

Book Review: Contemplative Dialogues

Contemplative Dialogues, Holodeck Architects and the Association of Siamese Architects under the Royal Patronage (ASA), Bangkok, 2017
196 pp.

Hearing in media in the past about awareness in Global climate changes, there were the El Nino in 1998, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, big carbon emission in China in 2006, and a following Movie “Inconvenience truth” by Al Gore in the same year. There are many more evidences, but these are highlights that raised people’s interest about new term, “Global warming” and “Climate changes”. The world is moving to the same direction of discussion about what we can respond to these changes, including in the architectural movement. I remember researches starting in 2008 until few years recently are talking a lot about the Sustainability. It has reached us, so that everybody was trying to share ideas of how architectural community can minimize impacts from this Climate changes. As well as In Thai designer’s community, individual, companies, and organizations are trying to incorporate the design for changes, creating many interesting ideas.

contemplative

dialogues

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This book is a rare item and based on cases in Thailand. It is the documentation of a workshop in 2017 organized by Association of Siamese Architects under the Royal Patronage (ASA), in collaborations with the Embassy of Austria in Thailand, and Faculty of Architecture of Thai universities, architects, and many cutting-edge designers. Participants are all architectural students from distinctive universities in Thailand. The reason I chose to review this book because it reflects many issues; learning local wisdom from many parts of Thailand, the reuse and transformation of local waste, and creative ideas in using sustainable materials. Main activities to this workshop were to find knowledge or wisdoms in using local materials in Thailand and doing mini-research on utilizing and applying those materials to new dimensions of usages. The purposes are to preserve the local knowledge about those prestigious materials, and to create new ideas addressing issues of sustainability to the current architectural applications. I found that this workshop is so wonderful, plus the outcomes are to share with the rest of architectural community to promote the sustainability and local wisdom.

I appreciate the book that is structured according to the various materials from multiple provinces in Thailand. The materials are laid by the alphabetical names of the researchers/ designers. Participants of this program came from architectural schools' students who decided to join the project and each would select one material to work on. Each material will have their own myth or belief by local people. The projects, made it interesting by researchers, are trying to solve that myth, and that became the dialogues as the name of the book came from. They are many dialogues that were trying to be contemplative, referring as the revisiting for thought. Materials are chosen such as, bamboo, charcoal, thatch, banana fiber, corn cob, etc. Those materials are representatives of local knowledge and wisdom, and then they are transformed and rationalized into contemporary uses. I enjoy reading about bamboo weaving mat from Kanchanaburi province, while bamboo is considered a sustainable material due to its renewability. A typical bamboo mat has turned into an interesting wall finishing materials with vernacular pattern. There are more about bamboo that researcher is thinking about the treatment to prolong the life of material. Researcher experimented on using salt and salt soap as agents to help treating bamboo culms from insects. The result turns that salt soap can do the job in some extent, and that was good enough. These are

examples of findings that make readers revisiting the vernacular materials and local wisdom to rethink of what they can be transformed to modern days. This becomes contemplative dialogues to present the significance of local wisdom that can help us with the sustainability that we should continue to preserve and explore.

Contemplative Dialogues reminds very much on many other books about experiment in materials in architecture. Exploring materials¹, a book by Alesina and Lupton, is the investigation of how everyday objects, such as egg cartons, plastic bags, can be put into new creative uses, while this book offers similar methods but the focused materials rather are tradition and vernacular. The intention may also lead to sustainability. Another book by Elizabeth and Adams, Alternation construction², provides the exploration of tradition materials such as adobe, earth, bamboo, straw, etc, as similar to Contemplative Dialogues indeed. However, this book addresses only typical applications to the construction as alternatives to modern materials. The information is great but there is nothing much in depth of the innovative techniques. A book by Schropfer, Material Design³, provides similar ideas of what Contemplative Dialogues is trying to do, such as Joints, Weaving, texturing techniques, however the book rather focuses on techniques of materials more than the materials itself, while Contemplative Dialogues covers the combination of materials and applicable techniques together.

Contemplative Dialogues is really good for architects who search for new ideas of using local materials in contributing to the sustainability of their designs. The choices of selection surely can respond to the regional materials where the project is located. They are easy to find, plus support the local business to sustain in their local community. This book is also good for graduate students or researchers in related field of built environment. Many findings in this book have answered one or few points that team in workshop trying to find, however there are many further aspects that researchers would like to continue or to profoundly investigate. That can expand even more body of knowledge to architectural community. This book is also good for international architectural community, so they can be interested in the exploration of local gems in Thailand, which eventually can bring more added values to villages that house the material, so that it can stimulate the local economy. The book is easy to read and follow, and well organized with lots of interesting images. It is hard to

find a book that can serve well in academics and made a great reading on coffee table.

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Reference

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