

DESIGNING AND OPERATING AN ECOLODGE IN THE LAO PDR



SUGGESTIONS FOR LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL INVESTORS

COMPLETE SETS OF *FREE* AUTOCAD
CONSTRUCTION DRAWINGS ON CD ROM

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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MORE INFORMATION

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INTRODUCTION

In Laos, warm hospitality, traditional architecture, local food, handicrafts and an unspoiled environment are the things that make the country attractive and interesting to tourists. If you ask the typical international tourist why they chose to visit Laos, many will reply “because the country is still quiet and traditional” or “everything is so green and natural.” Because it is getting easier to come here and travel around the countryside, the number of tourist arrivals is rising every year. As more and more people decide to visit Laos the demand for good quality guesthouses, hotels and restaurants is also increasing and presents a good opportunity for investment.

But what do these tourists want in terms of accommodation and food? Is it necessary to build large 5 star hotels stocked with western amenities? In most cases no, but of course there will be a need for this type of accommodation in Vientiane and some larger towns. What the typical international tourist and a growing number of Lao people that live in cities prefer is a clean, well managed small hotel or guesthouse located in a quiet natural area that is built of wood and bamboo. They prefer to eat local food and sleep in a room decorated with Lao handicrafts and furnishings. Also, most international tourists are very environmentally conscious and want to stay in a place that does not negatively affect the environment. Designing and operating this type of accommodation, an ecolodge, is the focus of this book. What we have written for the investor is an overview of the main design concepts behind a good ecolodge, and for managers highlighted many issues one needs to consider in order to professionally operate the business. We also provide some examples of existing ecolodges right here in Laos. If you are interested in investing in this type of responsible and profitable business, please read on to learn more about the basics of how to design and operate a successful ecolodge in Laos.

Vincent Fischer-Zernin
Steven Schipani
Vientiane, August 2005

WHAT IS AN ECOLOGE?

An ecolodge is a small hotel or guesthouse that incorporates local architectural, cultural and natural characteristics, promotes environmental conservation, and produces social and economic benefits for local communities.

GUIDELINES FOR ECOLOGES IN LAOS



Use Lao architecture and building materials This means that you must build the lodge to look like a traditional home or house. Construction materials should be local, such as bamboo, rattan, wood, locally made bricks or stone. This is actually the cheapest and most common way to build a house in Laos, so most carpenters know very well how to do it in this fashion.



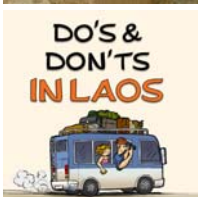
Minimise the use of energy This means avoiding air conditioning and other electric devices that use too much electricity. You should install solar energy to meet some power needs, such as lighting and hot water.



Use local products and minimise the use of chemicals in daily operations This means that you should use local food products (not canned imported products), locally produced bed sheets, table cloths and other items in your lodge. You should not buy chemical bug sprays, poisons or toxic cleaning fluids when there is a suitable substitute. Install screens to keep out the bugs, use non-toxic rat poison (or have housecats) and use simple soap and water for cleaning. All of these ideas will save money and the environment.



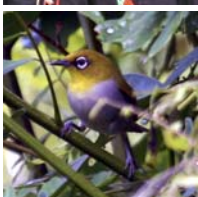
Minimise and manage your waste This means not using things that make a lot of waste, such as disposable water bottles, canned foods, or foods wrapped in plastic. This also means to recycle and reuse items when possible, especially glass and plastic.



Minimise negative impacts on nearby villages You should provide information to tourists on cultural do's and don'ts. You should also speak with local villagers regularly to learn how you can help them and to learn if there are any problems created by tourists that stay at your lodge.



Employ local people and support their community Your lodge should give work opportunities to nearby villagers. You may also support the community by helping with activities at a nearby school.



Support conservation of nature You can do this by giving information to your guests about nature tourism in your area. You can also help by not selling wildlife products and by supporting the conservation activities in a protected area nearby. Another simple way is to protect the trees around your lodge and prohibit hunting on your property.

THE ECOLOGE



Many, many tourists who come to Laos prefer to stay in a quiet, clean, safe and peaceful lodging that is built using traditional Lao designs. If you are thinking of investing in a guest house or hotel, you should remember that it is very, very important to consider what your *guests* like in terms of building materials, decorations, furnishings, lighting, landscaping, service and location. If you build accommodation that *you* prefer without considering what your guests like, you may end up with no customers and quickly go out of business.

In Laos it may be the personal preference of the investor to build in concrete and brick because his parent's house was made of wood and considered primitive. Yes, a concrete house gives face in local communities, lasts longer and is cheaper to maintain, however, tourists do not think this way. It is very important that you understand what tourists appreciate because if you do, you are more likely to have a profitable business – the main reason you invested in the first place.

Tourists are tired of seeing concrete in the cities they live in and go on holiday to relax in natural settings. This includes where they eat and sleep on vacation. Think about it; Lao people and international tourists have different preferences. Many Lao people like air-conditioning and don't mind cold baths. Tourists prefer ceiling fans and hot showers. A tourist will not always pay more for an air conditioned room, but they will pay more for a large, clean room that is built in Lao style using natural materials like wood or bamboo. This is good news for the Lao investor because it is cheaper to build in wood and bamboo than with cement or brick. If you have a good design and location, a tourist will pay more money to stay in an ecolodge. With good management, an ecolodge will allow you to make more money with a smaller investment. In Thailand and Malaysia, there are many examples of ecolodges that make a lot of money. In Laos, we can do better, if we remember to think about building and managing ecolodges the way tourists like them.



The design of traditional houses (left) can be used as a basis for the design of ecolodges



Traditional houses from Laos.

DESIGN ELEMENTS

First and foremost, always think about the safety and comfort of your guests, then think about how to make their surroundings as “functional” as possible. Functional means you should make it easy for tourists to move around both inside and outside their rooms. Pull the three concepts of *safety*, *comfort* and *function* together in your design and relate them to natural building materials, fixtures and furnishings. Your architect’s advice should always consider the guest. You are building the ecolodge for the guest, not the architect. Try and think like the guest when designing the ecolodge, and also think about what you like when you are on vacation with your family.

When designing rooms make them big. Tourists will pay more for a larger room with a large bathroom. Installing large windows and creating open spaces like a covered balcony or building a separate sala is a good idea. Don’t block a room’s view with a wall when you don’t need one. Try to use large windows and glass walls to take advantage of natural light. Tourists do not like to see neon lights in an ecolodge.

Unless it is completely necessary, you should not install air conditioning. Instead take advantage of natural ventilation and install ceiling fans. You should also build vents into the peak of the roof to allow hot air to escape the room. Put in screened windows and doors that can be opened. Even if you do install air conditioning, build the room with natural ventilation, ceiling fans, screened windows and doors so your guests have a choice about how to cool the room.

Outside the room there should be a nice garden with plenty of native flowers and spots for your guests to sit and relax under shady trees. There should be well lit walkways linking the guest rooms with your restaurant. It is not necessary to build them with cement. Raised wooden ones, gravel or brick looks nice to tourists and blends in well with natural surroundings.

It is possible to reduce the number of mosquitoes in your garden by planting local herbs and spices. Plant a lot of lemongrass, marigolds, chilies and basil and remember to limit the number of places with stagnant water where mosquitoes can breed.

In your restaurant serve delicious Lao food that tourists are very interested to eat. One of the main reasons tourists come to Laos is to try Lao food. You do not need to learn how to make fancy foreign food to please your guests. Simple, clean, delicious Lao food is fine, except for breakfast when most foreigners and many Lao people like to have bread, jam, coffee and eggs. For the table setting, use matching utensils, cotton table cloths, dishes and bowls, and a simple ordinary set of drinking glasses and cups. Try to limit the number of condiments on the table to salt and pepper. If a certain type of food requires special condiments, have the server bring them out when necessary. Fancy designs on plates and bowls are not necessary. Do not use any plastic chairs, tables, or other plastic utensils in your restaurant. Remember, tourists don’t like plastic.

In the next sections, we will talk more about some design and operational details behind successful ecolodges in Laos and other countries.



A garden walkway made from brick with a cement sculpture



Tourists like simple, attractive table settings made from local materials

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ECOLOGDGES IN LAOS

Because of the high demand for good quality ecolodges in Laos, a few people have already begun to build them.

EXAMPLES OF ECOLOGDGES IN LAOS



THE BOAT LANDING
Luang Namtha



TIGER TRAILS ELEPHANT CAMP
Luang Prabang



UTTAYAN BACHIENG
Champassak



LUANG XAY
Luang Prabang



SALA PAE
Champassak



TAHT FAN
Champassak



BAN SABAI BUNGALOW
Vang Vieng



THAT LO RESORT
Salavanh



THONGBAY RESORT
Luang Prabang

Before you start building your ecolodge, visit one of the examples above to see what the builders have done right and wrong, and then plan how you can do better.

Another place where you can see many good examples of ecolodges is on the internet at www.ecoclub.com. For further reference, section 14 of this manual has some sample architectural drawings that can be used as a basis for the design of an ecolodge. **On the CD-ROM attached to this manual are complete AutoCAD drawings and materials lists for a number of sample bungalows. (See page 24-27).**

3

SELECTING AND PREPARING A SITE

Where should you build an ecolodge? This is a very good question because if you build in the wrong spot, your investment will be lost. The good news is that there are many, many good natural areas to build an ecolodge in Laos. These can be in forested settings, in the mountains, beside rivers, lakes or near villages. If you are building in town, there should be an adequate buffer zone between the ecolodge and large infrastructure such as roads, big buildings or commercial structures. Tourists like quiet, relaxing surroundings with a view. You should not build too close to archaeological or religious sites, areas that flood, or sensitive natural habitats such as animal breeding sites.

When preparing a site for construction, cut as few trees as possible and try to position your rooms along the natural slope of the land. Do not clear the whole area expecting to plant trees again later. It will be many years before the trees you cut down grow back. If there is a natural slope or hills where you are building, take advantage of any opportunities you have to enhance the view from each room and the restaurant. Also consider water drainage and erosion if your land is located on a hill or riverbank.



Razed land - not good for building an ecolodge



Carefully cleared land



Erosion of a riverbank



Ecolodge construction on a slope

4

LOCAL BUILDING MATERIALS

In Laos there are abundant and cheap natural building materials. Remember, tourists want an ecolodge to be built of wood, bamboo, tile, stone and glass.

Use as much wood and bamboo in the general construction as possible. It is fine to show the timber frames of an ecolodge; tourists find this very appealing. You can make sturdy foundations for the ecolodge's main support pilings with stone or brick, and it is suggested that you lay natural colored earthenware tiles in the bathroom. Another possibility is to use walls made of cement or plaster over bamboo frames. These are all inexpensive materials that lower your investment costs and are what tourists like. Do not paint the beautiful wood you build with. Instead apply teak oil, "cuprinol" or "timbershield" to enhance its beauty.

USE OF LOCAL BUILDING MATERIALS



Round and square timber frames and support posts



Open ceiling and panorama windows



Brick wrap around foundation



Doxy walls



Use of river stones for bathroom floors



Tile and rock shower



A nice foundation



Wood benches and walkways



Integrated wood, brick and tile

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BUNGALOWS OR MULTI-ROOM LODGES

An ecolodge resort can be composed of a set of single or double room bungalows, dormitories, tree-houses, a boat or a single, multi-room building like a guesthouse. You can select just one or a combination of the above structures for your ecolodge, but it is best to keep the project to a common design theme. Factors that will affect your decision are how much land you have, location, slope of the land, how much you will charge for your rooms, target markets, and how much money you have to invest. Nicely designed single or double bungalows are a popular choice because you can start with a small number of units and expand as you acquire more investment capital. Even if you do not build all structures at the same time, you should have a master plan and “vision” about what you want the project to look like 10 years in the future.

ECOLOGDE DESIGN CONCEPTS



SINGLE LODGE 1



DORMITORY



GUESTHOUSE



DOUBLE LODGE



DORMITORY AND COMMUNITY HALL



MASTER PLAN

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RESTAURANTS AND COMMON AREAS

RESTAURANTS

The restaurant is an essential structure that should be built first. Why? Because a restaurant will allow you to produce immediate cash flow and draw additional customers that are not staying at your ecolodge. When people eat at your restaurant they also have the chance to see the ecolodge's nicely designed rooms and garden. Also, another reason to build the restaurant first is that because ecolodges are generally located outside of town, your guests will need somewhere to eat!

The restaurant should be located at a central and easily accessible location. It should not be too close to the rooms because guests will be bothered by noise from the restaurant or the exhaust from kitchen fans. Odors from kitchen waste should not be blowing into guest's rooms or the restaurant.

If there is a view of mountains, a river or any other attractive natural feature from your property, consider building the dining room in a place where tourists can have a full, unobstructed view from their tables. Build both open air and covered dining areas because tourists like to eat under the stars. If you are building a bar, do not build it so that the guests are looking at a boring back wall with liquor bottles. The bar should also have a good view for the guests to enjoy.

How many tables should you have in the restaurant? To answer this you will need to estimate how many outside customers will be using the restaurant in addition to the number of people that can sleep at your ecolodge. Minimally, there should be enough places to sit for the maximum number of guests you can accommodate in your rooms. If you are targeting large groups for receptions, or your ecolodge is close to an urban area, you should consider making the restaurant large, up to 100 seats. If you decide to have a large restaurant it should be located a good distance (at least 50 meters) from the guest rooms.

Decorate the restaurant using furnishings that have traditional designs and are made locally from wood or other natural materials. Don't use bright lights, plastic, or play the music too loud. There should **not** be a television in the restaurant. Tourists like hanging lamps made from bamboo baskets or mulberry paper. Table cloths and napkins should be made from local textiles, and plates, glasses and utensils should be simple and match. You can use Lao ceramics for serving bowls, and coasters made from rattan add a nice touch to table settings.



Tourists like a restaurant with a beautiful view



An example of a restaurant built from local materials

► RESTAURANTS AND COMMON AREAS

Tourists do not like to see dead animal parts like deer antlers, animal skins or elephant tusks on display at an ecolodge's restaurant. Even worse is to have live wild animals like birds or monkeys in cages or in chains.

Regarding food and beverage service you must always have available what is on the menu. Tourists will expect that you will. You should never be "out" of something. Tourists will want to eat delicious Lao food but not wildlife. Some Lao people might like to eat wildlife, but international tourists that stay at ecolodges do not. If some foods are only seasonal, they should be listed as a "daily special." Do not use MSG or processed margarine or jam. Instead serve pineapple and tamarind jam made by the Lao Farmers Group.



An example of a well furnished restaurant



Mulberry paper hanging lamps



A band playing traditional Lao music

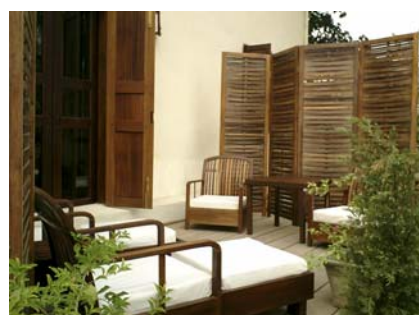


A purpose-built bar

The drink list should contain a basic selection of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks. Popular choices are gin, vodka, tequila, rum and whiskey. Beer Lao is very well-liked by international tourists. Keep mixers such as tonic, lime juice, soda and orange juice in stock. Standard soft drinks that any restaurant should have are Pepsi, 7up, drinking water, coffee and tea. Fruit shakes are also very popular.

COMMON AREAS

In addition to the restaurant, many ecolodges have a common area or purpose built facility. This may be a place where tourists can watch birds, view animals or see handicraft-making demonstrations. They give your guests a place to meet and talk outside their rooms, interact informally with staff and learn about the area's natural and cultural features. Common areas should be built following the same design elements as the ecolodge.



Examples of common areas for guests



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CONSTRUCTION ADVICE

This section is meant to provide some basic advice on incorporating ecolodge design concepts into the actual construction of the facility. It is not technical “how to” advice, but rather some additional information on what tourists like to see regarding ecolodge buildings and how you can ensure their preferences are considered during the construction process.

As mentioned earlier, tourists like big rooms with big bathrooms. They will pay more for a larger room, whether it is a bungalow or room in a larger hotel-like structure. Rooms should be at least 3.5 x 4 m with a bathroom of at least 2.15 x 1.75 m. Balconies should take full advantage of the view and be at least 1.5 m wide.

Don't pour a large concrete slab or lay a brick foundation when building bungalows. Instead slightly raise the structure and wrap the pillars in brick, stone or concrete to prevent termites. When framing in wood, you can show round or sawn pillars and leave the ceiling open. If you frame in concrete, surfaces in the bedroom will need to be covered in wood or bamboo to keep the ecolodge looking “natural”. If you have a concrete floor, it will need to be covered in wood or ceramic tile. Do not use building materials made with asbestos - it is illegal in many countries because it is dangerous to people's health.



Examples of exposed wooden pillar supports



Examples of traditional Lao roofing materials

Acceptable roofing materials are wood shingles, Lao ceramic tile or split bamboo. Tourists do not like tin roofs because they are hot, loud when it rains, and do not blend in well with nature. To prevent leaky bamboo, wood or tile roofs, use layers of black tarpaper, zinc sheets or alu-foil that can be hidden in-between the layers of roofing material. Grass is inexpensive but it quickly leaks and burns easily. Because you are building in wood, if one lodge burns, all might burn and you can lose your entire investment.

Doors and window frames should be similar in design and be large enough to allow a good view of the gardens and scenery beyond. The front door of your rooms should open outward to fan away mosquitoes. Always install mosquito screens on all windows and doors. Locks, window and door bolts, light switches, electric plug covers and other fixtures should match if possible.

It is not necessary to install iron bars in the window frames, it makes the room feel like a jail. Consider using sliding windows when you can. This design saves space and requires no hardware such as hinges and bolts.



Windows and doors should be large enough to provide a view

► CONSTRUCTION ADVICE

Your budget and how much you want to charge for the room will determine what type of wall construction to use. If you have a small budget and will sell your rooms cheaply, you can use a single layer of woven bamboo. For higher quality rooms, wooden clapboard on the outside and woven bamboo or another layer of clapboard on the inside will allow you to hide all wiring and install plugs and switches flush in the wall. If you are building in bamboo, be sure to soak the freshly cut and split bamboo in water for a couple of weeks before weaving it into wall panels or else it will become quickly infested with termites.

When installing electric wiring, try to hide wires behind the wall or on top of the ceiling frames. Make sure there are enough (2-3) electric sockets in the room that are no higher than 50 cm above the floor. Do not put electric sockets where they can get wet! Next to the bed, you should place reading lamps that can be turned off by the guest without getting up. The other light switches, fan and air conditioner controls should be centralized into 2 places; one at the entrance to the room, one at the entrance to the bathroom. Switches should be installed no higher than 80 cm from the floor.

Many tourists appreciate the use of solar energy in ecolodges. It has a higher start up cost, but in the long run can be inexpensive to operate and a good marketing tool. Solar hot water heaters are cheaply available from China and are a good option for making hot water with no electricity costs.



Properly installed switches

BATHROOMS

The bathroom should get special attention. Most Lao people do not consider a well-designed bathroom essential, but international tourists do. Tourists will sometimes select accommodation based on the bathroom design, and if you do not consider this fact, you will lose business. Clean bathrooms are also very important for the restaurant – restaurants with clean bathrooms will attract more customers.



Solar powered hot water heaters
Sunlabob is a Vientiane based solar energy company (see logo). Telephone or go to their website for more information



The absolute minimum



Well designed sinks



Attractive wood, glass and tile bathroom

BATHROOM ESSENTIALS



- ▶ All floor surfaces need to be slip-proof
- ▶ Bathrooms should have two towel racks
- ▶ Make sure windows are opaque
- ▶ Bathrooms do not need only to be made of concrete and tiles. All wood bathrooms work fine
- ▶ Install wooden hooks on back of door for clothes and towels
- ▶ Make sure the bathroom drains well and is separated from the room by a small threshold
- ▶ The door should open into the bathroom to prevent flooding the bedroom
- ▶ Bathtubs are expensive, difficult to install, hard to keep clean and waste a lot of water, which goes against the concept of an ecolodge. Install showers only
- ▶ Don't build square, open, cement water holders next to the toilet. They breed mosquitoes and are hard to clean. Use a covered clay-ceramic jar instead
- ▶ Make an enclosed shower area to stop the whole bathroom from getting wet. The enclosure can be ready-made, hand-built of bricks and tiles or made of glass/Plexiglas and wood
- ▶ Standard hot water heaters do not supply enough hot water during the cold winter months in northern Laos. To please your guests, spend a little more money on hot water boilers, and install them out of sight, in back or underneath the lodge. Using solar hot water heaters is a good idea and will help save energy
- ▶ Provide a hand shower next to the toilet
- ▶ Make sure the door into the bathroom is the same height as a standard door so people don't bang their heads
- ▶ Put a wastebasket in the bathroom
- ▶ Toilet paper holders and towel racks should be strong and made of wood
- ▶ Shower spray should not make toilet paper, soap holder or towel racks wet
- ▶ Shower heads should be installed 2 m high
- ▶ Don't install switches, breakers or fuses in the bathroom. If you install an electric hot water heater place it above the showerhead away from any water spray
- ▶ Install all fixtures for showers, sinks and toilets correctly and make sure they function properly. Check regularly. All PVC pipes should be inside or behind walls. Outside PVC pipes should be hidden or painted a natural wood color
- ▶ You must have a sit down toilet, not a squat toilet, with a quality, strong seat and cover which remains open when lifted up
- ▶ If your lodge is on flat land, ensure good water pressure by building a high water tower (one time cost) or install pressure pumps (monthly costs forever). If your site is located on a slope or has a hill behind it, take advantage of gravity by pumping your well water up to a holding tank at the highest possible point
- ▶ Install a simple mirror (no plastic frames) and a small shelf below it for shaving kits and brushes/combs. Make sure guests can wash their face and brush their teeth without banging their forehead on the shelf. A large, rounded counter with the sink built into it is even better

8

INTERIOR DECORATION

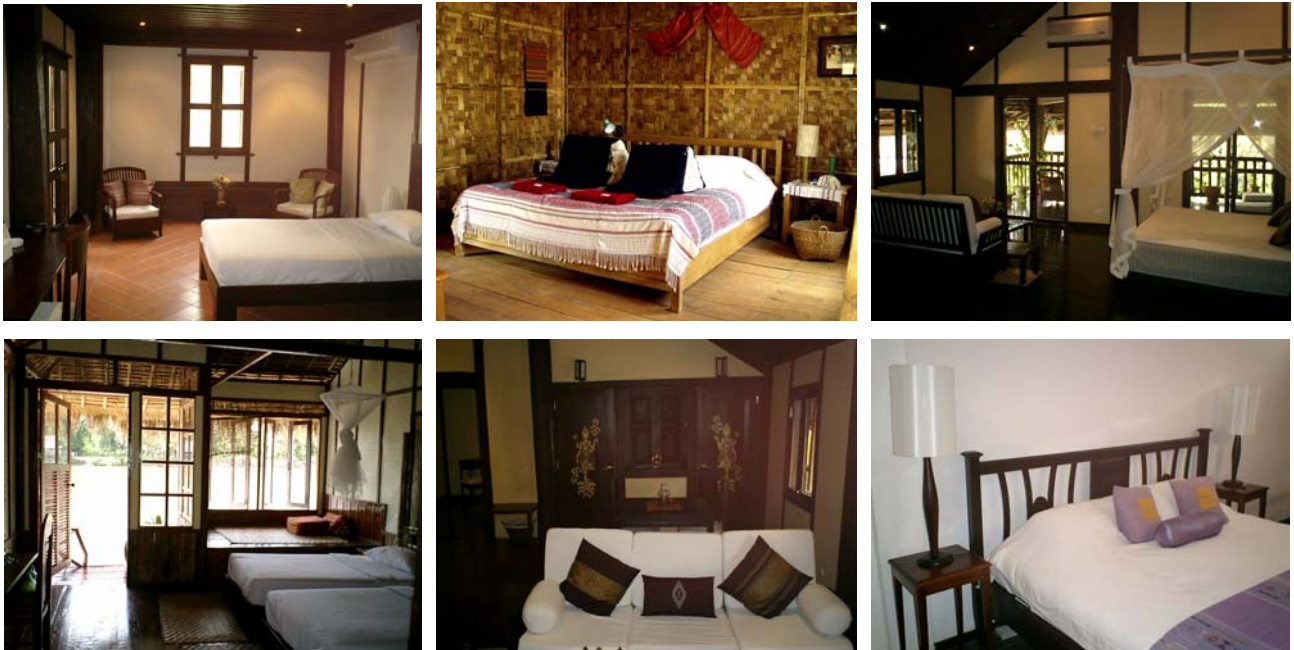
The way a room is decorated should reflect Lao styles and local traditions. Again, this is what the tourist likes. If your guest wanted to see a room decorated similar to what they have in their own country, they would have stayed there. Using Lao made furnishings is usually cheaper and supports the local economy. Consider using antique looking wood or rattan furniture and curtains, bed covers and wall decorations made of locally produced textiles. Never use plastic. Use light fixtures made from wood, rattan, ceramic or mulberry paper. Old style ceiling fans are nice too.

Tourists like plain wood or natural looking tile or stone floors that can be partially covered by bamboo or rattan mats. In the bathroom, use clay-ceramic water vessels covered with nicely made wood covers. Pottery and ceramics also add nice touches to a room. Minimize the use of appliances like water heaters and refrigerators in the room; guests will be dining in your restaurant or common areas.

One thing you should avoid doing is putting large wardrobes in the room. Wardrobes use up a lot of space, mosquitoes hide there, and most tourists don't even use them. Instead, install a simple, large luggage rack with a row of wooden clothes hooks above it. Avoid using plastic hooks or hangers. All rooms should have a mosquito net. Use only large nets made of white fabric.

Always position the bed so it faces large windows with a view because tourists like to see the environment around them. Remember to invest in good mattresses and remove the plastic wrapping before putting them on the bed frame. All bed sheets, blankets and towels should be made of cotton. Decorate with Lao handicrafts such as textiles, basketry, wood carvings, lamps, wood furniture and ceramics.

GOOD DECOR



Examples of interior decoration that combines natural local materials and Lao style

9

LANDSCAPE AND GARDENING



Resort gardens with plenty of water, plants and trees

Designing a beautiful ecolodge goes beyond the physical structures on the property. Tourists are very interested in seeing local trees, flowers and insects too, and will expect your ecolodge to have a nice garden. You should therefore try to conserve and enhance your property's flora by limiting the number of trees you remove during construction and by planting flowers. Well-drained walkways should be built through the garden. If located on a slope they should have steps with a handrail. Walkways should be well-lit using lighting that has wires buried underground. Common areas should also be well lit at night.

If you are going to build a parking lot at your ecolodge, think carefully about where to put it. Do not pour ugly concrete in front of rooms or the restaurant. Tourists do not like a parking lot in front of their room or restaurant because cars will make a lot of noise, and smelly car exhaust disturbs them when they are eating or sleeping. If your ecolodge is near a tourist attraction or river pier, you should make a walkway from the ecolodge to the site of interest.

If you ask a tourist "what are you more afraid of, a tiger or a mosquito", most would answer mosquito. Why? Because tourists are very afraid of malaria, dengue and other mosquito born diseases. An additional benefit of planting local plants like lemongrass, marigolds and mint in your garden is that they help to repel mosquitoes.



Lemongrass to deter mosquitos

10

SAFETY, CLEANLINESS AND HYGIENE

A number of safety issues have been raised in previous chapters. Keep in mind that slippery, uneven surfaces and steep stairs are potentially very dangerous hazards and you should be thinking about how to minimize the risk of accidents. Many international tourists that have a lot of money to spend at ecolodges are older and will be hurt very badly if they fall.

Since you will probably be building in wood or bamboo, there is the risk of fire at your ecolodge. You should therefore put one fire extinguisher in every room. Guests and staff should be reminded not to smoke in bed and be very careful with candles. If you are building near a lake or in an open area, lightning is another hazard that can be mitigated by installing lightning rods. Do not put electric sockets in places where they can get wet. For outside lighting, install water-proof lights, sockets and spotlights.

In the overall layout of your ecolodge, consider outsider access to rooms and facilities. It is not necessary to build a wall around the property, but site access should be routed to allow your staff to monitor a limited number of entry points. If you want to build a wall, consider using natural fencing like bamboo or hedges instead.

Your ecolodge and the people working there should always look clean and tidy. No garbage should be left lying around in the garden or rooms, and the restaurant and all bathrooms should be very, very clean. Food should be stored properly and guests should be reminded not to drink tap water by posting a small sign above faucets. Your staff should always wash their hands before preparing and serving food.

What if one of your guests is injured or there is an emergency? This may happen, therefore the ecolodge staff should be trained in basic first aid and you should keep a list of all emergency contact numbers in a place familiar to all employees. You should also have the contact information of all foreign embassies in the Lao PDR. If your ecolodge is located in a remote area it is a good idea to have a pre-set evacuation plan in case a guest is seriously injured.



Restaurants and kitchens should be kept clean



Your guests can be easily injured on uneven walkways or stairs that are too steep

11

STAFFING ISSUES

If after reading this manual you are ready to move forward and invest in an ecolodge, or improve your present facility, you should also be thinking about who manages and operates the facility. Good service and good management is just as important as a beautiful and well built ecolodge. If you do not have a lot of experience in managing a guesthouse or restaurant, you may want to consider hiring a professional manager to look after the day-to-day operations of the ecolodge. You should hire and train staff from the local community to become friendly reliable cooks, receptionists, waiters, gardeners and housekeepers.

The staff should learn as much English as possible to communicate with guests. Set rules about working hours, meals, uniforms, salaries (including bonuses) penalties (for being late or careless), distribution of tips, overtime, sick-leave, holidays, and maternity-leave. Treating your staff well is all part of the ecolodge concept. Consider providing staff with uniforms that reflect local dress style – your guests will love this because they like to see Lao style clothing. A uniform also helps guests identify who works at the ecolodge.

It is also very important to be able to arrange guided tours to local natural and cultural tourist attractions. The option to hire a good guide that can provide accurate information about local culture, flora and fauna is one of international tourist's main requests from ecolodge managers around the world.



Ecolodge staff wearing traditional clothing

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MARKETING AND PROMOTION

THE WISDOM OF MARKETING

**“DO NOT EXPECT THE CUSTOMER TO COME TO YOU;
IT IS YOU WHO HAS TO GO TO THE CUSTOMER”**

The authors of this manual were once asked by a Lao friend to come and look at the ecolodge he was building. After spending about an hour talking about the construction details, the garden, interior decoration and plans for the restaurant, we asked the investor what his marketing and promotion plan was. The investor quickly became irritated and told us he would finish the construction first and then worry about marketing and promotion later. He told us that tourists would come to his ecolodge with or without advertising. What happened? They never came and he had to sell the property less than two years after he opened. Marketing and promotion is important. If no one knows about your ecolodge, how can you expect anyone to stay there?

There are many ways that you can promote your ecolodge and get customers right away, but be prepared to spend at least the first 4-5 years of business operations recuperating your investment costs. A good marketing and promotion plan may shorten that amount of time.

First, post signs. You should post signs on the road leading to your ecolodge, beginning about 10 -20 km away depending on the distance you are located from a main road. Once you get within 5 km of the ecolodge, post signs every 1 km in order to guide your customers directly to the entrance. The sign closest to the entrance should be large, visible and well maintained.

Use modern technology like the internet to promote your ecolodge. Websites can reach people all over the world, 24 hours a day. Some good website designers in Laos are Cyberia www.muonglao.com/cyberia and Green Discovery's phitsamai@greendiscoverylaos.com. It costs about US\$ 800 – 2,000 to design a good-quality website. Once the website is built and posted, it is not expensive to maintain. Printing brochures is another promotional tool, but will only work if the brochure gets to a potential customer so you should work hard to distribute them. You should actively communicate and develop good relations with national and international tour companies that will help promote your ecolodge, and establish good contractual rates with them. What really helps is being mentioned in guidebooks like the Lonely Planet or Rough Guide, however, these are updated only once every 2-3 years so it may take awhile for them to discover you.

When you are about to open your ecolodge, post small printed advertisements in restaurants, guesthouses and information centers in Laos and Thailand. This is a cost-effective way to promote your ecolodge. If you design and post flyers yourself, you should make sure that you have an English language version that is accurate and attractive. A badly designed advertisement will discourage guests from coming.

Finally, remember that the best form of advertising is the mouth-to-mouth recommendations of your customers. Remember this. Every guest has the potential to help or hurt your business depending on what they say about your ecolodge to others. One satisfied customer will tell 10 people about your ecolodge. One unhappy customer will tell 20.



How is your guest going to find you?

13

EXAMPLES OF BAD DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

Throughout this book, we have given many examples of well designed ecolodges and shown what many tourists like in terms of interior decoration, architecture, use of natural materials, landscaping and lighting. In this section, we have shown some bad design examples so you can see what tourists don't like, to help you avoid making these mistakes in your own ecolodge.

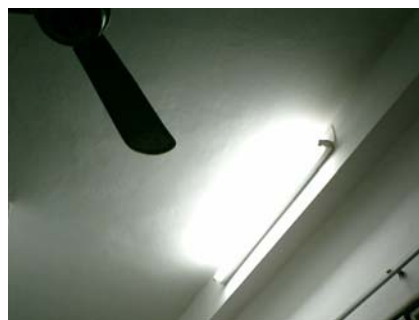
EXAMPLES OF BAD DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION



Exposed PVC pipes and broken toilet seat



Ugly and slippery floor tiles



Neon lights are too bright and unattractive



What a mess!



Metal bars in the window are unattractive and prison-like



This room is not decorated and there is nowhere to hang clothes



These steps are too steep and there is no handrail



Parking should not be in front of guestrooms



Do not use plastic furniture or synthetic fabrics

►EXAMPLES OF BAD DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

MORE EXAMPLES OF BAD DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION



Tin roofs are hot and noisy



Grass roofs burn easily



Use curtains made from Lao textiles



Tourists do not like to see caged animals



A guest can easily trip in this gutter



Ecolodges should not be built of concrete



How is he going to get in and out?



A poorly maintained shower



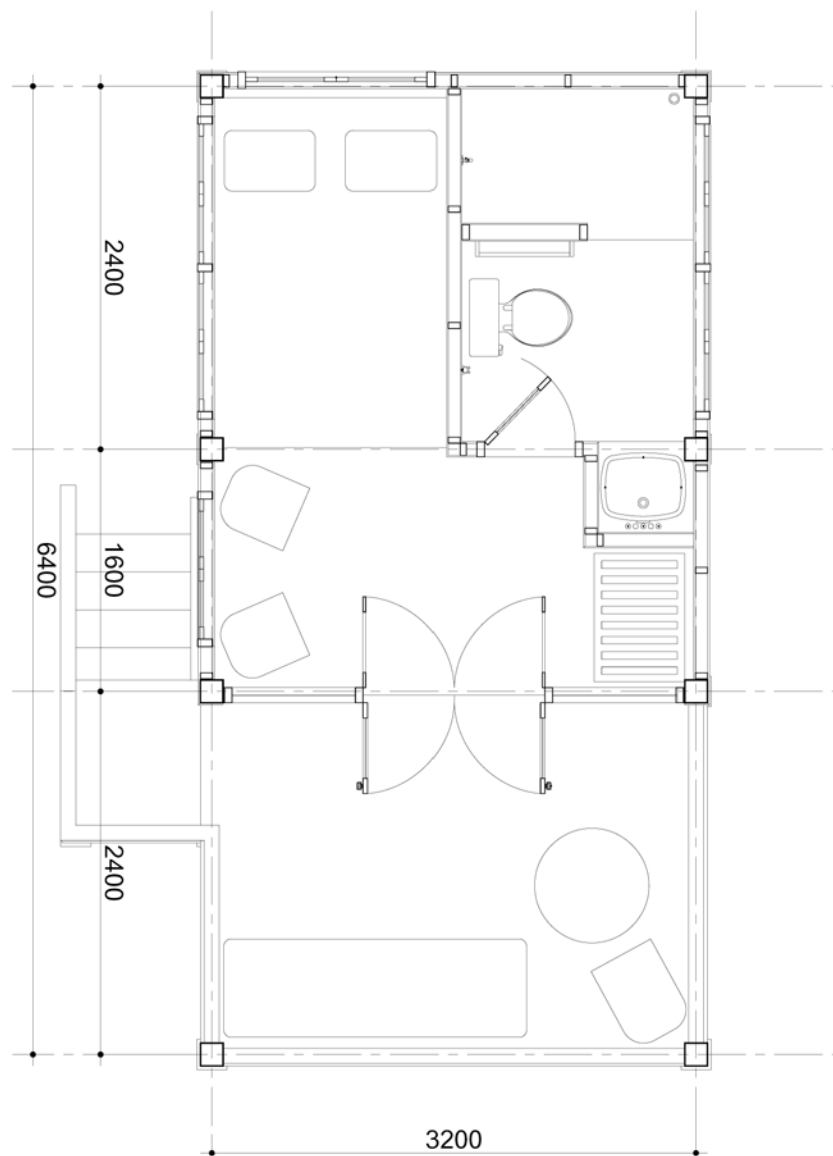
Water should not spray on the bathroom door

14

SAMPLE ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

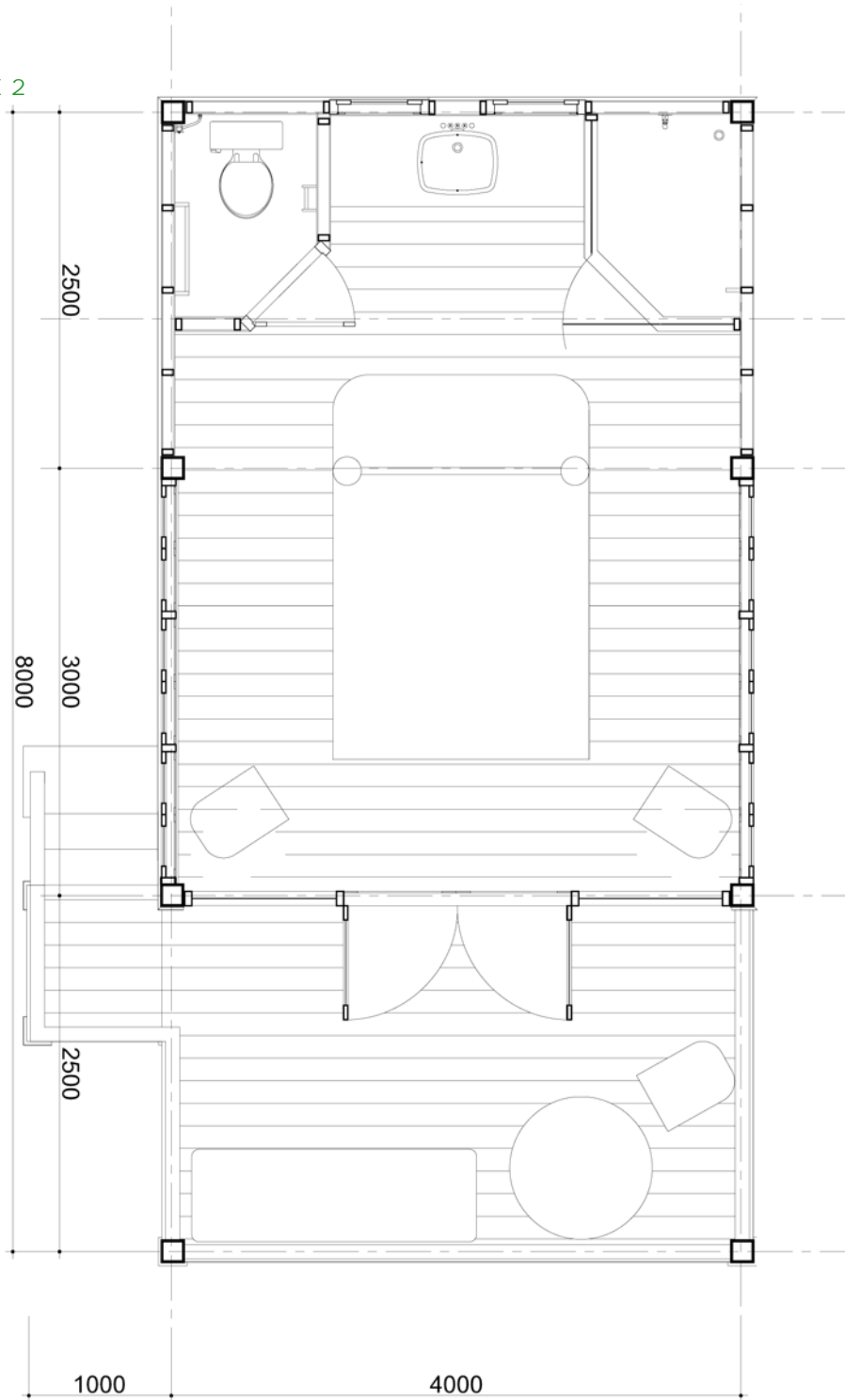
All of the drawings in this section are on file on the CD-ROM that this manual was printed from. On the CD-ROM there are also files with designs for furnishings, technical drawings for different roof styles, septic systems and foundations. You are free to use these designs in their present format, or use them as the basis for improved designs.

LODGE STYLE 1

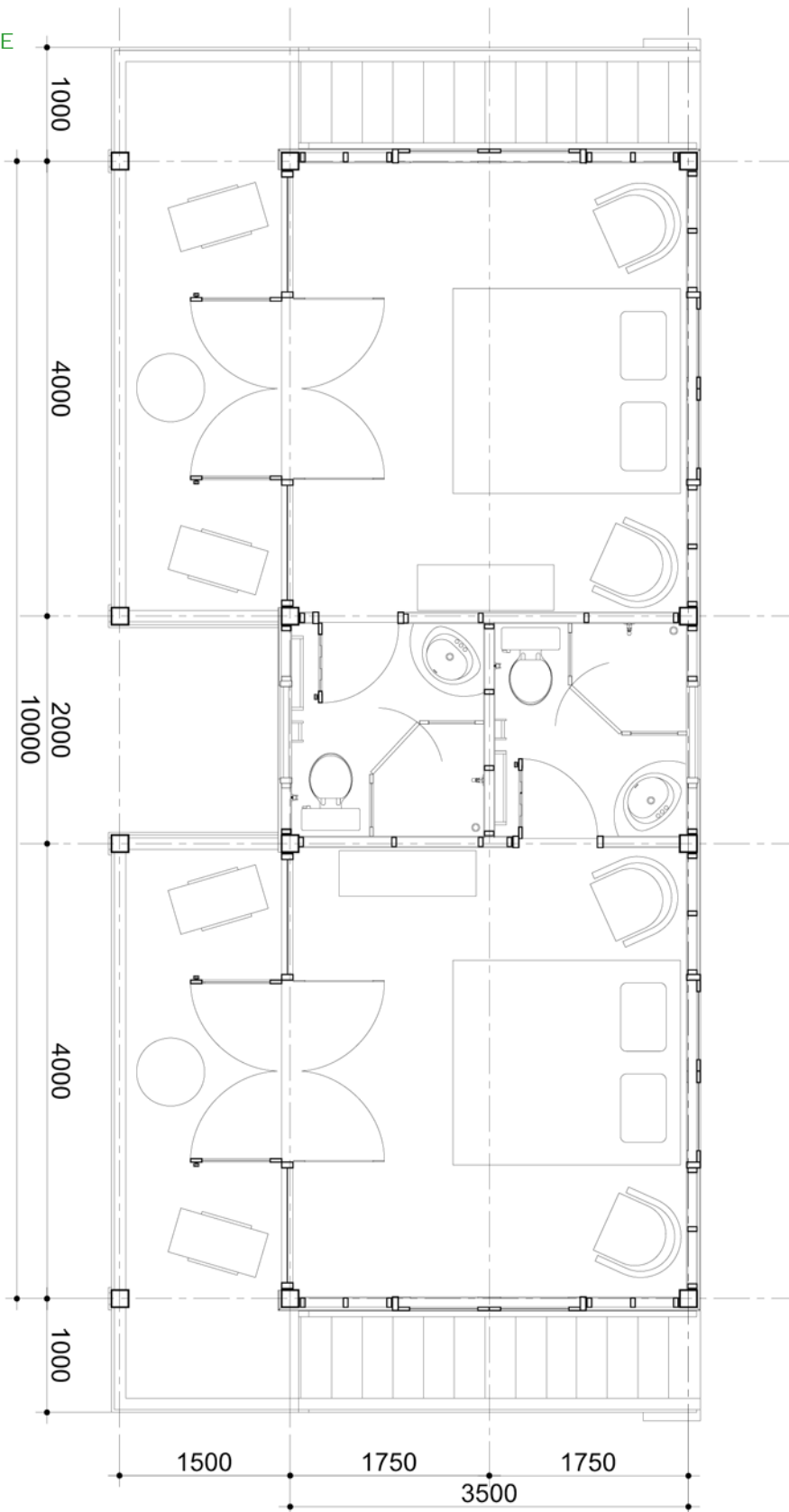


► SAMPLE ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

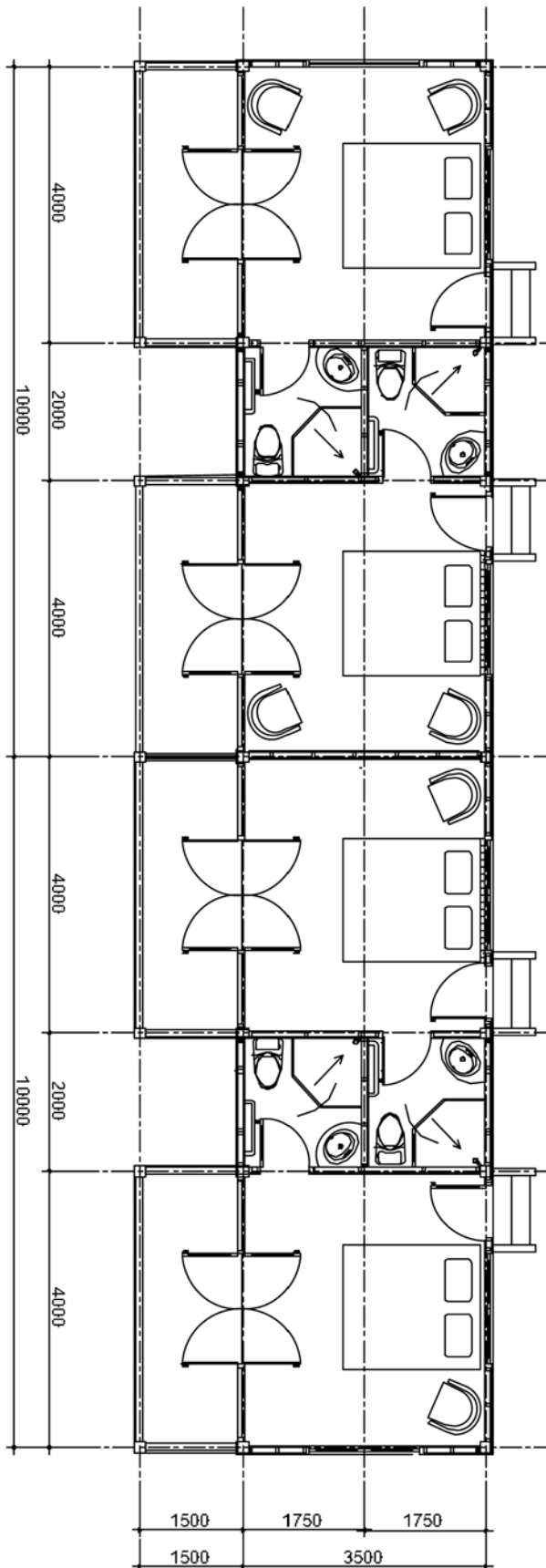
LODGE STYLE 2



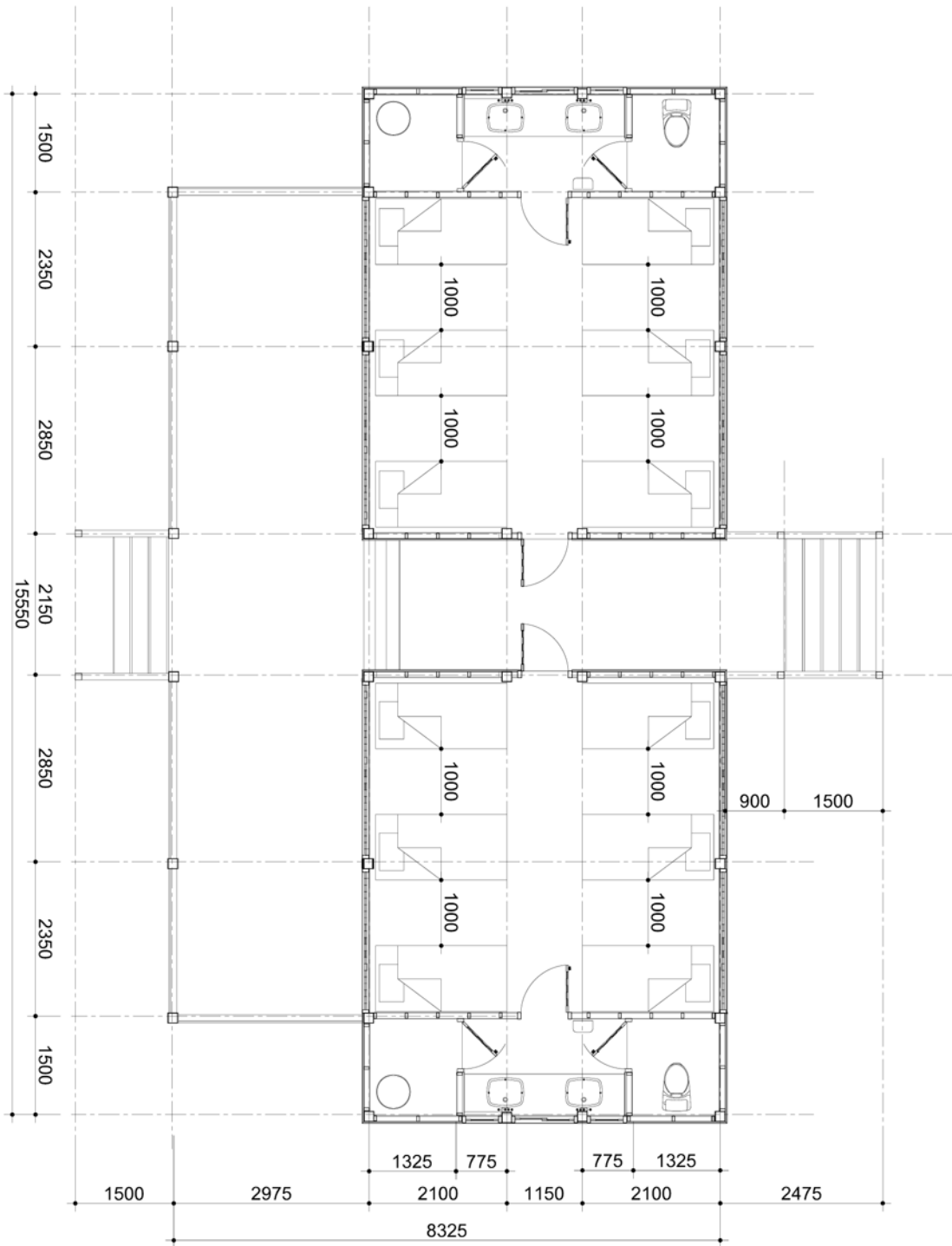
DOUBLE LODGE



GUESTHOUSE



DORMITORY



DORMITORY AND COMMUNITY HALL

