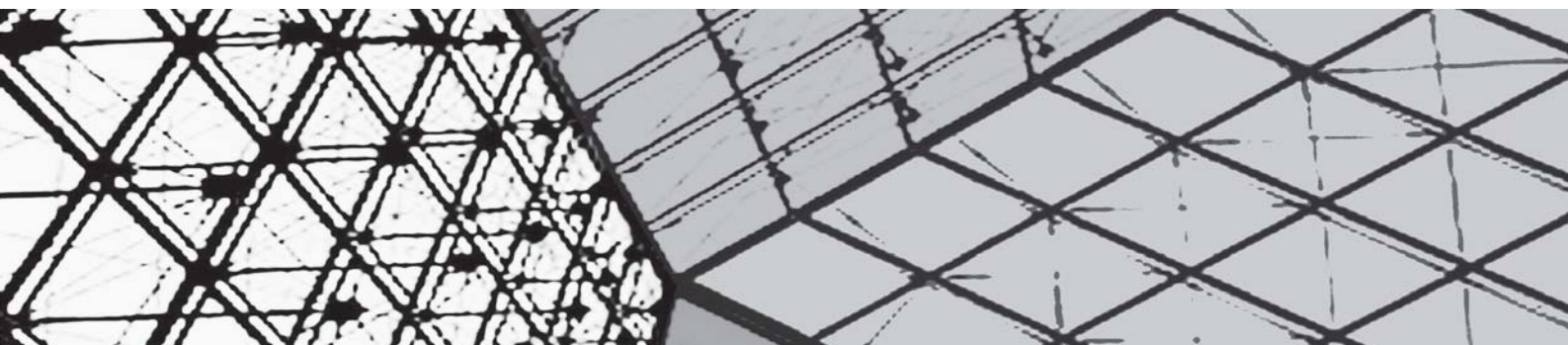**The Passenger Terminal at Suvarnabhumi International Airport**
and Thai Identity in the Midst of Globalization Era
อาคารผู้โดยสาร ณ ท่าอากาศยานนานาชาติสุวรรณภูมิ
และความเป็นไทย ในท่ามกลางยุคโลกาภิวัฒน์

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Abstract

Aside from functioning as a strategic instrument for modernization process and economic development, international airports represent a material embodiment for cultural identity of their host nations as evident from the architecture of passenger terminals around the world. Via semiological and phenomenological theories, this article presents a critical inquiry on the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Thailand in both cultural and social dimensions. The research also investigates the complex dynamism of the Thai identity discourse (known as Thainess or *khwampenthai*) during the age of globalization, which has resulted in contradictory readings on the building's ultra-modern appearance in terms of a dichotomy between place-ness and placeless-ness. Not only do the aforementioned studies reveal paradoxical characteristics of the Thai identity through the complexity, incongruity, and contradiction in architectural signification by the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi, but critical examinations on the design of this aviation facility further expose some fundamental problems in the discourse of Thainess as well.

บทคัดย่อ

นอกเหนือจากบทบาทหลักในยุทธศาสตร์การพัฒนาเศรษฐกิจและการเข้าสู่ความทันสมัยแล้ว อาคารที่ทำการท่าอากาศยานยังเป็นเครื่องบ่งชี้ให้เห็นถึงเอกลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมของประเทศด้วยเช่นกัน อันพึงสังเกตได้จากลักษณะทางสถาปัตยกรรมของอาคารผู้โดยสารในสนามบินต่าง ๆ ทั่วทุกมุมโลก ด้วยเหตุผลดังกล่าว บทความวิจัยชิ้นนี้โดยอาศัยทฤษฎีหัตถศาสตร์และปรากฏการณ์ศาสตร์จึงได้ทำการศึกษาอาคารที่พักผู้โดยสาร ณ ท่าอากาศยานนานาชาติสุวรรณภูมิในเชิงวิพากษ์ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในด้านสังคมและวัฒนธรรม สาระของงานวิจัยยังได้แสดงให้เห็นถึงต่อไป การเปลี่ยนแปลงทางวัฒนธรรมไทยในยุคโลกาภิวัตน์ ที่ได้ถูกสะท้อนโดยรูปลักษณ์ทางสถาปัตยกรรมอันทันสมัยของอาคารแห่งนี้ และนำมาซึ่งความคิดเห็นสองกระแสที่ขัดแย้งกัน คือ 1) อาคารผู้โดยสารในฐานะของสัญลักษณ์แห่งการเชื่อมต่อเข้ากับพลังขับเคลื่อนทางเศรษฐกิจ สังคม และวัฒนธรรมโลกยุคปัจจุบัน (ความเป็นสากล) กับ 2) อาคาร

The Passenger Terminal at Suvarnabhumi International Airport and Thai Identity in the Midst of Globalization Era
Koompong Noobanjong

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ผู้โดยสารในฐานะของสัญลักษณ์แห่งเอกลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมของประเทศที่ปรากฏต่อสายตาของประชาคมนานาชาติ (ความเป็นไทย) ขณะที่การศึกษาข้างต้นได้เผยให้ประจักษ์ถึงความซับซ้อน ความสับสนวุ่นวาย อันปราศจากระเบียบ และกฎเกณฑ์ที่แน่นอน รวมทั้งความขัดแย้งกันภายในตัวเองของการสื่อความหมายทางสถาปัตยกรรมโดยอาคาร ผู้โดยสาร ณ ท่าอากาศยานนานาชาติสุวรรณภูมิแล้ว ยังได้ชี้ถึงปัญหาพื้นฐานทางปรัชญาของวาทกรรมความเป็นไทย ผ่านการตั้งคำถามบนลักษณะทางสถาปัตยกรรมของตัวอาคารอีกเช่นกัน

Keywords

Modern Thai Architecture (ประวัติศาสตร์สถาปัตยกรรมสมัยใหม่ในประเทศไทย)

Local and Cultural Identity in Architectural Design (อัตลักษณ์ทางพื้นถิ่นและวัฒนธรรมในสถาปัตยกรรมและงานออกแบบ)

Globalization Studies (โลกาภิวัตน์ศึกษา)

Theories and Criticism on the Built Environment (ทฤษฎีและการวิพากษ์สภาพแวดล้อม)

1. Introduction

Together with other types of public structures, airports in Thailand have become an integral part of strategic instruments for economic developments and modernization process, apart from representing a material embodiment for the national and cultural identity known as Thainess or *khwampenthai* as evident from the architecture of passenger terminals around the country.

Based on semiological and phenomeno-logical theories, this article presents a critical inquiry on the design of the passenger terminal at Suvarna-bhumi International Airport in both cultural and social dimensions. The research also investigates the complex dynamism of the Thai identity discourse during the age of globalization via the ultra-modern design of the edifice, which has resulted in the contradictory readings on this aviation facility in terms of: a) a gateway linking the country with the globalizing force of the inter-connecting world (placeless-ness); versus b) a symbolic expression of the Thai identity (place-ness).

While these studies reveal complexity, incongruity, and contradiction of architectural meanings embedded in the design of the passenger terminal in addition to the paradoxical characteristics of the Thai identity, critical examinations further expose some fundamental problems in the discourse of Thainess, evolving around the following questions. For instance, is the design of the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi a modern way of expressing Thai identity or is it a Thai way of engaging the phenomenon of globalization, global culture, and modernity? Neither? Both? What do the contra-dictions in architectural signification of the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi mean for Thai culture and society in the present age of globalization?

2. Architecture, Cultural Identity, and the Age of Globalization

Humankind has been thinking about the phenomenological meanings of the built environment around the question of what it is to "be-in-the-world" since time unmemorable. Martin Heidegger, a renowned phenomenologist and a philosopher, once wrote that the trouble with dwelling today does not lie merely in a lack of houses, but instead in the fact that humans must learn to dwell by searching for the nature of dwelling. The process is a quest to comprehend the essential significance of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1971).

His remarks suggest that human beings must continue to explore how architecture and urban space evoke a sense of belonging, which in return provides a sense of place to a built environment thus contributing to its dwellers' image of self-identity (Heidegger, 1971). In built things and forms, humans belong to a disclosed reality, and in this reality, they are able to realize their own mortal nature, their proper relationship to the earth, its water, heavens, and seasons, and perhaps to the hidden divinity! The "built" then becomes a "place," which makes space for an ontological event for humans to encounter (Mugerauer, 1994).

While Heidegger's statements provide a theoretical ground for this article to scrutinize the contradictory readings on the passenger terminal complex at Suvarnabhumi in terms of a dichotomy between place-ness and placeless-ness, his obser-vations also indicate that phenomenological study on the built environment has emerged in a direction opposite to conventional positivism, traditional empiricism, or any scientific approach. According to Edmund Husserl, it was an attempt driven by "going-beyond everyday assumptions of our natural attitude to search for essential meanings and foundations of taken-for-granted life experiences" (Husserl, 1958).

In other words, phenomenological study does not restrict data to make sense out of the world, but admits on equal terms, non-sensory data like relations and values, as long as they present themselves intuitively. Therefore, it does not primarily seek to validate hypotheses, analyze causal relations, or synthesize conjectural theories of existence, but rather, aim to discover and describe the world spontaneously and pre-reflectively (Stefanovic, 1998). Consequently, differences between images, which can be consciously reflected upon, and those, which arise spontaneously within the activity of the transcendental imagination, or at our subconscious psychological level, play a very important role in interpreting and understanding architecture, urban space, and the built environment (Bachelard, 1969).

With respect to its theoretical framework of interpretations and criticism, this research maintains that since architecture is responsible for more than simply defining space, but making space an incarnation of human experiences, it essentially operates in the capacity of a cultural artifact. As a result, architecture can be studied in a manner analogous to other culturally constructed entities. Like textual materials, architecture signifies meanings through representations, as do words and signs in languages (Saussure et al., 1966). To use a semiotic analogy by imagining the built environment as a kind of language, the physicality of a building such as the stylistic composition and the patterns of connections between the parts and the whole in architectural programs parallels the grammatical relationships among words in a sentence, and/or among sentences in a paragraph.

For architectural signification, a building functions as a sign that contains two inseparable elements, the Signified (architectural meanings), and the Signifier (formal compositions and spatial organizations). Buildings stand for their meanings in the same way as proper names do to the objects denoted by them. The meanings are given, along with the practices that create these meanings. The

attempts to validate the practices are merely repetitions because the use of architectural elements presupposes precisely the justification aimed to provide (Goodman, 1968).

A corollary of the aforementioned view is that relations of identical logical structure and genealogy between relatively similar terms are really one and the same. If architecture and words are signs, then buildings stand for their cultural signification the same way that proper names do to the objects denoted by them. Hence, the meanings of the signs are attached, along with the artistic practice that creates them. When appropriating the theoretical foundation from semiotics to study the passenger terminal complex at Suvarnabhumi, it can be maintained that the discourse of Thainess supplies the framework, if not the process itself, of signification to the edifice.

Due to the fact that this public structure is a product of a living culture that is still evolving in today's rapidly changing and interconnecting world, its relationships with the social, cultural, and political contexts are dialectical, complicated, intertwined, controversial, and contradictory (Kessing, 1989). Regardless of these complexities, examining the dialogues among architecture, identity, and globalization remains quintessential to understand the intricate dynamism and paradoxical characteristics of *khwampenthai* discourse.

Before proceeding to further investigations, a definition of globalization needs to be clarified. In a literal sense, it means international integration ("Noam Chomsky," 2006) that may be characterized as a process by which people of the world are unified into a single society through a combination of economic, technological, socio-cultural and political forces (Croucher, 2004). As a term, globalization often conveys an economic connotation, which is integration of national economies into the international economy via trade, foreign direct investment, capital flows, migration, in conjunction with almost unrestricted spread of ideas and technology

(Bhagwati, 2007). Although the age of globalization typically alludes to the late 20th century period, the process itself has started long time ago, perhaps since the European expansion during the 16th century.

For this article, the word globalization refers to what Noam Chomsky called a doctrinal sense, which is used for describing the so-called Neo-liberal form of economic globalization as well (Chomsky, 2006). In addition, many scholars have made critical remarks on globalization as a disguised form of "Neo-colonialist" practice, where the developed world led by the Americans pressures the developing countries for trade and financial liberalization under conditions favorable to the "first-world" nations. For example, local tendencies of these "third world" countries were pegged to the U.S. dollar typified by their social, political, and economic dependency on international monetary institutions, such as the World Bank and IMF.

3. A Brief History of Suvarnabhumi International Airport and Physical Descriptions of the Passenger Terminal Complex

The growth of global tourist industry and modern Bangkok has played a crucial role in establishing Thailand both as a favorite vacation destination and emerging place for business opportunity. In order to secure a title of a world-class city, Bangkok has strived to become an aviation hub for the Southeast Asian region. Boosted by Thailand's geographical advantage, the new Bangkok international airport (*Suvarnabhumi*, meaning the golden land) was conceived more than three decades ago on a boggy 3,100 ha. site at *Nong Ngu Hao* (known as the Cobra Swamp), 50 km. east of the capital.

Far from being the busiest or largest airport in the world, Suvarnabhumi International Airport is, however, widely recognized as one of the most advanced but troublesome and time-consuming aviation projects ever built, plagued by a series of corruption scandals and uncertainty from several administrations. The saga of Suvarnabhumi International Airport's gestation, particularly in terms of political, economic, urban planning, environmental impact and transportation issues, is well-documented elsewhere. Nonetheless, the construction and physical descriptions of the airport together with its passenger terminal complex are worthy to be succinctly discussed and described. Suvarnabhumi's beginning can be traced to over forty years ago to Litchfield Whiting Boune and Associates' town planning exercise, which included a recommendation for a Bangkok commercial airport that did not share its facilities with the military, as did the existing Donmuang International Airport (National Council for Economic and Social Development, 1961).

Looking at the history of Suvarnabhumi's chronologically a pattern emerging of endless discussions, meetings, recommendations, stops and starts, all initiated around 1961 with the Ministry of Transportation's survey to find the best site (Ministry of Transportation, 1991). During most of the 1960s and the early part of the 1970s, time was spent accumulating a large plot of marshy land at *Nong Ngu Hao* in Bang Phli District, Samut Prakarn Province, which was deemed the most suitable location (Figure 1). In 1973, Northrop Corporation won the concession from the Kittikachorn-Jarusathien military government to built and operate the airport, but the project was shelved after the student uprising during October 14 -16 together with the demise of the junta regime in the same year.

Yet, as late as 1978, the land was still under re-evaluations for suitability under the supervision of Tippets Abbott McCarty Stration (TAMS) as a consultant company. Six years later, the Thai cabinet hired the Netherlands Airport Consultants B.V. to study and design the master plan for the airport. During the next decade, the pff decisions, Louis Berger International became the
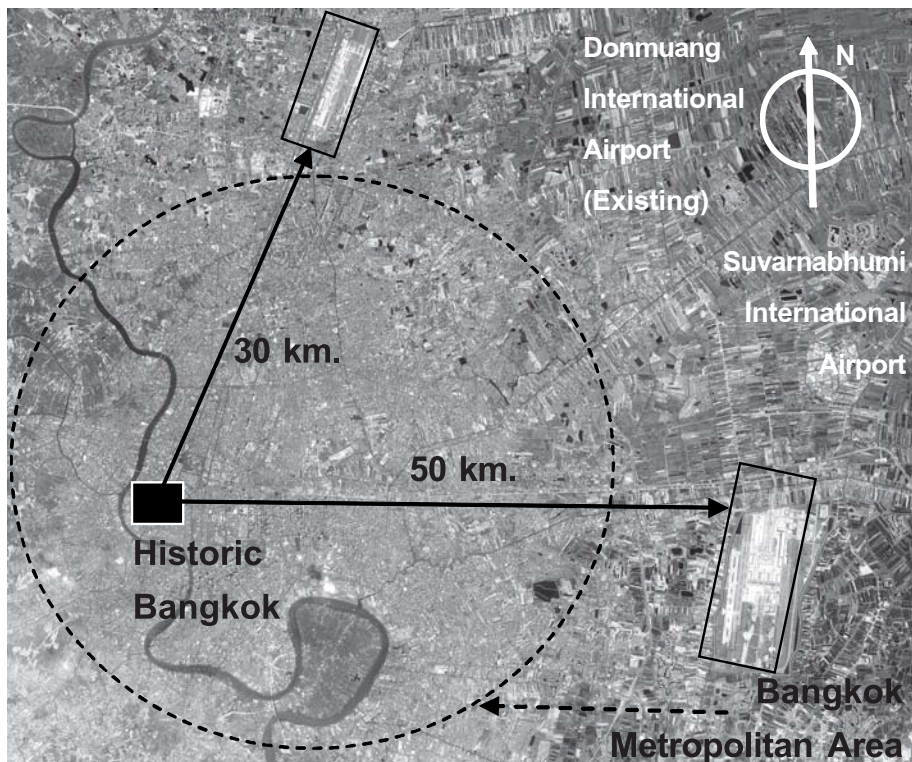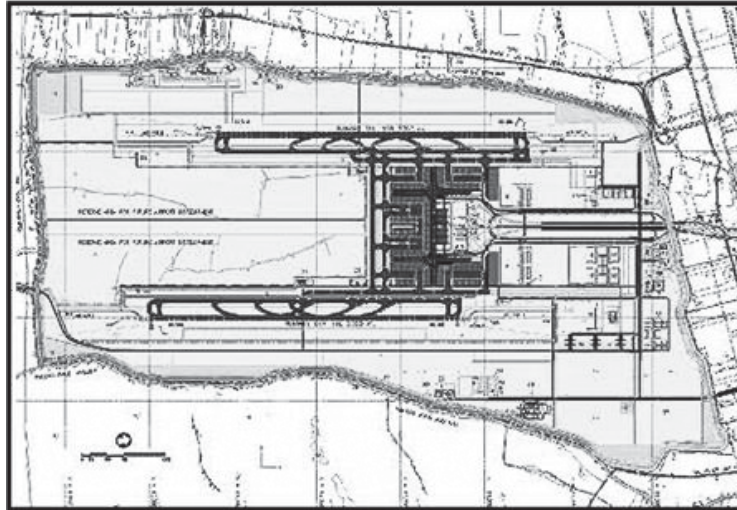
Figure 1. Location map of Suvarnabhumi International Airport in the greater Bangkok metropolitan area.

engineering consultant in 1989, and it was not until 1991 under the Anand Panyarachun administration that the government approved the initiation of construction whereas a name was not given until 2000 (Ministry of Transportation, 1991; Office of the Prime Minister, 1991).

In 1992, the Airport Authority of Thailand signed a contract hiring a consortium General Engineering Consultant (GEC) to implement the master plan and supervise the constructions. Within the same year a competition was held to select an architectural design for the passenger terminal complex. Twenty-two architectural firms from all over the world applied, but only six were invited to read the term of reference (TOR) document. Among the three finalists: Aeroports de Paris, C.W. Fentress & Associates, and Murphy Jahn Inc., the last contestant emerged as the winner (General Engineering Consultant, 1995). By 2001, under the then Thaksin Shinawatra administration, construction eventually moved forward. The passenger terminal complex

along with runways and other facilities only began in 2002. After countless delays and decision reversals, Suvarnabhumi finally commenced operating its commercial flights on September 28, 2006 (Airport of Thailand Public Company [AOT], 2006).

Since its inception, Suvarnabhumi has been destined to become a world-class aviation facility. It features two parallel runways (60 m. wide, 4,000 m. and 3,700 m. long), with an area set aside for future expansion for two more runways (Figure 2). The two parallel taxiways are capable of processing 76 flights per hour with 120 aircraft parking bays. Suvarnabhumi also contains a 132.2 m. tall flight control tower, the tallest in the world housing and the most advanced flight navigation system. There are two modern aircraft maintenance structures. All the flight facilities here are able to service Airbus 380 aircrafts, the largest commercial airliner ever produced. The 568,000 sq.m. cargo service at Suvarnabhumi consists of a 24-hour tax free zone with a handling capacity of 3 million tones of goods.

Figure 2. The master plan of Suvarnabhumi International Airport.

The airport is equipped with the latest flood prevention, water supply, water treatment, sanitary, rescue and fire fighting systems as well. The total number of vehicle parking is 15,600 with 5,000 parking in covered garages. A modern and luxurious five-star hotel is located across the passenger terminal (AOT, 2006).

Visible from afar, Suvarnabhumi boasts a gigantic 563,000 sq.m. passenger terminal complex, which is currently the world's largest single building able to accommodate 45 million passengers annually (Figure 3). This gigantic edifice is composed of seven floors and a basement with state of the art security and baggage handling systems. There are 360 check-in counters with 51 contact and 69 remote gates. A high-speed underground train station linking the airport and downtown Bangkok is located at the basement of the terminal (AOT, 2006).

The design concept of the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi according to the architect, Helmut Jahn, is to put passenger circulation before aircraft circulation, to unify the site through the use of a large roof trellis giving it an overriding architectural image, and to use louvers as shading devices while simultaneously reducing mechanical loads (Figure 4). In addition to these ideas is to allow for expansion in the future and to use the future

Figure 3. The passenger terminal and concourses at Suvarnabhumi International Airport.

Figure 4. The roof structure of the passenger terminal.

expansion areas as public green spaces in the meantime. These spaces are to also house Thai cultural artifacts and objects (Figure 5). Structurally, the architect employs the trellis for more than an overarching theme, but also to hang the rectangular ticketing area from it as well as the cylindrical rotunda's roofs (Figure 6) (Murphy Jahn Architects [MJTA], 2006).

Despite all of its promise, the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi has been burdened by numerous glitches since the opening day. The impressive view of the passenger terminal from the outside, of architectural structures, gave way to appalling design flaws and apparent mismanage-ment by officials. Many of the drawbacks are in fact outcomes of sub-standard design executions. Although these functional deficiencies reside outside the scope of this article, it is worthy to take note of them.

For instance, during the first month of its operation, Suvarnabhumi Airport is already running in crisis mode. Leaking roof, cracks on the runway surface, and baggage mishandling causing several flight delays a day, appear to be teething problems since day one. Numerous passengers have complained about insufficient toilets, absence of signs to direct passengers, confusing traffic paths throughout the terminal, shortage of meeting space notably at the arrivals lounge, as well as lack of mass transit lines to downtown Bangkok and beyond (Rojanaphruk, 2006). The modern look and beautiful design of Suvarnabhumi airport harbors potential dangers for unaware passengers. Those spots include no cement wall to prevent cars from plummeting to the ground at the parking garage, no passenger's railing at walkway connecting the garage to the terminal, frequently jammed revolving doors, sharp-edged air-conditioners fixed on the floor, and the slippery marble floor at the departure area for out-bound passengers (Figure 7) ("Confusing, Tiring First," 2006).

Figure 5. Future expansion area / green space.

Figure 6. The ticketing area.

Figure 7. Examples of potential hazards.

The troubles at Suvarnabhumi have become severe so that senior government officials called the airport together with its sub-standard services an embarrassment for the country. The Airports of Thailand Public Company was ordered to stop thinking about expanding Suvarnabhumi and instead spending more energy and time to make improvements to its services. "Although the airport and its hardware are considered world class, its facilities are not," said several senior ministers blaming the previous administration for its decision to open the airport too soon before it was ready (Mahitthirook, 2006).

The above statement demonstrates a major underlying assumption that as one of the prerequisites to achieve and/or maintain a "world-class" status, a city needs to possess a world-class airport as its gateway. Regardless of geographical differences, these so-called "world-class" airports seem to adhere to same design standards and feature similar amenities. Consequently, cities throughout the world—in their effort of reach and/or maintain the "world-class" status—have been building, renovating, expanding their airports as never before since the 1990s. Examples include constructing/expanding passenger terminals at O' Hare (Chicago), Heathrow (London), Charles de Gaulle (Paris) and Changi (Singapore), coupled with erecting entirely new mega airports such as Chek Lap Kok (Hong Kong), Kansai (Osaka), and Denver International Airport (Denver). Yet, the results do not always match the plan. For instance, the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport has fallen far short of expected arriving passengers despite its modern facilities. This set back, however, seems to have little effect for the city of Kuala Lumpur in reaching the world-class city status, which generally casts doubt over the cardinal equation of city + airport = world-class status. Hence, it raises a question on the necessity of possessing a world-class airport as a prerequisite to being a world-class city.

Where as millions of dollars have been pouring into the construction of those mega airports, little attention has been paid in creating a sense of place via architectural designs. In other words, there appears to be minimal concern for the connections in symbolic identity between the airports and their cities. The rush for airports in order to be an icon for world-class cities, then, has resulted in a global mediocrity in airport architecture throughout the world as demonstrated by the discussions below.

4. A Dichotomy of Reading on the Thai Identity Discourse

Similar to other global gateways, the ultra-modern architecture of the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi could not escape the criticism on its lack of expressions for the local and cultural identity through architectural designs. The following comments reveal intriguing interplays between two opposing points of views considering the issues of "place" and "identity": a phenomenon of place-ness versus placeless-ness, embedded in the design of the terminal complex at Suvarnabhumi.
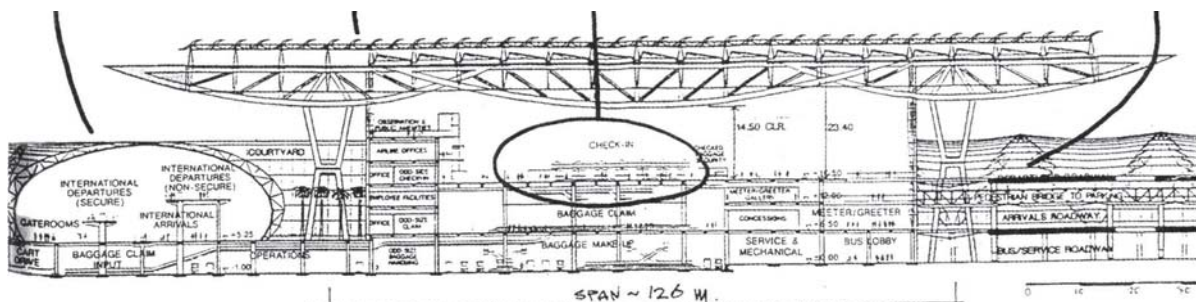
4.1 Place-ness

Critiques on the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi have surfaced since its design was made available to public. Leading the charge was the Association of Siamese Architects Under Royal Patronage (ASA) for the terminal's lack of a sense of place and *Khwampenthai*. The design of Murphy Jahn Inc. (MJTA)—a consortium led by a famous American-based architect Helmut Jahn, the winner of the competition for the terminal—has been heavily criticized by ASA according to seven factors: a) lack of Thai identity; b) unsuitability to local climate; c) inefficient energy consumption; d) unproven structural system; e) difficulty for utility and maintenance; f) overuse of imported materials; and g) high cost

over-run (Chavalnsipla, 2002; General Engineering Consultant, 1995, 1996; ASA, 1997). The use of glass and Teflon coated fabric for roof materials requiring enormous amount of energy for climatic control and the 126-m. structural span of the terminal are also viewed by ASA as generating unnecessary construction cost.

Among the seven allegations, the lack of Thai identity in MJTA's design proves to be the most serious point for ASA (1997). The critiques reached the culmination point when Chainimitr Nawarat, Chair of ASA Fine Arts Commission, published an article *Can Helmut Jahn's Identity be Changed to Thai Identity?* in ASA magazine in July 1997 (Nawarat, 1997). The author graphically illustrates roof alterations to suit the tropical climate of Thailand as well as to achieve what he perceives as Thai identity. Nawarat proposed to modify the roof 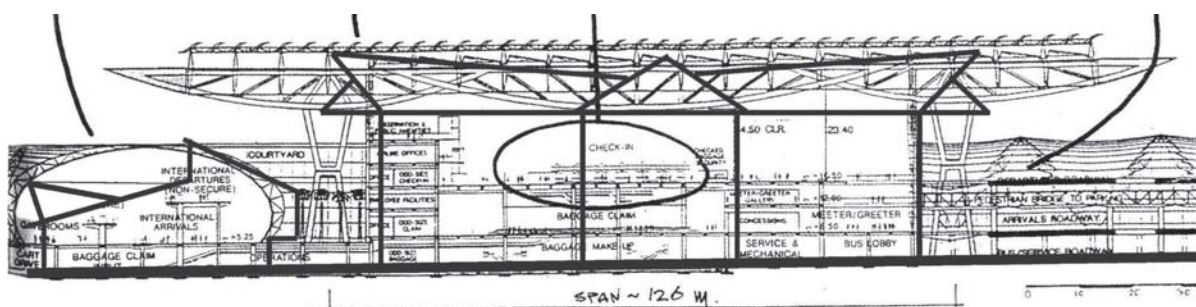of the terminal from glass with adjustable stainless steel louvers (Figure 8) to local materials like terracotta roof tiles (Figure 9). He also changed the shape of the roof from a large flat area (Figure 10) to a series of high-pitched gable roofs (Figure 11-14). As for the airplane concourses, their oval shape (Figure 12-13) is eliminated, replaced by simple rectangular forms with gable roofs and dormers on top (Figure 14). ASA always claims that articles published in their magazine are personal opinions of the authors and do not represent those of the association. However, on May 14, 1997, ASA president Chamnean Sasibutra sent a letter to the then Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh expressing concerns of the organization on MJTA's design. The essence of the letter contains remarkable similarities to Nawarat's critiques (ASA, 1997).

ASA's view on MJTA's design, as exemplified by Nawarat's article, shows the dilemma that the Thais face for their national and cultural identity

Source: ASA Journal (July, 1997)

Figure 8.   MJTA passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, section.

Source: ASA Journal (July, 1997)

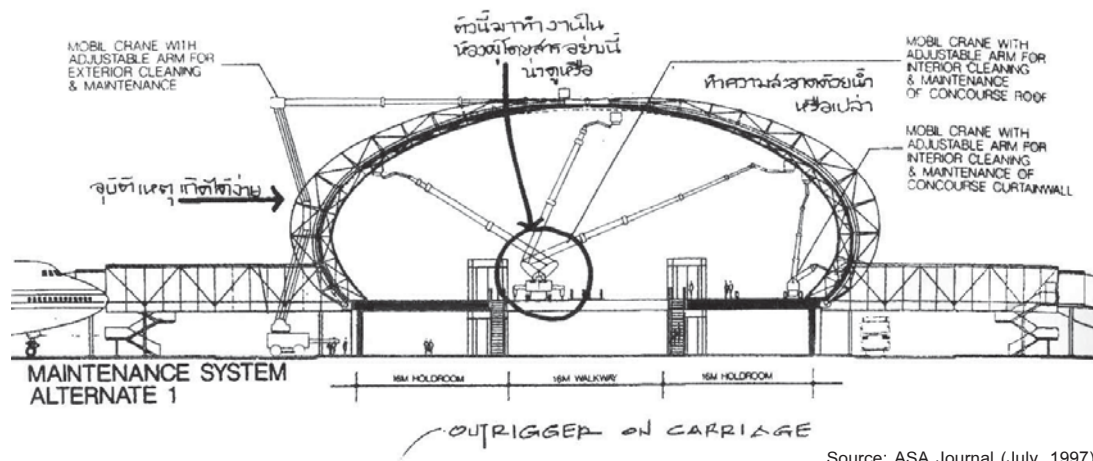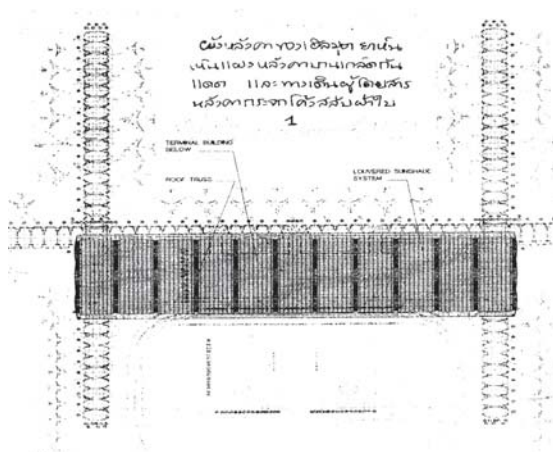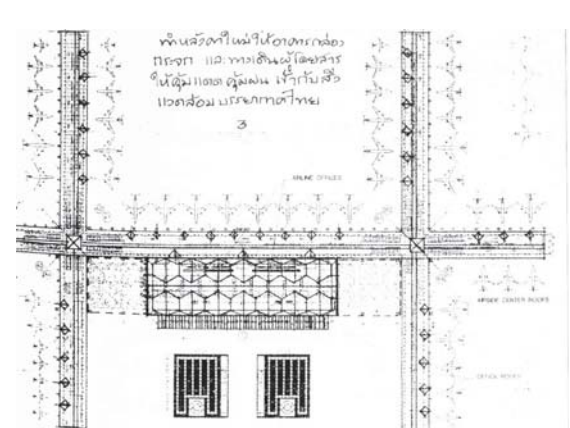**Figure 9.**   ASA's criticism on MJTA passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, section.

Figure 10. MJTA passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, aerial view.

Figure 11. ASA's Criticism on MJTA Passenger Terminal at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, aerial view.

Figure 12. ASA's criticism on MJTA passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, section.

Figure 13. MJTA passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, roof plan.

Figure 14. ASA's criticism on MJTA passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, roof plan.

during the age of globalization. On the one hand, the majority of Thai architects, composed mainly of the middle-age generation with the same conservative attitude represented by ASA, perceived Thai culture and its identity in terms of fixation, something intrinsic and unchangeable regardless of differences in time. As a consequence, without having a reference to historical Thai architecture—either in terms of elements, formal compositions, or spatial configuration—the MJTA designed the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi can be regarded as anything but Thai. It is therefore totally unsuitable for a building housing such a very important function as gateway to Thailand.

While presenting a compelling argument, ASA's criticism exposes the incongruity of their discourse on "place-ness" (Thainess) as well. ASA's critiques employ both positive and negative identifications of Thainess. Positively, it advocates the innate quality of Thai through the binary criterion of: nature/history; stability/change; authentic/fake; identity/difference; dominant/docile; and orientation/disorientation. Yet, such characteristics are never defined.

For another example, Wattanyu Na Thalang (ASA representative serving as a member of the sub-committee on Thai identity for the new airport) did not provide straight answers to MJTA's inquiry of the perception of the committee on Thainess. Because of the difficulty in identification, Na Thalang resorted to a rhetorical answer, saying that it is not the job of the committee to define Thainess and to tell where and how to apply it to the design of the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi. MJTA is solely responsible for coming up with such a definition themselves, as well as the design. In contrast, the ASA representative had no trouble in utilizing the negative identification, pointing out what he sees as "what is not Thai," in MJTA's scheme in great details (Chavalnsipla, 2002; Nawarat, 1997).

Na Thalang's rhetoric epitomizes the unfixed, ambiguous, and even self-contradictory nature of the discourse of place-ness. These paradoxical aspects of *khwampenthai*" reveal that the national characteristics in Thai cultural artifacts that create the characteristics of place-ness are inventive and artificial, continually being constructed, carved, inscribed, and in many cases manipulated to serve specific purposes. This is, perhaps, why expressions of the identity of place can sometimes be quite unreasonable and inexplicable. It is even more puzzling when considering the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi Airport as a building type itself is a modern, Western invention.

4.2 Placeless-ness

On the other hand, leading politicians, government officials, as well as both younger generations of Thai architects and older generations who are more attuned to modern knowledge and technology as well as Western culture and forms of consciousness, appear to be content with MJTA's design. Traditional Thai architecture, they argue, cannot accommodate a modern function like Suvarnabhumi. There is no precedent of building types in Thai architecture that can be adapted to the design of the passenger terminal here.

In contrast to ASA's perspective on the sense of place and the Thai identity, advocates of MJTA deem that similar to other cultures, Thai culture always evolves, and *khwampenthai* always fluctuates. In their perspective, MJTA's design may not be what is considered as "Thai" from both the past and present architectural precedents, but the passenger terminal edifice may symbolize the future of Thai architecture. Like the Eiffel Tower and Pompidou Center in Paris, the critics and people in general may not like them today since these structures look so unconventional for their times but would end up being fond of them in the future, said Helmut Jahn in his testimony to the sub-committee on Thai identity for Suvarnabhumi International Airport (Chavalnsipla, 2002; MJTA, 1997).

Those in favor of MJTA's design believe that in its bid to attain the status of a world-class city, Bangkok needs to operate a modern airport that would put the city on par with other cities in the West, particularly in terms of the capability to accommodate air travel. On a larger scale, MJTA supporters further maintain that Suvarnabhumi would advance Thailand in its race to become Southeast Asia's aviation hub. So, the design of the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi should reflect the vision of being a member of global cities—via modern architectural design. The terminal, they perceive, would act as a gateway linking Bangkok with the globalizing force of other "world-class" cities.

Although the centrality of the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi as a global gateway is undeniable, its architectural design begs more investigation on a phenomenon of cultural globalization. While fully embracing the globalizing force via the passenger terminal's ultra modern design, MJTA is well aware of localizing forces deeply entrenched in criticism for the lack of Thainess from the Thai public. As a result, several so-called "visual amenities," featuring traditional Thai artifacts and objects are devised and placed throughout the terminal (Figure 15 and 16). Yet, these visual amenities, such as Thai gazeboes (*salas*) in courtyards, mythical statues, wall murals, etched glass, etc., serve as decorative elements rather than holding any intrinsic value to the design. They, in fact, perform as "add-on" elements, that could easily be removed or changed. For example, the green spaces, landscape, courtyards, and other decorative visual elements are placed in the areas designated for future expansions flanking the terminal. When the expansion happens, what, then, would happen to the signification of "place," through the design of the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi?

Such expendability suggests that the creation of sense of place and local identity is not what the architect and those who are responsible for the design and construction of Suvarnabhumi have in mind. With little effort to harmonize the Thai decorative elements and the overall ultra modern appearance, the atmosphere of the passenger terminal has resulted in a simulacrum that is disharmonious and syncretic. Or to put it more succinctly, the edifice presents "kitsch" with no "soul." The "visual amenities" function merely as a device to appease public criticism.

Moreover, the emphasis on the notion of representing Bangkok as a member of world-class cities—stress on universalism through modern architecture—has inadvertently generated a "sterile" environment. Certainly, the use of high-tech materials, such as laminated glass, aluminum, and steel, together with the terminal's bridge-like superstructures with

Figure 15.   A Thai Sala.

Figure 16.   Thai mythical sculptures.

the span exceeding 100 m. (Figure 17), as well as the concourses' curved fabric roof look impressive (Figure 18). As a matter of fact, the futuristic passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi exhibits nothing short of a triumph in modern architecture, which has become a common sight around the world (Figure 19). Where as the edifice, in itself, is among one of best modern architectural designs, in a cultural context, it simply places Bangkok and Thailand in the club of world-class mediocrity in architectural expression (Figure 20).

Figure 18. The interior of the concourse.

5. Conclusion: Persisting Questions

The above discussions demonstrate that the design of the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi encompasses a modern way of expressing Thai identity as much as a Thai way of engaging global culture and modernity. The criticisms on placeness and placeless-ness of the passenger terminal also disclose that there is no definite answer depending on a personal view on identity of place: fixed versus adaptable.

In any case, a messier and, potentially, irresolvable inquiry on the identity of place emerges. The dichotomy between place-ness and placeless-ness of the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi

Source: AOT

Figure 19. The passenger terminal and concourses at Suvarnabhumi International Airport at the sunset.
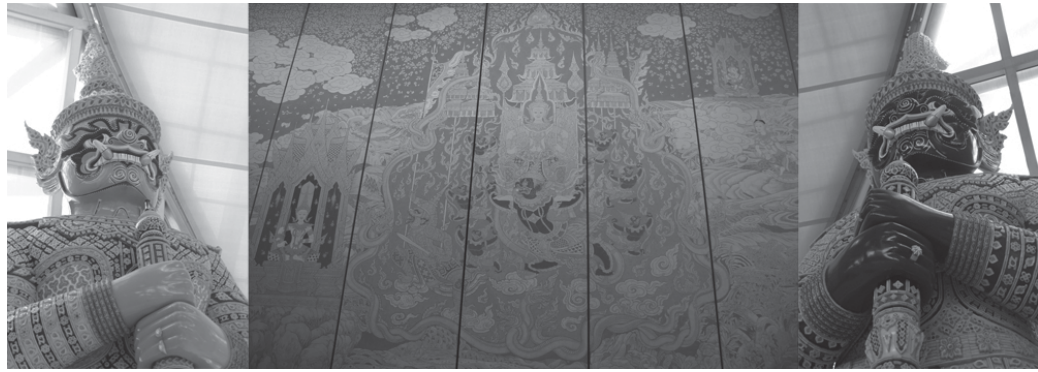

Figure 17. The superstructure of the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi.

Source: AOT

Figure 20. General atmosphere inside the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi.

Figure 21. The decorative "Visual Elements" inside the passenger terminal.

Airport raises more critical questions. For instance, what constitutes an identity of place particularly in terms of cultural and national identity in a world that seems to be merging into a single unit under globalization and economic interdependence? Does the age of global economy mean the era of global mediocrity in cultural consumption too?

Regardless of what the answers may be, Suvarnabhumi passenger terminal is evident to intricate links between airports and their parent cities in the cultural dimension. Although it is true that Suvarnabhumi Airport cannot represent Bangkok for its cultural developments, the passenger terminal's design yields a glimpse into what is happening for the capital in terms of being a global city. While much has been said on the airport as a projection of the image that Bangkok and Thailand aspire to assume, the terminal's "kitsch" comments at the same time reflect the reality—in which both the city and country face—in negotiating modernity and the global economy.

Living in the age of globalization, Thailand is geared up toward the world's primary driving force: capitalism and consumerism. Things of qualitative or abstract values such as its cultural heritage, traditions, customs, beliefs, ways of living, practice, knowledge, and natural beauty are assigned quantitative values, having tangible monetary prices and calculable numbers. The Thai identities—be it place, cultural, or national—have been revised and

Figure 22. The skyline of modern Bangkok.

commercialized as "commodities," being displaced from their original contexts (Figure 21). The results are kitsch and mediocrity as displayed by the simulacrum of the "visual amenities" and the overriding ultra modern design theme of the airport.

In a larger scale, a similar vain of arguments can be applied to the city of Bangkok as well. The city's landscape is strewn with skyscrapers and public transportation infrastructure juxtaposed with traditional architecture like temples and palaces (Figure 22). Along several major thoroughfares, gigantic models of celestial animals and decoration coexist with modern urban facilities, such as traffic lights and telephone booths (Figure 23). Until recently, it was not unusual to see wildlife animals,

notably elephants, walking the streets of Bangkok next to cars, trucks, and motorcycles sitting idly during traffic jams (Figure 24). These surreal yet kitschy characteristics are combined with mediocre façades of a modern city, generating a surreal "Disneytized," if not disoriented and schizophrenic, urban environment for the city of Bangkok (Figure 25).

In sum, a criticism may be made that Bangkok in its bid to be a world-class city incorporates all the cultural "gimmicks" from around the world, but ends up being nothing in terms of self-identity. However, a counterargument may also be asserted that such characteristics are precisely what Bangkok—as a cultural city and by extension Thailand—is all about. In this respect, it is an irony to accept that the design of the passenger terminal at Suvarnabhumi is in effect a success. While appearing to be a world-class mediocrity in its architectural design, the terminal as a gateway for Bangkok precisely captures both the phenomena of place and placeless-ness of the city.

Be that as it may, this research could not go without saying that skepticism on the globalizing process needs to be careful on the fact that the West itself is of diverse characteristics. As a case in point, although having some similarities, the Americans and Europeans are vastly different particularly in social and cultural terms. The process of modernization in the West is also varied. Western regimes with dissimilar cultural heritages, political and economic systems engage modernity differently, and so on globalization.

Finally, the dichotomy between fixed and adaptable identity of place from critical readings on the architecture of the passenger terminal complex at Suvarnebhumi International Airport further leads to fundamental problems considering *khwampenthai* discourse. For example, what constitutes Thai identity? What represents the Thais in terms of cultural expression and uniqueness? Living in a world that seems to be merging into a single unit

Source: TAT

Figure 23. Rajadamnoen Avenue, Bangkok, 2007.

Source: TAT

Figure 24. Elephants roaming the streets of Bangkok during rush hours, 2006.

Source: TAT

Figure 25. Khaosan Road, the backpacker district, Bangkok, 2007.

under globalization and economic interdependence, Thai people are increasingly aware of the loss of Thainess in the wake of Western cultural hegemony. Nevertheless, one rarely asking his or herself; does Thainess ever exist at all?

Today, the absence of economic and tele-communication boundaries among nations challenges the self-proclaimed legitimacy of *khwampenthai* discourse. The interactions between Western and non-Western cultures, through the movements of peoples, ideas, and cultural artifacts—particularly via electronic media such as television, radio, and the Internet—make Thainess more susceptible. Through these channels, foreigners, notably Westerners or *Farangs* have more access to the creation of Thai cultural artifacts, as do the Thais for their Western counterparts. A large number of foreign residents, including tourists and retirees, dwell in Thailand for a long periods, whereas a sizable portion of Thai diasporas reside in both the U.S. and Western Europe. Not only do they bring their cultural practices with them to the host countries, but also accept and bring back those from the hosts. As a case in point, while Hollywood movies and rapped music are popular in Thailand, *Tom Yum Kung* (spicy sour shrimp soup) along with other Thai food has become well known in the West. During the process of these cultural interactions, the practice of hybridization occurs. As a result, it is possible to find Westerners to become Thai folk singers or even Buddhist monks, while not uncommon to see Thai athletics competing in world-class series e.g. golf, tennis, and boxing.

As a part of cultural and economic transactions in the globalizing world, the productions of cultural artifacts are frequently created by non-natives. For Thailand, several culturally significant structures supposed to express the characteristic of Thainess, like the passenger terminal at Suvarna-bhumi, are of contributions from foreigners and their cultures. Why are these foreign contributions ignored? What makes them Thai and not foreign?

These examples brought a series of even more perplexing queries to ponder upon. For instance, as evident by Na Thalang's position on MJTA's design for Suvarnabhumi, because the critics themselves are unable to define Thainess, are their critiques then justifiable? In order to create authentic Thai characteristics, must the designers be of the correct race, and by extension gender, age, class, and so fourth? Can authentic qualities of Thai architecture be determined, given the fact that Thai culture itself is synthetic? If so, how? Does the predominantly Westernized architecture in modern Thailand such as the passenger terminal complex at Suvarnabhumi International Airport signify, if not reaffirm, that the country has succumbed to Western Neo-colonialism, especially through intellectual and cultural means? Or is it simply an expression of a country adjusting itself to a rapidly changing and interconnected world? Is it possible to be modern without being Western?

In the last analysis, the hybridized characteristics of the passenger terminal at Suvarna-bhumi—between its ultra modern architecture and traditional decorative elements—reveal that the creation of a "pure" Thai national and cultural identity is perhaps impossible, but only the myth of *khwampenthai* exists.

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