



'Good design is good design': Hung Fat restaurant, designed by sculptor John Underwood.

GOODBYE POINTY ROOFS

By Alasdair Forbes

If you had come to Phuket 10 years ago, you would have been struck by the graceful sweep of the steeply sloping roofs that were a feature of almost all of the high-end homes and resorts on the island.

Taking their inspiration from the soaring roofs of Thailand's Buddhist temples and from traditional Central and Northern Thai homes – an open deck surrounded by individual pavilions for living, sleeping and cooking – architects created a new, if derivative, visual language for holiday homes and accommodation for the wealthy.

This 'language' was so popular that anyone designing anything different was taking a serious risk. One developer at that time tried building attractive Spanish-style homes. He ended up abandoning the whole thing.

Buyers wanted "Thai" – never mind that the style of Thai they were getting was nothing like

the architecture of southern Thailand which was, in fact, better suited to the local environment – six months of rains and six months of dry weather. Anyone living during the rainy season in a collection of pavilions around an open area needs an umbrella and rubber boots to get from the "living room" to the "bedroom" and back. Luxury living?

But that was ten years ago. Today, Phuket is home to many styles of architecture, some Thai, some distinctly not. Increasingly, architects and their clients are going for groundbreaking, breathtaking structures. What happened? Why is Phuket attracting so much experimentation and innovation?

Original Vision, founded by Hong Kong-based Architect Adrian McCarroll, has been responsible for some of the more unusual designs in Phuket. Five years ago the company decided to set up an office in Phuket, which has picked up some of the biggest contracts on the island and nearby.

McCarroll says there are several reasons

why people moved away from “pointy roof” architecture. Some are purely practical: “The Ayutthaya [Central Thailand] and Lanna [Northern Thailand] styles, which most of the traditional villas follow, are more suited to the northern climate. The amount of exposed timber becomes a maintenance headache in the harsh marine monsoon climate of Phuket.”

He also believes that, in addition to the problems with rain, these traditional Thai styles “are not conducive to the free flow and adaptive use of a contemporary lifestyle.

“Owners often tell us that they want their home to embrace their modern way of living but they also want to sense that they are in Thailand. There are ways to create this sense of place without resorting to pastiche.

“Reinterpretation of forms and techniques can be used to infuse a design with a more genuine representation of the local culture and the use of local materials can help reinforce these ideas,” McCarroll says.

Thai architect Suchja Pinyochon has been designing resorts and villas in Phuket for 20 years. He says he has detected three “periods” in recent architectural history in Phuket. In the 1980s architectural design in the tourism industry was driven by locals, who opted to follow styles from Hawaii, resulting in a lot of concrete and the white towers one sees today in Patong and Phuket City.

In the 1990s, demand for vacation or retirement homes boomed. “People wanted Thai styles of architecture to provide an identity; they wanted to feel that they lived in Thailand, not in Hawaii or in a copy of their home in Europe.”

In about 2003, however, there was another change. He agrees with McCarroll that maintenance was a factor, but also feels that more adventurous design was driven by the availability of new materials that made possible designs that had been difficult and expensive to achieve before.

As an example, he cites his own current project, The Village - Coconut Island, on an island just off Phuket. This community, which has already won awards for its design, will eventually have 142 homes, many right next to the ocean with only a golden beach in the way.

The design of the homes pays homage to the location through the roofs, which echo the shape of Thailand’s famed long-tail boats, while French windows allow the interior to be opened wide to the tropical breezes. But the architect has also been careful to create designs that give privacy and comfort when required, something that is not always possible with the pavilion design.

The developer, former Sunsail yachting holidays boss Chris Gordon, chose the site for its views of, and immediate access to Phang Nga Bay, which he describes as “a wonderful boating playground. There’s nowhere really like it.” Being on the east coast, The Village is also sheltered from the wet and windy southwest monsoons, from May to October, which means that the sea can be enjoyed year-round.

The Village is aimed squarely at those who enjoy water sports so, naturally, the location right next to the sea is essential. But this also means that the homes must be able to withstand the saline conditions without constant costly maintenance. So very careful thought went into the selection of materials. Much of the timber, for example, is not from Thailand – which has plenty of trees – but is specially treated timber sourced from New Zealand.

The distinctive roofs, apart from lending a Thai taste to the homes, are also very practical, Suchja says; their relatively shallow pitch means that they provide much more overhang than a steeply-pitched roof – another example of why “pointy roofs” are less sensible.

While homes in Phuket have been moving steadily away from Thai pastiche to more adventurous forms, the most adventurous



Pointy roof design - Architect Adrian McCarroll says, ‘There are ways to create this sense of place without resorting to pastiche.’



The roofs of The Village, apart from lending a Thai taste to the homes, are also practical

architecture in Phuket is currently to be seen in the island's restaurants, from the stark black-and-grey minimalism of fusion restaurant Rain-Hail (by Italian architects Liverani and Molteni) to the Mediterranean white and blue of the White Box.

But the most astonishing design is that of Hung Fat's, a classy Szechuan Chinese restaurant and jazz bar that opened recently just to the north of Patong, Phuket's boisterous tourism centre.

Hung Fat's was designed, not by an architect, but by sculptor John Underwood. He had architectural and engineering help to ensure the design was stable ("They fill in the dots for me," is how he puts it) but this has by no means cramped his style.

The main frame of the building consists of enormous steel pylons and curving trusses, fabricated in Underwood's workshops and bolted together on site. The upper floor is, in

effect, like a giant table placed inside the structure which, Underwood says, makes it feel as though the upper and lower floors are part of one another.

The interior is clad in thousands of pieces of recycled timber; one of Underwood's most endearing qualities is his use of materials other people have thrown away.

Underwood – who is in huge demand around Asia for his remarkable ideas and his skills with metal – is currently thinking about the design for his own new home. It will, he says, be open to the elements, possibly under a massive tent.

For Underwood and Phuket's pioneering architects there are, it seems, no limits but imagination itself. As the sculptor puts it, "Good design is good design."