

***Fantasized Romanticity:  
Rethinking the Role of Curtained Motels in Thai Contemporary Culture***

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**Abstract**

Examining through the lens of social-sexual production, this paper focuses on the curtained motel, known to Thais as *rong raem man rud*, in Thai contemporary culture, which has long been determined by Thai sex-gender discourse or so-called “hetero-normality”. In general, these are enjoyable places for anonymous sexual activities or having sex without any strings attached. For many, they are condemned and tainted, while for some they are partially legitimate and culturally tolerated. This paradoxical meaning of the curtained motel is our point of focus. It is important for us to explore curtained motels before they close down due to rapidly changing mobile culture, which allows people to meet virtually and initiate sexual interaction elsewhere, not limited to hotel facilities. This paper aims to analyze the curtained motel in terms of social-sexual production of space, through the question of what and under which conditions curtained motels have arisen, and to argue for an alternative value and meaning to that given and/or imposed by mainstream sex-gender discourse. Methodologically, this paper embraces Michel Foucault's “Other Space” as the theoretical framework for collecting and analyzing data from a field survey based on 6 curtained motels, built between 1977-1991, in Chiang Mai Municipality. This paper also aims to use the curtained motel as a point of reflection, opening up for discussion dominant cultural values, leading then, perhaps, to an alternative meaning in Thai contemporary culture.

Keywords: Other Space, Heterotopias, Hotel, Chiang Mai, Thailand

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## Introduction

Architecture regarded as a materialization of how people interact with each other is this paper's standing point, that we also use as a lens through which to research and explore specific architectural programs in our city. This paper is interested in a specific type of architectural program featuring curtains attached at the front of rooms, called "curtained motels", commonly known to Thais as *rong raem man rud*. The curtained motel is a Registered Hotel Type 1, which facilitates only separate rooms and, of course, parking spaces. In general, curtained motels are one-story in height with one main internal roadway at least 6 meters wide running through the center, surrounded by individual rooms with parking spaces in front of them. Importantly, there is an opaque plastic curtain attached to the entrance way of each room.

Based on the way local people frequent curtained motels, many people believe that these are places for having casual sex, engaging in sexual activity without any strings attached. Moreover, we find that many Thai contemporary soap operas broadcast on television choose curtained motels as the scene of secret sexual activity, or one-night-stand sexual activity, as many locals may know. It is not surprising then that people perceive curtained motels as bad, condemned, and perhaps sinful. Many people believe that curtained motels should be located on the outskirts of the city.

Yet, instead of being destroyed or eliminated, curtained motels can still be found in other major cities. The question arises, if curtained motels are understood as bad and sinful places, paradoxically, why are they found in many major cities? For some people, the way they are still used as part of everyday life may reflect something related to Thai contemporary socio-cultural construction, from which the physicality of their built form manifests. The aim of this research paper is to unearth these ambiguous and paradoxical relations with curtained motels while, at the same time, exploring and elaborating on the spatial organization of curtained motels through their physicality and visibility.

To be able to go beyond the built form of curtained motels and explore their socio-cultural as well as political construction, the paper "A Place for One Night Stand" by Sant Suwatharapinun can act as a starting point<sup>1</sup>. Using "Other Space" as a theoretical framework, coined by Michel Foucault, opens up the possibility of conducting field work, data collection, and questioning how the meaning imposed onto curtained motels has been constituted as such<sup>2</sup>. In short, this research is an extension of the speculative and conceptual approach of Sant's paper based on how curtained motels have been politically and socially constituted and how their spaces have been secretively operated – expanding into real spaces and real cases of curtained motels.

## Physical Construction and Social Structure of Curtained Motels

The question of what curtained motels are, in actual, may not reveal the whole spectrum of what we would like to discover, as we aim to examine both physical and social aspects. The first curtained motel was erected in the 1960s in Bangkok, which we may call the first period

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<sup>1</sup> Suwatharapinun, S. (2012). A Place for One Night Stand. *Journal of Sociology* 1-2 (2011)(23), 53-80. And also see Charoensinolarn, C. (2017). *Development Discourses: Power, Knowledge, Truth, Identity and Otherness*. Bangkok: Matichon.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, M. (1967). Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias. in N. Leach (Ed.), *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (pp. 330-336). New York: City Routledge.

of curtained motels in Thailand, before they spread to other parts of the country. It is important to note that curtained motels are legitimate businesses and most of them are registered as Hotel Type 1 – servicing for room only. Yet, the curtain has nothing to do with this registration.

In terms of physicality, most curtained motels are generally hidden behind a 2.5-3.0 meter sparsely decorated wall, tending to appear as plain to the public as possible. We find two types of spatial organization: one with a 6-meter wide, two-way road – through the center of the property, surrounded by rooms; the other with a 3-meter-wide one-way road – circling the property, with rooms in the center. A curtain can be seen from the roadway at the head of each parking space, at the entrance to each room. Next to the parking space is the room entrance. We find that most are simple studio units – a bed with ensuite bathroom. The typical size of a room is around 4.00 x 12.00 meters including the parking space. Vivid decoration seems to be preferred. Various styles can be found in the hotels, including Western countryside or cowboy theme, seaside view, old traditional or Thai local styles, Japanese tearoom, boxing ring, and even outer space. Essential decorative features are found in some special rooms, such as dimmable lighting, black lights, and mirrors on the wall and ceiling reflecting directly the position of the bed.

While the physical construction of curtained motels tends to be simple, their social structure seems to be more complex and ambiguous. People perceive them differently, not solely as hotels but rather as places for having casual sex. These are places related directly to the social construction of sex-gender discourses. For some, curtained motels are seen as locations where different norms regarding sexual activity can be explored. Could it mean that curtained motels are accepted by locals because they are easily found on the streets in many cities? To answer this question may not be so simple. Many scholars argue that when we discuss the differentiation of sex-gender discourses in Thailand – alternative forms of sexual activity or sexual practice outside of social norms and institutions – the situation could be regarded as tolerated, but not accepted<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps curtained motels may need to be theorized in the same way. It is important to go beyond physicality into the social as well as political constitution by which curtained motels have been placed. In short, we need to look at curtained motels in relation to dominant Thai sex-gender discourse, meaning that patriarchy and hetero-normality may need to be taken into account.

Somchai Yensabai and Supaporn Assasamongkol mentioned that the dominant social structure in Thailand is related directly to heterosexual social thought, including the institutions of family and marriage, laws and social norms which collectively and simultaneously help to maintain power. These lead to the meaning and value given to appearance and behavior in Thai society, where sexual activity has many obligations<sup>4</sup>. The domination of sex-gender discourse is evident in various scrutinized forms, such as people dressing according to beliefs about their biological sex, sexual activity outside the realm of marriage, or the notion that reproduction should be condemned and marginalized. The role of space then becomes vitally important because it offers a way to escape from the public and permits different forms of sexual practice to occur, if only fleetingly. Sometimes it can be

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<sup>3</sup> Jackson, P. A. (1999). Tolerance but Unaccepting: the Myth of a Thai "Gay Paradise" In *Gender & Sexualities in Modern Thailand* (pp. 226-242). Chiang Mai Silkworm Books.

<sup>4</sup> Yensabai, S. (1999). *Politics of the Body: a Natural Case of Homosexuality* Bangkok: KledThai, p. 318; and Assasamongkol, S. (2011). *Femininity, Truth, Illusion of Prejudice in Patriarchal Society* Bangkok: Woman's Foundation, p. 2.

hidden at home, or performed outside in public where a specific space is required<sup>5</sup>. Regardless, space is needed which allows time for breaks, self-concealment, and safety from scrutinization by mainstream discourse.

In short, this research argues that curtained motels can be understood as another tolerated form and an integration between spatial, sexual, and political construction that allows different social values and sexual practices to be possible.

## **Conceptual Framework**

To explore curtained motels in the light of spatial, social, and political construction, our research project embraces “Other Space” coined by Michel Foucault both as a conceptual framework and research tool.

“Other Space” allows us to investigate architectural formation in terms of social construction, leading to discussion about the “discursive formation”, the way in which the constitution of dominant sex-gender discourse – hetero-normality – originates the constituent meaning and value of what is good and what is bad sex. It opens up the possibility of examining the built form, without sole reliance on physical form, but also as a form of negotiation. “Other Space” can be conceptualized as a mirror for discussion of apparent phenomenon, while simultaneously addressing the causes, reasons, why and how such forms manifest. Also, it is important to be aware of employing Foucauldian concepts of space and using them in different cultures or contexts<sup>6</sup>.

“Other Space” is also used as a research tool. The notions of seen/unseen, hidden/apparent, known/unknown run through all architectural and urban features related to the curtained motels from which we collected data. Data pertaining to location, street network, view from the street, signage, walls, entrance, room, decoration and, importantly, use of a curtain was collected and analyzed. We would like to elaborate the discussion in two directions: (a) socio-political aspect – by re-investigating social meaning and value imposed by Thai sex-gender discourse; (b) architectural aspect – by looking at built form in terms of how sex-gender discourses have materialized.

## **Methodology**

Data is collected from Chiang Mai Province, home to the second largest city in Thailand, located in the North. The city has a long history dating back over 720 years and was formerly the center of the Lanna Kingdom before being subsumed into Siam in 1874 (during the reign of King Rama V) and then designated a province of Thailand in 1909. Today, Chiang Mai is a center for the tourism, health and spa industries, and seems to be perceived by many elderly people as an ideal place for long stay business, while also being a university city due to the 7 universities located around Chiang Mai. Our focus site is found within Chiang Mai Municipality, named Chet Yod Sub-district, where 6 curtained motels were operating during the research period.

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<sup>5</sup> Sanders, J. (1996). *Stud Architecture of Masculinity*. New York City: Princeton Architectural Press.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, M. (1967). *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*. in N. Leach (Ed.), *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (pp. 330-336). New York: City Routledge.

The objectives of this article are: (1) to identify the social constitution of curtained motels in Thailand; (2) to analyze laws and various building regulations related to the appearance of curtained motels; (3) to elaborate on how curtained motels may be regarded as “Other Space”. This article divides data collection into (1) a document section for collection of relevant literature studies and 2) a field survey for collection of architectural data, including floor plan and side layout, and conduction of in-depth interviews with hotel owners. All field data was collected by the authors during the period spanning January to December 2018. Data for each case study was collected over an average period of 1 month, including in-depth interviews. Architectural data was collected in the following order: (1) city level - regarding location, characteristics of the area, and street networks; (2) district level – accessibility, visibility, surroundings; (3) architectural level – room layout, orientation, internal roadway, and service rates, including examples of curtained motel interior and exterior design. The authors use sketches, photographs, computer 3D models, and architectural drawings to represent information collected during field survey.

### Case Studies

The author now presents a brief summary of the 6 case studies, divided into (1) Santitham District and (2) Chet Yod Sub-district.

#### 1) Santitham District

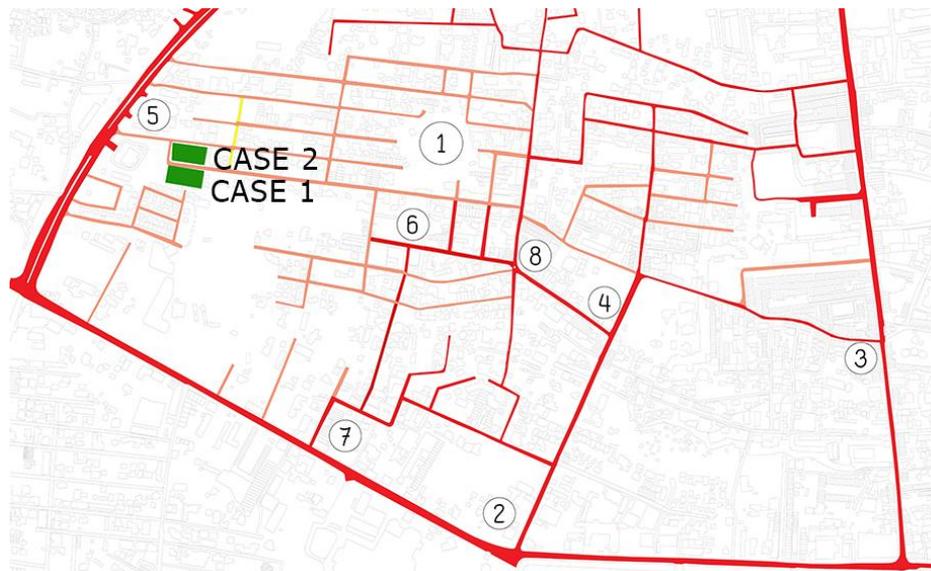


Figure 1: Location of case studies 1 and 2 in Santitham District (graphic by Jakkit Mancha)

In Santitham District, case studies 1 and 2 are located adjacent to the main road. (see figure 1) 1) Complex street layout is characteristic of this district. The numbers above indicate main routes routinely used to access the case study. (see figure 2 and 3)

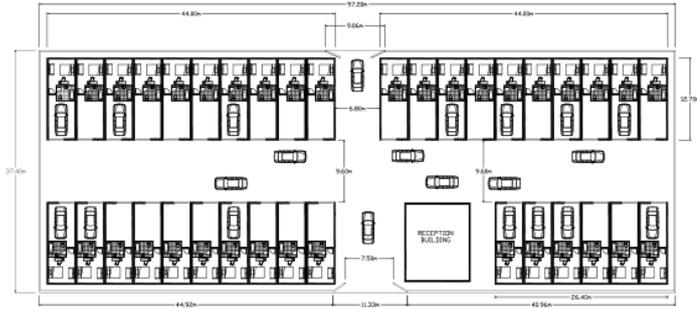
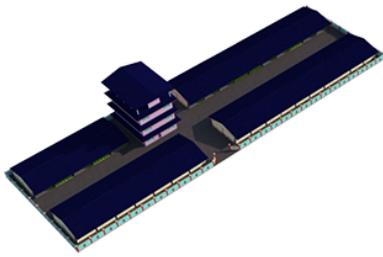


Figure 2: Case Study 1: Gasalong Inn, built in 2004, 36 rooms. (graphic by Jakkit Mancha)

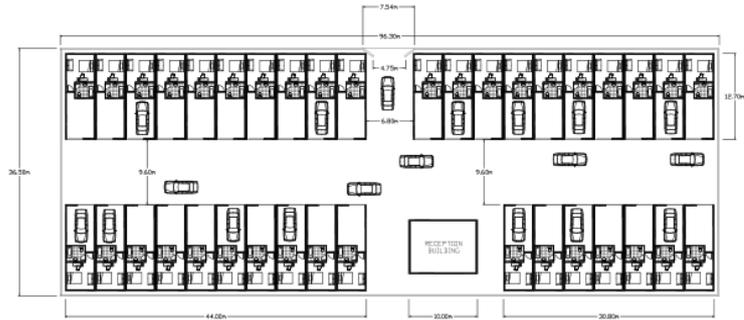
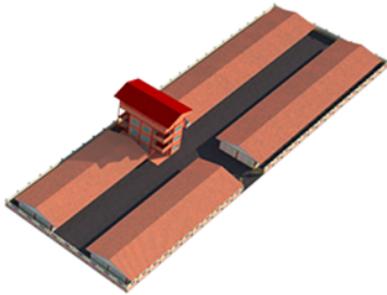


Figure 3: Case Study 2: Honeymoon Inn, built in 2004, 37 rooms. (Graphics by Jakkit Mancha)

Case studies 1 and 2 share the same building shape as they belong to the same owner. Therefore, building plan and rooms, including service fee, are the same. The locations of both cases are very close to the main road, giving the advantage of quick access. Because the layout of Santitham District is very complicated, whilst also being completely obscured by buildings from the outside, accessing case studies is difficult. Familiarity with routes in the area is therefore necessary to a certain extent.

## 2) Chet Yod Sub-district

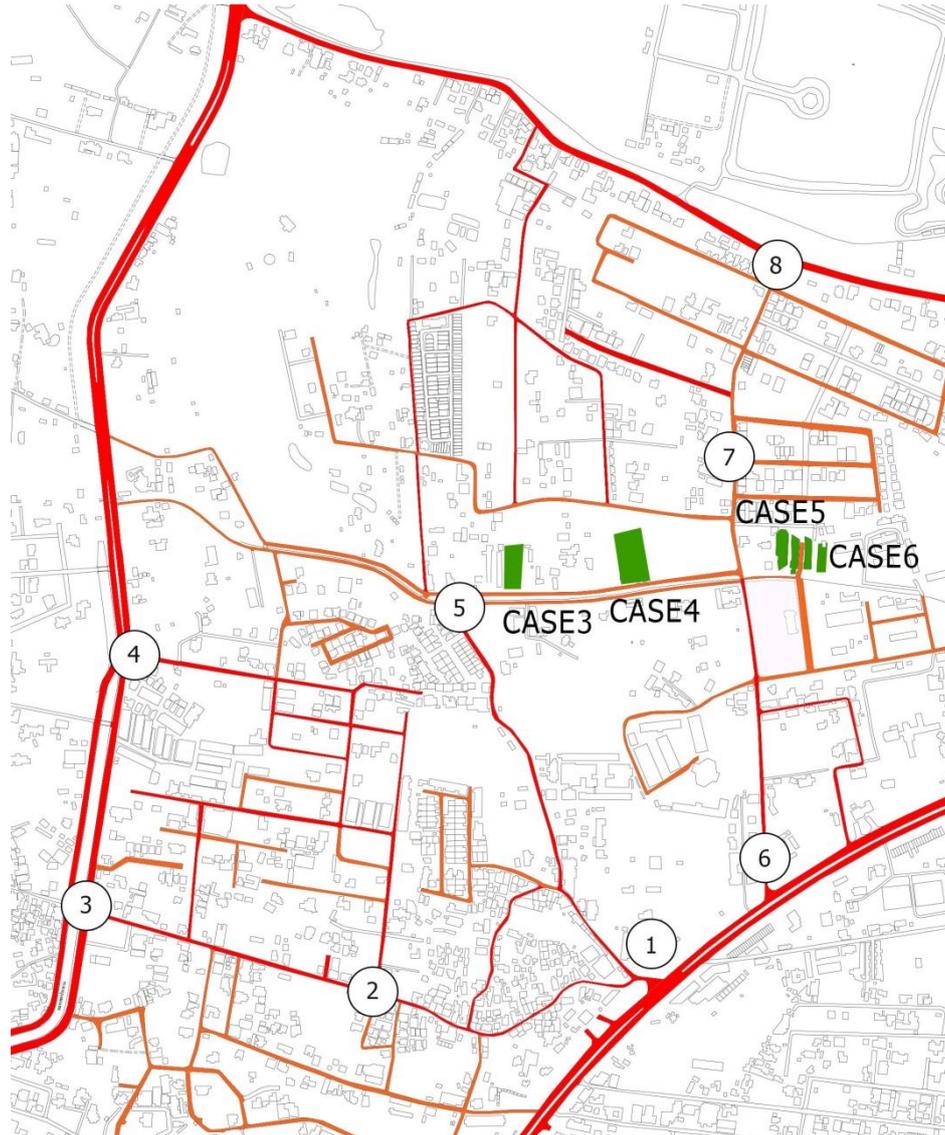


Figure 4: Location of case studies 3 to 6 in Chet Yod Sub-district (graphic by Jakkit Mancha)

The case studies in Chet Yod are located in the center of the district and are more difficult to reach than in Santitham because of the one-way road system. Also, trees obscure the motels from the outside. However, in case studies 3 to 6, there are slight architectural differences. (see figure 4)

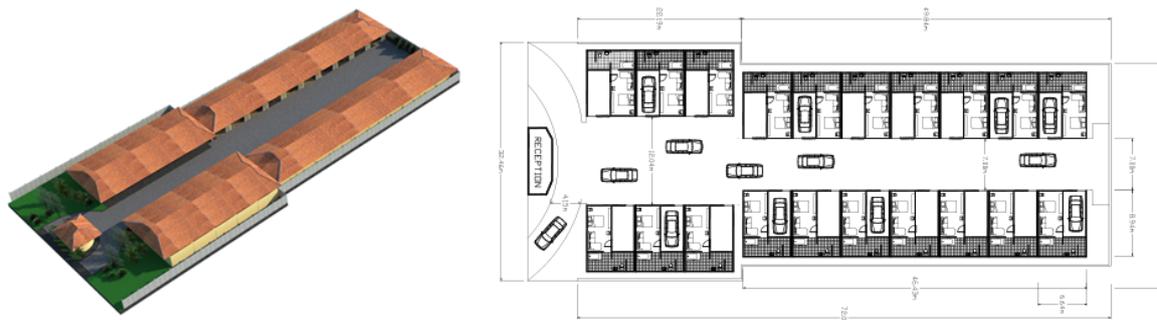


Figure 5: Case Study 2: China Chic, built in 1989, 20 rooms. (Graphics by Jakkit Mancha)



Figure 6: Case Study 4: Time Movement, built in 2004, 18 rooms. (Graphics by Jakkit Mancha)

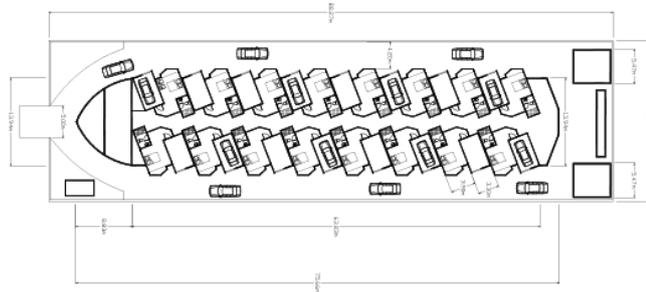


Figure 7: Case Study 5: Love Boat, built in 2004, 16 rooms. (Graphics by Jakkit Mancha)

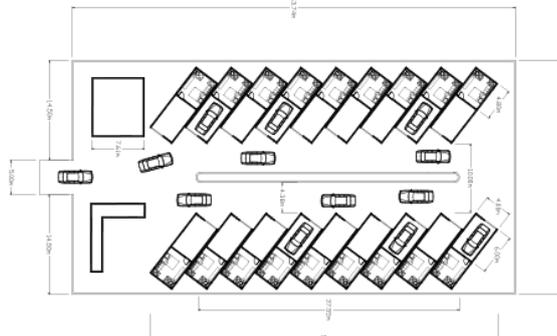
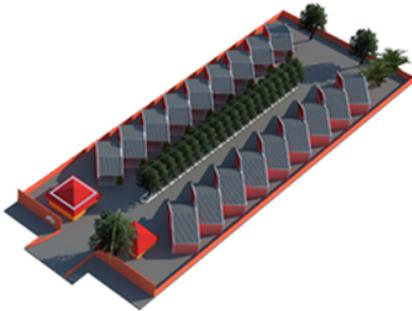


Figure 8: Case Study 6: Mixx Motel, built in 1996, 18 rooms. (Graphics by Jakkit Mancha)

For case studies 3 to 6, all motels are separately owned and were constructed at different times. (see figure 5-8) Therefore, with respect to design concept and building plan, even though the layouts are similar, they differ in terms of number and size of rooms, as well as service rate. Case studies 4 and 5 have the highest service fees, but the rooms are larger in size and feature more decoration than other case studies, and come complete with equipment and entertainment systems. Field data indicates a highly similar building style between the six case studies, including adjacent rooms and an internal roadway through the motel property. The case studies are located at 6 sites specific to the route, and order of access is also quite specific. Ordinary people or tourists who are not familiar with the area may not be able to access the case studies at all, as visibility is completely obscured from the outside. The interior design of each case study is different, including room layout, depending on the decorative sense of each entrepreneur. For example, case studies 4 and 5 impart uniqueness to each room by way of particular themes.

## **Curtained Motels and Their Accessibility**

Field surveys show that the 6 case studies are not located on a main road, but rather subordinate roads connected to a web of inner streets. This may be due to the perception of curtained motels as inappropriate and 'shouldn't-be-seen-easily'. Their response to such notions may be to hide themselves from public view. Their locations seem to reveal not only a method of avoiding scrutiny and judgement by the normality of Thai sex-gender discourse, but also a physical technicality to protect and maintain the privacy of patrons and ensure they remain unseen and unknown.

First priority at the urban planning level of research are the areas of Santitham and Chet Yod, densely populated communities, encompassing their original areas – former agricultural areas that were divided into sub-plots. This structure eventually effected a particular business model within said areas and consequent dense residential communities due to urban development. Visitors tend to be students and residents rather than tourists, resulting in lack of easy access to the area for both tourists and provincial residents. Therefore, to reach an area, one must know the neighborhood and routes to be able to reach different areas without confusion<sup>7</sup>.

Second, thoroughfare within the district is the next important link to the concept of “Other Space”. Because the thoroughfare is a large road that surrounds the district, it is a dense traffic route. But at the same time, these routes within the two research areas are generally not used by foreign tourists. The complexity of the labyrinth-like streets within the district is a key block that disguises occupants from the surrounding context. Therefore, the use of main thoroughfares and turning vehicles within the neighborhood gradually makes patrons fade away, ingeniously preventing them from being seen from outside the district, especially at nighttime.

The key issue arising from accessibility of the study area is the subject of sighting/non-sighting perspective. Access data collected for each case study in both areas shows that the main surrounding thoroughfares suffer from very heavy traffic due to turning vehicles in the neighborhood. Surrounding visibility immediately narrows and locations are even more difficult to find after having entered the area, to a certain degree.

## **Discussion**

This research aims to elaborate discussion in two directions: (1) socio-political aspect of curtained motels by re-investigating the meaning and value imparted by Thai sex-gender discourse; (2) architectural aspect of curtained motels through examination in terms of materialization of sex-gender discourse.

### **Socio-political aspect of curtained motels**

The earliest period of curtained motels in Thailand occurred around 1957 and gradually transformed their services from that of typical hotels to low-cost motels. We can argue that such change seems to arise from social context in relation to sex-gender discourse. The physical appearance of motel buildings may not change that much compared to decorative

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<sup>7</sup> Kitika, C. (2013). *Closet Space of Gay Show Bars in Santitham Area, Chiang Mai*. (Master of Architecture). Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai.

items, in particular the curtain, which hangs at the entrance of each room along the parking lot.



Figure 9: (Left) Peep Inn Hotel, Bangkok (Right) inside Peep Inn's driveway (Resource: <https://thestandard.co/peep-inn-motel>)

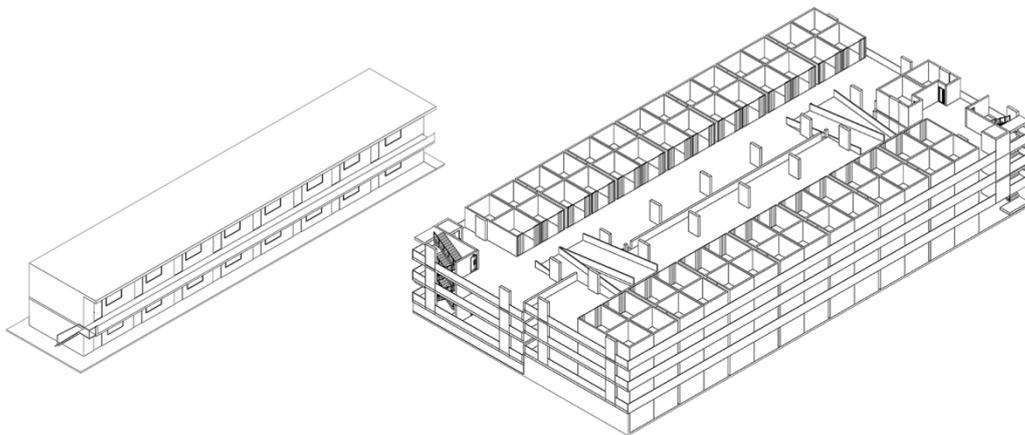


Figure 10: (Left) Isometric view of motel in 1943 (Right) Isometric view of motel in 1957 (Graphic by Jakkit Mancha)

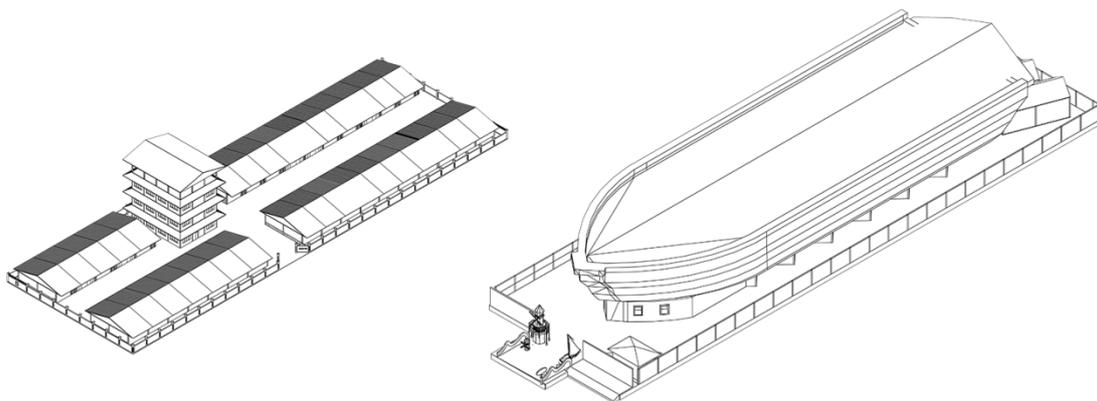


Figure 11: (Left) Isometric view of motel in 2004 (Right) Isometric view of motel in 2004 (Graphic by Jakkit Mancha)



Figure 12: Inside area of case study 4 (photograph by Jakkit Mancha)



Figure 13: Case study 4: closed curtain while room in use (photograph by Jakkit Mancha)

The first generation of curtained motels circa 1957, although often containing their rooms within a single-story building as what we find today, also featured a variety of spatial arrangements, e.g. public road in front of the hotel, multi-story building with ramp, private roadway through the center with rooms on each side (see figure 9-11), private roadway circling around the building with rooms in the center (pic x), etc. Yet, the common key feature is easy access with a simple plan to allow motel patrons to access rooms as quickly and easily as possible. They should be able to easily understand how to drive in and out of the motel without need for traffic signage or contact with staff. (see figure 12-13)

By embracing “Other Space” as a theoretical framework, we can argue that curtained motels tend to respond to social value based on Thai sex-gender discourse. It is important to note that the perception of curtained motels is based on negotiation with dominant sex-gender discourse, which currently includes both patriarchy and heterosexual normality. Behind the curtain, people can go in and out without being seen or noticed, remaining anonymous. The idea of “nobody knows what happens or where” seems to be crucial for curtained motels. They permit alternative forms of sexual practice and offer spaces outside the realm of sexual practices determined by the institutions of marriage, monogamy, reproduction or the notion of vice and virtue. Not only does this process physically prevent visibility, but the dominant influence of sex-gender discourse regarding the notion of visibility is also dismantled at the same time. Curtained motels tend to also include other spaces within the property, in addition to rooms. When finished using a room, people are able to return subtly to mainstream discourse. To some extent, the spaces provided by curtained motels allow people to abstain from long-term commitment, even if for a very short time.

## **Physical appearance of curtained motels**

By examining the appearance of curtained motels in the light of building regulations, we begin to understand that curtained motels design and organize their space in response to laws and building regulations, in particular those regulations concerning driveways, parking, and visibility of vehicles. Simply, we can argue that curtained motels look as they do today because of building regulations.

Four building regulations are particularly relevant: Ministerial Regulations No. 7 (1974), Ministerial Regulations No. 41 (1994), Ministerial Regulations No. 55 (2000), and Ministerial Regulations: determine the types and rules for hotel business operations (2008). Curtained motels (and their physical attributes) are constructed accordingly. For example, based on Ministerial Regulations No. 7 (1974), the width of a roadway must be 3 meters for one-way and 6 meters for two-way. Based on Ministerial Regulations No. 41 (1994), perpendicular parking spaces require a minimum dimension of 2.4 x 5.0 meters. Based on Ministerial Regulations No. 55 (2000), bedroom size must be no less than 8 square meters, while height of fencing must not exceed 3 meters. Based on Ministerial Regulations: determine the types and rules for hotel business operations (2008), cars parked in front of rooms must be visible at all times. These examples show how laws and building regulations have materialized and manifested through the physical appearance of curtained motels. “Other Spaces”, according to laws and building regulations, could thus include the case of curtained motels.

To maximize usable area of the property, the simplest method is to construct a roadway 6 meters wide through the center and place rooms on both sides. Connection between the roadway and parking spaces in front of the rooms can be easily created. Importantly, because most customers travel by car, this specific road connection allows customers to traverse the roadway and park directly in front of a room without any assistance from motel staff. The only sign customers look for are room curtains. When a curtain is lifted, this means the room is available, and when it is closed, it means otherwise. The privacy of customers must be preserved, hidden, and exclusive, meaning they can go to a room without contacting staff, for both checking-in and checking-out. This transitional process, the connection between car and room, can be regarded as beginning inside the car and ending inside the room. This is a continuous space which attempts to impart a sense of “super-privacy”. (see figure 14)

Most of the curtained motels we observe are surrounded by a wall 3.00 meters in height – the maximum height allowed by building regulations. This high wall functions as a “fortress”, aiming to limit visibility from within and outside the motel. Only a few things can be seen or are allowed to be seen, including motel signage and logos which suggest the nature of business.

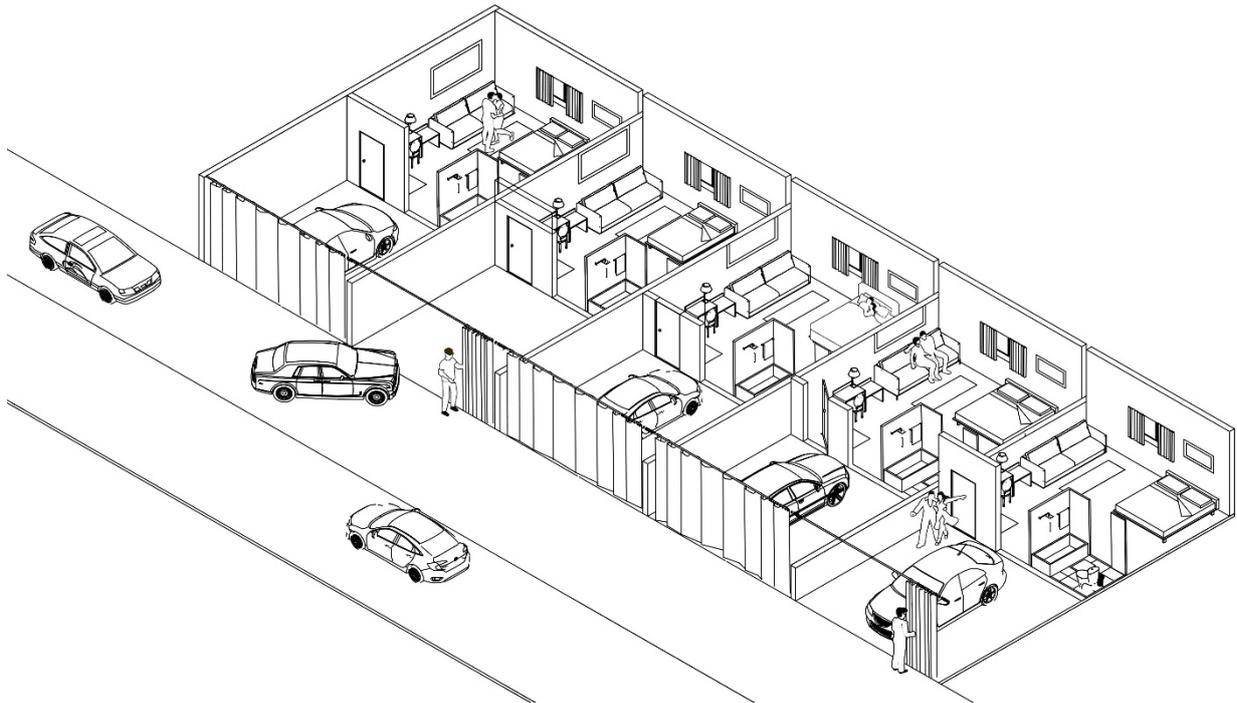


Figure 14: Isometric view showing how the motel's rooms are operated  
(Graphic by Jakkit Mancha)

The curtain can be understood on two levels: the physical level and the abstract level. For the physical level, it functions as another decorative feature, allowing customers to maintain their condition of privacy, while motels use it as a signal for room availability. Importantly, the curtain is not a permanent structure according to laws and building regulations. Although Ministerial Regulations: determine the types and rules for hotel business operations (2008) states that cars parked in front of rooms must be visible at all times, this curtain, being a temporary decorative item, does not intend to block or render the parking space invisible. At the abstract level, the curtain takes on the semantic ambiguity of a veil. Because people perceive curtains as temporary or decorative features, the decorative veil can be interpreted as neither permanent nor temporary, aiming to conceal, but not permanently or forever. The curtain can be regarded as a channel through which mainstream discourse and laws are negotiated with, thereby placing curtained motels in the realm of "Other Space".

Interior decoration, such as pictures and colors, may be used to stimulate imagination for the activities to take place in the room. Selected decorative themes range from 'under the ocean', 'inside the boxing ring', to outer space and Japanese tearooms. Chosen themes are very interesting because they reflect, simply, how people relate sexual fantasy to such themes. This subject may need to be explored further. Examined through the notion of "Other Space", we may argue that these themes themselves constitute the notion of "Other Space". They allow people to be out of place, to be different from usual everyday life. For many people, such themes allow them to detach themselves from reality by being provided a space to romanticize, even for a very short moment.

### **Conclusion: Curtained Motel, Architecture of Other Space**

Curtained motels can be seen as a physical, socio-cultural, as well as political construction. They can be interpreted as a form of negotiation. We can allocate them in opposition to what is understood as good sex, reproduction, marriage and family institutions. In short, curtained

motels have been situated on the fringes of mainstream sex-gender discourse, including both patriarchy and heterosexual normality.

Examining through the notion of “Other Space”, coined by Michel Foucault, allows us to theorize curtained motels as a socio-cultural production. In terms of their abstraction, curtained motels can be regarded as sites for romanticized fantasy, sub-ordinated discourse, places of male-dominated car culture. In terms of physical appearance, they are the fortress, the hidden and secret land, escape routes, which have different apparent social codes to those perceived from the outside. The main space of curtained motels, the room, is very intriguing because it is designed to maintain a high level of privacy, allowing people to remain in unbroken privacy and exclusivity from inside the car to inside the room.

Paradoxically, the physical appearance of curtained motels can be understood as the result of how to negotiate with building code regulations size of parking spaces, width of the internal roadway, setback, and especially codes pertaining to visibility. The curtain is a vital decorative feature which need not be counted as structural. The curtain becomes symbolic of a temporal condition – taking a break from the mainstream discourse, to breath or do something not allowed by such a discourse. People perceive curtained motels differently – tolerated but unaccepted, as is the behavioral norm of Thai people when encountering conflicting perspectives, differing concepts of sex-gender discourse, and differing notions of proper space. We could say, perhaps, that curtained motels need to be present in society because, paradoxically, they assist mainstream social structure based on sex-gender discourse and heterosexual normality. For us, curtained motels can be viewed as an architectural program that reflects the interplay between built form and social constitution. They are a reflection of how forms of negotiation materialize and become established as the architecture of “Other Space”.

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