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**Do Landscape Architects Wear 'Nikes'?**

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Abstract

*This paper discusses a learning process I went through during a semester study at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. Most of my learning was not during classes but through understanding about how and why I thought the way I did. These discoveries led to a change in my perception, the way I see the world I live and interact in.*

A question was asked during a class- 'What is "Thai-ness"?' (Where is it out in the landscape?)

At first I thought in a very limited way.

As a visitor to this country, I had "the" preconceived ideas of what "Thai-ness" was- the postcard picture, an ideal or romantic view of the country for the tourist- the Grand Palace, Ayuthaya, Buddhism, a culture far older than the one I grew up in and a place where I could live cheaply.

When I came to Bangkok, I looked for the postcard pictures. They were there, either in pockets or blended in amongst the imposing modern lifestyle. I found that a lot of "other" things had "spoilt" my image that I had created- the high rise building, the lack of open spaces, the power and telephone lines strung haphazardly along the streets, the cars and the pollution. Then there were the comforts of a modern lifestyle- cable TV, the mobile phone (Who hasn't got one!),<sup>1</sup> the Internet and Email.com, the McDonalds style food outlet (Everywhere it seems), trendy fashions (How

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<sup>1</sup> 'Guess what's the most popular activity among city people visiting natural sites. The answer: Checking out if their mobile phone works.' 'Bangkok Post' 24/1/2000

high can platform shoes go?)<sup>2</sup>, places to be seen (The malls and nightclubs) and the Skytrain (Is the "Bladerunner" image becoming real?).

Next, I thought it was just the cost of developing a modern city. Seddon(1979) discusses the idea of the 'Hilton International Landscape' and the ease it is to copy existing ideas. Bangkok certainly appears to fit within this concept.

Maybe, I will find more "Thai-ness" in the rural areas?



**Skytrain: Brought to you by Bladerunner Inc.**

It was much easier to find a more traditional lifestyle beyond the limits of the city, although, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish this boundary for Bangkok. The rural landscape had that romantic appeal that is portrayed in the postcard- rice farming, quiet villages, limestone mountains, rivers and waterfalls, Buddha images in caves and a far more relaxed attitude towards life. Still, the Coca Cola and Pepsi signs (written in Thai)

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<sup>2</sup> 'Tokyo- Police in Osaka had some bad news yesterday for the millions of trendy woman who can't do without their towering platform shoes. Citing a traffic accident last year in which a passenger was killed because the driver's thick sole kept her from braking quickly enough, police said they may add the fashionable footwear to the list things you can't wear to drive. "Common sense says platform heels are dangerous for driving, but we're going to prove it scientifically for the first time," said a Traffic Department official.' 'Bangkok Post 5/2/200

and the TV satellite dishes revealed the spread of western ideals but not in the same overwhelming way that is seen in the city.<sup>3</sup>

Generally, it appeared that it was easier to find "Thai-ness" in the country than in the city. But is that true? What had I been told or what did I tell myself was "Thai-ness"?

How open are we at looking at something with fresh eyes or without judgement? Is it possible?

It was very easy for me to look at the city of Bangkok over a period of 2 months and think '*I know it*'. As I explored "parts" of the city I would judge if what I saw was right or wrong, or if it worked or didn't work. Having had the chance to re-read George 'The GENIUS LOCI and Australian Landscape', I applied these ideas to Bangkok. As I mentioned, at first it seem to fit but I grew more conscious that this city was more than just a postcard. Maybe the original landscape has been modified but the cultural landscape is still rich. I gained a lot more insight into Bangkok from the areas where the ordinary person lived. Some of their homes are hidden within the commercial center, in quieter alleys and sois while others where beyond the river in almost rural settings where the waterway separated the busy lifestyle of a city from a peaceful setting of stilt homes among plantations of coconut palms. What I noticed here was that these people have adapted to the existing conditions and remain to live this way. These places did not appear to have been designed but still had a character of their own and a sense of place within the environment.

Why doesn't the tourist come to these places? Is it not special enough, or are they not told that these places exist? Is it not the image "Amazing Thailand" wants to promote? Maybe, the fact that it is not a tourist destination that makes it special. It is just a way of life there.

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<sup>3</sup> The one major image that seemed out of place, may because I am Australian, were the Eucalyptus plantations. Seeing one was like a little reminder of home, but seeing thousands in huge plots was too much. The promise of a big return from this tree *Eucalyptus canaldulensis*, has lured may to establish this crop with a profit of around 250 baht/tonne(A\$10). Although, it appears that this could provide an easy income on depleted land, there is still some debate over the environmental impact of large planting(1000 rai)('Bangkok Post' 9/1/2000).

I believe that a lot of us wait to be told what we should see, or how to behave. For a 7 baht return (A\$0-30) bus trip and a boat trip of 8 baht return (A\$0-35) over the length of the morning, the experience beyond the river will remain with me for a long time. The children seem to very happy to see someone different and were quite content to follow me around for a while and repeat "hull-low". Walking along raised pathways, amongst coconut and date palms and passing within metres of front doors, revealed the people's homes and their lives.



**A different life beyond a river.**

It is very easy to promote the special parts of a city or country for people to see. In Bangkok, it is either, at one end, its history, its shopping, and its magic or at the other end places like Pat Pong or Soi Cowboy. It is easy to forget that it is a place where people live and that they have their own culture and lifestyle, which can easily become invisible to the tourist who visits for 10 days.

How much has changed since the industrial revolution? Living standards have improved, our lives appear to have become easier and we no longer need to just survive, we are able to do more. But, at what cost? Jung believes that we have lost contact with nature as we have sort to control it to suit our own needs. Also, we have consciously lost that symbolic power that nature provided for us. Science has overwhelmed us with the need to have "proof" that something exists and that the processes of nature have become

a series of diagrams, numbers and statistics. As nature has been catalogued and understood we have looked to control it and make it work for us. Culture seems to be the human expression for controlling nature. *'Culture is humans' attempt to elevate themselves above nature.* (Tea 1992,p240)

It appears that nature must not work well enough for us and we can do better. Four and a half billion years of natural process and evolution has not been long enough for nature to have got it "right". Have we decided that we are the new "gods"?<sup>4</sup> Can we do better?

*'Our intellect has created a new world that dominated nature, and has populated it with monstrous machines.'* (Jung 1964, p101). With the environmental movement over the past 20 to 30 years, we have become more and more aware that we need to work with nature. The results of our intervention to natural processes are becoming more and more obvious. It is easy to turn a blind eye to small trivial problems, especially if it is in someone else's "yard". Commonly, a change in one environment is the result from changes in another. Look at algal blooms in our rivers, lakes and oceans resulting from fertilizing regimes in farmland upstream. It seems that nature can only absorb so much. The loss of mangroves on the coast of Thailand is due to the reduction of sediment supply from major rivers, (dam construction), resulting in depositional environments becoming erosional zones. Adding to this, industrial areas pollute coastal waterways compounding the problem.

It is easy to create the appearance that we are doing something about these problems. Just working on areas that are the most obvious or are just in our own "yard" can boost our image in the public's eye or on the

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<sup>4</sup> 'A group of scientists were sitting around discussing which one was going to go to God and tell Him that they didn't need Him anymore. Finally, one volunteered.

So the scientists say to God: "God, you know that we're been coming up with great theories and ideas. We've cloned sheep and we're on the verge of cloning humans. So as you can see, we really don't need you."

God nods understandingly and says: "I see, well, no hard feelings. But before you go lets have a contest. What do you think?"

The scientist say: "Sure, I'm all for it. What kind of contest?"

God: "A man-making contest."

The scientist: "Sure! No problem." The scientist bends down and picks up a handful of dirt and says: "Okay, I'm ready!"

And God says: "No, no. You get your own dirt." Trink('Bangkok Post' 11/2/2000)

international scene but is it working with a holistic view in mind. It is easy to create a public image, look at the example reported in 'Newsweek' recently on China during the Great Leap Forward.<sup>5</sup> If we can believe that we can fool others, then, in reality, we are only fooling ourselves.

Carl Jung's core argument focuses on how we have lost contact with nature. The ideas and symbolism developed and handed down in myths and legends have been lost as science and reason take control of our daily lives. *'As scientific understanding has grown, so our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional "unconscious identity" with natural phenomena. These have slowly lost their symbolic implications. Thunder is no longer the voice of an angry god, nor is lightning his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree is the life principle of a man, no snake the embodiment of wisdom, no mountain cave the home of a great demon. No voices now speak to man from stones, plants, and animals, nor does he speak to them believing they can hear. His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy this symbolic connection supplied.'* (Jung, 1964, p95). Although we have or have chosen to ignore this connection with nature it remains with us in our subconscious and is reminded to us nightly through our dreams.

Jung believes that we are still governed by unconscious thoughts and visions. When we image the ideal or most romantic place to live, although in reality may be impossible, it stems from our subconscious thoughts pertaining to our lost connection with nature. We all yearn for that perfect world but seeking this place by controlling it seems not the answer. *'Attitudes and perceptions of the environment expressed in town planning*

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<sup>5</sup> 'In the old days, lying was a political necessity. During the Great Leap Forward, Mao's production goals were unrealistically high. The industrial sector tried to increase steel production by smelting down old pots, spoons and nails in "backyard furnaces". Local cadres didn't dare report that they weren't meeting agricultural or industrial targets. They staged elaborate dramas instead; bragging that wheat had grown so thick a boy could walk on top of it. In reality, the peasants' entire harvest was turned over to the authorities as proof that the lies were true. Left without a harvest, their cooking pots melted into useless lumps of metal and dependent on people, communes for food, 30 million people died of starvation and disease.' Pappas('Newsweek' 24/1/2000)

*have been more concerned with utopian ideals and design doctrine than with natural process as a basis for form.'*(Hough 1990, p2)

People would argue that progress must occur at no matter the cost, but these people tend to think with their wallets, bank accounts and egos. *'We have no other choice,'* they would say. But where is that written? In a constitution? In the Bible? Maybe, on a wall somewhere? Learn to think outside the circle you live in and discover what is true for yourself. Books and teachers can only tell and show you so much, experiencing life will reveal to you so much more. Von Franz, a contemporary of Jung, wrote, *'we must never forget that for us outer reality exists only in so far as we perceive it consciously.'*(Jung 1964, p203)

### What is "Thai-ness" then?

"Thai-ness" it seems is its people. The people decide what "Thai" is. A culture and landscape has been created, developed over many centuries, who have an understanding of the environment and the natural processes unique to this area. In the past, they have worked to live with the landscape, the wet/dry seasons, the hot climate and the rainforests. They have understood how to live in this environment through knowledge and learning passed along from generation to generation. *'The child knows the world more sensuously than does the adult. This is (a) reason why a native citizen knows his country in a way that cannot be duplicated by a naturalized citizen who has grown up elsewhere.'*(Tuan 1977, p185)

With the expansion of Western civilization, the ideals of the West have come too. Maybe they can work here, but who decides? Is there a belief, in the East, that to succeed in this modern world we need to adopt Western methods? For millennia, Eastern cultures have stood the test of time. Most of their strength has come for their beliefs and cultural rituals. Buddhism and Feng Shui have principles based upon nature or natural processes. These influences have helped develop cultures, which are regionally distinctive and are molded around climatic and topographic elements. Many modern Western practices appear to be the reverse; nature is to work around us.

Has the traditions and ideals of the eastern countries stopped working? *'Urbanism is a fact of life in postindustrial society.'*(Hough 1990, p2) It is obvious that to live in large cities that some form of compromise is required. But, to what extent?

It can be seen that Western architecture dominates central Bangkok but how many of these buildings are empty? A concrete jungle replaces the rainforest. Is it working? Who decides how things should be?



**Bangkok: the new jungle?**

Humans have an inherited trait of creating heroes. *'The hero figure is an archetype, which has existed since time immemorial.'* (Jung 1964, p73) History is full of them. The image created by a hero relates to people liking or "worshipping" someone whom has succeeded against the odds. The hero possesses some trait that we would like to have. So if we can think like them and act like them we may become like them. It may be their ability to be innovative, clever or bold; or just the idea that they are famous and recognized may be appealing to us. We study their work, the way they think and try to copy their styles (maybe, to become a part of a trend and to be seen as a part of the crowd). We want to learn what they have learnt and as a part of the process we become like them. For example, look at the resurgence in tennis in Thailand following the success of Tamarine Tanasugarn and Paradorn Srichaphan in Australia recently. (*'Bangkok Post'*, 21/1/2000)

Is this the way the design process works?

A recent visitor from Sasaki Associates to Chulalongkorn University mentioned the "rock star" type of landscape architect who dictates their ideas to others (she came from a more democratic environment where



everybody can express their view and, I guess, reach a consensus). Is this the type of hero we want to aspire to and become?

It is very hard to predict the future. As designers it is. *'The fundamental problem is that designers are obliged to use current information to predict a future state that will not come about unless their predictions are correct. The final outcome of designing has to be assumed before the means of achieving it can be explored: the designers have to work backwards in time from an assumed effect upon the world to the beginning of a chain of events that will bring the effect about.'* (Jones 1979, p9/10). Knowing the present helps, this means knowing ourselves.

A danger lies in believing that we do not have a choice in how we direct our lives. We always have a choice and we are always choosing the way to go but most of the time it is a subconscious choice. We were at sometime told about how things should be, usually by someone in authority, our parents, our teachers, our bosses, our heroes; and we maintain that belief so we can maintain that image of ourselves. These beliefs become the "right" and "wrong" in our lives. (War is a common struggle between "right" and "wrong".) *'Children are taught how to behave. Adults present them with a standard of manners and courtesy- a theater of gestures and movements-for emulation. Impulses of natural kindness and generosity are encouraged; anger and violence are discouraged. Manners, backed by moral beliefs, issue in imperatives of dos and don'ts.'* (Tuan 1992, p228)

As a student of landscape architecture, I have realized that a lot of my understanding and learning has not come from my lectures and books. Most has come from the experiencing life. Some of the students that I have interacted with over the past 3 months have commented on how clever I am. I don't think it is cleverness, it's experience and understanding. Being 10 years older than most of the 4<sup>th</sup> Year students at Chulalongkorn University means that I have had a third longer to learn what life can be about and those 10 years have made all the difference. Taking responsibility for your actions makes the difference. This means letting go of blame, guilt and excuses which hold us back and keep us small. *'As any change must begin somewhere, it is the single individual who will experience it and carry it through. The change must indeed begin with an individual; it might be any one of us. Nobody can afford to look around and wait for someone else to do what he is loath to do himself.'* (Jung 1964, p101)

Life is still an individual process and still largely consists of pain and laughter. It is a willingness to face the pains and challenges of everyday life that results in growth and learning. Be willing to make mistakes and be made a fool. Be willing to believe in miracles. Be willing to find the time to do some of those things that you have always wanted to do but were always too scared or busy to do. Ask yourself, 'Who do I really want to become, where do I want to go and how do I get there?' So often we tell ourselves what we can and can not do. We tell ourselves what we can and can not have. We tell ourselves who we are and are not. Ask yourself 'Who told me how life is?' You may find it was someone who was told by somebody else.

It is very easy to wear shoes that are trendy and help us to look to part. Sometimes we need to take those shoes off and feel the ground we walk on. As Landscape Architects we need to look beyond our egos and see the bigger picture. We may learn as individuals but we do not live our lives in isolation. We are a part of a much bigger system - an ecosystem.



**The front garden, Thai style.**

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