In Search of Bangkok's Architectural Heritage

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Abstract

The study of our past is ultimately about our present. Thus, our discussion of these architectural traditions is closely tied to our understanding of their modern successors. Of course, the "modern" is a most loaded word, and historians should be aware of its various implications. This paper presents our way of interpreting why and what is modern Architecture in Asia? "Asia" means different things to different people, depending on their own history, geography, and cultural background. "modern Architecture" built during the "modern" period is the focus of study because it is this style that defines our "contemporary" cities and villages. While "modern architecture" is our focus, it's difficult to define "modern" strictly in terms of calendar years, since the style differs according to geography, by nation or region. In this paper, we intentionally do not capitalize the initial letter "m" to express the complexity and connotation surrounding the word "modern" in Asia. The concept of universal Modernism (with a capital "M") can not be easily applied to Asia.

Introduction

The architectural "modernization" of Asia is not equal to architectural "Westernization". It is certainly true that the modern architectural map of Asia we visualized is the result of large-scale colonial domination by European, American and Japanese powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many buildings built around Asia during these centuries were in fact designed –politically, economically and culturally – to support the construction of colonies. There are also unique difficulties that we in Asia face today in re-evaluating the architectural legacies of these centuries, because those in non-Western parts of the world, who should be critical of Eurocentric world views, are still very much living by them. It is thus difficult for these once-colonized nations to evaluate such buildings free of ideological understanding of their bitter past.

However, we should remember that the process of architectural modernization essentially consists of this ongoing appropriation of outside influence by local architectural (in terms of materials, technologies and aesthetics) traditions that had been firmly rooted in early modern development. In short, the world's modern architecture, especially the non-Western, did not develop in a vacuum.

For our purposes, "modern Architecture" refers somewhat loosely to all of those buildings that were built between the mid-19th century (pre-18th century in case of the Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch colonies), when Western architecture started its infiltration, and should be regarded as the beginning of "modern architecture" in Asia. This is because the contemporary architecture of our own time, to a large extent, also evolved under the influence of - and as a reaction to - that infiltration. This modern period ended around the 1960s, when a new stage of rapid economic development, thorough participation in the global market, began to change the face of many Asian countries.

Active research of modern architecture had already started in Japan in the 1950s, and this led to the compilation in the 1980s of a list containing more than 15,000 relevant buildings. National registration of some of the best examples followed, and today an established system of documentation, evaluation, conservation, and revitalization of modern architecture is firmly in place in Japan. However, in other countries around Asia, such a process has not taken place due to inhospitable feelings towards the architectural heritage from their colonial past, indifferent on the past of researchers, and a lack of government support. In China, for example, though the country's first official architectural history was complied in 1959, it failed to recognize the architecture of its treaty ports and foreign concessions as a part of the nation's cultural heritage that needed to be preserved. Later, the Cultural Revolution made the situation for preserving such buildings much more difficult. In South Korea and Taiwan, on the other hand, the necessity to study and preserve modern buildings has, since the 1980s, been understood, using Japan as a model.

After intra-regional cooperation was expanded, an inventory list covering modern architecture in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Macao, and Taiwan, was completed and published as "A Comprehensive Study of East Asian Architecture and Urban Planning: 1840-1945" (edited by Terunobu Fujimori and Wan Tan, Taisei Kensetsu, 1996, Tokyo). In the East Asian countries and regions, there still exist differences in terms of popularity and academic awareness of modern architecture. However, the situation has been improving in all these places, and a new generation of scholars is actively conducting basic research and documenting buildings that remain and are now endangered.

In Southeast Asia, Singapore started its efforts to document and evaluate its modern architecture in the 1970s. Overall, a shared common method of documentation and evaluation still does not exist in Southeast Asia. As a result, the whole picture of what constitutes Southeast Asian modern architectural heritage still remains largely unclear. A team of researchers from the University of Tokyo (led by Dr. Terunobu Fujimori and Dr. Shin Muramatsu) has been working with its local

counterparts in Hanoi (Vietnam), Bangkok (Thailand) and Medan (Indonesia) since the 1990s, as part of ongoing effort to expand the Southeast Asian inventory list to cover other parts of Asia thorough intra-regional collaboration. These efforts finally led to the creation of an organization, named mAAN (modern Asian Architecture Network) in 2000.

How to make a Comprehensive Inventory of Architectural Heritage?

Exhaustive research, for the comprehensive inventory of modern architecture in Bangkok, Thailand, was carried out by the University of Tokyo (led by Dr. Terunobu Fujimori and Dr. Shin Muramatsu) with Chulalongkorn University as its local counterpart. The first phase of this survey commenced on the 22nd of November and ended on 3rd of December 1999.

Exhaustive research means that literally walk every street was visited to find out what kind of architecture and significant engineering and infrastructure could be found there. In the first step we assimilated existing information. The target of survey area, spreading to Rattanakosin, Thonburi, Bangrak, Ratchathewi, Phayathai, Patumwan and Dusit, was set up based on historical importance and separated into nine blocks in order to adjust to the number of working units in advance. Each team consisted of two researchers (most participants are Masters or Doctorate candidate students), one from Thailand and another from Japan. Teams were constructed in this way in order to facilitate the exchange of education and ideas. The most difficult obstacle for the students was not to force the use of an evaluation method but to collaborate and think together.

Researchers went to every street, side road or "soi" in Thai , canal and river exhaustively with detailed maps and our original survey sheets. This sheet was composed in three languages (Thai, English and Japanese), and included important items such as sampling architecture number, name, address, use, structure, material, size, completion year, architect, engineer, contractor, specially mentioned feature of buildings, recorders, survey date and photographs. We gathered as much information as we could through interviews and analyzing documents in order to fill in the blanks. However, it is important to remember that the survey sheet is only a representation of reality.

Each team observed and estimated all architecture (built heritage including civil engineering and landscape) in a given area, and then filled in the particulars of all buildings heritage evaluated by our criteria. All participants reviewed our works on a daily basis. Through these daily discussions, and accumulated experience, our basic criteria improved day by day to adapt to each spot case. In this sense, the methodology of the comprehensive inventory is acquired physically, it is not an art that can learnt from books.

Upon completion of the survey, we reviewed the data sheets once to complete a short list of best works, and then reviewed them again and again until our final selection was completed. Although we used the rigorous evaluation criteria (in next chapter), we basically relied on intuitive knowledge that we acquired from past experiences as a one of method of judging. We also sort the buildings by these categories and listed them accordingly to best examples. These processes happened simultaneously in our minds. As a result of twelve days of exhausted exhaustive surveying, more than 1,200 objects are documented. Finally 200 modern urban cultural heritage buildings were selected from this comprehensive inventory. The compilation of this inventory was only the starting point of further actions.

This work is only an initial step to recognizing Bangkok's identity not only for local people but also for the other Asians. By documenting and compiling a list of modern architectural heritage, we can share the history and recognize new thinking. This plants the seeds of a New Asia. It means that informing and educating the public through publishing the results and process of this comprehensive survey for the next generation will improve Bangkok's environment in future. One reason why we conduct such research is because it is important for the people

who live here, not just for those who come from outside to get a 'whole' picture of the city. This is similar to the desire to know our family history, as it is also natural to be curious about the history of ones domicile and actually our obligation to understand the greater picture.

Cities keep changing by importing new technologies, but if we cut out and erase our past and build a new city from scratch, then it is like erasing our history and creating a new one. We choose to incorporate it into our new life.

Trying to grasp a whole picture of Bangkok is not an end in itself, but rather a way to decide how to make a better future for Bangkok by involving what is available from the past. The last, most important thing is that all of us who participate in this research will develop a 'body' knowledge of the city by walking around and observing. This can be the basis for a love for the city or academic research. It can produce internalized memories and love for a city.

Architectural Evaluation Criteria for an Exhaustive Research

The evaluation criteria listed here have been derived from the past research experiences of ARAC and the University of Tokyo. They are applied when an exhaustive research project is conducted in a city in order to study its modern urban cultural (architecture, civil engineering, landscape) heritage.

Those who are experienced in our research method have always used these criteria unconsciously. We verbalize and articulate them as it allows us to refamiliarize ourselves with them. Otherwise, the 'internalized' knowledge can become diluted and obscured during the course of the research. On the other hand, for those without prior experience, these criteria should be first understood on the basis of artistic value. Later, it is important for a researcher to internalize the criteria and be able to apply them freely. One should then return to this list of criteria in order to reevaluate or reconfirm one's judgment.

Each building should first be evaluated according to the criteria under the category A. Only when it is deemed 'not valuable enough' under that category, should it be further considered vis-à-vis under category B, so that non-architectural points of view can also be addressed. The criteria are not meant to be assigned numerical values. Our evaluation should rather be 'holistic'.

Criteria for Evaluation of Heritage Buildings

A. Academic Evaluation based on Architectural Historical Criteria

1. Chronological value (What is the age of the building?)
2. Technological value (Is it built using innovative materials or techniques?)
3. Stylistic value (Does it belong to a recognizable architectural style?)
4. Significance of its architect/contractor (Is the architect/contractor a historically important figure?)
5. Rareness value (Is it a unique example of a particular building type?)
6. Regional value (Does it belong to a type that is unique to the region?)

B. Broader Cultural Criteria

1. Aesthetic Impression value (Is it impressive? Beautiful? Does it move you, surprise you, or amuse you?)
2. Historical value (Does the building reflect the economic and political conditions of its time and place? Is the building related to significant events of local /regional /national /world history?)
3. Preservation value (Has it been well preserved?)
4. Integration value (Is it appropriate to the surrounding cityscape? Is it meaningful as a group of buildings?)
5. Public value (Is it a local landmark? Is it popular?)
6. Stock value (Is it still functional and usable? Can it be used for any other purposes?)
7. Modernization value (Does this illustrate the modernization of people's domestic and civic lifestyle?)

Architectural Heritage of Bangkok, from 1855 to the early 1960s

In Thailand, the popular understanding of the term "modern" refers to the period starting around 1855 when the Bowring Trade Treaty was established between Thailand and Britain. Urban expression of social changes caused by the treaty and strongly swayed under world economies. The modern city began to be formed along Chaophraya River with small settlements of foreigners being established at the lower reaches of a river (fig.3). The scene along the river and so-called New Road, constructed in 1861, was quite similar to other British settlements, with Verandah Colonial style buildings prevalent. We regard this style as pseudo-Western architecture (architectural Creole). These kinds of buildings exemplified local builders' abilities to appropriate Western architecture as they came into contact with it,initially at colonial cities and treaty ports. However, such appropriation was often achieved by superficial copying of the visual elements, instead of a systematic adaptation of the construction methods, and spatial arrangements, since their builders were still firmly rooted in local architectural traditions. Such evidence of this can be seen when examining various wooden houses built on pillars (raised-floor type houses) in Bangkok, which have French style portrait windows that are quite different from old houses. Such examples emerged after the British influence brought about improved development in terms of economics and the manufacturing of teak wood. Local builders were able to adapt to foreign techniques with ease due to the fact that local mature construction methods were not prevalent.

However, urban elements began to be affected in Chakri Dynasty before this trade treaty was established. At the reign of the King Rama III, some buildings in the Grand Palace were absolutely designed in Chinese style. After the start of European influence countries, the first official contact with European architecture in Southeast Asian counties can be observed in Thailand. In the reign of King Rama V, mixed Thai and Western, especially neo-Gothic and Classical style, palaces appeared. For example, British architects, John Clunish and Henry Clunish Rose, were invited from Singapore in order to design Phra Thinang Chakri Maha Prasat in 1875 (fig.4). The throne hall here has a Neo-Renaissance style body with a Thai style roof. However, this did not mean that Thailand had accepted Western concepts entirely. This is because from outside the palace walls only the Thai style sublime roof can be seen, with the Western classical style hidden from view. This was possibly to maintain national prestige, with the public only being able to see a traditional style roof.

As mentioned previously, the treaty integrated the local market into the world economy so decisively that a local social system had to be built to respond to new international challenges. As with Japan, Thailand easily adopted to Westernization, furthermore there might not have been a choice. King Chulalongkorn took innovative steps to reform traditional institutions into the modern ones in order to catch up with contemporary modernized European countries. From 1892 until the Democratic Revolution in 1932, the Chakri Reformation, under the strong leadership of the King, helped to modernize and create a primary framework for present Thai society. This reformation was aimed principally at the rapid remodeling of the capital city in order to reconfirm the symbolic King's power. In order to do this, government authorities were reorganized into twelve ministries. Roads, railways and telecommunications were placed under the supervision of Prince Naris, and the Military Engineering group from the Royal Bodyguards was established towards making first Bangkok map in Thailand.

From the end of the nineteenth century, many foreign architects and engineers from Europe, especially Italy, Britain and Germany, were invited and hired in order to boost national prestige and to design authentically Western buildings. Most were designed in Neoclassical and Neo-Baroque styles to show that Thailand was willing to modernize and change. From the Ayutthaya period in the sixteenth century, there was a unique tendency to use foreign advisors indiscriminately rather than promoting local education. This "Emerging Nation State" type

architecture can be seen in many Asian countries, and is not limited to the palaces and mansions, but can also be seen in the various kinds of industrial heritage such as factories and railways. After the King's first visit to Europe in 1897, modernization was accelerated and he decided to create a splendid courtesy landscape along Ratchadamnoen Avenue, modeling on Paris, which extended from the Grand Palace to the newly located Dusit Palace, in the north. At the end of this road, Italian foreign advisors designed a basilica throne hall in Neo-classical and Renaissance style, called the Ananta Samakom Palace (fig. 5). This rises as a piece of grandiose from the King's urban project. In short, the King's vision for modern city was completed only in Bangkok.

Contrary to some beliefs, Chinese, not only Westerners, played a key role in Bangkok, by helping develop land for lots. Around the mid-nineteenth century, Bangkok began to expand beyond the city walls and achieve rapid growth due to increased economic development into the world economy. Along the New Road extending to Bangrak in the south (fig. 6), European trading companies and Chinese factories established various business activities. In the transformation of infrastructure from the canal to the road, shop houses appeared after King Chulalongkorn visited Singapore in 1868 (fig 7). Shop houses can be considered as "Hybrid Type" architecture in response to new local conditions. Reflecting the developing cosmopolitan nature of colonial culture, such architecture was no longer a curious copying of surface Western architectural elements, but one that already started to incorporate Western construction techniques. The landscape in Bangkok was quite similar to the Ginza brick town in Japan, designed by T. J. Waters in a same period. As a colonial engineer, he referred to the styles used in Singapore, Penang and so on, thus, when compared with the other colonial cities, shop houses in Bangkok and Tokyo might be more old-fashioned. Unfortunately it is still not certain who designed these shop houses in Bangkok, but it is clear that some colonial engineers like Waters did, because many foreign advisors were hired by the Public Works Department at that time.

While Bangkok integrated some Western elements into local designs, the utopia of Stanford Raffles town planning methods used in Singapore, the first modern city model in Southeast Asia, did not reach here. Bangkok transformed0sporadically, that is to say, it developed as the King's city, a religious city and a treaty port city, all in a unit. Geographically the development of linear infrastructure caused city expansion to intensify these characteristics.

Around the 1920s, nationalism in the architectural field grew as Thai architects learnt from the skills of their foreign advisers. This movement came to fruition at the Democratic Revolution in 1932. By the 1930s, Thailand had its own ranks of educated local architects after foreign advisers went back to their own countries. The architectural "modern" in Bangkok continued up to around the 1960s when selfish urban sprawl stood out without restructuring the city base, which was closed by the city walls from the start. Thailand's colonization experience has been vastly different to other Asian countries. Other Asian countries can not recognize their modern heritage due to bitter past memories. However, Thailand has a different problem, in that no experience of colonization causes an indifference towards modern architecture, and thus sometimes regarding it as only daily incurious rubbish. Though we in Asia have a different sense of modernity, most Asian countries face the same dilemma, losing heritage that reminds us of our memories.

When examining the modern architectural heritage of Thailand, it is important to unwind and examine its composition from all dimensions. For example, the place called 'Bangkok' has another Thai name, 'Krungthep'. In general, Bangkok is international but on the other hand Krungthep is domestic and cultural. Those two place names are very suggestive of the interactions between two opposite dimensions at the same time. The accumulated layers in all fields of historical development have brought about conflict in the radical urbanization by the King's top-down system. If we judge only from today's layer, we find superficial chaotic

situation. However, the historical layers of Krungthep will become clearer when we not only observe a superficial Bangkok, but also untie its mental structure.

Conclusion

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Conducting Survey

1. walk around as much as possible
2. observe every detail
3. discern pattern and variations
4. learn to judge the age of building
5. record all observations
6. shoot informative photographs
7. interview appropriate persons
8. note all sources of information
9. complete the survey sheet

The research team will survey Bangkok twice a year until the end of 2003. This continuous research phase has been delved step by step, top down from urban structure to individual, and finally focuses on function as well as human daily life in wooden houses, mansions and shop houses in Bangkok. We regard these kind of hybrid buildings as the outputs of modernization, or moreover as cultural appropriation, one of the Thai's most significant characteristics. How it effects the building environment is also investigated. Using this sequential process, we can recognize how Bangkok has been modernized until now. The coming next step is to publish the result of the first stage of this comprehensive inventory project towards the government and public to gain their understanding and supports. With this understanding, we should discuss about the urban heritage in order to make a conservation master plan and strategy for whole city for the long terms implementation. However, we also should remember that successful conservation are basically social (communal, political, economical) processes rather than physical or aesthetical projects.

In addition, ARAC (Association for Rehabilitation of Asian Cities) has been working in Indonesia from December 2002, making an inventory list of Medan with support from local universities and coordination by Sumatra Heritage Trust (BWS). The overall direction for them is provided by mAAN (modern Asian Architecture Network). Other projects in curru\ently discussed at mAAN include the compilation of digital inventories od Asia's.

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