

ISAAN FIELDNOTES 2007 February

February 2, 2007 or 2050 of the Buddhist calendar

Progress on building the house is coming along nicely, and at last I have found some workers who do things the right way. They are the men who are installing the ceiling squares. They did a very professional job, and when I pointed out that they had installed some panels that were not pointed the same way as the others, they apologized and were very conscientious about doing all the rest of the panels in the same way. I only had to say it once. Amazing! On the second day they were doing a slope in the wrong way and I pointed this out. As with the other workers, they assured me that it was being done correctly. So I backed off, even though I knew I was right. Within a few hours the workers realized they were in fact doing it wrong, and without me saying anything else they corrected the problem and did it correctly. They are by far the most efficient workers I have had on this house. If all of them were like these men, the construction process would have been long finished.

With the other workers, unfortunately, every day there are some problems. I have to watch every hour. You can be sure that if I want the workers to work on one room first and another room later, they will do the reverse. If I want a door hung with the hinges on the left side, and explain that to the workers, who say they understand, that later I will come back and see the door hung on the right side. Lek assures me that he is translating my directions accurately, but sometimes I wonder because he often does not understand

what I am saying and I have to repeat the directions several times. To save time, I suggested to the concrete workers a quick and easy way to lay some metal rods across an open space for a shelf, and then lay the tile on top of the rods. Lek translated and the workers said that the way I suggested would take too long and was too hard to do. Again, I backed off. But then they laboriously constructed a form to hold wet concrete, and ended up putting metal rods inside it. It took much longer for them to do than the easy way I suggested, but obviously Lek did not explain my directions accurately or they would have seen that my way would have taken a few minutes as opposed to the hours they spent on that shelf. Well, since I was paying them by the job instead of by the hour, the way they did it was stronger and better, I was just trying to save them some work. Sometimes I have learned that when I try to help a worker, they think I am doing something else and they do not realize I am only trying to make it easier for them. So sometimes I have to just stand there helplessly and not try to help.

When it comes to matters of décor, however, I really want to make the house beautiful, and I insist on things being done the right way. For example, I have matching grey doorknobs for all the grey doors, except the entry door which is wood and I got a special lock for that door that is wood color. When I came back from lunch today the worker had used the one wood color doorknob for one of the grey doors. I pointed out that of the three doors in the living room, I want all three doorknobs to match. When I point this out, they all agree. Then the next thing that comes along, the same kind of thing happens again. I keep saying I want everything to be “suay” {beautiful} and they always laugh and agree. But later they will choose the ugliest piece of wood to put in the

most prominent place. I have to say that many Thai people have little sense of style and décor in their houses.

Lek does not care about any of these details, and tells me I am wrong to be insisting on everything a certain way. But then later Lek often admits I am right.. For example, I told the painters to put down paper before they paint, so that they do not get paint on the nice tile floor. They assured me repeatedly that the paint was very easy to remove, and not to worry. When I came back later, there were paint spots on the floor and it took the workers over two hours to scrap it off. I patiently explained that they could save a lot of time if they would always put down paper, and if they spill some paint to wipe it up immediately. They always kindly agree, then I come back an hour later and they are painting with no paper on the floor. When I put paper there they are quick to comply, but later forget again. Since I am not paying them by the hour it is a loss of their time not mine. But still it slows down the construction process. One painter kept using a roller to roll paint on a wall that had a hook sticking out. Repeatedly he did the roller over the hook, so that a spot was missed. I tried to explain how to use the roller on each side of the hook, so it could all be covered. Finally, I had to do it myself. He never did seem to understand.

Lek has also continued to be a problem. He thinks I am crazy to be worried about paint splatters on the beautiful tile floor, and says nobody will notice. I reply that I will notice, and since it is my money paying for this I want it to be done the way I want it. Finally today I made him clean up the paint spots and after working for over an hour he

agreed with me about the painters being sloppy in spilling paint spots on the floor. The next day he fussed at them to be more careful. When he fusses at me, his relatives tell me to slap him. They all take my side, and think the house is turning out to be beautiful. At least they seem to appreciate the care I am taking to make everything beautiful. They bring me little gifts of food, and today Lek's niece brought me some several containers of soymilk that must have been expensive for them. Lek's sister's husband gave me a cement stand for my Buddha statue, and another cement stand to hold a water container. I like their kindness, but do not want them to spend money since they have so little.

Lek can be difficult to deal with, but then he will turn around and cook me a delicious meal, or do something especially kind. He even admits to his relatives that he was wrong, and tells me the reason he gets so tense is because he's worried that I am spending so much money on the house. I told him I would rather spend the money than have him fussing at me. His relatives say that is just his character, and I have to understand that he is like that. He really does have my interests at heart, and tries very hard to save money by arguing with the workers to accept less pay. The rate he has gotten me is 200 baht per day, which is about \$5.50 USD. It all seems so incredibly cheap to me that I do not begrudge what I am paying the workers. It is incredible that I am close to finishing the house, and the entire construction of materials and labor is only about a little over \$7,000 USD. I couldn't even put in a driveway for a house in America for that amount of money.

Because labor costs are so cheap, there is not much emphasis on using laborers efficiently, and I repeatedly see how things could be done much more efficiently and faster. A lot of time is wasted, with workers taking more time to do something than would occur in America where labor costs are so high. A worker will spend a lot of time chiseling out a piece of plastic PCV pipe rather than asking me to buy another one that is not expensive at all. They are masters of ingenuity in doing work with few tools and little expense, even if it takes a long time to do. They can be incredibly skillful in laying tile or smoothing a wall, much better than I could ever do, but then be completely befuddled by something that I find simple and easy. The way Thai people and Americans think is indeed very different.

Besides the money that he owes me for loans I have made to him, Lek had to borrow 14,000 baht from his sister, and 1,000 baht from his niece, to help pay for the security door for his salon room in the front of the house. Lek paid for the land, and he and I agreed that he would pay for the expenses for his salon while I would pay for the residential part of the building. He has insisted that I spend more for beautiful floor tiles and ceiling tiles, when I would have been happy to have a smooth concrete floor and to use bamboo woven mats for the ceiling. But I have to admit that Lek was right, because the floor tiles and ceiling do look beautiful. And the cost is not as much as I feared. But still, Lek does not have the money to pay for the salon part, and he has had to borrow money from his sister, his nephew and me. He wants to get a cash advance from his credit card, which charges 20% interest, to pay us back. I explained that he could get a home mortgage from a bank at a much lower interest rate, but he thinks it is crazy to

allow the bank to have the possibility to take the house if he could not pay them back. I explained that Americans get mortgages on their houses all the time, that I have a mortgage on my house in Los Angeles, and no one worries about that. But no matter what I said I could not persuade him to do that. He would rather pay the high interest to the credit card company than risk bank repossession of the house. Many Americans lose their houses due to bank repossession, so who is to say that Lek is not right. But paying 20% interest seems crazy to me.

February 3, 2007

Oh, I am so angry! I have lost patience with the workers. With no income here and his debts mounting, Lek has been impatient to go back to Bangkok to sell his hair salon there, and move his things to this village. I also need to go to Bangkok to renew my Visa at the Thai Immigration Office, and I also want to try to get a Thai drivers license. Since we cannot move into the house until February 19, which is the first “lucky day” according to the local shaman, we decided it would be best to go to Bangkok now. So now we want to get the house finished as quickly as possible. That is a tall order for Thai workers, since they will repeatedly do something different from the priorities that I set for them. The man who laid the floor tiles did excellent work, and the floor is beautiful. But he would repeatedly knock out bricks and work done by other workers, without asking me. For example, because I have a bad knee, and it is uncomfortable for me to sit on a low toilet, I had a worker make a base of bricks about six inches high in the bathroom. This man went in and tore out all that work. When I saw it, and was aghast, he apologized. I told him not to remove anything without checking with me first. He

agreed. Well, he finished the floor tiles, and then said he could fix the doors that the previous contractor had so screwed up (with non-right angles on the door frames, etc.). Because he did such a good job on the floor tiles, I hired him to do the doors, but told him to check with me before he did anything. He agreed. Then I go into the next room to oversee some other workers and I hear “bang, bang, bang”. I come back, and to my shock, he has torn out part of the kitchen wall next to the door frame. The kitchen was finished, and was beautiful. Now it is a mess. I had told him the other three doors to the outside were highest priority, so I have no idea why he started working on the kitchen door first.

This man speaks no English, and does not ever try to understand me, and I cannot understand him at all as he rapidly speaks Thai or Isaan language (I am not sure which). So I am completely dependent upon Lek as translator. At least the other workers make an effort to communicate with me by gesture, and are friendly, but this arrogant man just talks and talks at me when he knows I cannot understand him. Despite my many complaints about the other workers, at least they are nice and pleasant. But this man is dour and arrogant. With Lek translating I learn that he thinks the door frames are too small, and that all of the doors will have to be torn out. I say that is not true, and I physically take the doors and put them into the frames. I show him that only three of the frames are too small. By doing this, I show him that he will have much less work. He nods a grudging agreement.

I then say it would be much less work to make the doors smaller, and that I want to try to avoid tearing out any more frames and walls. He says it is possible to shorten the doors, but not to make them less wide because they are plastic. Lek agrees with him, and angrily tells me to shut up and let him do his work. In disgust, I give in, and agree. But then when I left to talk with Lek's sister about his continual hostile attitude, Lek's nephew who has been very helpful to me told the man he was doing it the wrong way, and that he could have easily cut out the door frame rather than bust out almost the whole kitchen wall. They got into an argument, and the arrogant man left in disgust. Lek's nephew then somehow right away found another man to repair the doors. This man came in and, just as I suggested earlier, he said the best way is to make the doors smaller and leave the frames as they are. The plastic could, in fact, be made less wide. Lek now saw that I was right, and acknowledged that he was wrong to get angry at me by taking the side of the arrogant tile man.

So I am happy with the new workers on the doors. I tell them that we need to leave for Bangkok tomorrow, and I want them to focus on the three doors that lead to outside so we can lock the house up while we are gone. They nod agreement. Then I come back later and they are spending all this time on the closet door. I protest that I want them to work on the outside doors as I said earlier. Don't worry, they cheerily reply; there is plenty of time to finish all the doors today. I say I want them to stop everything on the other doors and focus on the three exterior doors. To my dismay, Lek again agrees with the workers, and refuses to translate my request. I have no choice but to back off, though

I know the result. The work on the closet door continues. I say nothing, and everybody is working happily.

By late afternoon it is obvious that they are nowhere close to finishing the outside doors. Then, for some reason that even Lek does not understand, the door workers leave about 3:30pm, without saying anything. They knew we wanted to get the three exterior doors finished today. Even Lek was exasperated with them, and again acknowledged that I was right. Since this process with Lek has happened so many times, I am weary of what I know will be the result. Now Lek is complaining that I am too demanding of the workers, and that the tile man said bad things about me. I cannot believe, after all this, that Lek still does not see that the tile man was wrong on the doors. I told Lek I have equally bad things to say about the arrogant tile man, even though he does excellent work in laying the tiles he does not follow directions and things end up differently than what I wanted.

February 4, 2007

Lek is very happy to have the security gate installed in the front of his salon, even though I think it is quite ugly and destroys the beauty of the front of the house. I told him it makes the building look like a warehouse rather than a residence, but Lek thinks it looks just fine. Lek is so worried about his mounting debts that he wants to leave for Bangkok right away, even if the doors are not finished. He says Thai workers are so slow and inefficient that it will be another three days before they can finish the doors. I say that they could have finished the three exterior doors yesterday if they would work on

them and nothing else, and if they will show up and work a full day without leaving. Lek repeatedly complains that Thai workers are not dependable. But Lek says we can trust his nephew to finish the three exterior doors while we are gone, and that his sister will keep a watch on the house to make sure everything is protected. My things are securely locked up in my office, so I am inclined to agree. I want to get out of here as much as Lek does.

Despite my frustrations, I have to continually remind myself to relax and not get so stressed out about all this. I write all this to show young anthropologists the reality that many times the most frustrating things about fieldwork are the unexpected matters of daily living. If things are trying to be done on a deadline, Thai workers are terrible because they do not follow priorities. I have seen this pattern with so many workers now, where they will work on the lowest priority (ex. Without checking with me first, the painter begins working on painting the inside of the closet rather than finishing the living room, which remains half painted), that I have to conclude this is a cultural pattern. The closet could be painted later if need be, but the living room needs to be finished to be presentable for the opening ceremony.

If deadlines and priorities are ignored, the work on the house is in fact progressing nicely. Except for the gaping hole in the kitchen wall that the arrogant tile man left, the other parts of the building are nearing completion.. But other than that the house by now actually appears as the drawings and plans I put onto my computer three months ago. I am pleased that Lek's nephew hooked up the water system, and everything works just as

I planned. It is really coming together, despite all the problems and frustrations. All the neighbors are very complementary about the house, and some of them have even come in and volunteered to help with the work. They are very kind. I have to keep all this in mind, and not let the problems deflect me from the overall picture that it is in fact getting close to completion. Lek's nephew told me that he wants to take some of my ideas and put them in his own house, and Lek's sister and her husband want me to help them improve their house after I finish building this one. Lek's niece laughingly volunteered to smack Lek for me if he gives me problems. Lek laughed along with the rest of us.

In Lek's defense, I have to acknowledge that doing translating is not easy for him. His English is just not as good as I used to think. Sometimes I will ask a question like "What is the soil like at the house?" and Lek will give an answer like "Yes, people have been appealing to the local government to install street lights" or some other words that have nothing at all to do with what I am asking. I think the way Lek negotiates a strange language like English is to recognize a few words and then respond. I can only imagine what he might be telling the workers when I ask a question or make a request! In addition, Lek has no experience at all with construction or building. He can sew well, dress well, and give a great haircut to make people beautiful. But construction, interior decoration, gardening, or any kind of residential beauty is just not his forte. If he puts up a poster in his hair salon, it is inevitably crooked, and if I try to make it vertical he thinks it is a waste of time. He has no sense of décor at all. In this regard I think Lek is fairly typical of many Isaan people. In my opinion, they are among the most beautiful people on earth, and are very clean in their person. But they tend to live in filthy ugly houses,

with unsanitary kitchens and bathrooms, that in many respects could be easily cleaned up and made more pleasant to live in. But they do not seem to care about these kinds of aesthetics.

What an experience this building process has been! I feel that I have learned a lot about construction, and about techniques that Thai workers use that are different from American construction, but I have also learned more about Thai culture. There are many things that I like about Thai culture, and Thai Buddhist temples are among the most beautiful architecture I have seen in the entire world. I have seen some really beautiful modern commercial buildings here. But the way they build houses and the difficulties of living in those structures are not to my taste. So, while I have many complaints about American ways of doing things, I do realize that American emphasis on efficiency, beauty, and attention to detail is one of America's strengths.

Feb.5, 2007

After the main entry door was installed, Lek and I left for Bangkok. I hope I can trust Lek's nephew to install the other three exterior doors correctly while we are gone. I needed to come to Bangkok anyway, to renew my Visa at the Thai Immigration Office, and also to try to get a Thai driver license. The last time I went to that office the worker told me I had to show my Work Permit to get a license. The Visa I have prohibits employment, so of course I do not have a Work Permit. Also, the worker saw a date on my Visa, which was the date by which I had to arrive in Thailand. Since that date was

soon approaching, the worker (who could not speak or read English) said that I had to leave Thailand by that date, so they would not give me a license. Lek and I tried in vain to tell the worker that was the date by which I had to ARRIVE in Thailand, not the date I had to leave, but to no avail. This time I hope I can talk to the Immigration Office to write a letter for me to get a driver license.

I want to drive because I am scared to death in riding in the car with Lek driving. Actually, Lek is a very good driver, except for one thing. Like some other Thai drivers, he does not pay much attention to staying within the lane. He weaves over the line, and if there is another car weaving likewise, they come within a few inches of each other. Lek thinks I'm crazy to worry about this, but I think he has many times been dangerously close to having a scrape with another car. Of course, I see a lot of cars doing this kind of thing, and they always seem to avoid an accident at the last moment. In contrast to America, where it is common to see an auto wreck along a highway, I seldom see wrecks in Thailand. But the way people weave across lanes and cut in front with only a few inches to spare, I'm surprised that there are not scores of wrecks along every highway in Thailand. This is just one of the many things I do not understand about how things seem to work here.

When we got to Bangkok I measured the glass front and glass door of Lek's salon. Just as I feared, the glass is nine inches higher than the security door that Lek had installed for his salon in our house. I tried repeatedly to get him to tell the security door installer to place it higher, but Lek dismissed my concerns and refused to translate this to

the installer. Now the glass will not fit. Lek says not to worry because he will sell his salon, including the glass front and door. I say that is a good idea, but what will he do if he cannot find a buyer, and needs to take it all to the village with his other things? Lek says nothing. This is just one example of Lek's lack of attention to detail. If he cannot sell the salon, he will bring the glass to the village and probably have to tear out the security door and reinstall it higher. By doing it the way I suggested, he could have avoided this problem and expense. There was plenty of room at the top to install the security door higher, and it would have looked better also. But I am sure Lek will not learn from this experience. In this case, it is his salon, not my residence, so I will not worry about it.

One of my friends in America has asked me why I don't just buy an existing house in Thailand, and avoid all these worries in building. The answer is three-fold. First, the way Isaan houses are constructed it is impossible to keep out animals and insects. The night before we left the village, a cat got into the house again and defecated on Lek's bed. Lek is determined to poison this cat, which seems to delight in shitting on beds. It would require so much work to try to make this house animal-proof and insect-proof, that I would rather just build a new house the way I want. Second, I am learning a lot about Thai culture and ways of doing things, that I did not realize before building this house. Third, to my surprise I find that I actually enjoy building the house. In the process of building this house, I found some workers who were quite good. Actually, what I would like to do is to sell this house with all its problems, and now that I know the mistakes to avoid I would like to build another house the way I really want it.

After what I have been through, I am sure some people think I am crazy, but my concerns in wanting to build houses in Thailand are more than just my own personal desires. I think I could really make a contribution to improving residential architecture in Thailand. Construction of inexpensive housing is a major problem facing many nations. People with money build these ugly houses that cost a lot because they use so much wood, which has become scarce and expensive. People live in ugly houses made of tin roofs and concrete blocks. Now that I have learned what mistakes to avoid, I think I could build a house that is inexpensive, but also aesthetically pleasing. If I could do this as a model, other people would see that they could have nice houses for not so much money.

When people in the village visit my house, they always tell me how beautiful it is. So I know they like beauty, if they could afford it. I had hoped that my house would be so inexpensive to build that it could be a model for others, but with all the mistakes it cost a lot more than I had planned. Of course, \$7,000 for a nice house is unbelievably cheap for me as an American, but for Isaan people who make so little money, that amount is more than they could afford.

I came to Thailand to study gender and sexuality, but living in this village has meant that a major topic of my concern is with residential construction. Fieldwork always involves major surprises, and a need to be flexible. I had no idea that building this house would be so frustrating. That is all the more reason I would like to build another house that has all

the beauty of this one, but avoiding the mistakes. I believe I could build it for half the price of this one. If I could train workers to build a house the way I suggest, I believe I could make a significant contribution to improving Thai living standards.

The people of this village work in making concrete grave markers and spirit houses, so they are expert in working with concrete. They can build a concrete block wall very quickly (though I showed them how to insert steel rods to make it stronger and less likely to fall down), and smooth it over to make it look nice. This is not expensive at all. I would use a nice aluminum roof, which is somewhat more expensive than the tin sheeting that is usually used for roofs, but reflects heat more efficiently and looks better. I would build a frame using the concrete pillars that are used in all houses here, topped with metal, as was done with my house.

Three principles I would use to keep the house cool in the hot weather: high roof, insulation under the roof, and lots of natural air circulation below the roof to let the hot air out. Then I would spend money to purchase manufactured windows and sliding glass doors for the sides, along with the concrete block walls. If they used inexpensive plastic tarps to shade the west walls, that could prevent a lot of heat buildup in the concrete blocks facing the afternoon sun. I think that would make a very nice house.

Because the old houses have septic tanks that smell, people build their bathrooms far from the living quarters. I do not like this because it is too far to walk outside when one

wants to use the bathroom. If they would construct the septic tanks correctly, and have them emptied when they are full, the smells could be avoided.

An even less expensive way to build the walls is to use wire mesh between the concrete pillars, and spray concrete on the mesh. I looked everywhere in Maha Sarakham for a concrete sprayer, but no one had ever heard of such a machine. I will see if I can find a concrete sprayer while I am in Bangkok. If it is not expensive it might be worth the investment for spraying the remaining walls of my house, or I could sell it to a local builder after I am finished with it. I may yet be able to help the people here afford to have houses that are as pleasing to live in as they are practical. But it may require living in Thailand for much longer than a year.