Seven

Discussion

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The value of any discussion depends on the quality of the materials discussed and the clarity of the position from which particular arguments are developed. In previous chapters I presented and analyzed the materials compiled within this project, and ensured their value through rigorous application of the chosen research methods. The analysis was based on the contextualized findings from the literature reviews and other theoretical considerations. In this chapter I intend to address some expression of the value systems expressed by the majority of the interviewees, as reported in Chapters 5 and 6. The articulation of their value system is developed from the literature on Buddhist and Eastern worldviews. The discussion is consistent with my starting position, which was strengthened by the knowledge developed in this project, that cultural sustainability can be achieved only through culturally sensitive, locally relevant approaches. Cultural specificity raises the issue of global relevance. Some of the propositions in this chapter might, therefore, be alien to some general, global point of view. Radovic (in press) suggests that differences between local and global viewpoints is a necessary precondition for understanding and respecting cultural otherness.

The preceding two chapters confirm that vernacular houses, their patterns of use and associated meanings are constantly changing. Much of that change has been generated by evolution of the residents’ understanding of well-being. Changes to the components of the houses, the ways they are used and the meanings ascribed to them
reflect various influences on the way Khwam Phasook is perceived. It is now obvious that the meanings the residents attach to the terms Khwam Phasook and Khwam Sabai have diverged. My aim in the present chapter is to integrate the findings reported in Chapters 5 and 6, and to discuss them critically based on the value system shared by the people who inhabit the houses investigated. Since this study was conducted only in Tambon Pakkran, it is impossible to generalize and to apply the findings to other localities, as discussed in Section 4.3. However, because of the broader regional relevance of the value system adopted for the present discussion, it should be possible to use most of the insights gained to make a contribution to the quest to sustain Thai vernacular houses and the values they embody.

This chapter begins in Section 7.2 with a discussion of my findings on the relationship between the changes in physical characteristics of the houses, the ways they are used and the associated meanings. This provides a basis for discussion in Section 7.3 of the shifting attitudes of the residents to their well-being during socio-cultural changes. Some speculative considerations about the possible strategies for sustaining Thai vernacular houses and ideas about further research are presented in Sections 7.4 and 7.5 respectively. The conclusions to this chapter are given in a separate chapter, Chapter 8, which presents the conclusions for this whole research project.

**7.2 RELATIONSHIP OF CHANGES TO THE HOUSES, AND TO THEIR USES AND MEANINGS**

The analyses in Chapters 5 and 6 confirmed the hypothesis that the residents’ experiences of well-being within changes of the broader social conditions of Thailand have brought about evolution of the physical characteristics of vernacular houses, to the ways they are used and, finally, to the meanings ascribed to them. The often dramatic evolution of these three factors in most contemporary houses in Tambon Pakkran has generated changes that question the inherent quality of the traditional houses and their cultural significance. Rossi (1982, p. 96) argues that in the processes of evolution ‘nothing guarantees an effective continuity.’ The pattern of modification in a growing number of contemporary houses in Tambon Pakkran is clearly manifested as a decline in the quality of their past vernacular values. Evolution of the
vernacular houses has also brought about changes to the rural landscape of the region. My aim in this section is to discuss the relationship of these various changes, and to compare them with those in other Thai vernacular communities. Three themes are discussed in detail: evolution of architectural elements; installation of household goods and modern facilities; and overall changes to the houses.

### 7.2.1 Evolution of architectural elements

The evolution of contemporary houses in Tambon Pakkran is most clearly manifested in changes to various architectural elements. The discussion in this section begins with the most important elements of evolution in the contemporary *Reun Thai*, and then goes on to the consequences of changes in these elements for characteristics of housing compounds and house forms.

#### Change of intermediate spaces

As explained in Chapter 5, the first and the most significant changes of contemporary *Reun Thai* in Tambon Pakkran have been to the transitional spaces, such as the *Nok Chan*, *Phalai* and *Tai Thun Baan*, and to the platform levels. For the residents, these intermediate spaces provide not only interaction of the house with the natural environment but also induce and reflect social integration of family members and neighbors. In the present work I argue that these spaces also reflect the characteristics of the residents themselves. For example, the platform levels not only establish the decorum of everyday life, but also act as symbols of hierarchical relationship of mutual respect and interdependence of the family members. The open space of the *Tai Thun Baan* expresses open-mindedness and community acceptance, thus providing the atmosphere of living with *Khwam Phasook* among the residents. These spaces are, thus, essential for the residents’ daily activities and their beliefs.

However, as conditions and values have changed, the residents have modified their houses. Enclosing the *Nok Chan* to form a *Look Thong* has changed the traditional spatial pattern and isolated the house from the environment. A new *Phalai* has had to be created as a transitional space to mediate between the inside and the outside of the house. The modification of the *Nok Chan* has resulted in further...
adjustment of the platforms between the Look Thong, or the previous Nok Chan, and the Phalai to a single level. The modification of platform levels has also had many consequences on the traditional value system. In most contemporary houses the Look Thong and the Tai Thun Baan have usually remained open, but in a number of houses further modification to intermediate spaces, such as demarcating interior spaces into various entirely enclosed rooms and enclosing the Tai Thun Baan with concrete walls, has possibly resulted in total elimination of local lifestyles. This has caused loss of the sense of social integration among the people (see Sub-sections 6.3.4 and 6.3.6).

I found that most of the residents in contemporary houses in Tambon Pakkran followed two unwritten rules when modifying intermediate spaces. The first rule was that no change should obstruct or obliterate the traditional ways of use and the essential meanings they attributed to their houses. For example, even though in the contemporary Reun Thai in Tambon Pakkran the Nok Chan has nearly always been enclosed to form the Look Thong, this space usually remains open for gatherings of family members. Only in a small number of houses has the Look Thong been divided into various entirely enclosed rooms, resulting in curtailed social interaction and relationships among family members.

The second rule of change was to ensure that no change should go beyond the residents’ ability to adjust and adapt themselves to the new situation while still retaining their cultural values. The adjustment of the Nok Chan and the Phalai platforms to a single level in the contemporary Reun Thai is a good example. Even though the platforms were adjusted to a single level, the residents adapted themselves in their use of the resultant space, which is reflected, for example, in their modification of sitting gestures (see Figure 6.7). This ensures the maintenance of traditional respect for the older members of the family, intimacy and the traditional sense of domestic contentment, within changes of spatial conditions and adjusted forms of behavior.

The openness of the intermediate spaces of the vernacular houses in Tambon Pakkran is an essential physical expression and product of the social norms and cultural beliefs of the residents. The Tai Thun Baan, for instance, responds to the climate and floods. It also induces a particular kind of social interaction, especially in
the everyday ritual of visiting. It is expressed as open-mindedness of the residents, and acts as a symbol of communal integration. In Tambon Pakkran, the openness of the Tai Thun Baan is important for the villagers’ everyday living. Enclosing this space with concrete walls interrupts the local ways of life and reduces intimacy among the residents. Loss of this vernacular quality is likely to erode family and community intimacy, and thus may distort a deeply rooted concept of Khwam Phasook in Thai culture.

**Changes to housing compounds**

Modification around intermediate spaces has brought about significant changes to the characteristics of the housing compounds of the contemporary houses of the villages. Figure 5.11 illustrated the typical evolution of housing compounds in Tambon Pakkran that has taken place since the 1950s. It shows how the residents adjusted their houses and ways of life to the changes in the traditional main access to the villages from the khlongs to the roads. This, in turn, influenced the organization of housing compounds, which evolved from houses clustered around a single Nok Chan to compact houses of individual families. This change redefined an open space on the ground between the houses. My syntactic analysis, however, shows the retention of the traditional spatial configuration. This not only reflects the continuity of kinship structures among a particular group of relatives of the villages, but also reveals the flexibility of the residents to adapt to their local conditions. The new arrangements still reflect the culturally critical values that have managed to evolve and survive with the changes of social and environmental conditions.

**Changes to house features**

The evolution of the transitional spaces has resulted in new physical features of the contemporary houses. Modifications usually began from the traditional structure of the Reun Thai, which is the primary component, and then affected other added components and functions. These secondary changes have particularly occurred around intermediate spaces such as enclosures close to the Look Thong, the new Phalai and the external and internal toilets, with the old and the new parts complementing one another. As Norberg-Schulz (1963, pp. 149–150) argued:
The primary elements are by definition basic to the structure; if they are taken away the composition disintegrates...The secondary ones, instead, may be treated with a relatively high degree of freedom, though care must be taken that they do not interfere with the primary elements. This freedom, however, does not imply that the secondary elements are artistically more important than the primary ones. They only participate in the structure via the primary elements.

The primary parts usually retain the morphological characteristics of the floor plan of the Reun Thai. They are still built largely using traditional methods of mortising and the use of wooden pegs, while the secondary ones are constructed with modern techniques using nails and weatherboards. Even though this pattern of modification has resulted in enclosing and isolating the houses from interaction with the environment and in a loss of associated symbolic meanings, it expresses the residents’ freedom and ability to break from convention while still retaining the intrinsic quality of their traditional houses.

I found that this pattern of modification in Tambon Pakkran was similar to what had occurred in contemporary Kalae houses (Figure 7.1 and Sub-sections 2.3.2 and 2.3.6). The similarity of the modifications to the two types of houses was most clearly expressed in the retention of the morphological characteristics of the floor plan and the use of weatherboards fitted together with nails instead of using traditional techniques. These houses had independently evolved with changes to the residents’ ways of life, their beliefs and their experimentation through trial and error in accordance with the available materials and technologies, but in both cases the consequences of modification were a reduction in the quality of craftsmanship. The contemporary Thai vernacular houses have retained the morphological characteristics of the traditional houses that reflect their cultural significance for the residents, but the community has lost the ingenuity of the carpentry. It remains to be seen how long it will take before the diminished craftsmanship causes loss of house form and subsequently of associated meanings.
According to Aasen (1998) and Horayangkura, Intrawijit, Chatawiladwong, Inphunthung (1993), Thai craftsmanship has been progressively lost since the introduction of the European style of architecture into Thai society in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is an urgent need to preserve Thai ingenuity of craftsmanship. But the ingenious carpentry construction on Thai vernacular houses in a given locality should not be conserved as unchanged antiquity because, as Norberg-Schulz (1963, p. 159) wrote, ‘vulgar-conservative product is banal or meaningless.’ Rather, it could be revived to develop a new expression of such creativity connected with cultural traditions.

The contemporary Reun Thai in Tambon Pakkran also have similarities with the Muslim Thai houses (see also Sub-section 2.3.5). First, we note the appearance of openings under the roof in a few houses of the residents, as shown in Figure 7.2.
Another similarity is the spatial configuration of the living spaces. Figure 7.3 illustrates this by comparing two types of houses: one of the II-shaped modified houses of Tambon Pakkran (see also Sub-sections 5.3.2 and 5.4.2) and the other a typical Muslim Thai house (see Sub-section 2.3.5 and the analysis in Chapter 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(a) Exteriors</th>
<th>(b) Floor plans</th>
<th>(c) Spatial configurations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>II-3 house</td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Traditional houses" /></td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Spatial configurations" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>A Southern Thai house</td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Floor plans" /></td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Spatial configurations" /></td>
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*Figure 7.3 Spatial characteristics of II-3 and a typical Muslim Thai house*

Source: Muslim Thai house from Kate Rattanajarana (1995), in *Thai houses*

Even though the interior spaces of these two houses are spatially different (Figure 7.3b), syntactically they are similar, especially around the verandah and the open hall entry to other parts of the houses (Figure 7.3c).

The pattern of modification in the contemporary houses of Tambon Pakkran, particularly the new *Phalai*, might have been influenced by the architectural style from the Southern region of Thailand, which then was modified to suit the local social norms and cultural beliefs. Evidence to support this possibility has not been sought in the present study—the point of the observation is that this pattern is far more common
in the southern region than elsewhere. Pinsri (1997) and Temiyabandha (1995) explained how architectural styles from one culture often influence another, but nevertheless they are always evolving in accordance with culturally accumulated local wisdom.

Importation of architectural styles from other cultures, particularly modern, international styles, without consideration of local conditions will not only eliminate the physical, visual and historical continuity of the context, but is also likely reduce the more fragile expressions of culture, such as intimacy (as shown by many examples reported in the preceding two chapters). To establish culturally sustainable development it is of critical importance to develop a broad awareness of this possibility and the associated dangers.

### 7.2.2 Insertion of modern facilities

Besides the changes in architectural elements, the evolution of the contemporary *Reun Thai* in Tambon Pakkran is also manifested in the insertion of modern household items and the installation of piped water and electricity. In the past the villagers relied on the materials available in the locality. Their lives followed traditional daily and seasonal rhythms. Daily activities took place on the *Nok Chan*, the *Phalai* and the *Tai Thun Baan*. Everyday entertainment was simple: getting together for chatting and telling stories, resting and lying down on the floorboards of the *Nok Chan* to gaze at the stars and the sky at night before going to one’s own sleeping place. The houses were almost devoid of furniture. Tools and household goods for daily activities were developed by unique local knowledge and materials.

Since the development of roads and the installation of electricity and piped water over the past three decades, the residents have had the opportunity to include various items of furniture and electric appliances for ease and convenience of living. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 230) notes that ‘material possessions serve as pacifiers for the self-induced helplessness we have created.’ This argument is well supported by many expressions of newly gained modernity in the households of Tambon Pakkran. Even though many residents of the contemporary houses investigated were aware of the importance of history and tradition, some had begun to
follow the obviously divergent trends of modern lifestyles, and had included various appliances, such as air-conditioners and microwave ovens that, in the opinion of many villagers as explained in Sub-section 6.3.7, are irrelevant to ways of living in vernacular houses.

The installation of various modern inventions in vernacular houses evidently reduces the chores of the residents, but it also affects various aspects of the residents’ ways of life and attitudes in several unintended ways:

- Lessening self-reliance, self-sufficiency and associated creativity;
- Curtailing the traditional behavioral patterns, such as visiting one another, particularly because of the influence of TV and air-conditioning;
- Changing the behavior and attitudes of the residents from those that cherish simplicity to those that express global consumerism;
- Reinforcing the shift to a money economy and a focus on material consumption.

Modern invention, as Malpas argues (2000, p. 205), interpreting Heidegger, ‘actually brings about a profound distancing of ourselves from the things around us and from the world.’ For the residents in Tambon Pakkran some modern facilities have not only eliminated traditional lifestyles but also the very concept of Phung Pha—the social relationship of mutual respect and interdependence, thus bringing about feelings of loss of happiness and intimacy among the villagers.

7.2.3 Overall changes to the houses

As in other vernacular settlements, particularly in the central region of Thailand, the villagers’ living habits, their vernacular houses and the watercourses in Tambon Pakkran were inseparable. They had blended together. The recent changes to the houses of the locality suggest disconnection of the villagers from the watercourses.

This disconnection is reflected in the evolution of housing compounds of the contemporary Reun Thai. They are now reoriented to provide access from the roads rather than the khlongs. Even though the analysis of this change revealed the continuity of key morphological characteristics of housing compounds, the physical
growth of the houses of the villages has spatially disconnected them from the watercourses.

The physical disconnection of the houses from the *khlongs* is also manifested in the new *Phalai* in many of the contemporary *Reun Thai* located between *khlong* Takean and the Ayutthaya–Bang Pa In road. The new *Phalai* of these houses announce the roadside as the front of the houses, with the *khlong* Takean being at the rear. The physical appearance of the front of the houses, however, is in opposition to the villagers’ perceptions. The villagers still perceived the *khlong* side as the front of the house. As explained in Sub-section 6.3.2, this opposition is manifested in their everyday language, in which they call the *khlong* Takean *Nha Baan* (the front of the house) and the roadside *Lhung Baan* (the rear of the house).

The disappearance of the relationship with the *khlongs* is also associated with the installation of piped water, which has completely eliminated the traditional lifestyle of hard work in fetching water from the *khlongs* and village wells, particularly during water shortages, as prevailed in the past. This is not to argue that the reduction of hard work does not provide collateral convenience for the villagers, but in this research no benefits of the new leisure time was revealed. On the other hand, many respondents commented that their experiences of such arduous situations had made them aware of the value of natural resources, and had promoted social strong bonds among them. The underlying value of the relationship between the houses, the residents’ lifestyles and the watercourses is now manifested only in the residents’ memory, and this may be completely lost in the next generation.

Hinshiranan (2000), Jumsai (1997) and Beek (1995) state that rivers and canals are not only a source of life, but they have also made a profound contribution to shaping Thai culture. Jumsai (1997, p. 72) argues how:

The intellectual conditioning of the water-based civilization arose from an environment of flux and flow, constantly requiring great flexibility and relentless adaptability. With this came the metaphysical aspect, the ability to create and communicate instinctively and abstractly. There was no ground to hold on to; hence permanency and, in architecture, purely static or compression structures often played a secondary or, at most, a parallel role to the relatively dynamic and mobile solutions.
Radovic and Boontharm (2003, p. 1) note that ‘for Thais water always was and still is much more than a mere necessity for physical survival.’ The loss of the relationship between the houses, the residents’ lifestyles and the watercourses has thus brought about profound changes to the atmosphere of rural landscape, which may eventually lead to irreplaceable loss from the totality of Thai culture.

7.3 THE EFFECTS OF MODERNITY ON EXPERIENCES OF KHWAM PHASOOK IN THAI VERNACULAR HOUSES

The above discussion confirms the relationship between the ongoing changes in the physical characteristics of vernacular houses, the way they are used and the meanings the residents attach to them. The evolution of these three factors is always associated with changes of the residents’ attitudes and experiences of well-being. The purpose of the discussion in this section is to bring to the surface the key issues, dilemmas and controversies associated with this topic. This leads to discussion on what influences the changes have had on the residents’ views of well-being, what are their key concerns in retaining their vernacular houses despite these forces for change, and how their concepts of well-being have changed.

7.3.1 Influences of changes

The study revealed that external influences have affected the residents’ sense of Khwam Phasook in Tambon Pakkran. These external influences, which have been increasing during the past three decades, are of various kinds. They include issues as diverse as the installation of infrastructure, the disappearance of seasonal floods and the development of media and advertisements. Charoenwong (2001) and Nathsupha and Leardvichadha (1998) emphasize that many of these influences imposed on remote areas of the country are always in the direction of modernization and often antipathetic to the local patterns. In Tambon Pakkran the construction of the road system, in particular, has provided convenience, while simultaneously bringing about radical changes to social and physical conditions. These changes have influenced the villagers to modify their vernacular houses and to change their living habits. As a
result, various aspects of their traditional lifestyles and their vernacular values are declining.

Internally generated conditions have also caused a significant departure from the traditional patterns of habitation. These internal influences are usually associated with the scarcity of land, inheritance rights and changes to family structure, such as marriage and the rapid growth in family members. The changes of internal requirements have brought about modification of the spatial structure of the houses and the growth of settlement. A growing number of enclosed Tai Thun Baan with concrete walls in Tambon Pakkran is a case in point (see also Sub-section 5.4.2).

The personal experiences of the villagers in visiting and living and working in other environments, particularly urban contexts, are a force for change which has both external and internal elements. Gaston Bachelard (1994) considers that personal experiences of seeing other houses or even glancing over their pictures in magazines and advertisements can generate desires and ideas of the archetypal model for a dream house. Rapoport (1969, p. 78) notes that the built forms, the way they are used and the meanings ascribed to them are ‘complete relativism,’ and thus when the ways of life and views for well-being change, the house forms change accordingly. This is clearly manifested in Tambon Pakkran. As discussed in Chapter 5, architectural styles from other cultures and new materials and technology of construction are usually used in the new parts of the contemporary Reun Thai. It is also common that when change in one house is seen as beneficial, it generates changes to the aspirations and requirements of other villagers. One intervention, thus, becomes a model and agent of change for other houses in the locality. The new wave of modifications, in turn, affects environmental conditions around the locality. The installation of external and internal toilets of the contemporary houses in Tambon Pakkran is a good example of this point.

Personal experiences associated with changing environmental conditions have an even more important influence. Many residents revealed that enclosing the Tai Thaun Baan with concrete walls has interrupted not only their lifestyles, but has also caused a feeling of segregation and lessened intimacy. This is being perceived as a major loss today, but it is obvious that the issue might not even be seen as important
by the next generation of villagers. The constant changes of local conditions, especially the disappearance of periodic floods in the locality, have become a reality, and a new generation has grown up without recognition of such fundamental structuring elements of Thai culture and everyday life.

7.3.2 Sense of Khwam Phasook in Thai vernacular houses

The study revealed that attitudes to well-being of the residents in Tambon Pakkran are constantly changing. But, at the same time, there is an obvious desire to retain vernacular houses. This phenomenon requires discussion within this project, and it may even deserve a separate research project.

Even though modernity and urbanization have greatly accelerated changes in various aspects of society, culture and environment, I found that the majority of the residents in Tambon Pakkran valued their vernacular houses highly, and showed profound awareness of the importance of their past. Most residents are aware of their origins and remember how they used to live. An important fact that should be emphasized is that the residents in Tambon Pakkran realized that their vernacular houses have been central to the rural landscape of Ayutthaya, a precious cultural and historical place of Thailand (see also Section 4.4). A statement of one of the interviewees illustrates this point very strongly:

The houses in our villages are usually modified from traditional houses, and they are of Ayutthaya. We have to protect them for our children, and for continuing the history of Ayutthaya. I do, I always tell my children about the importance of continuing our houses and our way of life. (IAC-9)

Most of my interviewees were aware of the important fact that whatever they do to their houses can affect the identity of the place and perhaps the country itself. Their vernacular houses must be maintained and sustained in order, literally, to sustain the cultural history of Thailand.

Since local conditions are changing faster than ever before, the residents have no alternative but to adapt and adjust themselves to these changes. Changes in their lifestyles and attitudes for living attuned to the environment are inevitable. For these
people, new materials and techniques of construction and modern appliances have brought, through trial and error, an ability to free themselves from the restriction of conventions. But the wisdom from the past is constantly reinterpreted and integrated within their present.

This is not to argue that the people of Tambon Pakkran have not lost any significant values of their culture. They may have lost the larger part of it. As argued earlier, they have lost their traditional lifestyle of self-reliance and community participation, the attitude towards helping one another for accessing resources to support everyday life, which is essential to local Thai culture. Various symbolic meanings attached to their houses and the various elements of them are also disappearing. Some residents have begun to view their vernacular houses as merely convenient places for habitation (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981; Dewey 1934), without giving attention to the embodied elements of their history, culture, society and environment (Heidegger 1962; Merleau-Ponty 1962). Whereas in the past these residents could live in their vernacular houses and community by relying on the resources available within the locality and by helping one another, in modern times they have included various modern facilities that are sometimes irrelevant to the lifestyle of the community. These residents, to some extent, have become more focused on individual habitation, and cannot disengage attention from modern necessities (Tanizaki 1991). Thus they have tended to lose not only their connection with their cultural traditions but also the intrinsic quality of their houses.

A sense of Khwam Phasook for most residents, however, is about control of the quality of their own existence. The standards for well-being do not necessarily follow modern conditions. They are concerned with what they had in the past, how they lived and what they believed. When they use modern facilities it is only to support their life, rather than for material wealth. For them, domestic well-being suggests their attempts to bridge existing conditions and traditional conventions, and their concern for their relationship with their neighbors.

Because it happens only gradually, and is often part of much larger disturbances to vernacular quality, changes to Khwam Phasook for most residents in the contemporary houses in Tambon Pakkran are almost unnoticed. Houses are evolving
with an overwhelming cultural change that is sweeping through the entire country, affecting the traditional ways of living and the associated value systems. But, as mentioned above, the majority of my interviewees are aware of the loss of vernacular quality of their lives. They do not see such change as desirable. They consciously connect their experiences of well-being with their physical environment, and link their traditional lifestyles and original sense of Khwam Phasook with changes in their housing conditions, and vice versa. These residents of Tambon Pakkran are keen to preserve the vernacular quality of their region, while accommodating the aspects of change that improve the basic standard of living.

The change they would like to facilitate is different from the one they have been experiencing, but is not aimed at repeating the conditions of the past. It is about their flexibility and adaptability to reflect the intrinsic quality of local cultural traditions evolving with dynamic, social changes. Radovic and Boontharm (2003) quote Heidegger as saying, ‘everything essential and great has only emerged when human beings had a home and were rooted in tradition.’

Their acts of safeguarding their culture as expressed in their dwellings are very encouraging. These acts should have government support as a contribution to the culturally sustainable future of vernacular houses in other localities.

7.3.3 Khwam Phasook versus Khwam Sabai

As discussed in Chapter 3, Khwam Phasook in Thai vernacular houses originally referred to Khwam Sabai. However, during the interviews I found that the meanings of Khwam Phasook and Khwam Sabai have diverged. It seems that the divergence has occurred since the introduction of the roads and the installation of all modern services for the villages. For the residents of Tambon Pakkran the term Khwam Phasook is still retained in the sense of the term Khwam Yhou Yen Pensook, or the relationship between Thai vernacular houses and Thai residents’ experiences and attitudes for living attuned to the environment, while the meaning of Khwam Sabai has changed to become physical comfort, with the concept of convenience supported by modern facilities. The change in the meaning of Khwam Sabai is similar to the change in the meaning of the English terms ‘comfort’ or ‘comfortable,’ which
nowadays can be objectively measured in a scientific sense, and is concerned with the support of modern facilities such as ventilation and air-conditioning systems (Rybczynski 1986; Alexander 1979).

Ferdinand de Saussure (1994, p. 151) states that ‘language is always changing. But it does not change at the behest of individuals; it changes over time independently of the speaker’s wills.’ The meaning of Khwam Sabai in Thai residential spaces has evolved from its original meaning toward the modern concept. McCumber (1993, p. 263) notes that ‘new language games are always coming into being, with others passing away.’ Anuman-Rajadhon (1967) says that, because everything is subject to change, meanings of terms can change accordingly. The term Khwam Sabai for the residents in Tambon Pakkran is inevitably moving away from its original meaning towards the modern sense of comfort. This raises the question of whether the changing of the meaning of the term Khwam Sabai, or its other equivalents, is also occurring in other Thai societies. If this change is happening in various places, to what extent can Thais rethink the meaning of this term? Pathummanon (1994, p. 129) makes the point that the Thai language is the house of Thai minds and culture.1 Even though language is always changing, reconsidering the intrinsic meaning of the term Khwam Sabai in day-to-day spoken language might bring back attention to the essential concept of dwelling in the Thai way—Khwam Phasook.

Generation of awareness is perhaps the most fundamental skill. It is necessary to draw people’s attention to change as part of their language of everyday usage. Thus we might hypothesize that they may be able to realize their sense of unhappiness with the loss of their vernacular quality. It is then to be hoped that they will be able to manage ways of retaining or reviving their cultural value system and sustaining it into the future.

1 The author’s translation
7.4 CONSIDERATIONS FOR SUSTAINING THAI VERNACULAR HOUSES

This thesis required a thorough analysis of present conditions, and relied on many parallels with past Thai vernacular houses and settlements. Being founded on the idea of sustainable development, research of this kind must be forward-oriented. The gravity of the situations discussed earlier in this section always reminds us of the urgent need to act and the necessity of translating knowledge into action. This needs proactive conclusions. Instead of safely leaving such ideas out of this thesis or placing them in appendices, I want to present some of my key considerations about the desirable future of the issues explored in this thesis as part of this discussion chapter. The aim of this section is to give additional emphasis to the need to act, and thus to contribute to the ongoing debates on sustaining Thai vernacular dwellings.

To paraphrase Ruangsak Kantaputra (1997), a scholar in Thai architecture, Thai vernacular houses are considered to be a valuable treasure and heritage reflecting the national identity. There is no doubt that vernacular housing must be protected. There are various approaches to satisfy this need. They range from conventional elaborate preservation and conservation to the much more difficult-to-achieve methods of true cultural sustainability. Matero (2000, p. 7) explains that the first two approaches have a similar fundamental objective for protecting and passing on cultural heritage. He explains, ‘whereas preservation seeks to safeguard and explain by maintaining the existing physical state—or at least the illusion of no change—conservation, in its more broadly used meaning, seeks to establish continuity through controlled change.’ Therefore, although conservation provides more flexibility than preservation, it involves some ossifying and potentially dangerous restriction and control of change. Sarah Staniforth² notes that ‘one of the keys to the future, and not just for conservation, is [cultural] sustainability’ (p. 7). Cultural sustainability, which is different from those ideas of preservation and conservation, is not resistant to change. Rather it is about change itself. It focuses on culturally appropriate evolution and

change. The Marion organization\(^3\) refers to cultural sustainability as ‘developing, renewing and maintaining human cultures that create enduring relationships with other peoples and the natural world.’ This approach requires our practices and critical thoughts to redefine many dangerous trends in modern development (Wasi 2002; Payutto 1999; 1995; Chiras 1992). Because, as I showed in the previous chapters, vernacular houses are constantly evolving, the approach of cultural sustainability could provide flexibility and adaptability.

But how to sustain these vernacular houses in the face of the strong and rapid influences of modernity? On the basis of this research I believe that the solution is implicit in the analysis presented in the preceding two chapters and the discussion above. It is necessary to understand ways in which the residents of surviving Thai vernacular houses manage to maintain their high levels of cultural awareness, and to develop that ability to recognize and link critical elements of their cultural being with the present world. It is also very important to understand where the loss is irreversible. The remainder of this section discusses four principles for sustaining Thai vernacular houses as deduced from the present research.

Thus, we could say that the first principle is the necessity of choosing a culturally sensitive method of exploring and understanding the ‘object’ of our concern, the intricate interconnections of its physical and social existence.

The second principle is the need for comprehensive and continuing dissemination of knowledge. Urlandova (2002, p. 1) notes that ‘the topic of education needs for the conservation and protection of cultural heritage involves not only all the different levels and types of education and training, different types of heritage, but also different professions or target groups, contexts and the manifold links involved.’ It is important to remind ourselves here that the idea of sustainability is linked to action, making the participants aware that their knowledge bears an ethical imperative to act of fundamental importance. Thus it is necessary to recognize its significance at all levels of Thai society: from the residents themselves to various social institutions.

\(^3\) The City of Marion 2003, Accessed August 2003, 
The task is to make everyone understand the importance of vernacular houses. Even though Thai vernacular houses and their surroundings in various remote areas may seem to be in opposition to modern conditions, and thus unpopular with the young, they must not be viewed as backward or uncivilized. On the contrary, they express different lifestyles and beliefs that nurture the roots of all Thai traditions.

The importance of pride should never be underestimated (Radovic 1999), and its evolution should be an important part of local education. The local residents are critical. If the residents in vernacular societies were unaware of their own well-being, it would be impossible to sustain their vernacular houses and their intrinsic values. As discussed above, most residents in Tambon Pakkran, Pra Nakhon Sri Ayutthaya, realize the importance of the relationship between themselves, their houses and their place. They safeguard their history of dwelling and their houses not only for themselves but also for Ayutthaya itself. Thus it is very important to capture the energy of that cultural pride and translate it into action—passing on local wisdom to the next generation of residents.

The third principle is the need to empower the local people. Bottom-up power is of critical importance in balancing the decision-making process (Wasi 2001; Radovic 1999; Nathsupha & Leardvichadha 1998). Tuan (1986) states that in the pre-condition of modern times every culture had unique flavors, traditions and lifestyles that it held to be good. Why, then, do we ask only how to have good living conditions as modern stereotypes for the development around the vernacular communities? For some philosophical positions an answer to this question would be also far too easy. It is impossible to turn the clock of progress back, they would say. But from the position expressed by a number of my interviewees only the push towards modern conditions seems to preclude the evolution of the intrinsic quality of the residents themselves and their vernacular houses in their own culture.

We, thus, maybe have to ask what conditions are needed for living attuned to the environment in each particular locality, thus putting the clear emphasis on our rapport with the environment and the uniqueness of that interrelationship, before emphasising individual, quantifiable needs. To answer this question a definition of good or appropriate conditions is needed. However, this also is a potentially
dangerous field. Definition and regulation of qualitative aspects of life is always bordered with controversy, and can easily transgress into the unacceptable. But, in the context of the idea of cultural sustainability the regulation of the development processes is essential. Clarity of philosophical positions and definitions is of fundamental importance. It is critical that the power that shapes such regulations expresses an agreeable balance between top-down and bottom-up initiatives (Wasi 2001; Radovic 1999; Nathsupha & Leardvichadha 1998). Only a balanced set of strict development regulations can provide the freedom and necessary possibilities for the residents to retain the intrinsic quality of their traditional houses while still dealing with existing conditions (Low 2000; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981; Fromm 1978). The linkage between past and present may create a new pattern of vernacular houses suitable for the residents in a particular place that is not necessarily similar to that in other places. This give us an opportunity to speculate on the possibility of emerging, new Thai vernacular values, which would at the same time be both new and traditional, deeply rooted both in local traditions and the cutting edge of contemporary ideas.

Even though modern technology and facilities have become part of everyday life in vernacular societies, the quintessence of the culture must continue. Radovic and Boontham (2003) note that ‘technically efficient but culturally alien solutions have no better chance to succeed than those that rely exclusively on cultural relevance.’ My study revealed two different views that the residents in Tambon Pakkran had of their well-being. On the one hand, most of them tried as much as possible to retain the references of the past, while living with present conditions. On the other hand, some of them had little concern about the cultural significance of the way they lived. They have, typically, uncritically inserted modern facilities into their houses, so that those insertions become an expression of new individual requirements and tastes. However, most residents of Tambon Pakkran realized that although they could bring in modern things and facilities to support their living activities, if they were to sustain their vernacular dwellings, customs and cultural values into the future, their decisions had to be congruent with the constraints of the locality.

The fourth step of sustainable practice for preservation of Thai vernacular housing is, thus, the need for continuous monitoring and measuring of success. Only
the value systems provided by Thai locals themselves can provide appropriate firm, deeply rooted foundations for these critical evaluations. Tambon administrative organizations (TAOs, established according to the decentralization policy of the Thai government in 19974), in particular, have the authority to determine the orientation of the actions and the goal of the community or villages and to attempt to revive their customs and local wisdom. If these TAOs are to be able to encourage the villagers and the next generation of them to safeguard their vernacular dwellings, an informed action and elaborately systemic evaluation will be needed.

The rationale for such action is summarised in the four principles discussed above: (1) investigation and learning through implementation of culturally sensitive methodology; (2) generating awareness of all the participants; (3) empowerment of the locals; and (4) constant research, evaluation and re-evaluation of the process and the outcomes. Radovic (1999, p. 359) suggests that this ‘should be delivered through redefined education…with particular emphasis on community awareness.’ It is important to seek, as Radovic and Boontham (2003) wrote, ‘dialectical synthesis of…vernacular and imported values.’ Thai vernacular dwellings in a particular place will then be able not only to sustain and to evolve with the residents’ lifestyles and their cultural beliefs during social changes, without losing the intrinsic quality of their traditional houses, but also to express local and national identity.

The above discussion offers a vision of practices that are radically different from the current way of dealing with the issue of Thai vernacular houses. This different, new practice is not impossible. It is of critical importance to draw to the attention of those in power the issue of cultural loss associated with the trends towards globalization. If adequately supported by the Thai government, a project oriented towards sustaining Thai vernacular quality is achievable. Sustainable development is about process, and about thinking. In this case it is critically about constant

improving of our government and planning practices towards a better future of Thai vernacular houses.

7.5 CONSIDERATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In this study I have documented, analyzed and theorized the evolution of vernacular houses, the ways they are used and the meanings the residents attach to them from a certain point in the past to the present in Tambon Pakkran. However, Thai vernacular houses are passed on from one generation to the next and they are always changing to suit the residents’ needs for living attuned to the environment. Many of the houses have been demolished because of the influences of modernity and the scarcity of traditional materials (Jumsai 1997; Chompunuch 1987). Although the present study was conducted only in Tambon Pakkran, the original materials of this thesis may not only provide a contribution to the historical documentation of Thai vernacular houses but also complement the knowledge that has emerged from a number of previous studies in this subject, and also to further research.

The study suggests two further lines of research. The first suggestion is that the relationship of changes to housing compounds, the ways they are used and the meanings the residents ascribe to them require further study. The analysis of the evolution of the contemporary Reun Thai in Tambon Pakkran included changes to the characteristics of housing compounds. One of the important findings was that changes in the formation of housing compounds have also affected the physical settings of the villages. Norberg-Schulz (1985; 1971) notes that a village is a type of built environment that is not solely created physically but is also ordered by the way it is used and the meanings the villagers attach to it. This raises a question: how have changes to the formation of housing compounds affected changes to the uses and meanings the residents attach to their houses and other associated spaces?

The second suggestion for further research is that the evolution of Thai vernacular houses, their patterns of use and the associated meanings could be examined in a cross-cultural, comparative study. The study in a single locality provided me with rich information for in-depth understanding of the relationship between changes in the residents themselves and the evolution of their houses. I
believe that some of the findings could be generalized. Putting those findings into a cross-cultural, comparative perspective on the houses from various cultures, regions and societies would highlight similarities and differences among them (Altman & Guavain 1981; Rapoport 1981). Such cross-cultural, comparative examination of the evolution of Thai vernacular houses could explicate and strengthen the relationship between the residents and their dwellings in particular localities.

Besides these suggestions, I want to make one proposition for further research derived from one of the earliest exercises in this project. I found that to work with local residents in Tambon Pakkran I had to be open-minded and flexible. It was necessary to develop methods and techniques for eliciting data that enabled the residents to be approached gradually, while creating a relaxed atmosphere so that they could tell their story without reluctance (see Appendix B). Since those early days many interrelated questions worth investigating have been raised: Is it possible that these methods and techniques could be applied in other field research concerning the interrelationship between people and their built environments in other localities? What is the local significance that was to be re-invented for each situation, and what has broader relevance? Where does cultural specificity take over and where does the general, global knowledge apply?
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