

Intergenerational Living

Thai Cultural Frictions and Taboos in Changing Times

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As extended families grow in number, property development in Thailand increasingly focuses on single-family homes. Our client, Magnolias Quality Development Corporation (MQDC), has introduced a new property brand centered on intergenerational living, embracing the Thai traditional concept of "Katanyu," gratitude. While the benefits of such living arrangements are widely discussed, there is limited information on the associated challenges due to their taboo nature.

These research projects were initiated to understand how family members coexist under one roof while maintaining their relationships, following Thai reciprocity norms. The findings reveal that intergenerational households face complex dynamics in family relationships and living spaces. These dynamics are influenced by shifting financial power and the evolving lifestyles of the younger generation. We also seek to explore how thoughtful space design can alleviate tensions within the family, fostering harmony among intergenerational families who embrace the Katanyu concept.

INTRODUCTION

This article, based on a series of privately commissioned qualitative research studies, informs the design of future dwellings for intergenerational families by exploring the spatial needs of different generations living under one roof, on the same piece of land, or in proximity.

As a follow up to a foundational project on a property development in a Bangkok suburb, our applied ethnographic research led to an emerging typology of home seekers that were looking for a cluster of homes where multi-families with the same grandparents would live together in one property. The findings led to the launch of a new property brand with a strategic position for intergenerational living solutions targeting mature, affluent home seekers.

Our client believes in the value of intergenerational family living and the Thai traditional concept of "Katanyu," which emphasizes gratitude. They are developing a project to support intergenerational family living, recognizing that living in such a scenario allows the younger generation to learn from the elders through their life experiences and ensures that the elders are not lonely as they will be surrounded by their loved ones. While the benefits of intergenerational living are commonly discussed, little information is available on the challenges, due to the taboo nature of expressing "Akantanyu," or ingratitude. The concept of Katanyu and the cultural and historical context of intergenerational living in Thai culture are discussed in this paper, which consists of two key friction points.

- While intergenerational living is prominent in Thailand, very little is discussed about family dynamics and friction points in these living arrangements because of cultural taboos related to discussing these challenges publicly.
- While intergenerational living is a traditional practice, family dynamics are changing as a result of Thailand's "evolving social and economic landscape."

These projects were negotiations of the friction between traditional values and social change in Thailand from both methodologies and findings.

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF INTERGENERATIONAL LIVING

House differences can be categorized by cultures and meanings, as the concept of home is also related to cultural context (Pink, 2017). In Thai culture, it is believed that grown-up sons or daughters must take care of their parents, and this care can be reciprocated in various ways. The foundation of Katanyu thinking originated in Thai-Buddhist ideology. This perspective is reflected in Buddhist narratives and stories (Phrahruthammasarnkosol and Suwanprateep, 2019). One of the key beliefs in Buddhism is *karma*, which is the law of cause and effect. According to this rule, individuals who do good deeds will receive good consequences, while those who do bad deeds will face negative consequences (Pinchuyon & Gray, 1997).

The concept of Katanyu or gratitude, holds great significance in Thai-Buddhist culture. Gratitude can range from feelings of thankfulness to a sense of obligation to reciprocate. (Walaiporn Nantsupawat, 2010; Facts and Details 2014; Roobe 2011). Thai parents have expectations that their children will grow up to be virtuous individuals who abide by traditions, prioritize their education, and perform good deeds. In accordance with Buddhist teachings, children are obliged to care for their parents in their old age.

Similar to other Asian societies, Thais maintain strong bonds with their families, which permeate all aspects of their lives. In the context of Thai society, it is common for individuals adhering to the Buddhist faith to live with their family during their university education, and this practice sometimes extends beyond graduation (Choowattanapakorn 1998). This is caused by the Katanyu concept, which expects offspring to repay their parents by living with them. Thais hold immense appreciation for their parents' upbringing and care, which leads them to feel obligated to repay their parents as adults. This entails prioritizing their parents' wishes over those of their spouse or partner, if necessary. Privacy and personal space are of little importance in Thai households, as family members often live together under one roof, sometimes sharing a single bedroom. Unlike Westerners, Thais embrace physical closeness and derive joy from it.

The general idea of reciprocity in the family is universal; it is often called the "generational contract." This contract is widely understood, stating that families have a responsibility to care for their vulnerable members, such as the elderly, children, and the sick. Therefore, it becomes the duty of the younger generation to care for

their parents or other elderly family members by providing them with a common standard of living (Haberlein, 2015).

Traditionally, multiple generations living together in the same household have been a common practice, fostering close-knit family ties. Intergenerational living allows for the passing down of wisdom, cultural traditions, and values from older generations to younger ones. It embodies the principle of filial piety, where children are expected to care for and support their parents in their old age. The practice also strengthens social cohesion, as it promotes a sense of collective responsibility and shared resources within the extended family. Moreover, intergenerational living provides a support system for the elderly, ensuring their well-being and reducing feelings of isolation.

In Thai cultural norms, taking care of elderly parents is a given, and the idea of placing them in nursing homes, which are not prevalent in Thailand, is rarely entertained. It is expected that children will willingly care for their aging parents, without feeling inconvenienced by it. In fact, family support may be different from the past, this is due to the fact that many children nowadays may have conflict with this norm (Choowattanapakorn 1998).

Mauss (2000) proposed that reciprocity, as outlined in his theory on gifts and exchanges, is linked to the socio-economic context, and people perform it not as individuals but as members of collective society. Katanyu concept in Thai culture also involves some rapid changes; transformations in social and economic conditions have led to a shift in Thai values compared to the past. Family members focus more on providing for their immediate family's needs, as the value of currency holds significant importance in the lives of Thai people. Some individuals now prioritize material possessions as the key to happiness, resulting in a greater emphasis on earning money rather than spending time with their children. This shift has limited opportunities for moral and ethical teaching.

Additionally, misunderstandings have arisen regarding the concepts of gratitude and reciprocation of kindness. Some individuals mistakenly believe that parents fulfill their duties out of obligation without truly understanding the importance of gratitude and the need to reciprocate. This misunderstanding leads to a lack of appreciation and a failure to compensate those who have shown kindness.

BUSINESS CHALLENGES

The real estate market in Bangkok is undergoing heightened competition due to the rapid urbanization and expansion of the city, accompanied by a substantial surge in urban residents. The prevalent trend in housing development leans towards the establishment of housing estates, shophouses, informal settlements, dormitories, and condominiums, forming the general landscape of settlements in Bangkok (Julayanont & Ratanawaraha, 2020). Notably, housing estates and luxury apartments, as well as condominiums, are on the rise. According to a report from a Thai real estate

research firm, the proportion of new condominiums has escalated by 85% compared to the previous year, while housing projects have seen a 48% increase from the previous year (Thansettakij, 2023). However, the dimensions of condominium units are primarily tailored for one to two individuals (Julayanont & Ratanawaraha, 2020), which contradicts the traditional living arrangements of Southeast Asians, who often reside as extended families under the same roof.

Our client's typical development process normally includes research on properties in the existing market to compare the advantages of location, property sizes, additional services and facilities, parking space, levels of privacy, and price. To develop new products tailored to intergenerational living, they needed to understand the lifestyle of the affluent intergenerational family to inform land acquisition, space design, programming, services, and marketing communication. However, existing information on intergenerational living was more focused on statistical or moral aspects. For example, Tantasavasdi and Inprom (2019) conducted a survey of 200 people who live in multigenerational homes using an architectural approach and method for designing future house estates. Hence, there is a lack of ethnographic information on intergenerational living among the wealthy. To be specific, the information pertained to private architectural practice; there were no precedents for researching commercial buildings.

The mentioned problems prompted our clients to seek an understanding of Thai intergenerational families before they develop residential products. These led to our research to explore Thai cultural concepts which influence intergenerational family dynamics.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodologies chosen were aimed at addressing the first friction point: “While intergenerational living is prominent in Thailand, very little is discussed about family dynamics and friction points in these living arrangements because of cultural taboos related to discussing these challenges publicly”.

The traditional group discussion method was challenged due to the taboo nature of expressing *Akantanyu*, or ingratitude. And Thai people have a fear of bringing dishonor and losing face for their family. They believe that sharing family problems with outsiders may amplify the shame. They have learned to conceal emotions and avoid openly expressing their feelings and thoughts to others, which is influenced by Buddhism's teaching of the importance of being non-expressive.

However, the role of researcher is to assemble both of these approaches (Pink et al. 2017). This study's aim was to understand how intergenerational family members live together and customize their living spaces, both within commercial property developments and through custom-built homes. The two main methods employed were ethnographic interviews and co-creation.

Ethnographic Interviews

Ethnographic interviews involved researchers conducting interviews with a total of 39 families (consisting of 72 individuals across generations) and visiting 23 homes of Thai families, both physically and virtually. Data was collected in the form of videos, still images, and filled-out worksheets. Decision-makers and/or members of different generations were interviewed together to observe their interactions. Additionally, separate interviews were conducted to understand different perspectives and to avoid culturally sensitive topics related to family relationships and conflicts.

Conducting interviews in the participants' personal or private spaces helped create a comfortable environment for them to freely express their emotions. Researchers also used environmental cues to elicit stories that may have otherwise been omitted. During in-home visits, participants were asked to give a tour of their personal and shared spaces and to share stories and experiences related to the following topics:

- Family history
- Individual roles and responsibilities
- Family structure and relationships between family members
- Evolution of their homes
- Usage and experiences within different spaces

Co-creation

Co-creation involved using creative exercises to understand how participants would negotiate living arrangements if they had the opportunity to build a new home and live together. These generative exercises allowed them to address underlying tensions that may be sensitive to discuss directly.

Generative brainstorming sessions were conducted during in-depth interviews, utilizing paper models and miniature furniture, to generate hypothetical housing configurations. The main decision-makers and/or a collaboration of family members were asked to imagine spaces and layouts that would support their intergenerational living, including considerations for the following topics:

- home structure, plot of land and location
- spaces within the home (personal spaces, common spaces, reception spaces)
- plans for future adaptations.

With both methods, researchers were able to understand family dynamics both explicitly through storytelling and implicitly through observations of spaces and the ideal home. The results were then used to create conceptual space solutions as well as marketing and communication strategies related to intergenerational living in future property development projects.

RESEARCH ANALYSIS

The research findings revealed key factors that led to the second friction point: while intergenerational living is a traditional practice, family dynamics are changing as a result of Thailand's "evolving social and economic landscape."

In the past, intergenerational family living provided emotional and economic advantages and embraced established roles that upheld the principle of *Katanyu*, emphasizing the emotional value of respecting elders and governing the hierarchical structure within families. However, contemporary intergenerational families face the challenge of balancing emotional and economic benefits due to evolving dynamics caused by five emerging factors.

Factor 1: Change in Power Dynamics within the Family

Frictions among family members are inevitable in intergenerational households as the power dynamic within the family hierarchy is challenged. Thai culture teaches to respect elders, with the older generation holding the highest respect, while the middle or younger generations possess economic power. This often causes friction due to differing needs. While the hierarchy in family tradition influences the power structure within the household, intergenerational households experience competing economic powers.

"For housewives, they have their own way of managing their family, personal tastes, or lifestyles, so space for two housewives in the home have to be separated to make them both feel comfortable. I think they should be separated, not put together." - Jeed, 47 years old

"I am the person who takes care of all other household expenses. Sometimes my mother-in-law would contribute or share the grocery costs, but Nan always pays more for the food." - Nan's mom, 57 years old

"My daughter-in-law gave me 5,000 baht per month, I use it for grocery shopping and keep the change as pocket money. So, when the food expense is not enough, I would use my pocket money to pay. For example, "This month is 2,000 baht beyond the budget." – Pam's mother-in-law, 59 years old

Factor 2: Differences in Lifestyles due to Generational Gap

The lifestyle of younger generations is influenced by urbanization and city modernization, which presents challenges in spending quality time together within intergenerational households in Bangkok. Busy schedules and traffic congestion limit interactions, allowing only brief moments of connection in the early morning or evening. Shared activities among household members are rare, as individual interests are not always aligned. Although they may physically coexist in the same space, each member often engages in their own activities. Lack of meaningful time spending

together and disagreement with the elders can be viewed as unappreciative to the family.

Frictions also arises within intergenerational households due to micromanaging personalities and differing personal behaviors of elders. The significant age gap between generations contributes to varying perspectives on life. The middle generation often assumes the role of mediators, as they can understand the perspectives of both older generations and younger generations. The sources of friction related to the age gap are differences in personal manners, work ethics, and time spent at home.

"My grandma is older than my daughter, around 60 years old, so they have a different mindset. She must understand that my daughter wants to sleep until noon on the weekend, but her granny doesn't understand. I always told my kid to just say 'yes!'" - Whiteblue, 53 years old

"I always told my mom that a wise elder shouldn't intervene in a kid's life. I told her this so she wouldn't complain to my daughter. Her job is to prepare food, but sometimes she's too involved. This is different from her generation." - June's mom, 62 years old

"When my mom saw her niece using an iPad, it would irritate her. It's like everyone doesn't want to talk to her and is instead chatting with a metal board." – Whiteblue's sister, retirement age

Factor 3: Lack of Personal Space and Growing Desire for Privacy

Territorial issues among members of intergenerational families are another cause of friction because household members don't always desire constant presence with one another. These territorial frictions result in a desire for more personal space, privacy, control over acoustic disturbances, and control of personal belongings.

Sharing bedrooms is common in intergenerational households. In some cases, siblings of the same gender are assigned to share a bedroom when there are not enough private bedrooms for everyone. Elderly individuals or frail seniors sleep with another household member or a maid to monitor their well-being and in case of emergencies. Most families may have separate bedrooms designated for their children, especially if the home was acquired after the children were born.

Ownership of private bedrooms changes over time based on the current needs of the household. When available, private bedrooms are given to teenagers and adults to provide personal spaces. Most private rooms are equipped with a TV and occasionally a refrigerator; however, this is viewed as a cause of isolation. Private bedrooms may also be shared when there are visiting guests.

"There are some privacy issues. About 3-4 years ago, when I was studying, my older sister, who I respect as my mom, was very concerned about me, and wanted to know what I was up to. Whenever I was in my room in the evening, she would come to check

on me. As an adult at that time, I needed privacy. I decided to tell her that she shouldn't invade my privacy. My grandma was there, and she said my mom was just worried about me. Now, it's better." – Mob, 26, years old

Factor 4: Misalignment in the Distillation of Tradition

Intergenerational homes serve as a way to pass on traditions as older or middle generations provide for the home, which can be passed down to future generations. However, in recent times, younger generations prioritize their own personal lives and sometimes perceive it as a burden.

Intergenerational homes have a lifespan of roughly one generation, approximately 20-30 years. In most cases, middle generations are the direct heirs, favorite children, or the last ones residing in the house, such as the first son, only daughter, or unmarried children.

Homeowners plan to live in their homes until their children are grown. However, they do not know if their children will continue living in the same home they grew up in or if they will live in an intergenerational household at all.

During our exercise, adult younger generations were often designated as the individuals to design the new home, as they might be the potential future heads of the household. However, they tended to keep the same arrangements for the new house, as they might choose to move out completely. Meanwhile, middle generations were concerned about the well-being of older generations and wanted to be prepared for their elderly years. They considered the near future and how the assets would be divided.

Kaew's Story

Kaew (older generation)'s family used to live in a big family including three generations who resided together. After Kaew bought a commercial row house in the city as place for residence and business, his first son, Own (middle generation) and his family moved in. The younger son of Kaew (middle generation) moved to another house, but he asked Kaew to accommodate his two children in their home due to its proximity to their school.

World, Kaew's grandson and his dad, Own, always had arguments because his dad wanted him to join the family business, but he decided to work with another company. So, World and his brother are closer to their mom. World and Kaew primarily talk together only during breakfast.

Kaew and Own want to move to a detached house because they don't want to deal with stairs when they are older. However, they are uncertain if they will continue living together in a multigenerational household. World wants to move out and have its own apartment. He doesn't want to be involved in the family business.

Factor 5: Tensions from Shared Ownership of the Property

Intergenerational homeowners buy or build their own homes out of necessity or when they are ready to establish themselves as heads of the household. Since intergenerational homes are often owned by the older generation or co-owned by other members who do not reside in the home, middle and younger generation members must gain permission before renovating, expanding, or rebuilding on the same land. Shared ownership of property creates inflexibility for the middle and younger generations to grow.

When the intergenerational home has served its purpose for the family living in it, the decision to retire the intergenerational home rests with the youngest generation, who are now adults. They must decide about what to do with the intergenerational home after obtaining the blessing of the original owner (middle or younger generations) and reaching a consensus with other younger siblings. Common solutions to resolve differing opinions include selling, renting out, or leaving the property vacant.

"Our family received the land as a royal grant because our ancestors belonged to the noble class (in the past). We still own it as it cannot be divided and sold. Every family member must sign before we can make any changes to it. So, we all stay in this home as a very big family. My parents, two uncles, and two families from two grandfathers in the younger generation. Apart from our house, there is an apartment where we all divide rental income equally."-Tong, 41 years old

"I was forced to leave my home because my grandparents had many children and grandchildren and one of the children wanted to take possession. The home is located in the city and has a nice location, so it had a good value. They were concerned that if my siblings stayed there too long, we would live there forever. So, they wanted me out, and I had to find somewhere else to live." – Sam, 52 years old

These five emerging factors challenged the fit of conventional property developments that design based only on number of the bedrooms, size, and facility. To continue with tradition, home is the space of negotiation that empowers the head of the household's autonomy and flexibility and accommodates the different lifestyles of different generations while providing spaces that support their desired interactions.

DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

Criteria for product development

The market currently lacks pre-built homes designed specifically for intergenerational living. Most intergenerational homes are custom-designed or renovated homes to fit their needs. Instead of designing homes based solely on the

number of household members, the concept of intergenerational homes should focus on fostering interactions between household members while reducing tensions and optimizing for longer lifespans. A home design for Intergenerational living may not solve relationship problems, however, we hope that the space design can help alleviate some while enhancing the interaction. The following are design principles for an intergenerational home:

Various types of home that match family dynamics

Our research identifies three typologies of homes, defined by the way household members live, the family lineages, their family relationship and how they to negotiate and balance traditional values with their privacy space.

- **Type 1: Single-Lineage Intergenerational Home** which consists of members from one paternal or maternal family line, without any siblings or extended family members. However, it serves as the center of an extended family. They often live in a household with unmarried siblings, and most members stay at home. They prefer a large home with an open layout that facilitates shared activities in one area. They want everyone's presence to be felt. The head of household has autonomy in their home, though they may receive financial support from older generations. This type of home represents how home intertwines with Thai family values, particularly in the case of close-knit families. This makes them want to live together as a family rather than being alone, especially the members who have not entered marriage.
- **Type 2: Multi-Lineage Conjoined Intergenerational Home** which consists of members from two family lineages from the same family tree living in separate homes or a group of homes on the same plot of land with shared land or real estate assets. Family members compromise the family value by balancing both personal and family time, but they prioritize family gatherings at specific times. Members of this group prefer a layout that provides buffers, such as different wings or zoning based on generation or sub-family. These help them separate themselves from other members of the family when they need to.
- **Type 3: Neighboring Multi-Lineal Intergenerational Home** which consists of members from two or more family lineages living as neighbors who want to maintain family bonds while maintaining their independence in separate houses and plots of land. This type of home reflects how people negotiate the value of their home by separating it. Neighboring Multi-Lineal households prefer clear separation between each sub-family's territory, and these conjoined homes can either be under one roof or adjacent homes, they

also desire autonomy in their living spaces and do not want to interfere in the affairs of other household members.

Space design that strategically encourage interactions while allow for control of privacy with shared amenities and good organizational system.

A well-designed living space should encourage spontaneous interactions among family members, allow individuals to share the same space while maintaining their own territories, or offering acoustic separation if needed.

Additionally, the space should be able to accommodate extended family members and friends by providing areas for family shrines with good ventilation, large family and friend gathering space and offer space for overnight stays by extended family guests. Flexibility in space usage is key to fulfilling these requirements. For example, round tables in intergenerational homes, particularly for meals. These spaces can be designed as pop-up tables that can be hidden or folded when not in use, freeing up the area for other activities.

Shared amenities can play a crucial role in intergenerational homes to accommodate the lack of space and facilitate household chores. Observations have shown that shared bathrooms among members of the same gender, resembling dormitory-style bathrooms, can be effective. For example, separating the private showering area from the sink allows one person to brush their teeth while another is showering. Additionally, incorporating a shared closet provides an additional storage option for anyone whose personal closet is insufficient.

Intergenerational homes often accumulate gifts and personal belongings that may be shared with extended family members or elders. A well-designed home organizational system and ample storage solutions can help manage and store these items effectively.

Adaptable structure that accommodates changes of family composition and/or health condition

Space utilization in intergenerational homes is often unpredictable, leading to the repurposing of various areas based on immediate needs. Changes in the health of household members, such as frailty, sickness, or disability, as well as the addition of new members like newborns, siblings of middle generations, or younger generations who move back in, may require renovations and structural changes. This could involve altering layouts, installing lifts, wheelchair ramps, rails, or sliding doors when repurposing alone is not sufficient. This can be achieved through flexible structures, adaptable staging of spaces, or services that enable customization over time.

Property location that supports existing and future lifestyles of all generations

When selecting the location for intergenerational homes, it is crucial to optimize it for the needs of all generations. Given the traffic conditions in Bangkok,

intergenerational households are often formed or sustained due to the proximity and convenience to routine activities such as work, school, or extended family members. Considerations for location may include proximity to hospitals and communities for older generations, convenience to work and social activities for middle generations, and convenience to work or school for younger generations.

CRITERIA FOR MARKETING & COMMUNICATION

While our client focuses its communication on the value of Katanyu, we found that it may not resonate with potential homebuyers who understand the intricacies and challenges of intergenerational living.

The research helps them understand the reality and enables them to visualize themselves in the homes they develop. The visual communication shows home design features and interior spaces that are unique to intergenerational living i.e a cluster home designed with corridor to connect two homes, large dining spaces that accommodate different generations and extended family.

The key message could emphasize how multigenerational living connects their family's past to the future. The aim is to communicate the emotional and economic benefits while providing guidance through the challenges. The team explored potential pre-launch activities such as panel talks with celebrities who live intergenerationally, engagement with academic scholars, and experiential marketing initiatives like short films or TV series about three-generation living. Another idea is to create experiential spaces where intergenerational families can spend time together, such as public parks.

The target audience for marketing efforts includes primary homeowners who are middle generations, with teen and adult younger generations living in conventional intergenerational households. The message may focus on supporting intergenerational households in transition due to social or economic factors by promoting relationships where all generations benefit beyond the value of Katanyu. Additionally, providing a support system for intergenerational families who may not live together but continuously support each other socially and economically can serve as an example and provide guidance in navigating the challenges of intergenerational living.

CONCLUSION

Urbanization and modernization have brought changes to the Thai lifestyle and have posed challenges to traditional family values, leading to frictions within intergenerational living arrangements. These frictions arise from factors such as changes in power dynamics, differences in lifestyles due to generational gaps, the lack of personal space and growing desire for privacy, tensions arising from shared property ownership, and misalignment in the distillation of tradition.

While these frictions may not be resolved, the design of the home and its spaces can help reduce and better manage them. Given the limited number of property development projects that address these issues in the market, this provides an opportunity for our real estate development client to offer solutions that resonate better with their potential target audience.

From an organizational perspective, the adoption of ethnographic research offers significant advantages for developers and marketing teams as it bridges the gap between them and their potential customers. It's noteworthy that ethnography is not widely understood or extensively utilized in Thai market research due to the longer duration of data collection and analysis process. Throughout our interactions, our client has embraced more customer engagement and creativity in their development process in many projects. Research findings and user stories from research were still referred by different teams within the organization as they continue to develop intergenerational living solutions.

These projects have another beneficial aspect by engaging with the current societal issue. Recent trend of luxury real estate ventures and governmental organizations have focus on homes for the elderly. These projects typically highlight the value of physical and mental wellness for aged residents. This is perhaps to be expected in the context of society like Thailand, which has a strict protocol for care of the elderly (Chatphiraya, 2022). On the contrary, our client has alternative ideas for engaging with the family market by developing homes for extended families which include mixed generations. Our client's project offer the first Super-Luxury Residence designed to support both traditional and the changing needs of Thai families. Likewise, it shows that there are still urban residents who desire to live in the city with the whole family while keeping their private space (TERRABKK, 2022).

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