

The design concept and style of contemporary Isan pagodas

Pakorn Pattananurot, Surapone Virulrak and Arkom Sa-ngiamviboon

Fine and Applied Arts Research, Mahasarakham University, Khamriang Sub-District, Kantarawichai District,
Maha Sarakham Province 44150, Thailand
ppattananurot203@hotmail.com

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Abstract – Pagodas in Northeastern Thailand (Isan) are places where local people go to pay their respects. The purposes of this research were: to study the evolution of the shape of contemporary Isan pagodas built from 1982-2012 and to study the design concepts of contemporary Isan pagodas. Data collection tools were primary documents, interviews and observations. The findings of the study show that the evolution of the contemporary Isan pagoda can be divided into three eras. There are also four groups of pagoda design: bell pagodas in a plan shape, bell pagodas in a polygon shape, pagodas on a bualeam base and pagodas with a bualeam top. An octagonal base is the preferred contemporary Isan pagoda shape. The contemporary Isan pagoda style was created using Isan identity and can reflect the current context of Thai society.

Keywords – Contemporary, Isan style, Pagoda design concepts, Pagoda style.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhist pagodas originated from ancient India. Over time and by the process of cultural diffusion, Buddhism and pagoda styles were adopted and adapted by neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. The influence of location-specific culture and development over time has led to the current definition and shape of Buddhist pagodas. This relationship between adjacent lands and artistic influences from different societies caused a cultural network of Buddhist followers who are engaged together, but who have a unique approach to their local religious observation.

In Thai language, the term pagoda refers to in any form of architecture built for the same purpose as traditional *Phra Prang*. In a thesis about The Origin and Development of Stupa Architecture in India, Pant [1] concluded that Thai people use many names to describe the same structure. In the North of Thailand, the Lanna people called the structures *ku*, such as *Ku Tao Chedi*. However, in Northeastern Thailand,

similar structures are called *that*, such as *Phra That Phanom* and *Phra That Buabuk*.

Despite the variations in terminology, pagodas in Thailand reflect the identity of local people. These structures pay respect to the Buddhist religion in their specific characteristics and forms, which are uniquely designed to depict the deep rooted community reverence of Buddhist principles (Figure 1). One example is the bell-shaped pagoda. This is the identity of people from the area of the historic Kingdom of Lanna and is sometimes called the Lanna pagoda shape. Top Pumkaewbin pagoda shape was the identity of the Sukhothai Kingdom. Jomhair pagoda shape was the identity of the Ayutthaya Kingdom. Corn pagoda shape was the identity of the Khmer empire or Lopburi in Siam.

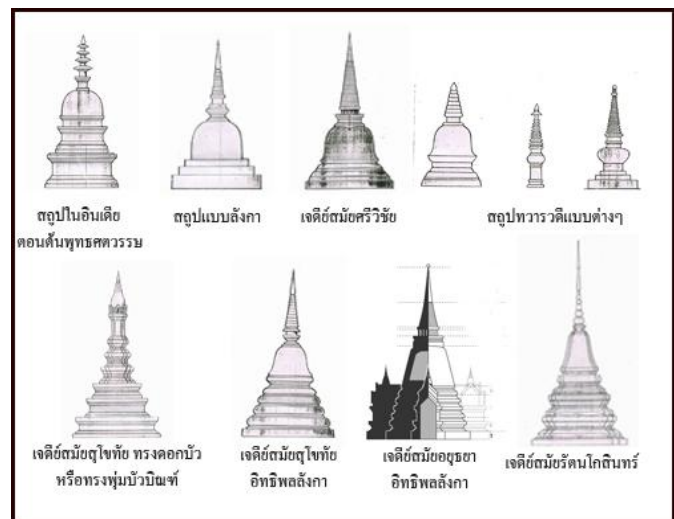


Figure 1. The different architectural styles of pagodas in different periods of Thai history.

The Kodtabon Kingdom was a historical kingdom located in the area now covered by Northeastern Thailand (Isan) along the Mekong River [2]. In the spacious surroundings of Nakhon Phanom, the rulers of Kodtabon established a stupa or pagoda in the thirteenth century to house sacred Buddhist relics. These relics, and thus the structure that housed them

were consecrated and considered integral to local beliefs about the inner workings of the universe [3]. Thai pagodas are designed to reflect the three realms of heaven, Earth and hell. The top of the pagoda represents the celestial world (Heaven), the middle of the pagoda represents the human world (Earth) and the base of the pagoda represents the underworld (Hell). These principles are visible in the elements of pagoda design in both Laos and Northeast Thailand [4]. The Phra That Bualeam is the style of pagoda with an identity that best shows the presence of Lanchang Empire architecture in Thailand (Figure 2-4) [5].



Figure 2. Pagodas in the Phra That Bualeam style with a high base. From left to right: *Phra That Phanom*, *Phra That Renu*, *Phra That Tautan* and *Phra That Choeng Chum*.



Figure 3. Pagodas in the Phra That Bualeam style with a low base. From left to right: *Phra That Kham Kaen*, *Phra That Si Song Rak* and *Phra That Luang*.



Figure 4. Pagodas in the Phra That Bualeam style with a recess and *chumruenkaew*. From left to right: *Phra That Anon Phra*, *Phra That Kong Kaewnoy* and *Phra That Bangpun*.

Contemporary Isan pagodas are those pagodas designed using the ideas and styles of traditional Northeastern pagoda heritage and background knowledge. This knowledge is applied to modern design principles that take into account the suitability of contemporary pagodas for multicultural society, construction materials and modern construction technology. The purposes of this research were: to study the evolution of the shape of contemporary Isan pagodas built from 1982-2012 and to study the design concepts of contemporary Isan pagodas.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purposes of this research were: to study the evolution of the shape of contemporary Isan pagodas built from 1982-2012 and to study the design concepts of contemporary Isan pagodas.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a qualitative investigation to study contemporary pagodas in North-eastern Thailand built from 1982 to 2012. The framework of the research addresses two main theories: Tectonics in Contemporary Architecture and Pagoda Shape Theory.

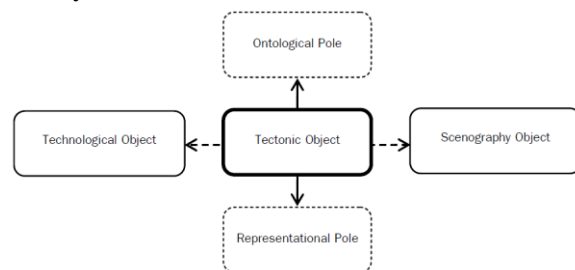


Figure 5. The categories of tectonic architecture.

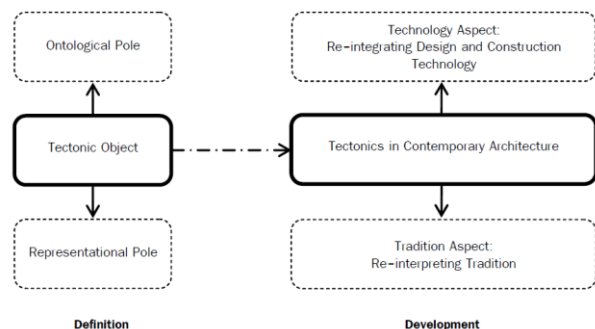


Figure 6. Tectonic architectural development direction in contemporary architecture.

The concept of tectonics in contemporary architecture was a theory designed by Frampton, who defined tectonics as the art form that

determines structure and shape based on the purpose and use of an object or building [6]. This is achieved by combining artistic and scientific knowledge and significantly benefits the impression of the structure built by visitors. According to Frampton, the form of tectonic architecture can be divided into categories. (Figure 5-6).

In order to accurately analyse the full spectrum of pagoda shapes in North-eastern Thailand, fifteen temples were purposively selected for further investigation. These temples were chosen on the criteria that they were built from 1982-2012 and fitted one of the aforementioned shape categories. The fifteen temples selected for the research area were: 1) Luang Pu Khouw Pagoda Museum; 2) Luang Pu Say Pagoda; 3) Kumpong Tisso Pagoda; 4) Luang Pu Komde Pagoda; 5) Phra Thum Pagoda; 6) Luang Pu Cha; 7) Luang Pu Ted Pagoda Museum; 8) Luang Pu Fun Pagoda Museum; 9) Luang Pu Louis Pagoda Museum; 10) Luang Pu Juen Pagoda Museum; 11) Luang Pu La Pagoda Museum; 12) Pudtanimid Pagoda; 13) Luang Pu Ken Pagoda; 14) Phra Maha Bua Pagoda; 15) Luang Pu Janshi Phra That. Prior to field research, the research team conducted analysis of documents related to contemporary and traditional design of religious structures, especially Buddhist stupas. The tools used for data collection were individual interviews, group interviews and telephone interviews with a purposively selected group of twenty pagoda designers and physical surveys of the pagodas and observations. Results were categorised according to the aims of the research and validated by triangulation. The data were analysed typologically using inductive analysis and the results are presented as a descriptive analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pagodas are architectural symbols of Thai faith. They are high, carved religious structures that are based on the features of Angkorian-style temples [8]. These features have been adapted to represent Buddhism in modern Thailand. Despite their function in the Khmer civilization as sacred centres, they are now used by Buddhist followers as places of veneration [9, 10].

Contemporary Isan pagodas can be grouped by shape in a similar way. There are four distinguishable categories of Isan pagoda shape: 1) bell-shaped top

with a round base (Figure 7); 2) bell-shaped top with a square base (Figure 8); 3) *bualeam*-shaped (lotus-shaped) top (Figure 9); 4) *bualeam*-shaped top with an octagonal base (Figure 10) [7].

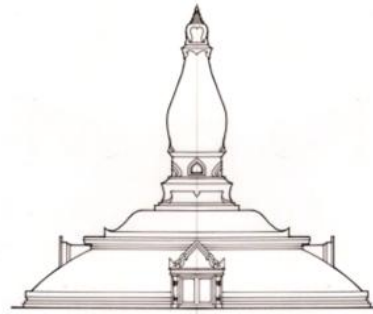


Figure 7. Bell-shaped pagodas with a round base.

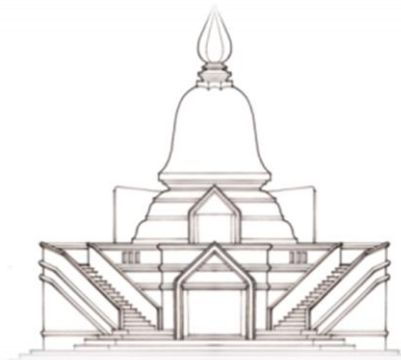


Figure 8. Bell-shaped pagodas with a square base.

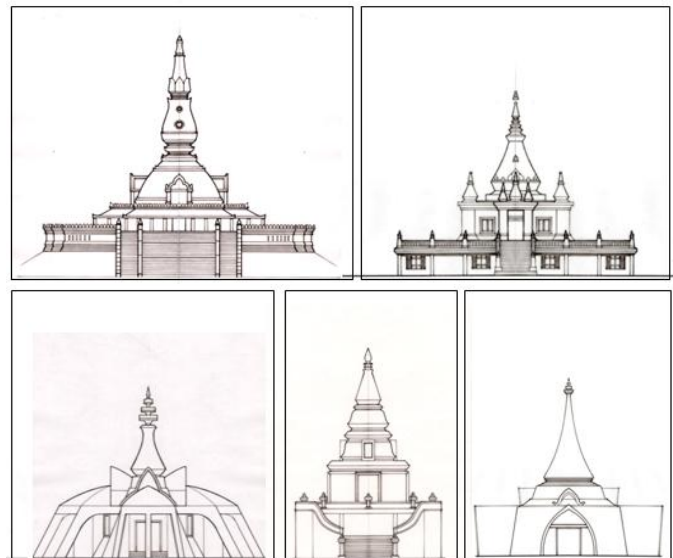


Figure 9. *Bualeam*-shaped pagodas.

The results of the study showed that the evolution of the shape of contemporary pagodas has continued in line with the construction of *Phra That Phanom*.

The majority of contemporary pagodas have a lotus-shaped top element (*bualeam*). Designers use the traditional concept of pagoda designs and the main teachings of Buddhism to reflect the identity of the traditional Isan pagoda in their contemporary style.

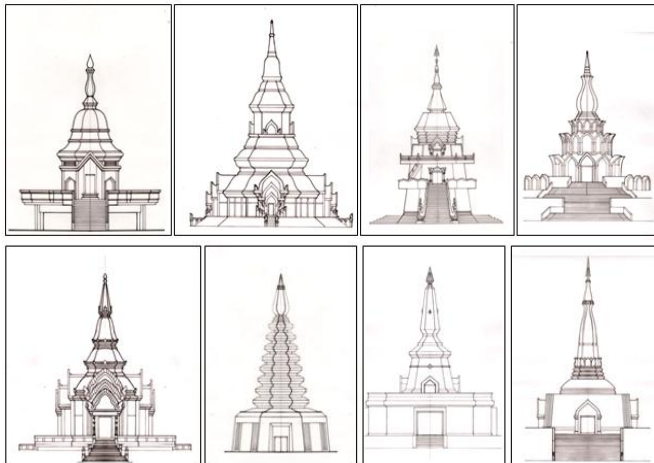


Figure 10. *Bualeam*-shaped pagodas with an octagonal base.

The preservation of pagoda identity and culture is the responsibility of the Thai Ministry of Culture. Although it is their primary duty to restore, maintain and preserve existing traditional Thai architectural structures and cultural heritage, they are also responsible for projects to create contemporary places of worship. Given the important role of tourism in the Thai economy and the influence of aesthetics on the tourist industry, there may be increased pressure on new pagoda projects to create aesthetically pleasing structures to draw more tourist attention and, therefore, revenue. This may explain why the majority of pagodas investigated here wear of a more intricate and aesthetically pleasing shape. These results are in agreement with the conclusions of Prommapan and Wongsuntorn [11], which identified a confidence crisis in Buddhism. According to Prommapan and Wongsuntorn, tourism has played a significant role in skewing traditional Buddhist values and culture, of which architecture must be considered an integral part.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Pagodas in Northeastern Thailand (Isan) are places where local people go to pay their respects. The purposes of this research were: to study the evolution of the shape of contemporary Isan pagodas built from 1982-2012 and to study the design

concepts of contemporary Isan pagodas. The findings of the study show that the evolution of the contemporary Isan pagoda can be divided into three eras, 1) early, simple pagoda construction, when pagodas were built with a bell shape, 2) middle-age *bualeam* pagoda construction and 3) contemporary pagoda design era. There are also four groups of pagoda design: bell pagodas in a plan shape, bell pagodas in a polygon shape, pagodas on a *bualeam* base and pagodas with a *bualeam* top. An octagonal base is the preferred contemporary Isan pagoda shape. The contemporary Isan pagoda style was created using Isan identity and can reflect the current context of Thai society.

The style of contemporary Isan pagodas is based on traditional architecture but influenced by modern trends. This corresponds to the tectonic architecture theory of Frampton [12], which maintains that meaningful architecture has a practical use as well as a connection to human emotions. In the case of the pagodas, aesthetics plays a large part in their contemporary design. Nevertheless, all contemporary pagodas in Isan retain their strong spiritual link and function as the spiritual centre of the communities in which they are constructed.

Following the results of this investigation, the researchers wish to make the following recommendations for further research: 1) Analysis of contemporary religious structures in other areas of Thailand should be examined to identify a pattern of architectural evolution; 2) The use and meaning of the Isan pagodas for the local community should be analysed to determine if structure is the only aspect of the pagodas that has been influenced by modern society; 3) The structure and style of other, non-religious Thai architecture should be examined to determine the influence of modern society on Thai architecture as a whole.

The contemporary pagodas in the area of northeast Thailand have been designed to conceptualize the shapes and the character of Isan and to consider the suitability for use by society. In this regard, the materials and technology have changed over time. The research results have revealed that contemporary Isan pagodas display abstract qualities, such as simplicity, integrity, tranquility, transparency and the expression and creation of critical thinking of the architects. The character of contemporary Isan pagodas derives from architectural design in building placement, building base, materials, applied technology, landscaping, color and other

environmental issues. The designers employ their own pagoda style concepts in conjunction with the main Buddhist teachings and the pagoda shape of traditional Isan pagodas. Construction of modern pagodas is a valuable identity creation process that attracts Buddhists to the temples for Dharma practice and making donations for temple renovation, as well as other religious activities that can reflect the current context of Thai society.

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