

Redefining Wang Na Rattanakosin: The History and Conservation of a Royal Thai Palace

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Abstract

This purpose of the research is to determine the proper physical characteristics of the area formerly referred to as *Bhawornsathanmongkon* or Wang Na. Located in Rattanakosin Island, Wang Na is occupied by historical buildings containing artistic and architectural material dating back to the beginning of the Rattanakosin era. Many of these ancient buildings were built more than 200 years ago. In 1926 King Rama VI gave all of the buildings in Wang Na to the authorities for the purpose of creating a museum for the city of Bangkok and to manage the housing and preservation of antiques from all over the country. The use of the original area of Wang Na has undergone many changes. Today the area of Wang Na houses academic and government offices including the National Museum, the National Theatre, the Bhanditpattanasin Institute, Thammasat University and the northern portion of the Phramen grounds.

The change of the Wang Na area from being a palace to being part of the academic section of Thammasat University was carried out without any meaningful conservation plan or proper plan to conserve the history of the area and as a result has been the cause of many problems. These problems have caused disadvantages to the buildings in the area of Rattanakosin in both direct and indirect ways. The government established the Rattanakosin Council to draw up and implement policies to conserve and develop the area. Unfortunately, these policies did not include any effort to conserve Wang Na's historical value.

Keyword: Conservation, Wang Na, Archeological site, Interpretation Planning

1. Introduction

In order to redefine Wang Na it is necessary to appreciate the many factors that have brought so much change to this important historical site. A principal factor has been the historic changes brought about by its governors and people but other important factors have had a negative impact. In recent years the population, trading, transportation, traffic, residency, public services and traveling in the immediate area of Wang Na have increased at an unprecedented speed. This has put enormous pressure on an area that was not designed to meet these demands and requires special protection in the case of its historic buildings. This increase has created many environmental problems for Wang Na and a revision of planning procedures seems both appropriate and timely. It is proposed, therefore, to conduct research in order to determine the best possible ways to preserve this remarkable area for future generations.

2. Literature Review



Figure 1: Picture of Wang Na. Resource: Google Earth accessed in 2007



Figure 2: Picture of Wang Na taken in 1946. Resource: National Archive, Bangkok

In 1965, ICOM invited the chairman of the Thai National Committee to join the 7th General Conference of ICOM which was being held in New York. The Thai National Committee did send delegates to the general conference.

In 1967, the Fine Arts Department requested exhibition cooperation and a display of antiques in the Museum of Bangkok at UNESCO. Dr. Grace Morley, the museum's expert, took a trip to Thailand in March 1967 to coordinate the activities.

On April 15th, 1967, Dr. Morley wrote a letter to Mr. Dhanij Yupho, Director-General of Fine Arts Department, outlining her impressions of the museum during the time of her visit. In her message she stated:

"Installation is a success, in all galleries the standard is very high, labeling is attractive with good text and at a high level of education, excellent maps which are decorative, use of photographs to illustrate settings or architectural complexes from which exhibited objects come."

Some explanation of the generally used term "cultural property" will help clarify some of the Department's defined responsibilities. An accepted definition is as follows, as stated in the final act of an

intergovernmental conference held in The Hague (1954) on the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict:

“Movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people, such as monuments of architecture, art, or history, whether religious or secular; archaeological sites; groups of buildings which, as a whole, are of historical or artistic interest; works of art; manuscripts, books and other projects of artistic, historical, or archaeological interest, as well as scientific collections and important collections of books or archives of reproductions of the property defined above.”

It is clear that the Fine Arts Department is responsible for a wide variety of materials and media. This is of special importance in the application of multidisciplinary conservation treatments, especially with regards to murals. For example, mural conditions are closely related to temple architecture and mural treatment may be incomplete without attention to the supporting structure.

The traditional western approach to conservation is given in the Venice Charter (1965) and the Burra Charter (1979: revised edition 1999). Both documents emphasize the need to maintain the authenticity of the original physical fabric and the need to add new materials in a way which is clearly distinguishable. In Asia the issue of historic authenticity differs as the local community frequently repairs many traditional buildings on a cyclical basis, whether they are religious or secular. The Asian approach as described in the Nara document places more emphasis on maintaining the condition of the site, utilizing traditional building skills and renewing earlier fabric with new and similar materials using traditional methods.

The standards of conservation practiced for Wang Na need to address issues of identification, documentation, retention issues and authentic preservation of Thai heritage. It is important to articulate clearly what is the significant character of Wang Na, whether it is the buildings or a precinct, and integrate this information with future strategies that ensure the historical importance of the site will not be diminished by inappropriate alteration.

The position of Wang Na existed from ancient times until the Rattanakosin period and it is thought that Somdej Maha Surasinghanaj was the first person to hold this position. The construction of Wang Na reflected his impact and importance. In addition to his ability in warfare, he supervised the creation of Wang Na in architectural terms; its distinctive forms and impressive artwork were to reflect his powerful image.

The author has divided the study into several distinct parts:

- A study of the importance of Wang Na.
- An examination of the role of its importance in Thai history.
- An overview of important works of architecture and art.
- A study of the general surroundings which affect this historic site.
- A study and classification of groups of historical Thai sites.
- A study and classification all surroundings which affect the Wang Na site.
- An overview of theories and ideas for the development in and conservation work of the management of historical sites, notably those of international significance, and applying those ideas of conservation to maintain sites in Thailand.

3. Research Methodology:

3.1 Sources of information:

- I. The field data source is the physical data of Wang Na. This data is gathered from a study at the actual site.
- II. Documentary data which gives details of the history, work of art and architecture of the following:
 - The National Museum, Bangkok
 - The National Archives
 - Silpakorn University, Sanamchandra Central Library
 - The Library of the Siam Society under the Royal Patronage
 - The Library of The Princess Maha Chakri Sirinthorn Anthropology Centre
 - The National Museum Academic Section

3.2 Objectives:

- To determine Wang Na's current changed physical condition and that of its surroundings which affect or undermine the future preservation of the historical site.
- Suggestions will be made for future interpretive planning of this site as a prototype for other projects in the future.
- Information collected from the study will enable proper conservation action to be taken to improve the severely degraded parts of this historic site.

3.3 Methodology:

- It is necessary to establish the original context of Wang Na and its inhabitants using historical, economic and social data and then to compare this to its current day appearance and state of preservation.
- Information has been collected from documentary sources and by doing a field study of the site. Other information has been derived from interviewing local people.
- Parameters for the study are defined in time and space. The time is limited to the period when the ancient buildings were built around 200 years ago. The spatial limits are those of the area once strictly known as Wang Na.
- The findings should be published in order to inform the public of the need to conserve this historical area, particularly in terms of its national artwork and cultural heritage.

4. Research Result

4.1 The Problems in the Past Conservation

a. The letter from Dr. Morley inspired the author to realize that in the 1960's when they were setting up exhibition rooms they were not concerned about the meaning of archeological sites including the antiques from the site of Wang Na. The dealers at that time never had a clear understanding of the authenticity of the Wang Na in historic precincts.

b. Monetary problems were an issue hindering the restoration of archeological sites.

c. Ignoring problems regarding the worth of Wang Na's archeological site: The Museum was open only in daytime while the National Theater was only open at night time. The problem was that the audiences could walk through the museum at night where there was no fence. The public came in and out of the area easily. The meaning of conservation was not understood nor was it concerned with its worth in terms of the preservation of Thai cultural history. They did not realize the need to take care of fragile items.

d. By misfortune many of the ancient buildings were torn down and replaced with new concrete buildings. As a result there is now a group of controversial new buildings among the ancient ones which has caused Wang Na to lose its ambience.

4.2 The Condition of Wang Na's Remaining Historical Buildings after an on-site Investigation



Figure 3: This picture shows the deterioration inside Wat Bavornsataan Suttawas.



Figure 4: The crack of the pole at the Phuthaisawan Chapel.
Photo taken in 2007

It is a clear fact that the area of Wang Na has been irrevocably changed. Each official department that makes use of the land has built a wall to separate their territory, changing the road line and the old pathways in the process. This chapter describes the outcome of three main ancient groups of buildings once part of Wang Na and now operated each by different government departments. The original primary old building of Wang Na was destroyed to make room for the site of the National Theater. The theater building was re-constructed around 1960.

After this survey into the present condition of the ancient buildings of Wang Na site it is possible to ascertain the main causes of deterioration and then to propose possible methods of preservation.

4.2.1 Analysis of deterioration of historic buildings

In Bangkok the average daily temperature ranges between 22° and 38°C. Humidity is high, throughout most of the year, and the rainfall fairly high during the summer months. It is widely understood fact that the influence of heat in the physical decay of building material is a significant factor because of the expansion and contraction of minerals. The decay due to heat is greatly increased by high humidity. Nearly 90 per cent of the total annual rainfall takes place during the six months of the monsoon while other months are comparatively dry. The continuous changes in the temperature and weather conditions have the effect of straining the outer layer of the building materials which start showing signs of cracks and exfoliation.

The main sources of moisture in the building are:

1. Water rising from the ground by capillary action
2. Condensation from the atmosphere

The main causes of damage to the monuments found in the buildings of Wang Na are the following:

1. Humidity
2. Contamination from polluted air
3. Neglect
4. Pests, fungi, bacteria, wood beetles, ants, rats and birds

4.3 Conclusions regarding the deterioration at the Wang Na site

1. Air pollution can be ruled out in most cases, thus leaving temperature and moisture as the principle causes of the deterioration.
2. Special attention should be given to the growth and damage caused by microorganisms and insects. Proper air circulation and ventilation combined with dehumidifying units are simple safeguards against the accumulation of condensation.
3. All of these actions are very simple and can be carried out by technicians, preferably those with training in field of the conservation of buildings and ancient objects. Such people should have a specific knowledge of the local climatic conditions and its effect on the various sections of the buildings under review.
4. As a maintenance plan, fungicides and insecticides should be applied to wooden building material regularly.
5. All metal parts should be coated with a protective insecticidal and fungicidal varnish.
6. Where feasible walls and roofs should be insulated.
7. It is important that objects should not be placed in direct contact with external walls or near to a source of heat.

5. Conclusions of the Research and Recommendations

The primary purpose of the *Guidelines for the Conservation of Wang Na* is to provide practical guidance toward achieving ongoing and sustainable conservation. This study is not intended to replace the role of conservation practitioners or provide detailed technical specifications appropriate to every situation. It does offer results-oriented guidance for decision making when planning intervention on or future reuse of an historic place.

A second purpose of the *Guidelines for the Conservation of Wang Na* is to develop a new set of guidelines. Future conservation projects should respect and conserve the value of Wang Na and the unique character of the various elements of the historic site.

5.1 Guidelines for retaining the authenticity of places in the historic precinct of Wang Na

Step 1: Assess cultural significance

- Gather evidence as to why the site is important, including a clear and concise understanding of the historical development of the area.
- Use early photographs to compare current appearance with past appearance.
- Analyze evidence, prepare a detailed inventory and decide what is significant.

Step 2: Consult with the consensus

- The group will consult and reach an agreement. This is an essential part of any conservation process and can be undertaken in a variety of ways. Without consultation the community may not develop any feeling of ownership of the process, making implementation of proposals problematic.
- Develop leadership strategies and focus on the involvement of holders of cultural knowledge within the community.

Step 3: Develop conservation policies, goals and implementation strategies

- Gather information and record the condition of the elements which contribute to the character of the study. Study available resources, the applicable legislative framework and the current and proposed regulations covering land use.
- Formulate consistent strategies which clearly outline buildings and elements which are to be retained and conserved.
- Draw up a management strategy and planning framework which can achieve conservation objectives.
- Spell out conservation and reuse guidelines
- Identify funding sources and incentive programs
- Explore and identify cultural tourism opportunities
- Identify interpretation guidelines and proposals

Step 4: Carry out the heritage conservation strategy

- Conserve and maintain precincts and individual buildings.
- Promote new development proposals which reinforce a unique sense of place.
- Retain and develop traditional and new economic bases.

These guidelines which deal with different resource types, including their separate components, should not be used in isolation but rather take in consideration the overall view of the whole historic site and its environs. There may be heritage value in the relationships between archaeological sites, landscapes, buildings and engineering works, and these values should not be compromised when undertaking a project focused on individual components of an historic place.

5.2 Conclusion

Over a number of years the significant historical value of the Wang Na site has not been fully recognized. Traditionally the Fine Art Department in Thailand has relied on historical representations of Thai history at the National Museum, Bangkok. This is what forms the basis of assessment for the places, people and events of interest in Thai national history. However, the conventional criteria, structure and framework for evaluation do not adequately respond to the values inherent in the history of Wang Na.

A key question to ask is that the Fine Art Department develop a commemorative approach to viceroy history in Thailand in ways that are meaningful to Thai people and at the same time upholding the rigor of its own evaluation process.

The author has explored various approaches to this challenge. One possible response is to take the whole "culture landscape" viewpoint. It is the author's specific aim to speak about and redefine Wang Na in order to widen the historic framework and values with which people are traditionally presented at the National Museum, Bangkok. By extensive research which has included studying the site (on site and in documentation), its people (past and present), its policies and cultural perspectives, the author is able to fully represent Wang Na by putting it precisely in historical context.

A key question to ask is whether it is possible for the concept of "cultural landscape" to be a particularly useful one for the national recognition of Wang Na's history.

Landscape can provide a conceptual bridge between people and heritage conservation theory. The concept of cultural landscape is a relatively new one in the heritage conservation movement, but it has actively emerged in the field of heritage conservation in Thailand. The approach offers a significant and broader way of looking at places focusing not only on monuments, but also on the relationship between human activities and the environment.

Significance is defined by the author as studying a group of buildings, structures and open spaces which share strong associations with individual events or themes of "national significance". An historic site should have a sense of history; intrusive elements should therefore be minimal and set apart from the arena that immediately surrounds the site. In both historical and cultural terms, Wang Na is a site strongly associated with the establishment and evolution of Thailand. Wang Na is also set (since 1780) within the well-preserved area referred to as "Rattanakosin Island", a long established place with a rich history and strong identity.

The palace of Wang Na, one of the oldest palaces in Thailand, was the viceroy's residence from the 18th century to the abolition of the position of viceroy. Designed by Maha Surasinghanaj, first viceroy of Rattanakosin, it is full of outstanding examples of decorative art and its architecture is a remarkable tribute to the Ayutthaya style. On the same site, the Phutthaisawan chapel is one of the most important religious buildings to have survived in Bangkok and one of the finest examples of late Ayudhya art and architecture.

The original structures were built in the early Rattanakosin Era. The Phra Buddha Sihing and the chapel's mural paintings are of the highest quality; their historical and artistic values are of the same order as the Buddha statue in the Grand Palace. The mural paintings include scenes from the life story of the Lord Buddha (from the version called Phatom Somphothikhatha), for example, the marriage scenes of Prince Sudhodana and Princess Sririmahamaya. The best known panel is the "Scene of engagement depicting the seated couple and the ceremonial cup, a respected and much worshiped icon of Thai Buddhist Art. These buildings, developed under the viceroy, represented a refined school of art and craft and set the key precedents for the Thai school of architecture.

Like many urban environments, Bangkok and the historic site of Wang Na have suffered many inappropriate alterations over time. This is an ongoing problem that must be addressed on a long-term scale and in terms of landscape conservation.

"Considering that in all periods human have sometimes subjected the beauty and character of landscapes and sites forming part of their natural environment to damage, which has impoverished the cultural, aesthetic and even vital heritage of whole regions and that, on account of their beauty and character, the safeguarding of landscape and sites...is necessary to the life of men for whom they represent a powerful physical, moral and spiritually regenerating influence, while at the same time contributing to the artistic and cultural life of people..."¹

This means the preservation and, when possible, the restoration of the natural aspect of rural and urban landscapes, which have outstanding cultural and aesthetic interest or "typical form" surroundings.

Preventive measures should be aimed at protecting sites from damage, which may threaten them. These measures should include, in particular, the supervision of works and activities likely to cause damage to the important buildings and sites, for example, the construction of all types of public and private buildings. These should be designed so as to meet certain aesthetic requirements in respect of the building itself and, while avoiding a simplistic imitation of certain traditional forms, should be in harmony with the general atmosphere. It is the author's opinion that these same principles must be applied to Wang Na, as with all the important ancient sites in Thailand, so that the beauty and character of the site can be safeguarded for future generations to enjoy and appreciate.

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¹ The general conference of the "United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization", meeting in Paris, from 9 November to 12 December 1962.

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