Eurocentrism: Do Thai and Australian Housing Developers Have a Case to Answer?

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Abstract

In many cities throughout the world real estate developers are producing houses with architectural styles that speak of an imported heritage rather than one that might be named specifically local. Furthermore the local construction technologies, plans and forms that constitute a nation’s vernacular architectures have been supplemented or replaced by styles that reflect notions of European inspired modernity and practices of industrialisation. Developers argue that they are responding to market forces with products that offer new forms of living and status.

This paper seeks to grapple with this interaction between tradition and modernity, localism and Eurocentrism. In particular it looks at the implications of this phenomena by analysing advertisements for contemporary housing in both Thailand and Australia. Despite their significantly different histories Thailand and Australia have experienced a boom in housing development. Analysis suggests that common themes emerge, primarily the advertiser’s (and consumer’s) desire to tap into a European architectural heritage.

This paper argues that the trend to replicate European styles is problematic in countries with different cultural and environmental conditions. It leaves many residents stranded between the fragments of their own architectural heritage and a series of new aspirations promoted by housing developers and advertisers. This trend negates the value of the many previous generations of architects, both formally and informally trained, who developed housing to specifically accommodate local needs.

Key words: Developer housing, Advertising, Thailand, Australia, Housing estates
Introduction

How can we go about understanding the undercurrents of any Eurocentrism, and here I include European design sensibilities filtered through other dominant Western societies such as the United States, which are embedded within the housing culture of both Thailand and Australia? What are the myths propagated by housing developers and their counterparts in the advertising industry?

Dovey (1994, 1999) claims we can begin to understand how housing types are valued by analysing advertising material. By deciphering naming systems and images he claims we engage with the social values being promoted and can make links between housing types and status. This discourse analysis enables us to interpret the advertising and ‘articulate the experience with which the dweller is asked to identify' (Dovey 1994: 128). This technique has been appropriated by Dovey after Barthes’ seminal text ‘Mythologies’. Barthes reifies contemporary culture to describe the myths of its creation, a technique that allows us to unravel the advertiser’s message.

There are many forms of advertising employed by the housing industry; print media, websites, trade exhibitions and roadside billboards. Furthermore there are subtle extensions such as the promotion of middle class lifestyles during television soap operas. However the most common appear to be the brochures given to prospective customers who visit the estates and the advertisements placed in magazines and newspapers. It is the brochures and newspaper advertisements that we shall concentrate on in this paper, first considering two advertisements for upper/middle class family houses in Bangkok’s suburbs and a further two middle class houses in Melbourne.

I would like to conclude this paper with comments regarding some future challenges for architects working in these two countries. In the face of any Eurocentric design and marketing agendas we might question if there is any scope for an architecture that perhaps reflects the local or ‘glocal’ (a mix of global and local) attributes. Can architects have any meaningful role designing developer housing for the middle/upper class, or is this a segment of the market that considers any architectural input as unnecessary?

Is paradise an impossible dream?
Developer housing in Thailand

The top end of Thailand’s housing market shares many characteristics with elite housing estate projects in locations with a high differentiation between the wealthy and poor. In response to perceived threats, either real, imagined or contrived, developers have built ‘gated communities’ where housing estates are enclosed within defined and secure compounds. Here the poor and undesirable are excluded through physical, social and economic barriers. Whilst protection from crime is certainly a factor of these developments, Blakeley and Snyder suggest a complex range of motivations and argue that the elite favour these compounds because they offer a specific type of amenity and lifestyle, often centered on health resorts, golf clubs or other sporting activity. Furthermore these developments offer symbols connected with social stability and prestige, such as elaborate architectural forms (Blakeley and Snyder 1997: 92). Protection from crime is seen to be a lesser attraction when compared with the desire to protect a stable lifestyle and live in a community with a shared sense of prestige, image and status (Blakeley and Snyder 1998: 62).

The largest proportion of Thailand’s advertising budget is spent on the promotion of housing estates (Askew 2002: 170) where residents are promised social and economic exclusivity. However these estates are becoming increasingly affordable to the nation’s middle classes consumers as lifestyles become bound within globalisation’s mechanisms and values of consumption (Ockey 1999: 231). Young (1999: 68) links the conspicuous consumption associated with Asia’s elite with the creation of new identities, and suggests that this is demonstrated in both the shopping mall and housing estate. Here, he argues, the observer is offered the opportunity to study ‘middle class style’, where the advertising messages of the mass media are extended and complimented (Young 1999: 70).
Thailand’s daily newspapers, the Thai language Thai Rath and Daily News, and the English language Bangkok Post and Nation regularly carry advertisements for housing development companies. An advertisement placed in the Bangkok Post by the Golden Land Company reads, ‘And who said, “Paradise is only an impossible dream?”’ as it promotes the ‘Grand Oakwood’ for 10.6 million baht (US$320,000). The advertisement shows a double storey detached house in a forest beside a flowing stream and signs that suggest that there are wild deer, squirrels, monkeys and birds close by. Small text in the corner of the image explains that a real home has been superimposed onto scenery.

‘And who said “Paradise is only an impossible dream?”’ Advertising the Grand Oakwood

Figure 1: And who said, “Paradise is only an impossible dream?” Advertising the Grand Oakwood

The construction materials we see in the image are predominantly concrete, tile and glass. These materials are commonly associated with the industrialisation and standardisation promoted by European modernists designing at the beginning of the twentieth century. Architects such as Le Corbusier and his contemporaries argued that new technologies, and consequently new architectural forms, held the key to new housing development. The Grand Oakwood’s reinforced concrete structure, typical of the construction technology used in Thailand’s housing estates, has been closely modeled on the ‘Dom-ino’ system developed by Le Corbusier in 1914. However the architecture speak of styles that emerged before the European modernists, in particular the styles that emerged in the centuries before modernism. Dominant design features include the octagonal element at the corner of the façade and the symmetrical entry portico. Large windows, divided into smaller panes, articulate a classically proportioned façade. A European sensibility, guided by the palace buildings and prestigious manor houses constructed from the seventeenth century, becomes the dominant architectural motif.

The Grand Oakwood’s architect was not the first Thai to reference the architectural styles of Europe. The octagonal corner detail of the Grand Oakwood reminds us of the Prasumon Fort built by King Rama I on Bangkok’s Chao Phraya River in 1783. This fort replicates the forts of Europe and the Middle East. However later architects made subtle changes to the European styles to suit local conditions. The Vimanmek Royal Mansion at the Dusit Palace complex, constructed after King Rama V’s visit to Europe, is a European style palace built from wood and represents a period when Thai architects began to make hybrid architecture. In this case they replicated European form but substituted the imported construction technology for a local technology. The Rama dynasty’s engagement with Europe encouraged an eclectic architecture known as the ‘Royal Preferred Style’ (Apinan 1992: 5 & 12, Aasen 1998: 138).

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1 This development is unusual because it is located in central Bangkok in the established suburb of Ladprao.
Our second example of Thai advertising material was produced to promote the 'Krisda Marina' housing estate in the 1990's in the western suburbs of Bangkok. Fifteen house types are available at Krisda Marina. Houses located beside the canals have generally been named with nautical themes; hence the 'Marina', 'Galley', and 'Clipper'. Houses with garden views are named after European plants; 'Maple', 'Violet', 'Camellia', 'Primrose' and 'Iris'. Others include the 'Chalet', the 'Venezia', and the 'Riche'. No reference is made to any Thai construction traditions, or boats, flowers and cities from the region. There are no houses named 'Orchid', 'Longtail' or 'Khorat' there is little evidence to connect these houses with any specific Thai sensibilities.

![Figure 2: The 'Maple']

![Figure 3: The 'Clipper']

In the absence of any imagery that clearly connects to a traditional Thai housing culture, and the absence of any specific Thai naming systems, we might question if these really are Thai houses. Perhaps they represent a general mutation of a global house type? A closer look at the advertising message in the brochure suggests that local aspirations and traditions are at play, albeit disguised in a cloak of modernity. In the advertising images we see people shown relaxing by a waterfront, admiring a model boat, waterskiing and gathering for a picnic. Powerboats and yachts cruise the waters and sports cars sit in the driveways. Captions idealise the scene; 'quiet but never lonely', 'everyone loves flowing water', 'everyday is Friday', 'life never stops'. The underlying message is that Krisda Marina offers the social and environmental benefits of the traditional Thai village in addition to the luxuries of the new post industrial suburb. Harmonious social bonds and a spiritual connection with water, strong components of traditional Thai culture, are connected with status symbols such as luxury houses, landscaped gardens, leisure boats and sports cars.

![Figure 4: Advertising images from the Krisda Marina brochure]

The central image shows the development from above with nearly half of the houses completed and surrounded by ricefields. Boats cruise the river, yachts sail the canals and the expressway leading to Bangkok's commercial district is in the near distance. The land immediately surrounding the estate is lush and undeveloped, and there is no suggestion of congestion. The brochure incorporates a selection of tree varieties common in European parks. This linkage is enhancements to show people in European clothing sitting by the waterside, walking with children in the garden, tending their boat or playing football. Furthermore the cars shown in the commercials are not the common Toyotas, Mitsubishi or Nissans seen on Bangkok's streets. The images suggest that Krisda Marina's residents own the most prestigious European cars such as...
Volvos, BMWs, Mercedes and Saabs. Similarly, the types of powerboats shown are for leisure activities rather than commerce. Perhaps we are seeing an idealised version of the traditional Thai village.

Figure 5: Perspective of the Krisda Marina development in the western suburbs of Bangkok

These images depict the idealised modern village, accommodating the trappings of consumerism and status, but also recognising strong communal bonds. They suggest that the urban resident maintains a lifestyle that is spiritually connected with the lifestyles in rural Thai communities. This idealised village is shown to have access to water, strong communal bonds and high status housing. What has clearly changed is the way they are now cloaked with a European identity.

Remnants of European colonization: Developer housing in Australia

The detached house remains the popular choice for families throughout Australia and most of the population lives in suburbs surrounding city centers. In response to further demands the government has identified land at the city fringe for new housing. Government and developers alike have targeted Melbourne’s northern and western suburbs as suitable places and as house prices rise in these suburbs a high number of new estates are being constructed.

The case for a Eurocentric housing culture in Australia is perhaps stronger that it is in Thailand. Popular types are modeled on the Victorian and Georgian styles common in England during Australia’s European colonization from the late eighteenth century. The marketing strategy used by the Australian development companies is remarkably similar to the one used to sell housing in Thailand. Again the advertisers aim to connect their products to a European heritage.

Applying the same method used to uncover the myths promoted within Thai advertising we can equally consider Australian advertisements published in the property supplement to The Age newspaper. The following advertisement published by the Mirvac Corporation is for ‘The Heath’ housing estate adjacent to the Kingston Heath Golf Club.

Figure 6: The ‘Heath’ development by Mirvac

Just as the Thai developments discussed earlier in this paper attach themselves with European identities so do many Australian examples. The ‘Heath’ development by Mirvac makes this connection clear. Firstly the selection of the

2 Unlike the majority of new developments at the northern and western city fringe this estate is located on the site of a former hospital in an established southeastern suburb.
name makes reference to a plant variety common in northern Europe. This link is strengthened as this estate is located on St Andrews Drive, a name that references the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews in Great Britain. This golf club, the oldest in the world and the governing authority for the rules of the game, is famous for being built within heathland. Furthermore, the text proclaims that the kitchen appliances are European brands, recognising that these brands, rather than domestic brands, are the ones associated with higher degrees of status.

The advertising image of The Heath displays the front façade, and notwithstanding the contemporary additions such as the double garage, the materials and form of the house speak of the European architectural styles adopted by the early colonialists. The upper floor windows are regularly spaced on the façade, a gable is prominent and columns are grouped together to support this gable. The house is sited to maximise the grandeur and initial impact.

Australian housing development companies also produce brochures to capture their market. Metricon Homes, one of the largest home building companies in Australia, produces the ‘Designer Series’ of project homes which includes ‘The Sovereign’ as its most sought-after model. The name ‘Sovereign’ is both a reference to the head of state, especially the king or queen, as well as a gold coin used in England between the seventeenth and late nineteenth century. Furthermore, the landscaping shown in the drawings that promote the Sovereign range depict a range of European tree types not native to Australia.

The Sovereign has been designed so that alternate façades can be attached to the basic plan. This provides the consumer with a further degree of choice whilst keeping costs down by maintaining a standardised floor plan. Façade types include the ‘Manor’, ‘Colonial’, ‘Traditional’, ‘Victorian’ and ‘Georgian’, names that again clearly connect to a European heritage. Metricon, the Sovereign’s developer, is not alone in selecting this type of name as its competitors include the ‘Majestic’, ‘Embassy Regency’, ‘Canterbury’, ‘Palladium’ and ‘Carrington’. Even in an English speaking country such as Australia, these names are particularly associated with an English heritage and reference styles popular at the time of Australia’s settlement. These naming systems are closely connected with the English monarchy, or cities named after high profile families, government figures and architectural styles.

Figure 7: The brochure cover advertising ‘The Sovereign’

Figure 8.1: The interchangeable ‘Colonial’ and ‘Manor’ facades in the Sovereign range

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3 Other models attempt to link with the suburban housing culture of the United States with models including the ‘Nevada’, ‘Sierra’, ‘Sacramento’ and ‘Californian’.
Language and Image in Housing Advertisements

This discussion of house advertisements in Thailand and Australia demonstrates that both countries import naming systems to specifically connect their houses with a European heritage. In addition to using language to convey 'European-ness', the brochure's imagery uses European cars, trees, and planning principles. Could we then surmise that these houses are closely based on European style? Do these advertising texts and images attempt to align themselves more closely with an imported architecture than any local architectural styles?

This is a complex question that must take into account the many ways global cultural flows can direct architectural style. Firstly the style of these houses has now become ubiquitous for many segments of the middle and upper classes throughout the developed and developing world. As the global economy, media, and ideology work to entwine people together various mechanisms are created to promote particular house types as desirable harbingers of status. This has been reflected in the Thai elite's cultivation of imported architectural styles to maintain itself on the world stage. Furthermore, as new construction materials become available they are used in ways that often precludes the use of traditional architectural styles. The reinforced concrete frame has introduced the architecture of modernism to Thailand and created the opportunity for a new architecture to replace the old.

It would, however, be dangerous to claim that these new forms of housing advertised in Thailand and Australia blindly reflect a borrowed European style. Despite the Thai advertising agencies using naming systems to create the myth that the Grand Oakwood and Krisda Marina are European derivatives, we see that these developments have taken on many of the characteristics of the contemporary Asian elite house. Thailand's upper class house owes much to the architecture of its neighboring countries; Malaysia, Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka. The sheer size of these elite Asian houses, their formal facades, squared columns, balconies and dominant roof forms (especially in Thailand) are further, and regional, extensions of the bungalow type. This regionalist attitude circumvents the notion of a single type and creates the 'glocal', blending global and local architectural identities.

It should not be surprising that the Thais are adept at sourcing a variety of references for their architecture. Both King Rama IV and King Rama V used architecture to stave off the colonial powers threatening their sovereignty. By diplomatically controlling external influences they created their 'Royal Preferred Style' (Apinan 1992, Aasen 1998). In this process the European styles became deeply embedded with notions of prestige and status. These are powerful tools for Thailand's advertisers.

In Australia's case it was never considered the English monarchy's role to mediate between its preferred style and the indigenous housing culture. The English aristocracy had such a dismal view of the indigenous population of Australia they could never have recognised the indigenous housing culture as valid. This position was unfortunate in that the importation of European housing ideals did not take into account the Australian climate. The first houses built in Australia were copied from English pattern books and performed poorly in the different climate.

Australia's early colonial houses were modified by later generations of architects and builders to suit the Australian conditions. The most common trend was to add wide verandas to shade the house from the hot sun. From the 1960's the developer houses built in Australia were often designed by architects with an

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4 See King's book 'The Bungalow' (1995) for further discussion.
awareness of local conditions such as Graeme Gunn. Companies such as Merchant Builders strove to make a uniquely local architecture. However the contemporary developer houses, such as the Sovereign, ignore the need to shade windows and are built without sun protection in the same manner as the first colonial houses. By ignoring the local conditions and modifications made to address the local conditions the contemporary developers are placing image above content and fail to deliver sustainable housing models. The consequences of this ‘façadism’ are significant and go hand in hand with concerns over the cultural implications and the pragmatic concerns such as the diminished liveability. The environmental impact of this type of housing raises a range of problems that remain to be addressed.\(^5\)

It is inevitable that ‘glocal’ architecture will become a part of both nations architectural consciousness. However we might suggest that much of the contemporary middle class Australian developer housing is resisting regional characteristics for a closer alignment with European forms. A local architecture is being neglected in favour of a recreated European heritage that extends beyond the naming systems and imagery used by the advertising agencies. The rectangular and arched windows, symmetrical façade, centralised front entry with flanking columns, and small caves appear as a continued reference to the architectural styles used by the early European colonialists. Specifically Australian design systems, modified and developed over hundreds, if not thousands, of years to suit the local climate, have been neglected in favour of a return to early colonial sensibilities.

So what might the future hold if an unsophisticated mimicry of the Eurocentric style was replaced with an elevated role for architects that grapple with specifically local architectural character? There are many contemporary architects in both countries whose design philosophy incorporates both the local and the global in a sophisticated manner. But these architects are not working for the housing developers, nor the middle class market. These architects rely on a sophisticated, educated client (with money) who eschews the common depictions of status architecture in favour of one that replaces the local in an elevated light. This architect, and their enlightened client, hold the key to the development of a truly ‘glocal’ architecture that eschews Eurocentric façadism.

**Conclusion**

The texts and images accompanying the housing advertisements selected for this paper are unequivocal in their use of imported myths. Texts attempt to link locally available developer housing in Thailand and Australia with European styles and notions of status. The forms of language used to describe this housing has been selected to enhance this link, and particular words are used to act as cultural signs to connect these houses with European symbols. Similarly the advertising images reinforce cultural characteristics closer to those of Europe than the local. This form of advertising creates myths to connect local Thai and Australian housing types with European design.

However there is some evidence that the Thai designers are adept at sourcing inspiration from a variety of regional sources. These houses, despite the advertiser’s messages, extend Eurocentric design sensibilities with regional characteristics. This stands in contrast to the developer houses built in Australia. Here the local design sensibilities that have emerged in the previous centuries have recently been surpassed for a return to those sensibilities exported by the Europeans, particularly the English, at the time of Australia’s colonization.

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\(^5\) For further details of the implications of increased energy usage in Thailand’s housing industry see O’Brien’s article ‘Timber, earth or concrete?: Towards a new housing industry in Southeast Asia’ (2003).
References