

# Architectural Rhythm

Architecture is no different to any other form of art insofar as it harmonizes phases like the chapters in a book, shades in a painting or movements in a piece of classical music.

Story and Photography : Robert Kimmins  
Images : courtesy of Mr.Ong-Ard Satrabhandhu



The "Elephant" Building



Ong-Ard Satrabhandhu

When speaking to me about his condominium creations, Ong-Ard Satrabhandhu had this to say. "Architecture has a kind of rhythm. For instance, in a building the size of Icon III in Bangkok, three parts need blending together - the head, body and feet so to speak. It's a matter of correctly scaling what one sees at close range with that seen from a distance."

Born in Bangkok in 1944, the only son of four children, Ong-Ard turned down the chance to work in his family run school, and his love of beauty took him to America's Yale and Cornell Universities where he studied architectural design.

"It was a tough start," recalled Ong-Ard. "My English language skills weren't so good and I had to work round the clock to keep up to schedule. But in the USA I found a good study environment with few distractions. I was also lucky enough to learn under the British-born architectural historian, Colin Rowe, who taught me about the conceptual relationship between modernity and tradition, especially classicism and modern movements."

Ong-Ard learnt to appreciate how great architects such as Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe showed respect for each others work, and he allowed their themes and innovation to enter his creative thinking. But on returning to Thailand, Ong-Ard soon developed a versatile and an imaginative style of his own.



The Rachamankha Hotel, Chiang Mai



The Rachamankha Hotel, Chiang Mai

"I try to blend my work into its surroundings and keep things simple and symmetrical," said Ong-Ard as he showed me pictorials of his work to date. "I prefer creating designs that will stand the test of time and avoid entering trends."

In an effort to keep Ong-Ard close to home, his family consigned him to design three contemporary-styled buildings for their school. And after starting his own practice, he went on to find his own individual form by conceiving Henkel's Bangkok factory, an office block for Toshiba and the multi-purpose Duchess Plaza.

Construction of the Icon condominium series, I, II and III, brought Ong-Ard further claims to fame, particularly Icon III, with its brick-built base, fountain and partially covered L-shaped swimming pool up on the roof.

Ong-Ard explained, "I chose brick for the lower section of Icon III because people will come close to a familiar material possessing life and warmth. And the upper sections have been scaled to provide the best appearance from longer distances. While the exterior of the building could be described as modern, my son, Rooj Changtrakul, put in a more traditional interior with genuine antique furniture from Europe."

But Ong-Ard reached the pinnacle of his Bangkok experience with the world renowned landmark - the "Elephant" Building. This gigantic, 32 storey, M-shaped building can't be missed as Thailand's capital is approached from the north.

The top cross-section, which comprises seven floors, is effectively adorned with eyes and tusks to resemble an elephant. I asked Ong-Ard about the difficulties in constructing such a building.

"It wasn't easy, especially when my client wanted the cross-section far bigger than I suggested. But we managed to keep everyone satisfied. It's a pity, however, that unless you're in them, you can't see the courtyards and gardens on the roof."

In Japanese philosophy, wabi sabi is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent and incomplete. It is the beauty of things modest and humble. It is the beauty of things unconventional.

After the hustle and bustle of Bangkok, this saying from Japan influenced Ong-Ard into how to blend Tamarind Village into Chiang Mai's history and cultural heritage. The many trees on the construction site were allowed to dictate a simple and informal plan, especially a 200 year old tamarind tree that has been made the focal point.

This hotel was built to a low-level traditional style and divided into 3 courtyards, with a covered walkway connecting the restaurant and swimming pool to the hotel area. To enter the complex, guests travel through a tunnel of bamboo trees.

"Tamarind Village is in the middle of town and the bamboo tunnel gives the impression of escaping from it into peace and tranquility," said Ong-Ard. "The courtyard idea dates back thousands of years. It also helps one to look inwards, away from the surrounding areas and I designed a curved walkway so that anyone using it holds the mystery of what might lie ahead."

Ong-Ard was so taken by Chiang Mai, he and his family moved there from Bangkok and built the Rachamankha Hotel, located less than 500 metres from Tamarind Village.



Tamarind Village



Tamarind Village



Office & Residential Condominium, Bangkok

The Rachamankha's design was inspired by the Lampang temple of Wat Phra That Lampang Luang in order to create an atmosphere of total calm and relaxation. Rooj Changtrakul based the interior design on northern Thai Lanna culture, furnished and decorated with antiques gathered from China, Burma and Laos.

"The site here was different to the one for Tamarind Village," added Ong-Ard. "There were no trees and we had to create a more formal, 3-dimensional layout. I believe Chinese design to be the roots of Thai architecture, so I applied its principles here. We also used traditional techniques such as mixing lime with the cement and leaving the walls lumpy, with an unfinished appearance. We want our visitors to feel that they're stepping back into the past."

Ong-Ard Satrabhandhu has achieved a distinguished career, containing architectural achievements that are looked upon as masterpieces. From a schoolhouse to the Icon condos and magnificent "Elephant" Building and now the Rachamankha Hotel - recently voted by Conde' Nast Traveler Truth as one of the 116 best new hotels in the world. At 63 years old, does Ong-Ard have more to offer? I asked him about retirement.

"Retire? No. Right now, I'm working on residential homes and who knows what the future holds. Besides, if I didn't do this, what else would I do? Putting plans for a building together requires a sense of rhythm. For me that is the rhythm of life." ■



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