

Bangkok: The Architecture of Three Ecologies

This studio examine the nested scales of **Bangkok's Three Ecologies**: the productive agricultural **environment** of the Chaophraya River Delta, the **social space** of the Pathumwan Central Shopping District, and the split attention of the Bangkok citizen's **psyche** between the demands of traditional "Thainess" and the distractions of globalization. Bangkok's Central Shopping District stretches for two kilometers along the recently completed Skytrain. The entire megastructural system runs parallel to the ancient San Saeb Canal, lined with Muslim communities, and irrigating the lotus gardens surrounding Wat Patumwanaram, a Buddhist meditation monastery.

Currently many services are provided to the stores and their employees by working communities immediately adjacent to the canal. Before and after hours, numerous vendors occupy the plazas, bridges and mezzanines which comprise the public spaces of the malls. Travel is essential for this studio. Informal economic and social activities will be observed, recorded and surveyed by the students during their site visit. Field observations of the daily cycles of social appropriation of public space is required in order to record the activities of involved in this busy economic zone where the local and the global intersect. The studio will to develop designs for public spaces and cultural institutions along the canal.

Expanded statement: Three goals of trip and studio

1. Architecture embedded in environmental knowledge

While the professional training of the "global architect" might focus on the skills needed to design the elaborate mixed used commercial centers which comprise Bangkok's Central Shopping District, the goal of the studio is to examine the built environment around these buildings after the architects left. The malls' themed environments are focused on elaborate water features which mimic the canals, gardens and fruit orchards which dominate the Chaophraya River Delta. While symbolically connected to the verdant water-based ecology of Bangkok, each mall turns its back to the historical canal. The **first goal** of the studio is to counter this disjunction between the aestheticization and performance of natural systems by comparing the hydrological systems of this center city canal side site to intact canal fed fruit orchards at the periphery of the city.

2. Architecture embedded in social agency

A close examination of the daily life in and around Bangkok's malls, especially before they open and after they close, will demonstrate how space is adapted and appropriated by informal economic and social activities. Bangkok is not a city with great spatial distances between income groups. International tourists and ex-pats, the super wealthy, even the Crown Princess, live next to crowded informal settlements which line the San Saeb Canal and the Wat Prathumwanaram temple. After hours, the plazas of the malls and the bridges which connect the overhead transit system are taken over by break dancers, artists, vendors and food sellers. Just at dawn, Buddhist monks walk barefoot through nearby neighborhoods accepting food offerings and dispensing merit to the local population. Additionally, mall workers can pick up their meals from snack vendors who are allowed to congregate before the malls open and after they close. Small businesses, such as ice makers, supply restaurants in the shopping centers with crushed ice delivered by bicycle samlor. Motorcycle taxi drivers have a unique self-organized system of shuttling people on short hops across busy intersections and down narrow lines deep into crowded communities. The **second goal** of this studio is to provide students with the social observation, notational and survey tools to be able to provide the basis of the design of urban institutions and spaces which can accommodate the logistics of daily life and unpredictable use of architectural space adapted for other uses.

3. Globalization and the human psyche

While the architecture of the central shopping district is designed to dazzle and seduce the leisure shopper, inhabitants of a globalizing city balance the demands of family, religion and tradition while imagining a world without limits. Aspirations and desires for the new and the unknown are always checked by the realities and duties of the here and now. The design project of this studio will focus on creating a public realm of water gardens and cultural institutions which are situated in between these physical, social and psychological realms. These new public programs will connect with planned and existing cultural institutions along the canal. The **final goal** of this studio is to give students the opportunity to design an architecture of resilience and reconciliation, resonating with all three geometries outlined above: the tropical river delta, the diverse social spaces of the canal side neighborhoods, and the psychological dimensions of inhabiting globalizing Bangkok.

Use of funds: total request \$20,000

All funds will be used to offset the cost for students for travel to Bangkok, for site documentation, and for preparing for an exhibition of the final studio designs. Airfare: 12 students, 2 faculty RT JFK/Bangkok \$1000 each; \$14,000 is requested for airfare costs. Local transportation, housing and studio space, subsidized and hosted by Chulalongkorn. Studio expenses, facilities and staffing for the design studio provided by Parsons, the New School for Design. \$6000 is requested for documentation preparing for exhibition and publication includes one student intern, three month summer salary \$3000 and \$3000 for printing.

Faculty background and aspirations for studio

Brian McGrath, Associate Professor of Urban Design, Parsons, the New School for Design, is an architect and co-founder of urban-interface.com, a collaborative group exploring the relationship between urban design, ecology and multi-media. He is the co-author of *Cinematics: Architectural Drawing Today*, (Wiley, 2007) and co-editor of *Sensing the 21st Century City: Close-up and Remote*, (AD, 2006) and *New Urbanisms/New Workplace: Yonkers' Nepperhan Valley* (Columbia Books on Architecture, 2000) as well as author of *Transparent Cities*, (SITES Books, 1994). Currently in press is *Designing Patch Dynamics* (Columbia Books on Architecture, 2007), *Digital Modeling for Urban Design* (Wiley, 2008) and a text co-edited with ecologists *Resilience in Ecology and Urban Design* (Yale University Press, 2009). His on-line project *Manhattan Timeformations* (2000) has received many awards from arts, architecture and science organization internationally (www.skyscraper.org/timeformations). McGrath was a Senior Fulbright Scholar in Thailand in 1998/99, a Fellow at the India China Institute at the New School, and is currently a co-investigator on an interdisciplinary team on Long Term Ecological Research where he coordinates a working group linking science and design in the Baltimore Ecosystem Study. (www.beslter.org)

This studio aspires to bring issues of the ecological impact of urbanization and globalization to the architecture students at Parsons, the New School of Design. The studio is part of a larger New School university-wide mission to promote the interrelationship between design and social change, especially as design and social research can impact the urban and the environmental. The New School has a rich history of social research and critical thinking, while Parsons, a division of the New School, is an internationally known school of design. This studio brings together these two institutional strengths as a model of studio based learning for the larger intellectual community, and as an example of design directed towards social change for the Parsons constituency. McGrath brings a background in urban and ecological design together with new media technologies to conduct this studio in collaboration with Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, where he has taught, lectured and consulted for nine years. This studio is also meant to initiate an institutional exchange between the International Design and Architecture Program at Chulalongkorn, whose students will participate in the field work in Bangkok, and Parsons Department of Architecture, Interior Design and Lighting.

Rotch Traveling Studio Committee

October 18 2007

To whom it may concern:

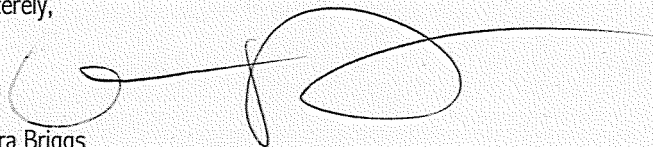
I write in support of Brian McGrath's application for the Rotch Traveling Studio. Brian is a valued faculty in our department. After teaching part time for many years, this year, he joined us a full time associate professor. Brian is an excellent teacher. He brings a depth of experience to his courses and in addition, continually rethinks the content in relation to the new challenges we face. He has an expertise in Urban Studies and is a leading theorist in the area of urban ecologies. The studio he proposes reflects this balance of solid academic pursuits and inventive ways to see the world. It also builds on relationships he has been building over the last few years as an advisor at the Chulalongkorn University Faculty of Architecture. The relationships he has fostered give me the utmost confidence about the success of the studio. First it will provide the students with an intimate understanding of the place through the direct interaction with student, faculty and city administrators. Second it means the course is focused on problems that have already been identified and fully researched and finally, it will allow for an ease of navigation in a city that could otherwise be difficult territory. I am confident that this will not be a tourist trip. It will be a productive study into the dynamics of a particular urban culture that has much to offer.

The course will be invaluable for our students. While they are exposed to an international student body, they do not have the opportunity to travel at length. Working in the context of the Bangkok will broaden their understanding of architecture and urban space in a profound way. The course will be the end of an intensive sequence of studios that lead to large-scale urban studies. So by the time they travel with Brian the students will be fully prepared to take on the challenges of the course. The focus on regional ecology will build on their understandings of environmental issues as they relate to architecture.

Finally the work that the student bring back to the school will help to advance our discussions about our environmental challenges in relation to its global impact. The work will complement the ongoing work at the NEW SCHOOL on zero energy buildings, regional infrastructure and local food and water shed conservations. I look forward to the work contributing to our general understandings. I also believe that this will be an important way to help equip our students with architectural and cultural knowledge that they will need to progress as architects in a global context.

Please accept his proposal. He has our full support.

Sincerely,



Laura Briggs
 Director
 Bachelor of Fine Arts Architectural Design
Parsons The New School for Design
 25 E. 13th Street, 2nd floor
 New York, NY 10003
 t 212.229.8955 x2916