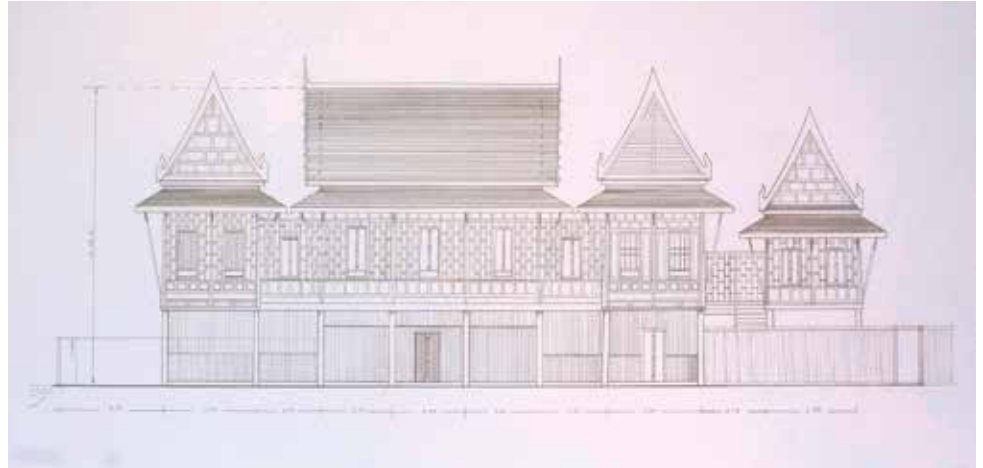


The House that Jim Built: The Jim Thompson House

By Clem McMurray

Just after arriving in Thailand, Jim Thompson took an avid interest in Asian antiques and Thai handicrafts. His closest female friend, Connie Mangskau, who also worked in the Office of Strategic Services, shared his interests. Jim's main focus was Southeast Asian art, which at the time was not well known internationally. As his silk business grew, Jim built a large collection of Buddhist and secular art, not only from Thailand but also from Burma, Cambodia and Laos. He and Connie made frequent buying trips both in Asia as well as overseas. Jim's acquisitions multiplied rapidly and his collection came to be recognised one of the finest in the world, with a number of pieces becoming part of an exhibition which toured US museums under the sponsorship of the US State Department

With an ever-increasing art and antique collection, Jim began looking for a permanent location in which to display it. His architectural background had fostered a genuine



Architectural perspective of the house

Every aspect of life along the *klongs* fascinated him. The peaceful tree-lined banks with branches gracefully arching over the water reflected tranquility, an aspect of life Jim so dearly sought. He and Connie discussed the idea of purchasing and disassembling several old houses and reassembling them to new designs as single dwellings - one for Jim and one for Connie. Older Thai houses were designed with light, prefabricated wall sections allowing relatively easy attachment to the substructure. This provided a practical means of construction as well as one of disassembly if a family wanted to move the house to a new area, which was common practice. If a family decided to move their house it was disassembled, the components were placed on a raft and floated down the closest waterway. Jim put a couple of basic designs together to act as a guide to the type of houses they were looking for, then they searched various areas of Thailand for structures that suited the designs. Subsequently they purchased teak houses from families in Ayuddhya, the former capital of Siam. The houses were disassembled and floated on barges down the Chao Phraya River to Bangkok.



Jim Thompson's house

interest in how traditional Thai houses were constructed and he found that many houses that were one or two hundred years old, were still in excellent condition. Much of the structural longevity of these buildings could be attributed to the use of teak, which resists rotting. Captivated by the nostalgic charm of old Bangkok, Jim applied to the Thai government to purchase a block of land on the Saan Saab *Klong* (canal) directly across from Bangkrua, which was home to the weavers he used to visit each morning. At that time according to Thai law, expatriates could purchase land for residential purposes provided that Thai citizens could also purchase residential land of a similar size in the buyer's home country or state. In this instance, Delaware was agreeable to these conditions and Jim's dream was fulfilled.



Connie and Jim when the house was under construction

In keeping with Thai tradition and to ensure that good luck, peace and harmony endured in the new house, Buddhist monks were engaged to set the dates and times that would be auspicious to begin construction. The monks then created an astrological chart based on Jim's birthdate and recommended that the starting time and date for construction should be 9:00 am on 15 September 1958; both were adhered to. The house was assembled to Jim's



Elephant statue

final design by Thai craftsmen (mostly from Ayudhya) who applied traditional techniques and used only wooden joints and pegs, no metal nails or screws. The oldest part of his renovated main house was built in the early 1800s and was originally a weaver's house from Bangkok, directly across the *klong*. This section of the house became the living room.

While Jim ensured that his house was built to Thai specifications he did change a few basic Thai construction components. A very important design component that he did incorporate in his house was that of the little Thai spirit house which, according to Buddhist belief, provides a home for the resident spirits of the compound. They can have a major influence on the good fortune of those who inhabit the compound, providing the occupants live in harmony and in accordance with their religious beliefs. To ensure the well-being of the spirits, incense sticks, flowers and food are daily presented at the spirit house. Its positioning is of primary importance as it must never be shaded by the main structure.

The completion date for Jim's house was fixed for 3 April 1959 and that was accomplished. The house then was occupied, after a Buddhist ceremony at the entrance. To this day, the original astrological chart remains framed and hanging on the study wall. Jim planted a lush garden to reflect the tropical jungles of the region and also provide a cool and peaceful atmosphere. In conversation Jim referred to his garden as "the jungle". The *klong* flowing at the rear of the house beyond the garden wall was and still is

constantly used by riverboats carrying people and cargo. Lessons were learned from the design and construction of Jim's house and these were applied to the construction of Connie's house.

For the following eight years the house was a social centre and many celebrities included Bangkok in travel plans with the specific objective of meeting Jim and, with any luck, being invited to dinner at the house. It is said that although dinners were sourced by Jim's houseboy from local markets and



The little spirit house

street vendors as takeaway foods, they were usually praised and no-one was the wiser. While appearing to be very much the 'man up front' in every respect, Jim was quietly spoken and rarely offered an opinion unless invited. Even though he was endowed with a sizeable fortune from the time he had made Thailand his home, he never forgot what the country



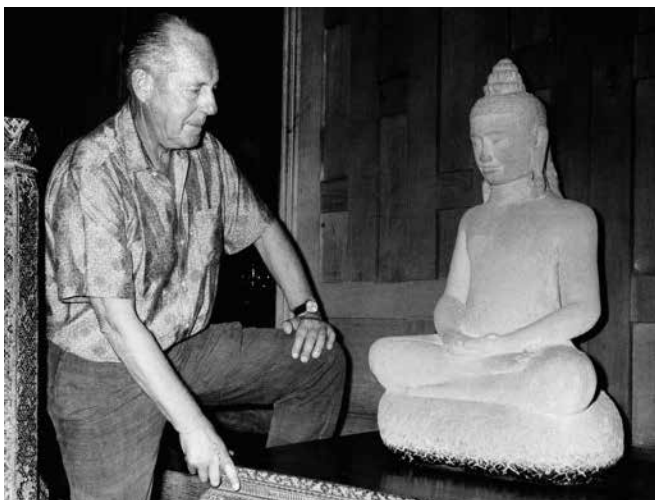
The living room

had given him and shortly after his house was completed, he allowed tourists to visit with proceeds going to the School for the Blind.

Following Jim's disappearance in 1967, the largest manhunt in Malaysian history began and to this day no trace of him has ever been found. The Jim Thompson House is preserved by a Thai charitable and cultural foundation. Some 40,000 people visit it every year and so the legend of the Thai Silk King lives on.

Clem McMurray lives in Australia. An initial visit to the Jim Thompson House in Bangkok led to his deepening interest in Jim's story and the origins of the house.

Photos courtesy of the Jim Thompson Art Centre, Thailand, MaryAnne Stanislaw (Connie Mangskau's granddaughter) and the author. Article published by permission of the James H W Thompson Foundation, Bangkok.



Jim and a Buddha statue from his collection

To read more about Jim Thompson and Thai spirit houses, please see the Jan/Feb 2013 issue of PASSAGE magazine.