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Duangrit Bunnag -- Hipster on the river

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Most architects work in straight lines and perfect angles. Duangrit Bunnag, sometimes referred to as Thailand's "hottest architect," prefers chaos.

A long-time designer of chic yet unconventional buildings and resorts, Duangrit took his already big reputation to new heights in December 2013, when he relocated his studio to the "unfashionable" western side of Bangkok and opened the Jam Factory restaurant and studio complex in Thonburi, along the Chaophraya river.

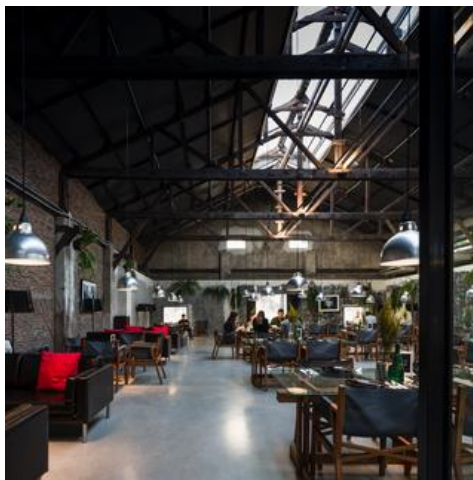
He discovered a group of rundown warehouses in the sleepy Klongsan district. They had been derelict for years, but Duangrit transformed them into a complex housing his architecture studio, furniture studio, a stylish cafe and bookstore, an art gallery, and a restaurant whimsically named Never Ending Summer. The complex quickly became the hippest ticket on the river and a magnet for Bangkok's burgeoning community of "new Bohemians."

Playing to his "hip" image, the longhaired Duangrit, 50, oversees a booming design network. He is now planning to renovate historic structures on both sides of the river, launching restaurants and more zones for creative events like he has done with the Jam Factory. After designing resorts such as Hotel de la Paix in Luang Prabang in Laos, and Naka Phuket in Thailand, he will soon launch his own brand, Bocage Hotels, in the seaside resort of Hua Hin, southeast of Bangkok.

In art and design circles in Bangkok, Duangrit appears to be everywhere, speaking not only at forums on architecture and planning, but on philosophy, design and his own concepts of chaos theory. Increasingly, he turns up at festivals -- his own Jam Factory hosts crafts markets, with arts and music monthly. At the inaugural Bangkok Edge Festival earlier this year, billed as a celebration of ideas, he was among the most controversial speakers, decrying tidy urban planning for Bangkok.



Duangrit Bunnag architect and designer of the Jam Factory in Bangkok inside his riverside restaurant. (Courtesy of Duangrit Bunnag Architect)



Bare bricks and industrial chic are featured at Never Ending Summer, the restaurant at Duangrit Bunnag's The Jam Factory. (Courtesy of Duangrit Bunnag Architect)



Bangkok architect Duangrit Bunnag's daring design for Naka Phuket put rooms inside glass boxes projecting off a cliff in a secluded cove. (Photo by Ron Gluckman)

"A lot of people in Bangkok come from somewhere else and want to make Bangkok look like other cities, like Singapore, or Seattle," he says. "I go to Singapore, and they ask me how to make things less structured, more chaotic," he adds.

Bangkok may be snarled with traffic, Duangrit concedes, but its eclectic charm partly stems from the chaotic manner in which it has evolved organically from a maze of canals. Instead of master plans, he espouses even more chaos. "Bangkok is diverse, exciting. It doesn't need more order. Bangkok is all mixed up - that's why it's so fun, so dynamic."

"I don't think there is any problem with this city," he insists. "Bangkok is the best city in the world. It's a city of life, of diversity, of chaos. We don't need order. Bangkok is great because of the chaos."

That is a radical view, but Duangrit, true to form, has never really cared who he irritates. Lately, he has led resistance to government plans for a riverside promenade, slamming the costly scheme as poorly conceived and lacking adequate local input. However, it has put Duangrit at odds with some of his young environmentalist followers.

"He has definitely become an important public figure now, and not just because of his architecture," says Pranitan Phornprapa, founder of the Wonderfruit Festival that combines music, design and arts with his own conservationist ideals. "Thais tend to be more shy." Still, he praises Duangrit for being "outspoken and inspirational."

Australian David Robinson has devoted years to conservation and cultural endeavors along the river, recently helping form the Creative District Foundation. Duangrit chairs the organization. "He's a creative powerhouse -- a unique mix of entrepreneur, artist and activist -- with no shortage of ideas and new projects to get busy with," notes Robinson.

His recent surge of success may make Duangrit look like an overnight sensation, but it is more like vindication for a creative talent who has long struggled to find the perfect avenue for his architectural vision. "Right now, I feel like I can do anything," Duangrit says happily.

Born and reared in Bangkok to a working-class family, Duangrit had architecture in his sights from an early age. He studied at Bangkok's prestigious Chulalongkorn University, then took his graduate degree at London's Architectural Association School of Architecture in 1995.

He began attracting attention back in Bangkok while working at Architects 49, a prominent local firm. He quickly gained a following for his stunning contemporary homes and hip resorts before going independent in 1998. From the start, he specialized in adventurous resorts, such as X2 Kui Buri and Alila Cha Am in Thailand, and Hotel de la Paix (now the Sofitel) in Luang Prabang. His stark, minimalist designs have won numerous awards and acclaim from architectural and design publications such as Wallpaper and Architectural Digest.

He gained fresh attention with the opening in 2003 of H1, his urban mall in Bangkok's fashionable food and shopping district of Thonglor, off Sukhumvit Road, one of the city's main drags. With low-rise design, ample wood and greenery, this Zen-inspired complex defied Asia's trend toward large and lavish malls. H1 was also credited with helping Thonglor transform into one of the city's key "fashionista" districts.

Even so, H1's commercial returns failed to match its much-praised design. Thonglor further evolved into a district of opulent nightspots, while mega-malls continued to spring up around Bangkok. Reflecting the trajectory of H1, Duangrit's resorts continue to draw rave reviews in design magazines but rarely muster equal commercial returns. Hotel industry sources say Duangrit can be exhaustingly exact in his designs and, as his fame grows as an artist, increasingly reluctant to compromise, including on cost. "His designs are beautiful, but they often don't work as hotels," said one hotel executive, who requested anonymity. "Hotel owners want businesses that make money, not serve as museums," he added.

"He definitely set himself apart as a designer, and his influence has been enormous," says Bill Barnett, managing director of hotel consultancy C9 Hotelworks. "His fusion of art and creativity always provoked thought and was such a departure from the tradition of Thai architects."

Duangrit's bold designs are perhaps best showcased at Naka Phuket, where rooms in glass tubes project perilously from sheer cliffs over a panoramic cove on the resort island of Phuket. Chayanon Phucharoen, chairman of the family company that built Naka, recalls walking with Duangrit, laboriously pinpointing every room for maximum view and effect. "Then, he kept working, adjusting the height of villas, to get it perfect," he says.



Hilltop panorama view shows how the villas at Naka Phuket overlook a secluded beach cove in southern Thailand. (Photo by Ron Gluckman)

The project was a major step up for a family that had operated mass-market inns on the island.

"The cost was very high," Chayanon remarked on a tour of the \$500-per-night property, while expressing satisfaction with the results. "It has been a real dream for us to achieve."

Barnett says Duangrit's transition beyond hotel design has been a logical move, since his ambitious resort designs did not always lend themselves to commercial projects. "He has got a much broader spectrum now and is clearly redefining himself."

Sky is the limit

These days nothing seems out of reach for the hip designer. Models of his architectural projects are displayed behind windows at the offices of Duangrit Bunnag Architect, housed in the Jam Factory complex. At the bookstore and coffee shop, patrons can browse some of



At X2 Resort in Kui Buri, Duangrit Bunnag used stark stone walls to offset the natural greenery in the remote beach hideaway. (Courtesy of Duangrit Bunnag Architect)

the magazines he publishes, including one devoted to motorcycles. He is a longtime motorbike enthusiast who likes to clear his head on brisk rides to Khao Yai, a national park about 180 km drive northeast of Bangkok.

Duangrit's drawing board is packed with projects. He is renovating a group of old warehouses across the river near the Portuguese embassy that will become Warehouse 30, a bigger version of the Jam Factory, but with more restaurants, crafts, arts and events. Nearby, he is planning a venue for creative events in a historic, renovated mansion by the Royal Orchid Sheraton Hotel. The century-old Thai-European edifice is called House No. 1 -- it was the first address in the area registered with Bangkok's central post office. "It would be a fantastic place for food, movie screenings and special events," Duangrit says.



Duangrit Bunnag was famed for his stark resort designs, like at X2 Resort Kui Buri. (Courtesy of Duangrit Bunnag Architect)

Upriver, he is negotiating to turn another landmark into a riverside hotel. It could become the first Bangkok property under his Bocage brand, which will debut soon in Hua Hin, at the low-rise Seenspace beachside mall that recalls his beloved H1.

"It will only have six rooms, very minimalist but with fantastic service," says Duangrit, noting that Bocage properties will be boutique hotels with "exquisite design." He is overseeing every aspect, he adds, and has set up a separate company to run them.

It is hardly surprising to learn that Duangrit's ambitions extend far beyond design. He is involved in environmental schemes that include a plan to harvest seaweed as a food source, and he wants to expand into feature films. As is his style, he intends to shatter the mold. "In Thailand, with movies, it's always the same story. We want to do things differently. But we don't want to make an art movie. We want to make a commercial film, but a quality one, with a good story."

Offers for all kinds of projects are now flooding in, more than this hipster workaholic can handle. Yet he happily plans still more new ventures. "I love doing creative things," he notes.

"It's my passion. You only have one life to live, and I want to live it fully."