

Book Reviews

The Aesthetics of Power: Architecture, Modernity, and Identity from Siam to Thailand

Noobanjong, K. (2013)

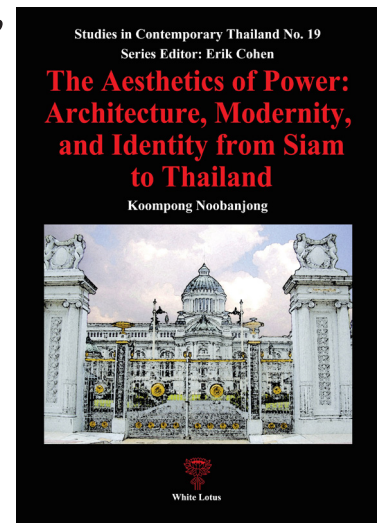
Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Studies in Contemporary Thailand
461 pp.

This is an ambitious and, on the whole, accomplished work that examines with both richness of detail and conceptual sophistication the politics of representation in the architecture and urban space of Siam/Thailand from the mid nineteenth century to the present. Based on a 2003 dissertation at the University of Colorado but updated to include events of the last decade, the book is informed by the author's knowledge of both architectural theory and practice as well as of cultural theory and historiography. As such, *The Aesthetics of Power* represents a significant improvement on a previous English-language work with a similar timeframe, Clarence Aasen's *Architecture of Siam: A Cultural History* (1998), and establishes Koompong Noobanjong's pre-eminence among a new generation of historically-minded architectural historians, which also includes Chatri Prakitnondhakarn, whose *Kanmuang lae sangkhom nai silpa satthapatayakam sayam samai thaiprayuk chatniyom* (BE 2547 [2004]) overlaps both thematically and chronologically with the book under review.

The Aesthetics of Power comprises six substantive chapters, along with an introduction and conclusion, which chart chronologically developments in Thailand's political order and architecture as well as in the use of urban space. From the abandonment of "traditional," cosmological architecture to the

importation via the colonial powers and under the monarchy's aegis of revivalist architectural styles in the late nineteenth century, and from the flourishing of modernist civic buildings and nationalist monuments in the 1930s and 1940s to the localization of the International Style in the 1950s and 1960s and the diffusion since the 1980s of architectural forms organic to transnational capitalism, this book offers a penetrating analysis of the role of architecture and public space in projecting the ideology of successive ruling elites—an analytical concern that has become mainstream in architectural history over the past three decades but that in Thailand's academia is still potentially controversial due to the pervasiveness of the royalist/nationalist discourse that naturalizes dominant ideological constructs as intrinsic and immutable givens.

One ideological construct in particular, *khwam-penthai*, serves as the conceptual pivot of Koompong's analysis, whose aim is to "stimulate awareness of the issues of identity formation in Thai society, as well as of the relationship between identity formation and political ideologies—especially nationalism and democracy—which are simply a means to an end for those in positions of power" (pp. xxiv-xxv). The ar-



ticulation of *khwampenthai* in and through the built environment is the *fil rouge* that runs through the analysis of royal, religious, and civic architecture across one and a half century. Yet whatever the meanings inscribed in these buildings by patrons and architects, cultural artifacts are notoriously polysemic or, in the opposite analytical perspective, open to multiple readings; slippages, contestations, and appropriations are common modes whereby inscribed meanings are subverted and re-signified by users/ beholders. Koompong emphasizes this dynamic of re-signification at various points in his study—most revealingly with regard to the counter-hegemonic appropriation of Ratchadamnoen Avenue and the Democracy Monument in 1973 and 1992—yet concludes starkly that the “examinations of the politics of representation in architecture and urban space in Siam and modern Thailand have elucidated that the signification of *khwampenthai* in built forms has largely been a means of self-justification for those in power to dictate to the country and pursue their own interests” (p. 419).

Koompong handles expertly a variety of built forms, still some chapters do a better work than others in combining architectural and historical analysis. Especially illuminating is the discussion of the post-absolutist politics of architectural representations, as is that of the National Assembly inaugurated in 1973, of Suvarnabhumi Airport and the competition for the new House of Parliament. In Chapter 6, instead, the narration of political events takes over the analysis of the built environment. Like most scholarship on Thailand, this book too is Bangkok-centered (though strangely reticent on Bangkok’s demographic as much as urbanistic “Chineseness”). Of course, there are very good reasons for this bias, given that the economic and administrative resources that have made possible the transformation over two centuries of the capital from riverine settlement to world megalopolis overshadow any other urban development project in the kingdom. Chiang Mai—a much older city than

Bangkok whose architectural heritage is much celebrated—is mentioned exclusively in relation to the only commercial building examined by Koompong, the Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi Hotel. Discussion in the final chapter of two heritage sites—Preah Vihear and Pattani’s Krue Se Mosque—that have in recent years catalyzed identity-rooted conflicts, albeit relevant to the deconstruction of *khwampenthai*, arguably stretches the analytical scope too widely, and lacks both the wealth of details and the conceptual grounding of the previous chapters.

The Aesthetics of Power is clearly written and manages to keep the use of academic jargon to a minimum. Appropriately for its subject matter, the book is copiously illustrated, even though several images are too small to be of much use; conversely, the lack an alphabetical index is regrettable. The author’s careless citations, at least in parts of the book, must also be stigmatized. It is unfortunate that despite repeated citations of my *Lords of Things* (2002), there are passages in Koompong’s book based on it where citation is not provided (p. 75) or misattributed (p. 70, note 44; p. 87, note 56), and others where the citation provided is out of place (p. 73, note 30). Although such oversights are not infrequent in lengthy books such as this, careful handling of sources remains a fundamental of reputable scholarship. These minor shortcomings aside, *The Aesthetics of Power* is a major work of scholarship that should be of interest to students of Thailand in fields from architectural and urban history to sociology and political science, and from social and cultural history to visual culture studies. The author and the publisher deserve appreciation for bringing this book to the public. It is to be hoped that it may fuel further debate within and outside Thai academia on the ideological and not merely aesthetic value of Thailand’s built environment.

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