





FROM AMPHAWA TO FLORENCE :

How the Navarong pottery progressed from a quiet river town

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ABSTRACT

 Through their state-funded research, a team of design academics undertook to bring new life to Benjarong traditional pottery in Amphawa by reconciling innovation with tradition. The research outcome was twofold. Firstly, an alternative discourse was proposed to enable designers to draw visual resources from Asia, thus extending design possibilities much further. Secondly an improvement of the production technique of Benjarong was recommended to enable design developments for the pottery. By putting the traditional Benjarong in the context of today's cultural dynamism, Amphawa became the birthplace of a new version of polychrome pottery - Navarong, which later earned recognitions in cities abroad, including Florence.

Keywords : *tradition / innovation / product design / crafts / appropriate technology*

1. LIKE IT OR NOT, THE CURRENT FORCE OF CAPITALISM, IN THE NAME OF GLOBALIZATION, HAS TAKEN OVER THE WHOLE WORLD. WELL, AT LEAST ITS ECONOMY. THIS INEVITABLY AND UNDENIABLY AFFECTS ALMOST EVERYONE ON THIS PLANET. THE CRAFTSPEOPLE IN THAILAND ARE NO EXCEPTION.

When such an economic superpower as China became the major exporter of industrial products, as well as crafts, many industries in Thailand, especially. The ceramic industry, are seriously under threat. And exporting is now becoming even more difficult with the pressure from FTAs. As a developing country with no major valuable high technology of its own, Thailand is obviously losing this economic battle, because most of products with hi-tech components or fashionable designs are patented, copyrighted, or licensed by other industrial countries, who take the major stakes of profits Thailand can generate. What Thailand needs is a major rethinking in terms of its product research and development.

One of the possible solutions is to utilize the country's rich cultural heritage as its capital. This is evident in the current government's scheme '*OTOP*', which aims to promote local products, especially traditional crafts internationally. Regrettably the *OTOP* scheme proved to be a failure; and many of its R&D projects lost their focus.

2. THE THAI'S OBSESSIONS WITH THAINESS

When presenting souvenirs to foreign visitors, the most popular choice among Thai hosts is *Benjarong*, the traditional polychrome hand-painted pottery. Most Thais genuinely believe that this colourful pottery can very well represent 'Thainess'. Thai society has witnessed an ongoing campaign to promote 'Thainess' - the Thai national identity (real or imagined) believed to exist in different strands of its culture, including traditional crafts. This campaign is problematic in its assumption that there is homogeneity within Thai culture; and this cannot (or should not) be changed or modified. The latter assumption is particularly true when it comes to designing Benjarong, as evident in most texts on Benjarong, which almost unanimously point that there are strict rules inherited from ancient Benjarong masters. These rules are concerned with the use of colours, motifs, patterns, and forms to produce Benjarong. Experts on Benjarong, being historians or craft masters, who mostly work for the government, as educators or conservationists, try to perpetuate this nationalistic idea, which has long been the dominant discourse on Thai traditional crafts. And the upcountry craftspeople, who laboriously produce Benjarong, view these rules as sacred dogmas.

Whilst, from a conservationist's position, it is necessary to adhere to ancient traditions, when it comes to exporting, traders must acknowledge the fact that people's tastes are different in different places and are always in a state of flux, as evident in ever-changing trends and fashions. But Thai nationalists maintain that, because of the priceless value of Thai cultural

¹ *OTOP is the acronym for the Thai Government's 'One Tambon, One Product' scheme. (The Thai word 'Tambon' means a cluster of villages.) This scheme aims to improve income for rural households by empowering them with abilities to develop their unique products for sales, and consequently, hopefully, to strengthen the Thai rural economy and standard of living.*

heritage, products made strictly according to traditional designs can be imposed upon consumers in every part of the world. It is possible that this nationalistic view is the main obstacle in creating Benjarong designs. And this was the starting point of the *Contemporary Benjarong research project*, conducted by Pattanopas and Kongsangchai between 2002-2003.

3. IS BENJARONG ‘PURELY’ THAI ?

Through literature survey, it was found that, Benjarong pottery was not really a product of Thailand, as for many hundred years this colorful pottery was ‘imported’ from China. It is important to point that this fact strongly contradicts the Thai popular belief in the ‘pure’ Thainess of Benjarong. For centuries Benjarong was produced in China for the Thai royal court according to Thai designs, and was very popular among Thai royalty and the elite classes for their domestic use from the ancient Ayutthaya period (circa 1400 A.D.) to the early twentieth century. It should also be noted that these designs were heavily influenced by Indian hand-painted fabric. (*Dharmapreechakorn & Pinsri*, 1990) Benjarong reached its zenith during the reigns of Rama II – RAMA V or King Chulalongkorn (1809-1910), when an almost endless number of exquisite designs were developed and produced, many of which are now highly treasured. Interestingly, one of the most popular and valuable Benjarong collections from this era was produced by *Seur*, ceramic factory in France. (ibid.)

After Chulalongkorn’s reign (1910) Benjarong’s popularity among Thai aristocrats was replaced by expensive industrially-made tableware from the West. Since then Thailand ceased to have Benjarong produced from China, or France; and it was only recently (circa 1950) that Thai craftsmen were able to commercially produce Benjarong pottery. (*Nagbua*, 2002) However, much of the production of Benjarong has been merely the reproduction of ancient designs, and in some cases the production of fake antiques. As a result, with only some exceptions, for almost 100 years the development of Benjarong in terms of design has been frozen. What can be found on the today’s market are Benjarong souvenirs - imitations of ancient designs with little relevance to contemporary, everyday use and taste. From a design point of view, it was apparent that, in spite of a rather large volume of products, the Benjarong industry was in steady decline.

Over the past few decades the Benjarong industry became aware of its problem; and there have been ongoing attempts by individuals and private and government organizations to revitalize the design of Benjarong. These efforts, however, have produced either design failures or one-off designs with little sustainable significance. The main reason for this lies in the complexity of issues involving Benjarong. For new Benjarong designs to have a commercially viable future, designers need to understand Benjarong’s history and its uses and positions within foreign, especially Western, markets. Furthermore, designers need to be aware of ever-changing trends and fashions, and, of particular importance, technical problems concerning ceramic on-glaze colors and its compatibility with glazes.

4. RESEARCH THROUGH MAKING

To structure the project, a research methodology called ‘studio research’ was applied. Studio research was first outlined during 1769-1776 by Joshua Reynolds, the founding president of the Royal Academy of Arts, London, and furthered by *Stonyer* (1978), *Frayling* (1993/4), *Elinor* (1997), *Gray* (1998) and *Pattanopas* (1999, 2000 and 2003). In the context of this research, studio research means conducting research primarily in design studios, which can be compared with experimenting in scientific laboratories. This involved applying design processes to generate new Benjarong designs, resulting in new Benjarong prototypes. These prototypes, in turn, became their objects of research. And finally these designs were then analysed, contextualised, and a conclusion drawn as to their potential utilization.

To stipulate the collaboration between the research team and the community, two parts of the research were run in tandem. The design and technical research was conducted in a design studio and ceramic laboratory at Chulalongkorn University, while the possible new designs and techniques were tested by a group of volunteer Amphawa craftsmen.

The project was set clearly from the start that the new Benjarong designs were not intended for existing markets (local, tourist, and Arabic). It was rather that the new Benjarong designs would help expand Benjarong’s market to Europe and America. From a design standpoint, the researchers saw Benjarong as a ceramic decoration technique with strong potential to add sophistication to industrial ceramic wares. Balancing the new with the old was their major challenge. Most importantly the new designs had to acknowledge today’s tastes and consumers’ behavior, while maintaining its uniqueness in terms of styles, as well as hand-painted qualities.

5. ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSE AND PROCESS

In their preliminary surveys, the researchers found that potential Western consumers find it difficult to accommodate Benjarong pottery in their domestic contexts. This problem is mostly concerned with design: forms, motifs, and colors. This finding confirms the researchers’ skepticism towards imposing ‘Thainess’ uncritically on Thai crafts for export. The researchers found it important that an alternative discourse be proposed to counter the dominant discourse on the pure Thainess of Benjarong.

As found through literature surveys, the researchers could conclude that Benjarong is empirical evidence of Thailand’s position as a cultural ‘melting pot’ between the two major Asian cultures - Chinese and Indian. (*Pattanopas & Kongsangchai*, 2003) This statement eventually helped formulate an alternative Benjarong discourse, which validated the use of various cultural resources to inform new Benjarong designs. This implies that there is no need for designers to strictly limit themselves to ancient Benjarong designs. As the Thai ancestors did, contemporary designers can be informed and inspired by visual cultures around the region, especially Chinese and Indian. Designers, nonetheless, need to be both historically well informed, and to deeply understand current trends and fashions. This new discourse, however, was not enough to revitalise Benjarong, as many past failures show. There was another major force obstructing Benjarong’s design progress-production process.

For many decades since Thai craftspeople began producing Benjarong in Thailand, patterns on Benjarong changed very slowly despite the speed of today’s fashion trends and consumer

tastes. The researchers found that there are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, the traditional method of transferring pattern onto porcelain wares relies heavily on highly dexterous craftsmen. Secondly, the traditional process of applying Benjarong patterns begins with drawing outlines on the ware's empty surface with pencils and subsequently very fine patterns of gold enamel are meticulously painted on the pencil outlines. Finally on-glaze colors are painted within these gold outlines. But drawing precise lines on the curved surfaces of the ware requires a high level of skill; and this is not what every craftsman can do. In their survey, the researchers found that, within a traditional Benjarong production line, less than 20% of the craftsmen can do this task. Furthermore, to draw new patterns requires considerable training time. The more complicated the new motif and pattern, the more time it requires to practice, the less income the craftsman will earn.

Systematic tests were conducted; and the research team found that design development of Benjarong would be possible through the use of decalcomania, which is a method of transferring printed on-glaze patterns onto glazed ceramic surfaces. This allows outlines of Benjarong patterns to be printed before other colours are filled in by hand. The implication here is that the special skill to draw outlines directly onto ceramic wares is no longer required in this newly improved Benjarong production method.

Over many decades Benjarong was mostly designed by upcountry craftsmen, most of whom tended to repeat traditional designs or evolved them very slowly; and, as a result, both patterns and the color palette of Benjarong were too limited, especially within the context of global markets. The combination between printing (decalcomania) and hand-painting, changed all these by placing designers right at the beginning of the development process.

6. 'GLOCAL' ISSUES

By taking into account the needs of potential European and American customers for decorative products, the researchers made use of information concerning future trends from major trend forecasters, especially in Paris and New York. This enabled us to select appropriate color schemes and the content of motifs that were expected to be in trend during 2004. The implication seems to be that colors and patterns of the newly designed Benjarong must be changed more rapidly than ever.

Since on-glaze colours react chemically to produce colours, mixing them can be very complicated, unlike mixing such pigment colours as oil paint, watercolor or tempera, changing Benjarong colours can be technically complicated for upcountry craftspeople with limited understanding of ceramic technology. This prohibited craftspeople from modifying Benjarong colour palettes over time. The research team collaborated with ceramic scientists to come up with new formulae for on-glaze colours to produce new colour palettes suitable for current colour trends, which maintain Asian flavours.

Whilst faster changes in Benjarong may be necessary to satisfy international consumers, but maintaining its identity is also a necessity. Here the researchers were facing a tradition-innovation dichotomy. By doing an extensive survey on traditional Benjarong patterns, they were determined to transpose traditional styles into contemporary contexts. This was achieved by adopting themes that could represent, to some extent, the current zeitgeist.

7. FROM AMPAWA TO FLORENCE

During 2003-2004, after the research was officially completed, the researchers used their own funding to develop the designs further and turn them into a business venture called More Pun, with its extensive collections of 'Navarong' - the new version of Benjarong pottery. This business, of course, includes the craftspeople of Amphawa as its suppliers, to continue the researchers' mission to serve local people and to sustain the craft tradition within this community.

It was set that Navarong be decorated with motifs of imaginary plants, genetic science, or modern cosmology. The most difficult task, however, was to translate these themes into new motifs and patterns that simultaneously reflected, to some extent, Thai or Asian characteristics. This pattern was later named *Chakra*, a sanskrit word for gyration or galaxy.

The research team also experimented with different pattern structures, which have never been used in old Benjarong patterns. For instance, they explored the use of 'sintao' or a visual device for dividing scenes in Thai mural paintings, as well as collage. This led to the experiment with multi-layered patterns, which resulted in very sophisticated motifs comparable to lace patterns. The latter design was so successful that the collection called *Malila-lace*, which was constructed from two sets of patterns intricately intertwined, won a national award for best tableware design from Elle Decor magazine in Thailand in 2004.

It could be safely stated that, both in terms of research and design, the Contemporary Benjarong project and its offspring, the Navarong products, were immensely successful. The products were mentioned and warmly praised by design academics, designers and international traders. However, this did not guarantee its commercial success. After one year, due to many unexpected problems, especially marketing and management, More Pun went out of business. In October 2005 Pattanopas and Sudhikam (then Kongsangchai) were invited as keynote speakers at the international conference Design "(Design Infinito) organized by Centro Studi Giovanni Klaus Koenig of the University of Florence, Italy. Their presentation was titled 'Sustainable Traditions: the Benjarong polychrome pottery research', in which they addressed how research could help communities generate sustainable jobs that could simultaneously help the environment. In 2006 By Takerng Pattanopas received a 2006 National Invention Award from the National Research Council of Thailand for the Navarong invention. In April 2007 Pattanopas and Sudhikam were the only two artists from Thailand in the guest-artist exhibition titled *Ethnic, Its Abundance and Freedom* in *Ceramic House III* at the 4th *World Ceramic Biennale*, in Icheon, Korea. Now two of Navarong platters are in permanent collections of the museum of the *World Ceramic Exposition Foundation (WOCEF)*. And most recently, more than 30 pieces of Navarong were selected by the French art curator Cécile Morisset to be on display by the ancient Benjarong collections of James HW Thompson, the founder of the Jim Thompson silk empire. The exhibition which as a part of the French festival in Bangkok *La Fête 2007* was titled 'The Place and the Plate' showed objects related to French and Thai culinary cultures by many French world-famous designers, including Phillipe Starck and André Putman, and the Thai internationally renowned artists Rirkrit Tiravanija and Pinaree Sanpitak.

The Contemporary Benjarong research and later the Navarong was one of the first systematic R&D projects aimed at Thai traditional crafts. Their commercial failures did not mean that the research was in vain. Further research and businesses are already expected.

This innovative seed is still waiting to grow.

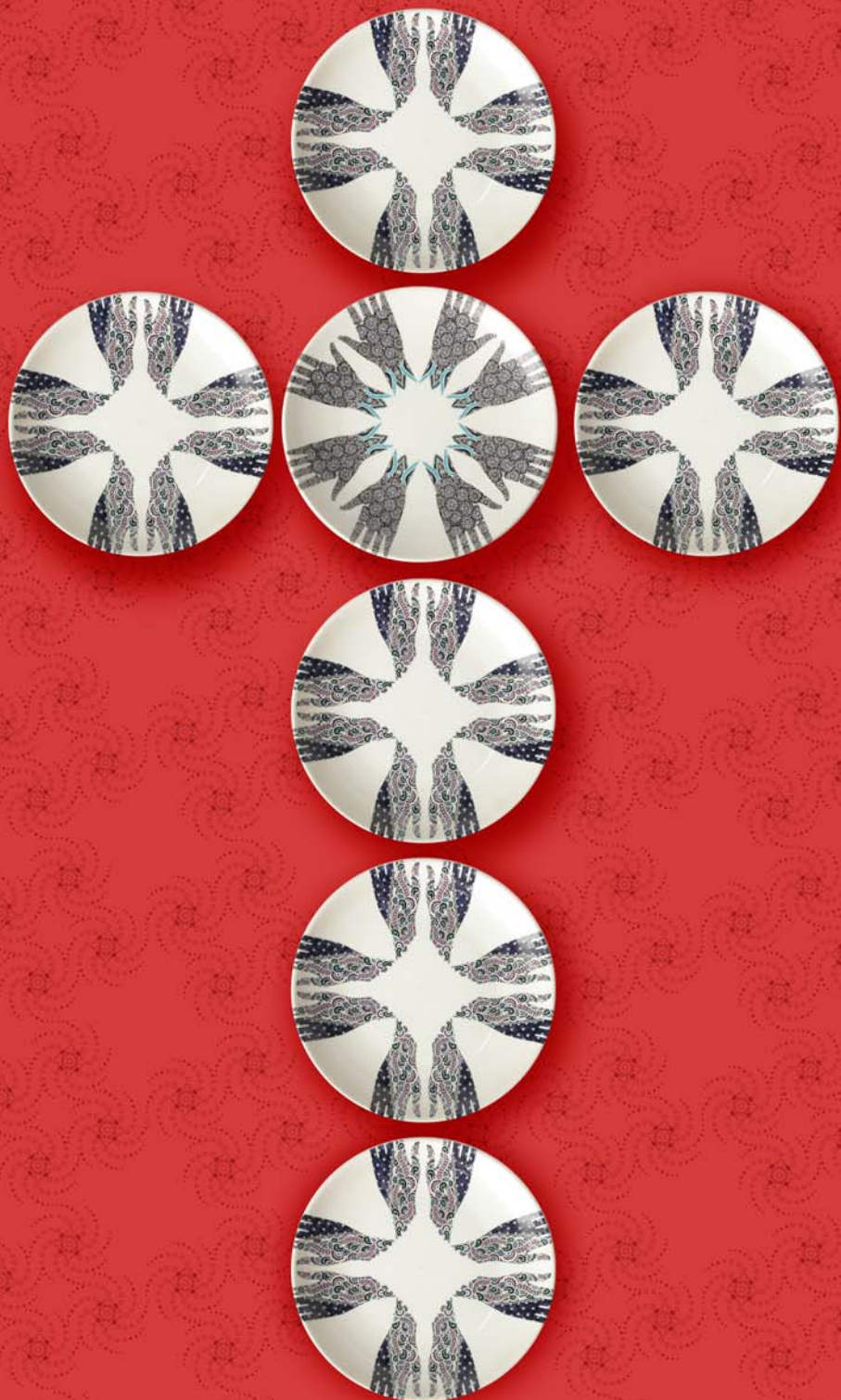


Figure 1: Takerng Pattanopas and Pim Sudhikam, Cross Culture, an installation in Galileo Chini and the colours of the Orient, Queens Gallery, Bangkok, November 2005.



Figure 2: Ancient and today's traditional Benjarong pottery



Figure 3: The Navarong process developed by the researchers.

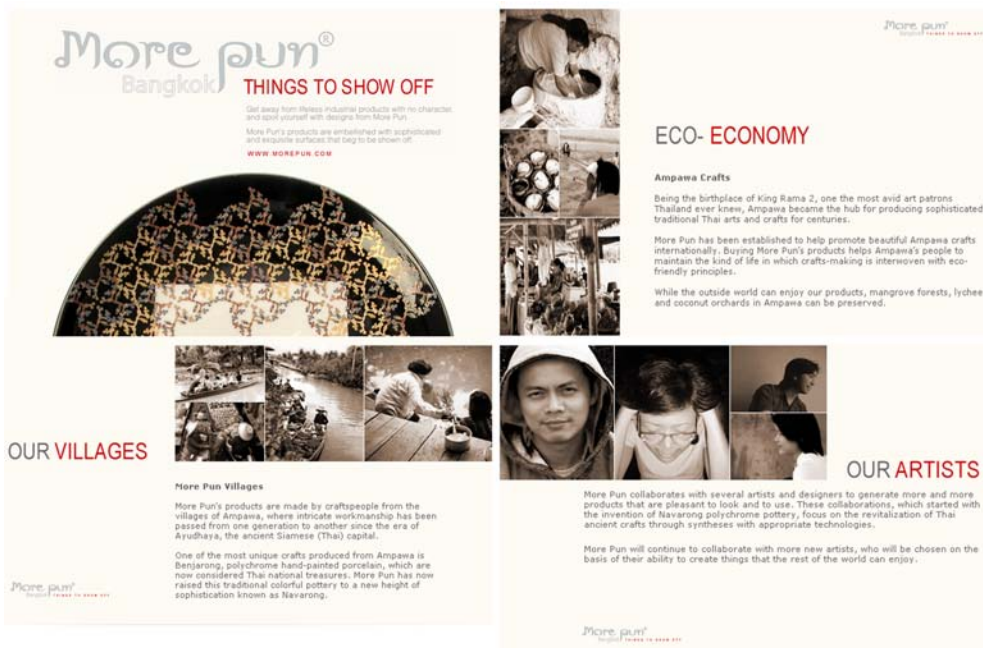


Figure 6: Examples of webpages of www.morepun.com



Figure 5: Lampu collection, designed specially for the Ampawa community.

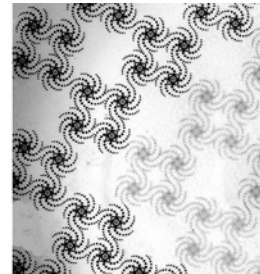
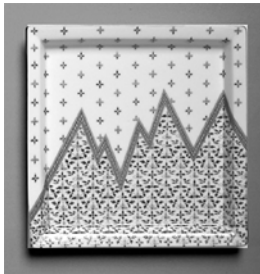


Figure 4: Examples of pattern structures that resulted in radical changes of Navarong motifs and patterns.

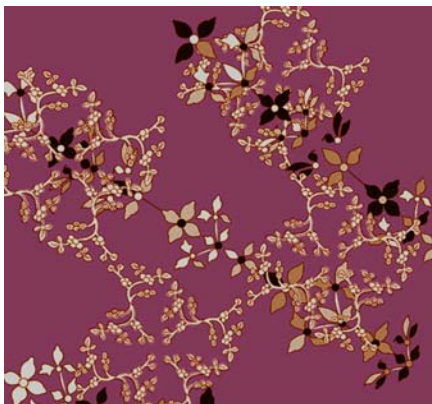


Figure 7: The award-winning Malila Lace collection

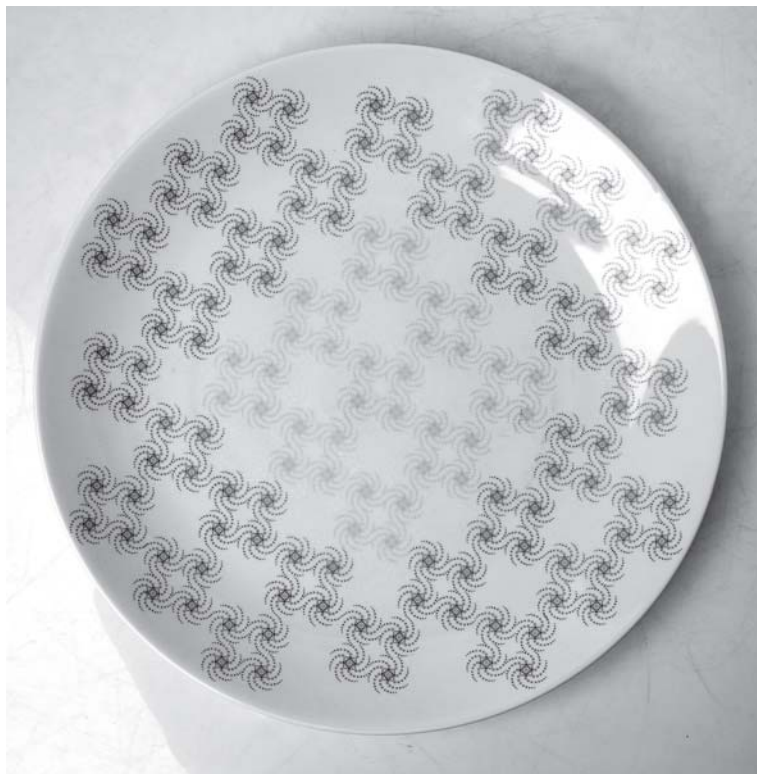


Figure 8: Chakra pattern inspired by the cosmic views from the Hubble Telescope.



Figure 9: A Navarong platter, Malila Chaquer collection, Navarong on-glaze technique on glazed porcelain, diameter 12 inches. The platter is now in permanent collections of the museum of the World Ceramic Exposition Foundation (WOCEF).

The researchers would like to express their gratitude to the Bureau of University Affairs and Dr. Prasit Tong-sawai, the Department of Industrial Design and the Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University, Johnson Matthey (Thailand), material scientists at Ferro Cerdec (Thailand), Assistant Professor Kaweeakrai and Apawadi Srihiran, Assistant Professor Ampon Wattanorangsarn, Dr. Siritan Jiamsirilerd, Surapon Lerddamrongchai, Sadanon Tayangkanon, Dr. Brian A. Curtin, and particularly the people of Amphawa for their support throughout this research.

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