Introduction

1.1 BACKGROUND

Various studies have been made of vernacular houses. However, there has been little research on the relationship between the sense of well-being of the residents of these houses and the houses themselves. Most of what there has been is fragmentary and of marginal significance, often with an emphasis on health (Lawrence 1987) and aesthetics (Cold 2001; Lawrence 2001). Panin (1999) and Bachelard (1994) consider the sense of well-being to be a primary function of the existence of vernacular houses. Wasi (2001) and the monk Buddhathat, quoted by Nartsupha (1997, p. 238) hold that people’s perceptions of well-being are always changing in accordance with the conditions of the environment. These changed perceptions express themselves in the residents’ behavior and their immediate physical environments (Duncan 1981; Bourdieu 1977). It could be speculated that vernacular houses in a particular culture continually evolve to reflect the values, lifestyles and beliefs about well-being of their residents.

However, the push towards modernity and globalization associated with developments in technology, transportation, communication and economic growth over the past fifty years have accelerated changes in various aspects of socio-cultural conditions, and have brought about new standards for domestic well-being in every

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1 See Section 2.2 for a discussion on the relationship between vernacular houses and the residents’ sense of well-being.
corner of the world (Tuan 1986; Fromm 1978). The modern concept of domestic well-being is often associated with people’s ambitions and aspirations for material success, as an expression of individual requirements and tastes (Liangyong 1998; Lim 1998), thus eliminating its original sense as understood by most people in the past (Heynen 1999; Berman 1982). This trend is now overwhelming. This has not only curtailed the development of cultural values about the intrinsic meanings of well-being in particular societies (Rybczynski 1986) but also, in extreme cases, has caused the disappearance of vernacular houses in many cultures (Oliver 1997; Rapoport 1969).

The present study is particularly concerned with the residents’ experiences of well-being in Thai vernacular houses. These houses have long been central to the rural landscape of the country. They reflect the differences between various regions and cultures. They have been designed in accordance with the activities of Thai residents and their attitudes for living in harmony and happiness (Panin 1999; Temiyabandha 1997; 1994). However, the influences of modernity, especially the recent extensive rural developments, have brought about changes not only to socio-cultural and environmental conditions, but also to lifestyles and attitudes for well-being of local Thai residents (Horayangkura 2001; Wasi 2001; Nartsupha 1997). Because local conditions are changing so rapidly, many Thai vernacular dwellings in various remote areas have now been demolished (Askew 2003; Panin 1999; Jumsai 1997) and, to some extent, replaced by new, modern houses (Chompunuch 1987).

Despite the ravages that could be associated with modernity, some Thai vernacular houses still exist in various localities (Nathsupha & Leardvichadha 1998). They have retained the atmosphere of living in harmony with the environment of those places (Panin 2000; 1999; Temiyabandha 1994). In this research project I focused on these surviving vernacular houses and asked: What are the residents’ feelings of well-being in their vernacular houses? And why have they retained (but usually modified) their vernacular houses during the current trends of modern development? Lawrence (1982, p. 45) states that ‘the connotation of architecture is not solely on its form but also on the meanings and uses attributed to it.’ This establishes a further question: What is the relationship between the physical forms of the houses, the living habits of the residents and the meanings they attribute to them?
1.2 RESEARCH AIM

Thus, the aim of this thesis is to establish an understanding of how changes in the residents’ sense of well-being have influenced the evolution of Thai vernacular houses, the ways they are used, and the meanings attributed to them.

The relationship between the residents’ lifestyles and values of well-being and their vernacular houses is dynamic and reflexive. Examining the physical and socio-cultural evolution of those surviving vernacular houses associated with narratives of the residents should offer an insight into their reactions to dynamic, cultural changes. This, I believe, could contribute to a better future for vernacular dwellings in other localities.

1.3 THESIS OUTLINE

To achieve the above aim, this research project is divided into three parts:

The first part constitutes the background to the research and outlines the theoretical and conceptual ideas important for understanding experiences of well-being in Thai vernacular houses. Three chapters are used to develop this first part. It begins with this introduction to the thesis in Chapter 1. Then, in Chapter 2 the key term ‘Thai vernacular houses’ is defined, and the studies that have been conducted on these houses are reviewed. In Chapter 3, a second key term ‘well-being,’ or Khwam Phasook in the Thai language, is defined and related to Thai vernacular houses. Various factors in the relationship between the native concept of Khwam Phasook and Thai vernacular houses, and the effects of changes in the sense of well-being of the residents on their configuration of the houses, their patterns of use and their associated meanings are also discussed.

The second part forms the core of the research. It consists of three chapters. In Chapter 4, a set of research questions is developed. This is followed by a discussion of how I came to conduct the present study on vernacular houses in Tambon Pakkran of Pra Nakhon Sri Ayutthaya. The selection of various research methods for conducting the research and providing answers to the questions identified is also
described. In Chapter 5, I describe my investigations on the evolution of vernacular houses in Tambon Pakkran, and how the physical characteristics of vernacular houses in the study area have been retained or changed from their traditional patterns in accordance with the residents’ experiences of Khwam Phasook during changing conditions in the locality. In Chapter 6, I examine how the evolution of physical features of the elements of the houses identified in Chapter 5 have brought about changes to the ways they are used and the meanings the residents attach to them. These two chapters present the main body of results of the extensive fieldwork that provided primary materials for this thesis.

The third part is a synthesis of knowledge derived from the first part and the main findings from the second part. Chapter 7 begins with a reflection on the relationship of changes in the physical properties of the contemporary vernacular houses, their patterns of use and the meanings ascribed to them. Examining changes to those three factors reveals various influences on the shifting attitudes towards Khwam Phasook of the residents, and provides an argument in favour of why they desire to retain their vernacular houses. This argument provides a contribution to the discussion on sustaining of Thai vernacular houses in other localities. Considerations for further research are also discussed in Chapter 7. Conclusions to the whole research project are drawn in Chapter 8.
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