

# Interpreting Cultural Identity through Light in Bangkok

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## ABSTRACT

Feeling of belonging to place or social group can express through characteristic of individual and group sharing the same cultural identity. The uniqueness can be investigated, understood and recognized through light. Question of interest was what would be light pattern in Bangkok? What could we learn from findings? The study has been conducted in collaboration between Lighting Detective group led by Kaoru Mende and King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), led by the author. There were five different groups facilitated by well-respected lighting designers working together with stakeholders in lighting i.e.; students, local lighting designers, international lighting industries, government and interested people. The group have studied five different unique places in Bangkok. Those are Pra-Artit / Kaosarn area, Royal temple area, City hall area, Chao-Phraya river front area and Lumpinee park area. The study was done by observation technique, interview with users in areas, together with light level measurement in the five areas. Common identity have been found through light and material in relation to lifestyle and culture. Analysis of results suggests future value creation for city commercially by creating cultural identity through light, not only in Bangkok, but its process can be applied in different cities.

**Keywords:** Cultural Identity, Light, Bangkok, Thai, Urban, Interpretation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Culture shapes identity. It is everywhere, integrating with the way of life. However, to identify a single conclusion or representation is not possible for this multi-cultural city. Identity design for culture is opposing to the idea of a single essence and thus defies all attempts at standardization representation. I believe that design should communicate key tendencies of cultural content. Challenge in lighting design in order to take cultural identity and people's preference is needed to study in a systematic way. The study attempted to understand cultural identity: people's behavior, lifestyle and preference through light investigation. Purpose

of this paper is to seek for the relationship between light and culture for Bangkok, using an inverse process. It is the hope that the process and result can be a guided process for lighting designers in interpreting needs and preferences in cultural dimension, in addition to general lighting recommendations.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 Approaches

A curiosity in Bangkok and light lead to this study organized by stakeholders in light such as lighting educators, graduate students, alumni, lighting manufactures, suppliers, people who live or work in selected areas and government. Main organizers were KMUTT, Lighting Detective group, Bangkok Design Festival and Thai Illuminating Engineering Association (TIEA). Prior to conducting an observation and workshop among stakeholders to investigate and to interpret results into further work, a photo contest has been done with the purpose to learn from public opinion how they perceive Bangkok at night time. To elaborate, it was to understand concern or perception on how people think of Bangkok at night time. From results of the photo contest, a set of criteria has been established to select sites for observation and workshop. Finally discussion and presentation were conducted to share knowledge found from the study.

### 2.2 Photographic Contest

"Bangkok by Night" photographic contest were set to open for the public in 2012. It was designed to understand how people think of Bangkok in night time and what could be the relationship between light and environment. Therefore, it was an open ended statement without restriction or condition for the photographic contest. Participants were only requested to describe their thought behind submitted photos. Four judges were representatives from each organizer to evaluate submitted photos. They were from different disciplines; lighting design, education and media from both local and international. Results from photo contest were used to determined workshop framework and sites for observation method which will be explained in section 3.

### 2.3 Site Selection and Criteria

Findings from people's thought on Bangkok at night time has been evaluated and interpreted in the next section. Its results were starting points for a field study on real environmental observation and workshop focusing on public spaces. Site selection criteria was a continuity from earlier discoveries from photo contest. The criteria were simple public spaces/roads/communities around landmark, park and Chao Praya River. According to Thainess structure with respect to ethology adapted from James Clifford by Suveeranont (Suveeranont and Techapera, 2011), ethno-space can be divided into 4 categories. Those are 1. Traditional Thai; 2. Folk Thai; 3. Vernacular Thai; and 4. Contemporary Thai. This paper emphasizes vernacular Thai where variety of experience has more meaning to every day's life and it has been melted everywhere such as on street, public spaces and semi-public spaces. More vernacular Thai examples can be found in Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture book (Cornwel-Smith and Goss, 2013).

Therefore, with respect to the stated criteria, five areas of study were determined. Those were 1. Pra Sumen Fort and park on Chao Praya River and Kaosarn area; 2. Bangkok old town along the Chao Praya River; 3. Kadeejeen community, Wat Arun and flower market area; 4. The old town from Bangkok city hall toward the Democracy monument landmark along Rachadamnern road; and 5. Central business district (CBD at Lumpini Park as presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Five selected areas for field studies

### 2.4 Participants and tasks in the Workshop

To conduct observation and workshop, a call for limited participants was advertised through different channels under topic "Light Detective: Bangkok Light Identity". Total number of attendant for the workshop was 60 including workshop leaders from Lighting Detective Group as well as stakeholders in lighting such as students, local lighting designers, international lighting industries, government and interested people. The participants were separated into 5 groups according to the site selection. See Figure 2 for working atmosphere after the night field work. The workshop began with purpose



Figure 2: General atmosphere during the group workshop

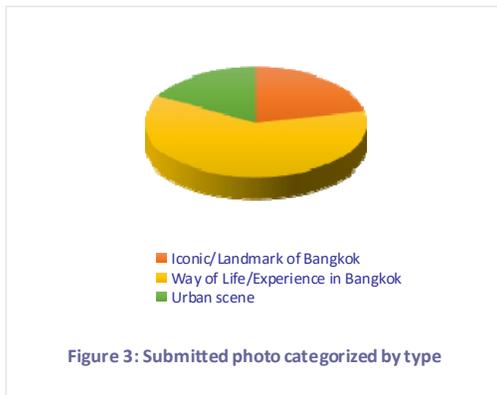
of study; to learn pattern on usage related to light observation at night walk around selected sites. Then discussion from pictures taken and observation were conducted with suggestions for such design and direction for light for Bangkok in sketch and presentation. Photos collected from photo contest were displayed in the conference room with map and luminance measurement performed by KMUTT graduate student to provide basic and in depth information about Bangkok at night, perception and its current lighting condition. Finally each group exchanged knowledge via dialog, compiled their findings and presented to the public in a Forum where 120 attendant participated to listen and to exchange ideas.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

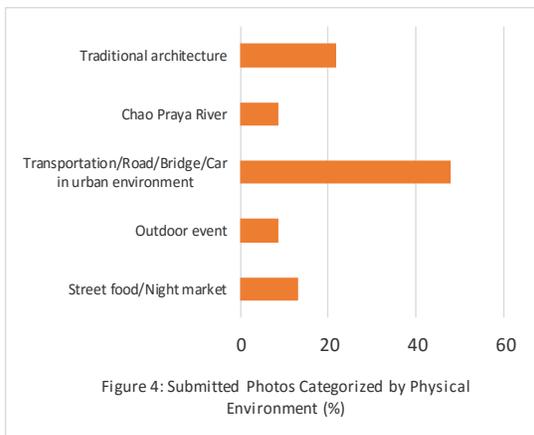
### 3.1 Photo Contest

23 photo submissions were evaluated through photos and its description. From submissions, type of photos can be categorized into 3 types; iconic or landmark of Bangkok and lifestyle experienced in Bangkok and urban scenes. Figure 3 presents percentage of types of submitted photos (Chutarat, 2012). It shows that 61% of submitted photos were ways of life or experience in Bangkok, and 22% and 17%

were landmark and urban scenes respectively. Majority related light in Bangkok toward ways of life in a simple manner rather than traditional landmark, Thai architecture or urban scenes. Results from selecting 6 winning photos by judges confirmed the same direction where 66% of winning photos indicated people's perception of Bangkok at night toward life style and only 33% was traditional landmark.



Moreover, it is interesting to note that roadway, bridge and ways of transportation is important in connecting with people's perception of Bangkok as indicated in Figure 4 (Chutarat, 2012). It can be interpreted that current interest of people shifted toward the importance of experience of light that people prefer to interact with environment than one way visualization or communication reflecting a philosophical change in values.



**3.2 Results of Site Observation and Workshop**  
 Keys important of findings from observations and dialogue during the workshop are discussed in this section according to the five selected sites.

3.2.1. Pra Sumen Fort and park on Chao Praya River and Kaosarn area. The walk started from Kaosarn road, Soi Ram Butri, Pra Arthit road

where it is famous for backpackers and night life, toward Pra Sumen Fort and the park adjacent to it on the river. Roads are small with only 1 - 2 lanes with shop houses that turned into bars, restaurants and small hotels along the roads. Bright road and uniform HPS light were partially temporary adapted into low ambient light level by plants, fabric, black plastic sheets. Task lights for food stalled were simple and DIY style from variety of reused materials such as foam cup, card board from unused boxes, aluminum foil from snack packaging. Elements in achieving successful implementation found during observation were food, low ambient light, and music.

Pra Sumen Fort and park area were glare and bright for public activities. The workshop suggested to bring back its history of "Lumpoo" tree, once used to be pride and identity of this district "Bang Lumpoo". Lumpoo tree has a unique characteristic that is a habitat of fireflies. Design suggestion at this area was to keep the darkness at the park along the river for mood and to be able to appreciate the river by night with decorative light of "Fireflies" effect. The rest is low position light for people to be able to see the river and sky with adaptable design features for public event. See Figure 5 for an idea from Mr.Mende and workshop attendee team.

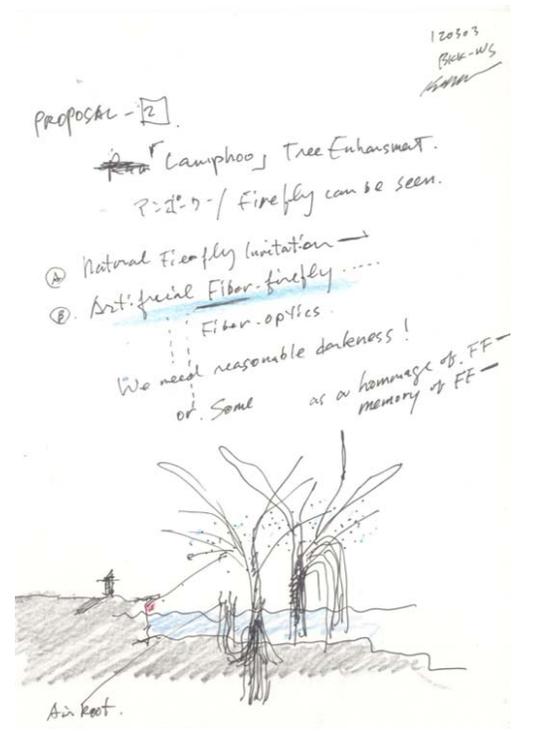


Figure 5: A sketch by Kaoru Mende proposing "firefly" lighting effect on Lumpoo tree on the Chao Praya River at Pra Sumen Park

3.2.2 Bangkok old town along the Chao Praya River. The walk started from market around Rakang temple and Siriraj hospital, Siriraj pier, Ta Chang pier, Royal temple and Royal palace areas, including Sanam Luang and market around Museum Siam. Perceived images were a combination of shimmering, gold color, religious and heritage surrounded by informal, local activities on small streets. This indicated that monarch family lived with people in harmony. General findings from the workshop attendee were that heritage buildings were lit with warm HPS light sources without proper details where major and formal street lights were cooler metal halide lamps. Light in the market were found similar to other areas which was simply DIY and glare without details.



Figure 6: Warm and shimmering atmosphere along with glare from non-glare protection luminaire



Figure 7: Proposed color contrast with glare protection detail for Grand Palace and Royal Temple walls

3.2.3 Kadeejeen community, Wat Arun and flower market area. The Kadeejeen community is located on the western bank of the Chao Praya River where it is recognized for its cultural and religious diversity. Kadeejeen was perceived to be a romantic riverside and quiet residential area. The new light installation along boardwalk on the river seemed formal uniform bright light level yielding high contrast between dark and light providing harsh shadow and discomfort as well as unsafe feeling. Preferred conditions would

be cozy warm and softer atmosphere that allows people to enjoy the river by night in a relax mode. Not far from Kadeejeen is Wat Arun or temple of dawn and flower market where they are ones of Bangkok's landmarks on the Chao Praya River.



Figure 8: Formal decorative bright light with high uniformity along the boardwalk on the Chao Praya River at Kadeejeen community

To Thais, golden candle light has brighten for both visual and spiritual senses. This has been rooted into Thai cultural events such as Loy Kratong (floating light festival), Kao Pansa and Wisakhabucha day, etc. Thais make candle light on their own into such activities. It is interesting to note that those ritual days are on full moon days that do not require electric light. Human eyes can be adapted under mesopic condition provided by the moon. The shinier the surface, the less light source required, similar to costume, art and architecture. The more reflective the object, the higher that status of the owner (Cornwel-Smith and Goss, 2013). Arun temple finish materials are pieces of broken ceramic bowls. Existing light conditions around Arun temple were low CRI, light pollution with



Figure 9: Warm and shimmering atmosphere along with glare from non-glare protection luminaire

less glare control. Recommendations from the workshop were to choose right color temperature with tested materials, good CRI, glare controlled luminaires to reduce visible to light sources and design with appropriate light proposition.

Flower market, was perceived to be colorful and cheerful place that operates 24 hours. Existing light sources were different types of light sources, creative solutions for low budget but bare lamps create glare. The workshop attendee recommended to use better CRI with right color temperature for different types of flowers with lower power consumption and to remain creative of handmade solutions for cheap, pleasant and cheerful atmosphere.

3.2.4 The old town from Bangkok city hall toward the Democracy monument landmark along Rachadamnern road. A combination of formal light at the city hall with informal light along the road from shop houses toward formal light at the Democracy monument were found again. Most shop houses open during the daytime and only certain areas opens until night time. There were street food and food stall where comprehensive innovation ability in lighting product content including DIY can be found near the landmark (the monument and the city hall/giant swing). Most lighting is bright, glare or with custom glare-shielded do-it-yourself luminaire to attract customers in a simple way. Materials range from bare LED, incandescent lamp, fluorescent lamp with paper or foam as a light control material. Sources of energy come from battery or tapping with neighbours. There is a need to continue atmosphere that connects landmarks with small roads or paths. Patterned and unpatterned light were documented along with proposed proposition of light in sketches below by workshop attendee.

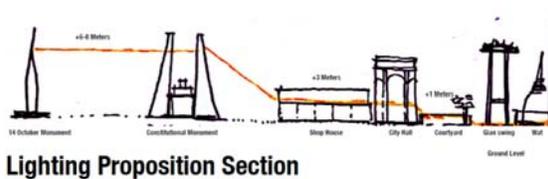


Figure 10: Proposed lighting proposition from Bangkok City Hall toward Rajadamnern road

3.2.5. Central business district (CBD at Lumpini Park). Problems found from interview were glare and too bright light level that people can hardly see faces if walking away from light sources. Also, light level was too dark at some

parts of the park that made people feel unsafe. Potential from the workshop was to propose appropriate light zone and strategies for jogging and relaxing at night without disturbing each other while providing safety. Example of ideas were sketched by workshop attendee.



Figure 11: Sketch presented glare controlled lighting poles for jogging path while leaving water body dark to be able to enjoy the stars

It is interesting to understand relationship among these places, how light supports them in different ways and great potential for market expansion in night cultural route as a sustainable development. Values in cultural lighting design integrated with life style can have a possibility in opening in a longer period of time, creating a new value to the district, extending through the night route with more employment rate, rental rate. Thus, this creates urban scenery figure Bangkok culture with special unique characteristic as from different approaches by walk, bike or boat. These uniqueness are already there and can be emphasized by light. Through understanding human and cultural interaction in such environment, this design approach will help in improving experiences in different ways during normal days and events. Furthermore, from observing those sites on other days during special events, most events cannot be success without food, light and supporting activities such as music elements.

### 3.3 Conclusion on Cultural Identity Interpretation through Light in Bangkok: the Contemporary Issue

As discussed earlier, lighting in space itself contains visual information that can be perceived, interpreted and understood in many different ways. It is important in interpretation. This section discusses the contemporary issue of cultural identity interpretation in Bangkok. Through the workshop and observation, values of environment do not only depend upon brightness dimensions, but also depend upon other

dimensions comprising aesthetic, socio-cultural, integrative and associative with surrounding. The cultural values lead to processes considering design concept, implementation, maintenance, conservation, adaptation for multi-purpose usage and management with respect to context.

In summary, for Bangkok, common identities have been found from night walk and workshop. However each area established its own characteristics, although it is in one city; Bangkok. There are common similarities and unique differences. Similarities are formal lighting that is expressed in a form of uniform and in some cases, traditional Thai style lighting fixtures, where informal lighting is more interesting. For informal lighting, most are functional light and custom-made in a sustainable way using recycled materials or practical design by people for people of its own community (DIY). Practical lighting is un-pattern or non-regular since it is flexible and adaptable for such different activities or way of life.

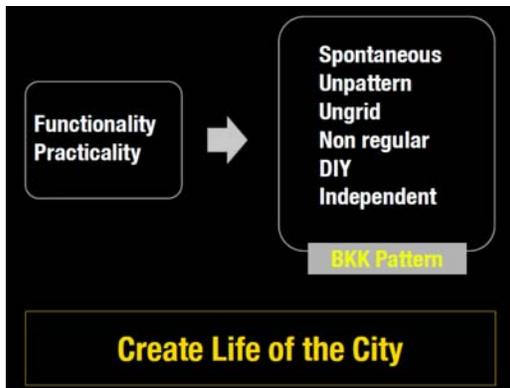


Figure 12: Diagram from the workshop group led by Prof.Jan Ejhed summarized findings on Bangkok pattern.

It suggested that next development for the future lighting and environmental design could be to understand people's experience from bottom up to fulfill with ordinary life that can be considered as a new design process for true values of history and culture in a modern way of life. Outcome from such a process is beyond design and research but to inspire each other, and to strengthen relationship among team for stronger community in a sustainable way.

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