

Thai-Australian Identities in Architecture: Case Studies of Australian and Thai Embassies

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The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Thailand and Australia have a long-standing relationship. Both countries have engaged in diverse cultural exchanges over the years, including the construction of architecture that combines and transfers the identities of each nation, like embassies. This paper examines cultural exchange and identity exchange through the architecture of both countries as cultural bridges. These embassies act as bridges between the two countries, showcasing Thai architecture in Australia and Australian design influences in Thailand. This paper also traces and compares the design and concept of the cultural interpretation of both countries in these buildings. These buildings not only serve a political and diplomatic purpose but also play a significant cultural role by conveying concepts about national identity by using a design that represents their culture and national styles. These buildings are applied and hybridised with local architecture to interpret the exchange and relationship. This study analyses the design resources of both embassies of Thailand and Australia, including their design concept, material construction and cultural elements, to explore how they disseminate identity and interpret the local culture and architecture and maintain their identities. The research was focused and based on data in archival documents, observation, and visual analysis. The findings reveal that the architectural designs of both countries incorporate elements of cultural exchange, sharing ideas and expressions of identity while respecting each nation's unique context. Additionally, this study highlights the importance of transnationalism in fostering connections between cultures and enhancing international relations, ultimately contributing to the expression of individual identities across different continents.

Keywords: Thai architecture, Australian architecture, embassy, cultural interpretation, identities in architecture

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Introduction

Thailand and Australia have had a long-standing relationship since 1952. Both countries have engaged in diverse cultural exchanges that have increased each year (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.), including the construction of architecture that combines and transfers the identities of each nation, such as embassies. This paper examines cultural exchange and identity exchange through the architecture of both countries as cultural bridges. These embassies act as bridges between the two countries, showcasing Thai architecture in Australia and Australian design influences in Thailand. This paper also traces and compares the design and concept of the cultural interpretation of both countries in these buildings. These buildings not only serve a political and diplomatic purpose but also play a significant cultural role by conveying concepts about national identity by using a design that represents their culture and national styles. These buildings are applied and hybridised with local architecture to interpret the exchange and relationship. This study analyses the design resources of both embassies of Thailand and Australia, including their design concept, material construction and cultural elements, to explore how they disseminate identity and interpret the local culture and architecture and represent their identities.

This paper aims to study, analyse and understand a general overview of the architecture that applies its culture and national styles and hybridises with local architecture to interpret the exchange and relationship. Furthermore, the author aims to explore how embassies of Thailand and Australia disseminate identity, interpret the local culture and architecture and also represent their identities.

Methodology

The author used documentary research methods and was focused and based on data in archival documents, primary and secondary data, observation, and visual analysis (Aksamija, 2021). For the case studies, the author selected embassies located in capital cities and selected the cases that were constructed in the same period: specifically, the Old Australian Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand, and the Thai Embassy in Canberra, Australia. These two buildings were built in the 1970s.

The author selected embassy buildings that were constructed in similar periods, including the old Australian Embassy and the current Thai Embassy in Australia, because these cases allow for a better understanding of the context during that time, the use of similar construction materials, and insights into the similarities and differences in representation and styles between the two countries.

Results and Discussion

The findings reveal that the architectural designs of both countries incorporate elements of cultural exchange, sharing ideas and expressions of identity while respecting each nation's unique context. The old Australian Embassy building in Thailand was designed by Ken Woolley from the firm Ancher, Mortlock, and Woolley, in collaboration with Thai architect M.L. Tridhosyuth Devakul (see Figure 1). Construction began in 1973, with the Australian architect working closely with the Thai architect, who acted as a consultant. Ken Woolley specialised in Modernist architecture and was part of a movement known as the Sydney School style. This style emerged in Australia during the 1960s, blending Modernist principles with consideration for the local climate, natural settings, and the use of local materials, resulting in

a distinctive style of modern architecture in Australia (Horyingsawad, 2017; Jackson, 2022). In the design of the Australian Embassy, this architectural style was integrated with elements of Thai architecture. M.L. Tridhosyuth Devakul, the Thai architect, had expertise in resort design, and together, they combined features of Australian Modernist architecture with aspects from the Suan Pakkad Palace, which is characterised by its vernacular architecture set amidst ponds and nature.

The result is an architectural style that merges two cultures. The embassy's main building consists of elevated modern structures surrounded by waterways, reflecting Bangkok's informal style while being enveloped by numerous trees that evoke Australia's natural beauty (see Figure 2). The elevated design addresses environmental needs, while the cantilevered upper floors provide shade for the lower levels, protecting them from the heat of the sun. The freestanding column design draws inspiration from traditional Thai architecture, where buildings are raised on stilts. The raised foundation and large courtyard further emphasise Thai architectural characteristics and align with the principles of vernacular architecture, while these freestanding columns are also a common feature in Sydney School style's architecture. The exterior, resembling a castle, is adorned with yellow ceramic tiles, similar to those used in traditional Thai roofs and building facades (Horayangkura, 2017; Horyingsawad, 2017).

On the other hand, the Thai Embassy in Canberra, Australia, was constructed between 1970 and 1971. The building is located in a central area, close to key Australian government agencies in the capital. From the outside, the embassy architecture is an intriguing blend of the two cultures' architectural styles (see Figure 3). The design is based on a traditional Thai architectural style, adapted by Australian architect Tibor N. Olgay. Olgay created a Western-style floor plan that is proportionally balanced and focused on functionality, resulting in a modern two-story building. The roof design used elements from traditional Thai vernacular houses. The gables and pediments were designed and constructed by the Thai Fine Arts Department (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2019). These roof ornaments are masterpieces and elegant, and they are reflective of traditional Thai architecture that is hybridised with Australian two-story houses. This design integrates seamlessly with the modern floor plan while emphasising the unique traditional Thai identity.

Figure 1

Model - Australian Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand, 1975



Note.: Model - Australian Embassy, Bangkok, Thailand. Photograph b&w print. Preservation material. From National Archives of Australia, 1975

(<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/PhotoDetail.aspx?Barcode=9737498>). Copyright 2026 by National Archives of Australia. In the public domain.

Figure 2

Australian Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand, 2017



Note. Photograph of the Australian Embassy in Bangkok, 2017, by Waricha Wongphyat. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 3

Thai Embassy in Canberra, Australia, 1971



Note. International relations - Diplomatic representation - Royal Thai Embassy Canberra (Ian Mitchell). From National Archives of Australia, 1971 (<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/PhotoDetail.aspx?Barcode=11828909>). Copyright 2026 by National Archives of Australia. In the public domain.

Conclusion

The architectural designs of both embassies reflect a combination of national identities and local influences. The old Australian Embassy in Bangkok features materials, styles, and elements from the natural landscape of Thailand, which complement its modern Sydney School-style architecture. This integration creates a harmonious aesthetic, resulting in a distinctly modern building. In contrast, the Thai Embassy in Australia presents a more pronounced blend of styles. Although the layout is modern and designed by an Australian architect, the roofs are crafted by the Thai Fine Arts Department, which stands out as a separate element and is not as seamlessly integrated as the roof of the Australian Embassy in Thailand. The roof of the Thai Embassy in Australia also represents a more traditional architectural design. Nevertheless, both buildings exemplify cultural hybridity. Despite the differing approaches, they share a common objective: to express their national identity while honouring the local context and highlighting the importance of transnationalism.

Acknowledgements

The author has no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The paper's data is from parts of the research: "A Study of Australian Architecture: Historical Development and Connections with Thailand, 1901 – 2025," by the author, Chaipat Ngambutsabongsophon. This research is funded by the Office of Research Affairs (ORA), Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. The author acknowledges and thanks the ORA, Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University, National Archives of Australia, Australian Embassy in Thailand, Thai Embassy in Australia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, Art4D, Baan Lae Suan, and Assoc. Prof. Dr Waricha Wongphyat.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that this paper has used AI-assisted writing tools and technologies, namely Grammarly and ChatGPT (version 5.3), merely for language editing, translation, and proofreading purposes. The usage was limited to correcting grammar and spelling, improving clarity, concising and refining wording, and enhancing the accuracy of translations. No AI technologies other than Grammarly and ChatGPT were employed in the preparation of this manuscript. The content, research design, methodology, results, analyses, and conclusions presented in this work are entirely the author's own and are based on original research and appropriate scholarly sources.

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