

Superficiality takes aim at Scala

There is a mix of rage, gloom and longing as, once again, the fate of the Scala theatre in Siam Square is questioned. To wreck is easy, to save is hard. The jackhammer screeches louder than nostalgia. Will the Scala, that quaint majesty stuck in a prime retail area, that solemn granddaddy in the flashy, messy, heavily commercialised quarter, be next to fall?

I'm neither playing the alarmist nor the romantic. It's just plain bitterness at the thought of another grand building gone, lost to the rush of faux-modernity that is smothering Siam Square. Earlier this week, one of the vice-presidents of Chulalongkorn University, which owns the land around Siam area and which has lately been very enthusiastic about building malls, gave an interview to Thai Rath newspaper. Asked about the future of Bangkok's last palatial-style cinema, he said: "We have to consider if the Scala is really that historical. Maybe to only a group of people. It's beautiful architecture, but it's not Wat Phra Kaeo."

Mic drop. Curtains fall. Wat Phra Kaeo!

The uncertainty around the Scala -- its status as an old yet functioning building in one of the most expensive areas in the country -- is another high-profile case on how we define progress, and how the tricky balance between history and commerce, between beauty and the beast, between romanticism and capitalism, is so hard to strike. The fear of Scala fans is not groundless in the least, since Thailand hasn't had an award-winning record when it comes to preservation of old buildings and historical structures: take the recent fiasco of the Mahakan community, ready to be bulldozed; the destruction of the prized ruins in Wat Kalayanamit; the smashing of the Supreme Court Building, built after the 1932 Revolution in elegant monumentalism. If all those could be done in, what power has the Scala to resist, especially now that the Wat Phra Kaeo comparison is thrown in?

To be fair, I asked Chulalongkorn University's newly appointed president, Prof Bundit Eua-arporn, a lively, youthful-looking man who speaks about various challenges facing his grand old institution. On the Scala, the president said that he never wanted to see "the demolition or the smashing of Scala", and that Chulalongkorn is committed to the support of the arts and culture. He added, however, that it's important to think about how to adapt the Scala to the changes around it, and he wants conservationists and fans of the cinema to reflect on this too. Prof Bundit said that the lease contract between Chulalongkorn and Apex, which runs the Scala and Lido, will be extended to 2020. So Wat Phra Kaeo or not, there's some room to breathe. Until then.

The 47-year-old Scala evokes such passion in many people because it is the last stronghold of home-like, affordable entertainment in the relentless expansion of garish multiplexes and their obscenely expensive popcorn (and tickets). It also shows that it's possible to spend your weekend outside the air-con tombs of shopping malls; nothing's wrong with them per se, but the fixed, cynical pattern of putting movie screens -- in fact every leisure activity -- under the roof of a shopping complex is a way to condition our behaviour: we're led to believe that there's nowhere else to spend time but in the mall. We're led to believe that we are only consumers. The Scala is not perfect, but it's more than just a relic of architectural romance: without meaning to be, it has become a gesture of defiance against encroaching superficiality around it.

Chulalongkorn's president has a point about the Scala having to prepare to adapt to change, and as an institution that promotes social innovation, they should come up with some ideas. If not, let's take a look at Myanmar, from where we can learn many things these days.

For many years the Yangon-based Mingalar Cinemas, the country's big theatre chain, has done something remarkable: they've bought and renovated 11 vintage movie halls, refurbished the interiors while maintaining the old-school exteriors, and nine of them are now up and running across Myanmar. As reported by cultural researcher Philip Jablon, Mingalar places a priority on keeping the facade of the old architecture, and this "sensitive treatment of long-established structures can increase the reserves of cultural capital of a city", he said.

This is the opposite to what's happening in Thailand (and I'm not even talking about the election!). Thai cinema chains prefer plastic artificiality to a more difficult and cultural form of theatre building. For a rich landlord like Chulalongkorn University, destruction often precedes construction. To wreck is easy, to save is hard. We have only Wat Phra Kaeo, but Thai history is much more expansive than just one temple.

(Bron: Kong Rithdee, *Bangkok Post*, 4 juni 2016)