

The Imaginary Path: Design Research in Mae Hong Son, Thailand

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DESIGN AS RESEARCH

This issue of design as research may appear as pointlessly academic. Most research has quantitative value, and tangible results. It deals with facts—their discovery and their significance. Architecture does not. It operates in the social and perceptual world of associations and qualities. Its ambitions may be plausible and accepted, but strictly speaking they are not factual. It is not a fact that a bank should use the Corinthian order, just as it is not absolutely necessary to consciously reflect one's time in history. Architecture addresses significant existential issues without being overly concerned with establishing any verifiable foundations for its actions.

Yet the ability for design to participate in human knowledge remains provocative, especially in relation to other forms of urban research. It would also seem rash to eliminate architecture's potential for revelation absolutely. Investigating the capacity of design as a research tool can thus be a means for larger speculations on the relationship between architecture and knowledge, or even truth itself.

This identifies two principle concerns. The arts manifest a general and fundamental participation in the realm of human perception. As Aristotle explained in *The Poetics*, poetry is more valuable and worthy of attention than history because it deals with universal truth whereas history treats only of particular facts.² The challenge for the arts is to maintain contact with this arena, and to find ways of ensuring a credible participation within it. The second issue is slightly different. Research, as distinct from a general search for truth, is a more specialised activity. It is based on the necessity of making very tangible and verifiable observations on defined subjects. Research should be repeatable and freely communicated. Further, it must prove its truth value rather than implying it by analogy or association alone. Can architecture meet this more specific criteria?

The following reflects on these issues through a theoretical design proposal for Mae Hong Son, a small town in northern Thailand.

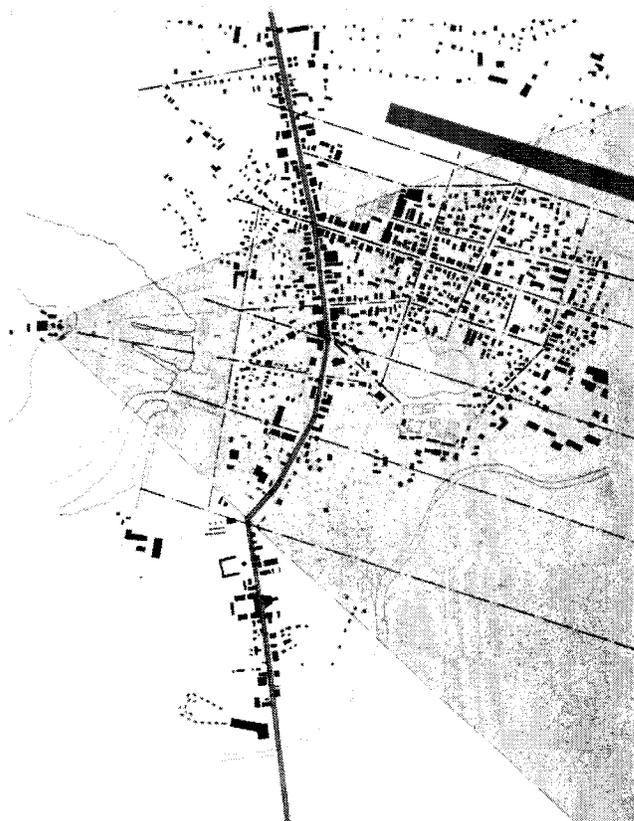


Fig.1. Mae Hong Son: Plan and Analysis

DESIGN AS REQUIREMENT

Design is normally undertaken after some form of preliminary research has been completed. It uses the results of research rather than creating such knowledge itself. Such design may then become the subjects of further research activity, though remaining mute in the process. Yet hypothetically design may be a research activity in itself. This may be especially necessary in cases where 'normal' research tools do not suffice to explain the spirit (and reality) of a place.

Mae Hong Son, for example, is modest in scale. It has a murky and undocumented past, leaving a textual absence which challenges or even disqualifies many research practices. Historical distance from the town's creators makes knowledge of their intentions partial at best. More significantly, a researcher may be separated from inherited urban ideals by the barriers of language and culture. This situation makes the implicit values assumed by a local or historical populace difficult to appreciate. Different expectations of the city and the value of civic form may exist without clear articulation. These challenges render customary research tools insufficient, thereby potentially eliminating the possibility of a coherent investigation. Yet Mae Hong Son is architecturally rich, with interesting building/ landscape relationships, and an appealing enigmatic quality. In spite of the difficulties mentioned above it is worthy of critical attention, and indeed provides interesting provocations for architectural reflection. Perhaps design, properly applied, can provide insights into this urban situation in ways that traditional analysis can not.

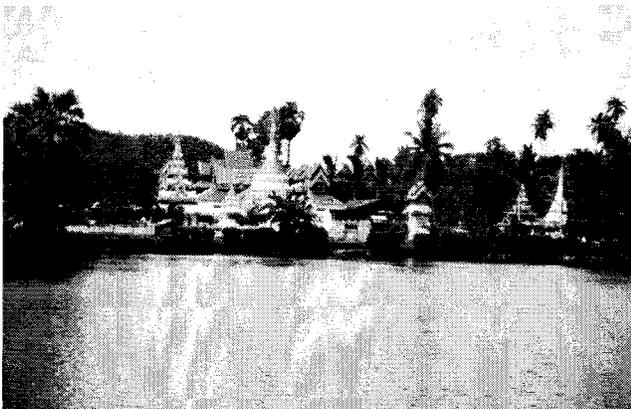


Fig. 2. Wat Chong Klang

DESIGN: THEMES AND STRATEGIES

The primary question explored here is whether design can tangibly excavate qualities specific to a place. In this case the design is challenged to evoke or participate in a valued urban quality—one which may be difficult to establish precisely in any other way. The following outlines a framework for approaching design in this context. Though other architectural concerns will necessarily exist, this strategic approach clarifies the active means of the research.

Acting Local: Imitating Means

Acting within a context can help one understand that context. One learns by carrying out similar tasks in similar conditions. Indeed research focus is established through a mimesis of action, where one studies local sensibilities by following its examples and respecting its conditions.

The issues of landscape and climate are the most clearly

significant in this respect. The torrential rains of the Thai forest demand different architectural responses than urban North America. The conditions of a landscape will always bring tangible specificity to building. Working with local materials and practices equally inflects one's design sensibilities, and provides insights into the reasoning of an existing architecture. Programme also carries significant mimetic value. By immersing oneself in an appropriate programmatic response to a site a designer engages with a society and its values in a very direct way. Different places have differing needs and expectations, and participating with these establishes a strong cultural focus for one's architectural reflections.

In each case a designer faces similar conditions as their predecessors. To engage with the same landscape, climate, and society places one in a related mental position, in a more tangible way than analysis alone is able to do.³ Urban conditions change, but one is best able to recognise this through interacting with the enduring qualities of a context itself.

Translation: Imitating Ideals

All research is a form of translation, extrapolating an existing thing to a clearer mode of expression. This activity, understood historically, translates human life to words, thereby creating sequences of clarity and order. Events become part of a discursive narrative. Numbers are also translations, bringing the fluidity of the world to a digital precision. Indeed number posits a clarity so powerful that it may even replace its original subject as a focus of attention, in spite of the fact that such clarity is seldom experienced in the world itself. Through the application of discursive language or number jumbles of material are brought to clear structures of cause and effect.

Design, approached as research, is by necessity also a form of translation. A project translates a form, condition, or intangible spirit into a new and imaginary architectural experience, and thus renders it available for appreciation. Like all research it must concentrate on those aspects of the subject which can be made significant within the new frame of reference. Issues of form and spatial perception will be necessarily more significant architecturally than those of biography or history.

Treating design as translation may seem artistically reductive. Yet the idea of mimesis isn't necessarily so derogatory. Mimetic action exists across a spectrum of physicality. The degree of artistic value or research freedom depends primarily upon what aspect or type of a thing is being translated. Imitating a building or its details in a new building is a tangible and relatively easy task, though it risks redundancy.⁴ Interpreting a spirit, idea or essence demands a greater degree of flexibility (and challenge) in a design, though perhaps with an accompanying loss of verifiability. In the process of translation/transformation the level of physicality addressed identifies different issues or 'subjects' for exploration, with

varying degrees of tangibility. In the case of a full research programme it is not necessary to decide on one approach alone. One can test different possibilities, just as one can explore variations of contrast and congruence with the host subject (literal versus free translation). The challenge is to maintain a conscious contact with some aspect of the original in order to ensure a translations credibility and capacity for genuine revelation.

PROVOCATION

Insights may also result through provocation. In this case a process of action and reflection can reveal latent tendencies in a host context as each combination creates new potential for insight. A reaction to any urban intervention produces useful material for critical interpretation. This strategy, however, tends to be most effective with actual physical constructions. Imagining the impact of an imaginary building risks tautology, and thus eliminates the truly surprising in favour of a predetermined result.

In Mae Hong Son the airport runway is provocative in this way. Designed for landing planes, the runway did not necessarily deform or intentionally relate to local social conditions. Once present, however, it provokes a reaction. Here the runway has become the most striking social space in the city. After the last plane for Chiang Mai has departed it becomes animated by joggers, strollers; soccer games and picnics. Its use reveals spatial preferences which may have been difficult to observe clearly elsewhere.

The Design Project

The general inspiration for the design research in Mae Hong Son was cultural. It attempts to discover those qualities of the town which risk being forgotten or obscured through insensitive development. Further it strives to render this implicit spirit active. This desire develops strategies for social action within an open field of transformative interpretation rather than a historiographic reconstruction alone. In formal terms, however, the architectural means derive from the architecture of the city. Mae Hong Son's buildings were analysed in order to understand their principles and implied intentions. Certain traits and inclinations repeated themselves within the town, in varying degrees of clarity. The most striking of these were the ideals of vertical progression in use and form, the persistence of individual figures acting within defined precincts, and a recurring focus on landscape and view. Orientation and material quality also appear consistently significant.

More abstractly, an idea of a subtle and even loose order was perceived within the town's architecture. Ideals of spatial freedom interact simultaneously with underlying principles of organisation. This remains the most provocative quality discovered in the architectural analysis. It leads to new ways of considering design, in contrast to the privileging of explicit formal order so prevalent within contemporary, or western architecture in general.

This idea of a casual or non formal order also presents clues for examining the city as a whole. Indeed Mae Hong Son is urbanistically ambiguous. Unlike its buildings, with their somewhat enigmatic but powerful physical presence, its civic form manifests a difficult structure. There is a lake and a hill, both apparently significant though it is not clear why. Notions of centre or structure remain tenuous. What does appear striking, however, is the role of view. As one travels through the town different destinations are provocatively presented for appreciation. These visual and physical voyages order the experience of the place more directly than does the plan. Yet the journeys are curious ones. One is drawn to special moments which then disappear or reveal themselves to be either anticlimactic or partial at best. Wat Chong Klang, viewed across Lake Jongkam presents a tantalising image, but its internal form is modestly developed. Wat Doi Kong Mu controls the summit of the hill central to Mae Hong Son's experience and draws attention, both visually and physically. Yet it offers little as a spatial experience. This condition is an odd one. In the absence of a clear planimetric order for the town these strange paths provoke curiosity.



Fig. 3. The Directed View

THE CHALLENGE

The following reflects upon this strange urban character through the design of a regional museum.⁵ The museum will (hypothetically) house local sculpture and crafts, the most significant of which are textiles. Fabrics of remarkable richness, practicality, and ephemerality are locally produced, demonstrating the distinct artistic cultures active in the region. The significant material quality of the crafts presents direct provocations for architectural design. Patterns, textures, materials - all are considered as inspirations for architectural form. Building fragments also animate the building and its landscape.

Site

The museum, resting above a soccer field and beside a school, extends the edge condition experienced elsewhere in the town. Between the commercial city and the surrounding



Fig. 4. Museum Site Plan

landscape a buffer is constructed by significant institutions. Wats, schools, and civic buildings (such as the hospital) lead one from the realm of daily life to the landscape beyond. Architecture points to nature, though in a rather strange way. Both protecting and foreshadowing the landscape, the buildings identify the larger context active within the city as well as maintain its separation.

Most simply the museum constructs a linear retaining wall to the hill. Creating a base for the landscape above, this visual backdrop also provides places to view the landscape from - a condition which defines its exterior form as well as its internal organisation. The facade is part infrastructure and part face, creating a visual focus as well as supporting the hill above.

PASSAGE

These landscape qualities are explored directly within the museum itself. Most simply the museum engages the horizontal path from city to nature, and speculates on its significance. Different routes are constructed, each leading to particular moments and views. Less physically, the design attempts to thematically interpret the strange cycle of seduction and anticlimactic fulfilment which is experienced in both

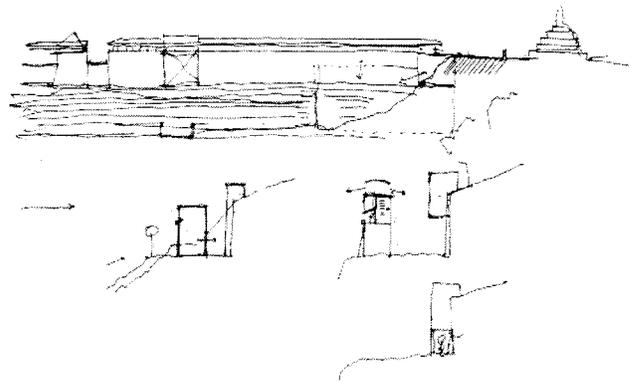


Fig. 5. Preliminary Sketches

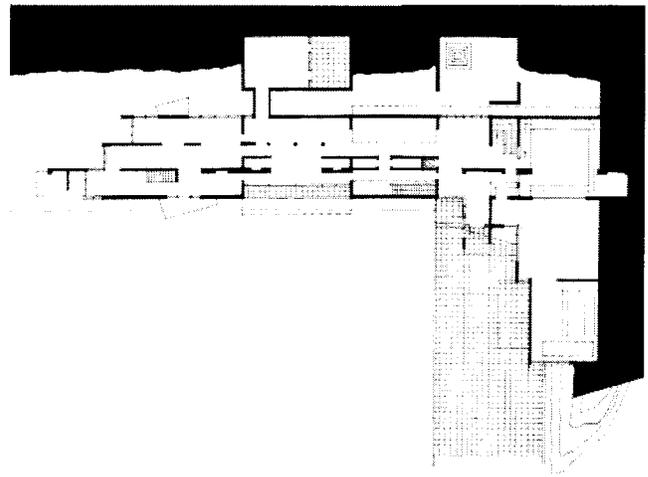


Fig. 6. Lower Floor Plan

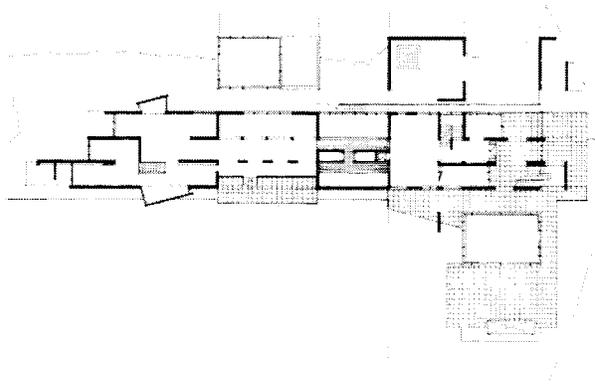


Fig. 7. Upper Floor Plan

the architecture and structure of the town. Paths of relative clarity lead to mysterious absences and abrupt conclusions. Through consciously applying ranging degrees of congruence and contrast with this urban provocation a spectrum of relationships is explored.

The plan establishes a rhythm of presented and blocked destinations, both internally and externally. This is partly achieved through the relationships of objects and precincts.

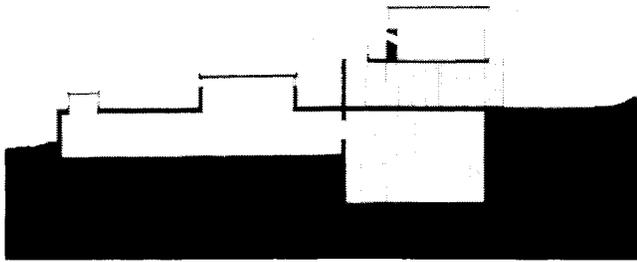


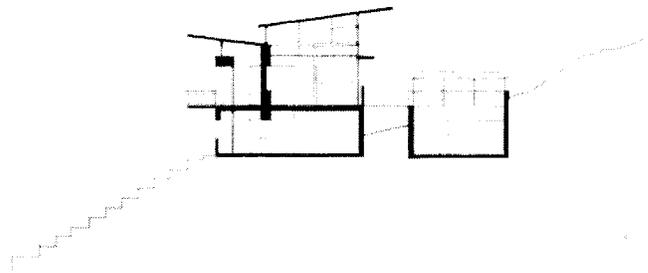
Fig. 8 and 9. Cross sections

Like the Wats, significant figures are arranged in different forms of order and orientation within a general orthogonal framework. The artifacts of the museum participate in defining these varying arrangements. Of particular significance is the Blanket Room, a space housing hanging textiles, juxtaposed with the dense forest behind. Other locations set images of the Buddha against views of the distant landscape. In each case artifacts are seen in relation to different destinations. The somewhat labyrinthian quality of the plan creates rhythms of expectation and surprise, as inflections modulate the apparently simple geometric order.

The section explores passage as well. One progresses vertically from darkness to light; from the enclosed to the exposed. Like Mae Hong Son's architecture the building becomes increasingly figural as it meets the sky, where the forms least affected by physical inhabitation attain greater lightness and purity. These significant increases in figural quality animate the passage, as well as direct views past the architecture to the landscape and sky beyond.

The varying shifts in focus, within a provocative but ambiguous whole, present paths leading to ambiguous ideals. Destinations are presented without providing their absolute completion. The most significant of these parallels the primary view in the town, towards Wat Doi Kong Mu on the summit of the hill. This view, partially experienced within the museum, is revealed most clearly on the roof terrace. As a final punctuation one looks back towards the hill top Wat, over a reflecting pool. Viewed from a distance, the pool reminds the visitor of the enigmatic nature of the ground, and the flickering quality of visual reality. Yet even here it remains ambiguous as the Wat disappears as you move more closely towards it. It is only visually accessible from the inside, looking back over the journey taken and up to the hill simultaneously. The wall frames the view towards the Wat and its enigmatic reflection, while also presenting a barrier to its achievement.

This relation to different forms of travel, arguably present in the artifacts, reminds us of the nature of Thai Buddhism. The physical word is special, but simultaneously transient and insignificant. One moves through the world in order to



speculate on its replacement. The visual achievement of the landscape through the architecture demonstrates this ambition, while also stopping short of providing resolution. One is directed by the building, but moves beyond it, to further pursue the destinations made visible architecturally.

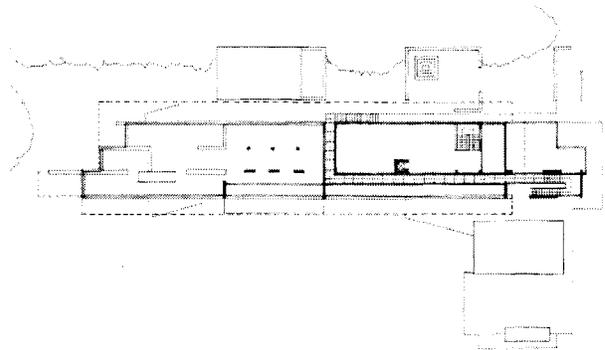


Fig. 10. Terrace Plan

IMAGINARY FUTURES/IDEAL PASTS

The idea of path explored here remains to be investigated in more detail within the town itself. Indeed the concern for the explicit role of view and object versus physical travel is an intriguing one, both within the town and its architectural interpretation. In this case the design exercise has helped clarify the subtlety of the urban structure. The strange coexistence of provocative objects and their perceptual disappearance present a spatial experience which remains compellingly enigmatic.

While the issue of design as research is not yet resolved, some preliminary observations regarding the question, and some caveats, are possible. In general the site and programme of the museum offer means for considering the particular qualities of Mae Hong Son. One faces its landscape and culture in the attempt to appropriately engage with the town's future. The principal design/ research challenge lies in maintaining a precise relation to that culture, so that the connection between the design and its 'subject' can be legible. In this case the decision was made to err on the side of

verifiable relations, rather than the more tenuous forms of translation and provocation which are available.

There may be some dangers in this approach, as architecture isn't necessarily about a place at all.⁶ Here, however, the intent is to concentrate on issues of local value through a directed attention. A specific question is articulated for a design - one which helps to maintain focus on the town's significant qualities.⁷ The town's economic situation is also significant in this respect. In the context of a developing culture (and economy) imaginary interventions which do not accept a certain modesty in form and material risk being pointless, or even vulgar. The effort here has been to design within reasonably simple financial, structural and technical constraints. As a result the project is intentionally modest physically, though hopefully rich in its experiential and associational qualities. This is not necessarily the correct approach. Architectural spirit might be sacrificed through the application of a foreign ideal of economy, just as analogous qualities might disappear in favour of tangible or verifiable connections. More generally, rejecting random novelty, that most useful tool for the artist, may not benefit the town nor animate its future.

Yet in spite of these concerns there may be benefits in approaching design as research, for both researchers and designers.

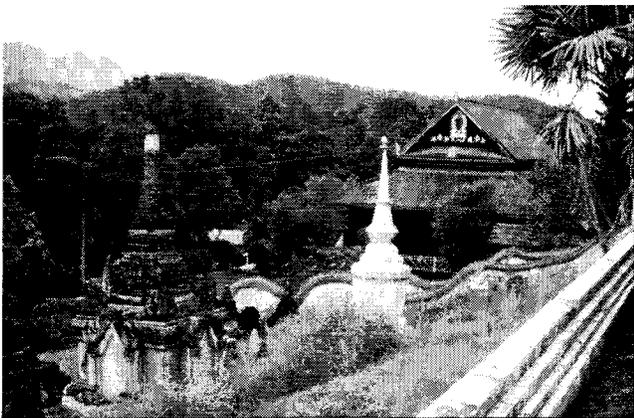


Fig. 11. The Landscape Edge

MERITS FOR THE RESEARCHER

Focus

Design is first a means of establishing focus. Through the specificity of site and programme one is able to concentrate attention on a specific architectural condition, tendency, or possibility. The condition is brought to visibility so that it can be reflected upon in greater clarity. As a result an implicit quality can be made explicit for future consideration and possible extrapolation. The research challenge remains one of proximity. Architectural design is closer in mode to the world it reflects upon than either discursive history or numerical statistics. As a result design may lack the conceptual

distance from its subject necessary for its research orientation or its focus to be clearly legible. Yet design can direct the researcher to focus on aspects which are tangibly present, and thus brings a considerable degree of specificity to one's attentions.

Tools

Considering design as research broadens the practices of the researcher. Design, as a type of drawing, brings forth possible conditions in an experiential way. Urban research normally has a fairly limited set of tools, especially outside of major capitals. There is limited cartographic evidence, if any, just as there is no biographical information or textual background on issues of urban intent. Any increase in the means available to a researcher should be a positive one.

More specifically design remind us of the significance of form and use, of the power of landscape and its practical demands. These issues are of immediate concern to a designer, but maintain a limited presence in textual documentation or subsequent analysis. To be made aware of their significance also means to be able to bring that knowledge to other forms of research.

Anti-Dogmatism/ mental flexibility

Design reminds us that things could have been different. Accidents happen, just as flashes of insight might redirect a town's form. As a result design clarifies the role of personal intent and the value of a specific moment. More fundamentally, by calling attention to the choices taken, design challenges the sense of necessity which sometimes plagues larger historical constructs. An engaged designer sees issues of choice that might otherwise be lost in a more comprehensive but distant critical relationship.

Much historical research unconsciously assumes its own biases. Design is a way to challenge this. It (ideally) responds to the place, to what might have been as well as what is. Hopefully this awareness results in a useful degree of mental flexibility. It is a reminder of chance, options and possibilities. A process of design reinforces an awareness of the non fixed nature of architectural decisions, which should allow us to observe the same condition in reverse as well. This perception awakens fresh analytical possibilities by calling attention to similar choices taken in a historic situation. It is a reminder of the myriad of variables that create cities.

Revelation

Design has been approached here as a way of revealing implicit urban conditions. Though partly intuited and identified through other forms of analysis, some were provoked by the act of designing itself. This sense of articulating a real, or even a surreal condition, thus posits a continuity of spirit within the city.⁸ Urban cultures are fragile, especially when confronted with rapid development, and their transformation into new forms of expression proposes their greater endurance. Through metamorphoses an underlying spirit is revealed.

MERITS FOR DESIGN?

The qualities mentioned above are useful for the researcher. But are they useful for the designer? Does considering design as research help design itself?

Fundamentally design reminds one of purpose. Much research concentrates on what or how a condition came to be. While necessary, this can become a self-referential demonstration of sequence, which may not address the things that really matter within an urban condition or its experience. Design, given its responsive nature, reminds us of the persistent necessity of intent. This sense of purpose is as necessary for action as well as study. It serves as a corrective to distractions and inherited assumptions. It also returns us to the place of study, to reflect on its values and concerns.

Indeed this sense of purpose is a good reminder that architectural actions relate to a larger whole, and its continued expression. Choices taken create effects and leave their traces. Our continued and deepened relationship to these results is thus also a valuable reminder of the significance of architecture itself.

But is it research? But what exactly does design reveal in this case? Design as research does not, strictly speaking add to the verifiable knowledge of a place. Its tools remain too open to interpretation, its presence too particular. What a design may do instead is identify those aspects of a condition that have the capacity to become meaningful in spatial experience. Rather than adding to factual knowledge, design reveals and investigates those facts and qualities which might be significant. Indeed, through design, the transformation of facts to meaning reminds us of the core subject matter of the arts - the making of reality into truth, experienced through form.

NOTES

1. Special thanks to the Canada Council for providing financial assistance for this presentation.
2. Aristotle. *The Poetics*. 9, 1451b, 5,6.
3. The gap between the luxury of designing for research versus building for practical, financial, or social needs is, however, likely unbridgeable, no matter how conscious and sincere the attempt.
4. In terms of the Aristotelian distinction mentioned above, imitating a form is more like history than poetry, as it replicates facts rather than a more valuable truth.
5. Mae Hong Son rests at the centre of a number of distinct ethnic regions, whose presence remains modest within the town. In the search for a more varied and sustainable tourism, culture can tangibly balance and compliment the local natural attractions. This combination demonstrates a symbiotic relation between sustainable ecology and culture - one which can interact with the larger city and its national context.
6. Architecture can be about a variety of things, and to fix it to a geographical specificity would be absurd, especially when the places themselves are often interesting precisely because of the strange overlaps of ideas and practices. We should not necessarily accept that we are at the end of history. A context with its implicit sensibilities presents only one option among many for a designer.
7. Architectural focus also results from the difficult editing or exclusion of other personal design inclinations. This raises the question of what should be sacrificed for conceptual clarity? Should one err on the side of precision or architectural delight? What is the role of whimsy in architectural research? This issue is, however, too complex to enter into here.
8. Louis Aragon, writing in *Paris Peasant*, demonstrates the power of an urban truth awaiting revelation. In his description of the Passage de L'Opera in Paris he brings its strange conditions to visibility. The subsequent destruction of the street renders the imaginative description even more poignant.