

## THAILAND

### New Measures for Heritage at Risk

ICOMOS Thailand has support to report on heritage under threat from the Fine Arts Commission and the Royal Association of Siamese Architects, which is responsible for the Architectural Conservation Awards. The awards have been given annually since 1982, presided over by Her Royal Highness, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.

This year the Commission has improved the award criteria by adding another category, namely the Award for Significant Architecture for Conservation, in order to compile a list of buildings at risk. The objective of this award category is to promote and encourage an awareness of the value of heritage conservation, and to give future assistance to owners for conservation and maintenance. This issue has been publicly announced to invite nominations of buildings for this new award.

In this first year, there are 21 eligible nominations which can be categorised as:

- 4 Palaces and government buildings,
- 10 Private properties,
- 7 Religious buildings.

The nominations have a variety of histories and aspects of heritage value, yet they mostly have a similar level of risk. There are three sites which are representatives of the group as follows:

- Bang Rak Old Customs House,
- Ratchakarun School, Thon Buri,
- Samsen Filter Plant.

These buildings were all built from the reign of King Rama V to King Rama VII (1868–1934), when Thailand was highly influenced by Western European nations in terms of economic, social, and, inclusively, art and architecture.

*Bang Rak Old Customs House:* Trade and communications with European countries led to agreements via business contracts, which greatly affected the economic and tax system of Thailand. A customs house was built for the first time in the country, and this building was designed by an Italian architect and built in 1888 on the Chao Phraya river bank. It was once a large and stately building but it is now used as the Bang Rak Police Fire Brigade Residence. Its condition is as seen today.

*Ratchakarun School:* Originally a nobleman's house, the building was bought by the Muslim Krungthep Witthayathan Foundation and converted to a school. The architecture indicates European influences applied to local domestic architecture. Its date was understood to be later than the customs house, that is from 1897 onwards. The style was popular amongst wealthy people, or was chosen for public buildings because of its favourable features such as the beautiful and stately appearance and fine decorative craftsmanship which added to the value of the architecture. Unfortunately, the school has been redundant since 1978 and so abandoned. Its location by the river-bank has also increased natural risks and worsened problems.

*Samsen Filter Plant:* This site represents a page in the history of water and sewerage works in Siam, and also a turning point of construction technology imported from foreign countries. Modern architecture with reinforced concrete construction makes this building a pioneering example of 20<sup>th</sup>-century architecture in Thailand, although to some scholars this kind of building is not worth conserving because it lacks elaborate decorative elements similar to former times. Waterworks have since been so highly developed that this filter plant has today become a redundant structure.

Today, the historic and spiritual values of these buildings have been neglected. The owners may not care for their maintenance, or their function may have been changed until they are left in a ruinous state. They are at risk of physical deterioration from temperature change, moisture, and use. Another kind of risk ranges from the change of use that leads to the application of inappropriate building materials which reduce the value of and cause damage to the beauty of an architectural heritage site.

Another problem facing old buildings are economic developments and a preference for new buildings, which may result from the rapid increases in land prices. The above examples include buildings which are redundant, but there has been very little thought about rehabilitation and rather more on demolishing buildings to be replaced by new ones. The historic and aesthetic values of these heritage places have not been involved.

ICOMOS Thailand has joined this activity to consider the award giving initiated by the Association of Siamese Architects, and intends to continue to support this activity in the coming years. We hope that this will be another means to encourage the public to be aware of the value of heritage places, to watch over them, and to help conserve their values for the future.

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Bang Rak Old Customs House, river front

Bang Rak Old Customs House





Ratchakarun school



Samsen filter plant



Samsen filter plant



Ratchakarun school