



IN CONVERSATION WITH
ONG-ARD SATRABHANDHU

The recipient of the Driehaus Architecture Prize 2020 unravels his design journey, philosophy, upcoming projects and more in an elaborate discourse

TEXT BY **SALONI REGE** PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY **PIRAK ANURAKYAWACHON**

"There's a common misconception that rules restrict us from being creative. On the contrary, I think working within set norms urges us to create more," says prolific architect, urbanist and conservationist Ong-ard Satrabhandhu. Establishing his namesake practice in 1970, the Thai architect has been a flag-bearer of classical and traditional architecture in today's modern era. He attained a career milestone when he brought recognition to the conventional Lanna architectural typology that's sensitive to the history of Thailand as well as its environment.

On the subject of the preservation of Lanna architecture, he reveals, "My approach is not academic, I try to preserve the parts that are unique by infusing them in my work. For instance, the idea of free-standing stucco and wood columns within structures helps create a distinctive space. I believe emphasis should be given to grouping of buildings in site planning scenarios."

Since his graduation in architecture from Cornell University and master's in urban studies from Yale University in the 1960s, he has perceived traditional architecture as a relaxed version of classical design. Identifying the many similarities between Western, Chinese and Indian classical architecture, he integrates the principles of axiality and bilateral symmetry into his designs. He says, "Architects should familiarise with the grammar and rules of classical architecture, both of the east and the west. The idea of a base, middle and top—a human body, is a universal idea behind classical design everywhere."

The architect's belief in the concept of 'designing as little as possible' has an indelible effect on his approach to projects. "If someone's really good, they don't possibly need to design at all to create a righteous building. Good structures should be quiet and composed so as to make people feel comfortable in them," he quips. "When there are set precedents, why try to reinvent what has been done before and done well. Why not just take their solutions and then reapply them to solve our problems," adds the designer.

An exemplary project that focuses on proportion and movement is the acclaimed Rachamankha Hotel in Thailand's Chiang Mai city, which was initially simply a nondescript site. "I was mesmerised by the layout of ancient

"WHEN THERE ARE SET PRECEDENTS, WHY TRY TO REINVENT WHAT HAS BEEN DONE BEFORE AND DONE WELL"

Chinese dwellings. There's a hierarchy of spaces—from semi private to private ones—gradually unveiling themselves with a sense of mystery. We've used several axes to connect different kinds of open spaces," Satrabhandhu explains.

Another well received project is the Courtyard House in Bangkok, the eminent designer shares, "The idea was to create a retreat. We've lifted the entire house so that all the services, and parking are beneath it. At the entrance, we wanted everyone to feel that they're entering another world. We've used many historical building elements sourced from across the world, including the early 17th century Wang Compound in Shanxi Province." Resolving this complex programme, Satrabhandhu and his team have planned courtyards to link separate quarters for the family.

The architect derives his inspiration during his travels, meandering through spaces, sensing the tension and compression, by observing how a building responds to the site. He reveals, "I believe, one cannot experience emotion from a photograph. Visiting the space is a must. I always take measurements and scribble sketches while travelling and keep it as references for my design." A source of inspiration for Satrabhandhu are architect Palladio's villas in Italy's Veneto region. The facade of Léon Krier also struck him as the most surreal composition of perfect proportion. He adds, "When you visit the Market Hall at One Nimman in Thailand's Chiang Mai city, you'll see it's inspired by one I'd visited in France, some 20 years ago."

With this market, Satrabhandhu continues his passion for urban design. He's imbued the space with a serene essence of transitional spaces. "We've aligned our buildings with the main street, emphasising on quality public spaces. A glass enclosed galleria is intended for a leisurely walk, coffee hangout or browsing at the bookstore.

It also blocks the existing parking garage," says the urbanist.

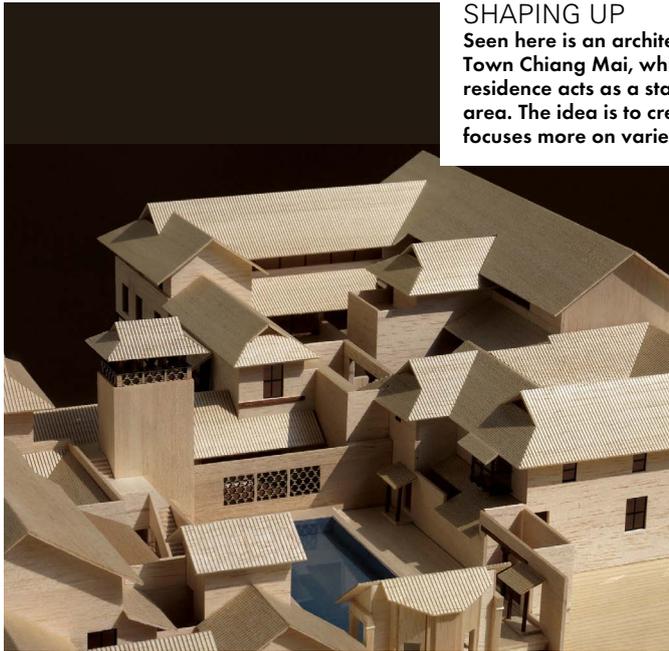
In 2015, the icon authored *A Tradition of Serenity: The Tropical Houses*, which stresses on the importance of open spaces that are enclosed by the structures. The renowned architect says, "I abide by Lucien Steil's quote: 'The building should look as though it had always been there'. This is the experience we wish to achieve."

It's no wonder that the creative won the prestigious Driehaus Architecture Prize last year. But no one was more surprised than him. "I've always admired the work of previous winners; I never dreamt I'd be a recipient because there's much to be improved on the work that I do. I am deeply honoured to be one of the laureates."

To those who are likely to follow in his footsteps, the Thai creative says: "Worry less about abstract theories and be more concerned with the experience of emotions. Good buildings communicate. I believe that we should have more architecture schools like The University of Notre Dame, where basic knowledge of traditional and classical architecture is imparted rather than abstract theories. It's imperative for the next generation of architects to acknowledge our rich history. There's just so much to learn from the past." >>

LOOKING FORWARD...

"We're working on hotel projects in Old Town Chiang Mai and Phuket that are not typical in design; they have more variety and human scale. We've also been invited to build a public pavilion by the seaside in Haikou. The masterplan is located along a 32 km coastline and aims to bring long term and sustainable vitality to the city, enriching the local community."



SHAPING UP

Seen here is an architectural model of a proposed 40 room hotel in Old Town Chiang Mai, which opens into an existing Sino-Portuguese house. The residence acts as a starting point of reference for the reception and lounge area. The idea is to create an environment that feels less hotel-like and focuses more on variety and human scale. Photograph by Puvanart Svavasu



PEEK A BOO

Antique ceramic doors open into the entrance of the tropical Courtyard House in Bangkok. Photograph by François Halard

SNEAK PEEK INTO...

Ong-ard Satrabhandhu's highly acclaimed works...



COURTING THE NATURE

A glimpse of the vernacular dressed Courtyard House that uses its namesake element to bind spaces within the residence. Low, generous overhangs offer shelter while lending an intimacy to the open space, in contrast to the high ceilings. The entryway court mingles with the outdoor greens and flirts with abundant daylight and efficient ventilation. Additionally, exposed concrete platform encircles the courtyard to provide an extended verandah. Photograph by François Halard

QUICK WORD

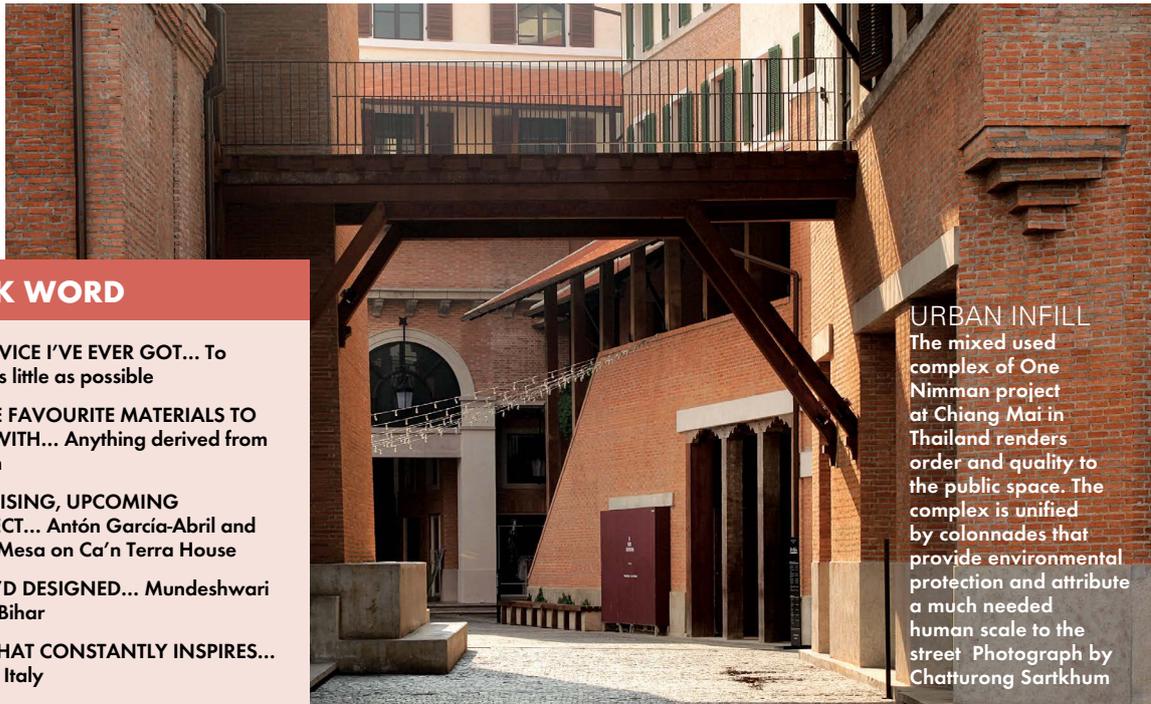
BEST ADVICE I'VE EVER GOT... To design as little as possible

ALL-TIME FAVOURITE MATERIALS TO WORK WITH... Anything derived from the earth

A PROMISING, UPCOMING ARCHITECT... Antón García-Abril and Débora Mesa on Ca'n Terra House

I WISH I'D DESIGNED... Mundeshwari Temple, Bihar

A CITY THAT CONSTANTLY INSPIRES... Vicenza, Italy



URBAN INFILL

The mixed used complex of One Nimman project at Chiang Mai in Thailand renders order and quality to the public space. The complex is unified by colonnades that provide environmental protection and attribute a much needed human scale to the street. Photograph by Chatturong Sarrkhum

TROPICAL SERENITY

Rachamankha Hotel in Chiang Mai explores the introspective essence of crafting a luxury retreat around a courtyard module that acts as an oasis in the tropical climate. Symmetrical and reclaimed teak columns support the high sloping roofs, dressed in clay tiles. Gracing the lounge area of the hotel, the design features are reminiscent of the architecture in Nepal and China. Photograph by François Halard



TRIPLE TREATS

Three-Family Residence is a reflection of how urban spaces work together as a cohesive unit, making way for both private and public oriented zones. Encompassing the courtyards are three dwelling clusters that intersperse visually and functionally. Roman bricks and arches are evident throughout the house and two courtyards are linked by a colonnade. Photograph by François Halard

Ong-ard Satrabhandhu, Chiang Mai.
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