

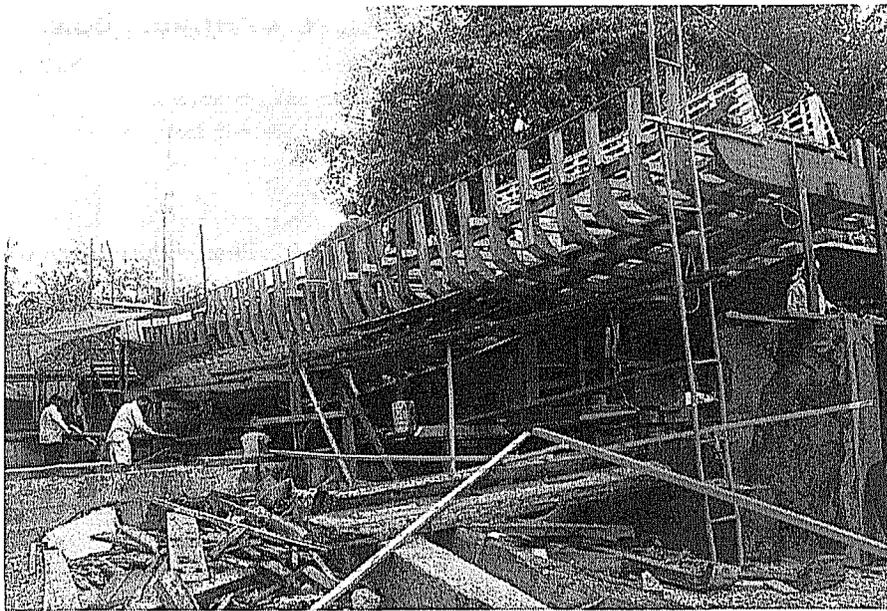
POK PHON: FROM A FISHING VESSEL TO A TOURIST BOAT IN THREE MONTHS

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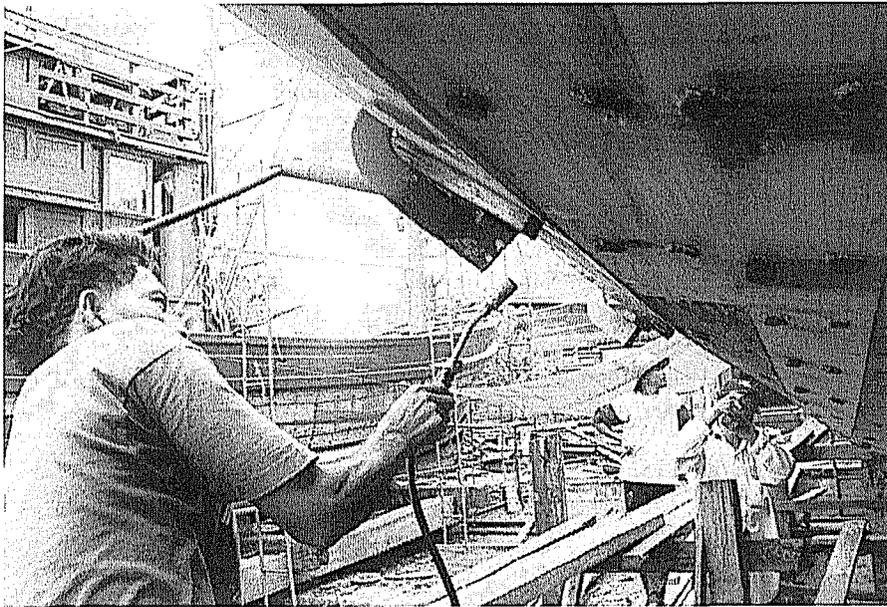
This photo essay deals with the transformation of the Pok Phon, a thirty seven year old Thai fishing vessel. Every two to three years, boats like the Pok Phon have to be repaired, a process which involves cleaning, replacing damaged wood, recaulking, painting, and overhauling the engine. In 2001 the Pok Phon, rather than undergoing just the usual repairs, was completely restored and transformed into a tourist boat. The shipyard where this operation took place is situated in the south of Thailand in the village of Kantang. I visited the shipyard between August and November 2001 in order to do a boat building internship.

First the hull of this fishing vessel had to be restored before the transformation could start. After the hull was finished, the work on the first deck - the construction of a restroom and a small sleeping hut as well as other cabins - began. Beams were attached to the frame in order to build a second deck with a steering hut. While this operation was going on women were painting the outside of the boat. Other people were doing the caulking. Almost all of the labourers doing the painting, welding, and caulking were subcontracted. Only a few people were engaged full-time with the rebuilding of the boat. This latter group were paid well, earning more than Thai policemen, who are commonly known to get good salaries. The construction and repairs were done by regular workers with basic tools: a simple electrical power drill, an electrical planer, chisels, hammers, tape measures, handsaws, axes, and electrical saws. Given that almost all of the workers' tools were extremely blunt, the results of their work were amazing. Painting, however, is not done in a very refined way: surfaces were neither cleaned nor sanded and painting continues even when it is raining.

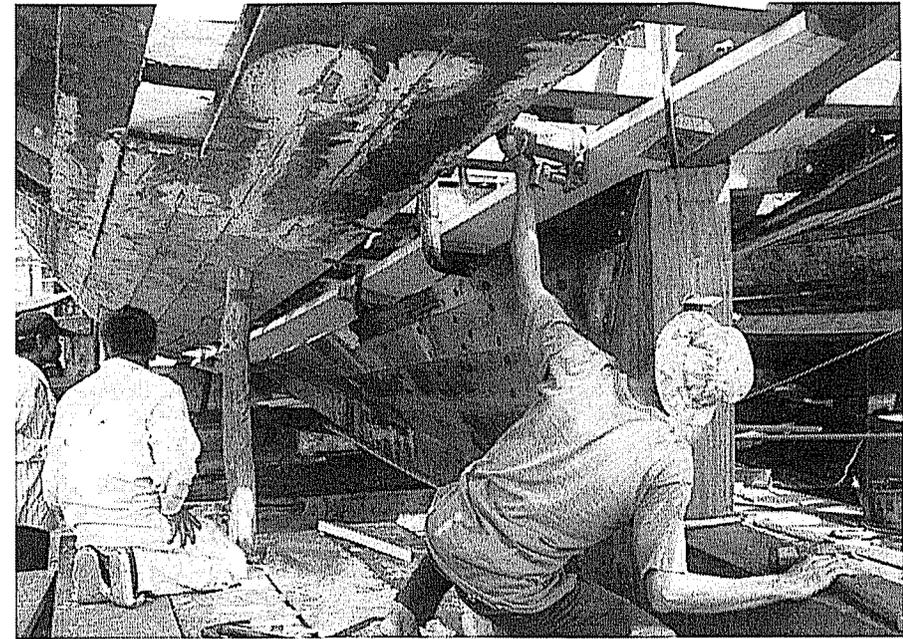
The costs of the repairs depend on the work that needs to be done. For the Pok Phon the repair costs were 800,000 Thai baht (approximately 18,000 Euros). An additional amount of money had to be paid for using the slipways to get the boat out of and into the water (3,000-5,000 baht depending on the size of the boat) and wharf fees (about 300-500 baht per day). The Pok Phon was completely rebuilt in four months and sailed thereafter to Ko Lanta where it is in use now as a tourist boat for diving trips.



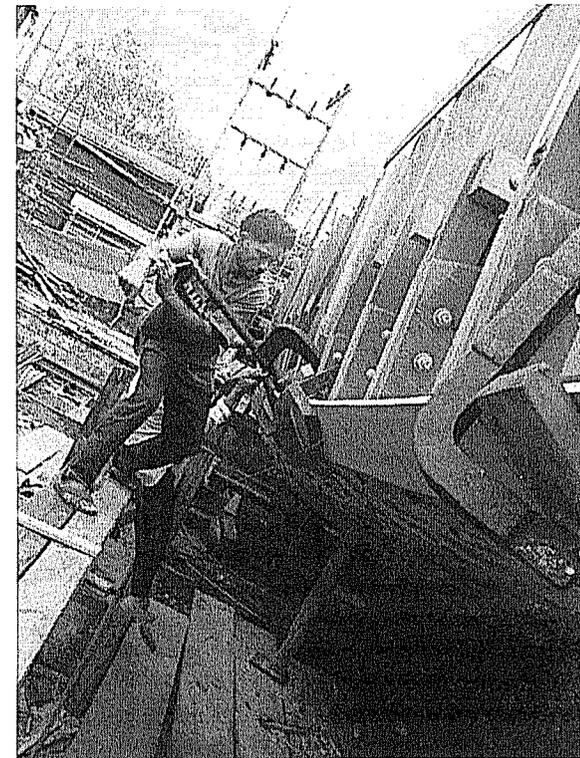
When I arrived at the shipyard the boat had already been stripped down to its frame. Only the pieces of the hull that recently had been replaced were left. The rebuilding of the frame was not done with the help of blueprints, but on the basis of the workers' long experience in boat building. The foreman who co-ordinated the project took all the construction decisions.



In order to give the boat a new hull, 12-metre planks were clamped to the frame. In order to bend these planks into proper position, the workers used oil and a blowtorch. The oil was put on the plank and then it was heated with the blowtorch. When the oil started to boil and the plank became dark brown in colour, that was the sign that it could be bent it into position with the help of clamps.

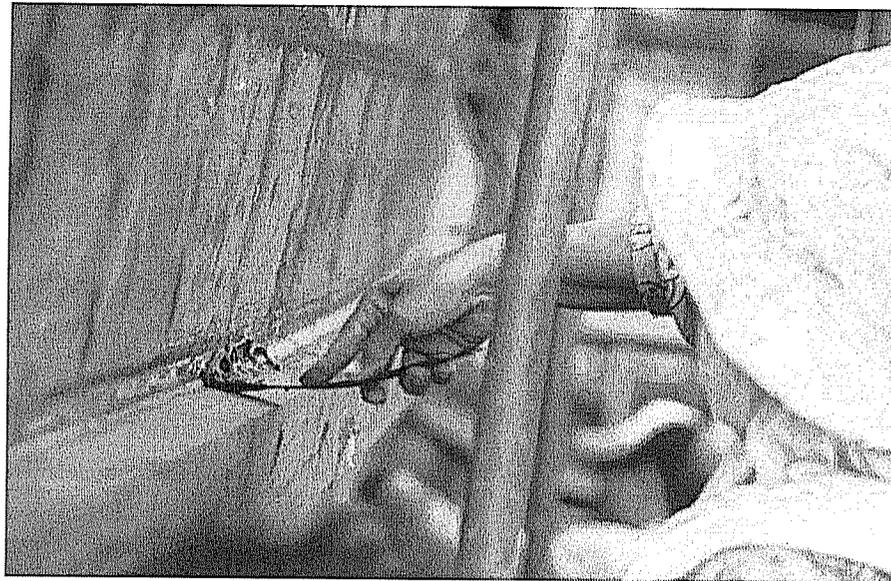


Sometimes a jack was used in order to put planks in their proper position. If a plank did not fit perfectly, the boat builders simply trimmed it to fit.



Planks were forced to bend to the shape of the frame using clamps. The clamps were left in place until a plank had been fixed with wooden pins. After holes were drilled through the planks and the frame, palm wood pins were hammered into these holes. On the other side the pins were trimmed, notched, and split with a wedge. Finally, the part of the pin that was still sticking out was removed and sanded. No bolts or nails were used to attach the planks to the frame.

After the hull was finished the caulking began. First the spaces between the planks were deepened with a special chisel. Then cotton threads and flax were put into these spaces. The flax was treated with an orange powder (probably red lead powder) to lubricate it so that it would go more easily into the clefts and in order to prevent the flax from rotting.

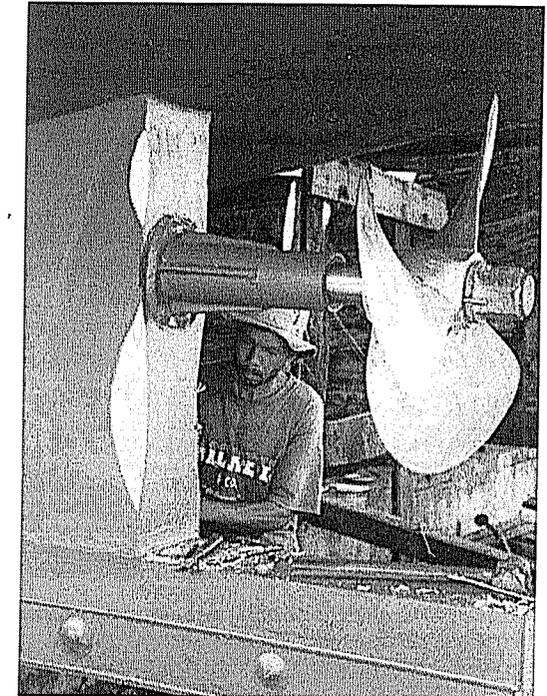


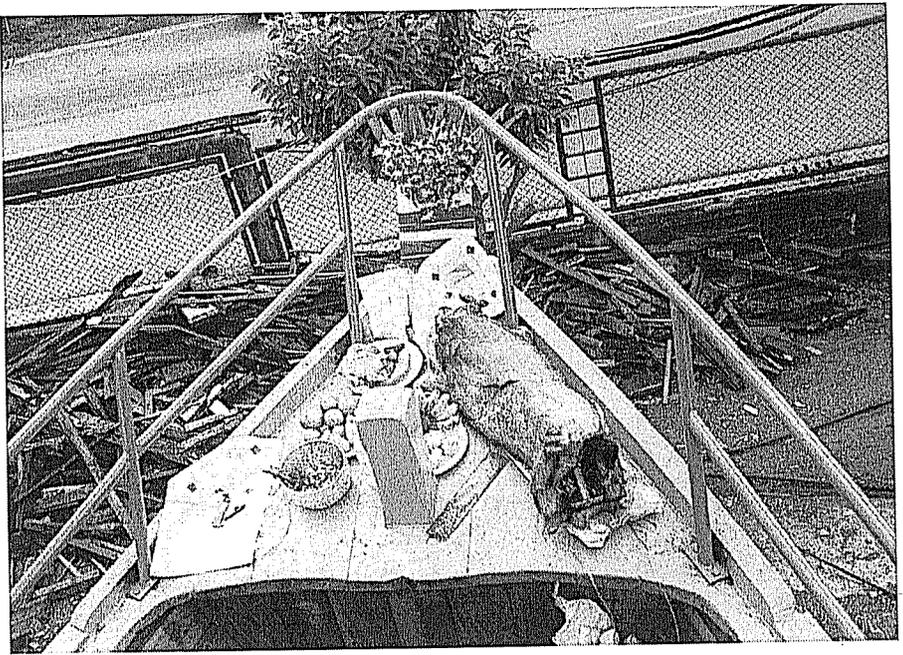
A special paste made from linseed oil, natural resin powder, and a little bit of putty was used to seal the clefts, gaps, and the places where the pins came out of the hull. The paste was elastic and quite durable. The workers applied the paste with a self made spatula. This was one of the only jobs done by women. For the Pok Phon, the workers also used a white epoxy paste. This is a modern technique that in future might replace the traditional paste. But epoxy paste is far more expensive than the indigenous material. Moreover, according to boat building experts, it is only effective when a boat is completely covered in epoxy.



The new deck was not constructed in a traditional way and with traditional material, but with plywood, glass fibre mats, and polyester to make it more durable.

The foreman is shaping the beam behind the propeller so that water will flow towards it more easily.





Before the boat was launched a special ritual was performed. Cakes, fruits, a cooked chicken, a roasted pig, incense, candles, and Buddhist ritual sheets of paper were placed on the front deck. The bow was decorated with red and white strings over a red cloth. Underneath these strings were some fresh picked orchids and a colourful plastic flower bouquet hung from the bow. The shipyard boss performed the ritual. After he had washed the bow and had sprinkled some fragrant oil and talc powder on it and the front deck, he started praying for good luck. Finally he used firecrackers to drive away bad ghosts. After the ritual, the food was given to the workers and then the boat was launched.



After launching, the boat stayed for some time at the shipyard because there was still a lot of work to do on the engine, the steering house and the cabins. As rental of the boat-building wharf is quite expensive, the new boat owners preferred to complete these last details while the boat was moored in the water.