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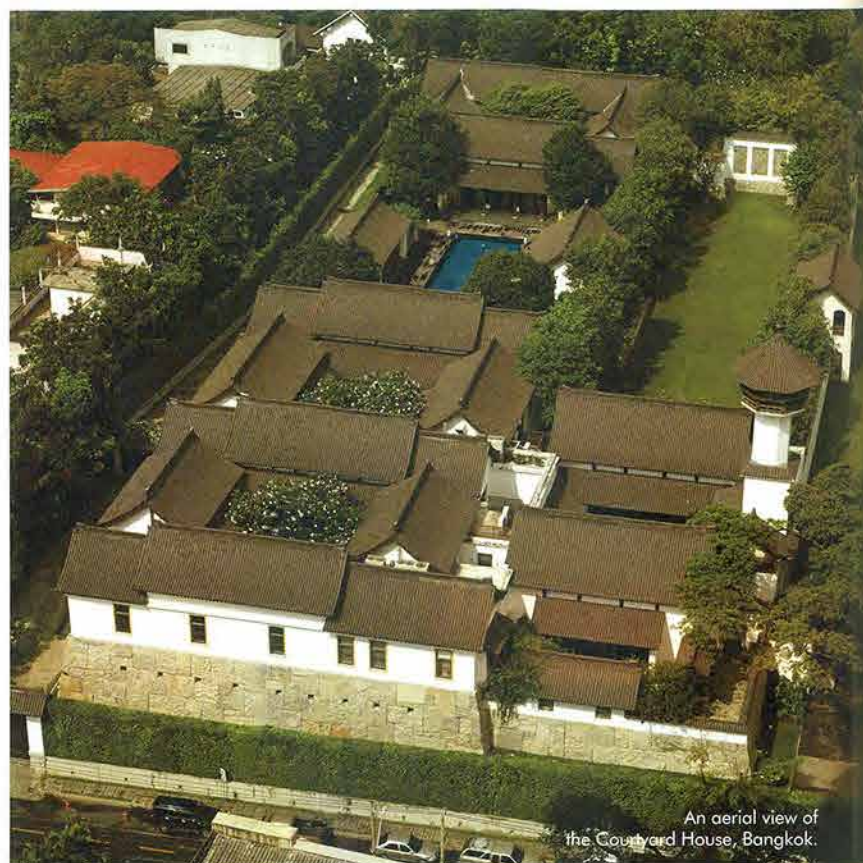
To enter a hotel or private residence by architect Ong-ard Satrabhandu is to retreat from the breakneck pace of the modern world – and rediscover the old rules-of-the-game.

BY SHANE SUVIKAPAKORNKUL / PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANÇOIS HALARD

Tradition is easily dismissed in contemporary architecture, an industry in which technology assumes the lead. Precise renderings by computers now make the wildest day-dreams of architects possible, resulting in the globally widespread trend for extreme curvature and outlandish fusions. Which is not to say they are lacking in merit *per se*; many are stupendous technological achievements with true aesthetic value. But, in this frantic day and age, there is a lot to be said for the structure that doesn't try to please us through its cutting-edge adornments and wanton plays with geometry but rather by the sense of space and volume and almost monastic calm it creates. While the ultra-modern building seems to embody and reflect the city's urge to move forwards, to embrace the future, those that hark back to tradition can stop time dead in its tracks.

What is it about a traditional building that slows things down and creates in us a feeling of serenity? Many architects have pondered this question, but few more so than Thailand's very own Ong-ard Satrabhandu, whose decades-long practice and intellectual quest have been realised in seven select projects, including the celebrated Rachamankha and Tamarind Village hotels in Chiang Mai, and are explored in a new book, *A Tradition of Serenity: The Tropical Houses of Ong-ard Satrabhandu*.

A fervently traditionalist architect who was educated at Cornell and Yale University and appointed a National Artist, Ong-ard's creations aren't confined merely to the north, where his private home and office are also located. One of his best hidden but most celebrated works is a stunning



An aerial view of the Courtyard House, Bangkok.

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A quadrangle in the Courtyard House, Bangkok.



The light-bathed Courtyard House, Bangkok.

courtyard house compound in Bangkok's Sukhumvit Road area, the home of business tycoon Paiboon Damrongchaitham.

But more on that later. One of the Ong-art's early private homes is a three-family residence wrought out of red-brick. Dating back to 1992, it represents a formative exploration in urban housing that would lead to a series of others, each one marking a progression in his preoccupation with interpreting the past. Among its remarkable features are sequences of space and height that ignite our innate sense of discovery, and an inner courtyard that blurs notions of public and private, an interplay that recalls a sense of communities past.

His most renowned work – the one you can and really should seek out – is the Rachamankha in Chiang Mai. A modest hotel by room count (25), it is a place where his deep understanding of the past manifests in monumental style. And unlike the Tamarind Village Hotel, which draws from the Lanna culture of Thailand's north, the Rachamankha – which opened in 2004 and also houses his office and private residence – is conscious of its juxtaposition with modernity, albeit devoid of any fusion sentimentality.

Its layout was carefully considered. Firstly, a two-storied dining hall and restaurant greets visitors arriving on foot or by car. Then, one enters the hotel at a separate entrance on the left, whereupon you're greeted by a reception area. From there, a tree punctuates the wall, turning the visitor rightward into the hotel residence proper. The guestrooms



The verandah at the Mae Rim Residence, Chiang Mai.



The interior of the Rachamankha, Chiang Mai.

surround two connected courtyards, separated by a sizable veranda. On its roof, Ong-ard subtly employs Thai temple motifs – a central roof finial and stylised *hang hong* edges. And over a low topiary wall sits his magnificent library, office and, at the back of the property, his private residence. While serving various functional purposes, the complex achieves something more profound – exploring the Rachamankha it's hard to get your head around the fact that this building hasn't existed for time immemorial. It isn't an homage to history, it feels as if a part of history.

A major influence on all his projects are the ancient architects and their use of space according to a rational scale. Andrea Palladio's Villa Rotunda was inspired by Rome's Pantheon, its grandeur adapted for private use from a transcendental scale to a more human one. Similarly, Ong-ard studies the precise measurements and relationships among structures of varying proportions, from Italian villas to Newari temples in Kathmandu, to understand their different applications. He also draws upon studies of the Chinese courtyard house, or the *siheyuan*, and its mathematics. While the Italians use 'the golden ratio,' the Chinese employ 'feng shui' scales both for structures used by the living as well as for the dead in the afterlife. There are motifs and rules, from the squares and the circles representing earth and heaven to the cardinal directions, that must be respected if a home is to achieve the harmony necessary for the resident family's wellbeing.

Take Khun Paiboon's Sukhumvit estate, for which he conceived a Chinese courtyard house. Upon entry into this magnificent compound, one notices a decades-old tree that shades the entire driveway, which slopes upward, suggesting the entire property has been subtly elevated. The main entrance resembles that of a modest Chinese quadrangle home, with a pair of stone horses welcoming visitors. Upon entrance, a 'spirit wall' charts the visitor's path to the first inner courtyard. From there, the

visitor soon discovers a network of two others, dividing the reception and entertaining space and the private ones for the master and guest bedrooms. The interplay between rhythm and proportion allows the authenticity of the *siheyuan* ground plan to be interpreted. Misaligned roof corners become opportunities for innovation as well as creating room for a small courtyard 'skywell' pool with a stone bridge. Here, Ong-ard surprises us with a transparency of space – rooms in the private quarter open up to a vast outdoor swimming pool, whereas rooms from the main dining open up to the distant green, creating zones of relative tranquility and intimacy within these quadrangle networks.

The compound's sacred ambience is enhanced by his choice of natural materials. Teak columns on stone bases support the beams of the ridged rooftop, which are lined with locally-fired tiles. Unlike their Chinese reference points, the wooden beams are not bracketed, but follow the Thai preference for simpler roof supports. In anticipation of tropical rains, he designed the roof's end-tiles so that raindrops are guided downwards in an orderly fashion. These are subtle details that one barely notices, as is the entire ground-level service area and garage being completely hidden by large blocks of stone that form naturally-sloped walls that surround the compound. Seen from above, Ong-ard's vision is flawlessly executed – the estate is a majestic silhouette of ancient rooftops. Altogether it is – like all his projects – an harmonious space that pleases all who dwell in it.

North of Chiang Mai, the artist Jakkai Siributr's Mae Rim residence emphasises, once again, Ong-ard's masterful knowledge of tradition. Occupying farmland and with uninterrupted views of the countryside, the main house has two stories; the first enveloped by an expansive verandah lined with slim double French doors, and the second a continuous balcony on all sides. Inside, the generous living room is lined with



An exposed roof structure at the Rachamankha, Chiang Mai.

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An interconnected courtyard at the Rachamankha, Chiang Mai.



The Three-Family Residence, Bangkok.

continuous beams against white ceilings. Accented with beautiful furnishings and the choicest contemporary art, it is a place where elegance comes naturally. The verandah's slightly angled roofs are dotted with ceiling fans. One could be reminded of the cottages from *The Jewel in the Crown*, or a gracefully-aged European villa built for the tropics. Regardless of what it evokes, the overall feeling is that this country-house has always been there, and that it is steeped in a deeply-rooted history.

All of these projects – and more – can be found within *A Tradition of Serenity: The Tropical Houses of Ong-ard Satrabhandu*. Featuring the photography of renowned French photographer François Halard, the book is not only stunning, but also serves as testament of his commitment, informing us about Ong-ard's works in detail. Originally it was to be titled *Serene Oasis*, but that was dropped, explains Ong-ard, because “it sounded like a spa.” Speaking of which, perhaps he should consider gifting us with one – in his talented hands, the serene spa would surely be raised to a whole new level. ✖

A Tradition of Serenity: The Tropical Houses of Ong-ard Satrabhandu (Rizzoli, 2015) is available in local bookstores now for \$75.