

Differences, Originality and Assimilation: Building Nine at Panabhandhu School

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An Architect should neither compete in the war of images, nor be concerned with absolute originality.
Ongard Satrabhandhu¹

In 1969, the architect Ongard Satrabhandhu was commissioned by his family to design Building Nine of the prestigious Panabhandhu Elementary School in Bangkok. Thai by birth but educated at both Cornell and Yale, where architectural study emphasized the latest and greatest design *du jour*, Ongard chose instead to directly reference Modernist architects such as Le Corbusier. This emulation, though often criticized by Western academics as a form of plagiarism, not only allowed Modernism's entrance into the Thai tradition but also highlights the differences in the definitions of originality and assimilation when viewed through a specific cultural lens. In the case of Thailand, a country with a long history of cultural intermingling as a result of its frequently shifting borders, Building Nine was enthusiastically received as an emblem of Western high culture in Thailand and its architect as a fearless appropriator of elements and motifs from various sources as a means of paying homage to the purity of Modernist form.²

Architecture of Building Nine: Transplantation and Adaptation

At its core, Ongard's Building Nine is essentially a modified version of Le Corbusier's unbuilt French embassy in Brasilia (1963), treating the original design as a design template or *found object* that could be adjusted or exaggerated to satisfy the needs of the school and dormitory program [figs.2,3]. Given the limited and awkwardly triangular nature of the site, the circular plan of the transplanted Embassy allowed for an aesthetically pleasing site strategy as well as a method for vertical expansion. Ongard re-imagined the L-shaped office spaces of the Embassy plan as a series of classrooms connected together by double-loaded corridors, which, when echoed without partitions, served as dormitory space at the upper levels of the building. The top floors, which Le Corbusier intended for the office of the French Ambassador, were also paralleled in Ongard's transplantation, which desig-

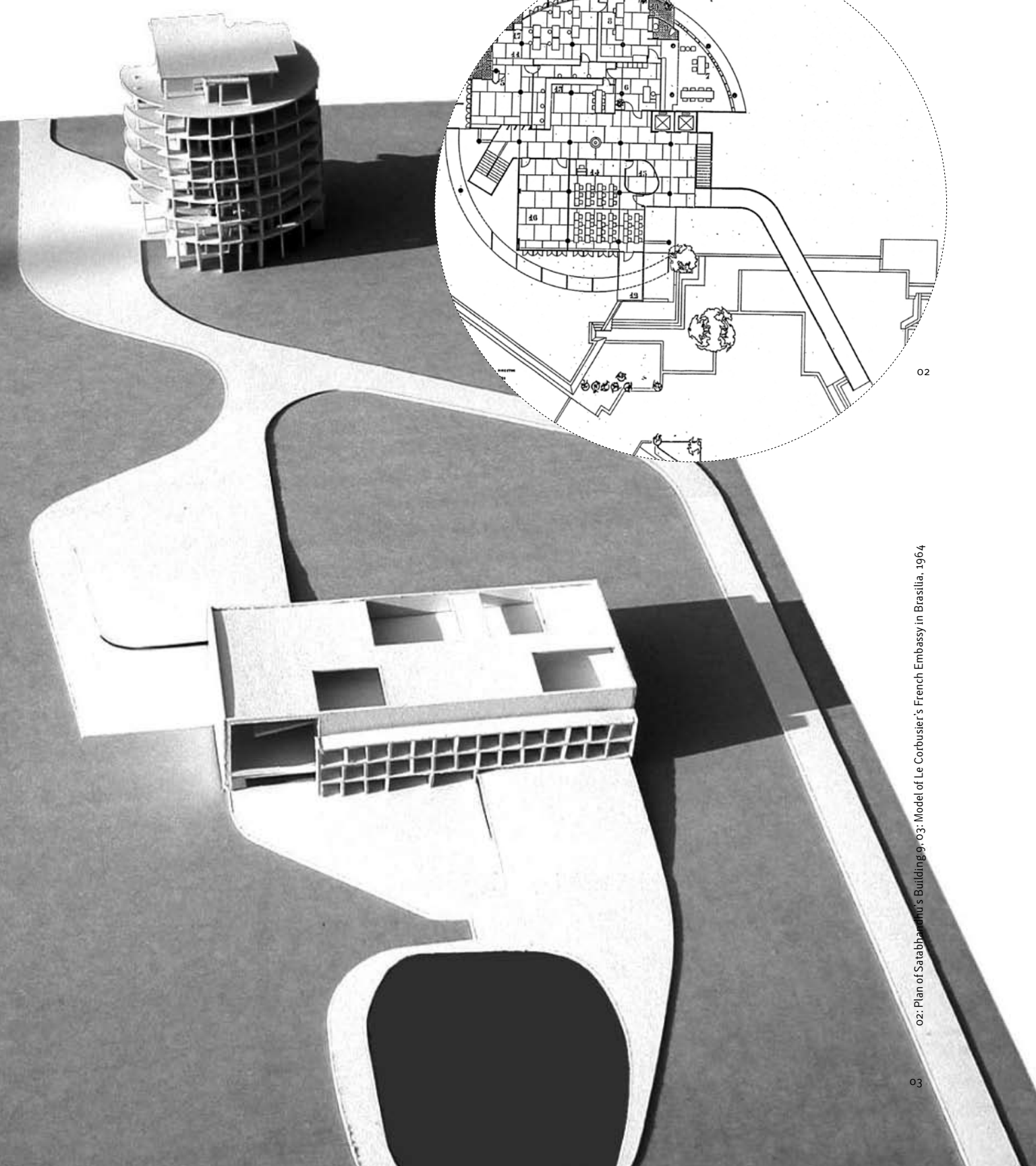
nated those spaces instead for building and academic administration. In addition to these programmatic adjustments, Ongard also expanded the Embassy shading system to protect the entire circumference of the façade from the Bangkok sun and added an exterior fire escape to the east side to satisfy the local building code – an element that would later prove to be the distinguishing feature from the Le Corbusier's original scheme [figs.1,4].

The *found object* strategy extended further to the aesthetic modifications of Building Nine, with many of the few modifications having themselves been taken from other well-known modern buildings, including other works by Le Corbusier himself. The curved ramp of Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center of the Visual Arts at Harvard University [1962; figs.10,11], the mushroom capitals of his Chandigarh Assembly Hall [1953-63; figs.6,7], and the sculptural water tank on the roof of the Unité d'Habitation in Marseille [1952; figs.14,15] all make an appearance in Building Nine, as do the principles of flat slab concrete construction (from Le Corbusier's "five points") and the average European ceiling height as defined by Le Corbusier's *Le Modulor*. And although Ongard is later quoted as saying that Building Nine "owed a lot to Le Corbusier," the brick circular cutaway to the ground floor directly quotes Louis I. Kahn's arch at the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad [1962-74; figs.12,13], and the oddly juxtaposed and incongruous auditorium on the top floor is also borrowed from James Stirling's expressively sloped auditorium at the Engineering Building at the University of Leicester [1963; figs.16,17].³ Ongard even takes cues from the postmodernist Robert Venturi by prominently displaying the letters "PB" atop the exterior wall of the auditorium, a billboard-like advertisement in the manner of Venturi Scott Brown's Seattle Art Museum (1984-91).

Salient features of Ongard's design not found in prior Modernist examples were the open ground floor and the particular classroom type. The ground floor of Building Nine was set on columns, seemingly in accordance with Le Corbusier's use of pilotis. In fact, however, this

01: Expanded Embassy shading system, Satabhandhu's Building 9





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02: Plan of Sarabhardam's Building 9; 03: Model of Le Corbusier's French Embassy in Brasilia, 1964

03



Exterior fire escape on east side of building, Satabhandhu's Building 9



Ongard Satabhandhu's Building 9 at Panabhandhu School, 1969



Mushroom capitals, Le Corbusier's Chandigarh Assembly Hall, 1961



Mushroom capitals, Satabhandhu's Building 9

decision relates more to the traditions of the vernacular Thai house; rather than using the ground floor's openness solely for the sanitary reasons that Corbusier prescribed,⁴ Ongard opened the entire space for natural indirect lighting, ventilation, and social activities – traditions inherent in Thai culture.⁵ Its multi-purpose program was enriched by the integration of stairs, benches and tilted walls to encourage active use, appealing to the Thai preference for outdoor public spaces. When configuring the classroom arrangement, Ongard offered an alternative to the conventional Thai school design of single-loaded corridors of classrooms terminating in administration. By separating the classroom from the faculty area, Building Nine modified the traditional Thai student-teacher relationship to encourage more self-discipline among the student body. Finally, Ongard's regionalized alterations extended to the landscape, as he eschewed Le Corbusier's use of massive concrete plazas (found at Chandigarh and elsewhere) in favor of tree-lined public spaces that created a pleasant student atmosphere while lowering the ambient temperature.⁶

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Polarized Reception: West vs. East

As a radical break from the emphasis on "originality" taught by Western schools, Ongard's Building Nine was panned by Western architectural critics of the day, who referred to the excessive transplantation as demonstrative of an "immature appreciation of Modernism."⁷ Nevertheless, the new building was extremely well-received in its native Thailand, where critics perceived it as a socio-cultural phenomenon: a conjunction of Modern architecture and the local context. Architecture in Thailand already had a strong history of cultural adoption and assimilation, due in no small part to the shifting borders and multiple cultures that have been historically endemic to the Siam area; thus, the nature of the Thai reaction was hardly unusual. The Grand Palace at Bangkok features several examples of architectural importation, including the model of Angkor Wat commissioned shortly after the Siamese occupation of Cambodia [fig.9], and the hybridized Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall designed in 1876 [fig.8]. The Throne Hall, with its juxtaposition of a Thai roof on Baroque imperial architecture, is of particular importance in relation to Building Nine, since it was the first indication of Western influence on Thai culture.⁸

Like the Angkor Wat model and the Throne Hall, the popular interpretation of Building Nine's transplantation and imitation was shaped largely by the power of social image. King Rama IV commissioned the model in order to illustrate to the Siamese people the vast cultural wealth of their empire.⁹ His successor, Rama V, commissioned the Throne hall to symbolically reinforce the country's modernization by requiring a Western-style classical revival.¹⁰ As a result, the Khmer and Baroque styles of the model and hall both made their way into the Thai architectural tradition. Building Nine, although not a governmental building per se, held similar prestige due to its association with the elite and royally-sponsored Panabhandhu School.¹¹ Thus, the building's widespread acceptance similarly allowed Modernism to arrive in Thailand.



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Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall at Bangkok's Grand Palace, 2008



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Model of Angkor Wat at Bangkok's Grand Palace, 2008



Entrance ramp, Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center of Visual Arts at Harvard University, 2005



Entrance ramp, Satabhandhu's Building 9



Brick circular cutaway, Louis Kahn's Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, 1988



Brick circular cutaway, Satabhandhu's Building 9

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What is Original, Anyway?

The construction of Building Nine emphasizes the subjective nature of originality in the context of adaptation or imitation. Western academia's negative attitude towards Ongard's emulation reflects a culture that frames "originality" as an act of conceptual generation. In Thailand - a developing country with a history of cultural conquest and assimilation - the appreciation of form and its social and political ramifications is considerably more important; "originality," then, is determined directly by architecture's successful adaptation to Thai soil. Generally unconcerned with the difference between "authentic West" and "imitated West", the success of Building Nine comes from the limited moves Ongard took in making Le Corbusier's Embassy design appropriate for use as an academic building in the middle of Bangkok. His sensitive modifications - the exaggerated shading system, the double loaded corridors, and the modified open ground floor, all of which satisfy the physical needs of the Thai lifestyle - are only important insofar as they remain emulations of other Modernist motifs, while his inclusion of Modern and Postmodern elements from other buildings help to reinforce a progressive image of the Thai state and its people. So although the means of Modernism's entrance into Thailand challenged certain Western attitudes vis-à-vis architecture, the perception of the building's nuances and slight variations softened with the social and cultural context. Building Nine becomes a clear manifestation of a cultural conjunction in the context of Modernism, an easy dialogue between architecture and the local culture, mirroring the introduction of Thai Colonialism as the royal architectural style one hundred years before.

What comes out of the Building Nine narrative is the question of how far must one move from the original template in order to be considered "original". Between Western and Thai academia, the perceptual difference - at least in terms of form - is considerable. However, at its heart, the construction of Building Nine reveals the nature of originality as culturally subjective. Is Building Nine plagiarized? Largely, yes. But is Building Nine original...?



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Sculptural water tank on the roof. Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseille, 1952

Sculptural water tank on the roof, Satabhandhu's Building 9

Sloped auditorium, James Stirling's Engineering Building at the University of Leicester, 1959

Sloped auditorium, Satabhandhu's Building 9

Endnotes

1. Ongard Satabhandhu, cited in John Hoskin, *Bangkok by Design* (Bangkok: Post Books, 1995), 118.
2. The argument of this paper is mainly drawn from one exhaustive account of this important work. One of them is Ongard's undergraduate thesis at Cornell University: Ongat Satraphan, "Pana Bhandu School Redevelopment, Bangkok, Thailand" (M.Arch Thesis, Cornell University, 1965). This thesis was done the under supervision of Professor Colin Rowe.
3. Hoskin, *Bangkok*, 119.
4. *Almanach d'Architecture Moderne* (Les editions G. Cres, Paris, 1926).
5. The lifting of the traditional Thai house is mainly for an amphibious function: avoiding the constant flood and humidity, providing security from wild animals, and creating a supplementary living area under the house. It also acts as a multi-purpose area for storing goods, engaging in cottage industries, and sheltering boats during the rainy season. Horayangkura gives an interesting comparison to the design strategy of the Modern master: the stilt feature inspires analogous architectonic expression of Le Corbusier with regard to manifesting Modernism in his five-point manifesto. See Vimolsiddhi Horayangkura, "The Architecture of Thailand, Change Amid Continuity: The New Challenge", *Transforming Tradition in Architecture in ASEAN country*, edited by Jon Lim (Singapore: Unique Press, 2001), 234; and Sumet Jumsai, *Naga: Cultural Origins in Siam and the West Pacific* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 86-7.
6. "Education and culture were means of social control." Panabhandhu School was one of the first boarding schools in the country. The founders of the school had a vision of a better education that included healthiness, discipline, and community; the owners of this private school believed that this could only be achieved using the learning environment of a boarding school. Whereas most schools were public, funded by government, Panabhandhu School was a totally private institution (the name of the school was a mixing of the two founders' last names: *Pananonda* and *Satabhandhu*). This independence allowed the leaders of the school to use any teaching styles they saw best for the students. See Edward N. Saveth, "Education of an Elite", *History of Education Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 3 (1988), 367-86.
7. Vimolsiddhi Horayangkura categorized this as "towards Modernity in architecture through imitation." He also added his skepticism in using an extreme term *plagiarism* since there was a particular positive in provoking the understanding of the cultural transformation, thus he compromises by describing it as a "direct assimilation." See Horayangkura, "The Architecture of Thailand", 248-9.
8. More incisive studies of what indicates Western influence on Thai culture can be found in Non Arkaraprasertkul, "An Unexpected Introduction of Modern Architecture in Thailand", *Examining Cultural Constructions*, edited by Robert Cowherd (Cambridge, MA: HTC/AKPIA, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2006).
9. This experienced the first image of "Modernism" from the monuments of the early twentieth century. The monuments themselves were not cultural artifacts of Thai culture, but were "civic elements" through which meaning was derived from the precedent in the Western world, like Napoleon's arch and the Washington Monument. See Michael R. Rhum, "Modernity and 'Tradition' in 'Thailand'", *Modern Asian Studies*, no.30, vol. 2 (2006), 338-41.
10. John Clunish, a British architect, was commissioned to design the *Chakri Maha Prasat* Throne Hall (1876-82) by King Maha Chulalongkorn. It was originally designed in Renaissance style with three domes on the top. The design of the roof, however, was changed because Somdet Chao Phraya Borom Maha Sisuriyawong, who was an important figure in the country's "Cultural Identity" movement, was concerned about the image of the palace; he suggested that it should still be mainly characterized as a traditional Thai style building. Therefore, he suggested the alteration of the roof, from the domes to *Krueng Yord*, Thai-style decorate pitch roofs. The Throne Hall, thus, demonstrates this duality as a "crash of two different cultures". The fact that no one, Thai or foreigner, questions the cultural "authenticity" of the Throne Hall seems to indicate the successful appropriation of Western style architecture then transforming it into "modern" Thai architecture style. See Horayangkura, "The Architecture of Thailand", 237.
11. Non Arkaraprasertkul, "A Sudden Appearance of Modernism in Thailand," in "Keeping Up - Modern Thai Architecture 1967-1987," *Exhibition Catalog* (Bangkok: Thailand Creative & Design Center [TCDC], 2008).

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