

## **CHUDADHUJ PALACE, SICHANG ISLAND : CONSERVATION FOR COMMUNITY**

*Chulasai Bundit / Thailand*

Department of Architecture of Architecture Chulalongkorn University

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### **Introduction**

The trend of rehabilitation by the sea has been popular in Thailand with the influence of Western health ideas since the nineteenth century. Consequently, Sichang Island became a popular place for vacations and rehabilitation of the royal family. During the reign of King Rama V, Chudadhuj Rachasathan Palace was built to accommodate regular visits of the King and his family. Situated in a rich natural forest, the summer palace was built in the European architectural style. Subsequently, however, the threat of colonization made the island unsafe and less popular for royal visits. As a result, the summer palace was abandoned and eventually deteriorated.

Eighty years later, while building its marine science research centre, Chulalongkorn University rediscovered the remains of the palace. The discovery encouraged the Faculty of Architecture to conduct an in-depth architectural study and a full-scaled renovation for the palace. This paper describes the development, abandonment and renovation of Chudadhuj Rachasathan. A unique case study of heritage conservation in Thailand, the story of Chudadhuj Rachasathan reflects a renovation that involves not only architectural and landscape issues, but also solutions to environmental threats. Its successful outcome contributed to considerable improvements to the island including quality of life, economy, culture, science, and natural preservation.

### **A Large Island in Gulf of Thailand**

Sichang Island is one of the most important islands of Thailand. It is situated in the Gulf of Thailand, twelve kilometers offshore from the city of Sriracha, Chonburi Province. Its proximity to shipping lanes made it a convenient anchorage spot for dozens of barges which transship their cargoes to lighter boats for the trip up the Chao Phraya to Bangkok.

Sichang was well known as a busy port and one of the gateways to Siam for ships from China, Vietnam and the East Indies. The island once was the symbolic landmark

for arriving immigrants to Siam; nowadays it still attracts children of Chinese immigrants visiting shrines and their religious artifacts. In addition, the island is surrounded with beautiful environment, scenic landscape and topography. Since its location was not very far from Bangkok, Sichang became a popular place for health rehabilitation for both foreign and local people.

Sichang Island is also of historical importance to the Chakri Dynasty since it became a favorite destination for King Rama IV, who admired the island for its fresh and clean air. Believing that the island's air contributed to the long lives of the island people, the King made periodic trips to Sichang. Later the island became the place for convalescence of King Rama V, or Chulalongkorn, and the royal family.

### **Chudadhuj Rachasathan Palace**

In 1891, when one of his sons became ill, King Chulalongkorn took a long visit on the island to aid the prince's recovery. On the occasion the King ordered a temple, a bridge, a lighthouse, and many new roads built. Decorative trees and other landscape elements were added to enhance the natural landscape.

Still, it was not until 1892 that the royal summer residence took on the formal status of a palace. When Prince Chudadhuj Daradilok was born to Queen Sri Bajarindra on the island in July. The traditional ceremony was held a month later to bless the newborn prince. A royal pavilion was inaugurated, and the palace was named Chudadhuj Rachasathan after the name of the newborn prince. The royal gardens were expanded and redecorated with fountains, ponds, gazeboes, and sculptures, in the style of Italian water garden.

However, the construction was never completed. The rise of Western colonialism forced the royal family to stop visiting the island. The Franco-Siamese conflict over sovereignty of neighbouring Laos led to the aggression by French gunboats. The French also stationed their troops along the eastern coast of Siam. This notorious conflict led

to the dangerous threat of French battleships blockading the Chao Phraya River and the Gulf of Siam. In turn, Sichang Island was no longer considered safe for royal sojourns. In 1893 the palace was abandoned. King Chulalongkorn ordered the royal pavilion Munthat Rattanakot, to be dismantled and brought to Dusit Palace in Bangkok, where it was rebuilt as Vimanmek Mansion. Only the octagonal stone base where the original mansion once stood can still be seen.

After the abandonment of the palace, the responsibility for upkeep first belonged to the Navy. Later it was taken over by the Provincial Police. For eighty years, the palace ground was occupied by several branches of the government. Uses included a police station, a juvenile correction facility, a wartime logistical rice transportation centre by the Japanese, a public school, a municipal office, and a research laboratory for vaccine production. These heavy uses and the lack of regular upkeep resulted in the significant deterioration of the palace and the gardens. In addition, Sichang's importance as a vacation destination became diminished by the development of Hua Hin, a seaside resort on the Western coast of the Gulf.

### **Marine Science Research**

By the 1970s, the decline in both the quantity and quality of aquatic resources in the Gulf of Thailand raised the significant concern, and the need of in-depth marine science research became acute. Marine Science Research Station and Training Center (SMART) Program was developed by Chulalongkorn University at Sichang in 1979. Providing facilities for teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels in the Department of Marine Science, Faculty of Science, the Center also offers academic services for local communities.

In 1991, the SMART was upgraded to be the "Aquatic Resources Research Institute" (ARRI) to serve an increasing mission. Today ARRI has remained a well-equipped research station and training center to carry out a wide range of aquatic resources researches and studies. ARRI provides well-equipped facilities, including laboratories for aquatic researches and accommodations for university staff and students. Currently, the center has carried out many research projects in coastal oceanography, water quality monitoring and conservation of living aquatic resources such as coral reef ecology.

The construction of the Center began with a site survey. Surprisingly the architects uncovered the abandoned buildings and its gardens. In spite of its deteriorated conditions, the architectural and historical value of

Chudadhuja Rachasathan was apparent.

The discovery stimulated the interest to undertake a historical research, and a formal and proper architectural renovation. The full-scaled architectural study and survey for the palace were then undertaken by the faculties and students from the Faculty of architecture. The architectural documents were used as a reference for the future renovations. Subsequently, Chulalongkorn University cooperated with the Department of Fine Arts to renovate the palace and its gardens. The Aquatic Resources Research Institute thus also has a responsibility to conserve and maintain the historical importance of Sichang Island, a rare but fruitful combination of scientific research and cultural conservation.

### **The Island Community**

Fishing had been the traditional occupation for the natives of Sichang Island. But due to the decrease of the fish population and the increase of competition from large fishing boats, the number of fishermen has also decreased. Sichang is no longer the main port, as many new ports were built. Consequently the local economy declined and the income of the locals decreased substantially. The improvement of water transportation led to the increase in both the island people's commute to work on the mainland, and tourism activities on the island. More tourists come to visit the Chinese temple, and Chudadhuja Rachasathan.

However, one of the most dangerous environmental threats in the past was the stone quarry industry. During the 1970s Sichang Island was chosen to be a source of the gravel used in building the deep-water seaport for the Eastern Seaboard project. The quarry caused landslides, air and noise pollution. More importantly, the sensation from the quarry threatens the natural and architectural heritage of the island. This led to the controversial issue of closing down the quarry. Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Economics conducted an Environmental Impact Assessment study, and a strong evidence of these damages was identified. As a result, the stone quarry on the island was eventually brought to an end.

### **Conclusion**

On the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of King Rama V, the government agreed to convert some parts of the palace into a museum and a royal memorial of the monarch. Partially funded by H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the museum was completed and opened by the Princess on 12 January 2004.

Today, the palace and the museum are under the supervision of the cultural center of the university. Operating expenses come from the university's budget and the Ministry of Tourism. Sufficient financial resources enable the center to revive and maintain both the architecture and landscape in good condition.

The conservation of the Palace has not only brought back an invaluable piece of national heritage, but also raised the pride of Sichang natives and awareness of their heritage and environment. The island natives are much more concerned with environmental issues now, and cooperated with the university on the conversation.

The renovation of Chudadhuji Rachasathan Palace is the key factor initiating significant improvements on Sichang Island. New activities around the palace and the Aquatic Resource Research Institute brought many positive changes to the people and community of the island. The project is not limited to architectural preservation, but also to local community development, and improvements to the natural environment. Moreover, it has raised the awareness of people in environmental preservation and national heritage.

## **Abstract**

In the late nineteenth century, modern medical science led to the Thai elite's trend of seaside rehabilitation. The second largest isle in the Gulf of Thailand, Sichang Island was then transformed from a maritime entrepot to a sanatoria, and finally which in turn became Chudadhuji Rachasathan Palace, a palace by the sea for members of the royal family.

Numerous villas were built on the island's best beach, complete with bridges, leisurely walks, ponds, fountains, waterways, waterfalls, and other pleasant landscape elements.

However, political conflicts during the age of colonial threats, followed by modern development in railway and highway transportation, led to the decline of Sichang Island and the desertion of the royal palace. During the Second World War, the palace ground was assigned as logistic supplies entrepot. It was also subsequently used as juvenile detention center, school, district office, etc. Accordingly, the palace became greatly deteriorated through time.

In the 1980s, a research by the Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University, led to the rediscovery of the palace compound. It also initiated a string of conservation activities: an architectural survey by architectural students, a masterplan for marine research center within the palace grounds, the budget repairs restoration of palace buildings, and the addition of conference and seminar center for a university.

In addition, when the province of Chonburi began to develop its tourism industry, funds began to pour into the conservation of architecture and landscapes of Chudadhuji Rachasathan. Under the royal patronage of H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the conservation initiatives have been warmly received by the island residents, who directly benefit from tourism, which replaced fishing industry and stone mining that were environmentally destructive. The conservation of Chudadhuji Rachasathan has been designed in conjunction with community developments, so that a balance between conservation, development, tourism, and community will be sustained for the future.