

SPIRIT HOUSES

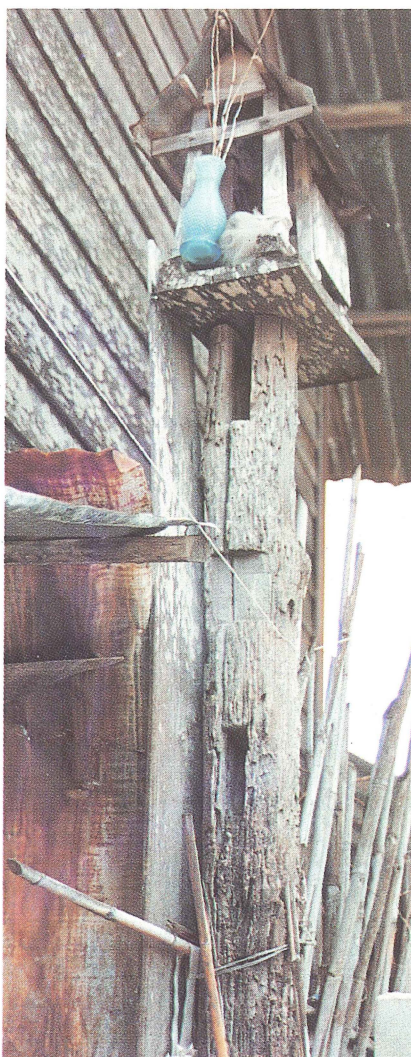
Stephanie Olen describes the architecture in miniature that furnishes factories, apartments and offices throughout Thailand.

In Thailand and other parts of the world, where a belief in animism accompanies other forms of religion and spirituality, the land is used and buildings are constructed with consideration of the spirit world. The spirit houses depicted in this article are symbolic of a deep connection with and respect for man's inter-dependent relationship with nature. Animistic doctrine, the root of spirit reverence, is based upon the god or goddesshood of nature – 'Mother Earth' in the western vernacular. As is evident in the increasing global environmental crisis, man cannot risk appropriating from nature without giving something back. Whether it is symbolized and ritualized through spirit houses or environmental policy, the relationship is as, if not more, critical today than ever before.

In metropolitan Bangkok, smog and exhaust fumes compete with the pervasive aroma of incense and flowers given as offerings to the many spirit houses. From executives seeking success in commercial negotiations to visitors fascinated by the aesthetic sensuality of the spirit houses, individuals stop and reverently bow in front of these structures before presenting their offerings to the spirits of nature. Nearly every home, apartment complex, office complex, store and factory boasts at least one spirit house.

It is said that during the construction of the Erawan Hotel in Bangkok the work was plagued by a series of inexplicable accidents and delays. Spirit doctors were called in and determined that by cutting down the trees on the land they had angered the spirits by depriving them of a home. A spirit house was constructed and became as famous as the Statue of Fatima and the grotto at Lourdes for granting wishes.¹

In simpler times and places, the harmony of the home and family, the fruition of the crops cultivated on the land, and the appreciation of resources extracted from the land were symbolically noted on a daily basis through the various rituals and offerings associated with the spirit houses. Today in urban areas the rituals are often performed only on special



1. This simple spirit house has weathered many seasons of the tropical climate in Hua Hin, Thailand. When it is to be replaced, the spirit will be informed so that he may vacate the premises temporarily until a new spirit house can be erected. The old structure will be placed on the grounds of a Buddhist wat where whatever powers remain will be neutralized.

occasions. Nevertheless, there remains sufficient belief in the power of the animistic spirit world to cause some individuals to forego having a spirit house for fear that they will be too busy to attend to it properly, thereby inviting misfortune.

Traditionally there are two major schools of thought regarding the origins of the spirits who reside in the spirit houses. One school of thought is based upon the belief that spirits live 'in' the land and when ground is broken for construction or cultivation of crops the spirits escape and must be appeased by being given a 'better' house in which to live. The other school of thought is that the spirits are the owners and inhabitants of the land and simply must be given a residence more attractive than the one being constructed in order to be appeased and not interfere with the prosperity and well-being of the land-holders. In both cases it is believed that, properly cared for, the spirits will ensure the safety and abundance of the land, the construction and cultivation on the land, and the individuals who reside or visit the location. Furthermore, they can be called upon to assist, usually on a 'contractual' basis, in fulfilling goals and solving problems. The penalty, however, for the individual who gains the support of the spirits and does not fulfil the contract, can be misery, illness, and any variety of misfortune.

There is, however, some debate regarding the types of spirits that reside in the spirit houses. According to Kaufman in his ethnography of a rural Thai village, it is either *thewada* (angels) or *phii* (spirits) that reside in the spirit house, though none of his Thai informants could explain the precise distinction between the two. *Thewada* are believed to be guardian angels that represent four categories of nature: earth, fire, water, and vegetation. *Cawthi* are thought to be a generally benevolent but easily offended kind of spirit of the *phii* type.²

Textor, in his *Ethnography of the Supernatural in a Thai Village*, elaborates upon the relationship among these

1. Beek, Steven Van, *Bangkok*, APA Publications, 1988, p.104.

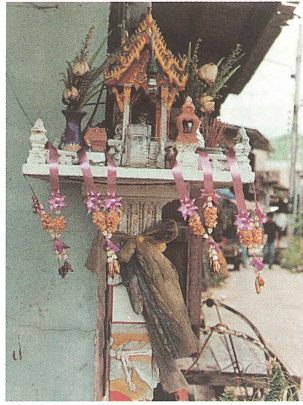
2. Kaufman, Howard Keva, *Bangkok: A Community Study in Thailand*, Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1976.



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2. The architectural style of this concrete spirit house is one of the most common in Thailand today. It is the least ornate of the concrete variety, yet it is desirable to those who can afford it because it is significantly more durable than wood in the tropical weather. (Hua Hin, Thailand)

3. The remains of incense, the fresh orchids, the ribbon, and especially the two servant figurines placed inside the spirit house (to help Phra Phuum Caw Thii carry messages to Lord Phaali) indicate the active involvement of the household with the spirit world. (Hua Hin, Thailand)

4. This Hua Hin spirit house has entered the age of technology — a permanent electric light bulb assists the offering of candles to light the way of offerings and requests to Phra Phuum Caw Thii. Architecturally this structure is representative of the middle range ornate style of mass-produced concrete spirit houses.

5. This ethnic Chinese spirit house, or spirit shrine, depicts the Chinese animistic cosmology of earth spirits and celestial spirits. It is located on a pillar in front of a small shop in Singapore.

6. The co-existence of indigenous and 'global' style is evidenced most profoundly in the respective architectural designs that house the archaic and the technological spirits. The spirit house, located on the grounds of a spirit house shop, is of the medium size variety and the statue within has Brahminical attributes reflecting an association with Lord Phaali.



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7. Located in the main market in Hua Hin, Thailand, this spirit house serves all who visit or work in the marketplace. Offerings of food, flowers, dancing girls to entertain the spirit, animals for his transport and livelihood, incense and candles surround the shrine.

8. The spirit house of Bangkok is an impressive complex with many buildings and areas for worship. It combines Buddhist and animistic worship. There are areas for fortune-telling; performances of morality plays may be purchased as offerings; sparrows, turtles, and other small caged animals may be purchased and set free as tribute to the spirits, and the usual flower garlands, incense and gold foil, are on sale within the compound.

9, 10, 11. These spirit houses are located on the corporate office grounds of Siam Cement, the largest company in Thailand. They each have pedestals in front for offerings. As 'corporate spirit houses' at least two out of three like coffee, as evidenced by the coffee cups. Food and other perishable goods are offered on a regular basis. Of particular note is the gold foil placed on the eaves of two of the spirit houses in appreciation for and offering of wealth.

12. Mass-produced concrete spirit houses are sold in shops like this all over Thailand. The spirit houses depicted are of the more ornate and expensive variety and are stylistically modelled on the basis of traditional Buddhist wats. (Bangkok)



various spirits and angels. Lord Phaali is a sort of meta-spirit who, among other functions is specifically related to the home and has power over other spirits. He is the spirit supplicated during the initial breaking of the ground and is housed in a temporary altar even before the spirit house is constructed. He is again honoured when the spirit house for the *Phra of the Area* and Lord of the Place (*Saan Phra Phuum Caw Thii*) is erected. Lord Phaali emanates from Brahmanistic tradition. The linguistic etymology indicates that the name *phra phuum* is derived from both Pali and Sanskrit – *phuum* or *bhumi* meaning earth or place, while *Caw* (lord) and *thii* (place) are indigenous (Thai) terms. Still he concurs with Kaufman that villagers perceive the two as being different. To be specific there are nine spirits of the *phra phuum* type – only one of which is said to inhabit the spirit house, The *Phra of the Area* and Lord of the Place, *Phra Phuum Caw Thii*.³

The ethnic Chinese influence in South-

east Asia is also represented in a particular spirit shrine style. Instead of an elevated spirit house constructed upon a vertical post, there are often two separate shrines – one suspended from the ceiling or attached at eye-level to a wall or column, the other resting on the ground. This is indicative of the cosmology of the Chinese spirits that differentiates spirits of the earth from celestial spirits.

There are also distinctions in size of spirit house and type of spirit. For instance, in addition to the smaller, more personal type of spirit houses, there are larger shrines (on the average five cubic feet in area) that house spirit lords called *caaw*. These are patronized equally by the Thai and ethnic Chinese though they are indigenously Thai in origin. These spirit lords are similar to the *Phra of the Area* and Lord of the Place, but differ in their broader scope of influence, derivation from the death of some natural person, ability to possess people, and ability to be of either gender (*Phra Phuum Caw Thii* is always male in Thailand).

The most impressive of all spirit houses is that housing the Lord Father Pillar of the City *Caw Phau Lag Myang*. This spirit has jurisdiction over the entire

geographical area of the city and his residence is more akin to a compound. The Spirit House of Bangkok, for instance, covers approximately one entire city block and contains several buildings and areas for ritual activity as well as Buddhist merit-making (indicative of the harmonious co-existence of the two belief systems).

Today, spirit houses prevail. As with many traditions across the world, the ritual is often continued without conscious connection to its true beginnings and meanings. One of the lessons that can be learned from this ancient practice is that it is out of man's individual relationship with nature that our collective relationship is elaborated and enacted. Perhaps we need more spirit houses to remind us of the god/goddesshood of our planet.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

STEPHANIE OLEN IS A GRADUATE IN FINE ARTS. SHE IS RESEARCHING INCENTIVES FOR COMPLIANCE WITH THE MONTREAL PROTOCOL FOR CFC REDUCTION AND TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER FOR THE WORLD BANK AND IS A PHD STUDENT IN ANTHROPOLOGY. 

3. Textor, Robert B., *Roster of the Gods: An Ethnography of the Supernatural in a Thai Village*, Human Relations Area Files, 1973.