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# The Creation and Conservation of Saint Paul Church, Thailand

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## Abstract

There are very few Catholic churches in Thailand that conserve wooden structures. Take St. Paul in Muang District, Chachoengsao Province located on the east of Bangkok as an example, it was built by Bishop Pallegoix Jean-Baptiste the Vicar Apostolic of Siam in 1840. The first church was made of bamboo and the other wood. In 1873, Father Schmidt Francois-Joseph bought a piece of land and built the third one with concrete including wooden structures such as priest quarters, a bell tower, a rest pavilion on the Bang Pakong River, a granary, a school building, all of which were designed by a French priest in colonial architecture and constructed by Chinese workers. As the time passes, heritage buildings have been deteriorating. However, their conservation plans have been launched, and most of them have been implemented. Most of the structures were constructed of teak that can adapt itself to the weather. Another property of wood is that it can be deconstructed and reconstructed with or without changing its former architectural style.

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**Keywords:** conservation; cultural heritage; architecture; community

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## 1. Introduction

Domestic wooden structures have appeared in many countries and cultures around the world. Most community structures were also built of wood, take China as the example. The Haukeng Timber-Arched Corridor Bridge constructed in 1671, located in Qingyuan, in Zhejiang Province, China, is unique in their architectural design. This timber bridge was restored and served as heritage landmark in this village. ([www.unescobkk.org/culture](http://www.unescobkk.org/culture), 2015)

In Thailand, wood was a commonly found as basic material in the past for residential building as well as religious ones; as a result, most buildings – house, pavilion, monastery, bell tower – were made of wood. Other old wooden Catholic churches can be seen in St. Philip-James Catholic Church, Chonburi Province and St. Roch Church in

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Chachoengsao Province. ([www.chandiocese.org](http://www.chandiocese.org), 2015) Another wooden monastery in St. Michael Church Song Yae, Yasothorn Province. The latter was built in 1947 and now it is a cultural tourist attraction. ([www.catholicubon.org](http://www.catholicubon.org), 2015)

The St. Paul community, located in Muang District, Chachoengsao Province, is on the east bank of the Bang Pakong River. Most of the community members are Catholics and St. Paul is the first Catholic Church on this river. There are many wooden buildings in this church that are unique and valuable in terms of cultural heritage, research, and conservation. Even though, the building conditions are deteriorated. In general, Thai people often look back to their heritage and realize how important it is as a basic of their identity (Pinraj Kanjanusthiti, 1988). The Saint Paul church community people performed the same way and they can participate to revive their cultural heritage actively.

The church was awarded the outstanding architectural conservation in 1990 for community category and in 1991 for building category by the Association of Siamese Architects under the Royal Patronage.

The objectives of this action research project are to 1) conserve the culturally significant buildings of the Church, 2) involve both the community members and the stakeholders in this project and 3) transform the local historical site into a cultural tourist attraction.

## **2. Research Concept**

### *2.1. Conservation of cultural heritage*

At present, the Saint Paul Church community still retains its cultural heritage, history, culture, lifestyle and natural surroundings which make this city culturally unique. The following buildings are in the conservation plan:

- The 135 –year-old abbot residence built of golden teak in a colonial style.
- The bell tower built of teak in 1890 and the pavilion.
- The raised 110-year-old chapel made of golden teak which is going to use as a religious museum displaying the exhibits donated by the community and the church.
- The rice barn which is going to be transformed in the community learning center. portraying the community history and community way of life from the exhibits donated by the residents and the church.

### *2.2. Community participation and stakeholder*

The residents have donated some money for restoring the buildings and some items to be displayed in the museum. Several private companies who produce roof tiles, floor tiles and paints has donated construction materials while some Christians and individuals have contributed some donation to conserving this cultural heritage site.

## **3. Research Methodology**

Several financial sources have done the conservation procedure of this action research.

### *Step I. Inventory of cultural heritage*

The research was funded by the Office of Environmental Policy and Planning in 2007. The activities were:

- Studying on history and cultural heritage of the community,
- Organizing meetings with the community in order to inform the project proposal and ask for local participation,
- Field surveying and doing a draft measure work of the five wooden buildings of the church: the abbot residence, the granary, the bell tower, the rest pavilion, and the former chapel,

- Printing a book entitled “Cultural Heritage Environment Atlas of Saint Paul Church Community, Muang District, Chachoengsao Province” for references.

### *Step II. Planning for cultural heritage conservation*

The research works have been funded by Chulalongkorn University under the project “Chulalongkorn University Century Academic Development Project” during the year 2010-2012. The main activities were:

- Prioritizing the five wooden buildings for restoration,
- Fundraising for both money donation and construction materials,
- Organizing meetings with the church and local people to plan for the conservation project,
- Print a book entitled “Thai Traditional Way of Living: Community Spirit along the Bang Pakong River” for reference.

### *Step III. Implementation of building conservation*

The research works have been done during the year 2013-2016 and funded by the National Research Council of Thailand under the project “The Architectural Conservation of St.Paul Church and Community-based Tourism Management”. The main activities are as follow.

- Conservation of buildings, the abbot house in 2013, the wooden bell tower and the rest pavilion in 2014, the old chapel in 2015-2016 and, the granary in 2016
- The request for construction materials from a manufacturer is essential since it can reduce the cost but it takes time to process the request.
  - The demand for construction materials of paint products, roof tiles, floor tiles and ceiling tiles from manufacturers and distributors is essential since it can reduce the cost of conservation.
  - The conservation of buildings in the church has to be approved by the Church Council and the Diocesan Bishop. The residents and other Christians donate some money for restoration.
- Strengthening the community to guide visitors and maintain their heritage in 2016.

## **4. Research Results**

On August 15, 1856, Siam signed a treaty with France, allowing the French missionary to teach Christianity in Siam and constructing a church, a school, a hospital and other related structures under the Siamese laws.

In 1858, Father Daniel Severin Jaques Marie built a church with wood and later Father Péan Alexis asked for the donation from the Christians in France to rebuild the church. After that, Father Schmidt François-Joseph bought a piece of land on the east bank of the Bang Pakong River and built a church with concrete in 1873. (Adrian Launey, 1846) (Figure 1)

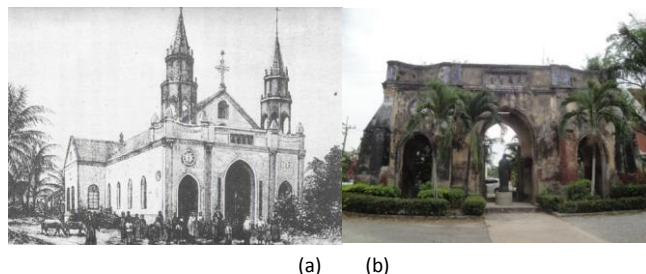


Fig. 1. (a) The old Church of St.Paul; (b) Façade of the Old Church (Sources: Adrian Launey, 1846)

#### 4.1. The Wooden Structures in the Church

At present the St. Paul community possesses the Roman Catholic identity – the old church, the new church, St. Paolo statue, the bell tower and the rest pavilion on the river, a school, a cemetery, Mary's cave, the priest quarters, the chapel, the granary, and residence for the Christian. This article deals with the five wooden structures or timber heritage left in the church, which includes the bell tower, the rest pavilion, the abbot residence, the old chapel and the old granary.

Most of the timber heritages were the works of Father Schmidt, Father Perbet and Father Carrière who were priest and abbots in the St.Paul Church during mid 19<sup>th</sup> – mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Figure 2)

Father Jean Carrière, skillful in mathematics, acted as an architect and designed several Colonial architectural wooden buildings in St.Paul Church. Chinese artisans constructed These teak buildings. The material is suitable for the weather and relocation. These buildings are the teak heritage of the St. Paul community, describing the establishment of the first Catholic Church on the Bang Pakong River and the settlement of the Catholics.

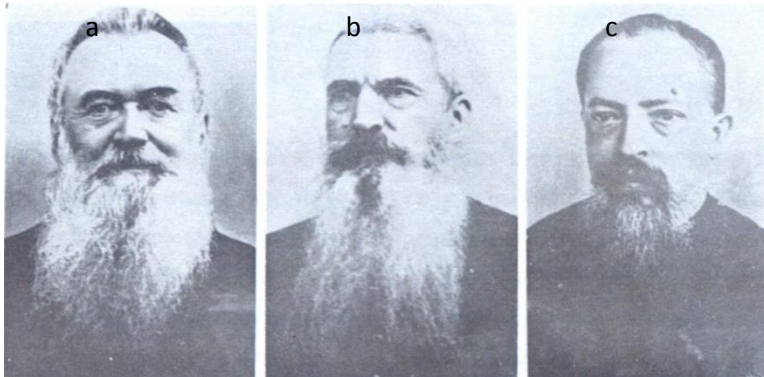


Fig. 2. (a) Father Schmidt; (b) Father Perbet; (c) Father Carrière

#### 4.2. The Bell Tower and the Pavilion

The 16-meter-high wooden bell tower was built during the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910). The tower is in a square shape – 4 meters each. The wall is made of wood. The base of the tower is in the shape of the cross with 10 meters wide on each side. The height of the tower is about the same height as a three-story building and steps are leading to the three bells – a small bell (soprano voice), a medium bell (average voice) and a big bell (alto voice). Built in Dijon, France in 1897, all of them were made of bronze and engraved with a picture of a priest and an inscription 'Mission de Petriou'. The name of Father Perbet was on the big bell. (Figure 3)

Next to the tower is the rest pavilion that is made of teak. There are 1.20-m-high teak balustrades around the rest pavilion except the walkway. The roof is in a square shape with four gable ends. The floor plan is in the shape of the cross with the width of 10.50 meters and the length of 14.00 meters. (Figure 4)

Since the tower represents the community way of life and the religion, the renovation of the tower and the rest pavilion has been carried out and paid by the donation from a family. John Donne's proverb in a plate fixed on the tower after the renovation: (Figure 5).

“...No man is an island, entire of itself ... Any man's death diminishes me,  
because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for  
whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

John Donne (1572-1631)

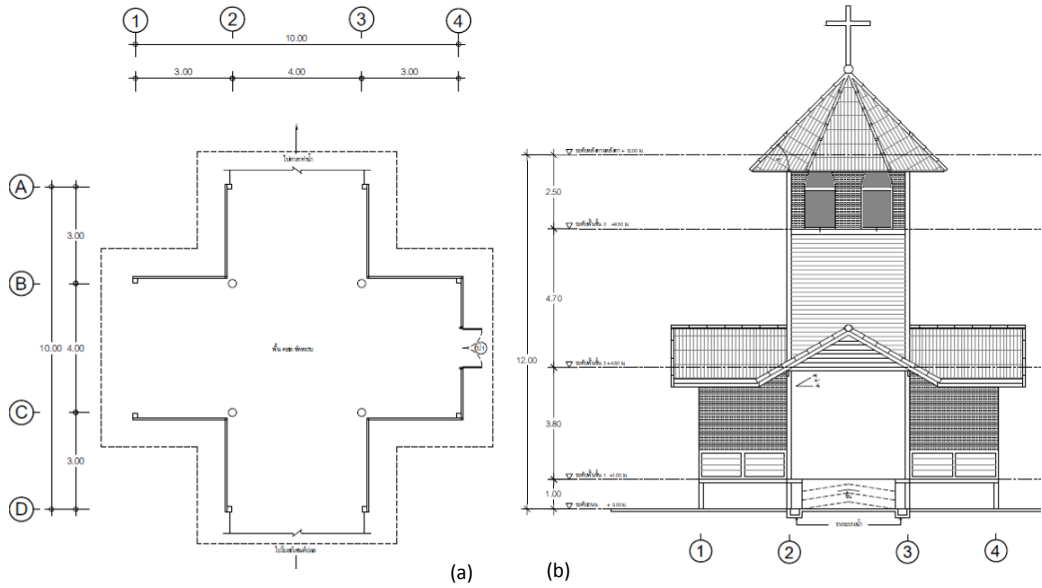


Fig. 3. (a) Floor Plan; (b) Front Section of the Bell Tower

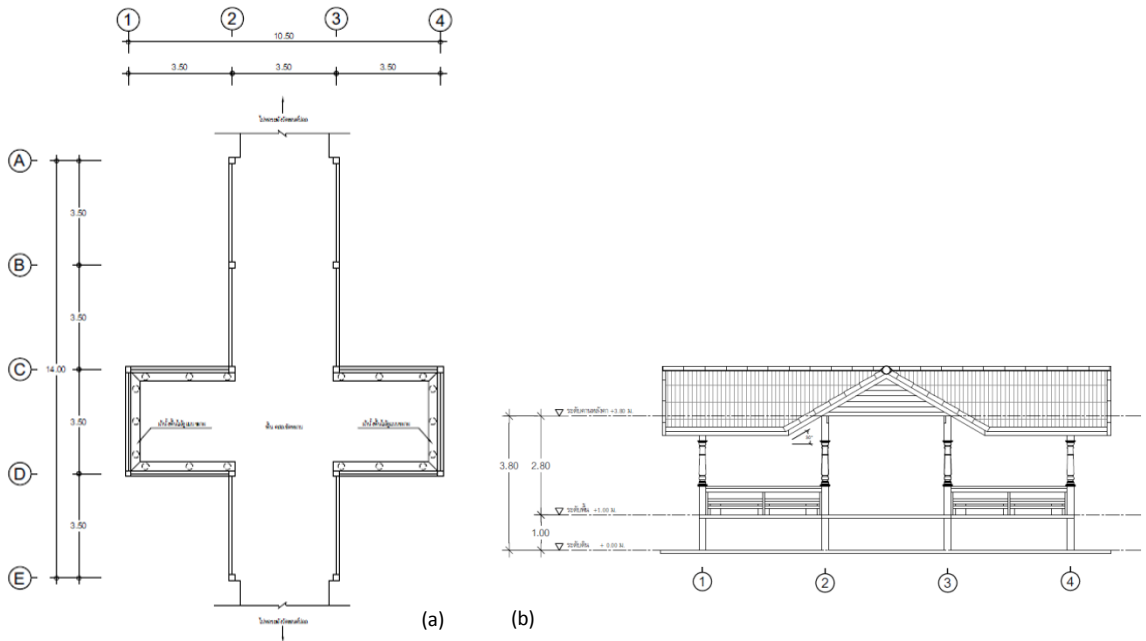


Fig. 4. (a) Floor Plan; (b) Front Section of the Pavilion



Fig. 5. (a) The Bell Tower and the Rest Pavilion; (b) The Bell

#### 4.3 Abbot Residence

Made of teak with the length of 15 meters and the width of 30 meters, the residence was built during the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910). Designed by Father Jean Carrière, it was constructed by Chinese men and its architectural style was of the Colonial Architecture. It is a two-story house with steps on the left and the right side. There is a corridor on the second floor and wooden balustrades around the house. On the side and the back of the house are the window shutters of 0.65 meter in length and 2.40 meters in width. There is an open space in the middle of the house flanked by rooms. The rooms on the first floor are parallel to those on the second. This house is more than 130 years old and in the past besides being the abbot's residence, other priests that traveled past the church could stay overnight here. (Figure 6 and 7)

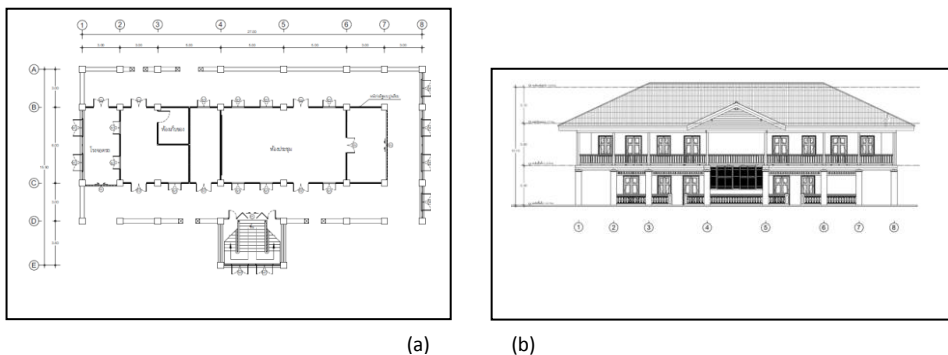


Fig. 6. (a) Floor Plan; (b) Front Section of the Abbot Residence



Fig. 7. Abbot Residence

There is a sister house in St. Anthony Church located nearby on the opposite bank of the Bang Pakong River. The house is made of wood with wooden balustrades around the house. The left and the right side of the house are in the symmetric pattern. Like the middle part of the abbot residence in St. Paul, this house has an open space in the middle. Actually, this house was relocated from St. Paul. The first floor was an open space since it was used as a congregation hall while the second floor was Father Carrière's residence. At present, the first floor serves as offices (Interview of Sister Berchmanh Likhitham). A two-story wooden school building with steps on the left and the right side is located in this church, like the abbot residence designed by Father Jean Carrière. When he was an abbot here (1946-1961), he had the school building relocated from Fatima Catholic Church in Bang Wua down south of the river to St. Anthony Church (Interview of Kimlong Phoonphokphol). (Figure 8)

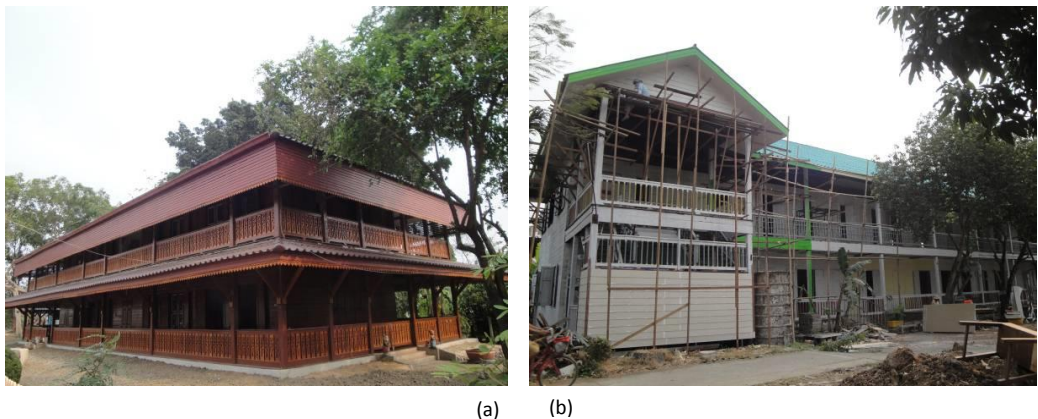


Fig. 8. (a) a Sister House; (b) School Building in St. Anthony Church

#### 4.4 The Old Chapel

This chapel was used by those who taught girls who wanted to be nuns for a certain amount of time. In 1947, it accommodated female orphans but at present, it is for storage. It is a wooden building with an elevated floor, 12 meters in length and 23 meters in width. Its hip roof is 12 meters long and 16 meters wide. Long wooden balustrades from the floor to the ceiling are placed around the building for safety purpose. The steps leading to the second floor are on the corners of the building and these steps are equipped with doors that can be closed from the inside. The front steps were removed. After the renovation in 2016, it will be used as the museum of belief with the partial fund for the exhibition from the Ministry of Culture. (Figure 9 and 10)

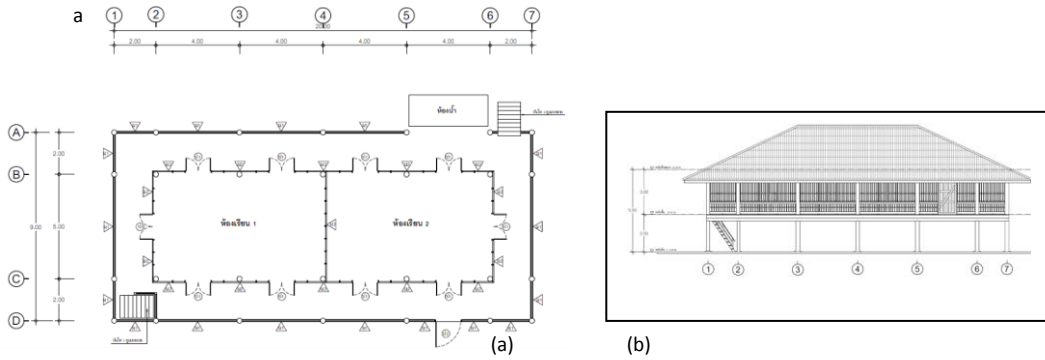


Fig. 9. (a) Floor Plan; (b) Front Section of the Old Chapel

The experience of this action research reveals that participation in different partnership: the church, the Catholic community, public and private agencies, is an influential factor to realize this conservation project though it would take almost nine years. This research is in line with the community conservation project in Amphawa, Samut Songkhram in Thailand for participatory importance. (Wannasilpa Peerapun, 2012)



Fig. 10. The Old Chapel

#### 4.5 Granary

18 meters long and 10 meters wide, it was built to store rice taken from the St.Roch church's rice fields on the opposite side of the river. The farmers who rented the rice fields gave some paddies to the church as the rental fee. In the past, the rice has been paid to the orphans and those living in the church. Later, new dioceses are assigned by using the Bang Pakong as division; consequently, the rice fields do not belong to the church. At present, under the restoration and it will be used as a cultural learning center of the church. (Figure 11 and 12)



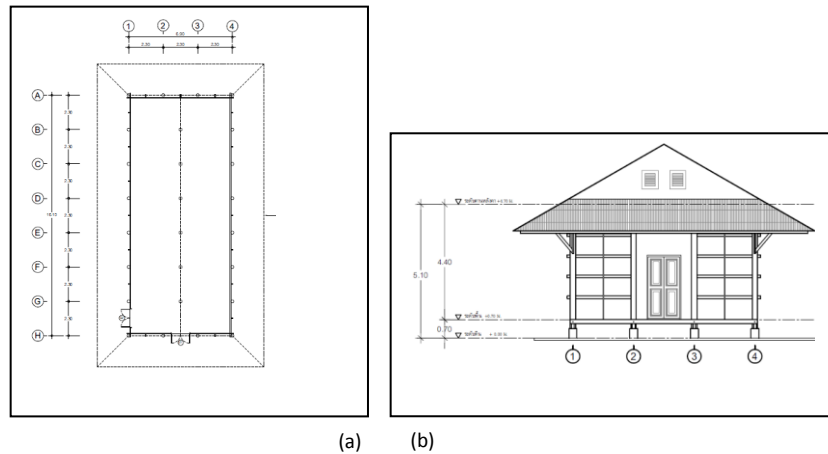


Fig. 11. (a) Floor Plan; (b) Front Section of the Granary



Fig. 12. Granary

## 5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that St. Paul Church possesses strong cultural identity. It was founded by a French priest and most of the community members around the church are descendants of the Chinese immigrants.

The project has been carried out by 1) raising the community member's awareness through various activities such as meetings with the Church and community members and the church council, 2) inviting the church, community members, government agencies and the private sector to participate in the project, 3) raising funds for renovating old buildings such as the missionary housing the chapel, the bell tower, the wooden pavilion, the granary 4) adapting the function of the old buildings such as transforming the rice barn into a learning center of local community and the chapel into a religious museum displaying the items which the church and the community members have collected and 5) improving the landscape of the Church and the community. With the completion of the project, this community will be regarded as a cultural tourist attraction that can be accessed by both water and land routes. Presently, the church and the community are jointly working with other sectors to conserve this timber heritage as an identity of their cultural heritage.

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