



Bangkok to Chonburi

Suriya Umpansiriratana,
interviewed by Adam
Smith, translations
and interpretations by
Ajahn Keng

This interview took place in a car on July 21, 2012. Our destination was Vachirabunpotcha Forest Monastery on a small hill outside Chonburi, where Suriya was currently working on a project. The drive took about an hour so we had some time to talk. Suriya was being recorded while driving. His answers were given in Thai, a language I do not speak, so the whole thing was translated on the fly by the courageous Ajahn Keng.

My specific questions about currency for *Scapegoat* would have been totally incomprehensible without Keng's knowledgeable interpretation. Though somewhat out-of-the-blue, they also drew on earlier conversations I had with Suriya and his friend Kyai. The year before, I had also learned of the curious fact that Buddhist temples in Thailand are not subject to secular building codes. Suriya gives his time and experience to the temple "for dhamma" [in our terms, *pro bono*, but literally "for truth"] and now has a substantial body of work. In search of relationships between freedom, work, and the coercive nature of money, I had hoped to discuss the curious coincidence of working for dhamma and outside the law. In exchange for the gift of time, does Suriya obtain freedom to experiment? Is the money paid to him in normal secular commissions used by clients to restrict or control?

Translation and travel immediately thwarted my efforts to steer the conversation. The ensuing disintegration of narrative flow was not really unexpected, though in the end the conversation arrived at some places more or less intact. Even so, I was not as prepared for the difficulty of securing direct answers. Earlier conversations with Suriya had benefitted from the luxury of context, where we frequently abandoned words in favour

of gestures, drawings, or indications toward places themselves. The meditative quality that comes with having to rely on these latter modes of exchange often produced a kind of inarticulate clarity, quite different from that required of an interview.



Our discussion in the car wasn't supposed to be about money, but it was about money, about getting paid and not getting paid. But it also became more about the kind of currency I was using up by being granted an interview. In the end, between languages and through the landscape, it became less about expected dichotomies of money and freedom and more about the fruits of a determined effort shaped by circumstance. Along the way, the concept of exchange dissolved so that currency came to embrace not just the movement of money or dhamma, but also the collective movement of sustained practice.



Scapegoat

[The interview begins as we shuffle into Suriya's car outside his tiny office off Seri Thai Road in Bangkok.
Keng and Suriya are talking.]

SURIYA [Speaking in Thai: "It's a weird view, the work that we do is kind of...playful, but not too much. If it's an architectural photographer or writer, they can play, no problem. Architecture itself can be 'played' around with, but with a certain level of limitation. We are not comedians when we work. We may think like a comedian, or be funny, but when we do it, it is not like a comedian. We may be funny or have fun when thinking, and laugh like hell. But when we do, it is very serious, as we have to take money from clients."]

KENG Adam, we are talking about how architecture is a serious profession, and also how we need to take money from others, from the clients, so in a way we need to be serious to prove that if we have to take their money, we do it appropriately.

ADAM Okay...

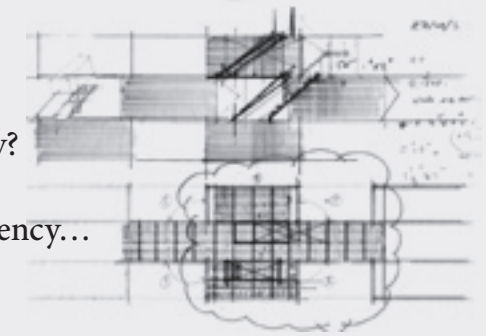
KENG Is that about currency?

ADAM Yes, that's about currency...
it's serious...

SURIYA ["It's not that serious, but sometimes it has certain limitations."]

KENG Limitations—sometimes you can play a lot, but when you work with limitations, you have to be serious.

ADAM Is it different when designing your own office or house, where there's no money, you just spend money? Is it not serious then? Can you do whatever you want, *sabai sabai*? [*Sabai sabai* means "chill," more or less.]



SURIYA *Sabai sabai mak!* [Continues in Thai...]

KENG He says yes, *sabai sabai dai*. He said it's not like a comedy show, that's for when you want to have fun, have a joke and a laugh, but when he works—he gets a kind of fun or good feeling, he's happy when he designs—but in the frame of our profession there has to be this seriousness, a kind of strict limitation. However, he is kind of casual when working.

ADAM When doing design for Wat Khao Buddhakhodom or Wat Pha Vachirabunpotcha, then it's different again, right? Because there's no fee.

SURIYA ... **KENG** It's the same.

SURIYA ... **KENG** It's different.

SURIYA ... **KENG** He said it's not that different, but is in some ways the same. It varies. It depends on the users, the client, conditions. For the temple you might have a similar kind of thinking when finding the points to start with, but then it could be different for the client, for the house, for others. It goes differently...

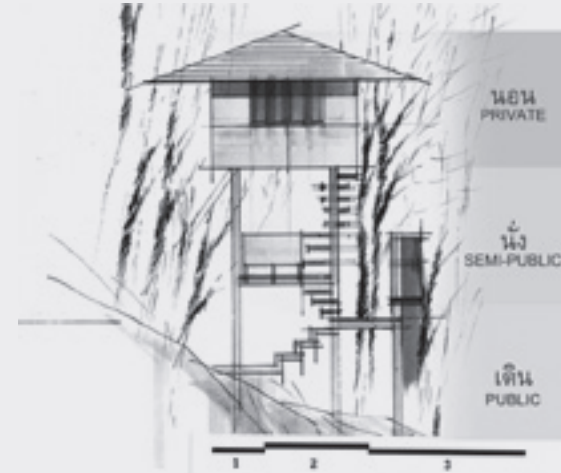
[The car pulls onto the highway from the Seri Thai Road, a straight flat line, except for the sudden rise and fall at each of the *klongs* (canals).]

ADAM For the temple and the house, it's different also because there are building codes when you design a house, but with the temple there's a different form of regulation when it comes to how it's built, no?

SURIYA ... **KENG** Yes, they are different, but he takes the regulations in the law as working limitations, or conditions, even though in the temple you don't have that kind of strict regulation. But

there are other kinds of limitations, so that in the end it is also in some ways the same as with a house, although the house is clearer in terms of rules or limitations, whatever you call it. But in the temple there is also a financial limit in terms of budget.

SURIYA ... **KENG** There is the question of budget, but also site, place, privacy, and so on. Those are his limitations on the Buddhist projects.



ADAM Okay...

[As we pull up to the toll-booth on the Krungthep-Chonburi New Line Motorway, Ox—graphic designer and co-worker who is along for the ride—interjects. He asks about the number of people involved with Suriya in the early days working

for the temple. Suriya explains that in the beginning his team was quite small, and he worked mostly with his nephew Joe and a few others. Now, on these bigger projects, he has access to numerous other kinds of connections, as well as frequent donations of materials and labour. The engineer is a disciple of the Abbot, for example, so Suriya can make use of—but must also respect—those sorts of connections. He also now has access to big backhoes and trucks, so he can consider going for the big machines rather than using primitive tools. Explanation and translation complete, we pass the toll-booth and begin again to pick up speed.]

ADAM So if you work on a project for a private client, they will pay for the different things you have. So you have freedom to do anything—if you want to dig, however you want to dig, or the

kind of materials, or the people that work on the project—you can decide based on whether they want to do the project or if you have the budget for it. If the client wants to buy a certain stone, they see if they have enough money to pay for that stone. But if you are working at the temple then you have to use materials that somebody donates. If someone has a certain skill then you use that skill. So you have to accommodate the many different things that you are given. Is that true? Is that fair? Can we say that?

SURIYA [*“Does ‘manage’ mean to force?”*]

KENG [*“Manage with whatever is there.”*]

SURIYA [*“Oh, I think it is fair because we use our head.”*]

KENG He says it’s fair, because he uses his thinking skills to use those materials.



SURIYA ... **KENG** It’s similar to his office now. It depends on what you have, what kind of problem or what kind of condition you face. And then you have to do it.

ADAM So, the other way, it would seem that, if you worked for the temple, working for dhamma or just giving your labour, then you have the freedom to do whatever you like, in a way. Whereas if you work for a client, they’re paying you, so they have control. But actually at the same time, with a client, because they’re paying you, you might have the freedom to do anything you want. In the temple you don’t have any freedom to do whatever you want because you have to accommodate all the things that people give you. So then it seems that maybe whether you get paid to do it, or whether you do it pro bono, is not the big question about how you work. Does that make sense?

KENG That makes sense.

SURIYA ... **KENG** The pro bono thing is like his habit or his life now. He doesn’t think about that because it’s just like that now. For the temple, sometimes he’s happy, sometimes he can’t really answer or tell why he has to do that job, but he has to do it. Or for you too, you cannot really give a clear answer, if you think back to why you have to make the magazine or book design, you just have to do it. Something like that.

ADAM Okay...

SURIYA Okay, but *mai kaojai*.

[I don’t understand, and the phrase is followed with laughter. I pause, still struggling to find my way.]



KENG It’s quite difficult to really explain why he has to do this work for the temple. But it’s his work for the temple. That’s the answer, you know.

ADAM I don’t think that question is confusing, because it seems like it’s a very good opportunity if you care about architecture or building. If you make architecture because you need a job—so that people will pay you to work—then maybe it’s better to work in a big architecture firm and get a salary every month. But if you actually care about what is possible, then a temple is an amazing possibility, because the people that go to a temple are going to practice, or the monks are practicing. They are doing their part well. They are doing it as best they can. So then it’s a great opportunity to make the buildings they practice in as best you can, right?

So it seems clear to me that it would be a great opportunity.

SURIYA [*“Everything should be done with patience. I observed that the people who wanted to do temple work, they jumped directly to the bosdh (phra ubosot)—the main monastery hall. When we started temple work, we didn’t start with that, we started with the waterway, the road gutter, or other drainage systems. We helped with other kinds of construction work such as when there was heavy rain on the road, we had to help with that drainage. We always started with that...And when we worked this way, we began to know most of the area. Most people are familiar with working within an organization, but the temple is not a normal kind of organization. We had to understand the temple system as we worked through it, and it seems like it has its own system that emerged as a response to capitalism. You must learn whatever kind of system you are working with because you do not encounter the same system everywhere.”*]

KENG I think, yes, he agrees that it’s a good opportunity, but it’s also *very* difficult.

ADAM Very difficult for someone to get the opportunity, or very difficult for him to do it?

KENG For anyone to get that opportunity—there are a lot or reasons why something like that is possible. An architect might come into a temple and want to design the *ubosot*, but Suriya first worked on the road, the drainage, the landscape, other things. Then he got a chance to do a *kuti* [monk’s hut], and then other things later on. And also he mentioned the importance of the system one is working in. The temple has its own system that he has to learn, or that anyone has to learn. The mafia has their own system. In capitalism there’s the system that pushes things constantly to develop.



ADAM When you talk about the question of currency, there are two situations. The first one is when you design a private house or a garden for somebody, the second is when you design a temple. You were saying at the beginning that because we get paid it’s serious. But how is that different, getting paid? Does anything change compared with the temple, or is it just a small detail?

SURIYA ... **KENG** So, he said that the difference is first his freedom: when he works for the temple he has the freedom to design according to any conditions that arise. The second thing is the flexibility of time: At the temple he doesn’t have any schedule. It doesn’t have to be done in three months or in six months. It depends on how it goes. If a truck breaks down today, never mind; we can wait until next week.

ADAM Because he does drainage and other things first, he slowly builds up this kind of currency, building experience, learning how things work, and developing a relationship with the people at the temple, so they can understand what he is talking about. This kind of currency is like a sense of a community, and then the larger projects come because the temple needs someone to do it and he has the experience and the ability, and then one project follows another. This is another idea about currency I want to make clear, and then I have a question.

KENG Okay...

ADAM There is a common idea that, as an architect, you can develop a reputation with people that you haven’t met yet, with people that you don’t know. They read about you and the idea is that they will call you up and hire you because they know who you are and they like your work and can trust you. So reputation is really another kind of currency. Is that true, is that clear, is that fair?

KENG That’s true. A person can use reputation as currency.

ADAM Yes. Using the currency of one's reputation to get projects, which is very different from Suriya's work in the temple, where he *develops* currency with people. The question is, does reputation actually work? Do people actually come to do a project because they know about you? Does that work out? Because there is this other idea that "it's all about who you know," where working as an architect you end up doing projects with a friend of a friend, or someone you met on another project. In such cases you never actually use the currency of fame and having photographs and so on. The projects still come from people you already know or can trust, or who you have worked with before.

SURIYA ... KENG He said currency is both. You will need to use it in both ways, building up a community bit by bit, but also being out there so people come to you. He thinks both of them are important. But when compared to the temple, it's more than that. If you build up ten good works, or good projects, and have this sense of community, it makes for more opportunity because you have the credibility to push things further. It is similar to working on his own office, where he works by instinct. That's the way he designs, the way he makes architecture. You don't think too much, but at any point you can still think a lot.

ADAM I think the model is that the architect uses the currency of a reputation to get projects like the main temple hall, where the client will pay them money to do the project. The architect uses a certain kind of currency, and is then paid money, which is another kind of currency, for that project. The alternative is to think of currency as developing through the process of working with somebody. Because there's a relationship, when it comes time to design the main hall of the temple, you are already familiar with the site and the people and you can understand the climate and everything about the place. You have so much more experience and, as Suriya says, so much more

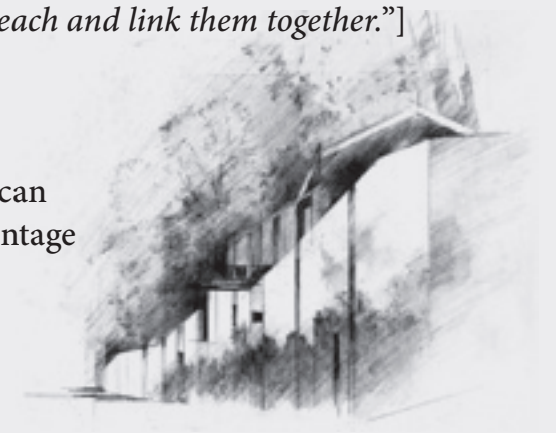
freedom in a way. You already have the credibility to push new ideas. The only question then is about getting paid, because at the temple you don't get paid. Could you use that same model of working with people outside the temple, so that when you do a project with private clients in the city you have that same knowledge about the place and can push things the same way?

[Keng sighs, Nan and Ox laugh. The car stops again at the toll-booth before Suriya pulls off the Krungthep-Chonburi New Line Motorway onto Highway 344.]

SURIYA [*It's possible. The two must be viewed and must be separated. During your work, there are expenses. You should see it first, and then you will know the way to separate it. It's like you encounter both the good guy and the bad guy. You know that sometimes you have to be with the bad guy, but that's all, and that's enough. Therefore, from my observation, normal people and architects, they don't separate. If it's about passion, then it's only about passion. Or when you do holy work, just holy work only. They don't separate. We have to make a living! So now I link the temple work to the commercial. The reason is that the work for the temple builds us a good image and sends it to our commercial side. It's as though you prove to people that you can do it for the temple. First, it means you have a stable status. Second, you are not a lame person as you have been doing it for decades. When the client sees that, they trust you and think that you are very responsible on the job, that you won't leave the work undone for sure. So, that makes you gain on both sides. You can take the advantages from each and link them together.*]

ADAM Right.

KENG And now maybe we can say he's taking more advantage of the commercial side.



SURIYA [*“It supports a bit, as there are some things that cannot be done in commercial work. Also there are some things that cannot be done in temple work. This is a good point for me to experience; I think that I am lucky here. If you want to play with a low budget, you will not take it, because it will also have lower design fees. Like this work for the temple, the current design now with an earthen pit; it is impossible to work on it for your client. But when you do it for the temple, you save about five million Baht, which all of us would appreciate a lot. This is another thing that I discovered; it’s like a blessing for me. These two things they gave me lots of ideas. In the future some day, I might be able to apply this earthen pit to my client’s project, if I had a client that would like to build such a pit, right? This never happened anywhere before, but I made it right here.”*]

[We turn down Watnongree Road towards the small collection of low, forested hills.]

KENG Wow. This is really using currency now. He’s saying that these two—working both in the commercial or the non-commercial, the temple—gives him an advantage. Sometimes you cannot do something on the commercial side, but you can do it on the temple side. Sometimes you cannot do something for the temple, but you can do it on a commercial project. And this also gives him a broader perspective, because in a commercial project, if you use a low budget approach, your design fees, which are a percentage, go down. But in the temple, budget is important because if you save more, that’s very precious. But once you’ve learned from it, it can be done for commercial projects again in the future, because you have an example where it has been done already in the temple. So in a way, it goes back and forth.

ADAM Well, at the beginning he was saying that the work of the architect is serious because you get paid—not that that’s the only reason, but that there’s an income and you have a job to

do so you do it. It seems from our conversation that there are different kinds of currency, but also responsibility. And there are different reasons why you would do something, but then there are also different things that you get from it: experience, or you can show the work, or you get paid, or something, but maybe the critical point is that we can’t make a division where we say, “this one we get paid, so we just do it this way, and this one we do for dhamma so we just do it this way.” What he’s saying is that they’re all connected somehow, that you can’t separate them out. So just ask if that’s true, that there are different currencies connected, and also if the responsibilities and reasons for doing the work are the same, if there are many different reasons why you have to be careful and thoughtful.

SURIYA ... KENG Adam, you have to be more into the Buddhism side now. You cannot really divide work with money from work without money. Money is important, but when you work for the temple, what he gains is that many people can come and use what he did, rather than when designing a house for a single family. That’s one. But what really makes him more happy, is working for a lot of people. Doing that makes you open minded, it opens your heart. You have to open up now. At a certain point it comes back to you.

ADAM So as an architect working, that experience forces you to be more open and thoughtful.



KENG Yes.

ADAM So it even benefits in doing other work.

KENG Right.

ADAM Wow.

KENG That's the end. [Continuing in Thai: "Adam sees it in our architectural profession: you work as you want to change yourself too. Work gives you that opportunity."]

SURIYA ["I believe that the farang [meaning 'Caucasian' but used loosely to signify 'foreigner'] can see me more clearly than the Thais. They really look into the details. When I worked with him, I rarely used difficult words to communicate, but sometimes Khun Hnoi would come and help us translate. Sometimes I talk, sometimes he writes, but...he knows detailed things about me. The conclusion is 'nature,' and he concluded it well. I don't know what to say—when he sees the project I am working on, he may never have thought of it having come out that way. Something like that."]

KENG Wat Pha Vachirabunpotcha. They don't have an English sign Adam, only Thai. You have to notice this rock. ○



BIOS Suriya Umpansiriratana is an architect working in Thailand who has gained international recognition for his *pro bono* work at two Buddhist forest monasteries, Wat Khao Buddhakhodom in Si Racha, and Wat Pha Vachirabunpotcha in Chonburi. Outside the temple context he works collaboratively as an architect and a landscape architect, often with close friend and colleague Kyai Nuichan.

Kisnaphol Wattanawanyoo, or Ajahn Keng, teaches architecture at KMUTT's school of architecture and design, or SoA+D, in Bangkok. He is heavily involved with Commonbooks, a Thai publishing house dedicated to art, culture, architecture, and architectural education.

Adam Smith recently completed architectural studies that included an internship with Suriya and Kyai. Working in Bangkok as a freelance editor and book designer at the time of the interview, he currently works at Willowbank, in Queenston, ON.