



## **“Houses that Speak To Us”**

### **When SPAFA Meets Phrae, Together We Preserve Houses That Speak To Us**

On the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the book ***“Houses that Speak to Us: Community-based Architectural Heritage Preservation in Phrae, Thailand”*** published by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SEAMEO SPAFA), in collaboration with Phrae Architectural Heritage Preservation Club and Luk Lan Muang Phare Network, produced with the support of the US Ambassador’s Fund for Cultural Preservation, SEAMEO SPAFA was pleased to organize a live broadcast for a talk under the SPAFA SESH Programme Series on Monday 29 June 2020. The talk entitled ***“Houses that Speak To Us” When SPAFA Meets Phrae, Together We Preserve Houses That Speak To Us*** brought together three discussants who played an important role in SEAMEO SPAFA’s various research activities on tangible and intangible cultural heritage carried out in Phrae Province, which resulted in the documentation of historical houses of architectural significance located in the city of Phrae, subsequently published in the aforementioned book. The discussants included:

1. Dr Pornthum Thumvimol  
Landscape Architect, Thai Fine Arts Department
2. Mr Shinnaworn Chomphuphan  
Phrae-born architect and founder of the Phrae Architectural Heritage Preservation Club
3. Dr Patcharawee Tunprawat  
Head of Arts and Creative Industries, British Council Thailand, former Project Leader of Phrae Cultural Heritage Research Project implemented by SEAMEO SPAFA.

During the Talk the three invited discussants shared their perspectives on what constitutes some of Phrae’s cultural heritage. On the one hand, the tangible cultural heritage of Phrae can be seen in the form of old houses, objects, the city wall, among other elements of material culture while the intangible expressions of Phrae’s heritage is embedded in its people. The discussants said that it is obvious that the integration of tangible and intangible cultural heritage contributes to the unique identity of Phrae and the city’s enchanting character. For both the local community and visitors who have a chance to experience the cultural heritage of Phrae through various cultural activities, falling in love with Phrae is inevitable, and together they share a sense of pride for and belonging to Phrae’s rich cultural identity.

The next part of the talk focused on the book ***“Houses that Speak to Us: Community-based Architectural Heritage Preservation in Phrae, Thailand”***, which



was an output of the Living Heritage Programme, a collaborative research initiative between SEAMEO SPAFA and ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property), based in Rome. The project started in 2004 and consisted of several community-based activities. Phrae was selected to be the pilot site in the Southeast Asian region for the programme due to the active local network, already set up by its own people. In addition, SEAMEO SPAFA invited the Thai Fine Arts Department (FAD), the main governmental agency in charge of cultural heritage conservation in Thailand, to play another key role in this project.

Dr Pornthum said that his colleague, Pitchya Boonphinon, a conservation architect, and himself acted as the FAD's representatives to work on the project. Their role was mainly to transfer and share knowledge in wooden architectural conservation, and to help with awareness raising activities for children and youth in Phrae. However, it should be noted that it was a good opportunity for both him and his colleague to hear the conservation concerns voiced by the community directly from the local people themselves. Moreover, the exchanges and experiences shared across all relevant sectors helped to broaden his perspectives, especially when it came to possible alternative modes of heritage conservation practised at the local level.. As a result, the FAD was also able to strengthen its efficiency and effectiveness in cultural heritage conservation.

Shinnaworn recalled the first time he came to know about SEAMEO SPAFA when he attended the forum in Bangkok to exchange and discuss with other heritage conservation networks from various areas. It was a great introduction to working with SEAMEO SPAFA, since one of the main threats to Phrae's cultural heritage at that time was the dismantlement of the old teak houses. Due to social and economic factors, many people moved to other nearby provinces, while the demand for old teak wood significantly increased as it became more highly valued than new teak wood. Shinnaworn shared his activities during that time were to raise awareness on cultural heritage conservation among the local people, and to help them find job opportunities in the area for them. Then, from 2004 to 2010 SEAMEO SPAFA initiated and took part in many activities that generated a meaningful development for cultural heritage sites, which subsequently became tourist attractions. It can be said that those days represent an era in which the people of Phrae found new meaning in the values of their identity. As a result, many young people joined the network. As for SEAMEO SPAFA and the FAD's collaboration on developing the book, both institutions agreed that the dismantling of old houses to resell the old teak wood was a critical issue. Shinnaworn thought about how to cope with this problem. His first idea was to conduct an historical and architectural documentation endeavour so that the concrete evidence of these old houses would be kept as historical records that could be used for the future. He also added that the eleven houses that



had been documented in the book represent the architectural typology and style of timber buildings of Phrae from different periods.

In addition to the information documented in this publication, cooperation from the community as well as local organizations and governmental agencies was one of the main factors contributing to the success of this book. It was also remarked that the information in the book came from primary sources, such as interviews with the homes' owners or caretakers, site surveys and measurement works, and historical documents. The contents of the book include local histories related to the old houses of Phrae, such as the history and development of teak plantations and teak concessions, the erection of these houses, the stories of traditional carpenters, known as *sala* in northern Thai language, and the conservation approach for the old houses in Phrae. This book has inspired many who are interested in the conservation of wooden architectural heritage, even though the dismantling of these houses has persisted because of various social and economic factors. What is reassuring is that the information in this book can be hugely beneficial in understanding the history of these houses and the city of Phrae, and can be used for the reconstruction of houses in the event of unexpected circumstances. Furthermore, the book provides an opportunity to rethink the matter before tearing down houses of such significance, as conveyed in the book's title "Houses That Speak To Us".

In conclusion, the talk highlighted that the cultural heritage conservation of Phrae adopts an integrated approach that intertwines both the tangible and intangible aspects of heritage, whether they are still in practise or have evolved from their original expression. In a way, it can be said that the city of Phrae and its vicinity are a living museum exhibiting various kinds of cultural heritage. Therefore cultural heritage conservation in Phrae is one of the most interesting case studies whereby an appropriate methodology for conservation action is necessary together with continuity in conservation interventions passed from external resource persons to the local people for a greater impact. It can be observed that, following the completion of the Living Heritage programme, the local conservation network still continues working to this day. Last but not least, the pride in and love for cultural heritage in Phrae has been transferred from generation to generation through oral histories told by elders and thanks to the engagement of all stakeholders in adopting a sustainable approach to conservation.

The recording of the live broadcast can be viewed on SEAMEO SPAFA's YouTube Channel at the following link: <https://youtu.be/JtpbuXX8Vgw>



Download the book “Houses that Speak to Us: Community-based Architectural Heritage Preservation in Phrae, Thailand” at the following link:

<http://www.spafajournal.org/index.php/spafapub/issue/view/92/showToc>