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Bangkok Rising

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As architecture keeps expanding vertically, with the skyscraper having long become the predominant typology of architectural production in most geographic regions of hyper-growth, we need to investigate and understand the consequences of vertical stratification and generate alternative typologies of spatial quality and social sustainability in the urban realm. MahaNakhon is an architectural prototype that generates shared spaces of social interaction and manifests the creation of spaces not only within, but through and around, its specific urban context. The project has the capacity to direct the dialogue of tall buildings towards a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of its place in the creation of cities and social realities. It illustrates, in its specific configurations,

unique strategies to (re)address and (re)instate the importance and quality of space within architectural production, and its responsibility towards a greater whole – to inhabitants, the city, and the society. This, in effect, is what generates its difference, its significance – and its meaning.

Babel

Architecture as process: The building as a dialogue – between large scale and small scale, between symbolism and activity, between the city and its inhabitants, between inside and outside. Bangkok is a city of many contradictions – and of an untamable energy. It is a city that has generated some of the most frivolous

architectures: robot and elephant buildings, pyramids, UFO's and vertical structures reminiscent of Louis XIV. It is a city between tradition and future, between construction and decay, between subtlety and brutality. Difference only exists in contrast. But what is there to do when "special" exists everywhere already? When almost any type or shape or character has already been invented, inverted...constructed?

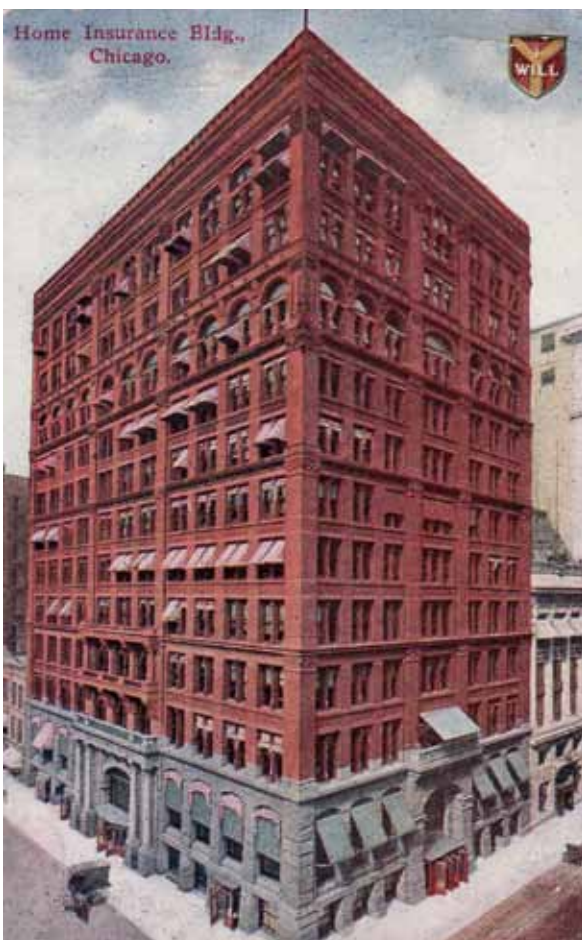
In this context, the most boring might be the most surprising – a needle. An extrusion. A shaft. A square tower footprint, repeated 77 times to reach 314 meters in height, to be the tallest building in the City of Bangkok: a take on the generic. The problem of the generic tower is that it has no connection to the urban realm. It does not contribute to the true life of the city, but rather absorbs it and makes it vanish and disappear. The scale of the skyscraper is abstract by definition - it is beyond the human, beyond the occupant, beyond what it contains and shelters: life and activity.

The Skyscraper

In the 125 years since William Le Baron Jenney's ten-story Home Insurance Building in Chicago became the world's first skyscraper, the spectacle of soaring towers has become increasingly common wherever land is scarce, allowing cities to stack life ever taller, denser and more dynamic. Like cathedrals and palaces of the past, skyscrapers today define their cities' identities as they shape the skyline. As the late critic Herbert Muschamp wrote of these modern wonders, "Contemporary architects

Left: The world's first skyscraper, the Home Insurance Building, Chicago, 1885. Source: CTBUH-Norman Ramsey Collection

Opposite: Rendering of the MahaNakhon, afternoon view. Source: Buro Ole Scheeren / OMA





reveal the inner world in the process of adorning the outer one.”

Although the skyscraper originated in the West, Asia has embraced the skyscraper as a symbol of its emerging economic power and urbanization, and, in the last thirty years, has become home to more tall buildings than any other region in the world. Beginning in Fall 2009, the city of Bangkok – home to an estimated 15 million people – started to witness the architectural manifestation of its extraordinary “inner world” when construction began on MahaNakhon.

MahaNakhon – the “Great Metropolis”

MahaNakhon dismantles the traditional formula of a seamless, inert, glossy totem, and instead actively engages the city: Its pixelated and carved presence embraces and connects to the surrounding urban fabric rather than overpowering it. Its glittering stacked surfaces, terraces and protrusions simultaneously create the impression of digital pixelation while echoing the irregularity of ancient mountain topography. This architectural geography introduces a three-dimensional ribbon of architectural pixels that circle the

tower’s full height, as if excavating portions of the tower to reveal the inner life of the building – both metaphorically and actually an architecture that reveals its inner life, its inner scale to the city.

What from afar might evoke a sense of being yet unfinished, still under construction or already in decay, engulfed in a process of becoming and passing, from up-close it reveals itself to be not a purely formal gesture but that the erosion generates actual living spaces: terraces, balconies, floating rooms and apartments that merge the tropical outdoors with the indoors.

This urban geography of elements is conceived to convey the energy, intensity and inclusiveness of Thai society and celebrate Bangkok’s emergence as a true global capital, fitting the Thai meaning of the name MahaNakhon, translated as the ‘great metropolis.’

A Microcosm of Urban Elements

The complex, at 150,000 square meters (approximately 1.6 million square feet) seeks to communicate intimately with Bangkok from the ground up: its series of

components comprise MahaNakhon Square, a landscaped outdoor public plaza intended as a new public destination within the city; MahaNakhon Terraces, 10,000 square meters (nearly 110,000 square feet) of retail space with lush gardens and terraces spread over multiple levels for restaurants, cafés and a 24-hour marketplace; The Ritz-Carlton Residences, Bangkok with 200 highly-customized single-level and duplex homes, each offering the atmosphere of a skybox penthouse, managed by The Ritz-Carlton with amenities for all residents; The Bangkok Edition, a boutique hotel with 150 hotel rooms, a collaboration between Marriott International and renowned hotelier Ian Schrager; and a multi-level roof-top sky bar and restaurant. An observation deck occupies the very top of the tower and welcomes the public to experience panoramic views of the city from Bangkok’s tallest elevation.

The Hill

The design further dissolves the typical tower-podium typology to render not a tower in isolation but instead a skyscraper that melds with the city as it moves vertically between ground and sky. Generous, cascading indoor/outdoor terraces at its



base evoke the shifting protrusions of a mountain landscape and form an outdoor atrium reminiscent of a natural valley with lush tropical gardens containing a multitude of social spaces.

With its distinctive sculptural appearance, a series of generous, cascading indoor/outdoor terraces at The Hill – the seven-story area of tower's base housing retail and dining. The Hill Terraces fit keenly with the lush, cultivated tropical gardens that give way to the city's own many green swaths.

The Cube

MahaNakhon also features an adjacent freestanding seven-story building known as the Cube, with multi-level indoor/outdoor terraces corresponding to those of the Hill Terraces across the expanse of an outdoor atrium. The outdoor atrium forms a natural valley, offering a network of social spaces with an extensive and carefully selected mix of dining and leisure facilities that serve the general public via a direct above-ground pedestrian link to the main CBD Skytrain station and plaza-level access, Residences in the main tower of MahaNakhon, as well as guests of the hotel.

The Square

MahaNakhon Square, located in front of the tower, is intimately connected to the space between The Hill and Cube. This dynamic public plaza – intended as a meeting place, a spot for planned and spontaneous cultural events – will be a landscaped retreat for the city's inhabitants, a gathering place, a rare venue for cultural and social interactivity, with direct connection to the Chongnonsi Skytrain station and future rapid bus transit system: an urban oasis that provides refuge from the intense daily clamor of greater Bangkok while being intimately connected to its public fabric.

The Tower

MahaNakhon Tower itself has been carefully carved to introduce a distinctive profile while generating a set of specific features – projecting glass skyboxes with sweeping views and generous indoor/outdoor spaces with plunge pools and oversized terraces – uncommon to high-rise living in metropolises but well-suited to the tropical climate of Bangkok. The pixels have been designed to maximize unobstructed panoramas for the residences, offering rare bird's-eye views of the city and the Chaophraya River.

Sky Bar and Observation Deck

The top of the MahaNakhon tower houses a multi-level three-floor sky bar and restaurant with dramatic double-height spaces, private dining facilities for entertaining, and a rooftop outdoor bar with sweeping 360-degree views of the skyline and river, floating 314 meters (more than 1,000 feet) above the city.

Grain of the City

The combination of these elements forms a symbiotic whole which is greater than the sum of its parts. Residents and guests, urbanites and tourists, office workers and patrons, young and old, all take part in the social ecosystem of the project and contribute to the vibrancy of the urban realm. The activity of the city is drawn into the site through physical connections to the Skytrain and public transportation network, but also through its integration with the surrounding grain of the city and urban street life.

As the tower dissolves towards the ground, its scale at the base is further modulated to form not a typical wall-like podium condition, but a multi-level topography of occupiable volumes and landscaped

Opposite: Nighttime construction photo, taken February 2015. Source: Buro Ole Scheeren / OMA

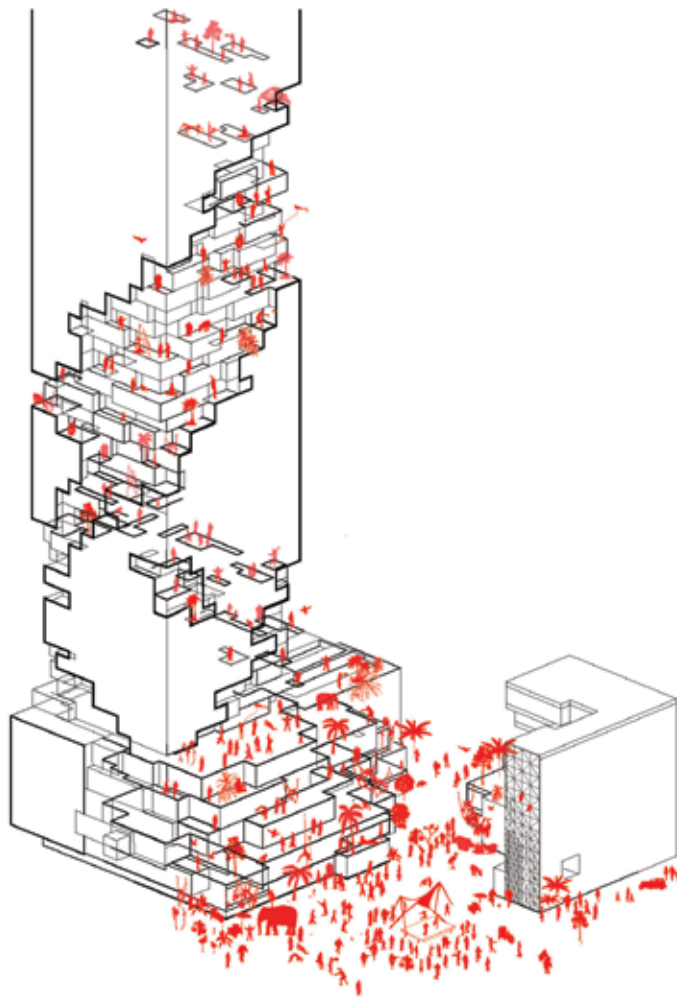
Right: View of the setbacks that decompose the base of the tower and provide usable outdoor spaces in the retail zone. Source: PACE Development

Bottom: Rooftop outdoor bar. Source: PACE Development



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outdoor terraces. The Cube, at the front edge of the site, faces the city and Skytrain with a large scale media screen which broadcasts interactive information, while creating a buffer to the active bustle of Bangkok. Its rear, modulated in a sculpted pixel landscape towards MahaNakhon Square and the Hill, creates an urban oasis in the heart of the CBD – a public sphere that both engages the urban fabric and gives back to the city.

MahaNakhon Square has been designed as an open platform for events, performances, gatherings, or simply a lunchtime meeting place – a flexible public space that is rare in the high density environment of Bangkok's CBD. Full-height scaffolding integrated with the façade of the Cube and facing the public plaza, provides a robust flexible infrastructure for ad-hoc equipment to support any number of happenings. The Square, together with the tower and its public rooftop, forms a place for the mind of the city to occupy and inhabit, and in that sense, philosophically, represents a place for the city's consciousness to declare as its own.

This space of and for the city stretches through the Hill Terraces, climbing upwards through the pixelated excavation of the tower, and melds vertical living in the tropics into a new kind of skyscraper. The grain of the city becomes an integral part of the project, which is woven into and welcomes the energy and activity of Bangkok. Residents and visitors alike are able to occupy the structure of the tower and move from its base to the uppermost sky bar and observation deck where an open rooftop space and cantilevering sky deck extend public space into the air.

Diverse International Team

The design and realization of the project itself exemplifies the construction of a city-defining landmark in the age of globalization. A diverse international team has come together with a common purpose



Opposite Top: Concept diagram. Source: Buro Ole Scheeren / OMA

Opposite Bottom: Daytime construction photo, taken June 2015. Source: PACE Development

Right: Daytime construction photo, taken June 2015. Source: PACE Development



to build this structure and realize its vision in the city of Bangkok – a Thai owner/ developer; an international team operating from Beijing, Hong Kong, London, New York, Tokyo and Thailand; architects and engineers in Bangkok; international tenants from New York, Paris, and Hong Kong; a French/Thai contractor and materials from all over the world converging in one location.

Through a shared vision, perseverance and commitment to an ambitious long term view, witness to multiple rounds of political changes and unprecedented flooding in the city, MahaNakhon has continued onwards with its design, excavation, and construction to become the tallest building in Bangkok. It has garnered a renewed awareness of its presence, both internal and external, to arrive on a global stage and capture the energy of the city in the heart of the city itself.

Final Thoughts

How can we make a building relevant, how can a building define a place and stimulate the imagination of the people? How can it become part of people's memory, and play a role in their lives?

In order to achieve this, we have to design buildings that engage people, both visually and also physically; we have to conceive them not only as objects we look at but also as spaces we inhabit. As the awareness and importance of sustainable architecture increases, environmental responsibility – and that of the architect – must be understood not only in the context of carbon footprints and green building, but equally how to integrate buildings into their social and cultural context to generate truly sustainable scenarios for the future. And in this sense I would like to suggest our work as something fundamentally contextual.

There is an importance to being truly involved and committed to the environments we built in, to be objective but also complicit, to think beyond but also from within. As the world order is not only changing its center of gravity in economic terms, it will, inevitably, also reverse its patterns of cultural influence and directionality: It will start to confront the western hemisphere with different thoughts, different values. For the past many decades, maybe for the past century, it used to be west to east. Now we are at

the beginning of a reversal of the order in which things move across the world.

So it seems relevant to re-affirm and re-confirm our commitment to this part of the world. For us, it was a conscious decision to be headquartered in Asia and to design from here and to continue to work from here, with here, and for the future of here. And by being here, by continuing our engagement, but also by now expanding to Europe and the United States, we hope to further contribute to the development of new prototypes for architecture...for Asia, and for the Western part of the world.