

The Democracy Monument: Ideology, Identity, and Power Manifested in Built Forms

อนุสาวรีย์ประชาธิปไตย: อุดมการณ์ เอกลักษณ์ และอำนาจ สื่อผ่านงานสถาปัตยกรรม

Assistant Professor Koompong Noobanjong, Ph.D.

ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์ ดร. คัมพงค์ หนูบรรจง

Faculty of Industrial Education, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, Ladkrabang

คณะครุศาสตร์อุตสาหกรรม สถาบันเทคโนโลยีพระจอมเกล้าเจ้าคุณทหารลาดกระบัง

Abstract

This research article examines the methods of power mediation in the design of the Democracy Monument in Bangkok, Thailand. It examines its underlying concept and mechanisms for conveying political power and social practice, along with the national and cultural identity that operates under an ideological framework. The study consists of two major parts. First, it investigates the monument as a political form of architecture: a symbolic device for the state to manifest, legitimize, and maintain power. The focus then shifts to an architectural form of politics: the ways in which ordinary citizens re-appropriated the Democracy Monument through semantic subversions to perform their social and political activities as well as to form their modern identities. Via the discourse theory, the analytical and critical discussions further reveal complexity, incongruity, and contradiction of meanings in the design of the monument in addition to paradoxical relationships with its setting, Rajadamnoen Avenue, which resulted from changes in the country's socio-political situations.

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ศึกษากระบวนการสื่อผ่านอำนาจอนุสาวรีย์ประชาธิปไตย รวมทั้งบริบททางจารีตสังคม อุดมคติรัฐชาติสมัยใหม่ และเอกลักษณ์วัฒนธรรม ซึ่งถูกชี้นำโดยอุดมการณ์การเมือง โดยอาศัยทฤษฎีวิพากษ์บนปรัชญายุคหลังสมัยใหม่สาระของงานวิจัยตั้งอยู่บนปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างวาทกรรมในสองกระแสหลักคือ อนุสาวรีย์ประชาธิปไตยในฐานะ 1. รูปแบบสถาปัตยกรรมที่ตอบสนองต่อการเมือง: เครื่องหมายแห่งอำนาจและความชอบธรรมของรัฐบาลเผด็จการในการครอบงำประเทศ และ 2. ความเคลื่อนไหวทางการเมืองอันนำมาซึ่งการเปลี่ยนแปลงความหมายของงานสถาปัตยกรรม: การสร้างอัตลักษณ์ใหม่ให้แก่อนุสาวรีย์จากการเมืองภาคประชาชน เพื่อท้าทาย ปฏิเสธ และล้มล้างระบอบทหาร ผลลัพธ์จากปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างวาทกรรมดังกล่าวบ่งชี้ต่อไปว่า อนุสาวรีย์ประชาธิปไตยนั้นเต็มไปด้วยความหมายที่ซับซ้อน ไม่ชัดเจน ไม่เป็นระเบียบ และขัดแย้ง อันเป็นเหตุมาจากองค์ประกอบการออกแบบสถาปัตยกรรม และจากความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างอนุสาวรีย์กับสภาพแวดล้อมของถนนราชดำเนิน

Keywords (คำสำคัญ)

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1. Introduction

Located at the heart of Rajadamnoen Avenue, the Democracy Monument occupies a prominent space not only in the urban fabric of Bangkok but also in the collective Thai psyche. Commissioned in 1939 to celebrate the democratic revolution of 1932, this public structure was initially perceived by many as a relic of the junta regime due to its duplicity in architectural signification. After serving as a rallying point for demonstrations against military dictators that ended in bloodsheds in 1973 and 1992, the monument has become a place to commemorate people's struggles towards democracy and self-empowerment.

Via the discourse theory, this paper examines the Democracy Monument through its underlying concept and mechanism for conveying political power and social practice, along with its national and cultural identity operating under an ideological framework. The investigations evolve around two analytical and critical themes of: a) a political form of architecture: the monument as a symbolic device for the state to manifest, legitimize, and maintain power; and b) an architectural form of politics: the ways in which ordinary citizens re-appropriated the monument through semantic subversions to empower themselves, to perform their social and political activities, as well as to form their modern identities. The discussions further reveal complexity, incongruity, and contradiction of meanings in the design of the Democracy Monument in addition to its paradoxical relationships with Rajadamnoen Avenue, which result from changes in the country's socio-political situations.

2. Architecture, Power, Identity, and Ideology: A Critical Dialogue

Based on Saussure's linguistic theory, it

can be argued that similar to textual materials, architecture signifies meanings through representations just like words and signs in languages [1]. 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 them. The attempts to validate the practices are merely repetitions because the use of architectural elements presupposes precisely the justification aimed to provide [2].

For architecture of the state like the Democracy Monument, the practice that brings these buildings into being, a mediation of power, signifies their meanings. In other words, government and public structures function primarily as a "discourse" for power mediation. According to Foucault (1972), discourse is a construction of subjectivity within certain historical, social and cultural systems of knowledge in a society. Just as the subject is produced by, and must operate within, the laws of language, a discourse produces a subject equally dependent upon the rules of the system of knowledge that generates it. Discourse is used to legitimate the exercise of power and therefore is always associated with desire, but these links must be masked if the desire and power were to be manifested [3].

Dovey (1999) mentioned that the masking of power in built forms results from rapid changes in political situations, which require swift moves in exercising power from one method to another, thus concealing itself in the transitional process. The masking of power also derives from the fact that a naked will to power is morally unacceptable. Hence, self-deceit or hypocrisy is needed to legitimize that one's rise to power is for the common good of a society, which is normally carried out through an allusion to ideologies [4].

In architectural and urban design, self-deceit dictates the aesthetics. Buildings and public space propagating political contents usually

operate under an ideological guise via the creation of identity: a projection of specific characteristics that can mobilize people to come together to express their solidarity and feeling of belonging, which could be politically exploited.

In any case, the identification ascribed to an ideology does not present any intrinsic quality of it, but simply represents what it creates. Winichakul (1994) maintained that identity is constructed by combined effects of ideological discourses in defining its domain, conferring definitions, and competing with each other. The presence of identity is merely a temporary discursive conjuncture in which certain discourses have stabilized their hegemonic forces and then asserted their power upon the domain while negating others [5].

As for the built environment, it must be noted that architecture and urban form by themselves do not contain any form of power. As remarked by Bentley (1999), buildings are not inherently subjugating or liberating. People utilize them to generate such meanings, and by a discursive mode of signification buildings can serve interests for which they are not originally intended [6].

Since the Democracy Monument is a product of a living culture that is still evolving, its relationships with the social, cultural, and political contexts are dialectical, complicated, intertwined, controversial, and contradictory [7]. Regardless of these complexities, examining the dialogues among architecture, power, identity, and ideology remains quintessential to understand the mediation of power in this public structure.

3. The Political Form of Architecture

3.1 The Genesis of the Democracy Monument

The Democracy Monument was built to celebrate the bloodless revolution of June 24,

1932, when a group of intelligentsia in military and civil service known as the People's Party overthrew the absolute monarchy and installed a constitutional rule. Although professing the democratic ideology, the People's Party's real motive behind the revolution seemed to be a Western-style modernization process.

Following the revolution were the years of turmoil. The new regime survived the royalists' counter-revolution in 1933. After falling out with the constitutional government, King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, 1925-1935) chose exile in 1934 and abdicated while in England a year later. His foreign-born and educated nephew, Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII, 1935-1946), ascended to the throne at the age of nine, but did not take a permanent residency in Thailand until the end of World War II. Notwithstanding the constitution and parliamentary system, most members of the National Assembly and the Cabinet, not to mention all the Prime Ministers, were appointed. It was not before 1946 when Thailand could fully become a democratic country, albeit in a brief moment, by allowing the legalization of political parties and holding the first general election.

A plan to erect a memorial for the 1932 revolution was conceived in the early days of the constitutional period and eventually materialized in 1938 after Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsonggram (Pibul), a founding member of the People's Party, consolidated his position and assumed the rank of the Prime Minister.

3.2 Pibulsonggram's Legacy

As much as Pibul and his politics shaped its design, the Democracy Monument supplied the Prime Minister and his clique a self-serving discourse to assert, legitimize, and maintain power. Under the pretext of advocating nationalism and democracy, Pibul fashioned a semi-fascist state during his first tenure of the premiership (1938-1944), emphasizing a modernization process.

In the cultural arena, the government embarked on the National Building Program, issuing a series of twelve Cultural Mandates [8] aimed to “uplift the national spirit and moral code of the nation and instilling progressive tendencies and a newness into Thai life” [9]. The mandates instructed the people in all aspects of their social life, which were “necessarily in the interests of progress and civilization that the world might see that Thailand was a modern nation” [10].

Nevertheless, the Cultural Mandates proved to be conceptually schizophrenic. Several measures taken to define the new Thai identity were in many respects as much Western as Thai. The most vivid example was the name of the country that was altered in 1939 from “Siam” (a native word) to “Thailand” (a hybrid Thai-English term). In spite of these projected images, Thailand in the late 1930s was far from realizing its namesake as a “land of the free,” since it was ruled by the administration that was despotic in nature.

During World War II, Thailand sided with the Axis Power. Pibul himself was an admirer of Mussolini and Hitler, particularly the ways in which the Duce and the Fuhrer transformed their nations through modern architectural and urban designs. The Thai autocrat’s acute awareness on the importance of the built environment as *media par excellence* to convey political propaganda and to mediate power was among the major contributing factors that led to the construction of the Democracy Monument.

3.3 The Democracy Monument and its Setting

Architecture of the state in Thailand from 1938 to 1944 demonstrated that the preference for Modern Architecture was a conscious decision by Pibulsonggram government to: a) relegate the royal authority; b) dissociate from the old regime; c) implement the National Building Program by a

creation of modern identity; and d) signify the authority of the new administration.

Being broadly defined, the term “Modern Architecture” coined in the Pibul period was an amalgam, consisting of various early 20th century stylistic movements. Pibul envisioned “the Rajadamnoen the Champs-Élysées” and the Democracy Monument the Arc de Triomphe” of Bangkok [11]. The monument, he said, would act as “a center of all things progressive, from which the thoroughfares linking the capital to other parts of the country would originate” [11]. The main axis of the Rajadamnoen Avenue, built in the late-19th century during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, “would be widened and lined up with handsome edifices, becoming a pride of the modern and civilized Thailand” [11].

Known in Thai as *Anusawari Prachathipatai*, the Democracy Monument sits on a circular plinth in a traffic roundabout at an intersection between the middle Rajadamnoen Avenue (Rajadamnoen Klang) and Dinso Road (Figure 1). Designed by the architect Mew Aphaiwong, its construction was carried out by Christiani & Nielsen (Siam) Ltd. An Italian artist Corrado Feroci a founder of Silpakorn University who later became a Thai citizen Silpa Bhirasri executed the sculptural program, assisted by Sithidej Sanghirand.

The design of the Democracy Monument is abundant with symbolism, especially in terms of numerological signification. The centerpiece, with a formal arrangement akin to that of the Art Deco, is composed of a round turret capped by golden-stacked bowls supporting an image of the constitution carved in the form of a folded document (Figure 2). The turret contains six gates decorated with swords and Buddha images, referring to the People’s Party’s six principles of freedom, peace, education, equality, economy, and unity. The three-meter high turret also denotes



Figure 1. An aerial view of the Democracy Monument, ca. 1940s.



Figure 2. The centerpiece of the Democracy Monument.



Figure 3. An overall view of the Democracy Monument.



Figure 4. The mythical serpent and fountain.

the month of June that is the third month of the traditional Thai calendar, along with the national triumvirate of administrative, legislative, and juridical powers [12].

Influenced by Italian Futuristic architecture, four slender vertical fins with splayed striations standing for the army, navy, air force and police, guard the constitution (Figure 3). The height of the fins and the radius of the base of the monument are 24 meters, indicating the date of June twenty-fourth [12].

Originally, seventy-five half-buried cannons with their barrels facing down encircled the Democracy Monument. The number of cannons (75) represents the last two digits of the year of the revolution, which was 2475 in the Buddhist chronology [12]. At the ground level, facing outwards from the base of the fins are fountains sculpted in the form of *naga*, the protective serpent in Hindu-Buddhist mythology, whose aesthetics does not conform to the Thai convention but bears stylistic influences from the West (Figure 4).

Eight Bas-reliefs are positioned at the pedestals of the fins. Five panels recount the story of the 1932 revolution from the establishment of the People's Party to the events of June 24. Being propagandistic in nature, these sculptures nonetheless betray the democratic ideology. They celebrate the dominance of the armed forces in carrying out the revolution on behalf of the people, who are relegated to the peripheries in the compositions of the images. The Bas-reliefs also portray the civilian figures passively as grateful recipients of virtues from the armed forces as shown by the people's static postures of spectators witnessing the unfolding revolution. On the contrary, the military figures—from their energetic and dramatic body movements—are depicted as being idealistic and vigorous, possessing both the intention and effect of making Thailand a *bona fide* democracy [13].

The supremacy of the armed forces reigns in other three Bas-reliefs as well. The panel titled “Soldiers Fighting for Democracy” (Figure 5) shows heroic and united armed forces as the champions of Thai democracy. Next, the panel titled “Depiction of the People” (Figure 6) exhibits a soldier protecting people in their civilian pursuits. While these two panels capture

a self-justifying view of the military regime to rule on behalf of the people, the panel titled “Depiction of Balance and Good Life” (Figure 7) displays the guiding principle for the social policies of Pibul government by alluding to the Prime Minister's interpretations on nationalism and Buddhism. At the center of its composition, an allegorical figure seated in a meditating posture symbolizes the nation and religion. This figure holds a sword and a set of scales, symbolizing the armed forces and justice. It is flanked by other figures representing (from left to right): sport (a half-naked man with a shot put), education (a female teacher and two young pupils), religion (a monk and a boy) and the arts (a couple of artisans) [14]. All the figures seem to be endowed with the characteristics of Social Realism, being depicted as ordinary persons carrying their tools of trades and donning normal attire as in real life.

This research argues that a symbolic reference to the crown does exist, albeit in a minimized and hypocritical fashion, which is the golden-stacked bowls. The Thais have a long tradition of using them to carry their offerings to those considered “sacred,” including the god-king. In this case, the offering is the folded



Figure 5. “Soldier Fighting for Democracy” Bas-relief.



Figure 6. “Depiction of the People” Bas-relief.



Figure 7. “Depiction of Balanced and Good Life” Bas-relief.

document denoting the constitution. In addition, it is obvious that the role of women in the design of the monument is marginalized. Few female images appear in the Bas-relief panels. For instance, “Depiction of Balance and Good Life” (Figure 7) displays a woman teacher, and “Soldiers Fighting for Democracy” (Figure 5) illustrates a mother holding a child.

Aesthetically, by encompassing “a rich layering of meanings including Buddhism, nationalism, militarism and democracy in a mix of styles from social realism to art deco and futurism,” the Democracy Monument evokes a feeling of dynamism [15]. The fusion of styles further reflects differences in artistic backgrounds between the designers: Apaiwong and Feroci, resulting in an awkward visual composition. This ungainly look is noticeable from a disharmonious hybridization between the traditional Thai decorative elements and the overall Modernist profile.

In urban scale, accompanying the construction of the Democracy Monument was a transformation of the *Rajadamnoen Klang* (Figure 8) where the government constructed the Rajadamnoen Edifice Group (Figure 9). Designed in

Neo-Plastic and Art Deco styles, the buildings housed several shops, offices, restaurants, hotel and theater, operating as a stage for the monument to proclaim its glory. Yet, both the Rajadamnoen Edifice Group and Democracy Monument were initially unpopular with Bangkok residents, because the government evicted local residents and shopkeepers from the area for their constructions. The widening of the *Rajadamnoen Klang* to create a ceremonial boulevard involved cutting down hundreds of shade trees as well [16]. These factors coupled with the aforementioned schizophrenic, if not hypocritical, characteristics made the Democracy Monument a tribute to military dictatorship and its tyrannical clout in public perception.

3.4 The Mechanism of Power Mediated in Built Forms

The Democracy Monument—in the original capacity—operated as a mediator of: a) arbitative power for controlling and allocating; b) creative power for founding, claiming, legitimizing, and transforming; c) assertive power for contesting, maintaining, and accommodating; and d) destructive power for negating and subjugating.



Figure 8. The middle section of the Rajadamnoen towards the Democracy Monument, ca. 1940s.



Figure 9. The Rajadamnoen edifice group.

These forms of power are manifested through a collaboration of the following methods [4].

3.5 Force

Force is the most overt means of exercising power, depriving its subjects of noncompliance. Yet, this method offers rather limited environmental applications, mainly restricted to the assertive and destructive powers. As a consequence, force is utilized for preventative rather than creative purposes in terms of a spatial confinement and/or exclusion, such as a prison,

hospital, military installation, and residential enclave.

For the Democracy Monument, the method of force was employed in both spatial and temporal dimensions. Via the assertive power, the monument disrupted the physical continuity of the Rajadamnoen, thus symbolically terminating the monarchical succession. This placement not only altered the contextual conditions, but also the meanings of the avenue to become a corridor of power for the People's Party. With urban cohesion between the two palatial nodes severed, the

destructive power of the Democracy monument negated the authority and legitimacy of the absolutist rule to a subservient status, while enabling the People's Party and the post-1932 government to establish their rightful places in the modern history of Thailand.

Moreover, by occupying a sizable traffic roundabout, everyone was forced to circumnavigate the monument. So, it could be said that, psychologically, the assertive power of such central location required people to pay their homage to this secular architecture, and by extension the People's Party and Pibul administration under the name of democracy.

3.6 Coercion

Unlike the preceding method, coercion is an oblique means of power mediation, using the threat of force to secure compliance under a cover of voluntarism through implied sanction. As for the built forms, coercion works in three different but closely related ways.

3.6.1 Domination or Intimidation

The built environment acts as a threat for the use of force, as exemplified by martial architecture such as war memorials and statues of national heroes. With respect to the Democracy Monument, the authority of the Pibul regime is expressed via the assertive power of its militaristic decorative elements, e.g., the swords, cannons, and the Bass-relief sculptures.

3.6.2 Manipulation or Distortion

This method executes its coercive duty by keeping the subjects ignorant, hence unable to discern dissimilarities between facts versus fictions, reality versus myth, and so on. By deceiving people into a false sense of freedom and security, the concealed intent of the manipulators directed their actions. Examples of deception in built forms

include architecture of the state, whose stylistic identification is strategically associated with political ideologies, such as national assemblies and capitols.

For the Democracy Monument, the concepts of nationalism and democracy framed the terms of references, as opposed to the ancient belief of *Devaraja* (the sacred kingship) and the *Triphum* cosmology of traditional Siamese architecture. By mediating the arbitrate and creative power, this Modernist structure stood for a new and progressive democratic nation of Thailand in place of the absolutist kingdom of old Siam.

However, the projection of the national and cultural identity was indeed an ideological camouflage. Being an integral part and material embodiment of the twelve Cultural Mandates and National Building Program, the ideological identification of the monument supplied a discourse for power assertion, legitimization, and preservation for Pibul and his clique to pursue their own political agenda concealed through the iconography of the art works. This was further complicated by the projection of the identity by architectural symbolism in the design of the Democracy Monument, e.g., its numerological signification that could unite and mobilize people to express their solidarity and feeling of belonging, which could be politically exploited.

3.6.3 Seduction

It is a highly sophisticated form of power mediation, exercised through a skillful but devious management of the interests and desires of the subjects by a construction of their self vis-a-vis collective image, particularly in terms of national and cultural identity.

The Democracy Monument was conceived as a manipulative device to seduce people to accept the legitimacy of Pibul regime via a discourse of Thainess, or the Thai identity, in

terms of a binary opposition between: a) positive identification (what is Thai) by a combination of the arbitative, creative, and assertive power; and b) negative identification (what is not Thai) by the destructive power.

The polyglot of architectural styles of the Democracy Monument exemplified the positive identification of Thainess by signifying a remarkable capability of Thailand under the helm of Pibul as a country and culture that was able to assimilate modern ideas, procedures, knowledge, and technology from abroad and integrate them with existing practices. This stylistic fusion, if not confusion, typified the “Thai way” in negotiating modernity, as stipulated in the guiding principles of the Cultural Mandates.

In contrast, the negative identification of the Thai identity was signified by negligible existence of references to the royalty and absolutism by avoiding architectural styles of the absolute monarchy, i.e., the European Historicism or “the Royal Preferred style” and the Siamese “Royal Custom Style” of palatial and religious architecture. Pibul deemed these stylistic features as backward and therefore represented a quality of being “un-Thai.” In fact, the Thai decorative components in the Democracy Monument did not conform to the convention, but was influenced by contemporary artistic movements from abroad.

Furthermore, the Modernistic architectural expression of the Democracy Monument was a means to seduce people to the glory of Pibul’s vision. While symbolizing Thailand’s engagement with modernity, the monument’s qualities of novelty not only denoted the Modernization and Westernization process of Thainess, but also distinguished the post-1932 regime as “superior” from the “inferior” absolutist rule.

3.7 Authority

Embedded in the institutional structure of a society, authority is an ultimate form of power resulting in unquestioned recognition and subjugation of the subjects. Being a quasi-overt means, it frames the terms of references for any interpretation, and is able to circumvent any dispute. Established upon the ideas of rights and duties of citizens, its effectiveness relies on legitimization and self-deceit or hypocrisy by claiming the self-interest or self-aggrandizement of the ruling elite as public benefits. In the built environment, authority operates through symbolism and iconography, such as royal seals, religious symbols, and national emblems.

Because of a remnant of symbolic references to the monarchy, the golden-stacked bowls, the power of Pibul administration signified by the Democracy Monument was far from being omnipotent. The Prime Minister knew full well that the royal authority was deeply entrenched in the collective Thai psyche. As a consequence, the royal authority became a discourse of power mediation for Pibul to negotiate and then relegated it to a lesser position. This was, perhaps, one of the main reasons why Pibul and the People’s Party did not eradicate the monarchy from the country’s political structure and transformed Thailand to a republic.

From above, the Democracy Monument—notably the golden-stacked bowls—supplied various forms of power mediation, on which the effectiveness of Pibul’s authority relied. Through a combination of the arbitative, creative, and assertive powers, the methods of domination, manipulation, and seduction provided a ground for Pibul to assert that this public structure denoted civil empowerment and national progress. On the contrary, via the destructive power by means of force, the monument offered the Prime Minister a medium to affirm his authority while

contesting and subjugating that of the royalty to oblivion.

3.8 The Democracy Monument Unveiled

The stylistic differences of the Democracy Monument generated many complex layers of meanings, resulting in duplicity in architectural signification. On the one hand, the monument celebrated a victory of the 1932 democratic revolution over the absolute monarchy. On the other hand, its militaristic connotation undid everything that democracy stood for. Completed during Pibul administration, the monument acted as a self-glorifying contrivance for the Prime Minister rather than a bona fide expression of the revolutionary spirit. The Democracy Monument then ironically became a symbolic manifestation of military tyranny, signaling fascism and the practice of lip service to Thai democracy.

With changing socio-political circumstances of the post-World War II period, the Democracy Monument was de-inscribed and then re-inscribed through a discursive discourse from being an architectural form of Pibul's politics to a political representation of people's struggle for civil empowerment and national unity in a built form. The transfigurations of the meanings happened despite the fact that the physicality of this public structure remained almost virtually unscathed. These re-appropriations and fluctuations of architectural signification are revealed by the discussions below.

4. The Architectural Form of Politics

4.1 The Junta Period

Pibul fled abroad just before the fall of Japan. Yet, Thailand was saved from losing World War II by the Seri Thai (Free Thai) underground resistance, organized by Dr. Pridi Phanomyong, a socialist-oriented founder of the People's Party

and the first elected Prime Minister. In 1946, King Ananda Mahidol was mysteriously shot dead and succeeded by his younger brother Bhumibol Adulyadej, the present sovereign. Accused of being the regicidal mastermind, Phanomyong ran off and lived in exile. He was demonized by the military and royal apologists as a monarchy-destroying communist to intimidate those with liberal ideas.

Up to the mid-1970s, notwithstanding some elections and bureaucratized civilian administrations, Thailand was ruled mostly by a series of junta and was beset with coups and counter-coups. Under the pretext of national security, the military regime prosecuted their critics without trial, casting them as communist sympathizers. The army restored Pibul to power in 1948, but only to be ousted by his lieutenants in 1957. In the second premiership, Pibul switched from fascism and ultra-nationalism to constitutionalism as an ideological facade.

His successors, Field Marshals Sarit Thanarat (1959-1963) and Thanom Kittikachorn (1963-1973) who ran the country without the constitution but by martial law were Thai traditionalists. Unlike Pibul, the nationalist principles of these domestic-educated strongmen, espousing orderliness and cleanliness, were based on the triumvirate of nation, religion, and monarchy, instead of ideals like the constitution. In order to maintain and legitimize power, Thanarat re-suscitated the role, status, and ancient Hindu-Buddhist custom of the crown, together with the *lese majeste* law. It was the beginning of the authoritative status of the present sovereign, which was a far cry from King Ananda Mahidol's powerless figurehead position.

Although Thanarat and Kittikachorn retained some aspects of Pibul's National Building Program, mainly the modernization process, they abolished and/or altered most cultural policies

and social practices initiated by the previous government. As for the built environment, the junta appropriated architecture of the state by replacing the existing meanings through a displacement of significative framework. Both the Democracy Monument and Rajadamnoen Avenue were re-semanticized to express the royal authority, and by association, the power of the military regime at the expense of democratic egalitarianism.

With a suspension of the constitution, the Democracy Monument lost its *raison d'être* and faded into symbolic obscurity, simply serving as a traffic roundabout. As the military government suppressed commemorative activities for the 1932 revolution, royal functions regained priority in social festivities and state ceremonials. Both the Grand Palace and Dusit Palace re-emerged as Bangkok's twin cultural-cum-political nodes, while Rajadamnoen Avenue revitalized its monarchical origin.

Thanarat and Kittikachorn also revised historical readings on the 1932 revolution, which consequently reframed the symbolic meanings of the Democracy Monument. The junta saw the golden-stacked bowls as a representation of King Rama VII's, not the People's Party's, noble deeds. The king relinquished his absolutist power in 1932 because he did not wish to see Thai blood being spilled. Hence, the bowls stood for King Prajadhipok's approval of the constitution, in place of his acquiescence to the proletarian request as propagated by the coup promoters. Revivalist interpretations occurred on the Rajadamnoen Edifice Group as well in terms of a symbolic continuation of the grand-scale modernization process inaugurated by King Rama V (1868-1910), instead of a material embodiment of Pibul's National Building Program.

In a larger intellectual context, the said re-interpretations of the built environment by the junta were a part of their efforts to "rewrite" the

country's history, which went hand in hand with royalist historians' narratives on the socio-political development leading to the coup of 1932 [17]. The parliamentary system, they claimed, was already mulled over by King Rama VII but the Westernized People's Party was too impatient to wait and forced Siam towards democracy prematurely. This royal-national story line had been developed as the official account of the modern Thai history. It portrayed the Democracy Monument in terms of symbolic union between the divine rule and democratic practice, despite an ideological incompatibility between the concepts of the celestial ruler and democratic egalitarianism.

Throughout the Cold War and conflicts in Indochina, Thailand was a faithful ally of the U.S. Because of their anti-communist conviction, the ruling junta enjoyed supports from the U.S. government. Concomitantly, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), joined by left-wing intelligentsias and disgruntled peasants, initiated an insurgency, which was assisted by China and the USSR to challenge the Americans.

4.2 The Youth Revolution

In 1973, Thai university and college students orchestrated a series of massive demonstrations against the junta, evolving into a bloody uprising on October 14 that eventually brought down the regime (Figure 10). Re-appropriated by the student movement through their semantic subversion of Rajadamnoen Avenue, the Democracy Monument's emblematic stigma of a relic of Pibul regime frattered away.

Originating in the late-1950s, the resistance was started by students from Thammasat University, which was founded by Dr. Pridi Phanomyong. Prior to in the uprising, peaceful speeches and marches were held at the Royal Field (Sanam Luang) in front of the university and along Rajadamnoen Avenue. On October 14, 1973,



Figure 10. Student demonstration on October 14, 1973 along Rajadamnoen Avenue.

a huge demonstration of 400,000 people marched from Thammasat University to the Democracy Monument demanding a release of some political activists and student leaders from the junta.

To win public sympathy and support, the students located their political activities on the same foundations of legitimacy used by the military: the triumvirate of nation, religion, and monarchy, and subverted them against the junta regime. By means of symbolic re-appropriations, the triumvirate became a discursive discourse of power contention through the assertive and negative power of the monument.

On that day, urban surroundings around the Democracy Monument and along Rajadamnoen Avenue, together with the march itself, were adorned with the royal images, Thai national flags, Buddhist emblems, as well as patriotic and democratic banners, resulting in a surreal yet tangible and dynamic atmosphere. The venues included the Royal Field, Democracy Monument, Royal Plaza or *Lan Phra Boromma Roop Song Mah* (Rama V's Equestrian Plaza), and King Bhumibol's

Chitralada Palace. They were strategically chosen to symbolize petitions of people's grievance to the monarchy and the royal grounding of the Thai nationhood. The references to Buddhism alluded to the law of dharma. This rallying route installed a new meaning for Rajadamnoen Avenue as a path of democracy via the following semantic subversions.

The discursive spatial-cum-temporal progression of the rally began at the pipal (bodhi) tree courtyard in Thammasat University, which can be interpreted as referring to the sacred Buddhist bodhi tree, whereas the university's Dome Building represents intellectual legitimacy of the students. They were strengthened by the name of the university itself, *Thamma* (*dharma*: the Law of the Universe) + *Sat* (*satra*: knowledge). Then, an overlap of meanings occurred with *Sanam Luang*, whose original meaning was the royal field. In this context, it stood for the earth, the ground for democracy and Thai nationhood. Next, the Democracy Monument signified modernity, as well as people's struggles to fulfill the democratic

ideology. These narratives discursively connected the triumvirate to the protest, thus enabling the students to challenge the power of the military government [15].

At first, the Democracy Monument was to be a resting point for the demonstrators. When the rally reached the outer Rajadamnoen, it became unorganized and was confronted by heavily armed troops. Due to their disarray, the protestors were accused of being anarchists and anti-monarchists. In the morning of the following day, students gathering around Chitralada Palace to ask for royal support were attacked by police forces. Although King Bhumibol gave them sanctuary, vicious urban fighting broke out along Rajadamnoen Avenue. A score of casualties accumulated over the next few days. The king decided to intervene by asking Kittikachorn and Jarasathien to exile themselves, and granted a provisional constitution and government headed by Professor Sanya Dharmasakti (1973–1975). He also allowed the Royal Field to be used for cremations of the dead demonstrators.

Three years of chaotic democracy ensued. In 1976, panicked by the fall of Indo-China to communism, the ultra-right wing in the armed forces seized power and massacred students at Thammasat University on October 6, eliminating political activities of the youths. The surviving students fled and/or joined CPT to wage a revolutionary war, which intensified throughout the country. After claiming thousands of lives, the armed conflict ceased by the late 1980s together with the Cold War.

4.3 Democratic Struggles and the Black May Incident

Thailand during the 1970s and 1980s was once again riddled with coups, successful or otherwise. It was not until the end of the 1980s when the country's socio-political situations could

be stabilized. Despite the atrocity committed, the massacre of students had largely been ignored by the post-1976 administrations. King Bhumibol positioned himself neutrally from the incident as well. Realizing the strain of the silence, the bureaucratic government initiated campaigns to salvage the image of the ruling authority, while negating the legacy of the youth revolution as exemplified by the following proposal for the Democracy Monument.

In 1982, the Fine Arts Department classified the monument as “not worthy of conservation,” and planned to replace the constitutional image and central turret with King Prajadhipok's statue [18]. Via its creative and assertive powers, this image would popularize the concept of a “divine constitutional monarch,” while casting the student movement and the People's Party as the national villains through its destructive power. The project did not materialize, due to oppositions led by those in the academia.

The plan to replace the constitutional image demonstrated that the Thai constitution was just a disposable legal tool. Since 1932, Thailand had adopted far more than a dozen charters and constitutions. Military governments often abrogated existing constitutions after successful coups, and then promulgated new ones.

In 1991, General Suchinda Kraprayoon deposed an elected civilian administration. Fearing for a return of another junta, the urban middle class organized large-scale protests against Kraprayoon and his cronies in Bangkok in early May 1992. This so-called “Black May” began a rise of the bourgeoisie in Thai politics. The event set out peacefully when a group of opposition leaders went on hunger strike at the Royal Plaza, drawing a crowd of 100,000 people onto Rajadamnoen Avenue for protest rallies that moved between this Westernized public square and the Royal Field.

Unlike the rigid top-down hierarchy of the student movement in the 1970s, the horizontal organization of the 1990s-demonstrators was made possible by modern telecommunication technology: mobile phones. Initially, the rallies had a playful sense of festivity along the Rajadamnoen, resulting in an offbeat atmosphere.

The military top brass ordered the crack-down on the night of May 17. The flashpoint was nearby the Democracy Monument (Figure 11). Distrusting the news from government broadcasting, a rapidly growing number of urban residents came to Rajadamnoen Avenue and fought against heavily armed troops. The conjunction of Modernist open spaces with permeable streets around the Democracy Monument enabled this so-called “urban insurgency” to persist for some days. The killing and brutality stopped when the general, at King Bhumibol’s request, left the Prime Minister post. The total death tolls are still unknown, ranging anywhere from 50 to over 200 [19]. Similar to 1973, the king’s intervention narrowly averted the prospects of a civil war from

Thailand and re-established the royal authority as the country’s supreme socio-political arbitrating force.

4.4 Ongoing Developments

The aftermath of the bloody uprising of 1992 brought a fifteen-year hiatus to the involvement of the military in Thai politics. They suffered a serious blow, bearing a stigma of oppressors who murdered unarmed advocates of democracy. Consequently, not only did the fate of democracy seem to be secured, but also that of the Democracy Monument in the collective Thai psyche. Being an integral part of the Thai modern identity, this public structure had become a place to commemorate people’s struggles towards democracy and self-empowerment. Despite the devastating effects of the 1997 economic crisis, the nation enjoyed robust socio-political developments. Since 1992, general elections were regularly held.

Yet, on September 19, 2006, Thailand experienced a rude awakening from its false



Figure 11. Government troops firing at the protest on May 18, 1992 near the Democracy Monument.

sense of democratic stability. Thai people found themselves under military rule again when the popularly elected but very controversial and corrupted Thaksin Shinawatra administration was removed from office by a coup. The current political situation is still unsettled and could become socially explosive. This uncertainty leaves the future of the Democracy Monument as well as that of the Thai democracy hanging in balance once again.

5. Conclusion

Embellished with a multitude of regal paraphernalia, such as royal images and emblems on arches and gateways bearing mythical figures (Figure 12), the present environmental context of Rajadamnoen Avenue overtly submit the Democracy Monument to the omnipresent power of the ruling sovereign, who commands the authoritative status and respect from Thai people both by legal stipulations and by his virtues.

Notwithstanding His Majesty's benevolence, the paradoxical symbolic affiliations between the avenue and monument reflect not only incompatibilities between the concepts of divine rule and democracy, but also political competitions between the constitutional monarchy and democratic egalitarianism. The subjugation of democratic foundations—liberty, equality, and fraternity to the omnipotent royal authority—further reveals underlying problematic relationships between the monarchy, constitution, and modern society.

As keenly observed by Dovey (2001), “a truly democratic constitution must displace the monarch as the ‘ground’ of political power” [15]. While the importance of the royal grounding in modern Thai nationhood is undeniable, the royal authority in fact serves as a discourse of power mediation as already examined by the discussions on the architectural forms of politics and political forms of architecture in the design of the Democracy Monument.



Figure 12. A current view of the Democracy Monument and Rajadamnoen Avenue.

In addition to the aforementioned ideological conflicts and contentions, by employing several architectural styles, the Democracy Monument generated many complex layers of meanings. To begin with, the monument owed its existence to a man whose convictions were far from being democratic. Moreover, through a slippage of meanings, this structure could convey messages both for the constitutional and totalitarian regimes, military and civilian administrations, resistance and violence, liberation and repression, inherited power and meritocracy. These attributes accommodated changes in architectural signification, from being a form of fascist propaganda to a struggle for civil empowerment, liberty, equality, and national unity, despite the fact that the physicality of the monument remains almost unmodified.

Ironically, such conflict, confusion, and duplicity of meanings may be precisely an apposite representation of the country and its identity. The production of Thai cultural artifacts, especially architecture, often involves a privileging of the ebb and flow of life rather than the stabilization of identities [20]. For architectural signification, oblique means of communication, e.g., allegory, parody, and irony, are preferred to the direct ones. On that basis, the re-appropriations of the meanings of the Democracy Monument and Rajadamnoen Avenue seem to reaffirm the paradoxical peculiarity of the post-1932 Thailand [15-16, 21-23].

Be that as it may, the ongoing political situations under the junta-sponsored administration urge a critical reassessment upon the design of the Democracy Monument through the following questions. Who are the military figures depicted in the Bas-relief panels fighting

against? According to the historical record from 1973 and 1992, the people—who the military swore to protect—bore the brunt of the armed forces in their pursue of self-empowerment and democratic principles. If the iconographic program of this public structure justifies the military's involvement in the country's political affairs, why should it still be called the “democracy” monument? Had a liberal government, like Phanomyong socialist-oriented administration, constructed the Democracy Monument, would it then be labeled as being communistic and therefore “un-Thai”? What would be the architectural characteristics of a democratic monument by a liberal administration? How should this structure be designed in order to realize its real signification as an expression of democracy and modernity?

The proposed questions may become irrelevant, perhaps if Thailand were able to assume a position of a “true” democratic country. At the time of this writing, the new constitution is being drafted, and is soon to be followed by the nation's first constitutional referendum. As a consequence, the Democracy Monument and its urban setting are primed for another chance to resign from being contrivances for political exploitations, and to fulfill their “real” meanings as:

“The battlegrounds where key historical battles for democracy were waged, these natural or man-made physical things are popularly regarded as the concrete and hence stable and solid embodiment of the memory and spirit of the democratic movement...For people to whom democracy remains an abstract, amorphous and oft-thwarted aspiration, they give a sense of concreteness, of shape and form, or time and place, to their dreams of democracy” [22].

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