

An Architectural Approach to Studying the Neighborhood

Wua-Lai, Chiang Mai

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In an architectural approach, we “read” and “learn” about the neighborhood by mapping, by visiting for sketch observations, and by conducting measurements and interviews. Through SEANNET’s pedagogy with students covering roundtable sessions and many workshops as in-situ investigations, it has been an interesting process over the four years of the program.



Fig. 1 (above): Monks at Wat Mern-sarn learning about silver-making (Photo by the author, 2019).
Fig. 2 (right): Sketches illustrating domestic living within wooden houses done by a group of 6-8 students at the 2018 workshop (Photo by the author, 2018).

The Wua-Lai neighborhood has a reputation for “silver-craft” skills, and the area is well-known as a “silver-smith village.” This has created a strong image for the neighborhood. Wua-Lai residents carry out their crafts and trades within the neighborhood’s traditional area, identifiable by its numerous timber houses and shop-houses representing the characteristics of Lanna’ architecture. However, the inhabitants have also drawn attention to the increase in land and property speculation, which affects the neighborhood’s social structures, cultural values, and identity. The community craftsmanship center was established through local initiative to preserve the local skills and knowledge, as well as to promote the image of the area as the “Silver Village” of the past. All of this strives to keep alive the ties of kinship and history.

Regarding the transformation of neighborhoods and the city as a whole, Chiang Mai has faced accelerated urbanization over the last five decades, following the national economic development objective to develop Chiang Mai as the “second city” of Thailand. The promotion of tourism and other new developments bring more pressures to transform the Wua-Lai neighborhood, which is located in between the new commercial town in the east and the university town in the west. Since the 1960s, following the government’s policy to promote Chiang Mai as a main touristic hub in Northern Thailand, Wua-Lai was set to run the Saturday Walking Street,² which brought in numerous tourists and a new socio-economic image of the neighborhood area. The recent transformations to the urban landscape, as well as the destruction of the neighborhood’s morphological patterns, have raised much public awareness of local cultural heritage. The city government has designated the neighborhood as a “Conservation Area for Thai Art, Culture and Identity.” This designation comes with initiative-building regulations that aim to protect its urban and architectural characteristics.

During the SEANNET work, we found that temples play an important role in the promotion and conservation of local crafts,

as well as in the transmission of local craft knowledge. The abbots and monks have run local actions and projects together with the active neighborhood inhabitants and craftspeople. All of this is done in connection with tourism development authorities in Chiang Mai.

There are two objectives in the team’s investigation. The first one aims to understand the forms of organization among neighbors, in terms of both cooperation and competition. Do both temples within the area (i.e., Wat Sri-Suphan and Wat Muen-Sarn) develop the same form of organization and role within the local neighborhood? The second objective deals with the relationship between the neighborhood and the contemporary urban condition of the city: how has mass tourism in Chiang Mai led to the revival of local craft production?

The study has been conducted through the two neighborhoods at the heart of this district, namely Wat Sri-Suphan and Wat Muen-Sarn. We discovered that Wat Sri-Suphan developed its structure of learning and organizing the local silver-craftsmanship for the benefit of tourism, especially with the Saturday Walking Street event. They formed the “2-hour-silver-making” workshop for tourists, who love to create their own small silver gifts. Also, there are performances and tours around the area. Thus, the Saturday Walking Street event became their main vehicle for the neighborhood’s socio-economic survival. We called this the “Sri-Suphan Model” [Fig.1]. In contrast, the Wat Muen-Sarn neighborhood has a less active and less temple-centered structure, where the members of neighborhood are more relaxed and easier to talk with. Through ordinary heritage mapping, our research demonstrated how the two temples (Wat Sri-Suphan and Wat Muen-Sarn) took on distinct roles in the neighborhood. This helped us better understand two different models of a “temple-oriented neighborhood” – i.e., the former as a center-oriented and the latter as a network.

By considering the local neighborhood and its ordinary heritage context as an asset for learning, we regard the Wua-Lai neighborhood as a laboratory for teaching.

We adopted an interdisciplinary analysis based on architectural, urban, and socio-anthropological approaches that have been developed from the French-Thai Student Workshop,³ thereby suggesting new methodological approaches to neighborhood and urban studies. The lessons learned from the neighborhood became the basis for our pedagogical approach in response to the series of workshops. This led to the new idea of “a forum within a forum” where the students organized workshops within the neighborhood forum. Thus, the integrated interplay between the residents and students, enables local voices as well as the voices of students involved in the work of measuring local heritage houses, to be heard. It also reflects the need of the silver village to sustain its craft-heritage status and to respond wisely to future economic challenges and the changing urban condition.

At the heart of the intensive workshop⁴ in Chiang Mai, the students were assigned to conduct a survey of inhabited space. Each group comprised between five and eight students. The students explored a neighborhood and made sketches of the timber houses that were selected by the teachers, who had received the homeowners’ permission in advance to access these houses. Then, there was a transitional stage that brought the students from the urban to the domestic scale, measuring the wooden houses (of silversmith masters) around the neighborhood. Its realization allowed the students a new way of reflecting upon and imagining their study project.

The survey becomes “a tool of understanding” the neighborhoods’ essences. It is our intention to get the students into the reality of a residential area, allowing them to understand the complexity of the building structures, their specific materiality (in particular wood), the uses, and the context to which it responds and maintains with the outside, the garden, the street, and the neighborhood.

Moreover, the exercise allows the students to observe, to look at the world of the neighborhood. Drawing by observation is, then,

a way of connecting students with the owners of a property in pursuit of understanding it. Observation leads to identifying the “details of architecture,” naming and comparing them little by little. It enables students to discover the logic of forms and the material reality of architecture. Guided by the eye, manual drawing and sketching help the students to develop a specific spatial intelligence, which fully functions as part of the training for architectural practice. Unlike photography, the intelligence of the eye as an extension of the brain makes it possible to select and prioritize the data to be represented and illustrated.

In order to allow the establishment of a comparative inventory of the forms of the habitat of Chiang Mai (e.g., plans, sections, elevations, site plans, perspective views), each student appropriates the place and chooses what he or she wants to represent. It is a subjective exercise, and the purpose is precisely to learn to prioritize [Fig. 2]. For example, it can be done through the position of the section, the representation of certain pieces of furniture, the choice of perspective views. The survey of a living area allows them not only to develop architectural knowledge but also to link this knowledge to an ethnographic investigation. This means understanding how people inhabit a place full of history and symbols. The sociological approach to interviewing, meanwhile, allows students to determine a great deal: who lives there, the family connections or kinship ties between the inhabitants, how the plot or house has been divided over time, how much of the work is done on site, and how inhabitants live in the neighborhood (e.g., which schools, markets, and temples are attended). As architects, students need to understand these human relationships on the scale of the habitation, the plot, the street. This gives them essential information to develop the architectural project to come.

The recording of these data is a precious tool for understanding spatial organization, the succession of thresholds and limits (concrete, brick, wood, or plant), which considerably enriches the transition from public space to private space. The cross-sectional drawing of this subtle entanglement of plants, architecture, and furniture is a valuable source for understanding these domestic transitions in relation to spatial proportion, the scale of everyday living, and the human dimension. During this SEANNET project, these types of surveys have formed the basis of an inventory of socio-spatial situations, which today tend to disappear rapidly.

The pedagogy workshop lets us try to realize and become aware of the neighborhood’s quality, which has evolved through time in relation to the inhabitants themselves. Also, it informs the students within the workshop, to rethink how we might keep these living quarters alive through various possibilities. The project has uncovered architectural information within the neighborhood and among local people representing their reality of the neighborhood (i.e., residents, artisans, and monks). Many drawings and documents about tangible and intangible aspects of the Wua-Lai neighborhood are reviewed and re-interpreted to illustrate how we learn from this neighborhood, and how we will continue to do so in the next phase of SEANNET.

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Notes

- 1 A period after Teak Industry in Northern Thailand during 1910-1960.
- 2 The Saturday Walking Street is an evening-night market by closing Wua-Lai main road temporarily on Saturday between 18.00-22.00. The event organized by the municipality together with Silver-makers neighborhood within the area since 2005.
- 3 A workshop organized in December 2018 in Wua-Lai, Chiang Mai, Thailand.
- 4 An ongoing workshop every December of each year (before COVID-19).