

A Tudor House in Bangkok: HSH Prince Vodhyakara Varavarn's House at 42 Soi Tonson

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ABSTRACT

 This paper examines the design and construction process of the house at 42 Soi Tonson, Bangkok, designed and owned by His Serene Highness Prince Vodhyakara Varavarn – a Cambridge graduate and pioneering Thai architect – in 1929. By examining the house, the factors that influenced the design and the construction process are taken into account including contemporary circumstances of pre-World War II Siam culturally and economically, as well as the life and educational background of the architect. The paper reveals that the design and construction process not only involved the selection and appropriation of the Western ideas and knowledge but also the reinterpretation of them, as well as the mediation between them and local practices. As a result, the house is, to use H. K. Bhabha's word, a "hybrid" and "ambiguous" product of modernization in the non-western context.

Keywords: *modernization, modern architecture, HSH Prince Vodhyakara Varavarn, mediation, appropriation*

INTRODUCTION

Popular statements regarding Thai culture have informed the study of its history in many respects. The statements, in sum, revolve around the idea that Thais have always agglomerated external influences into their own culture. A good example of this can be seen from a quote of HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, the pioneering historian of the country, saying that Thais tended to select what they had seen as appropriate for their interest and adapt them to suit their situations (Damrong Rajanubhab, 1927, p.89 - 98).

In the architectural history of Thailand, this claim has also been adopted widely. The study of the period after mid-19th century Siam, when the Kingdom was

hugely influenced culturally but not colonized by the West, is no exception. For that period, Western architecture has been seen by scholars as something Thai people, especially the elite, have adopted and adapted to suit their cultural, economic, and climatic circumstances (Tiptus and Bongsadadt, 1983; Horayangkura et al., 1993; Tiptus, 1996; Horayangkura, 2001; Chuengsiriarak, 2010). However, the existing literature is mostly a broad observation of the subject; therefore, quite a few aspects of it are yet to be investigated in detail. Especially in the process of the adoption and adaptation of western ideas and practices in design, which this paper will discuss, the existing literature generally described it as a one-way transplantation from the West to Siam, only made suitable for the local context by adaptations in terms of function, climatic design, and construction.

This paper tries to point out an underlying complexity beyond the adoption and adaptation of styles, ideas, and technologies in a case study of the design and construction of a seemingly Western building built in Siam at the end of the 1920s. This is the house at 42 Soi Tonson, Bangkok, designed and owned by Mom Chao Vodhyakara Varavarn, a Cambridge-trained, Thai architect.¹ In order to study the work, the methodology is shaped by a postcolonial perspective. This perspective seeks to understand history not only in terms of the colonized, but also for other non-Western cultures engaged with Western influence in a more interactive ways, less hierarchical and divisive between West and East. In taking this line, the study reveals the *hybridity* and *ambivalence* of the complex phenomenon (Bhabha, 1994, p.112, 173).² Therefore, the paper counts a wide range of issues, for example, traditional ideas and practices that revolve and negotiate with modern life and ideas.

The paper is comprised of three parts; first the background of the architect, whose life experienced the interaction between the traditional and modern practices; second his education in Britain, where he was exposed to Western ideas, and finally his house at 42 Soi Tonson, which was an early project in which the architect exploited ideas and practices learned from the West, involving not only the selection and appropriation of Western ideas and knowledge, but also the reinterpretation of them, as well as the mediation between them and local practices.

THE ARCHITECT: EARLY LIFE

M.C.Vodhyakara's early years saw a combination of modernization and tradition in Siam. It spanned the closing period of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V)'s reign (1868 - 1910) and the beginning period of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI)'s reign (1910 - 1925) when Siam was being transformed in many aspects, culturally, administratively, and economically. It was during this period that the emerging middle class,



Figure 1:
M.C.Vodhyakara in his youth. He had a hair style called "Chuk", the traditional practice for Thai children under twelve years old. "Chuk" was believed to bring auspiciousness to the child's life, and its ritual removal marked the end of childhood. Source: *Works of Mom Chao Vodhyakara Varavarn 1900 – 1981*. (1991), p.6.

together with the nobles and the royal families, constructed their Western-style houses in timber or masonry rather than living in traditional timber houses. However, it should be noted that these changes primarily happened in the capital, affecting mainly urban life, while the agricultural and rural life of the majority in the outer regional areas remained intact. Furthermore, even in apparently modernized urban and royal life, many traditional practices and rituals were still evident. In particular, the life of

¹ Mom Chao is a rank of Thai royalty who is a grandson of a king. It is equal to HSH Prince in English. The prince will be addressed as M.C.Vodhyakara throughout this paper.

² One of the most recent compilations of the studies of modern Thai history and culture employing postcolonial perspective is Harrison, R. and Jackson, P. A. (eds.) (2010) *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. Regarding specifically in architecture, one of the most recent theses on western-style architecture in Siam after the mid-19th century whose methodological perspective is informed by postcolonial scholarship is Povatong, P. (2011) *Building Siwai: Transformation of Architecture and Architectural Practice in Siam during the Reign of Rama V, 1868 – 1910*. Doctor of Philosophy (Architecture) Thesis. University of Michigan.



Figure 2:
M.C. Vodhyakara's own sketch in 1964. He recalled "Kesakan", the ceremony of "getting rid of Chuk" for princes and princesses of the rank "Mom Chao" (M.C. Vodhyakara's rank) or higher. It was done when the children had reached the age of twelve to remind them of their purity. The ceremony was done in the royal palace. The children would wear an elaborate traditional costume. Source: Sisan Saensai Prawatsat: Phabrang Laiphahat Bantuek Kwamsongcham Lae Kan Winitchai Suan Phra Ong Khong Mom Chao Vodhyakara Varavarn (Colours and Lines of History: Sketches and Personal Analysis of Prof. Mom Chao Vodhyakara Varavarn. (2004), p.79.

M.C. Vodhyakara, who was a prince, was no exception as regards this combination of modernization and tradition, as will be shown here.

Born in a traditionally polygamist royal family in 1900, M.C. Vodhyakara was the 20th child of Phra Chao Barommawongther Krom Phra Narathipprapanpong or Prince Varavarnnakara – the 56th child of King Mongkut (Rama IV). In his early years, M.C. Vodhyakara was educated in his father's palace. He grew up in a context of progressive ideas, many connected with cultural activities. His father was a cultured and progressive figure, for in addition to his duty as a Deputy Minister of Finance, he was also

famous for his writings and musicals. He translated foreign books and authored four hundred Thai musical plays, a genre of his creation combining Thai, Malay, and Western opera (Angsunanthawiwat, 2009). In his palace, he built Siam's first musical theatre called Pridalai.

In 1911, M.C. Vodhyakara entered the new Royal Pages School (Vajiravudh College), in Bangkok established by King Vajiravudh to provide modern education for his royal page trainees and other students. The King was breaking with tradition when he built this school in place of a royal temple. He suggested that contemporary education needed to be conducted in modern schools by lay-teachers rather than by monks (Krasae Phra Ratchaongkan Sueng Banchu Wai Nai Sila Phra Roek Rongrian Mahadlek Luang [The royal announcement inscribed in the foundation stone of the Royal Pages School], 1915 (2458), p.2260).

He finished his studies in 1917 and was commissioned into the royal service of the King's secretariat where he became involved in the illustration of royal publications – Dusit Smith Journal and The Recorder. The King, impressed by his satirical cartoon depicting Kaiser Wilhelm II confronting World War I catastrophe, summoned him to an audience and rewarded him with a scholarship to pursue further studies in the United Kingdom (Works of Mom Chao Vodhyakara Varavarn 1900 - 1981, 1991, p.7). In 1919, after experiencing the combination of modernization and tradition in Siam in his early years, M.C. Vodhyakara set sail for England to have a first-hand experience of what Siamese elites saw as the most civilized nation in the world.

THE ARCHITECT: ARCHITECTURAL STUDIES AT CAMBRIDGE

After arriving in Britain, M.C. Vodhyakara was placed under the care of a series of tutors who helped him prepare academically and culturally for his new world (Carter, 1920, p.95, 1923, p.136 - 137, Royal Thai Embassy Office of Educational Affairs). He finally entered Gonville and Caius College at the University of Cambridge to commence his architectural studies, spending three and a half years for his B.A. Degree from 1924 to 1927. Being equipped with ideological ideas of architectural practice in Britain, M.C. Vodhyakara would turn them to be practical tools for the modernization of his home country.

In the architecture school, M.C.Vodhyakara obtained a particular training. It is fair to say that its particularity mainly derived from two factors – the school's curriculum, and the influence of Edward Schroeder Prior, the school's head and professor.

First, Cambridge School of Architectural Studies was formally established in 1912, followed by the succession of Edward Schroeder Prior, one of the second generation protagonists of the Arts and Crafts Movement, as head of the school (Saint, 2008, p.467). The three-year curriculum of the school comprised lectures and studio work, culminating in final exams each year (*Cambridge University School of Architecture Prospectus*, 1929, p.3) It did not aim to give a full professional training, but rather a practical training in Architecture in which the history of art was the principal subject, allowing the graduates broader choices of career (*Ibid*). There was a comment that the school tended to produce executives, so the subjects about professional practice were not much emphasized (Tiptus, 1996, p.37 – 38.). However, an ex-student, Theodore Fyfe, who had been at the school under E S Prior and followed him as head, had a different opinion. He argued that the training equipped students who wanted to practice architecture by pointing out that it aimed at the recognition of art as a practice, not theory. By doing so, it aimed to produce builders, not architects, who would build with knowledge of working conditions and knew how to control workmen, not contractors, yet would be capable also of dealing with building economy and contracts with clients (Fyfe, 1932, p.814). This argument is supported by the second factor – having Edward Schroeder Prior as head and professor.

Second, even though Theodore Fyfe had become the director of the school in 1925, taking over from Prior as head, it seems that Prior remained the most inspiring and influential figure for the students, especially M.C.Vodhyakara. Andrew Saint (2006, p.14) suggests that Prior's role in the school was overshadowed by Fyfe's after his arrival but that he seemed 'never uninvolved'. During his architectural practice prior to his position at the school, Prior's view of the professionalization of architects in Britain was pessimistic. In his article "*Architecture: a Profession or an Art*", published along with those of other Art Workers' Guild members, he claimed that irrelevant practices from the professional system would turn architects' backs on their role as artists – the role they had achieved in their own right (Prior, 1892, p.107 – 108). As regards his practice, Prior, as an Arts and Crafts architect, pursued an essence of truthfulness in the use of materials, especially local

ones, and in construction technique (Blomsfield, 1940, p.89). His buildings showed rationality and capitalized on natural qualities found in vernacular architecture (Garnham, 1996, p.4, 10). At the school, his idea of using truthful and local materials as well as fine craftsmanship persisted (*Printed notes by Graham Dawbarn on the birth of the Cambridge School of Architecture*, 1963). By the time he was chair at Cambridge, he had already finished his seminal works including The Barn in Exmouth, Home Place in Norfolk, and Saint Andrew's Church in Roker. On the academic side, Prior was an expert in medieval art. His works on medieval architecture also raised issues about social and economic causes – aspects that had hitherto remained largely unexplored (Prior, 1922).

An evidence in the case of M.C.Vodhyakara that specifically implies Prior's influence on him is the cartoon sketches and poems he drew and wrote about Prior found in his archive, while there is no evidence of special respect for other staff. Furthermore, in the archive was also found an original lecture note *How to build cheaply and well* (1927), stated as Prior's lecture. It describes Prior's proposal to reduce the post-Victorian construction cost while still achieving fine buildings. Prior claimed it was necessary to reduce the roles of the architect, surveyor, contractor, and merchant, whose working processes were seen by Prior as the "machine" that increased the construction cost of a project. The reduction would be of benefit to the clients and the craftsmen; the former would obtain the well-made and cheap building built finely by the latter. This proposal must have inspired M.C.Vodhyakara because he always saw the value and the necessity of building cheaply and well throughout his career. Regarding building without contractors, M.C.Vodhyakara did build some of his houses on his own (Varavarn, undated d).

After graduation in June 1927, he spent eight months training at the HM Office of Works in London. M.C.Vodhyakara was eager to visit construction sites much more than to experience office work (Carter, 1929, p.195). This gives us some idea of his attitude toward the learning of architectural practice. If Prior's approach to architectural design ever influenced him and if it persisted until then, he presumably gained the perspective that, to quote Saint's words, architecture and building are one, that architecture is a practical art in which pretence and perhaps even theory have little place (Saint, 2006, p. 13). He returned to Siam at the end of March 1928 (Royal Thai Embassy Office of Educational Affairs).

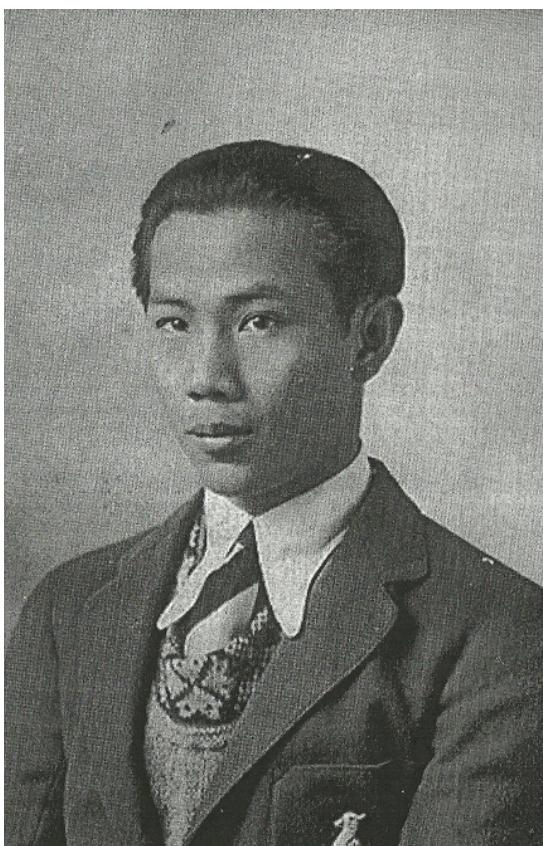


Figure 3:
M.C. Vodhyakara in the United Kingdom in the late 1920s
Source: Sisan Saensai Prawatsat: *Phabrang Laiphahat Bantuek Kwamsongcham Lae Kan Winitchai Suan Phra Ong Khong Mom Chao Vodhyakara Varavarn (Colours and Lines of History: Sketches and Personal Analysis of Prof. Mom Chao Vodhyakara Varavarn)*. (2004), p.15.

In sum, the architectural knowledge and Arts and Crafts ideology that influenced M.C. Vodhyakara through the curriculum and Prior happened to suit the context of Siam, but in a different way to what they supposed to suit British context. Unlike Britain, where architectural practice had long been established, the word architecture was almost unknown in Siam where industrialization, which the Arts and Crafts ideology was set to go against, never took place. The ideology became a perfectly practical means proposed by M.C. Vodhyakara to deliver a decent construction for local dwellings for the sake of modernization of the country. The house at 42 Soi Tonson was a pioneering case for the appropriation of the knowledge and ideology.

A TUDOR HOUSE IN BANGKOK: 42 SOI TONSON

After returning to Siam in 1928, M.C. Vodhyakara worked as an architect in the Royal Railway Department until 1949. His works and career took place in a transformational period in the history of Thailand, as well as the history of its architecture. Upon his return to Siam, the country's absolute monarchy was at its dusk, struggling with its legitimacy to rule the kingdom amid economic recessions and questions of social inequality. Amidst the instability, Siam at that time-similar to or even more than in preceding decades-was still experiencing an intermingling of tradition and modernization.

As for domestic architecture, less traditional houses were built, whereas more Western-influenced ones – either with reinforced concrete structure and masonry or timber – were constructed (Tiptus and Bongsadadt, 1982, p. 285 - 287). This was the normal trend among urban middle and upper classes. However, Western-influenced houses in Siam were no mere copy of Western styles. Within the Western appearance laid the process engaging more complex rationale of why they were built like they were, and how they were built. The process involved mediations between modern ideas and local practices. M.C. Vodhyakara's house at 42 Soi Tonson is one of the best case studies to portray this complexity.

The origin of the house at 42 Soi Tonson involved M.C. Vodhyakara's career at the Royal Railway Department and the economic difficulty at the time. His jobs took him to many provinces to supervise construction sites. It also provided him the opportunities to observe the hardship of rural life, especially, from his point of view, its impermanent and unhygienic domestic buildings (*Works of Mom Chao Vodhyakara Varavarn 1900 - 1981*, 1991, p. 6). In cities, including Bangkok, the economic recession of the 1920s also affected the construction of urban dwellers' houses. Imported materials especially steel for the reinforcement of concrete and nails became more expensive. As a result, M.C. Vodhyakara spent his free time doing an experiment with local materials that would benefit an economy and permanent construction (*Ibid*, 7). This would potentially benefit both rural dwellers, which deserved a better quality of life, and urban dwellers, which, apart from practical and hygienic purposes, craved for built-forms that demonstrate their social status.

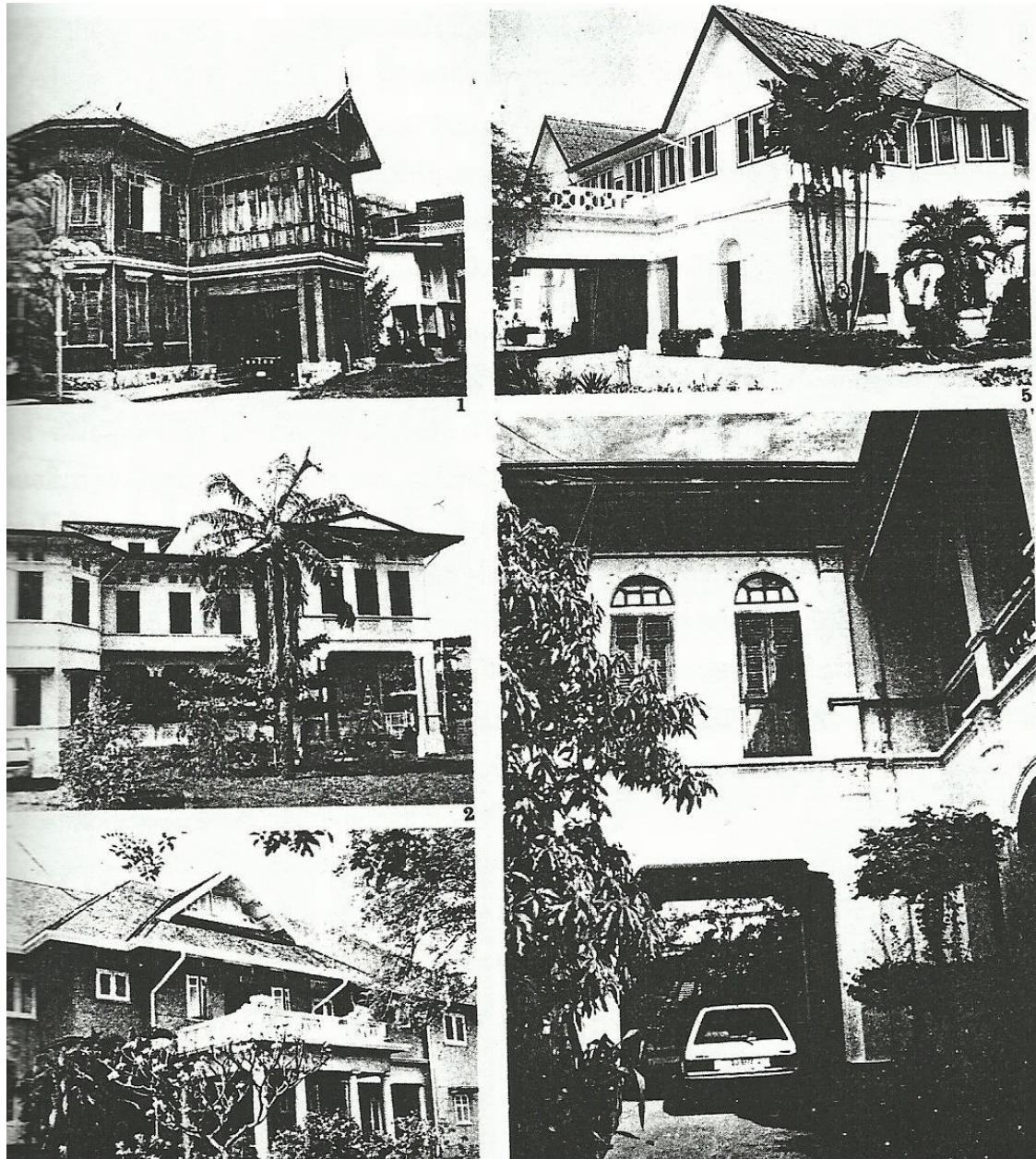


Figure 4:

Samples of Western-influenced houses of middle and upper classes, built with timber or reinforced concrete structure and masonry between 1910 and 1925. Source: Tiptus, P. and Bongsadadt, M. (1983), p.253.

It was on this occasion that he found an advantageous relation between a construction method – half-timbered construction – he had learnt from Britain, and local conditions in Siam. Therefore, he undertook the first experiment in half-timbered construction with his own house.

Before discussion about the experimental half-timbered house of M.C.Vodhyakara, It is worth noting here that there were previous uses of half-timbered construction in Siam, but they were rare cases. It was used in Ban Pin Railway Station, and parts of Phratamnak Chalimongkhonat. The first was a small



Figure 5:
Phratamnak Chalimongkhonat, 1910,
architect: M.C. Itthi-theepsan Kritdakorn.
Source: Sanam Chandra Palace. (2009).



Figure 6:
Manangkhasila House, approximately 1925,
architect: Edward Healey.
Source: Tiptus, P. (2008), p.113.

station on the northern line railway; the second was a mansion in Sanamchan Palace its name was derived from King Rama VI's impression on the play *My Friend Jarlet* by Arnold Goldsworthy and E.B.Norman. However, the relation between the architectural style and the king's literary impression has not been studied by any research. It is also worth to mention a house that appeared to be built with half-timbered construction but it was in fact not. It was Manangkhasila House, owned by Phraya Udomratchaphakdi (Tho Sutcharitkun), King Rama VI's favorite royal page. The apparent timber frames on the walls were not structure but decoration (*Ngan Prabprung Ban Manangkhasila Pen Samnakngan Plaeng Sabsin Pen Thun (The renovation and conversion of Ban Manangkhasila to Assets Capitalization Bureau)*, undated).

The experimental house was built in 1929 and located at 42 Soi Tonson, then a Bangkok suburb. It was called by the architect 'Tudor style' (Varavarn, 1942, p. 1). The lecture note, *Ban (House)*, submitted to the Department of Advertisement as an announcement for his lecture broadcast on the state radio in 1942, describes a reinterpretation of Western ideas. In the note, he used this house as an example of a Tudor house in order to describe its origin, influenced by the Gothic church. He concluded the introduction of his lecture with a section on the origin of house forms – both English and Thai, claiming that each had been adapted from religious building forms (ibid). The rationale behind the conclusion was that the use of these adapted forms not only reminded inhabitants of the moral quality of religion, but also proved their functional and objective suitability for domestic building. He then put forward an argument that this rationale emphasized the role of religion in conveying logical, ethical, traditional, as well as artistic and scientific aspects to domestic life. After that, he pointed out the composition of contemporary domestic architecture that comprised function, safety, and aesthetics within livable space and sound construction, reasonable cost compared to its value, sufficient appliances and furniture – suitable for the owners' status, adequate to the size of the plot, and the civilized inhabitants (ibid, 2). Putting all these components together, he argued that architects needed no experimentation but rather could adapt forms of architecture from the past which had been widely accepted (ibid, 3).

Adapting old architecture, he clarified, did not mean a mere copy, but an improvement to suit contemporary materials and construction. The house at 42 Soi Tonson, by the definition of the architect, is therefore not a mere copy of a Tudor house, but an adaptation of the architecture from the past to suit contemporary conditions. It was not only cozy in character but compact in function (Tiptus, 1996, p. 721, 729). Its materials used provided thermal insulation, making interior spaces comfortable (Varavarn, undated b, p.2).

The location of the house was on Soi Tonson, a small road off the main Ploenchit Road. It was in a suburban neighborhood occupied by Bangkok's elites. The house was built at the northeast corner of the plot, entered by a drive from the entrance gate to the east, the front of the house being equipped with a porch facing south into the garden. The garage has a separate gate at the rear, also in the east, connected directly to the road and service area.

Lying at the east side of the garden, a traditional spirit house is the first feature of the house that shows



Figure 7:

A series of sketch of 42 Soi Tonson by M.C. Vodhyakara Varavarn, dates unknown.

Source: M.C. Vodhyakara Varavarn's archive.



Figure 8:

House at 42 Soi Tonson, Bangkok. Date taken unknown, possibly in its early years.

Source: M.C. Vodhyakara Varavarn's archive

mediation between modern ideas and local practices. A Thai spirit house is a miniature house devoted to the “spirit of the property” on which the house is located. By routinely praying and making offerings to the spirit, the household is ensured its auspiciousness while living on the premise. The location chosen and the time of erecting the spirit house have to be carefully conducted according to traditional principles. Despite the fact that M.C. Vodhyakara described this practice as one of “superstitious” practices in architecture that was a little burden in designing and construction (Varavarn, undated a), he saw that such a belief might be an advantage and that it was actually not harmful (*ibid*). He evidently took this practice seriously for his house by choosing the location at the east, where the house’s shadow was not cast, and by hiring royal

astrologers to calculate the auspicious time for erection and execution.³

The house has two main stories with level changes in the floor levels, and a basement. There was a porch, hall, living room, dining room, and pantry on the ground floor, with a garage, kitchen, and maid’s quarter at the rear. On the upper floors, there was a study room, master bedroom, small bedroom, bathroom, and balcony.

By analyzing the interior features and the rationales behind them, the mediation between modern ideas and local practices is further revealed. In the living quarters of the ground floor, there are no doors between foyer, living room, and dining room. They are connected by large voids in the walls and, at the same time, separated by steps of level, mostly one step each as with traditional Thai houses where they are hierarchically significant.

The entrance was through the porch, where the first threshold of the house – the steps – led one through the door into the hall. When the owner used this house, the hall was the place for business discussions and unfamiliar guests.⁴ Without doors as mentioned, one steps over the next threshold to arrive in the living room. Being signified by the step as a more private and significant space, the living room is the largest and the most airy room in the house with the highest ceiling. Toward the west, one steps down through a further threshold to the dining room. All these rooms have windows on two sides, where daylight could come in, and summer wind could flow through in a southwest-northeast direction, and fresh winter breeze the other way round.

³ Interview with M.R. Chanvudhi Varavarn by Chomchon Fusinpaiboon, 5th January 2011.

⁴ *Ibid.*

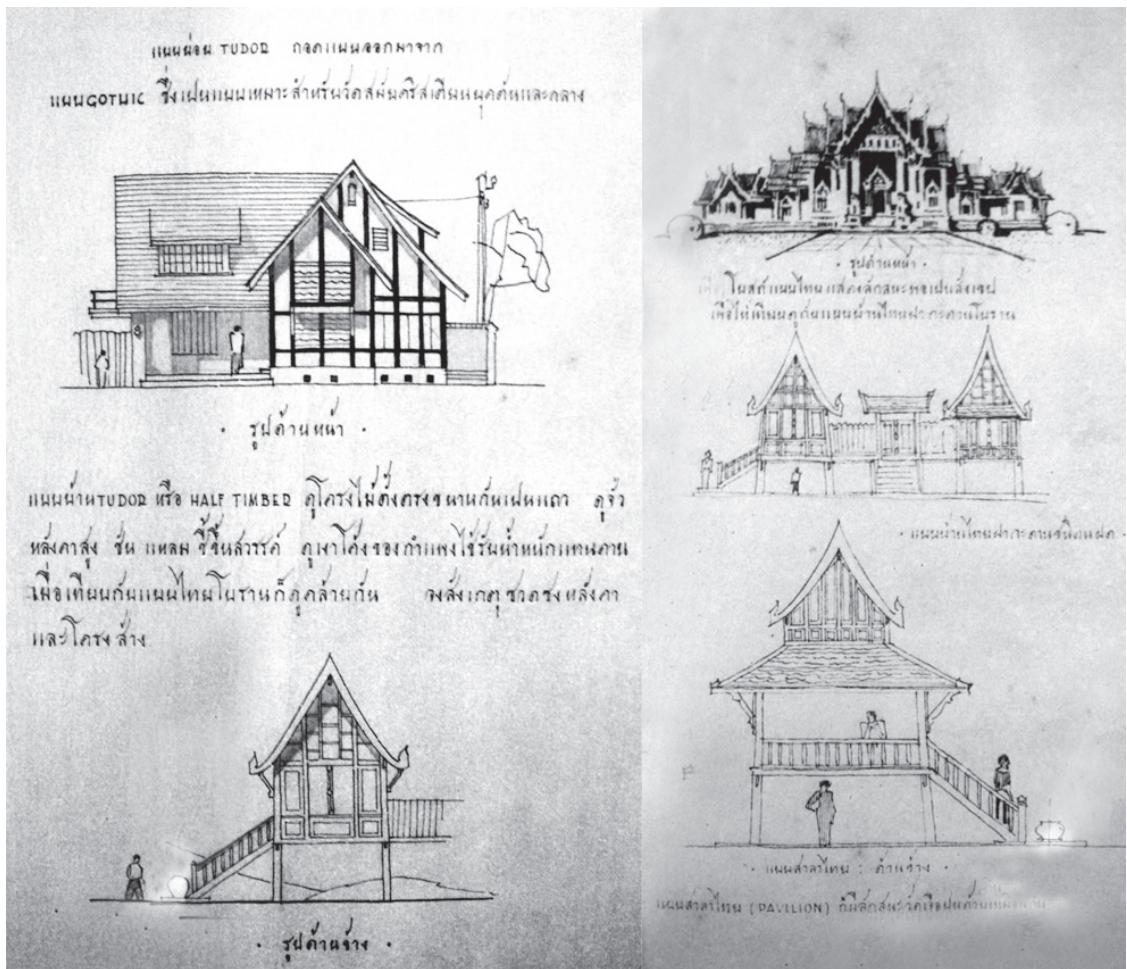


Figure 9:
M.C. Vodhyakara's sketches depicting the forms of Thai domestic architecture and how they derived from Thai religious architecture, also the similarity between a Tudor house and a Thai house in terms of their forms and the rationale behind them. Source: Varavarn. (1942).



Figure 10:
The house at 42 Soi Tonson, the view from its garden. The house faces south.
Source: 174 Moradok Sathapattayakam Nai Pratet Thai: 20 Pi Rangwan Anurak Di Den 2525 - 2545 (174 Architectural Heritage in Thailand: 20 Years of Architectural Conservation Award 1982 - 2002). (2004), p.53.



Figure 11:
The spirit house at the southeast corner of the garden.
Photograph by Author.

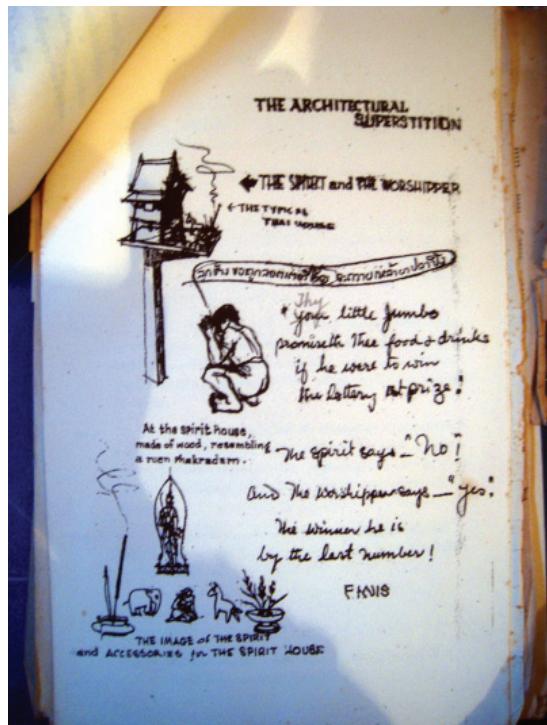


Figure 12:
M.C. Vodhyakara's satirical sketch in the chapter "The Architectural Superstition" in the draft of Meanings of materials and architectural design. Source: Varavarn, V., M.C. (undated a).

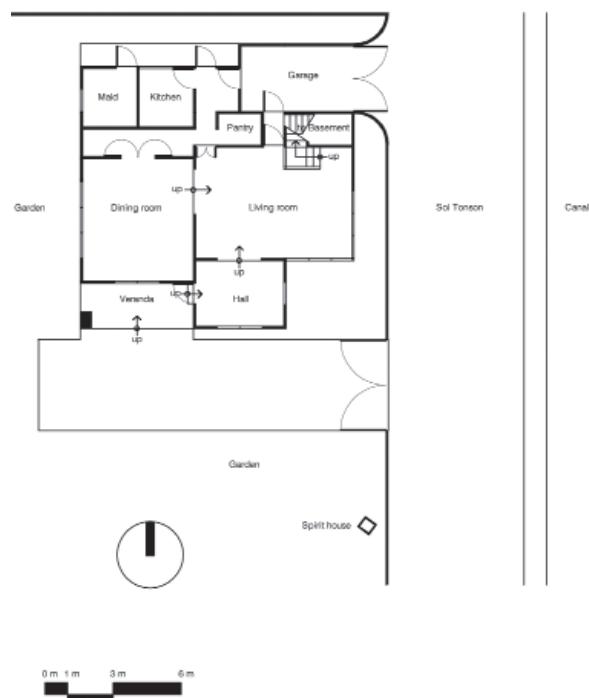
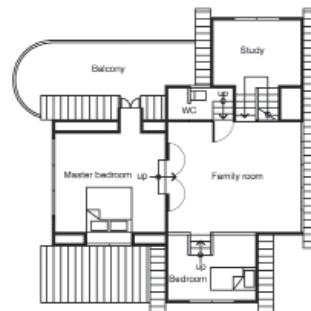
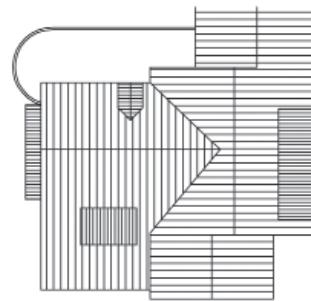


Figure 13:
Reconstructed plans of 42 Soi Tonson in its original design after a survey and an interview of M.R. Chanvudhi Varavarn. Photograph by Author.

Continuing up the stairs, one reaches the next level. It was here that M.C.Vodhyakara located his study room. From this space, one turns around to the left, continues up another flight of the stairs, and reaches the upper family room.

Before discussing the rooms upstairs, it is worth mentioning another aspect of the architect's recognition of and response to local practices in dwelling. This can be found in the design of many flights of stairs mentioned. It should be noted that those stairs have both odd and even numbered steps and a left-turn at one flight. These design details matter, as they oppose the Thai traditional practice that indicates the preference to "odd numbered steps" and the right-turn. Odd numbered steps are believed to be suitable for humans whereas even numbered steps are for ghosts. It is apparent that M.C.Vodhyakara recognized these practices but he did not follow them. He disdained the practices by substituting rational assumptions. First, he pointed out that the principle of having "odd-numbered steps" was not clear as it depended on whether one would count risers or treads (Varavarn, undated a). Second, he suggested that the principle of having right-turn flights was because normal people were right-handed so it was more practical to use their right hand to control their movement up the stairs (*ibid*). His argument about the stairs, therefore, shows an aspect of his design approach that did not conform to traditional practice.

A steep roof covers the rooms upstairs with parts opening to the outside with dormer windows, making them relatively more compact and cozy than the rooms underneath. Built-in furniture such as cabinets and shelves were fitted in under-roof-spaces at the edges of rooms, thus no spaces were left wasted.

To start with the upper family room, a hall connects to two bedrooms. The first one is the small bedroom for his son, Mom Ratchawong Chanvudhi Varavarn. This was not actually an enclosed room but a space descending from the family room by steps through an opening. The master bedroom lies under a big roof. There is a door leading to the balcony at the north side. In explaining the bedrooms, it is worth pointing out another response of M.C.Vodhyakara's design to local practices. He recognized the taboo of positioning one's head toward the west in bedrooms, regarding it as the direction of the dead. In his house's bedrooms, there was no bed with its head toward the west wall. However, he chose to explain scientifically the reason why one should not put one's head toward the west wall, claiming it was because the wall was heated by a strong afternoon



Figure 14:
A present view toward the living room with the descended hall on the right and the stairs to the upper floors behind the partition on the left. Photograph by Author.

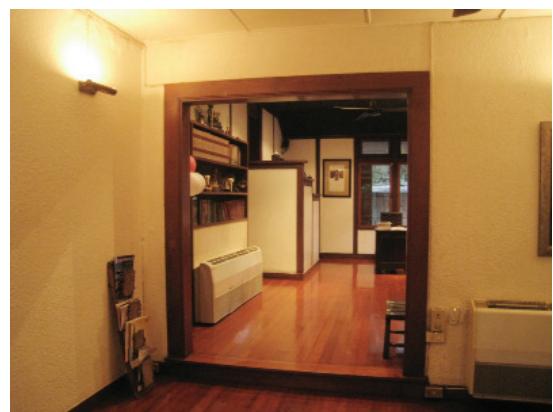


Figure 15:
The present view from the dining room toward the living room through the void with one-step change
Photograph by Author.



Figure 16:
The present view from the living room toward the dining room
Photograph by Author.

sun, therefore it was better to put the head towards another wall (*Ibid*). Therefore, on this point, M.C.Vodhyakara did not reject traditional practice, but appropriated it with a scientific explanation.

The analysis of the interior features already shows several mediations between modern ideas and local practices in the design of this house. Now the use of materials and the construction method will be analyzed.

Judging from its characteristics, the house seems to have been built by a timber-frame construction generally used in English half-timbered vernacular houses and houses of the Arts and Crafts movement. However, judging this Western-styled building's construction method by only the assumption from its appearance might lead one to a faulty understanding of modern architecture in this non-Western country.

The construction method of this house is by no means timber-frame. On contrary, the main structure of the house is more like a wooden post and lintel system – the contemporary method generally applied to both timber and reinforced concrete structures of contemporary houses in Siam.

The methods are different in the ways they distribute loads from the roof and upper floors to the foundations. In timber-frame buildings, the posts, studs, and/or girts of the walls frame the structure. In other words, the frames are load-bearing walls (Brunskill, 2000, p.55). They could be assembled by either building each one on the ground then erecting them or by building the main posts first then inserting the frames (*ibid*, p.54, West, 1971, p.60). On the other hand, building by post and lintel system required an erection of the main posts and beams before building the non-load bearing walls. This house is the latter case; its main structure consists of large members of wooden posts and beams, whereas the smaller members of wooden stud and girt form the non-load bearing wall structure. This is obviously different from what would have happened if the house was built by the timber-frame technique used in English vernacular and the Arts and Crafts houses, whose studs and girts' sections were generally as large as that of the posts.

Nevertheless, a similarity between the construction method of this house and that of the English vernacular and the Arts and Crafts is found in the infill of the walls. The solid walls were built by filling



Figure 17:
The present view from the study room toward the upper family room. Source: 174 Moradok Sathapattayakam Nai Pratet Thai: 20 Pi Rangwan Anurak Di Daen 2525 - 2545 (174 Architectural Heritage in Thailand: 20 Years of Architectural Conservation Award 1982 - 2002). (2004), p.124.

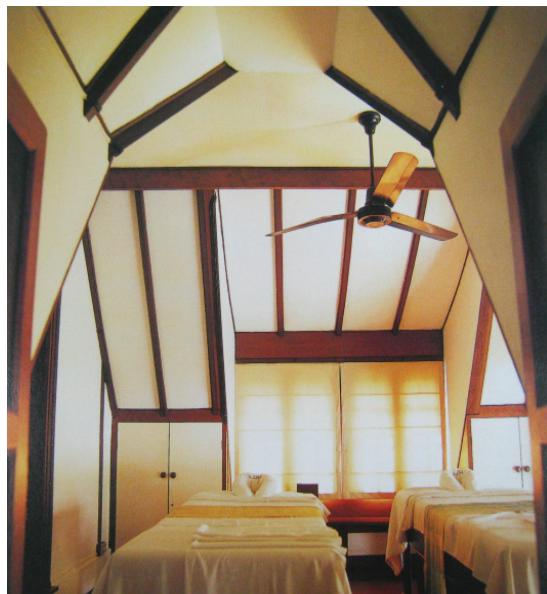


Figure 18:
The present view of the bedroom. The direction of the head points toward south. Source: 174 Moradok Sathapattayakam Nai Pratet Thai: 20 Pi Rangwan Anurak Di Daen 2525 - 2545 (174 Architectural Heritage in Thailand: 20 Years of Architectural Conservation Award 1982 - 2002). (2004), p.124.

the voids in-between the frames with bamboo laths and plaster (Varavarn, undated b, p.6). This method, he claimed, makes the house cooler than building with wood (*ibid*, 2). Furthermore, it was cheaper than building the house with reinforced concrete structure and brick walls; the main point was that the latter required steel which was relatively more expensive than wood in Siam. However, the character of the house, for contemporary Siamese, looked as if built in masonry and obviously not in wood. This was a significant feature that portrayed the owner's social and economic status in contemporary Siam – the time where Siamese saw modern masonry building as superior to that built by bamboo and timber (*Works of Mom Chao Vodhyakara Varavarn 1900 – 1981*, 1991, p. 45). Therefore, the construction method was reinterpreted in the particular circumstance.

After the experiment on his house at 42 Soi Tonson, M.C.Vodhyakara kept experimenting in other personal projects. As experimentation gradually confirmed the quality and practicality of the construction method, he later promoted it, as a proper mean for building houses that were durable, cost saving, and able to respond to the aspiration of

owners from all walks of life. Accordingly, he managed to exhibit the construction method in the National Day Exhibition in 1943, with the aim that it would benefit the public widely (Varavarn, undated c, p.1). Unfortunately, only a part of his aim was effective. The majority of people, especially those who lived in rural areas, did not manage to acquire the knowledge and skills of his construction method to improve their dwellings as M.C.Vodhyakara had intended. It was the middle and upper classes, many of them were in the architect's circle of friends and relatives, who could approach him personally and hire him to design their houses with the half-timbered method. The durable and cost-saving construction method that delivered decent designs therefore benefits mainly the elites for a certain period after World War II when the economic difficulty still lingered.

From the end of World War II, architectural practice in Thailand developed through changing periods amidst political, cultural, and economical changes involving both international architectural ideologies and local factors. From the end of the 1950s to the 1970s, Modernism was a dominant ideology in the practice, directing architectural designs for both

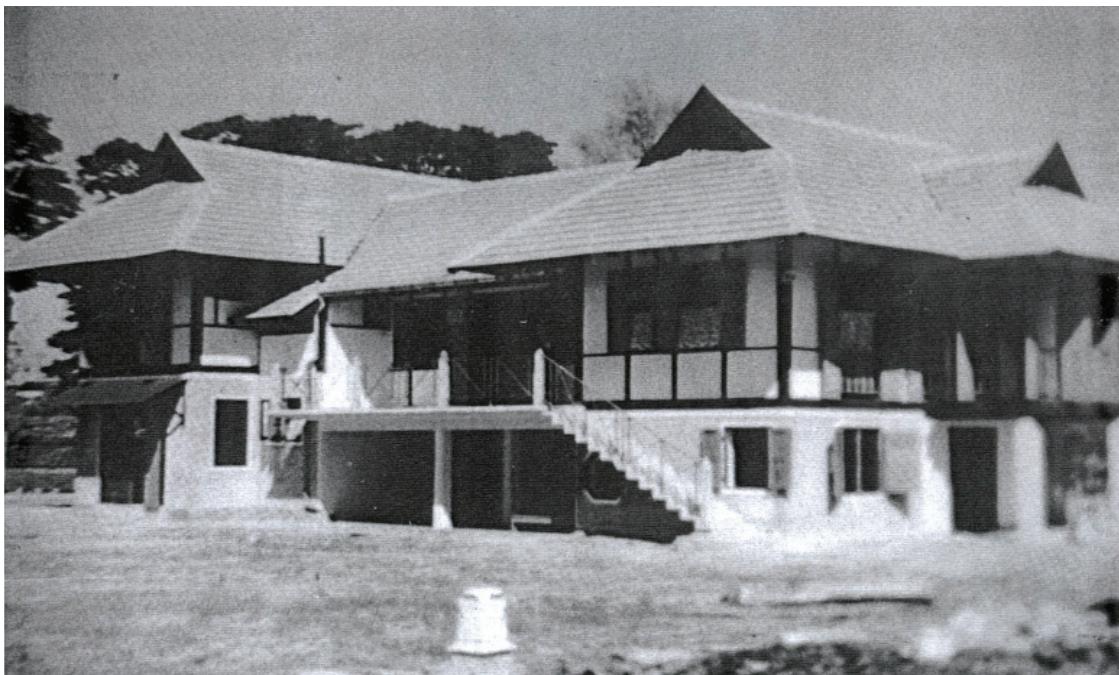


Figure 19:
Phraya Prichanusat (Sern Panyarachun's) house, 1946, now demolished. An example of houses partly built in half-timbered construction for M.C.Vodhyakara's elite clients after World War II. Source: *Works of Mom Chao Vodhyakara Varavarn 1900 – 1981*. (1991), p.48.



Figure 20:

An example of Tudor-styled houses built in the 1990's with reinforce concrete structure, masonry walls and wood frames decoration. Source: Tiptus, P. (1996), p.336.

public and private sectors. From the 1970s to the 1990s, amidst increasing doubts about the monotony of the so-called Modernist design worldwide, an increasing number of the middle class in Thailand, resulting from the rapid economic development, accelerated the phenomenon of imitating old architectural styles from Europe. Among such styles, the so-called Tudor style was popular for residential projects (Horayangkura et al., 1993, p. 332 - 333). Walls that appeared to be timber-framed were indeed decorated with wood planks attached to masonry walls. It only served either the clients' aspiration of having houses that look like Tudor houses or the developers' aim to make the project more attractive (Tiptus, 1996, p. 336, 880).

At the same period, the house at 42 Soi Tonson sat quietly in its suburb-turned-city center. Many of its contemporaries built in the same construction method were not lucky enough to remain untouched.

The real estate value of the locations where most of the houses were built increased rapidly and most were demolished to make ways for more profitable developments. Their truthfulness in material use and construction method suited to the local situation at the time when they were built has been gradually left forgotten.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the house at 42 Soi Tonson portrays its architect's exploitation of knowledge freshly gained from the West that was found relevant to the local situation and his own requirements. It shows the selection, application, and appropriation of a Western style, spatial organization, and construction to a local context. Within this process also underlay a number of interpretations and complex mediations between modern ideas and local practices.

Firstly, in regard to the style called “Tudor” by the architect, as far as the visual impact was concerned, the house could be seen by an Englishman as a vernacular house built by carpenters; it could be seen by an Arts and Crafts architects as a house conforming to their affection for vernacular architecture, fine craftsmanship, and local use of materials. On the other hand, the architect and contemporary Siamese could see it as a proper dwelling, durable and hygienic, suitable for its civilized dwellers.

Secondly, in regard to its spatial organization, the modern and compact spaces were articulated to serve the owner's modern lifestyle and at the same time respond to local climate. However, whether it was intended to or not, the spaces defined by one-step level changes and connected without doors, common features in traditional Thai houses, appeared in the design.

Thirdly, in regard to its construction method, the post and lintel technique with which contemporary carpenters were familiar, not the timber-frame technique generally used in English vernacular and the Arts and Crafts houses, was used. However, the English technique was used for the construction of walls, along with the use of laths and plaster for their infill. All the methods were promoted by the architect as a response to the necessity of building cheaply and well with as many local materials as possible rather than in confirmation of Arts and Crafts ideology or a mere adoption of the style.

Moreover, the house portrays how the architect mediated between modern ideas and traditional practices in dwelling. It happened that he used three different means to deal with the confrontation between the two. They ranged from fully conforming to tradition; following it but at the same time giving it a scientific rationale, or totally denying it. The design process and the house at 42 Soi Tonson were therefore the outcome of the “selection” and “application” of western ideas and practices and the “appropriation” of them to the local context, and vice versa.

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