

Re-constructing the Vernacular?

The search for contemporary vernacular houses in central Thailand

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the vernacular house program launched by the National Housing Authority of Thailand. While Bangkok has become a well known metropolis with various types of urban housing for its ten million populations, majority of the Thais live in rural areas. Twenty years ago traditional Thai houses as well as vernacular dwellings are familiar sight once we travel out of Bangkok. But as the world has been transformed by technology and globalization in the past few decades, rural dwellings of Thailand have also been transformed. Vernacular dwellings particular to each Ethnic groups have become much harder to find. Rapid communication network has introduced images and things once unobtainable and unfamiliar; the “*picture*” of ideal house has thus been changed. Much of the rural population would like to own something “*new*” and “*similar*” to everyone else, resulting in houses of stylistic similarities that answer to neither local needs nor topographical conditions.

In an attempt to re-construct vernacular dwellings that work with current technology, materials and demands, the National Housing Authority of Thailand has launched a research project, in conjunction with Silpakorn University, that aims to re-introduce and re-familiarize people with the old concept of vernacular dwelling, which represent socio-cultural specificities of each and every Ethnic group. Starting

from historic researches and a field survey of current dwellings, the research continues with an open architectural competition and concludes with designs of various prototypes that can be adapted to specific needs. Its goal is to find a new vision that answers to current demands while maintains certain characters as well as specific ways of life for each and every region.

But such design, while aims for the better, is also a paradox. While the old dwellings were born out dwelling instincts and often without architects, the new is offered by designers whose visions may or may not represent the real vernacular lives. This paper thus focuses on both the strengths and weaknesses of these new prototypes, which is a part of an attempt to answer the question: Is it possible to re-construct the vernacular?

Keyword: Traditional Architecture / Transformation / Re-constructing the Vernacular / Adaptation / Prototype

1. Introduction

In 2010 The Faculty of Architecture, Sikpakorn University, in collaboration with the National Housing Authority launched a new research program entitled “*Contemporary Housing for the Rural Thailand.*” There are four separate researches for each of Thailand’s region, the North, the South, the South-East and the Central region. The ultimate goal is to create prototypes for contemporary house that could become an alternative for both the disappearing vernacular dwelling and the modern mass-produced housing. Before the researches began, initial questions are: What are the current needs? How have the living conditions been transformed? How could the houses represent the local characteristic of each region? How could architectural heritages of each and every region be preserved and transformed into something new? How could the prototype be designed to satisfy both functional and aesthetic aspirations of the dwellers?¹

While Bangkok has become a well known metropolis with various types of urban housing for its ten million populations, majority of the Thais live in rural areas. The North, the North-East, the South and the Central Plain represent four distinct regions within the country. Domestic architectures of each region, while contain certain characteristic similarities, also differ in terms of proportional appearances, internal spatial organization, materials as well as modes of construction. Twenty years ago traditional Thai houses as well as vernacular dwellings are familiar sight once

we travel out of Bangkok. Houses of various migrated ethnic groups could easily be found along with the traditional Thai houses. Since most ethnic groups often live in close-knitted communities, distinct architectural characteristics of their houses were not much altered. Constructional methods were handed down from previous generations.²

But as the world has been transformed by technology and globalization in the past few decades, rural dwellings of Thailand have also been transformed. As various industries have been introduced and gradually replaced local agricultural cultures, domestic lives, as well as local professions have gradually been changed. Vernacular dwellings particular to each Ethnic groups have become much harder to find. Rapid communication network has introduced images and things once unobtainable and unfamiliar; the “*picture*” of ideal house has thus been changed. Much of the rural population would like to own something “*new*” and “*similar*” to everyone else, resulting in houses of stylistic similarities that answer to neither local needs nor topographical conditions. Aspirations to build a house according to the “*new*” image fit neither the social nor economic particularities of each region. It has generated houses of similar appearances that seem to belong to no one and nowhere. This problem have become more and more obvious during the past ten years that the Housing Authority of Thailand have launched many research projects studying the current needs and possibility for future housing.

In an attempt to re-construct vernacular dwellings that work with current technology, materials and demands, the Housing Authority of Thailand has launched a research project in 2009, in cooperation with various Universities, aiming to re-introduce and re-familiarize people with the old concept of vernacular dwelling, which represent socio-cultural specificities of each and every Ethnic group. Starting from historic researches and a field survey of current dwellings, the research continues with an open architectural competition and concludes with designs of various prototypes that can be adapted to specific needs. Its goal is to find a new vision that answers to current demands while maintains certain characters as well as specific ways of life for each and every region.

As these researches concluded, more questions are left unanswered: Does each and every region need a housing prototype? Should these houses to be similarly constructed all over each region? How are these designs fundamentally different from the real vernacular houses currently built? Is it possible to re-construct the vernacular?

This paper will focus on the creation of housing prototype for the central region of Thailand, following the competition.

2. Current Conditions

The Central Region of Thailand is divided into four parts, nineteen provinces, each with slightly different topographical conditions. But the majority of the areas can be topographically characterized as flat plane with the tendency for flooding. Thus domestic architectures of this region often feature houses on stilts of varying heights, regardless of materials and modes of construction.³

Today three types of houses can still be found. The first type is the vernacular dwellings of different appearances, materials and constructional methods, belonging to both the Thais and particular ethnic groups, built solely by the locals. The second type is the vernacular houses that have been altered or reconstructed by local people, using new industrious materials, resulting in architectural characteristics that are slightly different from the original. The third type is the “modern” or “new” kinds of dwelling built solely of industrious materials, by contractors, according to the designs that are usually pre-established by non-local designers. While the first type represent answers to local conditions, whether geographical, climatic, economic or social and cultural ones, the second type is an adaptation of the first vision to fit the changing demands, thus represents the transformation of housing needs. The last type, on the other hand, represents social and cultural aspirations for something new, modern and globally universal as opposed to the old version of local specificities that were readily familiar. Thus on one end of the spectrum stands the notion of locality while the other of the spectrum the idea of universality begins to emerge. As time progressed, local craftsmanship, materials as well as traditional and vernacular building trades began to recede into the background, giving ways to much more industrious and mass-produced building materials and generic methods of construction. The Housing Authority of Thailand recognized the changing architectural conditions similarly occurred in each and every region, thus launched the research program aiming to re-introduce and re-familiarize the locals with their own architectural characteristics and building art. The goal is not to imitate the vernacular, but to re-introduce certain spatial and formal configurations that directly respond to local conditions and demands, while also answer to the changing building materials and methods of construction. The new house would be something familiar, much like an old skeleton in a new outfit.



Figure 1: Existing houses in Petchburi Province, the Central region of Thailand.

3. The Competition

Following the research of existing housing conditions, the search for the new vernacular house of the Central Region of Thailand proceeded with an open competition to find possibilities and alternative visions. The program of the petition was aimed at creative possibilities to find appropriate spatial and formal configurations as well as suitable architectural characteristics. There were five points that must be taken into account.⁴

1.The design must demonstrate the possibility of growth and adaptation, to ultimately accommodate three generations of inhabitants.

2.The design must express spatial, formal as well as stylistic characteristics of the region; it must be the representation of regional architecture.

3.The design must demonstrate the use of local materials as well as modes of construction that can be accomplished by the locals, but with types of innovation that will improve the quality of life as well as demonstrate energy concerns for sustainable environment.

4.The design must answer to specific social, cultural, topographical as well as climatic characters of the region.

5.The design must be affordable for most families within the regions.

Of the seventy competition submissions, the design can be categorized into three groups. The first group is characterized by designs that mainly replicate the vernacular, both in terms of stylistic appearances and spatial configuration. Materials used in this group of designs are mostly similar to current materials, often without any types of innovation for improvement. The weakness of designs within this group is characterized by its lack of creative suggestions, they mostly replicate the old vision without offering anything new.

The second group is characterized by designs that aim to be completely modern and new, in terms of spatial and formal configuration as well as stylistic appearances. Materials used in this group of designs are mostly industrious, requiring both equipments and technologies that can hardly be done by the locals. The weakness of designs in this group is mostly marked by its lack of concerns for local climate as well as local domestic demands.

The third group of competition submissions is marked by its attempt to re-create and transform traditional as well as vernacular architecture into something vaguely familiar, but with new sets of concerns for material, constructional methods as well as issues of sustainability. Designs in this group, are preferred by academics and professionals alike for its innovation and creative vision as well as its ability to represent the new locality. Most of the winning entries are thus from this design category.⁵

4. The Prototype

After the winning entries were selected, prototypes must be developed from the designs of these entries. Yet, despite acceptance of designs by academic researchers as well as professionals, there exists great difficulties to foresee the actual acceptance of these types of houses by the locals. Before such prototypes can be created, these winning entries must be re-evaluated by the locals, through both questionnaires and focus-group meetings. The result of such evaluation showed strong disagreement between preferences of the locals and academic researchers. When facing with issues of the new vision for their housing, ninety percent of the locals

prefer something completely new and different from their vernacular architecture. Not wanting to be different, they prefer architectural similarities than specificities. These preferences, along with new and industrious materials ultimately led to an image of urban housing. But such preferences apply for only the issue of stylistic appearances. When pressed with issues of habits and activities as well as climate, the same group of locals expressed great concern that their houses must be climatically comfortable in terms of natural ventilation and accommodate specific domestic activities similar to their old houses. From the questionnaires as well as focus-group meetings, only two types of housing are preferred; if they cannot build something completely new, the locals much prefer their old vernacular culture than the ones introduced to them by academic researchers.

Despite the results, prototypes will be created from the winning entries. These prototypes, along with the building manuals will be distributed to local authorities. It is the aim of the Housing Authority of Thailand that these prototypes will act as a guideline for future housing construction within each and every region. Yet, the actual execution is another matter.

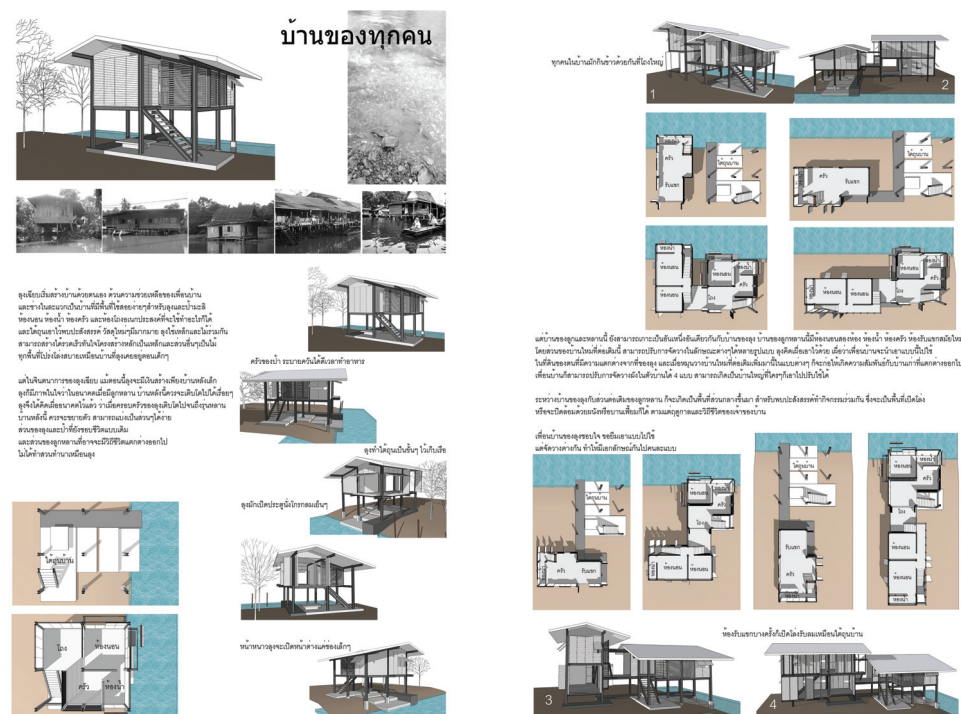


Figure 2: The 1st Prize winning entry.

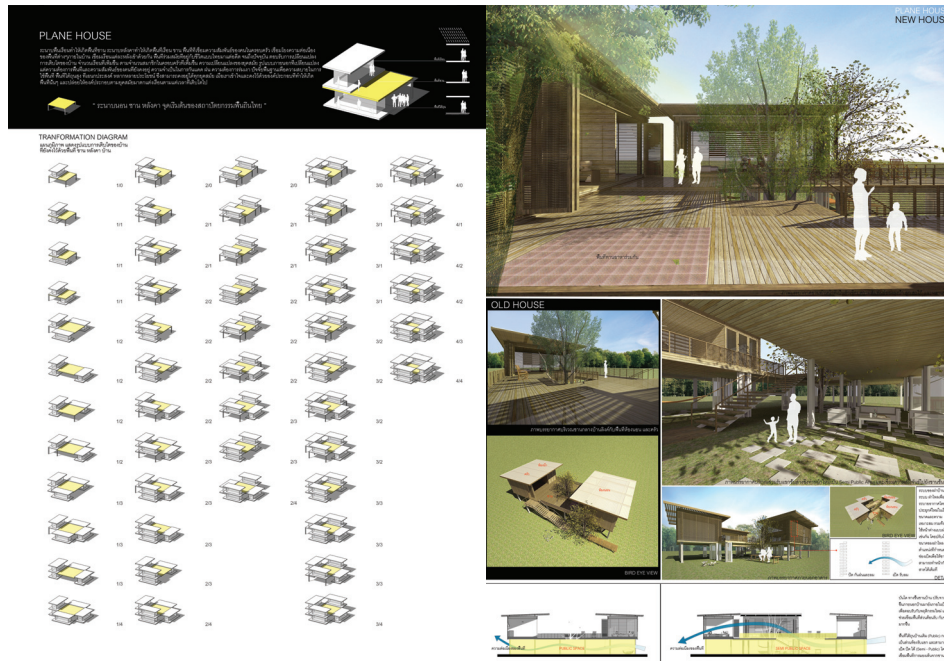


Figure 3: The 2nd Prize winning entry.



Figure 4: The 3rd Prize winning entry.

The goal of the Housing Authority of Thailand is to find a new vision that answers to current demands while maintains certain characters as well as specific ways of life for each and every region.⁶ But such design, while aims for the better, is also a paradox. While the old dwellings were born out dwelling instincts and often without architects, the new is offered by designers whose visions may or may not represent the real vernacular lives. The winning entries were designed by architects whose familiarity with local conditions in the region cannot be evaluated. They are also judged and selected by academic researchers as well as architectural professionals, with their own vision of how the new vernacular should be. Whether the winning entries represent actual local conditions and demands are left unanswered. Results are thus a number of prototypes that may or may not be executed in the future.



Figure 5: Prototype 1 for Central Region.

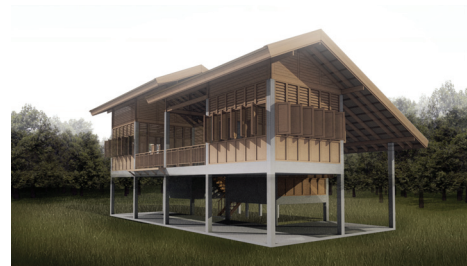


Figure 6: Prototype 2 for Central Region.

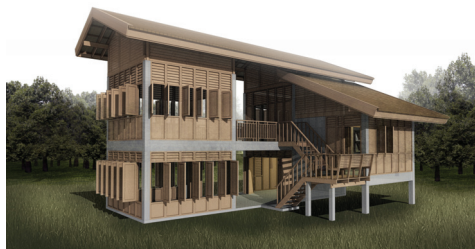


Figure 7: Prototype 3 for Central Region.

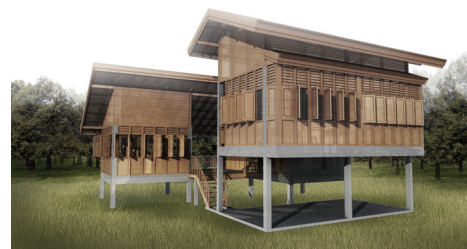


Figure 8: Prototype 4 for Central Region.

As the research and the creation of the prototypes came to an end, despite the results as prototypes that can be executed, new set of questions arose. Instead of asking the questions of how the house should look like and aiming to create a product that could readily be handed down to the locals and constructed, perhaps the more fundamental questions must be asked: What do the locals need? What are their demands for domestic architecture? How to re-introduce the value of their own

vernacular culture? Instead of giving them the ready-made designs of their houses, should they be given the fundamental knowledge and training to re-familiarize themselves with the disappearing building cultures? And instead of aiming at re-constructing the vernacular house, should the Housing Authority shift the goal to re-constructing the vernacular values, knowledge and craftsmanship that may facilitate the actual re-construction of the vernacular for the future.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Thailand Research Fund and Higher Education Research Promotion, National Research University, Office of the Higher Education Commission for their continual support in the research.

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