

## THAILAND – HERITAGE @ RISK!

The problem of risks threatening monuments in Thailand may be listed in 4 groups as follows:

1. Risks caused by natural disasters.
2. Deterioration by age and by lack of maintenance.
3. Risks caused by humans, which result from a lack of understanding of conservation and the values of heritage places.
4. Risks from other factors.

These problems are described further in the following examples.

Risks caused by natural disasters: although Thailand is situated in an area which is virtually free from serious natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, or critical storms, heavy and continuous rainfall, including some cyclones, for several months each year, affect monuments by floods. This is particularly a result of changes to the original agricultural area, a great water-retaining basin which enabled rapid water drainage during the monsoon season, into residential or factory areas, which block the water, making it stand for a long time. Rivers and canals have become the only means to drain water to the sea and are overloaded with an enormous amount of water. The river banks are therefore eroded by the force of the water and this also affects the cultural heritage places, which are mainly located beside rivers and canals, as they were the ancient means of transportation. The numerous canals that rendered the title "Venice of the East" to the city of Bangkok are now left to dry up or are filled for use as roads. The network of water drainage, a past ingenuity, is now neglected, thus incurring problems for heritage. The most obvious example of this situation are the monuments in Ayutthaya, a city surrounded by water in all directions.

Water, the most valuable resource for sustaining our lives and agriculture, causes at the same time, the problem of underground water and humidity, which is a major factor in the deterioration of heritage places, especially in Thailand with its hot and humid climate. Heritage places which were built with pregnable materials and techniques are most critically affected, for instance, monuments of the Dvaravati period that used brick as the main material, clay as the mortar, and lime as the plastering material. When the plaster fell off, it exposed a means for water penetration that melts the clay mortar and weakens the structure, that can eventually lead to collapse. Several monuments at the Khok Mai Dane site appear today as foundations only, were covered by a layer of debris that was once the brick and clay mortar of these monuments. When these sites were first excavated and exposed from this overburden of soil, they were in good condition but after some period of exposure, the sudden swings in humidity and attacks by rainwater caused a rapid deterioration of materials, so that the site is at risk of being totally lost. Apart from this case of a lack of good maintenance post-excavation, negligence of heritage places and a lack of ongoing maintenance can also cause a loss of heritage places. This may be caused by the preference to construct a new building to replace old ones rather than repairing existing buildings.

Human behaviour also threatens heritage: there are many examples of this issue, for instance, the latest case is the conflict between the government agency and people who live within archaeological and historic sites such as in Khao Khok, Saraburi

province. There, the government agency wanted the people to move out of the historic area that the community settled a 100 years ago. The people therefore refused to move or return the area to the public. Historic and archaeological sites, which are highly prone to loss tend not to be perceived as heritage in the general view, because they do not have the appearance of monuments. Nowadays, many cases of trespass or damage to the physical remains still occur all the time, both as a result of ignorance or intentionally.

In cases where heritage is tangible, such as religious monuments, which form the largest group of heritage places in Thailand, there are different kinds of risks depending on the owners or landlords. Such risks result from a lack of awareness of the values of the heritage in their ownership. Examples are:

- Wat Thung Sri Muang, iUbon Ratchathani province – where additional buildings in the area of the Scripture Hall, which is a monument of great artistic and architectural values, lessen the values of the overall atmosphere of the monument.
- Wat Arun Ratchavararam (Temple of Dawn), Bangkok – it is still not possible to control the number and tidiness of souvenir shops in the area due to the pressure of tourism, even after restoration of the monument and development of the landscape.
- Wat Phra That Lampangluang, Lampang province – has undergone a change to the original building from the northern architectural style to the style of Central Thailand. The materials have been changed according to the convenience and taste of the owner. The ground around the monuments which used to be covered by sand, to symbolize the ocean, was also changed to a tile-paved surface. Therefore, the local identity and beliefs as expressed in the architecture are now lost.
- The ruined mosque at Ban Krue Sae, Pattani province – where a religious group has come to use the place to perform religious ceremonies and wanted to reconstruct the monument to its completed state. However, many of the actions taken were damaging to the monument, due to a lack of understanding, such as the addition of marble paving on the floor, which blocked the evaporation of moisture from the built fabric. The need to add the lost elements to the heritage building could lead to the alteration of its original character, as well as threatening the stability of the existing structure.

Apart from the previously mentioned factors, another important risk factor is the shortage of expert and skilled personnel in conservation. There is no academic institution that provides a specific course on this subject and the government has no policy to increase the supply of personnel in this field. On the other hand, this staff shortage problem is contradictory to the budget increase under the terms of foreign monetary loans that aim to solve the current economic problems.

In today's society, there are more people interested in conservation so that the government agency in charge of conservation is being closely watched. When some misunderstandings occur or some mistakes are noticed, these watchers make serious public accusations, however, these are sometimes made without an understanding of correct conservation principles and rationale. Nevertheless, the accusers are mostly famous or well-known persons so that their voice causes confusion to the pub-



lie's idea and understanding of conservation that may eventually affect heritage. A recent case was the conflict in scientific opinion about the cleaning and the necessity to remove lichen at the Main Sanctuary, Phimai Monument, Nakhon Ratchasima province. Opposition to the cleaning was based on reasoning that lichens were not responsible for the deterioration of the monument but, instead that they protected the structure, whereas the personnel in charge confirmed the damaging effects that lichens were causing to the stone at Phimai. This was supported by many scientific studies, by both Thai and international scientists, that confirmed the requirement to clean and clear away the lichens.

### Case Study 1 – Wat Phra That Lampang Luang, Lampang province

At the building in the front, the glazed roof tiles with pointed ends and decorative elements of the Central Thai style have been applied to replace the unglazed tiles with straight-cut ends and the local decorations of the North. Cement and plastic emulsion paint replaces the ancient lime plaster, and the sand surface representing past local beliefs and traditions is now a tile-paved floor, which in the view of the Temple is more convenient to maintain.

### Case Study 2 – Krue Sae Mosque, Pattani province

The ruined monument, which has now had its use revived, includes unsightly additions and alterations that affect the conservation of the site. The project to complete the building, in order to invalidate an ancient spell as believed from an old legend, is compromised by a half-way measure, that is to allow this place to be restored and used to practice religious activities, in a way that will not affect its heritage conservation. The dome will not be added to the original structure, modern materials will be used to distinguish the new from the old parts, and the added parts which are damaging to the heritage building will be removed. As for its outer appearance, the heritage place will be seen as a ruin as it was originally. This advice has already been proposed and accepted and restoration based on this idea is to be implemented in the near future.

ICOMOS Thailand



Wat Phra That Lampang Luang, before renewal



Wat Phra That Lampang Luang, after renewal with wrong modern materials

Krue Sae Mosque

