https://doi.org/10.69598/najuahata.22.1.275195

Rethinking Identity in Contemporary High-rise Architecture in Bangkok

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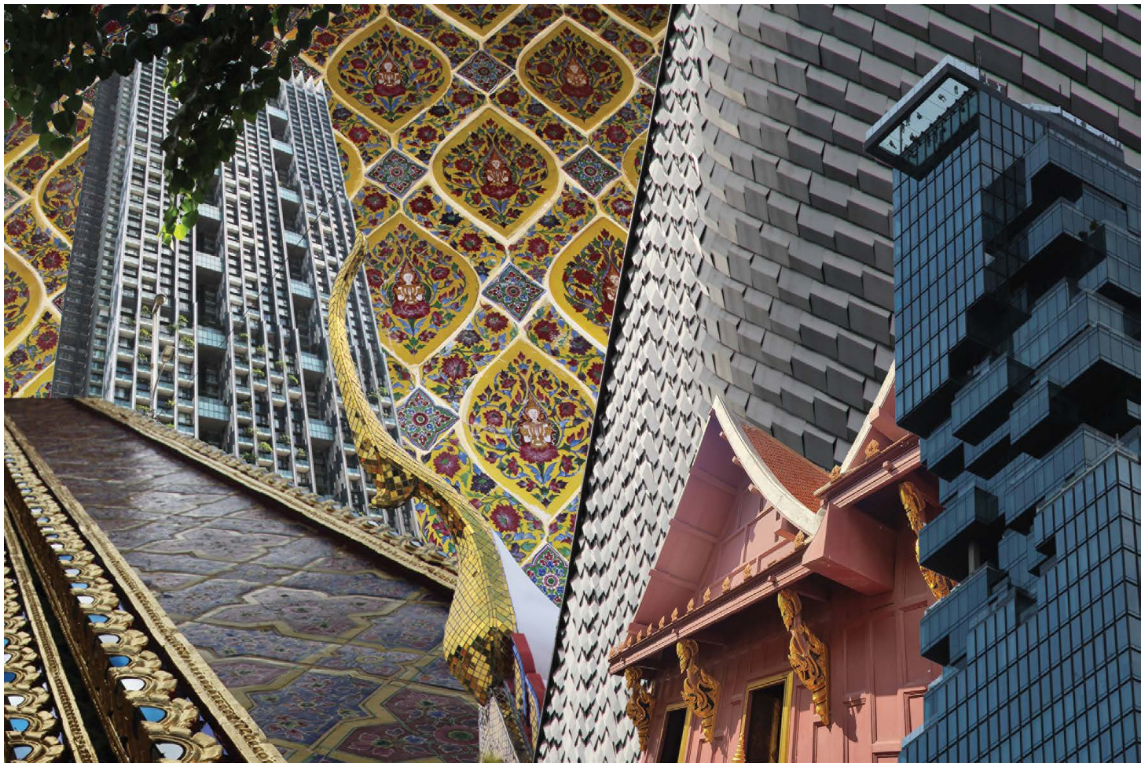
Received 06-10-2024
Revised 26-02-2025
Accepted 21-04-2025



Notable high-rise towers in Bangkok that reflect an aspect of Bangkok's identity.

Abstract

Homogenization is a prominent concern in the discourse on globalization's impact on architecture, particularly in high-rise buildings. This research explores how architectural identity can address perceptions of homogenization by analyzing the design concepts of three prominent skyscrapers in Bangkok, Thailand—a modern Asian metropolis with a rich history and cultural traditions. Drawing from existing theories and literature, the study examines how these buildings reflect local identity while engaging with global architectural trends.

The case studies—The MET (2005), Central Embassy (2017), and King Power Maha Nakhon (2019)—are evaluated for their ability to convey distinct architectural identities that resonate with the cultural and local context while avoiding overt nationalistic symbolism. The MET reflects tropical identity through design strategies rooted in vernacular architecture, emphasizing climatic responsiveness. Central Embassy reinterprets traditional Thai craftsmanship with modern materials and technology, offering an innovative yet subtle connection to local culture. Maha Nakhon Tower, the most iconic of the three, adopts a bold, pixelated form that engages with Bangkok's urban scale and morphology, though its local references remain speculative.

The findings suggest that high-rise architecture in Bangkok can incorporate global trends without succumbing entirely to homogenization, limitations notwithstanding. While The MET succeeds in establishing a clear relationship with its tropical context, Central Embassy takes a more experimental approach with uncertain outcomes. In contrast, Maha Nakhon Tower prioritizes urban contextuality but achieves limited success in resisting homogenization due to its ambiguous local references. Together, these cases highlight the possibilities and challenges of integrating cultural identity into high-rise design, emphasizing the need for nuanced approaches to counteract the homogenizing tendencies.

Keywords: homogenization, high-rise architecture, globalization, localization, identity, place

Introduction

High-rise architecture is primarily a result of commercial imperatives to optimize the use of valuable urban real estate. As these forces are closely tied to globalization and its economic impact, globalization is often blamed for the negative consequences of such architecture. The most common criticisms include:

1. The loss of distinct urban identities, as high-rises contribute to a homogenized cityscape.[1]
2. The visual and spatial dissonance between high-rises and historically significant structures, undermining urban cohesion.[2]
3. The encroachment on or destruction of heritage sites, diminishing cultural continuity.[3]

High-rises, by their sheer scale, often disrupt traditional urban landscapes, making them appear disconnected from their historical and cultural contexts. Rem Koolhaas famously encapsulates this phenomenon with the term “bigness” and his provocative declaration, “fuck context”.[4] This statement underscores the disjunction in scale, suggesting that high-rises operate under a different logic than traditional urban architecture. Although Koolhaas’s statement might be interpreted as a sign of contemporary architects’ apathy toward contextual integration, it can also be seen as a challenge: to rethink how high-rises engage with their surroundings in ways that are both meaningful and sophisticated. The challenge is not merely to avoid homogenization, but to resist the temptation of superficial historicist references that reduce identity to mere images and signs. Instead, meaningful contextual integration requires architects to critically interpret cultural and historical narratives.

The roots of architectural homogenization can be traced back to the 20th century, a period of rapid transformation in architecture worldwide. On one hand, the rise of globalized technologies and materials led to an increase in skyscraper construction, driven by the commercial needs of a globalized economy. On the other hand, following the decline of

Nationalism in the West after two World Wars, architects deliberately distanced themselves from nationalistic architectural expressions. Since the 18th century, nationalistic architecture had been used to consolidate power in emerging nation-states,[5] but after the wars, such symbolism was largely declined. It is within this context that the question of homogenization first emerged, prompting architects to explore alternative approaches to counter its effects. Among these attempts was the development of various forms of Regionalisms. Initially theorized by Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis,[6] Regionalism sought to integrate local cultural and environmental factors into modern architectural practices. Kenneth Frampton later expanded upon this concept with Critical Regionalism, which aimed to reconcile the Modern movement with local traditions.[7] Rather than merely replicating vernacular forms, Critical Regionalism strives to "represent and serve, in a critical sense, the limited constituencies in which they are grounded".[8]

Critical Regionalism is seen as a continuation of the Modern Movement rather than a call to return to traditional, vernacular, or historicist architecture. Rather than simply resolving the tensions between opposing forces such as "globalization and localism" or "modernity and tradition", It seeks to engage with and mediate these complexities.[9] In his essay *Ten points on Critical Regionalism: A Provisional Polemic*, Frampton elaborates on the dialogues within this approach, emphasizing several key aspects. He challenges the conventional understanding of region or locality, arguing that it extends beyond the framework of locality or climate. Space, in this context, is perceived as a continuity of place, rather than a discrete unit within a private and placeless domain. Critical Regionalism also calls for architecture to create profound spatial experiences rather than merely conveying superficial information about a location. It rejects the notion of buildings as freestanding aesthetic object or as static images or scenographic compositions. Instead, built forms should function as mediators between the artificial and the natural, reinforcing their relationship with the surrounding environment. Ultimately, this approach asserts that architecture should go beyond mere visual perception, engaging with deeper sensory and experiential dimensions.[10]

Summarizing Frampton's Critical Regionalism, Vincent B. Canizaro defined the concept through five key points, "a culture's unique identity, the manner of place-making, architectonic strategies, qualities of the environment in dialogue with local means of coping with that environment and possible tactile experiences that may enrich one's being there".[11] Given its mediatory role, Critical Regionalism provides a relevant framework for addressing regional concerns in high-rise architecture which must balance economic imperatives with identity. This theoretical foundation serves as the starting point for the literature review of this research.

Literature Review

Critical Regionalism is fundamentally a strategy to mediate the impact of universal civilization by incorporating elements influenced by local peculiarities.[12] Its potential to counter homogenization, specifically in high-rise design, warrants critical examination. Scholars have debated its applicability to high-rise architecture, noting its inherent limitations. Nima Zahiri et al. examine these limitations by focusing on three key aspects identified by Canizaro: Identity, Place and Architectonics. They argue that spatial perception within high-rise architecture differ fundamentally from traditional architecture, stating that "people tend to own a piece of the sky rather than land.[13] So, the conception of place on the surface of topography is moved toward the space".[14] This shift, they suggest, isolates high-rise occupants from the surrounding context, with limited potential for engagements with external features and local communities. Moreover, the verticality of skyscrapers reduces their compatibility with the predominantly horizontal elements of the urban landscape. To compensate, architects often integrate artificial (and often vertical) landscaping, to reconnect occupants with nature.[15] Yet, it remains crucial to explore how it reflects climates and support human activity, even at elevated heights.

In addition, high-rise buildings maintain connections to the city at ground level and on lower floors, while also possessing the potential to serve as urban landmarks. Chen Lin-Wei and Shih Chih-Ming's discussion on the "Public nature of high-rise buildings in Taiwan," provides insight into how high-rise architecture can transcend perception of homogenization. One key strategy is the thoughtful placement of public spaces within these buildings in relation to external urban spaces, fostering engagement with the surrounding community. This integration ensures its harmonious relationship with the broader cityscape.[16]

Zahiri et al. argued that skyscrapers have the potential to become national or regional icons, with an ability to "overthrow national culture and vernacular characters" while also serving as defining markers of a city if designed properly.[17] By considering in relation to Koolhaas' idea on "bigness" which frames high-rise buildings as dominating urban edifices largely indifferent to their surroundings, these perspectives suggest that skyscrapers inherently shape a city's identity—whether by reinforcing its existing character, redefining it, or even overshadowing it.

Moreover, Kheir Al-Kodmany and Mir M. Ali advocate for a more nuanced approach, emphasizing the importance of reinterpreting and integrating national and vernacular elements into high-rise architecture rather than simply discarding them. However, they caution against the pitfalls of historicist postmodernism, warning that uncritical regionalism can also lead to monotony.[18] They argue that assuming all high-rise designs in a region should derive inspiration from the same sources—such as the East Asian pagoda, seen in both Taipei 101 and the Jin Mao Tower—risks creating visual sameness across urban skylines. This critique highlights two distinct forms of homogenization: the overt effects of globalization and the subtler risks posed by repetitive regionalist design.

However, the assumption that similar references inevitably lead to monotony oversimplifies the issue. Traditional vernacular architecture, for instance, often repeats typological elements but fosters a shared cultural identity rather than uniformity. The challenge with high-rise architecture lies in its imposing scale and its dominant skyline presence, which can amplify repetitive abstractions if not carefully managed. To prevent regionalist homogenization, high-rise design should rigorously engage with vernacular or the traditional influences through a sophisticated approach. This means moving beyond superficial or formulaic references to embrace critical regionalism, fostering designs that are both contextually meaningful and diverse in expression.

Zahiri et al. highlight the issue that of locality and authenticity in high-rise architecture, arguing that its architectonics are fundamentally different.[19] High-rises are inherently products of global capitalistic demand, enabled by the developments in technology, engineering and material availability. This raises a critical question: To what extent can high-rises reflect local characteristics when they are shaped by global forces? Furthermore, if high-rise architecture relies on standardized materials and technologies driven by globalization, how can homogeneity be avoided?

Addressing these concerns, Zahiri suggests rethinking high-rise towers as living communities rather than mere extrusions of floor plates.[20] This can be achieved architecturally through variation in building mass, programming and façade design, addressing both the specific needs of users on each floor and fostering a more meaningful relationship with the external horizon. While this approach may help counter homogenization in high-rise architecture, its spatial qualities must still be shaped by appropriate technology, engineering and material availability.

Research Framework

The literature review highlights the significance of identity in architecture, particularly within the context of Critical Regionalism and its relevance to high-rise design. To establish a framework and methodology for this

research, it is essential to examine theories on identity from multiple perspectives. This exploration considers various dimensions of identity, including the identity of a single building as an individual architectural entity, the identity of a region, community, locality, extending to cultural aspects, and the identity of an area as defined by its geography and climate. Additionally, it examines the identity of a government or nation, recognizing the broader socio-political influences that shape architectural expression.

Tzonis argues that architectural identity is not solely a product of geographical and climatic determinants but is also shaped by the humane aspects of a community, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging.[21] This suggests that "identity" in architecture is dynamic, evolving through interactions with the people it serves. Preventing homogenization requires a thoughtful interplay of these different aspects of identity in varying combinations.

Architectural Identity

Architectural identity is shaped by various factors, including the building's forms, design principles, materiality, contextual relationships, spatial organization, temporality, and semantics.[22] In the case of large buildings, their sheer scale can establish a dominating presence, often creating an identity that may reinstate or overshadow the existing character of the local context. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the works of "starchitects" whose monumental designs frequently define a city's skyline, forging an identity of their own—sometimes independent of, or even at odds with, the surrounding architectural and cultural landscape.

In its simplest form, a building's architectural identity stems from its ability to either differentiate itself from or integrate itself with its surroundings. The same factors that define this identity can also be intentionally manipulated to create distinct facets of architectural expression. For example, when shaped by local climatic conditions, flora and fauna, a building may embody a tropical identity, such as a tropical one. If inspired by local vernacular forms and traditional architecture,

it may reflect cultural or local identity. Similarly, when aligned with governmental narrative, it can project a national identity. These variations denotes the conscious decisions presented to the architect and the need for an acute awareness of the nuances inherent in different forms of identities.

Tropical Identity and Place

Architectural identity can also reflect the climatic characteristics of its context, especially in tropical regions such as Bangkok. In Southeast Asia, architects like Ken Yeang have challenged the dominance of glass façades and mechanically conditioned skyscrapers,[23] advocating instead for designs that enhance building performance through climate-responsive strategies. Bruno Stagno argues that the unique climatic conditions and geographic context shape human activity and thought, directly influencing the architectural expression of the region.[24] This distinctive approach, often referred to as a tropical identity, not only responds to environmental factors but also helps reduce the homogenized appearance of architecture.

This dynamic between the environment, architecture and people can be understood through the concept of "place" a phenomenon that is neither strictly objective nor purely subjective. Rather, place emerges through a dynamic interaction, shaped by the lived experiences and processes through which human beings engage with their surroundings.[25] Place can be understood as a composition of three factors: the geographic ensemble, the people-in-place, and the *genius loci*—the spirit of the place.[26] A crucial aspect of place-making is the degree to which individuals, both mentally and physically, participate in and interact with their built environment.[27] By enabling a stronger connection to the climatic ensemble, architecture can foster these "dynamic interactions" reinforcing the essence of "place-making".

As an alternative to traditional place-making, high-rise architecture can explore vertical and artificial landscaping as a new paradigm for fostering a sense of place—one that also serve as a powerful medium for representing

tropical identity. While this approach offers unique opportunities for high-rise designs, it often struggles to establish strong connections between building's users and the surrounding environment, highlighting the ongoing challenge of creating meaningful places within vertical spaces.[28] This challenge, however, also presents an opportunity: by integrating tropical identity through innovative landscaping strategies, high-rise architecture can both enhance a sense of place and mitigate the homogenizing effects of globalization.

Local and Cultural identity

Beyond climatic considerations, architecture can serve as a deeply humane expression of identity, particularly when viewed collectively in relation to its cultural and regional context.[29] As Chris Abel mentions, "It is quite impossible to stand in front of any of these buildings and not feel that you are in a very particular place," emphasizing that cultural identity in architecture emerges from a unique response to place.[30] This inherent quality avoids homogeneity, yet a critical question arises: can high-rise architecture possess this same quality?

In addressing this, it is important to avoid rigid geographical definitions of identity. Frampton's theory of Critical Regionalism advocates for a more flexible, contextual approach rather than one confined by fixed boundaries.[31] Traditionally, vernacular architecture has demonstrated a strong cultural identity, developing organically without the intervention of the architects.[32] Abstracting and referencing the vernacular may be a powerful tool in representing cultural identity in contemporary architecture.[33] This can be achieved through the reinterpretation of elements, forms or ornamentations, or spatial and structural principles.[34] However, such references must be made with care, as superficial or naive applications risk degrading the value of the vernacular traditions.[35]

In the context of high-rise architecture, Daria D. Duzhik and Anna A. Kozhnova advises for further caution when reflecting cultural identity, especially in areas with significant cultural monuments. The challenge extends beyond issue of scale to encompass height, volume composition,

façade articulation, roofing, and even color.[36] This demonstrates the necessity for site-specific design solutions, which cannot be adequately addressed through universal theories alone. Instead, a nuanced understanding of the site's unique characteristics is essential. While this approach may contrast with Koolhaas's concept of "bigness", which embraces architectural autonomy from context, the reconciliation of these reconciliation may lie in the degree of contextual sensitivity required by the perceived cultural value of the context.

National Identity in Architecture

When the Petronas Towers were first conceived, then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad insisted that the design be "Malaysian." However, when pressed on what this entailed, his response was simply "I don't know." Given this blank statement, the architects took it upon themselves to define "Malaysian" in architectural terms, ultimately referring to Islamic geometry.[37] This choice, however, is questionable as it prioritizes Malaysia's official Islamic identity while ignoring the nation's multi-cultural and multi-religious composition.

The conflation of architecture and national identity dates back to the founding of the "modern nation state" in 18th century Europe, when vernacular architectural elements were incorporated into monumental structures to project a distinct national character.[38] In contemporary cases, this approach can serve as a tool of political chauvinism or be used to narrate a political ideology that strays from the lived identity of the local communities.[39] With its roots in some form of culturalism, nationalistic architecture is seldom homogenizing yet often functions as a top-down imposition of state authority. This can lead to tensions, particularly when such architectural expressions contradict organic, community-driven identity or implicitly promote exclusionary ideals.

Methodology

Given different forms of identity in architecture—whether individual, cultural, or national, this research examines the potential for architectural design, based on the architect's unique interpretation of the identity of the context. By questioning the homogenization of high-rise architecture, the study focuses on Bangkok, Thailand, as the location of case studies. The research aims to explore how identity can be expressed in high-rise architecture, providing a foundation for a more nuanced understanding that can assist designers in this explorative process.

To serve this purpose, the selected buildings must first be notable high-rise structures in Bangkok, possessing a unique architectural identity. Secondly, the buildings must contain a strong public aspect, as established in the literature review. Thirdly, the towers must be designed to avoid a certain cliché, naive attempts at transplanting vernacular forms or historicist post-modernism. Lastly, in each case, the architects must have explicitly referenced how aspects of the design depict cultural or historical identity. Based on these criteria, this study examines The MET, Central Embassy and King Power Maha Nakhon (Table 1). Coincidentally, all the buildings were designed by foreign architects. While this was not a deliberate selection criterion, it reflects the nature of contemporary architectural practice in globalized cities, where competition among architects transcends geographic limitation. As works of foreign designers, the identities represented in these buildings are shaped by external perspectives. Nevertheless, each case study represents a distinct approach to embedding a sense of place and identity within Bangkok 's evolving urban fabric.

The MET, in addition to using tropical greenery to make the impression of an upward extension of the surrounding landscape, incorporates abstracted elements from the local vernacular. Central Embassy reinterprets traditional aesthetics, crafting a design that appears inherently native. Meanwhile, King Power Maha Nakhon acknowledges the variation of scale of its urban context, employing a fragmented façade to reduce its visual dominance and create a more integrated presence within the cityscape.

Table 1

	THE MET	CENTRAL EMBASSY	KING POWER MAHA NAKHON
Principal Architects	WOHA	AL_A	Büro-OS
Year of completion	2005	2017	2019
Function	Residential	Retail & Hospitality	Retail, Hospitality & Residential
Location	Sathorn District	Pathum Wan District	Sathorn District
Remarks	Abstracts local features to develop the façade form and cladding. Highlighted tropical identity	Localized twist that refers to an aesthetic as opposed to particular features themselves.	Critical response to diversity of Urban scale and natural landscape

Table 1
Key facts about the case studies

Analysis, Discussion and Results

The MET by WOHA (Fig. 1)

The MET Residences, designed by WOHA in Bangkok's Sathorn district, are primarily admired for their innovative climatic responses. The design sought to develop a model for high-rise residential architecture catered to the tropical conditions. The design is composed of six towers, with staggered units, enhancing views, cross-ventilation and solar penetration. Sky gardens positioned between the towers serve as communal outdoor recreational spaces for inhabitants,[40] reinforcing the integration of greenery within the high-rise form. However, the actual effectiveness of these climatic strategies warrants further investigation, which falls beyond the scope of this research.

Fig. 1

The MET Residences blend easily into its tropical context.

Fig 1

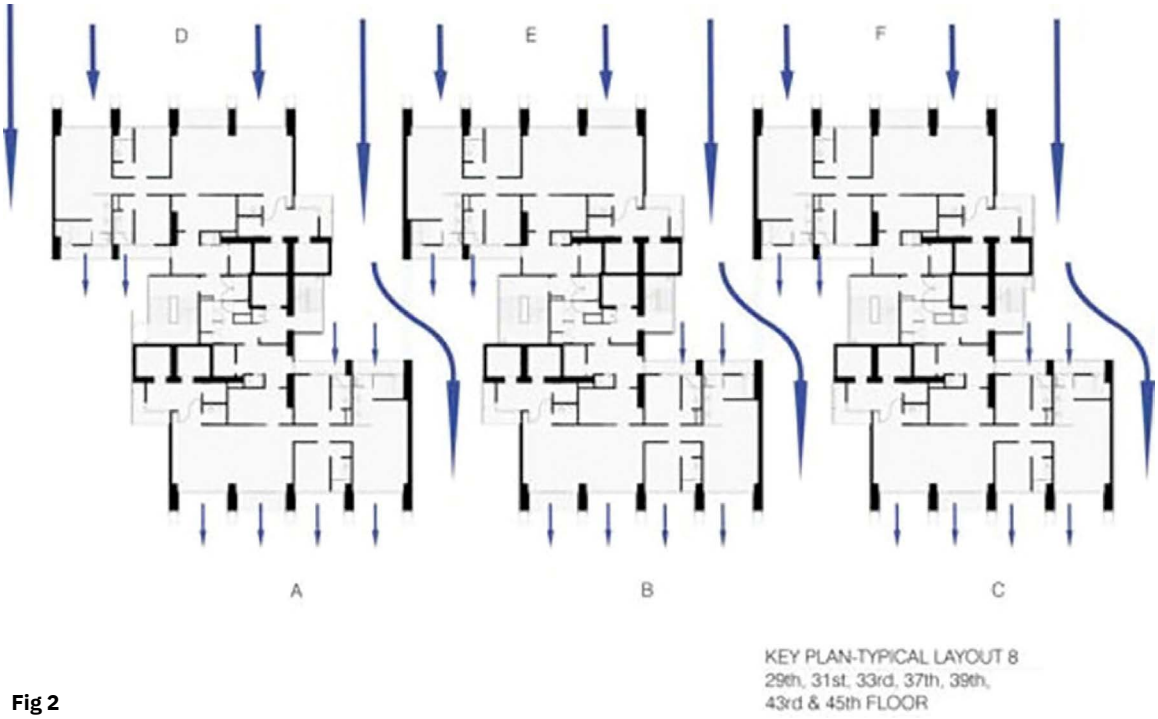


Fig 2

This representation of tropical identity and place-making highlights the experience of tropical living, constantly reminding users' connections to their surrounding environment. It also reflects local identity by virtue of incorporating the climatic design principles found in "traditional Thai houses," which are admired for their cross-ventilated interior and optimized outdoor living spaces. In such houses, the *chan* (raised platform) and *rabiang* (linear veranda) serve as primary social spaces,[41] a spatial quality mirrored in the MET's design. The building's double-height terraces at the MET evoke the *chan*, while its linear balconies, connecting indoor and outdoor space resemble the *rabiang*. The placement of planted balconies and terraces also allows for a vertical continuation of the ground-level landscape, reducing the perception of homogeneity by ensuing the architecture seemed well nestled within its surroundings. (Fig. 2)

Fig. 2
The simplified plan of 29th floor of the MET showing the potential for cross ventilation.

Beyond this tropical identity, WOHA explicitly references vernacular Thai elements as a basis for abstraction, further strengthening local identity.

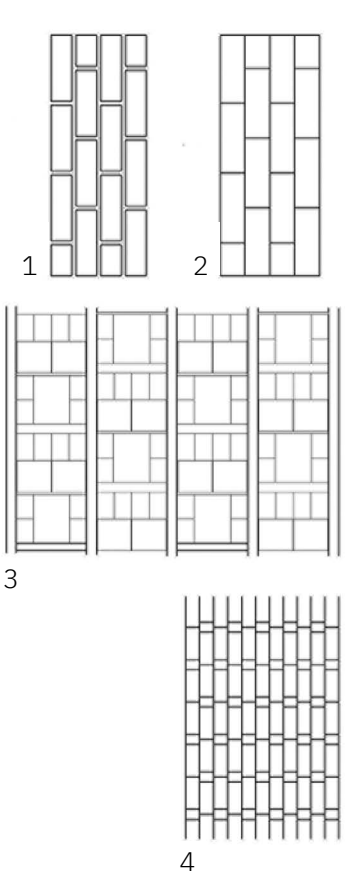
> *"Thai elements—ceramic tiles, textiles and timber paneling–are abstracted to organize forms. The cladding reinterprets Thai temple tiles, the staggered balconies recalls traditional timber paneling. The walls incorporate random mirrored stainless steel panels, a contemporary interpretation of the sparkling mirrors of Thai temples".*[42]

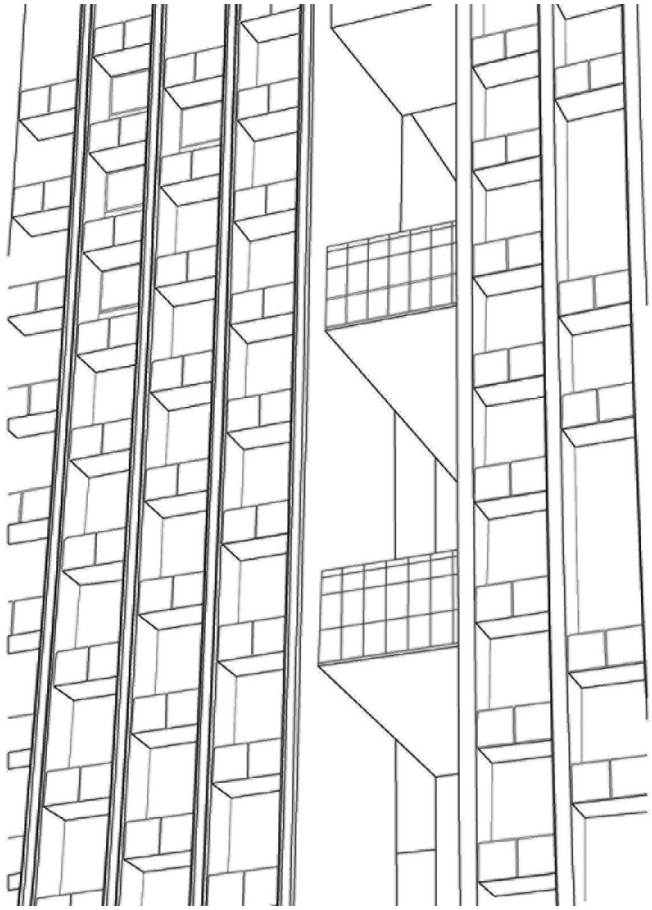
For example, Bangkok's Grand Palace and Wat Ratchabophit feature extensive exterior ceramic tilework with intricate traditional patterns. At the MET, this tradition is abstracted into colorful cladding panels on the side façades, interspersed with mirrored stainless steel panels, referencing the "sparkling mirrors of Thai temples." This abstract minimizes overt religious affiliation, making the design more suitable for its residential function. Yet, as these elements primarily serve a decorative purpose, their legibility as representations of cultural identity remains open to further inquiry.

More prominently, WOHA cites the timber paneling of Thai vernacular houses as a key inspiration for the MET's façade. These prefabricated timber panels, commonly termed *fa*, have a regional variation in central Thailand called *fa pakon*, characterized by a horizontally offset grid of tall rectangular panels.[43] This architectural feature is widespread across Bangkok, with a notable example located just 150 meters from the MET: the residence of former Prime Minister M. R. Kukrit Pramoj, now a conserved heritage house museum.

Fig 3 compares the traditional *fa pakon* timber panel pattern with the MET's frontal façade. As the façade design draws from vernacular houses historically associated with the upper class, it represents a clear instance of cultural identity, aligning with the MET's role as an elite residential tower. The façade's details subtly signal exclusivity, differentiating the case from projects like the Taipei 101, where the symbolism is more overt.[44]

Whether the MET's design successfully counteracts homogenization remains debatable. While it avoids the typical glass box extrusion criticized by Zahiri et al.,[45] its strong vertical presence—reinforced by uninterrupted





Progression from the Arrangement of timber panels (1) in the *fa pakon* pattern to a simplified pattern (2) and then the façade design (3 & 4)

Staggering of the balconies in a pattern reminiscent of the *fa pakon* pattern 3D view

Fig 3

façade lines—pose challenges in relating to Bangkok's more diverse urban scale. Additionally, its reliance on standardized materials and construction methods lacks significant architectonic maneuvering to resist homogenization. However, the integration of semi-public sky gardens fosters community engagement and reinforces a tropical identity, while the abstraction of traditional architectural elements subtly embeds cultural identity. Together, these features help differentiate *The MET* within an otherwise globalized architecture.

Fig. 3
The *fa pakon* pattern, its simplified version, a segment of the front elevation of the MET where the alternating balconies of the residential units are arranged in a similar pattern and the cladding of the lower part of the tower with a similar pattern.

Central Embassy by AL_A

AL_A describes Central Embassy as a project that embodies Bangkok's duality—blending advanced technology with local heritage to create a building that is both distinct and deeply rooted in its context:

> *"Central Embassy goes to the heart of what makes Bangkok such an extraordinary place. By embracing advanced technology as well as local heritage and culture, the building is local to its surroundings yet simultaneously redefine the location. A distinctive new presence on the skyline that is both fresh and exciting, Central Embassy nonetheless feels like it has always belonged here, already a valued part of the city".*[46]

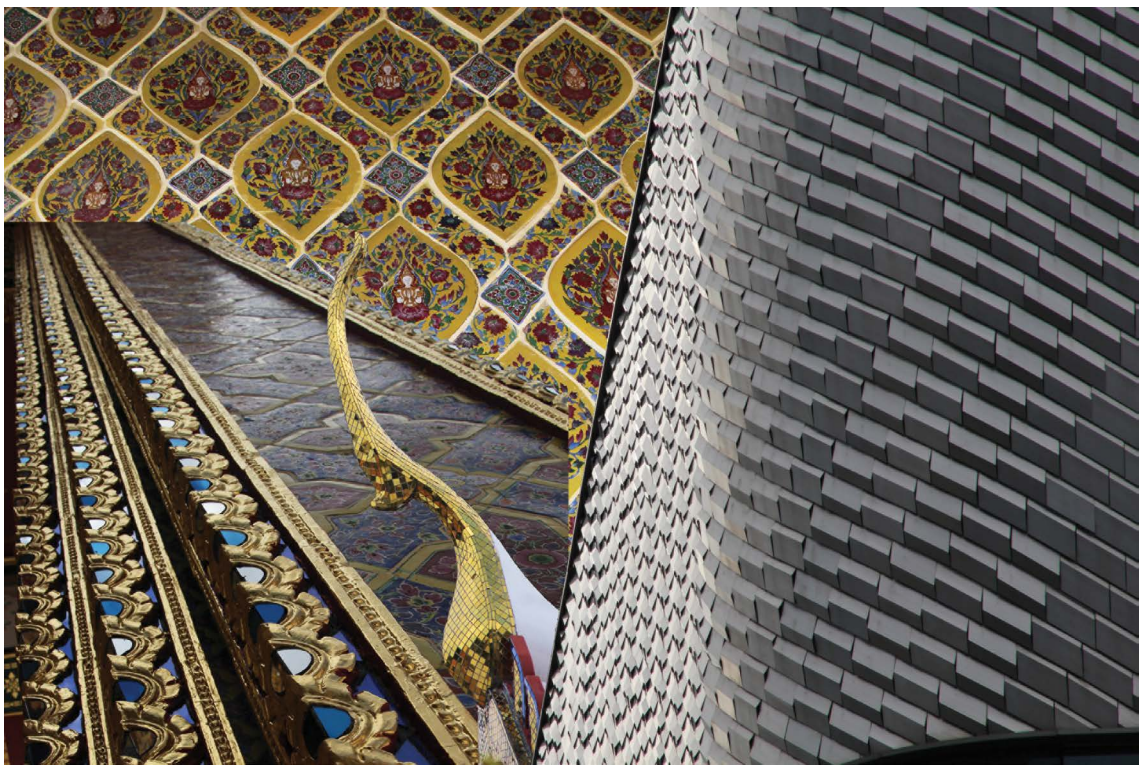
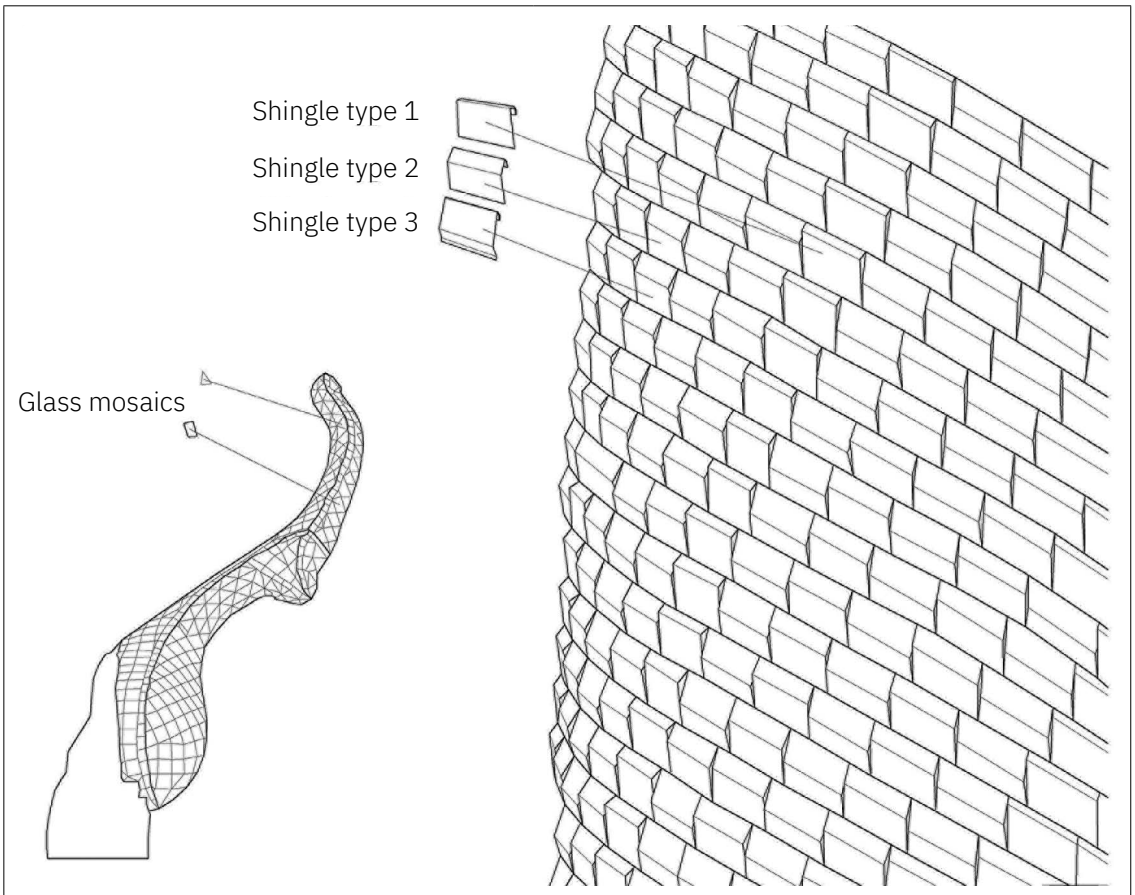


Fig 4

Fig. 4
The intricacy of 'Thai craftmanship' and the façade of the Central Embassy



The composition of the mosaic of sparkling mirrors in the curved surfaces of the *Chofa* finial of roofs in Thai temples.	The composition of the shingles that cover the warp shape of the Central Embassy tower. The shingles are of three types, and form an intricate pattern once fitted all together.

Fig 5

Fig. 5
The comparison of traditional intricate detailing with that of the Central Embassy

This statement highlights the architect's intent to balance locality with modernity. The design consists of two interconnected sections: a podium and a tower, tied together by a looping form that breaks down symmetrical composition, making it visually distinct within Bangkok's skyline. While its unique form helps avoid homogenization, what is more interesting is how the architecture attempts to engage with the city's cultural and heritage context. (Fig. 4)

Referencing the intricacy and dazzling splendor of traditional Thai craftsmanship, AL_A clads Central Embassy in aluminum shingles designed to create a moiré-like effect.[47] This approach strengthens the building's architectural identity particularly in terms of form and materiality.[48]

At first glance, Central Embassy may appear to contrast with the local architecture, appearing at odds with the architect's intention for it to harmonize with its context. However, this visual distinction is justified as a modern reinterpretation of traditional craftsmanship celebrated for its intricacy. The interplay of its irregular form and shimmering aluminum shingles not only evokes the richness of Thai architectural detailing but also helps mitigate the tower's monumentality, making the building less imposing, aligning it more closely with the varied scales of its surroundings.

In the design of the MET, elements from temples and vernacular houses of upper society are abstracted into the design of a contemporary (high-rise) residence of modern upper society. However, there are few, if at all, parallels for hospitality and retail architecture within the vocabulary of the local vernacular. This absence may compel architects to seek alternative design paradigms to localize new developments effectively, without inviting criticisms akin to those faced by Taipei 101. Instead, their approach aligns more closely with the second method identified by Salura et al., wherein a local concept (in this case a particular aesthetic) serves as the basis for developing new architectural forms and elements.

Though AL_A's design may draw inspiration from the intricacies of religious and royal architecture, the absence of traditional forms and details allows the Central Embassy to maintain a sense of secularity. Fig 5 compares the intricate composition of a *chofa*, an ornate roof element seen in Bangkok's temples and palaces, to the warped form of the Central Embassy. This approach plays with the architectonics of globalized technologies such as parametric modelling and pre-cast steel construction, while incorporating local labor to introduce a regional aesthetic nuance. The intention is for the building to emerge smoothly from its context. However, the experimental nature may weaken the strength of this conviction. While it clearly diverges from Modernist principles, whether it transcends them is a question best examined through the perspectives of those who inhabit or interact with the building and its surroundings.

King Power Maha Nakhon by Büro Ole Scheeren

Designed by Büro Ole Scheeren as Bangkok's tallest building, Maha Nakhon engages with the city's urban fabric in a way that acknowledges its diverse scales. The architect states the design as a dialogue—between large and small scale, symbolism and activity, the city and its inhabitants, inside and outside".[49] This diversity of urban scale is distinctly visible around the Maha Nakhon tower, where within 300-meter radius, one encounters active shophouses, heritage houses, cultural landmarks and other skyscrapers. (Fig. 6)

This thinking materialized in the tower's distinctive pixelated façade, making it easily distinguishable within the Bangkok skyline. While this pixelation establishes a strong architectural identity, it also aligns with Rem Koolhaas's perspective, which challenges the notion that larger-scale architecture must always be reconciled with its surroundings to avoid appearing overwhelming. Rather than reducing the tower's scale, the pixelation can appear as a tool to reduce its visual dominance, preventing it from feeling overly imposing or aggressive within its urban context. (Fig. 7)

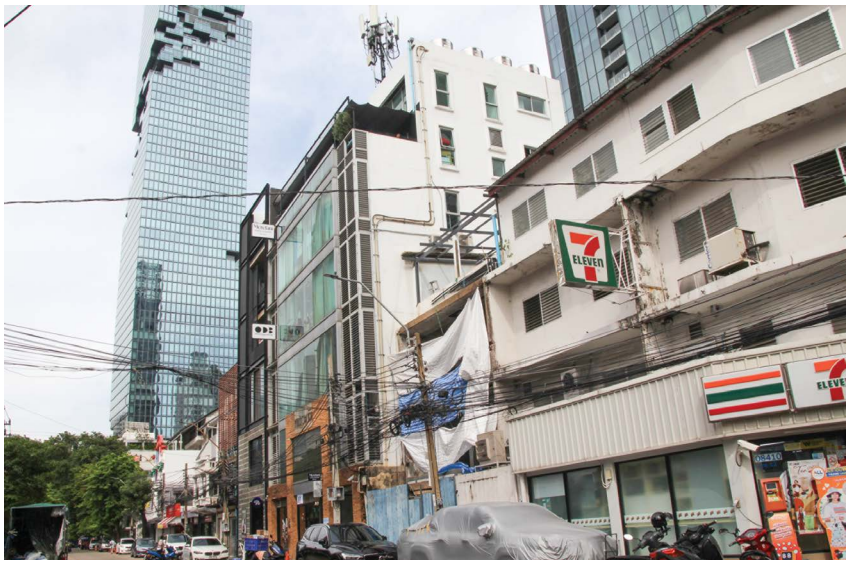


Fig. 6
The Maha Nakhon tower rises above a row of shophouses in its close vicinity.

Fig. 7
The design of the pixelated modules links the tower to the scale and the organization of the shophouses of the context.

Fig 6

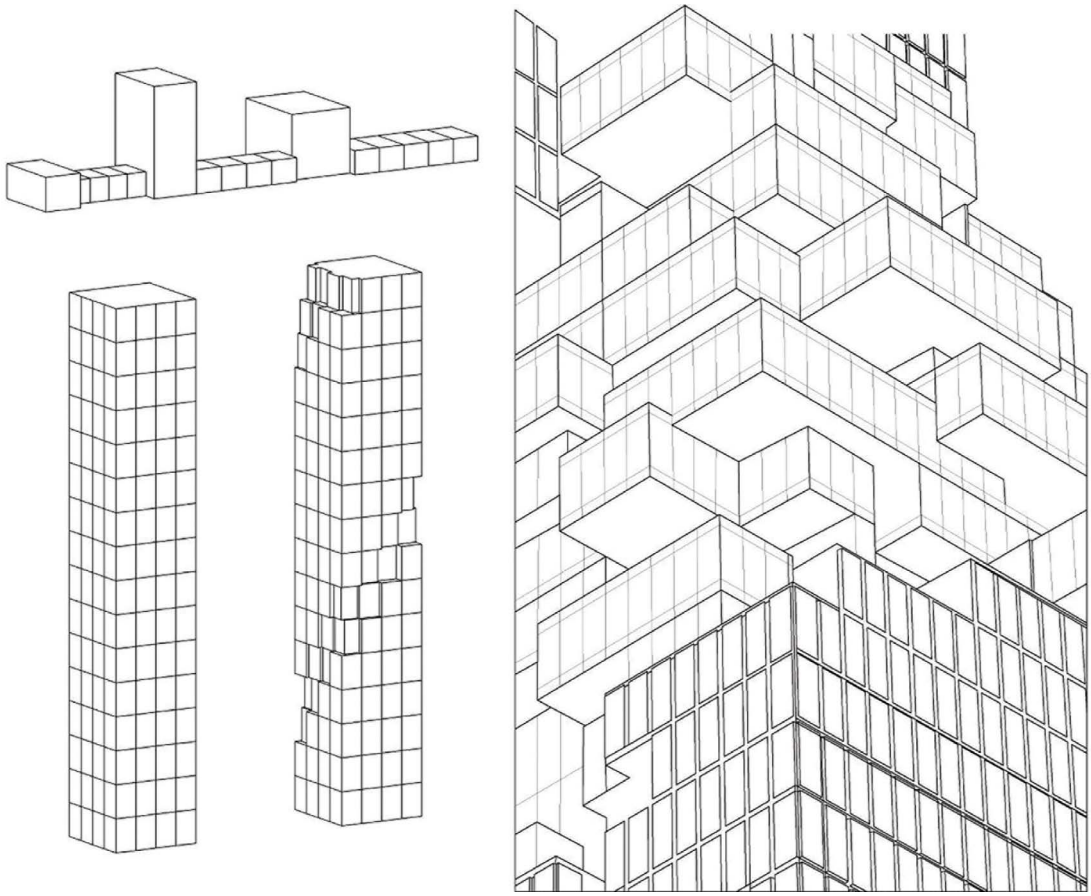


Fig 7

In Bangkok's architecturally diverse Sathorn district, where shophouses, Buddhist and Hindu temples, Christian Churches, Chinese cemeteries, and aristocracy residences coexist, the Maha Nakhon tower stands in stark contrast, seemingly indifferent to this cultural richness. While it acknowledges variations in urban scale, its glossy glass-and-steel rectilinear form contributes to concerns of architectural homogeneity. The absence of references to the area's cultural composition—whether through materiality, ornamentation or other design elements—is significant. Simply responding to variations in scale is insufficient to establish a local identity or counteract homogenization, particularly as this "layered urban fabric" is not unique to Bangkok. The shophouse model, for instance, was imported from colonial cities of the region, and can be found throughout Southeast Asia, where similar scale variations define many urban environments. This raises the question of whether Maha Nakhon's design, while not entirely homogenized on a global scale, reinforces architectural uniformity at the regional level.

In what may be an attempt to counteract its detachment from the surrounding context, Büro-OS explains that the façade's pixelation references the irregularity of the "ancient mountain topography," gradually eroding to reveal the activities within the building.[50] Given that the Chao Phraya River flows just over a kilometer from the Maha Nakhon tower, one could speculate this design element serves as a subtle architectural reference to the natural terrain the river once carved through before reaching the city. If this was intentional part of the design process, it could be seen as effort to evoke a deeper connection to Bangkok's identity—one shaped for centuries by the river, which continues to define the city's public transportation, recreation, entertainment, religious, cultural and logistical networks today.

Fig 8

From a distance, the Maha Nakhon tower appears as an extrusion of a floor plate covered in glossy glass. However, its most notable feature—the spiraling pixelation, breaks these stereotypical high-rise forms, creating unique floors with varied spatial compositions that echo a stacked community. This design provides greater flexibility and choice, which are typically unavailable in standard residential towers, while also contributing to Bangkok's dynamic skyline. (Fig. 8)

Fig. 8
The Maha Nakhon tower as seen from the Chao Phraya Sky Park at the Phra Pokklao Bridge. Life along the river is shown by the various types of boats visible.

While the resultant architectural character is evident, its tropical identity is more subtle. The spiral form creates unique outdoor spaces for selected residential units, though it allows only limited landscaping. However, this relationship with the outdoors appears incidental rather than a deliberate design strategy, as it does not fully account for varying vantage points or user experiences.

Fig 9

Fig. 9
The open plaza at the ground level of the Maha Nakhon tower with its spirit house, barely used during the high heat of the day.

The same spiraling detail is used to break the typical "podium and tower" archetype, extending outward to form a wider, irregular base that transitions into an open plaza facing the road. A free-standing, 7-story "cube" complements this expanded base, while also connecting the tower with the BTS Skytrain system. The architects envisioned this terraced, valley-like landscape, filled with restaurants and communal spaces as an "urban oasis that provides refuge from the intense daily clamor of greater Bangkok while being intimately connected to its public fabric".[51]

By breaking the tower's scale at the ground level, this approach makes the structure feel less imposing and more inviting. The creation of open, accessible space not only projects a tropical identity at the tower's base but also creates a unique architectural presence that distinguishes the tower from other high-rises at street level. The architecture capitalizes effectively on the duality of high-rise perception—both as a distant skyline landmark and as an experience at the human scale.

At the tower's base, two cultural installations contribute to the plaza's identity, helping to mitigate homogenization at the human scale. A traditional spirit house (commonly found in buildings across central Thailand) houses the Hindu God Brahma, while a nearby sculpture of the mythical elephant Erawan stands prominently near the plaza's main entrance along Naradhiwas Rajanagarindra Road. Although these monuments are highly visible upon entry, they remain free-standing elements, lacking meaningful integration into the architectural design of the tower. While their placement may follow cultural conventions, they play no active role in shaping the larger architectural narrative. Moreover, their exposure to Bangkok's hot and rainy tropical climate, with only limited shade provided by the tower and its neighboring structure, raises questions about their effectiveness as functional public installations. This could be seen as a missed opportunity to introduce a tropical identity at ground level while enhancing public engagement with the space. (Fig. 9)

Despite these criticisms, the Maha Nakhon tower has become a defining icon in Bangkok's skyline. Its distinctiveness is not solely due to its staggering scale but also to its striking, pixelated form—both simple and easily recognizable. Interestingly, its success as an urban icon suggests that height alone does not guarantee architectural impact; rather, it is the tower's unique visual identity that has cemented its role as a key reference point within the city.

Conclusions

The table below summarizes and categorizes the strategies used in the three case studies to counteract architectural homogenization. However, it does not assert that each attempt fully succeeds in achieving its goals, nor does it propose these strategies as templates for direct replication in other high-rise buildings. As emphasized throughout, the focus should remain on localization, ensuring that design approaches are thoughtfully adapted to their unique cultural and contextual settings. (Table 2)

Table 2

Case Study	Design feature	Theoretical Framework						Remarks
		Architectural Identity	Place-making	Tropical Identity	Local Identity	Cultural Identity	National Identity	
The MET	Vertical Landscaping	x	x	x				
	Courtyards		x	x				Serves a very practical function of giving residents a green space adjacent to their home
	Pattern on façade (front & back)	x				x		Highlighted vertical appearance
	Pattern on façade (side)	x				x		Secular aesthetic even though referenced from religious architecture
Central Embassy	Form	x						
	Cladding	x				x		Forms the cultural reference through aesthetics
Maha Nakhon	Pixelation	x	x	x	x*			Stems from a more critical observation of urban morphology
	Spiraling	x			x*			Breaks the linearity of the tower
	Terrain making	x			x*			
	Plaza					x*		The choice of a plaza may not be suitable for the tropical context.
The more questionable aspects as per the analysis is marked with an *								

Table 2
The summary of design elements in relation to the research framework

Notably all three case studies consciously avoid overt nationalistic expressions as a means of addressing homogenization. When examining their most distinctive architectural features—the continuous vertical green spaces of The MET, the fluid form and moiré effect of the Central Embassy, and the glossy spiraling pixelation of the Maha Nakhon Tower—it is evident that each possesses a distinct architectural identity at the urban scale. However, the extent to which these designs meaningfully represent their context remains open to interpretation.

Among the three, The MET Residences arguably achieves the most success in reflecting a tropical identity. This is due to the explicit integration of tropical concerns into the design concept as well as the architects' established reputation as pioneers of tropical architecture in the region. Nevertheless, this raises an important question: Does this focus on climate responsiveness stem from genuine contextual intent, or is it primarily a reflection of the architects' personal design ethos? Regardless, The MET demonstrates a deeper engagement with local climatic conditions than the other two towers, where such considerations are relatively minor.

The Central Embassy, by contrast, represents an experimental approach to blend global influences with local identity, intentionally avoiding both Modernist and historicist tendencies. However, the extent of its success remains debatable, as it largely depends on public reception and interpretation. Critiques may argue that the foreign architect lacked a nuanced understanding of local aesthetics and values. Yet, as Arata Isozaki's exploration of Japan-ness illustrates, an architect's nationality does not necessarily hinder meaningful contextual engagement—provided there is a deep, thoughtful understanding of local culture beyond the surface-level interpretations often taught in Western architectural discourse.[52]

Table 3

Category	Case Study			
	The MET	**Central Embassy**	**King Power Maha Nakhon**	**Remarks**
Form and space	A cluster of 6 box forms. Terraces connecting the box forms at some levels that are common spaces	Unique curved form that creates a strong architectural identity but not much cultural or local identity	Stereotypical box form. Some unique units and rooms due to pixelation of the façade.	Form itself can alone project a selected aspect of identity or can be a generic form to which aspects of identity can be layered upon.
Façade	Form of the façade inspired by *fa pakon* pattern	—	A pixelation with spiraling	Façade design can be elements of identity in an otherwise homogenized building
Form finishing	Cladding on the sides is inspired by ceramic tiles and mosaic mirrors in temples	Cladding of aluminum tiles referring to traditional craftsmanship	Glass covering the entire building	Convenient way to portray an aspect of identity, by materiality, patterns or details. The most visible aspect of a building being composed of globalized materials can add to homogenization.

Table 3
Comparison of design aspects of the three case studies

Table 3 (Continued)

Category	Case Study			
	The MET	**Central Embassy**	**King Power Maha Nakhon**	**Remarks**
Vertical	Many units at lower levels have planted balconies. Large, planted terraces on some floors	A terrace on the top level, not visible from a far	Some landscaping on the individual pixelated balconies, but not visible from a distance	Strong place-making tool. Can connect the building well to the context if notable from afar
Ground level	Large, landscaped area in the front, that blends the landscaping at upper levels well with the context	Smaller plots of planted areas with a smaller plaza in the front of the building	Open plaza that is occasionally used but not conducive to tropical weather	Can act as a connection between landscaping of upper floors with greenery beyond the sites' limit
Podium Design	Typical podium design with parking levels topped with a common area, but vertical and topped landscaping blends the tower easier into the context.	Typical podium but covered with the warped form	Podium breaks into smaller masses making the architecture less imposing at ground level.	Podium design can play a significant role in the perception of the tower by the community at the ground level.
Elements of	—	Spirit house placed at the side with no significance	Spirit house and Erawan Statue in the plaza, with little connection to the building	Placing elements of tradition may provide a more defined space with cultural identity but at a human scale.

Table 3
Comparison of design aspects of the three case studies

The Maha Nakhon Tower's design demonstrates sensitivity to its urban context by addressing scale relationships with its neighbors, yet it does not aim to harmonize visually with them. Instead, its spiraling pixelation and glossy glass façade define its architectural identity, making it a highly recognizable landmark. While the tower has become the most iconic of the three case studies, the source of this iconicity remains an open question: Is it purely a result of its design, or does is also stem from its relationship with its urban context? Furthermore, the tower highlights the dual role of high-rise architecture: as both a monumental urban icon and a structure experienced at a human scale. Attempt to mitigate the challenges of "bigness", such as cultural installations and pixelation adjustments at the lower levels, provide some level of contextual engagement, yet they fall short of fully realizing their potential.

In conclusion, the three case studies exhibit diverse approaches to incorporating identity in high-rise architecture, each addressing different facets of contextual and cultural integration. Table 3 compares their design strategies across key categories, including form and space, façade design, material finishing, vertical landscaping, ground-level landscaping, and the integration of traditional elements.

One immediate noticeable observation is that materiality does not play a key role in establishing cultural identity beyond an individual architectural expression, as all three towers rely on materials shaped by globalization. The same applies to technology, especially in the case of the Central Embassy. Given the advanced engineering for high-rise construction, the ability to manipulate these aspects to reinforce a distinct local identity inherently limited. This makes the question of whether and how these towers succeed in avoiding homogenization particularly compelling.

To bridge this cultural gap, the first two case studies explicitly reference elements of "Thai Architecture," incorporating features found across the local urban context. Both avoid associations with religious, racial, or political identities, ensuring that their designs remain free from overt chauvinism. However, the extent to which these references are legible to the public—the primary users and surrounding community—remains unresolved. Addressing this question would require public surveys beyond the scope of this research. Nevertheless, because these designs are rooted in local cultural elements, their replication outside the region lacks justification. While they may not fully escape critique, they contribute meaningfully to counteracting architectural homogenization.

Among the three, the MET Residences provides the clearest reflection of cultural identity, through its direct abstraction of vernacular architectural elements. In contrast, the Central Embassy employs subtler and open-ended cultural references, leaving its interpretation subject to individual perception. The Maha Nakhon Tower, on the other hand, focuses on urban morphology and scale rather than engaging with distinctly Bangkokian identity markers, while its material choices further amplify concerns of homogenization.

However, if one were to grant the Maha Nakhon Tower the benefit of the doubt regarding its speculative reference to "ancient mountain topography" as an allusion to the Chao Phraya River's terrain, the design could be seen as addressing homogenization by reflecting a key aspect of Bangkok's identity. Without concrete evidence supporting this interpretation, however, its position within this discourse remains ambiguous, leaving its stance on homogenization unresolved.

Acknowledgment

This article is part of a thesis entitled "Challenging the Myth of Homogenization: Identity in the Design Concepts of High-rise Architecture in Bangkok," for Master of Architecture in Architectural Design (International Program) at Department of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.

Notes

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