


A Place to P(r)ay: A Study of Spiritual Rituals in Bangkok Malls

Nicha Wiboonpote* / Pat Seeumpornroj**

* Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand
Corresponding Author: n.wiboonpote@gmail.com

** Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand
pat.s@chula.ac.th

ABSTRACT

 This research examines the phenomenon of Thai Buddhist elements for spiritual rituals in Bangkok malls. Today, religious settings are not only located in temples or churches, but they are also occasionally relocated to commercial spaces such as malls. This reflects the effort to bring the religion closer to the community and to use religion-related activities as a magnet that draws attention to the mall itself. Accordingly, this research explores the influences behind such happenings, which include spiritual beliefs, cultural practices of commercial spaces and marketing strategies. This phenomenon also leads to a wider aspect regarding the role of a mall in its community and space usages those went beyond commercial purposes.

Keywords: spiritual rituals

INTRODUCTION

A mall is commonly known not only for its retail spaces but also its atmosphere for social interactions. It is known to provide space for special occasions such as concerts, exhibitions, and fashion shows. Beside these, some customers also view shopping as a recreational social occasion where one can spend time alone or with others without having a specific purchase in mind (Martin and Mason, 1987). Moreover, most malls also provide services such as professional laundry, childcare, auto service, dentist, beauty salon, etc. (Zepp, 1997). Today, some government branch offices are also located in several malls. All of these diverse activities in malls, altogether, influence customers to spend more time there than other types of public spaces (Boundy, 2000). This subjects the changes that occur in

certain communities where people can experience different places inside the boundaries of malls.

In November of 2005, Thailand's former minister of culture, Uraivan Thienthong, had suggested that malls should provide yet another kind of space, the *Moom Sangob Pob Phra Dhamma* (A Peaceful Corner to Learn Lord Buddha's Teachings). Uraivan emphasised that the idea was not to draw people, especially youths, away from temples but to provide easy access to Lord Buddha's teachings within shopping malls.

"People nowadays have no time to go to temples, only shopping malls... They can get closer to religion if we provide the opportunity."

“It’s not about building a temple in a shopping mall... This will just be a 200-square-meter (2,150-square-foot) space with a room in which to pray and practice meditation, a reading and listening room, and a library with books of Lord Buddha’s teaching.”

(The Nation, 2005)

In December of 2005, in respond to the statement above, two shopping malls in Bangkok (Siam Discovery Centre and Central Plaza Pinklao) agreed to provide spaces as suggested. Siam Discovery Centre offered occasional use of its multi-purpose area, while Central Plaza Pinklao quoted a fee of about 300,000 baht per month (Bangkok Post, 2005).

A decade later, even though the proposal of the *Moom Sangob Pob Phra Dhamma* was no longer mentioned by the government, the concept can still be observed through different kinds of religious settings found in many Bangkok malls. These spaces for spiritual rituals in malls can be commonly seen during important Buddhist holidays and Thai traditional holidays. However, they are not presented as peaceful corners to learn Lord Buddha’s teachings, but in forms of religious settings that invite people to participate in religion-related activities.

This research focuses on spiritual rituals. The scope of the rituals involves cultural and traditional beliefs in Thai Buddhist communities and their adaptations with commercial contexts. This includes three major aspects. The first aspect involves marketing strategies where religion-related activities are used as a magnet to draw attention from the customers. The second aspect is defined by the observations of the built environments of religious settings in the malls and Buddhist temples. This is to look for their transformations and the link between the two contexts. The third aspect concerns Thai cultural practices of commercial spaces where flea markets occasionally relocate to the plaza areas of the malls.

MARKETING STRATEGIES OF ANNUAL ACTIVITIES IN BANGKOK MALLS

The concept of shopping malls is not new to Thailand. In 1825, during the reign of King Nang Klao (King Rama III), Robert Hunter, the British merchant, established the first department store in Thailand called the British Factory or as it was called “Hang Huntraa” by the locals (Moore, 1914).



Figure 1:
The display of the sacred relic of Lord Buddha and relics of saints from nine temples in nine countries at Nine Square, The Nine Center Rama Nine, Bangkok during Māgha Pūjā holiday, by Author, February 23, 2016.

Despite the fact that several department stores in the nineteenth century had not gained much attention from Thai people, numerous department stores were still being opened by Chinese and European investors. In 1956, the Central Wang Burapa was opened with the new feature of fixed prices for products with no bargaining. The business was so successful that another branch in Silom was opened in 1968. In 1973, the Central Chidlom branch was opened. It carried out another new concept of "One Stop Shopping". The concept was for the customers to purchase a wide range of merchandise in one place (Athiwat, 2002). The development of concepts for retail businesses did not stop there. New models from foreign countries were adopted and applied to Thai context. Department stores were replaced by shopping malls that generated a variety of experiences like movie theaters, restaurants, retail shops, skating parks, bowling alleys, karaoke machines and more. These, in a way, provided their communities with alternative social gathering spaces.

A mall presents its community with a new way to socialize. It is continuously responding to changes and developments of its city. For example, easy access and parking spaces are provided for the

emergence of automobiles as a means of mass transportations (Gruen, 1960, p.140). Moreover, a mall is also believed to fulfill the need for order and orientation (Zepp, 1997). It functions as a center that offers customers experiences that go beyond shopping. It is Victor Gruen's vision that a mall should not be merely just a retail space. It should be more of "the third place", where the concept of "the third place" is "a social setting distinct from both home (the first place) and work (the second place)" (Oldenburg, 1989).

Nonetheless, these benefits to a community are aimed to make customers stay in a mall as long as possible. The theory is the more time customers stay within a mall area, the more likely that they will spend. According to Ira G. Zepp in *The New Religious Image of Urban America*, another marketing strategy of a mall is to use rituals and seasonal celebrations to help maintain harmony between a mall and its surrounding community. Therefore, a mall always tries to fill in its annual cycle with special activities to keep its facility fluid. There are four main categories of activities listed in the annual cycle of a mall's events; National Observances, Personal and Family Celebrations, Religious Holidays, and Business Promotions (Table 1).

Table 1. The liturgical year or annual directory of events in the average mall, from *The New Religious Image of Urban America*, Second Edition: *The Shopping Mall as Ceremonial Center*, by Ira G. Zepp, 1997.

<u>National Observances</u>		<u>Religious Holidays</u>	
January	Martin Luther King's birthday	April	Easter (Easter Bunny)
February	Presidents' birthdays		Passover
July	Independence Day	December	Christmas (Santa Claus)
September	Labor Day		Hanukkah
November	Thanksgiving		
<u>Personal and Family Celebrations</u>		<u>Business Promotions</u>	
February	Valentine's Day	January	"Sidewalk Sales"
May	Mother's Day	March	Spring Sales Days
June	Father's Day	June	Gift Days
September	Grandparents' Day		Weddings
October	Halloween (Great Pumpkin)		Commencements
		August	Pro-school Sales
		October	Homebuilder's Month
			Furniture Sales

In Thailand, National holidays and observances are as shown in Table 2. Some Western celebrations are directly applied to Thai society for example, New Year's Day in January, Valentine's Day in February and Christmas in December. Both Thai and Western calendars share certain personal and family celebrations such as, Father's Day and Mother's Day. However, they do not share the dates as Thai Father's Day is on the King's birthday and Thai Mother's Day is on the Queen's birthday. Beside these, several holidays in Thailand are associated with Buddhism and Thai culture. There are Buddhist holidays on the three major full moon nights, which are *Māgha Pūjā*¹ (Sangha Day) in February, *Vesākha Pūjā*² (Buddha Day) in May, and *Āsālhā Pūjā*³ (Dhamma Day) in July. Thai festivals such as *Songkran* holidays⁴ (Thai New Year) in April

and *Loi Krathong* day (Water Goddess celebration) are also related to Buddhist rituals.

From the observations in Bangkok malls in 2015-2016, this marketing strategy of using holidays and celebrations both to highlight seasonal merchandise and to keep the atmosphere festive is applied to many malls in both rural and urban areas. These include both Western and Thai celebrations as listed previously, along with other business promotions to cover an annual cycle. This paper focuses on temporary settings of Thai Buddhist elements, which are arranged during important Buddhist holidays and Thai festivals. This research observes the effects of the adaptations in terms of built environments, both in physical contents of the settings and rituals performed by the customers.

¹ *Māgha Pūjā* (Sangha Day) is a major Uposatha (Holyday) in Buddhism. It is observed on the first full moon day of the third lunar month. The day marks the events during Lord Buddha's lifetime where one thousand two hundred and fifty Arhantas (the enlightened monks) whom had been or ordained by Lord Buddha himself came to pay homage to Lord Buddha. On the evening of *Māgha Pūjā*, Lord Buddha gave the assembly addressing *Ovādapātimokkham* (the disciplinary advice) (Thanakit, 1996). On this day, there are religious activities for participants to attend at temples. In the morning, they are to offer food and *Sang Khatan* (offering dedicated to Buddhist monks) to the monks. In the afternoon, the monks are to chant *Ovādapātimokkham*. In the evening, the monks are to lead a circumambulation or candlelight procession. The procession is where both the monks and participants are to perform walking meditations around the main shrine hall, which enshrines Lord Buddha image, three times (for the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha).

² *Vesākha Pūjā* (Buddha Day) is a major Uposatha (Holyday) on the first full moon day of the sixth lunar month. It is an observation of Lord Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing. On this day, participants are also to bring food and offerings to temples. Participants are then performing meditations and listening to the lectures on Lord Buddha's teaching. The candlelight procession is to be performed in the evening.

³ *Āsālhā Pūjā* (Dhamma Day) is a major Uposatha (Holyday) on the first full moon day of the eighth lunar month. It is an observation of the day Lord Buddha explained the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (The wheel of Law) or the teachings of Lord Buddha's enlightenment to the five ascetics for the first time. The religious activities, which are performed on this day, are also similar to *Māgha Pūjā* and *Vesākha Pūjā*.

⁴ *Songkran* (Traditional Thai New Year) is a celebration on April 13-15 of every year. The first day is *Maha Songkran* day where participants visit temples to offer food and offerings to the monks. The second day is *Nao* day, which is also a Family's day in Thailand. On this day, participants carry sand into the temples to build *Phra Chedi Sai* (sand pagodas) as another form of making merit. The third day is *Thaloeng Sok* day. This is the first day of the New Year. Traditionally, participants cleanse Lord Buddha images in their homes and in the temples with scented water. Younger people pay their respects to their seniors by pouring scented water on their seniors' hands. Their seniors then give them blessings.

Table 2. National Holidays and Observances in Thailand, and events in Seacon Square, retrieved July 15, 2016 from TimeAndDate website: <http://www.timeanddate.com/holidays/thailand/> and Seacon Square website: <http://www.seaconsquare.com>

	National Holiday	Observance	Events in Seacon Square 2015	Events in Seacon Square 2016
January	New Year's day			
		National Children's day	Happy Children's Day	My Hero My Idol
		Teacher's day		
			OTOP's products from Thonburi District	
February		Chinese Lunar New Year's day		
		Valentine's day	The Voice of Love Concert	Verona in Love 2016
				Seacon Pet Planet
March	Māgha Pūjā		Māgha Pūjā Festival	
			Seafood Fair	Chic My Style
			Pet Planet	Celebrity Bears Show
			Local Market from Northern Thailand	The History of King Naresuan
April	Chakri day			
			Local Market from Southern Thailand	Local Market from Northern Thailand
			Follow to footsteps of the King Rama IX	Baby I Love You
	Songkran (Thai New Year)			Songkran Festival
			Amazing Japan 2015	Mythical of the Magic Forest
May	Labor day			
	Coronation day			
	Royal Ploughing day			Fresh Food from Farms
			Pet Planet: Colorful Exotic Pet	
			Hipster Hub	
	Vesākha Pūjā		Vesākha Pūjā Festival	
June			Bicycle Expo 2015	Local Cars Festival
			Free Running - 1st Extreme Motion	
July	Āsāḥa Pūjā			
	Buddhist Lent day			
			The Lifestyle of Bang Rajun	Moto Culture
				Local Food Market
August	The Queen's birthday (Mother's day)			
			A Bug's Life	Songs from Films
				Japanese Themed Festival
September			The Unseen of 3 Provinces in Thailand	Alien & Monster
			Faiths of Gods Festival	Hipster Hub
			Japanese Themed Festival	
October	Chulalongkorn day			TBA
			Eco So Cool	
			Halloween Festival	
November			The History of Thai Boxers	TBA
			The Urban Flea Market	
			International Dog Show	
			Anime Festa 2015	
December	The King's birthday (Father's day)			TBA
			Tarzan the Adventure	
	Constitution day			
		Christmas		
	New Year's eve			

OBSERVATIONS ON THAI BUDDHIST ELEMENTS IN MALLS

The term “Thai Buddhist elements” in this paper refers to various styles of religious elements, which are widely seen in Thai tradition. Other elements which are influenced by neighboring countries in Southeast Asia are also included in this category. Thai Buddhist elements in malls are usually in the form of temporary settings. The observations of these temporary settings are categorized by two main topics; the physical contents and rituals. The categorizations of these temporary settings are scaled from (1) small settings, (2) medium setting, to (3) large settings.

A small setting

A small setting usually consists of one to three tables enshrined with a Lord Buddha statue on the tallest platform. The setting is typically located near an entrance area of a supermarket or a department store to attract customers’ attentions once they enter the area. When entering, most Thai customers perform a quick ritual to show their respects to Lord Buddha. This ritual is called *Wai* (placing their hands together and bowing their heads).

This kind of setting was observed during the *Songkran* holidays in 2016. In Isetan Department Store (Figure 2), the Lord Buddha statue was enshrined on the table decorated with flowers and gold fabric. A bowl of scented water and flower petals along with small silver bowls were provided for customers to gently sprinkle scented water from the silver bowls onto the statue. Many Thais consider this a rite of making merit on the third day of the *Songkran* holiday. There was also a donation box next to the Lord Buddha statue where customers could donate money to support temples in suburban areas. Similar settings were found in supermarkets like Seri Market (Figure 3) and Tops Market (Figure 4.)

Compared to the common practices on *Songkran* holidays where overall celebrations lasted three days and each day was assigned different ways of making merit, the decorated table enshrined with the Lord Buddha statue was merely a part of the whole ritual. It showed the minimization of Thai traditional cultures by using the statue of Lord Buddha and a bowl of scented water as the symbols of the



Figure 2:
The display of Lord Buddha statue on the decorated table at the ground floor entrance of Isetan Department Store, Central World Plaza, Bangkok during *Songkran* holidays, by Author, April 16, 2016.

Songkran holidays. These chosen representations of only the most recognizable elements raised the question of the importance of the other elements that were disregarded, along with the meanings attached with them. The event which also raised the similar question of neglect is the tradition of participants carrying sand into the temples’ area. Originally, the practice was to bring back the sand that participants may have unintentionally carried away on their shoes. Today, this is no longer practical for the temples that are located in towns. Building *Phra Chedi Sai* (sand pagodas) becomes a symbol of the tradition that once had the purpose. Consequently, people now have to be reminded of this original purpose, as the practice does not fit into the current context.

Beside these, it can be observed from figure 2 that the location of the setting did not encourage the customers to participate in the rituals. It was positioned in the middle of the walkway where most customers were more likely to pass by, instead of participating. There was no signage or instruction on how the rituals should be carried out. The customers would have to recognize this by the other contexts such as the dates that the temporary setting was launched and the elements presented in the setting.

In the Tops Market (Figure 4) setting, *Songkran* merchandise located on a side table was set next to



Figure 3:
The customer is sprinkling scented water from the silver bowl on Lord Buddha statue as a merit-making rite during Songkran holidays, Seri Market, Paradise Park, Bangkok, by Author, April 10, 2016.



Figure 4:
The display of Lord Buddha statue with Songkran merchandises at the entrance of Tops Market, Market Place Thonglor, Bangkok during Songkran holidays, by Author, April 9, 2016.

the Lord Buddha statue. This merchandise included *Nam Ob Thai* (Thai scented water), *Sang Khatan* (offering dedicated to Buddhist monks), silver bowls, and food carriers. The display was to highlight the merchandise. The customers then could purchase these items and use them in their residences, temples, or directly to the Lord Buddha statue in the store setting. This shows a direct integration between commercial purposes and the setting as the setting acted as a reminder of *Songkran* holidays' occurrence. The customers might then in turn be encouraged to purchase the merchandise according to their willingness to participate in the rituals.

A medium setting

A medium setting is commonly located in a larger space of a mall, usually a plaza area. In this setting, there are more Thai Buddhist elements by which customers may pay homage. Often, these elements are famous among Thai people in terms of holiness and sacredness. The setting is generally arranged during important Buddhist holidays such as *Māgha Pūjā* (Sangha day), *Vesākha Pūjā* (Buddha day), and *Āsālhā Pūjā* (Dhamma day). Usually, an opening ceremony is hosted on an opening date and the celebration continues on for a few days.

In the Street Ratchada (Figure 5), the sacred relic of Lord Buddha, Buddha images, and statues of

seven noble monks were temporary displayed on the second floor plaza during *Māgha Pūjā* in 2016. The decoration of the area included elevated platform to support *Busabok*, a pavilion throne, for the sacred relics of Lord Buddha to be enshrined. Other holy elements were supported by different levels of platforms, which signified their importance. The area was covered with carpets as a border marker. Floor cushions were provided for praying ceremonies.

In the Nine Center (Figure 6), the sacred relic of Lord Buddha and relics of saints were invited from nine temples in nine countries to be enshrined in the plaza area during *Māgha Pūjā* in 2016. The setting included a *Busabok* with a five-tiered roof which enshrined the sacred relic of Lord Buddha, along with nine additional three-tiered *Bosaboks* which enshrined relics of saints from nine temples. They were all placed within the boundaries set by red carpets and tables decorated with gold cloths. Rituals performed included elements for worship such as flowers, candles, and incenses. The customers could light the candles and incenses here since the setting is located outdoors.

Two elements were presented here in order to display the sacred relic of Lord Buddha. The first element is the miniature *Chedi* (Figure 7 & 8). The *Chedi* or stupa is located in the *Buddhavasa* (Figure 9) of Thai Buddhist temples. The temple is a complex which can be divided into two main sections Sanghavasa



Figure 5:
The display of the sacred relics of Lord Buddha, Buddha images, and statues of seven noble monks at the second floor plaza, The Street Ratchada, Bangkok during Māgha Pūjā holiday, retrieved February 17, 2016 from The Street website: <http://www.thestreetchada.com/gallery.html>



Figure 6:
The customers are making merits in front of the sacred relic of Lord Buddha at Nine Square, The Nine Center Rama Nine, Bangkok during Māgha Pūjā holiday, retrieved February 22, 2016 from The Nine Center Society facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/TheNineRama9/posts/1042080599171826>

(the monks' living quarter) and *Buddhavasa* (the religious building quarter) (Figure 10). A *Chedi* serves as a place to preserve relics. This can be the sacred relic of Lord Buddha or relics in the wider sense such as the alms bowl of Lord Buddha, the Holy Scripture, or a tomb for kings (Döhring, 2000). A *Chedi* consists of four main parts; the Plinth, a Bell or dome-shaped structure, the Platform above the dome, and a Spire. However, the design of a



Figure 7:
The miniature Chedi enshrines the sacred relic of Lord Buddha at Wat Satue, Ayutthaya, retrieved October 3, 2013 from Wat Satue website: <http://www.watsatue.org/>

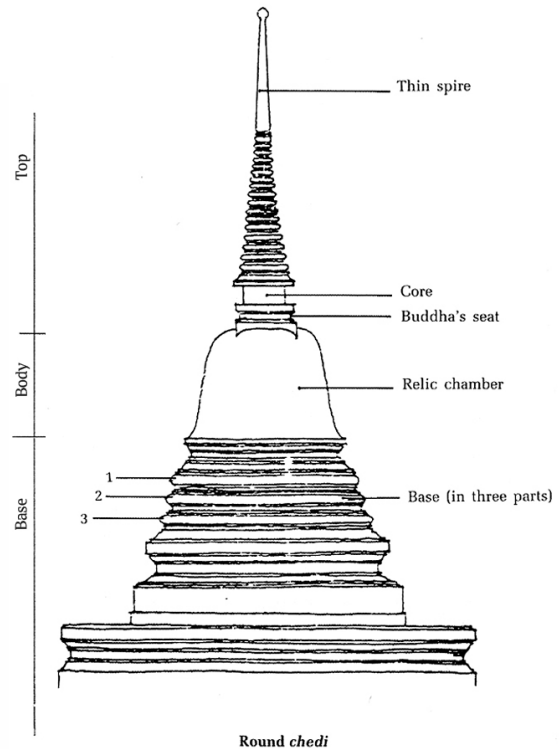


Figure 8:
Elevation of round Chedi, from *Introduction to the Thai Temple*, by K.I. Matics, 1995.

Chedi can vary. Today, the majority of *Chedi* are only replicas of those once containing relics, while they might contain none themselves (Matics, 1992). The miniature *Chedi* in a temporary setting is usually in gold, transparent, or the combination of both to display the sacred relic inside. The miniature *Chedi* is placed in the miniature *Busabok*.

The second element is a miniature *Busabok* (Figure 11). A *Busabok* is a small pavilion throne. It shares the similar design and proportions as a *Mondop*-styled structure (Figure 12). A *Mondop*-styled structure usually is a square or cruciform floor plan augmented by exterior pillars with a wooden roof of many receding tiers topped by a slender pinnacle. The roof portion of a *Mondop*-styled structure is significant to its usage. A seven-tiered *Mondop* roof is usually applied to a royal pantheon or throne building, for Lord Buddha's footprint, and a for the scripture house. Five or three-tiers are also used according to its significance (Matics, 1992). Other than these, a *Mondop*-styled structure can also be applied to multiple decorative purposes such as framework around the windows of palace

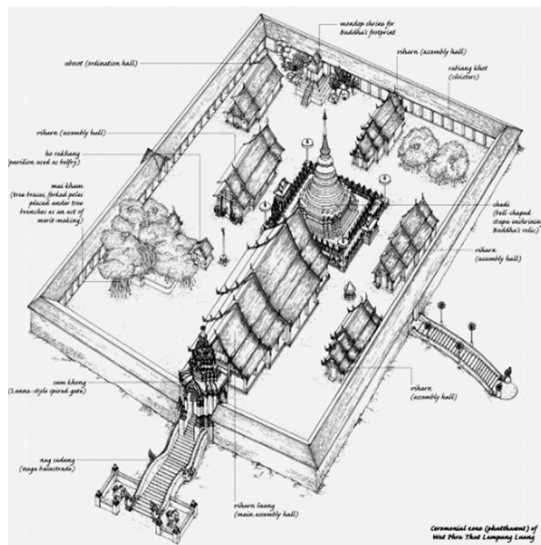
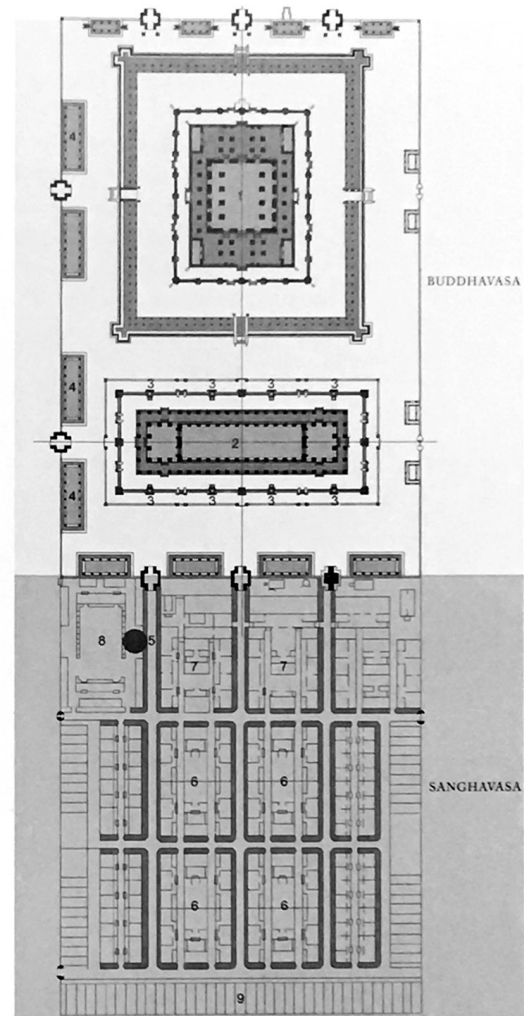


Figure 9:
The ground floor plan of the religious building quarter
of Lampang's hilltop Wat Phra That Lampang Luang,
from *Architecture of Thailand: A Guide to Traditional and
Contemporary Forms*, by Nithi Sthapitanond and Brian
Mertens. 2005.



- 1 WIHAN
- 2 UBOSOT
- 3 BAI SEMA
- 4 FUNCTION HALL
- 5 BELL TOWER
- 6 MONK'S QUARTER
- 7 KUTI
- 8 MEETING HALL
- 9 ROWS OF HOUSES

ABOVE
Detailed plan showing a typical
Thai temple precinct

Figure 10:
Detailed plan showing two main quarters in Thai Buddhist Temple complex: Above section shows Buddhavasa (the religious building quarter) and below section shows Sanghavasa (the monks' living quarter), from *The Golden Lands: Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam (Architecture of the Buddhist World)*, by Vikram Lall, 2014.

building and royal temples (Nithi and Mertens, 2005, p102). There are mainly two sizes of Busabok. The miniature *Busabok* enshrines either a Lord Buddha statue or sacred relics of Lord Buddha. The larger Busabok is large enough for the king to be seated. Both *Busabok* are mainly placed in indoor spaces such as, in *Ubosot* or *Bot*, an ordination hall, *Wihan*, a lecture hall, and palace buildings

Not only does this scale of the setting allow displaying more Thai Buddhist elements, it also provides room for more rituals to be practiced. The use of flowers, candles, and incense sticks are very common in traditional Buddhist rituals. Each of these elements signifies different meanings. Flowers symbolize beauty that will soon be withered; that all things are impermanent. Candles symbolize light and wisdom of Lord Buddha's teaching. Incense from incense sticks symbolizes the fragrance of pure moral conduct (Buddhist studies, 2008). Figure 1 shows that the setting engaged just a part of the plaza. Customers were free to sit on the chairs provided in the area next to the display where the rituals could easily be observed. This usage of space gave the customers options, they could decide on how they would participate with the setting. In the area, there was signage which indicated the significance of the setting. Signage also directed costumers to personnel who could give additional information.

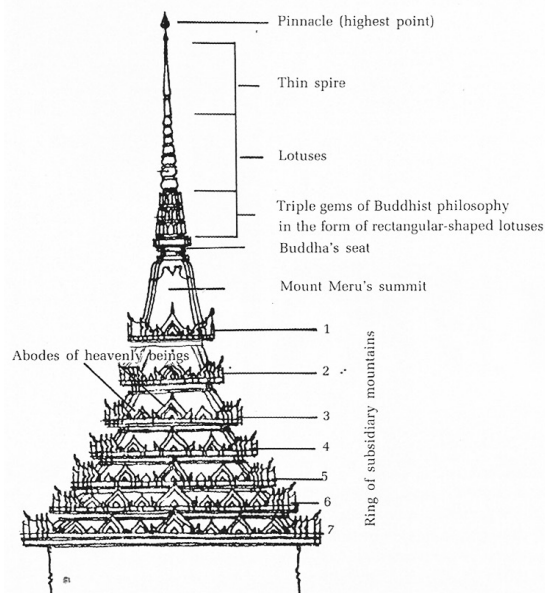


Figure 11:
The miniature *Busabok* enshrines the sacred relic of Lord Buddha at Nine Square, The Nine Center Rama Nine, Bangkok during *Māgha Pūjā* holiday, by Author, February 23, 2016.

A large setting

A large setting, similar to a medium setting, is usually located in a plaza area of a mall during important Buddhist holidays. The setting includes Thai Buddhist elements with the simulations of an environment around Thai Buddhist temples. Buddhist monks are invited to perform religious rituals such as praying ceremonies and candlelit processions.

An example for a large setting was located in the plaza area of Seacon Square (Figure 13-17) during the *Māgha Pūjā* holiday in 2015. An octagonal platform was constructed in the middle of the plaza to enshrine the sacred relic of Lord Buddha, Buddha images and one thousand two hundred and



Roof portion of a decorated *mondop*

A seven-tiered roof is usually applied to:

1. A royal pantheon or throne building (Five or three tiers may be used instead, according to its significance)
2. *Mondop* for the Buddha's footprint
3. *Mondop* for the scripture house

Figure 12:
Roof portion of a decorated *mondop*, from *Introduction to the Thai Temple*, by K.I. Matics, 1995.

fifty statues of *Arahantas*, the enlightened monks, (Figure 13) were displayed. This was according to the signification of *Māgha Pūjā*. The day marks the great events during Lord Buddha's lifetime where one thousand two hundred and fifty *Arahantas*, whom had been or ordained by Lord Buddha, came to pay homage to Lord Buddha. On the evening

of *Māgha Pūjā* day, Lord Buddha addressed the assembly concerning *Ovādapātimokkham* (the disciplinary advice) (Thanakit, 1996). Accordingly, the ceremonies in Seacon Square included the praying ceremony of *Ovādapātimokkham* by a group of Buddhist monks and a candlelit processional ceremony around the octagonal platform led by the



Figure 13:
An octagonal platform with the display of the sacred relic of Lord Buddha, Buddha images and one thousand two hundred and fifty statues of *Arahantas* (the enlightened monks) at the ground floor plaza, Seacon Square, Bangkok during *Māgha Pūjā* holiday, retrieved March 5, 2015 from NationTV 22 facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/NationChannelTV/posts/10153179973587450>



Figure 14:
A group of Buddhist monks are leading Thai actors and actresses in the candlelit procession at the ground floor plaza, Seacon Square, Bangkok during *Māgha Pūjā* holiday, retrieved March 5, 2015 from NationTV 22 facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/NationChannelTV/posts/10153179973587450>



Figure 15:
Customers are placing coins in alms bowls as a Merit-making rite at the ground floor plaza, Seacon Square, Bangkok during *Māgha Pūjā* holiday, retrieved March 5, 2015 from NationTV 22 facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/NationChannelTV/posts/10153179973587450>



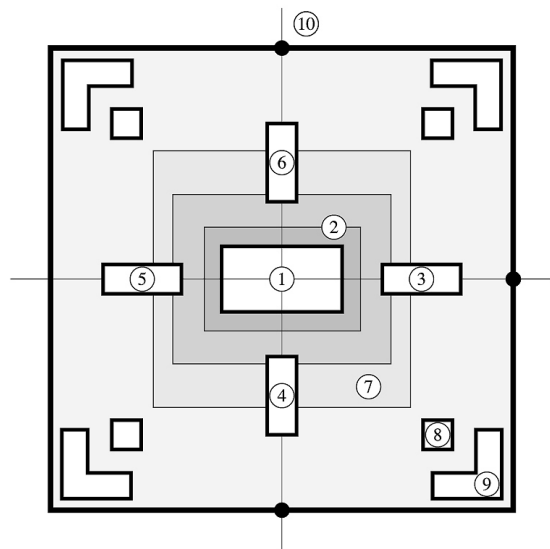
Figure 16:
Customers are ringing bells at the ground floor plaza, Seacon Square, Bangkok during *Māgha Pūjā* holiday, retrieved March 5, 2015 from NationTV 22 facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/NationChannelTV/posts/10153179973587450>

Buddhist monks (Figure 14). In addition, there were alms-bowls for customers in which to put coins as a way of making merit (Figure 15), bells for customers to ring for good luck (Figure 16), and an area for the customers to offer the monks cloth. (Figure 17). All of these activities were located in the area of the plaza where the octagonal platform located.

Usually, these ceremonies and rituals are hosted inside the temple area. In the morning, food is offered and Sang Khatans made to the monks. In the afternoon, the Buddhist monks chant *Ovādapātimokkham*. In the evening, monks lead a circumambulation or a candlelight procession. The procession is where both monks and participants perform three walking meditations around the main shrine hall, the hall enshrining the Lord Buddha's image, one circle for each; the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The main shrine hall in this case refers to *Ubosot* or *Bot*, an Ordination hall. *Ubosot* in Thai Buddhist temples is considered to be the most important building in the whole complex. The building enshrines the main statue of Lord Buddha. Ideally, *Ubosot* always lies with its main axis from west to east with the Lord Buddha statue facing east (Figure 18). Usually, this main axis also corresponds to the locations of the Wihan, the Lecture hall. While *Ubosot* is designed for monks, *Wihan* is for participants (Döhring, 2000). *Wihan*, similar to

Ubosot, can function as an assembly or preaching hall to serve many religious functions (Matics, 1992). *Ubosot* is also distinguished from other buildings in the complex by *Sima* markers, the Boundary stones, there are eight *Sima* markers placed around the *Ubosot*.

An *Ubosot* is designed with the least amount of natural light to emphasize the Lord Buddha's statue through candle illumination. This is to create



1. Ubosot
2. Kamphaeng kaew
3. East Wihan
4. South Wihan
5. West Wihan
6. North Wihan
7. Phra Rabiang
8. Chedi
9. Phra Wihan Kod
10. Gates



Figure 17:
Customers are offering cloths at the ground floor plaza, Seacon Square, Bangkok during Māgha Pūjā holiday, retrieved March 5, 2015 from NationTV 22 facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/NationChannelTV/posts/10153179973587450>

Figure 18:
The ground floor plan of the religious building quarter of the temple, by Author, July 29, 2016.

reflections from the golden surface of Lord Buddha's statue, which claims to enhance religious spirit. The sound is also considered to be very important. Since the religious building quarter is offset from the land boundaries, it leaves room for the outside noises to be filtered. Participants try not to make loud noise when they enter *Ubosot*. The environment is quiet and peaceful (Jayanin and Vorasun, 2006). From the observations, these kinds of effects were not reinterpreted when the Lord Buddha's statues were enshrined in Seacon Square. Both natural light and artificial light in the mall were too bright and did not recreate such an atmospheric outcome. The acoustical effect was not represented in the mall either. This was because the religious setting was hosted in the plaza area, which is opened to multiple stories of walkway terraces. Therefore, the setting was interrupted by both loud crowds and music from other shops, where the volume of sound was difficult to control.

The differences between a medium setting and a large setting are the atmosphere and the ranges of religion-related activities that the customers can participate. While the medium setting is located alone in the middle of the plaza, the large setting has the addition of local market area. In this study, there were small temporary stalls surrounded the

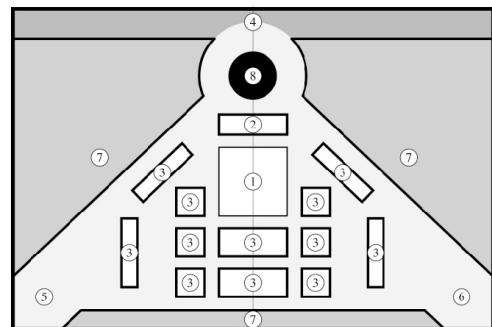


Figure 19:
Customer sprinkling scented water from silver bowls on Lord Buddha statue at the ground floor plaza, Seacon Square, Bangkok during Māgha Pūjā holiday, retrieved April 13, 2016 from Seacon Square facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/SeaconSquareFanPage/photos>

large setting which created the atmosphere of the temple fair. Although this temple fair atmosphere can highlight the environment of the festival, the spirit of place can be faded as there is no clear boundary between the setting and the market area.

CULTURAL PRACTICES OF COMMERCIAL SPACES

Another case study of the temporary setting in the shopping mall was observed in the plaza area of Seacon Square during *Songkran* holidays in 2016. Seacon Square hosted the festival, which consisted of an area for the religious setting (Figure 19) surrounded by small temporary stalls (Figure 20). These stalls were decorated with wood and



1. Religious setting
2. Stage
3. Temporary stalls
4. Main entrance of the mall
5. West wing of the mall
6. East wing of the mall
7. Shops
8. Reception

Figure 20:
The ground floor plan of the plaza area in the shopping mall during Buddhist holidays, by Author, July 29, 2016.



Figure 21:
Overall area of Songkran festival at the ground floor plaza, Seacon Square, Bangkok during Māgha Pūjā holiday, retrieved April 12, 2016 from Seacon Square facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/SeaconSquareFanPage/photos>



Figure 22:
Food stalls during Songkran festival at the ground floor plaza, Seacon Square, Bangkok during Māgha Pūjā holiday, retrieved April 13, 2016 from Seacon Square facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/SeaconSquareFanPage/photos>

corrugated galvanized iron sheets to simulate the atmosphere of a temple fair (Figure 21). The shops occupying these stalls sold Thai food and beverages and other merchandise for *Songkran* celebrations (Figure 22). Most shops in the festival were locally famous shops from different areas in Thailand. Moreover, there were Thai dance performances and cultural shows hosted on the stage throughout the festival.

“For Thai traditionalists, Buddhism often means merit making activities such as offering food to monks or contributing to the construction projects of a monastery. Taking part in Buddhist festivals and ceremonies is also considered a meritorious act. Temple fairs and celebrations provide them with cultural entertainment and more opportunities to make merit. These people are more or less content with the status quo and expect little from their involvement with the religion other than the so-called accumulation of merits.”

(Sunthorn, 1995)

In this case, the temple fair was relocated to the new context of the shopping mall. While a mall is considered as one of the symbols of globalization, the temple fair in the mall shows the subtle

integration between local and global contexts. This also presents distinction and uniqueness of the mall itself where it can stand out from its competitors. Local shops are encouraged to develop themselves to survive the changes in society. Furthermore, customers who intend to spend their time in malls are exposed to these religious settings and cultural practices of the local area. This can refer to Uraiwan’s suggestion where she aimed to educate the new generations about the Lord Buddha’s teaching. However, placing the same elements in different contexts translates them differently. The new generations who get to know malls before temples might not be able to separate religious activities from commercial activities as the two are merged in the context of malls. This leads to another question of its appropriation, including the balance in this imitation of the religious settings in the commercial contexts.

CONCLUSION

Thai Buddhist temples have always had a significant role in Thai community. They have been constructed as a spiritual refuge for community members and the temples have always been a foundation for a community (Kwanchit et al, 2012). The religion-related activities and local traditions that are

practiced are more of ancient strategies to guide people into doing good deeds by making merits. Nonetheless, if people cannot realize the meaning behind their actions, their rituals will eventually become merely representations of the religion as seen in the small settings.

This phenomenon of Thai Buddhist elements in Bangkok malls shows that to relocate the religious settings into the commercial context not only changes the customers' perceptions towards the religion in terms of practices but also the intentions behind it. Not only that, the customers might not be able to recognize the core meanings of the practices, this reinterpretation might also lead to false perceptions by linking the religion to commercial purposes. The malls have to find a balance in the way they represent the religion to carefully merge traditional practices with the present society. According to the case studies in this paper, the medium settings in The Nine and The Street are considered to be more appropriate than the direct integration with commercial purposes in Tops Market. This is because in The Nine and The Street, explanations were provided for the setting. Consequently, it was less likely to be misinterpreted. However, the co-existence between the religious settings and the market area in the large setting as seen in Seacon Square showed another type of the integration. It included the local context of Thai traditional lifestyles where the new generation could observe the way of living with the religion beyond its setting alone.

Additionally, these misinterpretations are not only due to the malls alone, but also the customers who participate in the space. In figure 23, the signage suggests guidelines of appropriate attire for participants who intend to visit Wat Phra Kaew (Temple of the Emerald Buddha). This shows that to visit the temples, people will have to be prepared and have initial ideas of how they should act. This is similarly applied to shopping malls. The customers dress according to their intentions of visiting commercial spaces to be entertained. Nevertheless, when the two different types of spaces merged, it can create alternative expectations of the mall itself, where there can be a variety of specified intents in one location at the same time.



Figure 23:
The prohibition sign of prohibited outfits and dress code at Wat Phra Kaew (Temple of the Emerald Buddha), Bangkok, retrieved from Wat Thai in Bangkok site: <https://sites.google.com/site/wadphrakaewwathaiinbangkok/kar-taeng-kay-khea-wad-phra-kaew>

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