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# Domesticating the Chaos

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## **Abstract**

One way to look at the term 'urban' is its association with a more chaotic or a less predictable situation, not only in terms of the relationship between inhabitants, but also the relationship between the inhabitants and the other agencies in the urban system. This leads to question whether a more predictable or a more ordered situation might be imposed. In the primitive society, an approach in dealing with chaos is to impose a well, hence orderly, symbolic universe onto the domestic sphere. In the contemporary society, although the order within the domestic sphere remains as significance as in the primitive society, it becomes more secular and gears towards scientific references, for example, cleanliness and hygiene. Thus, the order in the contemporary domestic sphere no longer rehearses the same relation with the external chaos, when comparing with that of the primitive domestic practice. Moreover, it becomes increasingly inclusive in the private sphere.

This paper explores the way in which the symbolic order is used in a contemporary domestic sphere in responding to the urban chaos with special reference to the Thai domestic architecture in the urban area of Bangkok. The evidence suggests that the application of the symbolic order is used as a remedy against the urban chaos. Yet, it presents a profoundly complex situation. Not only the situation induces a complicate way of inhabiting the domestic sphere, but it also portrays itself as a domestic chaos.

**Keywords :** Fear, Contemporary thai domestic architecture, Thai domesticity

## Introduction

*CHAOS, DISORDER, AND RISK* is commonly related to what goes on in the *OUTSIDE* hence the more public realm. Fear encourages individual to postulate a better and a safer environment isolating from what is thought to be dangerous and strange. We, as humans, commonly insulate and barricade ourselves by using architecture and its symbols as a mode of power, defence, and protection (Hirst, 1997; Tuan, 1979). Constructing domestic sphere is a reduced 'terrestrial acting-out' (Rykwert, 1975). It is the most significant human gesture in distinguishing between what is public and what is private. Our home, the *INSIDE: ORDER AND CONTROL*, embraces us with its elusive qualities such as comfort, privacy, and security.

In the past, when symbols were far more advanced than material aspects of the house, primitive men symbolised their house as a control microcosm. The established symbolic order was made capable of negotiating a state of equilibrium. Nowadays, we tend to focus on physical and utilitarian features of the house more than its symbolic significance. Nevertheless, we cherish our home because of its intrinsic attribution of 'safeguarding' (Heidegger, 1951). This safeguarding means not only that our home is our refuge but also that we are ourselves inside our home, and we and our surroundings coexist in a state of harmony. Our orderly home satisfies us by being a remedy against our primal fear of danger as much as fear of the disorientated world. In knowing our first dwelling, 'the primitive hut,' is significant to us the ways in which it satisfies us with a sense of 'being protected.' As described by Laugier, for the very first time, the primitive hut becomes our fundamental source of protection against the terrifying nature (Rykwert, 1981).

This paper aims to exemplify the effect of distinction between the public and the private sphere the ways in which its boundary is marked by symbolic order. With special reference to the Thai house, this paper problematises the practices of homemaking in contemporary Thai society the ways in which the householders have reinvented new topology of symbolic order as a

fundamental source of security and protection. In the Thai traditional society, rituals of housebuilding sanctified the household and brought about prosperity in dwelling. Modernisation, which took place during the reign of King Rama IV (*King Monkut*, r.1851-1868) and King Rama V (*King chulalongkorn*, r.1868-1910), introduced a profound repression of the traditional practices and rituals of housebuilding. Nevertheless, the paper will elaborate certain residues of these practices that have survived the modernisation but have been transformed to accommodate modern lifestyle. On the one hand, the paper will present the extent to which the Thais reinvent the domestic sanctification as a choice to gain their sense of security much needed in chaotic city. On the other hand, the practice has become far more complicated, ambiguous and excessive. Above all, it has become a disturbance of domestic comfort.

## Thai House in the Past

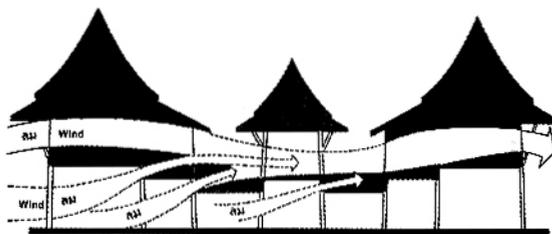
Similar to other primitive society, the Thais were imbued with fear caused by troublesome ecology and natural calamities. Dangerous and uncontrollable occurrences were believed to cause by supernatural powers. The traditional Thai house, shown in figure 1, was built by people using their intelligence, ability, and resources to the fullest extent. The house, shown in figure 2, was a prefabricated wooden house built on stiles to escape floods in the raining season and to take advantage of cool breeze in summer. The multi-floor levels signify spatial hierarchy and spatial accessibility. The Thai householders moved from the ground level and up the stairs. They then entered the circulation level that took them to the sitting area and further to the private sleeping area.

Accompanying construction techniques of housebuilding, the Thais developed the rituals of housebuilding. The rituals of housebuilding provided the Thais with principles of constructing a house and making a home. The rituals emphasised on building the house that belonging to a specific individual: on the right soil; using the right woods; at the right time; and with the right construction procedures. The rituals

also provided the Thai householders with rules of spatial orientation and rules for proper dwelling. The rituals were systematic and straightforward practices. As a obligation, in return for spiritual protection, the rituals must be carried out, the domestic remedies must be held in high regard, and the householders must properly dwelling in the house. The Thais believed that the rituals helped purifying their household from misfortunate occurrences, sanctifying the household parameter, animating spiritual protection, and providing guidelines in maintaining the auspiciousness. These rituals reinforced the true ownership of the house to the householder and orientated the house in such a manageable way that it ridded the fear, which came with disorientation of the outside world. The traditional Thai house significantly assured the Thai householders with physical as much as emotional security.



*Figure 1: Khun Pean's house, an example of a traditional Thai house in central region of Thailand (Chaichongrak et. al., 2002)*



*Figure 2: A section of the traditional Thai house shows the flow of cool breeze and different spatial hierarchy (Chaichongrak, 1996)*

### **Thai House in the Modernised Bangkok**

Modernisation that took place in the beginning

of the nineteenth century has changed the concept of Thai dwelling and its domestic architecture dramatically. Modernisation was used as a strategy in fighting against the subjugation of Western colonialism. Ironically, the process of modernisation imposed upon the Thais was equated to 'Westernisation.' The images of Western modernity were popularised by reformation in Bangkok. With fascination of modern amenities, the Thais began to develop a taste for western houses. The traditional Thai house was no longer suitable to accommodate the modern living. Thus, traditional practices that came with the traditional Thai house were no longer valid for the modernised (hence westernised) Thai householders. The extent to which how the traditional practices of housebuilding have diminished or survived through the modernisation is no longer the modernised Thais' interests.



*Figure 3: Houses in a private housing estate surround the guardian spirit house (Karnchanaporn, 2002)*

Fifty years after the first school of architecture was established and twenty two years after the First National Development Plan (1961-6) was called forth, the decade of 1980-1990 (especially 1983) was recognised as a golden era of architecture and construction in Thailand and especially in Bangkok. Changes in Bangkok, a modern city, have been rapid and uncontrollable. Bangkok itself has been transformed into a site of the extreme contradictions. Familiar elements of Western modernity strangely juxtapose with traditional elements and indigenous lifestyles. Although it might be an enigma for anyone who attempts to interpret the contradictions, but for

the Thais, these contradictions are mutual parts of their everyday lives. As it is shown in figure 3, a cluster of private urban houses, which no longer bear traces of the Thai traditional house, surrounds the guardian spirit house.

The economic overturn during the Asian economy crisis in 1997 was an unanticipated occurrence. Adding to Bangkok skyline, abandon-unfinished buildings and projects constantly haunt the Thais. Murders and crimes govern the front page of the everyday local newspapers. In addition, stories of survivals from unanticipated dangers and crimes dominate television industry. Many of the Thais have turned to the indigenous belief of the supernatural powers once succeeded in riding fear in the past to mend their uncertainty in the chaotic urban society. Urban areas in Thailand, especially in Bangkok, have been criticised as being under the empowerment of the superstition (Wongkul, 2000). Thai anthropologists and sociologists have interpreted this phenomenon as a 'culture of fear' causing by living in a 'high risk society' in Bangkok (Eawsriwong, 1993; Wallipodom, 1993; Sattayanurak, 1997). According to such studies, living in Bangkok has become considerably apprehensive. The modern Thais deprive of assurance and protection, which the society is unable to provide, more than ever before.

With no exception in the domestic sphere, recently there has been a trend toward regaining the spiritual protection in the contemporary Thai households. The empirical evidences, of the thesis which this paper is based on, suggest that the Thais have turn to their houses and have made so much effort to rehearse the spiritual protection as a principle of their house (Karnchanaporn, 2004). Home and its symbolic order have again become an important choice of protection in the *high risk society*. There has been no formal document in the extent to which the traditional practices and rituals of housebuilding survive the process of modernisation. Nevertheless, the formal rejection of the belief of supernatural powers and the advance modernisation has made the contemporary practices profoundly ambivalent.

The housebuilding in Bangkok have been influenced by the exposure to architectural fashions and availability of new materials and construction techniques. In general, the Thai domestic architecture has changed dramatically from its past to its present. Figure 4 shows examples of common Thai domestic architecture nowadays: a detached house in private housing estate, a townhouse or a semi-detached house in private housing estate, and a shop house.



**Figure 4:** A detached house in a private housing estate, a townhouse (semi-detached house) in a private housing estate, and a shop-house (Karnchanaporn, 2001)

Regardless the strange external appearances of the new house, the Thais have made tremendous efforts to accommodate the rituals of housebuilding to the building of their new house nowadays. Yet, what crucial, as this paper will demonstrate, are the applications of domestic remedies and other related animistic elements. The overindulgence towards the individual's and the family's well being has forced the applications of these domestic remedies to infiltrate into each room of the house. Following this, a brief account of what goes on inside the house, from direct observations of houses and interviews with householders in Bangkok and its vicinities, will elaborate the manifold practices in strengthening the domestic sphere of the middle class Thais.

### Into the Contemporary Thai Houses

Entering the household parameter, the Thais consider a **boundary** that separates the private from the public sphere critical. Nowadays, a main emphasis is commonly placed on an entrance into the domestic sphere. In some houses, a dimension of the entrance gate must be fixed to a certain dimension and a specific position in relation to the house. In some houses, material quality of the entrance gate is emphasised. For example, it is shown in figure 5 that an entrance gate of a detached house is made of a reflexive material, stainless steel. The owner of the house invented the stainless steel gate in order to cure the improper position of the house site. The house situates at the end of a three-way junction which is believed to bring misfortune. The reflexive quality of the stainless steel enables the gate to not only to secure the household boundary but also to reflect the approaching misfortunate occurrences.



*Figure 5: A stainless steel entrance gate of a house situated at the end of a three-way junction (Karnchanaporn, 2001)*

As soon as you are inside the household parameter, the **guardian spirit house** is eye-catching. The guardian spirit who protected the vil-

lage in the past has been re-established as '*Phra Phum Chao Thi*' or the guardian spirit inhabiting in a homestead. To the extent, there are two guardian spirit houses shown in figure 6. The higher one is designated for '*Phra Phum*' (God of land) and the lower one is for '*Chao Thi*' (the spirit of the place). Householders who have installed the guardian spirit house inside their household parameters must find a proper location for the spirit house. The most fundamental rule is that the spirit house must not be overshadowed by the human's house. However, the limitation of land and space in the contemporary households has forced the Thais to place the guardian spirit house on an unusual site, for example, on a balcony and on the flat rooftop.



*Figure 6: Two guardian spirit houses: the higher one is designated for the God of land and the lower one is for the spirit of the place (Karnchanaporn, 2001)*

Walking towards the house, one confronts with an actual entering into the private sphere at **the front door**. Contemporary Thai householders sometimes impose the significant of the traditional threshold to their front doors. In traditional society, the Thai householders believe that guardian spirit dwells inside the threshold of the house's front door. In the figure 7 and 8, householders of both houses constructed brick thresholds to imitate the traditional house's threshold. The householder of house in figure 7 decided to paint the threshold with red. In another house, as shown in figure 8, the householder decided to place the cabalistic inscription on the door. These practices are aimed to emphasis the sacredness of the threshold and the spiritual protection. Entering these houses, it is best to step 'over' the threshold.

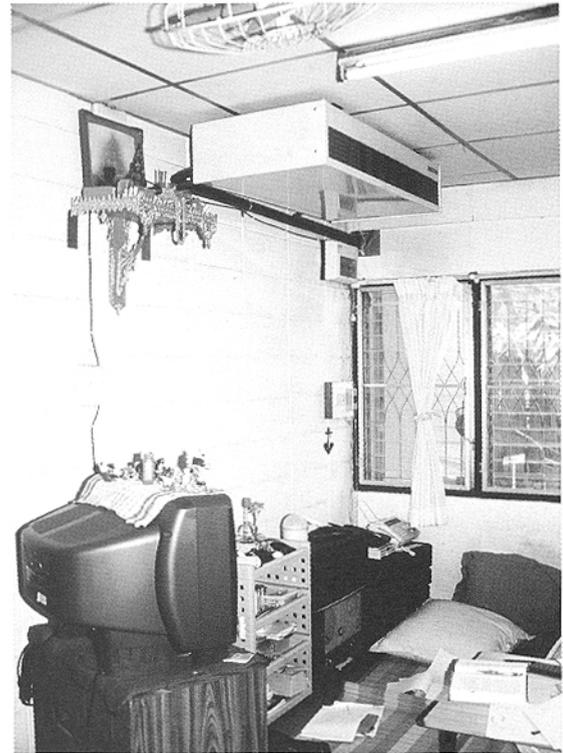


*Figure 7: A front door's brick threshold painted in red (Karnchanaporn, 2001)*



*Figure 8: A front door's threshold and the use of the cabalistic inscription cloth (Karnchanaporn, 2001)*

When entering through the front door, a living room and its adjacent dining room are the two rooms accessible for guests. The quest to catch up with western architectural fashion and facilities hybridises with the need of a spiritual refuge. Thus the living room becomes a showcase of the householder's belief as much as it is equipped with modern amenities such as furniture, a television, an air-conditioner and etc. In the living room, shown in figure 9 to 12, a shelf for installing spiritual icons is significant for a daily life as much as television screen and an air conditioner. Depicting from figure 9 to 12, the living room is occasionally filled with one or a combination of several items ranging from a shelf for the Buddha image (fig. 9 and 11), a shelf for ancestors (fig. 10), a Chinese spirit shrine (fig. 11), a shelf for Kuanyin (Avalokitesvara) image (fig. 12), a beckoning female spirit (fig. 11) and a photo of the late King Rama V (fig. 11 and 12), for example.



*Figure 9: A small living room with a shelf for the Buddha image placing next to the air conditioner*



**Figure 10:** A view from a dining room to a living room: a shelf designated for the homeowner's late mother is placed on one of the main wall.



**Figure 11:** A living room in a shop-house: the wall facing the main entrance is occupied fully with combination of domestic remedies. From left to right: a picture of two great Kings, a shelf for the late King Rama V, two Chinese spirit shrines (one on the floor and one above the doorway), a shelf for a Buddha image and a beckoning female spirit (on the cabinet) (Karnchanaporn, 2001)



**Figure 12:** A living room with a family picture on the side table, a shelf for Kuanyin image and a shelf for the late King Rama V (Karnchanaporn, 2001)

Going up the stairs to upper floor, the corridor leads to bedrooms and a **room designated for Buddhist praying**. Ideally, Buddha images must be kept collectively in this room. In most of the houses, this small room fills with Buddha images and other significant elements such as images of the late King Rama V and ancestral ash-urns, as shown in figure 13. In some houses where the number of rooms are limited, transitional space such as corridors (fig. 14) and available spaces such as on the cabinet top (fig. 15) become a place for these sacred elements.



**Figure 13:** A Buddhist praying room with Buddha images, Kuanyin image, and images of the late King Rama V (Karnchanaporn, 2001)



**Figure 14:** Buddha images and ancestral pictures occupy their place along a corridor (Karnchanaporn, 2001)

**Bedrooms** are considered the most private spheres of the house. An entrance to a bedroom is often been blessed by a monk with a sachet powder for auspiciousness. Most of bedrooms are carefully orientated according to the householder's belief. Similar to the living room, practices in orientation of the bedroom (especially the bed itself) and what kind of domestic remedies and animistic elements could be placed in the bedroom differ significantly. The three examples of the bedroom presented here are evidences of the diverse practices. In figure 16, a bed is aligned towards the Southwest direction. The Chinese cabalistic inscription cloth is placed on the exit to the balcony. Figure 17 shows a master bedroom with a bed aligning toward the East which seemingly to be the most preferable alignment among the Thais. The householder of this house believes that it is inappropriate to incorporate any domestic remedies in the bedroom. In figure 18, the bedroom is a profoundly dense environment the ways in which the room becomes a cluster filled with domestic remedies and other worshipping elements.



**Figure 15:** Buddha images and an ash-urn on top of a closet (Karnchanaporn, 2001)



**Figure 16:** A single bedroom in of a townhouse in a private housing estate (Karnchanaporn, 2001)

From the examples of domestic remedies and related animistic elements in the contemporary Thai domestic architecture, we can submit to the statement that the contemporary Thai house is often excessively fortified. The house has become, once again, a significant source of certainty and protection in contemporary Thai society. These examples indicate that the belief of supernatural power has survived over the years of modernisation. However, the applications of domestic remedies are often carried out unofficially with personal intervention, and are modified to accommodate modern living. The simple traditional technology of homemaking has diminished. What can be seen nowadays is the diversity of reinvented practices which have possessed profoundly ambivalence. These religious and non-religious elements spill out into the domain of human. They infiltrate into each room of the house and seep into every bits of the human privacy.

One can never tell the story by looking from the 'outside' of the house. There are clearly some discrepancies between the reality as observed objectively from the outside and what is going on in the domestic life where the notion of 'protection' is more central than ever. For the older generations, i.e. grandparents and parents, these elements signify the notion of care in providing protection for the individual and the family as a whole. For the younger generations of Thai householders, these elements are ambivalent. While they endure the protection provided by these elements, these elements have become a constraint imposing on the way in which they dwell. They often question on the comfortable ways of dwelling in the house filled with 'supernatural gazes.'

With the quest to master fear becomes an obsessive and excessive act, the situation induces a complicate way of inhabiting the domestic sphere. But what has happened then that turns the homely house into a hostile place? It is self-evident that the excessiveness of domestic remedies inside the home has evoked in the Thai householders a sense of fear. Some of these elements have touched upon residues of the repressed indigenous belief of supernatural power. Participating in a society committing to

modernisation, yet, haunted by supernatural gaze in a very close and intimate dimension, the uncanniness is proximate among the younger generation of householders. Without noticing it, the domestic remedies and animistic elements have been too close and too intimate that it destroys the sense of homeliness. Sadly, the intention of domesticating the chaos has reversed itself into domestic discomfort.

### Conclusion

In a chaotic urban city, people are imbued with a nostalgia for an idealised past, an infatuation with mass imagery, a marked privatism and a spiritual turn (Ellin, 1997). The Thais have been struggling through out these years to survive in the high-risk society. In the contemporary Thai society where fear has become a dominant part of everyday experience, yet most people find themselves unable to express their fear in public, domestic architecture and interiors become the hidden dimensions where fear is being freely expressed. As an idealised past succeeded in providing protection, the house has been rehearsed once again as a defence against fear. It is a place where remedies against misfortunate and dangerous occurrences can be hidden under the façade of modernisation.

In this paper, I hope that I have shown through some examples of contemporary Thai houses that symbolic order has recently regained its importance in the Thai house. I have reiterated that the symbolic order and the belief of supernatural powers are significant to the formation of the Thai concept of home and enabling the home to satisfy the Thais with the sense of protection. However, how can such comprehension influence our participation in the outside sphere, hence the more public related realm? Perhaps one way to answer the question is to think of the Thai household as a place where the idea of 'safeguarding' is omnipresent. This idea of 'being protected' satisfies the Thais and hence enables them to contend and participate in the more public sphere. When the Thais finish their social tasks in the public realm, they can withdraw to their own protective private world. And even if there will be new kinds of domestic architecture later in life, this idea of the home as a protected domain will always be rehearsed.

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