

Landscape Architecture in Thailand

Large infrastructure improvements in Bangkok and elsewhere offer exciting opportunities for landscape architects. But despite good educational programs, a professional organization, and governmental recognition, the number of landscape architects in Thailand remains small.



Landscape architecture has played an important role in urban development worldwide for many years. It is now becoming an even greater necessity in the burgeoning cities in southeast Asia, where globalization and free trade are stimulating rapid urbanization.

In the past two decades, many infrastructure “mega projects” initiated by multi-disciplinary organizations have bloomed in Bangkok and oth-

er big cities in Thailand. These projects have created ribbon development along transportation corridors, divided the urban fabric into pieces, developed on flood plains and wetlands, and been largely responsible for the imbalanced ecology of the region. Because many of these organizations are created for a single purpose, land utilization decisions are made without regard for neighbors, other involved organizations, or essential needs.

The best example in Thailand of this type of development is, of course, the nation’s capital and principal city. Bangkok’s registered population increased from 1.6 million in 1958 to 5.4 million in 1986, and was almost eight million in 2006. The urbanized area of Bangkok has doubled in size, due to unplanned sprawl along major roads and canals, which occurs in a finger-like pattern. This results in inefficient land use

Many landscape projects have been realised in Thailand in the last few years, such as the Villa Garden at the Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi Resort Hotel in Chiangmai.

Design: Aesthetics Createcs and Imagineers, Aesthetics Architect Go Group, Bangkok

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE THAILAND

SCHOOLS

- **FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE, CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY**
Bachelor of Landscape Architecture (5-year),
Master of Landscape Architecture (2-year)
www.land.arch.chula.ac.th
- **FACULTY OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION, MAEJO UNIVERSITY**
Bachelor of Landscape Architecture (5-year),
Bachelor of Sciences (Landscape Technology) (4-year)
www.landscape.mju.ac.th
- **FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE, KASETSART UNIVERSITY**
Bachelor of Landscape Architecture (5-year)
www.arch.ku.ac.th
- **FACULTY OF AGRICULTURE, KASETSART UNIVERSITY**
Bachelor of Sciences (Environmental Horticulture) (4-year)
www.hort.agr.ku.ac.th
- **FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE AND PLANNING, THAMMASART UNIVERSITY**
Bachelor of Landscape Architecture (4-year)
www.arch.tu.ac.th

ORGANISATIONS

- **THAI ASSOCIATION OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS, TALA**
www.talandscape.org
- **THE COUNCIL OF ARCHITECTS, COA**
www.coa.or.th

PUBLICATIONS

- **TALA NEWS** (six times a year)
- **TALA E-NEWS** (monthly)
www.talandscape.org

that makes it difficult to lay down systematic and interconnected infrastructure networks. The Bangkok Comprehensive Plan (initially written in June 1999 and updated in May 2006) is targeted to accommodate a population of 10.2 million by the year 2017 and 11 million by the year 2022. It is, however, already out of date, and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) is trying to propose a new plan for the longer-term future.

The roots of the problem are the government's urban development policy, the limited capabilities of local authorities in regulating efficient land use, and the lack of coordination regarding infrastructure management, land use, and environmental protection. Additionally, there is poor enforcement of the city master plan, serious traffic congestion problems, the lack of a comprehensive master plan, controversies among stakeholders, and increasingly serious pollution problems that lower residents' quality of life. As Bangkok and other Asian mega cities grow rapidly, the question is whether they can balance development and environmental protection in a sustainable way. This is where landscape architecture can play a significant role.

Profession and education. Thailand has been educating qualified landscape architects for three decades. The professional situation, however, is less than ideal for new graduates, who are faced with a choice of three career paths – none of which is ideal. They may: a) work for a firm in Thailand, where strict leg-

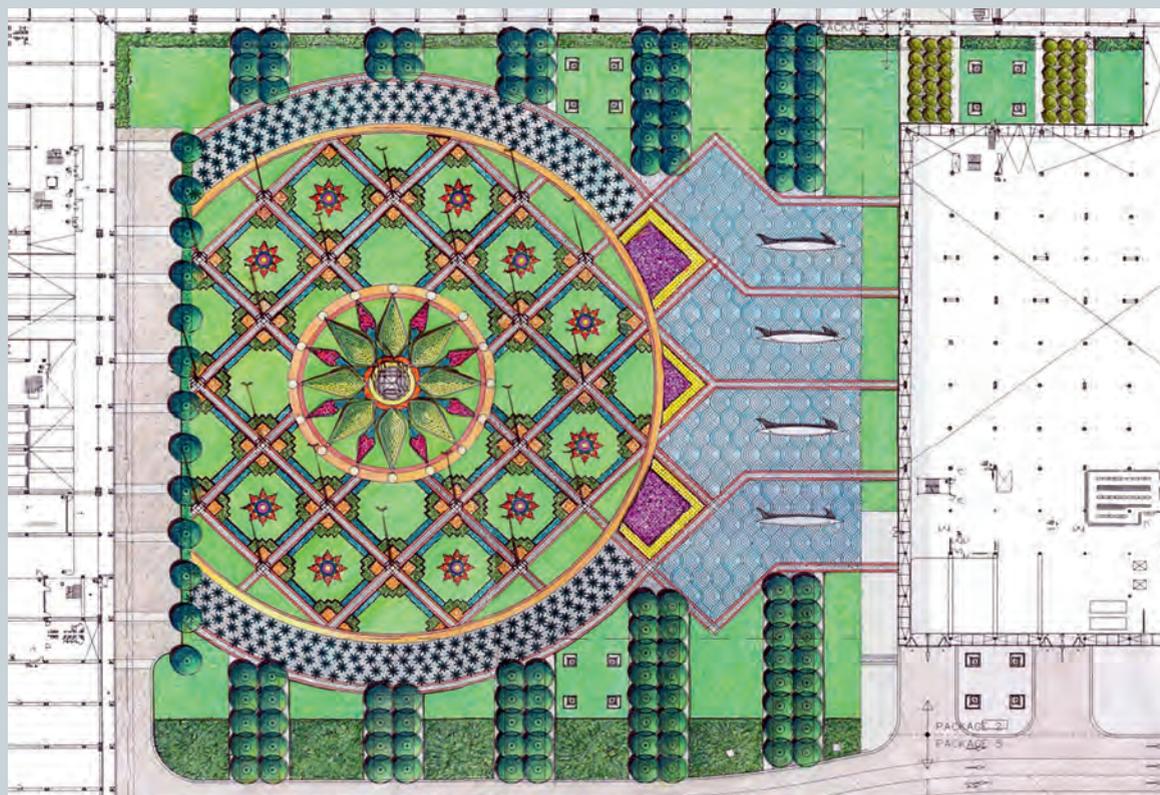


During the cabinet of the former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, many large infrastructure projects have been realised in Thailand, such as the City Garden at Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok, by Rafa Design Office, Bangkok.

islative rules and impractical ministerial regulation limit their long-term options; b) leave home to work abroad in neighboring countries where they may gain more experience and earn twice the salary; c) leave the region to work in the West, where competition is greater but opportunities for higher education are available.

Landscape architecture in Thailand is, like medicine, law, accounting, architecture, and engineering, a regulated profession. Both individuals and firms must obtain professional licensure and have professional education to a certain level as indicated in the regulations. The Council of Architects (CoA) is the organization under The Ministry of Interior that is responsible for standardization and enforcement of the four built-environment professions: architecture, interior architecture/decoration, urban design, and landscape architecture. Before the establishment of the Council of Architects in 2000, The Ministry of Interior had a unit called the Regulation Board of Engineering Profession and Architecture Profession (RB-EP/RB-AP), which was managed entirely by the state. Even though landscape architecture has been recognized in Thailand since 1965, it had never been included in any RB-AP regulations.

Landscape architecture education in Thailand has been in place for three decades. The Bachelor of Landscape Architecture (B.LA) curriculum was approved in 1977 by The Ministry of University Affairs, and just one year later Chulalongkorn University began the first 5-year B.LA program. Chulalongkorn was the



The sustainable government office complex in the northern part of Bangkok is expected to be completed in 2009. Water is an integral part of both the buildings' cooling system and the landscape design by P.L. Design, Bangkok.

The master plan of Princess Sirindhorn International Environmental Park by Landscape Planning from Bangkok is an ecological design that follows the king of Thailand's philosophy "Sufficiency Economy".



only university in Thailand to teach landscape architecture for 20 years, until it was joined by Maejo University, Kasetsart University, and Thammasart University (which began its 4-year B.LA program in 2007). A Master of Landscape Architecture is now also taught at Chulalongkorn. Thailand currently graduates around 100 landscape architects each year. There are also several vocational degrees that are eligible to apply for landscape architecture registration: the Bachelor of Science (B.S.) in Landscape Tech-

nology, the B.S. in Horticulture, and a vocational diploma in landscape architecture.

A developing country like Thailand with a mega city like Bangkok generates great demand for landscape architects and many employment opportunities. In his book *Landscape Architectural Practice*, Decha Boonkham, TALA founding member and president from 1991 to 1993, estimated in 1995 that Thailand would need up to 100 new landscape architects each year to fill the market demand in both the private and public sectors.

Today, there are approximately 30 landscape architecture firms nationwide and around 80 freelance landscape architects to supply those demands. Surprisingly, only 15 of these firms have registered with the Thai Association of Landscape Architects (TALA), and only 84 individual landscape architects have become registered through CoA, which constitutes only about half of the 183 landscape architects who are members of CoA. The remainder are ineligible to practice landscape architecture under national regulations.

Newly graduated landscape architects seem not to be satisfied with the situation. Most Chulalongkorn University 4th year B.LA students choose to do their Practical Training abroad, and, after their graduation, up to one third intend to seek employment in other countries: Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, China, and the USA.

More opportunities. Since 2000, the number of urban development and design projects in Thailand has grown rapidly and more steadily compared to during the 1990s. The lessons learned from the 1997 economic crisis have guided national development policy to more cautious projects involving long range planning. The mega projects initiated by the public sector such as highways, mass transit systems, a new airport, and large-scale land redevelopment projects were proposed especially during Thaksin Shinawatra's cabinet (2001 to 2006). Major projects such as the A1 World Exposition Royal Flora Expo in Chiangmai, Suvarnabhumi Bangkok International Airport and the Suvarnabhumi Aerotropolis proposal, and Chiangmai Night Safari Zoological Park are examples of landscape architecture and urban development projects in Thailand during that time.

Unfortunately, the landscape architecture firms at work on these projects were not involved to the extent possible. The reasons for this are not well known. Generally, project consultant teams have been lead by architects and engineers, with few landscape architects on the teams.



Khao Lak: The scheme "Mountains of Remembrance" by Disc-o Architecture from Spain was awarded the Tsunami Memorial Design Competition in 2006 (top). Richard Weller and Gary Marinko from Australia were among the finalists. They proposed a symbolic light grid on the sea.



In Thailand's neighboring country, the Republic of Singapore, the Singapore Institute of Landscape Architects (SILA) represents a professional body of qualified landscape architects with the aim of advancing the art of landscape architecture and civic design in that country. It also hopes to promote research and education in landscape architecture as well as to create and maintain a high standard of professional qualification. Members of SILA work under mandated professional codes of conduct.

Though the conceptual framework of landscape architecture practice varies from one country to another, it is interesting to explore

the differences between similar histories. Singapore created its professional landscape architecture organization in 1985, yet it has more successful and practical professional regulations than Thailand.

Exodus of landscape architects. TALA, which was officially founded in May 1988, will celebrate its 20th anniversary in early 2009. The Department of Landscape Architecture at Chulalongkorn University celebrated its three decades in 2007, which essentially began the fourth decade of landscape architecture in Thailand. Based on graduation rates, Chula-

longkorn should have by now placed approximately 700 qualified landscape architects into Thailand's market, to be joined by another 200 landscape architects from the other two universities. A simple calculation says there should be around 900 landscape architects in Thailand. Unfortunately, judging from CoA and TALA membership and registration numbers, this is far from the case.

The reason has much to do with the exodus of new landscape architectural graduates to other countries, where they perceive greater opportunities for advancement, salary, higher education, or creative freedom.

The International Horticultural Exposition "Royal Flora Ratchaphreuk 2006" displayed more than two and a half million plants and flowers on a 80 hectare site on the outskirts of Chiangmai. Design: Feel Green Design, Bangkok