THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

# DESIGNING DHAMMACRACY:
# AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN ACTIVISM
# AND
# COSMOPOLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN THAILAND

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"It's theme is impermanence." King Phya Lithai's begins his 14th century cosmography, the *Traibhumikatha*, or *Three Worlds of King Ruang*, with this declarative and succinct summary. It is no wonder that he was contemplating the tension between transcendence and impermanence. While he compiled the Pali and Theravada canon into a cosmological text that described three ephemeral worlds of existence that form and disintegrate serially around three constants—Mt Meru, the Dhamma, and the Buddha—the two-hundred-year-old Sukhothai Kingdom that King Lithai had ruled was falling apart. Over six centuries later, King Lithai's palaces and temples are remain as ruins, at best, while dozens of recensions of his text survive, as does its reincarnation into school curricula, urban plans, countless temples, crematoria and palaces, bureaucratic oaths and, as this dissertation will explain, 100,000 cans of fish and the world's largest parliament.

The theme of this dissertation, particularly its composition, has been impermanence. It was written during a global pandemic that instantly altered doxic behaviors as 'the social' was rendered dangerous at close range. While the social world metamorphosed, I lost my parents, grandparents, and an uncle, but added my dearest friends and two enchanting children. I emptied four homes, and designed three. I returned from studying two sovereign interregna in my research to witness a failed coup at home. While familiar foundations were rendered impermanent, my doctoral work formed or reformed relationships that endured the vicissitudes of politics and mortality. To these constants during the past nine years, I would now like to offer my deepest gratitude.

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## ABSTRACT

*Designing Dhammacracy: An Ethnography of Design Activism and Cosmopolitical Representation in Thailand,* analyzes how and why design has become a powerful field of activism in Thai politics. While three competing political institutions—the military, the monarchy, and the parliament—vied for power in Thailand between 2009-2019, groups of activist architects attempted to change political relations in the polity by transforming a shared cosmological form, the Hindu and Buddhist mythological form of Mt Meru, into both the country's new parliament (the world's largest) and a $90 million temporary royal crematorium. Based on 18 months of fieldwork with the architects that designed these buildings, *Designing Dhammacracy* theorizes how Thai architects configured their design practice as a political praxis during the conjuncture of two interregna: first, the only royal succession in 70 years and, second, the ruling dictatorship's specious restoration of democracy. The dissertation proposes two arguments at the nexus of political, design, and linguistic anthropology.

First, *Designing Dhammacracy* ethnographically studies the materialization of a political ideology that I am calling "dhammacracy," which emerged from the interregna's crucible of popular, dictatorial, dhammic and royalist sovereignties and materialized spectacularly in the design and politics of the new Thai parliament building. The architects called their design "*Sappaya Saphasathaan,*" which they translate as "a place for dhamma and doing good deeds." Dhamma is a transcendent moral order and truth, embodying the wisdom of Buddha. This dissertation argues that dhammacracy materializes in political projects (like the design activism of the *Sappaya Saphasathaan*) within which diverse human, nonhuman, and metahuman agents leverage the ideological affordance of the opaque, predestined, and transcendent force of dhamma, on the one hand, and of democratic visions of political representation, on the other, in

ways that successfully tarry between the contradictory political ideals of the dhamma and the demos as the bases for political legitimacy. In dhammacracy, distinctions between architectural and political representation collapsed when designers referred to themselves as 'design activists' as well as 'representatives' acting on behalf of their respective constituency. Moreover, their cosmological designs, forms, materials, and spaces were themselves considered activists, designed to orient their human counterparts through the mercurial cosmos of Thai politics. As such, *Designing Dhammacracy* ethnographically studies the cosmopolitics of design, drawn from the contested assemblages of the dhamma and the demos in the details of dhammacratic architecture.

Second, the rise of design activism in the interregna is due, I argue, to the felicitous compatibility of design ideologies with dhammacratic aesthetics of political change. The liminality of the interregna, the ideological framing of design as a technique for improving its phenomena, and Theravada semiotic ideologies converged into the second related concept of this dissertation: "designification" (design-ification), which describes the metasemiotic capture of citational transformation within ideologies of design. In designification, activists configure the transformation between the citing de-sign and the cited sign as an ameliorative process with positive entailments for the future interactions the designed citation (re)mediates. I argue that within the interregna's convolution of competing sovereignties, design activists leveraged the semiotic play of citationality through three processes of designification—representation, visualization, and materialization—to design agentive forms, materials, and spaces capable of acting within the ambiguous political tensions of dhammacracy.

***Keywords*****:** design, cosmology, representation, cosmopolitics, ideology, Thailand, architecture, citationality, materialization, sovereignty.

# Introduction

*Figure 1: Photoshopped image of the new Thai Parliament with the black smoke emitted from the cremation of Rama IX digitally superimposed on top of the parliament busabok to evoke the similarity in the architecture of the parliament and royal pyre. (Image provided by a former student who will remain anonymous 2019)*

On a sweltering sunny afternoon in July 2019, two goldsmiths (*chaangthong*), two architects of Thailand's new parliament building, and an architect-anthropologist (myself), are gathered on scaffolding 300 feet above Bangkok, below a fifty-foot-tall construction tarp in the colors of the Thai flag that sheltered us and the 150 feet royal *busabok* that we were carefully covering in 24 karat gold. A *busabok* is the transmutation[1] of the sacred mountain, Mt Meru (in

[1] Throughout the dissertation I will be using Jakobson's term "transformation" and Silverstein's concept "transmutation" interchangeably to describe "intersemiotic translations" (Jakobson 1959, 233) of language based text into other extra-lingual semiotic forms (like architecture). I will use Silverstein's term "transduction" (Silverstein 2003) to describe the "intersemiotic translation" of text into practices (like rituals).

Thai *Khao Phra Sumeru*) from Hindu cosmology and the 14th century Thai royalist cosmography, the *Traibhumi,* into architectural form. The cosmos described in the *Traibhumi* is the conceptual basis for the entire parliamentary complex below our feet. This is the world's largest parliament and, even more remarkably for a country of 65 million people and a government that has only sustained two popularly elected prime ministers in ninety years, it is Thailand's third parliament building.

The magnificent, tapering gilded *busabok* capping the massive complex is clad in 2mm thick ornamented bronze panels which will be entirely concealed beneath a patina of gold leaf. In the *Traibhumi*, Lord Indra resides in the 11th level of the middle of three worlds—the *Rupabhumi,* or World Without Material Qualities—that comprise the universe, presiding over all creatures from his golden palace on the summit of Mt Meru. The Thai King was historically identified a terrestrial avatar of Lord Indra, and the country's 20 constitutions have enshrined its monarchs as the "head of state." The *busabok* likewise begins on the 11th floor of the parliament, like a golden architecture crown[2] above a cosmos of state government: two domed legislative assembly halls, miles of open-air atria and bureaucratic offices, a museum of democracy, a museum of the parliament, two gyms, as well as public gathering and shopping facilities. Though it is itself 15 stories tall and composed of precious materials, it is designed only to contain a few offices for "VVIP" (very very important persons), a meeting hall and the temporary residences for the King and the royal family to use *just one day a year,* when the monarch 'opens' parliament. A month earlier, the new Thai king had returned from the Bavarian hotel that he and his harem had been renting for years to participate in a spectacular coronation ceremony, following the 70-year reign of his revered father. After seizing all royal assets from government

[2] In fact, the royal crown, called a *mangkut,* is itself a transmutation of Mt Meru and more closely resembles a *busabok* than any other architectural form that cites Mt Meru.

management—which became government property after the 1932 revolution—he is now the wealthiest monarch on earth.

The parliament's *busabok* was the only secular one of its kind on any commercial or government building, as its sacred form is otherwise reserved only for temples, palaces, and royal crematoria. That was until 2009, when the two architects accompanying me along with a small coterie of other sexagenarian architects assembled from their respective firms —all of whom demonstrated together in Thailand's transformative 1973 and 1976 student protests—and decided to appropriate the cosmological system of the *Traibhumi* from its royal and Buddhist ideological domain, and transform it into the architecture of Thailand's newest parliament. While Agamben calls such controversial citational moves "profanation" (Agamben 2007) or the playful act of citing sacred forms in ways that neutralize the powers protecting them, the architects frequently described their intervention as the "democratization" of royal and religious privileges. The architects mapped the cosmology's tri-world organization of cosmic existence directly onto a social hierarchy that arranged public educational, commercial, and civic space in the bottom world; the domain of politicians and bureaucrats in a middle world; and the realm for Royals and nationalism at the top world. They called their design *Sappaya Saphasathan*, which they gloss as "a place for dhamma and doing good deeds." Dhamma is a universal order and truth, embodied in the wisdom of Buddha (Tambiah 1976). They called themselves Sangop 1051, 'sangop' meaning 'peace' and 1051 referring to the number of hours they spent designing the *Sappaya Saphasathan* for the 2009 competition. It was an indexical title, indicating the effect (peace) of the dhammic place they designed, and the labor it took to design it.

This was my last day of fieldwork, after 18 months observing Sangop and other self-described design activists in design workshops, site walk throughs, public lectures, and studio meetings. As a parting gift, Sangop architects arranged for us to accompany temple goldsmiths (*chaangthong)* near the peak of the royal *busabok*. A duo of *chaangthong* were working their way down from the tapered summit of the complex, applying brittle 24 karat gold leaf one square inch at a time to an intricately decorated edifice larger than the statue of liberty. In three months, they had gilt the top third, just below the watchful 10-foot-tall golden statue of *Phra Siam Devaraj*, a monotheistic guardian Buddhist deity concocted by the current king's great-great-great-great-great grandfather (Rama IV) as a guardian spirit presiding over the city his dynasty established.

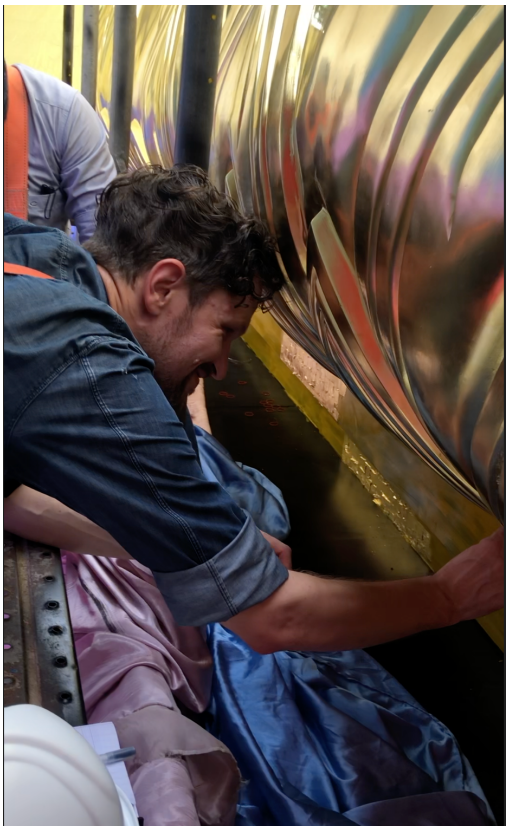

*Figure 2: the author gilding the parliament's royal busabok (photo by author 2019).*

Bathed in a blended purple light emanating from the red, white and blue tarp above us, and in the radiant heat of the bronze and gold façade before us, one *chaangthong* patiently taught me how to gild a parliament. This was not a skill I learned teaching and practicing architecture in Bangkok over the previous decade. He lifted a stack of what looked like brown paper matchbooks, with stamps of the 3 headed Erawan elephant on the cover, and a single square of wafer-thin gold in between. We pressed our gold squares against the bronze, and with a cotton ball in the other hand, massaged it onto the *busabok's* sumptuous bronze skin. The *chaangthong* asked me to return the empty covers, because they needed to be submitted to the office of the

Parliament to account for the over 1 million squares of costly gold leaf that would be used to gild the *busabok*. “Everyone has to watch out for corruption,” quipped one of the parliament architects, as we rose to talk privately outside the flag-toned-tarp protecting us and earshot of the *chaangthong.*

“I hope when you come back we can take you on a tour to see the finished building, if we are not in jail for making it,” joked one architect sardonically. An uncomfortable silence followed, broken only by the rapid staccato of gunfire echoing from the firing range of a military base across the street. Before 2009, the land beneath us was occupied by a one-hundred-year-old military base. The military agreed to surrender the land to the Parliament in exchange for the development of more modern facilities outside the city, which the parliament (ie taxpayers) paid for. For the twelfth time in Thai history, the parliament was controlled by a military dictatorship. Unlike the previous eleven military juntas, however, which governed from Thai parliament buildings located on Royal property, the new Parliament was located on military land. Standing on a golden royal busabok with two Octoberist design activists, fifteen stories above the nearly completed parliament for the ruling junta dictating its operations, and surrounded by the barracks and bullets of a powerful military that exists largely to control its own people on behalf of a powerful elite, design was prominently mediating cosmology, competing sovereignties and—as the discussion of imprisonment and echo of gunfire indicated—the specter of violence therein.

I had heard the ominous projections of design activists imagining imprisonment before. When an architect introduced me to his mentor at a press and VIP tour of the construction site two months prior, he explained “he is one of the architects who will go to jail if problems happen. They were part of the October generation, so I would always ask him about his years as a student activist between 1973-1976. I was too young. Perhaps all five will go to jail together.

They work with activists and lawyers. They plan political maneuvers. They do so much behind the scenes, they deal with the politicians, so I just help realize their vision [in the parliament architecture].” Thais identified as members of the October generation participated in massive student protests in October 1973 and 1976, that demonstrated for greater freedom of expression, more democratic representation, and less political dominance by the military and economic elite (Haberkorn 2011). In both protests, dozens were killed and many more injured when the government and military violently attacked student demonstrators. The three intervening years witnessed more liberal reforms, and more open circulation of progressive political theory and literature than at any moment in Thai history. However, the three year ‘democratic experiment’ (Anderson 1977) came to a brutal end with the government massacre of student demonstrators on October 11th 1976. Almost fifty years later, the Octoberist students were now the architects of the latest ‘democratic experiment,’ the *Sappaya Saphasathaan*, imagining their future imprisonment by the repressive dictatorship that was their official client, while military gunfire crackled menacingly around us.

Since its founding as a constitutional monarchy in 1932, Thailand has experienced 17 military and judicial coups, drafted 20 constitutions, half of its prime ministers have been military dictators, and it has had more parliaments than popularly elected prime ministers. Elections have become moot, as ruling parties gain prominence through military, judicial or popular uprisings. Yet the concept of representative democracy remains as aspirational as it is contradictory. While Thais often cannot choose most of their representatives, protest their policies, or form political parties, certain political actors can and are intervening in the political arena via the design of political arena – parliaments, royal crematoria, graphic design, municipal promenades, and exhibitions on Thai cosmological design. In the analyses I offer, these designed

arena reveal themselves in the following analyses to be more than passive arena *for* politics, but arena *as* politics. And while for most of the interregna the ruling junta prohibited public demonstrations, self-described design activists designed spaces of dissent into state architecture, publicized visualizations of their critiques, disseminated critical interpretations of the parliament's use of the *Traibhumi*, and organized protests against demolitions, material sourcing, and schematic designs of state projects. More importantly, the architecture itself was conceived as activist, as a persuasive conspirator that encourages the dissent of its publics. Architecture's exceptional political prowess raises more questions: what are the affordances and risks that materialize as design translates competing cosmological orders into the forms, materials, and discourses of new political worlds? What is the relationship between the repeated failure of liberal forms of political representation and the building-up of cosmopolitical representations?

The Sangop partners regularly characterized themselves as activists in the many talks, exhibitions and interviews they've delivered on the parliament design. Claiming "the Thai people are my clients," Sangop architects contended the design was itself activist: *Sangop* promised that not only could the building end corruption and unify the nation, the public parks in the lowest world and the 12-story monumental "stairway to heaven" connecting it to the top royal tier would facilitate photogenic scenes for future political demonstration. The parliament's form created a space that not only accommodated, but aestheticized dissent against its lawmakers. On multiple occasions throughout my 18 months of fieldwork, Sangop architects insisted their design would "help Thailand" become more democratic. And yet, though this design simultaneously allowed the architects' to politically represent an imagined 'people' when parliament did not, while it also supported the symbolic representation of said 'people' (their "clients") as inferior cosmic subjects. This contradiction continued to nag me while I

accompanied Sangop design activists in their daily campaign to design better political representation for 'the people' through their architecture.

The contradiction prompts the central question of this dissertation: How do designers and designs represent, both politically and spatially, a 'people'? This question then opens a series of subsidiary questions about the historical conditions and cosmopolitical implications for design activism in the interregna: Why are designers recognized as legitimate political actors at this time? Why does Thai design activism reflexively situated in a cosmological scale? How can an architecture that symbolically demonizes its demos be deemed remotely democratic? On behalf of whom or what can the architect claim to be an activist? In what ways does design as a political modality open up possibilities for people, materials and forms, and other worldly agencies to intervene in governance? These are the questions this dissertation seeks to answer.

These questions arise from encounters, like that of the opening vignette, among divergent worlds, through which an ontologically diverse assemblage of actors negotiate competing theories of knowledge, agency and legitimacy through design practices. The design of the new Thai parliament convenes several incongruous systems of knowledge: democratic ideologies of how people rule and politically represent one another; dhammic theories of action that distribute the power to rule across multiple lives, human, metahuman and nonhuman societies; Theravadan semiotic ideologies that endow certain signs (people, art, materials, forms and architecture) with authoritative powers by configuring them as indexical icons—that both look like and that effect— an unfolding eternal dhammic morality; and of design ideologies that valorizes privileged people (designers) and things intentionally intervening in the ordering of other people's life worlds.

This cosmic entanglement ensnares a set of analytical problems that has come to be associated with what scholars are calling "cosmopolitics." Cosmopolitics does not recognize the primacy of one cosmos over others, but unfolds through the give-and-take encounters (the politics) of multiple human and non-human constituencies across multiple worlds (cosmos) (Latour 2004; Stengers 2004). While theorists of cosmopolitics grapple with ways to "*design* the political scene" (Stengers 2005, 1001; emphasis added) in order to "work with" (Viveiros Da Castro 2004) the ontological diversity of their informants' cosmos, to operate in the social space within "divergence" (Stegners 2005) and "equivocation" (Viveiros Da Castro 2004), and to provoke hesitation not resolution, some scholars have noted (Graeber 2011; Mazzarella 2017) that too often this provocation for epistemological openness is a response to the theorists' own presuppositions of bounded cultural difference and the consequent plotting of orthodox vs radical world orders. As this ethnography considers alignments like that of elite socialist architects who are commissioned by a military junta to design the country's democratic parliament according to a royalist-dhammic cosmology, the analytical parsing of discrete worlds into normative vs radical constellations would be dubious to say the least. *Designing Dhammacracy* contributes to the anthropology of cosmopolitics, while avoiding its analytical limitations, through an ethnographic study of how the state architecture of Thailand's political scene is designed to sustain exchanges among multiple cosmologies via the collaborations of human, non-human and meta-human agencies involved in design.

As an analytic, design's strength vis a vis cosmopolitics is also its weakness: it is located everywhere. Design is treated as a universal category of things or of thing-making practices that shape and order enterprises conservative and radical alike. Not only is design treated universally, a fundamental premise of the Anthropocene is that the universe itself is now designed: mankind

manipulates every envelope and atmosphere (Halpern 2014; Latour 2008; Sloterdijk 2015). The universality of design things and practices, and the iterative, collaborative negotiations it structures among human and non-humans, materials and forms precludes the possible parsing of worlds into neatly bounded knowledge systems amenable to hegemonic vs radical, or internal vs external binaries. At the same time, the universality of design as a concept impoverishes its ethnographic promise as a productive site to focus analytical attention to how difference is negotiated, constituted and/or preempted (the give and take politics) in particular cosmological encounters among multiple cosmos. Considering design and cosmopolitics interactively productively treats design as a social field that dynamically structures a multiplicity of possible worlds encountering and transforming each other via human, non-human and meta-human encounters. Approaching cosmopolitics through design also recasts the former as a process of dialectical cosmogenesis, not as a rigid archipelago of essentializing "integral islands" (Mazzarella 39, 2017).

I am interested in the metasemiotic contestations that arise at the intersection of design and cosmopolitics, when designers debate why and how the forms and materials of their designs will do something better in imagined future encounters. Interlocutors engaging in metasemiotic debates evaluate, opine, or otherwise theorize the possibilities and expectations for the signs participating in and emerging from their interactions (Urban 2006). These discussions yield ideologies about sign relations—what one (meta)sign does to another sign. Those moments, I argue, calibrate complex cosmos of agencies. For example, in the first press conference after publicizing the new design, a government spokesman addressed two sources of controversy: how will a design stop corruption and why does the parliament look like a royal crematorium? Community architects, a third group of design activists I observed who work principally in grass

roots and community-based projects, leveled similar metasemiotic questions at the political efficacy of the parliament's forms and materials. Why use teak, gold and other luxurious materials, when bamboo and mud were more 'democratic'? What does it look like, why does it look like something else, what will it do, how will it do it, and how will its appearance equip it to do so? The semiotic and material ideologies elicited in design discourse to answer to such metasemiotic framing questions are themselves world-making forces.

The controversy of the parliament's resemblance to royal pyres also implied what is for Thais an unanswerable (and taboo) question: why design a parliament reminiscent of a royal funerary architecture at a moment when the country was then dreading the passing of its frail king? Royal crematoria (*Phra Sumerumat*) and the parliament design are both based on the same tri-world configuration of the universe in the form of Mt Meru as described in the *Traibhumi*, and as transformed into hundreds of stupas and temples throughout the country. Then, in October 2016, Thailand's revered monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, passed away. A year later, tens of millions of Thais commemorated their late king by either watching broadcasts of the cremation ceremonies that took place at a $90 million temporary funeral pyre, *Phra Sumerumat*, next to the Grand Palace, or at one of the 88 full-scale replicas of the pyre distributed throughout the country. After the ceremonies were completed, the crematorium and accompanying ceremonial buildings were converted into exhibition halls portraying the life of the king and explaining the design of his pyre. On a busy day, 100,000 visitors would tour the crematorium complex and observe videos, gilded architecture models, and multi-lingual docents (like myself)[3] describing how the design "translated" (*phlae*) the *Traibhumi* cosmos, the achievements of the king, and regional characteristics of the Thai people into the form, ornament and murals of *Phra*

[3] I conducted one month of participant observation as a docent in the "Architecture and Design" pavilion.

*Sumerumat*. As political scenes of the king and parliamentary politics have been mediatized in the simultaneous coverage of both the late king's cremation pyre and the parliament construction, Thai designers and critics debated questions about design and dhammic agencies in exhibitions on the parliament and on cosmological design, in online design forums, in architecture conferences and studios, and in government agencies. In addition to tracking discourse on Thai politics in relation to the pyres and parliament, this dissertation also explores the extent to which the publicity of these explicitly cosmological designs and theories of multi-world agencies enter into metasemiotic debates of design activists at other controversial state projects.

This project offers an ethnographic account of politics that contends with multiple cosmologies via design. I argue that recent cosmological interventions both in the forms of design and speech acts are part of an emergent apparatus of power in which political actors both sustain commitments to democratic process and yet justify their actions as unquestionable instances of a cosmic order or truth — dhamma — against which opposition gets configured as chaotic and criminal. I am calling this apparatus dhammacracy: a field of practices, materials, forms and discourse that "equivocate" (Da Castro 2004) through the encounters of contradictory democratic and dhammic world orders.

*I. Fieldwork in the Design Activist Cosmos*

This dissertation is based principally on fieldwork conducted between August 2017 until August 2019, but also on broader engagement with the parliament during the ten years I spent designing and teaching architecture in Bangkok. My research into design activism triangulated among three different communities of activist architects: royalist architects working for the Thai Government in the Department of Fine Arts; architects working for or with Sangop on the new

parliament; and "community architects" who typically operate not-for-profit design practices that focus on community advocacy through their design interventions. There was some overlap in the latter two communities. One of the Sangop principles founded the Arsomsilp Institute of the Arts, as a design activist and educational compound on the outskirts of Bangkok (more details are provided in Chapter 3). It was in this compound that Sangop 1051 spent 1,051 hours generating the design and competition boards that would win the 2009 ASA competition. In addition to an architecture office, Arsomsilp houses a k-12 private school and a private college with three departments: the department of art, department of education and department of architecture. In my years as a practicing architect and instructor, most of the community architects I observed in studios, installations or worksites graduated from this program. Almost universally, they assumed their founder's design for the parliament was a betrayal of the school's activist ethos. When I was teaching architecture in Bangkok, I collaborated twice with the Arsomsilp architecture department, whose undergraduate and graduate curriculum emphasizes community engagement and advocacy. In the words of their program description, "students will receive firsthand knowledge through designing and developing projects for community and the environment…[these] skills will lead them to create a harmonious environment and cooperative process within the community, which is the foundation of sustainable development.[4]" This statement evokes an aesthetic shared among each design activist community: the aspiration to design for a harmonious system, as a corrective against the divisiveness, individualism and political tensions that design activists felt were unraveling the polity's social fabric.

There was almost no overlap among the royalist design activists at the FAD and the other two camps. The only continuity was Ajaarn Pinyot: a spry, 80-year-old 'master' in classical Thai

[4] https://en.arsomsilp.ac.th/home-minimal/curriculum2/school-of-architecture/

design who was the mentor to the majority of FAD architects and the architect that Sangop outsourced to design the top royal world *busabok* of the parliament complex. I mention both his design philosophy and technique in greater detail in Chapters 1, 3 and 4. As one Sangop architect explained, their decision to hire the country's most revered classical Thai master "was political:" as lay architects trained outside the classical Thai design programs and traditions, Sangop both knew that any attempt at designing royal architecture would quickly invalidate their design and, most importantly, they believed the most flamboyant component of the parliament that venerated the monarchy would secure their success in the competition. Just as the citation of the *Traibhumi* gave their design a degree of unimpeachability, the architecture's supposed glorification of the monarchy in a *busabok* designed by Aj Pinyot would likewise render judgements against their design impolitic. FAD architects revered the royal *busabok* and reviled its integration with the remaining 'modern' qualities of the design; community activists typically felt the opposite.

While the parliament worksite occupied the majority of my fieldwork research, the pervasiveness of design, generally, and design activism in the interregna, specifically, drew my attention into a panoply of design contexts. My research visa was officially sponsored by the Department of Fine Arts, specifically under the aegis of one of the two principal architects credited for the design of Rama IX's royal crematorium. When observing FAD architects, I spent the bulk of my time shadowing architects in their government offices, conducting interviews at desks, or observing meetings in their boardroom, which was enveloped with large renderings of the crematorium. On one occasion, I accompanied the crematorium architects on a tour through *Phra Merumat* weeks before it was completed. I also accompanied FAD architects to public events with their mentor, Aj Pinyot and to his home studio. It was my visa sponsor who facilitated my introduction to the volunteer coordinator at the king's crematorium when it

became a public exhibition for one month after the cremation ceremony. Every week during that month, I was the "international architecture docent," assigned to a pavilion that the FAD originally designed to host visiting dignitary, and that became an exhibition *sala* displaying information on the history of royal crematoria. The FAD architects, staff, and graphic designers I researched were all classically trained in Bangkok and had never studied abroad. Except for one interlocutor, all my interactions were conducted in Thai with architects in their 30s and 40s, by far the youngest cohort among the three design activist communities with whom I worked.

My fieldwork with community and parliament architects encompassed a much wider cosmos of contexts: construction sites, design studios, schools of design, engineering firms, fabrication facilities, royal palaces, design festivals, design galleries, art museums, lecture halls, online chat forums, design exhibitions, residences of architects, and design activist meetings. The data I harvested from this multiplicity of design arena similarly assumed many forms: transcripts, observational notes, copious interviews, lectures I attended, videos, participant observation and many architectural sketches. Most community architects were in their 30s and 40s, and many had either traveled or studied abroad. Two firms identified themselves as Octoberists, like the Sangop architects, and given their age did not trace their design activist roots through the Arsomsilp Institute. My discussions with the younger community architects were typically conducted, by their preference, in English. The majority of the Sangop architects, on the other hand, were Octoberists, and thus in their 50s and 60s. Only one Sangop architect studied and worked abroad, and thus it was only with him that I spoke in English. Often, my interlocutors were incredibly generous with their time and considerate of my zeal to observe their work. They were very keen to publicize the ethical ambitions of their projects and divulge the struggles of their design

activist campaigns. As such, they would invite me to participate in and record meetings, studio charettes (quick collaborative design exercises), public lectures or exhibitions.

Nonetheless, despite their openness, hospitality and general will to promulgate their cause, they are all designing under precarious political conditions. Especially during the interregna, but even to an extent today, the NCPO and the monarchy maintained a violent and repressive campaign to silence any criticism of their actions. Thailand's draconian Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code declares that "whoever defames, insults or threatens the King, the Queen, the Heir-apparent or the Regent, shall be punished with imprisonment of three to fifteen years." *None of my interlocutors during my fieldwork communicated any defamatory or insulting opinions on the monarchy at any time*. Nonetheless, it has become a repugnant political maneuver for some Thais, typically conservative or elite, to delegitimize or imperil their opponents by accusing them of *lese majesté.* To avoid any possible manipulation of the words and actions of the design activists with whom I worked, who were dedicating their talents and lives to changing Thai society for the better with the considerable skillset they had honed as designers, I have at the very least given pseudonyms to all my interlocutors. When conveying interactions that appear remotely construable as illicit by potential political opponents, I have refrained from assigning any identifiable information, except their affiliation with one of the design activist communities. While my reference to 'a parliament architect' or 'community architect' might risk analytically flattening important sociological characteristics of an interaction, the generality is a precaution again the potentially insidious scrutiny of a vindictive reader.

Long before my fieldwork commenced in 2017, I had already practiced and taught architecture in Bangkok since 2009. My experience as an architect certainly earned some

credibility among my interlocutors, but it was my affiliation with country's oldest and most elite architecture school at Chulalongkorn University that afforded me considerable access to people and venues I would likely never have been allowed to observe. Being a 6'5" white, cisgendered American man who spoke fluent Thai, with a history of design partnerships with Thai architects, certainly gilt my credibility with a luster of novelty. Given the entitlement, arrogance or privileged bigotry of the stereotypical white male expat in Bangkok, even a juvenile attempt at Thai or display of knowledge of Thai architecture or customs was considered very impressive. It was easy for me to transcend this very low bar. The fact that I also came into my fieldwork with relatively detailed knowledge of the *Traibhumi* and Thai political and architectural history, and with a decade of experience teaching at Chulalongkorn University, meant that many of my interlocutors referred to me as *Ajaarn* (Professor) *Taylor,* or introduced me as *Ajaarn Chula*.

My relationship with the new parliament, its architects, and its controversial politics dates to my first day working as an architect for a small avant-garde architecture firm in Bangkok. The office was a small experimental design studio that consisted of two brilliant, critical, and creative Thai architects, and me. We first met in a stationary store located deep within the bowels of Asia's largest mall, Central World, in 2008. Red Shirt protestors would burn down Central World two years later, in 2010, after the government and military killed dozens and injured hundreds of the thousands of protestors who had spent months demonstrating around the mall. Red shirt demonstrators retaliated against the yellow-shirt government and the violent military crackdown by burning down buildings in the Ratchaprasong commercial district that were owned by powerful yellow shirt interests. This was the first time that I became aware of architecture providing a medium for political dissent in a climate of unspeakability.

I met S+PBA at a Starbucks that disappeared during the building's cremation. The day I started to work with them, almost a year later and several skytrain stops away, they were excited to tell me of the latest politically-driven conceptual twist that they introduced in their submission for the 2009 Parliament competition. The winning design that would become the focus of my graduate studies research—*Sappaya Saphasathaan*—was a transmutation of a mountain, Mt Meru. S+PBA, having never seen the winning design, designed the inverse of this: an upside-down mountain. It is extremely disrespectful to expose the bottom of your foot to the top of another person's body. One day my friend and I were eating frozen yoghurt at the top of a six-story atrium in Bangkok's (then) most luxurious mall. We were observing a familiar spectacle in such malls taking place on the ground floor: a staged product performance. Not five minutes into this production, a security guard arrived and chastised my companion for placing her foot at the edge of the floor plate. A tertiary member of the Royal family was seated 70 ft below us, prompting the security guard to travel six escalators to chastise the offending foot. My colleagues' decision to bury the government below a public park was more parodic that practical. They wanted their politicians to be perpetually shamed. As it happened, the winning design accomplished this defilement in the formal guise of reverence: a cosmological mountain upon which royals and politicians resembled super-human entities. But even these metahumans, the designers secretly insinuated, could be trod upon by any tourist, citizen, or protestor who was hearty enough to climb the complex's eleven-story monumental staircases. The contrast between the overtly cynical design of S+PBA and the surreptitious political maneuvers of the *Sappaya Saphasathan* design specifically, but the mobilization of very different design strategies to intervene in Thailand's political future, generally, inspired not only this research, but my decision to approach architecture anthropologically.

*II. Historical Background: A Cosmological Genealogy*

The final years of the first decade of the twenty-first century were uncommonly tumultuous for Thai politics. Starting in 2008 and continuing through 2010, a series of massive protests shut down government buildings, airports and shopping districts; violent clashes erupted between civilians and military and police; political parties were forcibly dissolved; the former "populist" Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, who was himself ousted in a military coup two years prior, was indicted for corruption and fled the country; and intransigent political antagonism reified ideologies into pigments as political parsing of left and right was fashioned into red and yellow shirts. In the midst of these crises, some "red" and "yellow" members of parliament could still agree on one issue: *Sangop*'s winning submission for the design of Thailand's new Parliament Building.

At the time Sangop 1051 was conceptualizing their design for the new parliament competition in mid 2009, tens of thousands of discontented red-shirt protesters were living and demonstrating on the streets of Bangkok after the government they had elected in 2007 was overthrown by a mass protest of yellow-shirt (royalist) supporters. In 2008, these Bangkok centric, more bourgeois, conservative and royalist supporters donning yellow shirts and paraphernalia demonstrated against their red-shirt opponents, who they accused of being antagonistic to the monarchy and selling their votes to populist candidates. Red-shirt proponents, on the other hand, more commonly hailed from outside Bangkok, were more often working class, and typically supported the exiled populist Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. They criticized their yellow-shirt opponents for elitism, for neglecting the rural poor, and for unconstitutionally ousting their democratically elected leader. As a provocation for the systemic disparity affecting them, many demonstrators during the 2010 red-shirt protests identified

themselves as "*phrai*" and elite yellow-shirt influentials as "*ammataya*," the former signifying "non-slave commoners" and the latter signifying "aristocrats" in terms borrowed from 14th century Sukhodian parlance (*The Nation* 3.24.2010). These terms were first inscribed by the same absolute monarch who condensed multiple Pali texts into the hierarchized tri-world cosmos of the *Traibhumi,* King Phya Luthai, back in the 14th century. Meanwhile, during the 2013 yellow-shirt protests many of the middle and upper middle-class demonstrators, who believed red-shirt politicians only gained office through vote-buying from the poor, campaigned to either suspend or reduce voting rights for rural, poor and 'uneducated' Thais (*The Nation* 12.31.2013). Thailand appeared in discourse, practice and red-yellow paraphernalia as a chaosmos of discordant and incompatible separate worlds. The *Traibhumi* cosmology would have offered the royalist Sangop 1051 team a model system consisting of separate worlds existing together within which people could remain fundamentally different, with different empowerment, agency, and resources, *and* still live in harmony together, in a system, in a cosmos.

*III. The (Tri)Worlding of the Traibhumikatha*

As described in the 14th century cosmography by its author King Phya Lithai, the last monarch of the Sukhothai Kingdom, the *Traibhumi* models an infinite system of alternating chaos and order manifest in the making and destruction of worlds. Dhamma is the order to the chaos, the Buddhist "truth" that ensures the eventual resurrection of the purified system after periods of crisis. The *Traibhumi* recognizes three entities – Mt Meru, the Buddha, and the Righteous King (dhammaraja) – as possessors of the exclusive power to know and/or constitute the permanence of dhamma over a Tri-world universe otherwise defined by impermanence[5].

[5] Indeed, impermanence is, according to the Traibhumi's reputed author the 14th century King Phya Lithai, the cosmography's principle theme

Worlds are created and destroyed, but throughout the eternal cosmogenesis Mt Meru, a dhammaraja and a Buddha sustain and renew an inevitably restorative order (dhamma).

Around this triadic axis of order, the *Traibhumi* describes a pulsating taxonomy of all animate beings in the known Theravada universe and maps them onto a conceptual system of three layered worlds ordered by karmic relations. The most beautiful, enlightened, and independent beings reside in the highest world (*Arupabhumi)*. The semi-dieties of the middle world (*Rupabhumi)* possess beautiful fair form, live in gem-palaces among the canopies of Mt Meru's trees, and have accrued sufficient karma to experience minimal sensation or desire. Residents of the lowest world (*gammabhumi)* possess corporeal form and experience desire and sensation, but are differentially capable of self-sufficient satisfaction. Mankind occupies the fifth of the lower world's eleven levels, spending much of its existence repeatedly, but only fleetingly, satisfying itself. At the top and center of the Mt Meru reigns the dhammaraja, the "righteous ruler," or the "dhamma" king. As an enlightened king he mediates between the cosmic and social orders by discerning the dhamma's "corrective process," "cosmic law," and "truth embodied in the Buddha's teachings" (Tambiah 1976, 40). Based on the dhamma, the dhammaraja's actions are realizations of its order within the volatile social world of humans. In short, a dhammaraja makes abstract dhamma visible. In fact, the dhammaraja, the Buddha, enlightened monks and sacred objects are all "models", or *tuayaang*, of the invisible moral power of dhamma. Their 'visualization' (to use the term of design activists, discussed in Chapter 3) in terrestrial forms and actions are said to catalyze recursive dhammic manifestations in the actors who emulate them. Dhamma, in other words, perdures through citationality. This Theravadin semiotic ideology, as chapter1, 3 and 4 elaborate, is fundamental to dhammacratic design activism.

Translations and transmutations of the *Traibhumi* into successive texts and textures (in architecture) will performatively bring the dhamma of the raja into being, asserting its model of order while negating the 'chaos' of his rivals. King Phya Lithai's final years as the Sukhothai monarch in the mid 14th century were also some of the last of his dynasty. At the same time he was compiling his cosmography about a chaos-cosmos dialectic writ and wrought through world-destruction and reconstruction, Phya Lithai was constructing stupas in the form of Mt. Meru while also strategically shifting his royal residence near them to avoid or quell insurrections in his kingdom. Against the instability of his itinerant reign, King Lithai's performative citations of Mt Meru in the architecture of the stupas and his proximity to them simulated an eternally ordered cosmos in each of the many microcosms he built. The construction of stupas in Southeast Asia, broadly, and Thailand, specifically, became an effective procedure of Kings intersemiotically drawing from and building upon the practices of previous kings, dating back to King Asoka. The network of stupas would constitute a system, a macrocosm, and each stupa itself a microcosm, a bell-shaped indexical icon of Mt. Meru, the center of the Buddhist spiritual and physical universe. The form looks like Meru's mountain shape – it is iconic – and as such, is recognized as having related effects – effects it indexes, or indicates—upon its observers (Silverstein 2003). Against the almost constant clashes amongst lesser principalities and larger kingdoms, capital relocations, patricide, and coups, the Sukothai, Ayutthaya, and Bangkok (Chakri) kings constructed cosmological architecture signifying "humanity was forever in the control of cosmic forces" (ibid 74). The production of indexically iconic architecture of stupas signifying Mt Meru, and their association with the monarch both by commission and proximity to palace architecture, will continue as an intersemiotic ritual up through the design of the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* (see Chapter 1 and 3).

Through a shared canon of intersemiotic productions, the *Traibhumi* cosmology creates a ritual topology of text, monarchs, territories, buildings, materials, and practices that shapes political change across space and time: an old kingdom dissolves; a new *dhammaraja* establishes a new kingdom; he preaches the dhamma through the purification of the sangha, the refinement of the cosmological canon, and the re-territorialization of the cosmology into the new world's architecture and urbanism. Each new world, each ritual transmutation expands the topology of the *Traibhumi* cosmology – particularly in this latest instance with the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* – to incorporate new actors and contexts.

*IV From Dhammaraja to Democracy: Three Parliamentary Worlds*

The *Sappaya Saphasathaan* is the third parliament building constructed in Thailand's brief ninety-year history of attempted parliamentary democracy. Like the dhammaraja palaces and stupas before it, all three Thai parliament buildings emerged amidst considerable political and social crisis. The first National Assembly building was a Beaux-Arts, Italian designed neoclassical throne hall commissioned by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). In 1932, the First National People's Assembly gathered in the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall for the first time one week after a bloodless military coup forced King Rama VII to accept the country's transition to a constitutional monarchy. The second Parliament was designed under a military dictatorship, was inaugurated less than a year after 400,000 protestors demonstrated against and eventually expelled the junta in 1973, and was only in operation for two more years before another military coup seized the government and massacred over 400 Thai protestors just down the road. Its post-colonial, international style modernism aesthetically disavowed the architectural language of the former neoclassical building. The third and latest parliament building, *Sappaya Saphasathaan*, is

located just three kilometers north of the previous parliament buildings and assumes yet a third architectural dialect, mixing classic Thai Buddhist and royal architectural motifs with contemporary Thai commercial and resort elements. In the nine years since the parliament design competition, Thailand experienced two military coups, two sets of protests consisting of over 300,000 demonstrators each, which concluded after 2,100 civilians were injured and another 60 killed by Thai military and police forces. The current junta leader, who came to power after yet another coup in 2014, announced in April 2016 that elections would be held the day the new parliament building opened (they didn't). The history of parliamentary architecture and mass demonstrations exactly coincides in Thailand.

The dynamic between public revolt ”nd p'litical architecture mediates and is mediated by a third institution, the Thai monarchy. The iterations and differences of Thailand's parliamentary architecture are a consequence of and contributor to the changing quadratic relations amongst the country's people, military, politicians and the monarchy. Popular historical narratives explain both the 1973 and 2020 parliament buildings' construction as solutions to an expanding parliamentary apparatus that had outgrown its previous home. This is an inadequate answer; buildings can be remodeled, reprogrammed, and expanded when necessary. I argue that, instead, it is not the size but the relations amongst the people, the military, the parliament, and the monarch that is 'outgrown' with each new design. The form, style, siting, and programming of each new National Assembly building provides spaces of visibilities that do not merely look like or represent politics, but allow for relations to be seeable, knowable, and thereby "operational" (Deleuze 1986)[6].

[6] Orit Halpern defines visibilities as "historically situated apparatuses for producing evidence about bodies, subjects, and now, perhaps, new modalities of population" (Halpern 2014; 24).

The architecture of both the first and the third National Assembly buildings are explicitly royalist, though the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* is more subtly ambivalent about its alignments. The Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall was commissioned by King Rama V (Chulalongkorn)—an absolute monarch—in 1908 as a throne and royal reception hall within the westernmost extent of the Dusit Palace. Two Italian Beaux-arts architects were hired to design a neoclassical structure that fused European cathedral and palace motifs, with Thai decorative embellishments. The plan of the building is identical to a cruciform cathedral, consisting of a long nave of saucer-dome covered bays, with a smaller transept extending off either side of large domed crossing. It was into such a structure – which fused Christian cosmological form, Buddhist iconography, neoclassical motifs and European materials – that both the first Thai monarch of the 20th century and then Thailand's first elected parliament would reside and identify their respective governments.

The 1973 National Assembly building made a very different political cosmology visible. The military regime commissioned a design that would distinguish its parliament from past royal and democratic governments, while at the same time sustaining unchecked power for its military leaders and political elites by leveraging a level of fidelity just shy of fealty to the monarchy. Because it included just one large national assembly hall (unlike the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* which has two glorious assembly halls), its architecture accommodated the vicissitudes of serial Thai constitutions that intermittently removed and restored one of the two legislative bodies sharing this chamber. The design process began under the military rule of Prime Minister and Army Commander-in-Chief Thanom Kittikachorn[7], and was finalized the year after he staged a

[7] The Kittikachorn administration would become known as the "Reign of the Three Tyrants" as a result of the power he, his son, and his brother-in-law mobilized against rural protests, communist sympathizers, political detractors, and anyone they accused of criticizing the monarchy.

coup against his own government and then dissolved the legislature for whom the design was intended. In 1970, under Kittikachorn's supervision, members of the Department of Public Works and the managing architect Pol Chulaswake embarked on a tour of National Assembly architecture in Western Europe, Japan and the United States. Significantly, they did not visit any countries that could be aligned with communism, pursuing only affiliations and architectural styles they considered post-colonial, democratic and anti-classical. Its international style design was both anti-classical and decidedly not *kwampenthai* (Thai-style). In fact, in Sangop 1051's "design thinking" presentation panel for the 2009 competition (figure 1), which situated the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* between panels of "Thai" and "World" democratic architecture, the architects never mentioned Thailand's two existing 'Thai democratic' structures. Only western parliaments and dhammaraja architecture were cited. The main structure of the National Assembly draws intertextually from the architecture of the two most recognizable international style post-colonial parliamentary complexes: Le Corbusier's Chandigarh and Oscar Niemeyer's Brasilia. The design's intertextual resemblance to Chandigarh and Brasilia architecture suggests the public works committee under Kittikachorn was determined to define itself as 'the future'


*Figure 3: A conceptual diagram of the Sappaya Saphasathan's citations of political and religious architectures (obtained by the author from the Association of Siamese Architects archives 2018).*

against which the Ananta Samakhom throne hall symbolized a Thai, parochial, and absolutist past.

The *Sappaya Saphasathaan* design embodies a new constellation of institutional relations. First of all, the government acquired its land from the Thai Royal Army, not the monarch (though the two are often aligned), on the northernmost outskirts of the old royal city (*Rattanakosin*), away from the Royal palaces and Rachadamnoen avenue. Second, whereas the National Assembly committee drew from western modernist architecture and avoided any public displays of the design, the Sapphaya Saphasathaan was one of 143 designs submitted to a public competition. Organized by the Thai Parliament and the Association of Siamese Architects (ASA), the competition established criteria for the designs, the most consequential of which was the legibility of a design's "Thainess" (kwampenthai). Every competition finalist proposed some adaptation of traditional Thai architectural motifs into contemporary architectural forms. The renderings, models and animations of the five finalists were then exhibited at the country's most prominent modern art museum, the Bangkok Arts and Culture Center (BACC), and circulated on webzines and YouTube. The winning design has since become the focus of two other major public exhibitions and significant online commentary.

While in appearance the National Assembly Building and the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* are stylistic foils of each other, both calibrate dhammaraja purification rituals to their cosmopolitical arrangements. Both projects are rationalized by their supporters for their powers to heal a country riven with political discord and social crisis: one with future-oriented "global" architecture, the other with the dialectical imagery of historical cosmological architecture plus contemporary Thai-resort modernism. The National Assembly does so by moving beyond the structures – political and architectural – of the past, while nonetheless sustaining a respectful

though independent bond with the monarchy. This is visible in the siting of the National Assembly on palace grounds, next to the throne hall, along the "corridor of power," while its setback maintains its invisibility to public or royal interference. The *Sappaya Saphasathaan* design, on the other hand, proposes a different temporal visibility that predicates the healing of the country and the perpetuation of the government's "good deeds" on its cosmological citation, and the close relationship its new dhammacratic world structures between politicians and the monarchy at the center of the Thai political cosmos.

*V. Dhammacracy*

As the architectural outcome of converging democratic and dhammaraja systems of political representation, the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* models an emergent configuration of political power that I am calling *dhammacracy*. The relationship between politics and dhamma is an old one in Thailand, despite language in the country's 20 constitutions (also called *thammanuan,* or a dhammic 'rule of procedure') that purport so separate Buddhism and the state (Mérieau 2018). Dhamma permeates Thai conceptualizations of law (*thammanun*), morality (*28attana28m*) and good governance (*thamaphibaan*), which are mobilized at times to authorize particular political agendas. The concept of 'dhammacracy' was originally introduced by the influential Buddhist scholar, Buddhadasa Bhikku as a justification for a dhammic socialist political order as an alternative to that of liberal democracy (Connors 2008; Jackson 2003; Khemthong 2022). Though the term itself achieved minimal uptake in Thai political life, its tenets have morphed into what conservative political interests euphemistically label "Thai style democracy." 'Thai Style' works oxymoronically with 'democracy,' authorizing non-elected 'good person' (*khon dii*) leaders who seize political power and suspend democracy as a necessary

exigency to circumvent the purported amorality of democratic ideologies (Sopranzetti 2020). In its original formulation, dhammacracy or Thai style democracy, politicians acquire the power to criminalize dissent, to assert a fundamental preeminence above the public, to, in other words, govern voting-citizens as predestined subjects in a hierarchy, by drawing their authority from the supposed dhamma – not the *demos* – their actions represent.

Similarly, after securing support from the IMF to restore its economy following the 1997 'Tom Yum Kung' financial crisis, political theorists translated a neoliberal conception of 'good governance' into competing conceptions of a political order rooted in the dhamma: *dhammarat,* or a 'dhamma' state, and *dhammaphibaan*, or dhammic governance (Sopranzetti 2022). Straying from and restoring 'good governance' was quickly recognized as both the cause and the corrective to the financial crisis (ibid). Original interpretations of 'good governance' as *29attana29m* did not attempt to imbue the term with religious or conservative attachments. The association was intended to compel political leaders to adhere to a transcendent, societal conceptualization of fairness when improving the country's democratic apparatus (Kasian 1998). However, following the coup that removed Thaksin from power in 2006, *29attana29m* became a conservative concept in keeping with anti-democratic visions of "Thai Style democracies" governed by unelected 'good persons' who justified their seizure of power with moral imperatives to expunge corruption and foster *29attana29m*. The eventual conversion of *29attana29m* to *thammaphiban* disassociated the former from what was characterized as corrupt party politics and, instead, depoliticized dhammic governance as a matter of technocratic "administrative morality." Doing so both bureaucratized morality and delegitimized the influence of elected officials, favoring instead the military, royal or self-appointed "good person" leadership.

My conception of 'dhammacracy' is more equivocal and, as such, ideologically more robust. Dhammacracy encompasses political projects with diverse human, nonhuman and metahuman agents who leverage the ideological affordance of the opaque, predestined, and transcendent force of dhamma, on the one hand, and of democratic visions of political representation, on the other, in ways that successfully tarry between the contradictory political ideals of the dhamma and the demos as the bases for political legitimacy. It encompasses claims of the NCPO dictatorship to suspend democratic processes in pursuit of a 'true order' that more closely resemble 'Thai style democracy,' while also expanding the concept to include design actors who mobilize dhammic forces to yield more democratic ends. It is a *dispositif* that enfolds actions, discourse, forms, and materials that draw from both the demos and the dhamma to sustain claims to power, legitimating both conservative and progressive pursuits that successfully blend the heterogeneous principles of Buddhist morality, dhammic soteriology, and democratic representation. It authorizes the fundamentally contradictory regimes of political value which is best encapsulated in the dialectical imagery of the new Thai parliament. Dhammacracy is made manifest in the cosmologics of the design activists who are trying to change Thai society through the siting, form, programming, ornamentation, and material choices of the *Sappaya Saphasathaan,* which weave together two interdiscursive threads from the ritual productions that have brought both dhammaraja and democratic political imaginaries into being in Thailand.

*Designing Dhammacracy* theorizes how the cosmological becomes praxiological in the political claims design activists are (literally) *making* in the materialization of new political worlds. This itself constitutes a new model of representative politics. In Peircian terms, dhammacratic design cannot be simplistically understood in iconic relation to the politics they are resembling, as something that passively serves the representation of politics. Design activists

treat their work—design as both a verb and noun—in an indexically iconic relationship with the politics of representation itself in Thailand. They visualize the improved system of relations among political actors in the architecture's form, materials, and programming (iconicity) and, in so doing, effect (index) alterations in political dynamics among the competing sovereignties of the interregna. The design itself was promised to act through its dhammic form and its democratic programming as a representative. Design activists who claim their designs will inspire moral behavior, prevent corruption, and facilitate increased participation among the populous likewise assert the privileged dhammacratic power to visualize dhamma and reproduce it in the forms and actors who emulate their models (*tuayaang*).

Agents of dhamma, or dhammacrats, also claim a degree of unimpeachability as enactors of a sacred moral order. This obtains in the worlds of dhammacratic politics and design, even (or especially when) the political orientations of dictators, demagogues or design activists are contrary to one another. Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code broadly prohibits any form of speech that the government can prove or construe as critical of *any* royal being, whether human or dog[8] (Reddy and Lowe 2012). In 2010 alone, the Thai government censored 110,000 websites for alleged anti-monarchy rhetoric. Since the selection of the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* in 2009, and particularly under the NCPO, the spectral surveillance apparatus that has policed and increasingly enforced article 112 was extended to the prohibition of political critique to both elected and usurping (junta) politicians. The "NCPO" translates in Thai to the "Council for the Preservation of State Peace[9]." It shares the same word "peace" in its name as does the architecture team that designed the *Sappaya Saphasathaan*: "31attan*."* In the service of said

[8] Some Thai commentators who have mocked or criticized *Khun Thongdaeng*, the favored dog of Ramam IX, have received jail sentences (Reddy and Lowe 2010).
[9] *khanaraksaakhwaamsangopheengchaat*

'peace,' in 2014 the NCPO made it illegal to perpetrate any conceivably critical "political symbol" such as publicly reading Orwell's *1984* or performing the Mockingjay's three fingered gesture from *The Hunger Games,* or publicly eating sandwiches in groups[10]. Soon after assuming his usurped title of Prime Minister, NCPO leader Prayuth commenced his campaign towards "a Thai style Democracy" (Guardian 3.22.15) by disrobing monks he deemed "corrupt," or in other *dhammaraja* terminology: "purifying the sangha." Archetypal *dhammaraja* like Rama IX, Rama I, Rama IV and Phya Lithai performed "purification" rituals soon after ascending to power, that involved purging errant monks ("purifying the Sangha"), translating the *Traibhumi* into a seemingly purer iteration, and transforming the *Traibhumi* cosmology into temples, palaces and master plans. The Prime Minister's purge of corrupt monks and ratification of the parliament project was a dhammacratic citation of *dhammaraja* world-making.

By performing *dhammaraja* world-making rites, the NCPO also condemned any form of criticism or resistance against them. In July 2016, students and reporters accused of criticizing even the NCPO government's latest constitutional referendum, which is a matter for public voting, were indefinitely imprisoned. The new Article 61 subjects "anyone who disseminates text, pictures or sounds that are inconsistent with *the truth*" (*Guardian* 8.3.15) with a jail sentence of up to ten years. In the Theravada cosmology, dhamma is "the truth" of the Buddha and the dhammaraja. Just as Thais are prohibited from questioning the dhamma of the monarchy's fauna[11] and family, during the interregna they increasingly could not question the "truth" of its dhammacrats. But, when a reporter asked a junta official why a recent protest against the construction of government residences on a sacred mountain and nature reserve in

[10] Shortly after the NCPO banned any group demonstrations, including gatherings of twelve persons or more, some enterprising students attempted to camouflage their dissent by organizing sandwich-eating gatherings. Soon even individual acts of consuming sandwiches with "anti-coup intent" in public was criminalized (PRI article, 6.27.2014)
[11] Online commentators who have mocked royal dogs, for instance, have received jail sentences (Reddy and Lowe 2010)

Chiang Mai was tolerated, the official replied "because they were not protesting a politician." There are no prohibitions on dissent against the dhammacratic government's designs, only its unelected 'good people.'

While in the case of the NCPO's suburban development near Chiang Mai, the architecture of a dhammacratic regime was a licit domain for dissent, the political resilience of the dhammic forms of design activist architecture provided its own ideological cover against reproach or modification. Sangop's decision to use the *Traibhumi* as the citational foundation of the entire complex's design endowed the architecture, and the architect's authority to defend their design, with an unquestionability similar to that enjoyed by dhammacrats in other political contexts. As described in more detail in Chapter 4, criticisms of material treatments or the sporadic incursion of a well-connected supplier's product into the contactor's corruption of Sangop's design often elicited uncompromising refusals from the Sangop architects on a simple justification: "because it is from the *Traibhumi*." As a canonical spiritual text, closely associated with the monarchy, the NCPO and the Sangha, a slight against the cosmography trespassed into the taboo because of the text's association with powerful and intolerant institutions. Architects were not simply protectors of their personal design, but stewards of the *Traibhumi* cosmopolitical cosmos that its architecture was materializing. Architectural criticism of dhammacratic forms was rendered profane.

2017. *Designification*

The rise of design activism in the interregna is due, I argue, to the felicitous compatibility of design ideologies with dhammacratic aesthetics of political change. The liminality of the interregna, the ideological framing of design as a technique for improving its phenomena, the figuration of a world-transforming selfless political actor, and the citational operations of design

converged into the second related concept this dissertation theorizes, a (metasemiotic) process I am calling *designification* (pronounced design-ification). The term is deliberately bivalent, capturing its ideological affordance to both de-signify and design-ify the phenomena it transforms. Its objects are treated *as-if* their cited meaning can be fundamentally altered, or *de-signified,* in the process of designification. At the same time, the metasemiotic framework to imagine such a semiotic alteration comes from ideologies of design that imagine its objects (signs) as matters that design processes will improve, or *design-ify*. Both operations are citational: the de-signed form cites an original sign, indicating both a continuity with and departure from it. Any citation similarly marks its simultaneous sameness and difference from the discursive event it refers to and distances from (Nakassis 2013). Citationality plays with sameness and difference between citing and cited events reflexively, and as such, opens the act of re-presentation to "new horizons of possibility, signification, and performative play" (ibid 51). Designification specifically brackets the (meta)semiotic play of citationality within the social domain of design. In so doing, designification ideologically packages the transformation between the citing de-sign and the cited sign as an ameliorative process with positive entailments for the interactions the designed citation mediates.

Under dhammacracy, designification was performed when design activists claimed political power by transforming references from the interregna's convolution of cosmologies – of the *Traibhumi,* democracy, dhamma, kingship, capital – into the citational details, systems and forms they designed into their spectacular projects. Be it a plug or golden stupa, design activists acted *as-if* the transmutation of a building element that comingled texts, textures, cosmology, institutions, and ideologies, could invest their designs with the power to "end corruption" and "improve morality." Just as the terms 'politicization' and 'depoliticization' characterize practices

and epistemologies that inject or extract politics, designification entails the capture of phenomena as design-able *and* de-signable, as capable of not only mediation but remediation, actualizable in future systems of relations.

Ideologies of design rendered the field amenable to dhammacratic visions of power. Guided by certain selfless actors capable of generating transformative forms that reorient the societies they mediate, dhammacracy adapts the *dhammaraja*, monk or *tuayaang* as a dhammic model that leads their onlookers to change their perceptions and emulate the moral order they embody. Social and design theory similarly recognize design as a field of transformative intervention in the lives of others, with designed things operating as transformative agents that infiltrate and manipulate the habitus of its human interlocutors. Social scientific characterizations typically emphasize some configuration of four common features that describe how design is intended to intervene in the lives of other humans: through form, order, planning and intentional human craft (Forty 1986; Murphy 2016; Papanek 1984). Yet, while design is considered an anthropogenic force of intentional order, it is also rendered as a potentially transformative modality for imaging and effecting emergent worlds. Latour explains that in French the word for design means "to re-look" (Latour 2008, 5), to see something in a new way. Architectural theorist Robert Somol similarly considers design as a fundamentally "transformative vision" in "diagrammatic work" that makes possible "the emergence of another world" (Somol 2002, 74). The philosopher Vilém Flusser, furthermore, observes "design" shares the same root as "sign," being *signum*: to represent or give meaning, but with the prefix "de-" (Flusser 1999). To design is to de-sign, to change the sign's representation. It is a process negatively oriented towards its model sign. It regards its prototype warily and endorses the boldness to reimagine it. Thus, design is seen to create critically. This is why Benjamin associated design with works by Adolf

Loos, Le Corbusier and Paul Klee that revealed an orientation toward "the absolutely new…founded on insight and renunciation" through which "mankind is preparing to outlive culture…with a laugh" (Benjamin 2002, 738). Agamben, similarly, associates "design" with both "play" and "profanation" (Agamben 2007). If something sacred is played with, it can be profaned, because such play "neutralizes what it profanes" (ibid, 77). Such play removes the object from its context, severs aesthetic strictures, negates its established sign while also reproducing the original as the design enunciates its profane departure from it. Such play de-signs. Of course, design can either stabilize ideologies in built form, but also materialize the risk of other visions, worlds, qualities, and actors contaminating an ideology's reproduction.

Designification affords design activists the power to make interlocutors re-look, to semiotically play with the discursive events it cites, no matter how sacred, and re-ify its de-signed form in a manner that is referential without being reverential. Designification can sustain recognition of the model it is transforming, thus offering design activism a surreptitious modality of political insurrection against powerfully repressive regimes while not appearing iconoclastic. Hence my proposition to a contradiction that motivated my doctoral research: how does a group of socialist activists commit themselves to the realization of a 14$^{th}$ century royalist cosmography in an architectural form that glorifies the monarchy and enshrines the ruling dictatorship in sacred forms? Designification provides the answer, and does so through three interrelated processes, each of which is theorized in its own chapter: representation (chapter 2), visualization (chapter 3), and materialization (chapter 4). While the design activism of the parliament design best illuminates the politics of designification—and the designification of politics—royalist and community design activism similarly unfolded through the designification of the "alternative system" they hoped to actualize on behalf of their respective sovereign commitments. The

interventions they designed also sustained citations of the interregna's competing sovereignties—popular, royal, military—while insinuating alternative models in the designed worlds their work and discourse projected into post-interregna futures.

Designification within the apparatus of dhammacracy provides an alternative to the canonical ultimatum Le Corbusier inscribed in the final words of his 1929 manifesto *Verse une Architecture* (*Towards a New Architecture),* which he considered to be "at the root of the social unrest of today: architecture or revolution" (Le Corbusier 1989, 289). Dhammacracy and designification, both reflexively citational concepts that uphold and upend, while packaging the interstitial transformation as progress—one an apparatus of power the other a technique of it—offer visions of something in between architecture and revolution, being both and neither, and thus escaping the exercise of arbitrary power by Thailand's repressive ruling elite in ways very few alternative political visions have.

### 2017. *Chapter Overview*

*Designing Dhammacracy* traces the ways in which dhammacracy materializes through the designification of its politics. This unfolds in three related processes, each of which is expanded into one chapter of the dissertation. Each chapter shares a trans-scalar methodology that captures the melding of politics and design in the design activism of Thailand's interregna, tracing the ways in which political imaginaries are shaped from the scale of words to worlds, constitutions to constructions, texts to textures, and building details to social systems.

Chapter one, 'Designing Dhammacracy,' elaborates the concept of dhammacracy and historically situates the discourses of dhammic and democratic political orders it intertwines. The chapter's overall objective is to theorize the discourses and semiotic ideologies that produce the figuration of the 'design activist' as an eligible political actor at the time of the interregna. To do

so, the chapter provides detailed historical analyses of the *dhammaraja* type, and delineates how the monarchy has claimed the moral authority to construe its actions and outcomes as manifestations of dhamma. The chapter similarly traces the genealogy of the non-royal political actor who channels a more opaque and arbitrary moral authority to suspend democratic processes, assume a dictatorial power over society, and to do so under the guise of a 'good person' (*khon dii*) political archetype. As such, these competing non-democratic forebearers to the 'dhammacrat'—political agent of dhammacracy—calibrate their authority with a careful balance of two forms of power: the auratic and moral power of *barami*, and the authoritative but also amoral power of *amnaat.* Negotiating these two models of power that are interdiscursively woven together in the design activist (a dhammacrat) determines the political longevity of Thailand's leaders (Sopranzetti 2020). While the figurative forbearers of the dhammacrat—the *dhammaraja* and good person—predicate their power on the anti-democratic depoliticization of governance through military coups, ritualized dhammic entitlement, and the increasing exclusion of popular representation across the country's twenty constitutions, design activists expand the arena of cosmopolitics through the delegation of non-human *tuayaang* representatives that are designed to sustain what one activist calls, "another way than democracy." This is how they come to design dhammacracy.

Chapters two, three and four ethnographically explore the triadic processes of designification used by design activists in their designs for dhammacracy. Chapter two, 'The Designification of Representation: Drawing Lines between Graft & Craft in the Architecture of Thailand's Interregna,' contemplates the actions and discourse of designers who enact the role of the people's "representative" as they attempt to curtail political corruption through design management. The analysis emulates an anthropological 'thick description' of a provocatively

disorienting punctum—a misplaced detail that displaces a simplistic reading of its surrounding phenomena. Beginning with a contentious dispute over the color of a single representative plug in a workshop mock-up for one desk in what will become the most grandiose parliament ever constructed, the analysis situates this detail within the cosmopolitical economy of representative forms, forces and actors of which the plug is a small but significant formation. The chapter shows how in the parliaments of design workshops, representatives of competing sovereignties legislate the balance of power through debates over design details. For design activists of the parliament, the corruption of the design indexes the corruption of politics itself, and thus any compromises to contractors, suppliers, or the political interests they represent is considered a concession to the entropy of the 'alternative' system of dhammacracy they hope their architecture will realize. The chapter articulates in greater detail the concept of 'designification' as the citational framework through which design activists hope to actualize their political projects among the public their design's will one day mediate.

The chapter inevitably explores a central question of this research: how are Thai designers envisioning their design-work as not just political representations, but political representatives? In pursuit of an answer, this chapter also fits within the literature both on political representation and on the politics of representation. Theories of political representation are generally anthropocentric, focusing on how a human representative "makes present again" (Pitkin 1967) an absent party of humans, interests, disagreements (Urbinati 2000), or discourses (Dryzek 2008) in decision making forums. My project builds off Latour's critique: that typically political philosophy considers only one form of representation – the gathering of a legitimate human assembly – while neglecting an inseparable second "object-oriented" definition of a "parliament of things" – those things that portray issues and concerns to such assemblies (Latour

1991). A common configuration underlies both conceptions: representation brackets a set of relations among a presence, a re-presence (its representation) and the transformative space in between. This transformative space is both powerful and volatile. Theories of representation differ according to how representation's gap corrupts (Locke 1689; Rousseau 1762), mediates (Hull 2012; Kafka 2012; Warner 1990), disciplines (Foucault 1966, 1977), and translates (Derrida 1972, 1982; Gal 2009) in the modulation of a presence into a re-presence. As Derrida famously indicated, many of these theories reify a "metaphysics of presence" that configures a representation as a departure, distortion, or violent replacement of an idealized original presence. However, this chapter echoes challenges from anthropologists of Southeast Asia (Geertz 1980; Jackson 2004; Klima 2001; Morris 2000) who demonstrate that not all societies look upon representation as a lack or derivative difference from a more real presence. Thai Buddhist semiotic ideologies of surface (Jackson 2004), corpses (Klima 2001), models (Grey 1984), and photographs (Morris 2000) value appearances and surfaces as realities, not as fetishistic tokens of a diluted type. In considering political representation from different cosmological orientations, the chapter asks, can referential designs, like Mt Meru architecture, play a non-representational political force that collapses the presence-represence binary?

Chapter three, 'Designification's Gimmick: From Visualization to Actualization,' considers the confluence of Theravada and design ideologies of modeling that are active in design studios, workshops, and exhibitions, through which actors imagine visualization as a technique for actualizing morality in politics. The chapter situates 'visualization' discursively and historically at the conjuncture of two regimes of visibility: one, a Theravadin order that associates moral perspicacity and embodiment with the transformative force of dhamma; two, reformist design ideologies that aestheticizes immersive designs, like the *gesamtkunstwerk* (total

work of art), which saturate the experience of the inhabitant with the 'feelings' of an alternative worldview that a comprehensively systematic design renders atmospheric. Using ethnographic material drawn from workshop observations, studio charettes, and design activist interviews, the chapter delineates how design activism relied on these conjoined aesthetic ideologies to formulate their theory of political action that they emically call, in English, 'visualization.' In its conclusion, the chapter situates design activist theories of 'visualization' as a 'gimmick' of designification – a political expedient that bypasses the fraught and futile instruments of Thailand's volatile political system through catalytic design—within contemporary theories of gimmickry and the semiotics of visualization.

Chapter four, 'Matter|Realization: Design Activist Materialisms in Thailand's Interregna,' analyzes the ways in which royal, parliamentary and popular sovereignties materialize in the affective powers design actors attribute to agentive building materials. The chapter takes seriously Tim Ingold's advice to "follow materials" (Ingold 2007) not as static properties but active flows, observing how their "qualia" (Munn 1976) become actualized across contexts as they shape and are shaped the interactions they mediate. This project aligns with anthropologists (Dawdy 2016; Hull 2012; Munn 1976; Keane 2005, 2013; Nakassis 2013) who have theorized materialization as a process through which certain qualities, even histories (Ingold 2007), of materials emerge as salient, powerful, and contingently 'real' features of a thing through and across interactions. Paying close attention to the history of teak commodification in relation to the materialization of the Thai state in maps, laws, trade, and institutions, the chapter tracks these material-flows and the realities they make imaginable in the controversies that arise around the new parliament's materials and the agencies they are accorded. During my fieldwork, teak exercised remarkable political power. While the ruling junta criminalized any construable act of

dissent, they rewarded rural protestors demonstrating against the harvesting of government owned teak for the new parliament by conceding to their demands. Government officials justified their capitulation with what became a mantra of design activism: “teak is the DNA of the Thai people.” The chapter tracks this discourse, and other political causes that get bundled into teak designs, as actors across the political spectrum rationalized their respective interventions through ‘materialisms’—ideologies of materialities—that treat materials as collaborative activists in their own right.

# Chapter 1

## *Designing Dhammacracy*

One sweltering morning in May 2019, four Sangop architects and I had participated in a walk-through workshop in the construction site of the world's largest parliament. This occurred on the eve of the first election since the 2014 coup, when the ruling junta ousted a popularly elected Prime Minister and established a repressive regime in the interest of supposedly curtailing corruption and defending the monarchy. As usual, the architects identified egregious construction mistakes in the contractors' work, despite the painstaking care Sangop had invested crafting a 200-page operation manual explaining precisely how construction workers and engineers ought to realize the meticulously rendered 5,000 pages of construction drawings they generated. Sangop architects often insisted, "the drawings are our contract with the [Thai] people." Design mistakes for the parliament design were, effectively, a violation of the social contract between Sangop and the people their building was designed to serve. Yet, they were commonplace. Even worse, Sangop design activists were adamant that the mistakes were deliberate, and thus *not* mistakes but lucrative acts of corruption perpetrated by the STECON contractors, on behalf of a powerful network of business magnates and the politicians they manipulated. Since thousands of drawings and written tutorials were ineffective at preempting these manifestations of corruption, Sangop had institutionalized almost daily workshops on site, where they demanded full scale mock-ups of every detail they designed. This is where corruption

materialized as bad architecture[1], and where the lamination of design and political accountability motivated design activism.

That day, corruption surfaced in the negative space between the marble clad walls of the Senate hallway, which were managed by one subcontractor's team, and the insulated dropped ceiling, managed by another subcontractor's team. Exasperated, sweaty and coated in concrete dust, the design activists invited me to join them not at the on-site commissary, but at a more luxurious air-conditioned northern Thai restaurant on the top floor of a neighboring mall. We piled into Prem's (one of the 5 principal architects in Sangop) immaculate BMW and retreated into the mall for some commensality and commiseration.

Prem was a designated National Artist, the owner of a very successful private practice, a celebrity architect in Thailand and a passionate political activist for almost 50 years. Despite his prestige in the worlds or art and design (and his luxury car), he always appeared disheveled in threadbare clothing and tousled salt and pepper hair. At our many meals together, we always ate street food cuisines from either Isaan province or Chiang Mai, where Prem was raised in a politically active Buddhist community. He and his Sangop partners first met as student activists in the transformative protests against anti-democratic forces in the Octobers of 1973 and 1976. Those who survived those protests, where hundreds died, are known as "Octoberists," and are commonly recognized for their outspoken political activism. Now, decades later this distinguished cabal of activist friends toil daily on the site of the most prominent architectural commission in the nation's history, designing the largest parliament ever made, during the double interregna between a revered king and his reviled heir, and another dictatorship and its farcical restoration of nominal electoralism. As they were buying me lunch, one illustrious architect

[1] More will be elaborated about the design workshops, the configuration of design deviation as corruption, and the design activism happening within the design process itself in the next chapter.

admitted, "[2]we have not been paid in seven years. Well, they pay us a salary, but a worker's salary. No profit. We have to pay 1.3 million baht ($40,000) in fines to the parliament every year."

This would be a startling disclosure for any architect with such a distinguished commission. But in Bangkok this was particularly baffling. Principally, because the parliament's delay is notoriously attributed to the construction management company, STECON, and a burgeoning budget. Contractually, STECON is obligated to pay the Thai government 100,000 baht for every day they are late delivering the completed project. But, after running almost a decade behind schedule, rather than pay one baht of the 3.6 billion they contractually owe in penalties, STECON has benefitted from serial contract extensions and expansions. When the military agreed to relocate their facilities at the current site of the new parliament, STECON garnered the commission to build them a new campus outside the city. When the government seized the land belonging to the century-old public Yothinburana school in the northeast corner of the property, razing it to the ground to create "Democracy Park," the commission to build the new 300-million-baht replacement campus down the road went to STECON. STECON benefitted handsomely from project mistakes, delays, the architects' exactitude, and controversies.

Why were the architects of the illustrious and well-intentioned design penalized? Why would they work tirelessly at their personal and pecuniary peril for no pay? Recall from the introduction of the dissertation, that some architects frequently envisioned a future in which they would witness the fruition of their design in the polity's enhanced democratic representation and improved morality in government, but from the vantage of

[2] As noted in every chapter, any dialogue that is quoted was originally communicated in Thai, unless I indicate that the speaker used English.

a prison cell. “We would love to take you on a tour of the finished building if we are not in prison,” quipped one design activist working on the parliament. Perhaps despite the fines and the specter of violence, the architects will attract additional commissions that will compensate for their sacrifices? Not according to them. Witee, the architect who authored the 200-page drawing manual and who visited the construction site daily, admitted in English:

> “I have never stopped working on this project. I was working on it today. I don’t boast about the project. I am proud of my church designs a lot more than this. Even though this has become my life, for seven years. It will probably be another three years at least or more. I do it because I am patriotic. I want to help my country. I want to protect the design and the money of the design. People say this is the dream of a Thai architect, to design our parliament, but it is like a patriotic burden. I might be proud in the future, but at the moment, I don’t like the people I have to work with. But this is my duty. It is my duty to be an activist. I don’t need to do this. I can get paid well to do other work.”

According to Witee, his commitment was selfless. He earned neither prestige nor money for his service. He faced daily antagonism from influential contractors reticent to maintain the architects’ standards for the design, who bristled at the architects’ bulwark against the infiltration of well-connected suppliers that Sangop did not vet and who did not bid for competitive pricing when funds were allocated according to the original construction documents. Fulfilling his duty was Witee’s own recompense. Though as a devout Christian, he would frequently disavow any credence in the cosmological agencies of the design, the moral intonation of his patriotic “duty” as a design activist cites Theravadan social aesthetics. The fulfillment of “duty” (*nathii*) is itself a meritorious act, made possible according to one’s configuration in a cosmic, karmic hierarchy (Hanks 1962; Gombrich 1988; Reddy 2017). In fact, according to the influential activist monk Buddhadasa Bhikku, the *dhamma* manifests in duty fulfilment.

"The *Dhamma* in rice farming," lectures Buddhadasa, "with its dutiful plowing in the hot sun behind a buffalo, is enjoyable and conducted with a felt smile. The early rice farmers knew such satisfaction because they felt their duty as their most important moral responsibility and action. The most important thing that we can do is our duty" (Buddhadasa 1991,Reddy 2017). Witee's sacrifice was thus a selfless commitment to his place in a cosmo-polity, and an index of his own moral authority. Duty was uncorruptible, it was a manifestation of a functioning cosmic system. Like dirt in Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, which she theorized as "matter out of place" (Douglas 2002) in systems of hygiene, corruption and erroneous details were matter out of place, indices of a system gone awry. For Witee, the dhamma was in the details and his duty to the demos.

Despite the financial penalties and legal precarities of their activism, Witee's colleague Prem elaborated that this sacrifice was not a deprivation, but the meritorious fulfillment of a duty to address a lack in Thai political society. In one patrimonial metaphor, he likened his duty as a design activist to both his design and his nation (the two were inseparable) as that of a father figure to his progeny. Sangop would assume co-parental duties over the populace that they had no contractual obligation to fulfill:

> If my child was falling, I could catch him. Thailand and the *Sappaya Saphasathan* doesn't have this person. We only do it…Witee, Pong, Mate, Peung and I [Sangop] do it. Shop drawings are not our department. The problems are blamed on us, the slowness is blamed on us. Work gets done even though it is not the design. It doesn't conform to drawings, and we are the ones left to say, 'this is not right' and we are blamed for it. We have to do everything, not just design. We don't have a duty (*naathii)* to manage construction, only a designer, but we must do it. My family says I must be proud (*phum jai*) of what I do…Mate [the landscape architect] avoided getting married because we need to be prepared to fight.

Their professional duties did not entail the years of construction management, the thousands of workshops they convened, and the thankless toil protecting their design that occupied them daily,

for which they were fined handsomely. Instead, they are driven by a patriotic imperative and moral duty to defend their design and thereby staunch misappropriation and misrepresentation. Regrettably, their orthodoxy to the design has been folded into the very system of self-interested profiteering they are battling: contractors erect erroneous details with off-the-books suppliers, that the designers then reject, entailing contract extensions, more resource expenditure and more wealth for the contractor network at the public and the architects' expense. While the provision of their services for seven years of unpaid labor, then, could be considered a donation to their country in defiance of their antagonists who prey on the taxpayer purse with impunity, the imperative that they "must" incur the threat of imprisonment, antagonizing a dictatorship and a politically connected contractor, and the sacrifice of a potential family in order to "fight" on the field of design activism is doing other ideological work.

This chapter argues that the sacrifices, duties, and uniquely cultivated faculties to perceive ills and actualize corrective interventions through their designs are characteristics common to the figure of the 'design activist' who emerges as a transformative agent during a liminal moment in Thai politics. This figuration draws interdiscursively from two figurations of transformative political actors: the enlightened *dhammaraja* – or king who acts on behalf of dhamma; and the selfless "good person" (*khon dii/phuu dii*) political player authorized to act against democratic processes because of his uncorruptible moral integrity. The conjuncture of these discursive lineages in the figure of the design activist affords the expansion of each political ideology—monarchical, autocratic, democratic—into both an agent of dhamma and representative of the demos, who has the power to disseminate vectors of moral correction via their48attana48mned designs.

This genealogy will help answer a question that haunts the dissertation as a whole: why has design become a field of political intervention now? How are design activists authorized to act as representatives and design nonhuman political representatives? The answer lies in the conjuncture of dhammic, democratic and design ideologies that culminates during the interregna as a cosmopolitical *dispositíf* of power I call *dhammacracy*. Citing contradicting sovereign aesthetics of the *dhammaraja*—absolutist, hierarchical, authorized as agents of dhamma—and of democracy—popular representation, electoral choice, authorized agents of the demos—*dhammacrats* can be instantiations of both and neither sovereign formation just as the monarchy, the military and the parliament are vying for political power over the post-interregna future. The conclusion of the opening vignette will illustrate the sovereign agonisms of *dhammacracy* that design mediates, and the affordance therein for design activists to emerge as *dhammacrats* in the new political world they helped build.

*Part I: Dhammacracy*

As we were wiping the sweet-sour-spicy residue of *som tam* (shredded papaya salad) and *laarp bet (*a ground duck salad) with balls of glutinous sticky rice from shared plates, news coverage of the latest political controversy flashed across a television overhead. The commiseration conversation over the architects' sacrifice and the injustice of their design campaign came to an abrupt silence. An extraordinary anomaly in the divide between the monarchy and parliament was breeched one month earlier, the repercussions of which were still agitating the political arena. In February 2019, the oldest sister of the new King, Princess Ubol Ratana, broke all political protocol and declared her candidacy for Prime Minister in the first elections since the 2014 coup. Traditionally, though constitutions appoint the King as "the head of state," the royal family has cultivated a ritualized and charismatic claim to a pure form of

power—*barami*—that is buttressed by avoiding any direct participation in parliament and thus sustaining a diaphanous performance of being "above politics." However, Princess Ubol occupied a liminal position in the royal family, having abdicated any royal titles and titular privileges when she married an American in 1972. Though she reclaimed the title "Princess" after divorcing her husband in 1998, her marriage foreclosed any privileges to the honorific "Her Royal Highness." This foray into royal gossip is important, because it highlights how the Princess herself occupied a somewhat labile position between sovereignties: she was the eldest child of the revered Rama IX but she had surrendered the distinction accorded those most immediate to the throne. She was quasi royal and thus quasi eligible to be otherwise. She had a claim to the demos and the dhamma, and thus dhammacratic power.

Perhaps the most sensational aspect of this gambit, however, was Princess Ubol's decision to run as the candidate for the *Thai Raksa Chart* party, the faction most closely affiliated with the two exiled Shinawatra Prime Ministers, and their red shirt followers. Only Thaksin Shinawatra, a former policeman and telecommunications magnate, and his younger sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, have won popular elections in the past thirty years. Both were ousted and exiled by the successive military coups of 2006 and 2014. Both coups suspended the government's democratic pretenses and the latest constitution with the justification of portectig the monarchy, curtailing corruption, restoring morality, and expunging the Shinawatras from authoritative political power–*amnaat*. While the candidacy of a royal for political office was unprecedented, her alignment with the only popularly elected officials that ever vied with the charismatic sway of her father was an act of royal heresy.

Later that day her younger brother, the new King and wealthiest monarch alive, formally denounced the appointment. The King's statement declared that "involvement of a high-ranking

member of the royal family in politics, in any way, is against the nation's traditions, customs and culture and is therefore considered improper and highly inappropriate" (NYTimes 2/9/19). Anyone with the vaguest knowledge of the late King's influence during 15 out of the 18 coups in the past century would find the current King's claim that the royal family was non-political completely preposterous. No coup can be complete without royal sanction, support or passive complicity. Though the constitution appoints the king as the "head of state," the royal family is hyper-political, being nominally above politics while also overshadowing politics in the monarchy's charismatic penumbra. Since the 1960s, the monarchy's political influence has been absolute. Princess Ubol's application was legal, and yet by the end of the day the King's censure precipitated the immediate withdrawal of her candidacy and the dissolution of the entire political party. That same day the ruling dictator, Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-O-Cha, announced his candidacy in the elections his junta had engineered, declaring "I am willing to sacrifice myself in order to protect Thailand." The specter of patrimonial sacrifice encompassed the dictator and the design activists at my table, who were sacrificing their lives and paying penalties to build his parliament.

The news that interrupted our meal discussed the latest chapter of the ongoing tension between the Shinawatras and democracy, on the one hand, and the ruling authoritarian king and his autocratic Prime Minister on the other. We did not share beers this meal because the sale of alcohol was banned the day preceding and the day of national elections. This was the day before the elections, a day referred to as "the night of the howling dogs." The expression is derisive, referring to the arrival of political party brokers at the home of rural Thai voters under the cover of night, when the opportunistic poor electorate sell their votes to corrupt agents of the competing political parties. This myth evokes a moralizing discourse that is mobilized by

Thailand's latest coup-de-jour after ousting its opposition, or suspending democratic processes, or coordinating a new constitution constraining political representation further under the auspices of "good leadership." It blames misrepresentation on a body politic that is too unschooled, too self-interested, or too unprincipled to warrant the privilege to vote. Each of its 18 coups, each of its 20 constitutions, ritualizes a "good person" (*phuu dii* or *khon dii*[3]) discourse as a justification to commandeer, suspend or defer democratic powers until the usurping regime can re-orient the country toward a distant democratic horizon.

It is this mythology that underlies the King's message that day to Thai voters, reminding "voters should support 'good people' to rule Thailand."[4] Most of the King's statement, in fact, siphoned both the words and the charismatic power (*barami)* of his father, who at the 1989 National Jamboree, adjured his audience to:

> please let it be known about an important thing in governing, that in the country, there are both good and bad people. No one will make all people become good people. So to give the country normality and order is not about making everyone become good people, but it lies in supporting goodness, so that good people govern the country and restraining bad people from having power in order not to create confusion.

On the surface, the advice sounds perfectly sensible: elect people with integrity. But the "good person" in Thai political history is seldom an elected official. Choice and 'goodness' in politics are historically antonymic values to ruling elites. This is in part why a tweet issued hours later from the former Prime Ministerial candidate (for several hours) and the Princess (all her life), Ubol Ratana, was so polemical. In response to her brother's invocation of the "good people"

[3] Recent protests have substituted the genderless *khon* for the masculine *phuu*, and simply refer to this discourse as *khondii*. As this chatper will elaborate in section III, the 'good person' political actor emerged first as *phudii*, or 'gentleman.' However, for the entirety of the chapter, I follow the conventions of recent activists and simply use *khondii* to refer to this political figuration.

[4] Prachatai. 3/24/2019. "Support good people to rule this country," says King of Thailand on eve of election. https://prachataienglish.com/node/7990

discourse, Princess Ubol reminded voters "we grownups can choose for ourselves.[5]" The statement undermined the King's moral authority to influence Thai voters and the hidden manipulations among conservative "good people" to dictate government operations—like the ruling dictator and leading candidate for the post, who promised to sacrifice himself for his nation. Popular 'choice' was pitted against "good person" power, again. Almost instantly, this became the most circulated tweet in Thailand. The other condition that made this tweet polemical was the context in which it was posted. Princess Ubol was photographed that day in Hong Kong, embracing Thaksin at the wedding of his daughter. Yingluck was also photographed with the Princess. The tweet was issued at a Shinwatra wedding in exile.

Even for a band of Octoberist design activists who openly align themselves with red shirt politics, Thaksin elicits considerable ambivalence. In the early 2000s, he was a promising and inspiring figure. One day in his home studio, Prem recalled the genesis of their design concept, which was, in short: transforming the *Traibhumi* into the parliament architecture in order to end corruption. He reminisced,

> our initial idea was to ask ourselves what do we dream for the new Thai parliament? We need a parliament *for (peua)* no corruption [emphasis add]. Corruption has stayed with us for a long time. Everybody does it. Like Thaksin. At first, all of us loved him. He was creative. He represented the people. He had a vision. If he was not corrupt and violent, we would have continued to love him. But his corruption made me think he is very dangers. The *Traibhumi* concept is there to change Thai society.

Prem's description of Thaksin resembles that of a design activist: he was creative, he was a representative of the public, he manifested his vision. But his self-interest fostered corruption and, with it, the need Prem felt to design a parliament *for* no corruption. The preposition is important in its indexicality. With the testament of their fallen political hero, Thaksin, who

[5] #โตแล้วเลือกเองได้ (the tweet has since been removed)

succumbed to corruption, Sangop lost faith in an uncorruptible politician. So, they did not presume to design a parliament *for* non-corrupt politicians, or a parliament *of* no corruption, or *without* corruption. No, the parliament building was designed *for* the eradication of corruption.

They were cynical about human politicians but optimistic about the power of architectural representation, and their ability to design it. This was again reinforced by the newsflash about Princess Ubolratana on the eve of the election that diverted our attention to the television. Turning back to his interlocutors at the table, Prem engaged in the following discussion with Witee and Mate on one type of power, *amnaat*:

> Prem: This makes me realize that we no longer have anyone who can instruct the people (*prachachon*). This is the way they play so that power (*amnaat*) reaches only the elite: everyone claims the people (*aang prachachon*) but no one thinks of them who says this.
>
> Mate: but our approach to *Thainess* (*khwaampen Thai*) considers everyday people, not the elite. We see how villagers (*chonabot*) live, we see what they think is important. Elites and democracy claim the people only as an opportunity to gain power (*amnaat*) and money, to exploit with no interest in the people.
>
> Witee (*in English and Thai*): to explain to people what our current election offers is 'to run from the tiger into the crocodile.' I don't know who to choose who is a good person who *wants* to be in the House. We need a new batch, a young batch now! The biggest problem in my life is corruption. The head of the parliament has relations with politicians and the contractor. They should be fining STECON but they are not because of corruption. There are no consequences for going slow: 3.6 billion baht ($120 million) in fines should be paid by November. Construction management knows who has power (*amnaat*).
>
> Mate: we are all working for our own safety.

There are several important associations to note in this discussion. First, their conversation about political corruption and inadequate representation was precipitated by the news about the King's admonition to choose "good people," his sister's retort that "the people" should choose and the presence of the Shinawatra family amidst this brokering of the monarchy, the parliament and the people. This typified the political problems their parliament was designed *for*: as an architectural

aid for the public to choose representatives worthy of the parliament's sacred form. Second, Sangop architects recognized their relationship with the people as different. They *see* and *learn* from the people, rather than accrue power by claiming them without recognition. Third, the discussion revolved around a particular conception of self-interested power, *amnaat*, that the monarchy, politicians, and contractors are generating through corruption, misappropriation, and misrepresentation. Having aligned themselves and their advocacy with 'the people,' the subject "our" of Mate's assertion, "we are working for our own safety," is ambiguous: is it the safety of the designers? The demos? Both? Finally, the digression begins with an omission. There is "no longer" someone to teach the people. This lack implicitly implicates the late king, who inherited a beleaguered monarchy under dubious circumstances and over seven decades helped sanctify his office in the ritual trappings of past *dhammarajas* while becoming the wealthiest monarch on earth. The architects insinuated the positive influence of their work, their designs, into the void left by their late *dhammaraja*. His power, and by extension their's and their designs', was not limited to *amnaat.* They also had *barami*.

Thai studies scholarship distinguishes three types of power: *amnaat, ittiphon,* and *barami*. *Amnaat* is an authoritative, physical power that is actualized as a power to make people or things act in particular ways (Pavin 2022, Sopranzetti 2020). *Amnaat* is typically a power derived from one's position that is earned in a formal hierarchy. As such, it can be a power for good or ill, a power that benefits the system or that is abused for self-aggrandizement. *Ittiphon* translates as an "influential" power, and carries the connotation of an ill-gotten power that insinuates and coerces those it controls (Tamada 1991) . This is a power that exceeds the authority one ought to have given their position in a social order. Organized criminals are called *phu mii itthipon* or 'people with influential power.' Military officials who break the law with

violent interference in politics use *itthipon* not *amnaat*. Lobbyists manipulate politicians and contractors through *ittiphon*.

Finally, *barami* is an auratic, charismatic power accrued through the accumulation of merit across many lives. It derives from the Pali word *parami*, meaning "perfection." To attain enlightenment, a Boddhisatva or Buddha-to-be, had to accrue 10 *parami* across their lives (Jory 2002). No appointment, office or bank balance alone can generate *barami*. Traditionally, this is a power exercised by kings, monks, Boddhisatva and the Buddha, figures who enact and thereby make visible the *dhamma*. *Barami*, then, constitutes a moral power; *amnaat* constitutes an authoritative, structural power; and *itthipon* indexes a cynical, selfish power over others.

In the Thai political imaginary, there are two models of political legitimacy that are empowered by very different configurations of *barami* and *amnaat* (Sopranzetti 2020). One model governs with power, mainly *amnaat*, that is generated through elections, political participation, popular choice, and the position one attains through these processes. Those who exercise *amnaat* privilege democratic processes over claims to morality. *Barami* on the other hand, is monarchic, moralistic and undergirds claims to political power by "good people" acting on behalf either of the monarchy or its democratic decoy, "Thai style democracy." "Good people" (*khon dii*) are often not elected, like royalty, military leaders, bureaucrats, or politicians who appoint or affirm one another. They assert a righteous power that privileges morality above democratic processes, typically suspending or deferring the latter until their cabal of "good people" can first prepare a moral foundation in Thai society for the democratic powers the polity has yet to deserve. One model generates power from the demos, the other over the demos on behalf of the dhamma—a righteous truth that unfolds in realizations of morality.

The challenge is, of course, parsing the power claims as one model of governance asserts itself over the other. While status and influential offices have laws and budgets that give their officers authority, those with *amnaat* can compel good or bad behavior. And while *barami* is itself an unequivocally positive and natural type of power, its intrinsic properties and the karmic commitments it took to accrue *barami* make its origins inscrutable, and therefore its authenticity debatable. Was someone efficacious because of *barami*, and thus a moral or dhammic mandate, or *amnaat*, and thus a more ambiguous official power? Was their power appropriate or excessive? This question underlies the entire volatile political history of a constitutional monarchy that has pulsated with 18 coups, 20 constitutions and 3 parliament buildings in less than a century.

The answer determines one's political longevity. An effective political leader in either model of governance must calibrate a balance of the two types of power – *amnaat* and *barami* – to survive the vicissitudes of Thai politics (Pavin 2022; Sopranzetti 2020). In fact, Sopranzetti claims that the tenure of any charismatic Thai leaders since the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) has negotiated mastery of the two. And, since former Prime Minister and Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram reclaimed power in a military coup in 1947, followed by a series of "modernization" reforms, the discourse of the "good person" governor has shared a common cause: the eradication of "corruption." Anti-corruption campaigns are often mobilized by "good person" political actors levying their *barami* against typically elected officials who abused the *amnaat* they obtained ignominiously. The ruling NCPO and its dictatorial leader, Prayuth, cited the same interdiscursive antimony between the *barami* of good people like himself against the *amnaat* of politicians like the Prime Minister he ousted, Yingluck Shinawatra. As Sopranzetti describes, "Prayuth is attempting to broker a new equilibrium in which the

government of the 'good people' can live inside the empty shell of an electoral democracy" (Sopranzetti 2020, 60).

A cynical rendering of Sangop's design for the *Sappaya Saphasathan* could delineate the same imagery: a democratic shell that protects the seeds for ongoing autocracy. They did, after all, transform a 14th century royalist cosmology that configures the universe as a stratified ontology, graduated from top to bottom according to one's karma and, by extension, descending claims to *barami*. And, they legitimated their design for the *Sappaya Saphasathan—Sappaya* translating as "comfort in dhamma" and the name as a whole "a place for doing good deeds and karma"—as an architectural instrument to end corruption. Hence the censure of detractors who condemn the design as fascist, royalist and undemocratic: on the surface, the design embodies the "good person" aesthetic of anti-democratic governance. One of the *Sappaya Saphasathaan's* more prominent critics, the academic Chatree Prakitnonthakarn, reported on *Prachathai* news that the design "did not reflect the principles of democracy, such as equality, rights and freedom, and the designers were more concerned about irrelevant points" (Prachathai 2009). Specifically, the preoccupation with morality rather than democracy troubled Ajaarn Chatri: "it is not that morality is bad, or unnecessary, but just to refer to religious morality over and over again does not solve social problems. If that was the case, why shouldn't we invite monks to run the country instead?" (ibid). What Ajaarn Chatri laments as the repetitiveness of the morality discourse is, of course, the interdiscursive basis for much of the design's polemical power: it draws precisely from over a century of conservative forces that legitimate their righteous power, their *barami*, as a moral imperative that trumps the pursuit and challenges Thailand's amenability to democracy. Why then is a group of self-described design activists, who identify with socialist politics and

condemn the conservativism of every elected official in the nation's history, repeating the discursive script of those they have spent decades opposing?

The short answer spills across the pages of this dissertation: because their goal is also not democracy, but as many design activists describe their ambition, "an alternative system," one I am labeling *dhammacracy*. Drawing from and thereby not abandoning either its dhammic or demic poles, *dhammacracy* constitutes a liminal political ideology that tarries between moral *barami* power and authoritative *amnaat* power, between the sovereignty of the king, military and the "bureaucratic polity" on one end and popular sovereignty on the other. It enshrines democratic choice, but makes the aesthetics of political judgement an object of design by recruiting architecture to align the will of the demos with the ineluctable force of the *dhamma*. And, significantly, design activism can emerge in the interregna as a force of *dhammacracy* precisely because its human and nonhuman agents can cite the forms and materiality of the competing sovereignties, of *barami* and *59attan*, of *dhammic* and democratic institutions, and materialize the resulting *dhammacratic* assemblages in the worlds of monumental government architecture.

While conservative movements have located *barami* in the king, the military, the technocrats chosen by the former, or the dictator who justifies his insurrection, design activists align moral power with the Thai people. The dhamma was with the demos, not the demagogues. Remarkably, this is true for both parliament architects (Sangop) and royal architects (FAD). At a public lecture during an annual Design Week festival that is held at the Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC) in Bangkok, Prem delivered a talk on "Architecture and Politics." He opened with Sangop's origin story. The design for the new parliament, he explained, was heavily influenced by their activism in the October 1973 and 1976 protests, and the months he spent in

between volunteering with rural villagers, seeing Thailand from their worldview. The current of morality in governance, from his perspective, is entirely grass roots, growing from the populace into the canopy of governance. Corruption, however, hijacks the transmission of morality from the people to politicians. "Power (*amnaat*) belongs to the people. The government depends on the quality of the people. Morality *(silathaam*) belongs to the people. The people must be able to choose representatives who have the same level of morality as they do" Authoritative power rests in the people, and only those appointed by this legitimate foundation of power can similarly exercise *amnaat* responsibly. Moreover, the people have both authoritative power (*amnaat*) and morality, or *silathaam*, which translates into the prefix *sila*-, meaning art, and *thaam*, or dhamma. Morality is the 'art of dhamma.' *Amnaat* and the art of dhamma are with the demos. Activist design is but a conduit for this dhammacratic reservoir or righteous power.

For Sangop, the visibility of dhammacratic power is fundamental to moral representation. Comparing the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* with Sir Norman Foster's design of a transparent dome with a helical staircase that was suspended above the Reichstag legislature in Berlin, Prem explained that good parliamentary architecture ought to 'show' the righteous supremacy of the people. "In both cases, people can walk everywhere, above the politicians, showing everyone that power (*amnaat*) belongs to the people." The visibility of the people's power in the Reichstag and *Sappaya Saphasathaan* is a departure from the *amnaat* of politicians that the Sangop architects described in the opening discussion of this section, which was identified as an amoral exercise of authoritative power (*amnaat*) by those who claim the people they neither represent nor understand. Politicians did not 'see' those they represented and their needs. *Sangop* describe themselves, on the other hand, as good representatives who "see" and "hear" the people, representing them without any material personal reward. Their role is to facilitate the moral

electorate's choice of moral leaders with the aid of moral architecture. Answering his own question, Prem continued: "if a parliament has the character of a temple, the way people choose/vote will change too, right? If people see the parliament like a temple, as a place where good people are supposed to enter and work, they will not accept corrupt representatives. The problem now is that moral Thai people accept corruption as part of their lives: 60% of voters just accept it. Democracy *must* have morality!" The problem with people isn't morality, it is cynicism, a pessimism weathered through generations of disappointment with corrupt leaders, anti-democratic governments, and violent transitions. The temple-like, Meru-based architecture of the *Sappaya Saphasathan* will serve as a moral infrastructure, facilitating the flow of popular morality and sovereignty through the circuitry of the parliament's human and nonhuman interactions. The people need to 'be seen' physically traversing the parliament above the politicians—like in the Reichstag and the Thai parliament's 11 story external staircase—and the people need 'to see' the parliament as a moral environment. The parliament is, thus, the inverse of Sopranzetti's image of Prayuth's reign: a shell of a 'good person' stratified autocracy, that protects the dhammic energy of the demos that will one day germinate a better system than democracy.

Noticeably exasperated from the latest agonism among the monarchy, parliament and the military, Prem shook his head and paid the bill, with money he did not earn working on the parliament daily. Looking at no one in particular, just focusing on a renegade grain of sticky rice he was rescuing from the table, Prem muttered: "What kind of democracy does this [the news drama] look like? How does it show that the power (*amnaat*) of the people *is* the heart of democracy? Our consideration, our answer, comes from *another way*. We still have hope to make our country better. We want good governance not corruption." Everyone nodded. They

were all working, sacrificing, performing their duty to bring out "another way" that democracy. They were designing Dhammacracy.

*II: Dhammacrats*

Pondering the bases for political legitimacy and striving to manage the conditions for good governance are grist for the contentious mill of politics. A question that pervades this dissertation, however, is why at this moment are designers claiming moral and authoritative powers to shape politics? Why are they answering these questions for the Thai people? What gives design activists the authority or ability to represent the people's power? Prem's distinction between Sangop's ability to 'see' the people's power and morality, as opposed to the corrupt politician and 'good person's' inclination to claim them without recognition, is mentioned to legitimate their role as the peoples' activists. Not only does Sangop have the capacity and commitment to 'see' the people's interest, they have the skills to make their power visible in architectural forms that materialize the dhamma of the demos through dhammacratic forms of power. But what gives them these distinct powers to see and make seeable the morality of popular sovereignty? Why is seeing and making visible the basis for dhammacratic legitimacy? How does is become imaginable that activism for 'another way' than democracy would take the architectural forms prescribed by design activists?

In claiming any authority to 'see' and 'transmit' morality, or even at times *barami*, that others cannot discern, design activists are drawing interdiscursively from a repertoire of rituals, powers and prowess historically associated with the *dhammaraja* – the enlightened King who enacts the *dhamma*. To be abundantly clear, design activists never explicitly claim royal privilege nor in any way directly claim to approximate *dhammaraja*. However, the possibilities for cosmological and dhammic transformative change that has been established over centuries of

*dhammaraja* rituals and royalist ideology offers an alternative framework to the ninety years of coups, violently quelled protests and political disenchantment that have characterized the polity's rapid oscillation between democracy and dictatorship. Moving beyond liberalism and militarism, *dhammacracy* cites the *dhammaraja* aesthetic in the habitus of its activists and the imagined power to change political worlds by visualizing their moral alternatives.

Dhamma is a force that reveals the reality of the Buddha's teachings, which are concealed phenomenon that only a rarefied coterie of actors conditioned through years or lifetimes of meritorious probity can discern (Gray 1986). This group traditionally includes kings, monks and Boddhisatva, or Buddhas-to-be. Such figures accumulate their *barami* –moral power—by accomplishing the 10 *parami* during their lifetimes. The ten *parami* or 'perfections' form the Pali root of *barami*, and include, in descending order: giving, moral conduct, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, resolution, loving kindness and equanimity (Jory 2002,76). As committed enactors of the 10 *parami*, the *dhammaraja* or monk's actions and way of being operate as a "model", or "body example" (*tuayaang*), of propriety and dhamma (ibid). The mere sight of these models is believed to "strike" onlookers with a moral and mental transformation that aligns with the conduct of the models they are admiring. Moreover, a powerful *tuayaang* has the potential to emanate a cosmic "multiplier principle," through which the moral influence of a potent king or monk can be recursively transmitted across an entire social system of interactants who witness the *tuayaang* directly or indirectly. A passage from *The Book of Gradual Sayings,* which contains teachings of the Buddha translated from Pali, illustrates the *tuayaang*'s recursivity:

> …when rajas are righteous, the ministers of rajahs also are righteous. When ministers are righteous, brahmins and householders also are righteous. Thus, townsfolk and villagers are righteous. This being so, moon and sun go right in their courses. This being so,

> constellations and starts do likewise; days and night, months and fortnights, seasons and years go on this course regularly…" (Woodward 2006, 85)

Righteousness radiates across animate and inanimate agents from the *tuayaang.* Human and object *tuayaang* have this capacity for moral reverberation that can reorient an errant cosmos.

While *tuayaang* like monks, kings and even statues of Buddha visualize dhammic truth, Theravadan ontology conceives of materiality generally consisting of potentially illusory forms and hidden moral essences (Vandergeest 1993). The *dhammaraja* and other *tuayaang* have cultivated the unique abilities to 'see' (*hendhaam*) the invisible moral causes of societal ills, and to enact perceptible manifestations of the dhamma in actions and built forms. This process of revelatory transformation is called 'purification.' Grey explains that "the purification of the kingdom entails the transformation of the Buddha's absence into a perceptible presence, of the invisible essence of *dhamma* into a perceptible name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*). Purification, then, is the search for dhamma, the illumination of the Path, or the search for a proper method of practice" (Grey 1986, 45). Dhammic forms can materialize as actions, the king's pronouncements, rituals, names, sacred texts (most commonly, the repeated reproductions of the *Traibhumi*) and architecture. Thai royal temples, for example, are considered such potent visual models that their plans are strictly regulated by the Department of Religious Affairs. When a king assigns a name to a person, place, historical period or object, the name is considered indexical of the true moral essence the king 'sees' in its recipient. Thus, the ability to make dhamma visible is a rare power, especially in a country that in 2016 lost the one individual that for seven decades had been enshrined in rituals and popular media, and purified by draconian lese majesté laws penalizing critiques of the monarchy, as Thailand's *dhammaraja*—King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

Nonetheless, without ever explicitly associating their actions with sacred *tuayaang* discourse, the rationale for the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* design and the figuration of the sacrificial design activist emulate the aesthetics that empower the *dhammaraja* and *tuayaang* to enact dhamma. I argue that the figuration of the design activist draws interdiscursively from the typology of the dhamma-seeing *tuayaang* in several ways. One, by enacting a discourse of self-denying sacrifice, that abjures material gains. Two, claiming to see moral truths and manifestations that others cannot. Three, enacting the virtue of a place or building by naming it. Four, exercising the power to 'purify' the kingdom through designs that will operate as moral 'multipliers,' precipitating recursive rectitude among those who perceive them. Design activist dhammacrats working on the parliament, for the monarchy and for local communities share these qualities.

### 2017. *Renunciation*

This chapter opened with a contradiction, that will be discursively situated now. The architects of the grandest, most mediatized, architectural commission by the government in the nation's history, and the architects of the largest and most grandiose parliament in the world, are being fined for their daily toil. They openly reject the prospect that they will garner any fame, accolades, or material benefit from this distinguished commission. Their labors yield personal precarity as agitators against the ruling junta and the powerful contractors with whom they collaborate. They even sacrifice potential relationships and families, out of their dedication to serve the nation and fulfill their cosmic duty. This figuration delineates an actor who is uncorruptible, who is not driven by personal benefit. Regardless of whether these circumstances that design activists have enumerated are entirely accurate does not matter. What is undeniable, however, is that the repeated utterance of these sacrifices is achieving ideological work for them.

Whether it's an American anthropologist, a lecture hall of architecture students, or Thai media, Sangop characterized themselves as figures of humility, egoless-ness, and unyielding patriotic activism. These characteristics enact, in short, several of the most consequential *parami*: giving, moral conduct, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, and resolution. To battle a corrupt political 'other' on the field of design, not only are design activists predicating the problem of corruption in the community they are designing against, they must in so doing establish their uncorruptible *barami*.

From a completely different political orientation, Royal activists from the Department of Fine Arts similarly justified their interventions as selfless service for the greater good. Government architects at the Fine Arts Department were simultaneously constructing another Meru, the royal crematorium "*Phrameru Mat*" for the late Rama IX, and they were equally and inversely committed to the preservation of its forms and motifs as sacred phenomena. Moreover, as representatives of both the king and his subjects, these architects considered their work design activism, responsible for cultivating what one FAD architect described as a "feeling of connection" within the "harmonious hierarchy" that their architecture aestheticized, particularly at a liminal moment for the monarchy. Vulnerable as the monarchy may be after Rama IX's death, their architecture and the cremation ceremony served the monarchy prosthetically as a *tuayaang* for Thai people. Like Sangop, their activism would operate through potent visualizations that could compellingly inculcate the interregna publics who experienced the crematorium complex, its 85 replica *busaboks*[6], its exhibitions on the crematorium, or its

[6] A full scale *busabok* replicating the central *busabok* in the *Phra Merumat* crematorium was erected in every province in the nation, with several replicas dispersed throughout Bangkok. These were erected to allow Thais throughout the country to pay their respects to the late King. Prior to the cremation ceremony, only parties involved in the construction of *Phra Merumat* and the royal family were able to visit the original crematorium. The public could access the replica *busabok*'s and participate in commemoration ceremonies only at these locations.

mediatization during the cremation rituals with a feeling of affectionate fealty to a monarchist system, not simply the late monarch.

The colossal cranes and looming summit of *Sappaya Saphasathaan* are visible from the opposite side of the Chao Phraya River, through the windows of the offices of the Fine Arts Department, located on the 12th floor of the Thana Longkorn tower. I was a frequent visitor to the architecture offices of the Fine Arts Department during my fieldwork. Pi Bang, one of the two principal crematorium architects, was the appointed mentor for the research visa that the Fine Arts Department sponsored for me. But it was with his colleagues who designed pavilions within the crematorium complex that I spoke with and observed most frequently. Wanchai, the architect who designed the dignitary's pavilion that I inhabited as a volunteer docent, was an extremely engaging and enthusiastic informant on the politics of the Fine Arts Department, the history of crematoria architecture, and the aesthetic ideologies of classical Thai design.

After explaining my research at the parliament for the first time, Wanchai looked distantly out the windows towards the parliament's silhouette shrouded in the morning smog and, reflecting upon it, immediately distinguished political (*amnaat)* and royal power (*barami*).

> "Maybe parliament architecture has meaning to politicians, to that kind of political power (*amnaat*). Our work is different. The royal family is not about that kind of power (*amnaat*), they have a 'soft power'. They have *barami*. It is not about the self, not about greed or corruption. It is about balance, hierarchy, harmony. Our clean and appropriate design will communicate not only the *barami* of the king, but the *barami* of the people."

Note the power binary: politicians are aligned with *amnaat*, the self, greed, corruption and 'hard power;' the people and the monarchy with *barami*, systematicity, hierarchy and harmony. The 'work' of FAD architects is associated with the latter, that of Sangop with managing the former. The powerful implications of the crematorium's architecture explain the FAD's motivations for design activism. The evening the late king died, Wanchai felt "activated" by the king's death. He

did not sleep that night, but chose instead to start sketching designs for Rama IX's crematorium. He felt "activated" by his "duty" to communicate a "harmonious hierarchy" of the king and his subjects, bound by the moral power relations of codependent *barami*, that transcended the reign of Rama IX and obtained around his controversial successor. The second objective calibrated human and meta-human reciprocity. "If we did not do a proper ceremony, the spirit of the king does not go where it is supposed to go. So, we design it, and the king's spirit will watch over his people." In other words, the appropriately designed crematorium and ritual cremation facilitated the king's apotheosis, for which the apotheosized monarch would, once restored to his celestial identity as Vishnu, continue to protect his loyal subjects. Like Sangop, FAD activists hoped to design the "art of morality" into politics, but according to a different cosmic hierarchy stabilized around both the living and the ascended dhammaraja. This is 'what' FAD design activists hoped to realize.

Generally sympathetic with the ruling junta and the 2014 coup, FAD architects did not concern themselves with eradicating corruption or political misrepresentation by government officials like Sangop did. Instead, the enemy emerged as the selfish, greedy, self-aggrandizing political actor—be they a politician or architect—who acts for his own prestige, rather that of the king and the people. Specifically, the lead FAD architect whose design was selected by the late king's daughter, Princess Sirindhorn, was often accused of such ignominious self-interest. In my conversation at Wanchai's desk, I mentioned that I had accompanied the lead architect, Korkiat Thongphut, on his tour of the crematorium construction site. Responding to his prior comment, that their design ought to reflect the *barami* of the king *and* the Thai people, I was curious to hear Wanchai's interpretation of what Korkiat described as the underlying principle of his design for the crematorium: "the bigger and golder the crematorium, the bigger the *barami*." In other

words, Korkiat claimed that the grandeur of the crematorium had to reflect the *barami* of the late *dhammaraja*, and by the logic of the multiplier effect, the crematorium too would wield such *barami*. *Barami* could only attend the spectacular, not the popular, not the people.

Wanchai shook his head disapprovingly. He completely disagreed with Korkiat's conceptualization of *barami* and the authorial position he postured in media interviews and public events. "He wants to show off his skill so he tells his staff they will design a crematorium. We have guys like that who want to take the credit. But we [Wanchai and the other nameless FAD architects who designed the rest of the complex] see his design and think, 'oh what a pity.' Design is about a team, the FAD is a group of people who share this experience, who allow future generations to do it too." The project needed to communicate the *barami* of the king and people, not the prowess of a single architect. FAD architects avoided explicit credit for any single design. A colleague elaborated, "we give the good things to the royal family, the credit is not for us, we learn everything from our masters. The *Phra Merumat* design is not about the designer, it is not about the ego!" An FAD "mas"er" 's a classically trained 'master' at the art of royal architecture. Every senior architect currently serving in the department apprenticed, in fact, under one of two great masters in the last half century: Ajaarn Pinyot, from Chulalongkorn University, and Ajaarn Awut, from Sialapakorn University. Notably, Korkiat did not apprentice with either, but only "copied" Aj Awut's work for his own benefit, according to one FAD architect. A third architect joining the conversation added, "Korkiat did not know how he put himself in danger with the credit he takes. The Princess now *hates* him. If the royal family knew how much credit he takes, he would not be in the world right now." Of course, Korkiat's credit and celebrity status was a matter of public knowledge, circulating in international media as the cremation ceremony approached. He was in no real danger. However, among some of his

colleagues, Korkiat's self-interested investment in the late king's crematorium merited both the censure of his colleagues and, according to one critic, a possibly deadly reprisal from the royal family—an instance in which even with all their *barami,* under exceptionally abhorrent circumstances, the exercise of a violent power (*amnaat*) was justified. In other words, Korkiat's efforts to establish his authoritative power (*amnaat*) undermined the *barami* of the king and the Thai people. This violated the 'harmonious system' of a royal hierarchy to which most FAD design activists performed their anonymous, selfless duties.

### *2. Visualizing Systematicity*

Design activists frequently cited their power to see and make seeable what others could not. Typically, this invisible phenomena was systematicity itself: design activists could see and make visible an interconnectedness otherwise estranged by combinations of professional incompetence, global capital and corrupt politics. The acumen to 'see' systematicity and improve it obtained among all design activists I observed, though the systems they aspired to realize differed greatly. As selfless designers, they possess unique faculties of perception both from enacting the *parami* in their daily lives, and through their architectural training in the arts of visualization.

For Sangop, defending the systematicity of their design was paramount both for the optimization of its architecture and the politics it would engender. Those who impeded the design, undermined both the architectural and dhammacratic project of, in their words, "designing better systems." This was a quotidian gripe architects lamented when discussing the poor work of parliament contractors. Indicating an incongruity between one subcontractor's wall and a supplier's carpentry on it, Witee complained:

> This is why it's so difficult to manage them: we treat buildings as a system, there's two, three, four suppliers working with the contractor...the issue is coordination, they break

> down a building into parts and each group has only its portion, but there is no coordination. This is the problem of the contractor not understanding the construction process. When I see this [handrail and mullion] I see a system. I give the definition of an element in relation to a system. They don't see systems, only piles of gadgets."

Thus, Sangop cannot isolate one poorly realized detail from the broader systems it cohered. Unlike contractors, they think and perceive cosmologically. One justification for selecting the *Traibhumi*, in fact, as the underlying concept for the massive complex was its potential power to sustain its systematic transformation. As a cosmography, its parsing of inhabitants and relations across three stratified worlds arranged along and above Mt Meru provided a repertoire of material, chromatic and formal motifs that were easily citable in its transmuted forms and spaces of the parliament. Conflating the architectural concept with an almost sacred text, too, was intended to discourage any departures from the design-concept. Abusing the design entailed abusing a hallowed cosmology, historically tied to the monarchy.

But finally, because the *Traibhumi* had been canonized in every village temple (*wat*) and school since the 19th century, its morphology had been disseminated in sundry objects, motifs, symbols, sweets and words that enfold the everyday lives of Thai people. There is a systematicity to Meru forms that is intersemiotically tied to temples, Buddhist festivities, daily rites, and spirit homes that Sangop identifies as a latent topology of morality in Thai society, that people experience apperceptively. Sangop 'sees' this potential and intends their design for the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* to channel habitus attending these familiar forms and transpose them onto perceptions of and expectations for the government. Prem explained:

> Khao Phra Sumeru has a very clear meaning for people in Thailand or Indonesia: 'do good, get good; do bad, get bad' (*thamdii daidii; thamchua daichua)*. This is a key meaning we want people to think about politics, that's all. We see it as sacred. And so do the people. It is a warning sign: you *must* think of government bad deeds and consequences...you can see this perception everywhere in Thailand. Villagers see Khao Phra Sumeru all around them, in the architecture, in objects, in sweets. We want to give this perception to the parliament."

Like the *dhammaraja* who both sees societal ills and the hidden dhamma that he can help reveal, thereby addressing those ills, Sangop intends their architecture to facilitate absorption of parliamentary politics into this moral economy of forms, rituals, and righteousness. Democracy alone does not provide a moral system. Sangop's architecture will 'give' this. Criticizing one of their more publicized detractors, Pong blamed his indoctrination in foreign liberal ideology as an impairment to apprehending the moral cosmos their design was mediating:

> …he is young, he studied the philosophy of democracy, but Sangop fought for democracy many years. He thinks if you find a problem in democracy you can change that element. He has a foreign way of thinking (*wiithii khit farang)* not the way of the people who think in terms of morality. The *Traibhumi* is a symbol borrowed from moral ideas, not democracy. We competed with 130 teams but they chose us. We want to change society in a way that doesn't involve fighting each other...design can do this. Street protest results in many people dead. Thaksin is dangerous, we lost faith in him. My basic criticism of [the critic] is he sees everything not as parts of an interconnected system."

The critic, the parliament contractors, and democracy generally 'see' isolated details not systems, and thus any gesture to improve their problematic conditions will always be futile. Aligning his thinking with that of 'the people,' and establishing his seasoned disenchantment with other modalities of political change (like protest), Pong envisions the 'other way' than democracy as an interconnected system that legitimizes the morality of popular sovereignty. This is what their design is intended to realize.

I heard community architects describe their role in the revelation of the people's virtue similarly. One community architect, Wisut, who was my former architecture student at Chulalongkorn University, had facilitated the cooperation of an entire community of southern Muslim Thais in what was described as a "communal open house" for the Bangkok Design Week Festival of 2019. The festival was located on both banks of the Chao Phraya River near the Thailand Center for Design and Creativity (TCDC). Most designers exhibited designed objects,

often transforming quotidian street objects and vernacular craft into contemporary furniture. Some architects erected installations around the TCDC. Wisut's firm, however, assembled all the households and worked closely with the community Imam to participate in a collective brainstorming session to determine what each household could create and sell from their homes in the neighborhood. "We show the community its reflection. They never see the beauty of their buildings, or their craft, but we help them see their own beauty," explained Wisut. Again, the percipient architect sees that which others cannot, and makes knowable a hidden essence (*nāma-rūpa*). Households opened windows or erected temporary tables that sold homemade food, others textiles, paintings, or design objects to tourists who meandered their narrow alleys. Wisut scheduled outdoor films at the mini artificial soccer pitch the community had built on a barge floating off the bank of the Chao Phraya. Unlike so many Design Week installations, this was not about exhibiting an alluring form, but eliciting precious qualities and relations that were being threatened by the expansion of the neighboring billion-dollar Icon Siam shopping mall. For Wisut, this encroachment and its corrosion of the community's interrelations was emblematic of development instigated misalignments occurring throughout the country.

> I don't care about the physical….this is about designing relations with society, how the design process enables people to **see** their potential and assets what might be solutions. So it is not about designing the physical, its about designing a new process. We Southeast Asians used to be very close, then something changed. Capitalism made people too dependent on money, people forgot they can change society through social interaction.

This is why design activists like Wisut, Sangop, and Wanchai say they are "designing systems" when they design buildings. For design activists, the building is but a node in a wider network of social interaction that includes—and is greatly influenced by—their designed interventions. The first step to redesign systematicity, according to Wisut, is recognition: the design activist's role is to 'enable people to see their potential,' to see as they do, the dhamma of the demos.

For the royalist design activists of the Fine Arts Department (FAD), their purpose was to communicate, and thereby sustain across interregna, the "harmonious system" that they sensed orbited the Thai monarchy. How FAD design activists pursued the actualization of their system relied upon their ability to conjure 'feelings' of it through their designs. Bang, a young but very accomplished FAD architect who single handedly designed the massive throne hall pavilion (*pratinang songkram*) that housed the royal family during the cremation ceremonies, explained the hidden essence that his architecture needed to embody. "When we see these buildings, we know what is most important, which is hierarchy and order. For this reason, not any architect can design these buildings. They must know how to communicate the order." Even other architects were blind to the systems that FAD architects could sense. Bang and Wanchai, unlike the Sangop architects who profaned *Traibhumi* motifs in the parliament, were such architects. They, along with all the crematorium architects, were graduates of two classical Thai architecture programs in Thailand: one at Chulalongkorn University and one at Silapakorn University. Pupils at the former program studied under the tutelage of Aj Pinyo, the 'master' architect Sangop hired to design the royal *busabok* atop the parliament[7]. Silapakorn graduates studied under Aj Awut. Both masters, Aj Awut and Aj Pinyo, executed classical design only through full scale (1:1) drawings. Unlike most of the design studios I observed, very few desktop computers occupied much space in the FAD architects' cubicles. Instead, large drafting tables, empty meeting rooms where the floor was the drawing board, and walls covered in stunningly sketched architectural details pervaded their workplaces. When I visited the FAD's construction site office for the royal crematorium at Sanam Luang, they had to occupy an entire university theater, clearing all the

[7] *See* chapter 3

seats and stage to reveal a vast enough area to draw every inch of the spectacular $90 million building at a 1:1 scale.

FAD architects call the technique that they and their masters use to design by generating drawings that are the same size as their buildings, "*jai taa meu,*" or "heart, eyes, hand." Only by recruiting the entire body and sensorium into generating the design in building-sized drawings, Bang and Wanchai explained, can an "appropriately trained" architect "communicate the order." This is because, according to Wanchai, "our masters are architects of a *harmonious hierarchy*" (my emphasis). "Only we know how to be absorbed in the details," because only *jai taa meu* drawings can "transfer the feelings of the design." Aj Pinyot and his acolytes crawl across their drawings on the ground, sketching in pencil and fountain pens; Aj Awut and his proteges stand and draw with pencils attached like bayonets to long wooden rods. Years of conditioning body memory enables FAD architects to deftly draw extremely precise and intricate curvilinear

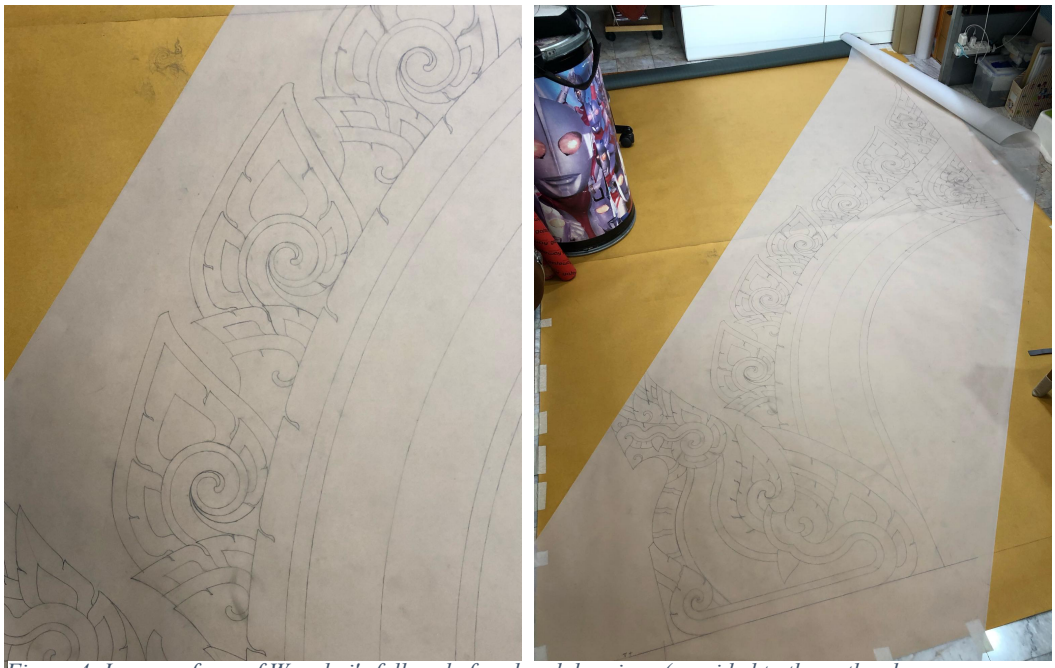

*Figure 4: Images of one of Wanchai's full scale free-hand drawings (provided to the author by my interlocutor 2019)*

ornamentation freehand, while exhaustive research into past styles, motifs and details ingrains an

expert archive of arcane and complex forms into the architect's repertoire of possible components they can intuitively incorporate into their compositions. To communicate their vision of 'a harmonious system,' they must condition fluency among their heart, eyes and hands while designing not simply *the* media, but designing *as the* media for the harmonious royal system they are making visceral.

This embodied sensibility is what empowered Wanchai's impulsive activism with the death of Rama IX, a cultivated facility that he described as "a gimmick." "I put some gimmick into the pavilion, in its details (*la iat*). I began drawing just 1 hour after Rama IX died. Experience told us what to do." The design activist's gimmick[8] is expeditious, not duplicitous. The gimmick this time was years of exercised muscle memory, stylistic fluency and design expertise that equipped FAD architects to instantly mobilize toward the production of the most mediatized architecture in Thailand's history: a monument aestheticizing cosmic hierarchy around the Thai monarchy. The gimmick also expedited uptake among the uninitiated. While FAD architects share decades of rigorous education in the arcana of classical design, the public does not. But, FAD architects, like Sangop design activists, do not intend to communicate the details of their concepts in the details of their visualizations, only the "feelings." After a lengthy tutorial on the symbolism of the tympanum above the southern façade of the pavilion he designed, Wanchai airily dismissed the minutiae that just minutes ago animated him. "But this does not matter so much. We do not design to represent information; we design to represent a feeling of Rama IX." And such a 'feeling' is apprehended through the appreciation of specific

[8] In chapters two and three, I will go into much greater detail about the design activist use of "the gimmick," relative to popular and scholarly interpretations of gimmickry. While scholars like Sianne Ngai (Ngai 2020) associate the gimmick with a capitalist aesthetic that both recognizes and doubts the dubious efficiency of the wily gimmick, design activists describe design gimmickry as an expedient exigency that designers ought to provide to correct Thailand's tumultuous political system.

details, not the hermeneutics of the crematorium's cosmological forms. Instead, it is the erotics of systematicity, conveyed in architectural compositions that immerse visitors in atmospheres of harmonious ornamental systems and material hierarchies, that communicate a sense of the (cosmo)polity's 'harmonious hierarchy.' *Jai taa meu* produces the details that assemble such systems, and the public immerses itself in the coherence of the systems centered around the monarchy. Bang added, "all our projects are political. They are made for people who love the king. The FAD architecture is made for people to still love and respect the king. I do this work because it is beautiful, but also for the meaning. We make our designs to create a feeling, a feeling of love for the king. This architecture represents that." Significantly, during the first royal interregnum in seven decades, FAD design activists did not specify which king.

### *3. Naming*

The name that a *dhammaraja* assigned its recipient – be it a person, place, practice, temple or thing – is considered a materialization of a hidden internal essence that only the *dhammaraja* can distill. The sacred apparatus around the spiritual naming of a hallowed site or building was not lost on Sangop architects when they submitted their competition boards for the 2009 Parliament competition. This is when they first revealed the name they assigned their design for the new parliament. Along with the nine A0 sized competition boards that described and visualized their design, Sangop also sent a short digital animation to the competition judges. After winning the competition, this video was circulated by the office of the parliament and other media covering the new design. It opens on the simulated street of Thanon Thahan, in the northeast corner of the site. Before the camera pans across the design, the sound of monks chanting to the music of a *khim* (a string instrument that is struck like a xylophone) plays in the

background. These are the sounds of a temple rite, not a competition design pitch. The camera speeds down the street for several seconds at the pace of the simulated motorcycles modeled in the animation. It takes seven seconds to reach the middle of the façade where the camera stops, and the words "*Sappaya Saphasathaan*" appear in front of the parliament. The script resembles that of the Pali penmanship that inscribes sacred Buddhist texts written on dried palm leaves. The religious tone that accompanies the digital revelation of Sangop's name for the new parliament conveys the sacred practice they are emulating of monks and kings, as well as the dhammic promise of the name they conjured. Again, "*Sappaya*" glosses as "a place for dhamma," and "*Saphasathaan*" translates as "a place for doing good deeds." The site was previously military barracks, a public school, an auxiliary firing range, and a riverside community. The sacred is a projection of the virtue Sangop envisions their design will unfold, the 'perception they will give' to the parliament. The design activist naming is subjunctive: it is a future state conditional upon the satisfaction of their design.

Even a decade after winning the competition, when the building itself was nearing completion, its architects continued proselytizing the connection among the people's morality, the name of their design and the effects it would engender. In mid 2019, the Association of Siamese Architects – the central accreditation and professionalization organization of architecture in Thailand—organized a symposium they called "The World of the Parliament." They convened architecture critics, subcontractors, and, of course, one of the Sangop principals, Mate – the landscape architect. Mate approached the lectern and commenced a video montage behind him. It was almost cybernetic in its unscripted alternation between images that were never directly explained. But a rhetorical rhythm emerged. Shuffled between, sometimes sepia toned images of villages, farmers, rural children playing, temple festivals and street food were

rich-toned photos of street protests, controversial politicians, parliamentarians sleeping in chairs, and demonstrators crying in the streets. Without ever glancing at the unsettling imagery behind him, Mate expounded on the need for "*winai*" – a rule, a principle or self-discipline. He did not restrict the application of this principle at first, but combined with the montage behind him, implied that the scenes of political strife lacked his prescription. Then he clarified, "principles need to be instilled into politics." Raising his right hand and uttering "governance" (*gaan muang*) and then his left, "with morality" (*gap 79attana79m*), he gesticulated the simple principle undergirding Sangop's design. In fact, in his only excursus into English, he called this principle "simplicity design." Politicians lack this sensibility, but the people do not. They just do not associate it with politics: "Thai folk know that a place with Meru architecture is a place of effects, a place where folk know when people are good or bad. But they need to be able to do this with the parliament." The official signage for the parliament along Thanon Thahan never uses the name "*Sappaya Saphasathaan*." Only the branded way-finders that Sangop designed inside the parliament, and the Sangop architects' speech refer with dogged frequency to the new parliament by the name they gave it. They do this because, as Mate concludes, "the design gives this [*winai*—a principle] a place: *Sappaya*. A place for doing good: *Saphasathaan*."

### *4. Purification*

Thai scholarship has maintained that traditionally, the principal duty of the *dhammaraja* is to reveal the dhamma to his kingdom (Gray 1986; Reynolds 1982; Tambiah 1976). In fact, the welfare of the kingdom depends upon it. Revealing, or more precisely, "illuminating the dhamma" (*suwaeng dhaam*), occurs through a multiplicity of forms and practices, that are appropriate both to the apprehension of his subjects and the cosmic conditions of the moment (Gray 1986, 105). The very concept of 'culture' itself, called *wattanathaam* is rooted in the

materialization of the dhamma in visible forms: *80attana* meaning the 'physical aspects' of *dhamma*. Righteous manifesters of culture – like monks and kings – convert the invisible essence of *nāma*, meaning 'name,' into material forms, or *rūpa*, that model appropriate behavior. Historically in both Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin kingdoms, when a powerful king wished to establish his new dynasty and assert his authority as a *dhammaraja*, he would begin with a robust purification campaign that involved: one, expelling questionable members from the Buddhist establishment known as the *sangha* ('purifying the *sangha*); two, assembling elaborate translations of the *Traibhumi* into an improved text; three, transforming the *Traibhumi* cosmos into new temples, palaces and at times, cosmologically oriented master plans (Grey 1986; Reynolds 1972; Tambiah 1976). The *Traibhumi* itself models this formula for world purification. After an errant, selfish, covetous king misguides his people away from the *dhamma*, his world disintegrates. Living inhabitants die, the sun and moon collapse, and the dhammic order of a previous *dhammaraja's* dynasty descends into entropy. In the wake of this cosmic collapse, Meru perdures. A new sun and moon rise to orbit its slopes, and new denizens emerge seeking a new king that they will choose to lead them in the way of the *dhamma* (Reynolds 1972). The newly anointed *dhammaraja* builds new worlds that materialize the dhamma, and the cosmos thrives until its next hijacking.

The *Traibhumi* thus provides provocatively ambiguous dogma. It can ratify the most conservative establishment, enshrining social hierarchies as a sacred ordering of ontological stratification. In such cosmos, dissent is undutiful, sentencing the ambitious or 'inappropriate' to serial damnation unless they preserve the holy order. Or, it can be revolutionary: the corruption of the powerful legitimates their downfall. Revolution by the righteous is warranted, and realignment with the dhamma occurs only through their cosmic realignment, in the election of

moral leadership. It is precisely this ambiguity that afforded Sangop the ideological cover to preserve a billion-dollar design across two dictatorships and three prime ministers, a hemorrhagic budget, the perils of political censure, and the infiltration of corrupting suppliers. It also modeled the design activist power to purify the nation's entropic political systems: following the demise the *dhammaraja*, moral actors trained in the arts of dhamma and design could create new *tuayaang*, new models for 'another way' out of the morass of both the interregna, and the volatile history of the parliament. While critics hailed the design as the reification of conservative power, and friends accused Sangop activists of political treason, Sangop maintained the promise of their design subterfuge: the purification of democracy and autocracy. The mediatization of their cosmological architecture would enact a moral 'multiplier principle.'

So, in 2009, following months of paralyzing protests and yet another coup, self-identifying socialists who for decades had fought for democracy in the courts and on the streets, proposed a design for the world's largest parliament that embodies the *Traibhumi* cosmology. The logic was simple, according to Witee: "in Thai culture, if we want to make anything meaningful, we pull out the framework of the *Traibhumi*. We might not understand the concept of 3B, but Thai people see it everywhere in their everyday lives. It's in the *saanphraphum* (spirit houses). It helps making meaning of everyday life. This new parliament might *act as an antenna* that signals to the people throughout the country. They will choose someone to go into the sacred place, someone worthy of entering that place." As cosmological thinkers capable of seeing systematicity where others see autonomous elements, Sangop saw two competing systems at play, a corrupt one that needed purification, and a moral one that needed reification. "Our greatest dream was a parliament with no corruption," Prem recalled when reflecting on the origin

story of their transmutation of the *Traibhumi*. Misrepresentation was a sign of corruption. Deviations from the drawings, the infiltration of unsanctioned materials into the parliament were signs of systems of corruption. Against this was the latent moral system of the people and the *Traibhumi* topology that enmeshed domains of moral decorum, like temples. Having diagnosed a society's ills as symptomatic of systemic corruption, Sangop transformed citations of the *Traibhumi* into "antenna" that signal and activate a moral entelechy lying dormant. This is, in short, the 'multiplier principle' (Gray 1986) of *tuayaang*: it has the power to awaken the dhammic potential for the unfolding of a moral order. It is through this process that, Prem adds, "our architecture will act:"

> I believe the morality of the people is better than the quality of their representatives. We should not be afraid of this power (*amnaat*), so the architecture shows the character of the people…temple architecture has a power (*amnaat*). It makes you quiet when you enter a building. It is the power sacred architecture can have to change perception and make people change behavior.

The building thus has a twofold power: one, it can itself improve behavior and, two, it transmits the moral power within the people that otherwise corrupt politics diverts away from functional governance. "Our architecture will act" as a catalyst for the multiplier principle, providing designed models that stimulate the moral power of the populace to choose representation worthy of the sacred forms Sangop adapted to popular sovereignty. This is precisely how dhammacratic design activism operates: the design, not only the designers, is an activist.

Even activist architecture by community architects, which does not cite sacred architecture, follows the purification model of diagnosing hidden ills and potentials, and fashioning catalytic architecture to repair society. Returning to the community open house project that Wanchai organized for Design Week, he elaborated just how his firm showed the community the beauty it possessed, but never recognized.

> Design week can put these people on a larger map. The community usually can only see one or two steps ahead, not the system. Random tourists, customers at Icon Siam can participate. And now the community wants to do this every month. This is a catalyst. This is how I see it; how bigger change is possible. One community sees this and sees it in their community...it is necessary to make it seen. Using a small amount of energy here can inspire others, and have a ripple effect. If this is not seen it cannot have large effect across scales. If a minister saw this, then he can arrange for this to continue. It is more effective, then, to make it visible.

Witee is describing his intervention as a catalyst for a multiplier principle that will reverberate throughout a system only he discerns. The community needs his perspicacity and his visualization skills for their own future wellbeing. And because of the multiplier potential to then model transformative change for other communities, in effect villages around the kingdom depend upon the design activist's creative vision.

Whereas the royal architecture could be imagined to function as multiplier-*tuayaang* through its association with the *dhamma*, the *dhammaraja* and Meru, social media afforded design activists a different multiplier modality to recursively alter peoples' perceptions. Part of Sangop's justification for citing the *Traibhumi* was its ubiquity in a multiplicity of media tied to moral habitus. Community architects similarly rely upon the citational reservoir of social media to spread the alluring graphics, images, drawings and forms that they designed for their political interventions. Few if any politician, bureaucrat or *dhammaraja* could summon these visualization powers for their political projects with such skilled facility. A different community architecture firm that participated in Design Week explained how their installation, like Wanchai's, would transmit throughout the social systems of the kingdom that had been alienated by corrupt politicians and capitalism. I asked the two architects, Fame and June, about their strategy for collaborating with government officials when they propose provocative built experiments in public spaces. The following dialogue ensued:

*Fame*: Young people have lost our trust in the government already, so we want to change by ourselves, our profession.

*June*: The perspective changed in the creative industry, because of social media, we see better examples from around the world to see how we can make our society better. We see something and share it with the creative community. Then we get data and encourage government to make changes. We want to be a small part to change the city from the bottom-up.

*Fame*: We don't talk about democracy. They [politicians] can't give us this. So we *do it, we try to make an example* [*tuayaang*] *for them*. [emphasis added]

*June*: They don't have creative people working for them. We can show them how to solve problems another way, a creative way, that represents what people want. Their way does not fit the people on the street.

*Fame*: If we talk about democracy, I don't care what you call it. The government only careers about economy, not about way of life. The government believes they only answer to capitalism not about what makes quality of life better. If it doesn't make a profit for them, they don't care.

*June*: We serve everyday life of people on the street. The government is more concerned with big issues – cultural tourism, making money from cultural tourism – but they forget everyday life of people.

Several important features to this dialogue embody the dhammacratic political aesthetic. First, the architects claim to know, see and represent the true interests of the people, unlike politicians. The self-interested, profit motivated commitments of politicians is juxtaposed to the figuration of the community architect, working *pro bono* for everyday Thai person. Two, they identify the potential for societal change beginning with small creative interventions that scale-up to transform all of Bangkok. Three, they have abandoned discussion of democracy, but are campaigning among the creative community and built environment for something related that they can model by designing transformative *tuayaang*. In this case, they are modeling alternative worlds that politicians who are incapable of 'giving' democracy, can follow. Finally, the design activist appears as a trans-scalar mediator or cosmological broker, tarrying between two poles: one, the 'everyday life of the people on the streets' and the interventions design activists

integrate therein, and, two, the scale of the city, kingdom, governance, and the international cosmos of activist architecture. They see systemic disjuncture, they represent the people, they provide catalytic correctives that reverberate throughout multiple simultaneous systems and, by doing so, 'purify' Thai society. These are the hallmarks of the design activist dhammacrat.

*III: Designing Dhammacracy*

While the decision to appropriate a royalist text in pursuit of a populist agenda was itself novel, the establishment of their moral authority to act as a non-democratic facilitator of improved political representation cited a second political figuration: the 'good person' (*khon dii*) typology. As mentioned in the first section, this discourse has historically encompassed technocrats, bureaucrats, politicians, and military leaders who pause democratic processes on the promise of fulfilling a moral mandate that only they, the 'good people,' can realize given the supposed dissipation of the system they were commandeering. While design activists are championing 'another way' than democracy that is related, but more moral, their activism is not democratic: they claim to design on behalf of their clientele—the people—who never have a say in the design. Their legitimacy as representatives depends on their ability to act as *tuayaang*—self-sacrificing, selfless, moral mediums for the popular will—and to create compelling architectural *tuayaang*. A final question that this last section, and inevitably the dissertation's conclusion, will ponder is: in what ways do design activists depoliticize democracy, like their *khondii* counterparts, by narrowing the avenues for political participation into rarefied realms of professional expertise? How do they cosmo-politicize governance, opening the political field to other human and nonhuman sovereignties?

The 'good person' political operative is both the foil and forbear to the design activist's entry into the political imaginary. Before 21st century architects could act as political

representatives that perform *dhammaraja*-like duties as facilitators of the *dhamma*, the 'good person' identity was the first figuration of a non-royal political operative with the power (*amnaat*) to claim political authority with a moral imperative. This discourse made it imaginable and licit for lay people to assert dominion without democratic appointment if there was a moral mandate. In this respect, the 'good person' was the forbear to the design activist figure. At the same time, it was precisely this arbitrary moral mandate that afforded the serial coups and constitutions that repeatedly undermined democratic institutions, and conditioned the political disenchantment that design activists cite as a motivation for 'another way' to governance than parliamentary politics. This final section will delineate this second discursive thread that weaves through the interdiscursive fabric of the design activist. And, in so doing, it will argue that the design of the country's three parliaments are dialectically related to the mercurial architecture of the parliament as an institution, which has changed over twenty times in less than a century precisely because of the 'good person' antinomy with democracy.

King Phya Luthai began his 14th century cosmography, *The Traibhumi*, with the declaration that "its theme is impermanence" (Reynolds 1972, 35). As disorienting as Sangop's adaptation of this royalist cosmology to the parliament was to their detractors, the same 'theme' could be applied to the parliament, as an institution comprised of constitutions, buildings, and bodies. The 'theme' of Thailand's parliament—architecturally and institutionally—is 'impermanence.' The following table catalogues the impermanence of the parliament's design as both an institution and architecture. The history of the parliament's form follows a familiar rhythm: a coup, followed by a constitution, oscillation between a single or bicameral legislature, the partial restoration of elected officials, and repeat…

*Table 1: A list of Thailand's constitutions, the consequent structuring of parliament, and the circumstances surrounding each transformation.*

| *YEAR* | *DATES* | *STRUCTURE* | *APPOINTMENT* | *BUILDING* | *CONSTITUTION* | *CONTEXT* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1932 | June 27 – Dec 10 | Single Council | Assigned by the People's party | Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall | Temporary Siamese Constitution 1932 (First Constitution) | After Siamese revolution, before King Rama VII capitulated to the People's Party and the first constitution. |
| 1932 – 1946 | Dec 10 – May 9 | Single Council | - 50% from indirect election: elected district (*Tambon* ) representatives, who then elected Council representatives.<br>- 50% assisnged my the Monarch | Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall | Siamese Constitution 1932 (Second Constitution) | - Rama VII abdicated the throne (March 2, 1934)<br>- Second World War 1939 – 1945 |
| 1946 – 1947 | May 9 – Nov 8 | Dual Council<br>- พฤฒสภา (Supreme Council)<br>- สภาผู้แทนราษฎร (Representative) | พฤฒสภา (Supreme Council) Assigned by house of representatives<br><br>House of Representatives: 100% from election | Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall | Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 1946 (3rd constitution) | - Death of Rama VIII (1946)<br>- Coronation of Rama IX (1946)<br>- Coup by Phin Chunhawan (Nov 8, 1947) |
| 1947 – 1949 | Nov 9 – March 23 | Dual Council<br>- วุฒิสภา (Senate)<br>- สภาผู้แทนราษฎร (Representative) | House of Senate: Assigned by the Monarch<br><br>House of Representatives: 100% from election | Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall | Temporary Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 1947 (4th constitution) | - Phibunsongkram is reinstated as Prime Minister after the coup |
| 1949 – 1951 | March 23 – Nov 29 | Dual Council<br>- วุฒิสภา (Senate)<br>- สภาผู้แทนราษฎร (Representative) | House of Senate: Assigned by the Monarch<br><br>House of Representatives: 100% from election | Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall | Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 1949 (5th constitution) | |
| 1952 – 1958 | Mach 8 – Oct 20 | Single Coucil<br>- สภาผู้แทนราษฎร (Representative) | House of Representatives 50% from election 50% Assigned by the Monarch | Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall | Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 1932 Amended edition 1952 (6th constitution) | - Coup by Sarit Thanarat (Sep 16, 1952) |
| 1959 – 1968 | Jan 28 – June 20 | Single Coucil<br>- Constituent Assembly | Constituent Assembly Assigned by the Monarch | Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall | Constitution of the Kingdom B.E. 1959 (7th constitution) | - Coup by Sarit Thanarat (Sep 16, 1959) |
| 1968 – 1971 | June 20 – Nov 17 | Dual Council<br>- วุฒิสภา (Senate)<br>- สภาผู้แทนราษฎร (Representative) | House of Senate: Assigned by the Monarch<br><br>House of Representatives: 100% from election | Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall | Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 1968 (8th constitution) | - Coup by Thanom Kittikajorn (Nov 17, 1971) |
| 1972 – 1974 | Dec 15 – Oct 7 | Single Coucil<br>- National Legislative Assembly | National Legislative Assembly Assigned by the Monarch | Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall | Constitution of the Kingdom B.E. 1972 (9th constitution) | |
| 1974 – 1976 | Oct 7 – Oct 6 | Dual Council<br>- วุฒิสภา (Senate)<br>- สภาผู้แทนราษฎร (Representative) | House of Senate: Assigned by the Monarch<br><br>House of Representatives: 100% from election | - Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall<br>- U Thong Nai Parliament | Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 1974 (10th constitution) | - Coup by Sangud Chaloryu (Oct 6, 1976) |
| 1976 – 1977 | Oct 22 – Oct 21 | Single Coucil<br>- Nation Reform Assembly | Nation Reform Assembly Assigned by the Monarch | U Thong Nai Parliament | Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 1976 (11th constitution) | - Coup by Sangud Chaloryu (Oct 20, 1977) |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1977 – 1978 | Nov 9 – Dec 22 | Single Coucil<br>- National Legislative Assembly | National Legislative Assembly<br>Assigned by the Monarch | U Thong Nai Parliament | Constitution of the Kingdom B.E. 1977 (12th constitution) | |
| 1978 – 1991 | Dec 22 – Feb 23 | Dual Council<br>- วุฒิสภา (Senate)<br>- สภาผู้แทนราษฎร (Representative) | House of Senate:<br>Assigned by the Monarch<br><br>House of Representatives:<br>100% from election | U Thong Nai Parliament | Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 1978 (13th constitution) | - Coup by National Peace Keeping Council: NPKC (Feb 23, 1991) |
| 1991 | March 1 – Dec 9 | Single Coucil<br>- National Legislative Assembly | National Legislative Assembly<br>Assigned by the Monarch | U Thong Nai Parliament | Constitution of the Kingdom B.E. 1991 (14th constitution) | |
| 1991 – 1997 | Dec 9 – Oct 11 | Dual Council<br>- วุฒิสภา (Senate)<br>- สภาผู้แทนราษฎร (Representative) | House of Senate:<br>Assigned by the Monarch<br><br>House of Representatives:<br>100% from election | U Thong Nai Parliament | Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 1991 (15th constitution) | - NPKC nominated Sujinda for prime minister (April 7, 1992)<br>- Black May incident (May 17-24, 1992) |
| 1997 – 2006 | Oct 11 – Sep 19 | Dual Council<br>- วุฒิสภา (Senate)<br>- สภาผู้แทนราษฎร (Representative) | House of Senate:<br>100% from election<br><br>House of Representatives:<br>100% from election | U Thong Nai Parliament | Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 1997 (16th constitution) | - Coup by Council for Democratic Reform: CDR (Sep 19, 2006) |
| 2006 – 2007 | Oct 1 – Aug 24 | Single Coucil<br>- National Legislative Assembly | National Legislative Assembly<br>Assigned by the Monarch | U Thong Nai Parliament | Temporary Constitution of the Kingdom B.E. 2006 (17th constitution) | |
| 2007 – 2014 | Oct 24 – May 22 | Dual Council<br>- วุฒิสภา (Senate)<br>- สภาผู้แทนราษฎร (Representative) | House of Senate:<br>Total 150 seats<br>- 76 seats from election (1 per province)<br>- 75 seats from nomination<br><br>House of Representatives<br>100% from election | U Thong Nai Parliament | Constitution of the Kingdom B.E. 2007 (18th constitution) | - Coup by National Council for Peace and Order: NCPO (May 22, 2014) |
| 2014 – 2017 | May 22 – Apr 6 | Single Coucil<br>- National Legislative Assembly | National Legislative Assembly<br>Assigned by the Monarch and NCPO | U Thong Nai Parliament | Temporary Constitution of the Kingdom B.E. 2014 (19th constitution) | |
| 2017 – Present (2022) | Apr 6 – Present | Dual Council<br>- วุฒิสภา (Senate)<br>- สภาผู้แทนราษฎร (Representative) | House of Senate:<br>- First term assigned by the Monarch according to the nomination from NCPO<br>- Nomination by groups of specialist from diverse professions<br><br>House of Representatives:<br>100% from election | Sappayasapastan | Constitution of the Kingdom B.E. 2019 (20th constitution) | |

*Table 2 continued*

As described in the table, it is common for a coup or constitution to dissolve a legislative chamber or change its appointment structure. Most often this involves the Senate, which is

alternately royally appointed, entirely elected, selected by military officials, chosen by trained bureaucrats or a combination of the former. In fact, within Thailand's 90-year flirtation with democratic appearances, the entire parliament was appointed by popular election only in the brief interval between 1997-2006. The Senate has been completely appointed by the monarch or military eight times. In the most recent constitution, the NCPO issued a referendum for public approval that would guarantee the military's influence over parliamentary politics even after the latest election by once again removing all senatorial appointments from the electoral process. Instead, the military, the monarch or a body of specialists selected by the military would appoint the Senate. Today, military officers chair 17 of the 29 Senate committees. The NCPO banned any public dissent, or any media criticism against the referendum. It was ratified in the constitution without opposition, which was otherwise criminalized. Any legislation must be ratified first by the House and then by the Senate, before it is submitted for royal approval. All cabinet officials are appointed by the senate. With the vast majority of the nation's senators securing their offices through military and/or royal appointment, the Senate has served a powerful gatekeeper against progressive House legislation while bolstering the powers and coffers of the military. Until the next coup or constitution, which in Thailand is never far away, the parliament occupying the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* remains staunchly undemocratic.

The history of the parliament's form is defined by a prevailing contradiction: it exists aspirationally to institutionalize democratic processes and check the powers of the monarchy and military, and yet the energy invested in limiting popular participation in politics by its constitutions, dictators, politicians, and buildings always betrays a powerful distrust of popular sovereignty. This suspicion predates the parliament's establishment. Despite his many projects to modernize Thai institutions according to contemporary European standards, King Chulalongkorn

(Rama V) doubted Thailand would ever be compatible with democracy. After a group of civil servants issued a letter to Rama V in 1885, arguing for the establishment of a government comprised of cabinet ministers and elected representatives, King Chula issued the following speech:

> …the Siamese king leads the people for the prosperity of the country and the happiness of the people. Besides, it is impossible for the king to govern the country following the European way because it is hard to find a person who is able to be a member of parliament. Also, the people are never pleased to have Western institutions. They have faith in the king more than members of the parliament because they believe the king more than anybody else practices justice and loves the people (Sopranzetti 2020, 61)

Rama V's opposition to democratic leadership resonates with Sangop's – a group of seasoned democratic activists – rationale for designing the new Thai parliament: democracy does not possess morality, and without some corrective, Thai elected officials are not worthy of their authoritative power (*amnaat*) over the people. When in 2015 the parliament revealed plans to build a new bridge across the Chao Phraya just north of the *Sappaya Saphasathaan*, the Sangop principals drafted an elaborate formal appeal—replete with renderings of the bridge's occlusion of the parliament's façade, traffic studies, and beautifully fashioned silk report cover—to the ailing Rama IX requesting his intervention against the new project. Sangop had, as Chula predicted, "more faith" in the incapacitated Rama IX than in their own clients to protect the parliament's design.

In fact, Rama V pursued 'another way' than democracy, one that bureaucratized dhamma as decorum. Given his suspicion of an elected government, King Chula developed a royal bureaucracy to carry out the administration of the state with fidelity to the monarchy (Jory 2015). His distant cousin, Pia Malakul, would play a foundational role in both this enterprise, and the imaginary of "good person" politics. A trusted advisor to Rama V and a cabinet member, Pia believed the education system for future civil servants was inadequate and in need of moral

guidance. In effect, he 'purified' bureaucratic training. In 1892, he incorporated *Dhammajariya* – or "Dhamma Conduct" –into the country's first modern education curriculum in all government schools in order to rectify the moral deficiencies he and King Chula observed in Thai society. In 1901, Pia added two new important texts into school curriculums nationwide: "The Good Citizen" (*Phonlamuean Dii*) and "Qualities of a Good Person" (*Sombat Khong Phuu Dii*). The latter canonized the 'good person' (*phuu dii*) in the education of all Thais for the first half of the 20th century. Originally titled a *Textbook for Dhamma Matters* (*Baeprian Khadidhaama*), the name was soon altered to address criticism that the text aspired to a 'higher order' of moral education than was appropriate to pervasive educational reform. Though the title changed, the project was preserved: train citizens and bureaucrats to adhere to a conception of *dhamma* that supported royal interests. Previously, overtly Buddhist codes of conduct that promoted alignment with the *dhamma* were directed at the perfection of the self to attain a better rebirth. *Qualities of a Good Person*, however, specifically targeted the cultivation of future royal officials to best serve the administrative performance of the monarchy. According to Jory, "in *Qualities of a Good Person*, the morality of the royal state official (*kharatchakan*—literally 'servant of the king') is to replace that of the Buddhist monk as the model of exemplary conduct" (ibid 366). Sangop's commitment to designing the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* to resemble a Meru-based temple reinstates the Buddhist monk as a political model: when choosing the occupants of their temple-like parliament, the moral electorate will authorize those with the moral probity of monks to enter the building's dhammic form. Their moral architecture revitalizes the anti-democratic, royalist archetype of the 'good person' in built form, replacing the *khondii* (good person) with the *khong**g**dii* (good thing) they design.

The ’good person’ archetype draws Its legitimacy from the tension between the two models of political power mentioned earlier – *barami* (charismatic power) and *amnaat* (authoritative power)—that have mediated the contentious dynamics among popular, royal, and military sovereignties since the 1932 revolution. A ‘good person’ cannot aspire to the *barami* of a monk or monarch, but claims to wield the *amnaat* of their office with a moral authority that exceeds that of their position. The practice dates most prominently back to the nation’s first dictator, Field Marshal Phlaek Phibunsongkram, who first rose to power as a leader in the People’s Party revolution of 1932. For decades, Phibun filled many positions of considerable political power: minister of education, minister of the interior, minister of finance, minister of commerce and twice as both the Minister of Defense, and as Prime Minister. As the architect of an aggressive modernization campaign known as the Thai Cultural Revolution, Phibun commissioned a new anthem, changed the name of the nation from *Siam* to *Thailand*, mandated the standardized central Thai language, Western attire and utensils, obligatory saluting of the flag, and mobilized a propaganda campaign modeled on Mussolini’s government that lionized both himself and Rama IX. In fact, some self-aggrandizing measures resembled privileges of the king: he declared his birthday public holiday and required audiences to stand during a short film about himself that proceeded any movie (Sopranzetti 2020). To buttress his claim to the authoritarian power needed to impose such transformative projects, Phibun distinguished the *amnaat* of his and his supporters’ duty to their nation from the ‘corrupt’ motivations of his opposition. The official announcement of Phibun’s administration following the coup justified its overthrow of the government “because our duties concerned with the people and hatred for corruption, we were forced to take over power (*amnaat*) to force the resignation of the

government" (ibid 65). Since 1947, anti-corruption discourse become the hallmark of national purification schemes by Thailand's dictators[9].

It was not until the coup of 2006 and the years that coincide with the parliament competition and Sangop's winning submission, however, that the discourse of the 'good person' came to define anti-democratic governance. Again, immediately following the coup, Prime Minister General Surayud Chulanont, members of the cabinet and royal Privy Council, including Prem Tinsulonanda, moralized the need for 'good people' to rule a nation led astray by Thaksin and the "People's Consitution" that made his regime possible. The 1997 constitution was the first composed by an entirely elected body, hence it being called "The People's Constitution." This was the only time in the nation's history that its entire parliament was elected. Academics, jurists and elected officials collaborated on what some Thai studies scholars have called a "postpolitical constitution," that aspired to reduce corruption, improve political representation, and disempower political parties. Senators, who were elected for the first time, were prohibited from participating in political parties. MPs were required to resign from their office if they became Cabinet Ministers. Voting became compulsory. Nonetheless, for post 2006-coup critics, it was precisely these measures that facilitated the populist rise of Thaksin. Citing the defense of the monarchy and the constitution's impotence at preventing the accumulation of Thaksin's and his party's power, even former supporters of Thaksin resorted to the 'good person' archetype at the

[9] Two subsequent regimes illustrate a similar configuration of power justified through anti-corruption rhetoric. Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat ruled the Thai government from his coup in 1958 until his ousting by Octoberist protestors, who included the Sangop principals, in 1973. He promoted an oxymoronic concept first conceived by the prominent author and public intellectual Kukrit Pramoj, called "Thai Style Democracy." It is oxymoronic, because "Thai style" implies the hollowing-out of the next term, 'democracy.' It legitimates a paternalistic parliamentary system favored by Thai elites and conservatives, that favored political rule by 'good people' over elected office. Sarit himself exercised considerable *amnaati* as a military leader, while also siphoning the *barami* of the king through close association. Sopranzetti argues that both Sarit and Phibun's downfalls resulted from their pursuit of *barami* that was disproportionate to the *amnaat* of their positions in Thai society (Sopranzetti 2020). The second regime, that of General Prem Tinsulanonda (19080-1988), similarly channeled its *barami* from Prem's close association with King Bhumibol during the most significant period of the monarchy's re-mystification.

expense of political representation. One of the architects of the People's Constitution and a former backer of Thaksin, Prawase Wasi, promoted a return to a political philosophy of 'good governance' predicated on the concept of *dhamma* more than democracy, which he called *Dhammarat*—literally, the 'dhamma state.' Prawase joined the conservative democratic party led by Abhisit Vejajiva that would replace the Thaksin government, promulgate aggressive anti-corruption propaganda, facilitate a rapid expansion of the state's censorship laws, and enforce a violent crackdown against red shirt protestors in 2009. The party was nicknamed "the Good People's Party" (*phak phuudii*). It was under this administration, and amidst the acrimonious antinomy between anti-democratic 'the good person party' and disgruntled red shirt democratic activism that Sangop proposed its design of the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* as an architectural panacea that would end corruption and "unify the nation."

*Conclusion*

Dwelling in the tense liminality between popular *amnaat* and royalist *barami*, the *demos* and the *dhamma, khon dii* (good people) and *khong dii* (good things), architectural citations of Meru-temples and international parliaments, Sangop designed dhammacracy into the architecture of Thailand's third parliament. Whereas conservative politicians and repressive dictators championed self-appointed 'good people' ruling the populace, Sangop claimed its activist architecture was designed to invert this vector of political power, representing the 'good people' of the governed over their errant politicians. Both approaches, nonetheless, predicated their unilateral interventions on a moral authority that materializes the *dhamma* to purify disjointed political systems. As such, design activism inhabits another liminal spectrum, between the depoliticizing measures of 'good people' who divert political participation from the public into

the hands of technocrats *and* the cosmopoliticizing expansion of the arena of political representation (literally) through the delegation of activist architectural forms, motifs, materials and spaces.

Constitutions and good person politics have almost exclusively narrowed the political field of actors. Dhammaraja and tuayaang powers, similarly, limit the constituency capable of claiming a catalytic moral authority, a precious reservoir of power that 'good people' aspire to transmit through affiliation with the monarch. While the design activist is the interdiscursive offspring of both models of political actors, it is precisely the will to counteract the depoliticizing apparatus empowering kings and 'good people' that motivates much of Sangop's transformation of the *Traibhumi*. For one, they claim that transforming the royalist text into a publicly accessible architectural complex by a group of lay designers constitutes an act of 'democratizing design.' Second, unlike the prior two parliaments and the 138 out of 144 submissions to the 2009 competition, the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* is the only design that creates two separate assembly halls for the House and the Senate. The Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall was, as the name suggests, never designed to be a parliament. Quite the opposite. However, after the 1932 revolution, the People's Party single council met below a dome painted with Italianate frescos of the Chakri kings. Bicameral legislatures would meet alternately in the same space until 1973. Once the second parliament in U Thong Nai was constructed, however, it too only had one large assembly hall. The provision of a single assembly hall in the architecture and imagination of parliamentary politics materialized the plasticity of a bicameral legislature that arbitrarily oscillated between a single and dual legislature for most of the nation's history.

Sangop's architecture was intended to act like a constitution, transforming the relations of government officials and checking the abuses of their power. In Thailand, however, the

vicissitudes of the legal system, the fickleness of its constitutions, and the immanence of the next coup undermined the credibility of any legislative boundaries to political powers. The *Sappaya Saphasathaan*, therefore, constituted a political contract among competing sovereignties, writ in the forms, materials and practices of its activist architecture. Sangop architects argued that the country's constitutions facilitated misrepresentation and corruption, that they intended to correct by designing a galactic arrangement for the complex: the offices of MP's, senators and bureaucrats would orbit around the two permanent legislative halls. The other five competition finalists also provided two assembly halls, but in completely isolated buildings without adequate office space to accommodate the support staff for all representatives. Witee explained, "our design literally floats the meeting halls in the air and surrounds them with the parliament system, like egg yolks, so they can feed them from every direction, up, down, left and right… the constitution requires 500 representatives in *saw saw*, by law it has become huge. The constitution allows too many people, its crazy, but that's how it was written." Previously, MPs and their staff would be distributed throughout the city, commuting through Bangkok's notoriously glacial traffic. "Because representatives have offices all over Bangkok, they are never there, they cannot come back and forth in time for meetings," added Prem. But bringing them all into a single interior cosmos, Sangop architects explained, renders everyone more accessible and, thereby, more accountable. The architecture, in effect, designs the parliamentary system—not the building, not its isolated elements, but its whole cosmology—to correct for deficiencies in its copious constitutions.

As a prosthetic intervention that corrects for the politics and impermanence of the government's constitutions, the architecture of the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* re-constitutes the field of political relations beyond the domain of politicians, legislation, *dhammarajas*, good people,

legislatures and technocrats. Spaces, forms, materials, architectural interdiscursivity, design activists, and materializations of *dhamma* enter the political arena *as* an activist political arena that participates in the cosmopolitics of the Thai state. Tarrying between the auratic *barami* of human and non-human *tuayaang*, on the one hand, and the authoritative *amnaat* of government officials on the other, activist architecture exerts a 'soft' seductive power some design activists compare with that of the king. Wisut called the 'multiplier' quality of his design week intervention an instance of architecture exerting a 'soft' power that persuades reorientation towards its models, unlike the coercive 'hard power' enforced by laws, the junta or the monarch's lese majesté censorship machine. Wanchai regretted the spectacular design of the royal crematorium communicated neither the 'soft power' of the monarch nor of the people. And it was the 'soft' power of a temple to inaudibly and ineffably compel the respectful silence of its visitors that Prem used to illustrate how 'architecture can act,' without the violence of the protests and uprisings he had long participated in. Compared with the violence of government crackdowns, architect penalties, bootless contractor fines, draconian censorship, 'good person' repression, and the bellicose carousel of military coups, the silent semiotics of dhammacratic architecture compel without coercion the emulation of the moral models it cites. Dhammacratic architecture is designed to insinuate itself somewhere in between the King's admonition to "choose good people" and his sister's remonstrance, to "make our own choice," conveying the force of the *dhamma* into the eyes of the demos with the faint whisper of a moral, 'soft' suggestion.

Figure 5: The silhouette of the new Thai Parliament (*Sappaya Saphasathaan*) under construction, looming above Pradiphat Road in Bangkok. (photo provided to the author by informant 2019)

Chapter 2:

*The Designification of Representation: Drawing Lines between Graft & Craft in the Architecture of Thailand's Interregna*

"This is *very bad*, it looks *very bad*, what were you thinking?!*"* Coming from the typically temperate Prem, this statement sounded like a malediction. In the two years I spent observing his conduct in meetings, lectures, workshops, site visits, studio critiques, press junkets and meals, I rarely witnessed Prem express the slightest sign of anger, unless provoked by the poor realization of an architectural detail his team designed. He often dismantled a subcontractor's proffered work with a belittling laugh, followed by a lengthy tutorial about how to do their craft the right way, the way Sangop designed it. But he seldom raised his voice or spoke derisively. This is one reason I found his anomalous outburst so disorienting at one of my first 'design workshops' that Sangop convened weekly at the parliament construction offices.

For this workshop, three Sangop architects, four STECON engineers and I were standing beneath the fluorescent lights of a boardroom, huddled around what to a casual observer could appear like a dismembered desk: it had no legs, just a white Corian work surface, a retractable drawer, and a back panel clad in teak veneer with a green electrical socket connected to nothing. Participants referred to the desktop as a *tuayaang*: a word that in Thai capaciously means prototype, model and representation. This was a *tuayaang* for what would become a government

representative's desk, one day, in the completed senatorial assembly hall. STECON engineers and construction managers had buoyantly presented the prototype, joking and grinning with self-satisfaction at what they saw as a finely executed realization of Sangop's design. It was quickly apparent by Prem's reaction, however, that he considered this *tuayaang* repugnant. The threshold between the horizontal white corian work surface and the vertical teak back panel was delineated with a clean straight line that was interrupted only by a plane of corian that extended behind the green plug, violating the partition between the two materials. This, I learned, was an aberration from Sangop's drawings. Prem was incensed at the sight of the green socket and the trespass of other materials it provoked into teak territory. The construction managers and engineers stopped their banter and listened in silent dejection to the waves of Prem's displeasure crashing against their craft, generally, and this prized prototype specifically. Their justifications were bootless against Prem's refrain "this is not in the drawings, did you read the drawings? *Can* you read the drawings?!! [in Thai]" The two other Sangop architects were similarly displeased, but their disapprobation appeared in awkward laughter and other gestures of bemused exasperation at the disgraceful representation before them.

The other reason Prem and the arch"tect'' responses struck me as disproportionately strong was due to the relative scale and subtlety of the offending detail. Compared to the maverick one-inch wide green electrical socket, the architectural behemoth outside our window was cosmically enormous. At 424,000 square meters, the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* is the world's largest parliament building, over 8 times larger than the US Capitol. It is second only to the US Pentagon among the largest government complexes on earth. The building complex and exterior courtyards encompass more area than Vatican City. It uses enough teak (59,000 square meters) to reconstruct three timber Taj Mahals. The seven-story royal stupa that begins at the parliament's

11th story is taller than the statue of liberty, and its cladding is composed of solid brass covered in richly ornamented 22k gold, delicately applied with cotton balls by goldsmiths one inch at a time (see intro). The parliament's sprawling layout and labyrinthine layers of internal, multistoried courtyards comprise over five kilometers of I: three times longer than the combined facades of the Palace of Versailles. Never mind the proverbial tree, I felt as if the architects were failing to see the forest for a bent needle. Why was something so relatively small becoming such a big issue? I failed to see, as they did, the "totality" (Lukacs 1972), the underlying network of interrelatedness, allowing the scalar connection of a plug to a polity.

The plug controversy Is what Barthes would call a *punctum*: the disorienting detail "that pricks me" (Barthes 1980, 25). To its observer, the punctum is the detail that derails orthodoxy and confounds formulaic thought. It is a tiny element that unravels any tidy presupposition of a whole. Or to adapt Mary Douglas's conceptualization of dirt, it is the detail indexing matter out of place, the threat that activates systematicity (Douglas 2002). Thus, to answer my question, and to understand how one plug within a spectacular parliament complex can precipitate opprobrium, and how violations of the design are signified as violations of the political system, will be the horizon of this chapter.

The short answer Is the most obvious: the controversy cannot be reduced to a plug as such, but to the plug as a representation. For their interlocutors, an erroneous hue of a socket or the token of frailty in a sovereign's body are symptoms of disorder, indexes of systemic derailment. But how? The affect it excited also cannot be consolidated in the plug as *a* problematic representation, but to a problem *of* representation (Mazzarella 2019): the impossibility of perfectly instantiating an absence *and* the powerful potential of reconstituting outside forces in the new form of a present representative, an impossible problem of being both

the same and different. This problem, as this chapter will show, became even more acutely convoluted when design activist workshops laminated architectural and political representation. Not only was the plug a *tuayaang*, a model and representation, so too were the other human and non- human design actors in the room. Recognizing "the people, not politicians are our clients" and "the drawings is the contract" the architects of the new Thai parliament labeled themselves "activists" and "representatives," with design providing both media and modality for their activism. Community architects and royal architects who also considered their design as politically active, though with very different political alignments, likewise asserted design mandates on behalf of 'the people' they represented. Within design workshops, designers and designed objects formed political caucuses, with constantly shifting attachments to past and future political forces well beyond but saturated within the workshop walls. To understand the heterogeneous tangles of representation in design workshops, the plug must be situated amongst the prototype it ruins, the diaspora of parliament plugs it represents, the contracted supplier relationships these plugs instantiate, the complex's conceptual and cosmological systematicity it balances, the political economy of the building industry, the heterotopic genre of 'workshops,' and its circulation amongst an expansive cosmopolitical economy of things, meta-humans (Sahlins 2017), architects, welders, kings, politicians, contractors and 'the people.' The first section of the chapter will demonstrate how design workshops operated as heterotopias for "opening up" (Latour 2005,454) and calibrating cosmopolitical representation.

The next section of the chapter will consider why workshops configured two forces of misrepresentation – corruption and royal entitlement – as problems design could solve. The notion of 'political representation' for Thais remains both contradictory and aspirational, and the conventional mechanisms of liberal democracy appear dysfunctional in a country that, in its

almost 90-year history as a constitutional monarchy, has convulsed with 21 coups, 13 dictatorships, 12 constitutions and almost yearly massive, paralyzing and typically violently suppressed protests. Political transitions are more often outcomes of military coups, judicial manipulation, royal intervention or popular uprising than of electoral politics. Given the volatility of conventional modalities of political representation in 21st century Thailand, what gives design exceptional promise to 'make' a difference in the politics of representation? Why are makers of massive and often flamboyant mediation mobilizing politically amidst populist cries for immediate representation?

The final section offers some answers, one of which has to do with ideologies of design, generally, that presuppose phenomena as problems entailing designable solutions, and the metasemiotic framing of design workshops, specifically, that proliferates at the intersections of architectural and political representation during Thailand's interregna. Building upon both Flusser's expansion of the term 'design' as de-sign (Flusser 1999) and semiotic analyses in design anthropology (Fortis 2010; Murphy 2013, 2015; Schull 2012), this dissertation theorizes processes of *designification*: a distinct mode of citationality that ideologically packages the signs it transforms as products of the ameliorating telos of design discourse. Moving beyond well-established theories of semiotic mediation (Mertz and Permantier 1985; Keane 2008), designification refers to specific semiotic processes and practices construed as semiotic *re*mediation. While all citations re-present a discursive event and indicate some difference in its current representation (Derrida 1998; Nakassis 2013), *designification* enunciates this difference, ideologically packaging it as an outcome of design's improving operations. Moreover, because this semiotic remediation unfolds through a performative repertoire that design enacts in material things –signs, objects, matter, space – *designification* reifies the concepts it actualizes. The

ambiguous pronunciation of the term evokes the duality of practices that make it imaginable to simultaneously *design-ify* phenomena – to reify objects, problems, ideas, signs as matter design improves – and *de-signify* phenomena – the semiotic 'gimmick' of de-signing, refurbishing or reinventing the signification of problematic signs. As such, *designification* is a mode of semiosis with powerful temporal and scalar play: it can suture tokens of a form or a detail to broader conceptual types, like cosmologies, sovereignties, political economy, affording the performative possibility of improving the system by improving links along the intersemiotic chain connecting it to Its microcosmic formations. When seen through this metasemiotic lens of designification, the problem of political representation shifts away from populist questions of excessive mediation, toward questions of how its mediation can be better designed, how it can be semiotically remediated. The designification of representation in interregna workshops thus renders profound questions over the aesthetics of governance during a transformative moment between monarchs, governments, parliaments and peoples as matters of design praxis.

The final section argues that design activism emerged as an alternative field for building successful political representation because it misrepresented better. Thais identify corruption as the most common force hijacking democracy[1]. Central to populist cries for immediacy is the figuration of crooked politicians, self-interested contractors, and opportunistic and I voters who imperil political representation through invisible arts of deception. Corruption connotes bad mediation (Mazzarella 2006): it commandeers what could otherwise become proper representation. Design activists, on the other hand, describe themselves as selfless, sacrificing, driven to work punishing hours over years of unpaid labor and, at times, physical precarity, because of their "duty" to the people and the nation. While they profess to working tirelessly,

[1] Informants repeatedly cited figures between 60-80% of Thais believed their politicians were corrupt. Based on local surveys, Transparency International estimates this number at 88%.

selflessly and thanklessly for 'the people,' their efforts to combat corruption will never be adequate. Like canned laughter (Zizek 2008) or about any good ideology, their designs, they contend, will *do the work for them* and the people they represent. Implementing a repertoire of devices they characterize with the English word "gimmick," designification unwittingly recruits participation and motivates morality through the use of deceptive materials, seductive spaces, disorienting proportions, false authorship or beguiling citationality that insidiously distort 'the people's' perceptions for the better. Nowhere is the campaign to design better representation through misrepresentation more prominent than in the parliament's conceptual apparatus: it is designed to replace the powerful institutions—the government, the military and, eventually the monarchy—it superficially glorifies. The final section situates this emic discourse of gimmickry within its broader emergence under late capitalism (Ngai 2019) and the genealogical association of design with trickery (Flusser 1995). I argue that design activists deploy the gimmickry of designification to save political representation by bypassing its pitfalls, offering instead a manipulative apparatus of things capable of sustaining both ambivalence *and* attachments to the convolution of competing sovereignties in the liminal atmosphere of the country's interregna.

*I: Unplugging Corruption in the Workshop*

Zooming out from the green plug, from its trespass on the *tuayaang* tabletop, from the workshop conference table, and from the construction site environs, tracing in reverse the meaningful itinerary that workshop participants experience daily as they form Thailand's new parliament reveals some of the plug's microcosmic entanglement. The construction site is not a canvas preparing for deferred political representation. It is already a vital parliamentary field

through which human and nonhuman representatives assemble the unfolding cosmopolity they call Thailand.

The approach from the neighboring streets to one of the site office's dozen meeting rooms provides a quick panorama of the new parliament's "representational economy...a totality of technologies, media, institutions, and practices prevalent in any given historical and social context, insofar as they have effects on one another" (Keane 2018, 68). There are two points of entry along the parliament's 1.5 km long construction fence: building supplies and construction workers enter on thanon tahaan ("soldier road") and everyone participating in *Sappaya Saphasathaan's* design enters on thanon samsen. Visual traces of the site's prior inhabitants linger only along the periphery. Anyone accessing either entryway from the intersection of thanon tahaan and thanon samsen must first drive by the ruins of the Yothinburana School sign, which once announced the century-old school that the government has since razed for its new parliament. Meter-tall gold lettering etched into black granite slabs recalls the displaced institution, but its monumental concrete frame is dusty and gashed. Rather than obliterate this sign along with the demolished school it continues to indicate, the construction management company preserved it as a ruin, a piece of spolia incorporated into the 4m-tall, corrugated steel construction fence concealing the site from the street. Despite weeks of protest by students, teachers and community members resisting their displacement back in 2010 and the ongoing resentments that continue to simmer in the neighborhood, it appears as though no attempt was ever made to mitigate the prominence of this relic. It lingers in hostile defiance, an unabashed symbol to the violent enactment of sovereign power by the military government over its people, but according to the design, *for* its people. In fact, the entire school property was obliterated to create space *not* for the parliament, but for a " people's park" at its periphery. Renderings

promise a challenging[2] space for potential gathering in the world's hottest city: an enormous patch of exposed lawn scored with narrow strips of tree-lined hardscape and an unprotected stepped, concrete amphitheater. The coexistence of the Yothinburana relic and 'the people's' promised park replacing it form a concise architectural statement of sovereign power that is capable of simultaneously gaslighting and catfishing Thai subjects: we destroy you for your benefit; here is a space to voice the words we will use against you.

Participants and visitors to the construction offices along Thanon Samsen park their cars below a massive banyan tree, the other relic of the residential community displaced from this portion of the parliament grounds. A new 3m tall spirit house (*saan phraphum*) stands before the tree's trunk, which is wrapped in polychrome diaphanous cloth. Most spirit houses are modeled on temple *wihaan*[3], with their concave roofs resembling the respectful hand gestures of their *wai*-inf propitiators. The parliament's spirit house culminates in a gold-painted *prang*, or multi-tiered chedi-form, above the curved *wihaan* gable. The *prang* resembles the form of Wat Arun, located just down the Chao Phraya, which is unsurprising as both are transmutations of Mt. Meru. So too is the golden royal *busabok*[4], and for that matter the entire form of the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* rising above the parking lot. The satin cloth binding the massive trunk behind the *saan praphum* like a scarf was tied at some point either as an encouraging gesture toward the tree spirit residing within or as a defense against the parliament's threat to the tree. Banyan trees are also venerated for their association with another fig-tree cousin, the Bodhi tree, the tree under which the Buddha

[2] Recent Facebook posts by the Sangop landscape architect who designed this forum depict him standing at his rammed earth dais, his shirt translucent with the sweat, under the caption "I have created a field for the people to relax, to show their power, and to listen and offer political speeches."

[3] Commonly situated in front of residential, commercial and institutional buildings, *saan praphum* domesticate residual strains of animism into conventionally Thai buddhist architectural forms.

[4] The *kruangyot* (เครื่องยอด) is a multi-layered tapering form that cites the cosmological delineation of the levels of existence organized along the slopes of Mt Meru, as described most canonically in the *Traibhumi*. This form is reserved for the royal family, and typically appears on throne halls, royal crematoria (*phramerumat*) and, now, the new Thai parliament.

attained enlightenment. The solitary survival of this impressive tree likely owes its existence to any or all of these significations. Its very survival is a trace of past activism. Each morning one can find a few draftspersons, security guards, designers or engineers kneeling before the spirit house, under the banyan's penumbra and *wai*-ing, sometimes situating smoking incense sticks and red soda bottles among the clay figures filling the miniature porcelain house's portico. Witee, a Sangop architect, never enters the construction offices without first visiting the *saan praphum* and honoring the agents it represents.

Before setting foot in the construction offices or grounds, an assembly of absent actors are already represented along the periphery. Haunting, memorializing and many forms of paranormal presencing assemble with other regimes of representation in the *Sappaya Saphasathan*. A ruinous sign and new spirit house index persisting agencies of past residents. An august tree in gauzy garb signifies spiritual stakeholders, the Buddha's enlightenment, and environmental activism. The gilt mountainous form of the spirit house enmeshes it, the parliament, and the most sacred temple forms along the Chao Phraya in an intertextual web of forms citing and channeling Mt Meru, the universe's axis. The red Fanta glass bottles accumulating on the *saan praphum*'s stylobate signal a powerful semiotic chemistry that can satisfy at once: one, the favored sweet red liquid (*naamdaeng*) that spirits enjoy seeing and consuming; two, the late king's favored drink; three, the meteorological conditions requiring a robust, cheap and available glass vessel in mercurial weather; four, the political economic pragmatics of the Coca-Cola company and US Information Services (USIS) that cooperated in the mass mediation of the late monarch (Handley 2006) during the Vietnam war. The envelope of the parliament construction site is itself a cosmopolitical assembly.

One cannot begin to 'see' the plug without becoming attuned to the phenomenology of the plug's cosmopolitical economy. What does this mimetically rich periphery sound like? Many days, anyone practicing obeisance at the gateway shrine can hear—even over the construction din, the incessant roar of cars, buses and *tuk-tuks* racing down Thanon Samsen—the staccato of rapid gunfire emanating from the military firing range across the street. Besides the odd visit of junta officials for administrative meetings, the parliament's landlords – the military – are remarkably invisible. Nevertheless, they become present at the parliament through the sporadic echo of gunfire and the indistinct tunes of the national anthem and the song "*nak phandin"* ("burden of the country") that every morning and evening wail across loudspeakers dispersed throughout the neighboring military base. Everyone, particularly in such close proximity to the military, is expected to stand and look flag-wards when the anthem plays. The reemergence of the nationalistic tune *nak phandin*, on the other hand, is a recent contribution of the ruling junta, and its embodied effects depends upon its audience. For Sangop architects (again, meaning "peace"), this song is arresting for the terror it excites at the trauma it recalls. The military played *nak phandin* as they and the sympathizers they abetted massacred student activists, like the future principals of Sangop, back in 1976. Its resurrection under the military junta, at a time when any form of public gathering beyond 10 people was illegal, has only enshrined the song as a jingoist anthem of pro-military might. One Sangop architect would appear visibly shaken the few times I was with him when we heard this song escaping the military base or permeating a shopping mall. "I try to leave the parliament before it starts playing, but sometimes it can't be avoided," he told me in Thai one evening as the muffled notes of *nak phandin* infiltrated the construction wall. Not yet out of the temporary construction parking lot, not yet inside the building that houses the electrical plug awaiting Prem's censure, the *Sappaya Saphasathaan's*

atmosphere – a future "place for doing good deeds and dhamma" – is redolent with specters of the country's and the designers' mediated past and distant present. Long before the assembly halls are completed, representation is spectral and the spectacular in the new parliament's architecture.

Turning one's back on the street, spirits, ruins, bullets and banyan, visitors walk towards the modular, prefabricated site construction building located at the base of the ever-rising form of *Sappaya Saphasathaan's* gilded summit. Security guards welcome visitors into a linoleum clad vestibule, while they borrow or return construction helmets and swap shoes for STECON branded rubber slippers. One then passes a vast unpartitioned room – more like a drafting factory–filled with over 50 active STECON employees constantly updating the hundreds of thousands of desk-sized construction drawings continually evolving after each day's workshop. Some drawing packets are encased in purple covers, others green, others yellow: each color indicating one of the 5 supervising design teams responsible for a given jurisdiction in the complex.

Clip-clopping up a flight of grey epoxied stairs of the Parliament's construction site offices, participants reach a waiting room with Sangop's table-size competition-winning architectural model of *Sappaya Saphasathaan*, displayed in front of decade-old interior renderings. As one approaches each workshop office from the lobby, an ever-changing exhibition of technical plans, building sections and construction progress charts cover the walls, promulgating the parliament's slow realization process. Red inked corrections, bold time stamps, and post-it reminders index work in progress, challenging what is otherwise the prevailing theme of *Sappaya Saphasathaan's* notorious slow construction. New constituencies of full-scale prototypes or material samples linger in the hallway. Sometimes one encounters a gathering of

lounge couches, other times ornamental mockups, a senatorial podium, an LCD touchscreen way finder, panels of stained wood samples, a massive CNC-milled royal column, a range of Herman Miller office chairs, and so on. Every object that will occupy the parliament has first existed here in the faulty bodies of *tuayaang*, loitering outside workshops awaiting approval, scrutiny and/or their senescence in a distant landfill. Among workshop participants, these prototypes represent spaces, relations, and activities both brokered in past contracts with suppliers, or that could-be one day. Their flaws make past unsanctioned dealings or future dystopias that might-be-designed-away present, now, behind the workshop doors.

For the Sangop designers of Thailand's tri-world cosmological parliament, the chromatic crime of an improper plug represented a microcosmic chronotope packed with entropic possibility. A superficial attendance could register eight humans gathered around a set of full-scale prototypes. However, this 'we' constituted a misleading quorum of agents, because every workshop also gathered its own constellation of representatives drawn from a cosmos of five design teams, two construction management offices, the office of the parliament, the offices of the senate and house of representatives, 131 subcontractors, the three worlds of the *Traibhumi*, the Thai monarchy, product suppliers, the 110isibiliy landlords, construction workers, billions of building elements, hundreds of thousands of drawings and most spectrally of all, the "distributed flesh" (Santner 2011) of "the people's" body politic. In workshop discussions, designers would assess the effectiveness of a design detail by situating it amongst the endorsements of past competition jurists, citations of Thai temple or modernist architecture, the commitments of commissioned product suppliers, and the design intentions of a decade prior. These citations of past actions and actors were then engaged with the imagined future experiences of ethical elected

officials and the enlightened publics that chose them,[5] or protested against them in the grounds of the parliament that workshop attendants were currently designing. Standing with pens or stylus over prototypes and/or drawings on paper, tablets and/or laptops, designers assessed the current suitability of a design by first narrating a series of conditional scenes of future political life that a given decision might animate. *If* a public thoroughfare maintains a consistent material and formal language, *then* visitors can navigate common spaces with less policing; *if* the lunar color scheme of the senate is sustained everywhere, *then* its participants would think of other dhammic forms associated with the *Traibhumi* cosmology; *if* an alien component that was not specified in the design specifications invades a given detail *then* the design's coherence unravels, like so….. And, *if* not, *if* unfolding modifications are ignored or passively sanctioned, the design risks reproducing the status quo it was expected to convert. Future subjects and objects were thus narrativized as subjunctive entities, or "subjunctivities" (Puett 2008), that re-presented potential futures-to-be within the present machinations of workshop politics and the designed forms that emerged from them. Past, present and future actors converged in the chronotope of each contested detail scrutinized and renegotiated in the workshop. Through designification, a prototypical plug was thus full of powerful potential.

The stakes of the smallest disjointed detail and its potentially systemic reverberations became clear in a conversation I shared with Prem during a design workshop in the quiet refuge of his secluded home studio. Prem designed his home and studio with the same material palette he applied to the parliament: elongated Ayutthaya bricks, handcrafted terracotta tiles, exposed

[5] This matter is discussed in greater detail in the introduction and chapter 3. Briefly, design activists generally deployed forms they believed would visually inspire altered behavior among Thai observers. Sangop, specifically, characterized the *Sappaya Saphasathan* as a "beacon" that will conjure visions of temples and, with these visions, the moral habitus associated with sacred spaces. As such, their theory is that the visibility of architecture will enact more moral behavior by informing the electoral decisions of the public and, thereby, the representatives they choose. I will analyze these logics as processes of visualization within designification, connecting them to Peirce's concept of the dicent sign and Theravada semiotic ideologies associated with religious *tuayaang*.

concrete, expansive glass and steel bays, and prodigious quantities of teak. The walls, floors and ceilings were teak, and long span horizontal windows extended the length of the bridge. Sitting at the enormous five-meter-long teak communal desk (he designed) in the middle of his office-bridge, guests are immersed in a panorama of tropical tree canopies and neo-vernacular teak architecture. Only one book and a pile of sketches populates the desk-cum-stage: a book on the exquisite details of the great Italian modernist architect, Carlos Scarpa.

I asked Prem about some of the irksome details that aggravated his team at every workshop. In Prem's space, no detail appears out of place. The same cannot be said for the parliament, where details assemble stakeholders vying to shape not merely the political institutions the building's form architecturally represents, but the politics of representation itself in Thailand. Sangop routinized workshops as a necessary operation in the design process for two interrelated reasons: the scale of the cosmological parliament and the precarity of political representation. These mistakes, he explained, "are not from us, they are from corruption." Significantly, Prem initially bypassed the specific actors of corruption and attributed all problems in the construction of Sangop's design to an occult force: corruption. Corruption manifested in errant details or any inconsistency between Sangop's construction drawing and its constructed realization. Like the manifestation of bad magic in a collapsed Azande granary (Evans Pritchard 1976), corruption is identified as a corrosive agency materializing in architectural misfortune. And, like bad magic, there is a power in naming the corrupt design witch. "The reason for the workshops is to prevent corruption. The project manager and construction manager are interested only in power and corruption strategy. Nothing works at this stage, so we have to work, fight, protect our design and ourselves." Importantly, the design's, the designer's and the country's welfare are the stakes of the design, and 'working, fighting and protection' are tactics of the

design process. Corruption was thus configured as the product of self-interested power, power exercised not for the representation of the clients – the people – but for the private benefit of contractors, construction managers and the politicians they colluded with.

In short, design activists claimed architectural misrepresentation materialized political misrepresentation. The plug is again exemplary of this signification. Using the plug controversy as an example, Prem elaborated. The drawings specified two colors of plugs, white and black. Sangop had selected these colors to cohere fluidly with the *Traibhumi* concept that systematized every level of the complex's design. They chose a distributor who would provide the precise shade of each plug at a price that fit within the budget allotted to the designers as part of their contract with the office of the parliament and, by their own extension, Thai taxpayers. Prem insisted, he "owes it" (the design 'fight') to "the people." At a symbolic level, the greenness of the plug abrogated their vaunted contract to their clients. So, why break it? What would possess a contractor to ignore the stipulation of a black or white plug and substitute a green one? Was it a gesture of aesthetic caprice or, as some Sangop architects complained at the workshop, professional incompetence? No, it was something insidious, it was corruption, Prem insisted. Contractors worked on behalf of themselves and their wealthy benefactors, not the people. A deviation in construction from the design as drawn in the construction documents constituted a double miscarriage in re-presentation: it indexed a breakdown in the transmutation of architectural drawing into built form *and* indexed the intrusion of unsanctioned influences and the misappropriation of taxpayer funds. Corruption constituted bad representation, both of which materialized in distortions of the design.

For parliament design activists, erroneous details thus indexed a broader *mis*representational economy: a system of relations among political actors and media that

conspired against the people Sangop represented. Prem's questioning of the construction managers' competence and his diagnosis of the flaw as a symptom of corruption reflect his constant awareness of the plug's genealogy. Detached as the prototype may be from circuitry, the plug entangled its supplier, its supplanted supplier, politicians, STECON, the Secretary of the parliament and the Deputy Prime Minister into what designers recognized as infrastructural corruption. First, the suppliers. This solitary green plug stands-in for (re-presents) a cosmos of plugs occupying nearly every space within the parliamentary complex. While Sangop specified two colors of plug from one supplier–one plug associated with the lunar Senate assembly hall, the other with the solar House assembly hall–the contractor appointed a different supplier, and the exclusive greenness of this plug communicated an unsanctioned contract with this mystery supplier. Witee, a Sangop architect, later informed me that the plug contract encompassed over 150,000 plugs, amounting to a multi-million-baht commitment between the contractor and the unratified supplier they secretly imported into the project. Supervising politicians or bureaucrats shared personal and often pecuniary relationships with different suppliers, more often with the invasive suppliers than those Sangop stipulated in the construction documents.

Even if an aberration was the product of perceived incompetence, this too indexed corruption to design activists. The construction managers and Sangop's "bosses" – the office of the secretary of the parliament and the government – enabled an apparatus of corruption that also collectively profited from delays, construction problems and design deviations. Only the designers and the people, Sangop claimed, suffered as a result. "The biggest problem in my life is corruption," one architect lamented on a walk-through of the parliament. "The head of the parliament has relations with politicians. They should fine STECON but they are not because of corruption. There are no consequences for going slow: $120 million in fines should be paid by

November [2018]. Construction management knows who has power." STECON garnered the commission to construct Thailand's most prominent and largest government building despite having little to no experience with this type of project. The secretary of the parliament at the time of my fieldwork was a former STECON CEO, and an intimate friend with the Deputy Prime Minister of the junta, Prawit Wongsuwan. Prawit earned notoriety and rare censure for donning a dazzling array of luxury watches in public events, valued at over $1 million, which he claimed were "borrowed" from "friends," like the owner of the parliament's construction management company. Prawit was also a major stakeholder in STECON. In hushed conversations, architects connected Prawit's $100,000 Patek Philipe timepiece and the aberrant details (like the abhorrent plug), underlining the contractor's poor craft as artful graft.

This corrupt infrastructure thrived off the delays that the antagonist yet symbiotic relationship between Sangop design activism and the contractors' networks of influence fostered. "Problems" were sites of opportunity that parsed and pitted designers against contractors and their networks. Sangop configured conditions (like corruption) as problems that design could improve. Designification could capture and correct corruption by transforming its architectural agents. Contractors, Sangop claimed, profited from problem making. Prem explained, "they need the unclear solution to claim" contract extensions, additional reimbursements, and more compensation. During a walk-through following another quarrelsome workshop, Witee explained under the concealing din of construction that "they are the most powerful contractor in Thailand, with connections to the government now. If there's confusion they can take that to claim more money and time. If they are late they must pay 12 million baht per day, but if it's due to something else – the designers – no penalty! This is why they propose terrible solutions. The construction process is wrong, but no one cares except us. We find problems only after it is built

[English].” Sangop’s uncompromising commitment to the design concept and construction drawings indirectly stimulated the economy of corruption they saw themselves combatting. If they noticed an aberration or objected to a novel element that was not stipulated in the construction documents, Sangop could demand rectification. Sometimes this entailed the modification of a prototype. The week I began my fieldwork, Sangop demanded the destruction of several meters of completed floor plates along a 9-story interior atrium, delaying completion for many weeks. Contractors and their network of representatives conveniently made Sangop both their scapegoat and meal ticket. “I am not proud of this project,” Witee complained. “I hate politicians, they blame me [in Thai].” Extracting a letter from his dossier with the seal of the Secretary of the Parliament, he continued “they are an excuse machine. The construction managers are badly qualified, so we solve problems but get blamed for our solutions. I avoid politician emails. I have 800[6] bosses. This building potentially will leak like hell. I drew details by myself so I have the full picture in my head…..[but] literally there are times when I can stick my hand out of the wall. And nobody could detect it?! The construction manager should be able to detect these problems [in English].” He was not exaggerating. During one walk-through workshop, I accompanied Sangop architects to a problematic length of courtyard I. Standing in a future meeting room, I could enjoy the view of the unfinished *busabok* through a several inch gap between the top of the window mullion and the concrete ceiling it was supposed to touch, and this extended the entire length of the atria. The corruption preventing parliament from functioning *in* the building was also preventing the new parliament from functioning *as* a building.

[6] This number is the sum of members of the National Assembly and Senate

By now the political potency of a renegade plug should be clearer. The green plug was an index, the proverbial smoke to the presupposed fire of corruption smoldering invisibly outside the designer's purview or the drawings' contracts (Peirce 2011). One form was present in the drawings, another materialized in construction, and the forces managing its transmutation were blamed for the miscarriage in representation. At the same time, the plug was also iconic, it made the aberration visible as deviant. Its greenness clashed with the grey and blue tones of the desk's accents, which were designed to evoke the lunar[7] theme of the Senate assembly hall in which the desk would participate. It's size also precipitated the creep of the corian panel into teak territory, destroying the deliberate line Sangop drew between the lunar white work surface and the vertical teak wall panel that connects fluidly with the other concentric layers of senatorial desks within the chamber, and the ubiquity of teak – "the DNA of the thai people[8]" (another Sangop mantra)—permeating the entire complex. To Sangop design activists, it made the design – and with it the institution, Thai governance, the *Traibhumi* cosmos – look corrupted. The design's corruption iconically indexed the country's corruption. As such, corruption materialized in workshops as designable matter. Mutant details were not arbitrary signifiers of corruption, they were formations of it, made visible and operational as objects of designification.

This dissection of a single controversy over a polemical plug within a parliament design workshop reveals how actors, sites, forces, and systems are condensed within the smallest

[7] The national assembly meets in the gold-surfaced "Sun" (*phraaathit*) legislative hall, and the Senate meets in the grey-toned "Moon" (*phrajan*) legislative hall. In the *Traibhumi*, the sun and the moon revolve around Mt Sumeru, beneath Lord Indra's palace. In the tale of the "The Destruction of the Mahakappa" in the *Traibhumi*, the regeneration of a new sun and moon along the sides of Mt Sumeru following a kingdom's demise. Only then, the first people who are reborn below the new sun and moon are tasked with the selection of the next dhammaraja. The implications this association of the sun and moon with Thailand's representatives makes possible are quite radical: these elect figures have the power to choose the next monarch after the world of Rama IX collapses. The "Sun" and "Moon" ministerial halls share identical domical forms, like the interior of *chedi*, but in different hues, with stadium-seating concentric desks looking down upon a main dais. The lunar Senate is clad in over 10,000 milled teak panels that have been painted a lunar blue-grey.

[8] This mantra that extends well beyond Parliament publics, will be analyzed in great detail in Chapter 4.

contested detail, and as such, how the balancing of political relations becomes problems and, thus, potentials for design improvement. When their design was selected in 2009, Sangop excited global derision in domestic and international news because of their provocative claim that the parliament design would end corruption. But what the politics of the plug, and the preceding seven years of workshop-warfare indicate, is that media outlets made the same mistake as many social theorists and anthropologists (Ingold 2007; Eglash 1999; Fortis 2010; Fisch 2016; Marx 1867) before them, confusing *the* design for design, a noun for a verb, a product for a process. The parliament, as a noun, as a determined culmination of terminal accumulation was not Sangop's project, was never pitted against its inhabitants' corruptibility. To say workshop participants were designing *a* parliament would perpetrate another conflation of media and modality, of determinate and animate: design *was* parliamentary, parliament workshops were parliaments. In workshops, design and parliament were processes, both constituting agonistic world making modalities. The ongoing *parliamentality* of the weekly workshops, in which human and non-human representatives participated in the governing of future political worlds via their designs, became the vital battleground for fighting corruption.

*II: Royal Unaccountability as Misrepresentation*

While the *Sappaya Saphasathaan*'s form, concept and design workshops combat corruption, this is not the lone agency animating the forces of misrepresentation in Thailand's interregna. Design activists see themselves, their crafts, their designs, and the relations they mediate intervening in these economies of *mis*representation plaguing the body politic, of which corruption is but one powerful affliction. Unlike other political stratagems, design, they contend, could actually *make* a difference.

On many occasions, I heard design activists justify their work, their fight, their "duty" and the consequent incumbency of maintaining design fidelity during construction based on their imagined mandate as the people's representatives. Sangop considered "the people," separate from parliamentarians misrepresenting them, their clients. Team P, short for Powarint, was a common enemy-collaborator. Their amicable-antagonism was due in part to the professional distribution of construction duties of the parliament. These responsibilities were often predicated on the personal relations of the participating architects and the powerful interests they represented. Sangop, formally recognized as Team S, assumed responsibility for overseeing the entirety of the design, and therefore met with and supervised the work of all five teams involved in construction. However, the one domain of the design to which Sangop designers were the most deferential was arguably the parliament's most flamboyant: the royal domain. This consisted of ½ a kilometer of private circulation decorated in red carpets, teak and travertine cladding, red lacquer and gold-leaf paint, and–most spectacularly–the 40 m gilt *busabok* containing the royal offices and apartments, as well as a ceremonial reception hall for VVIPs and the Secretary of the Parliament's offices. Team P managed this domain, which I will henceforth refer to as the royal world, befitting both the design's transformation of the *Traibhumi*'s tri-world cosmology and the way ethnographically this domain was parsed in terms of space, form, materiality, programming, security, financing, and design from the worlds of politicians, bureaucrats, and the public. In their joint workshops, the lines of representation among political worlds were clearly drawn and delicately negotiated: Sangop represented the people, Powarint represented the monarchy.

As always, the politics of the parliament's representational economy shaped the conditions and dynamics of the workshops. For one, social hierarchies determined the territories

for workshop activities. Sangop designers most often met other team representatives at the parliament construction site. Designers, craftspersons, engineers, junta officials, suppliers and subcontractors commuted to the site, assembled in the makeshift workshop spaces with views of the national assembly changing outside their window. Workshops would also occur occasionally at the Plan Architects offices, as they are the official design firm that provides most of the design labor for Sangop. Not so for Team P. Workshops for the royal *busabok's* design were convened 13 km away from the parliament at the Powarint headquarters, located within the compound of its principal's palace.

Yes palace, or what was once the Pramalai Palace. Team P's owner and principal architect is formally called *Momrachawong* Powari Suchiwa, the honorific "Momrachawong" (MR) signifying her filial connection with a former king. She is the great granddaughter of King Mongkut's brother, from the fourth reign of the Chakri dynasty. She is thus a distant cousin of the current king, who was also her sole architectural client for almost a decade. The more 'informal' title accorded members of her rank is Khun Ying, which is the honorific everyone used to refer to her during workshops. In the decades since Pramalai Palace was constructed, Khun Ying had converted what was once the family's personal residential compound into a mixed-use property including her family restaurant, private residences, staff residences and the office of her interior design firm that bears the birth name no one calls her, Powarint. Royal world workshops were always split between her office's boardroom and meals at the restaurant, which served recipes attributed to Khun Ying's parents and her staff.

It was in the design-and-dine workshops at Pramalai palace that 'the people's' and 'the king's' representatives negotiated their constituents' competing sovereign claims through design. On one occasion teams S and P gathered to strategize furniture selection for the royal family's

private quarters on the parliament's 11th floor. The history of this meeting dates back to the 2009 design competition, when the royal quarters existed only in renderings. According to conversations I had separately with Witee and Khun Ying, the renderings of the royal apartments could not have been conceived without Khun Ying's expert and intimate knowledge of royal aesthetics and protocols[9]. A decade later, the supply chain connecting the rendering's staging and the appointed supplier in southern France had sundered. Team P and Team S had to select a new supplier and new "classic chairs," as they called them, based on the arcane criteria only Khun Ying and her son knew. Pueng, the Sangop representative, whispered to me as an aside that it was her "duty to verify style, form and quality" based on Powarint's suggestions. Sangop, In other words, had nominal veto power, but almost always refrained from intervening in the design of the royal world. This workshop was urgently convened because the contractors had unilaterally selected one chair, manufactured in China, and were preparing to place the order unless designers intervened. Pueng proposed a coalition of interests with Team P, warning Khun Ying and her son Bomb, "you need to be careful of corruption!" One of the contractor's representatives, Nim, was part of the workshop, however any awkwardness about her participation was quickly dispelled. Allaying potential suspicion of Nim's conflicting interests, Pueng explained "Nim has a good relationship with us. She helps me." Nim, in other words, would not betray Team P, Team S or those they represent by supporting her company's clandestine contract. She was not beholden to any politician or bureaucrat, in other words. All parties agreed on an "appropriate classic chair" and contrived an argument against the

[9] An informant once explained that Khun Ying had meticulously designed and choreographed the precise location, number, colors and orientations of the digital red and gold French second-empire silk chairs depicted in the competition rendering. None of the Sangop architects (and very few in Thailand) possessed the expert knowledge to compose even a rendering of this space, much less design its realization. These were also the only items of furniture specified at the time of the competition because they were the only ones associated with the royal family amongst the 131 proposed designs.

contractor's selection, predicated on the grounds of Khun Ying's expertise, within the grounds of her royal palace. In another helpful aside, Pueng informed me "when I finish a workshop, I must make our decisions formal." Pueng signed the material samples and the mood boards, thereby endorsing the impending expenditure Team S and Team P collectively determined.

While not conventionally corrupt, royal entitlement materialized as another modality of misrepresentation in the parliament architecture. Though the boardroom workshop appeared to conclude in a collaborative campaign against corruption, Pueng and Nim met privately over lunch to discuss problematic implications of the workshop dynamics. Pramalai palace is located on the commercial boundary between Silom and Sathorn, some of the most valuable and dense real estate in Southeast Asia. The royal compound, however, encompassed an acre of gardens, single-story residences and a parking lot – all rarities in an urban environment with scant open space. We sat under a massive, century-old Banyan tree eating exquisite northern Thai cuisine that, as the menu reminds its consumers, is connected with Powarint's father, Prince Bhisadej Rajani, and his duties as both the president of the Royal Project Foundation and close advisor to the late Rama IX. According to the biographical menu, guests digested the royal family's craft and largesse. Water features, classical Thai music and the property's remove from the bustling commercial corridor outside the compound created an uncommonly quiet atmosphere for the Silom area. Feeling exposed and vulnerable to prying ears, Pueng and Nim soon adopted the discrete tenor of speech I struggled to hear when informants tried to conceal their conversations about the royal family.

Though the move against the contractor's selection evaded the allegedly corrupt agreement with an unknown supplier, Team P's selection of a luxurious new product introduced a new supplier, a new budget and the unspoken question of how Thai taxpayers will pay for this

costly change. Nim issued a question that could only be rhetorical in relation to the monarchy: "who will pay for this change?" In the seven months of around-the-clock labor Sangop spent in design development translating a competition design into realizable construction documents back in 2009, the complex's budget never accounted for the most luxurious world in the parliament.

This budgetary lacuna reflects an unrepresentable power, or what Lefort called the "empty place of power[10]" (1988), that materializes as a literally *unaccountable* affordance materializing in the unrestrained opulence of the royal world. The day before submitting their drawings, Sangop's design exceeded the budget by almost 1 billion baht. Witee slashed miles of glass from the facades, reducing window space for the parliament's inhabitants and replacing it with cheaper prefabricated concrete panels on the exterior, and hand-cast 123isibilit bricks on the atrium facades. Witee explained, "I was responsible for the envelope, which was the most expensive at 2.3 billion baht. So, I made a formula, if I lose money the glass gets reduced." The adjustment completely altered the appearance and performance of the building, and would entail hundreds of hours of added design and construction labor to devise the new I systems. That a last-minute redesign of three-Versailles worth of facades was more feasible than any concession from the financial lacuna of the gilt royal world heralded the monarchy's continued dominance in the future politics of the parliament's design. Like all critical discourse of the monarchy, the prospect of curtailing royal power in the parliament budget and architecture was unspeakable. The latest constitution stipulates that the king will be "enthroned in a position of revered worship." Years before these words materialize in the gold and silk throne room on the 11th

[10] Lefort theorized "the locus of power is an empty place, it cannot be occupied – it is such that no individual and no group can be consubstantial with it – and it cannot be represented" (Lefort 1988, 17).

floor[11] of the parliament the king is given the empty throne of a blank check in the Thai parliament building's budget.

As royal details materialized in sumptuous silks, precious gold, imported Italian Carrara marble, solid brass cladding, hand painted murals, and pervasive hand-crafted ornamentation, the official budget was never expanded to cover these expenses. After one workshop with Team P, Witee privately lamented, in English, "Team P wants artwork for the *busabok* and assembly halls!? More *Traibhumi* art?! Art was never in the budget. They are asking me to take funds from the design for the art. They think we can just re-allocate details! We must have a systematic approach to everything. Some people are not thinking systematically at all!" Every time a design modification occurs in the parliament, a workshop ensues and Sangop must meet with all relevant parties to determine the basis for the modification. Then, if Sangop deems it necessary, they will submit the necessary dossier of forms, RFI (Reason for Information) letters and signed samples to the office of the parliament for final approval. Though Prem could rail against the corrupt impulses of contractors consummated in the off-color of a plug, no objections were permissible when the power of the royal family materialized in golden ornamental architecture and other instances in which the deferential silence of Thais extended into the budgetary modulations of the design.

The *Traibhumi* casts its three worlds as ontologically distinct, and the transmutation of this concept into the design of the new parliament did much to reproduce such distinctions. This was evident in the interactions between Sangop and team P during a site visit to the full-scale mock-up of the *busabok's* brass I. Boonmeerit Engineering, an engineering company with

[11] The 11th level corresponding to the 11th world in the *Traibhumi* in which Lord Indra surveys all inferior existence. The royal krungyot was a transmutation of Indra's palace and, to some extent, all of the ruphabumi presiding above inferior worlds.

considerable experience assembling royal and Buddhist architecture, was subcontracted to fabricate the *busabok* I. Its fabrication facility is located on the periphery of Bangkok, surrounded by flat unobstructed rice paddies. Its compound is enclosed in a modest masonry security fence, containing a few single-story offices, a foundry, and large open-air workshops for metalwork. It was not difficult navigating to Boonmeerit: their compound had the enormous brass form of the parliament *busabok* rising with an other-worldly abruptness out of the flat rice patties. Only a little more than half of the I was simulated so far, but already it was the largest form on the horizon. By the time I arrived, several Sangop architects were there along with Khun Ying. In two years, this was the only time I encountered Khun Ying outside her palace.

I joined Khun Ying, her son, her entourage of designers and assistants, along with two Sangop architects as we toured the fabrication facility. Guided by a fabricator, we passed thousands of black lacquered panels. Dozens of craftspersons had hand carved thousands of plaster positives to generate fiberglass negatives in order to create molds for every unique component of the *busabok* skin. They then smelt the brass and cast it into the custom molds. Even more labor was invested burnishing the panels once cast. In order to "make the gold more gold [Thai]" as our guide explained, craftspersons concealed the gleaming brass beneath a black lacquered patina, to which the gold leaf would be delicately applied at the parliament. For months, the entire fabrication factory had been dedicated only to the generation of the royal *busabok* cladding. Standing with Witee as he interviewed a mold-maker about the fabrication process, he appeared noticeably alarmed, and once we reached a safe distance from Team P he explained, in English, "all this work...Boonmeerit is going to absorb this cost. It will probably cost them 450 million baht ($15 million)." Laughing at his own litotes, he continued, "the costs have not been balanced." The elliptical material budget for the tons of brass and gold was

unaccounted for, which typically meant, Witee anticipated, future reductions elsewhere in the design. “I am shocked,” Witee reflected while touching a shiny black ornamented square meter panel, “we had originally thought about making the *busabok* black, like this….but I am just shocked. Had I known it would be like this, I would have designed it differently [English].”

This was an enigmatically grandiose regret, seeing as Witee, the envelope designer for everywhere *but* the *busabok*, would have never been entrusted with the design of a royal form. His fantasy of retrospective redesign was a political one. He regretted, in experiencing the *busabok* opulence for the first time, that Sangop ever delegated the design to Team P and Aj Pinyot, a choice that was made, in another Sangop architect’s words, “for political reasons [Thai].” He now resented the glorious visible token of the monarchy that was always instrumental to winning the design competition, and to fulfilling the transmutation of the *Traibhumi* into a parliament. As much as designification in workshops, hovering above drawings, afforded the ideological apparatus to act ‘as-if’ current design decisions could shape the future subjunctivities they will mediate one day, here that fantasy extended retrospectively, conjuring in the present the imagined agency to design away the power of the monarchy in the configuration of the state architecture he was helping actualize.

Khun Ying’s perspective could not have been more divergent. We entered an open-air hall with a corrugated steel roof. Spread before us were a series of 4m tall copper panels that will be affixed to the ceremonial doors the royal family will enter through. Every centimeter was covered in hand-hammered ornamental patterns representing the vegetation and supra-human *devata* of the *Rupabhumi*, the middle world of the Traibhumi that touches the summit of Mt Meru, atop of which sits Lord Indra’s palace. Switching to English, Khun Ying explained to me “designers must think about when the King and royal family arrive to open parliament. They

must arrive like a god. They can't arrive like you and I." Prior to their arrival at these towering gilt copper doorways, members of the royal family will have followed their exclusive circulation corridor Team P designed. They alone can access a private entrance along the western I, simulating their arrival from the Chao Phraya river, a reenactment of ritualized royal arrivals dating back to the Ayutthaya kingdom. They would exit their motorcade underground and enter a silk, gold, teak and ornamented elevator designed and reserved for their exclusive use. The corridors that convey them to the *busabok* elevators are clad in red velvet rugs, travertine marble floors and walls, red lacquered colonnades painted with gold vegetation, and finally to the 11th floor plaza across from their gilt *busabok*. At this point, they will walk through a courtyard circumscribed by hundreds of meters of hand painted murals of the Traibhumi covering the base of the Museum of the State's brick I[12]. Reflections of the golden *busabok* commingle with the humble brick facades of the state museum in the courtyard's four large pools representing the 4 oceans surrounding Mt Meru. Then, only the royal family and attendants pass through the gilt ceremonial doorway. At this point Khun Ying indicates a problem to me (in English): a carved stainless-steel railing just inside the royal audience hall. "You cannot have stainless steel railing after the entrance! It must be beautiful! We can design it."

"*We can design it*:" each component of this declarative sentence warrants expansion. "We" indicates the exclusive domain of Team P and the legitimacy of her unique expertise made possible by her belonging to the royal family as a relative and as the king's architect. "We can:" not only her expertise in royal protocol, skills as a professional designer, but also a surplus

[12] The brick facades of the state museum trace another design concession. For years dating back to the 2009 competition, the courtyard facades of the museum were designed with bent chrome ornamental fenestration that formed a brise soleil behind an all glass envelope. This was intended to transmute the state museum into one of the glittering gem palaces described in the celestial *Rupabhumi*, symbolically representing the institutions of the State and the Monarchy in the same rarefied ontological sphere. But, accommodate rising expenses in the royal world, Sangop also slashed the entire glass and ornamental facade scheme and replaced it with the cheaper and more vernacular ayuthaya brick, just as they did in the complex's cavernous courtyards.

power, possibly from her royal lineage, affords her the unilateral license to dispense with profane steel and impulsively replace it with materials more worthy of a god-like arrival. “We can design it:” the ideological alchemy of royal unaccountability alloyed with the transformative power of designification makes the future conversion of a quotidian steel railing into a ‘more beautiful’ golden substitute—and the consequent reconceptualization of a monarch arriving, now, “like a god” in his gilt apartments—seem both imaginable and felicitous. Witee’s wish to redesign a modest *busabok* was a retrospective fantasy. Khun Ying’s assertion was a proleptic inevitability. In her statements, the metaphysics of Khun Ying’s financial and political (un)accountability has its own laws, unmoored from those of the profane cosmos of the public, their politicians, or their representative designers.

Nonetheless, any addition to the royal world’s design inevitably manifested in a reduction in the public and politician’s worlds, as all three drew from the same purse but only one party did so with impunity. The people and politicians were subject to the basic financial physics that every action has a pecuniary reaction, but the royal world in these workshops hovered above such laws of accountability. Despite having the wealthiest monarchy on earth, they are not expected to contribute a single baht toward the golden *busabok* glorifying them. It was left to Sangop designers, acting within workshops, to commensurate the costs of increasing royal grandeur at the expense of ‘the people’s’ design. Gilding the brass cladding in the highest quality gold leaf, for example, came at the expense of several kilometers of redwood counter space that Sangop designed throughout the government hallways, which were intended to provide officials with salubrious work and eating surfaces overlooking the complex’s light and tree filled atria. While contractor interests siphoned the people’s power through corrupted channels of

representation, royal interests, in Sangop's account, effectively stole from the public to give to the world's wealthiest monarchy.

Workshops were the bricks and mortar of Sangop's perceived bulwark against all forces of misrepresentation that sought to change the design that was designed to change them. The architects were paid only for a sporadic presence on the site, but they felt it was their "duty" to organize and attend almost daily workshops at their own expense to check political corruption and royal entitlement. Design mediated the dynamo of compromising-change and contractual-constancy, as emblematized in another of Peung's exasperated outbursts: "the drawing is the contract! It is easy to change the construction technique, but form and material is specified in the drawing. The drawing is the contract!" In order to fulfill their imagined mandate to defend the purity of the original design–their contractual duty to the people–their constant supervision of the drawing-contract became necessary. At the same time, when change proved unavoidable, because a detail or supply chain commitment grew obsolete during the delayed construction, or because a finished aberration was too big or costly to destroy, or because of the increasing elaborations of the royal world, designification offered activists the powerful political plasticity necessary to fulfill their conception of popular representation.

One approach was to use cheaper materials to represent "the people" with more spectacular symbolism in those spaces that had been compromised to compensate for royal world profligacy. For example, as costs escalated and the architects slashed the all-glass facades of the nine-story internal courtyards, Sangop replaced canyons of glazing with over one million handcrafted classical Ayutthaya bricks, and substituted rammed earth in lieu of more costly teak cladding beneath the assembly halls. Both materials were cheaper and, according to Sangop designers, more evocative of the people they and their design was representing. Referring to the

fall of the Ayutthaya kingdom, which preceded the establishment of the Chakri dynasty in Bangkok, Prem explained "we chose Ayutthaya brick for what it represents. That's the worst we can be: Ayutthaya was so beautiful, but it was destroyed, but bricks will last. Brick refers to the land and the people, which will last." Ayutthaya bricks signified for Sangop the cheap, vernacular masonry of 'the people' and their land, and the ruination of prior kingdoms; the permanence of the former and the ephemerality of the latter[13]. For the design activists, ruins evoked a contradiction fundamental to institutional power, generally, and the *Traibhumi*, specifically: the impermanence of the awesome power that built them. Pong, another Sangop designer, elaborated in Thai, "we decided to cover the base of the most important rooms in rammed earth because it is my favorite material because it represents the people. They are the foundation of democracy." Hues of earth were gathered from seven rural provinces, and compressed into walls of swirling stratified clays supporting the legislative chambers. With the loss of glass, Sangop increased the prevalence of brick and rammed earth in the areas visually and physically accessible to the public: on the ground floor and in the lightwells. In Sangop's account, designification afforded them a modality of converting the implications of royal and government misrepresentation into more evocative populist representation, materializing in vernacular and organic materials that naturalized popular sovereignty out of the very processes of financial and political misappropriation.

A second designification strategy – again, a dialectic of citing, negating the citation and remediating the sublated (de)sign – enabled activists to intervene in the symbolic configuration of the monarchy. This is best illustrated in the re-design of the statue of King Prachadhipok, or

[13] Misrepresentation afforded, via de-funding and designification, what Benjamin considered a dialectical thinking made possible in the apprehension of ruination: the architectural mediation of ambivalent thought--"an allegory in thinking itself" (Benjamin 1976)"--(ap)perceived in distraction.

Rama VII. Competing political orientations have configured the Chakri dynasty's seventh king and his relationship with democracy in competing ways. Royalist narratives commend him for his enlightened munificence in charitably choosing to "give" some of his erstwhile absolute power to a parliament and a constitution holding both institutions accountable to Thai subjects. Non-royalist (and any credible historical) accounts attribute the country's conversion from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy to the coup d'etat carried out by the People's Party on June 24th, 1932. Thus, the provenance of Thai democracy is a contested matter between the competing sovereignties of the king or the people, which in the case of the parliament building, coalesces in the design of Rama VII's plinth.

Once again in workshops, the currents of misrepresentation and the modality of restitution materialized as designable phenomena. In their competition proposal, Sangop located Rama VII's statue at the base of the parliament's monumental staircase, right in front of the public circulation both through and over the complex. They originally proposed a very modest plinth, marginally elevating the former king's statue above the public, but nonetheless securing it in their domain. I joined Sangop for an emergency workshop at the parliament, because this design was under threat. The influential National Statue Committee (NTC) had unilaterally decreed, with the backing of the parliament secretary and, so a Sangop architect intimated, "people in the palace," that the Rama VII statue would be relocated *inside* the National Assembly hall, situated imperiously above the legislature. "The statue is *very* political," Witee explained in Thai. "The National Statue Committee wants to put the original statue inside and then also build a new statue three times larger outside where we designed the original statue to be." Prem elaborated in Thai, "this is not a problem with design, but with the role of parliament. They [NTC] want to make a *devaraja*, not a *dhammaraja*!"

Here Prem Is referring to two Ideological configurations of a king. The former draws from a Brahminic and Khmer tradition of an absolutist monarch, the latter from a Theravada Buddhist one (Tambiah 2007). In Tambiah's rendering, the *Devaraja* is the world conquering absolute monarch, the "god king" (Tambiah 98, 2007) empowered with and through exceptional violence. The dhammaraja, on the other hand, is the "world renouncing" enlightened monarch who makes dhamma visible. While Tambiah argued the late monarch (Rama IX) merged both conceptions, Prem distinguishes between the two and believes Sangop's design could deny the deva but develop the dhamma. "The dhammaraja is the raja of democracy," Prem explained, and proceeded to link the "demos" with "dhamma" via this configuration. "He is below the people. The devaraja was the old style of kings who was above the people, all powerful. But this changed with Rama VII, because he was forced to accept democracy, so his monument should represent the dhammaraja." Now, Sangop feared, the relocation of the statue above the people and their political representatives would reify the sorts of *devaraja*-absolutist relations that were becoming increasingly common in the first year of Rama X's reign: political disappearances, the rapid growth of the king's private army, the feverish displacement of communities from royal lands, the eradication of People's Party monuments and elaborate ritual performances of obeisance. "This will change the meaning of the assembly hall. *Sappaya Saphasathaan* was designed so that people could choose better politicians. But how can anyone imagine choosing with the *devaraja* looking down on them? [Thai]"

To preempt this potential reification of the *devaraja*, Sangop devised a strategy that they believed would improve political representation while superficially placating the latest powerful interlopers threatening it. I asked the workshop architects how they can possibly deter such powerful interests. "We will get Aj. Pinyot to design a new plinth," Mate, Sangop's landscape

architect, explained (in Thai). "Everyone knows he is the best, and he is not part of our team, but we need him. He is a national artist. Sangop has three national artists. With Aj. Pinyot, they cannot say no. This is a political decision." This was nonetheless a risky political maneuver for Sangop. Aj. Pinyot is considered a master in Thai classical architecture. He is the only classical Thai architect favored by the monarchy, parliament and Sangop. But, it was also Aj. Pinyot who Sangop recruited to design the royal *busabok*. Nonetheless, within a week, Sangop's strategy proved successful: Aj. Pinyot issued a small sketch of his proposed design for Rama VII's plinth at the base of the stairway to heaven, and in response the NTC suspended its campaign to situate the king's statue above the people inside the National Assembly. For Sangop, designification achieved one victory for the sovereignty of dhamma and demos – what this dissertation calls dhammacracy [14]-- over the deva, for life after interregna.

The preceding sections of this chapter have demonstrated how the parliament design workshops operated as important cosmopolitical parliaments themselves, in which human and nonhuman representatives of the people, the government and the monarchy debated how the forms and forces of misrepresentation would shape the post-interregna polity. A prevailing tension around the aesthetics of change is central to the workshop dynamics illustrated in the ethnographic material considered thus far. Every level of these interactions was shot through with an apprehension – both in terms of consciousness and its uneasiness – of transformability and the ability of new institutions to govern future polities. What should change look like? What should not change? What legitimizes designs and designers as worthy arbiters–and design as better arbitration–of change? How can their designs govern the suspect actions of future

[14] I elaborate on the historical and ethnographic context of this formation of power in the first two chapters of the dissertation. Briefly, the dissertation identified dhammacracy in the field of practices, materials, forms and discourse that "equivocate" (Da Castro 2004) through the encounters of democratic and dhammic world orders.

unknown ruling entities? The invisible agency of corruption – the scapegoat for democracy's supposed failures in Thailand – materialized as design deformities and architectural dysfunction. The power of the monarchy became visible in the absence of words and budgets, and the spectacularly opulent formations that materialized its unaccountability. And these transformations of the absent and invisible into the visible and physical *tuayaang* of workshops were operationalized within the metasemiotics of designification: an old form is dialectically cited, negated, improved, and opened to alternate reifications. The plug accumulated its potency within this crucible of change.

Back at Pramalai Palace, Nim and Peung debated the aesthetics of change as they distinguished their commitments to the public servants they represented, versus the royal financial unaccountability they were trying to counteract through design. After commiserating over the budgetary encroachment of the royal world into the public and bureaucratic worlds of the parliament, Pueng explained her commitment to the design as a product of her relations with certain people who will benefit directly from using or interpreting the parliament's architecture, and suffer from the spending on the royal world or the machinations of contractors. In her view, the prior parliament building harmed its best inhabitants. "I don't like politicians, but I serve bureaucrats. The importance of what we do is for them, not for politicians." The previous building was far too small for its politicians, their retinues and their empire of paperwork . Over time the politicians fled to private offices scattered throughout the city, while government officials worked within a hostile jungle of mildewing paperwork, poor circulation and ventilation, and what Witee called "a slum of paper." Peung attributes one official's death from cancer to failings in the prior parliament's "unhealthy atmosphere." Speaking in an emotional voice, she asserted "this design belongs to the people, it belongs to the good guys working for

my people. Khun Prem wants to talk to people outside of Bangkok. They believe in the *Traibhumi*. It doesn't matter if I do, or politicians do. I do this for people like her [the deceased official]." In this understanding of the design *as* the people's interests, Sangop designers can easily imagine themselves both stewards of the peoples' property and wardens of their well-being. The vitality of their design was also the vitality of the public's servants. The demos was in the details. Any force of antagonism against the design, be it royal or corrupt, was an attack against the polity. For Peung, change was inevitable, necessary but precarious in the wrong forms:

> "Buddhism teaches me: everything must change, always and all the time. But the concept does not change. *The design is the contract*. If it changes it is because of corruption. For what? Money? Power? If someone tries to change the design they are corrupt for sure. Why does he [an imagined interloper] want to change the design? Its corruption"

Politicians, contractors, suppliers and the monarchy continually take liberties in their contracts with the people they misrepresent, materialized in the errant detail and the opaque accounting funding it. They are rendered poor arbiters of change. Such misrepresentation constituted bad, undemocratic and un-dhammic, change.

Design workshops thus became alternative chambers to check negative powers and imagine systemic change, in lieu of the nation's parliamentary or juridical systems. And Sangop architects were publicly recognized as public advocates for such work, as legitimate arbiters of proper change. Prior to a talk he delivered at the billion-dollar riverside luxury mall, IconSiam, the dean of a local university's architecture school introduced Prem as an activist: "Aj Prem is so inspiring and he fights so hard. He wants to make a change in society. He has told me many times that he can do more to change politics by going to the parliament site than he can going to the courts. He has been to court many times to challenge the government, but he can have a bigger effect being on site, making sure the parliament design doesn't change." Again, change

sounds contradictory: good design can change the behavior of parliament, but changing the design won't. Good change happens not through juridical courts or politicians, but through the design of their spaces, in the courts of design workshops. And yet, bad change in the form of corruption, efforts to maintain the status quo, or the aggrandizement of existing institutions works against Sangop's transformative designs. Against such deviant representation, in every workshop Sangop designers performed their fidelity to the design they crafted on "the people's" behalf, that was selected by their appointed design judges in 2009, and that was capitalized in the millions of details priced and placed within the construction documents that Sangop thereby considered contractual.

As defenders of a design that simultaneously represented "the people's" interests and did so according to a 14th century Theravada Buddhist conception of the universe predicated on impermanence, dhamma and morality – the demos and the dhamma – Sangop's aesthetics of change trafficked in a dhammacratic ideology. Recall Peung's seemingly contradictory insights spanning "Buddhism teaches me everything must change, always and all the time" and in a breath's breadth "but the concept does not change, the design is the contract." The drawing, the design and the people are concatenated in a chain of ideological as-ifs, each representing the other, acting as-if a drawing and a design embodied a relation between an imagined people and their unelected representative, the designer. On the one hand, the design, the drawings, and the demos exist in a triadic entanglement, predicated on a democratic ideology of political representation that configures an attack against one as an attack against the whole trinity. And yet "the theme" of the *Traibhumi* – and by extension its architectural transmutation – is impermanence, but a conceptualization of change driven by a dhamma that unfolds gradually through the acts of its enlightened representatives. A *dhammaraja* is a formation of dhamma who

makes the inscrutable but inevitable dhammic order visible within the murky currents of change. Worlds form and disintegrate, *dhammarajas* rise and fall, in other words change abounds, but dhamma and Mt Meru – the design's concepts – obtain eternally. The design, which was Sangop's agent of change *and* their popular contract, promised to be this *tuayaang* of change, a model of suspended interregna between reproduction and novelty.

Dhammacracy underwrote the seemingly contradictory theory of change and the politics of representation Sangop architects practiced and promoted in their workshops. Democracy, according to Sangop design activists, does not manage this tension between an ideal, moral unfolding process of profound but gradual change (dhamma) and the imperative to preserve its chosen representatives (a design, a drawing, a people, a *tuayaang*). Recalling his past as a student fighting on the front lines of what many commentators call Thailand's three-year democratic experiment between 1973-1976, Prem reflected "the government was 100% against socialists, but now we know even democracy is not the real answer. Hitler came from democracy. The best things come from everywhere. Maybe because I am older we learn that slow change is necessary." This statement abjures the hypocrisy of monolithic ideologies – democracy hates socialism but it fostered fascism—and promotes, instead, a gradual cosmopolitics that draws from all persuasions. And this openness or, better yet, enduring ambivalence towards any ideology is manifest in his design: a Theravada-socialist architect is translating a 14$^{th}$ century Buddhist-royalist cosmology whose "primary theme is impermanence" into the world's largest democratic building that glorifies an absolutist monarch under the patronage of a dictatorship. And, doing so constituted activism.

Prem blames the unsuitability of foreign democratic ideologies to Thailand for the volatility of Thai political life and the corruptibility of political representation. After a brief

account of his country's coups and profligate constitution drafts, he asked a question I heard him repeat in other contexts as well (see Chapter 1): "does this look like democracy?" His design doesn't "look like democracy" because he and his colleagues believe it shouldn't. Pueng said as much to Nim, under Khun Ying's banyan tree at Pramalai Palace. "*Sappaya Saphasathan* is not about the vernacular or democracy, its biggest focus is morality. Everyone can change, but the symbolism of the concept will remain forever." Instead, Sangop fought in daily workshops for 'another way,' a dhammacratic way that designification helps its agents actualize. Recall from Chapter 1, Prem's insistence that morality is ambiguous in democracy:

> "How does the heart of democracy show the power of the people? Our consideration, our answer comes from *another way*. Sangop fought for democracy for many years. Critics think that if you find a problem in democracy you can change that element. This is foreign thinking not the way Thai people think. We think in terms of morality. The *Traibhumi* is a symbol borrowed from moral thinking, *not democracy!* Democracy is not clear regarding morality. They have their own systematicity – the law. They constantly need to adjust the law. It is not in balance with power….We see how rural folk live, see what they think is important. Elites and democracy claims the people as an opportunity to gain power and money, to exploit with no interest in the people."

That "other way" of showing power — the moral authority of the people, that fuses the slow and inevitable change of dhamma with the sovereignty of the demos, that represents an interrelated totality of past and present beings rather than the liberal individuation of rights and laws — delineates the dhammacratic aesthetics of change guiding Sangop's design activism. An aberrant detail is abhorrent because it is more than 'an element' within this 'other way' of systematicity. It is a punctum, a systemic snag. Dhammacracy's demos *and* dhamma are in the details.

The contradictory forces of preserving a contractual obligation among the people and their design representatives and the mutability that design enables to assimilate incursions against the design-contract by corrupt or entitled self-interested parties necessitated a complete reorientation in the design process. Witee called this "horizontal design," and identified it as the

cumbersome but unfortunately necessary strategy to chaperone the design throughout its realization process. He illustrated the concept best in a GIF he texted me one day during a workshop. It was a cartoon looping footage of a goofy-esque mechanic assembling the wing of an airplane in flight. Witee explained the design process ought to be more linear: first generate the design, then produce construction documents, solicit bids, and rely on the construction manager to transmute the design according to the construction documents. Design the plane, build the plane, then fly it. Horizontal design workshops, however, fabricated the plane mid-flight. As Witee put it, "we quickly realized that the construction is *very very* political. And although there is a better way to do it, they chose not to do it this way. The delays have nothing to do with changes in the government." There had in fact been three separate forms of government in the decade between the competition and the *Sappaya Saphasathaan's* current state of incompletion: one formed through a judicial overthrow of an existing PM, one popularly elected, and one military dictator who ousted the popularly elected PM. Three forms of government transformation did less to delay construction than the political agonism thriving in design workshops amongst Sangop and the networks of influence representing the monarchy, politicians, contractors and corporations.

Witee referred to the slow and contentions workshop-based "horizonal design" process using the English word, "gimmick." The arduous apparatus of workshops that held stakeholders accountable, that demanded the production of thousands of *tuayaang*-prototypes for collective inspection prior to implementation, that preempted formations of corruption in the fabric of the parliament complex is here characterized as a beguiling ploy. It combats corruption with manipulation, improves fraught representation through remedial misrepresentation.

Perhaps if this was a singular characterization pronounced by an American trained architect like Witee, this could be an anomalous description. But the device of a design "gimmick" was a prevalent instrument of many design activists I observed in my fieldwork. Like any robust ideology, it resonated across competing political orientations. For example, a Marxist community architect, Wisut, claimed he "empowered" local stakeholders through a "gimmick process" while working pro-bono for a small community outside Bangkok who was resisting a government redevelopment scheme. His firm organized "participatory design" workshops amongst communities threatened by corporate or government development schemes, inviting local stakeholders to participate in generating their own design alternatives. "We start with a big blank paper and draw on it together. Even though we [the architects] can draw better, we don't because we want to draw it together. We have a *gimmick*: we start by drawing a house they described three times, and drawing it wrong each time. At first they wouldn't take the pen but soon they became annoyed and would take it. Then we would design together." Wisut was there to "represent the community's interests," which he could do more effectively through trickery, or persuasive misrepresentation.

Government architects also employed a "gimmick" to make the forms of architecture associated with the Royal family appear more sublime, as if they "disappear" into the sky and become one with the cosmos the monarchy presides over. Aj. Pinyot and his acolytes referred to this "gimmick" as designing forms that *kin akaat*, or appear to "eat air." Unlike a skyscraper that structurally rises high as if to 'scrape' the sky, the forms that *kin akaat* are illusory: they are designed to visually become one with the sky they digest. The two most prominent and intertextually resonant recent forms are the parliament *busabok*, designed by Aj. Pinyot, and the crematorium of Rama IX, designed by his former students at the FAD. Wanchai, an FAD

architect and I of Aj. Pinyot, proudly explained that any architect capable of designing forms that *kin akaat* can do so only via another "gimmick:" full-scale hand drawings of the building facades. Only by simulating and refining the exaggerated perspectival distortion of air-eating forms in drawings equally as large as the building, can an architect generate a form that will effectively dissolve in perspective[15]. Every inch of the parliament *busabok* and royal crematorium[16] were generated with this method. This incredibly skillful and laborious technique and the illusory forms it yielded were reserved only for buildings representing those institutions sanctioned for sacralization, those that had the political license to appear *as if* they were extensions of the celestial power that their buildings blended into: Buddhist temples or the monarchy. The profane application of such forms to secular entities excited protests and impassioned censure in the media. Designification materialized the cosmological preeminence of these institutions as an effect of architectural misrepresentation (gimmickry).

Finally, the anecdote that concluded the previous section – on the "political decision" Sangop made to recruit Aj. Pinyot to defeat the National Statue Committee (NSC) campaign to glorify Rama VII in and outside of the parliament – was only half the story. The other half involved layers of misrepresentation as well. Yes, when Sangop informed the parliament and the NSC that Aj. Pinyot would re-design the statue's plinth outside the parliament, the NSC paused their plans. However, neither the parliament nor the NSC will ever see the design Aj. Pinyot sketched. During Sangop's emergency workshop inside the construction canteen (notably outside

[15] In his basement studio, Aj. Pinyot unrolled one of these drawings for me: a five-meter-long elevation of the copper door that Khun Ying and I observed in its realized form at the fabrication warehouse. Well into his eighties, Aj. Pinyot had spread this enormous sheet of printer plotter paper from one end of the room to the other, and over the course of two days, equipped only with a fountain pen he executed the tapering form of the doors by sliding across the parchment on his silk-clad knees. The designer would occasionally stand at the base of the drawing and peer over the form stretched out across a prodigious open teak floor, and assess the effectiveness of the design's air-eating effects.
[16] I describe my visit to the design studios that were created for such drawings during the construction of Rama IX's crematorium in a later chapter that theorizes drawing and participation.

the modular workshop offices), a design activist laid Aj Pinyot's original sketch on the table and, shaking his head, complained "we need him but we do not like his design, so we need to change it. This is too *devaraja* design. There is too much *kin akaat*." Note, the indexical iconicity of the formal architectural gimmick, *kin akaat*, and the sovereign figuration, *devaraja* (absolutism). Uncapping their pens, a couple architects skillfully drew over Aj Pinyot's sketch, modifying the form to become heavier, more grounded, while discretely imitating Aj Pinyot's sketch sensibility. Again, in order to fulfill the imperative to represent "the people" against political corruption or royal entitlement, architects had to engage in fraudulent misrepresentation. The same architect-representatives who repeatedly challenged forces of change to their design with the dictum "the drawing is the contract" changed a drawing, and thus deceptively changed the implied contracts among the monarchy, parliament and the people, in order make the original design and its contract appear unchanged.

Under what conditions, then, is the good misrepresentation of design activists better than the bad representation of politicians and royals? I will hazard three interconnected answers: one, under the particular historical conditions comprising the interregna's representational economy; two, according to the aesthetic ideologies of change as they pertain to problems *in* representation; and three, within the metasemiotics of designification. To understand the opprobrium at the unratified change of an electrical socket in the world's largest parliament, and how design workshop gimmickry corrected such misrepresentations, these factors must be considered.

Gimmickry in the politics of representation could itself be a symptom of the interregna's transformative atmosphere. As previously mentioned, the workshops became redolent with an atmosphere of apprehensive transformability during a conjuncture of historical structures and

mediating processes of change. The workshops happened *within* a moment of interregnum between a dictatorship and a speciously elected government; within the interregnum between Thailand's longest reigning monarch and his ignominious heir; within the interregnum between the parliament's buildings. Sangop's conceptual language also drew heavily from the reservoir of the *traibhumi's* contradictory orientations to change. As its 14th century author insisted and as Peung reaffirmed at Pramalai palace, its "theme is impermanence" (Reynolds 1982, 23). And yet, certain moral agents of this impermanence are immutable: Mt Meru, the tri-world cosmic configuration, dhammic morality and the drawing/concept/contract. However, in uncertain times even dhammic formations, manifestations of eternal truth, can become strategically ambiguous. Christine Gray observed in her analysis of financialized royal Kathin rituals in the 1990s, that moments of "radical change," when religious and quasi-religious institutions (the monarchy), "give rise to the widespread perception that virtually all material aspects of dhamma, sacred language, ritual, kingship, and sangha action, had become tools of deception...false fronts of instruments of deceit" (Gray 1986, 908). More broadly, Sianne Ngai characterizes the gimmick as a force of ambivalence endemic to capitalism that "introduces doubt into aesthetic experience" (Ngai 2020, 4). Any commodity, but acknowledged gimmicks specifically, are dubious: they appear superficial but essential, we suspect and depend on them. Ngai, like Grey, ties this ambivalence to historical upheavals, like economic crises or political transitions. The gimmick, therefore, is an ambivalent aesthetic of change heightened in liminality. To a great degree, the designification of the royalist *Traibhumi* cosmography and its principal forms by a group of design activists into a parliamentary form intended to undermine the institutions funding and presiding within it is the consummation of a moralizing gimmickry imaginable within an atmosphere of systemic mutability, like the current interregna. The trickster designer is the

opposite of the figure of Sloterdijk's cynical ideologue who cannot be duped into complicity, who does not believe in something but does it anyway (Sloterdijk 1983). Sangop design activists believe in the *Traibhumi* and the possibility for a government to represent the people, but act otherwise, while nonetheless synergizing their design manipulation with their clients' cynicism. They do it another way than democracies or *dhammarajas*, they insinuate 'the other way' of dhammacracy by bricolaging forms of dhamma, monarchy and democracy in order to resonate with a pervasive ambivalence that can affirm *and* deny, critique *and* attach to dhammacracy's convolution of ideologies.

*Conclusion: Designification and Representation*

Interregna workshop participants negotiated the aesthetics of change, and in so doing they grappled with a fundamental challenge *in* representation, both political and architectural. Peung and Prem's theories of change underscores a prevailing tension in the politics of design representation between change and preservation. This dyadic agonism appears in Raymond Williams' definition of political representatives and artistic representation (Williams 1976). In the former, a body stands-in for a body politic, it works in lieu of a corpus too vast to be directly assembled. The emphasis is on the absence, what is-not-here. The latter refers to the present embodiment of an absence, the thing which is-here, and the art or artifice concealing the citational breach between the two. Representation thus invites the impossible challenge of being both change and reproduction. Any representation is a novel-copy, not an-other as much as a same-other, something judged to be both different and the same. To reconstitute an absent entity, to make it again present elsewhere, to re-present it in a new form that somehow copies a form differently, struggles too with a contradiction between its imperatives to repeat and to change. At

the same time, it conjures the expectation of replication, of essential fidelity to its model. How best to do it? How best to both change and reproduce (represent)? Is not misrepresentation an inevitability of representation? How is misrepresentation refined, how is it tolerated?

Designification manages the potential for change in the contradictions of representation. Everything the workshops processed was subjected to these two transformative processes: the liminality of representation, between the represented and the representative, and the dialectics of designification. I have argued in this chapter and elsewhere in this dissertation that designification emerged as an influential domain of signification out of the historical conjunctures of the interregna and a representational economy that in its opening-up to diverse actors and agencies has produced the possibility for a transformative imaginary despite the Thai government's many dejure and defacto prohibitions against free speech, mass assembly, royal criticism and electoral mechanisms for change. Keane's concept of semiotic ideology, or "people's underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs do or do not serve, or what consequences they might or might not produce" (Keane 2018, 64), of course underlies the conditions of possibility for what workshop phenomena can mean. However, there is a metasemiotic ideology reproduced within such workshops that also frames what can be done to its signs, who can change signs and how, as well as the etiology and teleology of these semiotic transformations. Willem Flusser hinted at a metasemiotic framework to design when he characterized it as a self-consciously "cunning and deceptive" process that assumes a negating orientation to a sign, captured in his etymological dissection of design into de-sign. Drawing from its Greek and Latin roots, Flusser demonstrates the association of *sigum* with *techne*, identifying modern designers with their predecessors, artists and technicians, who "were traitors to ideas and tricksters because they cunningly seduced people into perceiving distorted ideas"

(Flusser 1995, 51). The history of design is, according to Flusser's geneology, is a history of gimmickry.

But, as this chapter has demonstrated, both the gimmickry and disavowing orientation to signification only partially explain what could be better captured as designification. The term consciously plays with multiple meanings. It refers at once to a repertoire of design techniques that realizes and reifies the concepts they transform, that construes citation as fabrication. Citationality itself affords mediation between multiple frameworks, between those it cites and those it constitutes differently, at once repeating *and* reforming its referent. Citationality, in short, recursively sustains ambivalence. But designification does more. Designification fabricates and reifies through a dialectical mode of signification: it cites a form and negates that form, defines itself negatively from the citation and tarries with the citation in a sublated form that is irreverently referential, that proudly distorts that which it remedies in its re-presentation. It not only cites, but ideologically packages any citational distortion as a solution to a problematic citation. Just as the terms politicization and depoliticization characterize the signification of practices and epistemologies that inject or extract politics, designification entails the semiotic capture of phenomena as designable, as de-signable, as capable of not only semiotic mediation but remediation, realizable in human and non-human relationality. Designification subtends Witee's wish to retroactively humble the monarchy and Khun Ying's determination to proleptically deify it, Sangop's duplicitous gambit against the devaraja's reification, and workshop gimmickry that can hold the parliament of a polemical plug's stakeholders accountable to the changing currents of a (un)corrupted polity. These political visions become praxiological, as realities its agents "can design." In so doing, designification packages the transformation of cited forms into modified forms, the represented into representations, that preserves its referent

but recognizes the distortion in its sublated form as a positive modification, as better (mis)representation.

# Chapter 3:

## *Designification's Gimmick: From Visualization to Actualization*

Soon after the Thai government publicized the construction of its two most spectacular edifices—not only during the interregna but possibly since its inception as a constitutional monarchy in 1932—both projects were dogged with immediate and lingering skepticism. As divergent as the late king's crematorium and new Thai parliament were in their programming, they shared not only the same conceptual origin (the *Traibhumi* cosmology) but also similar controversies: their extravagance and their justification as architectural correctives of societal problems. The principal architects responsible for each building's cosmological design considered these buildings as instruments of their design activism. They were designed to act as devices for morally orienting their country out of the liminality of overlapping sovereign interregna through the powers of *visualization*: the making of affective visibilities that will induce social change among their apperceiving publics. And to be affective, and thus effective, the architects maintained that visualizations needed to be comprehensively spectacular.

All three groups of design activists that I observed during my fieldwork – parliament architects, royal architects, and community architects – used the same English emic term to describe their catalytic designs: "visualization". I argue that visualization is a design ideology operant in processes of "designification:" a metasemiotic framework that not only cites the signs it transforms (as any citation does), but also proleptically 'improves' the signs it designs and the interactions they will mediate. Visualization operates as an efficient modality of actualization, in which a concept takes form as visible. That visibility materializes in both architectural form and

the attendant perceptions of the publics who experience them, who then channel the habitus of distant contexts that the interdiscursive constellations of architectural forms introduce into contemporary interactions. Visualization reifies a concept that has undergone the positive transformation that is distinct to designification's mode of citationality.

It is precisely visualization's imagined semiotic felicity in converting 149isibilityy into actuality, by folding architecture into the political, that evokes another shared English term that design activists and their detractors use in contradictory ways to describe their visualizations: "gimmick." Suspicions that the parliament and crematorium were excessive, ineffectual or referentially irreverent voice the aesthetic of the gimmick (Ngai 2021): judgements of dubious labor-saving ruses that either suspiciously do too much or too little work for the ingenues who endorse them. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the genealogies of both "gimmicks" (Ngai 2021) and "design" (Flusser 1999) have associated each concept with suspicion, deceit, and the management of crises in late capitalism. And yet, Thai design activists view the 'gimmickry' of visualization differently: as earnest and expeditious stimuli for recursive social amelioration. Design activists believe decades of protest, coups, undermined elections, copious constitutions, and royal interventions have done little to facilitate the democratization and/or moral improvement of Thai politics. Their visualizations, however, are designed to felicitously recruit the participation of the Thai publics they interpellate and, as such, stimulate positive political change. The chapter ultimately argues that through visualization's expedient conversion of architectural visibilities into political actualities, designification becomes an altruistic gimmick of design activism.

This chapter's analysis of the ambivalent forces of design gimmickry during Thailand's dual interregna reveal, at the broadest theoretical level, insights into the relationship between

liminality, ideology and visibility. The duration of my fieldwork was conducted during a hugely transitional moment in Thai history. For the first time in over seven decades, Thais were forced to imagine a monarchy without the highly mediatized and auraticized specter of King Bhumibol Adulyadej as the nation's political figurehead. Myriad forms of merchandise donned bodies, bumpers and billboards proudly declaring "I was born in the reign of Rama IX," while also signaling the finitude of that generational experience as Thais awaited his controversial successor. And for the first time since the military coup of 2014 introduced an oppressive military dictatorship under Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-O-Cha, Thai voters could imagine a semblance of electoral agency and public dissent. The populace was both connected to and disconnecting from prior political worlds, navigating the uncertainty of competing parliamentary, popular and royal sovereignties with hope, cynicism and ambivalence. The interregna captured the time-space Nakassis uses to describe liminality, as "a relationship between incommensurables" that produces "a reflexive orientation to the experience of being beholden to multiple mandates at the same time" (Nakassis 2016, 16). This liminal condition of balancing simultaneous sameness and difference resides, too, within semiotic processes of citationality, which is in no way bracketed by the interregna, though its distinct manifestation in activist designification is. Designification mediates the liminality of the interregna, tarrying with both the sameness of the signs it cites and the differences its transformative arts—its de-signing—materializes in its 'improved' (de)signs. The visualizations described in this chapter that both cite Mt Meru religious contexts while also disavowing them, that work as cynical and catalytic gimmicks to expeditious political change, embody the productive polyvalence of a robust ideology that not only survives, but strengthens with its contradictions. This chapter explores the

ideologies of design that converge in design activist visualizations and, in so doing, explains why design emerged as a powerful modality of politics under the liminal conditions of the interregna.

*I. Designing Visibilities*

The politicization of designed visualizations raises two important questions: how and why do design activists think they should design affective visions? Though vision-making was not the objective of a competition workshop that Prem, a Sangop principal, invited me to attend, the subtext of the entire meeting addressed how to optimally make a concept visible and, as such, "operational" (Deleuze 1986) in future interactions. Studio interactions among designers and designed objects has provided design anthropologists rich verbal and gestural grist to study the interplay of ideation and reification (Ingold 2013; Murphy 2015). In this case, an established architecture firm and their engineer sought the advice of a more senior architect (Prem)—particularly one with an illustrious history of winning public design competitions—for an upcoming competition to design the new Aerothai Corporate park near the Suvarnabhumi airport. Prem was their competition guru. In addition to leading Sangop's successful submission for the country's most illustrious competition (the new Thai Parliament in 2009), Prem had boasted "we almost always win every competition we enter because we have a *gimmick*." That gimmick, as this section will elaborate, was a visualization strategy: the designification of affective imagery.

Workshop participants were expected to opine not simply about how to make *this* design good, but how to make a 'good design' generally. In other words, framed as an interactional event inviting the solicitation and administration of advice on how to visually and verbally craft a cogent design, the workshop yielded a survey of the metapragmatics and metasemiotics of designification generally speaking. Metapragmatics are reflexive frameworks that assess or

instruct acts of language use within a discursive event (Silverstein 1976). Metasemiotics more expansively regiments the possibilities and expectations for what any signs – speech and objects – can or ought to do within social interactions (ibid), defining the relationship of metapragmatics to pragmatics (Irvine 1995). Both frameworks implicate relations across events of discourse, and hence are also interdiscursive, in that any construal of the presupposing and entailing conditions for what can happen semiotically in an interaction necessarily resonates or isolates from other events of discourse. Thus, to advise the visiting architects about their particular design strategy, Prem cited his and a network of 'successful' design techniques (particularly with the parliament) to delineate the metasemiotic parameters for what design can do, and do so most efficaciously.

Once again, we gathered around the monumental eight-meter long teak worktable that filled much of Prem's office, suspended between two groves of palm trees that framed the participants via his office's panoramic horizontal windows. Both architects were *ajaarn* (professors, abbreviated as Aj.) at Chulalongkorn and Thammasat universities. They were accompanied by an intern who energetically supplemented the conversation with the necessary media to help the principals explain the design, be it drawings, a physical model, a digital model, or digital documents on an iPad. Prem's structural engineer, and Sangop's landscape architect, Mate joined him in the critique of the proffered project. Though only a few years younger than Prem and Mate, the visiting architects comported themselves deferentially, always addressing the Sangop architects as '*ajaarn,*' though both professors never studied under Prem or Mate.

With Prem's invitation, the architects commenced a 20-minute soliloquy explaining the 'design thinking' (*khwaamkhit awkbaap*) that shaped their project. Gathered around the square meter architectural model constructed of foam core, some plastic 3D printed details, and a scale model of aerothai's first plane located in the model's courtyard, the architects justified the

programmatic distribution and architectural forms of their design. With their intern's help, the conversation hopped frenetically across media as the architects used sectional drawings to visualize the model's interiors, iPad images to illustrate other architectural references and images of artefacts important to the aerothai brand. The sequencing of the presentation appeared impulsive: a detail would be illustrated in a drawing and then related to a citation from Thai history, classical Thai architecture, modernist office buildings, or contemporary parametricist architecture, and then the conversation would land again on another feature of the design. The entirety of the design explanation was communicated in a montage of tangents. The presentation came to an abrupt and unceremonious end once all media and its presenters were exhausted. Only then did the two Sangop architects speak.

With damning concision, Prem calmly explained that the design "lacked reasoning" (*maimii hetpon*) and proceeded to articulate his approach to a well-reasoned, and thus successful, visualization. Wielding his yellow Lami fountain pen, Prem indicated the entrance to the corporate park in the plans with his fountain tip. Tracing the imagined circulation of a prospective visitor to the complex, he narrated what the experience of the design would be, animating the 2-dimensional drawing with visions of the pedestrian's perspectives, the challenges of circulating through buildings, the prospects across courtyards of other buildings, and the confrontation with the design's many incongruous details. In short, he verbalized his visions of the current design by embedding, and narrating, a series of perspectives-on the building. Imagining an executive's arrival, Prem's pen walked down the ramp to an underground parking structure. He flipped to the previous page in the packet of plans, revealing the subterranean lobby. His executive-cum-pen-tip walked to the elevator and "boop!," hunching his own shoulders and lowering his head, Prem mimed the unfortunate compression of the executive

who was now embodied across multiple simultaneous media: Prem's words, his bodily contortions and the idled pen tip hemorrhaging ink onto the offending doorway. His body illustrated the imagined executive's sensory discomfort in the aerothai carpark's compressed architecture. "It is too small (*lekguenpai)*, it is very uncomfortable (*lambaakmaak*) to enter the building around these columns, and too packed into this elevator, where no one has a sense of the architecture. I think there is too much form!"

Prem's tutorial then shifted from the imagined perceptions of a future visitor, to that of a competition judge. "You need to consider what the image of your project is at the normal height view for a competition," even dictating the optimal printing dimensions of the competition boards: A0 not A3 for maximal imagery. Hoping to convince Prem that there was a 'sense,' specifically a Thai sense, to the experience of the design, the junior architect answered that they "enjoyed Thainess" (*khwaampenthai).* He indicated that the columns along with a few scattered elements in the subterranean lobby and the ground floor atria conveyed an image of "Thai characteristics" (*laksanaa Thai*). The illustration of sporadic elements of Thainess only confirmed Prem's initial criticism that the design strategy lacked coherence, prompting Prem's elaboration of the principles he has found effective in shaping a compelling competition design. The principles of an efficacious design, in the Sangop architects' considerable experience, facilitated stable and enthusiastic uptake.

First of all, the designers must promise an obvious benefit (*prayoot*). Mate elaborated that the entire project must be understood within 10 minutes, no matter the scale of the intervention. A key to making a design both memorable and indispensable, Prem added, was a clear verbal and visual articulation of the project's effects (*pho*). And, to justify the salience of the design's effects, it must address a problematic 'cause' (*het*) that necessitates this solution. Semantically,

the word for reasoning (*hetphon*)– i.e., the quality the design lacked, according to Prem—is a conjunction of cause (*het*) and effect (*phon*). Design reasoning according to Sangop, therefore, presupposed its cause and entailing effects, and articulated the connection between the two with the simplicity of "children's speech." It must not only be simple, to be truly compelling, the design's causality must also have a cause. "What is the purpose of your design?", Prem asked his acolytes. They had no answer, but he did: "your concept should be your solution." The design must become *the* solution to a set of conditions it presupposes as problematic. It becomes intelligible as *the* solution both in the verbal articulation of the design's 'cause' and in the visual permeation of its concept throughout the design. Mate adduced to their parliament design as a quintessential example. Even the world's largest legislative complex, *Sapppaya Saphasathan*, was distilled into a cogent elevator pitch: the cosmological design would curtail corruption.

> "There were just three of us in a room, and in one hour we sketched the schematics. Our initial idea was, 'what do you dream for the new Thai parliament? We need a parliament for no corruption. Corruption has stayed with us for a long time and no one likes it. At *Sappaya Saphasathaan* the concept of the *Traibhumi* will change Thai society."

The concept operated as a rhetorical vehicle for coordinating across scales: cohering elements across a massive complex, linking architectural elements to political life, fostering collaboration amongst participant designers, insinuating compliance among errant contractors, and above all, distilling a unifying cause that the design will embody.

Secondly, the design ought to felicitously "create a vision." To do so, one ought to design a readily apprehensible interpretant for an apperceiving subject. As Prem complained of the aerothai design, "one cannot see the concept easily; I cannot see your way of thinking easily (*mayhen whitikhit gnay*)." Instead, Mate explained, the design rationale must be packaged for

felicitous comprehension, "your way of thinking (*wiithiikhit)* must make an image, a '*gimmick*[1]' that will make sense even to a child" (emphasis added). The design is thus more than an image of a building, but a felicitous 'image of thought' (Deleuze 1994)[2], a device for visualizing a design's logic to optimize its affective resonance. The image of thought, in the aerothai design, was too convoluted for easy uptake. It took too much effort, too much patience, for the child-like apprehension of a scrutinizing or distracted judge.

Here, gimmick lacks a negative valence. Indeed, the design activist's gimmick inspires without deceit, it activates complicity without duplicity or impugning their compatriots' judgement.[3] Rather, as I will soon elaborate, it relies upon a moral entelechy, a latent but dormant potential that a comprehensively visual gimmick is expected to activate with the design of an effective interdiscursive catalyst. "We always find a problem and provide a clear solution," Prem continued, "this is the main idea of the design, and we must provide a *vision* for it." Specifically, visualization is designed to build a shared vision, one in which the designers, the design and the public that takes it up participate in the concept's actualization.

Thirdly, it is not enough for a thought to become visible, the Sangop architects explained, it must also become visceral. Not only did the aerothai design lack the 'purpose' of a conceptual

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[1] Throughout the chapter I will use quotation marks to signify a code switch. The entirety of the aerothai workshop was spoken in Thai, except for the words contained in speech marks, like 'gimmic,' 'visualization,' and 'systematic.'

[2] I find Deleuze's concept of "image of thought" from *What is Philosophy* resonates with the orienting function that Sangop expects their concept to perform in the publics who will perceive their building. Deleuze explains that "the image of thought gives itself of what it means to think, to make use of thought, to find one's bearings in thought" (Deleuze 1994, 37).

[3] The characterization of accelerated uptake as a helpful 'gimmick' underscores the design activist's favorable conceptualization of a gimmick, which is at odds with the gimmick aesthetic in Sianne Ngai's analysis. Ngai traces the emergence of the gimmick as "a critical judgement" (Ngai 2021, 16) endemic to capitalism, both as a response to its serial crises and the ideological trickery it recursively achieves through value abstraction and commodity fetishism. Thus, the inscrutable gimmick is always suspected of either doing too little or too much labor. A judgement about labor and value is thus converted into (dis)taste, an object of aesthetic revulsion. As such, the capitalist gimmick is a "catalyst for debate" that "introduces doubt into aesthetic experience" (ibid, 4). Ngai also identifies a heteroglossic dynamic to this aesthetic, one that presupposes confrontation with ingenuous others by "problematizing other people's aesthetic pleasures" (ibid 18). A distasteful gimmick is thus a tool of interactional recognition, by which a perceiving subject negatively identifies themselves relative to the imagined ingenue that the gimmick beguiles.

solution to a problem it never presupposed, it prompted Prem to ask what to him was a related question, "what is the feeling? (*ruesuk yangnay)*?" Again, the junior architects were speechless. Prem continued his catechism, insisting that the thought operant in a design needs to be sensible and sensuous, its purpose made palpable through the concept's complete permeation of a design. The thought must, in short, become "atmospheric:"

> "When you choose an image of Thainess or flight or *buup buup buup*…it must be an **atmosphere** (*tongpen banyakaat*). It must have a beautiful structure. Corbu's [Le Corbusier] work did this, it did not just take the form of a plane, it had the atmosphere of flight (*banyagaat gaanbin*). If you like your form too much it will be hard to improve…the character of your design must be everywhere in the function." To which Mate summarized, "the masterplan must be '*systematic*.'"

Visualization, in this formulation, actualizes an idea by transforming a concept into an atmosphere, facilitating an inhabitant's embodied apprehension of it by immersing in it. This transformation of a concept into an atmosphere happens, according to this design ideology, through its systematic metabolization across all scales of a building. This was evident in Prem's admonition against the limitations of fetishizing *a* form, which impairs the possibility of 'improving' the entirety of a design. 'Improvement,' in this context refers to the architecture's transmissibility of the design's conceptual 'character,' which must become not just visible but praxiological in the ubiquity of the building's function. The concept cannot be a form, it must be performed. And yet, the concept in the workshopped design was tokenistic of Thainess, and thus superficially symbolic. It's systematic application throughout the design would, however, promise to cultivate a 'sense' that is common to all its elements and, in so doing, reflexively 'common sensical,' or aesthetical, to those who perceive it.

The theory that conceptual transmission is optimized within a totalizing designed atmosphere helps explain the central controversy of the preceding chapter, namely Sangop's intense umbrage against the miscolored plug prototype that, to them, stymied the anti-corruption

objective of their weekly design workshops at the parliament. Recall as well Witee's exasperated denouncement of corrupt contractors, who "cannot think systematically at all." Asystematic implementation ruptured the concept's enchantment because it derailed the possibility of immersing inhabitants within a coherent conceptual cosmos. For the *Traibhumi* concept to prevail against corruption in the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* design its imagery must, as the aerothai workshop discussion revealed, flow across all scales of the spectacular complex, from the lunar hue of an electrical socket to the "beautiful structure" of the building's immense mountainous mandala form. The concept needed to be inescapable. Visualization is optimized when a design concept becomes atmospheric, and thus immersive.

*II. Designing Moral Atmospheres*

Crafting a vision, verbally and visually articulating a solution, atomizing a conceptual cure throughout the entirety of a potent design—these variables of the visualization formula are rooted in design ideologies that emerge from the same social compost as the gimmick: ambivalences towards capitalism. Visualization becomes a compelling design activist strategy in Thailand, I argue, through the conjuncture of ideologies of visibility at play in the indexical powers ascribed to contemporary design. Particular lineages of design ideology, broadly, and Thai theories of Dhammic materiality, specifically, support the figuration of powerful social actors who are at once critical of and yet complicit in the permeation of capitalism in social relations. One ideological regime of visibility is stabilized through a Theravada Buddhist metasemiotic framework that configures certain interactive forms, signs, acts, actors, and substances as moral materializations of Dhamma. I will elaborate how these frameworks inform the semiotic ideologies of design activists later in the chapter. The other powerful regime of

visibility comes from design ideologies that originate from 19th century European reformist movements formulated with and against the effects of global capital, and that continue to subtend international discourses of design, design pedagogy, and design citationality. These regimes of visibility converge in the design activist visualization strategies that imagine political and social change as an outcome of visualizing it architecturally. This section will briefly outline an international representational economy that undergirds the basic ideologies of designification's proleptic potential: its power to remediate the troublesome or inadequate signs its processes cite, transform and, in so doing, improve for the benefit of the societies the reformed (de)signs *will* mediate.

Prem, Mate and many other design activists' citations of Corbusier (and his modernist ilk) are performing a lot of interdiscursive work. Not only are they citing an architect, professional expertise, sophistication but an ideological apparatus of aesthetic discipline that idealizes immersive atmospheres as the object of design. Corbusier concludes his most canonical treatise on the future of design, *Towards a New Architecture*[4], with an ultimatum that captures the ambivalences that reformist architecture navigates because it "lies at the root of the social unrest of today: architecture or revolution" (Corbusier 1989, 269). Architecture modifies without destabilizing, rectifies without wrecking established orders. This is in part why Latour argues 'design' has replaced the word 'revolution' (Latour 2008), and an important reason why the

[4] Significantly, when I began teaching architectural history at Thailand's oldest architecture department at Chulalongkorn University, I was given very few explicit texts or principles that needed to be incorporated into my curriculum. I taught in an English medium international undergraduate design program, and for five years directed the program's required architectural history series. While I never read any of Corbusier's writings in my own graduate architecture programs, administrators in my department at Chulalongkorn University intimated that *Towards a New Architecture* ought to be included. As the department's history and theory instructor, I was provided several years' worth of syllabi for architectural history and architectural theory. *Towards a New Architecture* appeared repeatedly in both courses. Moreover, the contents of the university's architectural library evinced a long-standing commitment to Bauhaus and international style modernist aesthetics. The number of early edition texts on or by Adolf Loos, Corbusier, Mies and other European modernists vastly outnumbered texts on or by more contemporary international architects, Thai architects and classical Thai architecture.

interregna in Thailand stimulated design activism as a modality of imagining realizable, non-revolutionary futures.

Prem's citation of Corbusier as a model for designing conceptual atmospheres, in this case "an atmosphere of flight," indicates a "reformist" tradition that dates to early 19th century European architecture, generally, and another prominent parliament design, specifically. After the Palace of Westminster burnt to the ground in 1834, Augustus Pugin, best known for his popular architecture architecture manifesto on gothic revival architecture, garnered the commission to design the new parliament. His treatise[5] argued that the contemporary penchant for neoclassical or 'eclectic' styles borrowed elements willy-nilly from sundry architectural traditions, thereby eroding the moral fabric of British society. Pugin visualized his argument in a series of contrasts between a given building and function rendered in a market-melanged 'eclectic' style versus a disciplined gothic style. People, buildings, and the atmosphere (generally of the former) are tinged with disorder: disparity, disrepair, and dinginess. Whereas its gothic contrast conveyed an atmosphere of order if not solemnity to even the most quotidian and secular of building functions. Architectural historian Brent Brolin explains, "morally based nonvisual principles had never been used as guides in matters of taste before Pugin" (Brolin 2000, 107). Pugin saturated every scale of the interior, every surface, article of furniture, even door handles, with an atmosphere of ecclesiastical gothic architecture. In doing so, moral principles ascribed to a neo-gothic concept were visualized into a totalizing atmosphere of gothic-ness to help correct for societal problems its architects sought to ameliorate.

Both the commoditization of architecture that afforded the discretionary mixture of architecture styles Pugin found so offensive, along with the degradation of working conditions

[5] *Contrasts: or a Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries and Similar Buildings of the Present Day*

for the industrial working class, precipitated a glut of design experimentation that aspired to manage the emotional and environmental effects of capitalism while accelerating its expansion[6]. The possibility of performatively systematizing complex social worlds according to a prescriptive set of design principles became praxis at the 1851 World Expo. The responsibility of curating the most eclectic collection of artefacts and manufactured goods ever assembled in a single space of consumption was given to another architectural theorist, Owen Jones. Having spent years studying the ornamentation of the Alhambra and Moroccan architecture, Jones formulated 37 principles that guided both the decoration and coloration of the Expo's exhibition halls and his treatise that he published two years later, *The Grammar of Ornament* (1853). Jones's *Grammar* claimed to illustrate ornamentation from every region and historical period and, from this catalogue, prove that his 37 principles subtend them all, cohering every recognized tradition into a single aesthetic system ("grammar") of colors, proportions, and patterns. "True beauty," Jones asserts in his fourth principle, "results from that repose which the mind feels when the eye, the intellect, and the affections are satisfied from the absence of any want" (Jones 1853, 5). As with Pugin, architecture's 'grammar' communicated a moral quality (truth) into the 'reposed' mind of an apperceiving subject who experienced its comprehensive application, with "the absence of any want," in a designed atmosphere. Over 6 million observers

[6] In the year prior to the completion of the Palace of Westminster, the prominent social critic John Ruskin formulated his own set of moral principles that he argued was not only reflected in gothic architecture but capable of being refracted in those who experienced its revived forms. Explicitly translating architectural qualities into moral values, Ruskin asserted in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, that "what is true of human polity seems to me not less so of the distinctively political art of architecture" (Ruskin 1848, 2); that 'truth' being the necessary filtering of choice with grounded moral principles. Believing "architecture proposes an effect on the human mind, not merely a service to the human frame" (ibid 8) that was being threatened by the "declining and morbid taste of later architects" (ibid 63), Ruskin delineated seven moral principles that become illuminating 'lamps' embodied in Gothic architecture: the lamps of sacrifice, truth, power, beauty, life, memory and obedience. The architectural manifestation of these values is a device to counteract, as he argues several years later in *The Stones of Venice*, "the great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities…that we manufacture everything except men. You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both" (Ruskin 2010, 161). Man cannot be manufactured but his affects can, according to Ruskin, through "the distinctively political art of architecture."

experienced Jones's attempt to systematize the heterogeneity of global craft traditions by applying these principles to every available surface within the colorful exhibition halls of the crystalline world expo.

While Jones's curation did much to coordinate the World Expo's heterogeneous collections, for the millions of middle-class visitors and consumers who observed or purchased its contents the great attraction was the proliferation of affordable mass-produced objects of every possible style. Alarmed by the prospect of market tastes dictating design production, politicians, elites and social critics alike sought to achieve in manufacturing and product supply what Jones' "grammar" did with the expo's contents: systematicity (Bloomer 2000). Specifically, reformists institutionalized design epistemologies that aspired to improve social conditions by systematizing "good taste" in the world's first design programs established throughout the British empire. Following the expo, the British government formed the Department of Science and Art (DSA) whose mandate was the inculcation of design standards and principles in industrial workers via an apparatus of vocational and arts education[7]. Design pedagogy became an instrument of calibrating taste, and taste became the catalyst for reforming a society. As Arindum Dutta explains, "taste, and taste alone, would be the lever through which the entire concatenation [of]…industrial alienation, the degradation of the public realm, the impoverishment of mass-commodity culture…would be reformed" (Dutta 2007, 3). The DSA's curriculum canonized Pugin's *Contrasts* and Jones's *Grammar*. As a means of both stimulating capitalist production and mitigating some of its degrading effects, "it appeared tenable that an aesthetic education for the workers could conform the dual objectives of capitalist profit and social justice" (ibid 5). Designing taste, in short, was both critical and complicit: it promised to improve *and* reproduce

[7] At the time of the expo, there were 3,000 adults enrolled in British art schools; by 1900 there were over one million studying in its 180 design schools (Dutta 2007).

the fundamental contradiction of capitalist profit premised on worker and environmental exploitation.

Architects and theorists of subsequent architectural movements that would reject the styles of 19th century reformist design continued to define themselves negatively from the world created by industrial capitalism while also materializing its hegemony. Such critical movements aspired to a shared ideal, the *gesamtkunstwerk*[8], or what can be incompletely glossed as a 'total work of art.' In architecture, the ideal was an immersive atmosphere, in which every possible scale of a building, its objects and, often, the garb of its inhabitants participated in the enactment of harmonious cosmos. British Arts and Crafts[9], Art Nouveau, De Stijl, the Vienna Secession, the Bauhaus[10] all similarly aestheticized the totalizing design of architectural atmospheres. And, finally, as Prem indicated in his reference to Corbu's designed 'atmosphere of flight,' Le Corbusier formulated a variety of principles (his "5 points of architecture" and the "modulor man," for instance) that would actuate architectural environments wholistically embodying "a total concept[11]." Each of these movements promoted a vision, attributed to it certain corrective moral values, and fetishized its quintessence in totalizing[12] immersive environments. The *gesamtkunswerk* became a technique for spatial indoctrination.

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[8] Wagner is credited for applying the term in the mid 19th century to a theatrical composition that cohered every audible and visual art into a unified performance

[9] William Morris's Red House consummated the craftwork of a pre-Raphaelite, anti-capitalist collective that designed and executed everything from the building to its wallpapers, books, hardware and textiles

[10] While the Bauhaus under Walter Gropius seemingly rejected conventional forms of ornament, the school championed the "total design" of every element of its public's experience, from the campus architecture to the hardware, clothes, cutlery and even the cuisine of its faculty (Wolfe 1981).

[12] Though the *gesamtkunstwerk* ideal championed by reformist movements, including Thai design activism, is a device to catalyze corrective world-making at the scale of architecture, it is precisely because of this aspiration to maximally control the sensorium of design publics that, Sloterdijk argues, immersion is also a totalitarian technique. Sloterdijk's definition of immersion recapitulates the effects of a total work of art/design: "immersion as a method unframes images and vistas, dissolving the boundaries with their environment" (Sloterdijk 2006, 105). Immersion, in short, replaces "whole environments" with whole meticulously controlled synthetic environments. And, because architecture is "concerned with immersion, that is, with the production of an environment into which its inhabitants submerge, body and all" (ibid 106) Sloterdijk argues that architecture, or "the design of immersions" (ibid 109), perpetrates quotidian acts

After Prem and Mate discharged their advice on the necessity and methodology of making the young firm's aerothai design "atmospheric," the workshop concluded. The architects collected their media and scheduled a return visit three weeks ahead for the Sangop architects to reassess their more systematic design and presentation. Prem, Mate and I accompanied the architects to their car, and as we were preparing to grab lunch together, Prem told me "I won't design it [the aerothai campus] myself. Let them design it first and I will critique it. Maybe I will design it myself after." If his acolytes could not design a sufficiently totalizing atmosphere, Prem would take control.

*III. From Activation to Actualization*

Is Sangop's advice for designing a totalizing atmosphere nothing more than an inheritance of European design ideology? No. Thai design activism and their modality for activation – visualization – are not the utopian experiments of modern and modernist architects devising alternative future imaginaries. As my ethnographic research revealed, the object of design for design activists was a form of taste, the refinement of *political* choice, not consumer choice. It is not enough to say that the construction of immersive architecture cements a vision, in the case of design activists, the political consciousness that its atmosphere visualizes. There must be uptake. And to stimulate future uptake, design activist visualization presupposes a latent but immanent propensity, the possible actualization of an abiding potential—an entelechy

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of totalitarianism. This is a totalitarianism not based on the disciplinary force of a panoptical state apparatus, but a "totalitarianism of love" (ibid 106) that exercises total control by fostering attachments to its envelopes and the interactions it mediates within. Whether it's the actualization of a capitalist world view or the socialist and communitarian visions of gothic revival, British Arts and Crafts, De Stijl, Vienna Secession, Bauhaus and (some) Thai activist designers, the *aesthetic totalitarianism of love* reappears in the idealization of 'whole atmospheres' as the object of affective design.

(Latour 1988). Sangop design activists found this potential by citing, to use one of their English phrases, familiar forms and materials that comprise "the language of everyday life."

However, uptake is only part of visualization's transformative story. For design activists, these potential forces that a visualization actualizes in public encounters with their architecture triggers a "relation of mutual becoming rather than causal determination" (Mazzarella 2020, 19) that Mazzarella describes as "constitutive resonance." To activate such potently constitutive resonance, design activists have developed visualization techniques that cite and transform recognizable architectural forms into their projects that draw from, or resonate with, a public's "mimetic archive:" an interdiscursive repertoire of discourses, designed and material forms, "in the concrete history of the senses, and in the habits of our shared embodiment" (ibid 24). Indeed, when choosing the interdiscursive framework of their designification strategies, design activists cited architectural forms associated with a familiar domain of moral habitus (like cosmological temples), with the expectation that the designification of that cited form would transfuse both its formal and moral aesthetics into the domains of political life that their projects will mediate. Felicitous uptake, the mark of well-designed constitutive resonance, was taken as the effect of a good activist gimmick.

One of the principal Sangop architects communicated the clearest articulation of their visualization strategy to me at his architecture campus on the outskirts of Bangkok. Sprawling below thick tropical vegetation between Bangkok's peri-urban coastal shrimp fields and its commercial district, the Arsomsilp Institute occupies over fifty acres with its K–12 school, architecture design firm, and its graduate schools of community architecture, education, and the arts. Pi Pong[13] is the owner and figurehead of Arsomsilp, as well as a celebrity architect in

[13] the 'Pi' is an honorific of respect for one's elder or social superior

Thailand, a national artist, and one of the founding principals of the largest architecture firm that comprised much of the Sangop coalition. His compound exemplifies the holistic atmospherics that his colleague, Prem, proselytized in his critique at the aerothai workshop. Beautiful neo-vernacular structures are distributed throughout the campus. They resemble the dialectical quality Benjamin pondered in the arcades, but inverted: the bottom habitable floors were a mixture of Miesian modernist glass and exposed steel, with reclaimed teak trim and polished concrete flooring; the rooves formed the concave pitch seen in traditional Thai teak homes and temples. Some rooves were clad in hand-crafted terracotta tiles, others thatch. Thus, each building embodied a material dialectic between industrial produced imported materials expressed with modernist geometries below, and regional organic materials with vernacular forms above. Architects and many of the graduate design students similarly paired evocatively 'Thai' indigo cotton or silk garb, indicative of Northeastern Thai fashion, along with designer accessories. Given the tuition and commuter costs of enrollment, it was predominantly elites dressed in their aestheticized folk attire, that came to Arsomsilp to participate in what its motto describes as "holistic learning for human development and sustainable society."

I met Pi Pong in an idyllic office behind the Arsomsilp architecture office. Three of the room's four walls were comprised of floor-to-ceiling glass panels with steel fenestration, overlooking a lily-laden infinity pond that circumscribed the entire island-room. Inside, below exposed teak beams and bamboo thatch, suspended halogen lights illuminated a large contemporary teak desk, an iMac desktop, a polished concrete floor, and a Herman Miller office chair. Pi Pong entered, dressed entirely in hand woven indigo silk, wearing a smile below thin Corbusier circular eyeglasses. I had visited the campus before with my design students from Chulalongkorn University when we came to collaborate with Arsomsilp faculty on a summer

design-build studio project to renovate a hundred-year-old market. But this was my first introduction to Arsomsilp's founder, let alone any of the Sangop design activists. He introduced himself. "Hello, I am Pong, an activist, a socialist, a former communist…and an architect." A leftist activist first, an architect thereafter. My dissertation changed with this sentence as my mind reeled at the political cosmos it concatenated: a socialist architect is translating a 14th century Buddhist-royalist cosmology whose "primary theme is impermanence" (Reynolds 1982, 25) into the world's largest democratic building under the patronage of a dictatorship. And, doing so constituted activism. If cosmopolitics does not recognize the primacy of one cosmos over others[14], but unfolds through the give-and-take encounters (the politics) of diverse human and non-human constituents across multiple worlds (cosmos), this statement revealed to me, for the first time, the cosmopolitical stakes of design within the Thai interregna.

When I asked about his activism, Pi Pong elaborated his credentials. Conceptually and chronologically, he was an activist before he became an architect. He and his friends were young artists studying at Thammasat University's Faculty of Arts when the massive protests of 1973 began. Pi Pong, his friends, and hundreds of thousands of protestors in Bangkok and across the country protested against the ruling military dictatorship of Thanom Kittikachorn, calling for a more democratic society and expanded freedom of expression. On October 14th, 400,000 thousand demonstrators approached the palace to request Rama IX's intervention. A bomb exploded near the palace, precipitating one of the most violent episodes in the Thai government's history. The military joined the police in violently suppressing the protestors, resulting in 77 deaths and over 800 injuries. Nevertheless, the number of protestors increased. Pi Pong, his

[14] *See* Latour, Bruno. 2004. "Whose Cosmos, Which Cosmopolitics." *Common Knowledge* 10 (3): 450-462; Stengers, Isabelle. 2010. *Cosmopolitics I*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

friends, and his future collaborators at Sangop reaped the fruits of their activism, as the King inevitably intervened that evening and disbanded the military junta's rule.

The following three "democratic ye"rs" 'Haberkorn 2011) witnessed an influx of democratic and Marxist literature, ideologies and practices. Bangkok students, like Pi Pong and his future Sangop partners, coupled their education at Bangkok universities with the first grass roots campaigns in Thailand, which brought urban college students into remote villages to learn from their rural ways and practices. It was at this context that Pi Pong contemplated architecture as a profession, specifically designing architecture that uses natural low-cost, locally sourced materials to support holistic communal environments. Prem too shared the same origin story for his architecture practice. After spending several months working in rural villages, Prem and Pi Pong returned to Thammasat University and transferred to architecture design programs. They believed their artistic skills could be more fruitfully invested in creating accessible and salubrious architecture for the people they intended to represent as their architects.

Almost three years to the day after student protestors toppled a dictatorship and precipitated Thailand's 'democratic years,' everything reverted. In September 1976, military officials and powerful royalists facilitated the return of the ousted former dictator, Thanom Kittikachorn, to Thailand. He was promptly ordained as a monk and received a visitation from the King and Queen. Student protest recommenced immediately. Legitimated as an intrusion of the growing specter of communist regimes in neighboring countries, Thai military and police resumed brutal tactics of suppression. Thai police killed two protestors in neighboring Nakhon Pathom and hung their corpses from a gate. Thammasat student activists quickly staged a dramatization of the murdered protestors, generating provocative images that circulated in local media. One conservative publication, *Dao Siam*, hinted that one of the performers wearing a

noose resembled Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, (the current king, Rama X). A coalition of military, police, royalist and rightist forces who shared an abiding antipathy towards the student activism of the past three years quickly mobilized under the hybridized causes of "killing communists" and exacting retribution against the alleged perpetration of lèse-majesté (Handley 2006). On the morning of October 5th, the conservative coalition massacred Thammasat protestors. The military and police unleashed military-grade weaponry against unarmed protestors. 45 people died, including 5 perpetrators, and hundreds were injured. Murdered bodies were beaten, hung from Thammasat University's venerable trees, and immolated. Within one day, a military dictatorship resumed under the power of a staunch royalist and anti-communist judge, Thanin Kraivichien. The king did nothing to intervene. The horrors of October 6,th coupled with a global economic downturn, the demonstrable fragility of Thailand's 'democratic experiment,' and the withdrawal of US anti-communist investments, effectively extinguished any leftist forms of activism for decades to come (Anderson 1977; Haberkorn 2011).

Pi Pong recalled his disillusionment and his decision to recalibrate his activist strategies. "I saw my friends killed, beaten and burned, and others forced into the jungle." Pi Pong was referring to fellow leftist activists who fled Bangkok, if not Thailand, to escape violence and political persecution. "So I started designing many many main stream projects, but I always earned money in order to send it to my friends in the jungle." Indeed, Pi Pong became one of the most prominent Thai architects of the twentieth century, allowing him to establish his firm and his holistic educational and professional compound, Arsomsilp. He abandoned protesting and direct tactics of transforming Thai government, but his "desire to change Thai society" never waned. It only transformed into multiple modes of design activism. Referring to himself and Sangop colleagues, he assured me that "now we are activists in our own way. Through education,

working with communities and design." Pi Pong and his colleagues formed independent practices that each aspired to "change the way Thai people see themselves." Arsomsilp's educational orientation, too, was an activist enterprise. Plan Architects also created graphic and object design subdivisions that injected architectural and industrial design with activist values[15]. Inured to the incapacity for judicial coups, military coups, royal coups or populist coups to effect any fundamental change in Thai governance, Sangop activists sought to change Thai society by redesigning how it is envisioned through every scale and field of design: from toys, to graphics, to landscape, to education, to the world's largest parliament. In this post hoc narrative, they were orchestrating a surreptitious design coup by making the objects of their activism atmospheric in Thai society.

To demonstrate how the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* would fulfill Sangop's visualization activism, Pi Pong lifted up a traditional Thai sweet, *num kom*: a sweet glutinous mass of pounded sticky rice encased in a pyramidal shaped banana leaf envelope. One of his assistants had delivered a terracotta plate covered by a small range of these tiny green delectable mountains. I had asked him whether Sangop consulted any Buddhist experts, royal architects, monks or *Traibhumi* scholars when they decided to transform the *Traibhumi* into the architecture of Thailand's next parliament. He said 'no.' And, rotating the sweet before our eyes, Pi Pong explained that "the form of Mt Meru is everywhere in Thailand. I am not interested in what architects think, only what every day people think. People in Bangkok do not know the *Traibhumi*. Villagers don't either but *they see it* everywhere. In the *num kom*; in spirit houses (*saan phraphum*); in teak homes; in temples." People did not need to know or believe in the

[15] Plan Toys, for instance, designs and manufactures plywood, wood pulp, and bamboo toys in the same building that *Sappaya Saphasathan* workshops take place. Plan Toys are designed to inculcate children with creativity and environmental awareness. Arguably the most impactful flank of Pi Pong's activist empire, high end toy stores and online retailers around the world sell Plan Toys – instruments of Thai design activism – to international children.

*Traibhumi,* it was diffused into their semiotic atmosphere. He admitted he too knew very little of the cosmography's details. In fact, the mistake that Thai detractors of the design often made (myself included) was, ironically, to confuse the details of the *Traibhumi* with the details of the *Sappaya Saphasathan*. Instead, the latter is intended to awaken, as Pi Pong explained, "mainly *a feeling* of Mt Meru, not a precise translation. The trees, the form make it *feel* like a mountain" (my emphasis). The particularities of the *Traibhumi* would metabolize into the Meru atmosphere of *Sappaya Saphasathan*, vaporized into 'a feeling' familiar to particular Thai contexts. Meru was erotic, not hermeneutic.

"Some of my activist friends think I am a traitor, some students call the parliament fascist architecture," he admitted with an uncomfortable yet satisfied chuckle. But Pi Pong immediately acknowledged that the *Traibhumi's* text was outmoded, its science erroneous, and its vision of an ontologically stratified hierarchy with royalty at the top and common folk at the bottom was "very bad." Instead, it was Mt Meru's intertextual network of forms that populated everything from traditional Thai sweets, Thai festivals, hand gestures, and sacred rituals and spaces that are associated with morality (*silathaam*) that Sangop hoped the form of *Sappaya Saphasathan* would conjure in the minds of its publics. And once resonant, the interdiscursive repertoire of moralized forms was then transposed in the *Sappaya Saphasathan* design onto the highly flawed, immoral and profane domain of Thai governance. The intended effect was to reorient expectations for political conduct, exchanging the moral tastes associated with sacred Theravada spaces onto the public's and politician's tastes for acceptable political habitus. "Everyone we asked, 'what's the problem with government,' always responded with 'corruption.' Yes, it would be nice to change the social structure from feudalism (*sakhdina*) to socialism, but if the people are not good, if they do not remember what is good, then no system is going to work. We want the architecture to

make politicians feel shame if they are corrupt. We want the people to judge politicians the same way they judge monks." Be it the world's largest legislature or a sweet sticky green pyramid, the interdiscursive network of Meru morphology would act as the just dessert Sangop believed Thai society needed to visualize a more moral political order. For their designification of strictly spiritual Meru forms to be politically successful in the dialectical imagery of the new parliament architecture, according to this account, the design is expected to achieve a powerful citational ambivalence by sustaining references to moral-theological contexts while also profaning the forms, deracinating them from exclusive connections to temples and the royal family.

The visualization scheme for their design of *Sappaya Saphasathaan* is predicated on a theory that semiotic interconnectedness (and disconnectedness) will precipitate a double realization: as an apprehension and, then cumulatively, as a reality. Here is Sangop's activist algorithm: a perceiving subject recognizes certain sacred forms and details in the parliament that connect it with domains of moral behavior. This recognition triggers a dialectic between the moral judgements stabilized around sacred forms with the less moral accommodations granted to political life. The apperceiving actor thereby realizes their disjointed expectations for politicians relative to the behavioral standards they maintain in other arenas that share the Meru-mountain form. Recursive realizations among the publics that see politics through *Sappaya Saphasathan*'s moral-Meru lens then alter their personal conduct or electoral tolerances, effectively transforming the reality of governance—a double realization.

But how does a (de)sign stimulate this potent interconnectivity? Drawing from Peirce and Parmentier, Christopher Ball offers the concept of "dicentization" to account for "how people realize, in the sense of coming to know and at the same time bringing into existence, contiguity with the world" (Ball 2014, 152). A dicent interpretant, according to Peirce, construes indexes –

signs that indicate effects – out of the interpretation of other sign forms, like icons – or semiotic relations of likeness. Dicentization refers to the process of interpreting icons as indices, a signification process "wherein a likeness or a conventional relation is interpreted as actually constituting a relation of physical or dynamical connection" (ibid). Sangop's visualization strategy sounds similar to dicentization: the parliament's resemblance to sacred Meru domains actualizes the impulse of moral scrutiny among the publics that realize the architecture's interdiscursive connections. So, is visualization just another word for dicentization? No. Dicentization helpfully describes a process of semiotic transformation that converts concepts into realities. However, it does not account for the historical and ideological armature that configures the conditions of possibility for imagining either efficacious uptake or semiotic remediation, both of which makes visualization and designification distinct ideological formations of design activism in the Thai interregna. Why did designers assume the power to control the conditions and outcomes of semiotic transformation? This chapter's genealogy of the ideological configuration of design as a modality of remedial intervention offers one answer. The dissertation's theorization of designification – the process by which design is imagined to transformatively improve signs, in which semiotic mediation is remediated—offers a related answer.

*IV: Seeing Dhammacratic Gimmicks*

To understand how design activists could expect that the association of newly designed political forms with pervasive sacred forms would hastily import moral habitus, that in other words their beneficial gimmicks could access an entelechy capable of catalyzing political transformation, we need to consider Theravada semiotic ideologies of visualizing dhamma. As

mentioned in Chapter 1, "Seeing dhamma" (*hen tham*) or "illuminating dhamma" (*suwen tham*) is a highly regimented conception of moral visibility that has been discursively concretized in the very contexts that Meru forms interdiscursively connect (Gray 1986). As with any regime of visibility (Foucault 1995) or imageness (Rancière 1997), the visibility of dhamma is a discursive formation of power that has settled into privileged forms (Agha 2007), practices and subjects as its interpretive agents. In her dissertation on the politics of Royal Kathin rituals in Thailand, Christine Gray explains that "Theravada societies are organized around a single fundamental assumption and epistemological model: that the dhamma is primarily a hidden or immanent phenomena that must be carefully 'searched for' or 'illuminated' in a process called *suwaen tham* or 'lighting the dhamma' which is open to a very few exceptional individuals in society: monks, and kings, to men of pure minds" (Gray 1986, 45). In Theravada contexts that interdiscursively share Meru forms, only those who have honed a visual acuity through years of meditation, reflection, textual exegesis, and the contemplation of dhamma's forms can 'see dhamma.' This is because dhamma is believed to be invisible yet manifest everywhere, unfolding in a dialectic between dhamma's invisible essence into its forms, and the perception of its forms back into the essence of those who see the dhamma. The 'right' people see dhamma as atmospheric. And by seeing dhamma, its discoverers then become its visibilities, or its "body models": *tuayaang*. As briefly mentioned in the previous chapters, a *tuayaang* in the Theravada sense is a body-model of dhamma: a sign that manifests dhamma and, in its recognition, disseminates dhamma. In semiotic terms, it is an indexical icon of dhamma. A statue of the Buddha, a sacred Meru form, a monk, and most quintessentially, a *dhammaraja* (righteous king) are all *tuayaang* that reproduce "visual-sensory qualities of the Buddha" that "inspire men to emulate" (ibid 47-48) certain behaviors. Even in initiation ceremonies for Thai civil servants, employees swear an oath "to

make their bodies into models" (*tham tua pen tuayaang*) (ibid). Such theories of visibility are of course concretized in rituals, cosmographies, art, architecture, and other aesthetic expressions in sites that Meru forms interdiscursively cite. Thus, according to semiotic ideologies of how dhammic *tuayaang* act through recognition, it is readily conceivable that the design of a powerfully resonant model could precipitate the moral multiplier effect Sangop design activists anticipate for the *Sappaya Saphasathan*.

For decades, powerful political, financial, and international forces cooperated to revive *dhammaraja* rituals and regalia that discursively configured the late King Bhumibol as Thailand's quintessential *tuayaang* (Grey 1986; Tambiah 1976; Winichakul 2016). In fact, for Prem, dhamma and politics only merged in the works of Rama IX:

> "We only see dhamma in Rama IX. He was different. He looks the same as dhamma. The things he did, he did good, he helped people, so when we see him we think good things and want to do good things. He said, 'we govern by dhamma' (*raw ja pokrong doi dhamma*). That is the only relationship between dhamma and politics"

But, with the death of Rama IX in 2016 and the succession of his notoriously dissipated son, concomitant with the country's anticipated re-emergence as a quasi-democratic government from the latest military dictatorship (proceeded, of course, by decades of divisive political volatility), the interregna lacked dependable human *tuayaang*.

A former colleague of mine, Aj Yui, admitted as much during a brunch conversation I shared with her in Bangkok's luxurious Paragon Shopping mall. We met to discuss her own work as a community architect, a group of design activists who typically work at the grass roots level on behalf of economically disadvantaged communities resisting government or developer intrusions into their neighborhoods. Five days before we met, Aj Yui had joined over 300,000 mourners lining the streets of Bangkok, queuing miles away from *Phramerumat*'s ceremonial grounds. An elite, Harvard educated architect, she slept on the sidewalk for two nights, ate free

delicious street food volunteers had donated, and participated in the pervasive experience of mass bereavement shared among mourners around her. She recalled, in English, how "the collective experience of participating in the ceremonies was indescribable. I didn't experience the cremation at *Phrameru Mat* as an architect, but as a Thai person." However, with the ceremony complete and her *tuayaang* cremated, she felt disoriented: "we have a new king, who most of the time lives in another country. And we have a new government coming soon. We need new forms to imagine what it means to be Thai under these new conditions." This is precisely what Sangop and other design activists hoped to design. Citing his own past as a student activist from the "October generation," Prem justified the ambivalence he and Pong shared about citing royalist forms in the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* because in addition to citing Meru, they evoked the human incarnation of dhamma, Rama IX:

> "I come from the October people. Normally we are against things from the old system. The more important thing is I was born in the reign of Rama IX. Maybe not everyone loves him, but most people do, as a person and a king. We [Sangop] want to design this building [the parliament] as the most important building in his period. I know everything after him will change. If the new king is good, he will stay. If he is not, then….but the parliament will remain."

In short, the parliament would reverberate Rama IX's force as a *tuayaang,* an agent of dhamma's visibility and an orienting device for the recursive calibration of post interregna Thailand around new models of morality. The malleable potential to define a 'new Thai imaginary,' to orient this new vision away from destructive, corrupt, and divisive image associated with the country's recent political history was an opportunity to design new *tuayaang*. This is the challenge Sangop, community architects, and government design activists all aspired to design in the architecture of the interregna: to transform the "distributed flesh" (Santner 2011) not only of the monarch, but of the dhamma his actions were seen to visualize, into non-human *tuayaang* that, in turn, would

further redistribute dhamma among the publics who would experience design activist visualizations.

*V: Language of Everyday Life*

One evening I joined the entire Sangop team of principal architects at a riverside restaurant across the Chao Phraya river from their architectural intervention, *Sappaya Saphasathan*, to collectively discuss the political strategies of their design. It was a milestone day that occasioned the rare gathering of all six of the Sangop founders. After reaching 75% completion a mere 8 years later than expected, the architects guided a powerful cabal of political figures through their project for the first time. A flank of Thai journalists, Sangop architects, and I trailed the Secretary of the Parliament, the CEO of the construction management company (STECON), and some cabinet members and military officials from the ruling junta as Pong and Prem explained both their design and the discrepancies in its realization due to mishandled construction. In their complaints of construction mismanagement to the "VVIPs" (Very Very Important People) they never used the word "corruption," not least of all because the patronage networks they ascribed to the construction management's corrupt activities implicated their powerful interlocutors. Instead, Sangop conducted their guide through the most spectacular areas that had reached or neared completion: the sublime domed assembly halls, each of which is larger than the dome of the Pantheon; the stunning canyon sized atria lined in over one million hand-hewn bricks; the sumptuously detailed royal hallways with their travertine floors and walls, red lacquered colonnades and gilt capitols, and thousands of CNC milled relief ornamental details. These spaces flaunted the design promise of the complex and the design chops of its architects, separate of Sangop's undisclosed political program. Against this performance of the

team's exceptional design prowess, the kilometers of gaps separating windows from floor plates, the unsightly concrete patches in poorly poured concrete molds, the misaligned and shoddy joints of wall surfaces at the threshold between one design team's territory and another appeared all the more offensive. Sangop impugned STECON before press and politicians, while their audience delivered speeches, snapped selfies, and posed for photo ops before the *Sappaya Saphasathan*'s most photogenic spaces. The Secretary of the Parliament promised Pi Pong his cooperation overseeing the construction that remained. After a successful junket, the architects and I boarded a fleet of luxurious chauffeured VIP vans, replete with reclining leather chairs and televisions, to cross the river.

Reunited together and safely removed from their employers (not clients) and contractors, and with the magnificent, illuminated façade of the *Sappaya Saphasathan* towering behind them, the architects could bond again as activists. They too availed of the opportunity to take selfies of all of us with the Chao Phraya and parliament as backdrops—a panorama of human and nonhuman design activists (and one anthropologist). They were relieved that the day's pomp and festivities were over, pleased that the Secretary had promised his support, but skeptical that anything about their construction struggles will change. Change was their ambition, not that of the construction and government parties they left back at the parliament.

The principals of Sangop collectively explained to me how their design would activate change by "modeling (*beepyaang*/แบบอย่าง) moral behavior" (*phrutikaam siladhaam*)." The statement entangles architecture with Thai words compounding Theravada concepts. "Modeling" or *beepyaang* combines "form" (*beep*) with the same word "model or type" used in *tuayaang* (the *yang*). The form models. And what will the parliament's form model? Morality. "There are 7 design principles behind *Sappaya Sapahsathaan*, and morality is the most important," explained

Sangop's expert in Thai Buddhism, Ajaarn Wasin. Recall from Chapter 1, that "morality" or *silathaam* is itself a compound of "art" (-*sila*) and "dhamma" (-*thaam*). Morality is 'the art of dhamma.' Eliciting the Buddhist undertones of the Thai statement enunciates the ethical enterprise of the parliament's architecture: architecturally modelling the art of morality. And by such modeling, Prem contributes, "our architecture *will act*. It is not about the form (*beep*) but spirit—the design will help people develop the spirit (*winyan*)." Again, the architecture is activist, not only the architects.

But what activates *Sappaya Saphasathaan's* architecture is not its spiritual, but its linguistic qualities, according to Sangop. While the reliance on royalist forms, Buddhist values and the concept of a 'spirit' by Buddhist architects and scholars could be confused as expressions of religious faith, it was the Southern Baptist architect, Witee, who explained the architecture's agency as a semiotic outcome. Acknowledging, in English, that he does not believe in the *Traibhumi* and gaily admits "it does not make any sense," he does believe it will act "like an antenna:"

> In Thai culture, if we want to make anything meaningful, we pull out the framework of thought of the *Traibhumi*. Thai people might not understand the concept of the *Traibhumi*, but we see it everywhere in out everyday lives. Its in the *saanphraphum* (spirit houses). It helps making meaning of everyday life. This new parliament might act as an antenna that signals to the people throughout the country. They will choose someone to go into the sacred place, someone worthy of entering that place, maybe that is closest explanation and logical explanation I can see. You have to see it all in the *language of everyday life.*

The 'antenna' effect of the *Sappaya* Saphasathaan denotes the 'multiplier effect,' mentioned in Chapter 1, that empowers a *tuayaang* to recursively index effects on those actors or signs that cite them. Yet, moving beyond Theravadan concepts of ideological transmission, Wittee is recognizing the ideologically stabilized 'meaning' of forms he does not spiritually or logically believe in but comprises 'the language of everyday life.' He is describing the powerful repertoire

of forms and materials that channel constitutive resonance and, as such, animates the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* with agency (like the pyramidal sweets Pong adduced to in his office at Arsomsilp). Elaborating on the secular benefits of this repertoire, Aj Wasin added, in Thai, that "Buddha is a very democratic person, and Buddhism is democratic. Democracy values freedom of mind, which is a Buddhist concept too. But Buddhism values self-determination, but not by greed [unlike democracy]. We have democratized forms that in the past only belonged to the royal family." Borrowing Agamben's use of the word, Witee and Aj Wisut are describing the design's empowering "profanation" of Buddhist and royal forms—the semiotic play of the sacred in profane domains that at once subverts and siphons the inherited power of such forms (Agamben 2007). And yet, designification does more than profanation as a process of semiotic (re)mediation. Designification not only transforms but *reforms*, improves, and enhances the signs it manipulates. Thus, designification's political promise is precisely its affordance as an ameliorative profanation process, that improves the religious and royal sacred forms it transforms into secular and popular forms, thereby channeling both the residual power of the sacred forms it modulates while also resonating with meaningful signs circulating "in the language of everyday life." Sangop's visualization strategy dhammacratizes the sacred forms it makes powerfully accessible.

Several months later, I joined 300 audience members at the Association of Siamese Architects headquarters to listen to Sangop's landscape architect share the principles elaborated during our riverside conversation about the design's "effects" with an auditorium of architects, architecture students, and journalists. As the lights dimmed and Mate began his lecture, a looping montage of slides shuffled images of stupas, rural folk ("*chaobaan"*), voters waiting in balloting lines, along with competition renders and construction photos of *Sappaya Saphasathan*. Mate

explained, in Thai, "*chaobaan* know that a place with Meru architecture is a place of effects (*phon*), a place where *chaobaan* know when people are good or bad, but they need to be able to do this with parliament." Over the past decade, discourse on the authoritative power[16] of "*amnaat*," as an elite, self-interested power, and the legal impunity that it buys has become increasingly prevalent in media and protests following a series of very high-profile violent crimes that culminated in unprosecuted elites and their poor victims[17]. These stories resonated with the "*amnaat"* ascribed to corrupt politicians, who similarly benefit from exploitation and expropriation with impunity. *Sappaya Saphsasathan* and Meru architecture, on the other hand, signify domains of effects, heterotopia of cosmic justice. Their historic affiliations with temples, *dhammaraja* and Meru endow them with an auratic and dhammic power, *barami*, that is considered selfless and moral, and is accumulated through meritorious acts that accrue karma (*gaam*). Rama IX's power was attributed to *barami*; a politician's power was an effect of *amnaat*. The subtext of Mate's description of *Sappaya Saphasathaan's* agency was that its potency was fueled on *barami*: "the design of the assembly halls are there to make representatives aware of cause and effects, to make them aware of a system of karma (*gaam*), by modeling morality (*beepyaang sinlathaam*)."

The logic of this declaration encapsulates the semiotic and ideological mechanics of Sangop's visualization strategy. As a modality of designification, it relies upon dicentization, profanation, design remediation and entelechy to generate systemic effects. Forms that look like Meru forms are construed to indexically *act* like Meru forms; elements enregistered as sacred forms are beneficially transformed into signs that circulate in broader, more accessible secular

[16] Refer to the distinction between *amnaat* and *barami* from Chapter 1.
[17] *See* "Red Bull Heir Admits Hit and Run" https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/310669/red-bull-heir-admits-hit-and-run

domains; and a pervasive grammar of resonant forms catalyzes a latent participatory power that mobilizes publics and objects in the political "arts of morality." Mate's presentation trespassed briefly into English to describe visualization's outcome as one of "simplicity design," which he demonstrated by combining words and gestures. Lifting his right hand, he uttered "politics (*gaanmuang*)." Looking at the crowd he continued "with (*gap*)," and raising his left hand uttered "morality (*sinlathaam)*." He then clasped the otherwise bifurcated fists of politics and morality together. Simplicity design as visualization was the sinews that could bind these parallel worlds together through the architecture of the *Sappaya Saphasathaan*.

The lecture ended, the lights illuminated, and I joined the crowd for complimentary coffee and treats on the ASA veranda. Unsurprisingly, possibly at Pong's orchestration, little green mountains of *num khom* were on offer alongside French pastries. A landscape architect, Dao, was curious whether I understood or believed in *phasaadhamma*[18]: "*phasaa"* meaning language, and thus "*phasadhamma*" translating as 'the language of dhamma.' Having never heard this term I truthfully declined. Another attendee chimed in and identified with my ignorance, but not without an attempt at elucidation. Tacking between Thai and English, she agreed, "me neither, but I understand some of the concepts he [Mate] described. *Sati* is 'consciousness' [English] and the basic claim of the design is that if one has consciousness they will have wisdom, and if one has wisdom one can make good choices. So, the parliament architecture is a tool of consciousness." I asked my interlocutors, "do you believe this?" They looked at each other and laughed. Spoken with the ambivalent conviction of what Sloterdijk called a 'cynical ideologue,' Dao said, "no, that sounds impossible with our politicians. But, it must help for the architecture to remind them." She sounded like Witee, the architect who knew

[18] ภาษาธรรมะ

more about the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* than anyone alive, who despite his faith as a devout southern Baptist, believed in the semiotic potency of the parliament's fraught cosmological conceptualization to enact change. Our plates covered in the empty carcasses of our Meru sweets, we returned to the auditorium and continued to digest the potency of the parliament's visualization: an intertextual play among forms from 'the everyday language of life' of the demos, *and* 'the language of dhamma.'

*Conclusion: Visualization's Gimmickry*

To conclude, the work of the interregna's design activists was viewed both skeptically and optimistically using the emic English term "gimmick." The parliament was too big, the crematorium too grandiose, the cremation ritual too extravagant and, thus, the promised effects of ending corruption or realizing the monarch(y)'s transcendence were interpreted as untenable ruses to benefit the architects and the institutions their designs represented, at the expense of the hapless 'Thai people' funding them. This victimizing valence of the manipulatively designed 'gimmick' upholds the etymological affinity of design and trickery that Flusser identified as the historical ethos of the designer and their forbears --"traitors to ideas and tricksters because they cunningly seduced people into perceiving distorted ideas" (Flusser 1995, 51). For Flusser and critics of *Sappaya Saphasathaan* and *Phrameru Mat*, to de-sign is to deceive. And, according to both Theravada semiotics and the history of the gimmick, times of chaos were especially fertile atmospheres to doubt the veracity of gimmicks and *tuayaang*. Ngai situates the emergence of the dubious gimmick alongside a history of crises in capitalism. At the same time, Gray similarly chronicles discourses of doubting ritualized forms of dhamma, like *tuayaang*, during moments of chaos throughout the late 20$^{th}$ century: "the very resplendence of religious practice, however

occurring as it did in a time of chaos…was instead interpreted as its opposite, as a sign of cosmic decline" (Gray 1986, 910). With the government and monarchy in transition, with an increasingly politically disillusioned populous, with the discourse of political corruption permeating public perceptions of governance, and with signs of economic disparity and elite impunity accumulating in Thai media, the interregna appeared entropic. And the deployment of cosmological forms to combat such chaos, by political actors trained in de-sign's arts of artifice and 'trickery' no less, only reinforced popular suspicion towards the creation of spectacular monuments for liminal institutions. Under the interregna's conditions, design activist architecture added to a *dispositíf* of disbelief.

And yet, this chapter has demonstrated that design activists had the opposite view of their interventions. Why the ambivalence? Restating the thesis of this chapter: for design activists, visualization was a key strategy for the designification of new political orders. Design activist gimmickry attempted to foster constitutive resonance in order to felicitously activate the political reform of post-interregna sovereignties by designing architectural *tuayaang* that interdiscursively transferred and transformed elements from moral domains of social life into the perceived immoral setting of politics. As an ethnographer, my understanding of the 'gimmick' (the skeptic's gimmick) clashed with the emic use of the term as used among all groups of design activists who, in every other respect, repeatedly demonstrated their sincere commitments to positively change Thai society in ways no politician or human *tuayaang,* alone*,* could. Sangop architects called their anti-corruption workshops 'gimmicks,' and yet they functioned to filter the corruption of political representation and misappropriation of taxpayer funds, and to avoid further delays due to the improper construction of their meticulously documented designs. Their design of an easily intelligible conceptual atmosphere that immersed visitors in the 'feelings' of

the *Traibhumi*'s dhammic forces was also a 'gimmick' to facilitate their design's systematic realization, and to induce political probity amongst the elected and electorate. Even the community architect from the previous chapter, who manipulated reticent community stakeholders to take up his proffered pen and collaboratively design on massive room-sized planes of parchment described his deceptive ruse as a "gimmick process" to "empower" local resistance to developer or government encroachment. The 'gimmick process' misrepresented in order to expediently catalyze community activism and self-assertion.

To conclude, I argue that the semantic contradictions underlying design activist architectural gimmickry indexes underlying ideological tensions that were straining Thailand's interregna polity. For some, the interregna was the consummation of institutional disenchantment, and the extravagant architectural displays were evidence that the dhammic figurations of the polity's competing sovereignties – the monarch and the parliament – were nothing more than another instance of empty, superficial, and manipulative gimmickry. For design activists, the vacuum of moral leadership was an opportunity to design fast-acting gimmicks in the forms of new material incumbents—assemblages of Meru, dhammic forms, participatory design, democratic building typologies – to pursue "another way than democracy," through the designification of dhammacracy.

Chapter 4

*Matter|Realization:*
*Design Activist Materialisms in Thailand's Interregna*

*Figure 6: The Sun (House of Representatives) and the Moon (the Senate), covered in over 10,000 teak tiles, each measuring one square meter (Images provided by informants to the author 2018).*

Thus far, the dissertation has analyzed the political claims of activist designers who content that their design skills and personal ethics empower them to transform Thailand's post-interregna politics through two interrelated processes: representation (chapter 2) and visualization (chapter 3). Each process encompasses a dynamic of what this dissertation is calling *designification*: the metasemiotic framework of design practices within which actors purport to transform a sign into an improved, remediated citation that is not only different and similar, like all citations, but presumably iteratively 'better.' In the context of the Thai interregna, designification became a powerful technique for design activists to *build* morality into Thai political futures. By improving the forms that mediate political life, design activists intend to redesign Thai politics. This chapter examines a fourth modality of redesigning politics, *materialization*: how design activists imagine new matter-realities, by mobilizing the political

ontologies of materials-to-realize (to materialize) altered political relations among human actors. Drawing from ethnographic observations of parliament architects, royal architects, and community architects, I will pursue Ingold's challenge for anthropologists to "follow the materials" (Ingold 2012) as fluid mediators of social realities, and interrogate how design activist materialisms—ideologies of materiality— animate materials to actualize different political futures through their designed interventions.

*I. Teak, "the DNA of the Thai People"*

By May of 2014, the Thai government had already displaced residents of the homes, schools and orphanage that for decades had resided on the site of the new Thai Parliament. After years of community resistance against forced relocation, the buildings were finally demolished. Construction of the foundations and ground floor of the world's largest parliament had finally begun. Given the scale and expense of the spectacular structure, essential building materials were already ordered. This included 59,000 square meters of teak: enough teak to construct the great dome of Hagia Sophia, twice over. The world's largest parliament is also the largest architectural assemblage of teak in a single building. Why did designers of the world's largest parliament, which was built largely of glass, steel and concrete, demand so much teak?

Teak, specifically the new Parliament's teak, became a singularly politicized material following the military coup of 2014. On May 23rd, a military coup dissolved the legislative government that would one day inhabit the *Sappaya Saphasathaan*. Within the first three days of seizing power, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO or *khana raksaa khwaam sangop heengchaat*) mandated a curfew, prohibited the publication of any criticism by the press or on social media, and banned all forms of protest and any public gathering of groups exceeding

5 persons. Though parliament and any pretense of democracy was paralyzed, construction on its new headquarters crawled ahead.

Between 2014 and 2017, the NCPO's draconian suppression of most forms of protest, criticism and dissent was alarmingly effective. Enterprising demonstrators in Bangkok nevertheless discovered subversive tactics to circumvent the NCPO's prohibitions on gatherings and resistance. When the junta criminalized assemblages of 5 or more people, demonstrators camouflaged their resistance under otherwise mundane public practices, like eating and reading. At Thammasat University, activists sold "sandwiches for democracy" to individuals with an appetite for dissent. Consumers of 'democratic sandwiches' would eat their political diet in proximity to other fellow consumers, achieving a larger gathering of dissidents disguised as consumers. Others would read George Orwell's *1984* aloud in shopping malls or other crowded public areas. In social media, images circulated of detractors holding their hands aloft in the conjoined three finger solute of the resistance in the *Hunger Games* films and novels. The junta's Prime Minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha, admitted the gesture was not itself illegal, it was just "un-Thai," because it cited international film (cites?). Many protestors were arrested for their politicized modes of eating, reading and gesticulating, but resistance nonetheless percolated in oblique, but determined acts of civil disobedience.

The NCPO did, however, permit rare exceptions to their ban on protest. A lone protestor wielding anti-American posters was allowed to demonstrate at Thammasat University against the US government's suspension of military relations following the coup. The NCPO permitted this exception because it was levied against another government. When sandwich protestors gathered with their lunches and copies of *1984* outside the US Embassy the following day, they were arrested. In April 2018, over 1,000 protestors demonstrated against the construction of

government homes for Judges on government land near Doi Suthep mountain outside Chiang Mai. The government halted development and, according to the deputy commander of the Chaing Mai Police, did not arrest protestors violating the junta's protest ban because "the protestors focused on environmental issues and not politics[1]". Another junta official similarly sanctioned the demonstration, because "they were protesting buildings, not the government." In both justifications of sanctioned protests, environmentalism and architecture were depoliticized, at least rhetorically, become exceptions of licit dissent. Needless to say, in this (and most) contexts, environmentalism, architecture and politics cannot be disambiguated so easily.

In June 2016, with the prohibition on public protest still unyielding, rural demonstrators outside of Chiang Mai protested the Thai government's plans to harvest 2,000 teak logs from a state forestry. Nearby residents reportedly objected to the potential effects of the large scale harvesting that would be entailed within the forestry property. Online opposition to the teak harvest went viral. The teak protest was remarkable for five reasons. One, the government had complete authority to harvest the teak because the trees were located in the Thai government's Forestry Industry Organization (FIO) teak farm. Two, the government had been engineering these trees since 1985, concocting what it called "genetically superior teak" that was intended only to be used in the construction of government buildings. Three, the protestors were not arrested. Four, their remonstrance was rewarded: the Prime Minister sided with the protestors and ordered the Royal Forest Department to cancel the order of 2,000 teak trees. The NCPO was so conciliatory, in fact, that the PM promised to convert the FIO's forest park into a national forest reserve, thereby ensuring its preservation from future projects. And, finally, all the teak in question had been designated exclusively for one building: the new Thai parliament, which at the

[1] "Thailand protestors in rare rally over Chiang Mai development," BBC news April 29, 2018

time was only 20% complete. In short, protests against parliamentary actions were illegal, but against parliament architecture was permissible.

The controversy and the NCPO's exceptional recognition of the protest raised important questions in popular discourse: why was so much teak necessary? And, what was the political value of teak? What made teak such an exceptional material as to enable a successful protest against the state? While the protests were gaining international attention, and prior to the NCPOs conciliation, an Al Jazeera reporter asked Pornpetch Wichitcholchai, the Secretariat of the House of Representatives, about the government's demand for 2,000 teak trees. Defending both the quantity of teak and the justification for its incorporation into the new Thai parliament, Mr Pornpetch replied that teak "was necessary to show the uniqueness of Thai architecture" (Thai PBS 9/24/18) In fact, he insisted its copious application in the nation's parliament was not only a necessary representation of Thai architecture, it was *essential* to the state, because "teak is like the DNA of the nation."

The epistemological entanglement of this statement communicates a powerful *material ideology,* or *materialism*, in Thai political life that was shared across the otherwise contentious parties building the *Sappaya Saphasathaan*. It is both simile and metaphor: a 'nation' is equated to a biological body with a natural essence, its 'DNA;' and that essential coding materializes as teak. As such, the parliament architecture's materiality (specifically its teak) is expressed biopolitically, not only providing shelter for the administration of life but the life of administration—the DNA of the state—in the Thai polity. In so doing, this political formulation also "bundles" (Keane 2008) teak and the Thai state in a political ontology (Holbraad, Pederen and de Castro 2014), in which being Thai and being timber are symbiotic.

This comparison was not a hyperbolic assertion of one influential politician. It became commonplace among the new parliament building's publics. While typically critical of his employers, I first heard this justification of the architecture's copious teak from Prem in the first of many workshops I observed in which Sangop and contractors discussed teak details. As the chapter will discuss in greater detail, Prem was extremely exacting about the precise grain, fabrication and staining of every teak sample. Why? To motivate the teak subcontractors responsible for its sourcing and modification, Prem emphasized "teak *is* the DNA of the Thai people[2]." The simile often collapsed into ontological claims in such statements, and in so doing the rhetorical distinction between the body and the body politic disappeared.

I heard the same justification repeated from one of Sangop's common antagonists, a STECON construction manager. Asked by a subcontractor why so many teak mock-ups were necessary, he repeated the justification, "teak is the DNA of the Thai people." Try as I might, I never discovered the baptismal moment of this discourse. A teak furniture store in Phrae province essentialized teak even more locally, advertising "teak is the DNA of the Phrae people.[3]" Teak in fact does appear in the *Traibhumi* as one of Meru's more valued trees. Teak was, in short, a material that sustained attachments across all scales of the Thai imaginary, from the province to the state.

Even after the cancellation of the government contract outside Chiang Mai, the teak orders for the parliament were never reduced. In fact, the order was soon doubled. One month after the NCPO canceled the contract, Mr Pornpetch was now defending the new order for 4,231 logs of teak. By the time the parliament was completed, it would need to fell over 10,000 tree to

[2] Throughout the chapter, any quotes from ethnographic informants are translated from Thai, unless otherwise indicated as originally uttered in English.
[3] "ไม้สัก คือ DNA ของคนแพร่"

yield 5,018 logs with a grain character suitable for their ornamental application in the parliament. When asked, again, why so much controversial steak was necessary, Mr Pornpetch replied, "because teak represents the DNA of Thailand." No longer a relation of similarity, Thailand and teak now shared a relation of obligation in this utterance, in which teak stands for and works on behalf of the nation's genetic essence. Mr Pornpetch and government spokespersons were evasive when asked where this vital architectural material would be sourced, having already set a precedent for validating protests against government buildings.

In the parliament design workshops, however, the issue was fluidly resolved. In one teak workshop, over 20 prototypes of the square meter tiles that Sangop designed as interior cladding for the Senate and House domes were leaning against the conference room walls. They were unstained to better reveal the color and grain of the teak, which was sourced from teak farms and forests in Laos, Burma, Malaysia and Indonesia—anywhere *but* Thailand. Unlike the government cultivated farm that would have supplied the parliament's "genetically superior" teak, the imported teak would come from countries even more notorious than Thailand for devastating deforestation and fires associated with its extraction. It is not uncommon for Bangkok and Chiang Mai to experience dangerous levels of airborne particulate matter from deforestation both in the highlands and from hundreds of miles outside Thailand's borders. Again, reference to "teak as the DNA of the Thai people" circulated in the evaluation of the imported teak represented in the workshop's prototypes. Regardless of the deleterious effects of Southeast Asian teak harvesting on the bodies of Thai people, it's discursive programming in the DNA of its body politic justified the importation of 5,018 logs, and its resource intensive conversion into the body of the new Thai parliament. In the end, Prem selected a 'golden teak'

from Laos. If teak was the DNA of the Thai people, the Thai parliament's teak would have to come from a Lao transfusion.

Teak materialisms accrued as the controversy continued. According to Sangop, it was the most environmentally responsible material. Witee, who was vocally skeptical of the *Traibhumi* itself, defended the characterization of teak as the DNA of Thai culture. He insisted, "it is true that teak has been a part of our culture for hundreds of years, so it is in the DNA of our culture, which is why DNA is a key word in the way we represent teak." However, this account belies the political and environmental morality of Sangop's choice in materials. The problem, he admits, in saying "it is the DNA of the Thai people, so it [the design] must be teak, is not a defense based on responsible harvesting, which we designed for." In other words, not only is teak culturally essential, Sangop design activists insisted it is also more environmentally sustainable. The essentialist line of argumentation was a distraction from the ethical claim, that teak was the greener material.

The moral imperatives of teak did not end with cultural and ecological valorization: it was also a more democratic material. The protests by villagers against teak harvesting were, according to Sangop architects, nothing more than a performance of corruption, and corruption was nothing less than the hijacking of democratic representation. Witee insisted the protests were, in fact, "all theatrical." He enumerated the logic: the forestry harvests 10,000 cubic meters of farmed teak every year and has done so for 70 years. By Sangop's calculations, the parliament order fell well below annual yields. The controversy was, therefore, not a matter of supply, but of a self-interested supplier hoping to profit off the substitution of teak with his material. Sangop architects claimed an aluminum manufacturer tried to persuade the parliament contractor to replace teak with their product by politicizing the parliament's teak supply. "By writing letters to

the media, creating media spectacles, telling a tiny population in a village that they will be affected, he created the controversy," lamented Prem. "The government grows the teak in rows, and has a strategy to cut only a specific portion of these rows so that no villager would ever be affected. But no one, except the contractor, explained this." Mobilized against the corrupt network of suppliers, contractors and the politicians they patronized, teak—according to Sangop design activists—became the superlative political, cultural and environmental material of the parliament's architecture. And so, teak materialisms comprised multiple moral claims .

This chapter theorizes the politics that materialize through the choices and justifications of building materials by design activists. A recurring argument of this dissertation continues to assert that cosmology underlies all politics. Or, in short, all politics are cosmopolitical. And, just as materiality subtends all ideology, the diverse and contentious panoply of religious and political ideologies assembled in the parliament, specifically, and design activist architecture during the interregna, more broadly, coalesce in the agencies of the materials that mediate them. This chapter analyzes the materialisms that animate three material categories – teak, gold and bamboo – as design activists strived to activate a cosmos of ideologies, encompassing fascism, liberalism, absolutism, monarchism, Buddhism, animism, environmentalism, egalitarianism, and populism, within the architecture of the interregna. I argue that through designification, materials themselves become imaginable as enduring political activists.

*II: The Cosmopolitics of Teak*

Tim Ingold suggests that we ought to think of the properties of materials not as attributes but histories (Ingold 2012) and it is the case that teak cultivation and use is encoded into the imaginary and governing apparatus of Thailand. Popular and historical accounts distinguish

Thailand from its neighbors as the only Southeast Asian polity that was never colonized (cites???). Visitors to Thailand's most prominent state museums, like the National Museum of Bangkok, the archives of King Rama IX, the museum of the Parliament and the Royal Crematorium exhibition, learn that Thailand escaped colonial capture thanks to the nimble political stratagems and prudent compromises of 19th century Thai kings, Rama IV (King Mongkut) and Rama V (King Chulalongkorn). However, Bangkok's negotiations with neighboring colonial powers and its own internal history of colonizing peripheral kingdoms in what would become Siam (and eventually "Thailand" in 1939) are much more complex and fundamental to its formation as a state. And teak was the essential material mediating these negotiations and the territorialization of the nation. International demands and colonial encroachments for teak catalyzed the development of a government apparatus capable of documenting and practicing territorial sovereignty (Prasnak 2015; Winichakul 1994). This section will illustrate how essential teak has been to the formation of a Thai political imaginary.

Before Thailand had national borders, the maps to represent them, or the will to survey, articulate, document, and enforce them, it had rich teak forests that were highly coveted both domestically and by neighboring colonial powers. Because its natural resin and rubber made teak completely resistant to termites, teak was the wood that early 19th century British colonialists demanded to construct seacraft for their expanding empire. As one British trader described teak, it was the "universal sovereign of the sylvan world, the regal 'lord' of the forests" (Prasnak 2015, 480). Having exhausted teak resources in India and Burma, the British sought access to Thailand's extensive teak forests. Prior to international entreaties and the infiltration of capitalism, Teak was already a prized material in Thailand. Teak was enshrined in the *Traibhumi* as a tree in the middle world of Mt Meru, where only the best humans and super-human *devata*

built homes of precious metals and gems in the trees' robust canopies (Reynolds 1984). Again, due to its powers to resist termites and permit minimal expansion and contraction, teak was the most desirable material for construction as well. But, because it was relatively more resource intensive to harvest and fabricate, teak lumber was less accessible than bamboo, and therefore more of a luxury for temples and the elite members of Siamese societies. Teak was also a material of tribute. It grew entirely in smaller peripheral northern kingdoms, mostly controlled by powerful Lanna[4] families, that practiced fealty to the Siamese monarchy in Bangkok (ibid 481). While an aforementioned colonialist used the term 'universal sovereign' as a metaphor for teak's value as an international commodity, northern lords and kings in pre-capitalist Thailand accepted teak as an in-kind currency of local taxation and as a medium of paying tithes to the king in Bangkok.

The conjuncture of the international commodification of teak along with the existing configuration of territorial sovereignties that located teak in smaller northern kingdoms beholden to the monarchy in Bangkok precipitated the transition of Siam from a pre-capitalist constellation of interdependent kingdoms to a capitalist semi-colonial state. When British traders sought the authority of the Siamese monarch to harvest teak near Chiangmai in the early 19th century, they discovered a conception of territorial sovereignty predicated not so much on geographical or cartographical boundaries, but systems of hierarchical relations that loosely defined jurisdictional responsibilities of the territories they were hoping to exploit. Siam consisted of a constellation of hundreds of principalities, called *muang*, governed by lords or kings with allegiance to Bangkok. Tambiah describes this constellated system of power relations as a "galactic polity," predicated

[4] The Lanna kingdom covered much of what is now Northwest Thailand. Between 1557-1774, the Lanna kingdom was ruled by Burmese royalty. With the aid of the Siamese monarchy, the Lanna kingdoms gained independence from Burma and maintained filial and subsidiary relationship with the Siamese kings in Bangkok until the Lanna kingdom was formerly colonized by the central Thai state after the revolution of 1932.

on the concept of the mandala (*monthon*): the 'manda' is the center and the 'la' are the satellite principalities beholden to a political core (Tambiah 2013). The arrangement spatializes a multi-layered cosmopolitical hierarchy of, one, a pantheon of gods distributed around Meru; two, the capitol and the provinces it rules; three, the relations of a central ruler with peripheral kings, nobles and officials; four, "the devolution of graduated power on a scale of decreasing autonomies" (ibid 508). The galactic polity constituted a dynamic "pulsating" (ibid, 104)

*Figure 7: The mandala plan of the Sappaya Saphasathan. Significantly, because of its transformation of the Traibhumi into architecture, the plan of the new Thai parliament depicts the largest mandala form expressed in a single building, in Thailand (image provided by Sangop to author 2018).*

cosmological, territorial, logistical and political-economic configuration that was elusive to cartographic capture. And it was teak – as a material of Meru's *devata*, as a material of elite architecture, and as a currency of inter-provincial tribute—that mediated these polyvalent systems of relations..

For Siamese rulers, European maps failed to capture the configuration of power that enmeshed them. Siamese were defined not by geographical features as much by rulers, their locations and their interrelations among principalities. Local authorities exercised power over people's labor, output or military conscription, not territorial enforcement (Vandergeest and

Peluso 1995). For 19th century Siamese ruling elites, maps represented a conceptualization of space devoid of its internal relations. By 1825, the British had conquered much of southern Burma and requested the Siamese monarch appoint a delegation to negotiate the boundaries between western Siamese territory and the British colony (Thongchai 1994). According to Thongchai, "for the Siamese court, it was hard to imagine why the question of boundary should be so important; it should have been a matter for the local people, not those in Bangkok" (ibid 64). For over 20 years, British traders and officials continued their campaign to convince Siamese kings and local Lanna lords to articulate boundaries in letters, treaties, and maps. In 1837, the Chiangmai king acted unilaterally and deferred the matter to the British, permitting them to conduct a survey that would define the boundary near the Salween river. Wary of Bangkok's recognition of the survey, however, the British requested the court agree to "one uniform rule as regards the boundary line from north to south" (ibid 74). The court's response indicated such measures were superfluous, because for them the territorial borders were settled: the boundary of a given locality was under the jurisdiction of its local authority. For some, the boundary between the local *muang* and Burmese territory was defined by rivers, mountains, tracts of forest, piles of stone, or even proximity to certain temples and, in one case, the residence of a white elephant (ibid). The furthest extents of a ruler's domain were recognized as frontiers, not borders, that often dissolved into forests loosely ruled by overlapping sovereignties. For much of the 19th century, such layered, discretionary and inconsistent spatializations of boundaries made cartographic representation futile.

In the final decades of the 19th century, however, the international demand for teak combined with the modernizing ambitions of the new Siamese king, Rama IV (Mongkut), catalyzed the Siamese state to consolidate power through the representational entailments of

mapping. After decades of balking at explicit trade agreements and their requisite border commitments with foreign powers, in 1855, King Mongkut's court and the British government signed the Bowring treaty that officially liberalized trade conditions between the countries by effectively eradicating long-standing import duties on foreign goods. This had the effect of opening the Siamese economy to global capital, entailing the introduction of industrial production and the commodification of labor and resources. Teak quickly became one of Siam's three most lucrative exports (Nartsupha and Prasartset 1981). The decline in the royal tariff revenues accelerated extractions and exportation of such commodities, which demanded investments in improved trade infrastructure and the immigration of Chinese laborers. For Siam to both develop its borders and increase the exchange of resources and laborers across them, the Bangkok royal elite needed to consolidate its territory. The mapping of enforceable Siamese borders and their teak forests were fundamental to this transformation in the Siamese political economy. British officials keen to exclude neighboring French powers from Thailand's resources collaborated with King Mongkut's successor, King Chulalongkorn (Rama IV), to consolidate his power along Siam's teak-rich periphery (Prasanak 2015) between Burmese and Lanna territories. The creation of the Royal Forest Department in 1897 was fundamental to the reconfiguration of power relations away from the previous 'galactic' system of interdependent principalities to a bureaucratic apparatus oriented towards managing life, regulating production, and collecting tax revenue. The Forest Protection Act and Teak Trees Protection acts were implemented in 1897, codifying teak ownership under the dominion of the Royal Thai government, who could prohibit local teak extraction by demarcating and leasing land to interested parties. To enforce and clarify its recent delineation of its northern borders, and dominion over its resources, Bangkok dispatched police and military, welcomed the establishment of a British Consulate in Chiangmai,

assigned judges to manage land disputes and administer bidding for teak concessions (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995). It was these developments resulting from the teak trade that, in short, precipitated Bangkok's transformation into a modern "internal imperialist" (Thongchai 2016) or "semi-colonial" (Prasanak 2015) power, and structured both the imaginary of Siam as a state and the Chakri king as its sovereign.

Of course, for the cultivation of a state imaginary to be successful, it could not simply manifest as a coercive outcome of Bangkok's domination. It had to become hegemonic. An epistemological shift from the *Traibhumi* cosmology – again *the* conceptual basis of the new Thai parliament and royal crematorium – to a geographic conceptualization of the cosmos conditioned the possibility of imaging Siam as a state. King Mongkut developed such a passion for European cartography and astronomy that he authorized the instruction of British geographical texts in all British missionary schools, he abandoned the Buddhist calendar, and conducted his own astronomical calculations, including an expedition to observe the "Wakor solar eclipse" in 1868 where he contracted a strain of malaria that would soon end his life. Under his heir, King Chulalongkorn, the *Traibhumi* cosmology was further displaced from a scientific to only a moral authority on the workings of the cosmos. In 1892, texts like WG Johnson's *Phumisat Sayam* ("The Geography of Siam") became established curriculum in all secondary schools (Thongchai 1994). For the first time, students studying geography and astronomy were trained in the conventions of two-dimensional representation of spaces across scales, from homes (architectural plans), to houses, towns and the state. Across educational and state institutions, geography gradually became the authoritative epistemology on spatial matters, while Buddhism and the *Traibhumi* remained as instruments of moral guidance. It was during this time that the terminology of Siam as a polity changed from *muang* to a *pratheet*. The former, *muang*,

ambiguously referred to different spatio-political entities: it could be a city or a country. *Pratheet*, however, captured "a very specific meaning in the grammar of modern geography: a nation" (Thongchai 1995, 49). Within two generations, the kingdom of Siam was recognized, by its people, as *Pratheet Thai*. Teak and the *Traibhumi* were as essential to that realization of the Thai state, as they are, XX years later, to its newest parliament building.

*III: Realpoli-Teak*

Having delved into teak's fundamental role in the materialization of the Thai state in the past, let us return to how design activists intended teak to transform its post-interregna future. Recall the NCPO's anomalous concession to rural protesters near Chiang Mai who objected to the extraction of 2,000 trees from government owned orchards. Recall, too, that immediately after halting this harvest from the state's "genetically-superior" teak preserve, the parliament more than doubled its order of teak to 5,018 logs, discretely ~~transfusing~~ procuring the mandated "DNA of the Thai people" from Laos. The decision to increase the application of teak in the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* and to source a particular strain of teak from Laos came from one of the many parliament design workshops I observed that concentrated on teak prototypes and design.

Given the quantity of teak demanded and its controversies surrounding the parliament construction, two important questions remain: how does teak become imaginable as a political actor , and where is it all going in the new parliament's architecture? The previous section provides a historical explanation of teak's "representational economy," which Keane defines as "the dynamic interconnections among different modes of signification at play within a particular historical and social formation" (Keane 2003, 410). Teak mediated the conjuncture of multiple cosmologies: the *Traibhumi* cosmology that sacralized teak as a material of moral denizens;

capitalist cosmologies that configured teak as an international commodity, redefining Siamese political economy; sociopolitical cosmologies that aligned teak with power, prestige and proximity to the monarchy. Out of this ideological crucible the aesthetics of Thai stateness materialized and continues to do so in assertions like, "teak is the DNA of the Thai people." As we know already, this representational power is claimed to justify teak's extensive application in the new Thai parliament. While the coproduction of teak commodification and Thai statehood provide a historical answer to teak's representational economy today, this dissertation's theorization of design activist processes of visualization, representation and materialization will provide a more extensive answer both to how teak is politicized in the interregna, and how Thai politics materializes through such design activist materialisms. There are more simple answers to where the vast quantities of teak went. Briefly, teak was applied wherever its designers thought its presence would be most politically impactful, even, as this section will explain, when this meant designing its copious imperceptibility. This inscrutable answer—ie teak's politically impactful imperceptibility—and the design activist logics that determined the scale, design and locations of the parliament's teak surfaces requires a deeper dive into the teak details of the complex.

### *1. Teak colonnades and walls*

With its enormous footprint and extensive network of interior atria, the cumulative length of the *Sappaya Saphasathan*'s facades exceed that of the palace of Versailles twice over. The entirety of the first four stories of the complex's exterior is wrapped in a colonnade of over 1,000 roughly finished teak columns. For years prior to the parliament's completion, visitors to the parliament construction offices would have to walk by a series of free-standing teak columns outside the construction office doors. These were one of the earliest mock-ups requested on site.

Each teak log was sourced from a different forest and country, each had its own subtle variation in hues, and because they were exposed to Bangkok's particular climate for years, each developed a distinct patina. Teak columns also lined the 11 story internal facades of the central tower of the complex, which extends from Museum of Democracy on the ground floor up to the bottom of the gilt royal *busabok*. Every inch of the exterior walls of the 11-story central tower that is not penetrated with windows is clad entirely in vertically oriented teak boards. In order to express the decorative teak colonnades circumscribing the teak façade, and not have them disappear into their teak backdrop, Sangop made the controversial decision to paint all of the internal teak columns a politicized shade of red. The reader might ask the same questions dozens of visitors I accompanied in the parliament construction also asked, "why paint teak?" This section will conclude with an analysis of the politics and realpolitik of the parliament's painted teak.

### *2. Teak Domes*

Both the Senate and the House assembly rooms are contained in two enormous hemispherical domes, the surfaces of which are clad in 20,962 teak shingles, each measuring one square meter. To give an approximate sense of the amount of teak needed to cover the surface area of just these two rooms, the smaller Senate dome is larger than that of Hagia Sophia, and the larger house of representatives' dome is larger than that of St Peter's Cathedral. The rows of desks and chairs for Thailand's representatives are set in the middle of a hemisphere. This commitment to spherical design is a transmutation of the sun and the moon from the *Traibhumi's* depiction of world destruction and recreation. Negotiating both the ideological power of using *Traibhumi* citations as an affective repertoire of visualizing 'Thainess' (which indeed helped them win the parliament competition), Sangop's design also encouraged the more controversial

political imagery of the sun and moon rooms as spaces that could balance monarchical power[5]. So, they conceptualized the 250-member assembly hall for the Senate[6] as the Hall of the Moon, and labeled it with the Sanskritic name for the moon, "Chantra Hall." The much larger 500-member assembly hall for the House of Representatives[7] was correspondingly conceptualized as the Hall of the Sun, or Suriyan Hall, using the Sanskrit word for sun used in the *Triabhumi*. The form and scale of the halls, as well as the coloration of their thousands of teak panels, were designed to enunciate their citations of the *Triabhumi*'s moon and sun: the teak panels for the Chantra Hall would receive a lunar blue patina, while the tiles of the Suryan Hall required a very golden strain of teak. The inhabitant would be immersed in a comprehensive affective symbolism, in which the citationality of the *Traibhumi* in the chambers' form and materiality channeled a moral interdiscursivity wrought across temples, texts, rituals and cosmology would become atmospheric. The cosmological experience was, in Sontag's words, designed to be "erotic" not "hermeneutic" (Sontag 2001).

The affective symbolism of the two chambers and their teak panels did not end with its reference to the *Traibhumi*. Precisely because Sangop designed the *Sappaya Saphasathan* to maximally visualize a moral reformation in politics through the parliament's architecture, the form and details of the domes displayed multiple citations simultaneously. The hemispherical forms of the Sun and Moon rooms were also designed to cite the form of a *chedi*: a stupa that contains relics of the Buddha or one of his acolytes. These forms are themselves references to Mt

[5] As mentioned in the introduction, the Traibhumi describes how under an errant king who strays from the dhamma, the cosmos around Meru becomes entropic. Creatures die, the sun and moon collapse, and worlds end. Then, a new cosmos is regenerated. After a new sun and moon arise around the slopes of Meru, the middle world is repopulated with righteous people in need of an enlightened king (*dhammaraja*), who *they select*. If not unthinkable, at least it is unspeakable under Thailand's increasingly draconian *lese majeste* laws to consider a popular election of a Thai king does select = elect? what is an 'elected king'? This is unthinkable bc it is a contradiction in terms. delete . But the *Traibhumi* inscribes this as a cosmogenical moment.

[6] วุฒิสภา or *saw-wa,* for short, from the acronym สว

[7] สภาผู้แทนราษฎร or *saw-saw* for short, from the acronym สส

Meru, and are of course associated with Buddhist temples and rituals. But the *saw-wa (*สว) and


*Figure 8: 2009 competition plate citing 'global' democratic and Thai Buddhist domical forms underlying the designs for the Sun and Moon chambers (image acquired by the author from the ASA archives 2018).*

*saw-saw (*สส) ihalls are negatives of a *chedi*, which is a solid domical form that entombs relics and is only ever seen from without, while both chambers are experienced as the emptied interior of a *chedi* seen from within. Additionally, as indicated on Sangop's competition boards, the Sun and Moon domes also cited the domical architecture of "world architecture" from global parliaments. The domes were, thus, dhammacratic (dhammic and democratic) citations.

While the hues of the teak tiles cite the *Traibhumi*'s sun and moon, the shape, orientation and inscriptions on each tile signify associations with the Buddha and *chedis*. The smaller lunar dome is clad in 7,518 handmade teak tiles each measuring almost one square meter; the larger solar dome is clad in 13,444 teak tiles. Each tile is assembled like a luxurious chopping board, composed of dozens of laminated strips of teak compressed tightly together. Each assembled panel was then laid on a CNC (computer numerically controlled) milling bed, where a milling machine inscribes a spiral symbol into the surface of the panel. Sangop made this spiral the logo of the *Sappaya Saphasathaan*, emblazoning it on way-finders, signs, and parliament swag. The

curl represented the curls of the Buddha's matted hair after he rejected his princely wealth and grew increasingly unkempt as he dedicated his life to pursuing enlightenment through constant meditation. Most statues of the Buddha in Thailand depict his hair on the precipice of enlightenment, where the field of spiraled bumps on the sculptures' scalps signify that he has renounced dependence on the material conditions of an ephemeral life. Every tile displays one curl. Each tile is then drilled dozens of times with a ¼" drill bit to allow air to pass through the panel, softening the acoustic reverberation of the domes' solid teak scalps. Rather than create a uniform surface inside the domes, like the exterior of a *chedi* where each panel connects seamlessly to the borders of its neighbors, Sangop also designed the application of the tiles to enunciate each tile individually. Over 100,000 individually angled steel clips affix the teak tiles to the domical structure so that they appear noticeably layered, like shingles, making the Sun and Moon rooms appear like a cosmos of teak Buddha curls. As one stands as if inside the sun and moon of a new political world, *and* inside the domain of sacred relics, *and* inside the exterior scalp of the Buddha, Sangop wanted any imagery of legislators and one's own experience of their legislative duties to be saturated with the laminated messaging of domical spaces that internalized some of the most potent symbolism in Thai iconography. Three regimes of moral authority—the karmic system of the *Traibhumi*, the dhammic decency of the Buddha's selflessness, and the materialization of Thai statehood in teak—dominate the design? of Thailand's national assembly chambers. Witee explained that just as Sanam Luang[8] "must make people think of the king and respect him, the sign [of the buddha curl inscription] must make people think of democracy." Teak was *the* material that entangled citations of the *Traibhumi*,

[8] Sanam Lunag (The Yellow Field) is the royal cremation and ceremonial grounds outside the Grand Palace, where Phra Meru Mat was standing at the time Witee compared its semiotic function for royalism to that of the Parliament's semiosis of democracy via the *Sappaya Saphasathan* design.

Buddhist temple architecture, and the history of the Thai state into the architectural envelope of the country's legislatures.

But complications arose translating the *Traibhumi* imagery into teak from the first design workshop convened to discuss the teak dome panel prototypes. When I arrived, the temporary tables and chairs of an on-site meeting room had already been pushed aside to create space for a dozen teak panels. Each was a slightly different shade of a golden wood hue. Prem, Witee and Peung represented the design team, and were joined with two STECON construction managers and two subcontractors (*chaang sii* or 'color craftsman') who fabricated and delivered the

*Figure 9: Four teak dome panel finalists in a parliament workshop (photo taken by author 2018)*

prototypes. The architects were excited to see and touch the prototypes, debating the relative merits of each panel's character. One was more "*sii thong*" (golden), another "*sii namthaan*" (brown) and a third "*sii thamachaat*" (natural). Prem particularly liked the panels that combined the greatest variety of colors and exhibited the most pronounced wood grains within a single tile. In a rare outburst of approval, Prem declared "they are beautiful" (*suaymaak*), and directed the subcontractor to produce tiles that revealed "the most color." He wanted the national assembly hall's 13,444 tiles to dazzle the gaze of the observers, so "it would be like looking at the sun, without pain." Among the dozen prototypes, Sangop chose their model tile and requested the

subcontractor consult it when assembling the thousands of panels that would be assembled. Sangop thanked the *chaang sii*. The *chaang sii* nodded and said he was "doing my duty." By describing his commitment as a 'duty' not a 'job,' the *chaang sii* signaled a Buddhist moral aesthetic that associated duty fulfillment with merit-making (Reddy 2017). Duty motivation was a commitment to a system, not the self, precisely the sensibility Sangop intended their architecture to elicit in the representatives serving within their building and the electorate who put them there.

Despite the success of the golden teak *tuayaang*, there was one important prototype missing: the lunar-toned tile for the senate dome. Pueng inquired, "where is the tile for *saw-wa*?" The *chang sii* and STECON employees looked nonplussed. "These are the same tiles for both rooms, no?" replied the senior construction manager, Khun Champ. STECON's job was to manage the subcontractor's work, to facilitate the transformation of the designers' drawings and material selections into the workshop prototypes. Moderating her exasperation at the oversight, Pueng opened one of the over 20,000 pages of drawings that clearly indicated the tiles of the *saw-wa* dome were supposed to receive a "silver oak" stain. None of the prototypes were stained. The architects offered a number of suggestions to the *chaang sii* to help him in what would prove to be the daunting task of expressing the teak while entirely altering its warm brown hues: burnish a powder into the surface; scour the wood with a coffee and vinegar solution; apply a commercial aged teak stain, etc. Witee whispered as an aside to me, "you see, this is why we need workshops: no one reads the drawings!" A follow-up workshop to assess more multi-hued solar teak panels for *saw-saw* and silver oak panels for the lunar *saw-wa* was arranged for two weeks later.

The quest to sustain the competing citationality of the Senate's tiles – signifying at once the lunar-ness of the *Traibhumi* cosmos and the state-ness of Thai teak – dogged dozens of workshops, mock-ups and site visits even after the dome neared completion over a year later. None of the approaches to stain the teak were lunar enough; all the attempts to paint the tiles obscured the colors and marbling of the teak too much. In the end, Sangop decided to paint the teak tiles with a light blue-grey patina. I asked Prem how he felt about the lunar *tuayaang* tile Sangop eventually accepted, to which he replied: "not happy. It doesn't look teak enough. It is too late to change. The most important thing is that it looks different from the sun room. This looks like the moon room." In the debates about the design's semiosis, of what the dome will signify most potently to its viewer, Sangop determined that the visibility of the iconic association of the Senate with the *Traibhumi* was paramount. But when STECON participants suggested a cheaper, more accessible material for the tiles that were going to be painted, Sangop refused. Even if invisible, the dome must be teak. Witee admitted, in English, that for some time he too "thought it would look like wood. There are easier ways to be that color. It may as well be aluminum. But, we see it as *the spirit of teak*."

The statement and Sangop's persistence in painting teak indicates their belief that its "spirit" would perform the semiotic work of the parliament even if it was impossible to see. The fact that the echelons of budgetary oversight scrutinizing the design also ratified this decision and financed the painting of 7,518 costly teak tiles, and that the aforementioned politicians maintained the dictum that "teak was the DNA of the Thai people" even in the face of rare media scrutiny reflects the ideological achievement of teak materialism. Teak offered the power of political representation without visual representation. This indicates a different modality of designification than visualization (chapter 4), which relied on the indexicality of recognizable

(de)signs to actualize altered perceptions and behaviors. The materiality of the painted tiles is imagined to actualize political effects without visualizing itself, working indexically and symbolically without any iconic signification.

The concealed teak also revealed a power to shape the realpolitik of workshop actors. While on the surface, the *Traibhumi* paint and the nationalist teak substrate appeared to cancel each other out, the dual citationality sustained in both layers of materials was accessed by workshop interlocutors to resolve or preempt interpersonal conflicts. Even when it was invisible, the teak substrate was citable. For example, when the architects scrutinized the subtle variations in teak tonality at the first workshop, Khun Champ (the STECON construction manager) chuckled at the whole exchange, admitting he could hardly tell a difference among most of the panels. His comment at once undermined Sangop and the *chaang sii*'s precision, while also reaffirming the settled opposition between the design activists and the contractors. Prem sounded sanctimoniously defensive when he smiled and retorted, "the color is important because teak is the DNA of the Thai people." It was a justification not only for the time invested perfecting the tonality of 13,444 tiles, but also the architects' agency to do so. Having escalated the qualia of teak as a synecdoche of the Thai people, Khun Champ had no rejoinder. The architects got the more exacting teak they desired. And, when a STECON colleague attending a subsequent lunar tile workshop asked whether the architects wanted the tiles more grey or blue, Khun Champ exclaimed, "I don't know! Ask Ajaarn Prem. Architects' speech is too difficult." The expertise of the architect, mediated through their unique perspicacity with materials like wood and paint pigments, afforded them the power to silence opposition, while also allowing the construction manager the (lucrative) latitude to attribute design delays to the architects' inscrutable rigidity.

At times, *Traibhumi* citations also provided a conclusive power. Often, established architects, business magnates or associates of politicians would join the workshop teams for walk-throughs of the parliament construction site. On one occasion shortly after the lunar tiles were installed in the Senate dome, a national artist asked Pi Pong a familiar question: "what material is this?" He could not see the teak. Indirectly acknowledging the unfortunate circumstance of painting teak, Pi Pong admitted "It is teak. We had to paint it. We simulated this for 6 moths in a computer before building it." Yes, it was painted, but done with technical craft. The national artist said it looked like aluminum, why did they paint it? Why was it blue? Exasperated, Pi Pong replied "it is the concept, but I don't want to explain it because it will give me a headache." A friend of the artist prodded further, and quietly joked to his companions, "its so pretty, it is a girly color[9]." Pi Pong heard, and with a sober finality elaborated "it is from the *Traibhumi*." The banter and the questions stopped. The artist nodded and his friend grunted approvingly, each marking their sudden acquiescence. And the dubious act of painting teak was put to rest.

*IV: Seeing Red*, *Being Teak*

The teak painting controversy took other hues and, in so doing, infiltrated the politics *and* realpolitik between Sangop and royal architects, and by extension popular and royal sovereignties. In this instance, the controversy involved red, not blue paint. It started when the 1,000 teak columns lining the external facades were installed and Sangop discovered a problem: as they weathered and the golden hue started to grey, the extravagant teak colonnades vanished into their concrete backdrop. This was a bad invisibility, because Sangop wanted teak to be

[9] "สีฟ้าเป็นสีผู้หญิง"

recognizable on the façade from any possible angle. At first, the architects asked STECON to paint miles of concrete walls a darker grey, which indeed expressed the teak colonnade more clearly. However, to support the top four stories of teak colonnades, Sangop had to integrate an added steel colonnade along the bottom three parapets. Painted either black or grey, these larger steel colonnades were difficult to distinguish from the more precious teak columns. To maximize the contrast and draw attention to the otherwise ornamental teak colonnades (they did not provide any structural function for the cantilevering parapets framing them), Sangop proposed painting them red. STECON employees warned that red was a bad idea andthe office of the Secretary of the Parliament communicated that red was "inappropriate" (*mai mawsom*) for the parliament.

Red was dismissed implicitly because of the political taboo its hue signified to members and bureaucrats of the ruling junta. In Thai politics since the previous coup d'état in 2006, red was associated with the movement that opposed the deposition of the only popularly elected Prime Minister to ever serve an entire term in office, Thaksin Shinawatra[10]. Given the overt alignment of the ruling NCPO junta with anti-Thaksin "yellow shirt" faction and given the association of yellow with the royal family, red would have been offensive to the office of the parliament, which issues the final approval or rejection of any design modifications. The Sangop design activists were enthusiastic supporters of red shirt interests, and their choice of red as the

[10] Opposition against the two forces that precipitated the coup—the military government and the royalist group, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)—coalesced into a new political party, The United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). The UDD was predominantly comprised of progressive, left leaning activists, IT WAS???? Academics ????, and the urban, rural and working-class voters who formed Thaksin's successful electoral base. PAD supporters and royalists visualized their political alignments by wearing yellow shirts, UDD sympathizers wore red shirts. As a series of enormous, highly disruptive, and sometimes violent protests (discussed in depth in the introduction) ensued, the parsing of political alignments with red and yellow pigments only exacerbated the political and economic tensions dividing the country.

color to enunciate the teak colonnade was not accidental. It was just 'inappropriate.' They had crossed a chromatic and a political line.

When design activists met with the resistance of authorizing parties, they resorted to the profanely[11] (Agamben 2007[12]) transformative power of designification. The rejection of the proposal to paint the external colonnade red did not dissuade Sangop architects. "We are designers, so we are not afraid,[13]" retorted the landscape architect, Khun Mate in a subsequent workshop. His colleague Ajaarn Wasin, who was a Sangop architect with a doctorate in Buddhist studies, added "we democratize design principles that in the past only belonged to the royal family. After all, Buddha was a very democratic person." So how did their design "democratize"? They exercised their boldness by profanely citing sacred architecture precedent for their secular architecture, once again. This occurred first, of course, when Sangop chose the spiritual-cosmology of the *Traibhumi* as the concept for their parliament in 2009, for which they received considerable criticism for their intertextual temerity. This was a reference for temples and royal crematoria, translated by royal architects and monks, not an assemblage of acclaimed postmodern Thai architects. Indeed, the resentment echoed throughout my fieldwork as well. Royal architects at the Department of Fine Arts (FAD) dismissed the design as 'inappropriate.' When I asked his opinion on the parliament design, one senior FAD designer lamented to me, "the designers do not know what they are doing. They cannot translate the *Traibhumi* into a parliament!" I heard this judgement again, in a separate interview I conducted with an architect

[11] As explained in previous chapters, I borrow from Giorgio Agamben's definition of "profanation" as subversive practices of traditionally unauthorized actors who 'play' with taboos against sacred or otherwise discursively protected concepts and, in so doing, neutralize their sanctified powers. In "Toys and Play," Benjamin also identifies a child's "free play" as a quotidian subversive act that transcends established models, rules or conventions and, in so doing, unsettles the established order of things (Benjamin 1999).

[12] *See* Agamben, Giorgio. 2007. In Praise of Profanation. *Log* 10 (Summer/Fall): 23-32; Benjamin, Walter. 1999. Toys and Play. In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 1. Ed Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.*

[13] "R*aw pen* designers, *gaw mai khlua*"

who was a distant cousin of the king, and a former architect at the FAD, who similarly dismissed the legitimacy of the concept for a parliament: "don't ask me about the parliament, it is a bad design. The architects do not know the *Traibhumi* or they would not use it for the parliament. It is for temples or the king!"

The gatekeeping of royalist designers highlights the motivation for Sangop design activists to choose it in the first place: their design(ification) removed the cosmology from the purview of royal and religious elite and transposed it onto the supposed people's government. This constituted, for them, "democratizing" design. The appropriation of royal regalia and imagery in other contexts often excites legal or punitive reprisals from the government[14]. As profane as Sangop's transmutation of the *Traibhumi* is among royalist detractors, not only were they permitted to submit their proposal in the 2009 competition, but they successfully won the illustrious commission because their design best exemplified "Thainess" (see Introduction). It is this licitly profane potential of designification to cite the sacred, to play with the taboo, to transfuse some power from its references into the newly (de)signed contexts, and to configure this manipulation as a positive "democratizing" intervention that, I argue, affords activism a tolerable form – design activism – during the interregna.

To silence opposition against the use of red paint, Sangop cited sacred precedent for their profane design. Shortly after receiving the formal denial of their request to paint the columns red, Aj Wasin suggested they identify the exact Pantone color values for reds used in temples and royal architecture. The architects documented five shades of "sacred red[15]" that cited prominent

[14] Most sensationally, such retribution gained notoriety when the Bangkok police department issued an arrest warrant issued against Lady Gaga after she performed in a concert in Bangkok riding a motorcycle out of a giant vaginal portal, waving a Thai flag and wearing only a bikini and a traditional headdress, called a *mongkut*. (thai???) The *mongkut* is associated with *devata* from the *Traibhumi*, the form of Mt Meru, and most sacredly of all, the king's crown.

[15] "*Sii deng saksit*"

temples and palaces, like Wat Prakaew and the Grand Palace, and arranged for a full-scale mock-up of the paint applied to five of the external steel columns. The architects convened a workshop with NCPO officials, who prohibited me from attending. Witee later explained that they too rejected the reds, saying only "the color is a problem[16]."

As it happened, this second embargo was short lived. Their solution—citing royal design prerogatives *within* the parliament complex—emerged from a workshop with the design firm, Powarint, who was responsible for the interiors of the royal offices in the *busabok*. Back in the palace of Powarint's royal principal[17], who everyone referred to with the honorific "Khun Ying," Sangop architects were discussing Powarint's material and paint selections for the royal hallways, apartments, and audience hall. A national artist, Aj Son, who Khun Ying commissioned to hand paint murals of the *Traibhumi* onto the base of walls of the royal audience hall was also participating. When Khun Ying's assistant presented a material mood board for the colors of the upper walls of the hall to Pueng and a STECON representative, both acted very surprised. The paint was a deep and rusty red, and next to it was a small, detailed painting of a gold Thai ornamental motif, and a square sample of teak. Khun Ying prided herself for her unique expertise on designing for royal protocol, honed as both a member of the royal family and the current king's personal architect for many years. Speaking in Thai, Khun Ying reminded her colleagues:

> "our purpose is to make people aware this is Thailand, we *have hierarchy*, we are Thai people. Patterns and materials say this…everyone must know where they should go, where they are meant to be. That is protocol. As the king's architect, I am familiar with the palace and its protocol, so I design for guests to visit. But I don't know how they do it at the parliament. So I do it my way. I design for the parliament like I design for the palace."

[16] "*sii pen panhaa*"
[17] A detailed description of the palace, Khun Ying's royal lineage and workshop dynamics with royal designers is elaborated in chatper 2.

The entanglement of politics, materials, and design effects in Khun Ying's preface to her presentation of the material mood board demands expansion. Khun Ying's emphasis on the architectural enactment of hierarchy was a common refrain amongst royal design activists I observed at the Fine Arts Department (FAD). Explaining his design for the dignitaries' pavilion at Rama IX's crematorium (*Phra Merumat)*, Bang similarly opined "the most important thing in our culture is hierarchy, [which] shows the reality and our duty. Our buildings must communicate the order, make people love our *harmonious system*." From his and Khun Ying's perspective, this order is embodied in the *Traibhumi* and the hierarchical cosmos it delineates around Mt Meru. Both royalist activists (and earlier, the teak *chaangsii*) evoke the association Lucien Hanks observed in the Thai social order between merit and duty, wherein knowing and enacting one's place in a cosmic Theravadan hierarchy—with the dhammaraja and retinue at its peak—was itself a performance of morality (Hanks 1962). Fulfilling one's duties according to one's cosmic and economic rank is configured as conducive to the operations of, as Pi Bang put it, "our harmonious [royal] system." For Khun Ying and Pi Bang, "patterns and materials" must communicate this order so that users of the spaces they design will reproduce this order in their spatial practices, without explicit coercion. The architecture's programming and materials renders its inhabitants dutiful. In effect, design activists believed that the materiality of the ordered architecture, which programmatically parses social groups and classes, will be actualized in the behavior of its human participants. In her case, Khun Ying designs the royal domains under her purview in the parliamentary complex *as if* these sectors of the parliament were the palace.

What materials index adherence to a harmonious, royalist order? Khun Ying explained that in the royal visiting hall, the ceiling would be entirely teak, and completely covered in red

paint and gold decoration. “For the royal family,” Khun Ying explained, “we need the best materials. You must put gold everywhere…cover teak with red and gold[18].” Painting teak was not unprecedented, after all. While it was a convention of royal design, Sangop encountered significant resistance to their practice when used for legislative spaces. This was yet another usurpation and profanation of royal privilege, performed, according to Sangop design activists, for ‘the people.’ Marking the Parliament’s double standard, Pueng remarked (in Thai) “which red? The architects cannot use red. We tried using a deep red on the steel columns, but we were told, ‘you cannot.” Khun Ying grinned and said, “the one we used is not pantone, it is called ‘Thai colored’ (*sii Thai*), with a little orange,” that is produced by a local Thai paint manufacturer. Based on this conversation, Peung decided to specify that they intended to use the same brand and shade of “Thai red” for the exterior colonnade that was used in the parliament complex’s royal offices when she drafted her petition for approval from the office of the Parliament. Aj Son shook his head, lamenting “this is why artists all over Thailand are saying, ‘we want our reds back!” Sangop achieved this restoration. Citing the approval of a red tone in the parliament’s (royal) architecture, and emphasizing both its “Thai” character and orange inflection, Pueng submitted her paperwork the following day. Within a week, the royal Thai red was approved.

Having legitimated their controversial application of red paint to the external steel columns and secured the parliament’s approval, Sangop activists introduced red into the most symbolic publicly accessible spaces inside the complex. The public can access both the Museum of Democracy through the main entrance on the ground floor, or the royal world and the Museum of State History at the top of the complex, via the monumental 11 story external staircase or a

[18] “*tong chai wasadu phiset. Kap* Royal *tong sai sii thong….sit thong kap sii deng*”

public elevator that begins in the museum of democracy. Both the royal Kruanyot at the top and the Museum of Democracy at the bottom form a one vertical axis, comprising a single tower with walkways and atria connecting it to the rest of the complex. The royal world begins at the 11th story, because this cites the 11th and highest level of the lowest world in the *Traibhumi* cosmos, where the palace of Lord Indra resides. By this citational transformation, democracy and public access occur on the lowest floor/level of the *Traibhumi* cosmos, which also affords the public a point of access to the celestial royal world. Knowing its visibility, Sangop clad every inch of the internal façade of the tower that is not glass entirely in teak panels. Inaccessible concrete parapets circumscribe and articulate each floor, and carry around them an ornamental

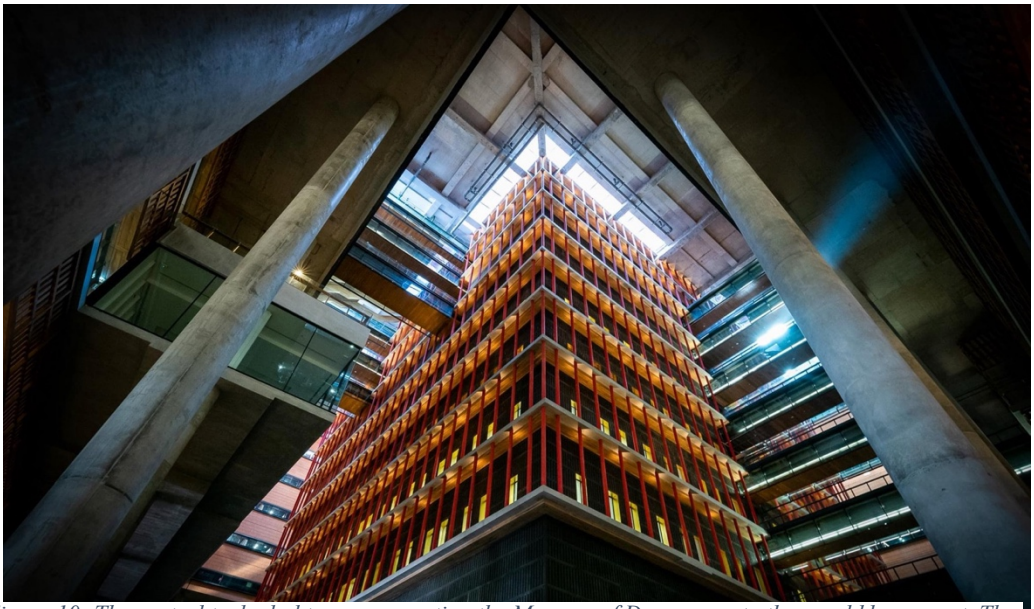

*Figure 10: The central teak-clad tower connecting the Museum of Democracy to the royal khruangyot. The dark walls are teak panels and the decorative columns are all painted teak.(photo provided by a Sangop architect 2019)*

colonnade of red teak columns. Once again, when Sangop viewed the weathered teak columns against the weathered teak façade, they felt the columns disappeared. This became an opportunity to draw again from royal precedent, and paint the publicly viewable teak columns a 'Thai' red. This was a provocative move, not sanctioned by any reference to *Traibhumi* colors or materials, but to the contradictory political tonality of sacred royal spaces and red shirt ideology.

Having secured approval for the exterior façade's steel colonnades, based on the precedent of Thai red in the Royal quarters, Sangop won immediate approval to paint the interior teak colonnade red. The architectural core of the *Sappaya Saphasathan*'s Meru linked the museum of democracy with the celestial golden Royal chedi—the peoples' and the kings' sovereignties—in a tower of provocatively painted red teak.

*V: Dhammacratic Materialisms*

These politics of teak design discussed thus far in the chapter reveal not simply the material's power to assemble conflicting political ideologies (royalist vs popular sovereignties; autocracy vs democracy), but, more importantly, converging *political ontologies* that suggest several questions: what power can a material possess? Do materials have political agency? How do these substances materialize—not represent—the state? More than simply represent human affairs, how do materials participate in political worlding?

Recent anthropological scholarship has contemplated processes of reality making, and specifically of political reality making, as matters of political ontology (de la Cadena and Blasser 2018, Stengers 2018). Cadena and Blaser describe political ontology as a way to "designate an imaginary for a politics of reality…that wants to enable political thought and practice beyond the onto-epistemic limits of modern politics and what its practice allows" (Cadena and Blaser 2018, 5-6). Most often, however, anthropological analyses of political materialities reifies onto-epistemic constraints on political reality. In his analysis of Swedish designers and their role in national "political cosmologies" (Murphy 2012, 302), Keith Murphy asked "how can a chair be political?" (ibid, 20). Asking how a chair can "be" rather than "become" political, through semiotics and recursive inter-objective interactions, poses an ontological question. And the text

cogently answers with ethnographic studies conducted among studios, furniture fairs and design schools that concretize political values and subjectivities into citable, socially enregistered (Agha 2008) forms of chairs – with "clean," machined, forms and "simple geometries." Similarly, Laura Kunreuther "asks a deceptively simple questions: what does democracy sound like?" (Kunreuther 2018, 1). Following the South Asian concept of *awaj*, Kunreuther's quest ties the sonic and metaphorical signs of democracy with forms of political activism, like performance art and street protests. In both instances, democracy is ascribed a political ontology that receives, discursively, formal expressions—an ideology is given materials and forms. Swedish social democratic values are enregistered in an ensemble of designed forms; democratic participation manifests in the physical form of mass assemblies or metaphorical form of a political "voice." Such political ontologies nonetheless presuppose a hylomorphic relation of an ideological formation (like democracy) that recursively ascribes sensible forms (*-morphs*) to the passive materials (*hylo-*) that perpetuate it. While ontological in their formulation – a chair *is* political, democracy *is* audible – they are predicated on an anthropocentric phenomenology of a political reality that unfolds only as it is apprehended by the (ap)perceiving subject taking up its forms. The materials lack political powers.

Similarly, many studies of enchanted materiality study how the power of social relations is relocated onto fetishized thing-exchanges, commodities or otherwise. A material's power arrives by a detour away from human relations, through dehumanized object relations that are mistakenly vitalized (ie fetishized) in service of an ideology that underlies and thrives off of objectification. Tambiah, for example, recognized a two-fold sedimentation of power into Thai amulets. Fabricated by a virtuous ascetic monk, these small stone amulets become "repositories of power," into which a monk's "charisma is concretized and sedimented in objects" (Tambiah

1986, 335). As such, the material's virtue is really the monk's, for which the amulet is but an indexical icon that signals (indexes) its origin (the monk) and carries an? image of him or the buddha (icon) on it that produces effects among the interactions it mediates. As a second fetishist operation, the amulet becomes a magical object purchased by laypersons "who expect to use the amulets' potency to manipulate, overpower, seduce and control their fellow men and women in an ongoing drama of social transactions" (ibid 342). Such amulets are acquired in an amulet market economy, typically with the more precious and potent amulets going to those with the capital to own them. Thus, amulets concretize both the monk's charisma and the client's financial resources, constituting a two-fold fetish that conflates moral and social potency with the amulet's material properties. While the amulet—like the parliament teak—is said to possess a power over others' behavior, unlike the parliament or its teak, that power is always derivative of its anthropogenic provenance in a meritorious monk and its market value.

Though the design activist materialisms examined could be understood as an instance of social actors politicizing materials that passively function as vehicles of their ideological practices—as media that recursively ground, neutralize and/or naturalize conceptualizations of social orders—this interpretation presupposes a reality in which materials themselves do not possess any political power. "Teak *is* the DNA of the Thai people" suggests a political ontology that is neither reflexively anthropocentric (parsing subjects and objects) nor hylomorphic (segregating materials and forms), but *hylopoetic*—in which material crafts and co-produces the state and its political worlds with humans. It does not automatically reify a reality that discursively organizes the body (with DNA), the body politic (with its government techniques and apparatuses), and their buildings (including their materials) into stratified and spatialized arrangements. Concepts of Thainess, democracy, even politics itself thus materialize within a

more fluid reality that, as Deleuze and Guattari would explain, recognizes "matter in movement, in flux, in variation" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 451-452), not as discrete entities. Following Ingold's injunction for anthropological inquiry that can "follow the materials" (Ingold 2012, 437) and think *from* analytical positions that can "follow the matter-flow as pure productivity" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 454), teak can be interpreted as an activist materiality that does not represent nor mediate, but *participates* in the formation of post-interregna political realities much as DNA participates genetically in an organism's morphogenesis.

The materialisms that animate design activist materialities express a political ontology more in keeping with the moral power of materials described in the *Traibhumi*. As mentioned in the introduction, the *Traibhumi* translates into "three (*trai*) worlds (*bhumi*)." These three worlds are ordered hierarchically along an axis graduated both by the karmic morality *and* the corresponding materiality of each world's constituents. Karmic superiority, in effect, materializes both in each subsequent world's ever more precious materials *and* in its inhabitants' increasing indifference to the materialities that rarefy as they ascend a cosmic-karmic hierarchy. The relationship of materiality to morality is encapsulated in the naming of each world, which is defined by its denizen's orientation to the materials that substantiate their temporary existence: the lowest *kamabhumi*, or "world of material desire," where humans dwell; the middle world, *rupabhumi,* or "world with only a remnant of material qualities;" and *arupabhumi*, or "world without material qualities" (Reynolds 1982, 17). In each world, precious materials exist in an inverse relationship to its inhabitants' desire for them: luxurious materials become more abundant as their increasingly moral human or meta-human counterparts disregard them. In other words, *materials gain power the less they are fetishized*. Humans dwell in the lowest world and desire the precious gems, gold and material acquisitions that escape them during their

materialistic lifetimes. Those who succeed in following the dhamma – the eternal unfolding truth of the universe—transcend the ego through meditative contemplation, fulfilling the duties of their socio-cosmic station, and negating material desire. They will be rewarded with reincarnation as superior beings who exist in materially spectacular worlds that they disregard. The denizens of the *rupabhumi*, for instance, are stunning, angelic *devata* who "know merit, know dhamma" (Reynolds 1982, 218). They reside in dazzling gold and gem encrusted castles "on the top of big trees, and the foliage also serves as an abode" (ibid). Many murals of the *Traibhumi* depict these trees as teak trees. The *Traibhumi* then delineates a series of conditions that imbricates the survival of these precious trees and the precious palaces of the devata within them. In Sangop's transmutation of the *Traibhumi* cosmos into the *Sappaya Saphasathan* architecture, this world directly coincides with the middle strata of the complex that includes the teak assembly halls, the teak tower connecting the museum of democracy to the base of the gilt royal world, and most of the external teak colonnade. Khun Mate, the landscape designer, also covered all the external parapets in trees, evoking the human-material flow of dhammic morality that the *Traibhumi* depicts in its description of the *rupabhumi*.

This literal transformation of the *arupabhumi* materiality into the parliamentary world of the complex could be analytically glossed as a symbolic gesture *if* the potency of the material was predicated on peoples' knowledge of Sangop's *Traibhumi* citations. However, as has been explained in previous chapters, most of the Sangop architects themselves do not remember the particular features of the *Traibhumi*'s worlds, nor do they ever expect that bureaucrats, politicians or the people will comprehend most of the *Sappaya Saphasathan's* citations. Such a symbolic reading risks the same mistake as do scholars (Prakitnonthakan 2015) and detractors who critique Sangop for choosing a royalist cosmography as the citational concept for the

architecture of Thailand's parliament: they assume the design is citing the *Traibhumi's* political ideology, when Sangop is channeling a political ontology that underwrites the imagination of the parliament's enduring, moral forms and materials continuing to act in the future with singular stability against the volatility that has historically defined the country's political history. The materials are there to participate in, not represent, the making of better political worlds.

Sangop design activists have personally suffered from this misinterpretation. In one of the guided walk-through site visits Sangop conducted with the press, politicians and STECON engineers, Pi Pong[19] looked up at the monumental entrance and eleven-story external staircase and lamented, "all my activist friends call me a traitor." They assumed Sangop's design was intended to represent a political reality predicated both on a royalist political ideology and a political ontology in which things and materials only house or at most glorify their human political actors.

Sangop's commitment to their activist materials challenges both their detractors and contemporary scholarship on the materiality of sovereignty. Even in his brilliant analysis of how popular sovereignty continues to uncannily channel ritualized configurations of royal sovereignty—its rites, practices, its binary corporeal and incorporated (institutional) bodies—Eric Santner's argument that the "carnal" dimensions of sovereign power are "excarnated" in the "flesh" of its popular political figurations only distributes power among human bodies, disregarding the powers actual materials might possess in sovereign architectures (Santner 2011). However, the activist designification strategies described thus far and the adage, "teak is the DNA of the Thai people" conjoins the body politic, the king's two bodies–the corporeal and

[19] As mentioned in the previous chapter, Pi Pong is the principal who introduced himself as "an activist, a socialist and an architect."

institutional—and the parliament building with a teak 'flesh' that flows across and incorporates the institutions, bodies and ideologies of the polity into a dhammacratic apparatus of power.

This underlies what Witee called "the power of the materials," which exceeds the tenure or sensorium of its human counterparts. Comparing the politicization of the parliament to Matthew 7:6, Witee (a southern Baptist) explained (in English), "'you show a pearl to a swine' and it will be trampled. The parliament will be colored with so many political interests, which will all wear away. The program, the spaces, the systems in place, they [politicians] can use it, can ruin it, but *the essence* is there already. When the brick is done, the mudbrick is done, and the teak is done, it [the parliament architecture] *will always be powerful because of the materials* (emphasis added)." Against the vicissitudes of corruptible politics and influential demagoguery that might undercut the values of the parliament architecture (ie the proverbial 'pigs that trample the pearl'), parliament design activists expect that the essence of 'natural' materials—teak, mud, brick—will continue to infuse the *Sappaya Saphasathan* with the power of popular sovereignty. The architecture, according to Witee, captures the permanence of the people's materials and the immanence of their politics as "a contradiction…a fight between something bigger than us and us. We have been through a lot, that's why we say 'teak is the DNA of the Thai people': it is majestic, not personal…it's the same with the brick. This is an Ayutthaya brick, the same as in the Ayutthaya kingdom which is now ruins. It's the worst we can be and the best: Ayutthaya was beautiful, but it is destroyed, and only us and the bricks last." While articulated by a Southern Baptist design activist, this explanation of the "power of materials" nonetheless reveals a fundamentally dhammacratic materialism: architectural materiality, not carnal humanity, can be the transcendent flesh facilitating the unfolding of an eternal moral order (dhamma) in the domain of popular sovereignty (dhammacracy). The enduring "power of materials" conveys the

'spirit' of the *Traibhumi*: a (Thai) people and their materials co-survive political world making and destruction, materializing the inscrutable but progressive force of dhamma.

Another key reason why critics cannot foreclose design activist materialities as simply an ideological maneuver—another instance of object fetishization, of symbolic nationalism, of spectacular propaganda, of semiotic ideologies about what signs do, or of just another visualization technique (chapter 3)—is the activists' commitment to a material's power to intervene in political life even when it is imperceptible. Khun Ying insisted the royal family needs to be surrounded in the finest materials, even if this entails concealing teak surfaces with layers of "Thai red" or gold leaf. Similarly, Sangop painted thousands of square meters of teak tiles blue, and hundreds of columns of interior teak columns red. The paint renders the wood invisible and non-odorous, and the teak's location on decorative parapets and lofty ceilings located it beyond the possibility of tactile apprehension. The painted teak is rendered entirely non-sensuous.

Again, the *Traibhumi* evokes a very similar political ontology to that of the design activists which entangles materiality, perceptibility and morality in a causal relationship that is not immediately "legible" (Scott 1998) according to the modern state's onto-epistemologies. In the text and in Theravada Buddhism, the only people who can 'see dhamma' are moral figures who transcend the ego, routinize meditation, resist material desire, and follow the ways of the Buddha and dhamma (Grey 1984). Dhamma is visible[20], indirectly, in *tuayaang*: model images, actors and things that are themselves model formations of dhamma. In the *Traibhumi*, therefore, powerfully moral materials of higher karmic planes of existence are only recognizable to those who have earned their perceptibility. This is true of the architecture of the *devata*: "these gem

[20] Refer to the Intro and Chapter 3 "Visualizations," for more analysis of "seeing Dhamma."

castles can never be seen by people, but only by the spirits and by the *devata*" (Reynolds 1982, 218). In short, karmically elevated materials are imperceptible to humans. The materials exist and exist where they are because of dhamma, and only those who have lived by dhamma can see and experience them as such. Nevertheless, the materials are formations of the dhamma's unfolding forces. Design activists' claim dhammacractic architecture operates through a similar material empowerment that flows across the alignment of "the people" and the dhamma with democracy, the sum of which this dissertation is theorizing as dhammacracy. Hence the mandate that materiality is a moral imperative: the painted tiles *must* be teak, the painted columns *must* be teak, the painted and gilt royal ceiling tiles *must* be teak, even though few (ie design activists) will ever know their physical properties. The politicians may not be morally worthy of this visibility, but the material entelechy *will be* there, lying latent and ready for activation, when its elected or electing human counterparts are prepared to participate in the dhamma flowing through the *Sappaya Saphasathan*'s inscrutable flesh.

Many community architects considered the parliament's gold and teak entirely "undemocratic" materials. Instead, brick and bamboo – materials that were abundant and accessible for relatively unskilled workers to fashion architecture—were "democratic" materials. While observing design activists at a non-profit architecture practice that specialized in low-cost community and emergency architecture, I asked their opinion on the new Thai parliament. None of the four architects liked it, which was not uncommon among designers. But their objections concentrated principally on the materials, which were inextricably connected with problematic power dynamics in Thai society. The principal architect, Pi Arm, thought the *Sappaya Saphasathan* "feels very far from the people. It makes you feel you have no rights, you are not the chosen people to come here, like the palace. I think this is because it comes from a Hindu

idea. The *Traibhumi* does not match democracy. It is a contrast." The undemocratic 'feeling' materializes in the graduated materiality of the complex, revealing rather than revolting (as Sangop contends) against the entrenched disparities in Thai society. "They [Sangop] try to use the best materials, but these are not democratic materials. They use simple materials like mud at the bottom and use marble and teak for politicians and gold for the royal family—this is the *Traibhumi*, this is Hindu caste system, this is fascism, not democracy. We live in a different material world from them, a world where a rich man's son can kill a policeman and not go to jail[21]." The inaccessibility of the parliament's opulent materials manifested different legal realities between the (cosmo)polity's classed worlds.

The architects argued that bamboo, however, actualizes a different set of relations among Thais and their built environment, one fundamentally more 'democratic.' Without any provocation, a younger architect named Oil adapted the teak mantra that has preoccupied this chapter: "Thailand is a bamboo culture. Bamboo is in our DNA. I grew up in bamboo houses. Teak is the best wood, but it grows only in the north. It is expensive, for luxury buildings. You need expensive tools. Everything is made from bamboo. Every villager knows bamboo…Bamboo is very democratic!" The dynamic that renders a political system nominally democratic is the same that materializes in bamboo's supposed ubiquity: participation. Bamboo, in this telling, affords a degree of participation that captures a human-material relation that "follows the matter-flow of pure productivity" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 454), worlding a plentiful and rapidly growing grass (bamboo), a food, a pervasive material for buildings, furniture and objects with the fabrication faculties of most villagers. This is what Tim Ingold

[21] Pi Arm is referring to an incident in 2012 when the heir to the Red Bull fortune, Vorayuth "Boss" Yoovaidhya, struck a police officer with his $200,000 Ferrari and drove away. A decade later, and Boss lives in exile awaiting the expiration of the statue of limitations and an inheritance of $20 billion in Thailand.

would call “correspondence: not the imposition of preconceived form on raw material substance, but the drawing out or bringing forth of potentials immanent in a world of becoming” (Ingold 2012, 435) by practitioners who co-respond with resonant materials. Unlike teak, gold and marble, this matter-flow of correspondence among ecologies, processed materials, architectural form and craftspersons is why Pi Arm asserts “bamboo is democratic, because people can participate in the design.” This association of participation, accessibility and democracy is not unlike Sangop’s claim that their appropriation of a royalist cosmology as a concept for ‘the people’ was a democratizing move. In each case, this modality of matter-fluid participation is powerful and, as such, renders the materialization of democracy powerful too. Mazzarella explains that in anthropological theory, participation accesses a surplus of social energy, a flow of what Durkheim called “collective effervescence” and many others called “mana” (Mazzarella 2017), which mass assemblages of actors channel through rituals and collective mobilizations. As an easily accessible and malleable material, bamboo affords an aesthetic imaginary of practices, materials and sensations, that accrue collective mana and imbue democracy with the performative power of participation.

What theorists have described as participatory correspondence, or matter-flow, or mana that enfolds people, plants, architecture and politics, community design activists gave another name: dhamma. Recall from previous chapters, that in Theravadan ideology, dhamma constitutes an unfolding moral order that realizes the teachings of the Buddha in actors and forms (*tuayaang*) that materialize his truths. In so doing, this matter-flow is also assigned a progressive telos, as dhamma exercises a positive, moral current that increasingly reveals itself only in the best forms, materials, and practices. Unlike other theories of correspondence and matter-flow, which enmesh nonhuman and human participation in realities that are both immanent and

transcendent but not teleological, design and dhamma are described as compatibly transformative frameworks that enfold their worlds into a progressive soteriology. Pi Arm's partner, Pi Bang, demonstrated this compatibility when he steered the discussion of political materiality in the direction of theology. He explained that both the principals were committed Buddhists, and declared that "the designs of Pi Arm is the best example of dhamma in Thailand." Together, they elaborated how the design process can reveal the dhamma:

> Pi Arm: "I start every project at the site with meditation. What is important is how a place feels. Function follows feeling. I spend time at the site and feel how the mind and body connect with the site. How do we feel the site? Feeling the present time in the present, this is dhamma. The most important thing is being present in a place. Dhamma helps you know, to realize, in each moment what is most important. Materials, light, help us feel a site, make us participate in the present. Dhamma and minimalism is the same thing to me: you only focus on what is necessary."

This interpretation of dhamma, as a cognizance of presence, of feeling the flow of a moment's worlding in a minimally designed material palette one participates in fashioning, is what distinguishes bamboo from the parliament materials. It lacks the "distance" they detected in the parliament's architecture, which "feels very far from the people." Bamboo is ubiquitous, it comes from the site of their projects, its treatment communicates its history and age, it can be grown, fabricated, inhabited and composted in the same site. The design activist is but a medium for this participatory worlding that design can materialize. Pi Bang then connects this image of dhamma that entangles the ecological belonging and self-sufficiency of bamboo with a political theological policy called "sufficiency economy" (*setakhit pawpiang*), which is attributed to the late King Bhumibol.

> Pi Bang: "Yes, it is about being self-sufficient with what is around you. This is the real dhamma. This is King Bhumibol. What you need is a very small thing. We hope architecture can do this, be a model [*tuayaang*] of this"

In short, teak and gold cannot be this *tuayaang* of self-sufficiency—an economic aesthetic discursively attached to the late *dhammaraja*—because the capital they require and the skilled labor it commodifies condition dependency on market mediated relations. Bamboo architecture ostensibly circumvents market economics, affording everyone the potential to participate in a cosmos of self-sufficient actors who are capable of transforming immediately available resources into their satisfying worlds. As such, the profound proximity of bamboo architecture to the late King Bhumibol as two *tuayaang* of self-sufficiency and dhamma reveals a powerful but taboo motivation for the designification of dhammacracy in the interregna: the (designed) provision of new dhammic *tuayaang* for a disoriented populace that lost its most prominent *tuayaang*—King Bhumibol. Agentive materialities thus assume a 'democratized' moral power, a *barami*, akin to that of a *dhammaraja* to shape political worlds and the subjectivities that participate in them.

*Conclusion: The Political Other(wise) of Materiality*

This chapter has explored a third modality of designification—materialization—by which design activists attempt to actualize new political realities through the agentive materials of their design interventions. Materialization, representation, and visualization can be both distinct and imbricated in the designers' activist repertoire. Chapter 2 explored the entanglement of architectural and political representation when architects acted as representatives of competing sovereignties; when drawings were construed as contracts; and when design workshops of parliament *were* parliaments for the brokering of sovereign power struggles and bulwarking against corruption. The ambiguation of representation and participation has been a powerful source of social cohesion and tension (Mazzarella 2017; Trouillot 1991). While the materials of this chapter certainly operate on a symbolic level to represent the interrelations of popular,

military, and royal sovereignties in the configuration of the parliament's materials, this was not the "matter-flow" captured in the practices that animates design activism. Materials and political subjects participated in the ontogenesis of the state, and as an assemblage of human and nonhuman participants, they and their ideological projects channeled transcendent or "majestic" powers that, as Witee philosophized, "are bigger than us and us," and that Pi Arm called "dhamma." The participatory practices that materials mediate in design and the powers accrued therein reflect one motivation for the mobilization of materials as political activists in the interregna.

Similarly, visualization and materialization are two schema that imagine a design's influence over human behavior, but again in very distinct ways. Drawing from Theravadan semiotic ideologies of the *tuayaang*—in which the visibility of moral models had the power to transform the individual who emulated it—and design ideologies that aspire to reform behavior through the total design of immersive environments, design activists believed persuasive architecture could actualize new realities through the visibilities it creates. Again, the materiality of visualizations were crucial to their affective and indexical potency, in as much as an architectural *tuayaang* needed to be seen to be transformative. However, this chapter has studied instances in which materials can be politically agentive without being perceptible, like pained teak, fake gold and lacquered brass. Suggesting agencies *other* than symbolic persuasion (representation) or visual manipulation (visualization), these imperceptible materials mark tremendous achievements of political profanation: the sacred tradition of painting teak red in temples and palaces is secularized in the public domain of the parliament, where it (dis)appears in a politically contraband red hue evoking taboo populist associations.

In addition to the participatory politics materiality facilitates, I argue these *other* materialist agencies also open-up Thai political relations through what Nakassis calls "the otherwise of materiality" (Nakassis 2012, 402). Analyzing Matthew Hull's study of bureaucratic papers in *Government of Paper*, Nakassis notes how the Indian government's "use of materiality…functions as a wedge to open-up a space beyond semiosis (or, more often, 'discourse'). It captions an exteriority, that which cannot be signified, that which escapes 'meaning' even as it makes it possible" (ibid 401). In this chapter, teak was repeatedly central to actualizing what was otherwise politically impossible: the instantiation of Siamese borders, the NCPOs concession to protestors, and the permission for the parliament's red shirt design activists to profane royal traditions. It cannot be underscored enough just how protected and policed royal prerogatives are in Thai society. Until a marginal relaxation in the past year, draconian lese majesté laws criminalized any construable display of criticism, even as seemingly benign as sharing a negative post on Facebook[22] or failing to censor another's criticism on an online news media's website[23]. As mentioned earlier, even a superstar like Lady Gaga faced arrest for wearing a ceremonial crown associated with the monarchy. The use of the royal Thai register of language, which draws from khmer and Sanskrit origins, can only be used to describe the royal family, foreign royal families, or sacred figures. The use of it for a common person is both taboo and pejorative, signifying its recipient is despicably entitled. Every form, material and detail of architecture constitutes semiotic events, and, as Nakassis argues, "materiality…captions the exteriority of any one semiotic event relative to some metasemoitic formulation of it. That is, it

[22] In 2017, a 34 year old man was sentenced to 35 years in jail for sharing posts that were considered critical of the monarchy.
[23] In 2009, the Prachathai web board manager, Chiranuch Premchaiporn, was arrested and faced 20 years in prison for failing to remove 10 critical comments of the monarchy from the Prachathai website. In 2012, she was formally sentenced to 8 months imprisonment for violating both the Article 112 lese majesté and Computer Crimes Act, because she failed to remove user comments quickly enough to satisfy the deciding judge.

could always be otherwise" (ibid 402). For design activists, this potential to "always be otherwise" *is* "the power of materials:" the possible incorporation of an otherwise to Thailand's volatile but perduring political impasses, that *makes* the impossible palpably plausible and recursively citable. Materiality and the semiotic power it has is thus "of us and bigger than us." It is a participant in the political ontology of the state that can transcend and upend ideological entrenchment. And, when metasemiotically packaged in a soteriological trajectory of behavioral or even spiritual reform—like dhamma and design—materials can thus be imagined as agents of moral correction, delegates of dhammic decorum that can preside over politicians long after the dhammaraja or design activists' demise. If not the people in the parliament, their buildings will remain dhammacratic.

# Conclusion

## The Ideologies of Design Activism

The dissertation has provided an observatory onto the complex cosmos of political ideologies, design ideologies, semiotic ideologies, materialisms, political economics, and political theologies swirling within the cosmopolitical pluriverse of Thailand's interregna. This observatory concentrates its lens onto a cosmopolitical big bang, in reverse: it tracks the condensation of the interregna's political and ideological cosmos into the potent architectural details of design activism. It is no wonder we have adages like, God is in the details, or the devil is in the details. Tiny details contain multitudes, voluminous enough to, apparently, accommodate heaven and hell in our popular reckoning. This is because details are of systems; they are misleadingly isolatable formations of broader systemic entanglements. Hence this dissertation's adage: the dhamma and the demos are in the details of dhammacracy.

With so much said and pondered about the ideologies that design is mediating in this political atmosphere, I will conclude with two related questions: what does the designification of dhammacracy reveal about ideology? Having survived two coups, two constitutions, two kings and eight separate administrations within a country with an astoundingly mercurial system of governance, what insights does the remarkable endurance of the *Sappaya Saphasathaan's* billion-dollar design—amid the profound 'impermanence' of Thai politics that inspires it—provide into the tectonics of ideology, generally, and design's potential to political worlding, specifically?

Among the many films and media that Slavoj Žižek uses to illustrate the operations of ideology in his film, *A Pervert's Guide to Ideology (*2012*),* Žižek offers Beethoven's 9th symphony as a succinct encapsulation, within a single composition, of ideology and its affordance for ideology critique. The symphony up to Bar 331 is canonical. The soaring exaltation of Ode to Joy has become the soundtrack to celebrations of humanity, most notably as the unofficial anthem of the Olympics and the European Union. However, as an ode to joy itself and an encomium to humanity as such, many political movements have played it to glorify their strict and sometimes horrific delimitation of who counts as humanity, and who is deserving of the magnificent joy that warrants their leaders' brutal protection (Žižek 1993). Žižek catalogued the chaosmos of Ode to Joy causes. Ode to Joy was played at celebrations of Hitler's birthday and at the 1938 Nazi music festival, the *Reichsmusiktag*. It was a favored score of Stalin for Soviet peasant propaganda, and of Mao during the Cultural Revolution, recovered by some as a rare relic of progressive class struggle salvaged from bourgeoise societies. In the two years that the white supremacist regime ruling the South Rhodesian government was able to sustain apartheid before it became Zimbabwe, Ode to Joy was the official anthem. It was the de facto anthem played for medalists in the 1950s and 1960s when Eastern and Western Germans were required to compete on a single team. At the same time, it was the favorite song of Abimael Guzmán, the founder of the communist guerrilla group, The Shining Path, in Brazil. In a somewhat synesthetic statement, Žižek infers that in this litany of Ode to Joy listening publics, "what strikes the eye is the universal adaptability of this well-known melody…. that can be used by political movements that are totally opposed to one another" (*Pervert's Guide*, 18:24-18:40). He envisions a scene resembling a nightmarish Diego Rivera mural: of Mao, Stalin, Hitler, the Bush Georges, Bin Laden, Sadam, some praxitelean Olympians, European ministers, and

Peruvian guerrillas draping their arms over each other's shoulders, mouths open as the ideological cacophony of constituents sing in a harmonious chorus what *Clockwork Orange's* hallmark hedonist (Alex) called reverently, "Ludwig Van's glorious ninth." Perverse as this assembly sounds, "this is how every ideology has to work: as an empty container that is open to all possible meanings" (*ibid* 25:05). Ode to Joy and ideology resemble—and in Žižek's case are made metaphorical as—sublime objects of universal design.

Consider the ambition, then, of Sangop's design of their architectural pluriverse in ideological terms, not only for its ideologies of design, but as a model—a *tuayaang* in its own analytical right—of the design of ideology: a spectacularly capacious container for the myriad meanings of the interregna. I will repeat, one last time, the ideological pantheon of sovereignties assembled in the *Sappaya Saphasathaan's* transmutation of the *Traibhumi*: a small coterie of social design activists, who trace their political origins to the revolutionary 1973 and 1976 protests, are designing the world's largest building for a small country's democratic institution, based on a 14th century royalist cosmography, that stratifies all human, nonhuman and meta-human existence in an ontological hierarchy, on behalf of a military dictatorship that has both suspended and later gutted democracy under its repressive regime. The Thai tableau of political actors of the interregna who are constituents—better yet, participants—in the activism of the parliament's architecture, would include princesses, villagers, ministers, design activists, teak tiles, janitors, Lord Indra, Phra Devaraj Siam, bureaucrats, generals, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, 247,500 red and yellow fish[1], a million Ayutthaya bricks and wafer-thin gold leaves,

[1] In 2011, my fellow architecture instructors at the International Program in Design and Architecture (INDA) at Chulalongkorn University and I, were commissioned by a Princess to create the world's largest Canstruction assemblage. Canstruction is an annual competition to build large structures out of canned food. The entire project was, inadvertently, an 'uncanny' extension of the *dhammaraja* purification ritual topology. One of the instructors, "Ajaarn[1] Toe" involved in the project was an architect from Sangop 1051. The *Sappaya Saphasathaan* was selected for the reasons its original design was selected: it was convenient and it looked "Thai." A canned fish company, with well known royalist sympathies, agreed to donate 247,500 cans of tuna and mackerel to the Princess's charitable

and the world's wealthiest monarch. Rather than the Rivera-esque tableau of "glorious 9th" afficionados Žižek describes, this convolution of humans, non-humans and meta-humans paints a swirling Francis Bacon-like portrait of the blended agents of cosmopolitical morphogenesis.

Thus far, I have argued that this diverse assembly of political actors convened by design activism—human and nonhuman alike—enacts the profound inclusivity of multiple cosmos that theorists are calling 'cosmopolitics.' While anthropology's ontological turn has bypassed subject-object binarism and opened our attention to the imbrication of social life with the life-worlds of things, cosmopolitical analysis draws attention to controversial encounters in which actors openly debate the truth value of competing world-views and ontologies. By observing how Thai designs and designers participate in political representation, and by contemplating how their theories of political action emerge from the encounter of dhammic, design and liberal cosmologies during the parliament's design process, this research ethnographically theorizes design-as-cosmopolitics. Just within the teak controversy of Chapter 4, actors cited a broad semiotic spectrum of what teak meant and did according to genetics, (ethno)nationalism, dhamma, environmentalism, regionalism, vernacularism and the *Traibhumi*. Such debates are emblematic of Stengers "cosmopolitical proposal" to unsettle "the political question par

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foundation. After we – architecture instructors and 140 architecture students – built the cosmological purification architecture out of 32 tons of putrified fish, it would be given to "poor" students in the countryside. The cans, one with tuna another with mackerel, were clad in yellow and red – the colors of the political factions then protesting in the streets of Bangkok. Because the red cans were narrower, they would be used along the base of the Canstruction. Red would be the color of the *Traibhumi*'s lowest world, and yellow would be the color of its dhammacratic and dhammaraja worlds in this Canstructed transmutation. More explicitly than the *Traibhumi's* world(s) structure transposed onto the *Sapphaya Saphasathaan* form, the distribution of red cans along the Canstruction's lowest 'world' and the superimposition of yellow cans above it signified the irreconcilable separation of the '*ammataya'* and the '*phrai'* into distinct and hierarchized worlds. When asked by a local reporter about his experience building the *Sappaya Saphasathan* canstruction, one of my former students remarked that "in addition to training and planning experience, it also taught the participating students unity"[1] (*Scoop* article 2010). Sangop 1051 was right: the people using the *Sappaya Saphasathan* would learn to come together after all, in their own separate and rarefied world. This world, to another observer, "looked like Scrooge McDuck's piles of gold coins." To the *Sappaya Saphasathaan*'s topology of cosmological forms signifying death and impermanence could now be added a mountain of 32 tons of dead fish embodying in ritual and color the class tensions threatening dhammacracy with impermanence.

excellence: who can talk of what, be the spokesperson of what, represent what?" (Stengers 2004, 2). In the case of the parliament design, its mass mediation and its origins in a public design competition introduced a grossly expanded cosmos of commentators and creators to the discursive formation of Thai cosmic architecture. Meru cosmological architecture was historically associated only with the king and was designed only by monks, palace architects, princes, or professors of classical design. The country's first dhammic and democratic institution was designed by socialist and erstwhile communist activists, its physical and digital imagery circulated among exhibition and gallery goers, chatroom contributors, international media, and protestors.

Cosmopolitics also promises to "slow down" the epistemological and ideological capture of political questions of access and authority, and in confronting instances of multiple divergent worlds (cosmos) sustain a "space for hesitation regarding what it means to say 'good'" (ibid). Significantly, the capacity to sustain cosmos as a framework of "insistent" and "entrancing" questions comes down to how well actors "*design* the political scene" (Stengers 2005, 995) to remain open to "the otherwise" (Povinelli 2011). This hesitant, open space that accommodates the excluded otherwise must be "designed" is a site of politics, one that, as Latour adds, protects "against the premature closure of cosmos" (Latour 2004, 454). Though conventional avenues of political representation are once again shut to most Thais, the political cosmos unfolding alongside a new king and a partially elected national assembly is being thrust open by a topology of new constituencies: teak protestors, architecture critics, materialisms, dhammic forms, convoluted architectural symbolism, exhibition designers, elite architects, displaced teachers, botched infrastructure and the waters of the Chao Phraya river. If a robust ideology contains everything, if like the Ode to Joy and the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* architecture, it can

accommodate fascist, communist, capitalist, humanist and leftist interests, is there a difference between a durable ideology and lively cosmopolitics?

The short answer is, yes. Again, Žižek's analysis of Beethoven's ninth is instructive. Specifically, the punctum of Bar 331 and the jaunty, carnivalesque tonal shift that follows, but is either forgotten or resented by admirers of the sublime symphony that precedes it, embodies for Žižek the essence of ideology critique. Ideology critique like a good conclusion to any turgid text (like this dissertation) ought to consider what was left out. To the capaciousness of a powerfully elastic official ideology, ideology critique questions, 'who and what is excluded?' If the first movement of Ode to Joy performs the ideological ideal of encompassing the brotherhood of humanity in a universal sonic container, the disorienting shift in the latter movement raises the question: who is excluded and what is occluded from the official ideological cosmos? In the context of Thai design activism, who or what is excluded from their designification of cosmopolitical representation?

While cosmopolitical theorists (Stengers 2004, 2010; Latour 2004; Cadena 2010) have opened the way to recognize and "make public" (Latour 2005) the enduring questioning and debating (politics) of world configurations (cosmos), many of their own theoretical formulations introduce the imagined epistemological closure they describe their informants' multi-world negotiations overcoming. This happens in three distinct ways. One, by replacing a post-enlightenment myth of a cohesive world etiology with an anticipated coherent teleology of a "common world" (Latour 2004, 2005) that actors inevitably build together. Two, by articulating a "pluriversal" (Escobar 2016) cosmos of many simultaneous and interconnected worlds, as Sloterdijk does with his Foams theory (Sloterdijk 2005, 2016), while excluding the possible validity of a transcendent, "higher world" position like that of a dhammic cosmos. Three, by

presupposing that capitalist modernity ever exists as a unified hegemonic world to which the dismissed cosmos of 'others' introduces radical political challenges (Cadena 2010, 2016). Studying the convergence of design, cosmologies and politics in Thailand provides a cosmopolitical study without these biases. For one, an illiberal, dhammic cosmology is neither secondary nor contrary to a hegemonic liberal-capitalist modernity, but has historically captured a proximate if not equivalent stake in the Thai political imaginary. After all, it is elite upper middle-class designers who are appropriating the mantle of design activism, who are operating vegetarian, indigo-clad design compounds, and designing modernist-vernacular dwellings and *Traibhumi*-based parliaments as referendums against political corruption. Radical politics, class hierarchies and cosmological commitments are never as isomorphic in Bangkok's privileged political economy of design as many cosmopolitical configurations would presume. Secondly, situated within the conceptual framing of the *Traibhumi* ("Three Worlds"), actors customarily engage the explicit imagery of an always already and inviolably multi-world cosmos. This pluriversal cosmological sensibility offers one approach to an underlying contradiction in the design's conceptual promise: how can a democratic Mt-Meru-Parliament foster unity through the tripartite ontological segregation of its people? Levi-Strauss suggested "the purpose of the myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction" (Levi-Strauss 1963, 229). What if the 'model' does not overcome the contradiction but feeds it, not simply to actualize nefarious agenda of ideological stabilization, but to animate processes of dialectical cosmogenesis that make social orders adaptable to emergent differences, available to re-design by future complex constituencies?

Rather than overcoming the contradiction underlying dhammacracy—of glorifying both democratic representation *and* the divine supremacy of dhammic models—the designification of

the *Traibhumi* myth achieves the remarkable ideological fortitude to tarry within the liminal tension of the contradiction. The question of exclusion was heightened under the liminal conditions of the interregna. Nakassis defines liminality as "a reflexive orientation to the experience of being beholden to multiple mandates at the same time" (Nakassis 2016, 16). Liminality is a condition of tarrying among multiple incompatible ideological formations. Subjects capable of navigating liminality must negotiate its contradictions, chameleonically inhabiting the in-between space of incommensurables in a way that allows them "to be or not be more than one thing at once" (ibid 17). Indeed, the interregna subject was set adrift the shifting forces of competing sovereignties. The *dhammaraja* who occupied a mythical and practical force of royal sovereignty for much of his seventy-year reign was dead. Twenty constitutions and countless laws seemingly conjured to balance power and protect citizens have become increasingly revealed as ephemeral and ineffectual at best, or instruments of displacement of the very people claimed in their composition from the mechanisms of their own governance. Meanwhile, dictatorship always looms as an immanent eruption in the rare recesses it takes between the more democratic regimes it overthrows, marshalled by a powerful military funded by and targeted at their own compatriots. I recall several months prior to the NCPO's coup in 2014, watching a general on a local Thai news program addressing a reporter's question about whether the military would intervene in Yingluck's administration. His response was emblematic of what Benjamin called the 'law making' force of arbitrary power (Benjamin 1996): "we are not yet planning a coup." Dozens of massive protests have yielded hundreds of casualties, thousands of injuries, and countless trauma. While they have often precipitated regime changes, they have done nothing to change the enduring 'impermanence' of democratic stability, nor the 'permanent' impunity of the Meru-like elite's power over the polity.

In this atmosphere of decidedly disorienting sovereign agonism, with this prodigious history of the available mechanisms for attaining a modicum of political representation failing the majority of Thailand's subjects, and in-between poles of political power based on dhammic, cosmological *barami* and democratic *amnaat*, the ideology of design activism, I argue, took a multiplicity of shapes through the unified framework of designification. At its core, ideology is a theory of action, about what makes something—a person, an object, a sign, a material—do something. Design activism purports design, as a process, a repertoire of practices, and a topology of things, can act politically. If nothing else, this dissertation is an ethnography of design activism, of the ideologies that claim design as a viable modality of political intervention. Representation, visualization, and materialization are all processes through which design is said to act through the interactions they are designed to mediate. The conceivable efficacy of the forces and resources available for design to compel action are, of course, circumscribed by the historical conditions of dhammacracy, which I argue emerge from the conjuncture of dhammic and democratic imaginaries during the interregna. The rising prevalence of design activism during the interregna, therefore, speaks to its semiotic fitness in negotiating the liminality of dhammacracy's contradictions. Designification's success is marked not in the political transformations that its architecture irrefutably achieves, as this causality is impossible to define. It is manifest, instead, in the circulation of its discourse and the prodigiousness of its outputs, best monumentalized in the glorious gilt Merus it generated in a few short years: one $90 million royal crematorium, 88 full scale replicas, and the world's largest parliament.

What makes designification a compelling political tactic of the interregna? Recall, designification is a citational process within which the transformation between a cited form and its citing iteration is ideologically packaged as one of manifest amelioration. Thus, the output of

designification is and is not the cited form, and the citational deviation therein is cast as an improvement. It is the conjuncture of Theravadin semiotic ideologies of dhammic visualization and reformist design ideologies that configure transformative acts like designification, in the right hands, as outcomes of its beneficial citationality. As liminality is the condition inhabited between contradictory conditions, and as the interregna is a political moment constantly mutating amidst the mandates of its contentious sovereign formations, the achievement of designification is its capacity to sustain the underdeterminacy of being both the same and different in very permanent forms. Designification produces ambivalent citations[2] capable of surviving hostile regimes of political intolerance *and* the aspirations of those wishing to destabilize them. It is this ideological wilyness to tarry with multiplicity that empowered the design activist of the interregna, specifically, and according to Flusser, designers historically, to thrive as "traitors to ideas and tricksters because they cunningly seduced people into perceiving distorted ideas" (Flusser 1995, 51). Levi-Strauss recognized similar qualities in a native American 'trickster' as the mediator capable of navigating existential contradictions that mythology, as mentioned earlier in the conclusion, is created to resolve. "Mythical thought," observed Levi-Strauss, "always progresses from the awareness of oppositions towards their resolution" (Levi-Strauss 1955, 430). The dhammacratic design activist similarly navigates the incommensurable ideologies of the interregna with the 'trickery' of their design-citationality (designification), which quite often cites cosmological myth. Sometimes, as argued in Chapter 2, they design better political representation through the art of architectural misrepresentation. As mentioned in chapters 3 and 4, Ngai explains that such dubiously efficient devices that are designed to be labor-saving and, as such, also suspicious, are pejoratively conceived in capitalism as

[2] I would like to thank my advisor, Constantine Nakassis, for the term "ambivalent citation."

'gimmicks.' Ngai specifically locates the aesthetics of gimmickry at moments of crises in capitalism, when the effectiveness of its fetishized commodities and the ingenuous 'others' they dupe are called into question. Design activists, as I have discussed, use the term proudly to describe their efficient bypassing of the otherwise fraught political systems upon which populist movements have inevitably foundered in Thailand. Design activist representation, visualization and materialization are all gimmicks of designification: they are efficient and beneficent catalysts of political transformation.

The suspicion of designs, gimmickry, and myth-defying tricksters can be understood as the design activist's gimmickry promising its interlocutors something truly fantastic: expediting political change under tense and uncertain conditions through design's realignment of errant social systems with a unifying sense of morality. This suspicion is a form of what Žižek and Sloterdijk refer to as cynical ideology, when a subject does not believe in something but does it anyways. Oriented to a design gimmick, one could say I do not believe this thing will do what is promised, but I will do it or use it anyway. This attitude appears several times in this dissertation, most evidently espoused by the Thai Southern Baptist who does not believe in the *Traibhumi* cosmology, does not believe in the Thai political system, and is not proud of the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* he is realizing, and yet, nonetheless, he is working without pay for seven years because he thinks it is his country's best hope. The 'doing-it-anyway,' Žižek argues, is the work of ideology addressing a fantasy that captures a profound and insuperable insecurity, fear or anxiety. Ideology, and its devices, equip us to manage our deepest fears. This insight undergirds Žižek's re-reading of the commodity fetish, not as the hijacking of human recognition through the fetishized relations among things, but rather, the offloading of the very social processes that we find so deeply unsettling onto things that relieve us from the many mysteries and

irrationalities of (capitalist) social life. Commodity exchange thereby frees the capitalist from "medieval superstitions" (Žižek 2008, 31) to engage in utilitarian ways with another's predictably selfish motivations. This is the ideology that manages the profound uncertainty of capitalist cosmologies, fulfilling a fantasy that seems "as if all their beliefs, superstitions, metaphysical mystifications, supposedly surmounted by the rational, utilitarian personality, are embodied in the 'social relations between things. They no longer believe, *but the things themselves believe for them*" (ibid 31). So often throughout the dissertation, design activists or their critics have questioned the plausibility of the *Traibhumi*'s uptake in the parliament architecture. Equally often, the design activist rejoinder is that belief does not matter, understanding does not matter, fluency does not matter. The *Sappaya Saphasathaan* will end corruption, inject morality, and unify a fragmented polity anyway.

In addition to offering ambivalent forms of political action that can evade authoritarian censure by appearing both critical and cooperative—what Lisa Wedeen captures as 'authoritarian apprehension' (Wedeen 2019)—and that also help political actors manage the uncertainty of the interregna, a final reason I will offer to explain the ideological perdurance of design activism is its imagined performative power. Underlying the genre of subjunctive design narration that describes imagined effects and experiences of future design interactions (as discussed in the Aerothai workshop in Chapter 3), is a design activist ideology that transduces architectural materiality into habitus. Like the aforementioned interlocutors who dismiss the relevance of belief to the entailments of design activism, Bourdieu theorized that "the body believes in what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief" (Bourdieu 1990, 73). The performative aspect of a body in space does the same ideological work of the commodity or the design activist architecture: it brings into being what it practices, on our behalf. It believes for us. An adage circulating in

design schools and media states, “good design disappears.” This has its own ideological metapragmatics of how designs act on social life. The magic of this is not its physical disappearance, which of course does not happen, but its reterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) into the habitus of its users, materializing ideology in a human-thing matter-flow.

Given all the theories delineated thus far that explain how design activism incorporates the many competing factions vying for political power in Thailand’s post-interegna political cosmos, the question that ideology critique poses of the official ideology remains to be answered: who does dhammacratic design activism exclude? I will end where my fieldwork began. The first time I visited the construction site, back in August of 2014, only the gigantic bottom floor slab of the complex’s ground story had been completed. I arrived to conduct a week of pre-field work. I had no contacts at the parliament when I arrived at the construction site guard house. After speaking in Thai and showing my Chulalongkorn University faculty ID card, the security guard walked me into the STECON field office and found an engineer to give me an impromptu tour. We climbed a freestanding, four story tower that was constructed to mock-up façade details and the first teak columns. I now recognize the tower as a ‘gimmick’ that Sangop institutionalized for years to prevent design distortions, or what they called ‘corruption.’ That day, however, my guide led me to a balcony overlooking the capacious space of the parliament to-be. I asked my first informant my first question: “what do you think about the design for the new parliament.” He thought carefully, and answered slowly. “It is very beautiful. And it expresses Thainess. But the architects made a *big* mistake. There is not enough security! They designed the grounds without any fence, and they built a staircase that anyone can climb all the way to the top. This was a big mistake. Anyone can come an protest *on* the parliament” The unofficial position of the

contractors realizing the parliament was that the design was not exclusive enough. That was, of course, Sangop's design.

As it happened, besides this official complaint that the parliament was too inclusive, the unifying reservation against the *Sappaya Saphasathaan* design among most its critics was that it is too exclusive. Some critics claim the overtly Buddhist citationality of its forms excludes Thai practitioners from other faiths. In short, it does not *represent* millions of Thais. Some community architects mentioned in this dissertation complained that the parliament "looks very far away from me. Like the palace, it suggests you have no place here…it should look humble, it should say we do this for the people." In short, it does not *visualize* a space for the people in the "empty place of power" (Lefort 1988), as Lefort calls it, for popular sovereignty that is shrouded by the imposing shadow of the monarchy's 50 m gilt *busabok*. Another community architect who works in the "more democratic" medium of bamboo, complained that Sangop "tried to use the best materials. But are those the materials of democracy?...when you are at the bottom [of the parliament] they use simple materials, then you go up and they use marble for politicians and gold for royals—that is the *Traibhumi*! That is a Hindu caste system, not democracy." In other words, the architecture *materializes* an entrenched and inaccessible class hierarchy that reifies the systems of power preventing democracy from unfolding in the first place. And so, we return again to Ludwig van's 9$^{th}$: the transcendent solemnity of the first 331 Bars (the official ideology) affords its own negation in the puckish transition that the former's afficionados find so dismissive (the critique of ideology). The techniques of designification used by dhammacracy's design activists—representation, visualization and materialization—also afford its negation: the ideology critique of everything its forms, style and materials exclude.

But is this not (again like Beethoven's ninth) not the genius of the political intervention of parliament's design activism? For all the subtle subterfuge that designification achieves by dissolving critical orientations into visual elective affinities, inviting bodies to 'play at' dhammacratic politics, or materializing the 'democratization' of royal material privileges (chapter 4) among lay architects, perhaps what is the most disturbing and distressing feature of the entire complex is the brutal realism of its depiction of an alarmingly stratified society. This is a vision that at once monumentally glorifies elite institutions *and* fosters revulsion against their exclusivity. It renders the central contradiction of dhammacracy—of dhammic and democratic models of governance—utterly sublime: as an awesome object that threatens the apperceiving subject with annihilation, the *Sappaya Saphasathaan's* dialectical imagery will provide an enduring provocation to challenge the institutions it defines as impermanent.

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