



FRANCE'S HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Through the centuries, the residence of the French ambassador to Thailand has been a silent witness to the relationship between the two countries, which had been punctuated by alliances, treaties, betrayals, trading partnerships, battles, and wars.

STORY BY MARK PHILIP HAYES; IMAGES COURTESY OF EDITIONS INTERNATIONALES DU PATRIMOINE



A lone in the Southeast Asian narrative, the Kingdom of Siam has remained an independent sovereign despite the colonial ambitions of European powers—first the Portuguese and the Dutch, and then the French and the British.

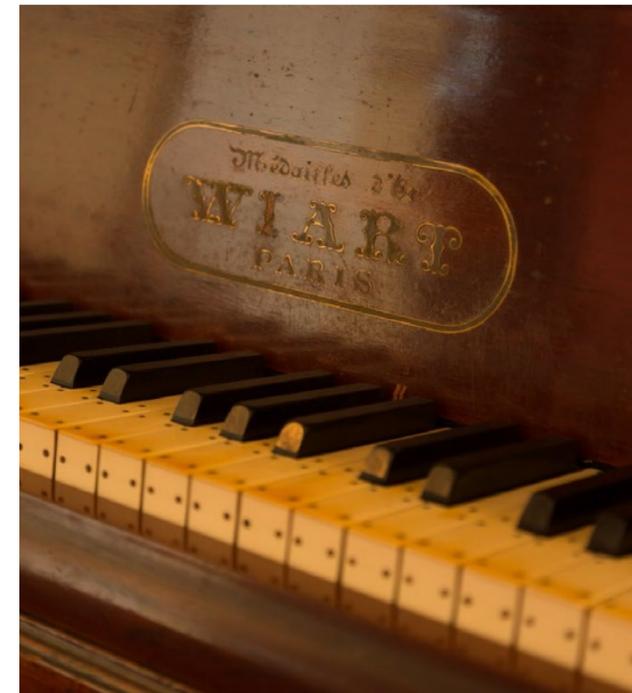
France has had a very long, often dramatic, and occasionally violent, relationship with Siam. While early missionaries' earnest attempts at religious conversion to Catholicism failed, trade missions and alliances with the Thai kings were established. In spite of these alliances and commerce, various intrigues and plots ultimately diminished the territory of the kingdom, but did not subjugate it. This, according to author Alexis Thuaux's observation, despite the kingdom's extreme fearfulness of full-scale invasions by the French and British from the 1870s onward. As an example, the French kept warships moored in the river outside their humble 'gifted' residence throughout the 1890s, pressuring the King of Siam to sign various treaties ceding control of Khmer and Laos territories to the French.

La résidence de France à Bangkok, published by Editions Internationales du Patrimoine, celebrates the 140th anniversary of His Majesty King Chulalongkorn's granting of a piece of land to the Republic of France to house its legation in the Kingdom of Siam. France had been previously renting the said plot on the bank of the Chao Phraya River from 1856 to 1875.

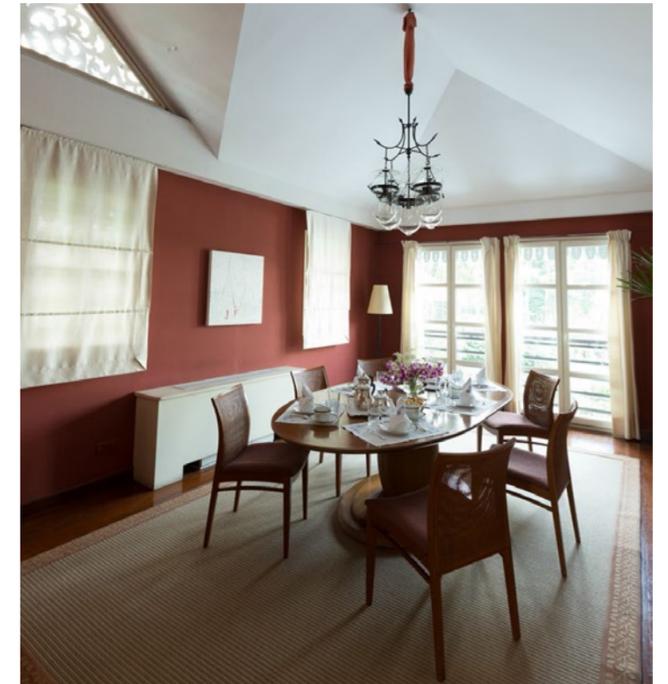
This book is a collaboration by three authors, Alexis Thuaux, writer and publisher of Portraits of Bangkok (2014), Sophie Trelcat, a journalist covering design and contemporary arts, and Jean-Francois Klein, a historian of the colonisation of East Asia and a teacher of modern history of Southeast Asia. The limited edition, which is unfortunately not for sale to the public, tells the fascinating story of the French ambassadors' residence.

The French compound comprising the ambassador's residence and the brand new French embassy building are interesting in that, in

addition to the continual evolution of the architecture, they represent a dynamic and evolving relationship between distinct cultures. European decoration and architectural façades blend with Thai woodwork and handicrafts, and, in the case of the new embassy building by ADPI architects, the form is a contemporary interpretation of local Southeast Asian form and structure. Above all, the buildings and grounds are a well used and comfortable home for the symbolic family of France, as well as the Thai visitors and dignitaries.



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A HOME ABROAD

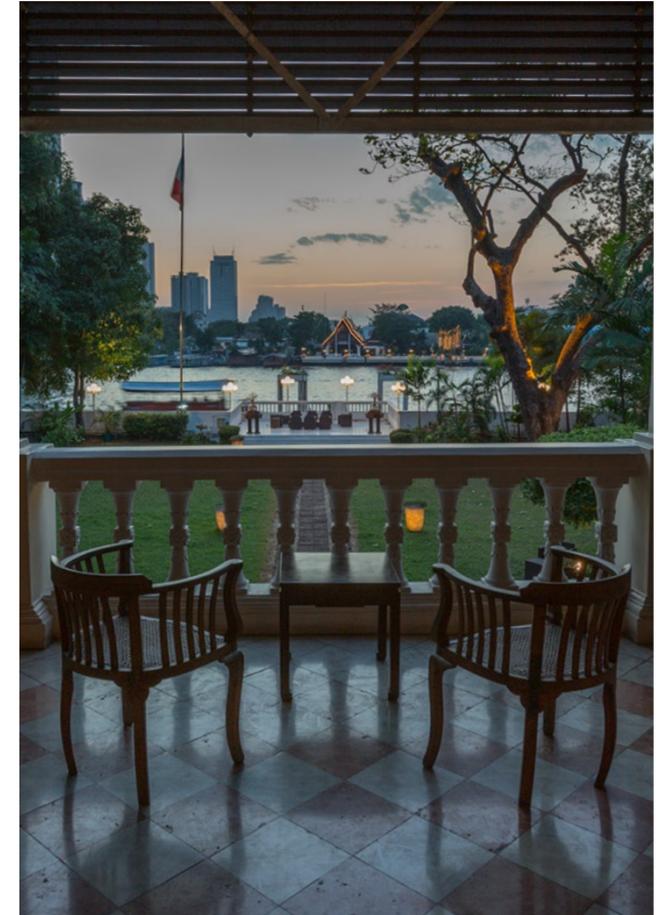
Despite its size, the house is unpretentious, informal and welcoming. Originally constructed on low-lying land prone to flooding, the original structure was a single storey vernacular building with a thatched, hipped roof. The structure has evolved considerably since then.

Today a far cry from its humble genesis, the house has taken on some of the common characteristics of colonial-style homes along with climate-sensitive additions and stylistic variations over time.

Parts of the house possess a neo-Palladian grandeur. Added to these are enamelled Victorian era gingerbread details, verandahs, vernacular-style window screens and louvered shutters. The original residence had a rectangular plan with one floor. Since the mid 1800s a new double-sided grand entry staircase, a front porch, a second floor, a reception room at the back, and a gallery on the right side, and upgraded and formalised landscaping and yard have altered its appearance considerably.

Built of brick masonry, the ground and first floors are preceded by a central terrace and double staircase covered by a pitched roof built between 1875 and 1894. The terrace measures 10 metres wide and 7 metres deep. The floor is paved with red and white checkered marble tiles, a luxurious extravagance in 19th century Siam. The composition of a pair of masonry stairs is a reference to the Palladian style, each having two landings and strung with decorative balusters of moulded cement in a flowered square sitting atop a wall punctuated by arched windows and Romanesque arches, and further ornamented with Doric pilasters. Before 1901, the terrace was used as a reception and dining area; today, it is a passage and place of relaxation.

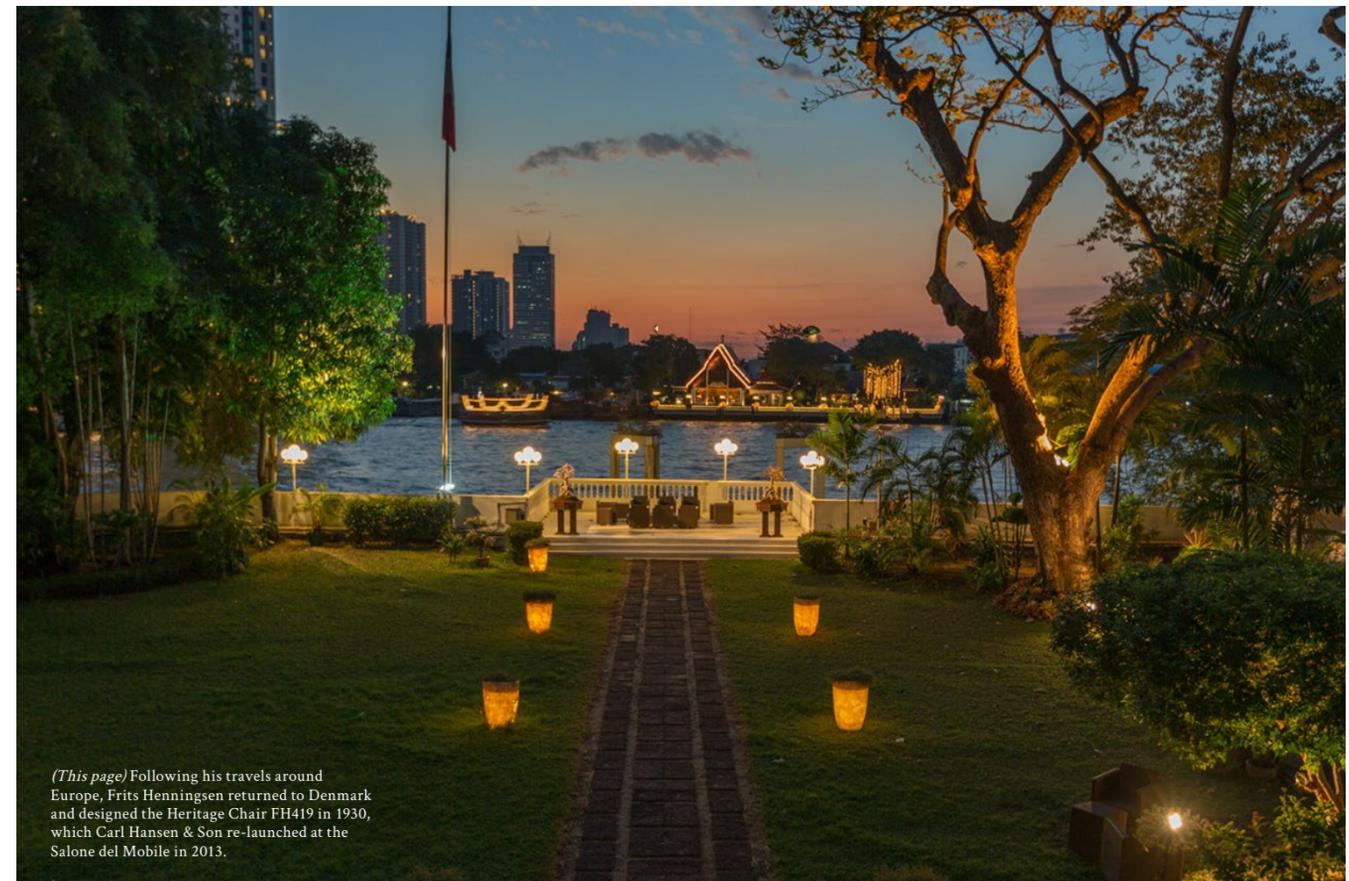




A WORK IN PROGRESS

Clearly the house has always been a work in progress. Each addition and embellishment have their own character and, rather like Bangkok itself, is unconcerned with consistency of style.

Added later, the roof of the porch and the second floor are in a Victorian Gingerbread style and, unlike the lower levels, are built entirely of wood. The newer second level houses the private apartments of the ambassador and his family. Aside from stylistic considerations, the choice to build in timbre is quite practical. The land upon which the residence sits comprises sandy and porous soil with low tolerance for heavy weight. Therefore, rather than constructing a completely new building and foundation system to accommodate a more formal masonry construction, the newer portions of the building were added on and favoured the lighter timbre construction. The new construction is more sympathetic to local vernacular style than to the heavy and powerfully symbolic architecture of colonial influence of other houses such as the earlier Portuguese ambassador's residence.



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The interior spaces are surprisingly tall when one considers the exterior proportions of the residence. This must have certainly helped keep cooler spaces by allowing the warmer air to rise. Over the years, the facade has changed from one that was open air, to catch the breezes in the sleeping quarters, to one that was enclosed, accommodating the wall and window air-conditioners.

It has now been modified to take advantage of new technologies, hiding the air conditioning units away for a cleaner look. The attic is topped with a hipped roof covered with long orange glazed tiles, and eaves decorated with wood fretwork. In its most recent renovation, the building was painted in a newly formulated colour scheme that harmonised the orange tiles of the roof, white shutters and soft blue green of the façade and set it all, radiant and glowing, against the variegated greens of the lush tropical garden setting on the majestic river.

TROPICAL ACCOMMODATIONS

At the rear of the residence, a dining room extension built in 1901 is flanked by an all teak verandah wrapping around the upper level – the roof of which shades the exterior on all sides of the dining room, helping to keep it cool and dry. Tall windows and a fretted clerestory facilitate a constant movement of air to help keep the room pleasant and relatively cool. It has a five-sided hipped double roof, a technique borrowed from vernacular houses of the region, that provides additional airflow and insulation against the intense tropical heat and sun.

A large, high-ceilinged living room at the heart of the residence is served by a separate inner gallery, the former boundary of the exterior loggia before the terrace addition, with three large Roman arches with Doric pilasters between that give the room a European formality apropos to the French home away from home.

Throughout there are beautiful teak wood floors that vary in width

depending on where they are located. In this way, one can tell the time in which they were installed. The wider floors of the living room are unusually wide at about 40 cm in contrast to narrower, more recent installations in other rooms.

In 1959, the functions of the ground floor were moved elsewhere, and that area opened to let air flow underneath. With the improved ventilation that followed, the suffocating floors above regained their original lustre. An interesting architectural note related to this space is the visible carved wooden screen above the doorways to adjacent rooms. Before the 1959 addition of a second floor, the central formal living room and adjacent rooms were kept cool as air was allowed to move from the high living room space, through the screens, into a plenum above the adjacent rooms, and there escape to the outside. When the second floor was added these openings were sealed. They were restored



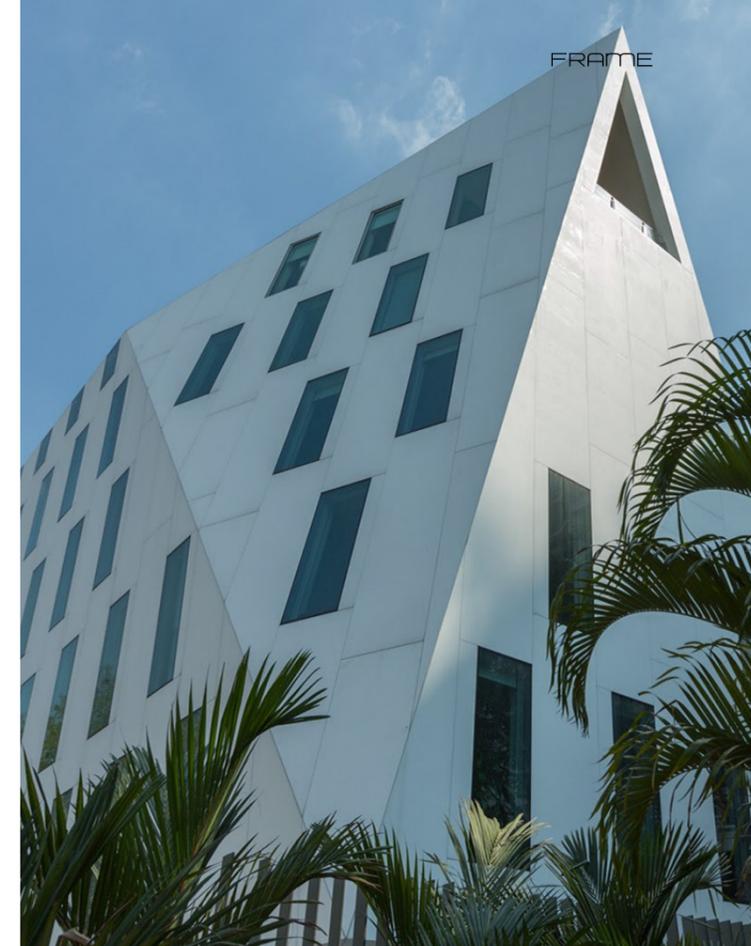
(This page) Following his travels around Europe, Frits Henningsen returned to Denmark and designed the Heritage Chair FH419 in 1930, which Carl Hansen & Son re-launched at the Salone del Mobile in 2013. *(Preceding page)* CH88, designed by Wegner in 1955, has only existed as a prototype until it was put into production in 2014. Wegner and his Wishbone Chair.

in the 1960's to balance the composition of the main salon.

Furniture was regularly sent from Paris, whether suited to the hot humid climate or not. Other pieces were made locally by Chinese cabinetmakers. Unfortunately, none of the original 19th century furniture pieces have survived. In 1929, the Minister of France, Charles Henry, asked for new furniture and of particular note, for a new piano.

A German-made piano, especially built for warm countries, was procured from the house of Wiart in Paris and shipped to Bangkok. A testament to the skills of its makers, the instrument is still in place today.

Next to the piano, around a small tripod table, are four Louis XVI style cabriolet armchairs that stand out amongst the couches, benches, modern chairs, and tables in the room. Nearby are two glass cabinets in carved wood that blend Western and Chinese influences with Siamese woodworking. Popular in the nobles' houses during the Fifth Kingdom, these cabinets display different pieces of richly coloured Benjarong porcelain and ornate silverware—gifts to successive occupants of the residence.





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IN THE PRIVATE QUARTERS

Access to the second floor private apartments of the ambassador is by a large teak staircase. Visitors access a gallery that runs along the rear façade of the building overlooking the roof of the large dining room. A row of movable flaps with open fretwork typical of Thai colonial style, open outward, protecting the house from the bright morning sun. Once through the private quarters was a large front gallery that offered splendid views of the river and less built neighbourhoods on the other side.

TIMELINE



According to Thuaux, the residence of France is a proud symbol of the long and tumultuous history of Franco-Thai diplomatic relations, reflecting the successive architectural tastes of its occupants. Today, this official national historic landmark occupies a prominent place in the hearts of the French and the Thai people.

In 1984, the building received the Architectural Conservation Award from the Association of Siamese Architects in recognition of preservation efforts in architecture. (Other winners include the residences of the American and Portuguese ambassadors.) As an officially landmarked structure, the future of this lovely mansion is assured.