

Conserving Vernacular Architecture through Action Planning

Lessons from Klong Bangluang Development, Thailand.

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Abstract

In Thailand, when the term 'vernacular architecture' is used, it is often confused with the term 'traditional Thai' and 'folk Thai'. Therefore, it leads to a static approach of analyzing and interpretation. Also the conservation approach of the 'vernacular architecture' in such meanings is many times insensitive to the dynamic changes of the people who designed and built those houses, for example, their desires to change those vernacular houses into the modern ones. First, this paper proposes that 'vernacular Thai' belonging to the "common" people and is often inauthentic. it has no outstanding character of a masterpiece or an artifact. Second, it is important to look at the communities of vernacular architecture as if they are the subject of the study. Therefore, action research was employed as a method. The paper is a reflection on the action planning workshops implemented in Klong Bangluang as a part of a selective module named Conservation of Vernacular Architecture and Community Development, MA & PhD in Vernacular Architecture Course, Silpakorn University, Thailand. The student's works included action community mapping, community guidebooks and community portraits. They were used as tools to raise awareness and a sense of community. Community empowerment is argued as a key element for conservation of vernacular architecture and community development.

Keywords: action planning, place-making, participatory community development, vernacular architecture.

Introduction

Jenks (1977) claimed that the modern architecture died at 3.32pm in St Louis, Missouri, on 15 July 1972 from the dynamiting of the notorious Pruitt Igoe housing scheme, the postmodern architecture realm, which had been explored, has been expanded. Bernard Rudofsky (1964) with "Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-pedigreed Architecture", Amos Rapoport (1969) with "House Form and Culture" and Paul Oliver (1969) with "Shelter and Society" pioneered the study of vernacular architecture, focusing on houses designed by non-architects in rural areas. Focusing on the urban area, there was the "Learning from Las Vegas" by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown (1972) who argued for architects to be more sensitive and receptive to the tastes and values of "common people". "Architecture" designed by non-architects have been studied and, arguably, 'romanticized' worldwide. In Thailand, when the term 'vernacular architecture' is used, many times it is confused with the term 'traditional Thai' and 'folk Thai'. An example of the traditional Thai architecture is the well-known traditional Thai house from the central

region and other grand temples. An example of the folk Thai architecture is a characteristic bamboo house in the rural areas.

First, this paper proposes that ‘vernacular Thai’ belongs to the “common” people and it is often inauthentic and has no outstanding character of a masterpiece or an artefact. This paper differentiates ‘vernacular Thai’ from ‘folk Thai’ and chose to focus on ‘vernacular Thai’, as explained below. Slum houses or informal settlements are used as an example to explore the quality of having no outstanding character of a masterpiece or an artefact of the ‘vernacular Thai.’ It is important to emphasize that this does not mean that ‘vernacular Thai’ can only be represented by slum houses. In fact, at international level, slum houses and vernacular architecture has just been associated in a much later phase, comparing to ‘folk’ architecture which has always been closely linked to vernacular architecture study. Examples are slum houses in urban areas, which the author’s previous study (Tovivich, 2002) shows that slum dwellers have creativity adapting their local building knowledge and techniques from the rural area to the city context.

Second, in order to avoid promoting conservation of vernacular architecture which focuses merely on the static physical appearance, it is important to look at the communities of vernacular settlements as if they are the subject of the study. It often happens when ‘experts’ impose their ideas of how to preserve vernacular architecture according to their own definition and criteria without adopting the points of view of the local. Therefore, action research was employed as a method. The paper is a reflection on the action planning workshops implemented as a part of a selective module named Conservation of Vernacular Architecture and Community Development, MA & PhD in Vernacular Architecture Course, Silpakorn University, Thailand. The studied site is called *Klong Bangluang* community which is a series of banal and ordinary timber row-houses along the *Bangkok Yai* river in the outskirt of Bangkok. There are no formal community leaders and there is a lack of a sense of community. The student’s work includes action community mapping, community guidebooks and community portraits. They were used as tools to raise awareness and a sense of community. The author also co-conducted another design-built workshop at *Klong Bangluang* community with an attempt to continue catalyzing a sense of community. The workshop is a part of a selective module named Community Architecture of the undergraduate course at the Faculty of Architecture, Silpakorn University. Community empowerment is argued as a key element for conservation of vernacular architecture and community development.

Traditional / Folk / Contemporary / Vernacular

Suveeranont (2011) referred to Clifford and differentiates the four related terms – traditional, folk, contemporary and vernacular Thai.

‘Traditional Thai’

It refers to something which is authentic and has a quality of an artistic masterpiece. It is faultless and absolute. Therefore, it cannot be edited or developed. Traditional Thai inherits and is supported by the State and social elites. It is the formal and official representation of ‘Thainess’. Examples of traditional Thai are evident in traditional Thai temples, palaces and national cultural institutions.

‘Folk Thai’

It is authentic and has a quality of an artifact, nevertheless contains no quality of an artistic masterpiece. It is often referred to a simple and humble way of living, especially of local communities in rural areas. Folk Thai inherits and is supported by the State, the middle-class and local villagers. Examples of folk Thai are evident in local communities (especially in rural areas) and local community museums.

‘Vernacular Thai’

As Suveeranont proposes, it is marginalized because it is not authentic or contains a quality of an artifact. Examples of folk Thai are evident on everyday local streets, semi-public spaces and personal spaces of Thais. Vernacular Thai emerges under the consumerism in post-modern realm. It is impossible to trace the authenticity or the root of vernacular Thai, as it is shaped from imitations and reproductions, not originally invented. The characters of Vernacular Thai are shaped from marginalized people, the lower-class and rural villagers, who do not necessarily live their life in a simple and humble way; unlike the folk Thais. It does not relate to the authentic folk wisdoms. It narrates superstition and informal economy of the local communities.

‘Contemporary Thai’

It has a quality of an artistic masterpiece, yet has no authenticity. It transforms and moves vernacular Thai objects from the context of everyday streets to the artistic spaces, such as contemporary art center or other middle-class media.

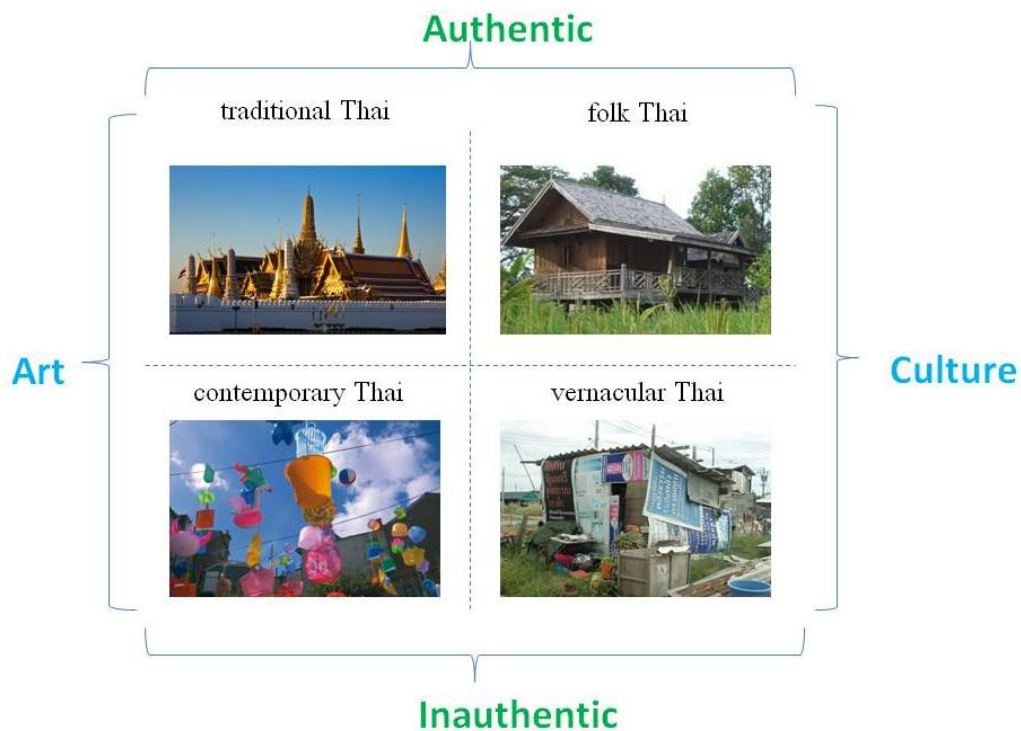


Fig. 1: Traditional, folk, contemporary and vernacular

Source: Suveeranont, 2011: 54, adapting and inserting images by the author

A well-known example of the study of vernacular Thai is the book named ‘Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture’ by Phillip Cornwel-Smith (2005). The book is an insight into contemporary Thai culture, which investigates beyond the traditional Thai or the romanticized folk Thai icons. It reveals the casual and everyday expressions of Thainess. The book shows how indigenous wisdom adapts to the present time and urban context, additionally customizes imports, for example, applying Roman architecture to shop houses.



Fig. 2: Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture, a book by Phillip Cornwel-Smith (2005)
Source: Author

From the author's previous research titled 'Occupied Spaces and Material Used in Urban Poor Houses' (Tovivich, 2002), which is a study of the design creativity of the urban vernacular Thai, using urban poor houses as case studies. Inspired by the difficulties and limited living conditions of the urban poor, the study examines problem solving, indigenous wisdom, local skills and adaptability of the urban poor people. The research concludes that the urban poor people have their own creativities in space adaptability, applying low-cost or free materials, basic structure and local skill construction to build their houses that can respond to their basic needs, despite many limited conditions.



Fig. 3: Images from a photo book titled 'Extra-ordinary Slum' (Tovivich 2004)
developed from the author's previous study (Tovivich, 2002)
Source: Author

As mentioned, in Thailand, the term 'vernacular architecture' is often confused with the term 'traditional Thai' and 'folk Thai'. Therefore, the studied 'vernacular houses' became an object of the study of a scholar who, many times, focuses on the 'authentic' physical characteristics of the building, such as the usage of natural materials and building techniques from the past, which may no longer be

applicable or sustainable at the present time. Also the conservation approach of the 'vernacular architecture' in such meanings is often insensitive to the dynamic changes of the people who designed and built those houses, for example, their desires to change those vernacular houses into the modern ones.

Community Empowerment in vernacular Conservation

The author notes that the study of vernacular Thai, as defined by Suveeranont (2011), values the people's everyday informality and adaptability as creativity and capacity of the local who are non-architects or non-designers. It examines beyond the rigid and static definition of traditional Thai and folk Thai. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that vernacular Thai study should not become another form of romanticization of poverty and decadence. Therefore, for this paper, in order to move beyond the dichotomy of 'small is beautiful' (Schumacher, 1973) versus 'small is difficult', a key is to put a studied vernacular community as a subject of the research. Therefore, action research can be employed as a useful tool in vernacular study and conservation.

Literature in the field of 'action science', 'theories of action', and reflection on 'reflection-in-action' (Forester, 1999, Argyris and Schon, 1974, Argyris et al., 1985, Forester, 1989, Schon, 1983, Schon, 1987), argue that 'problem setting' is more important than 'problem solving'. Moore (1970 as cited in Schon, 1983: 22) stated that the normative character of professions is based on the substantive field of knowledge and the technique of production or application of knowledge over which the specialist claims mastery. Schon (1983: 23) added that the normative systematic knowledge base of a profession have four essentials – specialized, firmly bounded, scientific and standardized. He continued and argued for 'reflective practitioners' who are "neither the heroic avant-garde of the Technological Program nor villainous elites who prevent people from taking control of their lives...[And when professionals] play their parts well, they help that conversation to become a reflective one" (Schon, 1983: 346)

Despite many ambiguous definitions and various levels of participation (Moser, 1989; Arnstein, 1969; Pretty et al., 1994; Hamdi and Majale, 2005; Chambers, 1995), in conclusion, 'participation' could be employed as a means to make a project more efficient and effective in terms of cost and responsiveness of the programme to the people whose lives are affected. To the next level, it can also build up local capacity at an individual and community level. At the ultimate level, as an end, participation concerns political change and empowerment in favour of the oppressed by increasing their self-reliance so they become capable to deal with and in control of their own everyday life problems. The challenges are in the complex power relations and the unequal power exercise in a negotiating process amongst different stakeholders.

Action research is a common method used by so called 'community architects'¹ (Tovivich, 2011), which means architects who work 'with' local communities using participatory design process towards community empowerment. Action research brought many opportunities to architectural practice, education and research. In relation to efficiency and effectiveness level, action research facilitates the researcher to gain better understanding and more insightful information of the studied communities, by putting them in the center so they become the subject, not the

¹ The term originally emerged in the 1960s-1970s from the idea of participatory design influenced by advocacy and participatory planning.

object of the study. In relation to local capacity building level, action research supports the local to understand potentials and problems of themselves and their context better. Additionally, skill training and other learning activities help the local to gain appropriate knowledge and skill in order to improve their own communities. Finally, in relation to the empowerment level, action research catalyzes local awareness and enable the local to make decisions, take action and reflect on their action.

For this paper, the author uses her collaboration in *Klong Bangluang* project as case studies. The paper is a reflection on the action research method implemented in *Klong Bangluang* projects as a part of a selective module named ‘Conservation of Vernacular Architecture and Community Development’ of the MA & PhD in Vernacular Architecture Course, Silpakorn University.

Reflection on Practice: Klong Bangluang Projects

Klong Bangluang or *Klong Bangkok Yai* is the canal-way out to Chao Phraya River. More than a hundred years ago, the neighbourhood was originally occupied by senior officials because the area is near the palace. Due to rapid urbanization and city growth, the area had been changing extensively. There are newcomers moving in and many abandoned houses are observed. During the past 5 years, the neighbourhood has been promoted as a touristic destination and became more popular. However, a lack of a sense of community is evident. At the same time, there are many artists living there. They are renters and original residents. In relation to architecture, *Klong Bangluang* community is comprised of ordinary old timber row-houses. Focusing on social dimensions, there are no formal community leaders or organizations. Most residents are middle-class and some of them are relatively wealthy. Most of them know their neighbours, yet they live individually in a peaceful environment.

The aim of the selective module named ‘Conservation of Vernacular Architecture and Community Development’ is for the students to learn about theory and practice of vernacular architecture conservation and community participation. *Klong Bangluang* was chosen as a case study because of its rich cultural and historic resources. There are a few old temples located in the neighbourhood, additionally there is a famous artist’s house which shows a contemporary Thai puppet show on the site. Fifteen MA and PhD students of the course, who come from different backgrounds—architecture, archaeology and interior decoration, were divided into 5 working groups. They spent 8 weeks on researching and developing a small-scale design proposal with an attempt to nurture social interaction amongst community members and ultimately to catalyze a sense of community. The student’s final works included, first, ‘participatory action community mapping’ with local students. The outcome was comprehensive and insightful information about the strength, weakness, opportunities and threats (SWOT) of a community from the views of the residents. Second, ‘participatory community walking guidebooks’ highlight places for hidden and great local meals and cultural and social attractions from the views of the residents. The aim is to reveal potentials of their place to the eyes of the community members themselves. Third, another student group focused on memories and traces of missing stories in the community—something that they used to have in the past and still long for. The students interviewed many old people and illustrate the stories through beautiful and simple drawings. Fourth, a ‘community portraits’ project invited the residents to stand in front of their house and take a panoramic photo

together. Taking photos together was used as a tool to catalyze dialogues amongst community members and create a virtual sense of community. Finally, a short video narrating the story of *Klong Bangluang* community was produced from the information gained from the action mapping and other participatory activities.

Students' final presentation was held on the site in a festive atmosphere. Local school students were invited to sing songs about *Klong Bangluang* community. Many residents came to see the final presentation. Local people were excited to see their faces and their contributions were produced into different forms of media—maps, guidebooks, video and photo exhibition—narrating stories about their own community. The 'community guidebook project' illustrates potentials and local resources of the community. The 'memory project' raises questions in relation to changes and rapid urbanization in the neighbourhood amongst the community members. All projects are mere starting points of community empowerment, as it is believed that if the locals understand their own strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and feel proud of their own community, appropriate conservation solutions can be revealed through community interactions and discussions. The students played the roles of supporter and catalyst, acting as a reflective practitioner helping to start up conversations and reflect on their discussions.



Fig. 4: *Klong Bangluang* community

Source: Author



Fig. 5: Action planning mapping activity with local students
Source: MA. & Ph.D. Vernacular Architecture students

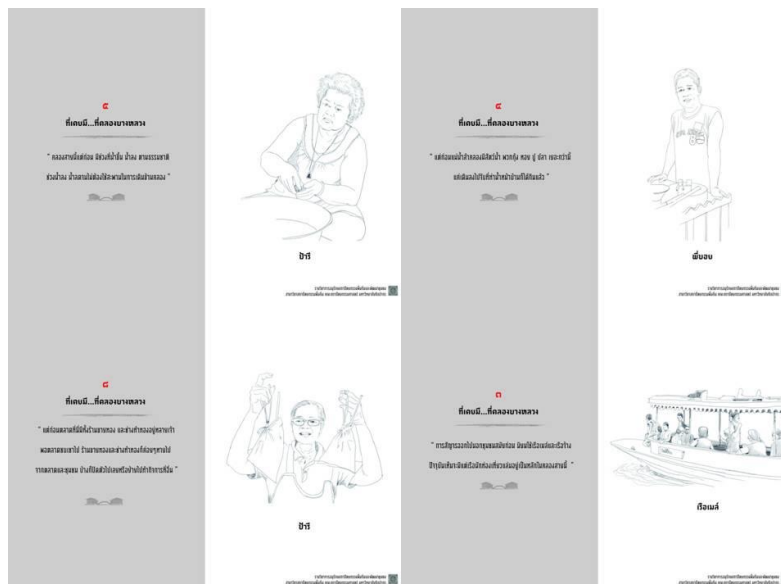


Fig. 6: 'Memories of *Klong Bangluang* community' project
Source: MA. & Ph.D. Vernacular Architecture students



Fig. 7: Community guidebook project
Source: MA. & Ph.D. Vernacular Architecture students



Fig. 8: 'Community photo project' 1
Source: Author



Fig. 9: 'Community photo project' 2
Source: Adisorn Srisaowanunt



Fig. 10: Student final presentation day was held on site

Source: Author



Fig. 11: Atmosphere of the student final presentation day

Source: Author

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the projects done by the students from the module ‘Conservation of Vernacular Architecture and Community Development’ is mere a starting step. A sense of community was strengthened, yet ongoing catalytic interventions are required to be carried on. Therefore, 2 months after the first project was finished, the author co-conducted another design-built workshop at *Klong Bangluang* community. The workshop is a part of a selective module named ‘Community Architecture’. Forty undergraduate architectural students were divided into 5 working groups. The task was for the students to design and build community furniture under the theme “Adjust-Expand-Retract-Remove”. The furniture was set up in an abandoned space, which had been used as an exhibition space for the MA & PhD student project, next to the canal and in front of local shops. Through informal lobbying, the landowners were willing to give their space to be

public space at daytime. All furniture had to be easily foldable and adaptable because the owners and renters of the local shops do not want to be disturbed, if the people use the furniture for partying at night time. The students spent 2 weeks on interviewing the local about their needs, designing the furniture, built the prototype and then assembling them on site. Similarly, students' final presentation was held on the site. Their works included chairs, tables, and partition for exhibiting images and community information, and a structure for a community map. Local school teachers, students and residents were invited to give comments on the design. The strategic aim was to enable the community members to see the potential of their abandoned space as a social area which was used as an exhibition area. By having design intervention—new furniture, it was hoped that social interaction amongst the local can be strengthened. Nevertheless, many people were worried about vandalism, as there are many problematic teenagers in the area. Therefore, they organize and manage a daily routine with Silpakorn students about when the furniture should be expanded and where it should be collapsed and kept in a safe place. Certainly, the future of the furniture is uncertain. To be or not to be vandalized is not the issue. The author believes that all small interventions conducted by the students help catalyzing dialogues and help strengthening a sense of community. The continuity of catalytic interventions is crucial, especially in a community where there are no serious threats from the outside.



Fig. 12: Foldable partition project

Source: Author



Fig. 13: Expandable chair projects
Source: Author



Fig. 14: Expandable table project
Source: Author



Fig. 15: Atmosphere of the student final presentation day

Source: Author

Conclusions

For this paper, action research was employed as a tool for catalysing community empowerment. It is important to note that current appropriations of the term ‘empowerment’ associates with self-actualization. It is the process that helps marginalized or oppressed people to recognize and exercise their agency involving individual discovery and change. (Cornwall, 2004; VeneKlasen and Miller, 2002) Freire and Ramos (1972) proposed an alternative educational approach which looks at education as a means toward a deeper understanding of the situation in which the oppressed lived, with an attempt to encourage them to take action to transform the situation that oppresses themselves. In relation to Freire’s ‘true education’, first, true education encourages the oppressed to believe in themselves. Second, this self-discovery experience “cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; [third,] nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be a praxis.” ‘True’ education should lead to a new awareness of selfhood enabling the learners to look critically at the situation in which they may find themselves be marginalized from the decision-making process that affects their life (1972).

Student’s projects from the modules of ‘Conservation of Vernacular Architecture and Community Development’ and ‘Community Architecture’ are a mere starting step. They were set to encourage the local community members to be more enthusiastic and become aware of the sense of community and their local capacity. By playing a role as outsiders, the author, students and the other tutors acted as a catalyst enabling design interventions which was set to reveal potentials and local resources of *Klong Bangluang* community, additionally to raise questions and facilitate dialogues amongst the local. However, the activities of the two modules did not proceed to the level of encouraging the local to act for themselves or to reflect on their action. Therefore, the outcomes of the activities can be claimed as limited. It is interesting for the students and tutors to continue and develop the catalytic activities with *Klong Bangluang* community and then observe, reflect and plan their actions accordingly, in order to enable community empowerment in more advanced levels.

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