

Panel at the 12th conference of the European Association for Southeast Asian Studies (EuroSEAS) at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS), 28 June – 1 July 2022.

‘Transforming Houses in Southeast Asia: New Materials, Aspirations and Change’

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Southeast Asia’s diverse built landscape has ranged prominent in the scholarly, most notably anthropological, studies of houses (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Sparkes and Howell 2003; Waterson 2009 [1990]). Indeed, houses are more than mere architecture in Southeast Asia are multi-faceted entities and have been studied in various relevant dimensions – including their cosmological aspect (Cunningham 1964), their role in shaping and enabling sociality and relatedness (Allerton 2013, Carsten 1997), their becoming remade as cultural heritage (Allerton 2003, Berliner 2012), or the aesthetic politics engrained in their design (Elinoff 2016) to name but a few themes.

What received less attention, though, is the transformation of housing that is occurring all over Southeast Asia – albeit to varying degrees and at different paces. Concrete is certainly on the rise in Southeast Asia – not only for huge infrastructure projects but also for ordinary houses, thereby changing the design and our understandings of vernacular architecture in the region. How does transformation of houses occur? How are new materials, emerging aspirations and changing relations implied in and/or contributing to these transformations?

This panel will address these questions systematically and based on empirical material related to Southeast Asia. The contributors are invited to engage with the topic from a diverse set of angles. Thus, emphasis may be given to kinship, the experience of space, to the political context, materiality, narratives of development, socio-economic change among other possible topics immediately connected to house transformations occurring in urban and, especially, rural Southeast Asia.

Abstracts:

Amata Jantarangsee (Kasetsart University)

How increasing land prices, changing state policies, and new urban planning paradigms transformed the planning and design of government-built flat complexes in Bangkok metropolitan

The development of government-built housing is influenced by a combination of political, economic, and urban planning factors, and therefore likely to change over time. However, most of the literature on government-building housing transformations focuses predominantly on political determinants. This documentary research explores transformations of low-income flat complexes in Bangkok metropolitan, Thailand through a more comprehensive lens. It does so by examining flats built under three consecutive housing programs operated by Thailand's National Housing Authority (NHA) in three different periods (1960s, early 2000s, and late 2010s). The focus in particular is on transformations in building design, locational patterns, their relation to the city, and the causes for the changes observed. The study outlines that building structures have become increasingly compact, a back-and-forth spatial shift has taken place between central business districts and more peripheral locations served by the city's super-block road system, and that the functions of low-income flat complexes have been adapted to suit different Bangkok urban planning schemes. The transformations observed are shaped by rising land prices and values, the dynamics of Thai government policies focusing on slum clearance and social welfare, the NHA's evolving mission of solving social problems or generating profits, and global urban planning movements concerning urbanism and sustainable urban neighbourhood design. The study reveals that those operating government-built housing developments in Thailand over the years have given insufficient attention to social factors, such as the living experiences of the people they tried to help.

Michaela Haug (University of Cologne)

Beyond Concrete: The Social and Cultural Value of Iron Wood Houses in East Kalimantan, Indonesia

In many rural regions of the global south, vernacular houses are becoming less popular. Instead, people aspire houses built of concrete, as these often symbolize a modern lifestyle, progress and economic success. The high value placed on ironwood houses in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, which counters this trend is the focus of my presentation.

My talk explores the continued appreciation of ironwood houses embedded in the broader transformation of houses, preferred living arrangements, building materials and aspirations linked to housebuilding among the Dayak Benuaq in East Kalimantan, Indonesia. Whereas in the past most settlements consisted of a longhouse (lou), most villages now consist of single-family houses that span two to three generations. When building a house, people pay attention to its size and the building materials used. Traditional building materials such as bamboo, tree bark, rattan and leaves are now used at most for field huts (belai umaq). Since the increasing availability of chainsaws in the 1970s and 1980s, the walls and floors of houses are built from sawn wooden boards and

roofs from sawn wooden shingles or corrugated iron sheets. In the last two decades, houses made of concrete have become an additional alternative - especially in the growing semi-urban centres of rural East Kalimantan. As prestigious government buildings are built of concrete, concrete houses reflect progress and a modern attitude towards life, which is oriented towards the model of an urban Indonesian middle class. However, no house is as coveted and highly regarded as one built entirely or partly of ironwood. I argue that the cultural significance of ironwood, its durability and its increasing rarity are leading to ironwood houses outperforming concrete houses.

Rebecca Villaret (EHESS-CASE)

Post-colonial transformations of Konyak polities. The house in a diachronic perspective (Nagaland, India)

The contemporary history of the Nagas, in Northeast India, was marked by a decades-long armed conflict between the newly independent Indian Union and the Naga ethno-nationalist factions. The post-colonial elaboration of a Naga national identity was mainly based on the development of a shared christian religiosity. During the contested creation of the federal state of Nagaland in the 1960s, the Konyak Nagas living in Mon district, experienced an unprecedented wave of conversions to baptist christianism. This has notably led to the end of inter-village warfare and the progressive anchoring of Indian administrative and governmental bodies.

The purpose of my presentation is to highlight the dynamics of social change that took place in rural areas of Nagaland in this specific historical context. In order to do so, I will lean on the ethnographic case of the Konyak village of Sheanghah Chingnyu, which has the particularity of being historically governed by a king (*ahng*). I will present the characteristics of this village organization based on the emic categories of social morphology, which are themselves very strongly centered around the house (*ham*) and the communal house (*po*). I will then describe the categories of kinship and the spatial organization of this village, in order to highlight the hierarchical relations system between local groups. Those elements will allow us to account for the post-colonial transformations of this polity in a context of such political and religious reconfigurations.

Rosalie Stolz (Heidelberg University)

Listening through houses in northern Laos

In this talk, I wish to discuss the changing acoustic experience of new concrete houses in upland northern Laos. Thereby, I will focus on one quality of houses that is of particular relevance in Southeast Asia, that is permeability (Allerton 2013; Helliwell 2006); that includes the ways in which one can listen (or not) through houses.

This relates to the research on the materiality of houses and, more specifically, on the “less tangible phenomena such as light, sound and air, are part of the sensuous experience of buildings” (Bille and Sørensen 2016: 159). In his article “Lighting up the Atmosphere”, Tim Ingold (2016) poses the question “Can there be architecture without atmosphere?”.

He proposes that “a building is as much a thing of air, light sound and mood as it is a construction wrought from solidary elements” (ibid.: 163). These intangible dimensions of houses play an important yet so far rarely considered role when discussing the interrelationships between houses and their residents.

Transformations of the materiality of houses, which go along with the increasing preference for concrete over bamboo and timber houses in northern Laos, are a good entry point for approaching the shift in sensory experience that then often only rises to the attention of the residents and, possibly, the ethnographer.