

## สัญลักษณ์ช้างในงานสถาปัตยกรรมในกรุงเทพฯ ประเทศไทย: ข้อเสนอของประการสำหรับ นครโโยจิมินท์ในการเขื่อมโยงคุณค่าวัฒนธรรมดั้งเดิมกับสถาปัตยกรรมเมืองสมัยใหม่

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### บทคัดย่อ

ช้างมีความเกี่ยวข้องกับคนไทยมาช้านานทั้งในวัฒนธรรมที่จับต้องได้และจับต้องไม่ได้ ในงานสถาปัตยกรรมของเมืองอันเป็นเอกลักษณ์ของกรุงเทพฯ ประเทศไทยมีอาคารสาธารณะหลายแห่งที่ได้รับแรงบันดาลใจจากสัญลักษณ์ช้าง ในบทความขึ้นนี้ ผู้เขียนได้สำรวจสิ่งก่อสร้างในกรุงเทพฯ ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับสัญลักษณ์ช้างหลังจากนั้นจึงวิเคราะห์ความหมายของช้างในวัฒนธรรมไทย จากมุ่งมองของมนุษยวิทยาสัญลักษณ์และในส่วนสุดท้ายของบทความได้นำเสนอข้อเสนอของประการแก่นครโโยจิมินท์ในการสร้างและตกแต่งงานสถาปัตยกรรมสาธารณะให้เขื่อมโยงกับค่านิยมวัฒนธรรมดั้งเดิมของเมืองพัฒนาต่อไป

คำสำคัญ: สัญลักษณ์ช้าง, สถาปัตยกรรม, วัฒนธรรมดั้งเดิม, เมือง

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Elephant Symbol in Architectural Works in Bangkok, Thailand: Several Suggestions for Ho Chi Minh City to Associate Traditional Cultural Value with Modern Urban Architecture.

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**Abstract**

For a long time, elephants have been associated with Thai people in both tangible and intangible cultures. In the unique urban architecture of Bangkok, Thailand, there are many public buildings inspired by the elephant symbol. From the perspective of symbolic anthropology, the authors explore several outstanding architectures in Bangkok and analyze the meaning of elephants in Thai culture and introduce some public buildings in Bangkok, Thailand relating to the elephant symbol. Finally, the article gives some suggestions for Ho Chi Minh City to build and embellish the public architectural works associated with traditional cultural values.

**Keywords:** elephant symbol, architecture, traditional culture, urban

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## 1. Introduction

Symbols are the fundamental nucleus of culture. The symbol has a long history and constantly moves and develops based on human thought and creativity development. The same symbol will have different interpretations depending on the natural and social environment of that symbol. This creates a distinct identity, imprint, or sign that distinguishes one community from another, country to country, especially in globalization. Symbols are identified in two aspects of a community's, ethnic group's, or nation's material and spiritual life, so the symbol is universal, having over one or two meanings. An icon has many meanings depending on whether we place and analyze the symbol in a wide or narrow perspective. Scores are analyzed and evaluated in a narrow scope in association with fields, professional activities, culture, and local products. At the national level, the major symbols are the national flag, the national flower, the national anthem, the national mascot. On a global perspective, the pigeon with olive branch is not only a bird but also a symbol of peace, and freedom.

In Thailand, the important role of elephants has been considered for long time. In the past, elephants once were used as a vehicles. Also, they were used in timber transportation as well as in royal ceremonies. Until in early Rattanakosin era, the image of an elephant was used as a symbol of Thainess especially white elephants and Erawan elephant (Suthilak Amphanwong, 1991). The White elephant has been symbolized as the majestic animals living beside Thai king. Also, it used to be appeared on the national flag during the reign of King Rama II. In addition, Elephants were used as the national souvenir presenting the friendship between Siam and international countries namely Singapore and Batavia which received the figure of bronze elephants in the period of King Rama V (Pasha, 2018, 3 September 3), and Saigon during the reign of king Rama VII in 1930 (Quynh Trang, 2012). In the recent days, the elephant is the national symbol of Thailand as announced by the Thai Government on 26 October 2001 [Announcement of the Prime Minister's Office, 2001, 11 December, P.1] and it is applied to represent the identity of Thai as shown in the architectural designs in Bangkok, the capital and center of Thailand where foreign countries connect with.

Comparing with Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City is one of the important cities of Vietnam and considered as an international city connecting internationally. On the other hand, the architectures which symbolize the traditional cultural values of Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City are limited. Therefore, in this article, the authors survey the outstanding architectures in Bangkok and analyze the meaning of elephants in Thai culture from the perspective of symbolic anthropology and give some suggestions for Ho Chi Minh City to build and embellish the public architectural works associated with traditional cultural values.

## 2. The symbolic anthropology and meaning of elephants in Thai culture

Anthropology has long been considered a science with a long history and has become a solid fulcrum with a system of general theories of many sciences, serving as a foundation for studying and comparing comprehensive issues. It relates to man and human social life in the broadest possible sense. In the 60s and 70s, cultural anthropology appeared, in which Symbolic Anthropology is the broadest major by scope and research object. This is the domain of some researchers interested in interpreting symbols or symbolic structures to understand the background of a culture that differs from previous approaches. To

search for universal values within communities and cultures and decipher the manifestations of culture on the material and spiritual levels.

According to Edith Turner, "Symbolic anthropology is the science that studies the natural manifestations of symbols which are used in different cultures, rituals, performances, in everyday life. The symbol contains deeper meaning comparing to the writing. Each symbol has two components: the visible entity and its manifest meaning. Symbolic anthropology interprets symbols in social processes and cultural life" (Edith Turner, 1997, pp.25-29 as cited in Dinh Hong Hai, 2013).

According to Mary Des Chene, "Symbolic anthropology is the science that studies a meaning in human social life, the way we perceive and interpret what is going on around us, and the way we create, communicate with the world or a system of cultural meanings. Symbolic anthropology approaches a broad perspective on symbols, symbolism, things, and the meanings that people give, receive, and communicate" (Mary Des Chene, 1998, pp.1274-1278 as cited in Dinh Hong Hai, 2013).

Raymond Firth observes links and explains events through symbolism with social structures and social events under specific conditions. Going beyond a wide range of specific cases, anthropologists observe what people used symbols, what they say about them, under what circumstances the symbols will manifest, revealed and reacted to them. Anthropologists are equipped to interpret the meanings of symbols in the cultures they are studying and use interpretations as mediating vehicles for further understanding the evolutionary process in social life (Raymond Firth, 1973, p. 25 as cited in Dinh Hong Hai, 2014). Other prominent symbolic anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas, and David Schneider looked at culture from a practical and concrete perspective, seeing how symbols give meaning and form up meanings in social action namely communication, rituals, festivals, as well as all kinds of other everyday activities. Symbolic anthropologists believe that symbols should not be viewed abstractly in terms of the meaning of human action but in constructing and using meaning in specific action.

Through the overview of symbolic anthropology and research approaches to socio-cultural anthropology in the context of Thai culture, we find that elephants are the symbol of Thailand, which the government officially recognizes. We are familiar with the image of elephants spraying water during Songkran Festival in Thailand, an elephant-themed outfit as the national costume in Miss Universe 2010 and 2018 and various national arms. Reverence to the elephant mascot is a moral part of the culture and way of life of the Thai people that is still preserved and expressed in various forms such as religion, royal protection, existing in architectural works, art, tourism, nature reserves. For Thai people, elephants symbolize religion, nation, and royalty and are also considered as a symbol of strength, loyalty, and longevity (William Warren & Ping Amranand, 1998). This sacred animal has become the national mascot of Thailand, continuing through the historical periods of the Kingdom of Thailand on the level of tangible and intangible culture.

Elephant symbol, as the national mascot, has been appeared publicly in form of the architecture of public buildings both in Bangkok and national wide. In this article, we would like to introduce some typical architectural works with elephant symbol in Bangkok.

Since the previous time, the elephant has been used to make sculptures and assembled in various parts of buildings in palaces and temples such as shaped bases, walls, booths namely some outstanding architectures in the early Rattanakosin period and popular tourist destinations today such as Wat Arun

Ratchawararam (aka The Temple of Dawn) and The Grand Palace. Wat Arun Ratchawararam has bronze elephant statues placed around the ordination hall. There are 8 bronze elephant figures with 1-meter height, placed on the pedestal at the entrance and exit of the ordination hall. It was built during the reign of King Rama III in 1846. Regarding the Grand Palace, in front of the Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall consisting of four bronze elephant statues, King Rama V (Chulalongkorn) to be cast at the time of the construction of the Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall in 1876 (Pasha, 2018) (See Figure 1). At the present time, the elephants are still being used to make sculptures such as the white elephants near the Royal Palace of Thailand, located in the center of the roundabout at Sanam Luang intersection near the Grand Palace. Three head white elephant statue was built on December 5, 2011, on the 84<sup>th</sup> birthday of the King Rama IX. (See Figure 2)



Figure 1: Bronze elephant at Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall, the Grand Palace

Source: Pasha, 2018



Figure 2: Three head pink elephants statue in Bangkok

Source: Uwe Aranas, 2017

Elephants are also used in the construction and design of buildings in contemporary architecture, namely:

**(1) Erawan Museum:** located in Samut Prakan province, south of Bangkok Thailand. According to the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (MTS), this is a work of art with a unique and distinctive architecture, which preserves the country's cultural values and its people. To come up with the idea of the central architecture for the museum, architect Khun Lek Viriyapant thought much and finally chose the image of the elephant god Airavata - a god of Hindu mythology to make the shape for the museum. The museum's appearance is not only the pride of Thailand but also makes a strong impression on international visitors when coming here by the statue of a three-headed elephant god standing on a giant pedestal. This statue is 29m high, 39m long, and weighs 250 tons, cast in pure copper; it took artisans ten years to perfect this statue. The entire Erawan Museum is located inside and below the three-headed elephant statue comprising three floors, with the first two floors built with a 15m high column to form a solid pedestal for the three-headed elephant statue. It is considered the largest three-headed elephant floating sculpture in the world (Dailynews, 2014, 21 April). The last floor is inside the elephant belly. Each floor has the characteristic features of different Thai myths and universes. The lowest floor represents the afterlife in Hindu mythology. The second floor represents the human world, and the highest floor is in the abdomen of the elephant statue representing the heaven of

Tavatimsa - this is the abode of Tavatimsa. Gods, including the elephant god Airavata (Hoang Viet Travel, 2019) (See Figure 3).



Figure 3: Erawan Museum

Source: Hoang Viet Travel, 2019

**(2) Elephant Building (Chang Building):** also known as Chang building, is located in Chatuchak district, Bangkok, Thailand. The building was built in 1997 in the shape of a giant elephant. This building was ranked 4th in "Top 25 most beautiful iconic skyscrapers" voted by CNN in 2011 (CNN, 2013, 20 August). This is the brainchild of engineer and real estate developer Arun Chaisaree and architect Ong-ard Satrabhandhu. Khun Arun Chaisaree is well-versed in wide range of elephants' figures. He previously opened his museum to display his collection of more than 2,000 elephant-shaped art objects. After its inauguration, this elephant-shaped building became known as a new national architectural symbol in Bangkok, attracting attention from residents and visitors. This building is a large urban complex with a shopping center, commercial offices, and high-class apartments. Elephant Building comprises three blocks (A, B, and C) connected at the top by a horizontal row of houses. The building comprises 32 floors, reaching a total height of 335 feet (102,108m), approximately 560 feet (170,688) long. m and 130 feet (39,624m) wide (See Figure 4). Two of the blocks are similar the legs of the elephant and the third block represents the trunk. A few other details that complement the overall look like ivory on either side of the trunk are the offices of the building management company; eyes are pairs of circular windows; The ears are multi-story balconies, and the tail stretches down the side of the building consisting of 20 floors with rooms with smoky glass. According to the Bangkok Post and Architectural Digest, the Elephant Building has become "the most controversial building in Thailand" (Hoag Levins, 2012). Chang building is now the largest elephant building in the world, replacing the former 1<sup>st</sup> rank - The Lucy Elephant Building in New Jersey (USA) – which had reserved its rank for 116 years (Hoag Levins, 2012).



Figure 4: Elephant Building in Bangkok, Thailand,

Source: Dat Viet Newspaper, 2017

The appearance of elephants in public buildings (not to mention worship buildings) shows the massive influence of elephants in the cultural and spiritual life of the country and people of Thailand. The elephant image becomes a unique architectural feature, sincerely expressing the Thai people's thoughts, spirit, and aspirations.

### 3. Some suggestions for HCMC to associate traditional cultural values with modern architecture in the city

Through symbols, we can understand deeper about an organization, a community, or a country. The symbol of a country will help us recognize and explain how that community or country behaves with the natural and social environment and understand the nation's soul. In Ho Chi Minh City, there are also many symbols identifying the land for over 300 years; relatively popular icons are Ben Thanh Market, Notre Dame Cathedral, Reunification Palace, Central Post Office, City Theatre. The recent modern architecture includes Financial Tower or Bitexco Building (2010) and Landmark 81 (2018). Although they are the new architectures with a modern appearance, a majestic high-rise in the heart of the urban center of Ho Chi Minh City, the design ideas of these two buildings over the past decade have been based on traditional Vietnamese cultural symbols.

Bitexco Financial Tower - started construction in May 2004, designed by American architect Zapata and inaugurated on October 31, 2010, with many items and spaces such as office area, commercial area shopping, food. In addition, there is an observatory on the 49th floor for visitors with a 360-degree view of the entire city of Ho Chi Minh City and the Saigon River. This is also the first project in Vietnam for the construction of a helipad on the 52<sup>nd</sup> floor. The image of a lotus bud inspired the design concept of Bitexco reaching up to the sky, representing the aspiration to reach out. Rise of the nation, representing a dynamic Vietnam but still preserving its identity. Bitexco Financial Tower, invested by Bitexco Group, was once the tallest tower in Ho Chi Minh City until Landmark 81 was inaugurated and "usurped the throne".

Landmark 81 Vinhomes Central Park is currently the tallest building of Vietnam. It is designed and constructed by Vingroup in 2015 and officially open in 2018. The building is inspired by the meaning of bamboo bundles which is strength, unity, and aspiration in the perception of Vietnamese people. There are the presentations of international flags and Vietnam flag on the top of Landmark 81 tower. The recent occasion on August 1, 2021 aims to celebrate 50 years of diplomatic relationship between Vietnam and Switzerland. The flags of Vietnam and Switzerland were shown outside the tower presenting the belief in the growing diplomatic cooperation between the two countries (Ngoc Tuyet, 2021).

Through two new modern architectural icons of Ho Chi Minh City in a decade from 2010 to now, real estate investors have also consciously contributed to creating a new identity for the city of Ho Chi Minh City which based on traditional cultural symbols of the nation. The image of lotus and bamboo has become a cultural constant, meaningful in the material and spiritual, cultural life of Vietnamese people.

However, when compared with public architecture in Bangkok, Thailand, we found that in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, there seem to be very few public architecture and building which base its architecture on Vietnamese national symbol namely; Lac bird, Long (Dragon), Lân (Qilin), Quy (Turtle), and Phụng (Phoenix). Currently, only Turtle Lake <sup>1</sup> (officially called “International Square” in English or “Công trường Quốc tế” in Vietnamese) is an artificial fountain between the intersection of three streets Vo Van Tan, Pham Ngoc Thach, and Tran Cao Van, in District 3, forming an intersection of the same level as a roundabout. The current location of Turtle Lake is used to be the Kham Khuyet gate of Bat Quai citadel (or Quy citadel) during 1790. King Minh Mang later changed its name to Vong Khuyet gate (Kien Cuong, 2021). Over 56 years of construction, from 1965 to 1967, the Turtle Lake is considered as a cultural-historical work which witness many national historical events. It was designed in the style of octagonal architecture, divided by umbrellas on a lake. Turtle Lake is considered a park, a favorite stop for people to rest and roam, especially the young peoples and tourists come to Saigon - Ho Chi Minh City (Tu Quy, 2015). Since 1976, neither image nor stele representing turtle appear in the Lake area (Thuy Tien, n.d.). The existing fountain does not bear the image of a turtle as the folk name of this lake. It is known that at the end of 2020, the People's Committee of District 3 has submitted a document to the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City to approve the investment policy, renovating Lake Con Turtles into a high-quality walking city with 100% of social capital with a budget of 50 billion VND. The project will renovate 107 new plant pots, build 150 square meters of inter-tank green area and the green area next to the fence wall, upgrade and replace the existing 64 utility hole cover mold, use maintenance hole cover and cast-iron water intake to increase aesthetics. Obviously, the plan to renovate and upgrade the sidewalk of Con Rua Lake of the People's Committee of District 3, which is expected to start in July and be completed by the end of December 2021, should be more ideas about the iconic fountain design. Linh Quy statue - renewing the historical period of the land as the name and the original idea is contributing to the creation of public architecture bearing the mark and symbol of the national culture and

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<sup>1</sup> According to many researchers, in Vietnamese culture, turtles refer to longevity. Therefore, in folklore, there is a common saying: "Live as long as an old turtle." Prof. Ngo Duc Thinh commented: "In Vietnamese temples and pagodas, we often encounter the image of turtles wearing cranes. This is a pair of symbols for yin-yang harmonization and stability. Besides, the figure of a turtle wearing a stone stele like the Doctor's stele in the Temple of Literature - Quoc Tu Giam, also implies that the doctors will be remembered forever. (V.V. Tuan, 2021)

attracting domestic and foreign tourists for walking, sightseeing, shopping in the new public space of the city. Besides the Turtle Lake which representing the use of national mascot in public area, Vietnam applied golden buffalo as the mascot of SEA Games 2003 and used Saola as the mascot of SEA Games 2021.

Regarding buffalo, it meaningfully associates with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the wet rice civilization of Vietnamese people and Southeast Asian people as Nguyen Luu said "...*The buffalo not only shows strength, speed, and sportsmanship but also shows wisdom and gentleness in character*" (Nguyen Luu, 2020 as cited in Dang Huynh, 2020). The image of the Buffalo has been shown in all spiritual areas of Vietnamese people for thousands of years. With the agricultural economy of wet rice, Buffalo is considered by farmers as a close friend. In the perception of Vietnamese people, buffalo is gentle and hard-working so, it is recognized as the symbol of gentleness, patience, and good health. The Vietnamese have a saying: "The buffalo is the head of the business" to show its essential role in agricultural life. In agricultural beliefs, the image of buffalo is also existed in many fields. According to cultural researchers, the motif of buffalo horn is also a symbol of the crescent moon in Vietnamese culture related to agricultural beliefs. Buffalo skin is used to cover the face of the drum; hence, when praying for rain, people beat the drum to imitate thunder (HN, 2021). The image of the Buffalo is associated with agricultural civilization and culture, deeply ingrained in the minds of Vietnamese people. However, in big cities like Ho Chi Minh City, with a cultural influence of Western civilization (France, America), there are almost no traditional cultural values architectural works bearing the image of Buffalo - which is close to farmers in wet-rice agricultural culture as described above. To embrace the national characteristic symbol of Vietnam such as Lac bird and Buffalo into the public architectural works such as stadiums, commercial buildings and financial centers, Ho Chi Minh City could be a smart, civilized, modern, and affectionate city by enhancing the traditional cultural aspect into its attractive tourists' attractions.

## 5. Conclusion

Culture and architecture have an organic relationship toward each other. Culture provides valuable "materials" for "manufactured" architecture. In the other way, the architectural design preserves and promotes cultural values, bringing the culture of the community and the country beyond the limits of space and time. Also, the architectural design improves the life quality of local people as the owners of culture and promotes the local culture to Vietnamese and international tourists.

To shorten the economic development gap with other ASEAN member countries, Vietnam could apply the lesson learn from other ASEAN countries regarding the application of cultural in preserving and promoting cultural values. Vietnam can be acknowledged by understanding the case study of Thailand which share some national identities with Vietnam including the natural geographical conditions, the agricultural-based society, the national status of front-row rice exporter, and the tourist destination country. As a cultural tourism destination, Thailand applies the national symbols, elephant in this case, with its meaningful urban area. This mean is applicable to preserve traditional cultural values and effective in increasing attractions from the foreigners to visit Thailand. Moreover, this strategy can spread national cultural values in global level. Through the comparative study of some public architectural symbols in Ho Chi Minh City with the elephant

symbol in public architecture in Bangkok - Thailand, we suggest Ho Chi Minh City could apply the concept of symbolism by promoting its traditional cultural identity through the future modernized public architectures. In our opinion, the crucial problem of Ho Chi Minh City is not lacking funds and designs, but lacking idea of development. There should be the integration between local culture and economic development for the raise of economy which contribute to the recovery of the tourism industry after the Covid 19 pandemic.

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