# Athens Institute for Education and Research
# ATINER

# ATINER's Conference Paper Series
# ARC2013-0715

## Thai Concept of Forms:
## A Case Study of the Ordination Hall 'Sim' or Ubosot' through Platoian Analysis

**Pimwadee Eomthurapote**
**Head, Administrative Academic and Research**
**Faculty of Architecture and Planning**
**Thammasat University**
**Thailand**

# An Introduction to
# ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

# Thai Concept of Forms:
# A Case Study of the Ordination Hall 'Sim' or 'Ubosot' through Platoian Analysis

**Pimwadee Eomthurapote**
**Head, Administrative Academic and Research**
**Faculty of Architecture and Planning**
**Thammasat University**
**Thailand**

## Abstract

Either the Hutan or Mural is used for the decorative "Sim" or "Ubosot" which is the valuable cultural arts of the northeast region of Thailand, also known as Isan. All are uniquely different from the murals in other regions which popular religious literature is such as the story of the Buddha and local property literary. This paper presents an analysis of the Thai concept of forms inspired by Sim through Plato's theory of forms. After studying inductive reasoning from literature, phenomena, and the interpretation of religious space manipulation, the essential form is only as it was a mirror-image of a sensible thing. Plato's theory of representations also elaborates on this by taking the perceptions that are the analysis of Plato's theory of forms and explains how these can account for two distinct worlds or dimensions of being. The world of physical objects in space and time is known through sense perception as ordinary thought. The perception of concrete and abstraction in the mural of Sim can access knowledge in the perfect form. The paper raises cases of how monasteries in Thailand were influenced by the concept of Sim and how ideological recognition has changed over time.

**Keywords:** Sim, Ubosot, Hutan, Plato's theory

**Corresponding Author:**

## Introduction

The Northeastern region of Thailand is a source of civilization and one of Thailand's most important areas. There was prosperity together with progress under Buddhist principles for a long period of time. Most people of the area were and continue to be Buddhist. Their beliefs and traditions are associated with religion and are visible in the community lifestyle. The village lifestyle is bound with Buddhism and the spiritual beliefs of the forefathers. These principles are firmly embedded in the lives of the people.

## The Sim of I-san: <u>Vernacular Architecture</u> in Buddhism

The spirit of a place varies according to the place itself, and the architecture represents the identity of a place very well. Factors of identity are geography, topography, religious beliefs, culture, economics, politics, materials, and skills of Isan vernacular architects; particularly, religious buildings which were conceived out of religious beliefs. The purpose of the study of Isan vernacular Sim is to uncover its values and characteristics in order to preserve its abstract value. Three major factors of both concrete and abstract meanings of spirit of place are physical features and appearances, observable activities and function, and meanings and symbols. (Nimlek, 2006)

## History and meaning of Sim

Sim or ordination hall, is Isan vernacular architecture that is a sacred space in the temple and was regarded as a pavilion of Buddha. Following an ordinance of Buddhism, Sim was made for monks to perform their activities. Isan villagers pay much attention to the invention, styles, mottos, notions, and culturally inherited construction. These aspects could reflect Buddhist ordinance with regards to a place of activity for monks, where 21 of them must gather no further than 48 kilometers away from the territory of the temple. If too many or too few gather, that territory is regarded as disastrous given that it cannot sustain 21 monks, which is the minimum number needed to perform activities such as praying, in order that they do not violate monastic discipline. In the eyes of Buddhists, Sim is Buddha's pavilion with the biggest symbolic Buddha image, which has become a sacred place in the temple and was built according to financial faith.

## Beliefs about Sim

In the context of construction, it was believed that Sim should not be positioned facing the west, which would overshadow the sun. This was regarded to the unfortunate by considering the belief that the west is not a good

direction. Another reason to place Sim in the east is the belief that it is a fortunate direction for the face of the biggest Buddha image. Furthermore, Sim itself must not tower over the stump of a tree, a pond, or a mortar for pounding paddies. If necessary, there must be a ceremony of demolition for those items where permission is asked of the land protector; the ceremony also serves as an invitation for the objects to live in other places. They do not have to remain, which would cause bad luck and therefore hamper the state of peace and good fortune. Beliefs about using building materials of Sim are not related with fortune but, rather, permission from the land's protector. In terms of Sim's decoration, the aim is to decorate for beauty as well as protection from enemies. Isan mural painting or Hoop Tam in Isan local language is the painting narrating a story of Buddhist religion portrayed on the inside and outside wall of Sim. There are no fixed architectural rules of Hoop Tam, providing local artisans with the freedom in imaginary artistic expression. Artisans are able to select stories from Buddhist or local literatures. (Srisuro, 1993)

## Scope of Concept

The physical beauty of Sim buildings mixed with religious literatures has become an inspiration for both internal and external architectural space. Such inspiration brings about the analysis of Thai concept of Forms inspired by Sim through Plato's theory of forms

## Aesthetics of Sim

The philosophy of aesthetics in architecture under a religious belief would best described as the ordination hall or "Sim" in Isan. Sim is the most important building of the temple subordinating to Buddha's relics; that is, financial contributions by villagers. The architectural identity of Sim was found related to a condition of economy, society, and cultures, plus a benefit in spiritual values that connects and maintains the peace and isolation of people, communities, and temples according to religious beliefs. This development was established during human migration in the pre-historical period. The background of the concrete aesthetic notion of western civilization was found in Greek's literature, especially in work stemming from the Hellenic era (500-400 B.C.), which involved intellectual and notional factors (Lacewing, 2011). It was stated in this era, where western aesthetics arose outstandingly from Plato (428-348 B.C.) that "all beauties in this world all come from standard ones existed in the world of concepts". Plato's notion leads to a Theory of Representation based on his standard model, which gathers beauty and perfection that exists in the world of concepts. Even though Plato's world did not actually exist, it can be accessed with developed intellectual notions that brought out the perfection. For Aristotle, the world was completely different

even though his notion's route was similar to Plato's. Nevertheless, Aristotle still believed that art is a representation, but the model in his eyes existing in the human world represented everything under human consciousness. On the other hand, Plato's model was in the universe or concept and stayed beyond nature, while form in his eyes was the abstract things that are untouchable, invisible, and unconscious. In this regard, humans can understand using their own reasoning or awareness of concrete and abstract nouns. It is this notion that we call a Pure Form.

If we were to compare Sim's aesthetic value with Plato's notion, we would see that the concrete beauty of Sim has a similar meaning to the model of standard beauty in the ideal world of Plato. What makes their meanings slightly different is the fact that artisans created stories with Hoop Tam in Sim following a beautiful conceptual pattern. In addition, those artisans incorporated an ideal about the symbols of the center of the universe with a traditional belief. It is abouta building with two floors onwards which has high-level royalty residing there along with the upper-classes, such as king or the father of god. The upper-classes called this kind of building a "castle" (Saenbun, 2010). For the Buddhist religion, it is required that an ordination hall or Sim built for housing the Buddha image and representing the Buddha must comprise a multi-layered roof that has become a model of a multi-floor building. Besides the meaning embedded in building a multi-layered roof, there came a decoration and combination of other components showing that Sim was the high-class building which symbolized the center of the universe or heaven. The most outstanding decorated part is a gable apex or Chor Far that was placed at the center of the roof ridge. This portrays the mounts of Sumeru and Sattaboriphan, which were believed to be located at the center of the universe. There are also other decorative works that have completed the meaning of Sim to become the real center of the universe, such as crafted or mural paintings of gods and goddesses on window panes. Such paintings represent those that protect religious places and the art of creation. Moreover, Naga at handrail means a rainbow bridge that connects the human and heavenly worlds. Also included is a portrait of giants and a singha (protectors at the foothills of Mount Sumeru), plus decorated door arches and surrounding walls that symbolize access to heaven and the wall of the universe.

**Discourse about Sim's Identity**

Sim is apparently small in size, but strong in shape embedding a delicacy. Such character can exemplify the identity of Isan people well. Sim was also regarded as a peaceful and simplified architecture reflecting social conditions and the ways of living for people of Isan in that era. We call this reflection a pure beauty as see in Figure 1

**Figure 1.** *Prototype of Pure Beauty*
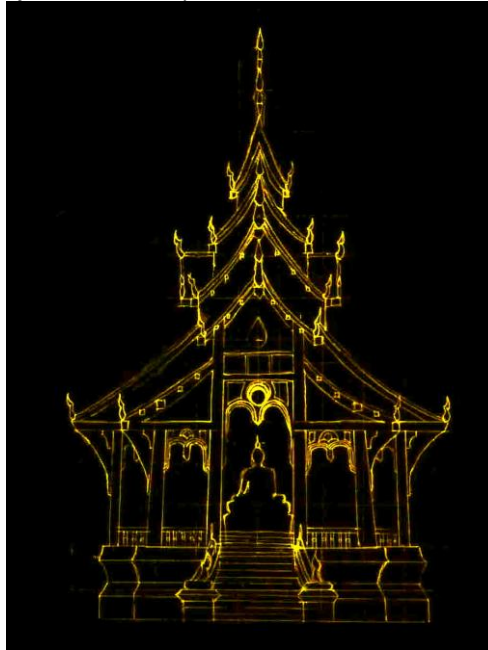


From Picture 1: A comparison between Sim and western aesthetic theory was made to explain abstractedly by applying the "Theravara Buddhism" philosophy, which divides beauty into two conditions, namely Conventional Truth that is a perfect physical beauty resulting in an advanced condition, and Ultimate Truth that is a genuinely pure state of mind without lust (see picture 2).

**Picture 2.** *Perfect Physical Beauty of Sim Isan*
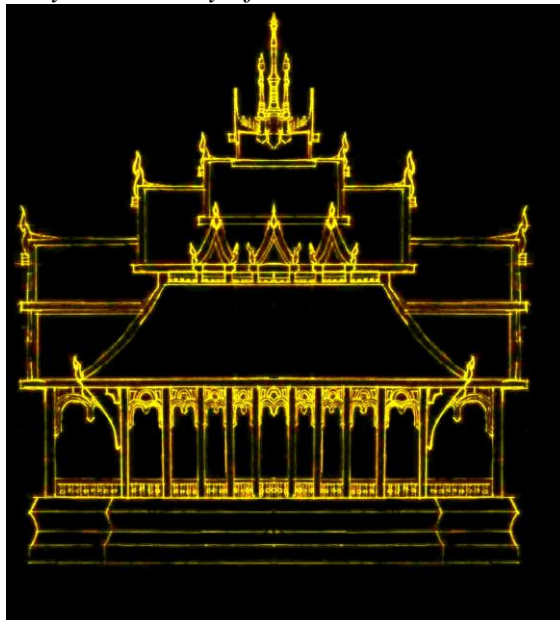
From picture 2: This latter type of beauty embeds conscious peace and gladness and focuses on ethics or a moral philosophy, while the western notion talks about aesthetics that require an intellectual consideration of its meaning. It can be said that building Sim is a harmonic demonstration of the abstract or religious ideal of Theravara Buddhism.


**Conclusion**

Plato's theory can be applied with Thai belief and faith because it could blend a notion in universe of three spheres that is similar to Plato's notion. All the buildings stimulate human awareness in touching to the context of the Buddhist community shaping a notion based on three spheres. This physical awareness brings about a belief to be settled for leading people to accept Buddha's doctrine in accordance with the Buddhism that stresses a morality to achieve a genuine release from life. Such a notion is related to the one by Plato that aims to educate in the format of abstract and concreteness, which is a so-called Pure Form. Most of the existing Sims were ruined and demolished because villagers have tended to pay attention to the new norms of capitalism, meaning that they favor the design of the center ordination hall and dislike the old one. This is because these villagers lack an understanding of value and meaning of folk wisdom. It thus seems that Sim halls in many temples were demolished and then replaced with new ones that have a pattern influenced by capitalism. Folk wisdom is a delicate thing we must consider intellectually to appreciate values created by our grandfathers and grandmothers. The hall in the context of Buddhist religion for instance, was built with a deep faith in the religion and connected people in the community. Therefore, considering the fact that the old Sim was no longer important and completely ruined, demolition of Sim and other religions was regarded as a destruction of historical evidence and ancestry.


**Bibliography**

Hegel, G.W.F. (1995). Reason in History. (translated by Hartman, R. S.). New York: The Liberal Arts Press.
Lacewing, M. (2011). Plato's Theory of Forms. Retrieved April 13, 2011 from www.alevelphilosophy.co.uk.
Nimlek, S. (2006). Sim: Isan architecture. NAJUA History of Architecture Thai Architecture. vol. 4(September 2006).
Pinyowanichaka, W. (2008). Sim : Vernacular Architecture. Retrieved February 15, 2013 from http://www.wisut.net/bureerum-article.
Puchidchawakorn, T. (2010). Isan Sim, from Discourse to Analysis: Architectural Plan, Space, Form Mass and Survival. NAJUA History of Architecture Thai Architecture. vol.7(September 2010 – August 2011).
Saenbun, T.(2010). Identity in the Decorations of Local Religious Constructions

of the Isan Region of Thailand and Lao PDR. Journal of Architecture, Khonkaen University. vol. 9, pp. 45-60.

Srisuro, V. (1993). Isan sim : Northeast Buddhist Holy Temples. Bangkok : Meka Press, 2536.

Veerapreeyakul, S. (2011). The Sim of Isan: A Conservation Format for Promoting and Restoring Cultural Vales through Community Participation. American Journal of Scientific Research. vol. 24(2011), pp. 90-100.