

BOOK REVIEW

Sangaroon 2



Aesthetics is undeniably at the heart of any artistic endeavor, architecture no exception. It is arguably what differentiates the art of architecture from mere buildings. For students of architectural aesthetics, however, the rarity of books on the subject is rather frustrating. A few obvious choices (from the western side) are Roger Scruton's *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, and perhaps the recently published *Aesthetics and the Environment* by Allen Carlson. Both, however, are works of philosophers. As such, one cannot help but wonder: is there any work on architectural aesthetics that explains it through the eyes of an architect?

Perhaps, *Sangaroon 2*¹ provides an answer. Originally published in 1980 as a memorium to the author at his funeral (along with *Sangaroon 1* which comprises a biography and eulogies from his family and friends), the book is a collection of essays and artistic works by the late Associate Professor Sangaroon Ratagasikorn of the Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University.

The essays in *Sangaroon 2* embrace a broad range of subject matter—from Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin in Wisconsin to the townscape of Beijing, from the Taj in Agra to Ryoanji in Kyoto, from Japanese Haikus to Ayne Rand's *the Fountain head*, from the mermaid and the lone poet at the Sunthornphu Monument to "the Monument behind the Flagpole," and from "Ugly sight"/ "Terrible Vista" in the Chiang Mai cityscape to the ever-changing natural sanctuary in the forest of Ithaca. One little thread that weaves these various things together, however, is the author's critical thoughts on aesthetics. Here, the piece that touches on the topic most evidently is perhaps "Ugly Sight"/ "Terrible Vista,"² the title of which is Sangaroon's term for the more cumbersome "visual pollution," the very urban symptom which he pointed out as a result of a clash between an overhasty urban development and age old traditions. As in most other essays in this collection, the author offers no vacant or dead-end

¹ The spelling of the book's title in English follows that of the author's name as he wrote it in one of his personal notebooks. It should be noted however, that one inconsistent spelling—Sang Aroon—was also found in the author's signature in a drawing of Tolstoy that he did a few years before.

² In Thai "*Tassana Ujaad*": see Lada Ratagasikorn, ed., *Sangaroon 2* (Bangkok: Amarin, 1980), 136-9.

criticism, but rather supports his arguments with principles while also offering possible solutions to the problem addressed. In this case, Sangaroon resorts to Buddhist philosophy and suggests coolness, cleanliness and calm³ as keys to a desirable urban environment. Although the piece was originally given as a lecture at a symposium on urban development and environmental problems in Chiang Mai more than 20 years ago, it remains relevant to each and every urban area of Thailand today.

Another interesting essay in terms of architectural aesthetics is "Aparihaniya Dharma in Architecture."⁴ In this essay, the author puts forth tranquility and simplicity as essential attributes that constitute poetic qualities in architecture. Based on the Buddhist Pitaka, a tranquil living environment is one that encourages peaceful and enlightened mind. Forest monasteries of the old days are but one example of such a tranquil environment. As the author points out, tranquility should be equally important in secular spaces; the world renowned Japanese house is celebrated for its tranquil aesthetic—*wabi*—long embedded in the people's life through Zen Buddhism. It is noteworthy, however, that this sense of tranquility is rather holistic, not merely acoustical, but manifest in the forms and lines that make up the architecture, and perceived through the eyes and other senses at the same time.

In the series of essays on the various places he visited—be they the Taliesins, the Taj Mahal, Beijing, or Kyoto—

Sangaroon never simply portrays the place in a descriptive manner. Rather, he always enriches his audiences' understanding with vivid historical and socio-cultural facets of the place, while also adding lively yet critical thoughts on what makes that place the way it is. Through his stories, one learns valuable lessons in sustainable and beautiful environments. Through his stories, one feels the author's love of nature and his passion for making the world a better place for humankind.

Throughout the essays, one begins to sense a few underlying themes to his aesthetic—simplicity and truthful/ honest tectonic expression, a sense of tranquility, and a poetic sympathy for nature and things Thai. M.R. Kukrit Pramoj once said, "Everything that is Thai, Ajarn Sangaroon would put his heart into it, and would try in every way to get to know, to study that thing ... incessantly, with every breath. And Ajarn Sangaroon himself is genuinely Thai—just as *miang kham*: so genuine it can never be found elsewhere but here in Thailand. Never. Nobody knows how it tastes but Thais."⁵ True, it is his passion for everything Thai that came out as a part of his character. Yet this passion is not without a critical nature. When Sangaroon talks about something Thai, he does not stop at the mere outward form, but goes beyond to capture its essence while also managing to reinterpret it in today's socio-cultural and technological context.

To me, Ajarn Sangaroon, or Kru Sang to many, is a legend—someone for whom a great understanding and appreciation of

³ Or *kwaam romyen*, *kwaam sa-aad*, and *kwaam sa-ngob* in Thai.

⁴ "Aparihaniya Dharma" is put forth in the Tripitaka as the seven conditions which prevent disintegration in the congregation of monks.

⁵ M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, "Wai Alai Ajarn Sangaroon [In Memorium]," *Sangaroon* 1 (Bangkok: Amarin, 1980), 10.

his works would hardly be complete without an insight into his character as a person, a student, a teacher, a friend, a husband, a father, an artist, an architect, and a citizen. "Sangaroon was a Renaissance Man," said one of his eulogies. One by one, the many facets of his character are unveiled. His ways were indeed an inspiration, yet they are also a very valuable lesson. One may say that he was born a genius; yet it is evident from the stories of his life that his artistic talents and intellectual mind had been constantly nurtured/deepened by his broad readings and exposure to various nourishment for the mind, be it music, poetry, travel or nature. This is not simply a book on architectural aesthetics and criticism; it is a lesson of character, one with intellect, passion and integrity, a valuable lesson for young architects today.

The book was honored by a study funded by the Thailand Research Fund as one of the 100 best Thai books in the past hundred years. Nevertheless, in my opinion, it would hardly do the book justice to set the limit only at Sangaroon 2, as I personally find that it is Sangaroon 1 which reveals an insight into the author's spirited character, the very insight which further helps illuminate the understanding of his works in Sangaroon 2.

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