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Well-being in Thai vernacular houses

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As discussed in Chapter 2, Thai vernacular houses are always changing in order to provide for the well-being of the residents in a particular place and society. The present chapter is aimed at defining the term well-being,¹ and reviewing the relationship between a sense of well-being and Thai vernacular houses.

It begins by defining a sense of domestic well-being in Section 3.2. Various factors in the relationship between a sense of well-being and the characteristics of Thai vernacular houses are discussed in Section 3.3. This is then followed in Section 3.4 by a discussion of the influences of social change on the residents’ sense of well-being in their vernacular houses. Conclusions are drawn in Section 3.5.

3.2 WELL-BEING

This section deals with what ‘well-being’ means in this thesis, and the differences between it and scientific measurements to do with physical comfort.

¹ The term well-being is as close as we can get in English to the Thai term Khwam Phasook. The subtleties of this term will be discussed in Section 3.3.
3.2.1 Defining well-being

Well-being is a state of happiness, health and prosperity (Oxford Dictionary). Various studies on domestic well-being have been concerned with behavior, a variety of attitudes, health (Lawrence 1987) and aesthetics (Cold 2001). This thesis, however, is focused on well-being as a fundamental need for living in domestic spaces. Rybczynski (1986, p. 217) stated that ‘domestic well-being is a fundamental human need that is deeply rooted in us, and that must be satisfied.’ This need is associated with one’s own justification for meeting an appropriate condition of living with happiness in a particular place at a given time (Alexander 1979).

Personal justification for one’s own appropriate condition, however, is not simply a quest for various facilities to support modern lifestyles. Alexander (1979) argues that the modern concept, in which the house becomes too protected and controlled by modern facilities, distorts the real meaning of ‘comfortable,’ or in this sense ‘domestic well-being.’ Domestic well-being, nonetheless, is not simply a desire for the positive aspects of the house for everyday life, or a pursuit of its benefits that we recognize as comfortable (Bachelard 1994). Heidegger (1975) considers that with this type of ‘comfort’ orientation of a house to serve one’s daily needs, well-being is being primarily viewed as subservient to human preoccupation. He suggests that a house is an important establishment expressing our intention of living in harmony with the environment. He emphasizes that our intention is to exist as human beings, to keep a relationship in an ontological sense of oneself to other people, to earth and sky, to the divinities present or absent, and to things, plants and animals (Naess 1989). Payutto (1998) provides the notion of ‘constitution of life:’ living with happiness is to learn how to dwell in harmony not only with oneself, but also with the community, society and the environment (Tuan 1986; Zimmerman 1985; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981).

A personal sense of well-being begins from one’s house. Bachelard (1994, p. 7) wrote, ‘life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house.’ A house is ‘our corner of the world’ (Bachelard 1994, p. 3) that we build to respond to our fundamental needs for living attuned to the environment, and is also associated with social values and cultural interpretations in a particular place at a
given time (Watsuji 1988). It is the environment where we live in everyday life until it becomes a familiar environment (Harries 1997; Bachelard 1994; Dovey 1985). Dovey (1985, p. 37) illustrates this point: ‘when we wander in the dark in our home, we do not need to see where the furniture and light switches are; we can “feel” them. The home environment is predictable.’ The order of things and the atmosphere of our living environment is collected as a community of our memories (Bachelard 1994), or ‘images’ in our mind (Sartre 1965). These images are constituted by our judgements and feelings, and they become our attitudes and standards for appropriate conditions of living (Tuan 1977; 1974a). The relationship between our lived spaces and ourselves is essentially dynamic and reflexive. We build a house for our fundamental needs of dwelling in a particular place, and afterwards our house shapes our experiences and perceptive attitudes for well-being.

Different individuals have different perceptive attitudes for well-being that depend on their own past experiences. One’s own familiar environments and preferences for domestic well-being are endowed with a gallery of memories and images collected since childhood. Russell (1921, p. 163) notes that ‘images are regarded by us as more or less accurate copies of past occurrences because they come to us with two sorts of feelings: (1) those that may be called feelings of familiarity; (2) those that may be called together as feelings giving a sense of pastness. The first lead us to trust our memories, the second to assign places to them in the time-order.’ This contributes to standards and attitudes of preferences for domestic well-being in one’s own adult life. Bachelard (1994, pp. 14–15) demonstrates the great importance of the memories from childhood:

But over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. After twenty years, in spite of all the other anonymous stairways, we would recapture the reflexes of the ‘first stairway,’ we would not stumble on that rather high step. The house’s entire being would open up, faithful to our own being. We would push the door that creaks with the same gesture, we would find our way in the dark to the distant attic. The feel of the latch has remained in our hands.

Thus, different experiences of different individuals are different in their own fundamental needs for well-being. Tuan (1986) noted that certain practices and attitudes for living attuned to the environment may be important for a particular
person, but these notions may be less fulfilling of fundamental needs for other people. This is associated with the environment in which one has lived and experienced. The differences between the rural life and the lifestyles of townsfolk are often remarked upon (Altman & Chemers 1984; Tuan 1974a). Tanizaki (1991, pp. 9–10) gives a great example:

For the solitary eccentric…, he can ignore the blessing of scientific civilization and retreat to some forsaken corner of the countryside; but a man who has a family and lives in the city cannot turn his back on the necessities of modern life—heating, electric lights, and sanitary facilities.

Personal attitudes of satisfactions and preferences are not fixed. Nathsupha (1997, p. 238) quoted the monk, Buhhdathat, as saying, ‘the intention of human beings always changes in accordance with conditions of the environment.’ This is especially true in fast-moving modern societies, where we have more opportunity to live in different places than was possible in the past. The media, propaganda and advertisements are developing faster than ever before. These influences make a contribution to our future expectations for our new living condition.

According to Harries (1997), Bachelard (1994) and Dovey (1985), a new house for one’s own well-being not only takes for reference the houses of our past experiences, but also discloses the influences of new experiences. Bachelard (1994, pp. 5–6) states, ‘an entire past comes to dwell in a new house… The various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days. And after we are in a new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all Immemorial things are. We live fixations, fixations of happiness.’ Our feelings, attitudes and thoughts for domestic well-being are adaptable, and always incorporate new conditions of the environment while retaining our past experiences and memories for living in harmony with the environment.

A sense of domestic well-being is experienced personally; however, the individual judgment of the different members of the community are brought together

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2 Author’s translation
and support one another to define what is comfortable and what is not in a particular culture at any particular time (Rybczynski 1986; Heidegger 1975). Tuan (1986, p. 3) argues that ‘before our time of instantaneous and powerful communication when certain standards and customs of the West have come to be rather widely accepted, people everywhere have tended to view the corner of the world they dwell in as uniquely favored and their own customs and habits as good.’ Vernacular dwellings, in particular, express the choices and habits of reflective agreements for living with harmony and happiness among the members of a community within the environment, and are different from culture to culture. The inhabitants’ attitudes of well-being in a particular culture express the relationship between their ways of life, their houses, and their environment, thus producing an atmosphere peculiar to the place at a given time.

### 3.2.2 The measurement of well-being

Domestic well-being is a subjective experience. It would be possible to identify a personal sense of appropriate conditions of well-being in the houses by recording the attitudes of a large number of people in a particular community and place (Rybczynski 1986; Zeisel 1984). This would be a quantitative opinion survey. However, the interpretation of such a survey would be of limited value, because it would be easier to know when we feel comfortable or what conditions are appropriate than to ask why or to what extent we feel that way. This type of argument presuppose our ‘knowledge of the conditions of knowledge’ (Bourdieu 1990) of how we perceive well-being in our houses to the responses allowed for in the survey (Robinson 1994).

Domestic well-being often refers to comfort. The idea of comfort in a scientific sense is focused on one issue at a time, especially those that can be measured. Most scientific research in this area emphasizes the ideas of comfort or discomfort, especially through measurements with a range of humidity and temperatures called the ‘comfort zone.’ Rybczynski (1986) and Alexander (1979) argued that the notion of comfort is impossible to be measured and, as Watsuji (1988, p. 18) wrote, ‘something that a hygrometer cannot do.’ Comfort or a sense of well-being is rather, a more profound quality in people’s minds (Pinijvarasin, 2001; Rybczynski 1986; Alexander 1979). Following the point of view of Tetsuro Watsuji (1988), a Japanese philosopher who proposes the function of climate as a factor within the structure of
human existence, we feel comfortable because we are in a certain environment that matches our feelings, familiarity, memories and expectations, which were derived from our past experiences. When we feel comfortable, we ourselves discover our own appropriate condition within that environment. Our sense of domestic well-being is itself related to the condition of the environment. The environment of a house, for example, pertains to the house itself and is not the thing that makes us feel comfortable (Heidegger 1975; 1962). It is we who perceive the house and feel comfortable, and it is we who attach our attitudes, thoughts and beliefs to the house.

Hence, comfort or a sense of domestic well-being is our subjective experiences in relation to how we have lived and who and where we are, and is hardly to be measured at all. Domestic well-being is personal relationship with one’s own house, which is deeply rooted in one’s own experiences concerning the environment, the history, the social norms and values, and the cultural beliefs and interpretations in a particular culture.

### 3.3 Well-being in Thai Vernacular Houses

So far the concept of well-being in general terms has been defined. The aim in this section is to define the concept of well-being in Thai vernacular houses. The section begins with a brief review of the concepts of well-being in Thai vernacular houses. Then, various dimensions that make up the concept of well-being in Thai vernacular houses are discussed.

#### 3.3.1 Thai concepts of well-being

As discussed in the preceding chapter, Thai vernacular houses are built in response to fundamental needs for comfortable living in the environment of Thai residents, and are different from region to region. The notion of well-being in Thai vernacular houses is associated with manifold factors of physical environment and social and cultural systems in a particular culture. This can be demonstrated in two ways.

The first way can be illustrated by works of art. Warren and Tettoni (1994) and Watsuji (1988) note that art forms of any kind always reflect the vitality of the
people’s ways of life and beliefs in a particular culture. Although there are many kinds and types of Thai art that reflect the relationship between the people and their living environment in a particular culture or region, I have selected Figure 3.1 as a great example of what I see as an expression of the concept of well-being in Thai vernacular houses.

![Figure 3.1 The atmosphere of well-being in Thai vernacular houses](image)

Source: The author’s photograph, taken in February 2002, of the Lacquer Pavilion at Suan Pakkad Palace, Bangkok, Thailand

This gold and lacquer painting, which was made during the Ayutthaya period (1350—1767), illustrates the aesthetic of Thai Buddhist art, especially in the Central region. It conveys the story that all villagers helped together in preparing food to offer the Buddha for his last meal before his enlightenment (Buribhand & Thongsawet 1981).

Heidegger (1975, pp. 19–20) stated that ‘the art work is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than the mere thing itself… The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory.’ It is ‘a

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3 Ayutthaya was one of the capitals of Thailand (See also Section 4.4).
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free essence’ (Fallico 1962) that allows all experiences of the people among whom it was created to open up a wider conceptual possibility (Vattimo 2000; Alexander 1987; Geertz 1983; Dewey 1934). Thus, it is possible to use the image shown in Figure 3.1 as a reflection of the atmosphere of well-being in Thai residential spaces.

This image illustrates not only the ways of life of the residents in their residential spaces, but also demonstrates the residents’ relationship with other villagers, with the environment and with the divinities, which are presented here as angels from the sky. Everything is presented in natural actions, and integrates together. The integration of the manifold factors appearing in the image gives a visual explanation of the Thai sense of well-being in residential spaces involving spiritual and religious beliefs and values, thus providing rewards of living with happiness among the villagers.

The second way of depicting well-being is by language. Heidegger (1975, p. 189) noted that ‘language belongs to the closest neighborhood of man’s being.’ Thus he argues that language is closely related to human-made environments in a particular culture. Mansbach (2002), Thiele (1995), Mugerauer (1994; 1988) and Norberg-Schulz (1996; 1985) argue that Heidegger did not view the essence of language in terms of a system of signs that contain meaning, as understood in its usual sense as written and spoken representation of semiotic discourse. Rather Heidegger’s view is that language enables the foundation of human existence to be revealed as meaningful phenomena. Norberg-Schulz (1985, p. 29) suggests that language, from Heidegger’s point of view, discloses the basic existential structures of people’s being-in-the-world, and ‘the structure is kept and visualized by means of architecture.’ This suggests a linkage of language and the concept of well-being in Thai vernacular houses.

The idea of domestic well-being for Thai residents is equivalent to the term Khwam Phasook in the Thai language. Khwam is used as a Thai prefix to turn an adjective into a noun. Phasook literally means happy or contented, and is similar to Sabai in the Thai language (Hirunyakant 2000). Sabai literally means comfortable, which refers to feeling pleasently and physically relaxed. Both Phasook and Sabai, which were originally derived from the Pali language, are described by the term Yhou Yen Pensook in Thai residential spaces. This last term describes unique and long-
standing principles in the relationship between Thai vernacular houses and Thai residents’ living experiences and their attitudes for living attuned to the environment in a particular place (Pathummanon 2001; 1994; Panin 1999). The term *Yhou Yen Pensook* in Thai vernacular houses refers to the combination of the fundamental needs for living in the tropical climate, the invisible socio-cultural influences and the goals of living serenely in the environment. This embraces the relationship between three main factors:

- *Yhou* in residential spaces, or *Karn Yhou Arsai*, suggesting the way people use spaces in their houses;

- *Yen* or *Khwam Yen*, which literally means the need for cool conditions in the hot and humid climate, thus reflecting the physical characteristics of Thai vernacular houses;

- *Pensook* or *Khwam Sook*, which is a state of happiness, and suggests the intention of the residents for living in a way that is attuned to the environment. Vernacular houses, with this intention, are developed and attached with meanings of the residents (this will be discussed in Sub-section 3.3.4).

These three factors in the concept of *Khwam Phasook* in Thai vernacular houses range from the physical characteristics, the patterns of use, and finally to the meanings people attribute to them. These are discussed in turn below.

### 3.3.2 Physical characteristics

Physical features of domestic spaces, as philosophers such as Bachelard (1994), Heidegger (1975; 1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) consider, primarily express ‘a form of life’ (Norberg-Schulz 1971). Dovey (1985; 1979) argues that the house has essentially two types of space: conceptual space and lived space. He explained that ‘conceptual space is abstract geometric, and objectively measured, a kind of context or ether within which places, people and things exist. Lived space, by contrast, is the

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4 There are three components in the term *Karn Yhou Arsai*. *Karn* is also one of the Thai prefixes to form a word as a noun. *Yhou* or *Yhou Arsai* means to dwell within a place.
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preconceptual and meaningful spatial experience...Whereas conceptual space is an abstract homogeneous continuum, lived space is a concrete and meaning-centered bodily experience’ (1985, p. 35). Russell (1948, p. 236) acknowledges that ‘it is true that in physical space only one place is involved, but this place lies outside our direct experience, and is neither visual nor tactual.’ For Dovey, lived-space constitutes the physical characteristics or architectural forms of the houses. The features of a house presuppose a purely abstract concept of geometrical components and orders to accommodate the simplest physical functions for dwelling.

The structure of the house generally represents our needs of being situated appropriately in the environment. Dovey (1985) and Tuan (1977; 1974b) note that the house appears through the relationship between the three fundamental directions, left/right, up/down and front/rear. The house is generally composed of fundamental elements in vertical and horizontal arrangements. However, the physical features of the house, as Watsuji (1988, p. 6) says, ‘is an established mode of construction and this cannot have come into being without some connections with climate,’ or with the geographical environment of a particular place (Bachelard 1994; Heidegger, 1975; Norberg-Schulz 1971). Norberg-Schulz (1971) further notes that the house is not only meant for us as a physical, functional abode, but also expresses our way of living attuned to the environment.

The Thai vernacular houses were designed for comfortable living in the hot and humid climate. Watsuji (1988, p. 6) notes that in monsoon climates ‘humidity imposes severe limitations on residential style. Where the humidity is very high, through ventilation is essential.’ This is reflected in the characteristics of both the vertical and horizontal arrangement of Thai vernacular houses. Customarily, the Thai house is divided vertically into three parts: a steep roof and long eaves, which are for heat protection and fast drainage of precipitation; living areas, which are organized in horizontal arrangements to facilitate ventilation; and supporting stilts, which give a buffer area, keeping the house free of water from the ground and floods, facilitating air circulation, and providing for cool living spaces. However, the physical characteristics of these three parts in the various regional Thai houses are different in their details in accordance with the micro-climate and socio-cultural significance of
the house in a particular region, as extensively described in Chapter 2 (see also later in this section).

As discussed earlier, regional Thai houses are not ‘a frozen mechanism’ (Moneo 1978), but are always changing in different ways in accordance with people’s experiences of well-being. The changes are driven by both inner and outer influences (Lawrence 1982). The inner influences consist of adjustments, experiments and new conclusions, formed by people’s own images of kinship models and the constraints of socio-cultural implications in the parental home. The outer influences are people’s attempts to assimilate traits from other systems of the wider society.

Although Thai vernacular houses in a particular region are always changing, and appear as various models suitable for living of individual people, they are more or less expressed as ‘a public character’ (Norberg-Schulz 1971) or ‘a formal structure’ (Moneo 1978; Norberg-Schulz 1963). Moneo (1978) noted that a house in this sense is no longer a single, isolated unit. Rather it is related to other houses, its surroundings and even its history. In this way the elements of each house are observable as a chain of related events in which it is possible to find common characteristics of change, thus disclosing their evolution within a particular group or culture.

3.3.3 Patterns of use

As argued above, the concept of Khwam Phasook can be interpreted in such a way that Thai vernacular houses disclose patterns of use. These patterns are intimately related to social and cultural imperatives, and have developed to meet specific needs within each cultural background (Bourdieu 1990; 1977; Oliver 1987; Dovey 1985; Rapoport 1969). Dovey (1985) argues that the way space is used in one’s own house differs from culture to culture, even though some activities such as sleeping and eating are fundamental practices among us. He gives a good example: ‘spatially, Westerners eat while seated in chairs, Indians sit on the floor, and ancient Romans ate lying down’ (p. 38). In Thai practice, taking one’s shoes off before entering the house, and sleeping, sitting and eating on the floorboards are common.
Sitting in a Thai house, for instance, is related to family structure. Although regional differences determine its size, a typical Thai house is the one nucleus where everyone lives together, such as grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles, aunts, mother, father and children. It is customary for the younger generation to always show respect to the older, and this is manifested in seating places, especially through the platform levels in the house, which are assigned in accordance with seniority of the family members. The higher level is always for the older members of the family, and the lower floorboards are for the younger members (Pinsri 1997). Other various daily activities such as sleeping, walking and talking, moreover, are all everyday behaviors and practices related to social norms and cultural values, and this has stabilized the arrangements and patterns of use of the house.

For living with Khwam Phasook, the Thai house not only provides for a pattern of daily living activities, but occasionally also becomes a place for holding ceremonies. To paraphrase Roxana Waterson (1990), the South–East Asian house is not always primarily a dwelling place taking precedence over everything else as in the Western world, but it can also become ‘a ritual site’ (p.43). Holding a ceremony in one’s own house is something with which every Thai Buddhist is familiar. Raglan (1964) discusses the ‘house as temple’ where many ceremonies, such as birth, marriage and death take place, in which the Thai house performs as a ritual place where many guests or neighbors can be accommodated. This is to ensure the relationship between the house, the residents, the neighbors and the social and spiritual or metaphysical values of the community.

The notion of Thai houses as part of the socio-cultural pattern is also associated with the concept of social participation. For reasons of protection and efficient administration, Thai vernacular houses are commonly arranged in compact groupings as a village (see later in this section). In the past, neighboring families and friends within a village usually gathered together to help each other in various activities that required labor, such as planting, harvesting and building a house. In the past when a new house was built, for example, the laborers were neighbors in a village. The owners of the new house would announce that they intended to build a house, and then ask for help. The traditional Thai house can be built within one or two days on the site because it is composed of prefabricated units in which all components are
prepared before construction (Jaijongrak 1996). The residents always helped each other in turn, from household to household and, as Jumsai (1986, p. 107) noted, ‘this also created a lively atmosphere in the community.’ There was no formal payment for helping and donating labor for someone’s work in Thai vernacular society. This characteristic of mutual relationship by helping one another in the community is called Long Khak in the Thai language (Nathsupha & Leardvichadha 1998). The concept of Long Khak is to sustain the social and economic strength of the community, thus ensuring satisfaction, reassurance and happiness.

Dovey (1985) emphasizes two aspects of the house as a pattern of use. The first aspect is that experiences and behaviors may establish meanings the residents attribute to the house (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981). The platform levels in the regional Thai houses, for instance, are used in accordance with seniority. This practice can evoke various symbolic values assigned to the divisions of the house (this will be discussed later in this section). The second aspect is that the house as a template of everyday living activities is not fixed. Rather it is always changing in accordance with people’s experiences during social and environmental transformations (Lawrence 1987; 1982). Dovey (1985, p. 39) ascribes great importance to this view:

> The adolescent who rejects the family home...may not be rejecting “at homeness” so much as reordering a spatial schema to center on a new “home”—a subcultural group and its preferred places. Although the particular spatial patterns may be sociocultural, the sense of connectedness may be more personal.

The house as a pattern of use for domestic well-being is always made up of all past experiences, familiarities and adaptabilities to meet personal satisfaction in a particular place at a given time.

Bourdieu (1990, p. 22) argues that ‘the more the conditions of production of dispositions resemble the conditions in which they function to produce ordinary practices, the more socially successful, and therefore unconscious, these practices will be.’ His view suggests that the house reflects a pattern of use imbued with our

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5 The author’s translation
thoughts, experiences and actions in relation to socio-cultural influences until it becomes sub-conscious and taken for granted (Bachelard 1994; Dovey 1985). Thus, the pattern of use in the house is an important factor reflecting certain attitudes of the residents for Khwam Phasook in their particular social and environmental context.

3.3.4 Meanings

‘Meaning’ expresses several ideas. This sub-section first begins with an explanation of how it is used in this thesis, and then goes on to describe the different ways people assign meaning to their houses, especially in Thailand.

Defining ‘meaning’

The notion of Khwam Phasook discloses not only patterns of use but also meanings that the residents attach to the house. Meaning attributed to the houses as ‘a nonverbal communication’ (Rapoport 1982) refers to the ideas for well-being that the Thai residents in a particular region or culture wish to communicate not only to other people, but also with the environment and the divinities, as discussed earlier in this chapter. The residents’ ideas or thoughts for domestic well-being are related to past living experiences, and are associated with the present social norms and values and cultural beliefs in their particular region. Jencks (1985, p. 227) says, ‘meaning liberates form; a symbolic programme sanctions expression.’ Thus, signs and symbols are taken to communicate meanings. Oliver (2003; 1975) notes that the concept of symbols is different from that of signs. Signs are used to denote an object or an event and to indicate a significant function of the object, while symbols are used to connote inferences, attitudes and beliefs in a larger sphere of association. Symbols also do not necessarily connect explicitly between themselves and what they stand for (Sartre 1965; Russell 1921). Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) emphasize that symbols are always derived from one’s own past experiences as a standard of comparison for new occurrences. He believes that symbols enable the residents to convey their attitudes and beliefs through their houses. This process of symbolic representation is considered to be ‘the greatest accomplishment of humankind’ (p. 21). By means of symbols Thai vernacular houses become an expression of the residents’ beliefs and attitudes.
There are many invaluable meanings attributed by scholars to Thai vernacular houses, but they all seem to be interpreting ‘meaning’ in their own way. They rarely consider a critical framework for understanding meanings the residents attribute to their houses. However, these past contributions will be reviewed wherever appropriate.

Dovey (1985) notes that besides the essence of the dwelling spaces as a linkage between the inhabitants and their place environment, the meanings attributed to them by the dwellers are not only to do with their personal and social circumstances, but also are ‘a matter of the representation of a self-image of a world view’ (p. 41). According to Dovey, three key meanings ascribed to houses can be identified: the house as an expression of self; the house as a symbol of social integration; and the house as a symbol of the culture of the inhabitants. These are discussed below as they are reflected in Thai vernacular houses.

**The house as an expression of self**

There are many ways in which Thai vernacular houses express the inner persona of the residents themselves. Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995) and Marcus (1995) noted that the house is an extension of the person, and thus it is an expression of self. According to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), the regional Thai houses signify qualities of both self and status.

**The house as a sign of qualities of self**

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 26) argue that ‘in almost every culture, objects are chosen to represent the power of the bearer. More than any other trait, the potential energy of the person, his or her power to affect others, is the one that is symbolically expressed.’ The house and its ornaments can reflect the values that the residents wish to portray. This can be illustrated in two of the four regional Thai houses, the Siamese houses and the *Kalae* houses.

Jumsai (1986) suggests a close relationship between the inhabitants of the Siamese houses and the houses themselves. He explained that in the past the dimensions and proportions of the Siamese houses were calculated from the dates of
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birth of the house owners, both husband and wife. Each house had its unique numbers and proportions, and this was considered to be auspicious and suitable exclusively for a particular family. This suggests the interdependence of the lives of the inhabitants and their house. The house is expressed as a living extension of the house owners.

In the *Kalae* houses the *Hum Yon*, a lintel with perforated design, serves as a representation of the traits of the house owner. The term *Hum* literally means ‘testicles,’ and the term *Yon* is derived from *yantra*, which means protection against evil spirits (Panin 2002). Thus, the *Hum Yon* literally means ‘magic testicles,’ and represents the virility of the family head to serve as a protection against intruders, both human and ghostly (Warren & Tettoni 1994; Waterson 1990). This carved lintel is supposed to represent the buffalo’s genitalia. Its height, which is usually one third of its width, is based on the owner’s foot. In the past, before carving the lintel a ceremony needed to be held in order to invite a good potent spirit to enter the wood to be used. The *Hum Yon* attaches to the house the magical power of the house owner, and this is exclusively for one’s own family (Figure 3.2 and see also Figure 2.4). Thus, changing ownership of the house without annihilating the previous magic charm may have unfortunate effects. Warren and Tettoni (1994, p. 112) quoted a prominent Chiang Mai scholar, Krisi Nimmanahaeminda, as saying, ‘often when an old house is sold, the new owner, before he moves in or dismantles it, will beat the *Ham Yon* mercilessly in order to destroy the magic accumulated in them under the old owner for it might bode ill for him. This beating of the lintel or “testicles” is actually a symbolic “castration”.’ The *Ham Yon* performs a creative function, expressing the house owners’ power to control their living sphere for the well-being of their family, and makes them different from other people. This reflects not only the lives of individuals but also their cultural evolution.
Since most houses of Thai residents have tended to follow the Western style during changing social conditions of the country, new *Hum Yon* are no longer made today. The old carved lintels have become antique objects, and the new owners unfortunately have no idea of the magical purpose that the *Hum Yon* served (Warren & Tettoni 1994; Waterson 1990).

**The house as a sign of status**

Regional Thai houses often expressed the social status of their owners. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 29) state that ‘objects signifying status express in almost all cultures,’ and the ways they express this differ from culture to culture. As discussed in Sub-section 2.3.1, houses for ordinary Thais were usually built using a mixture of various materials. This was to express the differences in social status between the royal family members and commoners. For instance, Wiwat Temiyabandha (1995) articulates that in the past building a *Kalae* house entirely of wood required refined carpentry works, and needed a certain period of time. Houses built entirely of wood were not for ordinary residents but only for royal...
family members, because of their ability to recruit many artisans in order to build such houses. Behind such differences are practical reasons. Wiwat explained that if people focused only on constructing their houses, it would reduce their time available for agricultural work and thus would result in an unsustainable economy not only for the residents themselves but also for the village as a whole. Hence, a house built entirely of wood was considered to be inauspicious for ordinary people. The appearance of Thai vernacular houses indicated the social class of the house owner associated with a shared set of virtues, norms and conventions of practices for living in harmony with the owners’ society.

However, these conventional practices have been disregarded since King Mongkut, Rama IV (1851–1868), signed treaties with many western countries, particularly the well-known ‘Bowring Treaty,’ or the ‘Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between Siam and Great Britain’ in 1855 (Horayangkura 2001; Temiyabandha 1995; Syamananda 1993; Wyatt 1984). Thus, everyone has had the opportunity to build their house entirely of wood since that time.

More recently, however, because of the scarcity of timber in the country, the numbers of Thai vernacular houses as well as the quality of craftsman’s skills are being reduced, thus adding value to the remaining traditional houses. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, too, consider that the rarity, the cost and the age of the house are criteria that enhance the owner’s status. He also emphasizes that the houses, particularly for the wealthier and ruling classes, can become an antique embodying their status, thus attracting attention not only among people who have status but also average people. As discussed in Chapter 2, moreover, the regional houses of ordinary Thais are customarily handed down from generation to generation, and are always being altered to accommodate changes to the ways of life and cultural beliefs. Thus the remaining traditional houses can become a reflection of the residents’ status and attract attention of other people who are unable to obtain them.

**The house as a symbol of social integration**

Houses reflect not only personal identification, but are also symbols of social integration. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) argue that houses can
serve as a means of expressing the personal ideology of an individual; however, these personal expressions still require other people to give them meaning. He also states that people ultimately still need to integrate their lives with those of the community, because expressing differentiation may cause turmoil instead of distinctiveness. Vernacular houses in almost all cultures are handed down from one generation to the next (Oliver 1989; Lawrence 1987; 1982) and follow on ‘accepted model with variations’ (Rapoport 1969) in a locality. Even though these houses are different in detail as giving shape to functions of one’s own specific and appropriate life, they are collectively in the same pattern. Thus, vernacular houses signify not only personal expression but also social integration in a particular culture (Watsuji 1988; Dovey 1985; Heidegger 1975; Dewey 1958).

Most Thai vernacular houses manifest themselves as a village, or *Baan* in the Thai language. One *Baan* is composed of many households, and forms itself in accordance with the geographical settings (Walipodom 2000; Jaijongrak 1997). The physical settings of a *Baan*, particularly in the Central region, are of three types (Figure 3.3): linear villages along watercourses and along roads; clustered villages; and scattered villages (Jaijongrak 1997; Panin 1997; Anuman-Rajadhon 1967). Different *Baan* have different characteristics of the houses, livelihoods and beliefs of their residents (Nartsupha & Leardvichadha 1998; Nartsupha 1996).
Harries (1997), Norberg-Schulz (1985) and Heidegger (1975) note that works of architecture function as ornament bearers of the residents’ intentions to link with their surroundings. This shows that even though individual vernacular houses always change in accordance with the residents’ adaptation to changing social conditions within their lifetime, their architectural characteristics more or less signify their social function as a linkage with the surroundings. Their expression as a common agreement among the group is, as (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981, p. 34) wrote, ‘somehow implicated in the existence and the survival of the clan.’ Hence, at
different historical periods Thai vernacular houses in a particular place may appear to have different characteristics appropriate for living, but they always appear as symbols of social integration.

**The house as a symbol of culture**

In most cultures houses are not only personal and collective expressions, but are also symbols of religious and cultural beliefs, and this varies from culture to culture. According to Dovey (1985), houses have been interpreted in various ways, such as the house as a metaphor of the body (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995; Waterson 1990; Dovey 1985); the house as symbolic representation of sexual union (Bourdieu 1990); the house as symbol of the universe; the house as an indication of kinship and rank; and the house as a reciprocal of place (Waterson 1990; Eliade 1985). Most interpretations of the symbolic meaning of regional Thai houses, however, fall into three categories: body metaphor; kinship and rank; and symbols of spiritual and religious beliefs. These are described below.

**The house as metaphor of the body**

Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995, p. 3) note that ‘intimacy [is] linked both physically and conceptually, the body and the house are the loci for dense webs of signification and affect and serve as basic cognitive models used to structure, think and experience the world.’ Waterson (1990) states that this idea of the house as a metaphor of the body is often used to reinforce the close relationship between the inhabitants and their houses, and differs from culture to culture. Among the four Thai regional types, however, the *Kalae* houses are the most suggestive in their images of a huge male buffalo’s body. The *Kalae*, the decorative V-shaped finials, express as its horns; the features of outward-leaning panels represent the body; the *Hum Yon*, the carved lintel above the door of the bedroom, is a symbol of the genitalia of the buffalo. Even though the metaphorical representation of the house as a buffalo’s body appears in many cultures around South–East Asia, the appearance of the *Hum Yon* makes it different from other vernacular houses (Temiyabandha 1995). The existence of this lintel in the *Kalae* houses is to enhance the prosperity of the house owner and to ensure the well-being of the family. As discussed in Chapter 2, the *Kalae* house as a
representation of a buffalo body functions as a sign of sacrifice to the divinities, thus providing happiness of living to the family.

The house as a representation of kinship and rank

As discussed earlier, in Thai society the way spaces are used is concerned with seniority, and this is symbolically reflected in the vertical arrangements of the platforms in traditional Thai houses. This, however, has been further interpreted in relation to the ranking system or hereditary classes of nobles, commoners, and slaves in Thai society, as prevailed in the past. Redmond (1999, p. 165) demonstrates that in the past ‘certain areas of the house would be raised for the masters to sit on, while on the lower floorboards the slaves and servants would crouch and crawl.’ Thevakul (2000) considers this difference in using space to be a mirror of the hierarchical system, or Sukdina, that prevailed in the past in Siamese society. The platform levels are symbolic of the social ranking structure assigned to the divisions of traditional Thai houses. The hierarchical stance of Sukdina (or ‘dignity marks’) literally means ‘power of land’ (Aasen 1998, p. 106), and was ensured by the nature of relationships such as King and commoner, and Nai and Phrai, or patron and client. Rabibhadana (1990, p. 79) notes, ‘Sukdina has nothing to do with classes or categories of people.’ The relationship between Phrai and Nai, for instance, was more of reliance on each other: as Rabibhadana (1990, p. 89) wrote, it is ‘a dyadic and contractual one in which one party (a phrai) offered gifts and services to the other (his nai) in return for aid and protection.’ This reflects a social relationship of mutual respect and equality in which everyone is dependent on the other for help, or Phung Pha in Thai society (Thevakul 2000; Rabibhadana 1990).

The house as symbol of spiritual and religious beliefs

Thai vernacular houses embody spiritual and religious beliefs and values, which vary from region to region. Two classical styles are distinctive: one in the Kalae houses reflecting the animism of reverence towards the potent spirits, and the other in the Siamese houses showing Buddhist beliefs. As discussed in Sub-section 2.3.4, the features of the inward-leaning structure of the Siamese houses and the high-pitched roof with curved profiles of the Pan-lom are a reflection of an attempt to reach the highest goal of Nirvana, which is the concern of the individual in Buddhist beliefs.
Chapter 3: Well-being in Thai vernacular houses

Nartsupha (1997, p. 238) quoted the monk, Buddhathat, as saying, ‘Thai people in the past required unsophisticated ways of life. They simply desired to be in a stage of Nirvana. Even though they did not know what Nirvana was, they wanted to live in serenity and peacefulness.’ Wasi (2001) makes the point that in the past Thai residents’ perceptions of well-being were directed towards the idea of giving to others. This concept, however, mutated into the physical expression of the wooden gable ends, or *Juaw Phrom Pak* of the Siamese houses, which are constructed with a wooden frame jointed without nails (See also Figure 2.9a). Kullayanamitt (1996) states that the *Juaw Phrom Pak* is a reminder for every inhabitant to be philanthropic, an aspect of Buddhist principles, which is comparable to *Phrom Vihan Sii* or *Dhamma* of *Phrom*. *Phrom Vihan Sii* consists of four principles (Payutto 2000): first, loving-kindness (*Metta*); second, compassion (*Karuna*); third, sympathetic joy (*Mudita*); and fourth, equanimity (*Upekkha*). Through this virtue of generosity, the goal of peaceful co-existence with society can be attained.

In all the above instances the regional Thai houses lifted utilitarian solutions to climatic conditions to high levels of self-expression, social integration, socio-cultural interpretation and religious belief, integrating the highest symbols of the culture in a particular region. The integration of symbolic expressions in Thai vernacular houses provides manifold rewards of reassurance and happiness for the Thai residents to live in harmony with society, the environment and the divinities in their region.

### 3.3.5 The relationship of structure, pattern of use and meaning

*Khwam Phasook* in Thai vernacular houses reflects the relationship between the physical characteristics of the houses, the way they are used, and the meanings attributed to them. Lozano (1990) suggests that they permanently affect one another. It follows that the creation of physical forms affects the pattern of uses, which also affects the cultural interpretations and beliefs of the residents. Since personal attitudes for domestic well-being are always changing during the residents’ lifetimes, this may cause changes to the structures of the houses, the way they are used and the meanings attached to them. A statement of Rapoport (1969, p. 78) illustrates this

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point: ‘attaching so much importance to the culturally linked aspects of built form tends to lead to a position of complete relativism. As soon as a given culture or way of life has changed, its form would become meaningless.’ These three factors are not a reducible or separable quality of Thai vernacular houses for ensuring well-being.

The house developed for utilitarian reasons, associated with patterns of use and meanings, reveals itself as co-ordination of physical forms and functional perspectives. Norberg-Schulz (1963) notes that each component of a house is not only assigned certain functions but also participates in the activities of the residents. For example, in the Siamese houses there are five main intermediate spaces: a small roofless platform at the arrival from a staircase; a gateway; a large roofless platform; a verandah, and a semi-enclosed room before entering the bedroom (see also Sub-sections 2.3.4 and 2.3.6). The enclosures and arrangements of these components regulate the movement of the residents from one place to another, and thus the residents connect to other places within the house by the ordering of spaces (Johnson 1993). This designates the house with its spatial relation or ‘configuration’ (Hillier 1996; Hillier & Hanson 1984). Hillier (1996, p. 1) refers to such a configuration not only as an arrangement of parts of the houses but also ‘relations taking account into other relations.’ Norberg-Schulz (1963) states that the spatial configuration of a house is often a very complicated affair that needs multiple principles to explain its organization. Lawrence (1982, p. 42) suggests four themes for considering the spatial organization of houses:

- The relationship between the exterior and the interior and between public spaces and private spaces;
- The spatial organization of interior spaces, particularly their ordering and the demarcation between them;
- The organization and positioning of household objects and furniture in the interior spaces;
- The relationship between the spatial ordering of a house and household objects, and daily domestic activities as well as rituals, especially how spaces are classified, positioned and used according to female and male classifications.
He uses these general themes to explain how domestic spaces have been employed and represented. Since a sense of well-being can change at different stages of a person’s life, the spatial arrangements and organizations of the house may be changed accordingly. Different individual houses differ in their spatial organization and arrangement in responding to different preferences and attitudes for appropriate conditions of living. However, in a vernacular community, where people are usually sharing the same social–psychological values and beliefs, the spatial organization of their houses as well as household objects usually appear as similar morphological characteristics of arrangements and relations.

Nitschke (1993) and Relph (1976) note that the relationship between physical features, observable activities and meanings also establishes the characteristics of rural landscape or ‘identity of place.’ In this view, the living sphere of an individual house cannot be considered as an isolated entity, because it is bounded by its surroundings. Thus, collections of houses are brought together to express the unique living atmosphere of a locality (Heidegger 1975). According to Relph, there is no strict rule or discernible limitation of how these three factors can combine to express the identity of place, or ‘images’ (Lynch 1960) of a particular place. Every identifiable place expresses its own unique living atmosphere in relation to the residents’ experiences for well-being within their houses and their surroundings. This seems to be appropriate for one’s own place, as opposed to any other (Panin 1999; Relph 1976; Lynch 1960). Thus, if the physical characteristics of the houses and the living activities and beliefs of the residents change, the milieu of their place changes accordingly.

### 3.4 Influences of Social Changes on Well-being in Thai Vernacular Houses

As discussed in Section 3.3 above, Khwam Phasook in Thai vernacular houses involves a combination of attitudes and experiences of the Thai residents, and expresses itself in the physical features of the houses, their patterns of use and the meanings the residents attach to them. The relationship between these factors is revealed not only in the morphological characteristics of individual houses but also reflects the characteristics of the rural landscape in a particular place at a given time.
The relationship between the residents’ attitudes for Khwam Phasook and their vernacular houses is dynamic and reflexive, and this constantly changes in accordance with their experiences through changing conditions of the society and environment during their lives.

There have been various influences contributing to changing values for Khwam Phasook of Thai residents in vernacular societies. As discussed in Chapter 2, since the reign of Rama IV (1851–1868), known as King Mongkut, Thai residential buildings have been influenced by European architectural styles, particularly Victorian styles introduced during the reign of Rama V (1868–1910), or King Chulalongkorn, and much later on by modern and international styles. According to Horayangkura, Intrawijit, Chantawiladwong and Inphunthung (1993), the establishment and development of the Thai architectural profession and education since the 1930s has also added a profusion of undigested values and ideas of imported architectural styles from other cultures to building design. Even though nowadays many Thai designers and architects have realized the problem of losing Thai identity in architecture and have attempted to foster the spirit of traditional Thai houses in their designs, a passion for the outward trappings with the values of economic efficiency, modernity and urbanization has been prevalent in the recent trends of architectural development in the country.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the complex progression of modernization and globalization associated with the development of the economy and the growth of the population of Thailand have enormously accelerated the changes of socio-cultural conditions in vernacular societies. These influences have included the

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6 The first architectural school in Thailand was founded in the 1930s at Chulalongkorn University with an essentially western curriculum, particularly taught in English. The architectural curriculum in Thailand adopted western paradigms, with the inclusion of some lessons on Thai traditional architecture added. The western-adopted curriculum teaches and guides students to develop their skills to correspond with the contemporary world. The point of the curriculum that deals with Thai architecture only focuses on history—classical aspects of architecture, including building ornaments, construction elements, specific proportions and typical building styles. As a consequence, Thai vernacular houses have been un-interpreted and ignored since the school of architecture began, and professional architects have been trained in the western tradition, which has dominated the profession.

importation of architectural styles from other cultures, the development of new construction technology, the availability of new materials, the expanding infrastructure (which has especially had a large impact on the well-being of Thai residents in various remote areas since the middle of the twentieth century), the development of the communication system and changes from water- to road-based transportation, the introduction of tourism, and the advancement of advertisements and media, particularly magazines and TV. Heidegger (1975) notes that television is the peak of radical abolition of every possibility of ‘remoteness.’ It allows us to see and hear in relation to things far away from us in physical environments (Malpas 2000; Heidegger 1975). These factors have stimulated changes of social patterns and culture faster than ever before (Alexander 1964). Horayangkura (2001) notes that modern technology, new materials and techniques of construction and economic developments have resulted in a wider freedom of ‘choices’ (Tuan 1986) for modern Thai house design. These new houses also embrace modern facilities and standards of health, cleanliness and convenience. As a consequence, house design in Thai society tends to be an expression of individual requirements and tastes rather than a reflection of the lifestyles and the beliefs for living accepted by the community as a whole, as happened in the past. These perspectives have led to new standards and attitudes for Khwam Phasook in Thai residential spaces. Many Thai residents have had no alternative but to adapt and adjust themselves to changes in society. Many residents may be caught up with modern values or architectural styles from other cultures, and this may cause them to replace their vernacular houses with new house styles (Temiyabandha 1994; Chompunuch 1987). This has resulted in a reduction of Thai vernacular houses in many localities (Askew 2003).

In the past, regional Thai houses were designed and evolved with the ways of life, the creative forces and the constraints of the culture in a particular region. Since vernacular houses in most cultures are handed down as a legacy from generation to generation, they express both permanent and changing characteristics to suit the daily lives of the residents and their cultural interpretations, while embodying the prevalent social and cultural values and ideas. The contemporary Kalae houses and the southern Thai houses are good examples of this. These houses and their ornaments have displayed a remarkable ability to absorb outside influences without losing their impressive and unique features. This not only reflects the quality of the residents
themselves, but also promotes the evolution of craftsmanship within the culture of particular regions. However, with today’s development of modern materials and technologies of construction and the scarcity of timber, many Thai residents have tended to build their houses in modern styles, particularly with concrete construction. This has resulted in a loss of artistic activity and craftsmanship (Aasen 1998; Horayangkura and et al. 1993), which had evolved with their ways of life and their beliefs in the past. The disappearance of the meanings attaching to the Hum Yon in the Kalae houses, for example, demonstrates this change.

Even though the social and environmental conditions today are dramatically different from those in the past, and are changing faster than ever before, and many people are struggling to live with this change, the concept of Khwam Phasook is simple and fundamental. It is true that physical survival generally has to be met prior to anything else in order to suit one’s own appropriate conditions for living well in the environment. To live well is to be able to control one’s own existence (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981), but this does not mean to live simply as an individual without interacting with others. A sense of Khwam Phasook is associated with psychological, social and economic stability. However, it is not concerned with material wealth and modern facilities to support living in a house; these are not relevant to the concept of fundamental needs. Village life in Thai vernacular societies is the end product of millennia of tradition, and appears as common scenes of simplicity and basic needs to support life (Panin 1999; Nathsupha & Leardvichadha 1998; Temiyabandha 1997). The lifestyles and values of the village people in their vernacular houses is the best place to learn about the real sense of Khwam Phasook and the essence of what it is to dwell with the constraints of history, culture, society and environment.

With the rapid changes in social and environmental conditions accompanying modernity and urbanization, changes in the residents’ lifestyles and attitudes for well-being are inescapable. Merleau-Ponty (2000), Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) and Dewey (1934), however, suggest a distinction between ‘recognition’ and ‘perception’ as an important stance for dealing with our sense of domestic well-being. Recognition can be described as the situation where we consciously or unconsciously experience our house and identify it simply as something that we already know or are
familiar with, without any further attention to the quality of the house itself. Merleau-Ponty (2000) and Heidegger (1975) note that many people view their residential spaces simply with recognition, because they are familiar with their day-to-day living; as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 44) wrote, it is ‘because they are unable to give their full attention to all information perceived from the environment.’ Perception, on the other hand, is ‘passive reception of impression’ (Norberg-Schulz 1963) or ‘accuracy of thought’ (Russell 1921). In this way we can experience our house and realize its intrinsic quality. Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues that perception suggests the potential for gathering together all of one’s own experiences. Through perception, our thoughts for domestic well-being can grasp ‘the totality of reality’ (Preston 1998), which is not only the intrinsic quality of the house itself but also our relationship with it, in which we have lived comfortably from the past until the present (Norberg-Schulz 1985).

Since domestic well-being often refers to the concept of living with ‘good condition,’ the different notions of ‘recognition’ and ‘perception’ lead to two questions: ‘how to have a good condition’ and ‘what should be a good condition.’ The first question refers to recognition of what we already know to be good and thus act directed toward it, whereas the second question refers to perception, which needs to define what an intrinsically good condition is before we can begin to consider how to achieve it (Lemos 1994; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981). There is no doubt that the latter approach can lead us to changes associated with a real sense of Khwam Phasook, while we can retain the intrinsic quality of the physical features of houses, the way they are used, and the meanings attributed to them, based on our own cultural significance.

Thai vernacular houses still remain a significant part of the daily life and beliefs of the residents, reflecting their cultural significance (Panin 1999). Temiyabandha’s (1995) studies on the appearance of the contemporary Kalae houses reveal that Thai vernacular houses have not preserved their ‘traditional pattern’ as a fixed image or a stereotypical imitation at some point in historical time. Rather they are ‘contemporary,’ and display the adaptability of the residents in retaining the past yet adapting to the changes of the new social and technological conditions. Oliver (2000, p. 3) expresses this idea clearly:
Vernacular builders are not resistant to change, but by experiment, trial and evaluation, embrace new technologies or details when their employment is perceived as beneficial. This is not to argue that mistakes do not occur, or that vernacular builders and the occupants of their constructions are impervious to fashion, or external influence. Superficially, it seems remarkable, bearing in mind the pressures of commercialisation, exploitation and economic repression that vernacular traditions persist. Yet, the values by which they flourish or evolve are of the cultures to which they belong and are not necessarily coincident with those of nations, still less with those of multi-national corporations, whose hegemonic domination is inimical to their survival.

The relationship between Thai residents and their vernacular houses is always evolving for living with happiness during socio-cultural transformation. They are regarded not only as an heirloom of technical know-how but also for the standards and values of a society embodied in their structure, function and symbolism. Thai vernacular house are always evolving with the residents’ way of life and attitudes of Khwam Phasook, reflecting their adaptability to new conditions of the present without losing the intrinsic quality of the house, as developed in the past.

3.5 CONCLUSIONS

Domestic well-being refers to our sense of living in harmony not only with ourselves but also with the family, the community, society and the environment. It reflects one’s own experiences associated with manifold factors, which make it difficult to be measured scientifically. It refers to our attitudes and standards for comfortable living in our houses associated with how we have lived and what we have experienced, while accumulating and embracing social practices and cultural beliefs in a particular place and time. Standards for domestic well-being are different from person to person, from place to place and from culture to culture. A sense of domestic well-being always changes during our lifetime, but involves our adaptation to our past experiences and future expectations, based on our present perspectives of living attuned to the environment in a particular culture at a given time. Even though domestic well-being reflects one’s own experiences for appropriate conditions, it appears as common attitudes in a particular culture, thus expressing unique characteristics of place.
Well-being, or Khwam Phasook, refers to unique and long-standing principles in Thai vernacular houses. It involves a concentration of intentions, attitudes, purposes and experiences of the Thai people with appropriate conditions of inhabiting their houses, community and land. Khwam Phasook in Thai vernacular houses reflects the characteristics of the relationship of the houses and their geographical environment, their history, and the ways of life and the beliefs of the Thai people in their own place and culture. This has resulted in differences of physical characteristics of vernacular houses, their patterns of use and the meanings the residents attribute to them in particular Thai cultures and societies. The relationship of these three factors is not a reducible or separable quality for understanding Khwam Phasook in Thai vernacular houses. This relationship also establishes the characteristics of landscape in a locality. Thus, changing attitudes about Khwam Phasook affect not only the relationship between these three factors of vernacular houses but also the milieu of place.

Because the relationship between the residents’ experiences of Khwam Phasook and their vernacular houses is related to specific socio-cultural and environmental conditions in a particular place at a given time, it does not follow the same response everywhere. Modernity and urbanization—the ability to gain the necessities of modern life—are one of the distinguishing features of a society ‘making’ progress, but it seems to be an ability that has become uncontrollable. If the requirements for modern lifestyles are excessive, the traditional patterns will be torn down. The danger of focusing excessively on convenience and material wealth for well-being in residential spaces is that people will not build upon the knowledge of their predecessors, and to some extent will erase their own cultural identity. However, even though Thai vernacular houses have been reducing in numbers during the fast moving and changing social conditions of the past fifty years, many of them still exist today. They have evolved with the residents’ ways of life and beliefs, reflecting their adaptability to convey their cultural significance for living attuned to their own place in this modern time.