The National Assembly: An Empty Promise to Democracy

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Abstract

Throughout history, architecture and urban design have been manipulated to serve politics. Capitals and capitols have become grand symbolic tools for the state, which should be understood in terms of their political and cultural contexts that helped bring them into being.

Accordingly, by presenting a multi-dimension critical inquiry of the National Assembly in Bangkok, Thailand, this paper argues via semiology, or a study of signs that the design of the Assembly fails to signify its original purpose: democratic ideology and practice. Ironically, however, such symbolic deficiency precisely captures the reality of democracy in Thailand. Here, democracy does not function merely as an ideology, but as a political discourse full of incongruity, paradox, manipulation, and deception.

In addition, through a critical urban study, this article reveals that the obscurity of the Assembly both in Thai architectural literature and in the urban fabric of Bangkok exemplifies the true state of the legislative branch of the government. A lack of integration between the Assembly and the physical condition of Bangkok notably the Rajadamnoen Avenue, 'the corridor of power,' further demonstrates that the parliament is a rather weak and neglected institution. Significant political policies and decisions are formed and made elsewhere. The parliamentary system acts merely as a tool for self-legitimization and authority-preservation in a game of power politics in Thailand.

บทคัดย่อ

ประวัติศาสตร์บ่งชี้ว่าสถาปัตยกรรมและการออกแบบสภาพแวดล้อม ถูกใช้เพื่อวัตถุประสงค์ทางการเมืองและการปกครอง ตั้งแต่ครั้งบรรพกาล บริบททางสังคมและมรดกทางวัฒนธรรมนำมาซึ่งฐานะของการเป็นเครื่องหมายแห่งอำนาจรัฐ อันพึงสังเกต ได้จากลักษณะสถาปัตยกรรมของอาคารที่ทำการรัฐบาล และลักษณะกายภาพของเมือง

จากเหตุผลข้างต้น งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้จึงได้ทำการศึกษาอาคารรัฐสภาไทย ทั้งในเชิงวิเคราะห์และวิพากษ์ โดยอาศัยทฤษฎี สัญลักษณ์และอรรถศาสตร์ งานวิจัยพบว่ารูปแบบสถาปัตยกรรมของอาคารไม่สามารถบรรลุถึงการเป็นสัญลักษณ์แห่งอุดมการณ์ ประชาธิปไตย ถึงกระนั้นความล้มเหลวดังกล่าวได้สะท้อนให้เห็นลักษณะของระบบการเมืองไทย ประชาธิปไตยเป็นเพียงแค่ วาทกรรมที่เต็มไปด้วยความซับซ้อน ไร้ระเบียบ หลอกลวง และขัดแย้ง มากกว่าเป็นอุดมการณ์การเมืองตามความหมายอันแท้จริง

นอกจากนี้ จากการศึกษาสภาพแวดล้อมของรัฐสภา สาระของงานวิจัยยังชี้ให้เห็นต่อไปว่าอาคารหลังนี้ตั้งอยู่ ณ บริเวณ อับสายตาจากถนนราชดำเนิน ซึ่งมีความผูกพันอย่างลึกซึ้งกับประวัติศาสตร์การเมืองและการปกครองของประเทศ การถูกบดบัง ความสำคัญดังกล่าวแสดงถึงความอ่อนแอของสถาบันนิติบัญญัติ รวมทั้งระบบรัฐสภา และระบอบประชาธิปไตยของไทย ที่ได้ กลายเป็นเครื่องมือเพื่อแสวงหาและคงไว้ซึ่งอำนาจและความชอบธรรมในการแก่งแย่งผลประโยชน์ทางการเมือง

1. Introduction

Throughout history, architecture and urban design have been manipulated to serve politics. Capitals and capitols have become a grand symbolic tool for the state, which should be understood in terms of their political and cultural contexts that helped bring them into being.

Accordingly, by presenting a multi-dimension critical inquiry of the National Assembly in Bangkok, Thailand, this paper argues via semiology, or a study of signs that the design of the Assembly fails to signify its original purpose: democratic ideology and practice. Ironically, however, such symbolic deficiency precisely captures the reality of democracy in Thailand. Here, democracy does not function only as an ideology, but as a political discourse full of incongruity, paradox, manipulation, and deception.

Oddly enough, the National Assembly, as important as it is, rarely occupies a central role in narratives on Thai history. The edifice has also largely been excluded from the canon of case studies in Thai architectural history, or simply appeared as a footnote in terms of stylistic research [1]. Few studies of the National Assembly fall into the category of exploratory or interpretative investigation.

Through a critical urban study, this article reveals that the obscurity of the Assembly both in Thai academic literature and in the urban fabric of Bangkok exemplifies the true state of the legislative branch of the government. A lack of integration between the Assembly and the physical condition of Bangkok notably with Rajadamnoen Avenue, 'the corridor of power,' further demonstrates that the parliament is a rather weak and neglected institution. Significant political policies and decisions are formed and made elsewhere. The parliamentary system acts merely as a tool for self-legitimization and authority-preservation in a game of power politics in Thailand.

A Brief History of the National Assembly

Constructed during the height of Kitikachorn-Jarusathien authoritarian military regime (1963-1973), the Thai Cabinet approved the construction of the National Assembly and the House of Parliament complex in 1969, after a three-year site selection period involving several possible locations in Bangkok. With a permission from King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX, the present king of Thailand), the government received from the crown a vacant 7.9-acre land plot east of Dusit Palace behind Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall to erect the compound (Figure 1). According to the official sources, the reasons for selecting this site were of two folds. First, its vicinity to the Anantha Samakhom would provide a symbolic-cum-political link between the old throne hall and the new House of Parliament, signifying Thailand's constitutional monarchy and their support to the parliamentary system. The second was to save cost for land acquisition since it was on loan from the crown [2].

The government realized the necessity of constructing an entirely new House of Parliament because of the inability of the Anantha Samakhom to perform as a national assembly. Designed as a throne hall for King Rama V, the Anantha Samakhom could not accommodate the modern functions required for a house of parliament. Furthermore, the symbolic and iconographic programs of the Anantha Samakhom, utilizing Italian Neo-Renaissance style which

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Rajadamnoen Avenue (the Corridor of Power)

Uthong Nai Road

Boundary of the Historic Bangkok

Chao Praya River

Figure 1   Location map of the House of Parliament

seems to stand for the defunct royal absolutist regime, appeared unsuitable to signify the notion of democracy (constitutional monarchy) and a modern nation-state.

Nonetheless, the military regime recognized the power of associating themselves with the historical significance of the Anantha Samakhom, whose image was deeply embedded in Thai psyche as a symbol of divine authority. For instance, its images appeared in numerous government publication including bank notes and postage stamps. So, in order to legitimize and

maintain their iron rules, they still referred to Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall as the nation's Assembly Hall, which merely served a ceremonial purpose. In actuality, all business of the legislative branch of the government, e.g. debating, meeting, and voting, were conducted in the new House of Parliament. In any case, it is important to note that the military regime excluded all public participation from the design process, the site-selection process, and the decision-making process to construct the Parliament.

The Secretariat of the Parliament was the agency responsible for supervising the construction of the House of Parliament compound, designed by the Department of Public Works led by the architect Pol Chulaswake. Its design took final form in 1970, after extensive studies and visits to a number of the parliament houses and capitols in Western Europe, U.S.A., and Japan [3]. Beginning in 1971, the construction lasted for three years with a budget of 78,112,628 baht. Pranakorn Construction Company won the bid and became the contractor for the complex. On September 19, 1974, the first meeting took place in this new facility after the demise of the Kitikachorn-Jarusathien administration, which was overthrown by the violent student uprising on October 14, 1973 [4].

2. Design Analysis for the National Assembly, the House of Parliament

The House of Parliament is not a single large edifice, but is composed of six structures: a three-story National Assembly, a seven-story office, a two-story reception house, a dining hall, a garage, and a guardhouse (Figure 2). Some of the buildings are connected by sky bridges. In front of the complex lies the statue of King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, 1925-1935) situated at the top of a stepped terrace before the drop-off of the National Assembly's main entrance (Figure 3). The statue is not a part of the original design, but was erected later in 1980. The main building in the complex is the National Assembly Hall (Figure 5). Visually, its formal composition and facade design seem to be heavily influenced by Le Corbusier's Assembly Building at Chandigarh, Punjab, India (Figure 4-5).

The spatial arrangement of the National Assembly is based on an octagonal shape with a square roof on top. At the center, there is a large dome under which the circular-shape Assembly
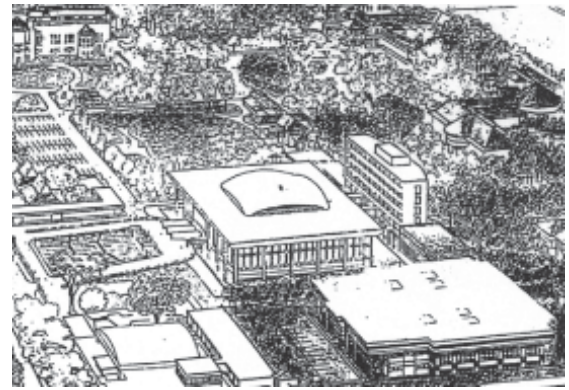

Figure 2   An aerial view of the House of Parliament Compound

Figure 3   King Rama VII's statue in front of the National Assembly

Figure 4   The National Assembly

Figure 5   The Assembly Building at Chandigarh Capitol, Punjab, India by Le Corbusier with Jeanneret, Drew and Fry, 1957-1965

Figure 6   The Assembly Building at Chandigarh Capitol, Punjab, India by Le Corbusier with Jeanneret, Drew and Fry, 1957-1965

Figure 7   Facade Details of the National Assembly

Figure 8   Interior of the National Assembly

Hall is located [5]. Similar to the Assembly Building at Chandigarh (Figure 6), the Thai National Assembly, too, has curved parapets wrapping around the building. As for the facade treatment, concrete piers supporting the parapets form vertical elements that create a rhythm throughout the elevations (Figure 7), comparable to the front and back facades of the Chandigarh counterpart. Additionally, both buildings sit behind reflective pools, generating an effect of lightness for these massive structures.

For the interior, the National Assembly consists of a large lobby and various staff offices on the ground floor. The second and the third floor are composed of the Assembly Hall surrounded by several conference rooms and offices of high-ranking members of the parliament. Both the members of the House of Representatives and the Senate use the same Assembly Hall for meetings (Figure 8). On the third floor, there is a mezzanine where journalists and visitors can observe the parliament. At the second level, bridges link the National Assembly to other functions in the compound; at the north to the Reception House and the Dining Hall and at the west to the office of the Secretariat of the Parliament as well as to the library of the Parliament [6].

In terms of accessibility, pedestrians come into the assembly from the east via the main entrance on the ground level while the service entrance is located on the west. Car traffic

reaches the building from two levels, either at the drop-off at the ground level or at the second level. The second floor drop-off is normally reserved for high-ranking officials, influential members of the parliament, royalty, as well as state and foreign dignitaries. The space under the drop-off and stepped terraces on the ground level opposite the main entrance to the Assembly is now used as a permanent exhibition of King Rama VII. This exhibition space was opened to public almost two decades after the construction of the House of Parliament complex was completed.

Similar to the buildings serving as a seat of power in the old absolutist Siam such as the Chakri Maha Prasat and Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall, structures in the House of Parliament compound are loaded with other forms of cultural artifacts, especially sculpture and painting, for symbolic and iconographic signification. All the artworks have been produced by Thai artists. For instance, in the second and the third floor galleries around the Assembly Hall, fifty oil paintings display royal activities of the Chakri kings (King Rama I-IX). In front of the Cabinet meeting room in the National Assembly, two wood-carved allegorical sculptures symbolize day and night exemplifying the duty of the government to look after Thai people at all times. In addition, the entrance wall to the observatory deck has a series of abstract bas-reliefs showing what appears to be the conventional view of Thai history, as well as the national and cultural identity of Thailand known as Thainess or *Khwampenthai* (Figure 9) [7].

The abstract bas-reliefs begin with a depiction of a city in red representing violence and bloodshed in Thai politics before the construction of the Assembly. Then, a picture of a medical pot symbolizes the building as a place

for peace and reconciliation. The next picture is fledging leaves from tree branches connoting a new beginning of Thailand with prosperity. Adjacent to it, another relief portrays religious symbols, i.e. a disk for Buddhism, a cross for Christianity and a vine for other faiths such as Islam and Hindu, expressing morality of Thai citizens. This is followed by a scale, standing for justice and equality in laws, economic opportunity, and education. An image of the constitution in the form of a folded document placed on a bound tree branches denotes Thailand's traditional agricultural society. In this work, the sun stands for the national unity, which will lead to progress and prosperity. Finally, there is a script of Thai alphabets manifesting the independence of the nation [8].

Another set of ceramic murals, at the landing of the staircase towards the observation deck, exhibits more direction or ideas of the country and its future (Figure 10-11). The mural centers on a picture of a golden human fetus in an egg signifying future generations of Thai youth growing under the democratic regime. Under it lies blooming flowers standing for a bright future of Thailand. On the far right, there is also a depiction of a beehive symbolizing the abundance of the country's natural resources, which however requires a careful management. On the left, a picture of fish swallowing a diamond warns of the danger of foreign influences on Thai tradition and culture [9].

The placement of artworks in other structures in the House of Parliament complex includes the following examples. A band of painting on terra cotta mosaics decorates the wall of the dining hall portraying a bond of tree branches and cancer. The bond represents a unity among

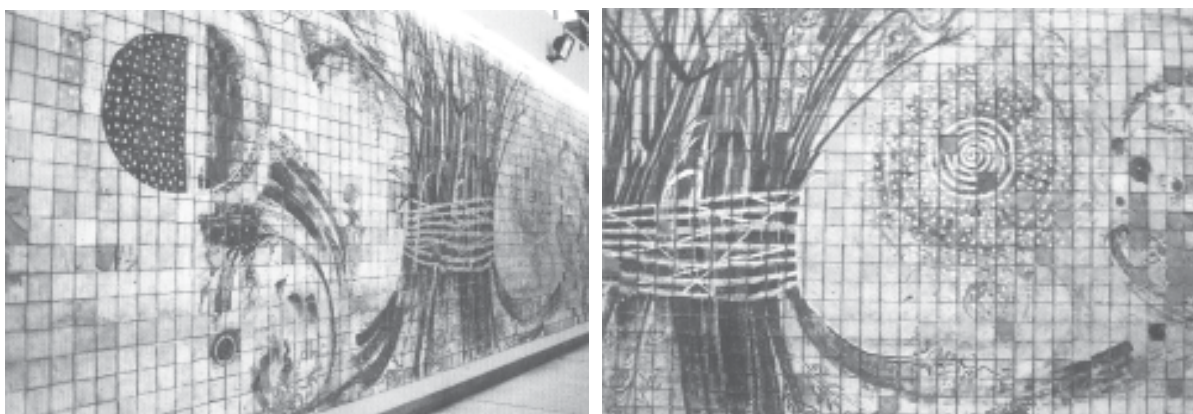Figure 9   Bas-relief in the National Assembly

Figure 10-11   The ceramic mural
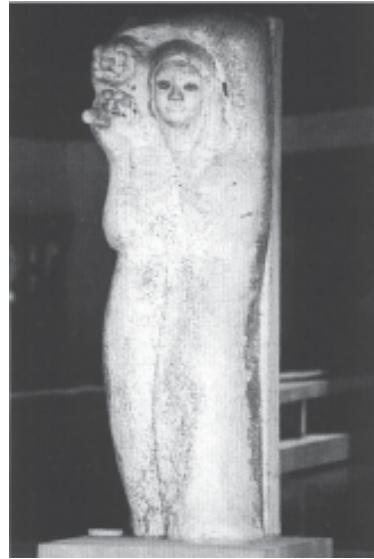

Figure 12   The terra cotta mosaic mural
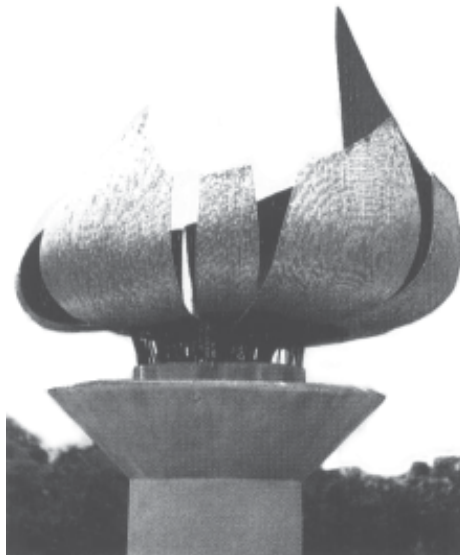
Figure 13-14　The garden sculpture

Figure 15　The garden sculpture

the members of the parliaments, while the cancer denotes an enemy seeking and waiting for an opportunity to destroy the nation（Figure 12）[10].

Artworks exist in the landscape design as well. Surrounding the Assembly are allegorical stone figures of ladies carrying jars（Figure 13）and chopped wood （Figure 14）respectively signifying water and soil that are considered sources of life. These ladies are joined by a flame-shaped sculpture representing fire for industrial power of the country, along with a bird denoting wind for peace and prosperity. Furthermore, in front of the National Assembly, a gilded steel freestanding sculpture in a form of flower depicts the country's transformation from an agricultural to industrial society（Figure 15）. Its uneven petals symbolize progress and downturn in the development of democracy in Thailand. This sculpture was relocated to the back lawn of the Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall, and replaced by the Statue of King Rama VII in 1980 [11].

Regarding the material and construction, all the buildings in the House of Parliament compound employ reinforced concrete with post-and-beam structural system. The National Assembly utilizes white-gray marble for its finishing material in both exterior and interior, earning it a nickname 'the Marble Parliament' from Thai press. Other edifices are painted in white. The use of the white marble can also be perceived as a symbolic link to the Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall, finished with marble from Italy, in addition to the fact that precious material like marble was considered suitable for politically important buildings such as the Assembly and the Throne Hall.

Stylistically, the entire House of Parliament compound, particularly the Assembly, appears to be a synthesis of many contemporary architectural movements of its time. The complex geometry of the Assembly results in an abstract and powerful formal composition, comparable to buildings conceived in what is known as New Brutalism led by Le Corbusier. Besides the aforementioned Corbusian influence from Chandigarh in the design of the Assembly, traces of other architectural styles can be seen as well. For example, the piers and vertical concrete elements in the facades function as an environmental control device in terms of sunshades and screens similar to structures based on environmentalist sustainable design principles. The hyperbolic dome on top of the roof with its folding umbrella interior resembles Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa's Modernist designs for government buildings at Brazilia, which are a variation of the International Style [12]. Finally, the cantilever roof of the National Assembly is reminiscent of cantilever floors cascading down for the shading purpose of *brise-soleil* edifices, such as Le Corbusier's Dominican Monastery at La Tourette and Gerhard Kallmann's Boston City Hall.

3. Interpreting the Aesthetics of Power Politics from the National Assembly

The design of the National Assembly and entire House of Parliament complex is full of symbolism. Consequently, semiology, or a study of signs, plays a crucial role in understanding their meanings.

Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory, architecture essentially operates in terms of a cultural artifact, which could be examined for its signification in a similar manner to that of texture material. Like words and signs, architectural meanings may be understood in the same way as proper names are to the objects denoted by them [13]. As elucidated by Nelson Goodman:

"The relation between sign and word can be described, similar to any relation, in terms of its formal structure, the objects related, and its genealogy. Yet, apart from that formal and factual analysis, there is nothing left to be said. Words are labels attached to things, but the attempt to justify that practice merely repeats it. Using words and their components presupposes precisely the justification that they aim to provide [14]."

Juan Pablo Bonta further elaborated that a building functions as a sign that contains two inseparable elements: the Signified (architectural meanings) and the Signifier (its forms). However, while their forms may remain the same, their meanings are always in flux. In fact, there is no intrinsic relation between the Signified and the

Signifier. Architectural signification, then, is always unfixed, ambiguous and even paradoxical. Architecture, like other forms of cultural artifacts, has been manipulated to serve goals other than to create space and to make place [15].

The above arguments provide a theoretical basis for this study, which is applied through discussions on the design of the National Assembly and the House of Parliament as shown below.

Cultural Transformation

In spite of academic negligence from Thai scholars, the National Assembly holds importance for Thai society and culture in many respects. In the temporal and spatial dimensions, the Assembly symbolizes the pinnacle of cultural transformation: the Modernization and Westernization processes of absolutist Siam that later became democratic Thailand. This is manifested by the location of the House of Parliament – situated beyond the north end of Rajadamnoen Avenue (Figure 1, 17-18), together with the development of Rajadamnoen Avenue and the buildings along it, which can be described via relationships between space and time as the following.

Conceptually, through the use of color code varying between black and white, the temporal begins with a state of Siamese culture before the arrival of Western influence that is traditional Thai architecture. Built or rebuilt at relatively the same time as the construction of Bangkok (from 1782 to 1850), the temples and palaces of this period, such as the Temple of Dawn and Bhodi Temple (1A and 2A), are represented in white (Figure 16).

Next, the Grand Palace illustrates a prime example of hybridity between Thai and Western cultures. With influences from Europe represented in black, hybridized structures became visible after 1850, when the threat Western colonialism became prevalent. Within the Grand Palace compound, the 19th century Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall is the most prominent building in that period.

However, while welcoming Western artistic and architectural ideas, as evidenced by the Borommabhiman Residence, the Siamese ruling elites maintained ties to their cultural identity by patronizing traditional architecture, for instance, restoring the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, and renovating, enlarging both the Dusit Maha Prasat and the Mahamonthien Throne Hall (1B-3B). A combination of black and white resulting in different shades of grey in Figure 16-18 demonstrates this phenomenon.

From 1850 to the present, the processes of Westernization and Modernization have gained their momentum over the production of Thai cultural artifacts. The variation of grey to black colors indicates the direction of Thai architecture towards Western architectural styles, culminating in the 20th century Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall, the Dusit Palace, and the National Assembly at the end of Rajadamnoen Avenue. Foreshadowing these along or nearby the avenue are the Prime Minister's Chancellery, the Supreme Court, the Rajadamnoen Building Group, and the Bureau of Public Relations Headquarters (1C-4C)(Figure 16). This change happened at the same time as the country's political transformation toward democracy, reaching its climax in 1932 when a small circle of foreign educated military staff and civil servants staged a coup ending the absolutist monarchical rule. Seven years later, the country changed its name from Siam to Thailand.

Westernization and Modernization met with resistance as well. From 1850 on, to preserve

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Westernized/Modernized architecture is coded by the variation from dark grey to black colors, while Siamized Western/Modern architecture is coded by the variation from white to light grey colors.

Toward Westernization/Modernization

Toward Siamization

A: Traditional Thai Architecture
1A: Temple of Dawn (Wat Arun), 18th century, Bangkok
2A: Temple of Reclining Buddha (Wat Bhodi), Bangkok, 1781

B: The Grand Palace
1B: Temple of the Emerald Buddha (Wat Prakaew), Bangkok, 1782
2B: Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall, Bangkok, 1790
3B: Maha Monthien Throne Hall, Bangkok, 1782
4B: Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall, John Clunish, Bangkok, 1876
5B: Borommabhiman Royal Residence, C. Sandreczki, Bangkok, 1897

C: Westernizing/Modernizing Thai Architecture
1C: Prime Minister's Chancellery (Norasingh Residence), Mario Tamagno, Bangkok, ca. 1910s
2C: The Supreme Court, the Department of Public Works, Bangkok, 1935
3C: The Rajadamnoen Edifice Group and Democracy Monument, Jitrsean Apaiwong and Corrado Feroci, Bangkok, 1941
4C: The Bureau of Public Relations Old Headquarters, the Department of Public Works, Bangkok, 1963

D: Siamizing Western/Modern Architecture
1D: Benjamabopit Temple, Prince Narisaranuwattiwong, Bangkok, 1901
2D: Temple of the Metal Palace (Wat Rajanatda), Bangkok, 1864
3D: The National Theater, the Department of Fine Arts, Bangkok, ca. 1950s

E: Dusit Palace
1E: The Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall and the Former House of Parliament, Annibele Rigotti
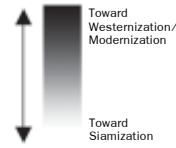2E: The National Assembly, the House of Parliament, Department of Public Works, 1973

Figure 16   Westernzation/Modernization and Siamization Processes
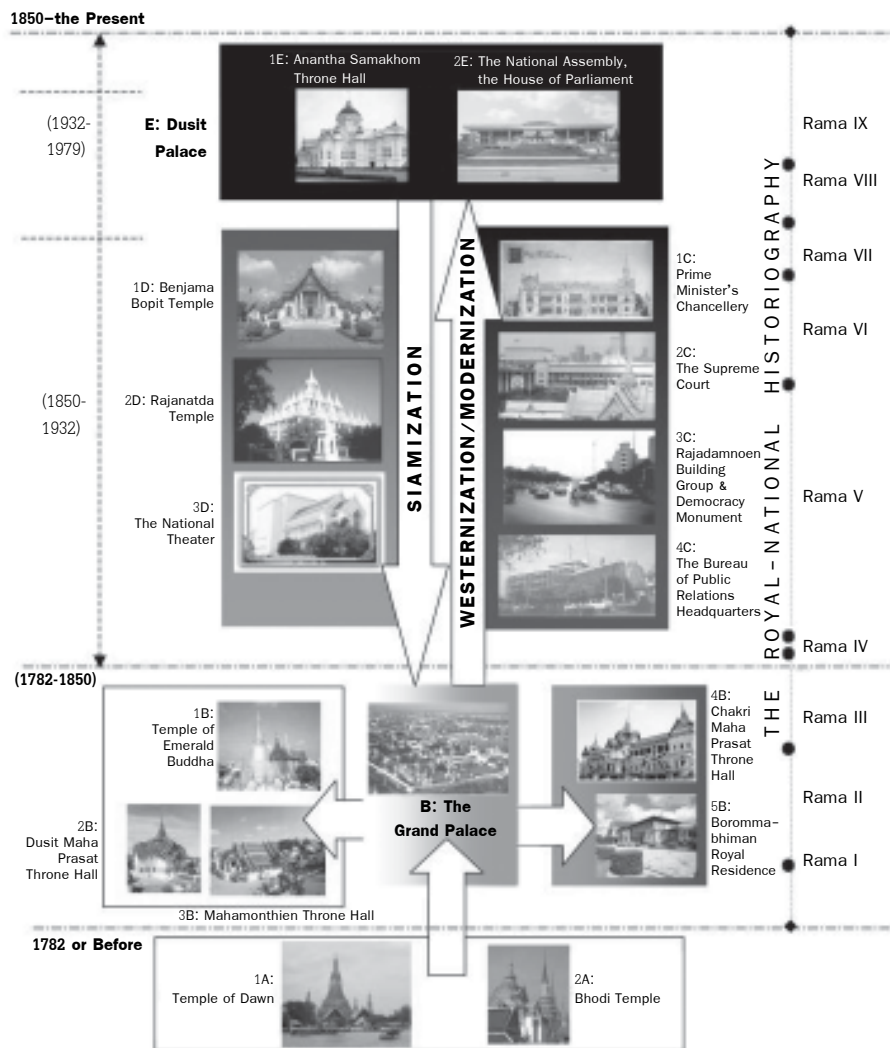

Figure 16   Westernization/Modernization and Siamization Processes (continue)
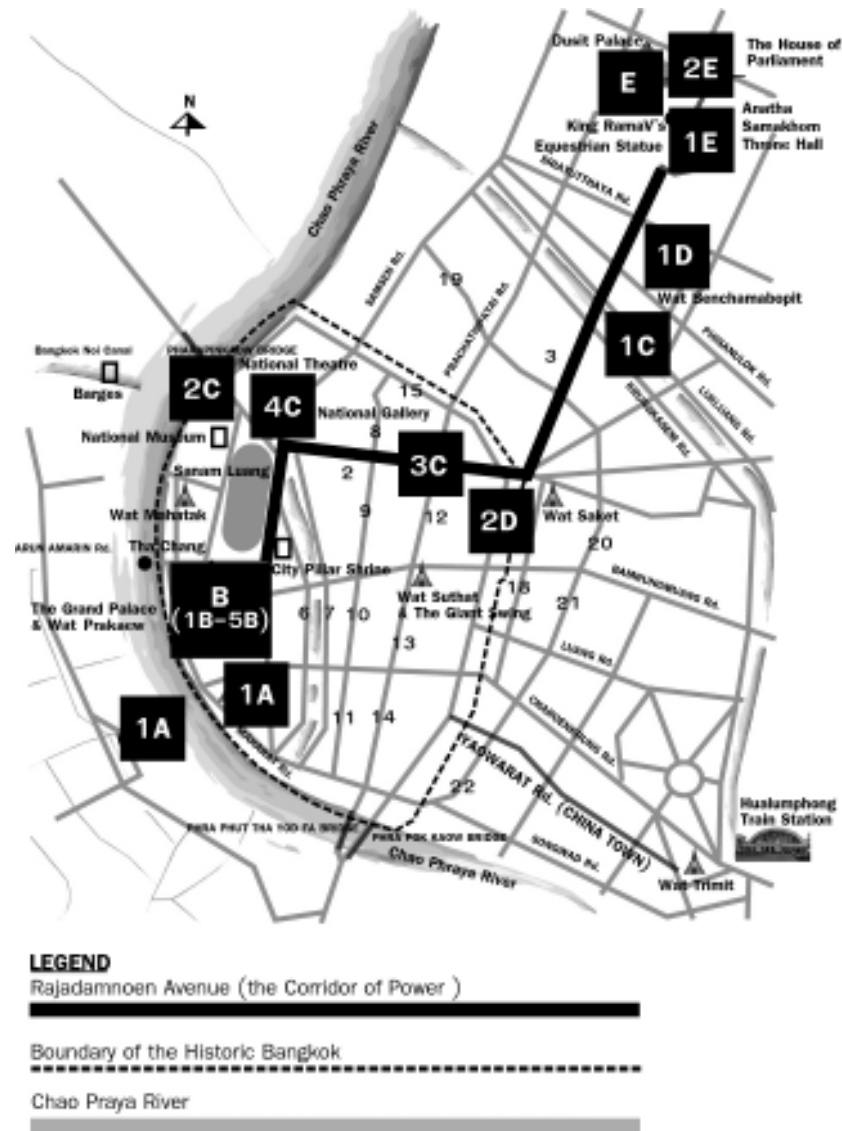
Figure 17   The physical reality of Rajadamnoen Avenue and the Historic Bangkok

cultural identity and to create a national identity, traditional Thai architecture merged with Western concepts, technology, and materials. The result was a quest for a 'National Style' as shown by example such as Benjamabopit Temple. The transformation of Thai architecture after 1850, therefore, is by no means unidirectional, but includes a Siamization process represented by the variation of light grey colors (Figure 16).

Figure 17 displays the temporal concept (Figure 16) mapped on the actual urban fabric of Bangkok. Most of the aforementioned buildings

dwell within Ratanakosin Island or the Historic Bangkok. Two focal nodes exist in this urban fabric. The origin for the city of Bangkok was the Grand Palace, founded in 1782. During the reign of King Rama V, the king built himself a garden palace: Dusit Palace, at the northern outskirts outside of the capital's wall. Connecting the two together is Rajadamnoen Avenue, meaning 'the Royal Processional Path' also recognized as 'the corridor of power' where various royal structures, ministries, and government functionaries are located [16]. The construction of both the Dusit Palace

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Rajadamnoen Avenue

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The Boundary of the Historic Bangkok

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Westernization/Modernization Process

⬅━━━➡
Siamization Process

↕ N

Toward Westernization/
Modernization

Toward Siamization

Western/Modern Architecture

– Anantha
  Samakhom
  Throne Hall
– The House of
  Parliament

**Siamizing
Western/Modern Architecture**
–Benjamabopit Temple
–Rajanatda Temple
–The National Theater

**Westernizing/Modernizing
Siamese Architecture**
–The Prime Minister Chancellery
–The Supreme Court
–The Rajadamnoen Edifice Group
  and the Democracy Monument
–The Bureau of Public Relations
  Old Headquarters

The Grand Palace
–Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall
–Temple of the Emerald Buddha
–Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall
–Maha Monthien Throne Hall
–Borommabhiman Royal Residence

Traditional Thai Architecture
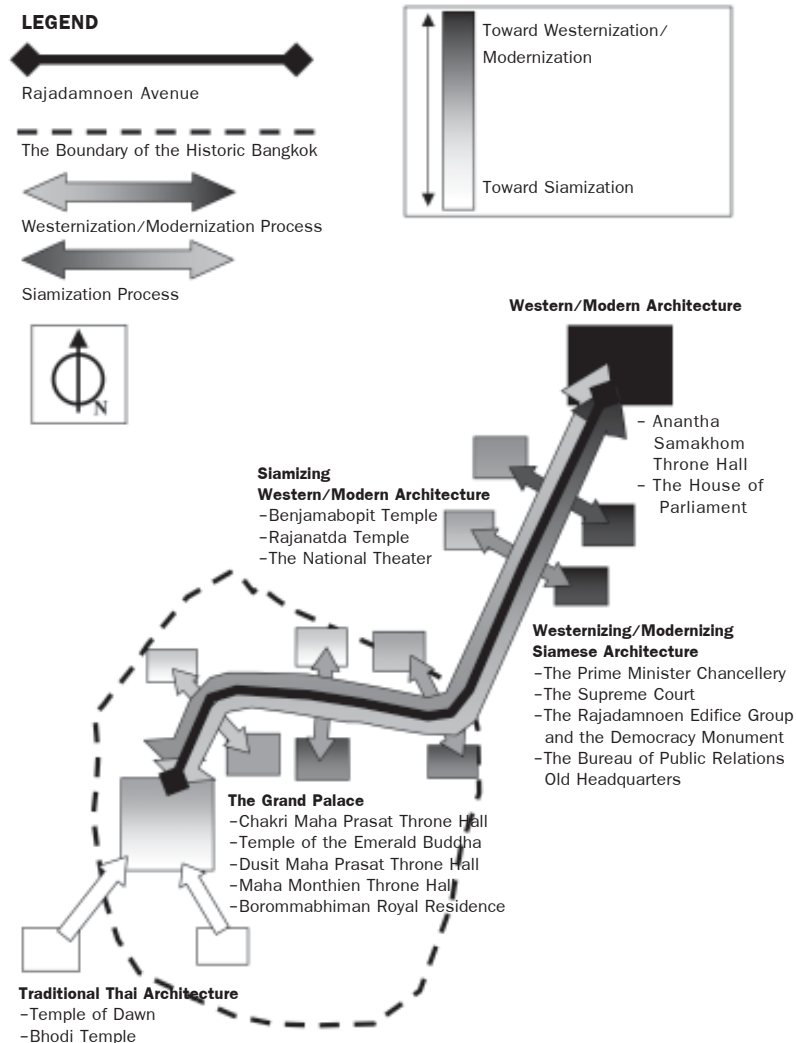–Temple of Dawn
–Bhodi Temple

Figure 18   The process of Westernization/Modernization and Siamization mapped on the urban fabric of Bangkok

and Rajadamnoen Avenue holds significance in the urban development of Bangkok. While the creation of the former initiated expansion of the capital outside of the city walls northward, that of the latter accommodated and furthered growth (Figure 17).

Next, the temporal (Figure 16) and spatial (Figure 17) dimensions of investigating the existence of Western architecture in Siam and Modern architecture in Thailand converge with one another (Figure 18). Figure 18 exhibits the physical reality: the locations of the buildings superimposed on the conceptual diagram of Westernization/

Modernization and Siamization processes. Here, the idea of hybridity, a combination of black and white colors, functions as a point of departure, whose prime examples reside in the Grand Palace. To the south of this complex, coded in white, stands examples of traditional Thai architecture, the state of Siamese culture uncontaminated by Western influence, represented by the Temple of Dawn and Bhodi Temple.

Northward along Rajadamnoen Avenue is the progression of Western and Modern architecture – signified by a variation of light to

dark grey colors – culminating in Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall and the National Assembly near Dusit Palace, coded in black. However, since the transformation of Thai architecture after 1850 is not unidirectional, the Siamization process presents the movement southward along Rajadamnoen Avenue back to the uncontaminated state of Siamese culture by Western influence. This is represented by the variation of dark to light grey colors (Figure 18).

Finally, while the said cultural transformation processes are constitutive to the cultural and national identity of Thailand, the absence of public participation in the cultural transformation processes must be taken into account particularly for interpretations on the cultural-cum-political applications of the built environment. The Kitikachorn-Jarusathien administration initiated neither the Westernization, Modernization, nor Siamization of Thai culture manifested through the built forms. These cultural transformation processes, in fact, had happened since the 1850s, participated only by the ruling elites via the 'top-down' approach. Similar to edifices of the royal absolutist era, the design of the National Assembly and the House of Parliament reflects the ruling authority's personal preference projected onto the government's cultural policy in creating the identities of the state. There was no public participation (the bottom-up approach) for both the site-selection for the House of Parliament and the design of the Assembly, and by extension the cultural policies of the Kitikachorn-Jarusathien administration. Therefore, not only does this totalitarian origin of the Assembly and the House of Parliament betray its intended meanings as a seat of democracy, but also illustrate Goodman and Bonta's semiological arguments on the incongruity between the Signified (meanings) and the Signifier (forms) in architectural signification.

Political and Social Exposition

As stated earlier in this article, the original purposes for selecting the site on a land belonging to the crown for the House of Parliament complex were to: a) symbolize the monarchy's support to democracy; and b) to save cost for the land acquisition. Be that as it may, considering the urban context of Bangkok, the obscured location of the Assembly and the Parliament compound reveals otherwise. Regardless of its extensive symbolic and iconographic programs for democratic and nationalistic propaganda: khwampenthai, the Assembly signifies the sad state of affairs for democracy in Thailand: the powerlessness of the parliamentary system.

Squeezed behind the Anantha Samakhom Throne Hall, there is no visual connection with the entire parliament from Rajadamnoen Avenue. The building sits slightly off axis from the Anantha Samakhom. Instead of facing a theatrical urban space as does the throne hall, the Assembly is on a relatively minor street facing Dusit Zoo. There is no grand vista of axis for its access. To reach the House of Parliament, one must travel along a circuitous road semi-circumnavigating around the throne hall (Figure 1). The National Assembly's modern broad low dome does not contribute to the building's impressive silhouette, thus rendering it invisible to the cognitive map of the city. In fact, the entire House of Parliament complex is barely visible from the Rajadamnoen.

The National Assembly and the House of Parliament thereby represent a failed attempt of the military regime to legitimize their authority and to maintain the power under the pretext of

promoting democratic ideology expressed by a built form. Ironically, what the authoritarian government pretended to advocate precisely discloses the true nature of the Thai political landscape: the practice of power politics, which eventually undermines the legitimacy and authority of the Kitikachorn–Jarusathien's administration. For example, the placement of King Rama VII's statue in front of the Assembly indicates the reconciliation and mutual dependency between the military regime and the monarchy. Sitting on a raised platform on a stepped terrace, the statue and its forecourt conceal the entrance to the edifice. The monumental statue displays the narrative of the royal-national history, portraying the royalty – through King Rama VII – as an instigator and protector, or even as a martyr of Thai democracy willing to sacrifice their power for the empowerment of Thai people.

In reality, however, the National Assembly and the House of Parliament reflect the incompatibility between the concepts of divine rule and democratic ideology, as well as ideological conflicts between a constitutional monarchy and democracy in general. The fact that the Assembly stands behind Rama VII's statue suggests that the foundations of democracy: liberty, equality, and fraternity come after the authority of the sovereign. This further leads to problematic relationships among the royalty, the constitution, and Thai society, notably in terms of interpreting the country's self-image through the built environment, as keenly observed by Kim Dovey (2001):

"In urban spatial terms, this monument completes a double-screening of parliament from the city. The building stands behind Rama VII and also behind the throne hall. The positioning of the parliament within the city marginalizes it and frames it within a larger hierarchy, headed by the King … [yet] a truly democratic constitution must displace the monarch as the 'ground' of political power. The widespread love of the King in Thailand has been portrayed, as if he were 'elected.' This contradictory ideal of a 'democratic monarch' has fueled resistance to any written constitution which formally strips the King of political power. The monarch is seen by many as the real constitution or foundation of the nation; in a slippage of meaning, monarchy is seen as 'Thai style' democracy. The tactics of double naming and slippages of meaning have enabled this contradiction of a democratic monarch to persist [17]."

National and Cultural Identity

Apart from indicating such incompatibility between the concept of kingship and democratic ideology, the most troublesome aspect of the National Assembly is its Modernist design in signifying the national and cultural identity. The Corbusian appearance makes it hard to recognize the edifice as an architectural design for Thailand. Without knowing what and where this structure is, the Assembly can easily be misidentified as being a part of the government offices as in Chandigarh or Brazilia; an auditorium or art museum; or simply a headquarters of a private company. In other words, the building could sit anywhere in the modern world, notably in the West, and could serve any function. It is a crisis of architectural identity. To make the matter worse, the sculpture and painting program employed in the entire House of Parliament compound – except for the royal statue and painting – seems to be too abstract and thus unable to communicate its intended content to the public. These artworks

merely function as decorative elements; losing their ability to deliver a political message.

The above criticism exposes the domestic and international politics that caused the design of the Assembly to neglect an integration of traditional Thai architecture with the Modern and Western counterparts. Domestically, the Kitikachorn-Jarusathien military government sought to portray itself as a progressive regime, looking forward to a brave new future rather clinging onto the past. Internationally, the administration wanted to create an image of Thailand as a progressive country with a strong will to fight Communist expansion – similar to other nations in the 'Free World' such as Brazil who embrace capitalism, democracy, and modernity to their societies and cultures [18].

The statement that the National Assembly acts as a symbol for Thailand as a member of the 'Free World' needs further elaboration. The Assembly was constructed at the zenith of the Cold War, which turned hot in Indo-China: the conflicts in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. During the Cold War (1945-1990), Thailand was a strategic place where foreign powers contended to gain hegemony. On the one hand, the U.S., Japan, and the European allies, viewed Thailand as an outpost of the 'Free World' to contain Communist expansion led by China and the USSR. On the other hand, the USSR and China perceived Thailand as a springboard to conquer capitalism and the West and therefore aided the Communist Party of Thailand in waging a revolutionary war. The war was carried by a number of Thais intelligentsia, peasants, and workers, who chose to fight oppression from the military regime, resulting in a long, bitter, and bloody battle. Knowing the magnitude of playing a strategic role

in the region, coupled with the fear of a Communist take-over and the desire to preserve their status, Thai ruling elite allied themselves and the country with the West in exchange for international support to fight the Communist insurgency and to secure power.

It is quite an absurdity that by gaining acceptance and support from the international community, the regime was then able to use violence to legitimize the power and maintain authority in the domestic affairs. The Kitikachorn-Jarusathien government was in fact one of the most autocratic, militaristic, corrupted, and brutal regimes that the people of Thailand has ever endured, which later ended after the violent students uprising on October 14, 1973. The fighting and killing took place elsewhere along the Rajadamnoen but not around the House of Parliament.

In this respect, the National Assembly provides the government a means of seduction to accomplish their political goals. Its qualities of newness and modernity contribute a major ingredient to the House of Parliament's symbolism and iconography: the Modernization and Westernization process of Thainess as demonstrated by Figure 16-18. The symbolic and iconographic programs are based on future aspirations, including a Modern and Western-oriented view set out for Thai society that is fascinated with the prospect of industrialization as well as Western technology, knowledge, ways of life and forms of consciousness. Because Thailand in the 1970s was relatively unmechanized and unindustrialized, the glorification of Modernity and Westernization still had a tremendous appeal. Sadly to say, these concepts were incompatible with a nationally and culturally significant structure

like the National Assembly and the House of Parliament.

Political Reality

Not only do the Modernist facades and spatial organization of the Assembly obscure its democratic ideology, but also disguise the practice of power politics. Unlike Le Corbusier's Assembly at Chandigarh whose solid front elevation suggests an enclosed assembly hall inside, the facades of the Thai counterpart are primarily composed of glass. Such transparency, however, does not stay true to the real utility of the building, which is a large enclosed space for gathering. Inadvertently, this deception – the imparity between the Assembly's see-through facades and its hidden interior – is a testimony to the government's manipulation of its image as a candid and accountable administration, which contrasts with the reality where both the House of Representatives and Senate usually meet and make important political deals behind closed doors.

The facile characteristic of the Assembly stands as an affirmation to a general criticism on Modern architecture as well. The Modernist's principles of universality and uniformity, betray symbolic functions of architecture. Widely adopted by governments around the globe, particularly those in developing countries and/or former colonies, Modern architecture became an integral part of their national building programs. However, as people in those countries later found, they ended up with structures of national and/or cultural significance that do not really represent their identities and cannot accommodate their ways of living. Architecture of Chandigarh and Brazilia, and certainly that of the National Assembly, the House of Parliament in Thailand, are undeniably testimonies to this critical remark.

As for the spatial organization, the layout of the seats in the Assembly is more closely resembled a lecture hall, where the Cabinet assumes the role of performers on a stage and members of the parliament act as an audience. It is less akin to an amphitheater, or a meeting hall where seats are arranged for debates and discussions. The seating arrangement is indicative of the top-down, authoritarian nature of the military regime, in which the parliament is a weak legislative institution receiving and processing orders from the administration.

The only feature of the National Assembly that appears to live up to its name as the House of Parliament – a democratic institution for people's self-empowerment – is the observation deck. From this area, people and the press exercise their power by assuming the role of gazers watching the politicians in actions. This type of power is known as 'disciplinary power' operating through social and spatial practices, and is embedded in institutions. It is exercised via regimes of normalization and eradication of deviance [19].

The act of gazing, then, transforms the politicians into the subjects, controlled by surveillance to detect derivations from a normalizing regime – the interest of the people and the country – for their political practices, such as debating, voting, negotiating, and proposing. Aside from the deck, there is also a closed circuit television system in the Assembly Hall broadcasting throughout the House of Parliament complex providing surveillance for the audience.

Yet, gazing as a form of power is ephemeral. The Thai constitution has always included a provision for the House of Representatives and the Senate to conduct their meeting, voting, and debating in secret. As a matter of fact, both

the House of Representatives and Senate have earned a nickname from the Thai and foreign press alike as a 'rubber-stamp' legislative mechanism for those in power. On numerous occasions, the people and the press are dismissed from the Assembly Hall, while the closed circuit television is suspended, ending their means of exercising power.

4. Conclusion

In sum, the above discussions underline semiology's general criticism on architectural signification, which is an incongruity between the Signified (meanings) and the Signifier (forms). Instead of staying true to the intended meanings, the Thai National Assembly and the House of Parliament represent a missed opportunity in applying foreign concepts both for architectural and political forms to create a national and cultural identity, as well as the localization of Modernity. Its design further exemplifies an argument by Ernest Gellner, a leading scholar in nationalism, that:

"those who are actively concerned with the process of national building in a rapidly evolving society often try to eliminate many aspects of 'the alien high culture' but do not replace this with 'the old local low culture.' Instead he claims, nationalist ideology 'revives, or invents, a local high (literate, specialist-transmitted) culture of its own,' which retains certain connections to the 'earlier folk styles and dialects' … Its myths invert reality: it claims to defend folk culture while in fact it is forging a high culture [20]."

Here, the syncretic idea of a democratic monarch, supported by a strong military rule,

pervades both the Parliament and the physicality of the National Assembly. In any case, while the government claimed that the Assembly symbolized the aspiration of the country towards Modernity, Western knowledge and democratic ideology, the building's lack of integration of Thai and Modern/Western architectural traditions reveals a crisis in creating the Thai national and cultural identity: schizophrenia.

The design of the Assembly instead indicates the taste or personal preference of the ruling elites, which is imposed upon the production of Thai cultural artifacts (especially architecture) to legitimize their authority in the power politics of Thailand. Consequently, it raises a series of very crucial questions that seriously weaken the power of the military regime.

Examples of the questions include the followings. Since there are neither traditional Thai architectural elements, nor efforts to integrate it with the design of the National Assembly, does the National Assembly reaffirm that Thailand has already succumbed to the cultural and intellectual colonization from the West? Do the elites in the government operate as agents of the West, benefiting themselves instead of the Thai people? Do the nationalist and democratic ideologies together with the parliamentary system indeed serve as a charade for the military to legitimize themselves and control the country? To a large extent, the overthrow of Kitikachorn-Jarusathien government in 1973 resulted from these concerns that stuck a deep nerve of the Thai people, particularly that of the middle class and the youth. The National Assembly and House of Parliament stand as witnesses to the military regime's undoing, and still function as an empty symbol for democracy of the Thai people's self-empowerment through the present day.

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[1] For instance, see:

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[3] Ibid., 1027-1029.

[4] Ibid., 1037-1039.

[5] Drawings for the plans of the National Assembly and layout of the House of Parliament are not available. The Secretariat of the Parliament has released neither any floor plan drawing for the National Assembly nor layout for the House of Parliament to public due to security concern.

[6] Sang-Aroon Art and Cultural Center. (1989). Thailand: Two decades of building design 1968-1989. Bangkok: Creative Print, 15.

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[9]   Ibid.

[10]   Duang-Jaiya, & Associates Architect. (1991). Arkarn Rattasapha [The House of Parliament Building]. The Association of Siamese Architects Journal, 19, 19.

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[17]   Ibid., 276.

[18]   This claim was made despite the fact that Oscar Niemeyer, the chief architect of Brazilia, was a communist. Also see Vale, L. J. (1992). Architecture, power, and national identity. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 120.

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Figure Credits

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