that they have all the data information, so developing countries like Thailand, we have to report our international reserves, so they have all these in their hands, so they know what their next strategy will be to deal with certain countries. So it seems that superficially they might have good intentions to these countries, developing countries like Thailand who need foreign money, who need financial assistance, but behind the scenes I think they look for profits and return. Not to mention that Thailand has this crisis because of the hedge funds. Hedge funds also have the access to information. I believe that [they got that from] the World Bank from the IMF, where else could they get information? And logical investors need basic information before they invest, before they make a move. No big funds in this world will make a move or make a kill without knowing the data information. They're not speculators with plans with figures. So our country's crisis has worsened because of the attack on our currency. Based on the economic fundamentals alone, I would say that we would not have been this deep down in the problem. We had a zero export growth in 1996. So what? Before 1996 we had tremendous export growth, so you could remedy the situation. But when our currency was attacked, then we [had] nowhere to go. So I would like to say that IMF, World Bank, and all these developed nations who go outside to invest to get returns understand that, thinking their concept, but I feel very sad. As of today I may say that we have been taken advantage of by the situation.

INTERVIEWER: All that money that flowed in, what happened to that money when the crisis hit?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Firstly you have to understand that the government of our financial market, we have had the stock market for the past 20 years. So slowly, small listed companies have become bigger listed companies because of expansion of the capital base, so when we had good years, early 1990s when the West saw that we had good prospects in Thailand, they started giving us money. We borrowed money through issuings of what we call convertible debentures, some direct borrowings, because the interest rate from them was only half of what we could borrow from domestic money, something like 7 to 8 percent. Other financial institutions from the West said they wanted more return by [exchanging stock] for the convertible debentures. Then, because they could convert the debentures into common stock, their stocks would appreciate, because once these listed companies could get cheaper funds their bottom line would be bigger, because there's less interest expense, so they were right for a couple of years. But once the crisis hit the Western financial institutions, the lenders started to take the money back.

They were panicked. It started with some of the real estate companies in the stock market. They faltered on the interest payment, a loan, so big news, so they storm in there not only wanting the interest; they wanted the principle amount. You have to understand that before the crisis, before the devaluation in July 1997, most of our foreign debts were in short term. Most of the US\$90 billion were short term; more than half were short term, so you were stuck with liquidity problems. We could not generate enough money to pay back, so the situation went down because more financial institutions wanted money back, and we were broke by overnight because of the demand. So I do not believe that they couldn't get the money that flowed in the few years before. They couldn't get their money back in time. Today our foreign debt has been reduced from US\$90 billion to US\$78 billion, but the new structure of the US\$78 billion overseas loan has been in the long term.

So today I think many of the foreign lenders, they seem to understand the problem. That's why they have converted most of the short-term loans into long-term loans, [to] restructure the thing. And I also believe that four years of crisis we have gone through in such a way that

we still survive. So many of them have changed their minds. Instead of getting their money back now, which they get nothing, [they now] extend the terms, and especially, my own belief, with the new government, new administration and policy, Thailand may seem to have better future. So I think this would be a good thing for both the creditors and us, the debtors. You can have compromise because if they want the cash right now we don't have it, so this is the thing.

INTERVIEWER: When the crisis hit, the Bank of Thailand asked the U.S. Government Federal Reserve for help. What happened?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: I think they asked the IMF to help us in the first place, and [then they asked] the U.S. government, I'm not sure what kind of help the U.S. government has given us, but could be a kind of a backup, because U.S. is the biggest shareholder in IMF. That's my own personal speculation. That's why IMF gave us a credit line of US\$17.2 billion, and we ended up using some US\$14 billion.

Living Through the Crisis

INTERVIEWER: When the crisis hit, what happened to your own business, your own dream out here of this big project? What happened there?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: When it hit I realized my fate—let's put it this way—because I owe a lot of money to the bank, I had paid a lot of interest, and I could not sell a single unit when the crisis hit. Even today, after four years, I could not sell a single unit, because most of my potential customers went down with the economy, and you're talking about rich people; you're not talking about normal people—multimillionaires, multibillionaires. So when it hit I foresaw four years ago that gosh, this bubble burst is too big for us to bear country-wise, and personally I could not bear it. I did not see any future until, like I said, when I was given a support from wife and this and that so I had the spirit to fight back up again. Had it not been because of all these factors, I don't know where I [would be] today.

INTERVIEWER: It must have been quite a thing to live through. Day to day what was it like to see your fortune slip away?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: In the beginning, I can tell you frankly, I couldn't sleep, but I did not take medicine. I did not drink because I tried to sleep. I exercised and tried to tell myself that I must live on at least. I have three children that are still small, and at that time because of my 20 staff who stayed with me I was only thinking of feeding my staff, taking good care of my family. My children were in school. I didn't think of anything else, and when I received notice from my creditors saying that if you don't pay interest after this date we will take you to court, send you notice, only receiving that kind of notice I couldn't go to sleep, and then six months later I received [a] court order. They must file my case to the court and the next... this date I have to appear in court. Again the situation returned. I couldn't go to sleep; I shook. I didn't know what to do because I couldn't go to anybody else. I couldn't go to my friend who has been in the financial institution. I have [a] friend who is president of the bank; I couldn't go to him because I know I'm NPL [non-performing loans]. It was a very hard life to live. It was really, if you don't believe me.

Who Is to Blame?

INTERVIEWER: Who's to blame for this? Who do you blame?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Firstly I will blame the Bank of Thailand. Bank of Thailand was a creditable institution that foreigners, private investors look up to them. They should give out the real correct figures of economic growth, unemployment, things like that. They have been lying to us all along. They have been telling us private sectors and foreign investors, foreign banks who loaned us money, Thailand will have this kind of double digit GDP growth. Where else could you find double digit GDP growth? Except China. Even in Europe, in America, you were talking some 4 or 5 percent GDP.... So we private investors we believed Bank of Thailand's figures, so we kept on investing, borrow[ing] money to invest.

But the most crucial point that I would blame Bank of Thailand was when they defended our currency by speculating with the hedge funds. If you recall back in early 1997, sometime in February, the famous George Soros [and his] friends attacked the baht after [they] successfully attacked the British pound, and they made something like over US\$1 billion until the Bank of England had to devalue the British pound. So they came in, and they speculated. They hit our currency. The Bank of Thailand went out to protect and to defend, and after one month The Bank of Thailand open champagne in front of television; the governor himself open

the champagne. Oh, we chase Soros away. And the group, you see, they were successful somewhere. They failed here. They lost a couple of billion baht, billion baht in May 1997; the figure was released in August 1997 by the same governor who opened the champagne in February that chased away Soros. In August 1997 he admitted that in front of the television, nationwide television that in May, one day in May, Bank of Thailand sold US\$20 billion to defend the baht, the currency, and by the time we went to IMF, Bank of Thailand had only US\$800 million in the international reserves—far from US\$39 billion, just in January. In January you have US\$39 billion in our international reserves. In July we had US\$800 million, because after baht support, defending the baht, so Bank of Thailand, the governor, the whole staff, were to be blamed.

But another blame should be put to the Thai people, including myself, because we have never been rich before. We've been a poor country, underdeveloped country. We're a developing country, so we never tasted richness, including myself. When we tasted the richness we wanted more, being greedy. I blame myself also. Never had enough. I remember I wanted to make one million baht, which is today maybe US\$25,000. When I graduated 28 years old, I couldn't make it. I wanted to make one million 30 years on.... But I made one million baht, my currency, when I was around 32 years old. And I made 10 million when I was 34, and I made my 100 million when I was 40 years old. And I wanted one billion, and I failed. Greediness, greediness.

So I blame Thai people. I blame the social value. When we had money we bought expensive foreign currency. You know, our import tax on cars in Thailand—some 400 to 600 percent. Import tax on import cars. We still bought them. We spent luxuriously. I build this condominium for real rich people. It is a luxurious condominium, so this kind of sentiment, I blame all Thai people. But today if I look back I say I'm glad that it happened. Had it not happened, including myself, I wouldn't be alive. Our country would have a kind of transitional period to adjust itself, so I hope that this would be a good lesson for us.

INTERVIEWER: You said on the way out here that [in] the early '90s, in a way, you wanted to be more like America. Is that still something that you aspire to?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Temporarily, no. I still think that in America, in Europe, you have a better standard of living, and I think I myself, because I was educated in America and I like the standard of living and that kind of life—you know, you practically have every thing you want—I still like that. But like I said, before we can go back to that level again, we have to adjust ourselves to the real situation. Let's not lie to ourselves. Now we are broke; let's accept we are broke. We cannot afford having nice American homes. ... My condominium is called American dream home, dream condominium. But we are broke. Even my clients who were multibillionaires are broke also. So during this time I'll say that we must be content. We may have a dream, but it has to be in the future. Could be my children's generation now, because I'm 52 years old, but for people to be ambitious, like myself, and I'm sure businessmen are ambitious people, we need to have that kind of dream. But in the past, like in the past three years, the previous government, they kept on kind of lying to us, not telling us the truth. So many types of people who are still rich, they don't care; they still go abroad, spend a lot of money. But I think for my country, it's time to tell the truth and accept the situation, because we can be prosperous again. And I believe, strongly believe, my country will be prosperous again, because we have the potential, we have the people, we have the resources. It's only that in the past few years we have had too much debt—that's all.

The Debt Burden

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Selling sandwiches? I said no way. [But] if we were to survive, we were [going to have] to sell on the street. My staff got shocked. Selling on the streets, it's kind of embarrassing, and also officials would chase you away, will take your things away. ... I said no, we don't know what to do, so they felt depressed, so I told them, "Don't worry; I will go with you to sell." And I did... The first afternoon I was caught; I was chased away, so I was very discouraged, but I continued to fight until today. I was arrested twice, put on the pickup truck, taken to the District to be fined, but I refused to pay because I said that I don't think I did anything wrong. So ... people know me; people come to help me. That boosts my morale and spirit to be higher and higher, until today I can say that I can feed all my staff, and in addition I employ many people who don't have jobs from upcountry. ... For myself I have not recovered yet. My debt was too big. I've been sued; I've been taken to court. Many cases have already been settled that I have to pay, but I don't have money to pay. Like [one of my projects has] been repossessed by the bank. I don't know my future.

INTERVIEWER: Big buildings here.

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: I think most [buildings] will be repossessed by the banks because [their owners] can't pay, because with the economic slowdown, most companies have to save their expenses. So there's many new buildings, [but] the rent will come down because of competition. So when the rent comes down the landlord does not have enough rent to pay the interest on the principal. So most of these big buildings that you see will what we call NPL—non-performing loans—which are heavy burdens for commercial banks. And if you ask what they will do with this, they have been trying to auction [them], and most of these buildings I would say will be auctioned to foreign multinational companies, because for Thai companies [it] will be very difficult. Thai companies, eight out of 10 big companies have already gone bankrupt.

This building's one of the telecommunication buildings, also NPL. They are surviving because they have financial assistance from [a financial group] in Europe.

Thailand's Future in the Global Economy

INTERVIEWER: What's your sense of where Thailand's economy is going now?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Given the current situation, I think that it will be at least another six years before it will recover.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Because our economic condition has not improved domestically. People are still unemployed; more university graduates do not get jobs; and currently our two major export markets, namely the United States and Japan, it seems that the U.S. economy is slowing down, and Japan has not recovered from its economic crisis. The two countries represent 35 percent of our export market. Therefore we have to depend on our domestic consumption with 62 million people. In addition, the world's oil price has gone up by more than 100 percent, and Thailand imports 90 percent of its oil consumption. We consume about 650,000 barrels a day. Two years ago, when we had the economic crisis, the world's price was around \$12 a barrel, and our currency was at 50 baht per dollar. Today the world's price is

about \$25 a barrel, and we still import 90 percent of the oil consumption. And the currency is about 45 baht per dollar, so we are paying something like 70 percent more on oil bills. This will cause us problems, because the production costs will increase. When production costs increase, then we lose the competitive advantage to other countries in exporting our products. And what makes it worse is that commodity prices in the past year or two have declined rather than increased. So I think our country is facing a very tough economic condition before we fully recover.

INTERVIEWER: The prices and slowdown in America and Japan, the loss of the competitive advantage, that's really all a sign of globalism. What is your sense of globalism?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Well, we cannot deny globalization nowadays. I think what Thailand needs to do is we have to find our strong points and weak points. To me personally, I think our strong point is that Thailand is an agriculture-based country. We are far behind [a country] like Singapore if we want to be the high-technology economy, because all we will get in the future for high technology I would say would be second class. First-class technology will be in America, in Europe, in Singapore, in Taiwan, in Japan, but not in Thailand, so I always try to tell the government that my personal view is that we need to concentrate on strong points; that is, Thailand must produce and feed the world. Rather than go and compete with the high technology, the capital goods, the petrochemical plants, steel plants, I said, that's not the timing anymore, especially after the economic crisis and the bankruptcies of many entrepreneurs. We are already far behind because before they can come back again and run their factories again, their machinery will be obsolete, so we should concentrate on growing foods on our own soil and export. And if we cannot export the fresh crops, then find technology, buy technology, buy machinery to convert them into the preserved forms. What I'm saying is that from now on, for Thailand to export anything, it has to come from our own ground, our own soil. We cannot import and do something, put in the labor, and then re-export. We will not survive. We cannot bounce back like we did it 20 years ago.

Thailand is so rich in soil, and we have never capitalized on it. In the past 20 years we have been receiving influence from America, so we did things that were not to the benefits or to the advantage of our own country, what we call the comparative advantage. We just followed the West [in terms of] modernization like you have seen in Bangkok—many unnecessarily tall

buildings, high buildings, high-technology buildings. We just went with the fashion. But we spent a lot of money; we borrowed a lot of money. But we cannot take them back. There are now just idle buildings which are being auctioned at half the price. What about the rest of the money, the rest of the debt that had been put in? It's gone. So I think that we should start again in the new life, what I would say a new life, like myself. So we have to face with the facts, where are we strong, what is our competitive advantage. Then we should concentrate on that direction. I used to say—and people would laugh at me—I said, who is the richest man in the world? Nobody denies Bill Gates. I say Bill Gates is so rich, but Bill Gates cannot eat his software. Microsoft is okay, but Bill Gates has to eat rice. So I say let's come back to the basics, what the human needs are. And what is Thailand standing at? I think our better chance is being the food export. We feed the world, kitchen of the world.

Anti-Globalization Protestors

INTERVIEWER: What's your thought about people who protest about globalization and say that it [keeps poor countries poor]? What do you think about that?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: I disagree with them. In our world, either you're capitalists or you're communist, those people that say that they are prone to communism, [to] ideas [of] socialism. I myself believe in free society, free competition. In capitalism it's the one who's stronger that has more incentive. It's the one who adjusts itself to the consumers. They are the ones who will win. I believe that consumers will get the best if there is strong competition, and the ones who take advantage of consumers will fade away, will lose this battle. So I disagree with the people who do not see that globalization works.

The Loss of a Dream

INTERVIEWER: We're driving now out of town towards a place that was very important to you. What made you decide to build a big project so far out of Bangkok?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Firstly, because at that time I was rich. I wanted to do something that no one has done—build a luxurious condominium, the structural design from America, the interior design from America. Secondly, I knew a lot of rich people because I was associating with rich people, including my clients, who allowed me to invest their money in the local stock market, and I foresaw at that time that the road to my location would be like

[what] today you see. I was thinking of this seven years ago, because there were plans to expand the roads and it would be just like the elevated highway. So I thought that by the time my project was completed, everything would be fully complete, so the traveling time would be less, and multimillionaires would like to take time off to play golf, to enjoy the fresh air in the mountains, which you cannot find in Bangkok—a hectic city, polluted city, traffic. So I was thinking that direction, only on my small market niche. And so that's really what I was thinking.

INTERVIEWER: I wonder if you could just think back to when you were developing this project. Just talk a bit about your hopes for it and the excitement of entertaining such an ambitious special project.

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Sure. I wanted to retire early and had a beautiful project: All my customers, who mostly will be my friends, will enjoy the atmosphere, and [it will be] one of the most luxurious condominiums ever built in Thailand, I must say, because all things are kind of "imported from America," even the landscape architect. I used the landscape architect who built the Mirage and the Treasure Islands in Las Vegas for the landscape, the Volcanoes. Anyway, that's my dream. I went there when I was 48 years old. I hoped that I would retire by 55 years old. Nice place to live, apart from Bangkok. Nice neighbors, rich people, and condominium, and people would talk about my project when it was completed. Already, a few magazines about home decoration came to take pictures and put in their magazines. Okay, this is the kind of condominium I was dreaming and I was building. So that was really my dream, to retire as a millionaire and have an easy life, play golf, enjoy life, but unfortunately....

INTERVIEWER: And you chose this scenery, which is just stunning, because of the tropical landscape.

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: And also the elevation. Bangkok is very flat, and here is a mountainous area, high elevations, 500, 600 meters above sea level. And, in fact, next to our project is a national park. It's one of the few national parks for mountains and trees left in Thailand. It's a sanctuary for birds. Many people come from all over the world just to visit this place, to look at birds. They say they find very rare birds living in this area. That's what I

learned from them. We have elephants, we have tigers in this national park. Of course they don't come to my project, but I see [them] in the national park. So it's a very good location. At that time I was calculating already. It would take Bangkok people less than two hours to drive here and enjoy their weekend life, you know, kind of secluded, and they're ready to return to Bangkok to work on Monday. They leave on Friday evening and return on Monday morning. That was kind of my concept.

INTERVIEWER: At the time, when you were building this and getting the designer from the Mirage, was it an exciting time?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: It was. And in fact the man, Mr. Brinkerhoff, the landscape architect who did the Mirage and Treasure Island, came at least three times to our site, and he told me this was one of the most beautiful sites he has seen in his life. And he appreciated what I was doing, so it was very exciting to have close contact with this kind of guy, and [also] the American architectural designer. I even went to America twice just to pick the kitchen cabinet, for example, which came from Canada—it's called "Connect"—that we used in the model condominium unit to present to our customers that this is the kind of stuff, this is the kind of things that we will be using once it's completed. So I was really excited to have a chance to be on that level, that status, which I was hoping when I retired I would be in that kind of situation.

INTERVIEWER: You said your dream was to retire and live in this place. Did that dream feel very close? Could you feel like you could almost touch it?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Yes, very close. Before the bubble burst, before 1997, I thought that that was a sure thing. I would have a happy life, a happy ending after many years of hard work, many years of risk-taking, many years of successes. But I never thought that the whole thing would collapse just overnight.

INTERVIEWER: Do you come back here much?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Not very often, not very often.

INTERVIEWER: What's it like to drive back now? What's running through your mind?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Oh, every time I come I feel pity for myself. [I say] what timing. I almost had it—you know, successful and retired. This just went down. I look at the golf course. This is one of the most beautiful golf courses—and designed by Jack Nicklaus. This golf course, it's designed to be a championship golf course. It's a shame....

My creditor said that they also sympathize with me that my timing was wrong, because I had no intention to be a non-performing loan. I put my effort into making it one of the most beautiful condominiums in Thailand, and I did it, but [it was] canceled because of the economic slump.

Still today, whenever I come, I will see people taking pictures, using my condominium as a background. They cannot get into my complex ... but they would stand outside and use my swimming pool, and the elephants as a background. This is the relaxation place—you know, no contact with the world. Enjoy the scenery, enjoy especially the clean air. Air is very clean. This [is the] entrance to my condominium project. (laughs) Some wanted to buy my guardhouse. (laughs) So, [they] don't want to buy my condominium—costs too much. "Can we buy your guardhouse?" I said, "No, you cannot." (laughs) So the landscape is now about 60, 70 percent of what it used to be.

I designed this, what they call portcochere or something—you know, when owners come and drive and leave and get in there, and the chauffeur will take the cars to the parking area. I have underground parking, which cost a lot of money, and underground cable. You don't see any cables hanging around. I even have an elevator in each of the buildings. Only three stories—I have elevators.

INTERVIEWER: Shall we walk to the swimming pool first?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: Every time I come up here, I feel kind of sad that [I had] another few steps to go and then I would be successful and would have a enjoyable life. Everything was complete; it's the economy that [failed].... Everyone [went] bankrupt, including myself. As you can see, the conditions, it's very bad. If I had not hired some people

[to] watch the property—mostly they are guards—this will be even worse. My two elephants wouldn't be here. These two elephants here, I love them very much, although they are not alive, but they represent something, especially this national park. It's known to have wild elephants still alive; that's why I use the two elephants. The project was complete. I still remember [the] nice swimming pool, spray water. I had a video to show to my clients in Bangkok before they'd come up here. If they are really interested they can come up here. You can see from the video that the project is beautiful, but today, as you can see, nothing I could do about it. The bank has already repossessed my property. Every time I come I feel sad. I'd hoped that my luck was better that time. As you can see, the surrounding, the building structure—I daresay that in Thailand, there would not be a property developer like myself. It's my creditor that mentioned it to me before I went down, while I was doing the construction, work was in progress, my creditor would come and visit once in a while. "Oh, you did a very beautiful project; you put everything in," he said. I wanted to make it a masterpiece before I retire. I would have a neighbourhood of rich people, living, swimming. We even had a Jacuzzi, right there, if you had a party or whatever. All gone.

See, this area I designed to be what we call a barbecue area for my customers to have barbecue, relax, and also up there they can read books—nice after the swimming pool. So I had everything arranged so that my customers [would] really enjoy. A selected group of people only would come and live here—that was my dream—and we would have a good time. You know, they're all businessmen. I know they're tired; they're bored of Bangkok. They wanted to get out, but they don't know where to get out, so this was my idea. All this sandstone—instead of using other things I used sandstone, which increased my costs, but now it's all rotten—that would be the entertainment room. The children, family can play cards or whatever. The family room I designed so everything was well planned. I talked to my designer that okay, this was my idea for family, for family only.

We have a lot of parking space because all my customers will have luxurious cars, so I provide them with nice parking space, wide enough. This would be our guardroom. Each building will have a guardroom. Any car that comes in will have to get permission in addition to the front gates, so security—I paid attention, and I concentrated on security. But this is only part of the land that I bought to do my first phase. What you see in front of you is [an]other lot of I'll say something like 15 acres of land that I could develop in the future if I were to be successful in

this project. I would continue doing it, and I would make this whole complex a place where people who have money and want to enjoy exclusively a quiet life and after two days [of the] weekend, Saturday and Sunday, they're ready to go back to Bangkok, and their brains [are] fresh, ready to concentrate on their business. That's my idea.

Now we're walking to the building. See some of the model units that I built, mice all scattered around. I used to have flowerbeds round the corner—no more. All empty.

This was my most expensive model unit—now no more doors or decorations, materials gone. Kitchen, living room, and out here to the balcony, sliding door looking at the fairway.

It's quite a view. I really feel bad because no one can enjoy it now. It's all left to the bank. Here I see a nice fairway and a nice lake in front of me, and by my side I see another fairway. It's so sad. It's today; I hope that it's tomorrow. There's a master bedroom. I had it decorated nicely. I'll show you my videotape for promotion.

INTERVIEWER: So if you got this tomorrow, why do you believe that tomorrow will be much better?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: I hope that tomorrow, if I'm lucky and [over] the next few years my sandwich business covers us, I don't know what will happen to this project. If no one has taken it, maybe—who knows?—I might come back and get it, redecorate it. That's maybe just a dream at this time. I just want to survive, have a good business. I must have really a lot of surplus money before I could come back, but under the present economic and property industry situation, no one knows. It could be five, 10 years before anybody could make use of this project. I know I have put a lot of money and effort into this project, and the strong point of this project, given that this kind of surroundings you cannot find everywhere in Thailand, I think this is one of the most scarce places in Thailand. So a location like this you can hardly find. A building you can repaint, redecorate; foundation is there, everything is there. I know I put a lot of piling in there to make it last. No one takes care of it, put more money in and you can sell it.

INTERVIEWER: Some people say that big dreams are a bad thing because they are so out of reach, and when you don't achieve them it's very painful.

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: It happened to me also. I had a big dream, and I couldn't achieve it. That's why today I'm standing on the street, but after four years of struggling, at least I know I have a chance; at least I know that people are supporting me. Thai people do not look back at what I was; Thai people are counting on me [for] what I am and what I will be in the future, because today already in my country I've been a symbol of a business failure with the economic crisis. I don't know how soon I will recover, but I have a hope that I will bounce back. And if don't, if I don't have that chance, because I'm 52 years old, I think that chance will go to my children, three children. They have experienced through good times and bad times with me. When I was rich, summer vacations [in] England, New Zealand, schooling for one month, they had a good life. But today, here I am. They are with me; they are still very young. I hope that whatever I'm doing now, if it's not for me, it will be for my children; it will be for Thai people which now... Thai society, they have accepted what I have been through and what I am doing.

INTERVIEWER: Before you said that your vision here was a community of friends and other businesspeople. You had a lot of money and lost it. Has your attitude about money and your values that you attach to it changed?

SIRIVAT VORAVETVUTHIKUN: It has changed in a sense that money still has a value, but it has changed in a sense for my thinking. Money is not everything. It's good to have money, but once you don't have money, it doesn't mean that you have to lose everything. And money, I think I can make it back. But before I thought that it was very good to have money. I never knew about sufferings; I never knew about hard working; I never knew about what kind of work it would be standing [and] selling things for two hours, and you don't sell anything, or you sell very seldom, or you stand six hours a day in the sun or the shade, sometimes in the rain, and you get less than \$100 a day. That kind of life I have passed already till today; before I never experienced [it]. So I still appreciate having money, but how to use money and how to think of it if you don't have it. I still love money, and I want to be rich again, but with my effort, with my hard work, with my own idea, with my own struggling, with my own effort, I will be proud of it.