

Modern Thai Architecture: Architectural Features and Refinement

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Abstract

Unique architectural components are often portrayed through features and refinements of the architecture while reflecting hierarchical status in their design and blending in smoothly with the current cultural context. When it comes to the creation of modern Thai architecture, cultural heritage is neglected and abandoned but if one has to present Thai identity through architecture, original Thai architectural styles and their features and refinement were more to be associated with. This reflects the current lack of identity in modern Thai designs, and whatever that has been created still lacks acceptance from the general public. To study the theories from architects and academics by inspecting on site architecture and by surveying the opinions of architects and general public. The survey seeks to summarize, analyze, debate, and make recommendations on the creation of a unique architectural feature to be used for future research purposes. Research methodology include desk research, inspection of architectural sites, interviews with architects and academics, survey questions for architects and the general public, data analysis and discussions, and the review of the summary and recommendations. The focus of the research is on the changes on architecture, and ways in which development can be made on the architectural features and refinements of modern Thai architecture. The research concept and the idea of integrating globalization and localization together by constructing a site to display national identity through modern Thai architecture remain debatable and require evidence and support from a highly efficient statistical program. Many of the architecture display unique architectural features and refinement that reflect Thai customs and beauty. Nationalism should be considered because it plays a vital role in either linking or corrupting the modern Thai architectural style. The identity of modern Thai architectural style may be the beginning of nationalism then turning into a way of life and customs for Thais. This builds an identity and security for modern Thai architecture, and coincides with the social and economic development plans under the Creative Economy.

Keywords: Thai Architecture, Modern Thai Architecture, Architectural Features, Architectural Refinement

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1. Introduction

Traditional Thai architectural style or traditional Thai architecture (Image 1) presents a trace of Thai civilization and cultural heritage through the ages. Architectural styles from Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Rattanakosin periods are evidence of such traces. The architectural style varies in their construction and structure which is influenced by the selection of materials, in their creation of windows and doors which correlates to the atmosphere of the construction, and in their selection of the construction elements to communicate the meaning or the significance of the place. In addition, architectural features and refinement become the basic foundation for the components and elements of the architecture through the era. Components and elements have been developed through time resulting from the adaptation and continuation of social hierarchy that blends in with the current social context. The current culture changes at a fast pace and people are forced to embrace the changes. The conditions that set the beliefs of old knowledge have changed including knowledge of Thai architecture.



Image 1: Wat Khao Phra Bat Noi and Phra Chedi
Source: <http://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/อาณาจักรสุโขทัย>

The changes in the Thai architectural style, especially the changes in the design and the component of the architectural feature and refinement may be the result of the influence from the western architecture accepted and adopted by notable Thai architects. Western architecture is an important factor that diminishes the identity of Thai architecture, leading to the changes or shift in the paradigm of Thai architecture and in the creation of modern Thai architect identity. However, it is also arguable that Thai architects may be neglecting the continuation and development of Thai cultural heritage in modern Thai architecture.

Thai history and civilization show evidence of cultural heritage passed on from generation to generation and are valued by Thai people today. When Thais need to present Thai identity through architecture, they refer to the traditional architectural features and refinement in their design. This is evident in the example of the Thai Pavilion at the World Expo (Image 2) and the new design of The Parliament House of Thailand (Image 3).



Image 2: Thailand Pavilion at the World Expo 2010
Source: <http://www.bbrrtv.com/2010/0610/17216.html>



Image 3: The Parliament House of Thailand's new construction project called "Sapayasatan"

Source: <http://www.parliament.go.th/>

Traces of the origin of Thai architecture and heritage do not create a modern Thai architecture identity that is much different from the past. The design technique still follows the same architectural features and refinement as seen from the rooftop, steeple, door facade, veranda, shore, and pattern in the design. These features continue to lack acceptance by the general public.

This research is one part of a bigger study in finding out about the overall picture of the creation of modern Thai architecture identity. The research focuses on the specific areas including architectural features and refinement, which can be divided into the study of the component and elements, and the ornament and refinement of the architecture. The research aims to bring about the direction for the design for the modern Thai architecture style.

2. Objectives

The objective of this research on Modern Thai Architecture: Architectural Features and Refinement are as follows:

1. To study the theory, principles, and designs of modern Thai architecture, and develop a framework with key concepts and

essential factors in creating the features and refinement for modern Thai architecture from architecture case study.

2. To inspect Thai architectures in different regions in Thailand that are part of the case study, where these architectures have special features reflecting different concepts and are related to the components of modern Thai architecture.

3. To study the ideas and concept of the architects and academics, including the idea behind their work, their inspiration, and the factors and direction that lead to the creation of work that showcase the feature and the refinement of the modern Thai architecture.

4. To study the thoughts and opinions of architects toward the concept and idea of the modern Thai architecture following the research's framework on architectural feature and refinement.

5. To study the thoughts and opinions of the general public toward the idea and concept of modern Thai architecture following the research's framework on architectural feature and refinement.

6. To bring in the summary from the analysis and the discussion from the research

as well as the recommendation to produce a result that help create the features and refinements of modern Thai architecture and for future recommendations.

3. Methods

The main methods and scope of the research are as follows:

1. Identifying key concepts by studying the basic theories from academic publications of all types and determining the key concept's definition. The research will look at architecture case study related to the features and refinement of modern Thai architecture from past to present through their continuation and transformation. The research will define major concepts in creating a research conceptual framework for development in the future.

2. Inspecting architectures in the different regions around the country from the list of sites to inspect, and looking at architectures in the Part 1 case study. Inspections will be done on architectures with the components that compliment with the key concept of this research.

3. Interviewing 21 architects and academics. Most of the architects interviewed designed or are responsible for the architectures that were inspected in the research. This is to look for the concept and inspiration of the design as well as understand the process behind the creation of the features and refinement of modern Thai architecture. Furthermore, an interview was conducted with 5 other architects and academics through electronic means discussing any disagreement and the solution in developing a unique modern Thai architecture.

4. Surveys were conducted with architects and the general public to find out the opinions they have toward the concept and design of the feature and refinements of modern Thai architecture. In the survey, the opinion of the respondents reflects the degree of acceptance. The survey comprises of 24 questions for architects and 24 questions for the general public. The guideline of the survey questions were developed from the research methods 1-3 above, which includes the study of the theory, architectures, and concepts from architects and academics.

5. Data analysis and discussions are carried out to develop the research conceptual framework. Results from the interview and surveys have led to a quantitative analysis of the opinion toward the concept and design of the feature and refinement of modern Thai architecture. The analysis of the results through factor analysis forms the framework for the research project. In the end of the research, there will be a presentation on the findings for further use.

6. Summary and recommendation are formulated to suggest a direction for the features and refinement of modern Thai architecture under the framework of the research. This helps to pin point the continuation of cultural heritage, the changes, and the development in the features and refinement of modern Thai architecture in the present and future. Utilizing the result of the research in creating modern Thai architecture identity together with the research from other research works can build the stability in the identity and benefit in the development of society and economy under the Creative Economy scheme, and provide a basic foundation for research in the future.

4. Results

The research is in the process of collating information from the survey to produce evidence and support using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science), an analytical software used for statistical analysis and data management.

Nonetheless, the present findings from the research can provide sufficient summary and basic information on the topic. The writer has summarized the primary concepts and ideas taken from the study of academic theories, inspection of architectures in the different regions around the country, and interviews with architects and academics, following the steps and procedures stated above. The results are as follows:

1. The important concept and content present in the framework of the research. The study found out that findings from academic theories, desk research, and inspection of architectures can determine the key concepts in

creating modern Thai architecture identity. Architectural features and refinement of modern Thai architecture can be divided into two main parts; 1) component and elements; and 2) ornament and refinement. To better understand the method in examining modern Thai architecture, importance must be given to the components and elements. All architectural designs have their basic and main components, and specific features that associate them with a certain design for example the features of Greek architecture or modern architecture. In creating modern Thai architecture, similar element and foundation to the basic components are found but there are differences in the design. The differences may include the appearance, component, layout, materials, structure and construction, façade, light entrance, door and window, pavilion and porch, floor elevation, base moldings, shade, and skid.

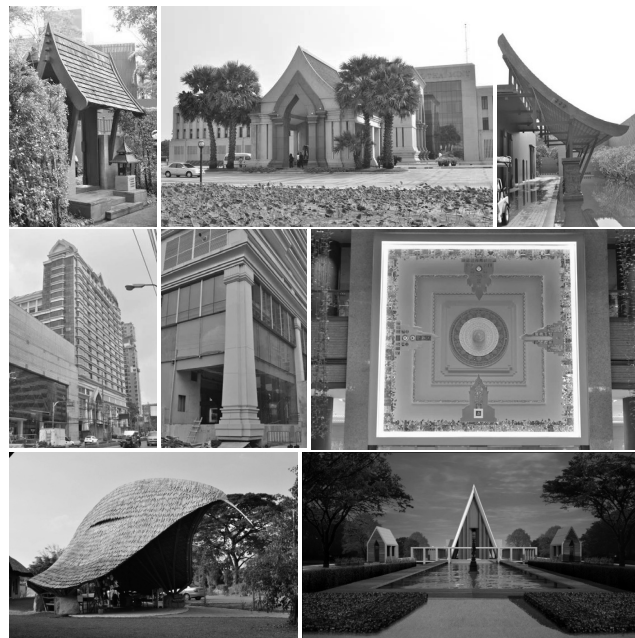


Image 4: Sample of Modern Thai Architecture

Moreover, the interview with architects and academics presented an interesting viewpoint on this topic. For example, Sinn Phonghanyudh and the Plan Architect Co., Ltd. (interviewed on 27th September 2012) introduced the idea that “architecture is the important factor in a city; it represents way of life, beliefs, folk wisdom, and the culture from one generation to the other. It also represents the face and soul of the community”. He also states that the design should be the landmark and

architects should incorporate local Thai style into the design. Architecture can create symbolism, and its glittering design can be applied to modern architecture. The Grill or Green filtering also aids people’s understanding of Thai architecture. Architects can employ elaborateness of the elements and ornaments that are easily perceivable by Thai people, as well as the designs based on historical references such as heritage designs and Rama V designs.



Image 5: Sinn Phonghanyudh and the Plan Architect Co., Ltd. (interviewed on 27th September 2012)

Nithi Sthapitanonda (interviewed on 10th October 2012) expressed an opinion on the same matter: “designs filtered by emotions, spirits, or materials can bring out the Thai-ness”. Furthermore, he pointed out the essence of Thai-ness by their 1) forms 2) colors (Thai design contains many colors but blended harmoniously) 3) clear diagram focusing on the

structure 4) structural identity 5) beliefs 6) elevation of the basement 7) lightings such as cloisters, gable roof, and decorations. The functionality must be the main focus as it provides simple circulation and symbolism is effective for design purposes. Another important principle is “Thai-ness is the outcome of inspiration”.



Image 6: Nithi Sthapitanonda (interviewed on 10th October 2012)

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One of the latest effective concepts that bring out the Thai-ness is the construction of the new parliament. Theerapol Niyom (interviewed on 24th October 2012) made a concise explanation that “we must blend in with nature”. This shall serve as the primary principle in architecture. The architecture concept in its originality can be seen through different designs supported by interesting concepts such as an unequal basic belief system, especially the Thai-ness of the villagers, academics, and architects. However the definition of Thai-ness must consist of 1) humble and respect towards nature 2) impermanence 3) inducing morale 4) belief in Buddhism, Brahma, ghosts, ancestors. More

importantly architects must create an understanding on the definition of architecture in the eyes of the general public and architects as well as its differences. Architects must study the country’s conditions and how architecture affects people’s perception. A good architectural design must incorporate local wisdom and technology in its designing process. Seeking the true value of each story is important. For example, true value lies in the consciousness upon death. Architects must apply participatory methods or mutual learning methods for everyone to have the same understanding, and a good design usually is simple, economical, and straightforward.

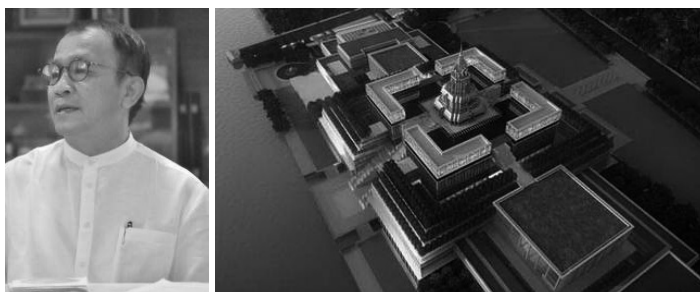


Image 7: Theerapol Niyom (interviewed on 24th October 2012)

Architecture in the social context is imperative. Khiensak Seangklieng (interviewed on 17th November 2012) provided an insightful idea that “the surrounding context is more important than architecture”, an idea proven quite interesting in architecture. Many more work ethics are explored such as 1) understanding the nature as it expresses power through instinct and basic needs 2) feel more, know less; understand the culture, and conduct research for better designing process 3) apply principles of professionalism which needs expertise - interpretation, reasoning, knowledge; autonomy

– freedom, not being shepherd; commitment – meet the work deadline; and accountability – responsibility, sacrifice, and social support. Thai characteristics evident in the design include transparency, lightness, solitary pillar, roofing, and ornaments (gables, platform, encircle, irrigation culture, rice padding culture, wickerwork, craftsman’s wisdom, craftsmanship). Suggestions on the study of Thai characteristics are given through a book called “Lasana Thai (Thai Characteristic)” by Nij Hinchiranan which emphasized on identity and status. Lastly, architects must give importance to the project owner.

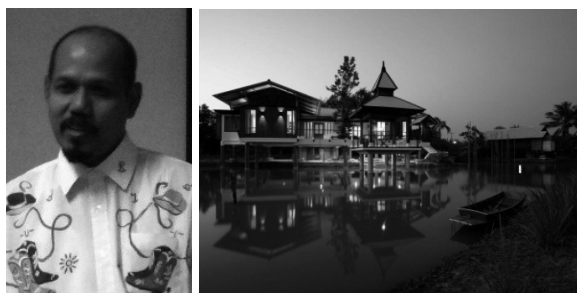


Image 8: Khiensak Seangklieng (interviewed on 17th November 2012)

The cultural context in the point-of-view of academics at the Faculty of Architecture, Khon Khaen University (interviewed on 26th January 2013) states that “design relies upon cultural context”. For example, 1) Isan region applies its context in its design such as sun gable or “Tawen” pattern that is derived from toddy stalk gable 2) the general public would get elevation rather than space 3) large-size object is a clear phenomenon such as large bamboo container for decorating department stores in Khon Khaen 4) referencing identity serves as a good filter for architects with several references such as the explanation of tropical architecture and modern Thai architecture

5) foreign companies that design Thai buildings found that 90 degree axis system is imperative and should not be changed otherwise 6) a good design requires craftsmanship skills and architecture education. The academics at the of Faculty of Architecture, Khon Khaen University gave examples of design works in Isan region as follows 1) designs of sanctuaries of Xieng Thong Temple (Luang Phra Bang) play an important role in the design works of the Isan region 2) postmodern thinking by applying Lao reed mouth organ or Isan local music instruments on the structural design 3) distinctive Thai design such as arches, supports, protruding eaves, solitary pillar, “Palo” roof, etc.



Image 9: Faculty of Architecture, Khon Khaen University (interviewed on 26th January 2013)

2. The ideas and concepts that serve as features and refinement of architectural work that are beneficial in creating modern identity of the architecture creates an ‘alternative’ instead of ‘retrospective’ application of past designs mixed with modern context. Such notion is meant by applying ornament and refinement to additional designs. That is, when architects completed the core compositions and fundamentals, the ornaments and refinements are similar to dressing appropriately or also known as “appropriate architecture”. This is an important factor in specifying the building to contain different “status” and “characteristic and identity”. Architects should take heed in this matter as it provides meaning and appropriateness to the design work. Such quality can be measured by aspects of ornaments, organization, material

application, and artworks such as painting and sculpture.

Field studies have shown that the beliefs in the three worlds have been part of architects’ common habit in decorating buildings, and creating environment through artworks, albeit original or modern, as well as exposing visitors to Thai characteristics.

When focusing and giving importance to occupants, Chaiwat Limwattananon (interviewed on 30th October 2012) brings up the story of “heart of the house: the space for exchanging ideas” as a design inspiration. It is another practical Thai-ness idea. Furthermore, it gives meaning of Thai-ness in its design like 1) tapering walls 2) solitary pillars 3) protruding eaves 4) sculpture 5) heart of the house 6) Prajam Yam patter 7) roof shape 8) gardens 9) Thai house diagram.



Image 10: Chaiwat Limwattananon (interviewed on 30th October 2012)

3. Creating awareness to the education system that features and refinement architecture can create modern Thai identity in the architectural works of modern society, especially in the instillation on globalization and glocalization through learning process and research. The results after interviewing architects and related academics are proven quite interesting. Soontorn

Boonyatikarn (interviewed on 20th September 2012) offered an idea that “architecture must be comprehensively adapted”. In his comparison, the modern Thai house should adjust its technology and form, and must be consistent with eastern natural way of life. This is in contrast with the western way of life that focuses the conquering of nature. There is also

the idea that the identity of Thai architecture must place importance on different matters such as convenience, suitable lighting, acoustic system, visual comfort system, IT system, etc. The architectural study should be conducted scientifically. Architects should have knowledge on the materials and inspection, and give meaning to Thai characteristic in terms of fine/composition for example protruding designs are derived from Thailand's raining season. Architecture requires sunlight and rain. Blocking heat from the sunlight using sun shield, with 5 times difference between outer and inner temperature,

our body may not be able to adjust on time and eventually gets sick. As such, proper design of the glass surface can prevent sunlight heat and the sun shield is no longer necessary. Proper reforming helps saves cost. Trees for decoration are also a design process. Each tree has its own quality. For instance, Lady Palm is known to absorb the smell, or Crinum Lily prevents subsidence. Therefore, it is wise to choose trees appropriate for the building. The aforementioned clearly point out that the learning process and research creates innovation for globalization and glocalization.



Image 11: Soontorn Boonyatikarn (interviewed on 20th September 2012)

4. Buildings of national importance such as the Thai Pavilions at World Expo, the new parliament, the National Convention Center, and revenue-generating buildings can bring the country's honor, all under the Creative Economic scheme, similar to Malaysia's Petronas Twin Tower. Pirast Pacharasawate (interviewed on 20th September 2012) gave a distinctive example on the matter that "nationalism" should be architect's first priority or at least the architectural primary initiative. Design may or may not include any concept as architects should be original. Familiarity is also suggested as a basic tool for Thai-ness. The principles of creating

physical and mental happiness through nature, creation, universalism, Feng Shui (respecting the sun, the moon and the wind), mixture of knowledge on heat and moist, natural materials application for the building to be long-lasting and clearly reflects eastern style. Architects should focus on the way of life, be indifferent and reduce garnishment, all of which helps reduce suffering. Architects must listen to project owner intently. As for the Thai-ness, it can be expressed by Thai construction techniques, architectural components, Thai materials, and most importantly architects should create design works that possesses identity, image, and symbol.

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Image 12: Pirast Pacharasawate (interviewed on 20th September 2012)

5. Creating modern Thai architecture, especially when incorporating features and refinement in the design process, provides opportunity to expose the Thai-ness in the global arena. From interviews, the importance of Thai-ness is still conflicting. Sumet Jumsai na Ayudhya (interviewed on 10th October 2012) stated that “why do we need Thai architecture?” “Those who care about identity are those who have no identity”. He stated further that “architecture is a poetry that relies upon bricks, stones, sands, glasses, woods”. However,

“style” is important in architecture as it is one of the principles of architectural design, as well as “spirit” of Thai-ness. That is, it must be fun and not serious. Thai people like to relive the past. A good architect must respect the history and not be adventurous. Thai-ness can be designed by using contrasting colors. Architects should distinguish Thai architecture into 2 parts: ritual architecture (temples, castles) and domestic architecture. More importantly, common sense should be incorporated as the principle of Thai architectural design.



Image 13: Sumet Jumsai na Ayudhya (interviewed on 10th October 2012)

Srisak Wallipodom (interviewed on 1st November 2012) stated that “identity equals corruption”. He expressed the body of knowledge on Thai-ness in different ways. 1) image is unnecessary and only used for decorations

2) modern building doesn’t require Thai symbol, but merely symbol is sufficient 3) don’t misuse the three worlds 4) there is no longer any dimension between humans and supernatural entity 5) Thai-ness or Thai-wannabe is absurd

and nonsense and merely an embellishment 6) focusing on heritage through Thai arts is to one's will but try to look at localization aspects 7) Architects still lacks social and cultural details, and fails to seek sufficient

information to be applied to their design 8) Thai identity is unnecessary. We should have knowledge on the locals, access and understand the locals, and should not create them as it is not us.



Image 14: Srisak Wallipodom (interviewed on 1st November 2012)

One interesting concept to ponder on by Chatree Prakitnonthakarn (interviewed 16th October 2012) is that “Thai-ness bridges nationalism”, and several viewpoints on Thai-ness such as 1) Thai-ness doesn't exist 2) modern generation is imaginative for example in the era of Rama V and Rama VI, people started to think about the past through formal analysis. Such analysis originated in Germany during the 18th Century B.C., separating Greeks from the Roman Empire, etc. It is then similarly divided in Thailand by different family names such as Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, etc. 3) Nationalism and methodology create characteristics 4) Spirits and forms create architecture in different times rooted from the thinking processes. Furthermore, Thai-ness is divided into 4 levels. Level 1) colonization

tools or suppression (sub-divided into ultra Thai-ness and Thai-ness); Level 2) Yearn for the past and absorbing Thai-ness; Level 3) rules and regulations (must be Thai) leads to violation issues; Level 4) tools for suppression as an establishment. He also suggested that it is unnecessary to interpret design by giving importance to characteristics or identity. Upon the coming of AEC, there will be more demand in the identity thus requires great control measures; don't be “over-abundant”. R&D (Research and development) should be used in the design processes. There should be inspection, and research to retrieve the forms. More importantly, Thai-ness is unnecessary but can be used if wanted through the study of the history to have a better understanding of what needs to be done and what needs to be avoided.

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Image 15: Chatree Praktitnonthakarn (interviewed 16th October 2012)

Architects that work internationally such as Amata Lupaiboon and Twitee Vajrabhaya Teparkum (interviewed on 27th September 2012) viewed that “we don’t create identity but rather good architecture”. “Thai people see differences rather than similarities”. “Intentionally creating identity is simply creating a symbol”. This idea is consistent with modern context. The focus on practicality is consistent with the way of life and shows in the physical expressions. “The company’s design must answer the question right here right now, and do not answer to the Thai

identity in first place”. There are many questions about Thai architectures today such as what creates identity? The follow-up question is that: is Thai-ness necessary? What are the pros and cons of having Thai identity? Should Thai architecture inherit and develop but also incorporate Thai-ness? A good architect must answer and be ready to answer those questions instantly. The architect’s works must reflect the norm, lifestyle, delicacy, placidity, thinking process, dimensions, and repetition.



Image 16: Amata Lupaiboon and Twitee Vajrabhaya Teparkum (interviewed on 27th September 2012)

Internationalizing Thai architecture may be applied through the ideas of Chatree Ladali-litsakul (interviewed on 16th October 2012) that “Eastern soul in a global body”. He also pointed out about Thai-ness is many aspects. 1) aes-

theticism expresses Thai-ness 2) design reflects beauty of peace, lighting, building components, winds, leaves 3) do something common but valuable. He also provided additional working guidelines. A good design answers the question

or confirms the architect's idea. Modern context is proven very dynamic as the usual way of life started to change. Architects must reflect upon their good quality such as Buddhism or universalism or guidelines. As for Thai-ness, Thai-ness is pluralism, combining locality together. There are roots, ranks of nobility thus integrated Thai-ness is considered a rewritten grammar. This is similar to cooking Kaeng Hor, a Northern Thailand cuisine. However, it can be refuted as destroying original Thai architecture. More

importantly, architects must understand the soul of the building through contemplating western idea of thinking in parts and eastern idea of thinking as a whole. Furthermore, Thai aestheticism is necessary which means several joints are needed. Architects must get acquainted with limitations and freedom unavoidable in the design process. A good design requires great will and firm stance like a place to perform good deeds, a place that changes evil to good.



Image 17: Chatree Ladalilitsakul (interviewed on 16th October 2012)

5. Discussion

The preceding research revealed that architects and academics all come with different ideas. There are those that want modern Thai identity and those that do not. In spite of the differences, the architectural works pointed out that many buildings display architectural identity through features and refinement. The ideas of architects and academics involved provide a clear understanding that Thai identity can be referenced in different ways such as the way of life, beliefs, wisdoms, cultural heritage, emotions, spirits, humbleness, and respect of nature, etc. However, the modern Thai identity are shown in many general architectural works such as schemes, solitary pillars, elevation, roof

patterns, protruding eaves, titled walls, encircling, transparency, decorations, water sources (wells, pools), arts, contrasting colors, or even wicker works that display aesthetic wisdom. The design should focus on the characteristics and status, and on scientific research of the architecture for comprehensive and complete adaption of the design. Architects should place more interest in the owner's project.

If architecture is a poetry that relies upon bricks, stones, sands, glasses, woods for creating any work, architects may require aesthetic attitude as a design tool. This is because aesthetic attitude expresses Thai-ness. At the same time it depends on the interpretations that exclude any interests in the characteristic or

identity. It is about creating a good architecture rather than a good identity. Creating identity on purpose is simply creating a symbol.

The national issue that requires a point of agreement is “nationalism”. How can we use the identity of modern Thai-ness as a bridge of nationalism? Or is it merely yearning for the past? Is using identity of modern Thai-ness in our architectural work considered a corruption?

6. Conclusion

Modern architectural identity in terms of features and refinement can be considered the genesis of nationalism although such claim depends on the needs of the architect. Process of creating modern architectural identity requires constant research updates necessary for reaffirmation until it is sufficient enough to become a way of life or Thai culture, and turn into stability of modern architectural identity. Such endeavor aims for the results of social and economical development alongside the future of the Creative Economy of Thailand.

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