

THAILAND

Cooperation on Cultural Heritage Conservation

Since the beginning of 2006, newspapers, magazines and other media have published frequent news items on threats to our nation's cultural heritage. These have given perceptions on conditions of cultural heritage at risk to a certain extent. The media reported not only several cases of theft, illegal diggings and smuggling of ancient objects which are high in historical and aesthetic values; but also demolition and plans of demolition of many "at risk" buildings and communities. These demolitions are profit-driven and completely ignore the social and cultural dimensions of a place. These incidents, which are probably the fastest-paced catastrophe and most difficult to cure threats, have occurred frequently both in urban and rural areas.

One of such cases involves the shophouses (Charoenkrung 52, Bangkok) built circa 1926 to the designs of a French architect. The buildings are home to the Wang Li community which takes its name from the family who built the houses and later donated the land to the Wat Yannawa temple. The proposed development of the area as a shopping centre has been prominent in the news since the end of 2006. The community members, tenants of Wat Yannawa, were unaware of their houses' architectural and historical values and the rich history of their area prior to the incident. They pleaded with the Fine Arts Department to register their community as a National Monument in order to protect their community but the 81-year-old buildings fail to meet the Department's criteria (minimum age 100 years).

In 2004, the landowner, the Wat Yannawa temple, filed a law suit to evict the tenants. The court required that the tenants move from the land by 4th January, 2007 but found that the temple had to pay compensation. However, many tenants have refused compensation and have refused to move. Nevertheless, the law enables the temple to evict the tenants and demolish the shophouses. In this case, conservation and development appear to be resolutely at odds.

Nevertheless, not all "at risk" buildings and communities are facing a dead-end. The Mahakan Fortress and its community are an example of a successful resolution of the issues. The Mahakan fortress is part of the remains of Bangkok's fortifications built by King Rama I (reigned 1782 – 1809). The area beside the Mahakan Fort, between the old city wall and the canal, is occupied by a community living in a group of wooden houses described as "a rare complex of vernacular architecture". After a long period of struggle, a solution has been reached by collaboration from several parties, both public and private, including wholehearted cooperation among community members, that the community will be developed into a centre for learning and exchange of knowledge on historical and cultural issues, as well as being a leisure area and tourist attraction. Thus the community, whose members also act as property



House in Wang Li community

Half-demolished house in Wang Li community



Wang Li community (Charoenkrung 52)



caretakers, is ensured its stay on the land. This scheme also conforms to the Rattanakosin Island Development Plan by emphasizing on integration of historical, cultural, and living dimensions as the core of development.

Natural threats to cultural heritage are also critical. Last year's heavy rainfall and flooding damaged a great number of monuments, for instance, the collapse of the pagoda at Wat Phan On and Chang Phueak Gate in Chiang Mai; and the disintegration of bricks, the main construction material of Wiang Kum Kam ancient town which had been submerged under water for months. The overflow of northern rivers also caused flood in the Central region which affected both local dwellings and temples on the river banks. A number of monuments in several provinces, especially Phra Nakahon Si Ayutthaya, Ang Thong and Sing Buri were damaged. Monuments on the northern side of Ayutthaya City Island were greatly affected, as well as those on the river banks i.e. Wat Chai Wattanaram. The Fine Arts Department has initially estimated that the number of damaged monuments represents approximately 10 percent of the total number of monuments in Thailand (approximately 4,000 – 5,000). Natural threats such as the above-mentioned flood, however, are in large part due to human-induced environmental changes.

Amidst the crises which threaten valuable monuments, buildings, communities and relevant arts, organizations which are responsible for protection, conservation, and information distribution both directly and indirectly, i.e. the Fine Arts Department, public and private academic institutions, associations (e.g. Association of Siamese Architects), foundations (e.g. Lek – Praphai Wiriaphan Foundation), and published media etc. are doing their best to help preserve the nation's heritage in a sustainable way.

With awareness in the values of buildings and communities at risk which still exist in every part of the country, the Association of Siamese Architects, in cooperation with the Nippon Paint Co. Ltd., Stonehenge Co. Ltd, Discovery Museum Institute, and ICOMOS Thailand, has organized an "On-line Inventory of Heritage@Risk Projects"; a competition programme aimed to encourage students, professors, and architects to participate in searching, surveying, and collecting data on buildings, communities, and monuments which are valuable in historic, archaeological, social, cultural, and artistic terms. Several groups joined the competition and all the collected information will form the basis of a cultural heritage at risk inventory that will continue to be built on.

Although news-reports on the conditions of cultural heritage and its conservation are disseminated only by small and medium-sized organizations and are of interest to only a limited number of people at present, cooperation and wide distribution of information concerning cultural heritage to the society is certain to catch a wider circle of interested groups and people in the long run. Such information will also raise awareness and recognition of values in monuments, ancient objects, buildings and communities in historic, archaeological, social and cultural terms. Conservation would then



Wooden house, Mahakan Fortress community

cease to be an isolated issue that relies on only one organization; instead it would be a mission of cooperation and participation of several parties. Such participative planning has been demonstrated in a number of successful recent projects.

Case Studies reported by Cultural Heritage Conservation at Heart Network Group

Timber Bridge with Tiered Roofs, Wat Som Kliang, Nonthaburi

It is recorded that Wat Som Kliang was once a (probably) deserted temple called "Wat Sangkhadet". An evidence of its old age is a Vihara (shrine) which is contemporary with the bridge.

The historical site layout is that the original entry to the temple was from Khlong Khue Khwang canal. (Other parts of this canal are known as Khlong Bang Sano, Khlong Hua Khu and Khlong Wat Phai which connect Khlong Bang Yai at Wat Tha Banthoengtham to Khlong Mahasawat around the Wat Si Rueang Bun area). Such approach is in the opposite direction to the present one. The new approach has separated the community along the canals from the temple, which has turned to face the road rather than the waterway. Due to the impact of modern transportation the Bridge, the old entrance to the temple and linkage between the temple and the community, has gradually lost its use and meaning.

Wooden houses, Mahakan Fortress community





▲ Wooden structured bridge with tiered roofs, Wat Som Kliang, Nonthaburi ▼



▲ Ho Trai (Scriptures Hall), Wat Chang Khong, Chiang Mai ▼



The Bridge is testimony to the flourishing history of orchard communities, whose settlement is at least 450 years old, along the banks of the old Chao Phraya river which has now been channeled into the Khlong Bangkok Noi and Khlong Maenam Om Non.

In terms of cultural landscape and the Central region way of life, it indicates a connection between three mysterious words that lead to a realization of self: community, temple, and Khlong (waterway).

In terms of architecture, it shows a clear wooden structure, a good example of its type and an valuable source of instruction for architectural students as long as it survives intact.

In terms of connection and transition, it is a meeting place between

Land and land	Sky and water
Sunlight and waves	Religious establishment and daily living
Past and future	Present life and next life
Merit-making	Knowledge and virtue
intention and superb craftsmanship	
Truth and beauty	Poem and space

If we allow ourselves time to be quiet and listen...

Ho Trai (Scriptures Hall), Wat Chang Khong, Chiang Mai

This Ho Trai, or Buddhist Scriptures Hall, was built in 1903 as recorded in a document dating from 104 years ago. The hall is a 2-storeyed plastered brick building with Chinese style structure. Decoration consists of stucco and carved wood of local craftsmanship. The upper floor is decorated with mural paintings. The architecture is a mixture of Lanna and Burmese styles.

This building is a highly valuable cultural heritage due to its:

- Being a representative of the history of Chinese community in Chiang Mai that indicates the role of the Chinese in Buddhism. That is, a new group of influential people who came to replace the noblemen.
- Being valuable in terms of its architectural style. The building is the only example in Chiang Mai of a Scriptures Hall with Chinese structure in the Lanna-Burmese style.
- Containing evidence of mural paintings in gouache technique. The paintings depict a tale "Prince Suwat and Nang Buakham" from Pannas Jataka. It is important evidence of the development of Lanna mural paintings.

At present, the hall is under threat due to negligence. Moreover, a new building adjacent to the back of the hall has caused rainwater entry



Ho Trai (Scriptures Hall), Wat Chang Khong, Chiang Mai, detail

and moisture in the scriptures hall. Apart from this, the setting of the hall has been compromised by inappropriate landscape management. This may also lead to further problems for the building in the future.

Two Ancient Chinese Shophouses with 5 Units, Pattani

Although both buildings are only shophouses of commoners, they possess high historic value for their part in the administration and settlement of Chinese immigrants in Thailand. They also provide valuable evidence for comparative studies of the architecture of the Chinese diaspora.

Value of the Buildings

Architectural value

The buildings are among the earliest groups of Chinese architecture in Thailand, which are evidences of architectural evolution in terms of structure and the use of materials that had developed from Chinese style buildings of the earliest date.

Social value

The buildings are evidence of the Chinese immigrants who played highly significant roles in the structure and development of Thai society.

Historical value

Both Chinese style shophouses, built more than a century ago, as well as other Chinese-style buildings in the area, are evidence of the role of Pattani as a port city and trade centre where people of a diversity of nationalities, races and religions have come to live, work, and settle in past centuries.

Scientific value

The buildings are highly valuable in architectural studies, i.e. space planning, design of shape and form, materials, construction techniques, colouring and decoration, and especially useful for comparative studies of urban dwellings of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asian towns.

Present Conditions and Threats

These shophouses are still in use, but a point of worry is that No. 220, which is used as an electrical appliances repair shop on the ground floor, is rather untidy. That may lead to deterioration due to lack of maintenance. Besides, the building is not used as dwelling, thus it is not occupied full-time.

Another point of concern is the deterioration of decorative elements, especially those on the gable tops and the top parts of the walls where the stucco and paintings are suffering decay caused by weathering and aging.

Threats to the buildings have been caused by nature, animals, and the dwellers themselves; however, another external factor which seriously threatens the existence of these two shophouses and other old buildings in the area, including all the old Chinese communities in Pattani, is terrorism. Pattani separatists seeking independence as a new Islamic State have caused many non-Muslim dwellers to migrate to safer places. Many ancient Chinese shophouses are now deserted and are rapidly deteriorating due to lack of maintenance. Swiftlets have come to build their nests in those shut-down buildings, which is welcomed by the owners who can gain quite a satisfactory income from the collecting of edible bird's nests instead of leaving the buildings unused.

ICOMOS Thailand



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Two Chinese shop-houses with five units, Pattani
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